

**WITNESSING OTHERS:
ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN RELATIONAL LIFE WRITING**

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine the nature and significance of ethical responsibility for witnessing others in life writing, especially vulnerable subjects who have suffered racial oppression and/or personal crises. Drawing on the philosophical ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, I argue that witnessing others is not simply a matter of testifying to truths about their lives but of responding to them as people beyond what can be seen or known about them. For Levinas and Ricoeur, the most ethical witness of others comes in responding, “here I am” to their humanity and alterity. This response begins in one’s reception to infinite alterity experienced as a trace in the faces of others or as a sense of otherness within oneself. Facing alterity, witnesses cannot remain self-directed in their responses, constitute themselves and others solely in terms of their identity markers, or narrate a monologue of another’s life. Instead, ethical witnessing is a responsive way of being with and for others that challenges one’s being for oneself and informs how one sees and tells the lives of others: in openness, existential generosity, and mutual responsibility.

With this framework in mind, I explore the life narratives of three twentieth-century writers who bear witness to alterity and attempt, in their own ways, a “here I am” response to the suffering of others. In *An Interrupted Life* and *Letters from Westerbork*, Etty Hillesum witnesses her life and responds to her Jewish community in Nazi-occupied Holland by encouraging a vision beyond victimization. In *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin struggles to witness his own otherness in passing for black as a response to racial oppression in the Deep South. And in *Stolen Life*, Rudy Wiebe witnesses Yvonne Johnson’s story of abuse and incarceration in Canada in the vexed space of narrative collaboration. In life writing, a “here I am” response takes on various forms and proves a complicated practice: these writers must constantly negotiate their self-interest, guilt, and positions of power with vulnerability and generosity. I trace how they grapple with the necessity and difficulty of witnessing others in such an existentially ethical way.

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Introduction

When I entered my doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia in 2004, I was interested in the intersections between religion, trauma, and life writing, and more specifically, in the ways that God has come to be understood and represented in Holocaust memoirs. My main question was one of theodicy—Where is God in the midst of suffering?—and my subsequent inquiry centred on the following issues: How do survivors of trauma signify the presence or absence of God in their stories? How do scholars of trauma understand “the sacred” and its role in witnessing one’s own or another person’s suffering? And how might one’s position of faith shape the way one interprets and represents that suffering?

After my first year, I had a particular experience that caused me to rethink the direction of my study. I spent the summer working together with an elderly Holocaust survivor, Rhoea Shandler, in order to prepare her memoir for publication. The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and Ronsdale Press were interested in publishing her story of motherhood and hiding during the Nazi occupation in Holland, but what they had in hand was a short manuscript that needed to be organized, developed, and doubled in size. My role was to collaborate with Mrs. Shandler to bring her story from manuscript to print. She and I met for a series of interviews in her home so that I could gain a better sense of her broader story as well as gather more detailed narrative material to fill the gaps we found in the manuscript. I asked her many questions: some she answered at length and in detail; others she could not answer or did not want to. I had to learn which questions were helpful to her and which questions diverted her story because they contained my own assumptions and directives. I also had to learn how to develop a dialogue between us, being mindful of our significant differences in age, life experience, background, and profession as well as our specific relationship over her story.

The memoir that emerged was christened, *A Long Labour* (2007), a fitting title given the arduous process of our collaboration and the many dilemmas it raised for me: What precisely *were* my assumptions and directives in our partnership? How did they shape my questions and her story? How did my knowledge of Holocaust history and my emotional responses to that suffering challenge my ability to listen to her narrative? How was I to bear witness to her memories when they did not conform to historical fact? At which points did I subsume or appropriate her voice in my writing of it? Indeed, whose story was it anyway, her own or my mediated version of it? These questions showed me that we somehow needed to navigate the narrative relationship between us. We had to sort out how to work together to tell her story and how to relate to each other as people and as collaborators on this project. This navigation of relational space, the question of how I “relate” to this person in order to bear witness to her suffering and story is, to my mind, an ethical question. For me, determining how to relate ethically was heightened by my tenuous subject position in relation to Mrs. Shandler: How was I to bear witness to her suffering when her experiences fell wholly outside my own frames of reference? And further, how was I to respond to her story as a German woman, one who struggled deeply with a sense of guilt for being associated with the Nazism that had oppressed Mrs. Shandler and exterminated her family?

In light of this experience of collaboration, I set aside my original question of theodicy—Where is God in the face of suffering?—as one that I did not have the resources to answer. What I had instead was a personal and practical glimpse into the related ethical question: Where *am I* when someone else suffers? That is, what would it mean to be present in my relationships with others and respond ethically to their suffering? What would motivate me to respond to them in the first place? And how might my religious faith affect my understanding and practice of ethics?

For my study here, I want to reframe these personal questions for the context of life writing more generally to ask: how does one witness another person's life and story in an ethically responsible way, especially when that story is one of suffering?

Exploring these questions has led me to the ethical philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. Both of these continental philosophers address what it means to be ethically responsible toward others (whether suffering strangers, neighbours, or enemies) in their respective works. And although they formulate this responsibility differently, they both rely on the biblical expression, "Here I am" to describe the orientation and response of an ethical subject who witnesses the *alterity* (otherness) of other people. I draw on their work for this dissertation in order to formulate an ethics of responsibility for witnessing others. My questions have also led me to life narratives where witnesses hold positions of faith in a divine alterity, positions which arguably inform their ability to witness the alterity of other people. These narratives enable me to analyze the possibilities and complications of a "here I am" witnessing posture: Etty Hillesum's witness of her Jewish community under Nazism in *An Interrupted Life* (1941-1943) is influenced by her Jewish mysticism. John Howard Griffin is motivated by his liberal Catholic views to witness the racial oppression and segregation of the Deep South in writing *Black Like Me* (1961). And Rudy Wiebe's witness of Yvonne Johnson in their collaboration, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), bears marks of his Protestant Mennonite roots as well as Johnson's Cree spirituality.

This dissertation, then, is a personal and philosophical study about ethics and witnessing in contemporary life writing. It examines the ethical responsibilities inherent in one's relationships with "vulnerable subjects"—those people who are subject to the abuse, exploitation, or oppression of others (Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects* x). It centres on the condition

of prolonged or ongoing suffering, what Susanna Egan and Miriam Fuchs describe as “crisis” situations, concurrent with the witnessing process (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 4; Fuchs, *Text is Myself* 81).¹ It asks how one should bear witness to the lives and suffering of these subjects in narrative form. It considers what motivates and challenges one’s abilities to do so. And it concentrates specifically on the question: what does it mean to be present in proximate, interpersonal relationships and dialogues with those who are suffering in order to witness their lives responsibly?

While I situate myself as a scholar and co-author of life writing and write from within this context, I am specifically interested in expanding the dialogue between life writing and philosophical ethics. Consequently I attempt two things in this work: first, to offer a philosophical framework from which to delineate an ethics of responsibility for autobiography studies, examining the inherent connection of ethics to relational identity and social interaction in life narratives. And second, to see how life writing makes concrete and thereby complicates the theoretical and hyperbolic ethics of responsibility posed by Levinas and Ricoeur. My hope is to find a fruitful space between these two discourses to discuss the practical potential of ethical responsibility and to discern what kind of person is able to witness others and convey their stories of suffering in ethically responsible ways.

¹ The sites of suffering I have chosen for this study focus on situations of continuous or prolonged suffering, such as incarceration, oppression, and abuse at the hands of others, rather than on those traumas of memory suffered belatedly by a survivor of a catastrophic event. Certainly the lines between past and present suffering, memory and current experience, overlap in the practice of witnessing. However, my sites for analysis centre on crisis rather than catastrophe. Miriam Fuchs expresses the difference as follows: “Crises extend continuously over time, but catastrophes are sudden and inconsistent. They, too, may be prolonged, but when this occurs the catastrophes stop at some point and begin again in unpredictable and erratic ways without stabilizing into a discernable pattern” (*Text is Myself* 81). With this distinction in mind, I use G. Thomas Couser’s term “vulnerable subject” rather than “survivor” to describe the sufferer. In my usage, I assume with the word “subject” that such persons have not fully lost their subjectivity (their ability to address and respond to others) but find it diminished or undermined due to the ongoing suffering they experience.

Relational Selves, Dialogic Subjects

Let me begin with a presupposition: The way we witness our lives and the lives of others in narrative form depends on the way we conceive of ourselves in the world.² By definition, “all autobiographies presuppose a model of identity” (Eakin, *Touching the World* 77), and we draw these models—our ways of conceiving of and representing *who we are*—from the specific “cultures we inhabit” (Eakin, *Lives Become Stories* 46).³ In autobiography scholarship these models, drawn from European and American cultural contexts, have shifted significantly in the last fifty years. In 1956, Georges Gusdorf determined a model of identity that he traced from Augustine to Rousseau, that of the autonomous individual, a “separate and unique” self who is distinct from others (Friedman 34). While this model continues to reflect such Western ideals of “independence and protecting the ‘natural rights’ of each individual,” it has largely been reframed through a relational conception of selfhood in academic scholarship (Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 16). In autobiography studies this shift began in 1980 with feminist scholar Mary Mason, who argued that while autonomy may well fit the lives of Augustine and Rousseau, it did not reflect the nature of women’s lives, who establish their identity “through relation to [a] chosen other” (210).⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman concurred, arguing that women writers not only locate themselves in relation to a singular chosen other, “but also—and simultaneously—to the *collective* experience of . . . gendered subjects in various social contexts” (Miller, *Representing*

² The assumption on which autobiography turns is this direct correlation between human lives socially and historically located in the world and literary lives in a text. The lives we write reflect and reference the lives we live or the lives we understand ourselves living: the literary text refers (however problematically and mediatedly) to a world and human lives outside the text. And the lives we tell inform the lives we live. For a careful exploration of referentiality in autobiography see Paul John Eakin’s *Touching the World* (1992).

³ In *The Conceptual Self in Context* (1997), cognitive psychologist Ulrich Neisser elaborates: “Each of us lives—and has grown up in—some specific cultural setting. That setting was the context in which we developed our ideas about human nature in general and about ourselves in particular” (4).

⁴ In fact, Nancy K. Miller makes a case that St. Augustine’s *Confessions* could also be read as relational, recognizing Monica’s importance to Augustine’s life story. See “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography” (1994) for her discussion of that relationship, especially as it is mirrored in Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession*, notably another “male” text.

Others 4).⁵ Mason and Friedman, among others, proposed that relational and collective identities, at least as they were revealed in women's life narratives, were not only culturally informed but also gender specific: autonomy appeared to define male accounts of selfhood where relationality defined female ones.

In his seminal book, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), Paul John Eakin reframes both models of identity to suggest that "all selfhood . . . is relational," a statement he admits will appear self-evident in other fields of inquiry, and has, in the past decade, become equally established in autobiography studies as a way of conceiving narrative lives (43).⁶ Eakin draws on Jessica Benjamin's work on childhood development to argue that while identity is certainly "inflected by gender" (48), a relational model of selfhood cannot be drawn down gender lines or polarized from the individual and independent characteristics of selfhood. Identity is "intersubjective" according to Benjamin, formed in the spaces where subjects meet, not only where they secede.⁷ In common human experience, one person is formed "in relation to another"

⁵ Friedman proposes the term "relational autobiography" in 1985 "to characterize the model of selfhood in women's autobiographical writing, against the autonomous individual posited by [Georges] Gusdorf, as interdependent identified with a community" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 201). Friedman draws on Sheila Rowbotham's historical model in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* and Carol Gilligan's psychoanalytic model in *In a Different Voice* to argue that women's narratives affirm a "sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness" ("Women's Autobiographical Selves" 44).

⁶ In their article, "Selfways: Diversity in Modes of Cultural Participation," H.R. Markus, P.R. Mullally, and S. Kitayama indicate that "theorists, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists alike generally acknowledge that the self is a social phenomenon. Cultural anthropologists and social psychologists, for example, have always held that one cannot be a self by oneself. Current research in cultural psychology reveals that even extreme individualism is a form of cultural participation and requires interdependence among a set of participants who share a system of consensual meaning and behavioral practices" (14-15). For further discussion on culturally shaped conceptions of selfhood, see Jessica Benjamin's *The Conceptual Self in Context: Culture, Experience, Self-Understanding* (1997). See also the influential sociological text, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985) by Robert Bellah et al. on the problems of radical individualism and the necessity of interdependence in the formation of selfhood.

⁷ According to Eakin, psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin proposes in *Bonds of Love* (1988) "an attractively balanced approach to the relation between gender and identity formation" (*Lives* 52). By highlighting the necessity of relatedness rather than the goal of autonomy in an infant's complex process of individuation, she argues for an "intersubjective dimension" in identity formation (Benjamin 49). She finds problematic that most theories of [infant] development accept Margaret Mahler's "unilinear trajectory that leads from oneness [with the mother] to separateness," "leaving unexplored the territory in which subjects meet" (25). For her, identity formation is rooted

by genetic inheritance and/or proximity of being (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 7). Countering our Western cultural tendency toward “possessive individualism,” as Eakin terms it (*Living*

Autobiographically 92), we exist in interdependent relationships with other people:

We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of our selves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning. Our individualism is itself one such pattern. (Bellah et al., *Habits* 84)

If “the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others,” then these “others” with whom one relates are both *part of oneself* and simultaneously *not oneself* (Eakin, *Lives* 50).

The lives of others, accordingly, cannot be understood in opposition to or independent from the self but rather, as both different from and interconnected with the self in various ways.

If “intersubjective” describes identity formed relationally in kinship (through genetic inheritance and/or social proximity), it also includes a discursive element: identity formed relationally through the social processes of dialogue. Turning to the psychology of John Shotter, Eakin asserts that identity formation “is socially and (more specifically) discursively transacted”: one’s capacity to say “I” depends on one’s being “addressed as a ‘you’ by others” (Eakin, *Lives* 63; Shotter 143). One’s ability to say “I” also expects and depends on a “you” to respond. Indeed, it appears that one cannot say “I” into a void without an address or response. Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, illustrates how this phenomenon is accentuated by trauma in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988). He writes about the nightmare that Holocaust survivors share about returning home to their families and finding that no one listens to their story (12). In that silence, Levi relates, the survivor loses the sense of himself that he has held together for that very moment of communication. In that collapse of dialogic interaction, the survivor’s subjectivity

instead in a paradox: “at the very moment of realizing our own independence we are dependent upon another to recognize it,” a dynamic that is inherently relational (33).

also breaks down. Levi's statement implies that selfhood is not only formed relationally, it is also maintained dialogically through conversation with others, especially those others with whom one is intimately connected. As Ian Burkitt posits in *Social Selves: Theories of the Social Formation of Personality* (1991), the "fundamental human reality is conversation" (67). Subjectivity, which I define as one's relational sense of self, is "generated in conversation," and conscious thinking functions, effectively, as private talking to oneself as if oneself were another (Eakin, *Lives* 64). Elaborating on the work of L.S. Vygotsky and A.N. Leontyev, Burkitt clarifies, "the self is a dialogue which reflects and refracts concrete social interactions in which it plays a part" (*Social* 143). Without dialogue, one's ability to think oneself and to speak oneself to others is profoundly diminished or even lost.⁸

Dialogue also characterizes the kinds of discursive interaction that occur in everyday social encounters. Mikhail Bakhtin illuminates this sense of relationality in dialogue. In living conversation speakers anticipate a response, taking a listener into account and accounting for themselves before a listener. That is, a speaker is always oriented toward a listener and the listener's system of understanding: "It is precisely such an understanding that the speaker counts on" (282). Between the speaker and the listener and their particular social context, the words are assigned meaning. Words themselves, then, are always "half someone else's" and above all are socially and contextually constituted. They become one's own only when the self imbues them with particular intentions (293). Neither language nor one's selfhood determined through language can be for oneself alone.

⁸ Eakin addresses precisely this state in *Living Autobiographically* when he asks whether we are diminished *as people* if our abilities to speak ourselves or call our identities into being through the stories we tell about ourselves are lost, as with Alzheimer's, dementia, or other forms of cognitive disfunction (2). He proposes that selfhood is not, in fact, lost in such cases but that our narrative norms of identity and our social interactions are seriously challenged by them. Such "de-storied" selves still exist in the lives and stories of others even if they are unable to recognize or speak themselves as subjects in these relationships (8). They may be lost to/as "themselves," but they still have a body, a "will" of their own, and a role in the stories of other people, particularly their family members (57-8).

By this token, the respondent (or listener) in dialogical and relational interactions must always be oriented to hear the words of the speaker. Dialogue, Egan writes, “is one mode of ‘realizing’ identities to which ‘attention must be paid,’” precisely those identities and voices of vulnerable subjects whose lives have not been attended to (*Mirror Talk* 8). In the process of dialogue, the respondent “posits the self as both respectful of and distinct from other selves” (8). In this way, dialogue has what could be called an ethical component: it reflects an understanding of oneself in relation to others, in which other people are both distinct from and interconnected with oneself (8). In order to be in dialogue, one must first negotiate this relational space of difference and likeness or risk turning conversation into a monologue, a misappropriation, or a problematic silence. Conversations are reciprocal interactions and can only function when both parties are mutually involved in “co-respondence,” constantly exchanging roles of speaker and respondent in the encounter, addressing and responding to each other in turn (3).

This dialogic encounter between two lives impacts both. The boundaries between “I” and “other” are flexible, permeable, and must shift to accommodate each other (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 2; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 64). The spaces between selves are thus social and interactive. The nature of these interpersonal encounters, conversations, and relationships shapes the way we create and narrate our life stories. If we conceive ourselves as relational and dialogic and write ourselves accordingly, then we inevitably write the lives of others in writing ourselves. By the same token, we implicate our own lives (whether hidden or apparent in the narrative itself) in the writing or telling of other lives. In either case, “one’s story is bound up with that of another” (Smith and Watson 64). Our lives are interdependent; our stories are never simply our “own.” These authorial interrelations implicit and explicit in life narratives have come to be represented by a backslash in the term *auto/biography*. This mark signals a “fluid boundary”

between autobiography (telling one's own life) and biography (telling another's life) traditionally separated as two distinct genres of life writing (184).⁹ Given the intersubjective identities and overlapping lives that the backslash in auto/biography implies, we might more aptly call this genre *relational life writing*.

My exploration, then, centres on the complexities of the relationships that this genre has come to define, particularly as these are emphasized in contexts of narrating another person's ongoing suffering and oppression. Taking a relational and dialogic model of selfhood as a given in these contexts, I ask: how are respondents to relate to vulnerable subjects in the creation of life narratives? How do such relationships function on the ground, so to speak, in actual interpersonal encounters and dialogues where the respondent is up close and personal, face-to-face with the vulnerable subject and directly implicated in his or her suffering? More fundamentally, what kind of subject is able to respond to the suffering of others in the first place? And what might those responses look like? For me, these questions are ethical in nature. How one relates with others in order to narrate their lives is a complicated ethical matter that arises from our conceptions of relational selfhood and the dialogic, interactive spaces that make up our human relationships.

Ethical Responsibility in Autobiography Studies

In his article, "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration," Eakin claims that "ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse" (123). Not only do life writers have ethical obligations in telling their stories, but "all [life] stories invite an ethical response from listeners

⁹ Averse to drawing boundaries between genres where relational spaces exist in narrative practices, scholars of autobiography have tended to favour terms like *life writing* or *memoir* in order to avoid the connotations of an autonomous "I" that a term like autobiography invokes, even with its backslash. *Memoir* suggests a dialogic self situated in a social environment who directs attention "more to the lives and actions of others than to the narrator," thus defying the boundaries between personal and public spheres. *Life writing* functions as an inclusive term for all varieties of "nonfictional modes of writing" (Smith and Watson 198, 197).

and readers,” Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith suggest, particularly those stories of vulnerable subjects who collectively or personally suffer ongoing oppression (4). What then does it mean to respond ethically to others? And what might the responsibilities of the respondent in a narrative dialogue look like?

Life writing differs from other forms of literary narrative in that it depicts an actual person in the world behind the text. Beyond its literary form, life narrative is a category of human experience (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* 49). Its studies are thus principally concerned with the ways that this written and writing self functions within a particular historical, political, and social context. Consequently, ethical responsibility in autobiography studies is defined almost exclusively as the “important work” that narrative lives perform in the world (Eakin, “Breaking Rules” 124). In keeping with this idea, scholars of life writing tend to frame their questions of ethical subjectivity (who am I and how am I to respond to others?) in terms of socio-political practices (what is it good to do and how does personal narrative stimulate human affect and moral action in the world?). Indeed, if a recent double issue of *Life Writing*, “Trauma in the Twenty-First Century” (2008), reflects the ongoing trends of the discipline, we are particularly interested in which ethical behaviours are imperative for responding to the stories of others in the context of oppression and abuse, and which vulnerable subjects currently demand our attention.

The question of “right action” covers a wide range of practices in response to a growing number of vulnerable subjects and their stories. For instance, the practices of listening to and telling the truth about others are upheld as paradigmatic ethical activities. Thinkers such as Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman in trauma theory and Eakin and Egan in autobiography studies have pointed to the ethical necessity of such actions while raising the relational, dialogical, and

narrative complications that arise in their practices.¹⁰ Other scholars, such as Marianne Hirsch and Susannah Radstone, conceive of ethical responsibility in affective terms. They assert that those who respond to vulnerable subjects should practice empathic identification, a way of seeing “through [their] eyes” as it were, without over-identifying with the other person’s trauma (Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 12).¹¹ This responsibility proves especially critical in our “culture of trauma,” as Miller and Jason Tougaw point out, a culture overly fascinated with the stories of shocking events, horrific abuse, and severe pain experienced by others (2). These stories are potentially read for the “thrill of borrowed emotion”—the negative underbelly of empathic identification—and result in a “pornographic seeing” that perpetuates the vulnerability of the sufferer in merely another form (Williams qtd. in Oliver, *Witnessing* 156).

Arguably, these practices of listening, truth telling, and empathy can be seen as expressions of a more fundamental practice of ethical response, that of recognition. Recognition is a way of seeing and attending to the identity and subjectivity of the sufferers themselves, rather than simply responding to their stories of suffering. With this in mind, autobiography scholars formulate ethical responsibility principally as a politics of recognition—a response to

¹⁰ Dori Laub, for instance, highlights the practice of listening to others as a responsible response to their suffering, a practice that includes an awareness of the hazards of listening and the importance of silences (57-73). Listening in an oral, dialogic relationship is meant to draw out the narrative, help the testifier make meaning of the suffering, and allow for the possibility of healing. Egan, Paul Lauritzen, and Stefan Maeckler have also addressed dialogical encounters but in terms of the truth-telling imperative in trauma and crisis autobiographies. The ethical responsibility in a dialogue between speaker and listener is a mutual interaction: the speaker is responsible to tell the “truth”—fully aware of the slipperiness of the term—without over-telling it, while the listener is responsible to trust in the narrator’s testimony as well as critically consider the text and the context in the event of possible fabrication (Eakin, *Lives* 2-3). The “autobiographical pact” in which I actually am who I say I am in my narrative, in this sense, is an ethical one.

¹¹ In “Projected Memory” Hirsch describes this as *heteropathic identification* with others: “identification that does not interiorize the other within the self but that goes out of one’s self and out of one’s own cultural norms in order to align oneself, through displacement, with another” (9). She borrows the terms *heteropathic* and *identification* from Max Scheler’s *The Nature of Sympathy* (1923) and Kaja Silverman’s *Threshold of the Visible World* (1996). Such identification has the potential to respond, “it could have been me” and *at the same time*, “but it was not me” (9). Historian and trauma theorist, Dominick LaCapra, calls this negotiation of space empathic “unsettlement,” an affective response that does not fuse or confuse oneself with others but unsettles identity with difference and tempers effusive connection with distance (*History and Memory* 40). Indeed, he cautions that empathy, without difference, easily slides into “intrusively arrogating to oneself the victim’s experience” or “undergoing surrogate victimage” (182).

gender, class, or racial oppression that seeks to recover the voices of marginalized or disempowered subjects and affirms their agency and subjectivity in the world (Parker, “Turn to Ethics” 3, 5). As Smith and Watson articulate it: “Narratives produced and circulating within the regime of human rights confront readers with emotional, even overwhelming, episodes of dehumanization, brutal violent victimization, and exploitation. They call the reader to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition” (“Trouble with Autobiography” 364). Like much of contemporary theory “dominated by conceptions of identity and subjectivity,” autobiography scholarship relies on a Hegelian notion of recognition in making its claims (Oliver, *Witnessing* 4). Kelly Oliver suggests that in work relying on a notion of recognition, “there is the sense that individual identity is constituted intersubjectively; that we come to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents (in likeness or in opposition to others) through the recognition from others” (4). From this perspective, recognition actualizes subjectivity: what makes subjects subjects is precisely the ability they have (or are given) to say “I,” to constitute themselves through the recognition of others as distinct agents who are able to act in the world and address others in reciprocal dialogue.¹²

In situations of marginalization, oppression, or abuse, this ability to say “I” and to conceive of oneself as a subject or agent of action is threatened, damaged, or destroyed (Gilmore 6). One is *subjected* to the domination of other people or systems of governance and reduced to an object or silenced as an “other” (Oliver, *Witnessing* 7). Such suffering often resists representation and challenges the sufferer’s ability to address it to others. To regain or repair

¹² Naturally autobiography theory has engaged in the complexities of agency in ways that I do not attend to here. For example, in *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson argue that despite the fact that “we tend to read autobiographical narratives as proofs of human agency, relating actions in which people exercise free choice over the interpretation of their lives,” humans are never “free agents” but always subject to the discursive systems, social structures, cultural norms, and ideologies in which they are located (44). Agents are changeable even as they have the ability to change their world (45).

subjectivity necessitates a reassertion of agency by bearing witness to the oppression, a space to “[take up] a position as a speaking subject” (7). To speak oneself and be spoken to in exchanges authenticates one’s presence and subjectivity to oneself and to others (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 8). Since the voices of vulnerable subjects are often left unattended by the dominant power structures, their stories summon listeners and readers to recognize their value as human beings and their claims as true (Schaffer and Smith 5). Functioning specifically within the rhetoric of human rights and social justice (Whitlock, “Second Person” 117), recognition challenges respondents to be actively and ethically involved in a process “that might bring about justice by acknowledging the loss and harm that [have] been done,” and in doing so, restore damaged, vulnerable subjects to fully functioning ones (Schaffer and Smith 107).

These conceptions of ethical responsibility have been significant for bringing together the fields of ethics and politics on the grounds of personal experience. They have made our scholarship in autobiography attentive to the political character of personal lives, and continue to create forums for new voices and stories of marginalized, oppressed, or abused subjects to be acknowledged and affirmed. They have also caused us to examine the many ways that ethical response is made manifest socially or politically and how it has proven deficient in various life writing contexts. Despite these gains, however, I find our formulations of ethical responsibility fall short in at least three ways. First, the general question of “right action” or ethical behaviour, as David Parker has recently suggested, “occupies only part of the broader ethical domain” (*Moral Space* 3). In *The Self in Moral Space* (2007), Parker draws together the various ethically responsible practices upheld in autobiography studies under a more fundamental question at the heart of all life narratives: “What is it good to be?” With this question he distinguishes ethical subjectivity from moral activity—being good from doing right—and suggests that the former

infuses the latter with its ethical potency. While the good and the right overlap and intersect in numerous ways in human life, Parker argues, our judgments about what it is right to do are embedded in our beliefs about what it is good to be (5). In short, ethical responsibility is an orientation of subjectivity, and ethical subjectivity (or being) determines moral action.¹³ From this perspective, practices like recognition or empathy are only as ethical as the subjects doing them. These responses are not somehow intrinsically responsible, but rather possible outworkings of a responsible subject. Parker's position has compelled me to consider, then, what does it mean *to be* ethically responsible beyond simply responding ethically to others? And what kind of respondent engages in responsible practices with and for others, particularly vulnerable subjects?

Second, the assumption that ethical responsibility functions as a politics of recognition proves reductive for engaging with vulnerable subjects in actual, interpersonal relationships and contending with the complexities of subjectivity that arise within this context. While recognition is an ethical response that seeks to acknowledge those vulnerable subjects who are marginalized within or oppressed by dominant power structures of class, race, or gender, it tends to conflate the *subjectivity* of the person with his or her victimized *subject position*. This conflation may well prove a fruitful response for reading stories of collective trauma or oppression in macro-social and political contexts, where the reader must relate and respond to vulnerable subjects and

¹³ For Parker, subjectivity (who I am in relation to others) is bound up in "how you are oriented" in moral space (*Moral Space* 16). He draws his vision of the self in moral space from the work of Charles Taylor, as expressed in *Sources of the Self* (1989). Both suggest that humans are oriented according to those things that they value as good. These are both personally and communally derived "strongly valued goods" that we use to decide between right and wrong, better and worse (Parker, *Moral Space* 15). These values are reflected in our language and used when we discern or judge what is good: dignity, courage, brutality, honesty, etc. See Parker's first chapter in *The Self in Moral Space* for further discussion. In my work, I hope it will become clear to those familiar with Parker and Taylor that while I hold to the view that the question of *being* informs my *doing* and that the self is oriented in moral space, I stray from their perspectives to suggest that ethics is not only determined through one's language, relationships, and systems of value, but must also be conceived metaphysically, as that which escapes my reasons and judgements about how to be good.

their experiences of suffering at a considerable remove, mediated by the text. I find, however, that it falters on the micro-social level when I consider my own narrative relationship and personal interactions with Mrs. Shandler.

In our unmediated, face-to-face relationship my responses had to exceed Mrs. Shandler's subject position as a Dutch Jew, a Holocaust survivor, a middle-class elderly woman, a wife and a mother of eight children, and a Canadian immigrant in order to be ethical. While these aspects of her identity had initially drawn us together to work on her story, they were not what ultimately constituted our relationship. In fact, defining our relationship by them, as I was apt to do, proved unethical in numerous ways. Over the course of our collaboration it became clear to me that while Mrs. Shandler wanted me to listen to and acknowledge her stories of suffering, she also wanted me to interact with her as a person *regardless* of her suffering—what we might call “beyond recognition” (Oliver 16). I recall her exclaiming in a moment of frustration that she was tired of my difficult questions in our interview process and would prefer if I just came to visit for tea. Her outburst suggested to me that what she desired, perhaps as much as voicing her story, was a relationship with me for its own sake. Responding to her ethically thus required me to communicate her value as a person apart from her story of suffering and her vulnerable subject position, not simply because of it. Indeed, responding to her suffering rather than her personhood could potentially keep her defined by and confined to her pain or feelings of victimization. Because her subjectivity exceeded her subject position in our narrative relationship, my ethical response also had to exceed her subject position and could not be reduced to a politics of recognition.

I find Oliver's distinction between *subjectivity* and *subject position* helpful in considering ethical responsibility in such face-to-face narrative relationships as my own. While the two are

profoundly interconnected in experiencing ourselves as subjects, she writes, “Subject positions are constituted in our social interactions and our positions within our culture and context. They are determined by history and circumstance . . . what we might call politics” (*Witnessing* 17). Subjectivity, in contrast, “is experienced as [a] sense of agency and response-ability,” a way of being relationally and dialogically constituted that is “fundamentally ethical” (17). Subjectivity is thus “logically prior to any possible subject position” (17). Insofar as we exist relationally and dialogically with other people, our ethical responsibilities are inherent in subjectivity itself, informing our socio-political interactions as ethical respondents and as vulnerable subjects.

Third, framing ethical responsibility purely in the political terms of recognition is philosophically suspect. Not only does it collapse ethics into a politics, it also reduces the philosophically nuanced conceptions of responsibility, as I will come to show them in the work of Levinas and Ricoeur, to a matter of recognition—of seeing, identifying, or acknowledging others in socio-political relation to oneself. The term, as Hegel uses it, formulates subjectivity as a struggle for recognition by which one gains a sense or grasp of oneself in likeness or in opposition to others (Ricoeur, *Recognition* 173). Oliver suggests that such a struggle, in which one defines oneself against others, indicates a fundamental antagonism at the heart of subjectivity that at least complicates, if not entirely contradicts, responsible relationships. This antagonism is reinforced when we consider that recognition is a response bestowed on vulnerable subjects by a more powerful group. Insofar as vulnerable subjects demand recognition from those who are powerful enough to confer it, the dynamic of domination and opposition is perpetuated: the vulnerable subject inevitably reinforces the power of the oppressor by needing him to “see” her or verify her worth. She remains *subject* to him. It is difficult to imagine, Oliver writes, “how these struggles can lead to compassionate personal relations, ethical social

relations, and democratic political relations” (*Witnessing* 4). To deal with this dilemma, we need an alternative conception of subjectivity that makes responsible relationships possible, a vision of relational subjectivity that is not fundamentally or inherently hierarchical or hostile toward others, one that does not require abjecting others or assimilating their differences in order to conceive of oneself or others as subjects (11). Such an alternative notion of subjectivity would have to take into account the uneasy relationship between recognition and ethical responsibility that Oliver points out by clearly defining this relationship and analyzing its complications in light of its roots in philosophical discourse.

In light of these complications, then, I want to consider how ethical responsibility is conceived philosophically as a question of subjectivity (how *to be* with others) informing and potentially transforming political action and social interaction (what *to do* for others), and see how it relates to the practice of witnessing the lives and stories of vulnerable others up close, in proximate relationships and interpersonal dialogues. I am convinced that a philosophical examination of this ethical posture and practice will prove fruitful for nuancing our terms of ethical responsibility and complicating their usage in autobiography scholarship. More than that, though, I hope that reconstituting subjectivity in ethical terms will offer a compelling framework from which to re-examine the pragmatic possibilities of responsibility, its political potential, and its significant dilemmas in the context of relational life writing. Indeed, it may open a space for further dialogue about the intersections between ethics and politics in witnessing the lives of others.

Witnessing Others: Ethical Response and Responsibility

In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001), Oliver proposes a model of subjectivity that is inherently responsible to and for others by nature of its relational and dialogic constitution. She

suggests that “while theorists of recognition like [Charles] Taylor, [Axel] Honneth, and [Judith] Butler discuss subjectivity or identity in terms of recognition that comes through dialogue or discourse, they don’t realize the full import of thinking of subjectivity as response-ability, or response to address” (5).¹⁴ Implicit in a subjectivity conceived as response-able is a subject’s obligation to respond to and be responsible for others. The possibility of subjectivity relies on both the condition of being able to respond to others (response-ability) and the ethical obligation “to respond and enable response-ability from others” (responsibility) (15). Oliver calls this double sense of response, *witnessing*. Whenever one bears witness to oppression, either in response to one’s own or another person’s suffering, one is put in a position of vulnerability and responsibility for others. Indeed, being addressed to respond always implies a vulnerable subject—either one who has already been made vulnerable by oppression and responds as a witness of that suffering, or one who chooses to be vulnerable in bearing witness and being responsible to the suffering of others. One cannot help but suffer vulnerability in a posture and practice of response-ability. I take Oliver’s framework as an entry point for exploring the inherent relationship between subjectivity and ethical response in terms of *witnessing* and launch my analysis by asking: What is the nature of such witnessing? And what kind of respondent is ethically responsible to witness the suffering and vulnerability of others?

Witnessing is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the fact of being present, observing something, and testifying to it. Working with this definition, I propose that witnessing is a practice of seeing and speaking (responding) informed by one’s “being present” in relation to

¹⁴ Judith Butler, for instance, describes the dialogic formation of the subject in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) as follows: “the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject. . . . I can only say ‘I’ to the extent that I have first been addressed” (225). From this perspective, the “respondent” in a dialogue is made into a subject because someone else has first addressed him. This “subject” then turns to address himself to others, who become respondents to his words, his life, or his story. It is this secondary responding—responding as a subject to the lives and stories of others—that takes central place in my study.

what or whom is being witnessed. Let me address these two aspects in turn as they relate particularly to the *respondent witness*—the witness of a vulnerable subject. Witnessing is first a practice of seeing that shapes one’s response, and second, a way of being present in response-able relationship and dialogue with vulnerable subjects that informs how one sees them and responds to their stories.

The practice of seeing is particularly critical for formulating a description of witnessing, since the way one sees determines what and how one responds. Witnessing carries two connotations of seeing: “the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, in other words, bearing witness” (Oliver, *Witnessing* 16). In the former sense, witnessing refers to an *eyewitness* testimony “based on first-hand knowledge” (16). In the latter sense, it refers to *bearing witness* to “something beyond recognition” that Oliver calls, “an infinite encounter with otherness” (16, 17). From a Western religious perspective, the infinite Other(ness) that cannot be seen but is encountered through mystical or spiritual “insight” is named God. In strains of psychoanalysis, such alterity has been used to describe the unconscious, the truth of an event or person’s story beyond historical fact (Laub 60), or the “infinite otherness” of a traumatic experience that cannot be comprehended or articulated (Agamben, *Remnants* 151; Caruth, *Trauma* 156; LaCapra, *Writing History* 93).¹⁵ It has also been taken up in the phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel

¹⁵ In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra warns that formulating trauma in terms of *infinite otherness* conflates it with elements of the “sublime” or “sacred” (93). He writes, “I have speculated that the sublime may itself be construed as a secular displacement of the sacred in the form of a radically transcendent, inaccessible, unrepresentable other (including the alterity of radical evil). The typical response it evokes is silent awe. I have also argued that one important tendency in modern thought and practice has been the attempt to link the traumatic to—or even convert it into—the sublime by transvaluing it and making it the basis for an elevating, supraethical, even elated or quasi-transcendental test of the self for the group” (93). For further discussion on the language of the sacred or sublime, particularly in the context of Holocaust suffering, see Thomas Trezise’s article “Unspeakable” (2001), and Michael Bernand-Donals and Richard Glejzer’s chapters, “Sublimity, Redemption, Witness” and

Levinas, which interprets “infinite otherness” as that which cannot be seen, grasped, appropriated, or totalized in another person, as I will come to show.

Oliver illustrates this double vision of witnessing (the seen and the unseen) as follows: “An eyewitness to the Jewish uprising at Auschwitz . . . testifies (incorrectly) to the events of [a] particular day when prisoners blew up a chimney. However, she bears witness to something that in itself cannot be seen, the conditions of possibility of Jewish resistance and survival” (7). Oliver’s illustration suggests that the act of bearing witness to “infinite otherness” shapes the way an eyewitness comes to see a historical event and testify to it. By extension, I contend that the way respondent witnesses bear witness to the “infinite otherness” in this woman’s life will shape how they see her and respond to her story within its historical and political context. Those who witness the eyewitness as respondents to her account, Laub asserts, may fixate on the empirical evidence of her testimony and dismiss her account as inaccurate. Or they may witness in her account that which is beyond comprehension—her “strength to make what seemed impossible possible: surviving the Holocaust” (62). While both elements—empirical evidence and infinite otherness—are crucial for witnessing vulnerable subjects, I argue that bearing witness to that which cannot be seen, grasped, or comprehended in another’s life is the basis for ethical response. Fundamental to an ethical practice of bearing witness, response-ability to the infinite otherness of others determines how respondent witnesses engage in dialogue with vulnerable subjects, how they open themselves in responsibility or close down response for the sake of what can be seen, told, comprehended, and verified.

I am convinced that both the eyewitness and the respondent witness need to *bear witness* to alterity in their dialogic relationships, encountering infinite otherness in themselves, in their

“Museums and the Imperative of Memory: History, Sublimity, and the Divine” in their co-authored book, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (2001).

experiences, and most critically, in other people for the sake of subjectivity and ethical response. Only in bearing witness to alterity, Oliver argues, can witnesses undermine oppositional relationships, power struggles, and cycles of suffering and conceive instead of peaceful or transformative interactions. As she writes:

We have a responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond. We have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others. . . . To serve subjectivity, and therefore humanity, we must be vigilant in our attempts to continually open and reopen the possibility of response. (*Witnessing* 18-19)

I take Oliver to mean two things by this assertion: First, that one's own response-ability should facilitate the response-ability of others. In taking account of subjects principally in terms of their suffering positions, our responses focus on restoring or maintaining their agency, but neglect summoning their corresponding responsibility. Vulnerable subjects must feel that they have something "to give" others (obligations to fulfil) and that the respondent witness is open to receiving their agency and not only to "giving" it. The question of how to witness vulnerable subjects, then, is principally an issue of how to respond to their address in a posture of openness toward their alterity (beyond what I can recognize about them) that facilitates their ability to respond in kind. Beyond a single address and response, dialogic subjectivity requires the perpetuation of agency and response-ability in one's relationships with others.

Second, the possibility of peace does not begin in recognizing the position of the vulnerable subject in a political context. If we simply respond to the position of subjects from within a politics of power, then our responses will be limited to power structures: even in challenging these power structures or inverting them, responsibility will still be constituted by that power and bound up in it. For the sake of peace, ethical responsibility must originally be located beyond power structures as a response to alterity (the otherness of the subject) in order to

transform subjects and their relationships. Responding to the other person's alterity means opening up the possibility of conversation across political boundaries, power hierarchies, or oppositional relationships, as well as "seeing" vulnerable subjects beyond their contexts of trauma as human subjects engaging other human subjects.

Beyond the response-able practice of *seeing* the alterity of vulnerable subjects in historical contexts and personal accounts, I argue that witnessing is a responsible way of *being present* with and for these subjects in one's proximate relationships and dialogues. In order to describe this responsible way of being more precisely, I turn to the ethical philosophies of Levinas and Ricoeur. The phenomenological ethics of Levinas has come to the fore in the last few decades as a key way of thinking about ethical responsibility in continental philosophy, and less explicitly, in literary studies through the work of Jacques Derrida.¹⁶ In the last two decades particularly, Levinas has been taken up as a way of rethinking the moral imperative in humanist discourse, and has even been read as offering a "new humanism" that privileges ethics to ontology, the alterity of others to the totalities of selfhood (Moran, *Phenomenology* 321). Indeed Oliver, with her background in phenomenology and her concerns about the nature and ethical possibilities of witnessing in the context of trauma, draws on the work of Levinas to describe the nature of ethical responsibility in one's face-to-face encounters with vulnerable subjects. As she writes:

¹⁶ Simon Critchley, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, traces this movement from Levinas's relative obscurity until the 1980s when ethics, phenomenology, and the religious gained renewed interest in intellectual discussion (2-3). Critchley writes, "It is fair to say that in the English-speaking world many people came to Levinas through the astonishing popularity of the work of Derrida. The turn to Levinas was motivated by the question of whether deconstruction, in its Derridian or DeManian versions, had any ethical status, which in its turn was linked to a widespread renewal of interest in the place of ethics in literary studies. . . . As the theme of ethics has occupied an increasingly central place in the humanities and the social sciences, so Levinas's work has assumed an imposing profile" (4, 5). Bettina Bergo and Richard Cohen also clearly endorse his significance in their respective works *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics* (1999) and *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (2001).

We could say that for Levinas the face-to-face encounter brings us into contact with the otherness that constitutes humanity—the infinite within the finite, the transcendent within the embodied, the meaning of being. This contact is not a knowing or grasping, because this otherness cannot be controlled by a subject. Yet it is this otherness through which the subject comes to be and is sustained. The face-to-face encounter . . . both grounds and presupposes discourse. As the very foundation of human life and language, the face-to-face encounter brings with it an ethical obligation and responsibility. . . . Insofar as we are constituted as subjects in our relations with others and otherness, we have an obligation to and for the other. (*Witnessing* 207)

In his analysis of the face-to-face relationship between one person and another, Levinas introduces this specific discourse of *response* and *responsibility* as a philosophical reaction to the totalizing program of Nazism and the human suffering (including his own as a Jew) that occurred under that regime. He uses “responsibility” to describe a metaphysical or originary ethical posture toward alterity *before* the self can posit itself as a subject of thought or action toward others. Responsibility is first and foremost an “ethical bearing”—a particular orientation, posture, and disposition toward others prior to and enabling one’s ability to deliberate the good of certain acts or responses in a given relationship. This posture of response-ability must first of all be open and receptive to the other’s address before *doing* anything. Describing the ethical bearing of a responsible self before action, Levinas does not determine ethics as a particular politics or a practical guide for social interactions, but rather as an inherent human obligation toward others that underpins what we normally define as ethics—those codes, norms, and regulations for valuing certain behaviours and condemning others. Beyond any “account of general rules, principles and procedures that would allow us to assess the acceptability of specific maxims or judgments relating to social action [or] civic duty,” Levinas argues that selves have “an existential commitment” to respond to the suffering of others (Critchley, “Introduction” 27, 28). Responsibility is fundamentally a way of being oriented in regard to others.

Not surprisingly, in an academic milieu where the subject is defined principally in terms of politics and power, Levinas's vision of responsibility as an ethical category of being beyond one's subject position has perplexed if not dissuaded numerous thinkers from his ethics. However, I am convinced that while selfhood is determined and defined by one's subject positions, ethical responsibility must ensure that selves are not reduced to the sum of their identifiable characteristics: aspects of our being always transcend our roles, capabilities, and positions in a politics of power and exceed the norms, distinctions, and regulations meant to inaugurate what it means to be human in social systems.

With this in mind, my first chapter combines Levinas's view of ethical responsibility with those of his contemporary, Ricoeur, to theorize between them this bearing or posture of an ethically responsible subject, response-able to witness the alterity of other people. Levinas and Ricoeur both explore the "ethical character of selfhood and its intimate relation to the alterity of [others]," but they formulate this intimate relation differently (Cohen, "Ricoeur" 283). Where Levinas figures this relation in terms of *infinity* (encountering the other person's alterity beyond oneself), Ricoeur describes it in terms of *identity* (encountering alterity within oneself). For Levinas, to be ethically responsible means to respond to the sheer otherness one encounters in the faces or voices of vulnerable subjects before one attempts to grasp or represent their suffering, their lives, or their stories. To which Ricoeur adds, such a response to another's alterity stems from the otherness one already experiences in oneself, particularly in the summons of one's own conscience (experienced as above and beyond oneself) when encountering other people.

Despite locating alterity differently in relation to the self, Levinas and Ricoeur both describe ethical responsibility as a matter of *bearing witness* to alterity in one's encounter with

other people. From their perspectives, the ethical self is first and foremost a witness of alterity, a witness whose primary and immediate response to the other person is “here I am!” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 145; Ricoeur, *Oneself as Other* 167). The expression “here I am” comes from the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, where it is used by the biblical prophets as a response to the call of the infinite Other (God). Borrowing the phrase from its religious context, Levinas describes “here I am” as the response *par excellence* to the alterity or infinite otherness of another person in the face of his or her suffering.

As I develop it in Chapter One, “here I am” is a radical re-signification of selfhood expressed in ethical rather than ontological or political terms. Under most circumstances, I establish my being in relation to others ontologically or politically and identify myself accordingly: I am a middle-class woman; I am Canadian; I am an academic. But to determine myself ethically is to be oriented *otherwise*, in light of the other person, privileging his or her alterity above my own agency and redefining myself in reception and response to it: “here I am.” In this way, “here I am” is also an orientation of generosity toward the other person. I am positioned in submission, self-sacrifice, and mutual vulnerability, giving myself over in response to the summons and needs of that person. Furthermore, as Ricoeur points out, “here I am” is a response that requires conviction and commitment to sustain its posture of openness to alterity. In the best case, “here I am” is a reciprocal stance; we are responsible for one another. We are both “here” for each other, oriented toward one another in generosity, being present for one another, exchanging the roles of addressee and respondent as we go.

As a signification of subjectivity *otherwise* than being for oneself and an orientation of generosity toward others in response to their alterity, I find “here I am” a particularly compelling concept for witnessing the alterity of another person and his or her suffering ethically. For my

discussion, then, I define witnessing as a “here I am” orientation, a way of being *otherwise* in generous response to alterity, which informs how one perceives, relates to, and narrates the lives of others. If witnessing has both the juridical connotations of testifying to that which can be seen, known, and told, and the religious connotations of bearing witness to that which cannot be seen (infinite and transcendent Otherness), then the responsible witness arguably witnesses that which is wholly other in what can be seen, known, and told of another person (Oliver 16). To be a responsible subject *is* to be an ethical witness of others.

Witnessing Vulnerable Subjects in Relational Life Writing

Redefining an ethics of responsibility in terms of witnessing “here I am” to the alterity of others, my study examines how such witnessing is borne out in narrative practices. As I see it, relational life writing is a narrative mode of witnessing particularly fruitful for seeing how ethical responsibilities function in relationships that bear witness to suffering. It emphasizes the overlapping spaces of interaction and identity between oneself and others and highlights the dialogic relationships that come to determine how one witnesses others. For this reason, I look at such narratives through the lens of a “here I am” witnessing stance and consider its nuances and complications in the actual practices of relating to and narrating the lives of vulnerable subjects. I consider, specifically, the narratives of three witnesses that emerge from different sites of oppression and suffering in the last century: the Jewish genocide in Nazi-occupied Holland, Black oppression in the United States, and Aboriginal marginalization in Canada. To what extent is a “here I am” posture of witnessing translatable in their personal, political, and narrative relationships? And further, since life writing scholars address such sites of suffering in strictly political terms, what might this alternative ethics of responsibility bring to the politics of recognition that govern our reading practices?

As I have already indicated, my focus in this discussion will be the position of the respondent witness as a writer of vulnerable subjects—one who bears witness to the lives and suffering of those whom they write, and one who is responsible to the particular relationship that ensues between them. Unlike a reader or listener responding to vulnerable subjects from a distance, removed from their personhood and suffering by the text, a respondent who bears witness as a narrator engages in a proximate, face-to-face relationship with them, both separated from and immersed in their ongoing suffering in the process. Scholars concerned with narrative witnessing practices in contexts of suffering have addressed this witness position of the writer in various ways. For instance, Holocaust scholarship has examined the position of the “secondary witness,” the child of trauma survivors who bears witness to his or her parents’ suffering in a familial context (Apel, *Memory Effects* 93). These witnesses are at a spatial and temporal remove from the event of trauma (the Holocaust) but intimately connected with their parents both in terms of identity and proximity, inheriting the memory of the event as it is transmitted to them directly in language and indirectly in kinship.¹⁷ Such issues as time and space—not being there then but being here now—create gaps of experience, mediations of memory, cross-generational inheritance, and processes of identification that challenge in various ways the space of the witnessing relationship, as such narratives as Lisa Appignanesi’s *Losing the Dead* (1999) and Anne Karpf’s *The War After* (1996) reveal.

¹⁷ Marianne Hirsch calls this “inherited memory” *postmemory*. Postmemory is “meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation—often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible (9). As Smith and Watson concur in “The Trouble with Autobiography” (2005), “postmemory . . . is witnessing by those who cannot offer direct witness; . . . it is the witnessing of [the] witness by children whose lives were haunted by the specter of the traumatic past and parental struggle of traumatic remembering” (369). Hirsch adds that this form of remembrance is not restricted to familial relationships or even ethnic or national community ties, but “through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available” (9-10). See her articles “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy” (1999) and “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory” (2001).

In autobiography studies, scholars have focused on the position of the “representative subject,” a witness who *stands for* and *speaks on behalf of* his or her own community or a collective group (Gilmore, *Limits of Autobiography* 130). Perhaps most well known is Rigoberta Menchu’s witness account of the Quiche people in Guatemala, *I Rigoberta Menchu* (1984), winning her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Notably, “standing for” others requires respondent witnesses to “stand apart” from their personal or extended communities in order to interpret the group and themselves within it. From this stance, witnesses may critically assess the very groups with which they associate and to which they are deeply committed in their writing. Along similar lines is the witness position of the ethnographer, who speaks on behalf of others in marginalized communities, often writing conjunctively with its members. Native or Aboriginal narratives in North America are often written in this way; the witness attempts to bring together the two disparate cultures in dialogue through his or her own mediating process. Two of the most well known in Western Canada are the ethnographies, *My Stories are My Wealth* (1997) and *Life Lived Like a Story: Life stories of three Yukon Native Elders* as told to Julie Cruikshank (1990).

Scholars in autobiography have also focused directly on the role of the “narrative collaborator” as a witness writing directly with and/or for vulnerable subjects (Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects* 36; Eakin, *Lives* 58). Collaboration refers to a partnership between two people in the process of telling one life story. Overtly relational and dialogic, collaboration sometimes takes the form of “one member [supplying] the ‘life’ while the other provides the ‘writing’,” as in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) written by Alex Haley (Couser 36). In more recent collaborations, the narrative attention has centred on the relationship itself as it is seen and told from the perspective of the writer. Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986, 1991) are cases in point. These respondent witnesses telling

“the story of the story” must negotiate between the equality of both members in the collaborative relationship and the authority that inevitably attends their role as writers (Eakin, *Lives* 176). Such a relational space, as Couser, Eakin, and Egan have observed, is fraught with the dilemmas of power, over-identification, and misappropriation in the narrative process and production, particularly with vulnerable subjects.

Witnessing the lives of others in narrative form, as these various respondent positions all affirm, is a practice of writing with, for, on behalf of, or by means of proximate vulnerable subjects through the process of relating and dialoguing with them. If witnessing is a dialogic act that occurs in the relational space between two people, then in its most basic terms the ethics of responsibility for the respondent witness refers to an ability to attend to and respond to others on the basis of their shared relationship and a practice of navigating the relational space between them in narrative form as an outworking of that ability. In these processes, however, the respondent witness is placed in a situation of hazard and struggle, Gillian Whitlock observes, “at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself” (“Second Person” 199). In their dialogue, he or she is located in the position of being respondent and narrator, listener and speaker at the same time. In their relationship, he or she is obligated to negotiate the proximity and intimacy between them with the difference of their respective experiences, between what can be seen, known, and told, and what cannot (Oliver, *Witnessing* 16). Witnessing vulnerable subjects thus emphasizes the ethical dilemmas that attend these spaces of relation and narration: How is the witness to navigate the relationship in order to respond ethically to the other person in representing and narrating his or her life? What kind of interaction and identification is ethically responsible? How is the witness to negotiate between a proximate relationship with the other person and the distance between their disparate

experiences? What can be told about others and how should their lives be represented? And how do the witness's responsibilities shift depending on his or her respondent position, the type of the witnessing relationship, and the nature of the other person's suffering?

In order to approach these practical problems of relating in bearing witness to vulnerable subjects, I limit my examination to those narratives in which respondent witnesses relate the other's story *at close range*, what Dominick LaCapra calls "the microsocial and interpersonal level" (*History and Memory* 9). The practices of ethical witnessing are most demanded and demanding in the proximate and immediate relationships between family members, within communities, and across communities. The ethical challenge as I see it is less in the witnessing of "past injustices" or "human crimes" in other places than in "[taking] responsibility for what's [actually] before our eyes," as Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw so fittingly put it (5).

Each of the three respondent-witnesses whose narratives I examine in this study—Etty Hillesum, John Howard Griffin, and Rudy Wiebe—are deeply connected to the vulnerable subjects they witness by proximity, identification, and relationship, but they are also located at various removes from these subjects. Their works reveal that the practice of witnessing "others" responsibly is a complicated navigation of relational and narrative space. I argue that each narrative exhibits the ethical possibilities of a "here I am" orientation toward these others. Indeed, Hillesum, Griffin, and Wiebe seem especially attuned to alterity on account of their positions of faith in a divine Other: witnessing what "cannot be seen" in faith deeply motivates them to respond ethically to the alterity of other people. And yet, even as they attempt a "here I am" orientation, their abilities to respond to and address the vulnerable subjects they witness are fraught with dilemmas of identity, relationship, and representation that challenge their dialogue and encumber their responsible interactions.

In Chapter Two, I address this practice of witnessing from within the context of the Holocaust, examining Etty Hillesum's 1941-1943 journals and letters collected and published posthumously as *An Interrupted Life* (1983) and *Letters from Westerbork* (1986). Looking at the specific site of trauma that inspired Levinas's ethical postulation of "here I am" in the first place, I determine three particular ways in which a "here I am" subjectivity bears out in verb form as a practice of witnessing: responsible witnessing is a cognitive matter of bearing the other in mind, a representational issue of bearing the other in language, and an embodied practice of bearing the other in person. Deeply informed by her Jewish mysticism and determined to help her fellow Jews as a member of the Jewish council in Amsterdam, Hillesum bears witness to personal and collective suffering under Nazism from within her own Jewish community in radically response-able ways. Her journal can be seen as embodying a Levinasian ethic, fleshing out an orientation of generosity in thinking *otherwise* about her fellow Jews and Nazi oppressors alike. She comes to "stand for" a small intellectual and mystical community within the larger community of Dutch Jews in Amsterdam and Westerbork, critically addressing what she sees as Jewish complicity in their own oppression. At the same time, she attempts to invert the power hierarchies implicit in standing for others by sacrificing herself to share in the suffering of her Jewish community, engaging generously in her personal and proximate relationships, and re-envisioning her experiences of suffering in her writing. I explore both the possibilities and complications of her "here I am" witnessing stance as she reveals it in her narrative.

In Chapters Three and Four, I examine two other witnessing positions in response to vulnerable subjects: witnessing *for* others as revealed in John Howard Griffin's ethnographic journal, *Black Like Me* (1961), and witnessing *with* others as seen in Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's collaborative narrative, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998). In these

two chapters, I consider what kind of reciprocal dialogue and responsibility might ensue in such relational stories “told of and by someone else” (Eakin, *Lives* 58). Griffin and Wiebe are both positioned at a greater experiential remove from the suffering lives they witness than Hillesum is. Indeed, not only do they belong to non-oppressed communities, they belong to the very communities that have oppressed and marginalized the subjects they witness. By this fact, both writers do not merely have to deal with the ordinary difficulties of negotiating a relational and narrative space between themselves and the subjects they witness, they must also contend with the problems of power and guilt that attend their dominant subject positions. These two chapters consider how these issues complicate their respective witnessing practices.

To this end, I focus expressly on the fact that both Griffin and Wiebe count themselves as perpetrators (by proxy) of the oppression they witness. They are “secondary witnesses” of a sort—those who have *inherited* the perpetration of their ancestors or their communities and implicitly bear the prevailing attitudes of racism (against Blacks and against the Cree respectively) maintained by these communities in the US and Canada at the time of their publication. Driven in part by their religious sensibilities, they both assume the burden of guilt for their complicit role in belonging to a culture of oppression. As I experienced a similar sense of guilt for my German heritage in bearing witness to Rhodea Shandler, I am particularly interested in the ways one’s association with collective perpetration and guilt affect one’s ability to witness another’s story and suffering, and explore this question most explicitly in Wiebe’s collaborative relationship with Johnson.

For Griffin and Wiebe the assumption of guilt motivates responsible witnessing: they are both opened by it and respond by embodying generosity to those whom they witness (collectively and interpersonally) in their respective narrative processes and by moving toward

dialogue and racial reconciliation through their specific relationships with “the other.” However, both narratives reveal that an assumption of guilt also heightens the challenge of negotiating the relational and narrative space between the respondent witness and vulnerable subject. It can turn the witness inward causing him to identify himself too closely with the other’s suffering or assume too much responsibility for the other’s life and story. In Chapter Three I analyze Griffin’s struggle with over-identification in his attempt to negotiate between himself and “the other” in his temporary passing for Black. And in Chapter Four I examine Wiebe’s struggle with over-responsibility in taking on Johnson’s case as an advocate for her social and juridical justice. In both cases, the possibilities for reciprocal dialogue between witness and vulnerable subject are impeded by the witness’s eagerness to right the collective wrongs of his community and cultivate justice and equality for the oppressed. Between the life narratives of these three respondent witnesses, my hope is to glean a better sense of the transformative possibilities of ethical responsibility in sites of political and personal oppression, as well as the relational and dialogic dilemmas that emerge for witnessing vulnerable subjects in narrative form. To set the stage, however, I begin with a chapter examining the philosophical work of Levinas and Ricoeur on the subject of ethical responsibility and witnessing alterity.

Ethical Bearing: Tracing an Ethics of Responsibility through the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur

My principle objective in this chapter is to formulate a nuanced conception of ethical responsibility to bring to bear on life narratives that witness vulnerable subjects. Through the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, I argue that ethical responsibility is an “existential commitment” to others that underpins and informs our politics of recognition, theories of justice, moral imperatives, and activities of response in our relationships with others (Critchley 28). As Levinas depicts it, responsibility is an intersubjective obligation to others preceding that which we normally define as ethics: those rules, principles, and procedures of judgment that determine what kinds of social interaction and action are good to do. Levinas postulates responsibility as the ethical bearing or orientation of a relational subject toward others that determines our responses to them and witness of them. Indeed, both Levinas and Ricoeur are concerned with what kind of being and ethical bearing informs how we live, what we do, and how we interact with other people in the world.

Drawing from their work, I contend that neither political action nor social interaction is in and of itself ethical and that constituting ethics purely in these terms results in an impoverished understanding of it. Any specific altruistic activity involved in witnessing others, such as recognition, empathy, identification, social justice, listening, or giving agency, can only be judged “on the grounds of the intentionality at work in them” (Davies 18).¹⁸ That is to say,

¹⁸ By intentionality, I do not here mean one’s “will,” that pre-meditated, objective, cognizant decision toward doing good, but rather, that which motivates one to move outside oneself toward others, such as divine or human alterity. While this motivation may include one’s own ethical intent toward others, it does so in the sense of intentionally opening oneself toward others. Oliver Davies in his ambitious and broad-ranging book, *A Theology of Compassion* (2001), describes ethical bearing as “other-centred intentionality,” arguing that any altruistic actions are only virtuous as they are directed outward toward others and function outside calculated (or uncalculated) self-interest. Direction and intention of the self, rather than practicing a particular action or interaction, determines whether one is ethical or not. Notably, this description of intention is different from Levinas’s view of it. He regards intentionality in the form of Husserl’s intentional consciousness, in which the intentions of a perceiving consciousness are rooted

bearing witness is first and foremost an ethically responsible “bearing” toward others—a particular orientation and disposition of the self toward alterity prior to and enabling one’s deliberation on the good of certain responses toward others. One’s bearing toward others essentially shapes the space between oneself and others and motivates ethically responsible action with and for others. My goal, then, is to draw on the perspectives of Levinas and Ricoeur in order to theorize this bearing of an ethically responsible subject and to consider what it might mean for autobiography scholars to take this conception of ethical subjectivity into account in their analyses of responsible witnessing relationships.

Levinas and Ricoeur both explore the ethical character of subjectivity in its intimate relation to the alterity of other people and formulate an other-centred ethics of responsibility in the process (Cohen, “Ricoeur” 283). However, they give alternative and even opposing accounts of this responsibility. Levinas constitutes the responsible subject as passive and subjected to the alterity of others in order to challenge what he sees as the human tendency to grasp, appropriate, or totalize others from a position of power and agency. Ricoeur reveals a different impulse and direction of responsibility. He suggests that the self is inherently constituted by alterity (oneself *as* another) and thereby insists that the responsible subject is an agent of responsibility, free to decide the good and capable of ethical activity toward others. Their differing viewpoints highlight the philosophical variations that underpin contemporary notions of ethical responsibility and reveal the difficulty in pinning down a definition of this term, as it depends on how one first constitutes selfhood, subjectivity, alterity, human nature, and the good. At the same time, however, Levinas’s phenomenology of otherness and Ricoeur’s phenomenology of selfhood reveal what I see as the two sides of ethical bearing involved in witnessing others:

in “accumulated knowledge of experience” (Smith, Introduction xvii). For Levinas, intentional consciousness is insufficient for describing the intersubjective relation between oneself and others.

passive subjection and active agency. Both are necessary for responsible human relationships and cannot be separated as mutually exclusive. Alterity and agency must inform each other.

My primary task, then, is to examine this ethical bearing between Levinas and Ricoeur and how it functions as a constitution of subjectivity. Toward this end I examine two things in turn. First, I address ethical bearing in its social sense: the dialogic, relational, and intersubjective constitution of selfhood in relation to other selves. Only when one perceives oneself as intrinsically relational (because of one's social situatedness in the world) and extrinsically relational (in one's dialogues with other people) can ethical responsibility occur. As long as one functions as a self-referential rather than relational self, one attempts an identity outside ethical responsibility. While ethical bearing is presupposed in a conception of self as relational, a relational self is not automatically an ethical self who functions responsibly in social relationships. Because a relational and dialogic self provides the space but not the impetus for ethical response, I move from social bearing (one's position with others) to responsible bearing (one's disposition toward others).

In the philosophies of Levinas and Ricoeur, responsible bearing is drawn from Jewish and Christian theology as one's orientation and response to the divine Other. The formation of an ethical subject is constituted in relation to God. The ethical response *par excellence* that emerges from this bearing is "here I am," a response which testifies or witnesses to that which is wholly other, outside and beyond oneself, and exceeding the regulating norms, ethical formulas, and value-laden constructions of what it means to be human and engage with other people. How does this witness, contingent on the divine Other and the place of the self in that relationship, translate to one's relationships with other people? What might it mean to have an ethical bearing in

relation to others beyond the identity markers and behaviours habitually used to describe an ethics of responsibility?

With its focus on the constitution of the subject rather than the virtues he or she practices, continental philosophy relies on biblical law and religious illustrations to establish their positions of the Other, otherness, and the self's responsible relation to others, positions that have been adopted in and for secular contexts and socio-political agendas.¹⁹ Assuming that an ethical bearing toward the divine Other can be translated as responsibility toward other people, I ask how a "here I am" bearing and response is relevant for the social interaction and political action addressed in autobiography studies, particularly in witnessing a suffering, vulnerable subject. Specifically, how does "here I am" function as *both* a universal response that can be taken to any context *and* a particular act of bearing witness to each individual person, which I propose as the complicated but necessary practical response to the lives (both lived and narrated) of others? Rather than offer a prescriptive ethics for witnessing others, this chapter will focus on the possibilities of an ethics of responsibility in light of the complexities of ethical bearing and the intricacies involved in navigating the relational space between oneself and another.

Social Bearing and Intersubjectivity

In my introduction, I indicated that all life writing presupposes a model of selfhood, a way of conceiving and representing the self in narrative form (Eakin, *Touching the World* 77). In the last two decades of autobiography scholarship, the pronoun "I" has ceased to mean the "first" person or the singular, and instead refers to a self who is interconnected with others through language, whose being is constituted relationally with and by means of other people. All selves, as we

¹⁹ For a discussion of Levinas's origins of "the Other" in Jewish and Christian theology of the early twentieth-century, see Samuel Moyn's *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (2005). Moyn traces Levinas's ethical philosophy and language of otherness through to its theological underpinnings. From his perspective, a secular or humanist ethics in Western philosophy cannot be constituted without recourse to theology.

understand them, are relational (Eakin, *Lives*; Miller, “Representing Others”), dialogic (Egan, *Mirror Talk*), and intersubjective (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*). With this in mind, I have come to wonder what, precisely, the link is between a self constituted as relational and the ways in which that self functions ethically in actual relationships with other people. We have carefully examined the self as intersubjective and dialogic, grappling with the questions, “Who am I?” and “What is an autobiographical identity?” in relation to other people and their stories, but such inquiries have not adequately approached the questions, “How should I be with others?” and “How do I determine this ‘should be’ in ways that may exceed the values and norms dictated within a given society?” In order to gain a fuller understanding of ethical being, it is not enough simply to determine the self in relation to others; we must also inquire how selves are oriented toward others within these relationships. As David Parker has persuasively argued, the self is not located in relational space without also being located in moral space with some set of ethical bearings: an orientation toward one’s own life and the lives of others directed by the question, “What is it good to be?” (*Moral Space* 2). How should a relational self relate to others? How should one negotiate the relational space between oneself and another? The question of selves in relationship both necessitates and determines the question of ethics.

One’s ethical bearing or orientation toward others is directly influenced by one’s intersubjectivity in the world. I do not use “intersubjectivity” here in the Foucauldian sense, where subjects are always necessarily subjected to discourse, to other people, and to regulating norms and disciplinary regimes (both external and internalized) for self-constitution and orientation (Butler, *Psychic Life* 32).²⁰ Rather, I define intersubjectivity in its broadest sense, as

²⁰ While being very aware of the pervasive role power plays in the formation of subjects, I do not describe intersubjectivity principally as a discursive category or a site for analyzing power relations between human subjects and institutional powers. Rather than use power as the dominating discourse for examining the relational and dialogic space between people and the way selves constitute themselves in and through those relationships, I want to

the intrinsic relationships between one person and another or the space shared by two or more people, in which a question of ethical orientation is shaped by but not reduced to questions of power. The connection between intersubjectivity and ethics posed in autobiography studies is rooted in philosophical discussions that far predate our recent concerns about relational identity and power dynamics.

Intersubjectivity enjoyed huge philosophical and theological debate in Germany during the interwar period (1930s), and has implicitly informed much of our contemporary thinking on relationality and ethics. Backtracking to these early discussions of intersubjectivity as encountered by Levinas and re-interpreted by Ricoeur, I want to contextualize intersubjectivity philosophically as well as examine how these two thinkers envision the relationship between self and other (and with others in community) as that which shapes ethical responsibility toward others. With theologian Karl Lowith, I believe that intersubjectivity determines one's individual interactions with others, whether ethical or unethical. As he writes in *The Individual and the Role of Fellow Man* (1928):

The structure of *relationships* in human life stems from the fact that men *relate* to one another, and this relation implies a foundational human way of being, i.e., an 'Ethos,' which is the original theme of ethics. . . . The ethos of man defines the meaning and attitude of relationships in human life, whether it is obligating or liberating and whether it is moral or immoral. (qtd. in Moyn 76)

Intersubjectivity (one's self with and by means of others) opens the space for ethical bearing (one's orientation toward others). If I already am in relationship with others by the fact that I exist, then how am I to be relational? Being relational is thus defined by these two interconnected elements: a social, intersubjective element answering the question, "What am I?" and an ethical element, answering the question, "How am I?" Together, social and ethical

suggest that ethics is an equally viable and potentially less oppressive starting point from which to examine human relationality.

bearing informs our interactions with others, functioning as a necessary precursor to responsible human relationships.

While this may be true, a relational subject does not naturally or necessarily relate ethically to other people, despite being relationally and ethically constituted to do so. I can *be* responsible for something or someone without *acting* responsibly. In the words of Robert Gibbs, my relational and ethical bearing is “independent of whether I act [or interact] ethically or not” (*Why Ethics?* 3). In making such a statement, Gibbs distinguishes between the ethical capability of bearing a responsibility (in being relationally constituted) and the “corresponding responsive performance” (3). This distinction is critical for nuancing the concept of responsibility for life writing. Particularly in examining the narratives of suffering and vulnerable subjects where the language of ethics comes to the fore, we tend to focus on the responsive performances of relational subjects as the basis for ethical responsibility, asking: What is it right to do? (Parker, *Moral Space* 2). The questions of truth-telling, representing others, judging others, invading privacy, exerting power over others, listening, helping others tell their stories, and encouraging counter-stories all deal with responsive performances. However, as I have just suggested, we have not attended to the ethical bearing undergirding these responsive performances: How is it good *to be*? (3). How one answers this question of orientation will determine one’s actions or lack of them. While a self constituted as relational may not necessarily engage with others ethically, a self conceived relationally *with* others arguably has more potential for ethical interaction and action than a self conceived of as autonomous or opposed to others. Kelly Oliver has argued that how we conceive of others in relation to us directly influences how we treat them (*Witnessing* 3). I would add further, that how we are intrinsically positioned (intersubjectively) with others and how we are oriented in relation toward them (subjectively) also determines our

interactions and our actions. How then, according to Levinas and Ricoeur, are we positioned intersubjectively from an ethical perspective? How is one to be oriented with and toward others?

Intersubjectivity in Phenomenology

Philosophical historian Samuel Moyn observes two competing views of intersubjectivity in the 1930s when Levinas enters the philosophical dialogue in Germany: a fully secular but not clearly moral theory of intersubjectivity as reflected in the thought of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and a version of intersubjectivity “that vindicated morality only by reverting to theology” (57). Both Levinas and Ricoeur lean toward the latter, closely aligning intersubjectivity with an ethics rooted in theology. Because our current paradigms of intersubjectivity grow out of and challenge the views of Husserl and Heidegger, it is worth briefly looking at them before turning to the ways they have been taken up by Levinas and Ricoeur.

Husserl poses the question of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations* as the problem of experiencing another person: How does one understand, constitute, or experience others?²¹ To answer his own question, Husserl describes the way others appear to one’s consciousness as *phenomena* and represents intersubjectivity as those relationships with others rooted in analogy and empathy.²² In order to engage with others at all, he determines, I must constitute them as “alter-egos,” analogous to me or just like me (*Cartesian Meditations* 94). At the same time, the

²¹ In his words, “What about other egos, who surely are not a merely intending and intended in me, merely synthetic unities of possible verification in me, but, according to their sense, precisely others?” (89).

²² Phenomenology, at least as it is articulated by Husserl, refers to the way the mind perceives and makes meaning of the concrete world (phenomena) or how the world and my experiences of it appear in consciousness: “It aims at describing man’s being or existing—not his nature” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 40). Ricoeur calls it Husserl’s “phenomenology of perception” (*Recognition* 154). Husserl argues that we cannot get to “things in themselves” (nature) but we can *describe* how things appear to us (subjectively) and how we create meaning out of our perceptions according to our bearing in the world. If philosophy can be defined as “the knowledge of what is,” phenomenology is concerned with the questions, “how is what is?” or “what does it mean that it is” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 31)?

other is *not* my ego, but “other than me, in the exclusive sense of the term” (Ricoeur, *Recognition* 156). While I apprehend another person with a body similar to my own, the original, primordial aspects of that person cannot be grasped: their actual lived experiences remain other to me, a gap in my experience. I may understand others in terms of association by relating them to myself through living in the same world, but I always recognize an alien aspect to others presented in this similarity. Empathy, for Husserl, reveals this tension. Empathy is an experience of that which is foreign but not unrecognizable. We cannot directly experience the pain of another person; we can only intuit it by our own experiences of pain. Through analogy (like me) and empathy (different from me), Husserl grounds intersubjectivity in the subject’s consciousness, examining how the other is constituted and experienced *by me* or *for me* (Moran 178).

He situates this conscious, perceiving subject in an intersubjective world, suggesting a similar paradigm of interactive analogy and empathy on a communal scale. To those others in my community (we), I am oriented in terms of reciprocal analogy: I experience them for myself just as they experience me for themselves. At the same time, we are not just “for ourselves,” we also exist as mutual beings for one another (Husserl 129). To those others in the world (them), I am oriented in terms of empathy: we hold the same “life-world” and their community is imaginable to me, but they exist in an alien cultural community (135). My understanding of myself becomes the position from which to understand my relationship with others, as we are situated in the same world. This positioning (from self to other) becomes Husserl’s paradigm for understanding myself in relation to all others and my community in relation to other communities.

Martin Heidegger is critical of this vision of intersubjectivity. One of the main problems he finds in Husserl's thinking is that the ego does not exceed consciousness: what exists is only what my consciousness perceives, constitutes, and intuitively of the world outside. The ego represents a solitary existence of self-consciousness, existing with other egos, but principally located in itself: "Nothing comes from outside into the ego; rather everything outside is what it is already within the inside" (Moran 178).²³ In contrast, Heidegger posits the ego (*Dasein*) as a concrete and finite being in the world who is with others (*Mitsein*) in its very constitution. For him, the subject is always first located immanently, finitely, and concretely with other people in the world before it is conscious of itself as a thinking, perceiving, and intuiting ego. "The world," he writes, "is always already what I share with others" (*Being and Time* 118). Frustrated with a metaphysical phenomenology that he sees as solipsistic (being that can only be experienced through *my* consciousness), Heidegger argues that the intersubjective world is prior to a subjective one: I am in the world before I can consciously constitute myself and others in that world (Moyn 63). If the self exists and is constituted by means of others before being conscious of it, then "others are not encountered by grasping and previously discriminating one's own subject . . . [or] by first looking at oneself and then ascertaining the opposite pole of distinction" (Heidegger 119). Rather than grasping others by reflecting on the self, being with others is precisely what it means to be a self. In Heidegger's words, "being-with existentially determines Da-sein even when an other is not factically present and perceived" (120). Whether I am alone or not, my finite being *is* by means of others.

Despite his understanding of being as "co-being" (or relational being) and in foregrounding the social bonds of being in the world, Heidegger's intersubjectivity remains

²³ Levinas, in his short article, "On Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty," claims that in the phenomenological theory of subjectivity, "it is always the *knowledge* of the alter ego that breaks egological isolation," which suggests that other people are accessible to the ego only through the ego's prior knowledge of others and itself (101).

conceptual and non-ethical. He does not seriously address intersubjectivity in actual, concrete situations of being with others fraught with the problem, “How *should* one be in relationship?” Nor does he explain why some social positions, such as being-against or being-indifferent, are more deficient than other forms of being with others (121). Being-with is a location of self prior to consciousness, and consequently, prior to thinking about how one should be in terms of moral attitude, positioning, and behaviour. His point is to show that to think most accurately about Being is to consider beings as they actually *exist* in the world in relation to others not as it *should be* nor how it could be constituted otherwise.²⁴ Ethics, then, is not an intrinsic aspect of being before thinking about it, but is determined by beings after thinking about it. *Dasein* may ponder ethics but is not determined by ethics. In this way, Heidegger does not frame being-with others as an ethical category but as an ontological one. Being-with others is significant only as it refers to being itself, “an answer to the question concerning the who of everyday *Dasein*” (Theunissen 172). While such beings may be constituted by means of others, *Dasein* is nonetheless concerned with itself for its own sake.

In autobiography studies, we tend to think about intersubjectivity and ethics somewhere between Heidegger’s being-with others in the world and Michel Foucault’s discourses of power. In both cases ethics is secondary to being, and defined as the norms that regulate beings or the behaviours valued as good in Western society. Ethics becomes a derivative “issue” to the questions of power or economics, simply a problem that occurs “where there is a substantial differential between partners in power or wealth” (Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects* 41). This view of

²⁴ From this perspective, Heidegger offers a kind of “ethics of interpretation” in terms of thinking and questioning, opening up ourselves, our presuppositions, and our representations of Being in order to listen to how Being reveals itself. Such thinking is meant to destabilize the totalities of philosophical knowledge and onto-theology and foreground the need to listen to the being given and to open up the same to the “other” by means of questioning. For a discussion on Heidegger’s “genuine thinking” as a form of ethical questioning and debunking of metaphysical and onto-theological traditions in philosophy, see Richard Cohen’s introduction to Levinas’s *Ethics and Infinity* (1-15), henceforth referred to as *EI*.

ethics is evident in Eakin's collection of essays, *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), wherein ethics refers to a set of imperatives for right action in writing the stories of selves and others: telling the truth, representing oneself and others responsibly, and respecting the rights and privacies of others. For Eakin, ethics also refers to the necessity of telling counter-stories and listening to others who resist master-narratives, stories that challenge our formulations of power and identity. Because we tend to constitute intersubjectivity in terms of ontology (systems of thinking about being) and power, we relegate ethics to a derivative position in our discourses about relationality. What might it mean instead to position ethics as the root of intersubjectivity, and determine ontology and power from this alternative starting point?

Levinas suggests such a move in posing ethics as a "first philosophy" ("Ethics as First Philosophy" 76). He turns the presupposition "ontology determines ethics" on its head by suggesting instead that "ethics conditions ontology" and by extension, complicates systems of power (Cohen, "Introduction" 9). Shifting the focus from ontology to ethics, he argues that the question of how to be with others is not principally a question of Being at all but a question of otherness or alterity. Levinas sees his work primarily as a response to the centrality of being in Heidegger's phenomenology and to his conception of "being-with" as solely an ontological category. While Levinas upholds Heidegger's phenomenological method in his concern with concrete situations and the questions, "How is what is?" or "What does it mean that it is?" (*EI* 31), Levinas argues that the problem with Heidegger's philosophy is that his conception of being for its own sake (being-for-itself) constantly takes centre stage.²⁵ "In Heidegger," Levinas observes, "the ethical relation, *Miteinandersein*, being-with-another, is only one moment of our presence in the world. It does not have the central place. *Mit* is always being next to. . . . It is not

²⁵ While Heidegger criticizes Husserl for his conception of being as solipsistic, Levinas criticizes Heidegger for his conception of being as equally solipsistic in its focus on being for its own sake in being with others.

in the first instance the face,” that is, the alterity revealed in the faces of other people (“Philosophy, Justice, and Love” 177). Levinas’ goal in response to Heidegger, then, is to destabilize the primacy and totality of Being in his study of human intersubjectivity and to posit ethics as the originary impulse of intersubjective bearing. In the process, he radically reconstitutes relationality outside established categories of what it means to be a self, codes of conduct, and institutional laws, focusing instead on that which is *other* than these systems. He finds the substance for these views not in phenomenology, however, but in biblical metaphors, Jewish mysticism, and Christian theology.

Religious Intersubjectivity

Levinas relies on a theological conception of alterity to propose an ethics centred on “the other” that exists prior to prescriptions of how to act in relationships (“Proximity” 213). He is particularly inspired by the biblical text as words that reveal a non-totalizing relationship with alterity (God) before its imposition within a religious system or translated into doctrine.²⁶ One of Levinas’ main influences in this area is the Jewish religious thinker, Martin Buber.²⁷ Buber, in his rendering of the “I-Thou” relationship, shows an “original sociality” invoked by God (the

²⁶ Notably, Levinas does not promote religious institutions in his support of biblical ethics. Religious doctrines or institutions, Levinas argues, totalize the bible. Instead he sees the biblical as belonging to a founding experience, before philosophy (*EI* 23-4). In signalling the biblical influence on Levinas, I have not begun to do justice to the complexity of their relationship. For further analysis see Jeffrey Bloechl’s edited collection of essays in *The Face of the Other and The Trace of God* (2000) and Oona Ajzenstat’s *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism* (2001). Ajzenstat also traces the Kabbalah mystic tradition in Levinas’s thought, a direction that I do not consider in this chapter.

²⁷ Other religious thinkers have also explicitly influenced Levinas’s thought, including Franz Rosenzweig and Gabriel Marcel. The current religious thought of the day, including the Protestant views of Karl Barth and Karl Lowith, introduce the concept of “otherness” as well as the other as transcendent. According to Moyn, otherness does not emerge from a secular ethical discourse, but “from the thoroughgoing revolution in Weimar-era theology” (12). He further observes, “Levinas’s conception of ethics as interpersonal encounter . . . is quite simply unthinkable except against the modern recasting of revelation as subjective experience and the Weimar-era understanding of revelation as interpersonal encounter” (12). It is critical to our understanding of Levinas’s ethics that we see the theological origins of “alterity” as describing the transcendent and infinite Other. These terms, most often used in the secular cultural context of conflict, marginalization, and domination are conceptually borrowed from religious thought, and we would do well to keep these origins in mind so as to interpret intersubjectivity according to its full range of meaning and consider what theology brings to secular intersubjectivity in the realm of ethics.

Eternal Thou), whose invocation or call opens up a dimension of relationality that preconditions “the meeting of a human Thou” (Levinas, “Martin Buber” 21). Using divine intersubjectivity as a conceptual starting point, Levinas describes human relationships in which the other is positioned as first and above oneself (Smith, “Introduction” xxi). Aspects of the Eternal Thou, particularly transcendence and infinity (outside and beyond a knowing self) who gives himself to be encountered and who initiates an encounter through his call in language, are all aspects that Levinas extends to human intersubjectivity.²⁸ Rather than see another person as an “it” rooted in one’s own knowledge and construed as an object, Levinas asserts that interhuman relations reflect the theological encounter: the approach of one person to another addressed as Thou (“Proximity” 213). Thou is “absolutely other” and thus requires a relation with me beyond the way I experience, perceive, or know him or her for myself (“Martin Buber” 29).

Of particular importance to Levinas is Buber’s concrete mode through which this relation is accomplished: that is, through language and dialogue (Buber, *I and Thou* 103, 104). The space between oneself and another is negotiated through language. The words that take place between us make a relational encounter possible. Through language, Levinas argues, the alterity of the other person (his complete otherness) remains intact and initiates ethical relations. Other thinkers like Gabriel Marcel disagree with Buber’s position, arguing instead that the bodily encounter *between* oneself and another is deeper and prior to any word. While quite aware of this perspective, Levinas opts for the word of the other person as the originary relation that requires

²⁸ Levinas’s intersubjectivity is directly shaped by the discourse of “the Other” and a conception of “ethics as an interpersonal encounter” emerging from Weimar-era theology. Thinkers like Karl Barth envisioned God as a transcendent Other who reveals himself through revelation as an interpersonal encounter, a language that Levinas comes to adopt and adapt for addressing one’s social encounters with others (Moyn 12).

ethical response and brings the possibility of peace to human relations, despite the problems that language—itself a system of thought and power—may pose for ethical intersubjectivity.²⁹

While he relies on Buber's I-Thou intersubjectivity and dialogue as the originary social relation, Levinas nonetheless argues that Buber does not take his I-Thou relationship far enough to be truly ethical. I and Thou are in a reciprocal relationship, equal within an economy of exchange: "Buber says that when I say 'Thou,' I know that I am saying 'Thou' to someone who is an I, and that he says 'Thou' to me. Consequently . . . I am to the other what the other is to me" ("Proximity" 213). Buber's vision is not ethical enough for Levinas in that it does not give Thou (the other) centre stage, but suggests a reciprocal sharing of the stage between oneself and others. Reciprocity is a problem for Levinas because he sees it as undermining the essence of human generosity: "Relation no longer arises from generosity but from the commercial relation, from the exchange of proper procedures" (213). From this perspective, Levinas proposes an intersubjectivity that is intrinsically asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, completely other-focused. The other cannot both be equal to me in reciprocity and above and beyond me, as wholly and infinitely other. Thou must be "absolutely other" in *every* respect.

²⁹ Levinas suggests the possibility of peace through language. Peace begins in my word, "hello" (*shalom*), in which I involve myself in another's life ("Humanity is Biblical" 80). Speech consists in welcoming another person, who is not reduced to objective thought, but overflows the limits of knowledge and representation. In contrast to this description of language as peace, Marcel views language or dialogue as that which objectifies others: "A principle of alienation, language petrifies living communication: it is precisely in speaking that we pass most easily from 'Thou' to 'He' and to 'It'—objectifying others" ("Martin Buber" 27). In Marcel's view, there must be a kind of incarnational (bodily) participation between oneself and others *before* language, what Levinas describes as "an intersubjective nexus deeper than language" (27). My body is situated between my inner self and others. In bodily form, I participate with others even before I speak, or despite the fact that I speak. Dialogue thus appears to have ethical potential or relational detriment depending on how one construes the possibility of language. Dialogue invites peace but may provoke war if it functions to objectify others (hence Louis Althusser's view of intersubjective power and control through language). Indeed, bodily participation with others before language or despite language can be constituted in much the same way—as ethically potent or relationally detrimental. Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life*, suggests that the body is vulnerable, exposed to the gaze and touch of others. Touch has as much potential as language to be violent or to be loving (26). My body relates me to others, both those others whom I choose, and those "who I do not choose to have in proximity to myself" (26). Consequently, it appears that neither intersubjectivity rooted in dialogue nor intersubjectivity rooted in bodily participation is intrinsically ethical or necessarily results in ethical behaviour.

Alterity and Intersubjectivity

With absolute otherness as his basis, Levinas's intersubjectivity is defined by difference and separation between oneself and another. In one sense, this necessary difference comes in response to his interpretation of Buber's reciprocity. If reciprocity implies that the self and the other are interchangeable or that their equality erases alterity, then the ethical response of generosity for others—giving oneself for another without receiving something in return—is impeded ("Proximity" 213). In another sense, and more fundamental to Levinas's thought, this necessary difference comes as a response to the Western philosophical tradition's privileging of human knowledge and Heidegger's ontological reduction of otherness to "the same" in being for-itself. Levinas contests the philosophical partiality to knowledge in conceiving of one's relation to others. To begin with the "I" who approaches others by means of knowledge results in objectifying or thematizing others as "things" under my power. As Levinas sees it, "the rigorous development of knowledge led to the fullest consciousness of self. To think being is to think on one's own scale, to coincide with oneself," and to reduce oneself and others to objects of one's own consciousness ("Martin Buber" 30). The philosophical arrogance of placing thinking being at the centre of the world expresses itself concretely and politically as a system enclosed in itself and for itself. This "being for-itself," Levinas argues, "takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another" (*Otherwise than Being* 4).³⁰ He points to National Socialism as the horrifying extreme of such being. To construct a system of being for itself totalizes the other. It subsumes alterity into similitude, others into selfhood, and one's encounters with others into a system of knowledge or even a "final solution." Thus, a model of intersubjectivity beginning with knowledge and being is, for Levinas, the origin of violence and destructive social relations.

³⁰ Henceforth *Otherwise than Being* will be referred to as *OTB*.

In contrast to this position Levinas asserts, “One has to find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression” (*OTB* 177). This search for another form of kinship, rooted in difference and inequality, is the driving force behind Levinas’s intersubjectivity, and that which makes his thinking particularly fruitful for discussing how to respond to the lives and stories of vulnerable subjects. How do we *be* in a way that centres on others rather than on our own being? Overturning Heidegger’s ontology, Levinas asserts that in order to encounter other people ethically we must begin with the other as wholly other and move toward the self rather than begin with the ego and move toward the other. Beginning with alterity, Levinas constitutes ethical subjectivity as the unsettling of being rather than as a prescription for being good. We are summoned to step outside the formulations and systems we use to make sense of ourselves and others and to determine the value of our respective lives. Because these are the ways we inevitably engage, Levinas challenges us to let go of these structures of being even for a moment in order to glimpse something or someone beyond ourselves.

If social bearing refers to the social position of the self with others in intersubjective relationships, Levinas situates others as wholly distinct from the self—that is, as infinitely other (*Totality and Infinity* 22). In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes this separation between oneself and others in two ways: as egoistic and as ethical.³¹ In egoism or being for-oneself, the self is separate in the natural human state of enjoyment *before* reflection, knowledge, and abstraction; the sensibility of the body is independent of thought and representation (112, 136).

³¹ It is critical to recognize here that separation does not mean *opposition*. Levinas writes, “if the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other” (*Totality and Infinity* 38). Otherness does not refer to dialectical opposition to the same, but to separation and difference.

Unaware or indifferent to everything outside itself, the “I” is “at home” with itself (138). Levinas reasons that egoistic separation is a necessary precursor for ethical separation, where the other remains absolutely other, outside myself. Without complete enjoyment (where one is content in oneself), any social bearing toward the other has the potential to be needy, an attempt to fill a lack within the self by means of the other.

At home with myself means I am separate and interior but not isolated. A home also has “a street front,” which conveys exteriority or alterity (156). If being at home is my natural state of interiority and enjoyment, then “opening my home” to the street is an expression of ethical intersubjectivity.³² As Levinas puts it, ethical separation “designates an interior being that is capable of a relation with the exterior, and does not take its own interiority for the totality of being” (180). In encountering the other as separate, being for-oneself is opened and the social bond is no longer a totalizing incorporation of otherness into sameness. Rather, “I welcome the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him” (171). Opening my home (hospitality) means opening myself, moving from engaging with the other as a “non-I” (defined by and referring back to the self) to engaging with the other as absolutely Other. However, Levinas is clear that such an opening is not natural. My natural state is to be at home with myself with the doors closed, completely unaware or indifferent to others (*OTB* 178). A truly intersubjective life, as Levinas distinguishes, “cannot remain life *satis*-fied in its equality to being, a life of quietude” because being human “is never—contrary to what so many reassuring traditions say—its own reason for being, that the famous *conatus essendi* is not the source of all

³² Levinas appears to take this metaphor from Franz Rosenzweig, who writes in “Apologetic Thinking,” “Insofar as the thinker looks into his innermost [being], he indeed sees this innermost, but for this reason he is still far from seeing—himself. He himself is not his innermost but is to the same extent also his outermost, and above all the bond that binds his innermost to his outermost, the street on which both associate reciprocally with each other” (108). However, Levinas’s interest is not reciprocity, but non-reciprocity and asymmetry.

right and all meaning” (*EI* 122). Rather, the intersubjective life requires that the self or the egoistic subject be de-centred and interrupted, “awakened” out of itself by the Other (122).

Levinas describes this awakening as a call *above* me.³³ I am first of all a passive recipient of the other’s call revealed to me in language (50). Levinas names this call “the face” or the face-to-face relation, which is not to be taken literally although the call may literally manifest itself in the face of another person. Rather, “the face” conveys an epiphany. “Its revelation is in speech,” given much in the way God reveals himself from on high: not seen but heard (193). As such, the face cannot be reduced to my gaze, perception, recognition, or identification; I have no power over it: “the face is a mystery that defies assimilation” (Schroeder 391). I can only bear witness to its alterity. The face is a stranger; it unsettles my being at home with myself. Yet the face *speaks* to me in language; it relates us.³⁴ This dialogue initiated by the other is one of address and response, in which the summoned self responds to the address of the other before thinking about it. By means of this dialogue, this call to respond, I become who I am: a unique subject, singular, and set apart. The subject is not comprised of itself for itself, but finds its very identity and significance in the call of the other and in its own response to this call.

In short, Levinas’s intersubjectivity begins in radical separation and distance and relates through the call and the face of the Other (“Intersubjectivity” 102). This relationship does not *originate* in community, but is nonetheless the foundation of communal life together.

³³ The face reveals itself as *revelation* rather than as *disclosure*. Levinas is careful to distinguish between these terms. In contrast to Heidegger, who uses the term “disclosure” to mean “letting beings be,” Levinas suggests that disclosure proposes the Other “as a theme” (*OTB* 71). While Heidegger suggests that disclosure is the way to get at the origin of truth, Levinas argues that truth is “founded on my relationship with the other” (99). For further discussion, see Anthony Steinbock’s essay, “Face and Revelation: Levinas on Teaching as Way-Faring” in *Addressing Levinas* (2005).

³⁴ If one were to use theological terms (avoided in *Totality and Infinity*) the face could be considered as the face of God, who speaks to his people *and* is Infinite. God’s face is not seen but is revealed in his voice. God cannot be understood, gazed at, conceived, controlled, or possessed. Because God is made manifest in my relation to other people, other people need to be approached in a similar way, that is, in terms of “height” or asymmetry rather than in reciprocity.

Community, if understood as unity, totality, synchrony, or absorption of every other one into the same, cannot generate the separation between oneself and another necessary to originate ethical intersubjectivity. To avoid totality and oppression of others, the other in intersubjective relation must remain wholly other, while the subject is made a passive subject to others (*OTB* 140). The relationship with alterity shifts the subject from being for-itself to being for-the-other (184). To bear oneself intersubjectively means “to leave one’s home to the point of leaving oneself [and] to substitute oneself for another” (182). The question of how to be other than being for myself, the principle movement of ethical bearing, is not about conducting myself well (182). Rather, it means giving oneself, one’s identity, or one’s being over for another: “In its subjectivity, its very bearing as a separate substance, the subject [is] an expiation for another, the condition or unconditionality of being hostage” (182, 184).³⁵ Levinas confesses that those who hold to the idea that “modern man takes himself as a being among beings” will balk at his hyperbolic expression of the subject in intersubjective sociality (184).³⁶ However, he holds to the paradox that only through the radical mortification of being for-oneself (dying as the complete undermining of being) can totalizing social and political relations of power be opened to peace. Etty Hillesum, a Jewish victim of the Nazi genocide whose journals I examine in my next chapter, illustrates this radical position when she writes: “I see no alternative. Each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember

³⁵ Despite its likeness to a Foucauldian or Althusserian vision of subjectivity, Levinas’s view of subjectivity bears some notable differences. Rather than envision the subject produced and maintained through regulatory mechanisms and disciplinary regimes of power or through the recognition of being addressed in language and accepting the subordination and normalization of the law (divine or otherwise) imposed through that address (Butler, *Psychic Life* 18, 32, 106), Levinas undermines the power hierarchies assumed in these positions. He suggests instead that the “other” who addresses me and to whom I am subject principally refers to other people who are vulnerable, the stranger and the destitute to whom I give of myself *as if* I were giving myself to God.

³⁶ Indeed, Hegel and Nietzsche would render such an extreme position as internalizing oppressive religious or social mechanisms that function to enslave, mortify, and subordinate the self to the impossible ethical demands of an unhappy conscience (Butler, *Psychic Life* 32). However, a revelation of the divine Thou, is not a set of institutionalized religious norms and is meant to free the self from persisting in its own being rather than enslave the self to an endless set of moral obligations.

that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable” (212). She reveals precisely this intersubjectivity of peace through self-expiation that Levinas advocates: not a turning *against oneself*, but the turning inside out of one’s being for-oneself (and against the other) in reorientation toward another in peace (*OTB* 49).

For Levinas, intersubjectivity is *otherwise* than being: being subject to and responsible for others. Intersubjectivity begins with the wholly other and contests the subject’s oppression of others by situating the subject in a passive, subjected position, exiled from home and infinitely responsible to bear witness to alterity in responding to the call of others: the stranger, the oppressed, the destitute, and the ostracized. In autobiography studies, our desire to give voice to the marginalized or silenced and to encourage counter stories that defy socio-political powers or ideological norms implicitly takes up this Levinasian ethical bearing toward the oppressed (Schaffer and Smith 17). However in turning these responses into prescriptions of how to be with others, we lose the radical undercurrent of Levinas’s vision. Levinas’s intersubjectivity challenges a conception of relational selfhood and responsibility defined within or against socially acceptable and prescribed modes of being and doing. Rather than set up a “for-the-other” doctrine of ethics, he suggests that to truly be for others we must constantly question even our own systems and languages of the good and recognize the way these systems morph into new hierarchies of power. For instance, to take the common example of being for-the-other as “giving voice to the oppressed,” how might giving voice to the silenced merely reiterate the giver’s power? Or how might helping others tell their stories recreate their identities? Might not helping them to assert themselves in the public sphere merely reinforce our dictates of which identities count (the voiced, public ones) and what defines being healed or whole (being able to speak)? If the point of ethics is *not* to conduct myself well, but to question my conduct and my subtle ways

of being for myself in my very definitions of how to be with others, then a Levinasian vision of ethical bearing becomes particularly fruitful in its challenge to let go of these formulations of ethical being and doing for others. Only in letting go can I encounter and witness other people who may not make sense to me, fit within my models of human interaction, or want my vision of help.

Intrinsic Alterity and Relational Intersubjectivity

If Levinas roots intersubjectivity in the absolute alterity of the other in our life together, Ricoeur counters this position in *Oneself as Another* (1992), suggesting that intersubjectivity originates in selfhood. For him the question of how to be with others is a matter of recognizing otherness at the heart of what it means to be a self. Alternatively, Levinas argues that beginning with the self results in a totality of “the same” or a reduction of otherness to similitude that denies the intersubjective impulse. While Ricoeur upholds Levinas’s stance of fundamental alterity and agrees that such an expression of the self makes sense considering Levinas’s concern with human evil and the totalizing effects of Nazism and war, he disagrees with Levinas’s notion of the self as “same.” Ricoeur separates “selfhood” (*ipse*) from “sameness” (*idem*) arguing that the self is not principally totalizing or at war but is rather a changeable entity, interactive, reciprocal, and rooted in relationship. In constituting selfhood as not necessarily oriented or defined “against” others, Ricoeur suggests that a relational self is intrinsically interconnected with others. Concerned with this lack of connection in Levinas’s intersubjectivity, Ricoeur sees alterity as carrying with it similitude, bridging the distance between self and other in the very place it creates dissymmetry. The other is not *absolutely* other but part of oneself.³⁷ Levinas’s other, he

³⁷ In “Ricoeur and the Lure of Self-Esteem,” Richard Cohen suggests that such a position raises a number of problems and concerns. I will mention two. First, if the self is primordial, is there such a thing as an-other-to-the-self? That is, if one begins with the self, how can an other be imagined? Does Ricoeur in fact lose the alterity of the

worries, is *too other* to be put into relation with the self: “[No] between is secured to lessen the utter dissymmetry between the Same and the Other” (*Oneself as Another* 338).³⁸ The self must be intimately related to and constituted by alterity in its social and ethical bearing for the sake of responsible interactions with others.

The title of Ricoeur’s text *Oneself as Another* emphasizes this connection between oneself and the other with the word “as.” Levinas’s “for-the-other” does not directly address such an analogy except negatively. For him, the other, as wholly other, defies analogy. In contrast, Ricoeur represents a relationship of both/and in which selfhood is defined by analogy, including both connection and difference in its identity:

Oneself as Another suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms. To ‘as’ I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of implication (oneself inasmuch as being other). (3)

Ricoeur expresses this intimate implication of “oneself inasmuch as being other” in a concrete way by looking at the body, conscience, and history (other stories entangled with my own).³⁹

other person in foregrounding the primacy of selfhood? Moreover, if the other is not “absolute alterity” how can it not be subsumed into the self? Ricoeur seems to suggest a much more benevolent sense of self here than does Levinas, one that implies the other intimately in its very articulation of self without subsuming the other *and* recognizes the other without totalizing or appropriating the other for one’s own ends. Levinas argues that such a natural state of benevolence is impossible since being is naturally indifferent or even at war with others. Second, Ricoeur reads Levinasian intersubjectivity as rooted in complete separation. He deems “absolute alterity” to mean absolute separation. However, such a reading misses the paradox of fecundity *in* separation. Levinas’s idea of fecundity suggests the Other who is and is not me at the same time, as exemplified in the relationship between a parent and child: For a parent, the child is a stranger and at the same time the child is also *me*. He is “my own” and “non-mine” simultaneously: “By total transcendence, the trans-substitution, the I is, in the child, an other” (*Totality and Infinity* 267). Ricoeur ignores this aspect of Levinas’s thinking when he declares that Levinas sees the self and other as entirely separated. Are Ricoeur and Levinas in fact both saying a similar thing, that there is at once separation and connection between self and other, though they differ in their focus and their starting point – alterity in Levinas’s case and selfhood in Ricoeur’s case? Or does Ricoeur privilege connection at the expense of alterity in his focus on the benevolent self? Does he affirm human goodness in response to Levinas’s focus on human evil?

³⁸ As Cohen clarifies, “For Ricoeur . . . the problem with Levinas’s thought is precisely its excess. First error: exaggerating the sameness of the same. . . . Second error, which follows from the first: exaggerating the alterity of the other. Third error, follows from both: exaggerating the difference separating same and other, self and other person” (311).

³⁹ Geoffrey Bennington observes that Derrida makes a similar kind of move in discussing “the-other-in-the-same” in which the other disrupts the totality that the word “same” has come to mean, but also in which absolute alterity is

First, Ricoeur argues that the most intimate sense of otherness is not “other people” but the otherness of my own body. In some cases, my mind explicitly tells my body what to do: shake her hand, jump this fence, sit down, get a massage. This interaction between mind and body reveals a certain kind of relationship: bi-directional activity—from mind to body (jump this fence) and from body to mind (sore muscles demand a massage). However, often my body seems absolutely other despite it being me. I become passive to the alterity of my body, particularly in cases of physical trauma or illness. The body becomes foreign to me. In suffering, I become a passive victim to its heavy hand. Ricoeur also reveals the “otherness” of my body in another way. My body is that which mediates between myself and others. I am always a body among other bodies. I am at once my own body (self) but at the same time a body among other bodies (other) because, as mediator, my body is at once part of me and part of the world outside me (*Oneself as Another* 326).⁴⁰ My body is never “my own” without also always existing as an other for others in being situated in the world with other bodies.⁴¹

Second, Ricoeur suggests that my conscience is other within me. The conscience represents the “ought” (the good) of moral behaviour that is alternate to the “is” of my experience. The good is *other* to the everyday, but exists within the “is” of everyday life. In much the same way that Levinas’s external other calls from on high and awakens me to respond,

incoherent. Otherness is never absolutely external to the self or the same but folded in with it, even as similarity and commonality are necessary aspects of all intersubjective relationships between people (303). It suggests a form of “reconciliation” between distinctions.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* will henceforth be referred to as *OA*.

⁴¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests a similar sense of embodiment and intersubjectivity in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Perception is our experience of being in the world, our orientation to the world and participation in the world. Merleau-Ponty calls the subject’s orientation/participation *intersubjectivity*. Rather than pose a dichotomy between the subject and the world outside the subject as “object,” he suggests a relationship of subject and intersubjectivity, beings in the world constantly interacting in time and space. There are certain phenomena experienced by myself alone, such as daydreams and images. However, there are many phenomena experienced by other people as well as myself: “That tree bending in the wind, this cliff wall, the cloud drifting overhead: these are not merely subjective; they are intersubjective phenomena—phenomena experienced by a multiplicity of sensing subjects” (Abram 38). We are situated in an intersubjective world, where we mutually experience each other and together we experience all forms of beings in the world.

Ricoeur speaks of the conscience as an interior other that is motivated from the outside and calls upon the self.⁴² When my conscience calls me, I become the listener, the passive respondent. Quoting Heidegger, Ricoeur suggests, “The call comes from me and yet from beyond me and over me” (348).⁴³ Although Ricoeur does not directly say so, this call of conscience could be read as theologically oriented.⁴⁴ From a Christian perspective, the otherness of conscience in oneself is informed by the divine Thou speaking in and through the conscience. The inner self, then, is open to the voice and word of the transcendent Other.

Third, Ricoeur assumes that selfhood is constituted by narrative and argues that one’s narrative is never one’s “own” but always exists in relation to the stories of others and the official “story” of history. He writes, “the actions of each one of us are intertwined with the actions of everyone else. We have insisted elsewhere . . . on the idea, proper to the narrative field, of ‘being entangled in stories’; the action of each person (and of that person’s history) is entangled not only with the physical course of things but with the social course of human activity” (*OA* 107). These narratives not only reveal the position of agency—“oneself in as much as being other” in the stories I tell myself and others about who I am—they also reveal the position of patient or passive sufferer. The stories of suffering are often those hidden and unrecounted stories woven into the same social fabric as stories that are told. Even the untold story (as other) implicitly becomes part of the social narrative, of which my story is also a part.

⁴² In contrast to a Nietzschean vision of conscience in which the self is internally prohibitive, repressive, and self-enslaving, Ricoeur positions conscience as that which is other within the self, challenging the self to function in other ways than those that may be most self-serving and even challenging the prohibitions and guilt that paralyze the self from esteeming other selves.

⁴³ At the same time, Ricoeur disagrees with Heidegger about grounding morality in ontology and agrees with Levinas that one cannot get to ethics from ontology since the good is beyond being, even as it appears in beings.

⁴⁴ The other *in* oneself, functioning in a spiritual sense, is a common theme in Christian thought beginning from Christ’s teaching. Christ figures himself in John’s gospel as “the vine” in which his disciples are rooted as “branches” who must abide “in him” as he abides “in them” (*KJV*, John 15:1-5). St. Paul picks up on this language of the wholly Other, Christ, as spiritually internal. As he phrases it in his epistle to the Colossians, his calling is to preach the “mystery”: “Christ *in* you, the hope of glory” (*KJV*, Col. 1:27, my emphasis).

Such an entangling of stories is the basis for constituting singular and social identity. The self *is* inasmuch as it is other.

Constituting alterity *within* the self or *as* the self, Ricoeur reveals an alternative social and intersubjective bearing to Levinas's. If selves are not naturally constituted as the same but as intrinsically other in their very essence, then they engage with others as both different and like themselves, both wholly other and analogous to them. From this perspective, reciprocity and mutuality become the foundational elements of human intersubjectivity. Reciprocity refers to my mutual relations with other people as sharing with them, whether in terms of social "living together" or in the intimacy of friendship (183). It includes sharing enjoyment and sharing the pain of suffering. The reciprocity of *sharing-with* is impossible if the self does not first recognize itself in community (existing by means of others) and as another (in body, conscience, and narrative).

Reciprocity and mutuality are perhaps most distinctly revealed in language and dialogue between oneself and others. Like Levinas, Ricoeur argues that language relates us. Unlike Levinas, however, Ricoeur suggests that ordinary dialogue tends not to be rooted in asymmetry and non-reciprocity, in which the other initiates, awakens, and calls me to respond from on high. He grants that dialogic positions of asymmetry and non-reciprocity do have a place in theological contexts where God speaks and humans respond in humble reverence and obedience, and in socio-political contexts where power hierarchies between powerful selves and oppressed others need to be destabilized. In these contexts, I must wait, listen, be passive, and subject myself *first* in order that their words can be heard without my drowning them out, even with such benevolent motives as equal rights and social justice. However, in most conversational contexts and in grammatical structure itself, I constantly exchange roles between being an agent in the

nominative and what Ricoeur calls being “a patient” in the accusative. When I speak, I am an agent; when I listen, I am a patient. These roles are reciprocal: the other is also agent and patient. As Ricoeur observes, “The agents and patients of an action are caught up in relationships of exchange which, like language, join together the reversibility of roles and the nonsubstitutability of persons” (193). *Roles* are reversible; *persons* are not. Ricoeur argues that such a relationship reveals the paradox of exchange: we are at once equivalent and exchangeable (in language) *and* different and irreplaceable (as people). The subject in intersubjective relationships, then, is mutually and reciprocally engaged with others, constantly exchanging positions of agent and patient, nominative and accusative, initiator and respondent with others. These double movements offer a mutuality, equality, and bi-directionality between people: human being is being for one another (*Recognition* 182).

Both Ricoeur and Levinas insist that alterity is absolutely essential to ethical intersubjectivity. Levinas, relying on biblical transcendence and the infinity of God as a model for alterity, applies to human relationality a wholly external otherness, a Thou that relates through language but cannot be reduced to language, to object, or to analogy. Ricoeur similarly applies to human relationality a complete otherness, but one that is internal and intrinsic to the self, rather than wholly external. He argues that self and wholly other are not mutually exclusive entities, but experience that which is other *within* themselves. If otherness is part of me, then I will encounter other people as wholly other but also as wholly interconnected with me. Arguably, this inherent interconnection rather than our separation motivates my responsibility for others. Ricoeur points out that a purely asymmetrical and non-mutual relationship proves ethically problematic in that it has as much potential for negative relations like domination or exclusion (being over and against others) as it does for ethical intersubjectivity (177, 191).

Because ethical asymmetry inverts power hierarchies but still functions within their structures, it has the potential to generate new hierarchies in which the oppressed victim becomes an oppressor of others. Moreover, asymmetry in which the self is subject to others can produce a negative subjection of selfhood—in which the self enslaves itself or turns against itself in guilty obligation to others. By balancing asymmetry with reciprocity and subjectivity with selfhood, Ricoeur suggests that we see each other as *selves* rather than as *others* in order to avoid the dichotomies of self/other and the uneven power structures they imply. In short, Ricoeur does not envision ethical intersubjectivity as rooted in subjects oriented *otherwise than being*, but in selves *being* oriented *otherwise* toward others selves, a distinction to which I will later return.

In autobiography scholarship about human rights and social justice through narrated lives, we foreground this necessity of equality and mutuality, of rendering others enough like ourselves to encourage democracy, belonging, and inclusivity of those who fall between the threads of the social fabric. Doing justice and respecting the rights and privacies of others assume an equality of being that undergirds our scholarly visions of how to be with and for vulnerable subjects—whether suffering from illness, personal abuse, social marginalization, or political oppression—in our witness of them. In fact, according to the double issue of *Life Writing* devoted to the subject of trauma (2008), our primary ethical concern is to continue broadening the spectrum of vulnerable voices to be heard so that more subjects can be granted equal human rights and social justice (Douglas and Whitlock 3).

The shortcoming of being an ethical globetrotter traveling to new sites and gathering an ever-increasing collection of life narratives, however, is that we potentially reinforce the very power hierarchies and negative asymmetries we mean to undermine. While benevolently collecting the stories of oppressed and traumatized people with whom we wish to empathize or

grant agency, we still maintain a separation between *us* and *them*, categorizing *them* as “others” or “victims” and reinforcing an asymmetrical relationship of patronage in our very desire to give them voice. Ricoeur’s vision of reciprocity challenges writers, readers, and critics of autobiography to consider whether we do, in fact, exhibit mutual, equal, and bi-directional relationships with those we label “others.” In witnessing the lives of others, textual dialogue may ensue but the power of the writer, reader, or critic is often unidirectional: We can choose how to witness others. We frequently have the last word—whether critical or benevolent. With Ricoeur’s vision we are challenged to see ourselves as “others” to those we witness, as scholars who require interruption, criticism, and questioning from those whom we hear or with whom we speak. Particularly in situations where we do not encounter vulnerable subjects face-to-face, how do we engage with their narrative voices in mutual address and response? Can vulnerable selves in textual form awaken, critique, call into question, and cause scholars to respond to such an extent that the power relations between them are not merely undermined or inverted but actually transcended?

From my perspective, the distinctive perspectives of Levinas and Ricoeur offer a fresh vision of intersubjectivity for autobiography studies. On a general level, they extend the idea that selves are relationally and dialogically constituted to propose that selves are also ethically constituted by their very sociality. Moreover, by beginning with ethical rather than political constitution, they present an alternative conception of intersubjectivity that has the potential to destabilize, exceed, and even transform the systems of power in which we are relationally and dialogically located. On a more specific level, addressing the question *how to be with others* as central to ethical responsibility, Levinas and Ricoeur reveal that the way these interconnections with others are envisioned—as intrinsic or extrinsic, reciprocal or asymmetrical, determined

through analogy or difference—will inform the kind of relationship, dialogue, and ethical action that ensues. In other words, *how* we position the self relationally and dialogically with other selves, *how* we constitute and navigate that space between oneself and others, and *how* we understand each particular relationship will determine the nature of ethical responsibility in relational and dialogic interactions.

I have suggested that *how to be with others* intersubjectively is principally a question of alterity as it informs being, whether in terms of *being otherwise* (Ricoeur) or *otherwise than being* (Levinas). With this in mind, I now turn to the more specific question of ethical subjectivity: How is one *otherwise*? What manner of being and what kind of subject orientation is *otherwise*? How, precisely, does one orient oneself toward other people ethically in order to negotiate relational and dialogic space with them? Levinas and Ricoeur disagree about what bearing or orientation toward alterity proves most ethically responsible. Their differences cause me to wonder how their visions of ethical subjectivity might intersect with and complicate each other in fruitful ways. And further, how their intersections might help us to define ethical responsibility for autobiography studies and accurately reflect the complexity of ethical orientation in processes of witnessing the alterity of others. In order to examine this question of ethical bearing I will consider three things in turn: (a) Levinas and Ricoeur's alternative positions of how one is to be an ethically-oriented subject, (b) how their alternate views of ethical bearing may be brought together so as to delineate (c) how one is oriented toward other people responsibly for the sake of ethical action and interaction in witness to their lives.

Ethical Bearing: The Subjective Orientation, "Here I am!"

The way Levinas and Ricoeur formulate intersubjectivity as rooted in alterity directly influences how they express ethical bearing in witnessing others. Bearing witness to the alterity of others

means orienting one's subjectivity *otherwise*, in regard to others. For these two thinkers, the very fact that one exists socially with others means that one is inherently located in an ethical space: to be relational not only begs the ethical question, *how* is one to relate to others, but also and by extension, how is one to be oriented *otherwise* and witness alterity in that relationship? One's ethical bearing is first and foremost a question of subject disposition. And bearing oneself *otherwise* reveals precisely how subjects are oriented in relation to others: that is, *toward* alterity.

Ricoeur observes in *Oneself as Another*, "It is . . . noteworthy that in many languages goodness is at one and the same time the ethical quality of the aims of action and the orientation of the person toward others, as though an action could not be held to be good unless it were done on behalf of others, out of *regard* for others" (189). Locating ethical responsibility in a relational orientation *toward* others, Levinas and Ricoeur do not prescribe specific actions or interactions as responsible but suggest that one's bearing determines whether or not a given action is ethical, regardless of whether it appears responsible or not. In other words, ethical bearing informs the ways we navigate the space between others and ourselves which, in turn, directs our social interactions and political actions with and for others. In this section I will examine the disposition of the subject toward others from a philosophical and theological standpoint. I ask *how* the subject is directed toward others responsibly in regard to their alterity, as reflected in the ethical bearing and witnessing stance par excellence, "here I am!" upheld by Levinas and Ricoeur. I am convinced that understanding ethical responsibility as a subject's ethical bearing toward alterity *preceding* political action or social interaction and *exceeding* the socio-political systems that define it will not only nuance the language of responsibility for autobiography studies but will also reveal the complexities of subjectivity that underpin and complicate our practices of ethical responsibility.

The Subject's Ethical Bearing Toward Others

Subjectivity is determined by intersubjectivity *with* others and ethical bearing *toward* others. If am constituted intersubjectively in terms of alterity, then my subjectivity is rooted in the way I am oriented toward alterity in ethical relation to others. Ethical bearing, at least in the Western tradition, tends to centre on a subject directed toward itself as the originary disposition from which to extend outward toward others. Beginning with Plato, the ethical self is one who has achieved self-mastery: the rule of reason over desire and order over chaos. Charles Taylor sums up Plato's perspective as follows: "We become good when reason comes to rule, and when we are no longer run by our desires" (*Sources of the Self* 115). He adds that "the mastery of self through reason brings with it these three fruits: unity with oneself, calm, and collected self-possession" (116).⁴⁵ Ethics begins in a rational re-orientation of the self and ends with collected self-possession from which to freely realize and assist the needs of others. The "responsible self" in such an ethics could be described as a thoughtful, knowing self who freely chooses to put himself out for another person (Cohen, "Introduction" 5).

A cursory reading of Augustine similarly suggests a subject oriented toward itself as the beginning of ethics; however, in his case the subject is directed toward itself as a means to encounter the divine Other internally, and through this internal relation, to reach out to other people. Augustine argues for an inward turn to find God, who is the basis by which one comes to know the truth about oneself and other people (Taylor, *Sources* 129). Taylor suggests that in turning inward, Augustine begins with the first person position of thinking and sensing, and thus his experience of the Other/other occurs by "[looking] to the self, [taking] up a reflexive stance"

⁴⁵ See Plato's explicit focus on the good man as master of himself in section 430 of the *Republic*. See also his discussion of the good as the ultimate object of knowledge, and knowledge as a definitive form of the good in section 471. The good is both expressed through knowledge and also transcends knowledge, as just beyond the grasp of the human mind. Knowledge and truth, Socrates teaches, are "like the good," but ultimately the good is the source of knowledge and truth, revealed through knowledge and truth (234).

(130).⁴⁶ Such an impetus, he argues, can be traced through to the self-reflexive self of modern thought. He explores how the “first-person standpoint”—one’s self-awareness, knowledge, or experience—translates into a knowledge-based ethics principally expressed as concern or care for oneself (131), and centred on the dignity of the human life and self-esteem (152). This view is accurate but limited, as I will come to show in my discussion of John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* in Chapter Three. Others are certainly part of this vision of reflexivity but only as experienced, known, or reached through the self.

Relying on Kelly Oliver’s assertion that “what makes human relationships human is what take[s] us beyond ourselves and toward otherness” (*Witnessing* 183), I want to suggest that an orientation not only “toward the otherness of others” but also “beyond ourselves” is where responsible human relations begin.⁴⁷ As a subject with others, one is always oriented toward someone: oneself or others. To some extent these directions overlap. In being oriented toward others, I may benefit myself. I respond to others *in order to* be acknowledged or feel worthwhile. This expectation of exchange is common enough in reciprocal relations and the subject bears no ill toward others in also being toward itself. However, this “in order to” reveals that one’s motive in orienting oneself toward others is implicitly a way to reinforce oneself, a movement “preformed essentially for ourselves with our own ends in mind” (Reynolds, “Love Without

⁴⁶ This position suggests that knowledge and reflexivity are self-directed, despite being informed by divine Otherness at the heart of the self. Augustine’s encounter with God can be read as an expression of the self engaged reflexively with itself, especially if the divine Other is construed as nothing but that which the self has created for itself. Alternatively, recent readings of Augustine have seen the divine Other at the heart of Augustine’s self—beyond any Christian or anti-Christian theology—as destabilizing or opening up self-directed knowledge with otherness, finite subjectivity with infinity, or more generally, the self/same with the Other (Capelle 116). In this reading of Augustine, the self is essentially in relation with the Other and reflects on itself only through or by means of otherness. That is to say, difference, not similitude, is at the heart of Augustine’s “inward life” (Scanlon 160). For further discussion on the complex issue of Augustine’s inward life, see *Augustine and Postmodernism* (2005).

⁴⁷ In this discussion I will refer to this orientation “toward the otherness of others” simply as “toward others,” assuming that an ethical orientation toward others *is* a response to the alterity or otherness of those others.

Boundaries” 195). The other becomes a means to an end, the end of my own good.⁴⁸ A subject directed toward itself or directed toward others in order to benefit itself may act in ethically responsible ways. However, such a subject does not ultimately have the ethical bearing to sustain these actions in situations that require behaviour beyond personal benefit or self-care, as in sacrifice, love, generosity, and forgiveness. Ethical bearing must also be an orientation beyond oneself, beyond one’s own formulations of being, and even beyond one’s own thinking about what it means to be ethical. This bearing beyond oneself and toward others is what Levinas and Ricoeur have in mind when they use the phrases *otherwise* than being or being *otherwise* respectively. With Levinas and Ricoeur, I explore how a subject orientation beyond oneself and toward others is both a precursor to responsible action and interaction in the world, and a radical vision of subjectivity that exceeds (though it does not escape) socio-political designations, conventional identity markers, and established power hierarchies.

A subject’s bearing beyond oneself and toward others is revealed in his or her responses to others, responses that essentially decentre the self or move the self outside its own orbit toward others. For Levinas and Ricoeur the subject expresses this movement in responding, “here I am” to the call of the Other. “Here I am” is the response *par excellence* that bears witness to what is wholly other, outside and beyond oneself and one’s systems of being. In keeping with the double meaning of the German “es gibt”—at once being and giving—“here I am” radically reconstitutes being as giving over oneself and giving up one’s notions of “the other” in one’s actual encounters with others. In this speech-act (or speech-response), one bears witness to the alterity of others by giving oneself for them, hence the close connection between *witness* and

⁴⁸ Ricoeur reminds us here of Kant’s moral philosophy (see *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*) in which humans are meant to treat one another “as an end and not a means” (*Fallible Man* 136).

martyr in the Greek: the one who bears witness by giving his very life (Levinas, *OTB* 146; Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics of Testimony” 129).

As an ethical response to the alterity of others, “here I am” stems principally from Judaism, which views the gift of life and the divine words of the bible as “God’s call to human responsibility” to which one is summoned to respond (Sacks 134). With its genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures, the ethics of responsibility must be explicitly situated in this theological context in order to do justice to its vision.⁴⁹ Levinas and Ricoeur both rely on the biblical text to formulate their respective visions of “here I am,” although they describe this ethical orientation differently not least because their ethical concerns are different. Motivated by the totalizing experiences and human atrocities of the Second World War, Levinas proposes a metaphysical responsibility that obliges a response to the vulnerability and needs of others in extreme situations of oppression (such as being Jewish in the context of Nazi Germany). This ethics appears in the face-to-face relation in which one is summoned to respond to the other person beyond one’s systems of philosophy, law, and social-politics while simultaneously being located within them.

Ricoeur, in contrast, is interested in the intersubjective and reciprocal relations between oneself and another in ordinary circumstances: in community life and in just institutions. Unlike Levinas, who questions the self and the system as ethically suspect, Ricoeur suggests that ethics is rooted in selves and systems, and defines his “here I am” as an “ethical intention . . . aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” (*OA* 172). Where Levinas envisions “here

⁴⁹ As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes, in the Western philosophical tradition more than one view of the ethical life exists, including a civic ethic, an ethic of duty, and ethic of honour, and an ethic of responsibility. He demonstrates that an ethic of responsibility is a biblical ethic. He writes, “One of Judaism’s most distinctive and challenging ideas is its ethics of responsibility” (3). The “ethics of responsibility [emphasizes] the love of God and humanity, and...the categorical dignity of the individual as such, regardless of status or power” (134). For further discussion on the biblical roots of ethical responsibility, see Sacks’s *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (2005) and Moyn’s *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics* (2005).

I am” as a passive response to the call of another *despite* oneself and one’s systems of being, Ricoeur envisions “here I am” as an intentional and active response to the call of another *because* one is able to realize one’s inherent intersubjectivity with others in the world. From my perspective, both activity and passivity are critical to one’s “here I am” bearing in response to alterity. However, I also see numerous tensions inherent in its orientation, which in turn affect one’s ability to bear witness to the lives of others in practice. I will thus address both Levinas’s and Ricoeur’s views of subjectivity oriented *otherwise* and consider how they might be brought together to convey both the possibilities and complications of such a subjectivity underpinning one’s capacity for ethical interaction with others.

Levinas and the Passive “Here I am”

For Levinas, “here I am” marks the ethical response of a passive subject, whose signification and designation of selfhood (I am) is radically constituted *otherwise* than being in bearing witness to the alterity of others. This marker of subjectivity—“here I am”—is saturated with philosophical potency. “I am” is generally considered a marker of being, often formulated through consciousness, perception, and reflection (I think therefore I am). However, in Levinas’s phenomenology, “here I am” is not an act of self-positing nor is it a marker of being, but a marker of *otherwise* than being, a constitution of subjectivity beyond being for oneself. In this move, Levinas inverts a linguistic understanding of signification where “this is that”—in which the sign (I am) stands for the signified (manifested being)—to an ethical signification of “one for the other,” in which the subject ceases to be a represented thing and locates its very subjectivity in giving itself for another (“Truth” 102). I am in that I am for another. My subjectivity, as being for the other, exceeds (though it does not escape) my own being. “Here I am” repositions the subject outside its totalizing gestures by dislocating or disorienting it from its position toward

itself. It signifies the subject's witness of alterity when it is called upon, brought into question, or interrupted by something other (person or idea). In shifting "here I am" from a statement of self-assertion to self-interruption, Levinas inverts the self/other hierarchy by beginning with the other and relegating the self to a secondary, derivative, and responsive position.

Levinas defines ethical responsibility as this radical decentring of the self so that the subject can respond to others before he or she recognizes them in consciousness or totalizes them in knowledge. He calls this response "a witness to the infinite" beyond oneself or systems of cognition (*OTB* 146). With this postulation he challenges a knowledge-based ethics, arguing that knowledge of the good and recognition of the other are both ways in which the self imposes its being (toward itself) on others. To *know* the good, Levinas contends, "is already not to have done it," because in knowing the subject has already calculated, decided on the good, made goodness a theme for itself, and located the other somewhere within that theme (*EI* 11). In its natural position toward itself, the subject cannot reason the good or choose it for the sake of the other without itself getting in the way. Since "no one is good voluntarily" (11), whatever presumed practice of ethical reasoning or recognition of others the subject affirms is shot through with self-centredness. For Levinas the most natural is the most problematic because being is not predisposed to decentre itself for the sake of another or for the sake of the good (121-122). I can only be good "despite-myself."⁵⁰ Consequently, the alterity of others must summon and awaken me, move me, and turn me toward them before I can think about myself. Saying, "here I am!" is

⁵⁰ In *Addressing Levinas*, Eric Nelson and Antje Kapust describe this responsibility before knowledge in a concrete and helpful way: "Prior to all reflection and calculation, one is compelled to answer to the other in acting for her, as when one leaps without thinking to save a child who falls into a well or river without considering the risks or rewards of such an action. Could such an ethical spontaneity reflect the human side of the interruption of violence and war?" (x). To be for someone is without "because" (a motivation or evaluation for my ethical action); to be for someone is "just because" I am and he has called me (an obligation and obedience without recourse to reasoning).

my expression and witness of this awakening and turning to responsibility before my totalizing themes of goodness and my calculated responses get in the way.

Examining the biblical “here I am” helps to clarify Levinas’s formulation of this expression. Such figures in the Hebrew Scriptures as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah respond to the summons or address of divine alterity (God) with the words, “Here I am.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that “when God calls, he does not do so by way of a universal imperative. Instead he whispers [the subject’s] name—and the greatest reply, the reply of Abraham, is simply *hineni*:” ‘here I am,’ ready to heed your call” (262). In its Hebrew rendering, *hineni*, “here I am” is not an assertion of self but a reference to oneself in the accusative (Ajzenstat 116). Because the summons of God comes to me from outside, initiated from beyond me, I am in a passive position to this One who has called and chosen me. When I respond, “here I am,” I am not responding as an ego but “me under assignation,” inspired by the divine Other to respond before I can see, deliberate, or choose it (*OTB* 142).⁵¹ As Levinas puts it, “There is an assignation to an identity for the response of responsibility, where one cannot have oneself be replaced without fault. To this command continually put forth only a ‘here I am’ (*me voici*) can answer, where the pronoun ‘I’ is in the accusative, declined before any declension, possessed by the other” (142).⁵² Like the Hebrew *hineni*, Levinas’s French *me voici* expresses the passivity of the subject’s response to the call of the other, beyond and above the self, revealing the subject grammatically and literally in the accusative. Levinas extends the grammatical to an ethical

⁵¹ For Jacques Derrida, Abraham reveals this very expression of passive subjectivity as “the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: [he is] ready to respond, [he replies] that [he is] ready to respond” (*Gift of Death* 71). See *The Gift of Death* (1992) for his exposition on the Abraham and Isaac story.

⁵² Prefiguring Levinas, Rosenzweig suggests that “here I am” reveals in language the formation of the subject who is divinely called and is therefore also individuated. See Moyn’s “Rosenzweig on Revelation” in *Origins of the Other* for further discussions (141-151).

positioning of the subject in the passive tense: accused, brought into question, subjected to the call of the other, and suffering for the other's sake.

This language of giving oneself over to suffering for another is easily misunderstood as turning against oneself (Butler, *Psychic Life* 108). Louis Althusser, for example, suggests that in responding, "here I am" one turns toward others in guilt and, in this movement, turns against oneself (Oliver, *Witnessing* 179).⁵³ In contrast to Althusser, I take Levinas's position a step further than perhaps he himself is willing to go to suggest that turning toward the other (even to the death) does not connote turning against oneself; rather, it reflects a reconstitution of one's identity beyond or exceeding being for oneself. Being for-the-other is being *more* than oneself. The difference between turning against oneself and giving oneself over reflects the difference between self-denial and devotion, between a reduction of being and a surplus. This distinction is critical because if turning toward the other solely meant turning against oneself, then the subject would be confined to an ethics rooted in guilt, an ethics that could easily slide into the obligatory self-enslavement that concerns Nietzsche in *A Genealogy of Morals*. Alternatively, if turning toward the other signifies losing one's instinctual being for oneself (death) to reconstitute one's subjectivity in giving oneself over for another, then ethics is open to the possibility that love, faithfulness, and forgiveness can motivate the subject beyond a guilty conscience.⁵⁴

⁵³ Both Althusser and Levinas use the phrase "here I am" to designate subjectivity through one's response to the call of the other and through turning toward that other (ultimately the divine Other) in that response. However, their visions are fundamentally different. Althusser situates the call of the other within laws, moral codes, and ideologies. Levinas, in contrast, positions the call of the other as a call of infinity that comes from outside systems of finite thought such as laws, moral codes, and ideologies (Oliver, *Witnessing* 181). The difference is significant because a subject responding to an "infinite call" is ultimately not defined by the codes and ideologies in which he is situated but finds himself in response to the other as exceeding such totalities. He has the potential, then, to respond to others without reducing them (or himself) to systems and formulations of being.

⁵⁴ While Levinas fixates on guilt in much the way Althusser does, his paradigm of "here I am" taken to its logical conclusions in biblical thought points to a space of response beyond guilt to devotion and love. A "here I am" of love and devotion comes forth much more strongly in the work of Jewish scholars Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption* (originally published in 1921) and Jonathan Sacks in *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (2005).

The “here I am” of Abraham clarifies this passive position of the subject, personally named to respond with obedience to the divine Other beyond guilt. For Abraham, passivity includes with it passion. Responding includes a movement of self-sacrifice and self-exposure to the divine Other before knowing what the request will be. To Abraham’s “here I am,” God commands, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering” (*NIV*, Gen. 22:2). Saying, “here I am” for Abraham is synonymous with saying “Yes” to sacrificing the one he loves (his son, his seed) to the one he is assigned to love more (the wholly and divine Other). To sacrifice his son is in effect to sacrifice his desires, his loves, and his future in devoted obedience to the Other. This obedience is not a response of obligation to any law, but a response of faith and love in this Other that exceeds law.⁵⁵ In responding, “here I am” Abraham bears witness to the infinite alterity of God which summons him beyond what he can see to sacrifice himself in giving up his son.

Drawing on this biblical “here I am” response to the summons of God, Levinas describes the human subject as responsible to bear witness and respond to the trace of God (infinite alterity) in other people, thus subjecting him- or herself to the human others who call him. “Obedience to the glory of the Infinite,” Levinas insists, “orders me to the other” (*OTB* 146). This movement toward others is explicit in the case of Isaiah, for whom “here I am” to God means “send me” to others (*OTB* 199 n.11). Oona Ajzenstat sees Isaiah’s “here I am” as “a record of Isaiah’s acceptance of a mission, and thus the expression of the connection, in the saying, between response to a divine command and the ethical movement toward a fellow human being” (118). This response is for anyone; it responds to the alterity in everyone. Levinas can

⁵⁵ According to Derrida (in his reading of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*), not only does it exceed law, it sacrifices the ethical law itself to kin, community, and nation (do not murder) in an outrageous act of faith and obedience to the call of God (*Gift of Death* 66-67).

thus conclude, “The subjectivity of the subject [is] being subject to everything (146).⁵⁶ To be (a) subject is to respond passively to the summons of another, in which passivity refers *both* to one’s being acted on or called upon from the outside to respond (by God or by others), *and* to one’s passion, a response of sacrifice or suffering for the other who calls. My subjectivity *is* my passive bearing toward others.

Levinas describes the subject as subjected and responsible in the hyperbole of being “held hostage” (*OTB* 184). I am held hostage by the face or words of others who question and destabilize me from the centre of my world.⁵⁷ Being held hostage means that I cannot evade the other’s call: it is singularly directed to me and me alone (Bernasconi 239). Nor can I evade the suffering that responding on the other’s behalf will produce for me. Levinas describes the other as having “a traumatic hold” on me, claiming me at the core of myself and “alienating” me in the depths of my identity without emptying me of myself (*OTB* 141). My subjectivity is nothing short of wounding the self-obsessed ego so that I can expose myself in vulnerability to others and give myself in the place of others. *Toward* and *for* are directions, movements that go beyond the ego and bear the burden of others without calculating the cost to myself or hoping for

⁵⁶ I may be subject to everyone, but I cannot subject myself to everyone simultaneously. Derrida asserts in *The Gift of Death* that in responding “here I am” to God or a fellow human, I am inadvertently irresponsible to others who similarly call on me at the same time. To be ethical to one other is to sacrifice all the other others. To be responsible to you requires me to be irresponsible to another person, who also summons me. One is always sacrificing one person for another person. In very concrete terms, Derrida explains at length: “By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher, writing and speaking here in a public language, French in my case, I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, to those who don’t speak my language and to whom I neither speak nor respond, to each of those who listen or read, and to whom I neither respond nor address myself in the proper manner, . . . thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my son, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day” (69).

⁵⁷ Robert Gibbs illustrates being hostage in terms of the egoistic self on trial, called into question before the court. He writes: “The face is not itself the other person’s face, but is a facing by the other, a being questioned or called to account for myself. Although I try to maintain myself as the centre of that story, my orientation to others is making sense of them in my story; when I am confronted by another, when I am faced by another, I discern that my way in the world violated what was other about the others, what did not fit into my story. I have truncated and dislocated others, and so my desire to keep control of my world is now put in question” (“Questioning Justice” 109).

reciprocity. Responsibility, as Levinas sees it, “goes one way, from me to the other” (139). He uses the excessive language, “torn up from oneself for another” and “giving to the other of the bread out of one’s own mouth” to suggest that my ethical bearing is a constant agonizing state of being destabilized (142). Bent on preventing the “insidious return” of self-affirmation in any form, Levinas insists that only an extreme formulation of subjection and sacrifice will turn me from myself toward others (*OA* 338). Indeed, he argues that only in being confronted, questioned, and held to give an account in being for myself can there be any “pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even . . . the simple ‘After you, sir’” (*OTB* 117). Levinas thus inverts the “I am” of being in its free choice of responsibility—its active agency and self-assertion—to the “here I am” of passivity and passion. Responsibility ultimately means giving myself over for the other: “To say: here I am [*me voici*]. To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that’s it” (*EI* 97). *I am* in that *I give*.

In being given over for another my subjectivity transcends being for myself and exceeds the markers of identity I use to define myself against others: being a woman, a scholar, a Christian, a Canadian. This Levinasian perspective of subjectivity is radical for rethinking an ethics of responsibility for autobiography studies. It calls into question our definitions of subjectivity as either an assertion of relational selfhood in narrative form or a subjected self under oppressive and unjust systems of power who must reassert his selfhood in language to regain himself. If we begin from conventional identity markers of being, then a Levinasian ethics of responsibility is impossible. To be ethically responsible, Levinas suggests, requires a positioning of selfhood beyond the systems of being and power relations by which to determine human being. Only in envisioning selfhood and others *otherwise*—other than our ideologies prescribe—can we bear witness to the alterity of others and respond to them in ways that do not

reinscribe their being in the very identifying systems that have reduced them. Passive subjectivity that exceeds my being for myself opens me to the possibility of responding to those who escape my identifications, who are outside my natural connections, and who challenge my markers of what it means to be human.

Ricoeur and the Active “Here I am”

Like Levinas, Ricoeur formulates ethical bearing as a passive orientation beyond oneself and toward others, but he adds as integral to this bearing an equal and opposite motion of action in one’s aim toward the other. Where Levinas centres on the *beyond oneself* that initiates ethical bearing, Ricoeur focuses on the *toward others* that bears it out in one’s relationships with others. His attention to active subjectivity can be seen as a critical response to Levinas’s passive subjectivity. Indeed, Ricoeur develops what I see as a necessary double movement of passivity and activity within ethical bearing.⁵⁸ His subject is a passive recipient of the other’s call as well as an agent who actively responds and is therefore situated in equal and reciprocal relationship with the other. For Ricoeur, “here I am” functions as a nominative assertion of conviction, self-constancy, and accountability in the subject: I am here; you can count on me (*OA* 165). I examine this active sense of ethical bearing by first addressing Ricoeur’s view that Levinasian passivity is limited if taken on its own and then turning to his expression of active bearing in one’s “here I am” for others.

Ricoeur begins with Levinas in passivity in a trajectory that leads to activity. Like Levinas, Ricoeur believes that the subject must be made subject to others in bearing witness to

⁵⁸ Certainly Ricoeur is not alone in challenging Levinas on the seeming lack of agency and activity of the subject in relation with others. Although thinkers such as Catherine Chalié argue that Levinasian passivity includes some sense of action—“passivity does not mean inertia or apathy but man’s ability to be moved by what happens to his neighbour” (8)—other thinkers, such as Luce Irigaray, disagree with this interpretation of Levinas, arguing instead that his intersubjective dialectic is lacking between activity and passivity, a dialectic she argues is necessary for marking both our capability for interaction and the limits of our connection (70).

their alterity and he follows Levinas by positing subjectivity beyond egoism by de-centring the ego. However, he clearly disagrees with Levinas about *how* one reaches the ethical position of a self beyond egoism—a subject oriented *otherwise*—in bearing witness to alterity. Levinas determines that to expel egoism, the subject's ego must be expiated. Such a radical displacement of the self beyond its egoistic tendencies cannot be self-initiated, for who would choose to displace oneself? Ricoeur diverges from Levinas on this point, insisting that the self does have the capacity to deny its egoism. As with his rejection of Levinas's *self* as *same*, Ricoeur challenges Levinas's view of selfhood as egoistic or self-interested—for itself alone. He reverses Levinas's view, arguing that selfhood be seen as a “non-egoistic, non-narcissistic, non-imperialistic mode of subjectivity” (“Philosophical” 17). Because otherness is intrinsic to selfhood and being is therefore essentially relational, the self cannot also be essentially egoistic. Being relational means that the self has equal potential to be toward itself in egoism as it does to be toward others in responsibility. Because egoism is only *one mode* of selfhood, the self need not be expiated for ethical bearing and relationship with others to occur. In fact, he worries that if selfhood is denied, the question of the other will be eclipsed. “If my identity were to lose all importance in every respect,” he asks, “would not the question of others also cease to matter” (OA 138-9)? For Ricoeur, one must necessarily have a sense of self in order to be open and available to others (138). In the passivity of ethical bearing, there must be a self to be summoned, a self to hear the word addressed to it, a self to respond. And further, to bear witness to the alterity of others that self must have an inclination toward others beyond egoism: open ears to hear and hands intent to give.⁵⁹ Ricoeur de-centres the ego in order to re-centre the self around the other. Selfhood is thus constituted as *being otherwise*.

⁵⁹ Where Levinas believes that the originary position of selfhood is not directed toward the good voluntarily so that absolute otherness (external to the self) must displace the ego in order that the self can respond to others, Ricoeur

Ricoeur also agrees with Levinas that the self is subject to the summons of another to respond and be responsible. However, he argues that this call to respond is not wholly external, above and beyond me, but is *both* external (either ‘vertical’ in the divine sense or ‘horizontal’ in a human sense) *and* internal, initiated by one’s own conscience.⁶⁰ Alterity is witnessed not only without but also within oneself. Ricoeur thus challenges Levinas, regarding his “entire philosophy” to rest on “the initiative of the [absolute] other in the intersubjective relation” rather than any initiating movement of the self toward others (188). If, with Ricoeur, we see otherness as *non-absolute*—both external in other people and intrinsic to oneself—then to encounter otherness requires a subject determined both by a passive response to the initiating call of other people and by an active response with and for others rooted internally, in one’s ethical aim, self-esteem, and self-realization that stimulates voluntary goodness toward others. In other words, the subjection of the self for others must be combined with agency of the self for response or responsibility.

The passivity and passion of a subjected subject, without an active counterpart, reveals a purely dissymmetrical relation, as problematic as it is potentially ethical. While passivity to the alterity of “another who needs me” necessarily includes vulnerability, submission, and sacrifice in responding to his or her need (*OA* 165), passivity and passion may also result in negative

holds that the originary constitution of selfhood includes voluntary goodness with and for others. The self has within itself the capacity and capability of “aiming at the good life,” directing itself toward the good (*OA* 170). He argues that while humans have the capacity for evil, the obsession of self that initiates human evil is not the originary point of human existence. We are “fallen,” in other words, with a propensity to evil but an originary position of goodness (*Fallible Man* 144, 146). For a careful examination of human finitude in relation to guilt, fallibility, fault, and evil see Ricoeur’s early works, *Fallible Man* (1965) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967).

⁶⁰ This tension between Levinas and Ricoeur mirrors a theological tension between Judaism and Christianity. Levinas’s other is wholly other, and this other as external and absolutely other reflected in the face and word of other people directs me toward the good. This wholly other is not unlike the God of Sinai who speaks and inscribes in stone tablets the good as a law of ethical action. His otherness (his glory) is reflected in the radiant face of the human other, Moses descending the mountain. The law at Sinai becomes a law inscribed “in our hearts” as an internal moral compass (*KJV*, 2 Cor. 3:2; *NIV*, Heb. 10:16), even as the glory of the absolute other shines in the “faces” of other people as an external moral beckoning. Ricoeur’s other as both external and internal reflects the paradoxical teaching of Christ who is at once “in” his followers and at home with his Father in heaven: wholly internal and wholly external.

subjection. Such imbalances of power as violence, exploitation, and abuse inflicted on the responsible subject reveal the negative underbelly of passive subjectivity and remind us that the subject cannot fully escape the systems of being and power in which he exists and defines himself. With this in mind, Ricoeur argues that passivity must include with it reciprocity, in which one is alternately passive and active. He challenges passive dissymmetry manifested as exploitative “power over” with the reciprocal and intersubjective structure of human friendship and the biblical “golden rule,” which he terms “the norm of reciprocity” between two agents (219).

Ricoeur describes reciprocity in the context of Aristotelian *philia* (friendship), as a virtue in which mutuality, equality, and voluntary goodness toward another person avert the egoistic leanings of the self (183). In friendship, two subjects engage responsively with one another, sharing mutually and equally with each other’s suffering and joy, and exchange positions of agent and patient in their relationships (183). Ricoeur sees these reciprocal positions reflected in the golden rule, in which a subject is both acted upon (what others should do to you) and acting (what you should do to them): “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (*KJV*, Matt 7:12), or in its negative rendering by Hillel, “Do not do unto your neighbour what you would hate him to do to you” (qtd. in Ricoeur 219). In commanding reciprocity, however, the golden rule presupposes that people are *not* in a state of mutual activity and passivity, and in its negative formulation clearly challenges a dissymmetry of abusive power over others. In being addressed to me, this rule positions me as the potential aggressor in my relationships with others and others as potential victims of my actions (“Summoned Subject” 295). The rule is directed precisely against one-sided action, particularly where that action is aggression. It suggests that the subject must be subjected and made

responsible to others in order to avoid its potential aggression against others, but also must be active in order to responsibly resist the other's potential aggression. As Ricoeur explains:

Acting and suffering then seem to be distributed between two different protagonists: the agent and the patient, the latter appearing as the potential victim of the former. But because of the reversibility of the roles, each agent is the patient of the other. Inasmuch as one is affected by the power over one exerted by the other, the agent is invested with the responsibility of an action that is placed from the very outset under the rule of reciprocity [the golden rule], which the rule of justice will transform into a rule of equality. (OA 330)

The ethical subject, then, engages with others in reversible and reciprocal relation of passivity *and* activity beyond pure dissymmetry in any form.

The norm of reciprocity commanded in the event of negative dissymmetry of power over another is meant to create an equality in which the roles of agent and patient are reciprocal rather than unidirectional. However, such reciprocity does not signify an economy of exchange in which I do good for the sake of the other *only if* the other does good toward me or *in order that* the other do good toward me. In the case of goodness, the golden rule is unidirectional: it makes me accountable to respond to the needs of others with their good in mind whether they reciprocate goodness or not.⁶¹ To the other person who calls out to me, "Where are you? I need you." I am *made accountable* to respond, "here I am!" by their very question singling me out (165). In "here I am," the passive subject called *is* the active subject responding. I am an agent who, in being oriented toward the alterity of others, aims and intends the good of the each person who summons me. I voluntarily undergo displacement from my self-centred position of power for the sake of others (Davies 16). Combining passive asymmetry with agency, Ricoeur proposes that being oriented toward the alterity of another person is a self-giving stance that is rooted both

⁶¹ Indeed, Ricoeur notes that a few short verses after stating the golden rule (at least in its rendering in Luke 6), Jesus states, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. . . . But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (NASB, Luke 6.32, 35). The golden rule of reciprocity—in which activity and passivity are reciprocal positions—suggests giving beyond reciprocity: to give as one would like to be given to without expectation that the other will give in response.

in the other's injunction and in my own conviction and intention to respond. In the assertion, "here I am," the injunction to respond meets conviction: "I will respond." The voice of the other who summons me becomes my own voice, my own conviction, and my own conscience speaking to me. This conviction balances the accusative "It's me here!" with the nominative stance "here I stand!" (339). How then does Ricoeur formulate this nominative "here I am?"

First, a nominative "here I am!" represents an active stance of responsibility to the summons of another rooted in self-esteem and self-recognition: "I am invited to . . . show regard for, and celebrate an *other* for [his] own sake, to reveal to [his] own value. Here lies the fundamental source of generosity" (Reynolds, "Love" 197). Such responsibility assumes an essential goodness within the self, or at least the capacity for "benevolent spontaneity" toward others through realizing itself in relation with others (reciprocity) and bearing witness to alterity as always already part of the self, whether in terms of the external otherness of other people or the internal otherness of one's own conscience (*OA* 190, 329). In a carefully nuanced discussion independent of its use in popular psychology, Ricoeur describes benevolent spontaneity and recognition as rooted in "self-esteem." Self-esteem is not "self-love" or "self-interest," two aspects of egoism that pervert self-esteem and reveal the self's propensity toward itself (215). Instead, self-esteem can be defined as turning outward beyond oneself by esteeming or valuing all selves. To *be otherwise*, for Ricoeur, is to esteem selves.

Esteeming selves requires one to bear witness to other people as genuinely other than oneself, as *other* selves. In witnessing genuine alterity, I avoid collapsing the other into myself; in witnessing another's selfhood, I avoid collapsing selves into dichotomies of self and other, in which I define "the other" *against* myself. To *be otherwise* by esteeming selves evades the categories and power hierarchies we use to define other selves in terms of disparity and

opposition. Esteeming selves also connotes esteeming oneself in *being otherwise*: being toward others is not turning against oneself, as I have already suggested. If esteeming selves means that no selves are to be negated, effaced, enslaved, or reduced, then it includes not negating, effacing, enslaving, or reducing oneself in *being otherwise*. Rather than a negation of self, Ricoeur implies that an excess of selfhood—being more than I am through the mystery of alterity beyond and within me—is the means by which selves can respond ethically to other people. A guilty conscience enslaving me to respond proves far less ethically transformative for human interactions than a benevolent and devoted spirit that exceeds myself, compelling me to respond.

Esteeming selves further demands some sense of self-reflexivity and realization of ‘the good’ “with and for others” as the ultimate aim of one’s actions (168). It requires that one see oneself as “a subject of imputation”—under accusation by the other—who has the capacity for firm action in choosing between models of living (167). The subject bears witness not only to the otherness of his own subjectivity and the otherness of other people but also to himself as a summoned subject and a choosing subject capable of action. With such self-reflexivity, self-esteem characterizes the reciprocity in mutual relations in which I give *and* receive from the other as the situation dictates. Indeed, giving without its necessary counterparts of reception and reciprocity potentially results in other forms of negative dissymmetry: a pathological giving of oneself that takes the form of *giving in* to others or a perpetually giving subject that reinforces a power hierarchy between the giver and the poor or needy other.⁶² In Chapter Four I examine

⁶²The perpetually giving subject, Luce Irigaray warns, creates a dissymmetrical relation in which “the other is the ‘weak, the poor, the widow and the orphan’ while I am ‘the rich or the powerful’” (70). In the name of charity, one gives to aid and accommodate the outsider. On the surface, Thomas Reynolds argues, this appears well and good. But at the same time charity “trades on and nourishes a disingenuous sense of privilege, presuming that those who receive aid are of no use and have nothing to offer in return” (“Love without Boundaries” 198-9). He suggests that giving not only reveals a hierarchical relationship, it may also function to isolate others, labelling and distancing them as “outsiders” who need my help. Deborah Tannen also focuses on the problem of dissymmetry in self-giving by showing the “paradox entailed in offering or giving help” from the perspective of social linguistics (32). She writes, “Insofar as it serves the needs of the one helped, it is a generous move that shows caring and builds rapport.

these and other complexities that emerge between generosity and reciprocity in Rudy Wiebe's witness of Yvonne Johnson. Because humans are inherently intersubjective, giving myself can never fully be outside an economy of exchange: paradoxically, losing my ego for your sake is to find myself "being" for you. In this sense, Ricoeur presents an inherent connection between self-recognition and responsibility: one must conceive of oneself in relationship—an "I" inherently determined by otherness—and thereby value all selves as the basis for responsible interaction.

Second, a nominative "here I am" is a speech-act that functions as a promise of dependability of character and decidability of action. To say, "here I am" is to promise to perform "here I am." When another person summons me, he is counting on me to respond, to say or do something: "I am *accountable for* my actions" before him (165). For Ricoeur, the self in an ethical context is a self-constant subject who *makes himself* available to others. I respond to this summons with the response of dependability: "You can count on me! My character is constant and reliable." When I say, "here I am," I am in effect saying, I am a subject who bears myself in such a way that I can be counted on to respond. Because I value other selves, I promise to be subject to their request as a subject who can respond and who will keep my word.

Responsibility thus requires the voluntary choice of a dependable subject to respond to the summons of another person at the instant of being awakened, whether by the divine Other, one's own conscience, or by another person. If the biblical story of Abraham exemplifies Levinas's "here I am" as a response of obedience and sacrifice for the Other without first knowing the outcome, Ricoeur would follow the story beyond Abraham's initial "here I am" to

But insofar as it is asymmetrical, giving help puts one person in a superior position with respect to the other" (32). The receiver slides from the place of active summoner to passive recipient and if this relation is perpetual, may come to resent the very hands that give as condescending and humiliating. To avoid such dissymmetry, the giver must see himself as rich in some ways and poor in others, powerful and vulnerable, a giver of aid and in need of help in a relation between equals. For further discussion see Irigaray's essay, "What Other are We Talking About?" (2004), Reynolds's "Love without Boundaries" (2005), and Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990).

the next frame: Abraham's unspoken decision to "go and do" through his actions. His response is his act of obedience as much as his words of passivity: "Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about" (NIV, Gen. 22:3). Obedience is an active bearing of responsibility: "Here I am" bears witness to one's self-recognition and decision to choose a specific beneficial action in response to others, regardless of what that might mean for the self.

Ricoeur later re-articulates this response as, "Here is where I stand!" which suggests a specific position or location in space that dictates one's response. Saying "here is where I stand" reinforces a certain orientation of self in an ethical space and a making up of one's mind about a specific ethical action (OA 352). I am convicted; I make up my mind to bear a particular ethical stance: "to recognize oneself as being enjoined *to live well with and for others in just institutions and to esteem oneself as the bearer of this wish*" (352). While Ricoeur concurs with Levinas that ethical bearing is practice of self-generosity that values others for their own sake and exceeds one's systems of selfhood and morality, Ricoeur argues that without activities of self-recognition, self-constancy, and reciprocity and regulating institutions to serve as counterweights, passivity and asymmetry become their own totalities. An ethically responsible bearing, then, requires a double movement: it must be both passive and active, exceeding without escaping oneself or the systems in which one is located. Its witness of alterity must somehow interrupt asymmetrical relationships with reciprocity and reciprocal relationships with asymmetry. In the following sections I consider this relationship between passivity and activity as a necessary but difficult navigation of subjectivity and relational space beyond oneself and

toward others. It both underpins and complicates the behaviours, norms, and codes we have loosely defined as ethically responsible for witnessing others in life writing.

Active Passivity: The Difficult Motion of Ethical Bearing

Ethical responsibility demands a double movement of passivity and activity, vulnerability and agency voiced in the “here I am!” While passivity and activity are intertwined in ethical bearing, I want to suggest that their movement does not simply alternate between a passive and active “here I am” or follow a trajectory from passive to active response. What Ricoeur implies in his work and what I believe requires explicit attention is that ethical bearing involves a simultaneous motion of action and passion that could be termed *active passivity*. Active passivity describes one’s “here I am” orientation not as a static position of my being toward another person but a constant motion of turning or changing direction in orientating myself toward the other. This “turning toward” is active and passive at the same time: I must be moved in order to move, but I must move on my own accord so that my being toward another is not merely a forced obligation or duty. This change of direction, John Caputo observes, is “the point of it all and the heart of . . . ethics” (“Reason” 86). I am always at once being turned and turning, being attuned and attuning myself. My movement comes simultaneously from without and from within.

The movement of active passivity functions in at least two ways. In one sense, passivity is not without activity. I am being turned, being affected, being opened, and being moved: these motions and emotions in which I am engaged begin from the other who acts upon me and turns me toward him. In being turned, I am acting. In being moved, I am moving. Active passivity reveals my being turned and my own turning as the inseparability between the other’s summons and my inner conscience, the other’s assignment of responsibility and my own. As Ricoeur describes it, “the self-designation of the agent of action appears to be inseparable from the

ascription by another, who designates me in the accusative as the author of my actions. In this exchange between ascription in the second person and self-designation, one can say that the reflexive recovery of this being-affected by the ascription pronounced by others is intertwined with the intimate ascription of action to oneself” (OA 329). My “here I am” response for the good of another is both chosen for me and chosen by me. Again, Ricoeur clearly reveals this double motion when he writes, “The assignment of responsibility, stemming from the summons by the Other and interpreted in terms of the most total passivity, is reversed in a show of abnegation in which the self attests to itself by the very movement with which it removes itself” (340). The ethical subject is thus actively passive, simultaneously and equally being made subject to another and voluntarily subjecting oneself to another.

In another sense, passivity is itself a form of activity. To respond passively may be initiated by the other, but to keep oneself in a passive-responsive state is a task and a discipline. Holding oneself open, forgetting oneself, being attuned, being moved by others again and again, listening before speaking, and abnegating one’s control over others are all passive responses that require a great deal of self-discipline and staying power to *withstand* or to *stand fast* (Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption* 170). “Here I am,” from this perspective, is a discipline of letting one’s ego go. Choosing to keep oneself subjected to others is nothing short of a trauma, a wounding or putting to death of the ego, a suffering that rends me from my egoism for the sake of another. Describing his personal experiences of raising a child with disabilities, Reynolds exemplifies how the activities of letting go and opening oneself are traumatic. To attend to his disabled son for his own sake, he writes, “we adjust or even give up our hold on reality as we see it and open ourselves to the unfamiliar, strange, perhaps threatening presence of another without imposing conditions that restrict or exclude their own particular capacities and ways of being.

. . . This is what makes [it] so difficult indeed traumatic. Its . . . giving hinges around letting go of those things by which we domesticate and manage reality so as to feel ourselves secure and in control” (“Love” 194). Here Levinas’s language of “being torn up from oneself” and the “traumatic hold of the other on [me]” applies, but not in the way he meant it (*OTB* 141); the trauma is not so much the hold of the other on me to give but the self-discipline of repeatedly choosing to give myself over and over again.⁶³

Notably, the trauma of active passivity is not categorically different from traumatic passivity under the heavy hand of oppression or abuse: both are expressions of vulnerability and suffering in relation to another. What, then, are the limits to ethical self-giving in one’s “here I am?” Can these limits be demarcated solely in terms of voluntary or involuntary action, willing or unwilling passivity? Situations in which the other is not a cruel master but a suffering person in need clearly require the ethical bearing of a responsible self: a passivity of self-giving that is at once a *movement* in which the other’s turning me beyond myself becomes my own turning toward the other, and a *staying power* in which my passivity is an act of willpower and self-discipline. However, limit cases in which the other is a cruel master challenge the possibility of agency or human response and stir up uneasiness about the ethical extents of active passivity in its bearing of self-giving. Who should be included in my ethical response? Under which conditions and for which others should I respond in a self-giving manner? How much sacrifice is too much?

These difficult questions suggest that the limits and extents of active passivity cannot be clearly demarcated or fully calculated. The suffering other may prove a cruel master. The cruel

⁶³ Neither Reynolds nor Levinas has a Nietzschean vision of self-beratement (denial, weakness, or cowardice) in mind in their language of trauma to one’s ego. Paradoxically, this traumatic letting go is a form of self-affirmation. The subject affirms selfhood in giving his devotion to another in need. This giving, outside calculation, is not a loss of self but a suspension of identity markers by which to define others and ourselves in order to feel in control of reality.

master may prove a suffering other. Every person, including oneself, exists in shades of grey. Consequently, every encounter and circumstance must be approached singularly. A “here I am” bearing may well be conceived as a universal ethical responsibility, but the expression of that bearing is particular. As Sacks explains, “the call to responsibility is always “here, now: this person, in this situation, at this time. It knows my name. It calls to me, not the person next to me. It says: there is an act only you can do, a situation only you can address” (262). To the particular call of my name, my “here I am” bearing will witness alterity as variously as the contexts in which I am called and the others who call me. Ethical responsibility, from this perspective, is a self-giving movement toward each other person as the encounter or circumstance dictates.

The Divided Subject: The Complications of Ethical Bearing

I have suggested that ethical bearing is the rudiment of what it means to be a human subject, both subjected (beyond oneself) and self-giving (toward others) in an intersubjective world. However, being ethically disposed also reveals the human subject as divided, struggling between good and evil. The subject may desire to bear witness to alterity and be oriented *otherwise* for the sake of equality or peace in human relationships, but this desire is laced with the subject’s internal conflict with itself to be for itself. This struggle contributes, at least in part, to its external tension with others (Lowe xxvii). Subjects constantly fluctuate between being good voluntarily and being incapable of goodness, between recognizing inherent interconnections with others and requiring constant interruption by others in order to be open to them. Ricoeur describes this tension as follows: “the most fundamental presupposition in every ethic is that there is . . . a cleavage between the valid and the non-valid and that man is already capable of the dual: of the true and the false, of good and evil, of the beautiful and the ugly” (*Fallible Man* 142). This duality at the heart of subjectivity reveals that one’s ethical bearing toward another cannot escape

one's egoistic bearing toward oneself. Even as the other interrupts my being for myself, my egoism ignores the other's summons or responds to it for its own purposes.

Situated between Levinas's assertion of human evil and Ricoeur's assumption of human benevolence, the subject is capable of both atrocity and benevolence, motivated by both solipsism and generosity. Autobiographies, in their narrative engagement with everyday life, speak directly to this complex and dynamic nature of human subjectivity. My ethical bearing is limited by and in conflict with my egoism. As Reynolds observes of himself in relation to his disabled son, "my own needs, expectations, and ideals have closed me in on myself and set up boundaries that condition and thereby limit my capacity to be open toward him, to be there with and for him. On occasions too numerous to mention, parenting has highlighted my own shortcomings . . . as a human being" ("Love" 200). Because the self always turns back to itself, one's ethical bearing cannot function as a single turning from oneself toward another, but must be a constant re-turning to the same turn: again and again from egoism toward the other. This motion of return is the principal motion of ethical subjectivity.

One's "here I am" orientation toward alterity must take into account this divided human subjectivity. In Levinasian thinking, "here I am" is a response of complete subjectivity and passive obedience in an asymmetrical relationship: an Abraham who seemingly without question gives himself by sacrificing the son he loves for the sake of the divine Other in accordance to His summons (Derrida, *Gift of Death* 62). However, using Abraham as the sole example of "here I am" inevitably results in a skewed understanding of this bearing. While Abraham's lack of questioning in response to God's summons may suggest absolute passive obedience, other biblical characters who also respond, "here I am" to the divine Other reveal that the

responsibility inherent in “here I am” is not simply passive nor is it without internal or external struggle with the Other who calls.

Moses, for instance, responds, “here I am” to the summons of God and then proceeds to question, challenge, and evade the summons. His “Here I am!” is followed by a “Who am I?” not only questioning his obedience but also questioning his own self-constancy, dependability, position to act, and identity in relation to this Other (*NIV*, Ex. 3.11). Far from passive obedience, Moses even begs, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it” (Ex. 4.13). While the summons may come from God, the conflict and the activity of obedience are his own. Moses reveals what Abraham does not: an egoistic challenge to my “here I am” response in a problematic expression of self-doubt and evasion: “Who am I, that I should respond?”⁶⁴ Ricoeur suggests that such an “answer of the subject who has been made responsible by the expectation of the other becomes a secret break at the very heart of commitment” (*OA* 168).⁶⁵ There is a human aversion to losing one’s egotistic identity in relationship and response to the other. But only in losing his former identity fixed in the self-absorbed fear of “who am I?” can Moses begin embracing an alternative subjectivity, a subject whose identity is determined in and through responsible relationships: who I am in relation to others beyond my formulations and fears. The subject who is held responsible by the other grapples in choosing that responsibility for himself: he is a subject not only subjected to the other but also subjected to the difficulty of ethical response. While Moses eventually obeys and becomes subject to the summons of the divine Other, he is not initially or even later, as a leader of the Israelite tribes, obedient without also being obstinate,

⁶⁴ In his discussion of “Who am I?” Rabbi Sacks suggests that the self-doubt represented in this question is the basis for most of our human evasions of ethical responsibility. He writes, “we often fail to act because we think someone else will, or should, or is better qualified than I am. More than evil or indifference, the fundamental moral problem is, ‘Why me?’ What connects me to this person in need? What gives me the right or the duty to intervene” (253)?

⁶⁵ “Who am I?” could be seen as a response of bringing oneself into question or a response of humility. However, in the case of Moses and in the way I use the phrase, it refers rather to a self-absorbed focus on one’s lack, one’s identity outside relation to the other, and one’s evasion to the summons of the other.

argumentative, and inconstant in his responsibility to the divine summons.⁶⁶ To be turned, to turn, and to re-turn toward another and away from egoism, then, reveals an ethical responsibility that holds within it the challenge of actual responding: the subject struggles between an actively passive, self-constant, and dependable affirmation in one's "here I am" and an evasion of the summons in self-doubt and inconstancy in one's "who am I?" (OA 165).

Because the divided subject is ethically unstable, a "here I am" response only exists in the "individual present moment," as Rosenzweig suggests in *The Star of Redemption* (163). This ethical bearing functions in time as one's "momentary self-transformation" (163). My "here I am" subjectivity is constantly challenged by my "who am I?" subjectivity so that turning is never a once and for all movement, as though saying, "here I am" also meant "I was always here" or "I will always be here." My turning is always a present instance of awakening and opening myself to responsibility for the other. It functions in the particular, the here and now, the moments that, "if not seized, may never come again" (Sacks 262). Consequently, the steadfastness, dependability, or constancy of "here I am" that Ricoeur describes must function as an accumulative combination of movements or returns toward the other, not a static timeless choice.

The Beyond In: A Hyperethical Bearing

I have been circling the phrase "here I am" to describe an ethical response *par excellence*. I have argued that "here I am" is a subject orientation that bears witness to alterity beyond egoism in a movement toward others. This bearing is determined by passivity and activity, which shape

⁶⁶ Ricoeur points out that Moses is not the only biblical character that reveals a subject identity torn or divided in being divinely summoned. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel reflect the self as divided between obedience and obstinacy in their responses: "Isaiah too responded, 'Here I am; send me.' But, under the insupportable burden of unhappiness and condemnation, he muttered, 'How long, O Lord?'" Jeremiah, always torn, cried out, "I am only a boy." Ezekiel does not object; the word overcomes him. Nevertheless, we read at the end of this episode: "The spirit lifted me and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me (3:14)" ("Summoned Subject" 266). Abraham, rather than the exemplar, proves an anomaly among the company of divided subjects in the Jewish scriptures.

one's relationships with and responses to others in each particular situation. I have also observed that any subject who attempts a "here I am" response to others is divided between egoism and alterity, self-interest and self-sacrifice. In light of this "incessant conflict," "here I am" functions in practice as a turning and re-turning from oneself toward others that occurs in certain moments, not a static posture of ethical responsibility in relation to others (Ricoeur, "Ethical" 301). I want to conclude now with one final turn of the "here I am" that centres on the ultimate potential of this bearing on the borders between Ricoeur and Levinas's thought before I turn to address the implications of this ethical bearing for autobiography studies.

In its most ideal form, Ricoeur asserts, "here I am" can be seen as a bearing of love *beyond* the ethical that is necessarily located *in* acts and systems of justice. He argues that ethical responsibility inevitably relies on the golden rule of reciprocity and equality to orient subjects toward others in daily interactions. Because subjects exist in a web of human relations, ethical bearing must take into account the fact that numerous others summon my "here I am" response and simultaneously demand my attention (OA 194, 196). To take these others into account, Ricoeur and Levinas both articulate the necessity of justice, the need to choose responsibilities, weigh evidence, and make judgements. The golden rule of doing as one would have done to them, suggests a need for equality and measurement of responsible action within systems of law and governance. At the same time, however, to be truly ethical, the reciprocal and justice-oriented expression of the golden rule must be infused with what Ricoeur calls the *hyperethical* expression of love ("Love and Justice" 324). This hyperethical "here I am" permeates the ethical "here I am" beyond oneself toward others and gives this bearing its transformative power. It is characterized by three interconnected elements: dependence, activity, and asymmetry. I will

examine each of these briefly in turn in order to establish the infinity of love infusing and inspiring one's ethical bearing.

The hyperethical "here I am" can first of all be described as a gift of love to others motivated by and dependent on divine love. Anticipating the work of Levinas and Ricoeur, Rosenzweig locates love in the theological or the divine, revealing that in biblical ethics, prior to the law of reciprocity the subject is divinely loved. He argues that response of human love for one another originates and is modelled on this divine love for humanity (Moyn 151). As Rosenzweig sees it, preceding and motivating my response "here I am" is the divine lover who summons, "Love me!" (*Star* 177). This lover does not plead for love or command it, however, without first loving or initiating love in an originary "here I am." As the prophet Isaiah records of God's love: "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, following their own imaginations—a people who continually provoke me to my very face" (*NIV*, 65:1-3a). The initiating "here am I" of the divine lover is *before* and *in spite of* any response: it functions asymmetrically in an economy of grace and generosity.⁶⁷ Consequently, a human "here I am" is derivative, only possible because the divine "here I am" has already been spoken in summoning me. In already being given life and love, the subject is called to love and give himself in love to others, to obey the divine command to love asymmetrically, "without waiting for reciprocity" (*EI* 98).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ See Miroslav Volf in his discussion of an economy of grace and the theological underpinnings of giving and forgiving in his recent book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (2005). See also Paul Ricoeur's discussion of "the economy of the gift" in his essays, "Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule" and "Love and Justice" in *Figuring the Sacred* (1995).

⁶⁸ Charity is being-for-the-other beyond reciprocity. It refers to an asymmetrical relationship in which generosity flourishes. In Levinas's words, "Love's second word speaks of gratuity, gratuitous love, without reciprocity" ("Humanity is Biblical" 84). The gift of love is before any response but also commands a response of giving love for

In this divine/human relationship of love, God is not figured as a cosmic policeman or an exacting judge. Consequently obeying God's command to love is not obedience rooted in fear or guilt, but a response fulfilled by sharing in the surplus of divine love that exceeds oneself.⁶⁹ The command to love, as Ricoeur sees it, is a "corrective" to the reciprocity commanded in the golden rule ("Ethical" 300). Because the reciprocity of the golden rule can be perverted to a stance of justice without love ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") or dominated by self-interest (I give *in order that* you give), the command to love converts the golden rule "from its penchant toward self-interest to a welcoming attitude toward the other" (300). It is not meant to replace the necessary reciprocity and justice expressed in the golden rule, but to replace one's "in order that" utilitarian attitude in an economy of reciprocity with a "because" in an economy of the gift (300): give in love *because* you are already loved.⁷⁰

Second, the hyperethical "here I am" can be seen as a loving response of giving oneself both passively and actively to others. In passivity the subject must realize himself as being loved and remain in this love in order to turn and re-turn toward other people in love. In fact, love could be described as those moments in which the divided subject releases the ego and turns completely toward the other. Christology affirms the need to receive love as a preliminary

others, as an imitation of divine love and as obedience to the divine command to love. Humanity's love for one another, Moyn writes, "is derivative of God's love for humanity" (150).

⁶⁹ A human response under the law is always a response of guilt, the subject is first of all deemed suspect and possibly, by extension, a criminal under condemnation (Oliver, *Witnessing* 177-180). Oliver argues for an alternative formation of subjectivity and response. As she writes: "I prefer to . . . think of subject formation as outside of an economy of guilt and suspicion" (177). She observes that even for Levinas's subject as martyr, who responds to the revelation of God and whose very being is born out of God's otherness or infinity, divine love is not factored into its formation (182-3). She concludes her study in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* with the importance of love to move subjects beyond themselves and thus also to move against domination and oppression (219, 220). While she does not subscribe to Rosenzweig's religious vision of love, she does transform the conception of subjectivity to centre on love.

⁷⁰ Despite the fact that I use the theological framework of Levinas and Ricoeur to discuss the hyperethical, one need not hold to a theological worldview to see life as a gift, dependent on sustenance from outside oneself. Ricoeur argues that human life is dependent on a higher power in nature that "precedes us, envelops us, and supports us" (297). Recognizing oneself in dependence on a cosmos that predates one's existence and shelters all forms of life demands a treatment of the earth and the creatures in it with concern, respect, and love in order to sustain such life. Love for other people becomes part of a greater expression of love "for every creature" (298).

imperative before the actual command to love. Revelation of infinity is first of all a revelation of love. And response is first of all reception. By remaining in divine love, the subject shifts from being in itself to being in divine love, a surplus of being rooted in a love beyond oneself (Moyn 149). As St. John records, Christ says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love,” before he continues, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (*NIV*, John 15:9,12). Passivity, in which one is to receive and remain in divine love, becomes active asymmetry, in which one gives because one is loved. This double imperative addressed to the subject—to remain and to love—assumes that one already recognizes oneself to be loved in an economy of grace and generosity. The obligation to love, then, is simply to pay love forward, participating “in the infinite life-giving generosity of the divine” (Reynolds, “Love” 206).

Finally, the “here I am” of love expands one’s vision of the other, extending beyond the neighbour and needy others to include the absolute alterity of one’s enemies. Beyond reciprocity, the divine “here I am” functions as a model for human bearing toward the other in love for one’s enemies and good for one’s persecutors. Far from discarding the rule of equivalence meant to govern everyday morality—such as care for one’s neighbours and institutions of justice rooted in reciprocity—the command to love one’s enemies broadens the pool of others to whom one is meant to respond, including the unresponsive and the irresponsible. The command to “love *as* you have been loved” by the divine Other, and “give *because* it has been given to you” reveals a dependent love that mirrors the love of the divine. In divine love no one is excluded. In a way both similar and dependent, the human “here I am” is meant to include *all* people, the deserving and undeserving alike, without being concerned about receiving something in return—whether recognition, recompense, or reward.

The hyperethical “here I am” is paradoxically a divine gift and a divine command. The subject is commanded but also motivated by a love beyond ethics and reciprocity toward all others, whether summoning or not, whether deserving love or not. This response of love cannot be dissociated from the ethical response of reciprocity and justice. They inform each other. Without the golden rule of reciprocity, Ricoeur warns, a hyperethical state of giving can easily slide into the non-ethical or even unethical state of injustice, the passive dissymmetry of being violently subjected. In human ethics, justice necessarily limits a love without boundaries. However, without a command of love to reinterpret the golden rule in terms of generosity, the rule may exact a harsh justice or a self-interested utilitarianism. Where the golden rule functions to limit violence or indifference toward the other or the lover, love imbues reciprocity with the motivation to give oneself so that turning toward the other for his sake does not simply become an obligation or duty to bear. Indeed, the command to love interrupts all ethical codes with a degree of compassion and generosity (Ricoeur, “Love and Justice” 329). In singular moments, both numerous and unexceptional, the divided ethical subject turns and re-turns toward the other in love, expressing a hyperethical subjectivity that participates mysteriously in the infinite “here I am.”

At the outermost, radical edges of being is an orientation of love beyond oneself and toward others. In love, Levinas’s “here I am” vision of responsive self-sacrifice and Ricoeur’s “here I am” vision of esteeming selves come together as an ultimate expression of bearing witness to alterity. Between Levinas and Ricoeur, we see love as much a passion of giving up my being for myself as it is an action of esteem, devotion, and self-constancy toward others. It is as much a passive reception of infinite love as it is an active bearing of love toward others. And paradoxically, it connotes both an interruption of being and an overflow of being for others. Both

stem from a surplus of being through alterity rather than a reduction of being against oneself and others. As I will show in the following chapters, this radical subjectivity is expressed in a generosity of being revealed through reconciliation and forgiveness toward others. Being constituted in infinite love is the critical excess of ethical responsibility that expands our vision of subjectivity (exceeding ourselves for the sake of others), expands the pool of others that summon our response, and expands our motivation to bear witness to the alterity of these others beyond duty, guilt, shame, fear, or obligation. In short, love challenges ethics, it exceeds ethics, and it imbues ethics with its transformative and regenerative power in our daily interactions and actions with and for others.

“Here I am”: Defining Ethical Responsibility for Autobiography Studies

Holding together Levinas’s “here I am” of being given over for others and Ricoeur’s “here I am” of giving oneself as another, we glean a sense of the thickness of ethical responsibility that we cannot gather from each thinker on his own. From Levinas we learn that ethical responsibility is a passive movement of subjectivity otherwise than being for oneself. Because being is naturally in a state of war against others and only good “despite itself,” we must interrupt, question, and sacrifice being to move beyond ourselves toward others. From Ricoeur we learn that ethical responsibility is an active movement of being otherwise. Because being has a capacity for goodness, we can move beyond ourselves toward others by recognizing our inherent otherness and esteeming selves. In light of their work, we can describe responsibility as an ethical bearing and witness of alterity that brings oneself into question (in being awakened to otherness) and esteems all selves. In its movement beyond oneself and toward others, it necessarily includes the excessive and interruptive generosity of love to inform and transform its systems of justice and goodness. And in practice, it reveals the complexities of turning beyond oneself toward others

due to the very rift in being that divides Levinas's thought from Ricoeur's—humans are naturally at war and naturally benevolent.

I want to conclude this chapter by considering how the visions of Levinas and Ricoeur contribute to the ethical discourse of responsibility in autobiography studies. In my study, three issues have come to the fore: (a) ethical responsibility refers to a radical formulation of subjectivity beyond conventional identity markers and systems of being; (b) ethical responsibility refers to a way of being oriented otherwise in witness to alterity rather than a specific set of behaviours defined as good or right; and (c) ethical responsibility must negotiate activity and passivity in this orientation toward alterity in order to ethically navigate one's relationships with others. I will address each one briefly here, and examine in each of my following chapters how they apply to, complicate, and potentially transform actual practices of witnessing others in the context of life writing.

First, ethical responsibility is a formation of subjectivity that is located in but exceeds the systems of being that define it. Our tendency, Reynolds observes, is to determine selfhood in terms of "being included in a group, upon how we 'fit' into its taken-for-granted framework of assumptions and values" ("Love" 198). However, in order to genuinely respond to others we must first see ourselves as transcending the frameworks we have created to define and identify ourselves. Through the orientation and response of "here I am," subjectivity is separated from the totalizing structures of being for oneself: egoism, sameness, and the system. Only by first signifying human identity otherwise, other than any formulations or systems of being for itself, can we step outside its confines to bear witness to the faces of actual others, whose very presence challenges even our best intentions, our systems for ethical behaviour, and our definitions of

alterity. Only in being reconstituted toward others to give oneself both sacrificially (Levinas) and intentionally (Ricoeur) can humans engage ethically with others.

From this perspective, ethics informs but cannot be rooted in the conventional formulations of selfhood assumed in autobiography studies because these very categories of being challenge our ability to bear witness to alterity and respond “here I am” to others. Defining subjectivity in ethical terms (here I am for you) rather than ontological or political terms (I am this; I am that) results in a paradigm shift that opens up the categories of being by which we identify ourselves and constrict our interactions. If, for instance, I formulate myself wholly in terms of my gender, class, race, sexual orientation, or location within a given power structure, I limit the possibilities of ethical action to being within these constructs. I can only respond ethically to others in *these* terms. Instead of determining ethics through these classifying systems and power structures, Levinas radically suggests that we determine these systems and structures through ethics. He and Ricoeur both propose a shift in our understanding of what it means to be a human subject in relation to others. Being constituted *otherwise* in witness to alterity, subjects are flexible and formed in and through their responses to others: *I am* in giving myself for you. Ethical subjectivity, defined *first* in ethical relation to alterity draws open our political and cultural categories of being to create alternative possibilities for relating with others and extends the pool of others to whom we are potentially able to respond. As I will show, each of the three witnesses whose narratives I address in the following chapters manifests aspects of this ethical subjectivity and thus challenges the social, political, and juridical systems in which they are located. Their witness to alterity in being oriented *otherwise* is effective in showing the transformative possibilities and the complexities of human interaction that attend this alternative way of being.

Second, ethical responsibility is an orientation or bearing of selfhood toward others before and beyond any codes of moral activity or behaviour. Located in a web of human relations, we are inherently positioned within socio-political systems of government and powers of law. Without evacuating the political or the juridical, Levinas and Ricoeur argue that ethics is not essentially a politics nor does it espouse a particular set of just activities. Ethical responsibility is a foundational bearing *before* socio-political or juridical action: the subject needs to turn beyond itself toward others in order to imbue these actions with the kind of ethical potency that generates social and political transformation. In other words, ethical bearing is a thick posture of subjectivity that animates the thin behaviours demanded in codes of conduct and moral norms. Without ethical bearing, these activities become obligatory motions or duties that lose their transformative power. Consequently responses to life narratives that use ethical responsibility purely as a lens for discussing or critiquing moral codes, human rights, or economic and social injustice can prove static or stale without addressing the bearing that generates and complicates these activities.

Indeed, ethical bearing determines whether an action is good or not. I am convinced that actions are only as ethical as the subjects performing them. No behaviour is intrinsically good in and of itself; rather, a subjectivity oriented toward others infuses behaviours with ethical potency and transformative power in any given relationship, while a subjectivity for its own sake can undermine the ethical actions one performs. If ethical actions depend on subjectivity, we can better understand why actions we value as ethical—justice, honesty, charity, empathy, etc.—are fraught with complications and uncertainty in practical situations and in life narratives. Because subjects oscillate between being for others and being for themselves, acts too shift between responsibility and irresponsibility. Reynolds illustrates this complexity in regard to love as it

relates to his own relationship with his disabled son, Chris. He suggests that in practice, love can easily morph into a charity that condescends to the ‘needy’ and presumes that “those who receive aid are of no use and have nothing to offer in return” (“Love” 198-199). Love can also be prized as “a disinterested and unilateral act of self-denial,” so distanced from actual others that it overlooks them (199). And further, the motivation to love may well be solipsistic, “a self-centred desire to be recognized by others as loving” (199). Without addressing the subject bearing behind behaviour, we cannot hope to understand the complexities that materialize in activities we deem ethically responsible. Observing the problematic and egoistic nuances of love, Reynolds writes, “learning to love my son has meant putting aside presumptions about what love is, what is of value in a person, what being human entails” (200). Face-to-face with Chris, Reynolds determines that ethical bearing must function *beyond* mores for ethical action, challenging and revitalizing them from without. Ricoeur and Levinas claim that ethical norms and systems, as critical as they are to the regulation of a just society, must be interrupted and disputed by an orientation other to these systems. Only in bearing oneself toward alterity can a subject turn, even if only momentarily, from the power struggles, self-interested utilitarianism, exacting equality, retributive justice, and economies of exchange inherent in and defended by these systems. In challenging equality with asymmetry, power with passivity, and retributive justice with forgiveness, ethical bearing destabilizes moral norms with a vulnerability and generosity of self.

Third, ethical responsibility means constantly questioning and negotiating one’s orientation toward alterity, one’s “how to be” with and for others. Ethical responsibility is hardly a straightforward orientation or practice. Bringing together the work of Levinas and Ricoeur shows that a responsible orientation functions between passivity and activity, asymmetry and

reciprocity, and depends on the nature of the relationship and the specific witnessing context in which one responds. Subjects must navigate this space between passive subjection and active agency in responding to the alterity of each particular person. In passivity the subject must give up and let go of his or her ethical presuppositions, security, and control in order to turn and return to the reality of the other person. At the same time, however, the subject must decide what kind of response most reflects this “here I am” orientation and actively move toward the other in each particular relationship. The question of how to be ethically responsible with others, then, functions contextually and interdependently—between oneself and another—and must be so constituted.

In practice, ethical responsibility proves to be a complicated subject orientation that requires constant negotiation between oneself and others, between ethical responses, and between contexts. Selves are often internally conflicted, unsure how to choose between agency and alterity in responding to others and who to respond to when more than one person requires help. As a description of being *otherwise* or *otherwise than being* with no prescriptive courses of action to follow in specific situations, this vision of responsibility liberates and complicates our definitions of responsible behaviour in relating with other people. In fact, this very lack of prescription is what gives Levinas and Ricoeur the freedom to develop their visions of “here I am” in alternative contexts: Levinas for oppressed others and Ricoeur for reciprocal friendships. While their thinking overlaps, they reveal with their very differences that the ethical bearing toward others at the root of responsibility is a dynamic orientation that requires negotiation in each encounter. Indeed, as I will come to show in the following chapters, this negotiation is particularly fraught in face-to-face relationships with vulnerable subjects in whom one is personally invested and engaged. Bearing witness to the otherness of these “others,” ethical

subjects must somehow navigate between the alterity of another's oppression with the reciprocity involved in their personal and narrative relationship.

With Levinas and Ricoeur, the question of "how to be" in witness and response to the lives and stories of others becomes a question of how to orient oneself to see others *otherwise* in the very systems of identity and morality that define us. This question introduces life-writing scholarship to new avenues of thought about ethical being and doing, the relationships between selves in contexts of suffering, and the ethical spaces that arise beyond our conventional formulations of responsibility. With these openings in mind, I now take this ethical bearing to three sites of witnessing in order to examine how "here I am" functions relationally and practically in these various contexts of narration.

**Bearing the Other: Witnessing Alterity in Etty Hillesum's
An Interrupted Life and *Letters from Westerbork***

In 1941, Etty Hillesum—a young, Dutch-Jewish woman—began to pursue the question of how to be truly human in the face of the inhumanity and oppression that she was witnessing in Nazi-occupied Holland. In her journals and letters from 1941 until her deportation to Auschwitz in 1943, she reveals a remarkable journey toward personal and spiritual liberation from the fear and hatred of others (which she sees as dehumanizing), and testifies to a “faith and love” that make human life meaningful and valuable, even in the midst of suffering and war (Gaarlandt, “Introduction” xviii). Hillesum’s writings, collected and published posthumously in English as *An Interrupted Life* and *Letters from Westerbork* (1983, 1986), present a radical example of witnessing *otherwise*: she sees herself and engages with members of her Jewish community *beyond* their suffering and victimization in her personal and proximate relationships both in Amsterdam and in Westerbork, the main Jewish concentration camp in Holland.⁷¹ “If I have one duty in these times,” Hillesum writes in the autumn of 1942, “it is to bear witness,” a duty she describes as “being there right in the thick of what people call ‘horror’ and still be able to say: life is beautiful” (219, 226). From my perspective, her witness functions as an exemplar for the actual, practical, and narrative possibilities of the “here I am” orientation for transforming one’s life and the lives of other vulnerable subjects by being present for them in the midst of suffering.

Drawing on Hillesum’s journals and letters, this chapter will explore how a “here I am” bearing functions in verb form as a concrete and generous movement of “bearing the other.” Bearing the other connotes an embodied practice of witnessing that takes on oneself, even to the point of suffering, the burden of otherness or other people—a different, alien, or infinite presence

⁷¹ All citations from Hillesum’s journals and letters are taken from a 1996 edition of her work that carries together *An Interrupted Life* (her journals) and *Letters from Westerbork* (letters) as they appear in their 1983 and 1986 editions respectively.

that challenges one's own reality and subjectivity as one sees it.⁷² Ethical bearing, as Levinas and Ricoeur pose it, is not simply meant to be abstract or theoretical: the ethical subject is a sensible subject, "an embodied being of flesh and blood" whose ethical orientation is "lived in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other" (Critchley 21). Ethical responsibility, then, can be seen as an orientation of generosity (self-exposure) embodied in the practice of bearing the burden of alterity in response to the lives and suffering of others. It assumes letting go and opening oneself to that which exceeds one's systems of thought, language, and action. At the same time, it means asking how one should give oneself practically through the very concepts, signs, and bodies by which one lives. What might it look like to be generous in mind, in language, and in person in one's witnessing practice?

Through Hillesum's writings, I propose that each of these three aspects is integral to the practice of ethical witnessing and will examine them here in the following terms: (a) bearing the other in mind, (b) bearing the other in language, and (c) bearing the other in person. These facets of practical bearing have been addressed to varying degrees within autobiography scholarship from the standpoint of ethical activity.⁷³ My goal is to flesh them out further from the philosophical starting point of ethical bearing that I proposed in my previous chapter. While I consider each one individually for the sake of clarity, these facets clearly overlap and intersect in practices of writing and reading autobiography.

I want to suggest at the outset that for Hillesum, the practices of bearing the other in mind, language, and person reveals an orientation of generosity in every response and involves

⁷² As this statement implies, the "other" can refer to both that which is other (things, experiences, the outside world, alternative ways of thinking, etc.) and those who are other, that is, other people. Often the two go together, as when our encounters with other people introduce us to other ways of thinking, doing, or being that we must somehow negotiate and, arguably, also integrate with our own ways of thinking, doing, and being. Bearing the other suggests this practice of negotiating and integrating alterity in our relationships with other people, which becomes particularly necessary and vexed when those others are suffering.

⁷³ See Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004), Eakin's *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), Parker's *The Self in Moral Space* (2009), and Whitlock's *Soft Weapons* (2007).

the practice of negotiation in every relationship. Indeed, to practice a bearing of generosity in every response *is* to continually negotiate between oneself and others, since the practice of bearing is fraught with the challenges and complexities of being located in time and place with other people. The very form of my statement “bearing the other in . . .” reflects this duality of generosity and negotiation: “bearing the other” signals a generosity of being toward alterity *beyond* being for itself, and “in . . .” refers to a particular location and context in which generosity both transforms and is limited by our formulations, bodies, systems of being, and institutions of governance. Responses of generosity *beyond* one’s self or systems always occur *in* the world and must constantly be negotiated in light of this tension—beyond/in. These negotiations take place on a number of levels concurrently: subjectively, intersubjectively, and practically.

On a subjective level, Hillesum negotiates between being for herself and being for others beyond her formulations of identity. In order to respond with generosity, she must step outside her categories and systems of thought for a moment to be able to encounter that which is other than she already knows or identifies in herself and others. On an intersubjective level, she must navigate the space between herself and others, the differences of other people with the proximity of their presence. If ethical responsibility “connects us to the world and other people,” how is one to be proximate with others in community while still acknowledging their differences (Oliver, *Witnessing* 12; Parker, *Moral Space* 109)? Thomas Reynolds and Kelly Oliver both imply that negotiating distance and proximity hinges on the recipient’s subject position in relation to the other person. For Reynolds, responding to his disabled son, negotiating space between oneself and another looks very different from Oliver’s scholarly response to Holocaust

survivor stories and narratives of slavery.⁷⁴ As with Reynolds, Hillesum's practice of bearing the other functions at close range, face-to-face and in dialogue with others, particularly those in her family and Jewish community (194). This concrete "up close-ness" makes negotiating their differences from her with their proximity to her both necessary and difficult.⁷⁵ On a practical level, Hillesum must navigate between levels of response, determining between activity and passivity in bearing the suffering of other people. In a 1942 journal entry, where she reflects on the growing restrictions of her life in Holland and her deep commitment to the refugee Jews in Westerbork, she challenges herself "to bear the suffering God [and by extension, others] . . . imposed on [her] and not just the suffering [she has] chosen for [herself]" (220). Actively choosing the burdens of others that she will bear differs from the actual burdens of otherness chosen for her and imposed upon her. Bearing the other in practice requires negotiating action and passion to deal with the interruptive, even stifling proximity of others and their suffering beyond her own choosing.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ethical responsibility requires Reynolds to engage with the reality of his son's experiences on a daily basis, existing as part of the fabric and language of his own identity and inseparable from his own experiences. The proximity of his son demands that "the other" not be made into an abstract category of difference. Rather, difference must function as the spatial bearing that separates his son's identity from a list of disabilities or from Reynolds's own disappointed expectations. In contrast, Oliver's distant subject position in time and space requires her to maintain a distinction between her own identity and the other person's identity and Holocaust suffering experienced mediately in narrative.

⁷⁵ In *The Brothers Karamozov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's reveals this tension explicitly. Ivan Karamozov confesses to his brother Alyosha that loving one's neighbour and by extension, bearing his burdens, can only occur abstractly and from a distance. The moment one is proximate with the other and sees his face, love disappears, and "not from an evil heart either" but because the other's face is too close, too needy, and too real (277). Ethically negotiating relational space is informed by the way one negotiates the abstract ideals of ethical engagement with others (in which the other is at theoretical and safe distance away) and concrete ethical engagement with others (in which the other's proximity challenges the possibility and practicality of the ideal). Only at close range can the other person's genuine differences and his pervasive proximity actually be negotiated to beget an ethical response.

⁷⁶ In *The War After*, Anne Karpf makes a similar distinction between active and passive suffering, but reveals a different facet of this negotiation. She depicts her struggle to negotiate between bearing another's pain and the act of taking it over or taking it upon herself. As a child of Holocaust survivors, she confesses to struggling between her own self-directed acts and assumptions of how to bear the suffering of her parents ethically and the actual suffering she comes to bear in relation to them. Bearing the other, as she reveals, means distinguishing which acts of suffering are legitimately self-giving and which are self-imposed, deciphering between bearing another's pain and taking it over, and determining when giving oneself over becomes over-giving oneself for the sake of others.

These negotiations of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and levels of response inform and complicate such practical questions as, how do I respond to suffering *otherwise* than my own or others' systems of being might determine? How am I to be generous to *this* person? When faced with a number of people that summon my responsibilities at the same time, how do I choose which person to respond to? And which response is the most ethical in *this* situation? Keeping in mind that bearing the other is both a practice of generosity toward alterity and negotiation in every encounter and relationship, I will begin this study by examining the ways that bearing the other transforms Hillesum's responses (in mind, language, and person) through the negotiations she reveals in her journal. I will then address a few of the complications of negotiating generosity between oneself and others that Hillesum faces in "bearing the other" as a witnessing practice.

In this discussion, I consider Hillesum's journals and letters from Westerbork together as a limit case through which to examine how these facets of bearing the other might function as responsible practices of witnessing in life writing documents about suffering in general. In the last two decades, we have relied on the Holocaust as the limit event of trauma *par excellence* in order to approach the question of suffering. As Ruth Leys characterizes it, "its sheer extremity" functions as an "affront to common norms and expectations," and thus helps us to reconsider and revise our ways of interacting with others accordingly (298). From my perspective, Hillesum's journals and letters confront what has now become our assumed "norms and expectations" of the Holocaust as a limit event, with its horrors and aporias of incomprehensible suffering, by challenging her position as a "victim" of suffering and witnessing her life as meaningful and beautiful in the midst of her suffering.

Because Hillesum is a woman, a Jew, and an oppressed victim of Nazi genocide, it makes sense to consider her ethical practices in terms of gender, ethnicity, politics, trauma, or social justice. Any one of these perspectives would prove fruitful for ethical analysis in its own right and has been taken up admirably by scholars working on Hillesum specifically and the Holocaust in general.⁷⁷ However, for my analysis, these critical distinctions of identity are secondary to what I see as Hillesum's overarching ethical impulse toward community and peace that transcends these differences (218). I argue that her writings embody, in a radical and compelling way, a Levinasian bearing "for the other" in mind, language, and relationship.⁷⁸ Not unlike Levinas, she reveals ethics as a spiritual or even metaphysical "first principle" that transcends her ontological formulations of herself and others and changes her views about what it means to be human. We cannot ignore the fact that ontological categories have effects on her being and her ability to respond to others. Ethnicity matters precisely because it is the category that marks Hillesum out for the death camps. Gender matters because it is a biological fact with social, emotional, and relational implications that Hillesum directly addresses. While such categories and contexts undoubtedly inform the shape her ethics takes, they are not where her "bearing the other" begins or where she fundamentally locates her ethical practices. In many ways these identity markers are incidental to her ethical vision, which consists of stepping outside them through her spirituality in order to speak to them from an alternative perspective. Witnessing herself in relation to alterity and infinity, she reorients the way she sees, thinks, reads, interprets,

⁷⁷ See Rachel Feldhay Brenner's *Writing As Resistance: 4 Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum* (1997); Mary Evans's "Gender and the Literature of the Holocaust: The Diary of Etty Hillesum" (2001); and Anne Whithead's "A Still, Small Voice: Letter-writing, Testimony and the Project of Address in Etty Hillesum's Letters from Westerbork" (2001).

⁷⁸ Her perspectives of being human in the midst of suffering are singular and unusual. For this reason, my chapter focuses almost exclusively on her journals and letters, rather than putting her in conversation with like-minded sufferers. The only other Holocaust writer that I have come across whose vision bears some resemblance to Hillesum's own is Viktor Frankl. I use his text, *Man's Search for Meaning*, as a companion piece to Hillesum's journals and letters later on in this chapter. Using him in conjunction with Hillesum suggests that her perspective is, notably, not gender specific.

writes, and behaves in her practices of relational and spatial negotiation and generosity toward others.

Bearing the Other in Mind: Witnessing as Re-cognition

In my introduction, I indicated that contemporary theorists often define ethical responsibility as a practice of recognizing others (Oliver, “Witnessing and Testimony” 78). In autobiography studies particularly, scholars who examine ethics and life writing rely on recognition to approach socio-political testimonies in which marginalized persons or groups share their experiences and memories of discrimination, injustice, or exploitation. For Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer, for instance, witnessing these vulnerable subjects means responding to their stories “through an ethics of recognition” (12). They suggest that ethical responsibility requires listeners to recognize the humanity of others and the justice of their claims, and to build awareness of their rights violations in public forums, while simultaneously being mindful of the media’s shaping and commodification of such awareness. Gillian Whitlock similarly locates recognition in human rights discourse. Focusing less on the role of the responsible listener, where bearing witness refers to “an open and sincere gesture of recognition and remembrance” (*Soft Weapons* 122), Whitlock deals with the claims of the testifier. For her, ethical recognition of the other’s story of suffering means not merely accepting his or her claims but also critically questioning these claims. Listeners must “recognize” that hoax stories can be used alongside legitimate ones to promote certain human rights agendas. In both contexts, recognition functions as a reading or listening practice that connotes awareness and acknowledgement of others, whether in view of their humanity, the mediation of their stories, or the authenticity of their testimonies.

Recognition can thus be seen as a way of bearing witness to others that affirms their identity or agency as human beings, particularly within a marginalized ethnic group, race,

gender, class, or sexual orientation. What remains unclear, however, is how recognition functions as a way of bearing witness to others beyond their markers of identity and what recognition means for life writing as an ethics that exceeds politics. Indeed, what would such awareness or acknowledgement of alterity look like *in practice*? As I have worked on these questions, I have found that philosophical designations of recognition reveal a far more vexed relationship with ethical responsibility than thinkers in autobiography have articulated, and extend its significance beyond a political scope. I thus address these philosophical influences in this chapter to develop other ways of thinking about recognition's connection to responsibility and its potential as a witnessing practice in micro-social contexts, that is, in personal or proximate relationships.

From a philosophical perspective, the term "recognition" is a complicated one, particularly in its relation to ethical responsibility. Thinkers do not agree about how the two are connected. Levinas and Ricoeur, for instance, disagree on the meaning of recognition and, consequently, on its ethical implications and practical possibilities. For Levinas, recognition and responsibility are at odds: he portrays the former as a thematizing vision rooted in the cognition of an egoistic subject and the latter as the responsive passivity of an ethical self. Indeed, thinkers in the continental tradition, such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Oliver, who address the alterity of the other in discussing responsibility, do not deem recognition an integral part of ethical responsibility at all, but see recognition as contrary to it. They have two main reasons for separating the two.

First, contemporary uses of recognition in literary and cultural theory are dominated by the Hegelian notion of *Anerkennung*, which defines recognition as a struggle to determine oneself and to be recognized by others in terms of likeness or difference from oneself (Oliver,

Witnessing 5). While recognition understood in this way is a relational and dialogic practice that may well stimulate awareness or acknowledgement of others, these relationships tend to grow out of antagonism or, at the very least, out of self-reference (Oliver 4). They are still formed *in relation to me*—the other is “like *me*” or “unlike *me*” and I am aware of and acknowledge him or her as such. As I suggested in my introduction, determining the self within the dichotomy of similitude and opposition does not allow for other ways of constituting selves or relationships with others beyond the context of struggle. Indeed, constituting oneself in a struggle against others for recognition contradicts a “here I am” vision of subjectivity, in which selves are conceived relationally for the sake of others, bearing and sharing in the suffering of their burdens. Furthermore, marginalized others cannot be encountered ethically if they are consistently identified as struggling to be acknowledged and affirmed. If their agency depends solely on another’s recognition, then the recognizer is put in a position of power and the sufferer’s marginalized, dependent position is reinforced. The struggle for recognition, then, may in fact perpetuate the very “hierarchies, domination, and injustice that they attempt to overcome” (“Witnessing and Testimony,” 79). Miroslav Volf addresses this problem in *Exclusion and Embrace*, arguing that relationships rooted in a struggle for recognition or constituted in terms of power hierarchies cannot lead to ethical and peaceful interactions with others (146). An ethical vision of subjectivity challenges both sufferers and oppressors to constitute themselves beyond or despite another’s recognition. It offers an alternative relational vision of subject formation that undermines the model of power relations in Hegel’s master—slave account.⁷⁹

Second, Levinas depicts recognition as a form of cognition, a practice that reduces others to what I can see and know about them. With its visual and cognitive implications, recognition

⁷⁹ For further discussion of recognition in the Hegelian sense (*Anerkennung*) see Paul Ricoeur’s chapter “Mutual Recognition” in *The Course of Recognition* (2005), pages 150-246.

connotes the idea of “something already known” and can thus create the illusion of “mastery” over the world or others (Oliver, *Witnessing* 170, 171). Encountering others through knowledge or cognition, Levinas warns, the self cannot escape itself: “Knowledge,” he writes, “has always been interpreted as assimilation. Even the most surprising discoveries end by being absorbed, comprehended. . . . The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude” (*EI* 60). Recognition, rooted in vision and cognition, alienates even as it assimilates the other into oneself. As Deleuze observes, recognition functions in much the same way as representation: both collapse the alterity of the other into analogy or similitude (Davies 119).⁸⁰ These thinkers point to the problems of assimilation, appropriation, and analogy inherent in the practice of recognition that function to alienate others from oneself and reduce them in mind. In its focus on finitude and similitude, recognition risks losing the alterity of the other and becoming a totalizing force. In constantly returning to the self, Levinas worries, the seeing and knowing inherent in recognition contradicts an ethics of responsibility in which genuine human relation takes place in one’s movement beyond the ego. Recognition, in this sense, is “not open to otherness, but only to confirmations of itself” (Oliver, *Witnessing* 206). For Oliver and Levinas, constituting me against you or making you into me reveals two facets of egoism implicit in recognition. Others are reduced to entities that either refer back to my identity or exist to create my identity. Both undermine an ethical “here I am” constitution of subjectivity and the practice of witnessing the alterity of others in sharing in their suffering.

In contrast to Levinas’s thinking and its offshoots in deconstruction and continental ethics, Ricoeur does not constitute recognition primarily as an aspect of being or subject

⁸⁰ In his analysis of deconstruction and difference, Oliver Davies discusses Gilles Deleuze’s identification of knowing with recognition and representation with analogy as fundamental to the language of these terms (119-120).

formation, but as a way of perceiving the self in relationship with others. For him, recognition is “a structure of the self reflecting on the movement that carries [esteem of selves] toward solicitude and solicitude toward justice” (OA 296). Recognition is the process of being aware or conscious of the self in relationship with and indebted to others for its very constitution. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur links recognition to responsibility, arguing that recognizing oneself in relationships with others and one’s being as indebted to others *is* to hold oneself responsible for others (295). In place of a reductive vision and knowledge that fixes or masters the other, Ricoeur describes recognition as a process of self-reflexivity that motivates action: opening oneself out toward others by seeing them in terms of difference *and* in terms of commonality. In other words, self-recognition recognizes the other beyond an assimilating vision or the mastering grasp of knowledge: “the neighbour is always already recognized [*reconnu*] without having already been known [*connu*]” (qtd. in *Recognition* 203). Rather than a form of knowing, Ricoeur argues, recognition is a practice of acknowledging others simultaneously *as* oneself and separate from oneself, a similitude that carries alterity *within* it, thereby keeping recognition from becoming merely self-referential or inherently antagonistic in relationships with others (OA 335).

Autobiography scholars addressing the relationship between recognition and responsibility use recognition in a Ricoeurian sense: awareness of others and affirmation of selves. However, because recognition is a term that stems from more than one philosophical tradition and because autobiography theory does not address the significance of alterity in its use of the term, we would do well to acknowledge that recognition is not as straightforward as our scholarship suggests and clearly define its connection to ethical responsibility in witnessing. In order to define recognition as ethically responsible, we first need to take into account why these terms have been separated. Thinkers who divorce the two are concerned that recognition

functions as antagonism (in which I define myself against you), egoism (in which I define you in terms of me), or totality (in which I reduce you to my perspective or knowledge of you), all of which undermine an ethical bearing.

Attending to these concerns, I propose that recognition be nuanced as re-cognition, a cognitive, ethical practice of witnessing alterity. Re-cognition is a humble reorienting of the mind to be both conscious of the problem of totalizing others in knowledge while still being aware of one's interconnection with others as part of the human constitution. Between Levinas and Ricoeur, bearing the other in mind suggests being mindful of the alterity of other people while bearing the person and his suffering in mind. Simon Critchley clearly describes such a mental practice when he writes, "In our relation to other persons we have to learn to acknowledge what we cannot know . . . and to respect the separateness or what Levinas calls the *transcendence* of the other person" (26). What Ricoeur adds to this vision of re-cognition is the "identification" or "joining together" with the other also necessary in the practice of acknowledgement (*Recognition* 23, 42). Clearly both are necessary in order to avoid totalities of difference and totalities of assimilation.⁸¹ Richard Cohen combines both visions to propose a recognition "mediated neither as knowledge nor as foreknowledge" but as "moral responsiveness, a subjectivity as subjection to the other in a humbling of powers and capacities, a reorientation of the self's natural for-oneself—its *conatus*—into a for-the-other" ("Ricoeur" 305-6). Re-cognition is both a humble awareness of my debt and connection to others as well as the shortcomings of my vision and knowledge in my witness of others. With Ricoeur, re-cognition acknowledges otherness and esteems selves, and with Levinas, re-cognition challenges the

⁸¹ David Parker discusses the shortcomings of a politics of difference without its corresponding vision of commonality. He argues that a politics of difference, while it ethically resists the universalizing and totalizing hypergoods of the modern state, has itself become a repressive hypergood, "one which resists recognizing communally shared goods that transcend boundaries of difference" (109). See his "Difference and Its Discontents" in *The Self in Moral Space* for further discussion (109-125).

egoism or a subject's power to reduce otherness in appropriation or antagonism. An ethical responsiveness emerges from such a vision of the self's relation to others. Bearing the other in mind requires a reorienting of mind and so a responding, "Here I am for your sake."

This reorientation includes being open to change one's mind about how to engage with others. It not only bears others by affirming the separateness and connectedness of their subjectivity and agency to one's own, but it also bears others by committing to reorient one's mind in every given situation for each different other. It challenges the subject to reconsider at every moment, "How do I think and perceive with the other in mind?" Requiring a mental negotiation between what I "already know" and the face of the other person whom I encounter, re-cognition demands an ethical space between my tendency to appropriate the other in mental similitude or alienate him in distance. This mental reorientation, negotiation, and humbling of cognitive control allows one to witness the other ethically. It requires the active passivity of a "here I am" bearing for the other's sake. While autobiography theorists such as Schaffer, Smith, and Whitlock may have these nuances in mind in their scholarship on narratives of social marginalization or political oppression, re-cognition as I have defined it applies to every subject and extends to any other in any context. It challenges the idea of recognition as an affirmation of selfhood by others and suggests instead a mental reorientation that constitutes subjects by means of their ethical engagements with others beyond, and even despite, being acknowledged or affirmed.

In *An Interrupted Life*, Etty Hillesum reveals precisely how re-cognition is a form of witnessing that is potentially reciprocal rather than unidirectional (extending from the powerful self toward the marginalized other) and functions outside the binaries of domination and exclusion. Levelling the power hierarchy in her own way, she demonstrates that victims—those

deemed to be “unrecognized” in a master—slave account—have the ability to re-cognize the “enemy” other. She challenges the idea that gaining subjectivity as a victim of atrocity relies on a more powerful other to bestow recognition on her and instead shows how she inwardly conceives herself beyond victimhood precisely through re-cognizing her persecutors.

On Friday February 27, 1942, Hillesum writes in her journal of her experience in a Gestapo Hall in Amsterdam. In this environment, she is marginalized racially and sexually by the Gestapo, who are politically and physically in power over her. On the one hand, she positions herself within this hierarchy as Jew, female, and helpless. On the other hand, she undermines this hierarchy inwardly in terms of her perspective. She does so in at least two ways. First, she re-cognizes one of the Gestapo beyond the frame of “oppressor” and within the frame of “human.” She describes their interaction and her witness of him as follows:

I noticed a young man with a sullen expression, who paced up and down looking driven and harassed and making no attempt to hide his irritation. He kept looking for pretexts to shout at the helpless Jews: “Take our hands out of your pockets . . .” and so on. I thought him more pitiable than those he shouted at, and those he shouted at I thought pitiable for being afraid of him. . . . I am not easily frightened. Not because I am brave, but because I know that I am dealing with human beings and that I must try as hard as I can to understand everything that anyone ever does. And that was the real import of this morning: not that a disgruntled young Gestapo officer yelled at me, but that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion, and would have liked to ask, ‘Did you have a very unhappy childhood, has your girlfriend let you down?’ Yes, he looked harassed and driven, sullen and weak. (85, 86)

In reorienting her mind to view the officer as a fellow human being with concerns and emotions, she is able to perceive him with compassion rather than indignation or fear. She recognizes herself embodied within a particular political, racial, and sexual hierarchy, but internally, she reorients her mind and rethinks “Gestapo officer” beyond what this political category must have meant for her. She witnesses him *otherwise*, as a whole person of which his differences are only a part.

Such a practice, she reveals, is challenging because she already has certain systems of identity in place in relation to “the Germans.” “Sometimes,” she writes, “when I read the papers or hear reports of what is happening all [around], I am suddenly beside myself with anger, cursing and swearing at the Germans” (12). In these moments, “the Germans” become her own essentialist category, which she tries to quell by remembering the “differences” among Germans: “Yes, of course, there are still some good Germans . . .” (13). However, even noting these differences among Germans does not enable her to respond in generosity toward them, though it does help to subdue her hatred. She finds that she has to let go of the “German” identity construct entirely in order to re-cognize the Gestapo officer as a “young man,” another human being. Her subjectivity in this context becomes more about how she re-cognizes others than about whether they come to recognize her. For indeed, they do not.

Second, she levels the political and spatial power hierarchy between the “helpless Jews” and the “men behind the desks” present in the Gestapo Hall that morning by re-cognizing the common humanity that united them: “At that moment,” she writes, “the circumstances of all our lives were the same. All of us occupied the same space, the men behind the desk no less than us about to be questioned” (85). Rather than determine her subjectivity solely from within a political framework separating the powerful from the helpless, she determines herself in terms of inner response to this situation: “What distinguished each one of us was only our inner attitudes,” she writes (85). The sullen inner attitude of the Gestapo officer, she realizes, not the man himself, contributes to making “young men like [him] dangerous” (86). And the fear her fellow Jews have in response to him contributes to their inner helplessness. Hillesum similarly judges her fellow Jews in Westerbork by this criterion of “inner attitude,” finding this more fundamental than political power or identity politics for defining subjectivity. She describes one of her

colleagues, for instance, as not unlike his persecutors because his inner orientation was indistinguishable from theirs: “The most striking thing about him is his inflexible, rigid neck. He hates our persecutors with an undying hatred, presumably with good reason. But he himself is a bully. He would make a model concentration camp guard” (210). Witnessing her persecutors and her fellow Jews alike according to their inner attitudes, Hillesum collapses power hierarchies as the defining source of their respective subjectivities. One’s own attitude in relation to others trumps one’s position of power.

Hillesum’s re-cognition of the situation in the hall keeps her from indignation or fear despite the officer’s cruelty. Focusing on inner attitude and re-cognition of others as her basis for subject formation, she is more concerned about what makes one human in the face of another’s oppression than about what makes one in an oppressed subject position recognizable to others. This reorientation is revealed in her mantra, “Each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others” (212). Beyond bearing herself in mind, Hillesum opts to find in herself something akin to her oppressors and is thus able to bear their oppression without, in her words, adding to the hate that makes the world “still more inhospitable” (212). In this radical move, Hillesum constitutes her subjectivity outside the victim position legitimately taken up by most Holocaust narrators and beyond the political designations in which Nazi perpetrators situate her. She may be considered “subjected” within current discourses of power but she ultimately does not define her own subjectivity in those terms. Rather she emphasizes a subjectivity that is not divided from others but internally related to them. Her journal forces readers to re-cognize her subjectivity, to witness her both within and exceeding the categories of marginalized, subordinated, or victimized “other” that would class her. Blurring the us/them binary that would confine her identity and her possibilities for response, she sees in herself

tendencies not unlike those of her perpetrators and sees in them human needs and desires not unlike her own. Consequently, she can respond to both her fellow Jews and her Nazi oppressors from within and from outside the boundaries and limitations that these categories would ordinarily pose.

Hillesum's journal reveals that re-cognition—as a responsible bearing of the other in mind—is a broader and deeper form of witnessing than political discourses suggest. Re-cognition demands a broader acknowledgement of humanity, extending from affirming marginalized others to acknowledging the humanity of victims and perpetrators, insiders and outsiders alike. Subject formation may indeed depend on recognition, but alongside affirmation from others re-cognition demands a reorientation of one's inner perspective of others and oneself. Subjectivity always exceeds its categorizations. Re-cognition also demands a broader usage beyond its strictly political contexts in order to address the interactions that play out in micro-social (personal and communal) relationships. Subjects must constantly re-cognize suffering and oppressive family, friends, or community members, which they see far too often or know far too well, in order to respond ethically to them. Indeed, subjects must repeatedly witness the alterity of these intimate others so as not to over-identify with them in kinship or become indifferent or impatient with their ongoing suffering. As Hillesum suggests, such witnessing proves particularly challenging in response to her own Jewish community—she is often more frustrated with their fear of the Nazis than compassionate.

Finally, re-cognition demands a deeper understanding of subject formation and human interaction than such dichotomous categories as victim and oppressor, powerful and marginalized, dominant and subordinate, or self and other allow. As Hillesum reveals, such dichotomous categories limit vulnerable subjects and neglect the possibilities that re-cognition

offers for engaging ethically with them. In and beyond these categories is a possibility for the ethical response: “Here I am.” For Hillesum, a response of fear or hatred in the face of an oppressor or irritation in the face of a victim falls short of re-cognizing him or her as a human being “very close to us” (86). I am not suggesting that re-cognition necessarily moves one from indignation to compassion (both have the potential to be ethical responses to oppression); however, re-cognition does revise one’s attitude toward others with their alterity *and* similarities in mind, creating alternative subject positions and ethical possibilities for witnessing others than purely political contexts might allow.

Bearing the Other in Language: Discursive and Narrative Witnessing

Alongside the possibilities of recognition, the problem of representation features prominently in discussions of ethical responsibility in autobiography studies.⁸² Where recognition addresses the socio-political dimensions of ethical responsibility, representation deals with the discursive dimension of ethical responsibility in witnessing oneself and others. As I outlined in my introduction, ethical inquiry in the study of autobiography tends to centre on issues of truth-telling, representing others, and respecting the rights and privacy of others in the practice of writing and reading life stories (Parker, *Moral Space* 2). Of the questions that have emerged, some address the responsibility of the life writer: How does one tell the truth about one’s life and represent the lives of others in narrative responsibly? How is one to write on behalf of another person or a whole community? Other questions focus on problems of narrative and language: What can be spoken and what remains unspeakable of a life? How can gaps in knowledge or silencing experiences be represented? Still others focus on responsible reception: What does it mean to respond ethically to the life narrative of another person and to acknowledge the human

⁸² See Eakin’s *Touching the World* (1992), Freedman’s “Decent and Indecent: Writing My Father’s Life” (2004), and Smith and Watson’s *Reading Autobiography* (2001).

life behind the story? These questions are fraught with concern about navigating the space between the narrating and the narrated self, between life and language, and between oneself and others.

From this perspective, ethical responsibility can be seen as a relational and discursive imperative to negotiate the space between people in and through language. The term “representation,” however, tends not to convey this negotiation of space necessary for ethical response. Defined principally as (a) the apprehension of an object by means of an idea, (b) the signification of one thing for another (in which a word, sign, image, or person stands for another), and (c) the correspondence or implicit connection of one thing with another, representation moves in one direction only: from one to another. If A *stands for* B, representation addresses a connection but it does not account for the gap or distinction between the two, nor does it suggest a sense of reciprocity between them (B does not also stand for A). Further, if A *apprehends* B, then representation suggests a capturing of B in the mind or language of A. Taken on its own, representation leaves little room for negotiating the difference between people and the mutual relationship they could share.

How, then, might one bear the other in language through a practice of negotiating the space between oneself and another beyond representation? To examine this question, I focus on discursive responsibility as the task of a witness in response to another’s summons or story.⁸³ Relying on Hillesum’s journal, I also discuss the writer as witness who writes in response to the summons of infinite otherness (God, in Hillesum’s case), other people, and the historical milieu

⁸³ I use the term “discursive” here in the sense that Paul Ricoeur does in *From Text to Action* (1991). He distinguishes discourse from language systems, signs, or linguistic codes and instead describes discourse as a “language-event or linguistic usage” (145). Discourse is language situated temporally in the present (here and now) and functioning as a verb—an action or an event (145). A language system, in contrast, is “virtual and out of time” (145). Discursive responsibility does not refer simply to “responsibility in language” but also to responsibility as a particular kind of relational performance in and through language.

in which one is situated. I want to suggest that *bearing the other* in language is distinct from *representing* another in language because it carries with it a dialogical and performative element of responsible engagement that partially relies on but also exceeds the possibilities of representation. Drawing again on Oliver, Levinas, and Ricoeur, I see this engagement beyond representation as a discursive practice of response-able witnessing. Response-able witnessing focuses less on how one thing stands for, conveys, or apprehends another in language (this for that) and more on how one person *is* or *bears oneself* for the other in response to them through language (here I am for you). As I see it, witnessing “here I am” is an ethically thick and effective way of engaging in the discursive practices and negotiations of ethical responsibility with vulnerable subjects.

With this in mind, I want to address three questions. The first two I will take together: What, precisely, does response-able witnessing entail in a discursive context? And how does this witnessing revise or exceed representation as an ethically responsible practice of bearing the other in language? I then take this discussion to life writing by asking how Hillesum’s writings—as a very real practice of bearing witness to life in Nazi-occupied Holland—illustrate and complicate my findings. To begin with the first of these questions, I want to return to Oliver’s conception of response-able witnessing outlined in my introduction. For Oliver, to be with and for others requires an encounter between us in and through language. Response-ability conveys this ability to engage with and respond to others in dialogue, an ability that at once determines one’s subjectivity and directs one’s actions with and for others (*Witnessing* 88). From Oliver’s perspective, the act of witnessing *is* response-able: to be able to respond to others in dialogue is a practice of witnessing oneself and others, a practice of calling ourselves into being and action through language. Because witnessing is rooted in interlocution, it also refers to the practice of

negotiating relational and dialogic space between us. This negotiation reveals the orientation of our respective subjectivities and determines the nature and extent of our responses. In short, witnessing describes my ability to respond to others based on my relationships with them and the way we navigate the space between us. This space is often described in the vocabulary of *distance* (singularity, difference, separation) and *proximity* (presence, immediacy, identification). Oliver uses this spatial terminology to propose that witnessing, when it is ethically responsible, neither assimilates difference into sameness nor formulates difference as alienation or exclusion. Instead, it “connects us to the world and other people” by both maintaining *and* bridging our differences as the nature of each relationship and witnessing context dictates (Oliver 12).⁸⁴

This notion of witnessing as a negotiation of space between two borne out in language is rooted in its very etymology. In having both a juridical connotation of giving testimony to that which one has seen with one’s own eyes and a religious connotation of bearing witness to that which cannot be seen and must be taken on faith, witnessing holds together seemingly opposing things: the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, the speakable and the unspeakable, fact and faith, similitude and difference, finitude and infinity.⁸⁵ The works of Levinas and

⁸⁴ Both scholarship and practices of response in life writing reveal the tendency to slide to one extreme or the other, espousing either an ethics of difference or an ethics of commonality as the context dictates: David Parker focuses particularly on the extremes of the former, suggesting that in autobiography studies the dimensions of difference have been foregrounded to undermine perceived essentialist or normalizing views of selfhood (109). This suspicion of universality common to current scholarship privileges the distance and infinity of other people, as well as the incomprehensibility and unspeakability of their experiences in the practice of witnessing.

⁸⁵ Autobiography studies tends to hold the juridical and religious dimensions of witnessing apart and focuses on the former (the juridical or historical) in its scholarship. Within a juridical framework, subjects assert the reality of a past event and designate themselves as authoritative witnesses for themselves and/or others—“I was there”—in a dialogic exchange with those removed from the event (*Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur 163). Scholars like Leigh Gilmore, Bella Brodski, and Gillian Whitlock thus focus on the problems of perception, memory, truth, or representation inherent in such testimonies. In her discussion of the Rigoberta Menchu debate in *Limits of Autobiography* (2001), Gilmore writes that testimony functions within particular protocols and tends to rely on “legal testimony” and “juridical framing” to function (5). She notes that these frameworks (and the legalistic questions that attend them) reduce the complexities entailed in representing oneself relationally and communally in the process of bearing witness. The question, then, of whether Menchu lies in telling the story of her community must address “truth” in a way that exceeds legalistic discourse. Brodski takes another approach to the Menchu debate, but also situates her discussion of testimony (as *testimonio*) within the realm of history and draws on the language of “truth” and “authenticity” to discuss how testimonios are used for purposes of political and cultural

Ricoeur show us how confronting these binaries between the juridical and religious dimensions and negotiating between their oppositions is fundamental to an ethical practice of witnessing others. For them, witnessing requires a negotiation between the finite (what can be seen, interpreted and judged) and infinite alterity (what cannot be seen and known) through language, and demands a performance of subjectivity in time and space that reflects this negotiation. *Saying* “here I am” is this performance *par excellence*. Relying on the inherent duality at the heart of witnessing, I want to tease out two of these double strands entailed in the practice of bearing witness: a double vision of otherness and a double signification of selfhood. In examining these strands, we can begin to see how witnessing revises the concept of representation and offers an ethically potent and transformative way to bear the other in language.

A Double Vision of Otherness

The practice of representation as the apprehension of an object with an idea proves problematic when encountering the alterity of others. When others are captured as ideas, they are reduced to the status of object or theme in one’s mind and thus cease to be “other.” As with the problems of cognition that I raised in the previous section, Levinas sees representation as totalizing what it presents. It functions as a mode of truth that not only expresses consciousness’s mastery of its object in a signified form (language, sign, image), but also reduces truth to a set of themes fixed

resistance: “testimonies are language events or speech acts with special claims to truth and authenticity and are received, reflected, assimilated, and appropriated by particular audiences and interpretive communities as representing those whose voices would otherwise not be heard” (870). In *Soft Weapons* (2007), Whitlock similarly explores witnessing from within a juridical framework. She addresses the deception and fraud that occur when a particular community—Muslim women—is assimilated and exploited by other women for a Western audience. This audience, with its ethnic curiosity and investment in the “Muslim Other” and its female victims, particularly after 9/11, is inclined to find “the latest victim to weep over” (110). Thus writers of “victimized Muslim women” justify their fraudulent life stories by invoking human rights as their principal concern (110). While they address numerous complexities and nuances of personal and political testimony, they rely solely on a historico-juridical framework to do so, examining the language of truth and falsity (even if only to undermine it) in what can be seen or told in witnessing oneself or others.

in the past (facts, figures, documentary evidence) and defines identity as manifestations of being that can be defined (name, gender, vocation, class, race). Rather than viewing truth as a representation made manifest to one's consciousness and testimony as the confession of such knowledge or experience, Levinas proposes a practice of bearing witness to that which *escapes* a truth consciously or epistemologically derived ("Truth" 99, 100).⁸⁶ He calls "infinity" the truth that exceeds the veracity of sensory perception and knowledge. In turning toward that which is infinite in the finite, the witness reorients himself toward others to speak beyond that which can be seen or known.

For Levinas, bearing the other in language means bearing witness to that which is infinitely other in the proximate and finite relations between oneself and other people. As I suggested in my previous chapter, Levinas relies on a religious mode of witnessing and positions the biblical prophet as the paradigmatic witness of alterity. When a prophet testifies, "here I am" to the summons of God, he enacts two things: he testifies to something wholly Other beyond representation (*EI* 106), and he opens himself as a medium or vessel for the Infinite to pass through his finite words and actions directed toward other people. In bearing witness to the wholly Other (God), the prophet functions as the recipient of infinity. His posture is one of complete submission and response. In saying "here I am," he opens himself to receive the revelation, an infinite word beyond sense that must be taken on faith. He does not "grasp" what he speaks any more than his audience does, despite the fact that he channels and reveals it in language. His symbolic message is polysemic and the contents of his proclamation exceed the

⁸⁶ As he sees it, not only does this mode of witnessing testify to that which is beyond represented truth and documented evidence, it also testifies to that which is beyond the truth of memory, as memory is, for Levinas, merely another thematized conception of lived experience distanced from proximate and immediate human encounter (Ricoeur, "Otherwise" 87). Ricoeur challenges this position, observing that "it did not occur to Levinas that memory might be interpreted as the recognition of a temporal distance that is irrecoverable in re-presentation" (88). Remembering, particularly in mourning and melancholia, holds the past in the present, making immediate the losses that are not thematizable or have not been worked through.

particular historical context in which the message is given.⁸⁷ From the vantage point of infinity, the word spoken transcends time and space, opening meaning and context to numerous readings for different groups of people in different time periods. The truth of infinity is revelation *otherwise* than fact, evidence, or documented proof.

Despite its transcendent quality, prophecy is given by a specific person in a particular time period to a certain group of people: the infinite is revealed in the finite. The prophet functions as mediator between the two: the infinite Other and finite others. His “here I am” witness to infinity is simultaneously his embodied and proximate being (I am) to other people in time and place (here). Ricoeur focuses on the finite characteristics of the prophetic message, arguing that even an infinite Other (who exceeds signification) gives himself in signs to be witnessed by the prophets, that is, he “*gives* something to be interpreted” in history (“Hermeneutics of Testimony” 144).⁸⁸ Witnessing is not beyond time or outside interpretation. It is an act of speaking in a particular moment with words meant to be deciphered. While the message given to be interpreted may be multivalent and metaphorical (presented *otherwise* than fact, theme, or formula), it is nonetheless given in structures of speech and images that are identifiable.

⁸⁷ Prophetic testimony, with its metaphorical and symbolic language, resembles literary testimony, where witnessing functions in poetic or imaginative form and draws attention to both the thickness of language (able to convey multiple significations) and the “eternal” quality of literature that speaks and bears the weight of memory beyond its own context. Annette Wieviorka speaks to the literary quality of witnessing in *The Era of the Witness*, where she writes, “At times, testimony is transformed into literature. It is often supposed that history is better transmitted by works of nonfiction. . . . the idea arises that the work of art is eternal, that it alone can guarantee memory, that is, immortality” (22). Northrop Frye takes the “literary” one step further, calling *kerygmatic* the kind of language that “eludes” objective metaphors. Kerygmatic language is a spiritual and creative “word” underneath “explicit or ideological meaning” (118, 119, 120). See his chapter “Spirit and Symbol” in *Words With Power* for a detailed discussion of the term (1992).

⁸⁸ Ricoeur implies that the infinite (what he calls “the absolute” elsewhere) is both beyond and necessarily located in history. In “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” Ricoeur returns to the paradoxical “word made flesh” or the *sign incarnate* of Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition to exemplify a witnessing of infinity that occurs within time. As he writes, “The first witnesses of the Gospel confess the significance of Christ directly on the Jesus event: ‘You are the Christ.’ There is no separation between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. This unity is written: Jesus-Christ” (145). The mediation of finite and infinite in Jesus-Christ expresses, for Ricoeur, the inherent mediation between the finite and infinite culminating in every moment of witnessing another.

Not unlike this prophetic sense of witnessing God, when one person witnesses another person, he responds to both the other's infinity and the finite representation of that person in a specific context: the way the other manifests himself in fact, discourse, description, narrative, photograph, etc. All human encounters are mediated by the linguistic and epistemological conditions of representation.⁸⁹ And arguably, only in proximate relationships with others and through finite representations in language can we recognize that the other person exceeds these systems and respond to that very infinity. In addition to interpretation, witnessing within a finite setting demands evaluation and judgement as part of its practice. Since relationships almost always include more than two people, the language of justice, loyalty, and history all factor into my response. Reason, precedence, and judgement must inform our relationships and direct our interactions.⁹⁰ To witness ethically, then, means choosing *to whom* I am response-able beyond the question of *how* to respond to the infinity of that person who exceeds representation.

Ricoeur modifies Levinas's perspective of witnessing by restoring the historical, representational, and juridical dimensions of testimony to his account of infinity. As I have suggested, the practice of witnessing holds both visions in tandem. To bear witness means to encounter the infinite (alterity) in the finite (location in history and law). The infinite points to the gaps in knowledge, the shortcomings of formulations, and the crises of appearance that trouble one's ability to know and judge, and thus necessitates a humility of mind to bear them. At the same time, however, witnessing infinite otherness relies on the linguistic systems,

⁸⁹ In fact, Ricoeur sees response-ability itself as a theme, relying on representation in language for its meaning and applicability ("Otherwise" 93). He observes that to talk about responsibility at all, even about the way it exceeds language or begins outside ontology, requires linguistics structures to give it meaning, to make it expressible (92). Ethical responsibility disconnected from systems of ontology has no language of its own; it relies on the language of *being* to describe *otherwise than being*. For Ricoeur, representation—the manifestation of being in perception, consciousness, and language—is necessary for constituting any philosophy of the good, including Levinas's own (96).

⁹⁰ In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida examines this very issue of problematic responsibility in the practical experiences of facing more than one other person at the same time (68-69).

historical contexts, and juridical institutions in which we necessarily find ourselves. Witnessing *exceeds* representation but is also apprehended in it and mediated by it. It holds the separation of infinity within the very finite words and minds that make relate-ability possible. *Otherwise* than representation, witnessing nonetheless functions within its strictures for the sake of response-able bearing the other in language.

A Double Signification of Selfhood

Representation also conveys the sense of something or someone standing for or acting in place of another. From a structural linguistic standpoint, every word functions as a sign (signifier) that stands in place of the thing itself (the signified). The word “apple” stands for the round, red, juicy piece of fruit that I eat. My name stands for my personhood. A “representative” stands for me and other members of my community in the legislative bodies that govern my city, province, and country. As I have implied in the previous section, there is always both a gap and a relationship between the two: the sign is both distinct from and connected to the signified thing, person, or divinity. Levinas and Ricoeur suggest that, like representation, witnessing is a practice of signification: one standing in for another. Their respective senses of signification are thick with nuance, however, and revise the practice of representation with that of witnessing for the sake of ethical human relationships.

To witness another is *to stand for* the other. In my previous chapter, I suggested that witnessing is first of all a radical signification of my subjectivity: *I am* in that *I am for another* in my proximate relationships. One signifies oneself principally “for the other,” not as an arbitrary or empty placeholder of selfhood, but as a subject born in the very process of bearing witness to that which is other than oneself. For both Levinas and Ricoeur, *saying* “here I am” means signifying oneself as a witness in response to the alterity of others. “Here I am” is an ethical

marker of subjectivity and a statement embodied in my orientation, ability to respond, and activity for others. In short, “here I am” is an excessive speech act that signifies giving one’s very life. It conveys “a total engagement not only of words but of acts and, in the extreme, . . . the sacrifice of a life” (Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutics” 131). The line between witness and martyr is both etymologically and effectively thin.⁹¹

Witnessing in this sense of giving oneself in sacrifice, Levinas suggests, begins by signifying oneself *for the other* in a passivity that functions in practice as *passion*, that is, as a testimony of suffering for another. Again, the biblical prophets exemplify this verbal response as a sacrifice of oneself for another. For instance, Hosea’s witness to God and his prophecy to the Israelites *is* his giving of himself to them. God summons Hosea to “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods” (NIV, Hos. 3.1). In response to God, Hosea’s prophecy to Israel *is* to love his adulterous wife. His being loving *is* his witness to God’s love for Israel. From this perspective, the witness himself “becomes a sign” that signifies giving up himself in response to others through saying, “here I am” (49). With this in mind, Levinas radically inverts a linguistic understanding of signification where “this is that,” in which the sign stands for and manifests being (*es gibt* as a noun). Instead, he proposes the ethical signification of “one for the other,” in which the subject ceases to be a represented thing but locates its very subjectivity in giving itself for another (*es gibt* as a verb) (“Truth” 102). Ethical signification reveals the difference between saying “I am a woman” (where *woman* stands for “I”) and “I am for you”

⁹¹ In “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” Ricoeur writes, “a witness may so implicate himself in his testimony that it becomes the best proof of his conviction. When this proof becomes the price of life itself, the witness changes names. He becomes a martyr. . . . [Martyrdom] is a test, a limit situation. A person becomes a martyr because first of all he is a witness” (133). Ricoeur notes that this active engagement of witnessing is exemplified in the person of Christ. He suggests, “Testimony, at the human level, is dual: it is internal testimony, the seal of conviction, but it is also the testimony of works; that is, it is modeled on the passion of Christ, the testimony of suffering” (142). In this sense, witnessing is also a passive (passion-ate) sacrifice of giving oneself up and subjecting oneself to suffering for the sake of another in word and action.

(where *being for you* stands for “I”). Saying “here I am” performs a verbal act of giving oneself in submission and peaceful interaction for others. Its act expresses an exposure of subjectivity (*I am*) to the other person directly and proximately (*here*) as my response. This response thus functions as an expression of vulnerability and subjection rather than a statement of fact or an egoistic assertion of oneself.⁹²

Ricoeur similarly posits the witness as an embodied sign: “here I am” is a discursive and performative signification of selfhood, a verbal temporal language-event (*From Text to Action* 145). However, he constitutes “standing for” another alternatively than Levinas, as an active posture of conviction and self-constancy. While “Here I stand” is necessarily involved in the passive self-giving of sacrifice and submission (*OA* 168; *OTB* 15), the other is not the only initiator or originator of my response; in the act of speaking, I too take initiative and assert myself actively in responding to and in addressing myself to the other person (“Otherwise” 86). The initiative and intention of the speaking subject reveal the speech-act of witnessing as not only the performance of self-exposure in saying “here I am being given for you” but also a performance of self-designation: “here I am to give myself for you.” For Ricoeur, self-designation is not egoistic self-assertion but is, rather, the witnessing posture of conviction and self-constancy (*OA* 165). The passivity of witnessing must be voluntary: a response-able witness

⁹² Levinas portrays this shift from assertive egoism to responsive and passive subjectivity by undercutting philosophical terms of subjectivity upheld by figures such as Descartes and Heidegger. Levinas describes the ego who addresses himself as “[resting] in self-certainty, [confirming] itself, [doubling] itself up, [consolidating] itself, [thickening] into a substance,” in contrast to the subject who “approaches a neighbor . . . in being expelled, in the literal sense of the term, out of any locus, no longer *dwelling*, not stomping any ground” (*OTB* 48-9). To respond “here I am” means practically that the subject must be willing to open itself up—that is, destabilize any vision of its identity as fixed and any thought as definitive—to be vulnerable and exposed to another person. To truly be “for the other” challenges the subject’s specific agendas or ethical intentions and destabilizes his subjectivity with giving of/up himself, a giving with no strings attached—“for nothing” (50). Nothing but drastic measures, Levinas reminds us, will undermine the totalities and egoistic assertions of selfhood necessary to deconstruct relational power hierarchies and totalities of war.

constituted by letting himself go for the sake of others must equally be an agent who chooses to give himself for others.⁹³

Without the active conviction and self-constancy implied in “standing for” another, a life given over (signified) in sacrificial passivity teeters dangerously close to a life oppressed at the hands of another’s consumptive need or despotic rule. In witnessing within the everyday constraints of ontology and power that govern human existence, passive and active significations of selfhood must function together in what I called “active passivity” in Chapter One. Indeed, holding them in tandem potentially extends witnessing from an asymmetrical or uni-directional practice (one for the other) to a mutual practice in reciprocal relationships (both for each other). In reciprocal witnessing, both subjects exchange roles of speaker and respondent, and both, in the best case, are mutually responsive witnesses of themselves and of each other, able to respond “here I am” reciprocally to each other in turn. Witnessing, in this sense, is not only “standing for” another, but also “standing with” another in conviction and self-constancy.

This double signification of selfhood radically revises the concept of one “standing for” the other in representation. In witnessing, one signifies oneself *ethically* rather than representing oneself *ontologically* according to a specific set of identity markers and encountering others from within these signs of being. Witnessing transcends these representational markers of selfhood; signifying oneself *otherwise* grants a freedom to respond to others *beyond* while still located *in* the systems that define and govern being and doing. In witnessing, “standing for” functions as an ethical practice that is active and passive. In one sense, action and passion function together in

⁹³ This description of subjectivity in self-constancy can be taken a step further as self-commitment to the other in witnessing. The subject saying “here I am” performs an act of committing his life to another, even unto death—a phrase that can be taken literally or figuratively as in the biblical “dying to oneself.” For Ricoeur, this willingness to stake one’s life on one’s testimony—a revelation of one’s conviction and personal commitment to the point of self-sacrifice—separates true witnesses from false ones. See his “Hermeneutics of Testimony” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* for further discussion.

my “here I am” response to convey an embodied practice of *voluntary* submission and self-sacrifice to others with conviction and self-constancy. In another sense, activity and passivity function together as a sign of reciprocal dialogue. Exceeding the uni-directionality and asymmetry of the representational *one standing for another*, response-able witnessing implies a relationship in which we stand for each other in being with one another.

The Practice of Witnessing Otherwise in Narrative

Turning now to Hillesum’s journals, I want to consider how her witnessing practice negotiates the infinite in the finite, action in passivity, and her signification of life beyond the historical context and identity markers that necessarily define her. For Hillesum, witnessing proves to be both a complicated and a transformative ethical practice in and through language. She writes that her one duty is to “bear witness” to her life and the lives of others in the particular time in which she finds herself (219). She characterizes witnessing as chronicling her age, “know[ing] this century of ours inside and out” and writing the things “that are happening now” (45, 41). What does she mean by being a chronicler of her age? To chronicle typically conveys the registering or recording of a set of events in the order of their happening, to write facts as they occur in time. In her journals, Hillesum testifies to the growing restrictions she faces as a Jewish woman in Holland, her work for the Jewish Council, and her voluntary transfer to Westerbork, the holding camp for Dutch Jews on their way to Auschwitz. However, her journals do not primarily record the things that happen to her or the Jews around her, “but what she *thinks* and *feels* about what is happening” (Liebert 396). For Hillesum, “bearing witness” goes beyond the duty to document the Holocaust events: “Others will record such stories in all their minutiae one day, something that will presumably be necessary if the history of these times is to be handed down in full to the next generation,” she writes. “I have no need for these details” (227). Instead, she collects other

details of “life” that are meant to answer her philosophical questions: How does one live fully and responsibly in an age of suffering? And how does one bear witness to the thickness of being in relationship with and for others in the midst of horror?

Parallel to a textbook history of her era runs another story that Hillesum endeavours to record, a story that nuances historical witnessing with the complexity, meaning, and beauty of relational life in the midst of suffering: “A few comfortable chairs, bought with the insurance money because all your possessions were wiped out of existence by bombs—a cup of coffee, a few good friends, a happy atmosphere, and a little philosophizing. And life being beautiful and worthwhile all the same. Or at least that was what I was bold enough to proclaim” (128-9). In proclaiming a side to the story *otherwise* than through the lens of objective observer or abused victim, Hillesum situates herself between chronicler, prophet, and poet as “one who experiences life and sings about it” (225). Her song testifies to a complex negotiation of life between the yellow lupin and the barbed wire of her experience (214). While honestly grappling with the weight of suffering, Hillesum nonetheless refashions her own suffering into a source of strength and fruitfulness by which to bear the suffering of others, particularly in her work in Westerbork. I want to touch on a number of ways that she addresses the question of what to make of life and suffering, and how to bear witness to both from a position of being *otherwise* in her narrative. For Hillesum, bearing the other in language begins by bearing witness to an infinite otherness within herself, which she alternately calls her soul, God, and a deep inner source.⁹⁴ From here,

⁹⁴ Hillesum is certainly not alone in associating God with both infinite alterity and interiority. In his discussion of the connections between Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, John Caputo writes, “If we step outside the framework of specific religious beliefs—Jewish, Christian, or Islamic—Derrida remarks, we can say that ‘God’ here is the name of ‘the possibility for me to keep a secret which is inwardly visible but outwardly invisible.’ ‘God’ constitutes the invisible sphere of conscience. . . . What I call God, God in me, calls me to be me, the interior I, which Kierkegaard calls ‘subjectivity’” (qtd. in Caputo, “Dealing Death” 230). “It is getting difficult,” Caputo surmises, “to distinguish God, the secret, and the structure of the subject: God is what calls up—what is called(?)—subjectivity” (230). I am convinced that Hillesum’s own connections between “God” and her

she signifies herself and testifies to her own suffering, the suffering of others, and the times in which she lives in radically alternative and potentially transformative ways.

First, Hillesum's journal functions principally as a testimony to the process of encountering an inner and infinite Other through prayer. As she reminisces late in her journal, "What a strange story it really is, my story: the girl who could not kneel. Or its variation: the girl who learned to pray" (228). In her "strange story," Hillesum bears witness to the fraught nature of turning inward, a movement that oscillates between egoism, a desire to capture herself and others in formulas and "own" those she loves (56), and prayer, an inner reception toward infinite alterity.⁹⁵ Initially, she conflates the two and struggles to negotiate them. This blurred space of inwardness is made manifest in her account of walking home from Amstel station one evening: "Quite suddenly," she writes, "I had the impression that I wasn't alone, that there were two of us. I felt as if I consisted of two people who were squashed tightly together and felt so good and so warm as a result. I was in such close [contact] with myself" (42). This "two in one" suggests an alterity within her, but her later description of the moment as "being completely immersed in

soul, or that which is "deepest" within her, reflects this vision of subjectivity that Kierkegaard (arguably Derrida and Levinas as well) espouses.

⁹⁵ Those who are familiar with Hillesum's work and the role that gender plays in it, particularly in the early part of her journal, may wonder why I do not address gender explicitly here as part of her inward negotiations between herself and the people she loves, particularly Julius Spier. I hope that it is clear throughout my study that for Hillesum the issue of gender becomes secondary to her questions of how to move beyond the categories of being to bear the suffering of others in terms of "being human." Even early on her comments suggest her desire to make this shift: "perhaps it is true, the essential emancipation of women still has to come. We are not yet full human beings' we are the 'weaker sex.' We are still tied down and enmeshed in century old traditions. We still have to be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us" (34). She later determines her "spirit," which she sees as transcending her body, to be the basis by which she can conduct herself with dignity as a human being, able to be "there for everyone" rather than limiting herself to longing for and loving "one man"—a longing she feels mistakenly locates her worth solely in being a woman (180, 195, 33). Because of the decreasing importance she places on gender distinctions in her journal, I am concerned that reading Hillesum in terms of her gender may reinforce the very categories that she is trying to transcend in her constant reiteration of the human being as the basis by which she signifies herself and others. Hillesum's understanding of what it means to be human therefore supports my interest in defining ethical relations outside the ontological and political criteria commonly foundational to the discussion of ethics in autobiography studies.

myself” and discovering “with no small satisfaction that I got on very well with myself” suggests an inward turn more solipsistic than genuinely heterogeneous (42).

Over the course of her journal, however, this inward turn of egoism becomes increasingly distinguishable from an inward turn to alterity in prayer because they result in different attitudes and behaviours. When Hillesum turns inward in a “cloud of her own thoughts and feelings,” as she does on the way home from Amstel station, she later becomes “uneasy, uncomfortable, and cross” with others (43). As she describes it, “I have taken against people I’m normally so fond of; I feel negative about everything, keep carping and complaining” (43). In contrast, when she turns inward and genuinely encounters alterity within, she is able to turn outward toward others in generosity. For Hillesum, prayer is at once a discourse turned inward toward alterity, which she names God, and a response turned outward toward the trace of God in other people. In the moments when Hillesum truly encounters alterity *within* without sliding solipsistically into herself, she paradoxically transcends herself, turning *outward* to extend love and peace to those around her.⁹⁶

Hillesum manifests this double movement—turning inward and outward—in at least two ways. First, she determines that facing her inner hostilities and bringing them to rest will abate her outer hostilities and hatred of other people. This movement is the basis of her mantra “each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others,” and her moral imperative “to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also

⁹⁶ In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl offers a similar vision of necessary alterity for human responsibility in his psychiatric theory of *logotherapy*. He argues, “being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is” (115). In “forgetting herself” through alterity, Hillesum is able to function beyond the circumstances of her own suffering to respond to the needs of others.

be in our troubled world” (212, 218). For her, to be in prayer *is* to be at peace, an inner state reflected outward into her relationships. Second, Hillesum determines that “finding herself” in prayer frees her to follow wherever [God’s] hand leads her and gives her the inner resources “to spread some of my warmth, of my genuine love for others, wherever I go,” seeking “[God] among people out in the world” (63). Unable to remain “in herself” in prayer, Hillesum re-signifies her “whole being,” becoming “one great prayer” for those intimate with her as well as strangers (165). To become a prayer for others suggests both a contemplative letting go of herself to “God” and a giving of herself to others, genuinely encountering their alterity. This double motion of witnessing culminates in Hillesum’s vision that to bear others is to be spiritually integrated with them through God, a mystical spirituality outside any particular religious tradition. She determines that it is not enough to witness infinity by “proclaiming God” but gives herself the task of bringing God to others by clearing a path for them to encounter God in themselves (205).⁹⁷ Bearing witness to infinity becomes a practice of seeking and finding God in every other person, and safeguarding the pieces of God within herself and within others. In witnessing this common bond of infinity that transcends national, physical, and personal barriers, Hillesum envisions a way to be at peace with others and to bear the burden of suffering in the midst of war (156).

In her chronicle of learning to pray and bearing witness to God in the human lives she encounters, Hillesum paints a radical self-portrait of living her life to the full in the midst of suffering and reads her age through this lens of nuance, fullness, and meaning. To document life,

⁹⁷ By “God” Hillesum means “the most essential and deepest” part of what it means to be human (204). She describes the process of “witnessing God” to and in others as follows: “Even if one’s body aches, the spirit can continue to do its work, can it not? It can love and *hineinhorchen*—“hearken unto”—itself and unto others and unto what binds us to life. . . . Truly my life is one long hearkening unto my self and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God” (204).

Hillesum argues, is to document the complexities and variations that are life: “Life is so odd and so surprising and so infinitely varied, and at every twist of the road the whole vista changes all of a sudden” (170). Because of the infinitely varied nature of life experience, Hillesum challenges herself and her imagined audience to evade the desire to control and capture life in formulas, and instead to simply “be embraced by life” (52). Rather than be ruled by “stereotyped ideas about life,” she argues, “[we] have to rid ourselves of all preconceptions, of all slogans, of all sense of security, find the courage to let go of everything, every standard, every conventional bulwark. Only then will life become infinitely rich and overflowing, even in the suffering it deals out to us” (170). To experience and chronicle life in its many nuances requires an active passivity of “letting go” of one’s assumptions about what life is or what it must be for me. In that process, Hillesum develops an internal hospitality for life, “making room” for the roses that are as real as the misery she witnesses daily and accepting each experience as it comes (188).

Coming to terms with life as both including and exceeding the experience of suffering, Hillesum witnesses her life as being made more meaningful through suffering and death, although she confesses, “I hardly dare say so in company these days” (154). As she clarifies:

By coming to terms with life I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our live[s] we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our li[ves] we enlarge and enrich it. (155)

Hillesum argues that the fear of death, like stereotypes of life, prove reductive when encountering the actual reality of death. Fear paralyses and deprives one of life itself. She admits that “most of us in the West don’t understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair” (152). For

Hillesum, the fear of suffering rather than its reality is the parasite that drains one of life.⁹⁸ She points to this fear in her fellow Jews, alongside humiliation, persecution, and hatred, as revealing as a “misguided compliance” with one’s oppressors by inflicting inner injuries on oneself (144, 145).⁹⁹ In accepting death as part of life without fear, she undermines the power of those who wield it in Nazi-occupied Holland and is able to comfort and encourage those around her in Westerbork. In fact, she goes so far as to say, “I have learned to love Westerbork. . . . Those two months behind barbed wire have been the two richest and most intense months of my life” (205). In spite of feeling her head bowed “under the great burden” of suffering, she testifies to “growing stronger” in bearing it and repeatedly professes “that life is beautiful and worth living and meaningful. Despite everything” (153). This radical re-visioning of life in the midst of suffering as not only “hard” but also “beautiful” bears witness to that which is *otherwise* within and around her and becomes the basis for her remarkable chronicle, which runs contrary to stereotypical views of the victimhood and the witnessing of Nazi atrocity (198). “This is a very one-sided story,” she admits, and further declares that her lack of hatred “in no way implies the absence of moral indignation,” and yet she feels compelled to tell it all the same, re-cognizing that a story of horror and hatred is also one-sided and contributes in its own way to making human life inhospitable for others (256).

How does one represent, not the horror of suffering, but this thickness of beauty and goodness of life in the midst of that horror? Hillesum finds this double vision, rather than the

⁹⁸ Her argument implicitly challenges those outside an actual event of suffering to re-cognize their fears of it as not only bearing little resemblance to its reality but also as proving useless to prepare for or escape the experience when it actually comes. To fear suffering and death ultimately uses up our reserves to bear the burden of our own or another’s suffering before tangible suffering actually occurs.

⁹⁹ She grants that sadness and depression in the face of their suffering are human and understandable, but determines nonetheless that the greatest injury is the one inflicted on oneself in fear and humiliation (145). As she writes in 1942 before all Holland is swept clean of Jews, “Everywhere signs [bar] Jews from the paths and the open country. But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, and oppressed. By our own hatred” (144).

suffering itself, to be precisely what she cannot put into words.¹⁰⁰ She tries to pose it in terms of questions: “How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely? How is it that my spirit, far from being oppressed, seemed to grow lighter and brighter there?” (209). She attempts to answer her own questions by suggesting that she is able to feel the contours of her time and read the signs of her age as “meaningful” to her (209).¹⁰¹ Rather than divide her life into manageable parts determined by occasion or location as a way to make meaning of it, she envisions her life as an integrated meaningful whole: “Life in those drafty barracks was no other than life in this protected, peaceful room. Not for one moment was I cut off from the life I was said to have left behind. There was simply one great, meaningful whole. Will I be able to describe all that one day? So that others can feel too how lovely and worth living . . . life really is?” (209). Hillesum worries that she will not be able to bear witness to this vision of her life and the lives of others in Westerbork without forging “a new language” or waiting for “one word” from God, the single stroke of a pen on a silent background, to convey it (195, 199, 137). And yet, her journal inadvertently proclaims this very affirmation of the fullness

¹⁰⁰ Current discussions in trauma theory and cultural studies tend to address the problem of representing suffering as an incommensurable or infinite gap because suffering ultimately cannot be represented. In *Witnessing History, Witnessing Trauma* (2001), Dominick LaCapra discerns that trauma, and its pre-occupations with aporias, hiddenness, death, or absence, involves “a more or less secularized displacement of the sacred and its paradoxes” and may translate certain events as “occasions of negative sublimity” (23). Hillesum’s focus on the unspeakability of beauty and life in the midst of suffering thus radically reverses the role of the unrepresentable in suffering, although she still relies on the language of the sacred to describe this witnessing *otherwise*. For further discussion on the language of the unrepresentable in relation to Holocaust suffering specifically, see Thomas Trezise’s article “Unspeakable” (2001), and Michael Bernand-Donals and Richard Glejzer’s chapters, “Sublimity, Redemption, Witness” and “Museums and the Imperative of Memory: History, Sublimity, and the Divine” in their co-authored book, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (2001). See also Georgio Agamben’s discussion on the “unsayable” and its link to the mystical or the divine in his chapter, “Witness,” located in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999).

¹⁰¹ Her vision of “making meaning” is not unlike that of Viktor Frankl, also a sufferer within the Nazi camps. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he observes that the ability to choose how to bear one’s sufferings reveals an inner freedom—what he also calls a spiritual or psychic freedom—that can make life meaningful and purposeful for that person (75-6). He argues, “The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life” (76).

of life in the face of suffering. A chronicle of life *otherwise* than textbook history and counter to stereotypical views of a suffering witness, Hillesum's story culminates with the very stroke of a pen on a silent background to which she aspires. On her final postcard thrown from a train headed for Auschwitz, she writes, "We left the camp singing" (356).

Bearing the Other in Person: Witnessing as Existential Generosity

I have suggested that Hillesum radically reorients the social, racial, and political boundaries between people by centring on what she sees are the "essential and deepest" common bonds of humanity (204). By way of this commonality, she re-cognizes distinctions between people as differences of inner orientation, attitude, and ways of relating within certain socio-political contexts. Constituting herself through her inner orientation toward infinite alterity, she witnesses herself beyond her finite circumstances and thereby functions alternatively within them. She chronicles her life and her age *otherwise*: as rich, varied, and meaningful in the midst of suffering and death. Far from negating the horrors she sees and experiences, Hillesum determines that these horrors magnify her ability to "read" life in its barest sense within one of many flashpoints of human suffering over history, and intensify her ethical compulsion to embody peace and love for the people she encounters (209). In this section, I explicitly examine Hillesum's ethical expression of generosity in giving herself for others, a witnessing practice that I call "bearing the other in person." She shows that a "here I am" orientation of generosity is made manifest as an embodied practice of "being there" in a specific locale and in response to a particular group of people—her Jewish community. Her ethical practice in this regard is perhaps most fully expressed in her prayer, "Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks" (225). Bearing others in person, as I will suggest through Hillesum's "thinking heart," functions as a witnessing practice of generous being (present) in every relationship.

Hillesum prays to be the “thinking heart of the barracks,” and later “of the whole concentration camp” in response to the Jewish women in Westerbork who tell her, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds” (225). She appears to mean at least two things by the response of a “thinking heart”: a preservation of what it means to be human, which she locates in the ability to think and feel, and a tenderness toward others made manifest in her face-to-face “being there” for them. Together, these aspects convey her orientation of generosity expressed outwardly as a deed of loving attention, a balm for all wounds (Hillesum 231; Sacks 45). To be the “thinking heart” of a collective group (the whole concentration camp) in many ways resembles what thinkers in trauma and autobiography studies describe as “the formation of an affective community” through one’s relations with and responses to sufferers (Hartman qtd. in Miller and Tougaw 12). Certain affects are valued and encouraged (as well as interrogated for their practical problems) as ethically responsible ways to witness others and foster community. They include “empathetic unsettlement” (LaCapra 42; Kaplan 88), “heteropathic identification” (Hirsch, “Projected Memory” 7; Silverman 73; Whitlock, “Second Person” 199), and the intimate presence of listening (Laub 70-71; Chun 162). Implicated in these affective and embodied responses to others is a generosity of being revealed in a person’s openness to respond beyond agendas (Laub 61) and beyond appropriation (Hirsch 9, LaCapra 38). While these visions of empathy, identification, and listening reveal some of the ways generosity is made manifest in witnessing, I want to suggest that we take a closer look at what a generosity of being means and so move behind these affective practices to their ethical source.

I find the Talmudic vision of *hessed* particularly helpful in understanding the generosity of being signalled in Hillesum's "thinking heart."¹⁰² In the Hebrew, a "thinking heart" turning outward in generosity is called *hessed*. This term connotes "emotional intelligence" expressed as a covenant relationship of love characterized by loyalty, faithfulness, and most significantly, existential generosity (Sacks 51, 54). As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes it:

Hessed is the love that is loyalty. . . . It is born in the generosity of faithfulness, the love that means being ever-present for the other, in hard times as well as good; love that grows stronger, not weaker, over time. It is love moralized into small gestures of help and understanding, support and friendship: the poetry of everyday life written in the language of simple deeds . . . *hessed* is the gift of the person. It costs less [than giving a gift or loan of money] and more: less because its gestures often cost little or nothing, more because it takes time and attention, existential generosity, the gift of self to self. More than anything else, *hessed* humanizes the world. (47)

Sacks calls "existential generosity" that generosity of being embodied in the practice of being present for others.¹⁰³ As a *practice* of being present in person, existential generosity (*hessed*) is the outworking and fulfillment of an orientation of generosity revealed in a "here I am" bearing. In *hessed*, the response "here I am" can be seen as both the bearing of generosity as described in Chapter One *and* the signification of an embodied and located person giving oneself to other selves. *Hessed*, Sacks explains, is the gift of one self that is "*lived* in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other" (Sacks 47; Critchley 21). Explicitly connecting passion, intellect, emotion, and action, *hessed* is the gift of complete personhood, involving both inner

¹⁰² While Hillesum's writings do not suggest she was familiar with the concept of *hessed*, the elements of her "thinking heart" embody its practice, and its thickness of meaning fruitfully informs my interest in how to bear the other in relationships.

¹⁰³ For Sacks, alongside thinkers like Levinas and Derrida, "generosity" is a universal and existential good characterizing what it means to be human. For other thinkers, like Charles Taylor, generosity is a social action (not an expression of being) that is defined principally against "the background of the social interchange characteristic of a given society and partly in light of a certain understanding of personal dedication" (*Sources of the Self* 55). While specific practices of generosity are certainly contextual and socially shaped, I am working with the concept of generosity of being, defined by Levinas and Sacks as an essential part of what it means to be human.

orientation and external response toward others.¹⁰⁴ It is rooted in the infinite or divine gift: God gives *hessed* to whom he has bound himself in promise, such as the Israelites in the Hebrew scriptures or all people of faith in the Christian bible.¹⁰⁵ Human *hessed* is meant to reflect the infinite gift in one's face-to-face encounters with other people: we see the trace of God in the face of others and respond accordingly.¹⁰⁶ In fact, *hessed* can be seen to unite Levinas's passive generosity "to give" in face-to-face relationship (*EI* 97) with Ricoeur's active "self-constancy" to stand with the other in moral commitment in relational covenant (*OA* 167, Sacks 53). Arguably, what makes empathy, heteropathic identification, and listening so effective as ethical responses in sustaining and creating community is precisely that they are undergirded by a generosity of being present with and for others. Both Sacks and Levinas agree that such generosity is at the core of what it means to "be human" and to engage in ethical relationships with others (Sacks 45; Levinas, *EI* 97).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ While Sacks does not say so explicitly, the unification of "emotion" and "intelligence" in *hessed* (as a single term) suggests a necessary combination of affect and reason in encountering vulnerable subjects. Neither intellectual thought nor emotional response on its own is thick enough to bear the other in relationship, and relying on one at the expense of the other tends to result in either excessive separation between subjects or over-identification in relationships. Negotiating the space of distance and proximity between oneself and others may need to begin by conceptually associating the "heart" and the "mind."

¹⁰⁵ *Hessed* is commonly used to describe the character of Yahweh (God) in the Hebrew Scriptures: "Yahweh has *steadfast love (hsd)*. . . . The term is related to tenacious fidelity in a relationship, readiness and resolve to continue to be loyal to those to whom one is bound" (Brueggemann 217). Sacks suggests that "despite the Torah's insistence on justice as the foundation of society, there is something prior to justice to society itself, namely the gossamer strands of kindness that link self to self in bonds of love" (52). For further discussion on the term *hessed*, see *To Heal a Fractured World* (2005). See also Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997).

¹⁰⁶ I borrow the phrase "the face of the Other and the trace of God" from the title of a collection of essays on the philosophy of Levinas edited by Jeffrey Bloechl (2000). Sacks argues that "Levinas was right to see the concept of 'face' as fundamental to our humanity. Society is faceless; *hessed* is a relationship of face to face. The Pentateuch repeatedly emphasizes that we cannot see God face to face. It follows that we can only see God in the face of another," a view Hillesum takes seriously in her desire to find God in the faces of others (Sacks 54; Hillesum 204).

¹⁰⁷ LaCapra questions this vision of generosity or gift giving outside an economy of exchange. He worries that leaping to such a "utopian" vision of generosity in excess of "calculation, positions judgement, and victimization of the other . . . [as well as] delimited conceptions of justice and historiography" may prove difficult discursively within "the countervailing force of normative limits and the role of critical thought and practice" (30). He may well be right that language borrowed from religion cannot be applied in other discursive forums. However, I hope it can be put into conversation with our "normative limits" at the very least. I return to this relation between generosity and exchange and examine it at length in Chapter Four.

Hillesum's "thinking heart" is a response meant to preserve the humanity of the women whose suffering in Westerbork causes them to not want to think or feel. She worries that these women will lose their human spirit, inner being, or soul—the site of the "thinking heart"—if they focus only on the "bare necessities" of bodily existence in the face of their suffering. She is concerned that these women will internalize the Nazis' external reduction of their humanity to its corporeal shell, impoverishing their humanity from within (231). She does not blame these women or the other fearful inmates in Westerbork for deserting their inner states in order to save their bodies, but she does suggest in one of her letters that the great moral danger in such circumstances is to become hardened in one's thinking and feeling, to become empty of life even before one is dead (250).¹⁰⁸ Viktor Frankl speaks of this problem in terms of apathy, "the blunting of emotions and the feeling that one could not care anymore" that makes many prisoners in Auschwitz both necessarily and problematically insensitive to the horrifying things around them as well as excessively protective of themselves for the sake of corporeal survival (35). He adds that those prisoners "who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the camp's degenerating influences" (78).¹⁰⁹ For Hillesum as well as for Frankl, to be human is to struggle against becoming hardened within oneself and toward others as a result of one's own appalling circumstances. As Hillesum writes,

¹⁰⁸ Such is the particular plight of the *Muselmann* as described in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989) and *If this is a Man* (2000). Giorgio Agamben similarly discusses the *Muselmann* as the subject who bears witness absolutely to dehumanization in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (150-151).

¹⁰⁹ Sacks argues that "a generosity of spirit is part of what makes us human" (45). To lose this generosity is, to some extent, to lose a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. It is not surprising then, that Levi suggests almost all survivors felt guilty for omitting to help others (who summoned them with pleas or simply with their presence in the camps) for the sake of their own needs (78-9). This almost universal omission surely follows from the degenerative influences of the camps: being treated like animals led inmates to become incapable of responding to others as other human beings. However, the universal guilt expressed in Holocaust memoirs suggests that survivors may have felt, in hindsight, that their choices (however small) to save themselves rather than help others inadvertently manifested the degeneration of their humanity in the camps. As Levi confesses of surviving Auschwitz, "It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother's Cain, that each one of us . . . has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at us" (*The Drowned* 81-2).

“If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but *how* we preserve them” (250).

This *how* of preserving lives, this conscious bearing of one’s inner reality, can be seen as a form of alterity—other than the body—through which Hillesum encounters other people in Westerbork. If part of what it means to “be human” is to be directed toward something or someone “other than oneself” by giving oneself “to a cause to serve or another person to love” (Frankl 115), then one might survive suffering by saving one’s body but still lose the core of one’s humanity: the inner state of mind, emotion, and ability to respond in generosity. Far from neglecting the body, Hillesum’s inward turn suggests that the human and ethical necessity of sustaining one’s abilities to think, feel, and respond may enhance the possibilities of bodily survival, and more importantly, may actually preserve one’s ability to live fully in the face of one’s suffering.

Ultimately, as I suggested earlier in regard to her narrative witness, Hillesum’s inward turn to alterity is made manifest in her outward, embodied responses to others in the midst of her own suffering. This move from inner orientation to outward expression of generosity is revealed in a second characteristic of the “thinking heart”: Hillesum’s being “filled with an infinite tenderness” that results in her response of care and compassion for the prisoners in Westerbork (225). For her, the generosity of a thinking heart means being “willing to act as a balm” for their wounds (231). Hillesum’s balm functions corporeally as an act of being present with and standing for the transient members of the Westerbork community, in face-to-face relationships with them. Because she can do very little for their physical needs, even as a member of the Jewish Council, she focuses her attention on being present in conversation, acting as a psychic or

spiritual balm for their inner suffering. Repeatedly she encourages them to re-cognize their circumstances and their oppressors *otherwise* and to reorient their attitudes and responses accordingly: “The barbed wire is more a question of attitude,” she writes in a letter (245), and highlights the response of “an indestructible old gentleman” to their imprisonment: “*Us* behind barbed wire? . . . *They* are the ones who live behind barbed wire”—and he pointed to the tall villas that stand like sentries on the other side of the fence” (246). Like him, Hillesum reorients her own attitude so as to help others “bear” their suffering (251).

Frankl holds a strikingly similar position for helping those suffering around him in Auschwitz. “What was really needed,” he writes, “was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us” (85). He argues that even in extreme cases of psychic and physical stress, in which everything has been taken away, one still has “the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (75).¹¹⁰ Radically, he suggests that the sort of person an inmate became was the result of an inner decision beyond the external circumstances or influences of the camps (75).¹¹¹ Both Hillesum and Frankl implicitly follow the philosophy of the late Julius Spier, offering a “balm” to others that is admittedly paradoxical: healing people “by teaching them how to suffer and accept” (Hillesum 75). Hillesum confesses that this balm

¹¹⁰ Frankl extends this position into a psychiatric practice of *logotherapy*, in which he challenges patients to pursue what he calls “spiritual freedom” or an “independence of mind” that transcends one’s surroundings and preserves a vestige of human liberty in the face of terrible conditions of physical and psychic stress.

¹¹¹ He explains, “the mental reactions of the inmates of a concentration camp must seem more to us than the mere expressions of certain physical and sociological conditions. Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not of the camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any [person] can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually” (75). Perhaps this focus on mental and spiritual freedom makes “the believers [live] better,” Levi observes. He notes that “it was completely unimportant what their religious or political faith might be” (*The Drowned* 146). Those who held onto their inner freedom with faith were able to decipher their sorrow and not let it “overflow into despair” (146).

does not offer healing to those victims whose psychoses, age, or disabilities do not allow them this inner freedom of attitude (252).¹¹² But given a functional mind and functional attitudes and responses, as Hillesum and Frankl reveal by their own inner states, inmates can choose to modify their visions of what it means to live *otherwise* as human beings in order to retain their inner freedom, manage their suffering, and respond to the suffering of others (Liebert 394).

Hillesum is equally aware and readily admits that in the most extreme cases, where inmates cannot respond due to their age or psychic collapse, “you can’t do much with words,” and a “helping hand on the shoulder is sometimes too heavy” (252). Acting as a balm in these cases becomes purely a practice of being present for others in responsive silence. She writes, “Sometimes I might sit down beside someone, put an arm round a shoulder, say very little and just look into their eyes. Nothing was alien to me, not one single expression of human sorrow. Everything seemed so familiar, as if I knew it all and had gone through it all before” (227). Part of what it means to act as a relational balm of comfort in relative silence, she implies here, is to see “nothing alien” in the faces of other people while at the same time avoiding a “know it all” answer for them because of her familiarity with their suffering. Hillesum suggests that facing others with a generosity of being means putting aside one’s formulations so that one can “see” the familiar (suffering) without reducing the (suffering) person.¹¹³

¹¹² Hillesum address this complexity specifically in one of her letters from Westerbork. She questions her own ability to respond to others with a psychic rally of keeping on when she encounters the elderly and mentally confused. She writes, “To the young and healthy, you can say something that you believe in and can act upon in your own life: that history has indeed laid a heavy destiny on our shoulders, and that we must try [to] attain the grandeur we need to bear it. You can even say that we should consider ourselves front-line soldiers, although we are sent to very peculiar fronts. It may seem as if we are doomed to complete passivity, but no one can prevent us from mobilizing our inner forces. No one. But have you ever heard of front-line soldiers aged eighty, bearing the red-and-white canes of the blind as their weapons?” (251). These are the points, she implies, where the transformative possibilities of attitude break down.

¹¹³ Whereas categories of suffering are faceless, humans have a face and a name. Sacks suggests that faces and narratives help us encounter others as humans within our own or another society. *Hessed* occurs in face-to-face and word-to-word interactions between people, turning society into community (54).

This generous activity of a thinking heart takes Hillesum beyond her fellow Jews in Westerbork to face German “others,” to see their human faces rather than conceive of them as a faceless and alien inhumanity. As she writes of a particular German soldier, “Out of all of those uniforms one has been given a face now. There will be other faces, too, in which we shall be able to read something we understand: that German soldiers suffer as well. There are no frontiers between suffering people, and we must pray for them all” (156).¹¹⁴ As suffering and death are the great equalizers between humans, so too is a response of *hessed* to others a universal responsibility in *every* face-to-face encounter, reinforced in the face of suffering. Indeed, as Sacks suggests, “societies are only human and humanizing when they are a community of communities built on face-to-face encounters—covenantal relationships” (54). With this in mind, “we should be willing to act as the balm for *all* wounds,” Hillesum writes, suggesting that her generosity of being extends from her tender response to the women in her barracks to the suffering soldiers she encounters on both fronts of the war (231, my emphasis).

What can we glean about the practice of witnessing through the orientation of generosity signalled by Hillesum’s “thinking heart”? I want to suggest two things. First, the universal impulse of the thinking heart is made manifest in the singularity of its practice with each individual. Despite Hillesum’s inclusive gesture transcending frontiers in praying “for them all,” her practice of *hessed* is made manifest differently depending on the person and the depth and context of their face-to-face relationship. For example, a generous presence with others in Westerbork, exhibited in an “arm round a shoulder” and a “look into their eyes,” is quite different than being-present for her partner, Spier. The embodied expression of “being with” functions on a much more intimate and intense level with the latter. As she writes of Julius Spier,

¹¹⁴ Hillesum makes this point after she learns that her friend Liesl has been kindly helped by a German soldier because she reminded him of “the late rabbi’s daughter who he had nursed on her deathbed for days and nights on end” (156).

“I was able to commit myself unreservedly to another, to bind myself to him and to share his sorrow” (222). Her binding commitment to “share” in Spier’s life is magnified and internalized in his death. “I carry on what is immortal in you,” Hillesum writes, “you continue to live in my heart” (217). Reflecting on their life together in the face of his death, she discovers that Spier has become a part of her; in her commitment to share in his life for his sake, she has opened herself to his alterity and honoured his freedom, so she has, more radically, sensed a mystical connection to his life that for her transcends his death (161). Participating, as she is apt to do, in “one great meaningful whole,” Hillesum nonetheless shares life with others singularly in each particular relationship (209).

Second, Hillesum’s journal shows that a generosity of being present with and for others is rooted in connection and community: she dismantles frontiers between suffering people and discovers that despite the many differences between herself and others, their suffering is comparable. At the same time, she clarifies that having “no frontiers” between sufferers does not mean collapsing differences between people. In fact, she finds that in the face of “shared distress” and collapsed boundaries in Westerbork, people reinforce their distinctions from each other and keep their ideological systems firmly intact. She writes, “You can find every attitude here, every class, ism, conflict, and current of society. And the area still remains only half a kilometre square” (253). The response to the great equalizer of suffering is both increased distinctions between some people and increased communion with others: boundaries and communities are both exaggerated and blurred within the barracks themselves and not merely marked out by the barbed wire separating those within the camps from those outside it (254, 245).¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ In the more extreme case of Auschwitz, Levi suggests that every prior notion of community he had had was broken down and reformulated within the camps. In most circumstances, solidarity, though desired, was sacrificed

However, generosity of being, much like human suffering, exceeds the ideological boundaries and identity distinctions upheld in the camp. For Hillesum, taking alterity seriously in witnessing vulnerable subjects means attending to those elements in others that cannot be categorized within the essentializing system of control (Nazism) or the categories of differences drawn through the camp, but transcends them by hearkening unto “God” or the “deepest in the other” in her responses (204).¹¹⁶ Responding to alterity—the “deepest” in other people that transcends ontological systems of being—is precisely what creates community between herself and others. Defining community through what she believes to be the common and deepest threads of humanity, Hillesum creates for herself a kinship with others beyond human distinctions and constructed boundaries, arguing that she feels “drawn right across all frontiers and feels a bond with all [God’s] warring creatures” (214). In the most intimate case (with Spier), she shows that generosity of being includes unreserved commitment, being bound to others and, from this place, sharing in their sorrow.

Face-to-face witnessing is an encounter with alterity that carries with it similitude; the other person is *like* me at least to the extent that he or she is a fellow human being, with a face

for the sake of survival. “One entered,” he writes, “hoping at least for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle” (38). In a way more complicated than Hillesum suggests, Levi remembers that these marks of separation were drawn down various (often indecipherable or conflicting) lines according to such things as privilege, experience in the Lager, age, religion, knowledge of the German language, ability to adapt, etc. At the same time, the explicit boundaries that one would want to maintain between “us” and “them” (victims and oppressors) were not clearly distinguishable (48). In “the gray zone” every inmate was both oppressor and victim. As Levi observes, “compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic” (56). In spite of these complications, however, Levi and Frankl are in accord with many other survivors when they both observe that having one friend was often critical to one’s survival, a community of two to look after each other (Levi 80; Frankl 40).

¹¹⁶ Hillesum relies on the spiritual union of “God within” to connect her to other people, binding them together to life. Clearly the Westerbork community is rife with differences, but these differences are not privileged to the exclusion of the common humanity (or the mystical union in Hillesum’s case) that unites them. The only way to bear alterity is to do so in community. Human community, as Sacks describes it, is “the redemption of solitude, the bridge we build across the ontological abyss between I and Thou” (47).

and a name (Sacks 54).¹¹⁷ Following Ricoeur here, rather than Levinas, we can assert that this practice of ethical witnessing—bearing the other in person—requires the self to be intimately related to the others, being with and for other people through analogy and community (*OA* 335).¹¹⁸ For Hillesum, ethical practices of generosity do not stem solely from an awareness of differences but are made possible through our face-to-face relationships and universal ties, which in turn function contextually and singularly within particular groups of people. In fact, Hillesum implies that in times of severe suffering, the need for community across boundaries is more critical than a necessary awareness of human differences. Suffering transcends the identity markers and ideological distinctions of being that one erects to make sense of others and oneself, but it also separates humans into “monads” who are disconnected by their experiences. To intervene in suffering is to challenge this monadic state. In her desire to be a balm for *all* wounds, the thinking heart of the *whole* concentration camp, Hillesum reveals that creating communities across these boundaries is a challenging but necessary and generous way to witness her own suffering and the suffering of her community.

Negotiating Generosity

As a practice of being open to alterity and community in witnessing others, generosity can be described as a commitment of giving oneself in love to and for others: the gift of the person (here

¹¹⁷ In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah similarly argues that these two strands (alterity and similitude) must be intertwined in ethical responsibility: “we have obligations to others ... that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship” and at the same time, “we take seriously the value of not just human life but of particular human lives” (xv).

¹¹⁸ As I outlined in Chapter One, Ricoeur emphasizes the relationality between people with the word “as” in *Oneself as Another*. He argues for a difference or alterity that “[reduces] a distance, [bridges] a gap, in the very place where it creates dissymmetry” (335). He critiques Levinas’s vision of alterity as *too other* to be put into relation with the self (338), and describes a relationship in which selfhood is defined by analogy, that is, being “oneself inasmuch as being other” (3).

I am).¹¹⁹ From Hillesum's journals and letters, we can glean that such generosity of being is a universal imperative determined particularly in each face-to-face encounter. It is manifest in community (being with others) and motivated by alterity and analogy. Generosity of being is not, therefore, a disembodied state but is made manifest in and through the body (being here) and, by proxy, in and through the written words of one's story. We see this generosity undergirding Hillesum's ability to re-cognize and witness in herself and for others that which is *otherwise* than a political or victim identity in Nazi-occupied Holland. She "bears the other" in signifying herself, telling her life, and responding to other people. That being said, her practice of generosity is difficult to pin down or limit to any one action. The practices we tend to prescribe as ethical, such as compassion, empathy, charity, recognition, and tolerance, in witnessing others ring with possibility and transformative potential *because* of the generosity of being that infuses them. Yet scholars have shown that these actions can prove unethical in practice.¹²⁰ The generosity infusing these actions is neither clear-cut nor consistent in its orientation toward the other. Generosity is a slippery state of being; we never inhabit it for long. A serious look at any relationship reveals that we rarely exist in a state of perpetual openness to alterity, revealed in loving presence (either bodily or discursively) with and for others. In fact, thinkers like Levinas suggest that our generosity occurs only in spite of ourselves (*EI* 11). With this challenge in mind,

¹¹⁹ In my efforts to understand how a "here I am" ethics might be made practical, my description of generosity relies on but also reformulates Levinasian and Ricoeurian ethics. With Levinas, I hold that generosity is *beyond* being for-itself in the face of alterity and functions as signifying and as sacrificing oneself for others. With Ricoeur, I hold that generosity is not only beyond being but also *in* being committed, convicted, and constant in giving myself (an ethics that determines ontology). Facing alterity must maintain the difference of others but arguably cannot function practically without some sense of analogy or community (like me, with me, to me) as a motivator and guide to move beyond myself toward others. A summons without connection lacks response.

¹²⁰ As I have suggested, Oliver reveals how recognition can be a way of constituting oneself *against* others or can totalize others in one's consciousness or cognition. E. Ann Kaplan, in her work on trauma in media and literature, addresses the problem of "empty empathy" in viewers' responses to non-contextualized images of suffering. Such images can stimulate "overarousal" or produce "vicarious traumatic effects" in viewers; their responses become more about themselves than about the sufferers they see (93). Thomas Reynolds considers the shortcomings of charity in his article "Love Without Boundaries" (2005), and David Lyle Jeffrey addressed the negative underbelly of freedom and tolerance in his lecture, "Intrinsic Goods of the Once and Future University" at The University of British Columbia (February 26, 2008).

I propose that generosity functions as a practice of negotiating being and the relational space between beings, as well as negotiating between others (which other?) and practical responses (which one?). The practice of bearing witness to others in relationship is rarely one of simple giving but is, rather, a constant questioning and reorientation of the *how* and *for whom* of generosity. I raise these intricacies of practicing generosity briefly here in relation to Hillesum and develop them in detail in my subsequent two chapters, particularly as issues of negotiating being and navigating relational space between oneself and others.

As Hillesum illustrates, practicing generosity is a quandary of multiple negotiations. She seems acutely aware of her fluctuating orientation toward others and her limited ability to navigate the space between herself and others. For her, these negotiations of bearing and of space are interconnected and take place both internally (as negotiations of a thinking heart) and externally (as a body among other bodies, a story among stories, and a being within systems of being).¹²¹ The closer another person is relationally (in intimacy) and spatially (in proximity) to her, the more potential for generosity she reveals and, equally, the more she struggles with her orientation of generosity toward them. Her relationships with her parents and with her partner, Spier, are cases in point. With her father, particularly, Hillesum struggles between the opposing orientations of love and self-centredness, revealing something of a complicated generosity:

Mischa announced that Father would be arriving on Saturday evening. First reaction: Oh, my God. My freedom threatened. A nuisance. What am I to do with him? Instead of: How nice that this lovable man has managed to get away for a few days from his excitable spouse and his dull provincial town. How can I make things as pleasant as possible for him with my limited resources and means? (66)

¹²¹ In *Lost Bodies*, Laura Tanner argues that negotiations of space are principally bodily negotiations: “the body functions as the means through which we enter into and negotiate space” (72). Ricoeur further suggests that negotiations of space are also narrative negotiations: “We have insisted elsewhere, following W. Schapp, on the idea, proper to the narrative field, of ‘being entangled in stories’; the action of each person (and of that person’s history) is entangled not only with the physical course of things but also with the social course of human activity” (OA 107). Inner negotiations of attitude and bearing toward others (inner spaces) are inseparable from these material, temporal, and narrative negotiations of space.

She analyzes her reaction to her father, both discouraged by her lack of generosity in the face of what she sees as her responsibility to love her parents “deep inside” (66), and aware that her love for her father is in fact a much more fraught affair than she would like: “My love for him is forced, spasmodic, and so mixed with compassion that my heart almost breaks. Masochistic compassion. A love that leads to outbursts of sadness and pity, but not to simple acts of tenderness” (67).¹²² Hillesum’s feelings of generosity, in the form of sympathy, compassion, and “waves of love,” seem as powerful in motivation as they are impotent in practice. They do not lead to “simple acts of tenderness” because she must also contend with her orientation of freedom for herself, which challenges her ability to bear the burden of her parents. Having her father “up close” poses a problem of proximity for her: she lacks space to bask in her own freedom. The nuisances and petty irritations of her father’s actual presence limit her.¹²³ She may *feel* generous, but *being* generous would require her to sacrifice her space and time for his sake. Her oscillations reveal a disconnection between these two forms of generosity. Generous and masochistic compassion slide together and complicate each other as Hillesum struggles to negotiate the threat and burden that her parents pose to her freedom with her desire to surrender that freedom in order to be generous and response-able to them.¹²⁴

¹²² Her oscillations between generosity and self-centredness are revealed directly with her mother as well. Hillesum writes of her mother, “Suddenly a wave of love and sympathy . . . washes away all the petty irritations. Five minutes later, of course, I am on edge once more” (78).

¹²³ Indeed, she determines in a different context that she finds herself more undone by the vexing minutiae of everyday encounters with others than she does by “great suffering” (192).

¹²⁴ A further complication to this ethical one is a psychological one in which personal identity is derived from separating from one’s parents. How might psychological separation inform ethical hospitality for one’s parents, and how might it be informed by ethical identity in the face of totalizing and egoistic visions that collapse such separation with freedom? Kaja Silverman addresses something of this complexity in her reading of Lacan’s “gift of love” (73). She suggests that a generous loving relationship occurs distinctly from narcissistic egoism (a searching for oneself in the mirror of every other). This does not mean that giving love is an act of freeing oneself from another in egoistic separation, but that it is, rather, an act of heteropathic identification with the subject of one’s love at a distance from the self-same (43, 73). See her second chapter, “From the Ideal-Ego to the Active Gift of Love” in *The Threshold of the Visible World* for her psychoanalytic expression of this “giving oneself” that I consider from the theological and phenomenological perspectives of Levinas and Ricoeur. See also Žižek’s chapter, “The Politics

Hillesum reiterates this complexity of generosity in her intimate relationship with Spier. In this case, however, she sees freedom as a necessary orientation for their relationship rather than as a problem of self-centredness. Her concern is not so much “my freedom threatened” by Spier but the difficulty of granting him freedom from being grasped “too close” to herself. Imbuing freedom with its ethical potential, generosity challenges the problem of proximity with the necessity of relational distance. This distance is revealed in Hillesum’s journal as a practice of opening up herself to Spier and freeing him from her controlling formulations of how to be in relationship. Early in her journal, Hillesum confesses to collapsing intimacy with possession: “I wanted to own [Spier],” she writes. “I wanted him to be part of me” (15). She associates this grasping with an existential greed inseparable from her desire for him and thus determines that a generosity of being would require letting go of this grasping of mind (in formulations) and emotion (in need) to “allow [him] the freedom to be what [he is]” (64). She describes what such a generosity might look like:

Trying to coerce others, of course, is quite undemocratic, but only too human. . . . We tend to forget that not only must we gain inner freedom from one another, but we must also leave the other free and abandon any fixed concept we may have of him in our imagination. There is scope enough for the imagination as it is, without our having to use it to shackle the people we love. (65)

While she asserts that generosity functions as a discipline of freeing herself from the greediness of being and the impulse to control and totalize others, her journal reveals her continuous struggle with this generosity in practice (148). Even when she matures to the point of saying of Spier, “this distance is good and fruitful: one discovers the other anew each time,” she still admits, “There was that silly stab in my heart again when he said, ‘Now I’m going to do my exercises and then I’ll get dressed.’ I felt as if I was forsaken and all alone in the world. I

of Truth” in *The Ticklish Subject* where, in his discussion of Freud and Lacan, he argues for a love “not bound by parental guilt but by the positive force of Love” (162).

remember thinking I would love to share my toothbrush with him, feeling the desire to be with someone, to share in his smallest everyday activity” (162). She must repeatedly negotiate for herself in what sense Spier is “hers” and respond to him through these negotiations.

But how does one negotiate *being with* and *being free* in generosity? This question is complicated precisely because generosity is *both* a human practice of being present and granting freedom *and* a challenge of one’s practice of presence and freedom. To *be free* can equally signal a bearing of self-enclosure (the other as threat) *or* self-exposure (the other as separate) in one’s being with others. On the one hand, as Hillesum illustrates, self-enclosure reveals an egoistical desire to distance others and be free of the burden of their proximity, while self-exposure reflects an openness of being that is aware and supportive of the others’ differences beyond one’s desire to control or totalize them. On the other hand, if the other is truly a threat, then self-enclosure proves indispensable and self-exposure becomes a foolish and even dangerous response. At what point does generosity need to be held in check by an economy of exchange and self-protection? At what point does being for others in generosity slide into overbearing “helpfulness” or into benign retreat (Alcoff, “Speaking for Others” 17)? Where do intimacy and totality overlap? And when does freedom become an excuse to avoid the burden of otherness? The space of generosity is thick with complexity and must be negotiated in every context. From this perspective, *being with* others is not inherently an ethically relational category but signals a space for ethical relationships to form and grow through negotiation. *Who* one is relating to (association), *how* one is with that person (bearing), *where* one is situated in a given moment with that person (location in time and space), and *why* one is relating in a certain way with that person (motive), all contribute to the shape of generosity negotiated between proximity and distance in being with others. Occurring in “odd flashes,” as Hillesum notes, perhaps best describes its practice (148).

The challenge of negotiating being (for oneself or others) and relational space (between us) extends to our everyday choices about which response is most generous in a given interaction and which person to respond to when faced with more than one. Such choices of response and of others are shaped by our fluid positions in webs of interlocution with others and our location within a particular community, ideology, and politics (Taylor, *Sources* 36). Our responses of generosity are informed by our circumstances: Where do I stand? Where do I speak from? What is my backdrop? What is happening in this location socially and politically? To which others am I relating at this moment? Generally speaking, our generous associations are necessarily limited to those with whom we share mutual concerns in a given time and place. A mutual sharing of concerns is assumed with those we have “a special bond of . . . memory and belonging: family, friends, fellow countrymen, or people with whom we share a faith” (Sacks 51). In *The Ethics of Memory*, Avashai Margalit describes these relationships as “thick” (37). He suggests that thick relations are guided by an ethics of responsibility rooted in a generosity of being (Margalit 37, Sacks 51). He contrasts thick relations with “thin” ones—those relations we have with every other human being by the simple fact that we share a common humanity—and suggests that our behaviours in thin relationships are guided by morality (respect and justice) rather than ethics.¹²⁵ In these terms, choosing “which other” is a question of loyalty, history, and community. Those who are closest to me in regard to our shared bonds tend to be the beneficiaries of my generosity. As a general rule, this answer does not, of course, assist my decisions in choosing generosity

¹²⁵ Margalit elaborates on making choices between thin and thick relations as follows: “Morality, in my usage, ought to guide our behavior toward those to whom we are related just by virtue of their being fellow human beings, and by virtue of no other attribute. These are our thin relations. Ethics, in contrast, guides our thick relations. True, we seldom refer to others as bare human beings. We may refer rather to others as people in distress or in need: the poor, the sick, the old, the orphans and widows. These labels of human distress denote morally relevant aspects of people and call for a moral response. But these labels are not defined from an egocentric point of view. On the contrary, the poor of *my* town, who, according to Jewish law should take precedence in my behaviour over the poor in general, are defined by their relation to me” (37). For further discussion see his chapter, “Intensive Care” in *The Ethics of Memory* (18-47). Arguably, even “the poor” and “the sick”—labels of human distress—can be categories of being that separate *them* from *us*.

within a community. For instance, to whom do I direct my generosity when my mother and daughter are ill simultaneously and equally require my undivided care? These responses prove to be singular and always shifting, guided by such things as depth of relationship, level of need, availability of outside assistance, geographical proximity, particular convictions, or even a given mood on a given day.¹²⁶

In addition to one's thick relations (those with whom I share the deepest bonds), Margalit argues that those with whom I am proximate in a given time and place (shared location) take precedence over those whom I have never seen, met, read, or heard about. In this case, the decision about "which other" is determined by the famous question, "Who is my neighbour?" The answer is not limited to those in my community, but extends, as in the case of the good Samaritan, to those one meets on the road, in one's path, face to face (41). Encountering other people face to face, whether or not they belong to my community, demands a generosity of being that transcends ethnic boundaries or national hostilities. Hillesum reflects this position, choosing to pray for the German soldier that "has been given a face" and separated in this regard from "all those in uniform" (156). Choosing "which other" thus extends from those in her own community (sharing her ethnic and economic background and socio-political affiliations) to all those proximate to her. In a face-to-face relationship, generosity creates community from difference.

Sacks makes a compelling argument for generosity in this sense. He suggests that while politics (power) and economics (class) drive our concerns of how to create generous associations that honour selves, they tend not to provide any lasting ethical changes: "Neither are adequate to

¹²⁶ Hillesum reveals something of these singularities and shifts, when she initially insists that she cannot go with her parents on the transport to Poland while her brother cannot be left behind: "If [Mischa] has to watch our parents leave this place, it will totally unhinge him. I shan't go, I just can't. It is easier to pray for someone from a distance than to see him suffer by your side. It is not fear of Poland that keeps me from going along with my parents, but fear of seeing them suffer" (314). Later, however, she *is* on the same transport as her family and writes of their little community in this moment: "We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa too" (360).

the fundamental dilemma: how do I create a lasting relationship of mutuality and trust with an other while honouring his or her freedom and dignity? If I pay another to do my will (economics) I have not created an enduring bond. Likewise if I coerce the other by the use, real or threatened, of force (politics). In both cases what is operative is the self-interest of two persons, not a sharing of concerns” (53).¹²⁷ An ethics rooted in power and class (or any other category of existence) implicitly subscribes to an us/them system of thinking rooted in the mutual self-interest of two groups. Self-interest, even if benevolent, undermines the possibility of generosity in its thickest sense—a generosity of being for-the-other. For this reason, Sacks suggests that generosity be rooted in building communities of people that challenge us/them distinctions (53). I think of Hillesum’s household specifically in this regard. She writes:

I have recently made it my business to preserve harmony in this household of so many conflicting elements: a German woman, a Christian of peasant stock, who has been a second mother to me; a Jewish girl student from Amsterdam; an old, levelheaded social democrat; Bernard the Philistine, with his pure heart and fair intellect, but limited by his background; and an upright young economics student, a good Christian, full of gentleness and sympathetic understanding but also with the kind of Christian militancy and rectitude we have become accustomed to in recent times. Ours was and is a bustling little world, so threatened by politics from outside as to be disturbed within. But it seems a worthy task to keep this small community together as a refutation of all those desperate and false theories of race, nation, and so on. As proof that life cannot be forced into pre-set [moulds]. (12)

Hillesum certainly recognizes the kinds of social and political categories that could potentially divide her from others. Indeed, this “bustling little world” of community, this “home” that Hillesum describes, is not without its own antagonisms, conflicts, and disappointments.

¹²⁷ Inverting power hierarchies and challenging class boundaries, while fruitful for highlighting differences, marginalities, and injustices of certain people groups, often succeed in inscribing new power hierarchies in different directions. These seem legitimate in an economy of exchange: the roles of powerful and marginalized are, at least categorically, inverted. However, in everyday encounters with others, distinctions are nonetheless upheld and someone is always in the position of marginality. Members of differing groups (some categorized as powerful, others categorized as marginal) bear resentments and nurse feelings of being the underdog in a system against them. Perhaps we need to question if a system of power is somehow “against” everyone, because inverting power hierarchies merely multiplies the victims. Crudely put, the underdog becomes an übermensch of sorts and the ball of injustice keeps rolling.

However, located squarely in a divided socio-political scene where identities and boundaries between *us* and *them* are clearly demarcated (Holland in the early 1940s), Hillesum's home is a community of disparate people created where there otherwise might be none. This example suggests that while choosing "which others" to respond to relies on common ties of association or relation in practical situations, these ties may be other than familial, ethnic, social, or economic ones. Hillesum locates her identity in her relational ties across categories of difference and relies on a shared living space (a highly provocative challenge to the Nazi *lebensraum*) and, more generally, on the common ties of suffering, which cross every real and constructed human category of being.

Hillesum takes this vision of being in community even further, questioning the assumption that our responses of generosity are solely informed by our circumstances—our finite position within a specific time and space. What distinguishes Hillesum from many witnesses who relay experiences of the Nazi genocide (or other historico-political atrocities) is her conviction that generosity of being is not only formed through external circumstances or finite conditions, but is also formed *beyond* them. While she advises that "one . . . keep in touch with the real world and know one's place in it," she also proposes that to live fully is to live inwardly as well as outwardly, a negotiation that she finds "quite a task" (25). With inwardness in mind, she radically reinterprets "location" or "position" in time and place as the sole determiners of how one can or will respond to others, arguing that one's position in internal and infinite space equally directs how and to whom one responds. Circumstances cannot fully determine one's being or response, in the same way that much about one's *life* cannot be gleaned from one's material or political context, despite the fact that much about one's *world* can (85). To rely on circumstances limits being and response to the *finite* world—what can be seen, known, and

categorized—and keeps alterity bound to these limits. To take alterity seriously, Hillesum implies, is to see how that which is wholly other (the infinite and the eternal of life) informs and shapes my generosity of being in this place and time. From this perspective, she is able to connect herself to others beyond her own time and place to an eternal community, so to speak. As she writes, “a hint of eternity steals through my smallest daily activities and perceptions. I am not alone in my tiredness or sickness or fears, but *at one with millions of others from many centuries*, and it is all part of life” (157, my emphasis). Being part of life, hearkening unto the “deepest” in herself, and experiencing suffering transcends time and place and grants her an immaterialist view of community, which unites her with any and every kind of other through the power of life. Generosity is for “all of creation” from this perspective, participating in “one great life” with anything that lives and suffers in and through that life (147). Community is wholly inclusive. Such extensive participation is a struggle that Hillesum admits “must be hard fought for” (60); its most difficult negotiations, however, are not fought “through politics or a party” but within herself through her re-cognitions, reorientations, and revisions of what it means to bear the other in the fullness of life in community (60).

I conclude with what seems to me the most difficult question, a question to which I return explicitly in the next two chapters: which particular actions exude a generosity of being in witnessing vulnerable subjects? On the one hand, such a question seems unanswerable. What makes for a generous response is rooted in human subjectivity located in certain times and spaces, and thus depends on numerous factors: what proves generous in one context with a certain person or community proves ungenerous in other contexts with other people. Hillesum suggests as much when she describes the elderly in Westerbork, admitting that her appeal to change their attitudes in re-cognition seems absurd, and even her hand on their shoulders proves

too heavy (251). The question of “which response” is answered contextually and singularly, wholly dependent on the *how* and *for whom* of generosity in terms of the respondent’s ethical orientation and interpretation of the good (Parker, *Moral Space* 15). As a result, generosity is spontaneous and free to inhabit any number of actions. Actions become vessels for generous being, directed and shaped by one’s orientations and negotiations toward alterity. From this perspective, negotiating between responses is at once contingent (dependent on the negotiations of being, space, and others that inform its practice) and freeing (no one action is always the most generous in every context). Each action has equal potential for generosity and each context expresses the generosity of a given action singularly. As a result, it is highly difficult to judge the good of an action. Because actions are contingent, we must decipher the orientation or motive of the person doing the action as a means to judge the action itself as “good” for this context. But in the process of weighing the evidence, we ourselves struggle between generous judgement and scepticism of the other person’s beneficence. Because actions are free to be imbued with generosity and thus become “equally good” means constantly deciding between actions to determine which one is most appropriate in a given situation.

On the other hand, certain actions seem more full of generosity than others. For instance, I have suggested that witnessing others through re-cognition is more likely to be existentially generous than recognition or representation. Where recognition and representation potentially close down our abilities to respond to others because our own being, terms, and ethical vision gets in the way, witnessing alterity opens us to response-ability in our relationships with other people. We might also further agree that love is thicker with generosity than tolerance or juridical justice. We are inclined to evaluate these actions as more or less generous according to our socially agreed upon definitions, beliefs, and customs surrounding them (Appiah 53). As

Charles Taylor suggests, certain actions, like love, hold a long etymological and historical tradition of conveying great openness to alterity and sacrifice of oneself for others (*Sources* 35).¹²⁸ Through our evaluative language and traditions we collectively believe that love is thicker with generosity than other actions. And yet, we can still concede that the actions we assume to be thickly generous prove problematic and even detrimental in certain circumstances.

I am convinced, then, that while our collective definitions and evaluations inform the way we think about being and ethical responsibility, it is our orientation and propensity toward alterity that actually directs our responses to other people in and across our communities. Consequently, as I will come to show in the following chapters, one's actions and responses in personal and proximate witnessing relationships are far more riddled with complications and negotiations than we would like and more free to be expressed in numerous practices than we might expect. As Hillesum reveals, being face to face with others in a specific context (like Nazi-occupied Holland) limits one's ethical possibilities, challenges one's ability to take alterity seriously, and demands relational negotiation between oneself and others at every turn. And yet, it is precisely in these everyday interactions with others that ethics is made manifest, potentially transforming one's ways of seeing other people and one's ways of being in relationship and community with them.

¹²⁸ The term "love" as explained in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* holds a number of different meanings and traditions. One seems particularly applicable from the Old English *lufian*, which conveys the sense of "no score" in games and "derives from the phrase for love without stakes, for nothing." "Love" meaning "without score" is still used in the game of tennis. Without score or stakes, for nothing, also suggests the depth of generosity signalled by this word: to love is a response outside an economy of exchange without expectation of response. From a biblical perspective, love is generosity without limits toward alterity, a generosity that imitates the *hesed* of God. The Sermon on the Mount recorded in the gospel of St. Matthew suggests love as a generous response to differing forms and extremes of alterity: one's response to the alterity of the divine, the alterity of one's neighbour, and the alterity of one's enemy (*KJV*, Matt. 5:43-48).

**Witnessing Oneself as Another:
Reconciliation as Responsibility in John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me***

In October 1959, John Howard Griffin, a white journalist and devout Catholic intellectual from Mansfield Texas, altered his skin colour with ultraviolet light and medication in order to pass for a black man in the segregated South. Troubled by the ethical and social injustices of racial segregation that faced black Americans and disenchanted by the lack of genuine communication between the races, Griffin sought a way to bridge the gap between the black and white worlds. “Though we lived side by side,” he writes, “communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race” (*Black Like Me* 1). But he wondered how someone white could bridge the racial impasse and open new ways for dialogue and mutuality across the colour line without first understanding racism from the other side, what it meant to suffer discrimination as a black person (Wald, “Reflections” 154). As he asks in the inaugural journal entry of what would become his best-selling book, *Black Like Me*, “How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?” (1). To discover “the Negro’s real problem” of racism in its multiple daily manifestations, Griffin determined to learn what it felt like “to be a problem,” to witness racial suffering first-hand through his own personal experience of it (Du Bois qtd. in Wald 155).

Griffin spent six weeks living as a black man and travelling through Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, walking around, so to speak, in the shoes of “the other.” From prohibited water fountains to segregated bathrooms, ominous threats to sexual harassment, superficial courtesies to generous hospitality, physical exhaustion to emotional collapse, Griffin documented his experiences and observations in a journal as he went. He initially planned to use these observations as data alongside statistics for a scientific article on discrimination for *Sepia*, a black monthly. However, in the process of writing he determined that his lived experience of

discrimination captured the reality of racism far more profoundly than any data could. “I filed the data,” he confesses in his preface to *Black Like Me*, “and here publish the journal of my own experience of living as a Negro . . . in all its crudity and rawness.” As his preface suggests, Griffin holds two major assumptions in his decision to pass for black and witness that experience in *Black Like Me*: first, that understanding the atrocities of racism is the most effective tool for challenging racial discrimination, inspiring dialogue, and reconciling opposing groups: “Only through deeper awareness and understanding,” he asserts in *A Time to be Human*, “can we hope to cure the wounds that racism causes in ourselves as well as in those whom we hurt through our prejudices” (6). And second, that such understanding is best gleaned through personal experience and identification with racially marginalized “others.”

To write about discrimination or other forms of violence and oppression, Gillian Whitlock observes, witnesses must situate themselves as trustworthy authorities who know the truth by experience in order to be heard, believed, and responded to by an audience (“Second Person” 208). Griffin’s journalistic account, both in its original serialized form for *Sepia* in 1960 and in its book form as *Black Like Me* first published in 1961, invokes his own experience of racism in order to authenticate it as a genuine problem for others. Knowing the truth about racism, he implies, is a matter of “being there” and “living it” rather than accruing facts about it from the outside. Since he was there, he can testify to the problems of racism in the first person, verifying that his own account and the accounts of others are true. The journal genre that he uses reinforces this sense of knowing from personal experience and has the rhetorical effect of deep sincerity, openness, and honesty. Its portrayal of “truth” is, of course, mediated and complicated by the narrative and publishing process; the journal is shaped for a particular audience, purpose, and context. “No document,” as Elizabeth Liebert reminds us, “can be presumed to reveal the

depth and complexity of a personality,” much less the depth and complexity of the multitude of personalities and persons that make up the black community (407). The truth of one’s own experiences and the experiences of others always exceeds one’s grasp and one’s narrative representations. Nonetheless, Griffin represents his story as an unmediated and authoritative account of how it feels to be black, or more accurately, how *he*, a “first-class citizen” who had never experienced racism, feels during his passing. This way, he can authenticate his black experience while remaining authoritative about racism to a white audience. Positioning himself as mediator between the two groups, he offers himself as an authority in both directions to both communities. While at least partly aware that his experience is filtered “through the lens of his ‘white’ consciousness” (Wald, “Reflections” 151), and that his “living as a Negro” cannot be equated with being Negro, Griffin still determined that his personal testimony to racism was the best means to communicate to a black audience that their oppression was recognized, and to expose the perpetration and complicity of racism to a white audience who denied or diminished its existence (*BLM* 166).¹²⁹ He anticipated that those who were deaf to the black community might accept the words of a white man who had crossed over the colour line, bridged the gap of unknowing, and experienced the discrimination for himself.

By becoming black, Griffin hoped to witness by his own skin that race was simply an extrinsic difference between people and that reconciling black and white communities was possible by attending to the common humanity that united them. Like Hillesum, Griffin centres his ethical vision on that which is “deepest” in himself as something essentially human and shared by all people, beyond their differences. If, as Adrian Piper argues, “the ultimate test of a person’s repudiation of racism is not what she can contemplate *doing* for or on behalf of black people, but whether she herself can contemplate calmly the likelihood of *being* black,” then

¹²⁹ *Black Like Me* will be cited as *BLM* from this point forward.

Griffin literally embodies this mental affinity by choosing to be identified with “the other” and “share in his lot” (Piper 253). He sees reconciliation and dialogue as a matter of building common ground between the races, not only by understanding the “other” side of the story, but also by gleaning such understanding intimately through “being other” in what could be seen as an existential expression of generosity. In passing for and living as black, he identifies and experiences himself as “the other” in his own skin and draws the two races together within himself. He *is* the common ground, so to speak, being both himself and another simultaneously.

Whitlock observes that witnessing the lives and stories of others is often addressed in terms of identification with “the other,” particularly in the ethical pursuit of reconciliation between disparate racial groups. Reconciliation, a political and ethical strategy widely implemented by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions across the globe in the last two decades, is a practice of communication or “truthful dialogue” aimed at drawing together opposing racial groups by acknowledging and redressing race crimes and injustice (Gaita 286).¹³⁰ In this dialogue, members of the victimized group are urged to testify to their experiences of suffering, while members of the dominant group are encouraged to respond ethically by listening to the testimonies, recognizing the suffering, identifying with the sufferers, and thus becoming moved to responsibility for their own acts of perpetration and complicity (Whitlock, “Second Person”

¹³⁰ Perhaps most well-known is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established after the overthrow of apartheid in 1994 and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. According to Tutu, this commission sought to “rehabilitate the human and civil dignity of victims” by “[allowing] those who came to testify mainly to tell *their* stories in their own words” and to “[grant] amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought” (26, 30). See *No Future Without Forgiveness* for his full account of this process (1999). In her recent work, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (2004), Teresa Godwin Phelps specifically analyzes the assumed conciliatory and therapeutic role of language (stories, testimonials, confessions, etc.) in the work of Truth Commissions. She examines three Truth Commissions in South America that differ significantly in nature and process from the South African TRC—the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) in Argentina (1983), the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (1990-1992), and the Salvadoran Commission in El Salvador (1992)—as the basis for her discussion. Closer to home is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada meant to determine the truth and educate all Canadians about the residential schools in Canada, reconcile the hostilities between First Nations peoples and Canadians, and bring healing to those victims who suffered in these schools. See The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Website: < <http://www.trc-cvr.ca/about.html>>.

201).¹³¹ The listener or “the second person” in this testimonial transaction is the addressee in their dialogue, the witness of and respondent to the other person’s trauma (199). As such, he or she is situated in a passive posture, not only called to affirm the experiences and suffering of the “first person” but also “to reflect upon . . . his/her own responsibility and implication in the events being narrated by a traumatized subject” through the processes of empathy and identification (200).¹³² However, such a witnessing position proves to be ethically and relationally fraught in practices of response. While it is meant to render the witness responsive and ethically responsible, it invariably places him or her in “a situation of hazard and struggle,” as Whitlock notes, tempted either to appropriate the other person’s trauma and become a victim by proxy or take on the weight of perpetration in response to that trauma, becoming self-absorbed or paralyzed by guilt and shame (199). The second person is thus situated tenuously as an ethical respondent, having to be “at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself” (Laub 58). His or her ability to respond is shot through with the complications of self-reflection, pity, and remorse.

This tenuous position of the “second person” can well be applied to Griffin, who witnesses by proxy the black community’s experience of racism. However, to complicate matters, Griffin also situates himself in the “first person” by passing for black: he witnesses the black community’s experience of racism by testifying to his own experience of blackness. Taking the position of first and second person—black testifier and white respondent—at the same time, Griffin struggles to navigate ethically between witnessing others and witnessing

¹³¹ Whitlock specifically addresses the racial dissensions plaguing Australia in this regard, noting that HREOC (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) activists have encouraged non-indigenous Australians to listen to the testimonies of indigenous Australians and put themselves “in their shoes” as a preliminary step toward reconciling the two groups (“Second Person” 199).

¹³² For thinkers like Levinas, as I have argued earlier in this dissertation, a passive posture demonstrates one’s openness in submission and response to others and responsibility for others. However, passivity without activity, as I have also suggested, is problematic even as it opens the space for ethical interaction.

himself “as other,” and complicates the possibility of truthful *dialogue* with others deemed necessary for racial reconciliation. Through his deep identification with “the other,” he is hard-pressed to negotiate alterity (otherness) with sameness (identity), the experiences of others with his own experiences, collective suffering with personal pain, and the other’s agency with his own responsibility. As a result, Griffin’s work is dominated by expressions of similitude that he mistakes for motions of reconciliation: In bridging visible racial differences by passing, he attempts to show how both races are “exactly the same” under the skin. More than that, he tries to eliminate racial difference altogether by existentially identifying himself with others. Both these conciliatory responses, while honourably motivated, prove to be ethically limited ways of witnessing racially vulnerable subjects. Indeed, such attempts at existential generosity *for the other*—those ethical negotiations of being and navigations of space between beings necessary for witnessing others and that are enacted in reconciliation—are deeply compromised in Griffin’s erasure of racial boundaries and identification of himself *as the other*.

I want to begin this chapter by addressing these shortcomings in Griffin’s efforts at racial reconciliation and consider the problematic assumptions that underpin each of them respectively: (a) the problem of understanding others through one’s experience of being othered in passing, and (b) the problem of collapsing difference into self-sameness through existential identification. If Griffin’s *Black Like Me* reveals a limited approach to racial reconciliation and truthful dialogue as I suggest, then what might be the ethical possibilities of witnessing “oneself as another,” to use the phrase coined by Ricoeur (*OA* 3)? What is the relationship, in other words, between ethical witnessing and racial (and relational) reconciliation? And in light of these questions, how might Griffin engage in such witnessing, precisely in the thorny and relationally fraught interval between himself and others? Indeed, how might his very struggles of identity

and dilemmas in negotiating this space open new possibilities for witnessing “oneself as another” that could revitalize the possibility of ethical reconciliation and peaceful dialogue?

Bridging the Racial Gap: Understanding and Existential Identification

In her article, “‘A Most Disagreeable Mirror’: Reflections on White Identity in *Black Like Me*,” Gayle Wald argues that Griffin’s project to understand the truth about racism as a means to racial reconciliation falls short on numerous counts. Not only does he assume that “as a white male intellectual he is entitled to the cultural knowledge of others,” he also expects that he can understand the experiences of others by means of his own experience of passing (155). From Wald’s perspective, Griffin posits himself as an objective researcher who can discover the truth about the “black experience,” and in the process of authenticating that position with his own experience, loses the voices and agency of actual blacks (156). I agree with Wald that Griffin initially puts too much emphasis on understanding “the Negro problem” as the impetus for moral engagement across the racial divide, and his own passing as the means to that understanding. He does not account for the fact that his “being black” is only a temporary state, geographically constrained to a small area of the South, existentially limited to his appearance, and experientially based on his personal feelings in response to the particular events that happen to him. As an individual case of passing, it cannot be taken for the “black experience” as a whole. While he exposes his reality of racism to a white audience, he simultaneously obscures the black experience of racism with his own reflections.

Despite these shortcomings, however, I find that Griffin is more reflective of his position and his belief in the moral capacity of understanding than Wald credits him for. What Griffin comes to discover, precisely *through* his passing, is that racial prejudice is not an intellectual matter and that knowing the truth about “the Negro problem” does not necessarily lead to

reconciliation or communication between the races. Rather, racism is a matter of perceiving other people as intrinsically different from oneself and determining one's own sense of identity against them or superior to them. Race is determined by visible and physical markers of difference between people that are used to identify, characterize, and determine others in relation to oneself (Alcoff, "Racial Embodiment" 268). These differences, as David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos suggest, are not natural categories but discursively fashioned, socially produced, and politically manipulated constructions of identity used to name, recognize, and distinguish between groups of people (3).¹³³ If these constructed differences are essentialized, then race reduces dynamic human interactions into static comparative structures: "the other" is defined in the negative as "not me" or seen as inferior compared to me, so that I can construct my own identity favourably (Piper 255). Indeed, as I suggested in Chapter Two, the very term "other" exposes a dichotomous and self-referential relationship between us: the "other" simply means "other than me," as if I were the measure of all things. Such comparisons result in caricatures that dehumanize us both (Griffin, "Intrinsic Other" 465). Whatever truth we think we know about other people from within this paradigm of difference, Griffin claims, we "judge from within the imprisoning framework of our own limited cultural criteria," a limitation he readily admits colours his own perceptions and challenges his intellectual liberality and ethical convictions of human equality (465).

With this limitation in mind, Griffin reinterprets racial reconciliation from a matter of knowing intimately the problems of "the other" to a matter of having one's own unconscious racist perceptions of others (as opposed or inferior to oneself) brought to light and challenged. In passing for black Griffin begins to discern the extent to which he has internalized the limited cultural criteria of race, inadvertently espousing an intrinsic difference between white and black

¹³³ See their introduction to *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (2002) for elaboration.

and its underlying self/other split. He realizes his own unexpected racism the moment he sees himself in the mirror for the first time. Face to face with himself, he experiences his blackness viscerally and emotionally as “other” with deep aversion and hostility: “I did not like the way he looked” (*BLM* 11). Finding no compatibility between the person he appears to be and the person he thinks he is, Griffin extricates his identity from the “stranger” he sees with whom he feels “no kinship” (10). As a result, he finds himself internally divided, dichotomized as two men: an observing white and a panicked black “who felt Negroid even to the depths of his entrails” (10). Griffin reflects on this incident in his essay, “The Intrinsic Other,” as follows:

That glance in the mirror brought a sickening shock that I tried not to admit, not to recognize, but I could not avoid it. It was the shock of seeing my black face in the mirror and of feeling an involuntary movement of antipathy for that face, because it was pigmented, the face of a Negro. I realized then that although intellectually I had liberated myself from the prejudices which our Southern culture inculcates in us, these prejudices were so profoundly indredged in me that at the emotional level I was in no way liberated. I was filled with despair. Here I had come all this way, had myself transformed chemically into a black man, because of my profound intellectual convictions about racism and prejudice, only to find that my own prejudices, at the emotional level, were hopelessly ingrained in me. (466)

Griffin frames his ethical dilemma as a deep disconnect between his intellectual liberal convictions about racism (the observing white) and his hostile visceral response to his black face (the panicked black). His racism turns out to be an unconscious division between self and other at the very root of his identity, experienced instinctively and involuntarily as antagonism toward and judgement of his own black skin. As a result, Griffin’s racial reconciliation in passing seems purely “skin deep.” While he traverses the visible and cultural boundaries of race, externally reconciling racial distinctions by changing his physical markers of identity, he cannot shake his own perception of blackness as “other,” distinct from his white identity (Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 68). Consequently, Griffin does not usurp or transform racial categories by passing, but superficially moves between them. Indeed, as a number of critics including Kate Baldwin, Elaine

Ginsberg, Eric Lott, and Wald have pointed out, passing simply “reifies racial distinctions” rather than dismantling them; the racial categories of black and white remain intact despite the visible human bridge that crosses between them (Baldwin 104).

At the same time, however, Griffin’s experience of passing is precisely what makes him acutely aware of his own persistent racial categories dividing him from himself and from others. Surely this is why he tries to eliminate these categories altogether by proposing humans as all “the same” under the skin. Using himself as the exemplar, Griffin argues that he remains exactly the same person under the skin during his passing and that the discrimination he faces from others hinges entirely on superficial, visual, and temporary differences. Griffin extends this sense of sameness outward to encompass the black community, observing in “The Intrinsic Other” that “the *Other* was not other at all. Within the context of home and family life we faced exactly the same problems in the homes of Negroes as those faced in all homes of all men: the universal problems of loving, of suffering, of bringing children to the light, of fulfilling human aspirations, of dying” (466). Drawing on the trials that face whites and blacks alike, Griffin favours an ethics of identification—the other is black “like me”—and associates “being human” with similitude. More than that, Griffin collapses all difference as “details,” asserting in his preface to *Black Like Me* that the story of suffering under racism is a universal one: “I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any ‘inferior’ group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same.” Extrapolating from his specific situation to others, Griffin ascertains that racial reconciliation is fundamentally a matter of dismantling ontological categories of difference (together with its assumptions of otherness and inferiority) as extrinsic and superficial particulars, and affirming one’s inherent common humanity with others.

As a result, he reframes his original question about the gap of communication between the races as less a problem of understanding than an issue of relational identification and perception—one's ways of seeing by being with others. Communication, he determines, must exceed one's understanding of others and even one's openness toward others. To truly be in dialogue with other people requires the collapse of the category of "other" altogether so as to transcend the self/other binary inherent in racial differentiation. As he writes in "The Intrinsic Other," "I believe that before we can truly dialogue in depth, we must first *perceive* that there is no *Other*, that the *Other* is self, and that the I-and-thou concept of Martin Buber must finally dissolve itself into the *We* concept" (467, my emphasis). Others must alternatively be perceived "as oneself" as opposed to "other than oneself." Communication begins in community.¹³⁴

In this shift toward universal commonality, Griffin convincingly challenges racism beyond the level of extrinsic difference by collapsing the self/other binary that underpins it. I-and-thou become dissolved or synthesized into a "we," an alternative category of relational subjectivity. However, in witnessing his own fraught identity in *Black Like Me*, Griffin struggles to show by his experience how such a "we" is possible, let alone ethical, given that it eliminates difference altogether. Indeed, this "we" presents a host of ethical problems that Griffin does not

¹³⁴ This impulse toward universal commonality, Wald notes in *Crossing the Line* (2000), situates Griffin's ethical stance clearly within contemporary liberal ideals of universality, equal rights, and recognition of all people as valued individuals and social agents beyond their differences (183). Wald associates Griffin's principle of "sameness under the skin" specifically with the logic of "'colour-blind' social policy" upheld by such activists as Patricia Williams in the early 1990s (183). Like Griffin, Williams promotes a world in which "we could all wake up and see all of ourselves reflected in the world" and "[envision] each of us in each other" in *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future* (14). Notably, this ideal of "colour-blindness" is critical to Griffin long before his passing. As Robert Bonazzi writes in his biography of Griffin, *Man in the Mirror* (1997), Griffin's physical blindness in the decade prior to his experiment of passing contributes significantly to his take on racial "blindness" (27). Georgina Kleege, in "The Strange Life and Times of John Howard Griffin" concurs, indicating that before he regained his sight, Griffin was involved in a movement to desegregate the schools in Mansfield, Texas. At the meetings he attended, "he could not always tell the race of speakers," she writes. "Part of his adaptation to blindness was that he no longer knew, or cared, what people looked like, even himself" (105). She adds that in regaining his sight, "Griffin seems to have become hyper-aware of the significance of visible appearances, and meditated on the connection between appearance and identity" (105). For Griffin's own account of his blindness, see his posthumously published memoir *Scattered Shadows* (2004).

address, including those of absorbing or appropriating the legitimate distinctions of others into sameness with oneself (Butler, “Conversational Break” 261). Furthermore, in moving from difference to similitude, Griffin simply inverts the binary structure of self/other on which racism rests. He combats the problem of “otherness” by privileging and essentializing the opposite extreme: sameness. In the process, the dualistic structure remains intact, a limitation that Kelly Oliver has also observed of affirmative action, which “[leaves] intact the subject/object opposition and merely [tries] to bridge the gap between them” (*Witnessing* 51).¹³⁵ Neither extreme in this structure stimulates genuine or responsible reconciliation. Whether Griffin perceives the other as *different* from himself (based on visible qualities) or the *same* as himself (according to universal criteria), he still recognizes other people in relation to himself, who they are “for him” from his privileged subject position.

Examining Griffin’s intellectual and experiential struggles of reconciliation has led me to wonder: what might it take to transform the self/other binary that underpins racism so as not to privilege sameness or eliminate difference altogether with identification? Turning again to Oliver, I suggest that an ethical response to racism undermines the logic of binary relationships by “transforming the underlying structure of cultural valuation” and “destabilizing existing group and individual identities and thereby changing every one’s sense of self” (50). Thus, if selves are constructed in binary terms, they need to be deconstructed and reconstituted. Genuine transformation in relationships begins with a change of mind about oneself (one’s conceptual

¹³⁵ Affirmative action can be defined in a cursory way as those social activities aimed at reversing past injustices done to certain communities by recognizing and affirming their differences. In other words, it follows a politics of difference, which seeks to “recognize the unique identity of [every] individual or group, their distinctiveness from everyone else,” while also attempting to establish what is “universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities” for all people (Taylor, “Politics of Recognition” 38). For Oliver, affirmative action attempts to correct the social inequalities and injustices of racism without addressing the underlying structures that create inequitable relations in the first place—the dualistic relationship between self and other at the level of subjectivity (50). See her discussion of the matter in her chapter “Identity Politics: Deconstruction, and Recognition” in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001).

frame of subjectivity) that changes how one witnesses and engages with others in the world (one's relational and ethical bearing).

Drawing on Oliver's work, I contend that reconciling the self/other binary in the broad scope of racial relations depends on transforming one's conceptions of selfhood and one's orientation toward others, perceptually, personally, and proximately. I combine her views of responsible witnessing with Ricoeur's postulation of relational selfhood—oneself as another—to propose another form of witnessing *otherwise* as it relates specifically to the practice of ethical reconciliation: “witnessing oneself as another.” How might *witnessing* oneself as another infuse racial perception, which depends on what can be seen or recognized, with what cannot be seen or grasped? How might witnessing *oneself as another* deconstruct binary conceptions of selfhood and reconcile the antagonistic relationship between self and others that underpins racial prejudice without privileging sameness or eliminating alterity? Indeed, how might this alternative posture of witnessing be brought to bear on Griffin's passing for black, precisely in his fraught relationship with the otherness within himself and his struggle to witness ethically the lives of others through his journalistic account?

In light of these questions, I sketch out what it means to witness oneself as another ethically as an alternative practice of reconciliation. Reiterating the work of Oliver and Ricoeur already discussed at length in this dissertation, I address this form of witnessing first as a vision of subjectivity characterized by intrinsic alterity and ethical responsibility, and second as a conciliatory relationship between oneself and others that culminates in the drama of embrace (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 140). I then consider how witnessing oneself as another functions practically in the work of Griffin. From my perspective, his fraught practice of racial reconciliation in *Black Like Me* complicates the ethical vision of witnessing alterity posed by

Oliver and Ricoeur. More than that, if we look at this text in the context of his other journalistic writings, we can see that Griffin's struggle to negotiate the space of witnessing himself as another is not solely a political issue but also a personal and spiritual one. In fact, it is precisely beyond the political, I contend, that Griffin *does* witness ethically, just not in the way he thinks. The possibilities of ethical witnessing emerge in his moments of deepest difficulty, in the face of his guilt, humility, and personal struggle beyond the force of his ethical convictions and liberal stance.

Witnessing Oneself as Another: A Transformative Vision of Subjectivity

Witnessing oneself as another is a transformative mode of being that is characterized by alterity and responsibility. Distinct from the form of witnessing that I outlined in Chapter Two—Hillesum's witness of alterity (God, in her case) in every self and her negotiated response of existential generosity in every relationship—witnessing oneself as another begins in subjectivity (oneself) rather than alterity (another) and functions principally as a form of reconciliation between the two. With this in mind, I begin this discussion with Ricoeur's formulation of subjectivity—the fullness of selfhood rather than its being emptied out for the sake of alterity, as in Levinas—and then turn to Oliver's formulation of witnessing as the conciliatory practice of a responsible subject par excellence.

Intrinsic Alterity: Oneself as Another

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur suggests that a subject has two modes of being, and is thus posited in terms of identity (*idem*) or in terms of selfhood (*ipse*). Identity refers to one's subject position constituted in social interactions and functioning within a particular culture and context, while selfhood refers to one's subjectivity constituted "in the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical" (Oliver 17). Let me briefly overview their differences. Identity

(idem) assumes sameness: a subject identical to itself across time and space and therefore identifiable in certain ways (Ricoeur 2). My identity refers to a given set of ontological categories that I use to identify myself and that make me recognizable to other people as me. These may include physical attributes (tall, thin, brown hair, glasses), core personality traits (loyal, critical, cautious, stubborn), or other marks of identification (name, class, race, gender, religion). Not only are such characteristics used to identify me, they are also the means by which others can identify with me, relating to me according to our overlapping traits, interests, beliefs, or circumstances. Religious, social, economic, or political communities are built by way of such identification. From this perspective, one's sense of identity and identification are vital to one's sense of self and one's ability to associate with and make oneself understood to others.

However, if identity is defined by sameness, then I can only be identified "as me" in distinction from or in opposition to something other, changeable, or diverse from me. A subject determined strictly by identity, then, implies a relational constitution that is antagonistic or self-referential: the other as opposed to me. While ontological categories of identity and difference are critical for understanding one's socio-political position in regard to others, we have a difficult if not impossible time, as Allison Wier suggests in *Sacrificial Logics*, conceiving of identity in a way that "does not repress either relationships to others or the differences within the self" (qtd. in Volf 66). Precisely for these reasons, ethical transformation in human relationships cannot occur at the level of identity, even though the categories by which we identify others and ourselves can be changed. As Griffin's passing exemplifies, altering one's skin-colour or racial affiliation may well change one's sense of identity or subject position in relation to others without ever penetrating to one's constitution of selfhood, who I am as a relational being.

Unlike identity, selfhood (ipseity) does not assume sameness or determine otherness against or in light of its own subject position. Rather, selfhood is inherently relational, constituted by otherness. As Ricoeur sees it, I am not myself without also being other to myself, which I have taken to mean in my previous chapters: the self bears an intrinsic alterity within itself that informs how one relates and interacts with other people (OA 3). In light of this otherness inherent within oneself, Ricoeur describes subjectivity in relational terms: “oneself as another.” This conjunction “as” has two connotations that are particularly significant for the practice of reconciliation, as I will come to show. First, it suggests analogy between oneself and another. “As” is an associative term, but one that does not connote sameness. It implies a relationship of “is and is not” simultaneously, in which the two are related, equal, and corresponding without being identical. In associating oneself with another “as” does not subsume the other into oneself. Otherness is preserved in the analogy. Second, and perhaps more significantly, “as” suggests implication: “oneself inasmuch as being other” (3). This “inasmuch” is not a synthesis between self and other where “oneself is another,” their differences rendered meaningless or simply ceasing to exist. Rather, constituting oneself inasmuch as being other opens the self to otherness, determines the self by that otherness, and addresses one’s experiences of being as both inherently shaped by others and at odds with oneself. Such a constitution accounts for the enigmas within selfhood to which one is rendered a passive recipient: those ailments, motivations, memories, and expectations that cannot be clearly categorized or identified, but remain elusive, unaccountable, or unrecognizable to me. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “I am never quite at one with myself” (347).

In my first chapter I outlined three ways that Ricoeur implicates alterity in selfhood and sees it made manifest in one’s shared world with others. To reiterate, he first describes one’s

body as other even as it is oneself. The body is often experienced enigmatically and its processes involuntarily. It exceeds one's conscious control. As Griffin experiences both in his blindness and in blackness, one is often made passive to one's body and suffers it without knowing how to cure its ailments, manage its afflictions, or bear its appearance. Not only is one's body experienced as other to oneself, it is also never simply one's own. To the extent it can be said to "belong to me" or "exist for me" it also belongs in the world and exists for others. As Ricoeur puts it, the human body is "at once a body among others and my body" (*OA* 319). We both experience my body directly and proximately, but in different ways: I suffer my body more intimately than others do. I am conscious of its functions and their affect on me in ways that are imperceptible to other people. Yet others can perceive my body more fully than I can, since I cannot see myself unless I look in a mirror, and even then I only see an image of myself—what I look *like*—void of my body language and social demeanour with others. My body is not mine alone but opens my self out to the world.

Second, Ricoeur describes one's being as intersubjective: one is socially and historically intertwined in the lives and stories of others, and participates as an interlocutor in reciprocal dialogue with others. "In our experience," he writes, "the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of other people. Whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others—of my parents, my friends, my companions in work and in leisure" (161). My life is therefore never a "singular totality," complete in itself or at the centre of any world (160, 318). It is integrated with the lives of others. Moreover, I am a self who both constitutes and is constituted by other selves in language. Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty both posit dialogue as the exemplar for illustrating this reciprocal relationship between people. In conversation, both parties take the role

of addressee and respondent in turn, functioning as agents and patients of each other.¹³⁶ Neither interlocutor is the centre of the dialogue, nor is one the creator of this shared interaction. As

Merleau-Ponty explains:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation. . . . We are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world. (354)

Dialogue thus illustrates how the self, as an integrated being with others, is both oneself for others and functions as another for other selves. As I have discussed in the context of autobiography studies with the work of Eakin and Egan, the self cannot escape from this relational constitution regardless of one's egocentric inclinations, sense of alienation from others, or internal antagonism toward others. Indeed, this integrated sense of alterity destabilizes the subject for itself, as a self-conscious individual perceiving others as external objects outside and in the light of itself, and reorients him or her toward others.

This brings me to Ricoeur's third form of inherent alterity: conscience. Following Heidegger, he depicts one's conscience as an "internal voice," a call that "comes *from* me and yet *from beyond me and over me*" (qtd. in Ricoeur, *OA* 348). This call functions as an imperative-injunction prohibiting certain behaviours and admitting others, thus directing the self how to live well with and for others (351). Finding myself called upon in this way I am rendered passive, summoned to listen to the command of conscience *as if* it were coming from another. The self projects onto itself the voice of another, internalizing this other into itself. And yet, one's internal call bears traces of that which *is* outside itself: the injunction of law, the pleas of

¹³⁶ See Ricoeur's discussion in *Oneself and Another* where he observes, "When I say 'you' to someone else, that person understands 'I' for himself or herself. When another addresses me in the second person, I feel I am implicated in the first person" (193).

other people, the voice of the beloved, or the word of God. This sense of otherness within comes from somewhere beyond me, directing me outward, toward others. Such a summons bears ethical overtones: My internal injunction to live well becomes a conviction borne out in my relationships with others, motivating me to ethical action on their behalf: “Here I stand! *I cannot do otherwise!*” (352). I am not simply a passive recipient of another’s need mediated by my conscience, but an agent moved and convicted to respond, risking my own sphere of comfort and complacency for the unknown waters of another’s life. Among these three forms of intrinsic otherness—the body, intersubjectivity, and conscience—we thus find the impetus for ethical interaction with and responsibility for others. As Ricoeur reveals, being moved toward another person does not just happen to me, but begins in constituting and conceiving myself as inherently relational, a relationality that penetrates my being with otherness.

Inherent Responsibility: Witnessing

Like Ricoeur, Oliver privileges selfhood over identity in formulating ethical subjectivity. She contends that understanding subjectivity according to one’s particular subject position distinct from others offers only a limited lens for envisioning the human capacity for ethical responsibility for others. And, as I have indicated elsewhere, she argues that human subjectivity is inherently determined by responsibility beyond one’s recognition of others and one’s conscious choice to respond. I return to her work briefly here to reiterate these two ethical issues as a matter of witnessing for the sake of reconciliation.

Oliver observes that most contemporary cultural theory on racism relies on a Hegelian model of relationality, in which persons are positioned within a master—slave dialectic and recognize themselves in light of each other. In this paradigm, one’s *self-consciousness*, who I am

“for myself,” depends entirely on *recognition*, who I am “for others.”¹³⁷ However, one is only recognized as *an object* of thought for other people, something they can see and know. In recognizing myself as an object for you, I become alien and other to myself. From Hegel’s perspective, one cannot be in the position of subject and object at the same time: If you are determining who I am *for me* (object), then I am not determining who I am *for myself* (subject). In order to move from the place of objectification back to oneself, the subject must first recognize herself as this object/other for others and then determine her own identity by superseding this otherness imposed on her from without (Oliver, *Witnessing* 28). In other words, if the only way to think about oneself as a subject is in distinction from otherness, then one must struggle to overcome this otherness by making it one’s own, an object of thought *for oneself*, something to grasp, synthesize, and identify as “me” distinct from what others think of me.¹³⁸

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Oliver finds this Hegelian paradigm of relationality inadequate for forming ethically responsible relationships with others. It falls short on at least two counts: First, recognition is self-divisive. It turns on an inherent dichotomy between self and other that manifests itself externally as antagonistic relationships with others. I recognize myself by dividing myself from an “alienating otherness” imposed on me, and thus posit my identity as fundamentally opposed to others, constituted over and against them in a struggle to determine myself for myself. Franz Fanon illustrates this problem as it relates to racial injustice in *Black Skin, White Masks*. If “man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him,” then a black man is rendered not a man but an

¹³⁷ As Hegel puts it in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (111).

¹³⁸ Notably, this making oneself an other for oneself directly contrasts Ricoeur’s postulation of selfhood. Where “oneself as another” signifies for Ricoeur a necessary relationality within oneself for the sake of responsible human interaction, it depicts for Hegel a dialectic that must be overcome for the self to claim self-consciousness and its own identity.

object for others because his existence has been imposed upon him and he has become unrecognizable to himself as a subject for himself (Fanon 191).¹³⁹ When both parties mistake identity for personhood, neither is able to respond to the actual needs of the other person or move toward reconciliation. Instead, both struggle to gain status through recognition and to maintain that status by enforcing distinctions and independence from each other. Indeed, neither party appears able to acknowledge the *dependence* each has on the other to conceive of themselves in the first place. By way of such conflict the position of each subject may well shift, the power hierarchy destabilized and the master usurped. But neither party is assured of significance as a person or capable of genuine ethical response toward the other because both are trampled in the push for social status or political power.

Second, recognition is self-referential and self-interested: it always returns to the self. Recognition is essentially a matter of procuring self-identity by producing and affirming my own subject position. By making my own otherness an object for me, I determine my identity distinct from other people: the other is “not me.” I recognize myself over and against others, wanting their acknowledgment for my own sake. While it remains necessary to secure my identity and be *recognizable* to other people so as not to be unduly subjected to and oppressed by them, it seems almost impossible to assert my identity without also conceiving of that identity “in and of itself,” separate or independent of others. Agency and independence become ethically problematic the moment they are not re-informed by interdependence, vulnerability, passivity, and generosity toward others. Indeed, in its self-referentiality, recognition becomes a mode of existing “for

¹³⁹ As he writes elsewhere in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “as long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for the other” (89). The moment he exists for whites, he is not black, but black in relation (and opposed) to white (90). Such relationality is inherently dichotomous and objectifying of the other. See “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks* for further discussion.

others” with the goal of being “for myself.” It is a movement inward rather than outward and as such, opposes ethical responsibility rather than being a practical outworking of it.

In light of these limitations, Oliver poses subjectivity as not relationally antagonistic or self-referential, but intrinsically interdependent, ethical, and dialogic. Since we depend on our environment and our relationships with others to live, she reasons, we *are* by virtue of them and thus have an ethical obligation to and responsibility for them rooted in our very subjectivity (*Witnessing* 15). Who I am “for others” ceases to be an issue of *recognition* and becomes an issue of *responsibility*: who I am is inextricably linked to how I am responsible for and subject to others, a sense of being that I have described in my previous chapters as “here I am” revealed in practices of “existential generosity.”¹⁴⁰ Oliver, of course, names this being responsible “witnessing” and defines it dialogically as one’s ability to respond to and address others “beyond recognition” by perceiving what *cannot* be seen—the other’s infinite alterity—in what *can* be seen or known of them. Where recognition assumes the other can be seen and known, witnessing re-cognizes oneself and others in light of alterity. Where recognition deciphers one’s subject position (race, class, gender, etc.) in a socio-political context, witnessing perceives one’s subjectivity in an ethical context. Where recognition determines my being a subject “for myself” according to the recognition of others, witnessing is being responsible “for others” beyond what I recognize about them or myself. In this regard, Griffin’s “witness” of others and himself as other in racial terms functions principally as a matter of recognition in *Black Like Me*, a problem to which I return later in this chapter.

¹⁴⁰ In this regard, Oliver extends Ricoeur’s position on ethical interaction motivated by conscience to a Levinasian ethics as “first philosophy”: prior to any conscious action one is *always already* situated in a position of responsibility by the very fact that one is a relational and interdependent subject in the world with others. Relational selfhood is fundamentally borne out in ethical responsibility.

Opposed to the self-division and self-referentiality of recognition, responsible witnessing is borne out in the ethical posture, “here I am.” As I have suggested in my previous chapters, “here I am” signifies my being made passive and open to alterity of others. Levinas argues that this passivity and subjection to others are critical for ethical engagement with others because the subject is inherently solipsistic, subsuming others into itself and alienating their alterity (*OA* 336). Constituted alternatively by responsibility, the witness potentially responds beyond self-identity to the sheer alterity of others by being open and available to receive it. Implicated in this orientation of passivity, Ricoeur adds, is activity. Reception and response function as *actions* emerging from a passive posture of openness toward alterity, what I described in Chapter One as “active passivity.” When I am called upon by another person or interrupted by otherness to respond, “Here I am!” I am simultaneously convicted by something other *within me* to speak it. Ricoeur describes this activity of responsibility as “self-constancy”—being accountable to respond and counted on to do so (*OA* 165). Self-constancy is the ethical quality of being consistent and committed to respond, by which I can be *identified* by others as responsible without being rendered *identical* to myself and recognized as such.

Ricoeur further suggests that reception and response function reciprocally in a witnessing relationship. Responsibility does not simply go one way, from me to you. Because we are in relationship, we constantly exchange roles and positions between us. Like the other, I am a subject who appeals for a response. And like me, the other is a subject responsible to and for me. We resemble one another in the way that we are both selves, other to one another and responsible for one another. Thus, in exchanging roles and positions, we not only challenge the totalities of sameness (we are both others), we also circumvent the totalities of otherness (we resemble each other). Bearing witness is thus the basis for genuine communication with others. We take turns

addressing and responding to one another, acting and suffering. We are both convicted and self-constant in our responsibility for each other. The witnessing subject conceived in terms of alterity and responsibility, then, is self-constant without being self-identical, active without assimilating others, distinct without alienating others, and reciprocal rather than oppositional in its relations with others.

Witnessing Oneself as Another: A Posture and Practice of Reconciliation

Drawing together Ricoeur's "oneself as another" and Oliver's postulation of witnessing, I see "witnessing oneself as another" as an ethical posture and practice of reconciliation, an embodied expression of "here I am" and a practice of existential generosity contrary to recognizing oneself as another in a divisive or self-referential way. I use the term "reconciliation" here as an ethical expression of subjectivity, one that underpins its socio-political signification as a "truthful dialogue" aimed at drawing together opposing racial groups. I am well aware that the term has been criticized as a synthesizing or totalizing gesture of resolution in this socio-political sense (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 109). In many ways reconciliation has become the pat answer to personal, relational, social, or racial division. Despite its shortcomings, however, I find it a fruitful term for this discussion, not simply because it continues to resonate as a plausible way for addressing racial and political factions but also because its relational nuances bear out in practice the ethical conception of witnessing oneself as another that I have just outlined. For this context, then, I use reconciliation to mean the inherent drawing together of selfhood and alterity *within* subjectivity that destabilizes a self-same identity from the centre of being and works itself out as a negotiation of space between oneself and others in human relationships. The "as" between oneself and another is the linguistic mark that signifies this non-totalizing reconciliation.

Reconciliation is first of all an internal and interdependent posture of subjectivity, a self opened up and profoundly informed by alterity. Reconciliation between subjectivity and alterity begins by *implication*, to return to Ricoeur's term: witnessing oneself inasmuch as being other. Indeed, it relies on a conception of selfhood in which the subject is inextricably bound together with others. Desmond Tutu describes this concept in his discussion of the South African TRC, reconciliation as the outworking of *ubuntu*, the Nguni expression for essential human interconnectedness:

It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather, 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (31)

Selfhood cannot simply be determined by self-consciousness (being through thinking about it), relational self-referentiality, or independence from others. If being human means being interdependent, existing in a web of relationships with others that obligates responsibility for them, then reconciliation can be seen as the ethical posture and practice of interdependence contrary to the self-sameness of identity. A subject can be reconciled with others only in "[receiving] the other into itself and [undertaking] a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other's alterity," an inner reception and reorientation rooted in generosity (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 110). Reconciliation requires a radical self-adjustment to witness oneself as another. This internal state of generosity to alterity is the necessary opening for one to give up one's right to oneself and let another person in.

Secondly, reconciliation is the responsible practice of making two apparently conflicting things consistent or compatible. Again following Ricoeur's terminology, reconciliation functions

by *analogy* not totality: one is and is not other at the same time. Relationality by analogy resists pure self-identity or otherness with the mutual conjunction and distinction of intersubjectivity. In reconciliation, one remains consistently oneself *and* compatible with others without subsuming their alterity or alienating it from oneself. Neither one's singularity nor one's interdependence is sacrificed. Indeed, subjects of reconciliation are self-constant without being self-identical and mutually other without being oppositional. As a practice, then, reconciliation is meant to negotiate a relational space within oneself that stimulates peace, mutual dependence and vulnerability, and reciprocal responsibility with other people, particularly in oppositional or hierarchical relationships.

In his theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), Miroslav Volf uses the metaphor of “embrace” to illustrate the necessary tension between singularity and interdependence in reconciliation. The human embrace is an interactive and embodied negotiation of space between oneself and another that enacts a dynamic relationship between two people and signifies a particular way of witnessing selfhood, both personally and communally, in relation to others. An embrace involves opening one's arms to another, waiting, closing one's arms around the other, and opening them again (141). In this process, the self does not lose itself to alterity, nor does it lose alterity in itself. We maintain our own subjectivities as singular beings even as we are intimately and reciprocally drawn together in the circle of the other's body, present and proximate. According to Volf, opening one's arms signals a discontent with one's self-enclosed identity—“I do not want to be myself only; I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other”—an initiating posture of desire, hospitality, and vulnerability that invites the other person into oneself, and a movement of risk that draws one outside oneself into the circle of the other person (141).

After opening one's arms to the other, one must stop and wait. An embrace does not invade the other person's boundaries but waits for the other person to open their arms as well. Volf describes waiting as the work of holding oneself in check "for the sake of the integrity of the other—the other, who may not want to be embraced but left alone" (142). If both parties mutually open their arms and mutually enclose their arms around each other, then embrace is fully realized. Embrace, Volf writes, cannot be thought without reciprocity. It takes *two* pairs of arms for *one* embrace: "each is both holding and being held by the other, both active and passive (Gurevitch qtd. in Volf 143). In this motion, Volf argues, "the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity of the other is both affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self" (143). Finally, both parties open their arms again and release each other. Embrace is an attempt not to fuse two bodies into one but to "transform the boundary between bodies" into a seam that holds them together. Ethically speaking, the "I" is not meant to disappear into a "we" as Griffin would have it; rather, as releasing one's arms around the other suggests, our mutual alterity must hold in check the desire to merge together into an undifferentiated unity or totality (144). In short, a genuine embrace is an expression of reconciliation. It embodies the double motion of receiving the other into oneself and giving oneself to another. In this movement toward each other, neither of us can remain the same; we will both be transformed in the circle of the other.

From my perspective, the metaphor of embrace is a productive way to express the generosity, mutuality, and careful negotiation between oneself and another involved in relational and racial reconciliation. Reconciliation, as I have tried to show, manifests a "here I am" bearing in witness to one's own alterity and the alterity of other people. In witnessing myself as another, I am radically reconceived in responsible relation to alterity: I am constituted *as* or *inasmuch as*

being other and “embrace” this otherness that is part of my own being. Reconciliation can be seen as the mark of this relational constitution, a self-giving and others-receiving posture that draws together oneself and another through analogy and implication. In negotiating this self/other binary within oneself, reconciliation opens the space for reciprocal generosity and conciliatory dialogue with other people, taking one beyond oneself into the circle of another person and potentially transforming our oppositional relationships with peaceful and restorative interactions.

Immersing Oneself in an Experience of Otherness: A Complicated Reconciliation

Witnessing oneself as another is a particular inward negotiation of subjectivity and relational space meant to reconcile oneself with others under conditions of racial enmity or interpersonal strife. I return now to Griffin’s *Black Like Me* in order to examine how this sense of reconciliation works itself out in practice, in one’s concrete encounters with others and narrative representations of them where antagonism and self-interest tend to prevail despite one’s best intentions. In this section, I will explore how Griffin’s embodied and narrative witness of alterity complicates an ethics of responsible reconciliation, challenging the conceptual framework of witnessing that Oliver and Ricoeur pose. Specifically, I focus on the dilemmas of subjectivity that trouble Griffin’s ability to witness himself as another and address how these dilemmas challenge his conciliatory responses to both blacks and whites in his narrative of racial passing.

Griffin’s struggle with internal reconciliation comes to the fore in his personal ethic of witnessing, which he defines as a posture and practice “immersing himself in an experience of otherness” in order to reveal alterity accurately in narrative form (*Scattered Shadows* 19). In the “Prologue” to *Scattered Shadows*, his memoir covering the decade of blindness and sight regained before his experiment of passing in 1959, Griffin describes this immersion into

otherness as a form of identification that takes him outside himself and opens him to witness and write that which is other, whether it be a setting, a set of circumstances, or other people. He depicts this orientation as follows: “I had ceased to be a person judging everything on the basis of pleasure or comfort. I had gone out of myself to the value of things in themselves, and I have never since been able to step back consistently into mere self-interest” (19). From this posture, he witnesses as follows: “the plants in the courtyard, the cobblestones, the lampposts, the faces of strangers—I no longer took them in and bound them up in me. Instead, I went out to them, focused on them, immersed myself in them—they retained their values, their own identities, and essences” (42). If one is naturally predisposed toward self-interest, as Griffin implies, then immersing oneself in an experience of otherness poses the alternative orientation of generosity in opening oneself to otherness without reducing it to oneself or one’s grasp. It evades the totality of observation and comprehension in writing one’s relationship to an outside world, leaving otherness intact in one’s witness of it. Indeed, as the term “immerse” suggests, this form of identification signifies giving oneself over wholly to another without impinging on his or her alterity. In *Scattered Shadows*, Griffin determines that this mode of witnessing is the most constructive way to engage with the otherness of his blindness and to write about a world he can no longer see. By immersing himself in the experience of blindness through writing about it, he hopes to gain insight into his condition and to discern the relationship between his experience and the human condition more generally so as to encounter other vulnerable subjects with compassion and wisdom (135).

Griffin embodies this stance of immersion in *Black Like Me*. In “becoming Negro” he cannot step back into mere self-interest, as he describes it, but puts himself “out there” by going into the Black community and immersing himself corporeally in their world. Bonazzi, in his

1996 “Afterword” to *Black Like Me*, suggests that Griffin’s narrative account reveals an orientation of generosity toward otherness in this immersion—what I called “existential generosity” in my previous chapter. First of all, Griffin shows generosity in his posture of passivity. In narrating his experience, Griffin centres on what is done to him rather than what he does (Bonazzi, “Afterword” 197). Immersing himself in otherness, he positions himself as the passive recipient of racial prejudice, rendered helpless and forced to suffer at the hands of both cruel and well-meaning people in the white community. Second, Griffin demonstrates generosity in his radical presence for others: “being here now” (197). In his narrative, he figures himself as fully present to his experience of otherness, a “here I am” for the sake of others, as it were. In a stance of passivity and presence to otherness, Griffin does not witness as an omnipotent “I” or ego “observing some ‘it’ out there,” but as a participant involved in an experience beyond himself that exceeds both his personal and narrative control (197).

And yet, even in this generous posture toward alterity, Griffin’s immersion in an experience of otherness (blackness) in *Black Like Me* falls short of the ethical embrace of reconciliation. Griffin attempts this self-giving and others-receiving posture, but, as he himself confesses, he struggles to negotiate this posture of embrace within himself. His immersion into otherness teeters dangerously close to losing himself and becoming absorbed in otherness, so much so that the motion becomes self-divisive and self-referential rather than conciliatory. If Griffin’s “real struggle” in passing comes in the “stripping away process” of egoistic self-interest and cultural conditioning, as Bonazzi puts it, then Griffin can be seen to strip away too much of himself, alienating himself from his white identity and unduly absorbing himself in his experience of otherness in the process (195). I want to examine carefully these complications of subjectivity—alienation and absorption—that challenge Griffin’s witnessing stance, and then

turn to two ethical problems that result: the problem of privileging self-reflection as the ethical narrative mode *par excellence* for witnessing oneself and others and the problem of mistaking racial integration for an ethics of reconciliation in witnessing others.

The Complications of Subjectivity in Immersion: Alienation and Absorption

In his practice of immersing himself in an experience of otherness, Griffin reveals the complications that his internal dichotomy (self vs. other) poses for moving toward others in reconciliation. First of all, he takes his racially othered identity for the whole of his personhood, alienating and even losing his sense of self in temporarily “becoming Negro.” As “white” turned “black,” Griffin is divided between these two identities and oscillates between them, thus reducing himself and his witness of otherness to those particular identity markers (*BLM* 11). He finds himself trapped in his ontological categories: he is unable to imagine immersing himself in being black without losing himself as white in the process, his sense of self being wholly wrapped up in his racial identity. Consequently, in practicing his ethics of immersion, Griffin alienates himself entirely from his white identity, a loss of self that he experiences both corporeally and relationally.

Throughout his narrative, Griffin feels disconnected from his white self and thus struggles to witness his black body otherwise than antagonistically, a negation of himself, or an enemy. At first, he is utterly devastated by his racial transformation because it signifies to him a total loss of selfhood: “The completeness of this transformation appalled me,” he writes. “The man I had been, the self I knew, was hidden in the flesh of another. . . . I had tampered with the mystery of existence and had lost the sense of my own being” (*BLM* 11). In this moment of shock, he conflates his appearance with his existence, his racial transformation with his sense of self. This initial panic of being separated from and unrecognizable to himself continues to

torment him throughout his experiment. In a later journal entry, he describes himself feeling “invisible,” entirely disconnected and watching himself from outside his body (33). In another entry, he associates his reflection with film negatives he finds in a hotel room: his black appearance is the “negative” of his white identity, and worse, it is devoid of existential meaning: “each negative was blank” (67). Recognition becomes the basis for his selfhood in these moments: the extent to which he is recognizable as himself to himself is the extent to which he *is* himself. Notably, Griffin already knows from his ten years of blindness not to take a particular ontological category (being blind or black) for the totality of his being, or to see it as an enemy that divests him of himself (*Scattered Shadows* 90, 94-5). Yet he still struggles to immerse his racial identity into the larger reality of his being, of which his appearance is only a part.

Griffin’s conflation of racial identity with his being and his anxiety about being “not himself” during his passing particularly challenges his familial relationships. Imagining himself as physically unrecognizable to his most intimate relations cuts Griffin off from his deepest sense of self and distresses him profoundly. Even before embarking on his experiment, he speculates in his *Journal*: “Perhaps I feel that the physical change will drag along with it a transformation of identity, even *interior identity*. My family suspects this. It is precisely, I think, their fear that their husband, son and brother, even though theoretically he will change only his pigment will in truth be changed more fundamentally. The eye is more powerful than the intellect in such things. If they should encounter me, they would have to remind themselves that I was *not* a Negro stranger,” an intellectual undertaking that Griffin fears that they will not, in fact, be able to perform (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 34). He worries that his assumed “Negro” identity and his intimate familial relationships are mutually exclusive, that he will be entirely disconnected from his loved ones the moment he changes his skin. Indeed, he makes the curious

remark in his journal that he will not be loved as himself while he is gone: “how can I actually be held in love when even my wife will think of me as a Negro stranger—thus what holds the man in existence will cease for the time that his existence as himself ceases” (qtd. in Bonazzi 35). This fear that the “eye” of misrecognition will overwhelm the “I” of his being is Griffin’s own projection imposed on his family, Bonazzi duly notes (35). His racial identity does not cancel out, even temporarily, his relational identity as husband, son, and father. “Ultimately, Griffin’s fear of losing identity had little to do with the reality of his family and everything to do with creative imagination,” Bonazzi contends, “the metaphors were his, not theirs—and the ‘Negro stranger’ would not be in their thoughts but in his mirror” (35). Griffin’s constant reiteration of himself as a “Negro stranger” becomes an all-encompassing metaphor that skews his witness of himself as another. He is overcome by a sense of alienation from himself and his family in appearing black. To compensate for this temporary crisis of identity, Griffin fixates on being recognized and known “as himself” and thus makes his witness of himself “as another” self-referential by his inner dividedness and fear.

Griffin’s struggle of identity leads to him to over-identify with “the other.” In stripping away his white identity in an excessive move of self-alienation, Griffin takes his immersion into otherness too far by absorbing himself in his pseudo-black identity and by extension, the black community he witnesses. He continues to sacrifice his personhood to his black appearance, what *can* be recognized and perceived by his skin. As a result, Griffin inadvertently sidelines his ethical practice of witnessing himself as another with a self-referentiality that reduces the other’s racial alterity to his own experience of it. In short, he mistakes being absorbed in his experience of racial otherness for immersing himself in actual otherness, a confusion that challenges the possibility of racial reconciliation in his encounters with actual blacks as a result.

This dilemma is most apparent in Griffin's corporeal over-identification with blackness. Looking into the mirror after he dyes his skin, he describes his altered appearance in ontological terms as "a newly created Negro" who "felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails" (*BLM* 11). As his black reflection "in no way resembled [him]," Griffin makes the extreme existential leap to suggest that "all traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence" (10). Even though he argues elsewhere that one's appearance cannot be taken for one's being, Griffin seems to believe that has been absorbed by his temporary appearance, collapsing his reflection of himself with the reality of actually being black. In gazing at himself, Griffin even alters his history, imagining an alternative black past for himself: "I . . . saw reflected nothing of John Griffin's past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness" (10). Through his corporeal and imaginative identification with otherness, Griffin witnesses a reflection of alterity, in a glass darkly so to speak, without actually perceiving alterity itself. He is simply looking at himself, imagining himself otherwise.

Immersing himself in a vision of his own alterity leads Griffin to absorb in his experience the experiences of other blacks. While he admits in his preface that his experience of racism is clearly his own and cannot be taken for the black experience as a whole, he nonetheless collapses the two in his narrative. He strays from simply telling his own story to drawing conclusions about "the Negro" in general based on that story. For instance, when he wanders the streets of Mobile that he had previously walked as a white man, he determines that "as in everything else, the atmosphere of a place is entirely different for Negro and white. The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed" (101). While this conjecture may well be accurate, Griffin bases it on the fact that because the atmosphere is different *for him*

as “a Negro” it must by extension be entirely different for “the Negro” in general. In reality, the differences he attributes solely to race would be complicated by his own memories and emotions—the difference between his pleasant boyhood memories of Mobile and his present fears of danger, for instance. The changes he experiences, in other words, must take other possible factors of difference into account to nuance his conclusions about race.

Griffin’s tendency to summarize “the Negro situation” by way of his experience results primarily from emotional over-identification. He speaks sentimentally about black victimization based on the particular kinds of oppression he feels. Perhaps most vivid are Griffin’s reflections on black hopelessness and despair upon arriving in Hattiesburg. He describes himself having an emotional breakdown in his hotel room, unable to bear his black appearance or even write a letter to his wife: “I knew I was in hell,” he writes. “Hell could be no more lonely or hopeless, no more agonizingly estranged from the world of order and harmony” (66). He then superimposes this private hell on the black community around him. He describes the black woman at the barbeque where he seeks food, “slicked yellow with sweat” lifting “the giant lid [off] the pit and fork[ing] out a great chunk of meat. White smoke billowed up, hazing her face to gray. . . . Her eyes said with unmistakable clarity, ‘God . . . isn’t it awful?’” (69). Together with the language of anguish and condemnation, Griffin relies on such images to portray the air of oppression he feels and attributes it to those in the black quarter:

Would [the casual observer] see the immense melancholy that hung over the quarter, so oppressive that men had to dull their sensibilities in noise or wine or sex or gluttony in order to escape it? The laughter had to be gross or it would turn to sobs, and to sob would be to realize, and to realize would be to despair. So the noise poured forth like a jazzed-up fugue, louder and louder to cover the whisper in every man’s soul. “You are black. You are condemned.” (69)

As a “casual observer” of the black quarter in Hattiesburg himself, none of Griffin’s impressions of blacks being condemned to hell stem from actual conversations he has with people there; they

are gleaned solely from his own emotions in observing them. Griffin's views remain projections of his feelings, revealing his complete absorption in an imagined otherness rather than the reality of black oppression within this particular context.

Griffin himself points out in *A Time to be Human* that he has been accused of overstating the degradations of racism on account of his own experiences: he felt its oppression more deeply than the average black person because it was new to him (49). Griffin rebuffs this accusation, but I think there is some truth to it. I find Griffin's conjectures problematic not because I think he speaks inaccurately about the degradations of racism but because he assumes that witnessing his experience can speak for the experiences of others—not just a few specific others, but a whole racial group that he collapses together as “the Negro.” And yet, Griffin seems alert to this tendency in himself and does not slide into such identification without some self-awareness or anxiety. I am persuaded, then, that the difficulties he encounters in negotiating himself with otherness are not simply personal shortcomings but seriously reflect the profound, inherent dilemmas of balancing alterity with selfhood at the heart of reconciliation. How does one practically give oneself for others without losing oneself in their suffering?

In his attempt at this negotiation, Griffin is too quick to join the lot of “the Negro” in his gestures of generosity, repeatedly including himself in their oppression by the plural pronoun “we”: “We winced and turned into mummies, staring vacantly, insulating ourselves against further insults” he writes of his black experience on a bus to Atlanta (*BLM* 131, my emphasis). By this plural “we,” Griffin reinforces his ethics of identification: “there is no *Other*” and the “I” must dissolved into “the *We*” (“Intrinsic Other” 467). In the process, it is difficult to discern how Griffin distinguishes this ethical “we” from the reductive plurality that his language of “the Negro” implies. Where exactly does alterity fit into this “we”? While Griffin seeks to challenge

white stereotypes about “the Negro,” he talks about racial oppression in the same sweeping terms, potentially introducing new stereotypes in their place. Indeed, he seems to slip into a problematic plurality that centres on his own experience and collapses alterity even as he attempts ethical inclusivity by blurring the boundaries for himself between “I” and “we,” the personal and the collective.

Griffin’s difficulty in negotiating the space of his subjectivity and his dilemmas of recognition in witnessing himself as another undermines the ethical potential of his “being immersed in an experience of otherness” for procuring relational or racial reconciliation. Griffin discovers that he cannot “become Negro” and stay “the same” under the skin as he expects, and finds he does not know how to negotiate the internal tensions between selfhood and otherness that emerge for him during his experiment. His struggle to reconcile otherness within himself makes it difficult for him to truly reconcile himself racially or relationally with others. Indeed, he falls short of his very ethical ideal of reconciliation by his inner dividedness and self-referentiality. Two ethical dilemmas emerge as a result: the problem of personal and narrative self-reflection as the means to transform racist attitudes, and the problem of racial integration as the goal of this transformation.

Immersion and the Dangers of Self-Reflection

Self-reflection, Griffin argues, is the best way to achieve wisdom and compassion toward others (*Scattered Shadows* 135). It seems hardly surprising, then, that Griffin privileges this mode of seeing or witnessing oneself as a primary motivator for changing one’s racial prejudices. Self-reflection can be seen as a practice of examining oneself in order to gain awareness or an accurate perception of one’s own deep-seated assumptions, desires, fears, and motives. From this perspective, self-reflection is absolutely vital for transforming one’s conceptions of oneself and

one's perceptions of others. Griffin literally takes this stance each time he looks into a mirror during his passing. Reflecting on his reflection leads him to self-analysis and a deeper awareness of his racial antagonism and prejudice toward others (*BLM* 11). Of this process, Griffin writes, "a sense of hopelessness and despair almost overwhelmed me. . . . I wondered how I could have committed myself so deeply to the cause of racial justice, only to discover now that at the level of emotional response I still carried those old racist poisons within me. I had to face this and recognize it for what it was" (*Time to be Human* 31). Through recognition, self-reflection leads to self-consciousness, a cognizance of who one is (for oneself), how one exists in the world with others, and how one perceives, understands, and determines that existence. Self-consciousness privileges cognitive insight as the basis for ethical transformation. As I suggested earlier, Griffin has great faith in the possibility that understanding and self-awareness can bring racial reconciliation and healing. Using himself as an exemplar, he expects that the awareness of racial prejudice he has gleaned by immersing himself in an experience of otherness will motivate self-awareness in others and impel them toward racial reconciliation.

However, Griffin's narrative reveals that self-reflection proves as ethically tenuous as it is effective for stimulating personal and social transformation. Not least problematic is its inherent self-referentiality. In self-reflection one makes oneself the object of one's analysis and examination. Journaling is its activity *par excellence*. In *Scattered Shadows*, Griffin argues that "the journal allows the writer to create directly and without wending his way through all the jungles of delusion and self-aggrandizement. The true writer, like the true painter, is an observer of all things, and quite especially of himself; but of himself in detachment, as though part of him stood away and appraised the rest, without love or partiality" (135). "This is not to make factual use of experience," he adds, but rather "[to understand] the powerful insights that come though

experience” (135). In detaching from himself for the sake of observation, awareness, and insight, Griffin witnesses himself not as another but as an object of thought posed as another. He becomes an object (an “it”) mediated by his own self-reflections and struggles to re-cognize himself *otherwise* in the process.¹⁴¹

For someone with the mental acuity of Griffin, such inward peering risks morphing into self-critical navel gazing, a hyper-awareness of one’s failings or shortcoming that potentially results in a state of negative self-absorption rather than accurate self-appraisal. Recognizing himself as racist causes Griffin instinctively to turn inward on himself rather than outward in recognition and generosity toward others. He describes himself as filled with “hopelessness and despair” by his racism not because it damages others but because it offends his own pride (*Time to be Human* 31). In wondering how *he* (of all people) could be racist, Griffin falls short of his idealistic image of himself as liberal and racially progressive and despairs to see himself in this way.

At the same time, Griffin overestimates the ethical power of his recognition of racism for transforming his prejudice and healing the racial divide between himself and others. In *A Time to Be Human*, he records an astonishingly rapid transformation of his racist inclinations: “Having recognized the depths of my own prejudices that I had carried with me since childhood, I was grateful to discover that within four or five days the old wounds were healed and all the emotional repulsion was gone. It disappeared for the simple reason that I was staying in the homes of black families and I was experiencing at the emotional level, for the first time, what I

¹⁴¹ Of course, this process of objectification is complicated by the fact that one can never fully see oneself “in detachment,” but only partially, in a self-mediated way. Self-mediation is further complicated in the journal genre, which appears to be a direct and unmediated written reflection of oneself. The moment one writes these reflections down (and further when one publishes them), language and narrative mediate one’s observations of oneself. One’s sense of detachment in appraising oneself is constantly interrupted by one’s self-interestedness in the process and one’s self-constructions in narrative form.

had know intellectually for a long time” (32). This assertion seems dubious, especially when read in conjunction with Griffin’s account in *Black Like Me*. In the latter he reveals his lingering prejudice and revulsion each time he looks in a mirror, well beyond the first few days in which he claims to have been healed in *A Time to be Human*. Clearly Griffin shapes his experiences according to what is most rhetorically powerful for each narrative context: in his 1961 journalistic account meant to make his white audience aware of their racial prejudice, Griffin presents himself as deeply struggling with his own “blackness.” In his later rendering meant to illustrate the commonality and conviviality between races as a basis for “being human,” Griffin presents himself as quickly overcoming the racial prejudice he recognizes in himself during his experiment. Read together, these accounts not only highlight Griffin’s rhetorical modifications to his experience (depending on his purpose, audience, and context), but also suggest that Griffin continues to struggle with the vestiges of racism and guilt *alongside* his experiences of reconciliation gleaned through relationships with blacks. In other words, his recognition of racism does not clearly lead to his personal healing or social transformation. Instead, the relationship between recognition and reconciliation remains a troubled and challenging one.

Furthermore, in transcribing these experiences in journal form, Griffin not only objectifies his own experience of otherness and detaches himself from his alterity, he also makes his experience the measure for witnessing others. The lives of others become obscured in Griffin’s personal reflections and account of himself as another. How can self-reflection stimulate ethical embrace if one’s vision remains inward and self-directed? How can recognition of one’s own racism promote reconciliation if its knowledge gleaned in self-reflection is never wholly void of prejudice or intellectual idealism? And how can a genre rooted in self-analysis and personal monologue turn witnesses outward and compel conciliatory, dialogic interactions

across racial divides? The very ways of thinking that Griffin attempts to avoid by immersing himself in an experience of otherness are reinforced in his reflection and writing of it: he cannot detach from “prejudices, and vanities, false values and inflated concepts” in telling his experiences of otherness or in witnessing the lives of vulnerable subjects around him (*Scattered Shadows* 135). Nor can he maintain the alterity of others in reflecting on his experiences of them, and thereby invite in his journalistic monologue a genuine dialogic interaction.

Immersion and the Shortcomings of Social Integration

Griffin challenges racial segregation by corporeally and experientially immersing himself in otherness, his ethical attempt at reconciling the two races. Like many of his activist contemporaries, Griffin’s goal of immersion is *social integration*—the creation of an integrated society in which equal opportunity is available to all, regardless of race—what Martin Luther King Jr. described as a “total commitment to [the] goal of equality and dignity” (King, “Time for Freedom” 81). As Griffin writes, social integration was held up as the “ultimate solution” for confronting segregation, discrimination, and racial injustice (*BLM* 188). By means of his own body, Griffin hoped to attain on an individual level the drawing together and making compatible of two races distanced from each other by their lack of communication, and to create a grey space between black and white systems of thought that could potentially merge the two groups, conceptually and socially. I have suggested that Griffin encounters his own dilemmas of subjectivity that challenge this racial integration. I want to add that Griffin also discovers the power dynamics that make social integration an unachievable dream, at least in the way that he and other activists imagined it at the time. In fact, in his 1977 “Epilogue” to *Black Like Me*, Griffin interrogates integration as an idealistic ethics of reconciliation that fails as a social paradigm.

Griffin describes the dream of social integration as an “unqualified good,” a solution to racism so engrained and cherished “that no one really questioned it” (*BLM* 188). It became painfully obvious, however, especially after the death of King in 1968 (and the hopes of a non-violent resistance with him), that the ideal of integration was rife with practical shortcomings. First, for integration to occur, whites would have to undergo a radical paradigm shift that not only challenged their way of thinking about race but also destabilized their self-centred way of being in the world. Simply opening themselves and their social system to include the black community was not enough, since such a move would continue to force blacks to adapt to a white world. Genuine integration would require a radical social reorientation in which neither party dominated or controlled the other. As the ruling group, whites clearly had more to lose in the mix. Their segregationist and racist attitudes persisted even though legal and social strides toward equal rights and opportunities were made.¹⁴² Indeed, many sincere white leaders and civil rights advocates maintained a posture of dominance, convinced of being “the good white leading the poor black out of the jungle,” as Griffin puts it, without realizing the sense of superiority and underhanded racism such patronizing attitudes held (*BLM* 192). As long as one party maintained dominance over the other, even with deeply benevolent motives of assistance and care, the racist strains of segregation would continue.

Second, and by extension, because the racial power dynamic privileged white society over black, integration was reduced to an immersion into otherness that could only be (potentially) ethical in one direction: from white to black. Because integration is a form of

¹⁴² For instance, in 1964 the civil rights bill was passed which reaffirmed the legal rights and liberties of citizens as guaranteed in the American Constitution: “This immediately made illegal many local discriminatory ordinances that had been passed in various states. It outlawed discrimination in all public places and in employment and education, and guaranteed voter registration rights (Griffin, *Time to be Human* 81). Bruce Dierenfield’s overview of the Civil Rights Movement (2004) clearly traces the various social, political, legal, and economic strides this movement made from its inception to its fracture in the late 1960s.

immersion into otherness in which the other's alterity always remains intact—I integrate myself into your life, your social system, your way of being—one always risks losing oneself in the process. For Griffin, or any other white person immersing himself in the life of the “oppressed other,” such loss offers a potential solution for racial segregation and discrimination. One must lose one's own self-centredness or self-absorption (at least momentarily) in order to be drawn toward the needs of another.¹⁴³ However, for a black person immersing himself in the life and world of the “dominant other,” losing oneself is hardly an ethical practice. Rather, his immersion reiterates a subjection to the “white other” that is centuries old. Losing oneself in whiteness, Griffin notes, means denying “[one's] negritude, [one's] culture, as though they were somehow shameful” (*BLM* 190). From this side of integration, a black self must become an imitation white in order to gain value as a person, acquire financial stability, or build social status in a white world. “If he succeeded,” Griffin writes of such a person, “he was an alienated marginal man—alienated from the strength of his culture and from fellow [blacks], and never able, of course, to become that imitation white man because he bore the pigment that made [whites] view him as intrinsically other” (190). The black response to this negative sense of integration was an alternative separation, a refiguring of what it meant to be black *apart* from the white imagination through the black pride and power movements of the late 1960s. In Griffin's view, these separatist movements were the inevitable outcome of the implacability of a white-imposed segregation. It was only by giving up the “dream of integration,” he realized, that black thinkers could “move toward a philosophy that was entirely their own,” struggling toward equal rights and justice through political and cultural desegregation and self-determination rather than through social integration with whites (Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 152, 153). Blacks had always

¹⁴³ In *becoming* black, Griffin risks an alternative form of self-absorption—centring on himself as another. But generally speaking, losing oneself (that is, one's egoism) in committed self-sacrifice is deemed an ethical response to alterity.

been “separate,” but now they were separate on their own terms; their alterity remained intact, for good and for ill, in the quest for a national “black identity” and a sense of belonging through differentiation (153).

From this perspective, integration is an attempt at racial reconciliation that must be considered a “qualified” rather than “unqualified good.” As *Black Like Me* reveals, reconciliation has significant ethical potential for transforming Griffin’s own racist attitudes. Personal integration—the ability to witness oneself as another—is precisely the orientation required for one’s own internal reconciliation with alterity. Interpersonal integration, like Griffin’s experiment of immersing himself in an experience of otherness, is a form of ethical identification with others intended to keep their alterity intact and promote relational reconciliation. However, neither of these forms of integration translates into an ethical practice when applied on a social level. Instead, the ethical ideal of social integration reinforces segregation, subjection, or separation when put into practice. In literally keeping alterity intact, one’s racist attitudes are allowed to persist: the “black other” remains oppressed as inferior or celebrated as different, but not embraced as equal. Without a sense of reciprocal embrace, integration remains a pseudo expression of social and racial reconciliation. More than that, since racism is fundamentally a private, even unconscious attitude against others, it can only be transformed on the personal level—within oneself, in one’s own particular ways of being in the world with others. Such transformations are necessarily aided by changes to external institutions, legal and political amendments, ideological shifts, careful education, and social revolutions. They are stimulated by reading stories of racial transformation like Griffin’s own. But if Griffin’s narrative shows us anything, it shows us that the actual movement of reconciliation begins on the level of subjectivity, in one’s own complicated and changing relational orientation toward others. His

journalistic account invites us to identify with him not as a white man passing for black or as an educator about racism but as a person struggling to witness himself as another, and so realize our own prejudiced attitudes along with his in the process.

Expressions of Reconciliation: Griffin's Spirituality Between Ethics and Politics

In light of these dilemmas of immersion—the dangers of self-reflection and the shortcomings of social integration—I want to conclude this chapter by examining a question that Griffin himself asks in his Epilogue to *Black Like Me*: “What reconciliation [is] possible then?” (188). In what sense does Griffin witness himself as another? What, in fact, is reconciled in his racial passing?

In their work on Griffin, Bonazzi and Robert Ellsberg make the seemingly surprising claim that Griffin's experiment in passing is principally a spiritual quest, despite the fact that *Black Like Me* has rarely been spoken of in religious or spiritual terms (Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 185). Tracing the religious path of Griffin's life and works, they observe that Griffin sees racism fundamentally as a spiritual problem: a “disease of the soul” or the human potential for evil that infects social relationships, legal institutions, and political spheres of power (Bonazzi 188).¹⁴⁴ As concerned as Griffin is to discover “what [it is] like to be a Negro under discrimination,” his experiment of passing is driven by the deeper question of human evil: what does such discrimination do to the human soul? (qtd. in Bonazzi 186). And more specifically, what does it do to *his* soul, both as a (temporary) victim and as a perpetrator of racism? While Griffin does not explicitly address his Catholic faith in *Black Like Me* or indicate how his spirituality drives his experiment, I am inclined to agree with Bonazzi and Ellsberg that Griffin's other works reveal how these aspects of his life motivate and shape his passing. More than that, I

¹⁴⁴ As Ellsberg posits in his 1981 commentary of *Black Like Me*, “Its concern goes beyond a particular set of social/political/economic conditions to the underlying disease of the soul. It is a meditation on the effects of dehumanization, both for the persecuted and the persecutors themselves—sadly a universal story, and one that is a long, long way from conclusion” (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 188).

contend that Griffin's spirituality is crucial for examining how reconciliation functions in this text—both internally as a matter of subjectivity and externally in racial relationships. I do not think we can accurately interpret Griffin's attempt to work out his ethical ideals in passing or his struggle to reconcile himself to otherness without focusing on this religious dimension in his life and work.

If racism is fundamentally a spiritual matter for Griffin, then reconciliation—the ability to witness oneself as another as an ethical response to racism—must also be examined from within this framework. Like Hillesum's effort to respond to what is “deepest” within her, Griffin describes reconciling otherness within himself as a spiritual struggle, in which the originary “otherness” he must embrace as a Catholic is the call of a divine Other. His crisis comes in the response: to witness this otherness within himself demands a re-ordering of subjectivity, “a complete breaking away from self-interest and the protective concerns of the personal ego” in submission and obedience to the divine will (Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 123). At the point where “the two forces threaten to tear him apart,” Griffin writes, he can either try to “balance the two in nice proportion and cease all [spiritual] growth” or abandon himself entirely to God in an act of faith (qtd. in Bonazzi 123). For him, reconciliation is not found in the balance but in the abandonment of himself to this Other. To witness oneself as another in this spiritual sense, then, is a response of faith to that which cannot be seen—the Other's infinite otherness, as Oliver puts it—that radically resignifies the self: I am other than a self-directed ego. I cannot remain “the same” in this response. I have shifted myself from the “I am” of ontological assertion to the “here I am” of conscious submission and response-ability.

In *Scattered Shadows*, Griffin describes this “here I am” response as “le grande oui,” the “great yes” to God (99).¹⁴⁵ He writes of taking this leap of faith tentatively and with great trepidation at the Abbey in Solesmes in France just prior to losing his eyesight completely:

I forced the words out. The *Great Yes*. ‘If you exist, take what I am. I hold back nothing. Show me what you want me to do. I’ll obey no matter how repulsive it is to me personally. I give you myself totally and without any reservations.’ I rested, smelling the building’s dust and age, and felt only deadness in my heart. Silence lay so deep I could hear the rumble of hunger in my belly. . . . I felt no joy, no relief, nothing but a sense of terrible finality in knowing that henceforth this life was not my own. (99)

Years later in 1954, after his official conversion to Catholicism, Griffin reiterates this posture of self-abandon in the “grande oui” of faith. While suffering blindness and paralysis from spinal malaria, he writes in his journal, “First my blindness, then this paralysis and loss of mobility, the uncertainty of the prognosis. It must drive us to turning into vegetables of frustration or it must drive us to God or an equivalent thing above and beyond us, to abandon ourselves finally, after all the self-delusions of seeming abandonment, to the great “yes” (as the French call it), to the *fiat*, and only after passing through can we begin to live again as functioning human beings” (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 194). Notably, Griffin never poses this “here I am” response as anything but a gamble and a perpetual struggle. To witness oneself in abandonment and submission to otherness by responding “here I am” or “yes” to it is a recurring crisis of subjectivity, of turning and returning from self-centredness to the call of the Other. The initial gamble Griffin makes in Solesmes demands his “reconversion every day” (195). In his “reconversion,” Griffin reinforces the fact that one’s ethical responses only occur in singular

¹⁴⁵ In *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig discusses the “great Yea” as an affirmative response of faith in the love of God (171). John Llewelyn discusses this connection between “Yes” and “God” in Rosenzweig’s work, suggesting that “Rosenzweig’s ‘grammatical thinking’ of the word Yes is at the same time a grammatical thinking of the word ‘God’” (“Amen” 200). This “grammatical thinking” critically shapes the language that Levinas uses of God in terms of affirmation and submission in *Otherwise than Being*. Indeed, Levinas and Ricoeur both talk about the “originary affirmation” or the “Yes” of the witness to absolute infinity or divine alterity that takes the form of letting go of oneself (Levinas, *OTB* 120; Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic” 110). Levinas, particularly, also describes this letting go of oneself in response to absolute infinity of the other in terms of “here I am.”

moments and thus demand the perpetual movement of giving oneself again and again, as I suggested in the previous two chapters. I suspect this is precisely why *Black Like Me* reveals both effort and failure in Griffin's attempts at reconciliation: his ability to respond is constantly limited by his egoism even as it is repeatedly revitalized by the Other's call.

Indeed, Griffin interprets his experiment of passing as responding "yes" to a divine call to justice and public activism that does *not* coincide with his own desires for artistic solitude and family intimacy. This call takes him down avenues he can scarcely imagine and into social climates over which he has no control. And perhaps most difficult, it requires him to face the disease of racism in his own soul. The risk of "becoming a Negro," Bonazzi writes, "was for Griffin, secondary and external compared to the primary, internal challenge of dismantling his prejudices and cleansing his soul of [self-centred egoism]" (195). For Griffin to say "here I am" to divine otherness means letting go of his deep-seated racism, his ideals of ethical responsibility, and even his pseudo-abandonment to God in order to witness himself in humility, as both "other" to his pious opinions of himself and "other" to his self-directed egoism.

Witnessing oneself as another is thus revealed in Griffin's journals as a response of faith that radically re-orders his subjectivity and opens him to racial otherness in two particular ways: First as a way of *seeing otherwise* in spiritual re-cognition, of fixing one's eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, to borrow from St. Paul's expression of faith. And second, as a way of *being otherwise* in existential generosity, as a vulnerable witness beyond one's ethical ideals and projects of empathy and understanding. Let me briefly address these two aspects of witnessing *otherwise* in turn.

Griffin first discovers "seeing otherwise" in his decade of blindness, when he is forced to witness himself, his environment, and other people beyond what he can literally see of them. In

ways not unlike Hillesum, Griffin writes repeatedly in *Scattered Shadows* about seeing “the heart” of others or witnessing others “by heart” rather than by sight and reinterprets the phenomenon of perception accordingly, as witnessing something of the essence rather than the appearance of another: “Without your sight, you go to the heart of [something]. You see in another way . . . but still you perceive the essences. Perhaps your perception means more than what we merely see” (*Scattered Shadows* 109). Griffin describes this “insight” as both a curse and a blessing in relating with other people. The hell of blindness, he writes, is precisely not being able to see another’s face (111). At the same time, the blessing of blindness is to see others beyond their faces and witness something of them that those who can see ironically miss. He narrates the story of Wooly, a taxi driver, whose scarred and deformed face Griffin cannot see. As a result, he treats Wooly with more generosity and kindness than others do, freeing Wooly to be more himself in Griffin’s presence: “With me, he had not been like any other man; with me he knew that his face could not blind me to the quality of his heart” (169). To get to the essence of another person, to “hearken unto the . . . deepest in the other” as Hillesum puts it (204), is to witness him or her beyond sight, outside categories of identification, *otherwise* than appearance.

In the context of racial reconciliation, such witnessing does not mean being unaware of colour (colour blind) or rendering all humans “the same” under the skin, but being aware of that which is essentially human beyond one’s conceptions of otherness; that is, witnessing “by faith” a human reality beyond one that can be seen. Griffin describes this essential human reality in “The Racist Sins of Christians” as the *res sacra*, the sacred reality of human beings. From within the Catholic tradition he writes:

I knew the Church’s teaching allowed for no racial distinction between members of the human family. It regarded man as a *res sacra*, a sacred reality. God created all men with equal rights and equal dignity. The color of skin did not matter. What mattered was the quality of soul. I remembered a statement made by Father J. Stanley Murphy C.S.B.:

“Whenever any man permits himself to regard any other man, in any condition, as anything less than a *res sacra*, then the potentiality for evil becomes almost limitless.” (436)

For Griffin, this *res sacra* is not an essence independent of one’s existence but is so deeply entwined in one’s existence that one cannot respond to the call or “the face” of another person, in the words of Levinas, without witnessing this aspect of their being. In fact, something of the *res sacra* may well be what Levinas has in mind when he speaks of the trace of God (the Infinite) in the face of the other as that which calls one to responsibility (*EI* 91-92).¹⁴⁶

In *Black Like Me*, Griffin records such an experience of seeing *otherwise* in a brief visit to a Trappist monastery at the tail end of his experiment. He describes the remarkable contrast between the witnessing posture of the monks and the racist orientation of white Christians outside the monastery: “Here men knew nothing of hatred. They sought to make themselves conform ever more perfectly to God’s will, whereas outside I had seen mostly men who sought to make God’s will conform to their wretched prejudices. Here men sought their centre in God, whereas outside they sought it in themselves. The difference was transforming” (*BLM* 135). When he marvels at this phenomenon to one of the monks and asks whether black guests experience any trouble from white ones, the monk responds, “The type of white man who would come to the Trappists—well, he comes here to be in an atmosphere of dedication to God. Such a man would hardly keep one eye on God and the other on the color of his neighbor’s skin” (136). To even begin seeing others *otherwise*, as the monk articulates it and as Griffin rediscovers at the monastery, demands witnessing each person by fixing his eyes on what cannot be seen—the

¹⁴⁶ As Levinas clarifies in *Ethics and Infinity*, “In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God. In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire. I have tried to describe the difference between Desire and need by the fact that Desire cannot be satisfied; that Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers and is augmented by its satisfaction; that Desire is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks. It is a paradoxical structure, without doubt, but one which is no more so than this presence of the Infinite in a finite act” (92).

otherness of God or the *res sacra* as a trace in the human face: “the only way to act with sanctity is not to attempt it, but to fix your attention on God. . . . The great ‘Yes’ must be said again; my own strengths must be abandoned” (Griffin qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 130). Only by fixing himself on the divine call of otherness within himself and reflected in the faces of others, Griffin stresses, can he hope to have his perceptions transformed and respond in love and justice to them.¹⁴⁷

This brings me to my second point: witnessing oneself as another is a way of “being otherwise” than self-assertive, self-referential, or solipsistic. Reconciliation by way of faith is a posture of submission, generosity, and self-constancy to otherness determined by a humble and vulnerable “here I am.” In *Black Like Me* this witnessing position toward otherness is not made manifest in Griffin’s decision to pass for black; rather, it is found precisely in those moments during the experiment when Griffin is made vulnerable, his identity unrecognizable, his strengths abandoned, and his being shaken. That is, reconciliation begins in his moments of humility, in Griffin’s suffering as a person, not in his pseudo-suffering as a white man temporarily passing for black. Perhaps the most striking example of such vulnerability is Griffin’s “escape” partway through his experiment, when he stays for three days at the home of P.D. East. He confesses that he cannot continue with the experiment in Hattiesburg, that he is “scared to death” and begs East for help and rescue (*BLM* 71). This is one of the few places in the text where Griffin speaks to his own personal fear and exhaustion rather than translating his vulnerability as the sad lot of “the Negro.” In this moment, Griffin must turn to something or someone beyond himself to

¹⁴⁷ Clearly Griffin’s assumption of the *res sacra* of human individuals assumes a theological, if not a Christian worldview. It proves a motivating force for Griffin’s own ethics and sense of witnessing others otherwise than by appearance, but assumes faith in God as the basis for this ethical responsibility. It is difficult to discern if human reality without this sense of the sacred (the quality of one’s soul) would equally motivate Griffin to ethical response, an ambiguity that could well be posed as a major ethical shortcoming of Griffin’s work in a post-Christian era. Not only does it read politics through a religious framework, it also leaves little room for developing an ethic outside the Judeo-Christian one.

direct and sustain him, his sense of confidence in himself in “being for the other” collapsed by his incapacities and weaknesses. He is forced against his will into a posture of submission and vulnerability: “here I am.”

Only here, in his personal suffering, is Griffin capable of truly empathizing with the suffering of others. Because he is shaken out of his presumptions about racial suffering and his ideals of ethical response, he can avoid over-identifying his suffering with that of “the Negro” or alienating himself from his whiteness. In this state of vulnerability, he is momentarily able to witness others *otherwise* than through his own grid of racial identity and oppression. It appears that Griffin overestimates the ability of his passing to promote racial reconciliation and underestimates how his own history of suffering—physically in his experience of blindness and other debilitating illnesses, spiritually by his faith in response to a divine Other, and emotionally in the fear and humility of personal weakness—puts him in the very position of submission and response to otherness that stimulates reconciliation. Indeed, I am convinced that Griffin’s reorientation of subjectivity in vulnerability toward otherness rather than his attempt to understand “the truth” of what it means to suffer discrimination as “the Negro” is what bears out the possibilities of truthful dialogue and racial reconciliation in *Black Like Me*.

If witnessing oneself as another begins as a response of faith for Griffin, a great ‘Yes’ to otherness that radically reorders his subjectivity, then this faith is worked out in existential generosity as acts of love toward other people. Reconciliation in this spiritual sense means faith expressing itself in love. As Griffin suggests in a number of his writings, to bear witness to one’s faith in otherness, particularly to the divine Other, *is* to embrace other people—both one’s neighbours and one’s enemies. To respond to God *is* to submit to the biblical command to love. Inspired by the theologies of Jacques Maritain and St. Thomas Aquinas, Griffin speaks of love as

caritas: the responsibility to open oneself to others in self-sacrifice and empathy (Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 189). *Caritas* is the biblical love ethic, the golden rule that summons one to love one's neighbour as oneself infused with the asymmetrical injunction to love one's enemies as if they were one's neighbours. Like Volf, Griffin describes *caritas* as the ultimate embrace of reconciliation—a love that confounds his own oppositions toward others and opens him to embrace the others he encounters, marginalized blacks and racist whites alike (Griffin, "Martin Luther King" 547; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 126-127).

An embrace of love begins in faith, by witnessing the divine Other or "the deepest" in oneself and others, but Griffin further argues that such an embrace of love is refined in the catalyst of one's own suffering. Witnessing connotes suffering oneself in being made passive to otherness. Griffin suffers his own body in the decade of blindness preceding his experiment and his ongoing ill health after it. He writes in *Scattered Shadows* of his deep struggle not to make his body an enemy but rather to integrate the otherness of his blindness within his sense of self without denying its existence (153). He further recounts suffering the perceptions of others—both actual and feared—of him in his blindness. Most difficult to bear, Griffin writes, is being seen as a condition rather than an individual, categorized as pitiful and tragic, and "helped" in such a way as to be constantly reminded of his handicap (103, 172, 106). The perceptions of others, whether real or imagined, skew his ability to witness himself as another by turning him inward in self-pity or pride (100, 108). If the sufferer does not discover a fresh perspective," he reflects, "he or she will fixate on the self as victim, blame the body as mortal enemy, and then become obsessed with either playing the role of stoic hero (which is a way of rationalizing the reality into a stereotype others can admire), or attempting to escape the pain through massive sedation (which is a form of denial)" (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 198).

To break free from the self-focused enslavement of suffering, Griffin writes in “The Terrain of Physical Pain,” one must begin by stepping away from self-interest and submitting to that fact that suffering cannot be explained by reason but must be “accepted, handled, then released” with an expectation “that pain in the body can cure things which are not of the body” (qtd. in Bonazzi 198, 199). Physical suffering may well elicit self-absorption or self-alienation, but it is also a means for awakening one to the infinite Other and the suffering of others. It has the potential to transform the sufferer’s self-pity into *caritas* and communion with otherness. In the words of Griffin, it “turns the sufferer into a giver, into [a] lover” (qtd. in Bonazzi 199). The hope and wisdom of suffering is that it can reorient the self toward others. In being accepted and released, suffering propels vulnerable witnesses to human generosity and acts of love that transform their hostile and discordant relationships with others.

Griffin follows Maritain to suggest that this spiritual posture of generosity and practice of love is the foundation for social reconciliation. Maritain writes in *Scholasticism and Politics*, “a political ideal of brotherly love alone can direct the work of authentic social regeneration: and it follows that to prepare a new age of the world, martyrs to the love of neighbor may first be necessary” (qtd. in Griffin, “Martin Luther King” 546). In this “Christ Ideal,” as Griffin calls it, the vulnerable witness becomes a martyr, the one who submits himself to loving others for the sake of social reconciliation and relational renewal even to the death of his own ego (546). Inspired by Maritain’s statement, Griffin adopts this posture in his experiment of passing: *Black Like Me* functions as his witness to loving his neighbour. Maritain, in fact, calls Griffin a martyr to the golden rule in his reflection on Griffin’s passing. In a 1961 letter to Griffin, Maritain describes Griffin’s attempts at reconciliation “a magnificent expression of love . . . which will have a sure and beneficial effect on souls” even though it does not produce the particular social

benefits or cross-racial dialogue that Griffin envisions (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 185). If racism is a spiritual problem, as Griffin insists, then his witness of himself as another in passing ultimately reconciles spiritually what it does not reconcile socially: Griffin's own soul to the divine summons to love others.

What, then, is the potential of this spiritual reconciliation and biblical love ethic for a social context? Reconciliation may well be a posture of faith toward alterity expressed as self-sacrificial love for others, and Griffin may well be reconciled to the divine summons to love; however, Griffin himself discerns "how difficult it is to put into practice the theories of the spiritual life that one never questions—the returning of love for hate, of tenderness for brutality" in social contexts (qtd. in Bonazzi 115). Martin Luther King Jr. equally speaks despairingly of the biblical love ethic early in his career, particularly the injunction to love one's enemies as a means to solve social or racial problems: it lacked the reciprocal justice necessary for combating discrimination and seemed to reiterate the relational inequality found in racism with its ideals of asymmetrical love (King, "How my Mind" 58; Griffin, "Martin Luther King" 546).

What King later espouses (for which he is now remembered), and what Griffin addresses implicitly in *Black Like Me*, are the possibilities of disinterested love and non-violent resistance to transform both one's soul (from hatred against one's oppressors) and one's society (from oppositional relations to communication). "Love, *agape*, is the only cement that can hold this broken community together," King writes. "When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice and to meet the needs of my brothers" (qtd. in Griffin, "Martin Luther King" 550). This *agape* is neither sentimental nor affectionate, but refers to one's conciliatory good will for the sake of restoring relationships, a personally disinterested love that seeks the good of one's neighbour beyond one's own good (550). With such love in view,

subjects are summoned to non-violent resistance, a “revolt” against the injustices of racism without retaliating against the people who act unjustly.

Such resistance always risks further suffering. But in refusing to hate or kill their opponents, non-violent resisters also open the relational space for embrace. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf argues that the posture of self-sacrificial love inevitably risks the other’s mastery the moment one opens oneself to him (147). It creates space in giving oneself and receiving the other that invites reciprocity, a mutual embrace that makes reconciliation possible. However, the other person may use this space of invitation not to reconcile but to subsume or destroy the subject in his or her vulnerability. This is the risk embedded in relational space. In reconciliation one gambles on the possibility that reciprocal embrace exceeds a master—slave dialectic (Hegel), taking the chance that *caritas* is stronger than the death of the self or the other and can stimulate others to respond reciprocally with the same kind of self-giving, others-receiving love (146-147).

For Griffin, like King, creating this space of reconciliation begins within himself as a will to love rather than to hate and retaliate against others, particularly one’s oppressors or enemies. Reconciliation, as I have argued, is fundamentally an inner reorientation toward alterity, a witness of oneself as another that bears out ethically in an embrace of love toward other people in relational and racial contexts. Griffin is eager to embrace blackness. He desires to love the marginalized and vulnerable blacks he encounters and bridge the chasm between them by being “the word” (in writing *Black Like Me*) that might begin an authentic and truthful dialogue between their opposing communities. *Caritas*, however, seems to flow more readily “downward” within systems of power than outward toward one’s own neighbours and community members. Griffin discovers that his greatest challenge of reconciliation is not embracing the “oppressed

other” but finding the humility and generosity to embrace his fellow (racist) whites, particularly his own neighbours who treat him as an enemy upon learning of his experiment. As he writes in his journal on January 18, 1960, just after his passing, “my bitterness to find my own people so distorted, so full of hate, has blackened me, and it is the devil temptation. I struggle against it. I pray for the ability to love them for they are sick and their meanness is a sickness that seems almost universally shared” (qtd. in Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* 124). His language here points to his continued association of himself with “blackness,” which not only emphasizes the opposition and distance he wants to create between himself and the “meanness and sickness” of racist whites, but also ironically reiterates his own unconscious racist attitudes—“blackness” describes the state of his own soul in bitterness and contempt. Beyond his intentions, Griffin’s narrative functions as form of self-exposure, his words confessing to his struggle with racism against *both* communities.

Griffin discerns that he cannot accurately witness whites who are racist in his account as long as he perceives them as enemies rather than “fellow souls in the eyes of God,” that is, as having a sacred reality: “Without loving them,” he writes, “I feel I cannot write properly of them as humans, but will continue to write of them as mere operatives, and therefore in giving an accurate account, will not give a wise or completely true one” (qtd. in Bonazzi 124).

Reconciliation is necessary for truth, for testimony, for dialogue. An openness of embrace toward one’s enemies enables one to witness them beyond one’s own prejudices, pride, or harsh judgements. Such disparaging attitudes distort one’s ability to see the humanity of others and oppose rather than invite conciliatory relationships. As Griffin reveals by his struggle, the ultimate challenge for racial reconciliation is not witnessing the *res sacra* of the oppressed but

finding the ability to witness the *res sacra* of the oppressors—in whose number he must count himself—beyond the sickness of their racism and the inescapable whiteness of his own skin.

Indeed, this unexpected challenge of embracing the racist white is magnified in Griffin's realization of his own racism, his implicit role in its perpetration, and his deep guilt and shame for falling short of his own ethical ideals. To compensate for these offences, he is bent on witnessing himself black, taking on the plight of the oppressed, embracing their oppression as his own, and identifying himself so profoundly with this racial group that he determines "the self *is* Other" in relation to them. However, he is deeply reluctant to associate himself with the white community. The "self is not Other" when it comes to racist whites, but is separated out from and sits in judgement over them. Even as he ethically sacrifices himself in love on behalf of "the victim," he reveals his own potential to hate the white community, struggling not to conflate their personhood with their racist condition and engage in a form of reverse racism as a result. In fact, it seems likely that Griffin's harshness toward such "neighbours" (taken for enemies) and his inclination to reduce their sacred reality to a sick one derives from his challenge to reconcile within himself his own "whiteness" and his own implicit attitudes of racism. He grapples to find the humility to accept this sickness and meanness in himself as part of his human reality. As a result, it proves rather difficult to read *Black Like Me* without seeing Griffin's passing as either an effort to distance himself from his own racism or to do penance for it.

My contention, then, and I close my chapter with this thought, is that hostility or disdain toward any other person (whether warranted or not) will undermine one's ethical witness of oneself and of others. And any attempt, however halting, toward loving another in faith of his or her *res sacra* will open one to the possibility of reconciliation, relational and racial. As Griffin reveals, as long as he responds in racial prejudice to *either* group he hinders his ability to

reconcile them through his account of passing. Indeed, the extent to which Griffin opposes himself to the white community and neglects to come to terms with his own prejudices against them is the extent to which he challenges his ability to witness the black community: his witness is impeded by the need to over-compensate for or alienate himself from the otherness of being white or racist. Only in the continuous struggle of opening to and accepting the reality of this ongoing prejudice within himself, does Griffin genuinely witness the affects of racism “for the other” and invite racial reconciliation in response.

**Witnessing Between Unilateral and Reciprocal Generosity:
Ethical Collaboration in Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's *Stolen Life***

In 1991 Yvonne Johnson, a young Cree woman and mother of three, was convicted of first-degree murder for her participation in the death of Leonard Skwarok. Under the impression that this casual acquaintance was a child molester, Johnson was part of a group who invited Skwarok over to her house and then turned on him in drunken violence. Of the four members of the group, Johnson was the only one who did not testify at her trial and the only one to receive a full life sentence for the crime. Beginning her sentence at the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W), she has since served time at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan and at the Edmonton Institute for Women. While at P4W she began to piece together and recount her story in her own way, outside the legal strictures of a court testimony. In the course of extensive journal writing, she sought her Cree roots in order to find lost members of her family, learn more of her ancestry (especially the Cree chief, Big Bear), and come to discover her own identity, spirituality, and sense of belonging within this community.

In this process, Johnson solicited the help of Rudy Wiebe, Canadian novelist and two-time winner of the Governor General's award for his First Nations novels, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *The Discovery of Strangers* (1994). Initially sceptical about Wiebe's ability to portray her people and history (he being a "White man" with German-Mennonite roots), she nonetheless read *The Temptations of Big Bear* and found herself "slapped in the face," as she describes it, "by how much [Wiebe] really knew or could understand" of her own heritage (Wiebe and Johnson 8). In her initial letter to Wiebe in 1992, she asks him, "How is it you came to know as much as you do? Were you led? What was the force behind you? Who are you? Why did you choose Big Bear to write about? What sparked your interest in this powerful man of long

ago?” (9). Intrigued by his ability and motivation to write a history she claims as her own, she entreats him in this letter, “Please help me share what it is you know, and how you got it” (3, 9).

Wiebe is inclined to help Johnson, but he does not know what kind of help would be appropriate and ethically responsible to give. He responds to her appeal with some reluctance, despite his marked interest in the history of the Plains Cree in Canada and Big Bear in particular. He confesses to his discomfort in encountering Johnson within the confines of the prison system and to his inexperience in writing *this kind* of story, a collaborative account with a proximate person rather than a piece of historical fiction (Wiebe and Johnson 41). He is also concerned that his perceived position of power and his “outsider” status in relation to Johnson and her Cree community will negatively affect the narrative relationship and the story produced. As he confides to Johnson’s counsellor at P4W: “Look, I’m an aging, professional man, exactly the kind of “powerful White” who’s so often created problems for her. Isn’t there someone else who should work with her, a woman, a Native writer?” (41). His confidence in writing “the Other” of history, as he explains to Linda Hutcheon in a 1990 interview about *Big Bear*, seems subdued in his proximate face-to-face encounter with Johnson.¹⁴⁸ Whatever spiritual or imaginative connections he might make fall short in relating to her. He cannot engage with her real and proximate presence in the way he does with the patchily understood past of her ancestor, Big Bear. How then is he to respond ethically to Johnson’s personal appeal for help across their ethnic, gender, class, and experiential divides, especially in a Canadian culture rife with the

¹⁴⁸ In an interview included in the collection, *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Linda Hutcheon asks Rudy Wiebe, “Some writers today are very nervous about speaking for the “Other”—be it the native people, as you do in *Big Bear*, or someone of a different gender or race. Did that bother you at all, or did you feel that someone had to tell [the *Big Bear*] story?” (84-5). Wiebe responds, as he does in earlier interviews about *Big Bear*, by appealing to the writer’s imaginative potential to identify at least partially with others, the value of “outsider” interpretations of a particular history, and the shared human connections that overarch particular and historical differences (85). Wiebe similarly responds to Eli Mandel’s concerns about his imaginative rendering of “the Indians” and Biblical impositions on Big Bear’s spirituality in an interview transcribed as “Where the Voice Comes From” in *A Voice in the Land* (1981).

complexities of diversity and a deep scholarly suspicion of “speaking for” the indigenous “other?”¹⁴⁹ Perhaps Wiebe’s biggest concern, as it clinches his decision to respond, is how he is to assist in writing her story “from her present perspective, in prison” (41). Indeed, he hesitates about committing to the narrative project until 1993, when he learns that the Court of Alberta has rejected Johnson’s appeal of her first-degree murder charge and thereby solidified her position as a federal prison inmate for life. Only at this point does he respond by fully deciding to help Johnson with her story. Notably, this response does not answer Johnson’s initial request to share his understanding about Big Bear with her but, rather, answers another summons (perhaps his own) to engage in social justice on behalf of Johnson in light of the problems he witnesses in Canada’s legal system: the law and the prison’s role in silencing and reducing Johnson’s personhood (41). The result is his five-year commitment to a collaborative, narrative project culminating in the publication of *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* in 1998.

Wiebe’s desire to help Johnson, mixed with his apprehension about witnessing and writing her life collaboratively, raises for me a significant ethical question that I dedicate this chapter to exploring: What does it mean to witness others generously and responsibly in the face-to-face relationships of narrative collaboration? And more specifically, how might witnessing itself be an ethical response of generosity toward others in collaborative relationships? I will use *Stolen Life* as the principal site for examining these questions.

So far, this dissertation has addressed ethical witnessing and its relation to generosity as a “here I am” posture toward alterity, as it is recorded in journal form and functions in such

¹⁴⁹This issue is central to discussions of representations of Native cultures in ethnological, anthropological, oral historical, and autobiographical practices of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Johnson proposed this project to Wiebe. Consider, for instance the concerns posed by Linda Alcoff (1991/2), Lee Maracle (1989), Penny Petrone (1990), and Janet Silman (1987), as well as the proliferation of anthologies in Canada by indigenous groups wanting to speak for themselves: *All my Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (1990); *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* (1992); *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (1993); and *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (1990). I will address this issue in more detail later on.

responsive practices as re-cognizing, being present for, reconciling with, and loving others. In this chapter, dedicated to the question of generosity explicitly in terms of narrative collaboration, I want to begin by considering how Wiebe's critics characterize witnessing as a form of generosity and further, how their vision of witnessing is compromised and made problematic in Wiebe's collaboration with Johnson. Witnessing in collaborative autobiography, ethnography, and oral history is generally defined as the practice of speaking with and for others in partnership. In narrative collaboration, such witnessing specifically takes the form of writing stories with and for others "who do not write" (Lejeune 187). The narrating subject is often a member of a marginalized group who does not have access "to literary or publishing institutions" while the collaborator "is representative of a more powerful social class" who does (Rymhs 92). The ethical inquiry that arises as a result, at least in this context, focuses on the political issues of "speaking for" others and the narrative issues of "speaking with" others. Notably, these two aspects of witnessing are addressed specifically as problems of generosity in light of the power dynamics that attend two people in dialogue, working together on writing one life—the dilemmas of how to "give voice" and "give credit" to vulnerable subjects in the collaborative process and the narrative produced.

Thinkers like Susanna Egan, Margery Fee, Heather Hodgson, and Penny Van Toorn address these dilemmas of witnessing in their readings of *Stolen Life*. In light of Wiebe's justice-oriented interpretation of Johnson's summons and his narrative witness of her life in response, they level two main criticisms against Wiebe's "generosity" in speaking with and for Johnson. First, he does not attend to the political and narrative complexities involved in speaking for Johnson in writing her narrative, which results in the problem of his "giving her voice": while he empowers her to tell her story (previously silenced by her family and by the Alberta court

system), he cannot help but impose on and determine that telling with his own narrative control. And second, he does not regard the political and narrative tensions of authorship that arise in speaking with Johnson, and as a result, neglects to give her sufficient credit for the text produced. In the face of these shortcomings, Hodgson criticizes Wiebe for being unable to “offer a gift without taking” (156). In giving his narrative assistance, Wiebe cannot help but “take” the life story Johnson tells, appropriating and shaping it as he deems fit in the process of writing it with and for her. Hodgson’s criticism signals a deep ethical concern about what and how to give in practice of collaboration. In light of the power relations that inevitably underpin collaborative narratives, she appears to invoke a unilateral generosity for collaborators—an asymmetrical giving without taking—as the most responsible way for them to engage with vulnerable subjects in their partnership. Such giving, she implies, is essential if Wiebe is to witness Johnson’s life and crime ethically. I want to begin, then, by looking at these two criticisms of giving and Hodgson’s alternative generosity as the starting point for this analysis.

The Problems of Speaking With and For Others

In writing *Stolen Life*, Wiebe must confront the political differences and power dynamics that make it difficult if not impossible to “speak for” Johnson generously in their collaboration. If collaboration is a narrative relationship that involves two people constructing one story together (Eakin, *Lives* 176), then ethical problems tend to arise, as G. Thomas Couser points out, from the difference of each member’s contribution to the work: “one member supplies the ‘life’ while the other provides the ‘writing’” (*Vulnerable Subjects* 36). This disparity is complicated by the fact that most narrative collaborations “involve partners whose relation is hierarchized by some difference in race, culture, gender, class, age or (in the case of illness and disability) somatic, intellectual, or emotional condition” (36). The partnership is a mutually cooperative practice but

generally not between social equals. The politics of this relationship thus make the subject “vulnerable to the writer’s domination” (37). As a result, Couser worries that collaborators may be “taking lives” in their very attempt to “give voice” to these vulnerable subjects. Ironically, the generosity assumed in “giving voice” (or making the voices of others heard) often reaffirms the very power dynamics it is meant to undermine. Cultural critic Gayatri Spivak addresses precisely this issue in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). She locates the practice of speaking for others within very real and disturbing socio-political power hierarchies and argues that members of marginalized or dominated groups are silenced by the very people who give them voice in historical, anthropological, postcolonial, or literary discourse. Scholars “misrepresent the subaltern/indigene because they cannot adequately escape their own predispositions,” and inevitably appropriate or subsume the other’s voice or story into their own (Beck 860). To respond to others by giving them voice becomes a skewed generosity in which the voices of others are mediated and compromised through the theoretical and personal perspectives of well-meaning but myopic thinkers or writers.

This problem of “speaking for” others has been a central concern in aboriginal writing and collaboration since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias’s imperative to “stop stealing native stories” (as she titles her 1990 article on the subject), encapsulates the “urgent need for Native authors, artists, and critics to be crafters of their own representations” (Rymhs 92). “People who have control of your stories, control of your voice, also have control of your destiny, your culture” Keeshig-Tobias warns,¹⁵⁰ and in light of this concern, non-Native writers, like Wiebe in writing *Big Bear*, have been taken to task for writing about Aboriginal

¹⁵⁰ Eakin concurs in *Living Autobiographically*, suggesting that “‘talking’ . . . actually calls our narrative identities into being” (2). Thus, to give vulnerable subjects voice gives them the ability to speak themselves (to say “I”), to become more fully conscious of themselves as selves and to be empowered in the process (66).

cultures instead of leaving Aboriginal writers to write for themselves.¹⁵¹ It is little wonder then, that Wiebe's cross-cultural collaboration with Johnson is fraught with issues of political and narrative power struggle. Can he presume to give voice to Johnson's life story, a traumatic childhood that she has been unable to tell (muted physically by her cleft palate and emotionally by her familial abuse) and a testimony silenced in the court of law?¹⁵²

Egan is concerned that Johnson's voice, particularly in testifying to her crime, may be obscured by Wiebe's narrative shaping and novelistic tone, as well as by his political overtones in advocating for social justice in the face of her marginalized position. Wiebe's strength as a novelist potentially "takes over" his role as collaborator, she argues in "Telling Trauma" (2000). In his imperative to "imagine 'Other'"—which he claims is the most critical role of the novelist—Wiebe lacks critical distance between his position and the Cree culture which he incorporates in writing Johnson's story (23).¹⁵³ Moreover, from his proximate position in relation to Johnson, Wiebe risks over-identifying with her in her suffering and taking on her cause as his own. He attempts to persuade his readers that Johnson's life sentence is unjust not

¹⁵¹ Indeed, Eli Mandel and Robert Kroetsch take Wiebe to task on this very issue in his writing of Big Bear in their respective interviews with Wiebe, "Where the Voice Comes From" (1974) and "Unearthing Language," facilitated and recorded by Shirley Neuman (1980).

¹⁵² For Johnson, collaborating with Wiebe breaks the silence that holds her tongue-tied in the Canadian court system by sharing the raw and harrowing testimony of her life. Her account reflects what Shoshana Felman observes of trauma victims in *The Juridical Unconscious*: a compulsion to testify "through literary or artistic channels" when the witness "[knows or feels] intuitively, that in the court of history (and . . . in a court of law) *evidence will fail* or will *fall short*" (96). In Johnson's case, the Alberta court misses and misunderstands her story, partially due to her own silence and partially due to the jury's assumptions imposed onto that silence and their inability to hear what could not be spoken: Johnson's own "stolen life."

¹⁵³ Wiebe discusses the role of imagination in writing about other people with Linda Hutcheon not long before beginning *Stolen Life*: "I'm right now working on a piece about a nineteenth-century Indian woman—an Indian tribe wiped out about 150 years ago," Wiebe tells Hutcheon in the interview. "Who will imagine this? Who will remember this? An 'Other' must. Who else?" (85). His mediated and imagined vision of another's story, he implies, is preferable to having that story lost altogether. When Hutcheon queries, "so the question of gender doesn't bother you there," Wiebe responds, "Why should it bother me any more than the fact of racial—or perceptual or spiritual—difference? A writer who cannot imagine 'Other' is no writer at all" (85). From Wiebe's perspective, the ethical obligation of a writer *is* to imagine and remember "Other," to imagine difference by traversing social, economic, gender, ethnic, and historical divides. He does such traversing, however, with perhaps too generous a view of imaginative connection, as Hodgson implies by her question of gender, and too modest a view of the political problems that accompany precisely such imagining and connecting.

only in light of her own trauma and the “history and present situation of her people” (23), but also in light of the tender and caring person he has come to know (Nemeth 63). In the process, he potentially overrides the complexity of her trauma and crime with a case to make and a cause to be heard (Egan, “Telling Trauma” 13). Van Toorn shares this concern, implying that Wiebe “takes” Johnson’s life and story in precisely the political ways that alarm Couser and Keeshig-Tobias: “Whether Yvonne Johnson will ever be in a position to reclaim her *Stolen Life*,” she writes, “is . . . a question that applies to numerous individuals and communities whose stories have, since colonial times, been appropriated by white authors and editors” (“Aboriginal Writing” 39). For her, Wiebe’s collaboration with Johnson is hardly equal, considering his powerful position as social advocate in her case and narrative mediator of her story. Whatever voice Wiebe might give Johnson is filtered through the power he will inevitably take in the process.

This brings me to the second criticism: how Wiebe “speaks with” Johnson in writing her story and claims primary authorship of *Stolen Life*. “There is never only one way to tell a story,” Wiebe asserts in the book’s prefatory disclaimer: “other persons involved in this one may well have experienced and remember differently the events and actions here portrayed” (xi). Seeing himself as “another person involved in this story,” Wiebe offers his own interpretation of it “based on [his] research into the circumstances of Yvonne’s life” (xi). The story reveals a combination of Johnson’s journal entries, her dialogues with Wiebe, and Wiebe’s painstakingly researched facts surrounding Johnson’s life and court case.¹⁵⁴ What emerges from the mix amounts to his story of her story. However, as Egan points out, Wiebe does not address the complications that arise from his narrative control and cohesive storyline—Johnson’s “long

¹⁵⁴ These may account for the conflicting and overlapping genres (scriptotherapy, testimony, and novel) that Egan has noted in this text (15). See her discussion in “Telling Trauma: Generic Dissonance in the Production of *Stolen Life*” (2000).

history of abuse, with its apparently natural result of crime and imprisonment” [which] “mirrors the history and present situation of her people” (“Telling Trauma” 23). This may not be an oversight on his part but simply his way of envisioning his relational involvement in writing with Johnson. If Wiebe sees Johnson’s life story as both relational and dialogic—as he suggests when he reminds her, “no story is ever only yours alone,” then he, as collaborator, can claim partial ownership of that story (Wiebe and Johnson 24). To the perplexing question of collaboration in Aboriginal writing posed by Kathleen Mullen Sands—“just whose life is this, anyway?” —Wiebe might well respond that *this* narrative life belongs to both Johnson and himself; in writing with each other they both have claims to authorship and authority over the story (Sands 39).

In examining the actual text produced, however, Egan and Hodgson both question whether Wiebe claims too much authority over the story and gives too little credit to Johnson in its narrative shaping. This concern is amplified in their noting the order of the two authors’ names as they appear on the cover: Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson. Why, they ask, was Johnson’s name not positioned first (Egan 19; Hodgson 156)? If for no other reason, should not their names appear in alphabetical order, suggesting an equal partnership? Addressing Wiebe’s claim to ownership in telling Johnson that her story is not hers alone, Hodgson criticizes him for lacking generosity in positioning himself as the “first” author in the narrative produced: “Can’t a major figure in Canadian literature offer a gift without taking?” (156). With her language of offering “a gift,” Hodgson’s comment appears to advocate a generosity in which Wiebe “give credit” to Johnson without taking something in return: attention from Johnson, acclaim for his contribution, admiration for his compassion, and more fundamentally, claim to her story. In light of the “life” already taken from Johnson by her trauma and imprisonment, should not Wiebe honour Johnson’s telling of her life story above his own research and narrative ordering of it?

Given the accreditation that he has already received for his other writing, would it not be more ethical for Wiebe to position himself literally in the Levinasian ethical stance, “After you!” in his collaborative production with Johnson rather than taking more credit for himself (*EI* 89)? Indeed, as Hodgson implies by her critique, would it not be most generous if he were to release his ownership of her story precisely because of his position of power in their collaboration? In regard to this issue of giving and taking, Wiebe might well respond to Hodgson’s concern as he does to Hutcheon about his historical novel, *Big Bear*: “You don’t steal anything from anyone when you tell their story, you make them live” (qtd. in Hutcheon 85). Whether Wiebe steals something from Johnson in co-authoring *Stolen Life* or whether he makes her live in telling her story seems up for debate. Indeed, to what extent is speaking with and for others a life-giving and ethical gesture of generosity and to what extent is it a form of life stealing?

Egan regards this tension of giving and stealing life as reflecting the discrepancy between Wiebe and Johnson’s relational process of writing and the textual product that results. Judging from the processes to which readers are privy, Wiebe and Johnson’s relationship appears to be a life-giving one: “Repeatedly I must acknowledge the generosity of Wiebe’s attention to Yvonne, the person,” Egan writes (“Telling Trauma” 22). However, in the text produced from this relationship, Wiebe’s story of Johnson’s life seems to take over as the narrative shifts from her witness of her past to Wiebe’s legal testimony of her present imprisonment. From Egan’s perspective, this movement reveals Wiebe’s “tendency (increasingly throughout the text) to sublimate [the relational] processes that he describes at [an] early stage” (22). The book’s “good flavour of . . . conversation” with “Yvonne face to face” in the first half of the text is overwhelmed in the second half with Wiebe’s conversations with others, his engagement with legal documents and oral testimonies surrounding her case, and ultimately, his own story of her

story (xi).¹⁵⁵ While Wiebe, the person, may engage in a generous proximate relationship with Johnson, Wiebe, the White male novelist, seems to occupy her story with his own authorial goal to advocate for social justice in the face of her legal judgement. Indeed, his dialogue with Johnson about her traumatic past seems sidelined by his enthusiasm to address her position as a victimized Cree woman and to right her wrongs, an eagerness Fee attributes to Wiebe's own sense of guilt for inadvertently being involved in the oppression of Johnson's people (7). I will return to this critical issue of guilt as a motivator for social justice later on in this chapter. Suffice to say here, both Egan and Hodgson see Wiebe's speaking with and for Johnson as an ungenerous form of witnessing, a way of submerging Johnson's voice in his very advocacy on her behalf and a way of reinforcing himself and his authorial position in telling her story.

In focusing on Wiebe's position as White male novelist and advocate in writing *Stolen Life*, Wiebe's critics frame witnessing as a politics of speaking with and for others in narrative production. As a result, generosity becomes a political issue—the problem of how to give voice and credit to others in light of the collaborator's privileged position in the partnership. Indeed, Wiebe's giving has as much capacity to reinscribe his own power as giver, novelist, or advocate as it does to affirm Johnson's agency as the subject of her life-story. Because power skews generosity to make giving a form of taking, Hodgson invokes an ethics of unilateral generosity to right this imbalance: the collaborator is called to speak with and for others without taking anything (power, voice, credit, life, or story) in the process or in return. Witnessing is not simply a practice of giving voice and credit but of giving up one's own voice and credit so that the other

¹⁵⁵ For a number of critics, this latter issue has become problematic and encompassing: Wiebe is accused of sublimating and appropriating Johnson's text from the beginning with *Stolen Life* rendered principally his work. Does he not, after all, admit to standardizing the spelling, punctuation, and grammar in Johnson's letters and notebooks (xii)? Does he not, ultimately, tell Johnson's story from his perspective, breaking the silence at the beginning of the story with his "I" who receives a letter from a stranger (3)? And of course, as Egan and Hodgson stress, is he not positioned as the first author of this life?

person can be heard and recognized. Hodgson's formulation of giving without taking is imperative in light of collaboration's politics of narrative production and the power dynamics that result. In the zero-sum condition of a relationship defined by power struggle, one person's power must be given over so that the other person can obtain agency and subjectivity.

The Limitations of Unilateral Giving for Collaboration

To define ethical witnessing as a summons to unilateral giving in light of the power struggles that occur in narrative production makes good sense given the political backdrop against which this summons is framed. However, from my perspective unilateral generosity does not offer a wide enough scope to account for the full ethical capacity and complexities of witnessing in narrative collaboration. It proves to be a limited ethics for witnessing on two counts. First, it is unrealistic given the social economy of the gift and gift giving. Giving, according to anthropologist Marcel Mauss, is a social practice that functions within systems of exchange. In most contexts, it works as a reciprocal activity of give and take between people in order to maintain peaceful personal and political relationships. Second, it is impractical given the nature of collaboration. Ethical witnessing in collaboration is not solely a politics of narrative production that determines how to tell one person's story; it is also an embodied, reciprocal, and responsible practice of being in relationship with another person in order to tell that story. What these two limitations suggest is that generosity in witnessing is not fundamentally a matter of power but a matter of mutual relationality. This is precisely the issue that Egan apprehends when she speaks of regretting Wiebe's tendency to sublimate the generous relational processes he describes early on in *Stolen Life* with his advocacy of Johnson's case later in the text ("Telling Trauma" 22). Their relational reciprocity is sidelined by his narrative inclination to give Johnson's case political and legal efficacy through his own powerful position. Let us consider

these limitations, then, in some detail in order to uncover the relational undercurrents of generosity that take ethical witnessing beyond its political inflections.

The Nature of Giving a Gift

What *is* a gift? What are its characteristics and conditions? How does it determine the relationship between people? In the *Canadian OED*, a gift is defined as “a thing freely given.” It refers both to the object (a thing) and the attitude in which the object is given: freely. A *free* gift costs its recipient nothing and is given without expectation of return, compensation, or reward (Taylor, “Capitalizing” 51). A gift, from this perspective, is not a trade, barter, or loan. It is not earned. It is not reciprocated. A gift does not circulate like money.¹⁵⁶ In fact, a gift evades circles altogether: it does not come back around to its giver; it is given “without taking” anything in return. Such a gift fits precisely with Hodgson’s vision of unilateral and asymmetrical giving. It cuts through the utility and productive gain of economic exchanges, challenging any reasonable calculation or obligation to reciprocate. “This gratuitousness,” Robyn Horner explains, “is emphasized as an essential part of the gift: a gift has to been given in a spirit of . . . sheer generosity” if it is to be a gift at all (1). Sheer generosity characterizes a giver who gives excessively and abundantly to another who does nothing to deserve it. It requires the giver to favour the recipient’s interests above his own, an attitude that culminates in the giver giving his very self in sacrifice for another’s sake, as Levinas describes it in his ethical phenomenology

¹⁵⁶ If giving is related to economy, as these terms suggest, then its relation is one of negation (Derrida, *Given Time* 7). Jacques Derrida makes much of this relationship between economy and the gift in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992). As he observes, “the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspecting economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged” (7). This negative relationship between the gift and economy is the basis for his analyses in the specific chapters, “The Time of the King” and “The Madness of Economic Reason: A Gift with Present” as well as his theological rendering of the topic in *The Gift of Death* (1992).

(OTB 142). To truly give something to or for another person is to *give up* something of oneself, a unilateral and asymmetrical movement that takes nothing from the recipient and seeks nothing in return.

Aafke Komter classifies this kind of radical generosity as a “pure gift” and situates it at one extreme of a continuum of gift giving in social interactions (5). Following Mauss in his famous *Essai sur le don* (1923-4), Komter argues that gift giving may well be motivated by excessive generosity but its practice in social contexts inevitably includes “expectations of return,” whether those expectations are conscious or unconscious (4). Even where close social ties between gift givers are more likely to produce a form of “pure” gift giving, gifts ultimately “prove to be part of a system of give and take,” a social economy of exchange driven by codes of conduct that are determined by reciprocity, mutuality, and return (Komter 5; Malinowski 15).¹⁵⁷ In practical terms, then, the excess of generosity exists within economies of social exchange. Gifts may therefore appear free, gratuitous, unilateral, or disinterested, but they are, inevitably, also obligatory, constrained, and quite interested (Mauss 1; Horner 13; Schrift 4).

Let me expand on this anthropological perspective: As part of a system of give and take, gift giving is *obligatory*, a moral duty to give, receive, and reciprocate in order to preserve stable and peaceful relations between people in social settings: “To refuse to give or receive is tantamount to declaring war, rejecting a bond of alliance and commonality” (Mauss 13). To participate in giving, receiving, and giving back affirms social bonds that preserve harmony and

¹⁵⁷ Indeed, reciprocity and return are inherent in the etymology of the word itself. Émile Benveniste reveals that Indo-European versions of “to give” (French *donner*, English *donor*) are derived from the root *do*, which bear similarities to the Hittite verb *da*, meaning “to take” (34). In light of this connection, he determines that “giving and taking actually have the same origin” (Horner 10). *Do* properly means “neither ‘give’ nor ‘take’ but either one or the other” (Benveniste 34). One must discern by its syntactic construction whether it means giving or taking in a specific context. Such semantic ambiguity is also reflected in other ancient renderings of the gift. For instance, Benveniste points out that one of the Greek words for gift, *δοτινη* (*dotine*), specifically involves an expectation of return: “whether the *dotine* is intended to call forth a gift in return or whether it serves to compensate for a previous gift, it always includes the idea of reciprocity” (36).

justice through a mutuality that is meant to benefit both sides equally (Malinowski 15). This idea of mutuality is well exemplified in Émile Benveniste's etymological connection of the gift to hospitality. In ancient Latin, *hospitality* assumed social reciprocity as well as political equality and mutuality between foreigners and citizens. He notes that the *hostis* (foreigner, guest) is "one who obtains from Rome the counterpart of the advantages which he has in his own country and the equivalent of which he owes in turn to the person whom he pays reciprocally" (Benveniste 38).¹⁵⁸ Giving, in this sense, functions as a rule of equivalence or civic mutuality between people "confirmed by reciprocal gifts" (38), what might also be described as justice: a gift of reciprocity or an ethics of equitable giving and return in social, political, or legal exchange (Wyschogrod, "Introduction" 2).

From this perspective, gift giving is necessarily *constrained* by the obligations of give and take in social interactions. Reciprocal relations limit the unilateral power a giver may procure over the recipient and the asymmetry that may undermine the ethical potential of the gift in order to maintain relationships of alliance, justice, solidarity, and peace between people. Gift giving is further constrained by personal limitations: by one's own knowledge of the recipient and the situation (What should I give; how should I give it; how will it be received?), one's financial status and time constraints (How much can I afford to give?), and one's capabilities (How much am I able to give?). External and personal limits both necessarily and problematically determine how freely one can give.

Finally, gift givers are invariably *interested* in relational exchange and are often motivated by some sense of return. This is not to say that givers are utterly self-absorbed,

¹⁵⁸ *Hostis* has been etymologically thickened over time with another sense of give and take: The English "*host*" (giver of hospitality) is derived from the same family as *hostis* (foreigner). As Derrida has elaborated in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), the one who hosts by offering hospitality to the guest is also one who becomes a stranger or foreigner to himself: his desire to be for himself in his own home is taken hostage by the guest, as it were. To give to another is to give up or take from oneself.

concerned only with what they can get for what they give. However, utilitarian or egoistic motives “for personal gain” or “to avoid material disadvantage or loss” do tend to be mixed in together with altruistic and benevolent motives (Komter 10). Even when a giver has genuinely benevolent motives—giving entirely for the sake of another—he or she still remains interested to some extent. A giver anticipates that the gift will at least return in the form of the recipient’s acknowledgement, acceptance, or gratitude.¹⁵⁹ While this interest in return could be construed as self-interest, it is not necessarily at odds with a giver’s interest for another. Adriaan Peperzak observes that a giver’s desire for return, for a recipient’s recognition and response, is usually *also* an interest to establish or develop a mutual and interdependent relationship with that person, a motivation that cannot be dismissed as purely egotistical or reduced to an economic system of barter or trade (167). Indeed, as Alan Jacobs points out from a theological perspective, the gift can be seen as a continual marker of our necessary dependence on and need for others by which our lives are enriched and our relationships made meaningful (80-81).

At the same time that interestedness brings people together, however, gifts create relational distance and dissymmetry: in giving, the giver assumes a subject position of agency and power: “A giver gives a gift to someone who, through this giving, is invited (asked, urged, demanded, forced) to receive the gift” (Peperzak 164). In receiving and accepting a gift, the recipient becomes subjected to the power of the giver and indebted to the giver through the gift (Godelier, “Some Things You Give” 22). Situated in subservience, the recipient is “dependent”

¹⁵⁹ If givers are purely self-interested—giving *only* for the sake of return—they will find themselves offended if their gifts go unappreciated or ignored by unresponsive recipients and seek out other forms of return on their giving. In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Derrida reveals how one secretly and symbolically gives back to oneself the value of what has been given in the self-satisfaction of one’s own generosity (14). Especially when no one notices or responds to the gift, the giver can enjoy her own generosity: “this is the reward [she] grants herself . . . realizing her own interest in being decent and honorable” (Peperzak 167). Or, more negatively, the giver may glean some sense of return by *taking* offence, soothing herself for being taken for granted, or esteeming herself in order to regain in identity what has been lost in the unrecognized gift.

on the giver until he can give something in return.¹⁶⁰ And as Nietzsche notes, “Great indebtedness does not make men grateful” (qtd. in Schrift 3). Instead, the very mark of unilateral generosity—giving without return—becomes a burden to the recipient. It may leave the recipient feeling inferior and even resentful at the intrusion on his independence, the unmasking of his insufficiencies, and the debt to repay (3). Jacobs speculates that recipients suspect gifts and despise being in another’s debt because within Platonic (and Western) traditions of thought “the assumption is that the strong and virtuous person is self-sufficient” and thus “the one who offers gifts presumes that we are deficient; if we accept them we confirm that deficiency” (80). In light of this tension between relational dependence and power struggle, the gift proves to be a *pharmakon*, both a present and a poison.¹⁶¹ In giving the giver cannot help but take something of the other’s identity or autonomy. And the recipient’s resulting dependency on others can feel as much a relational curse as a blessing. As a result, his desire for balance invoked in returning or repaying a gift can as easily become a competition for power or assertion of autonomy as a desire for reciprocal interaction and mutual good. The interest, then, inherent in the gift and its giving is fraught with ethical ambiguity, power struggles, relational expectations, and mixed feelings. To give without taking may well define a pure gift, but such giving is clearly complicated in social practices which cannot, and indeed should not, function without some sense of reciprocity and interdependency. If Mauss is right, and the gift *as such* is enmeshed

¹⁶⁰ In agonistic gift-giving relationships as Mauss has observed them in the potlatch, it is precisely for this reason that the various groups rival for the giver’s position (Godelier, “Some Things You Give” 26-7). Similar to ethical generosity, agonistic gift giving breaks the circle of exchange in order to give without return. However, the goal here is to obtain the giver’s position of power by giving others so much that they can never repay, thereby ensuring their subservience as debtors for as long as possible. See Godelier’s *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999) and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* for further discussion on Mauss’s notions of the gift.

¹⁶¹ This ambiguity or instability in *pharmakon* is also revealed in the German etymology of the “gift” as “present” and “poison” (Schrift 7). When ancient Scandinavians and Germans gave the “gift of drink” to honour kinship or customs, a recipient was never quite certain if the libation was a drink-present or drink-poison. Alan Schrift points out that this uncertainty “anticipates the conjoined pleasure and displeasure we still feel when receiving presents” (7). It also may have something to do with our impulse to reciprocate and return presents: we regain some sense of certainty or power by taking the position of the giver and having control over the nature, contents, and direction of the gift.

within systems of exchange, then why are we so inclined to separate unilateral generosity out from a system of give and take in ethical discourse and more specifically, in reading collaborative autobiography, holding that a truly gratuitous giving without taking is ethically superior to “an offering made with an eye toward reciprocation” (Jacobs 79)?

The Relational Nature of Narrative Collaboration

In fact, unilateral giving without taking—despite its ethical potential for evaluating the “unequal power relationship traditionally at play in the production of [a collaborative] text”—proves to be a limited and unrealistic ethics for the practice of narrative collaboration unless it is also combined with reciprocal giving and taking (Rymhs 92). Fundamentally, collaboration is a mode of social and verbal exchange. Writing in collaboration (with and for another person) depends on a reciprocal and dialogic relationship, an exchange that involves the “nitty-gritty give-and-take of ‘co-labouring,’ the salty rub between two selves at their work,” as Holly Laird describes it (11-12).¹⁶² Not only do partners share their lives with each other in this relationship, they also inhabit multiple, shifting, and reciprocal roles in their dialogue (12). As a result, the power imbalances assumed between partners—the hierarchies of difference exposed in their relationship and the textual mediations that ensue in the practice of narration—never quite disappear, but become “shared and contested” within the collaborative process (12). Consequently, to insist that Wiebe give without taking in *Stolen Life* may attend to the problems of political inequality that appear in this text but neglects the necessary and complicated reciprocal relationship between Wiebe and Johnson that underpins the text.

Drawing on my own collaborative work with Rhodea Shandler, which I outlined briefly in my introduction, I am not convinced that such an ethics of generosity accounts for either the

¹⁶² See her prefaces to the two special issues on collaborative writing carried in *TULSA Studies in Women's Literature* (Autumn 1994 and Spring 1995).

depth of connection and mutuality that occurs when two people work closely together or the dynamic and messy interactions that face them in their shared and contested space of partnership. In my experience of witnessing Rhodea's life and story, I found myself unable to offer a gift of help without taking something of her life in my narrative control: I was situated in the authoritative position of interviewer and crafter of her story; I had my own conceptions of Holocaust suffering that I kept imposing on her actual experiences; I struggled with guilt for being German and the need to compensate in narrative form for my ancestors' crimes against her people; and, not least of all, I had to produce a certain kind of Holocaust story in order to have her book published. It turned out, however, that while these forms of taking were ethically problematic, our partnership was enhanced by what I was able to "take"—in the sense of *receive* and *accept*—from Rhodea in our relational interaction. Our ability to engage reciprocally in give and take proved vital for our collaboration and ensured that our relationship grew and deepened. To relate reciprocally exceeded our narrative project and challenged the political identity markers I had assumed for us within that project: Rhodea was not simply an elderly, traumatized Holocaust survivor who needed my help, but also a witty, feisty, and controlling woman. I was not simply a young, academic, German-Canadian collecting her story, but also her friend. My giving, in short, was inevitably and necessarily entangled with taking and receiving in the context of our personal relationship.

In light of this tension between an ethics of unilateral generosity in narrative production and the reciprocal practices of giving and taking in collaborative relationship, I want to reframe Hodgson's question by asking an alternative one: how *should* Wiebe offer a gift without taking from within his collaborative relationship with Johnson? What exactly is his ethical role not only in producing her life story but also in engaging relationally with her in the process of witnessing

her life? Where does ethical witnessing fall between unilateral generosity and reciprocal responsibility in their narrative collaboration?

If collaboration is a narrative relationship in which two people tell one story, then it includes *both* the practice of narrating *and* the process of relating (Eakin, *Lives* 176). Hodgson's vision proves ethically limiting precisely because it neglects the generosity that does occur in Wiebe and Johnson's process of relating in her focus on the fraught politics of narrative production. As a result, their collaborative relationship is reduced to a struggle for power in which they are rendered antagonistic toward one another. "If we start from the assumption that relations are essentially antagonistic struggles," as Kelly Oliver puts it, then we will pose an ethics of unilateral giving to compensate accordingly (*Witnessing* 4). But if ethics is a matter of responsible relational interaction—a generous way of being with others that informs one's actions and practices—then how we narrate the lives of others will depend on how we relate with them in the collaborative process. Witnessing, from this perspective, is not simply a matter of how to speak with and for others in writing their stories but of *how to be* with other people in the first place in order to speak and write ethically. Put another way, witnessing can only be interpreted as a practice of speaking with and for others from *within* the context of relating with them: proximately, dialogically, and reciprocally. What might it mean, then, to begin with the reciprocal relationship in determining an ethics of witnessing for collaboration, addressing the narrative product and its politics only secondarily, through this relational grid? How might a relational posture of generosity in witnessing inform the politics of the text?

What seems called for is a thicker and more realistic ethics of giving in the practice of witnessing others: one concerned not only with how to tell another person's story ethically but also with how to be in ethical relationship with another person in order to tell that story. That is,

we need an ethics that accounts for the obvious power struggles in the narrative product as well as the “mixed and messy character” of the narrative relationship (Peperzak 169). From my perspective, giving must include receiving and reciprocity in such an ethics: a gift given freely in a relationship of give and take. If Wiebe *should* give Johnson a gift without taking as part of his responsibility in their collaboration, he must do so within the broader context of their reciprocal relationship, a relationship that depends on mutual giving and receiving. With this in mind, I propose an alternative ethics of witnessing for narrative collaboration that draws together both the unilateral and the reciprocal aspects of giving. Returning to the intersections between giving and witnessing in the phenomenology of Levinas and Ricoeur, I suggest that an ethics of witnessing others in collaboration involves two things: (a) a “here I am” posture of generosity that reorients the giver to be receptive and responsible to others, and (b) a dialogic interaction that requires reciprocal responsibility between interlocutors. I suspect that revisiting these conceptions of witnessing will offer a fruitful position from which to rethink Wiebe’s witness of Johnson’s life in their work together: the possibility of his giving without taking in their relationship of give and take.

Phenomenological Witnessing: Reorienting the Giver and the Gift

In its most basic phenomenological sense, witnessing is a practice of seeing or knowing something that has been given (or made manifest) to one’s consciousness. According to the *OED*, witnessing means “being present and observing something.” In order for me to observe or describe any phenomenon—that is, witness it—it must first be “given” to my senses (be seen) and “presented” to my consciousness (be known) (Horner 19). I can only witness something that has already been given or presented to me. Witnessing is thus, first of all, a posture of reception. Unlike an active giver who offers something, the witness takes the passive position of a

recipient, as one to whom something is given and the one who gives witness only in response to what has been received. As something given or presented to me, a phenomenon is not “a gift” or “a present” *per se*.¹⁶³ Rather, phenomenon refers more broadly to any object, existence, evidence, or occurrence revealed to us and made signifiable for us in its immanence. Every phenomenon given to us in this finite way enables us to give eyewitness testimony to it: I was there; I saw something. It is this evidence to which eyewitnesses testify in a court of law. As the phrase “I see” suggests, this form of witnessing carries both the visual connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the cognitive connotations of comprehending something with one’s mind.

However, not everything witnessed is a *thing* given to be seen (as evidence) or to be comprehended (objectively). Witnesses also receive that which exceeds their senses and conscious grasp, such as the lives and experiences of others. Alongside the obvious juridical connotations of witnessing as testifying to that which is seen, witnessing includes the religious dimension of bearing witness to that which does not appear and cannot be known or represented—what I have been calling alterity or otherness (Oliver, *Witnessing* 16; *OTB* 146). In witnessing that which is wholly other than me, something is still “given” to me, but in the form of a mystery, enigma, paradox, epiphany, or revelation.¹⁶⁴ While infinite otherness refers to the

¹⁶³ Jean-Luc Marion does, however, draw a semantic overlap between something given and the gift. He wants to “retain a characteristic of the gift—that it comes ‘from elsewhere’ (following Aquinas)—as characteristic of the given” (Horner 138). For him, neither the given nor the gift needs to suggest “an origin, a cause, or a giver” but can appear anonymously and independent of intention, as in the famous biblical mandate for giving in which one’s left hand does not know what one’s right hand is doing (Horner 139; *KJV*, Matt. 6:2). As Horner points out, Marion’s postulation “effectively means that all phenomenality will be able to be described as gift,” a viewpoint that is at odds with Derrida’s notions of the gift. Derrida disagrees with Marion, arguing that the gift and a phenomenological given are, in fact, semantically incongruous (“On the Gift” 138). See Marion’s “Book II” of *Being Given* (2002) for a more thorough explanation of his link between gift and the given, as well as his interview with Derrida and Richard Kearney “On the Gift” in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (1999) for examining his clashes with Derrida.

¹⁶⁴ For thinkers like Levinas, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Derrida, and Marion, these “givens” appear as phenomena beyond phenomenology. Otherness exceeds something being seen as an object or known as being (about which I can say “there is”). As Marion notes, these thinkers “are interested in some very strange phenomena, insofar as you cannot say that they ‘are’—for instance, for Levinas, quite expressly and obviously, you cannot say that the other ‘is.’” To

alterity of God in religious contexts, this terminology can extend to include the alterity of other people, whose sheer existence transcends me, escapes my awareness, exceeds my ability to contain or grasp them, defies my language to define them, and interrupts my reductions in consciousness to understand or explain them.¹⁶⁵ To witness such alterity demands an alternative form of engagement, a different form of reception that does not give way to the narrowness of vision or the constraints of knowledge by which we encounter objects. Levinas consequently reframes witnessing as a matter of “hearing,” an ethical response to others that exceeds seeing and knowing. Relying on the language of verbal intercourse (call and response), he argues that a call is given to me in my encounter with another person. This call breaks through my self-consciousness, my frames of reference, my sights and insights, and my being in my own little world, as a phenomenon summoning me to respond *beyond* myself (Horner 55).¹⁶⁶ To witness

describe the other means not to refer to being, which would on the contrary forbid an access to its phenomenon. So, in fact, they are describing new phenomena, like the self-affection of the flesh, the ethics of the other, the historical event, narrative, *différance*, and so forth, which, of course, cannot be said to be in any way objects and should not said to ‘be’ at all” (*Being Given* 57). Marion refers to these givens exceeding phenomenology as “saturated phenomenon” (199). See his discussion in “Book IV” of *Being Given* (179-247) and his “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift” (1999).

¹⁶⁵ As I suggested in my earlier chapters, Hillesum names this alterity “the most essential and deepest in the other” (*Interrupted Life* 204), and Griffin calls it the *res sacra* (“Racist Sins” 436). This excess can also describe the phenomenon of incidents, accidents, or events that surprise me with their suddenness and transcend my explanations and representations (Horner 139). Horner elaborates, “There are some ‘incidents’ that remain unable to be thought, not because thought is deficient, but because what is given simply exceeds the capacity of thought. What gives itself is neither an object or a thing, but instead a ‘pressure’ that takes place in an event beyond my control” (140). Such incidents occurring suddenly, outside my comprehension and control, are exemplified in human experiences of trauma. Trauma is often regarded as radically other and conveyed as “unrepresentable excess” (LaCapra 93). Consequently, to transmit, testify, or narrate it to others proves an impossible task. Indeed, in looking at Holocaust trauma specifically, theorists like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that trauma *cannot* be testified; that central to the experience is precisely the collapse of witnessing (Laub 65, 66). Cathy Caruth modifies this position when she argues that what is testified in trauma is not a complete collapse of witnessing but a gap (156), a silence (9), or an abyss that exceeds comprehension and language, making the trauma inaccessible to platitudes or projects of knowledge about the Holocaust, but not inexpressible or unrepresentable *per se*. See her discussions in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (151-157) and *Unclaimed Experience*.

¹⁶⁶ Horner clarifies the call as a gift, but a gift she argues “is necessarily anonymous” (150). As she elaborates in her analysis of Marion’s vision of the call, “the call is phenomenologically determined only by the four traits it manifests: convocation, surprise, interlocution, and facticity. And since the call is always already given, [it] remains unknown in origin, and is only recognizable in the response made, it is like a gift” (150). Marion characterizes these four traits as follows: The call is (i) a *summons* “so powerful and compelling that [the subject] must surrender to it” (268). It displaces the subject from his autarchy into a witnessing position of reception and submission. (ii) A *surprise* that overwhelms the subject’s understanding or reasoning ability by creating in him a state of wonder or

other people, then, specifically means to receive and to respond to their alterity given to me as a gift that *exceeds* what I think I see or already know, or that *precedes* “the possibility of seeing, therefore of conceiving,” as Jean-Luc Marion puts it (*Being Given* 305).

Positioning the witness as a recipient and respondent rather than the subject or giver of the gift, the phenomenology of witnessing radically reorders the whole grammar of giving. Gift giving is commonly structured as follows: someone gives a gift to someone else (Horner 8; Peperzak 164). Grammatically speaking, the giver is positioned in the nominative case as the subject, actor, or agent of generosity: *the one who gives*. The gift is positioned as the direct object: *that which is given*. And the recipient is positioned as the indirect object, responding to the giver by accepting or rejecting the gift: *the one to whom the gift is given*. The phenomenology of witnessing, however, inverts this grammatical order of the gift: In witnessing, something (nominative) is given to the witness (dative), who is being given in response (accusative). Note the two inversions that emerge. First, the nominative case of gift giving (*I give something*) is preceded by the dative case of receiving (*something is given to me*). Where the grammar of giving positions the giver as subject and agent of the gift, the grammar of witnessing positions the witness as recipient, submitting to a *prior* gift out of which he or she gives. Edith Wyschogrod observes how this inversion functions in witnessing the alterity of another person: “Must I not receive a prior gift bestowed upon me by the other, the gift of her or his sheer alterity through which I become a giver?” she asks (“Introduction” 9). From the perspective of witnessing others, we must first receive what is given of others (their existence and sheer

astonishment (269). (iii) An *interlocution* in which the subject finds himself as one “to whom” something has already been addressed, thus positioning him in a “to me” state of reception. And (iv) a *facticity* that is always already given: No one has lived “without discovering himself preceded by a call already there” (270). Every word we use to create meaning for ourselves is first given to us as a linguistic fact by someone else. For further discussion on Marion’s vision of the call as it relates to the call in Levinas’s ethics and Ricoeur’s phenomenology of prayer, see the end of Horner’s chapter, “Being Given” in *Rethinking God as Gift* (2001).

alterity) before we can respond, give in response, or discern how to give in response. Indeed, the very subjectivity out of which we give depends on receiving what has been given to us—life, breath, language, ability, time, freedom, love, community, sustenance, capital, etc. In its dependence on reception, giving in witnessing becomes less a show of self-sufficiency, autonomy, or power over others and more about sharing out of what one has already received and relating to others through this sharing.

But what is given in the witness's response? What is shared? From Levinas's perspective, these questions need to be reframed as a matter of *who* rather than *what*: in witnessing, the respondent himself is being given. This brings us to the second radical inversion in the order of the gift: the witness is not a subject in the nominative case (*I give something*), but subjected as an object in the accusative case—the *one* being given. In other words, the witness does not give *something* (an object) in response to another person; the witness *is* the response given to the other person. As Marion describes it, “When we give ourselves, our life, our time, when we give our word, not only do we give no *thing*, but we give much more” (*Being Given* 63). Playing on the double meaning of the German “es gibt”—*there is* and *it gives*—both Levinas and Marion overlap *being* with *giving* to suggest that the witness *is* only inasmuch as he *gives* himself as a response. The witness's very subjectivity depends on this giving of himself, hence the close etymological tie between witnessing and martyrdom that I have noted elsewhere in this work.

This grammatical reordering of the gift in witnessing is thick with ethical implications. In dislocating the giver from his privileged and powerful state as a subject in the nominative (*I give*) to a recipient in the dative (*I receive*) and a respondent in the accusative (*I am given*), a space is opened for responsible giving in witnessing the lives of others. Witnessing not only demands that I give to others from a place of reception and response rather than from one of power; it is the

very mode of responsibility that reorients my subjectivity as a giver. In witnessing, *I am* in that *I am being given* for others. As I discussed in my first chapter, this change of subject is marked by a shift in self-signification from asserting myself as an “I am” to being subjected in the response, “here I am.” As Levinas articulates it, “the word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone” (*OTB* 114). To be in a responsible witnessing relationship, then, depends wholly on being made subject to others in a responsive posture of generosity.

Levinas, Ricoeur, and Marion each convey this “here I am” reorientation toward others as the ethical witnessing posture *par excellence*. Between their views, “here I am” proves to be a multifaceted and nuanced response, one in which the witness inhabits more than one posture of subjectivity and is consequently “given” to others in various ways, depending on the nature and depth of their relationship. In the fullest sense of the term, “here I am” begins in a posture of reception toward others and works itself out in response between self-sacrifice for and self-constancy with others. To develop this ethics of witnessing for collaborative relationships, let us briefly review these three aspects of “here I am.”

“Here I am” is an ethical posture born in reception. It is the response of a witness who has already received a call that summons him. Marion indicates that this call is not necessarily verbal or aural, where I literally hear something or someone speak a word to me. Rather, following Levinas, he suggests that the call is most often a “silent address”—a face or a look that calls me to “face up” to that person as one “for whom I must respond” (*Being Given* 267). The face calling me as a silent appeal or a verbal address is the homeless person begging, the child starving, the woman abused, the person oppressed and exploited, the stranger who asks for help,

the loved one in pain, the friend in need, the family member disabled.¹⁶⁷ It signifies the very presence and proximity of another person that inexplicably seizes me, draws me out from my desire for my own security, comfort, and control into a state of vulnerability and powerlessness. For this reason, I cannot ignore the call. I am compelled to receive it.¹⁶⁸

For Marion, the call of alterity is so surprising and powerful that whatever “I think” is momentarily sidelined by “my being affected” by the other person (255). In that moment, I am transformed from an individual who reasons and determines my responses to a summoned *me* who is constituted first and foremost *in relation* to the one who affects me, calling me to witness and claiming me as a witness in his call (268).¹⁶⁹ “This is not simply a matter of inner feeling or experience,” Thomas Reynolds clarifies. “I have been touched by a singular value that cannot be measured according to conventional standards of exchange or absorbed into my own agendas or desires” (*Vulnerable Communion* 119). Suddenly, I am not my own anymore, on my own, or able to own my own life. I am separated from my self-possession and related to another. In this process, “the call, and not the I,” Marion asserts, “decides *myself/me* before myself” (*Being Given* 270). I am assigned an alternative subjectivity according to the claims of that call on my

¹⁶⁷ Outside human categories, we could certainly also include the call of the natural world—animals, plants, waterways, ecosystems, and natural resources whose exploitations and destruction demand my response. In this study, however, I limit the call of alterity to the study of ethical human relationship and interactions.

¹⁶⁸ Marion and Levinas both rely on biblical examples to illustrate this unshakable sense of calling, including God’s specific and singular calls to Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah; Christ’s summons to the twelve disciples, “Follow me” (*KJV*, Matt. 4:19), and the spiritual vision that strikes St. Paul blind on the road to Damascus (*KJV*, Acts 9:3-7). For them, it takes something excessive, above and beyond me, to move me outside myself.

¹⁶⁹ From Marion’s perspective, this posture of reception is not simply our initial ethical position in relation to others, but our original situation in being born: “My birth, which fixes my most singular identity even more than my existence, nevertheless happens without and before me—without my having to know about it or say a word, without my knowing or foreseeing anything” (*Being Given* 289). Not only is my birth a gift that is not constituted by me in any way, but I am first *called* (a name) by my parents and learn to think according to the words first given *to me* by others (270, 292). Such calls claim my identity and decide who I am before I can determine myself. Furthermore, I am encouraged to pursue *my calling* (vocation; profession), which could be said to “choose me,” calling me out for a certain task that identifies me and shapes my identity.

life.¹⁷⁰ Response hinges on this reception. I can only say “here I am” because I have already received a *me*—surprised, claimed, and reconstituted by a relation to alterity—to be given. Starting from this position of reception and relation to the call, the witness who gives himself in response is vastly different from a subject who asserts himself as a generous giver. Unlike a giver, who can maintain his relational distance in giving things to others, a witness receives another person’s presence and proximity (signified by the call) and gives himself to that person from a position of openness and vulnerability in the response, “here I am.” In responding to another person, Jean Vanier notes, “you are not just being generous, you are entering into a relationship, which will change your life. You are no longer in control. You have become vulnerable” (12). “Here I am” depends on the respondent’s vulnerability and lack of control both in the initial encounter with another person and in the persistence of this life-changing relationship.

As we are by now well aware, Levinas describes a “here I am” posture of the initial encounter as an asymmetrical and unilateral response of self-sacrifice toward an unknown, impoverished other. In order to actually respond, “here I am” to the call or the face of another person, I must be exposed and vulnerable to that call in passivity: subjected (in the grammatical sense) and responsible (in the relational sense) to it (*OTB* 114). In everyday relationships, witnessing in passivity translates as bearing the actual suffering and burden of another person’s presence and proximity, as Hillesum and Griffin both reveal in their narratives. Levinas discusses this sense of responsibility particularly in relation to one’s encounters with the

¹⁷⁰ Consider, for instance, the character of Simon in the gospels, who is reoriented by the call of Christ. The very moment Christ calls him out as a witness, Simon’s “calling” (vocation) is redirected from fisherman to disciple. In receiving that call, Simon finds that his identity is instantly reconstituted. He is even renamed (called) “Peter” to signify the responsibility of his new identity: the metaphorical rock on which the Christian church is to be built. In receiving the call, the witness assents to an upheaval of his own sense of selfhood, even if only for a moment. He receives an alternative subjectivity in relation to the one who calls him.

destitute, the helpless, and the strangers whom I do not or cannot know. To actually *be here* for these vulnerable subjects means *I am* decentred from myself, from my preoccupation with my own interests and desires, in order to encounter them fully in the context of our interaction. I am summoned to sacrifice my sense of self—who I am for my own sake as I see and understand myself—to be given for others. Situated in the accusative position in relation to the other person, the witness’s embodied response of generosity only goes one way: from me for you (Horner 69). There can be no reciprocity. For Levinas, building community or meeting justice is only launched by this alternative mechanism: taking on “my own, always greater, share of the responsibility” (69).

Taken alone, this sense of responsibility is excessive to say the least. Not only does it “leave no prospect for my alterity for the Other,” Horner suggests, “it breaks down the possibility of any general application of Levinas’s thinking” (69).¹⁷¹ At the same time, however, Levinas’s positioning the witness as a vulnerable and self-sacrificing respondent usurps the control the witness might otherwise have over others: “giving . . . is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself” (OA 191). From my perspective, this loss of control and sense of vulnerability with others is a necessary starting point from which to develop a practice of responsible witnessing that can be sustained within interpersonal relationships—both collaborative and otherwise. If the witness approaches relationship by taking the position of agent or subject (assuming power without receptivity), his ability to be open and respond to the other person’s sheer alterity will constantly be impeded by his assumptions of what he sees or knows about that person and his conclusions about how best to respond.

¹⁷¹ “This is exactly how Levinas desires it to be,” Horner adds (69); his “here I am” is an originary ethical posture of being otherwise that functions as a hyperbolic response to the horrors of humans at war, not a prescriptive ethics for everyday responsible interactions (“Proximity of the Other” 208).

In many ways, Ricoeur begins where Levinas leaves off. Ricoeur agrees with Levinas that “the self is ‘summoned to responsibility’ by the other” and that this injunction creates relational dissymmetry (189). But Ricoeur moves beyond one’s initial encounters with strangers to ordinary, long-term relationships with friends and family members. He determines that a “here I am” response in these relationships must be sustained by moral commitment, mutual vulnerability, and reciprocal responsibility. For the sake of ethical relationships, “here I am” cannot be confined to those singular responses of vulnerability that I give to strangers whom I do not know, but necessarily includes my chronic suffering in engaging with those I feel I know all too well.¹⁷² Since collaborative relationships most often begin between strangers in a state of relational imbalance and develop into mutual friendships (as with Wiebe and Johnson), ethical witnessing in this context must depend on these two “here I am” postures held together in tandem (OA 168). These relationships call for self-assertion—“here is where I stand”—within self-sacrifice, what I called *active passivity* in my first chapter (168). In commitment and persistence, a “here I am” response becomes a responsible conviction: I take my stance; you can count on me (165). I choose constancy in my response to others as a complementary stance to the passivity by which I make myself available to them. This personal commitment to active responsibility does not reinstate the witness’s control over others, but rather, perpetuates his vulnerability in relationships, giving from within a state of weakness far beyond his original encounters with others.

¹⁷² In *Vulnerable Communion* (2008), Thomas Reynolds develops this sense of here I am in terms of fidelity. He writes, “Fidelity means being disposed to another as a presence that abides over time. It is availability in the mode of faithfulness and trustworthiness, a posture that says, ‘I will be there for you,’ and thus commits itself to accompany another along the way. . . . In Marcel’s words availability involves fidelity insofar as it entails ‘the active perpetuation of presence, the renewal of its benefits’ which corresponds to a certain kind of hold’ another has on us. . . . Thus I bear witness to belonging with another, binding myself to abide with and for this or that person over time” (125). Reynolds’ ideas on fidelity are rooted in Gabriel Marcel’s “On the Ontological Mystery” and “Obedience and Fidelity” in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope* (1978) and *Creative Fidelity* (1964).

A collaborative relationship can only be truly developed, however, if this moral commitment to self-sacrificial responsibility is mutual. Relating depends on both people recognizing each other's alterity. This re-cognition situates each person as a witness of the other, mutually vulnerable, needy, and dependent, and thus responsible for each other. In responding to one another, each person receives one's sense of self and gives oneself. Our identities are interdependent, becoming more intertwined as we become more vulnerable in our responses, in our "shared admission of fragility" (OA 192). As Reynolds elaborates in his work on disability, "our vulnerability works to establish the mutuality of [our] connections, [opening] us to each other and enabling the possibility of love" (*Vulnerable Communion* 123). In our vulnerability, we not only suffer the burden of each other, we also suffer our burdens with each other and commit ourselves to bearing each other's burdens. Our responsibility is reciprocal: we both inhabit the position of respondent in relation to each other. And further, our responsibility is shared: we both give up ourselves for the sake of the other person, a mutual generosity of being that, in its persistence over time, develops the kind of relationship that changes our lives (Vanier 12). To sustain relationships we must recognize ourselves as witnesses of each other, vulnerable and committed to responsibility for each other: a self-sacrificing and self-constant "here I am" orientation goes both ways.

I want to pause here for a moment to affirm that such an ethics of relational and responsible interactions always runs the risk of sounding idealistic: as Hillesum and Griffin both reveal in their narratives, we tend not to get our philosophical ducks in a row before we encounter others, relate with them, or sit down to write their stories. Indeed, we will see this ethics complicated again in the collaborative relationship between Wiebe and Johnson later in this chapter. And yet, a "here I am" model of responsible witnessing cannot be dismissed

because it does not function clearly as an applied ethics. Whatever sense of impossibility attends our application of “here I am” does not negate its importance for us to imagine (*what if we . . .*) and strive toward (*we should . . .*) in our chance encounters, personal interactions, intimate relationships, and collaborative efforts with others. We must remember that “here I am” is an alternative, phenomenological vision of human subjectivity and relationality figured in terms of responsibility (asymmetrical and reciprocal) rather than power struggle, and a description of how to be with and for others in light of this vision. In actual interactions and narrative accounts, reciprocal responsibility is possible but only ever experienced in moments, shadows, glimpses, and hopes beyond what we can fully reason or prescribe.

Mutually Responsible Dialogue: The Basis for Ethical Collaboration

In collaborative relationships, reciprocal responsibility is best glimpsed and illustrated in the relational practice of dialogue. In dialogue, witnessing exceeds the interlocution of a single “call and response” and depends on verbal interaction and social exchange to function. Indeed, dialogue can be seen as a particular form of exchange that heightens the ethical potential of giving by making its responsibility mutual for both its interlocutors. In dialogue, exchange and responsibility are intertwined: Each person is a unique entity whose very existence summons another’s unilateral generosity, but both of us are called to respond to each other in just this way. “What language teaches, precisely as a practice,” Ricoeur points out, is that “the agents and patients of an action are caught up in relationships of exchange which, like language, join together the reversibility of roles and the nonsubstitutability of persons” (OA 193). The uniqueness of another person addressing me does not nullify our reciprocal roles as respondents. We are both called to address and respond to each other as equally valuable human beings whatever our social positions or political subjectivities might happen to be.

Dialogue reveals at least two reciprocal exchanges. The preliminary exchange is verbal: the other's first word functions as a gift and my response to that word with another word functions as a reciprocal gift. My ability to respond depends on my first hearing the address of the speaker and receiving this word. However, without also responding, that is, giving my word in return, this address simply becomes a monologue. As a return, response functions *within* a circle of exchange: someone receives something from someone—a word, address, summons, query—and gives something back. As a result, even an ethical response of “giving myself” risks calculated self-interest and expectation of return: what can be received for what is given. At the same time, response *exceeds* a circle of exchange: it returns to the addressee without actually securing a return for itself. Indeed, the very nature of a response is that it does not obligate a response in return. The response is potentially asymmetrical, spontaneous, and voluntary—a free gift, so to speak: I respond to the call of another person whether or not s/he can respond to mine. Characterized by gratuitous giving and return, ethical response in dialogue could well be called a *generous reciprocity*: a return without expectation of return.

This brings us to another reciprocal exchange. In order to perpetuate a dialogue beyond a single interaction—one address, reception, and response—an exchange of positions between addressee and respondent must occur. In a conversation each interlocutor takes the role of addressee and respondent in turn, addressing and responding to each other. This reciprocal exchange of roles appears to challenge the ethics of unilateral giving, since my response *is* responded to (or returned) as soon as I move from the position of respondent to that of addressee. However, a reciprocal exchange of roles also guards against the relational one-sidedness that characterizes a response without return, an asymmetry that potentially limits its own ethical reach. If both interlocutors attempt to take the same role of responsive giver at the same time,

their dialogue quickly comes to an impasse. Imagine two people meeting in a doorway, both insisting, “After you.” If both parties are too eager to bestow this gesture of generosity on the other, neither one will move. One of them will need to receive the gesture before both can continue their interaction.¹⁷³ Or consider an interlocutor who *only* responds to others without ever initiating a dialogue. He challenges a conversation, just as a self-sacrificial giver who never seems to need or accept help from others undermines the mutual vulnerability necessary for relationship. Such sacrificial giving can easily mutate into an expression of power, a taking responsibility away from others.¹⁷⁴ Where asymmetry potentially challenges interactions, reciprocity and return open the dialogue or a relationship to ever-new possibilities and directions for response, both conversationally and ethically.

In short, the witness in a narrative collaboration is not the only one called to respond or to give in response. The reciprocal exchange of positions exemplified in dialogue summons the vulnerable subject to bear witness to otherness and be responsible as well. We witness each other. In this exchange of roles, it is precisely an asymmetrical response that needs to be reciprocated. We are both obligated to respond to each other without the expectation of return.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ In his 1960s article on reciprocity reprinted in *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (1996), anthropologist Alvin W. Gouldner unwittingly challenges with reciprocity the well-known Levinasian ethical exemplar of asymmetry—“After you, sir!”—described in *Ethics and Infinity* (89). Goulder writes, “Like participants in a disarmament conference, each may say to [the] other, ‘You first!’ Thus the exchange may be delayed or altogether flounder, and the relationship may be prevented from developing” (66). The tension between these two thinkers suggests to me that while the originary moment of ethical interaction demands asymmetry—a motion of “after you” or “you first”—the continuation of that ethical interaction requires reciprocity so that the relationship and new possibilities for response might develop beyond the originary ethical motion. See Goulder’s *The Norm of Reciprocity: a Preliminary Statement* for his overview of reciprocal exchanges (49-66).

¹⁷⁴ This is precisely one of the criticisms levelled against Levinas. In his formulation, I *give* myself in response to others but in doing so I *take* responsibility for everything and everyone. In order to limit such power dynamics, the passive respondent (in the accusative case) must be able to exchange positions with others so as to receive (dative) and invite others’ responses (nominative).

¹⁷⁵ Ricoeur is adamant about this reciprocal exchange of roles illustrated in dialogue as the basis for ethical responsibility. In response to Levinas he argues, “To be sure, the self is ‘summoned to responsibility’ by the other. But as the initiative of the injunction comes from the other, it is in the accusative mode alone that the self is enjoined. And the summons to responsibility has opposite it simply the passivity of an “I” who has been called upon. The question is then whether, to be heard and received, the injunction must not call for a response that compensates for the dissymmetry of the face-to-face encounter” (OA 189). Ricoeur suggests that the injunction or address of the

Peperzak makes much of this point when he writes, “the reciprocity of our conversation manifests a double asymmetry: just as your speech obligates me, so my speech obligates you; your dignity awakens my responsibility, while my dignity awakens yours. Two asymmetrical but chiasmic relations of high esteem intersect one another, thus forming a knot that binds us together in responsibility” (172). The exchange of roles in dialogue thus illustrates a *reciprocal generosity* in the giving and receiving of responses necessary for an ethics of responsibility to persist beyond an initial address, reception, and response.

What we have, then, are two forms of reciprocal exchange in the context of dialogue: *generous reciprocity* (a response given without expectation of return), and *reciprocal generosity* (the mutual giving and receiving of precisely such responses). Structurally speaking, they both function within a circle of exchange. Ethically speaking they expand a conception of return beyond an economic system of barter and trade and beyond a self-interested giving in which the gift finds its way back to the giver. If response *is* a form of return, as I have argued, then what is reciprocated between interlocutors in relationships is the gift of response and the obligation to be responsible to and for one another. For a “here I am” response to have ethical effect in more than one direction it must be given and received; it must be shared.

Responsible Giving Without Receiving

In light of this phenomenological view of ethical witnessing exemplified in dialogue, it seems clear that Wiebe should not offer a gift without taking in his collaboration with Johnson unless his unilateral giving is also situated within a relationship of give and take. While our ethical inclinations may be to “separate generosity from a system of give and take,” the full sense of

other’s word or face does indeed call for a compensatory response, as in friendship and mutual dialogue. The other is not the only one with a word or a face. The fact that I have one too also demands response, a “symmetry” that always accompanies the dissymmetry of a singular response.

witnessing signalled in “here I am” reveals a complex and intimate connection between unilateral generosity and reciprocal responsibility (Jacobs 79). Working out this “here I am” in the practice of collaborative witnessing requires at least two forms of reciprocation to attend unilateral generosity: (a) the reciprocal exchange of address and response between interlocutors in dialogue and (b) the mutual sharing of responsibility between co-labourers within their relationship. Without reciprocal dialogue and shared responsibility, unilateral giving hazards the same ethical problems as unilateral taking: relational imbalance between partners or narrative domination on the part of the collaborator. In the case of Wiebe and Johnson, unilateral giving neglects the messy interactions and fruitful complexities that arise in their dialogue, and it risks a one-sided responsibility on the part of Wiebe for the story produced and the relationship developed in the process. Let me consider these two issues more closely. While Wiebe engages in the reciprocal give and take of dialogue, shaping *Stolen Life* according to his conversations with Johnson, he seems bent on responsible giving to the exclusion of receiving in their relationship. He situates himself exclusively as the respondent in relation to Johnson and lets the burden of responsibility for her narrative and her case rest entirely on him. While I applaud Wiebe for this radical giving without taking, I see his ethical generosity fall short the moment he sees himself responsible to “answer for everything” in Johnson’s life, precisely *because* he gives without taking (*OTB* 144). In his responsibility, he gives too much. What then are the ethical possibilities that emerge from Wiebe’s reciprocal give and take in his dialogue with Johnson? And more critically, what are the ethical dilemmas that arise from Wiebe’s responsible giving without receiving in their relationship?

Stolen Life is structured on a dialogic exchange—the giving and taking of words. In his prefatory note, Wiebe remarks that the qualities of his dialogue with Johnson in their face-to-face

encounter are reduced in the process of writing them down. However, he nonetheless reveals this dialogic dynamic in the text, taking care that “this book [give] its readers a good flavour of . . . conversation” (xi). He thematically and structurally patterns *Stolen Life* on his conversations with Johnson, at times relaying particular discussions they have shared, but, more generally, constructing the text itself as an extended verbal exchange: sections of Johnson’s story of her past are interspersed with Wiebe’s narration of their current interaction as if, structurally, they are taking turns speaking. This reciprocation does not function to meld their voices together. But instead, as Manina Jones observes, it reveals the lives of both its authors at “various degrees of intimacy and distance from the events of the story and from each other” (211). Singular and distinct from each other, neither voice dominates the text to the exclusion of the other. And together, they offer a wider vision of Johnson’s life than either of them could give alone. In fact, other verbal expressions are added to their own through the various legal records, documents, interviews, articles, and statements that Wiebe collects. This patchwork of voices resists the possibility of a monologue, despite Wiebe’s role of stitching them together into a coherent narrative (Jones 210).

Beyond the dialogic structure of the text itself, Wiebe’s narrative relationship with Johnson enacts a Bakhtinian dialogue in the sense that Laird describes it: “a loosely structured mode of collaboration involving multiple and shifting roles for each partner, where power and authority never disappear but are shared and contested” (12). Sharing authority demands a negotiation between two people, a practice of navigating the complicated and contested space between separate selves who think and do things in distinct and often contrary ways. Sharing is a “salty rub” precisely because in “the nitty-gritty of ‘co-labouring’” partners are up close and personal with each other, facing each other’s differences and facing themselves in light of those

differences (Laird 12, 11). For Wiebe and Johnson, something is gained in the rub that they could not have achieved separately: a relationship, deeper insight into Johnson's past and her crime, broader perspectives on their respective and shared worlds, and a published book. But something is also lost in the rub: each one's full autonomy, authority, ownership, and control over the text. Narrative collaborators become dependent on one another as their relationship develops, and this sharing of power both causes friction and creates a sense of mutual reliance between them.

Wiebe insists that in their six years of working together on *Stolen Life*, he and Johnson "never once have an argument" (23). At the same time, however, he shows that their very different ways of thinking and writing stories challenge him. He faces the difficulty of having to negotiate Johnson's circular thinking—"revolving around a given subject" (xi)—with his own desire to "find some order of chronology and fact in her past life" (80). He also struggles to navigate her oral story-telling manner with his own need for written accounts, and hints at the tension that ensues:

She places three thick notebooks on the low table—her journals—and explains how hard it is for her to write her thoughts; it would be so much easier, she thinks, to talk into a tape recorder . . . and I tell her again, please, as I have so often on the phone, tapes are so hard to order, so hopeless to organize or grasp because to find anything you have to listen to everything all over again, in sequence: if she wants to tell her story, her words must be on paper. (22)

Her most natural way of story telling rubs against his desire for order and sequence in putting together the fragments of her life in publishable form, a need that is ultimately non-negotiable given his own limits imposed by his writing knowledge. While Wiebe dictates the structure of *Stolen Life*, he is nonetheless dependent on Johnson's writing for its contents, writing that seems "almost oral" in quality and is often non-linear, repetitive, and even incoherent in style (xi). In their task, Johnson repeatedly contests his well-meaning organizational methods with her

content: “Some stories need to be told, then told again,” she insists (387). And indeed, she “circles and recircles potential meanings without conclusion” in her narrative process (Egan, “Telling Trauma” 15). By her repetitions, “circling around and around with variant facts,” Wiebe confesses, “she will ultimately unwind a meaning my intellectualized mind can, against all odds, fathom. And all I can say . . . as usual, is, ‘Yes . . . yes,’ and listen” (432). In this, Julia Emberley sees Wiebe situate Johnson’s voice as a “counter-narrative to *the law of narrative*,” a law of the letter, of coherence and chronology to which the story must also submit if it is to be published (216). For Wiebe to negotiate Johnson’s counter-narrative (as she shares it) with the demands of story telling (as he knows it) is no easy task.

The publishing process no doubt exacerbates the difficulty of this negotiation. Johnson’s traumatic fragments of experience must submit to Wiebe’s work of shaping them into book form to reach her intended audience: “the next abused and hurting person” who may benefit from her life story (Wiebe and Johnson 40). Her submission is most obviously displayed on the book’s front cover, where Wiebe is positioned as the first author and the mutuality of their collaborative process is sacrificed to a more exacting economy of exchange: what will sell this book? Wiebe says as much in an email dialogue with Jones: the order of names, he tells her, was “a marketing decision; after thirty-five years of writing, my name has some recognition-value in the book world. But it is clear that we are partners—and the whole cover emphasizes that this is her story and that we have worked together to tell it” (qtd. in Jones 209). The economy of publishing conceals the sticky negotiations in the partnership behind the text and draws Wiebe’s mutuality and generosity into question in the published product. How shared is Wiebe’s authority in the collaboration if Johnson’s story must bend to the law of the letter in his narrative shaping? How generous can Wiebe be in opening a space for Johnson’s story if that story must also submit to

the strictures of publishing and its marketing decisions? Any yet, despite the economies of exchange that challenge this collaboration, I see Wiebe attempting a generous reciprocity and negotiation of space in his motion of give and take within their partnership. This exchange may not be entirely equal, given the overarching nature of his role in crafting her narrative, but it is certainly equitable, given Johnson's desire to reach a wide audience with her story, and Wiebe's commitment to help her in the ways he knows how.

From a narrative and relational standpoint, Wiebe's interaction with Johnson seems largely characterized by a mutually responsive and reciprocal partnership. Johnson addresses Wiebe for help and he responds to her, just as Wiebe addresses Johnson with interview questions and she responds to him with her story. As Wiebe describes it, "writing *Stolen Life* with Yvonne Johnson was a mutual gift exchange: she gave me her trust and her story, I helped her work it into a book shape that people could read," a reciprocity to which I will return (qtd. in Morash). Not only that, Johnson also responds to Wiebe's account of her story with "reciprocal editorial discipline," as Jones sees it: "Sometimes I had to tell Rudy," [Johnson] says in an interview, "That's pretty white man thinking. Go back and do it again" (qtd. in Jones 213). However, from an ethical standpoint, Wiebe positions himself as a perpetual respondent to Johnson's subjectivity and story. While his ethical responsibility appears generous in its asymmetry, it also lopsidedly empowers him. In his very giving of himself, Wiebe takes responsibility away from Johnson. As a result, Wiebe and Johnson do not appear to be mutually responsible for witnessing Johnson's story and developing their relationship in the process. Johnson is located in a perpetual stance of reception, an alternative marginalized position in which she is unable to take responsibility for herself or be responsible for others. Perhaps ironically, the actions that Wiebe's critics find so disconcerting—his claim to primary authorship, his standardization of Johnson's

writing, his indifference to their differences of voice, his narrative shaping, his generic dissonances, and his descriptive additions to Johnson's trauma—are precisely the result of his giving too much without being able to receive anything in return. From my perspective, such unilateral giving is Wiebe's biggest temptation in his collaboration with Johnson. Beyond its benefit for their initial encounter, it proves problematic as Wiebe and Johnson develop their narrative relationship. If relationships require a shift from unilateral generosity to reciprocal responsibility in order for ethical witnessing to be sustained, then neglecting to make this move to reciprocal responsibility means that Wiebe not only compromises the narrative produced, he also limits the ethical potential of Johnson's responsibility in her life and in his own.

Following a pattern similar to the ethical “here I am,” Wiebe's witness begins in reception to Johnson's initial call, “Howdy, howdy, stranger” in a letter that both surprises him and summons him to respond (Wiebe and Johnson 3). And in good Levinasian fashion, he responds to her in the affirmative beyond what he can see or know about her. Wiebe notes that when he answered Johnson's first letter, he had “no idea of what crime she was convicted” or any real sense of her personhood apart from her relation to Big Bear (14). “She has asked me to help her,” Wiebe writes, “I have promised her, ‘Yes’—though, foolishly, I had no idea what a difficult thing I was promising” (16). With “no idea” as to what his “yes” entails, Wiebe witnesses what he cannot see and responds affectively, moved by her letter and history to help beyond what he might otherwise have dismissed as foolish involvement. His response at the outset is primarily passive, an answer to Johnson's call without taking something from her—agency, voice, story, life—in return. Like the role of a listener in trauma therapy, Wiebe's posture of response undermines the powerful subject position he might otherwise hold in relation

to Johnson.¹⁷⁶ He is very attentive to Johnson's otherness, acutely aware of her vulnerable position, and genuinely distressed at his own middle-class white maleness. Locating himself fully in the respondent role, he demonstrates his capacity to help Johnson by giving of himself, his time, and his narrative influence for her sake. His "here I am" proves to be both a self-giving response in helping Johnson with the "difficult thing" of telling her story and a self-constant response in promising to be committed to the task with and for her over a number of years, despite the struggle of its telling (16).

However, as he comes to know Johnson and their relationship develops, his witness of what cannot be seen—her "indecipherable" past that he pieces together carefully in the first half of the narrative—becomes overwhelmed by his ethical and political testimony to what can: Johnson's character, the facts of her case, her conviction of guilt, and the legal system that sentences her to life imprisonment (21). "More and more," Wiebe states in an interview about the narrative process, "the question in my mind became, 'How could a woman as tender and caring and considerate as she is—as I got to know her—have been involved in such a terrible murder?'" (qtd. in Nemeth 63). Coming to know her as he does in the context of their relationship causes Wiebe to question Johnson's guilt in the murder case—not whether she committed the crime, but how her traumatic background and position as a Cree woman contributed to her capacity for murder. "This simple [idea], you commit a crime, you're responsible for it, out you go—this is not justice," Wiebe insists. "We have to understand where

¹⁷⁶ Both in trauma therapy, as Laub describes it, and in its narrative counterpart, *scriptotherapy* (a term coined by Suzette Henke), victims and survivors of trauma are invited to speak and write their lives as a means to retrieve their own history, create a viable identity for themselves, and engage in the healing activity of language (Egan, "Telling Trauma" 12-13). Therapists are summoned to "bear witness" to the suffering subject through the practice of listening (Laub 57). The specific task of the listener, Laub writes, "is to be *unobtrusively present*" with and for the suffering subject (71). In Wiebe and Johnson's relationship, Egan writes, "Wiebe is the listener, the one who becomes 'you' when [Johnson's] words need an audience. His task is to hear and receive [her] scriptotherapy, a distinctive trauma in its own right. His ability to do so entails huge responsibility for good and for ill" ("Telling Trauma" 13).

this person comes from” (qtd. in Nemeth 68). Determining Johnson’s murder in light of her traumatized childhood, Wiebe questions the legal system: “Did Yvonne, of all the four acknowledged participants, deserve the heaviest sentence? Did she get justice, or simply a full, overwhelming measure of law?” (Wiebe and Johnson 14).

From his perspective, Johnson gets the law. And beyond the law, she gets the brunt of the blame for a murder in which a group was involved. In response, Wiebe calls Johnson’s sentence “a terrible injustice,” Davis Sheremata writes, “relative to other individuals in the case” (31). In light of this injustice as he perceives it, Wiebe’s response subtly shifts from passively witnessing Johnson’s personhood to actively witnessing her position as a trauma survivor, a marginalized Cree woman, and a federal prisoner. In his active responsibility, Wiebe attempts to give something to Johnson that he believes has been taken or stolen from her: her innocence, testimony, and life. But in doing so, he over-determines her story, mediating it by the responsibility he assumes on her behalf. In the three chapters that cover her court case, Wiebe takes the principal narrative voice, Rymhs notes, moving “from being a witness to her trauma to being an advocate in a legal sense” (96). As advocate, he reconstitutes Johnson’s crime in the context of a corrupt legal system and a guilty history of Canadian discrimination against its aboriginal peoples, determining her marginalization and incarceration as “horrifically representative of what has happened to the Native people of North America” (Wiebe and Johnson 16). In doing so, he positions his readers as the jury and judges, not simply of Johnson’s account and the injustices of her imprisonment as he sees them, but more self-reflexively, of themselves as perpetrators of a similar kind. He implies that if social justice and not simply legal justice is at stake in this case, then both the Alberta Court and Canadians in general need to face their own guilt for stealing Aboriginal lives and livelihood and then punishing their recipients for

the same crime. Wiebe seems determined to break the silences of perpetration and guilt on both sides, exposing the limitations of the juridical system's ability to witness the trauma of Johnson's life as well as the inconsistencies of a system willing to dig the proverbial speck out of another's eye for the sake of legal justice without recognizing the plank of social injustice in its own eye.

In the process, however, Wiebe sidelines Johnson's responsibility for her crime with his own respondent position, making himself wholly responsible to fight against her injustice and interpret her traumatic story through that grid for her sake. Johnson comes off seeming strangely innocent in the mix, the complicated mess of her perpetration and trauma sidelined for the less ambiguous position of her victimhood. This subtle shift toward innocence leaves me wondering: if justice is not simply "you commit a crime, you're responsible for it," as Wiebe argues, then what precisely *is* Johnson responsible for? What is her responsibility not only in the murder case, but also in the practise of telling her story and relating with Wiebe in the process? In what sense is she responsible for her life and her story in their collaborative relationship?

The issue of Johnson's responsibility seems largely untouched in *Stolen Life*. In testifying to Johnson's character and case as *he* sees it, Wiebe struggles to witness her ethically. He views Johnson's sentence as a terrible injustice in light of his own self-conscious guilt in being "exactly the kind of 'powerful White who's so often created problems for her'" (41). She may be guilty of murder, but he sees her guilt only through his own guilt for belonging to a history that has oppressed her people.¹⁷⁷ His "here I am" functions in true Levinasian form—unilaterally and asymmetrically. In fact, he embodies the famous Dostoyevsky line in *Brothers Karamozov*:

¹⁷⁷ As early as *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe states his deep concern for the plight of Aboriginal people in Canada and reveals that his motivation for writing stems from his indignation at the silencing of their history of which he has inadvertently been a part. See his interviews with Margaret Reimer and Sue Steiner (126-131), Eli Mandel (150-155), and Brian Bergman (163-169) in W.J. Keith's collection *A Voice in the Land* (1981). Indeed, Wiebe's Aboriginal writing has been conceived as an attempt to right the wrong of Canada's colonial history that could be attributed, as Fee suggests, to an "over-developed Mennonite sense of guilt" (7).

“Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others,” that Levinas uses as the principle marker of “here I am” (*OTB* 146). Wiebe overwhelms the possibility of Johnson’s own “here I am” response by taking on the responsibility not only for his own guilt but also for hers; he sees her crime as inadvertently but fundamentally his fault. “We have dealt very badly with our native population, the first inhabitants of this country,” he confesses. “We’ve broken so much of their spirit in many horrifying ways, and all Canadians should be aware of it” (qtd. in Sheremata 28). In effect, Wiebe evades reciprocal responsibility. He gives himself in sacrificial commitment, burdens himself with guilt and responsibility for Johnson’s marginalized position and legal injustices, and assumes the responsibility for her life and her story upon himself. Ironically, within this seemingly ethical “here I am” posture of vulnerability, Wiebe reasserts the power dynamic between them, taking control of the respondent position and full ownership of its responsibilities. As a result, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether Wiebe is, in fact, able to receive anything from Johnson. Can he be anything but a responsible giver in their relationship? Is Johnson able or even permitted to inhabit a “here I am” posture, giving herself in response to Wiebe or taking on responsibility for her crime?

The Secret: What Johnson Gives

In *Stolen Life*, generous responsibility only goes one way, from Wiebe to Johnson. Because Wiebe shapes the text, it naturally reveals his narrative standpoint in their collaboration—how he responds to Johnson, gives her his help, and assumes responsibility for her story and her life. As a result, we only see half the ethical story: Wiebe’s narrative responsibility for Johnson’s sake. What remains unseen, hidden behind the narrative produced, is the collaborative relationship that Wiebe and Johnson share. As readers, we are not privy to the full dynamic of this relationship or

the tenor of their relational interactions; these exceed the limits of the text.¹⁷⁸ And yet, to gain a fuller understanding of ethical witnessing, this relationship must be taken into account.

Witnessing in narrative collaboration depends on how one engages responsibly with another person in the world *beyond* the text so as to reveal that ethical posture of being (and writing) with and for another person *within* the text. How then, might Johnson ethically relate and respond to Wiebe in their relationship beyond the text, that is, beyond what we as readers can see?

The extent to which Johnson's responsibility is reciprocal remains hidden, a secret, a silence in the text. And yet, glimpses of it appear at the borders of the narrative, in the acknowledgements, epigraphs, and interviews that surround this text, giving us interpretive clues for reading Johnson's response to Wiebe's responsibility in their relationship. Rather than ignore this excess, I want to conclude this chapter by taking her responsibility into account as a critical, indeed imperative aspect of ethical witnessing in their collaboration. Considering these relational glimpses at the borders of the narrative, I want to suggest that Johnson does reciprocate responsibility; she gives herself in response to Wiebe. This is not to give Johnson more responsibility that she herself bears or to make mutually responsible a relationship where Wiebe clearly takes control of the ethical action and interaction in the text. In fact, compared with Wiebe's active responsibility for her injustice in the narrative, Johnson's responsibility for Wiebe works altogether differently. Her witnessing response is predominantly relational, enacted in the very process of working together with him on her story. She gives herself in relating with him. In doing so, she forgets herself and offers Wiebe her trust and vulnerability in a way that

¹⁷⁸ Because the relationship remains unseen and largely inaccessible to us as readers, it tends to be neglected in our ethical discussions. Because the text is all we have to go on in most autobiographical studies, our discussions privilege the narrative produced (and our interpretations of it) rather than its reference to actual lives and living relationships behind the text—how it “touches the world” as Eakin puts it in his book bearing that name: *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992). In collaboration, the relational process is integral to the text produced, and consequently our ethical discussions must open to include the ethics of human relationality underpinning the narrative itself.

surprises even her. Being in relationship, in and of itself, proves to be a generous response of witnessing that “sees” Wiebe beyond the categories in which he sees himself in relation to her. Indeed, her gift of relationship inadvertently confronts Wiebe’s sense of moral guilt and his own subject position as “powerful White,” not to reduce them as insignificant in their interaction but to free him from their overwhelming burden.

If Wiebe’s unilateral response to Johnson is a “here I am” responsibility motivated largely by his guilt (his personal burden for her injustices and victimhood), then Johnson responds to that responsibility in two ways: (a) She sees herself as accountable to give her account and assume culpability for her crime, and (b) she sees Wiebe *otherwise* than as a “powerful White,” opening herself to be vulnerable and trust him in their relationship. First and most obviously, Johnson responds to Wiebe with her own admission of guilt for her crime and responsibility for her story. Unlike Wiebe, Johnson never questions her guilt about her role in the murder—how she could possibly be capable of it or have been involved in it—or justifies it by reference to her traumatized past. Nor does she appear to expect that revisiting her past and her case in writing *Stolen Life* will change her legal sentence or bring justice to her people in a representative way. Instead, she seeks a less lofty and more personal goal: “To me, writing this book will release long hidden fears, dreams, hurts, love, pain,” she writes as she awaits her new trial. “I’m trying this also in hopes of dealing with things that I never did before. Somehow maybe figure out some answers” (qtd. in Nemeth 64). Writing her story with Wiebe is a way of dealing with her guilt and personal trauma relationally, with and for other people beyond Wiebe’s own responsibility for her social justice. If Wiebe takes responsibility for Johnson’s crime in light of the past—situating it in the larger context of her familial trauma and the national marginalization and legal injustice that has plagued her (and him)—then Johnson bears

responsibility for her crime in light of the future, telling her story in hopes of rebuilding what has been broken in her relationships and binding up what has been wounded in her crime.

Based on her prayerful epigraphs that book-end *Stolen Life*, we can interpret the story in between as Johnson pouring out her life in order to bring understanding and healing to those she has wounded personally, as well as to offer hope to those who have experienced traumas similar to her own. She prays at the outset of the narrative, “help me to make amends to all those I have harmed; Grant them love and peace, so that they may understand I am sorry; help me to share my shame and pain, so that others will do the same, and so awaken to themselves and to all the peoples of the world.” Through this prayer, she directs readers to interpret her story as a confession of guilt and a summons to relational reconciliation, one that begins with her own family: “I’ve tried to tell my sisters I’ve made a way for them to follow, I can take it, I’ve laid myself down like a bridge, all they have to do is walk over me” (Wiebe and Johnson 24). This posture of submission is articulated directly in her closing epigraph, where she writes, “Here I am, Medicine Bear Woman.” In this “here I am,” she reconstitutes her identity beyond her crime and the pain it has caused as well as the victimhood and marginalization she has endured: for future reference, she is “Medicine Bear Woman”—the one who heals. With this new identity, she signals an alternative relational vulnerability with and for others than the one that trauma had imposed on her: she chooses to give herself in humble disclosure for the sake of bringing reconciliation to her family and the possibility of healing others with her words.

This brings me to her second response to Wiebe: Johnson not only assumes responsibility for her crime she also gives herself in relationship. She gives Wiebe her vulnerable “here I am” in the very act of relating and being in relationship with him. In the face of their discordant subject positions, their coming together in relationship enacts a form of reconciliation and

restoration that responds directly to Wiebe's guilt for his own identity and his complicit oppression of her people. As I have noted, Wiebe identifies himself in their relationship as "exactly the kind of 'powerful White' who's so often created problems for [Johnson]" (41). While this sense of self drives him to devote himself responsibly to her cause, it also subtly challenges his capacity to engage with her fully because it preoccupies him with his own conflicted subject position. His guilt and self-doubt become the primary lenses through which he sees Johnson and himself in relation to her. Johnson challenges this position inadvertently in their relationship, and even surprises herself by her own response: "In working with Rudy I never directly saw him as male. I never directly saw him as a white. I laughed when it dawned on me half a year into [the book], I'm supposed to be scared of you!" (qtd. in Sheremata 28). Johnson witnesses Wiebe contrary to his self-perceptions and ontological categories. In fact, she goes so far as to reconstitute his "powerful White" position in terms of his relational connection with her: "'Rudy was a kindred spirit,' says Johnson from the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan. 'We were destined to meet in our lives. The Spirit of Big Bear has been with Rudy for a long time, and it brought him and I together to accomplish what we had to do'" (28). In witnessing Wiebe as "spiritually" part of her family (kindred), Johnson opens herself to him and invites him into her life through their relationship.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, Johnson offers herself in vulnerability to Wiebe, choosing to trust him in their work together. Laub emphasizes trust and reciprocity as fundamental to the act of witnessing because it creates a relational opening for partners to come together in mutual connection (Laub 85; Rymhs 96). Considering her past of abusive interactions with men and her social isolation and alienation on account of her childhood muteness, Johnson's trust in Wiebe is

¹⁷⁹ In her spiritual sense of witnessing *otherwise*, Johnson echoes the witnessing postures of Hillesum and Griffin. All three of them invoke a spiritual vision (what cannot be seen) to challenge the power hierarchies and ontological categories that can be seen, and so reconcile the disparities between themselves and others.

nothing short of astounding. It entirely contradicts her protective inclination to depend solely on herself, an isolating tendency that develops, as Rymhs observes, “into apprehension, mistrust, and even hostility, toward others” in her life (102). Wiebe *is* exactly the kind of “powerful White” that would normally make her afraid. But in trust, Johnson witnesses Wiebe *otherwise* in order to engage with him as a person. To choose to trust, even someone as trustworthy and full of integrity as Wiebe, is a response of courage and hope. It means moving from a state of apprehension and enmity into a space of openness and vulnerability that enables their relationship to grow, however difficult that process may be.

In effect, Johnson’s trust in Wiebe communicates relationally what it does not say verbally to him: “You may feel guilty, but in our relationship I don’t see you that way.” Johnson dissociates Wiebe’s burden of guilt from his personhood, revealing what Ricoeur calls “an ultimate act of trust” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 490). She responds powerfully to Wiebe’s hesitation in being involved with her, his apprehension based on his own self-doubt and fear about how critics might interpret him (Wiebe and Johnson 41). His “here I am” response to Johnson is limited by this self-doubt, made clear when he asks Johnson’s counsellor, “Isn’t there someone else who should work with her, a woman, a Native writer?” (41). When the counsellor responds, ““Vonnie trusts you,”” she undercuts his presumptions and insecurities about the differences and power hierarchy between them (41). She implies that sameness does not ensure a “here I am” response any more than difference challenges it. Indeed, what proves most problematic for difference is a posture of distance, an avoidance of vulnerability because of one’s own discomfort with oneself in the face of the other person. While Wiebe’s insecurity and self-accusation haunt the collaborative process, his “here I am” posture toward Johnson challenged by his own discomfort with himself, Johnson repeatedly destabilizes his self-

perception with her nonverbal communication of trust and her alternative witness of him (355). Her trust and vulnerability function as her “here I am” response to Wiebe, one that opens a new space for Wiebe to extend his own “here I am” posture beyond social justice advocacy to mutual relationality. Where Wiebe’s advocacy simply reaffirms their respective political positions, Johnson’s mutuality reconciles the disparity between their identities, crossing the problematic divide that their differences create.

From my perspective, Johnson’s reconciliation through relationship is a gift that signals a deeper giving, one that is entirely secret, hidden from our view as readers, silent in the text, and perhaps even unknown to Johnson and Wiebe. In relating deeply and intimately with Wiebe, reconciling the negative disparity between their identities, and dissociating Wiebe’s guilt from his personhood, Johnson offers Wiebe a gift of forgiveness. By forgiveness I mean a pardoning and restorative act that unbinds the other person from his or her offence in order to bridge the distance that the offence has created between that person and oneself.¹⁸⁰ Forgiveness normally functions as a speech act, a word of pardon that initiates relational reunion between people formerly at odds with each other. What one expects of forgiveness is, as Ricoeur describes of love, “that it will convert the enemy into a friend” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 482). A word may enable this process, but a relationship enacts it. In fact, a relationship embodies forgiveness through reconciliation in the way a word never can. Furthermore, in its relation to love, forgiveness is not a political activity but, rather, an “apolitical” or even “antipolitical” one (Ricoeur 488). “There is no politics of forgiveness,” Ricoeur writes, following Hannah Arendt on

¹⁸⁰ In this definition I loosely follow Ricoeur’s notion of forgiveness discussed in the epilogue of *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004).

the subject (488).¹⁸¹ Forgiveness is a measure of relationality beyond any institution, an activity largely invisible in the public sphere. In short, it assumes a relational interaction motivated by genuine human care and love, not power. Forgiveness therefore has the potential for turning social and political enmity in relationships into a hope for peaceful and caring interaction in the future.¹⁸² This process is naturally always “partial, incomplete, and therefore ongoing,” as Reynolds notes, but it nonetheless offers the possibility of renewal and restoration to broken relationships (“Toward Forgiveness” 8). In the case of Wiebe and Johnson, it sidelines the hostility signalled in their disparate subject positions and undermines the distance caused by Wiebe’s perceived offences with the regenerative power of kinship.

How can I claim that Johnson offers Wiebe forgiveness when Johnson never once says, “I forgive you” in the text, nor even hints at it in their narrative relationship?¹⁸³ In fact, I do not base my conjecture on the text itself, but on what I see as some uncanny similarities between Wiebe and Johnson’s relationship and my own experience of narrative collaboration with Rhodea Shandler. Like Johnson and Wiebe, Rhodea and I occupied disparate identity positions in our collaborative relationship. I went into our project wondering how I could relate with this

¹⁸¹ See Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* in which she discusses the connection between forgiveness and love. She argues that institutionalizing and politicizing forgiveness prove problematic for numerous reasons. See also Ricoeur’s discussion on Arendt in the epilogue of *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004).

¹⁸² Thomas Reynolds discusses this orientation from the past (in memory) toward the future (in hope) extensively in his unpublished paper, “Toward Forgiveness: Hope, Theology, and Dialogic Excess” (2009). He writes, “forgiveness trades on an economy of generosity, where the offender is given the gift of freedom from being beholden to a closed past, an act by which the giver is also released from the binding hold of the past. Legitimate claims to justice remain, however, for the offending act is not condoned. The difference [between forgiveness and justice] is that the offender is accepted back, opening up a future in which the possibility of restored relation comes into the clearing” (7).

¹⁸³ Indeed, we could go further to ask whether Wiebe even needs forgiveness for his perceived offences. And if he does, should Johnson offer it on behalf of her Cree community? I am well aware of the political tensions that surround the question of forgiveness, its religious overtones, and its public and collective shortcomings. Indeed, forgiveness might well be criticized for trivializing the trauma and pain of the victim and neglecting the critical matter of justice in addressing the offence of the perpetrator, as Reynolds notes in “Toward Forgiveness” (4). However, I want to leave these important issues to the side in this analysis and focus instead on my own personal experience of forgiveness in the context of collaboration in order to offer an alternative angle from which to interpret the surprising ethical potential of Johnson’s response to Wiebe’s responsibility.

elderly Jewish woman in order to write her story of hiding and survival under Nazi rule. How could I assume to know anything of her suffering when all I had was textbook knowledge of her trauma and her history? How was I to involve myself in her life when our backgrounds were so burdened by the hostilities of the past? I felt intense guilt for “being German” and had taken on its burden as if I were personally involved in the genocide that had taken place some thirty years before I was born. How was I to negotiate our disparate identities and my feelings of guilt with the personal relationship we shared in working on her story?

Despite our different collaborative contexts, I identify with Wiebe’s identity-struggle in the face of Johnson’s collective and personal suffering. He seems to function in a way similar to my own. By my own identity markers, I had determined my relation to Rhodea within an economy of guilt: I could never pay enough for the suffering of her community but still hoped that by carrying the weight of it in my being, I could try. However, it was difficult to see her as a whole person with her own faults and shortcomings this way: I was too busy witnessing her as a suffering subject and making her experience representative of Holocaust trauma. Wiebe hints at carrying a similar burden: his guilt determines his relational identity with Johnson and he can never give back or be generous enough to compensate for it. And perhaps, like me with Rhodea, Wiebe becomes so active in trying to compensate for his burden (Johnson’s suffering as he bears it) that he risks losing the aspects of Johnson that exceed his vision of her suffering, victimization, or representative oppression. What we both struggle to witness in our respective collaborations is the possibility that working together in relationship with “the other” could offer us an alternative perspective of ourselves, a perspective that, in challenging our personal guilt, could inadvertently free us from this economy so that we might engage in a more relationally responsible practice of witnessing.

What I find particularly powerful in reflecting on my partnership with Rhodea is that she did not determine our relationship according to our identity markers as I did. She did see me as a young, academic woman helping her publish her story, but she did not recognize me as “German,” “perpetrator,” or “guilty” and engage with me on those terms. In fact, she witnessed me entirely *otherwise*—in an embodied and proximate generosity that dismantled my perceptions of our difference. She invited me into her home. She opened herself and shared her life story with me. She chose to become vulnerable and to trust me in our relationship. And far beyond the parameters of our narrative task, she offered me space in her life. In doing so, she embodied responsible generosity in a way that my own self-conscious sense of guilt kept me from giving to the same degree. Some of her off-hand comments suggested that she saw our relationship in a far more personal and intimate way than I had imagined. At the beginning of one of our interviews, after complaining that I was taking so long on our work, she joked, “I have a bed in the back room,” a joke which quickly turned into a sincere offer of hospitality: “I have room, an extra room. Anytime, as a matter of fact, anytime you like to sleep here.” This openness toward me became even more vivid on another occasion when she teased me that I would make a good girlfriend for her son. What I heard was her approval of my person. Without trying or even knowing it, Rhodea was challenging my views of my outsider status, my fixation on our differences, and my sense of guilt. She was accepting me not only as a person in friendship but also as a friend in kinship, drawing me out of myself and into her family.

I have come to realize that Rhodea, in offering me a place in her life beyond our narrative project and in witnessing me *otherwise* than as I saw myself, granted me a sense of forgiveness that challenged my self-centredness and short-sightedness. Her “here I am” enacted in our relationship freed me from the weight of my self-imposed guilt and self-oppressive sense of

responsibility. In effect, she showed me what generosity and responsibility “for the other” truly meant by laying herself down as a relational bridge to reach out to me in my need. But she did so in secret, surprisingly, inadvertently, unbeknownst to either of us. She had pardoned me without even knowing it. I had been forgiven without her ever saying it. Her forgiveness had slid under the radar of my guilt and evaded whatever power dynamic her absolution may have produced. I only discovered it in hindsight when I realized that the weight of my guilt had disappeared and I was free to engage with her from a view beyond my own—in reciprocal generosity and in love. This is not to say that our relationship was free from complication or tension, but, rather, that a space was created for responsible witnessing to develop between us.

And so I say: perhaps like Rhodea’s gift, forgiveness is the gift that Johnson offers Wiebe, in secret. In her posture, “here I am, Medicine Bear Woman,” she may well be healing that which she cannot even see in her collaborative relationship with Wiebe. As a reader, I have no way of knowing. Nor can I know if Wiebe would receive such a gift if it were offered. But I am convinced that a “here I am” posture of making room for others in one’s life offers freedom and hope in response to the guilty conscience and perceived offences that motivate but also plague many a collaborator. The desire to compensate for past wrongs with guilt is certainly a compelling force to initiate ethical witnessing, but it cannot sustain a “here I am” stance within a relationship. Guilt is a motivation to self-sacrifice that feeds off its own accusations, thus turning the self back toward itself and even against itself in its relationships. The “I” who can never give enough or be enough becomes burdened by its own self-centred need to sacrifice itself. As a result, “here I am” cannot function in its fullest capacity within an economy of guilt, however generous its responsibility may be. Wiebe’s ethical witness of Johnson in giving his help, energy, and time needs to be reciprocated by Johnson’s gift of trust and acceptance of him in order for

their relationship to turn from the past toward the future. Unilateral generosity requires the reciprocity of responsibility for ethical witnessing to thrive. The ultimate goal of a “here I am” witnessing posture is not simply to give at all costs or to give in equal measure, but to give up one’s self-centredness (whatever form it may take) and to offer one’s space and time relationally so as to be with the other person for both our sakes. Being given in this way allows us both to become more fully human, our mutual existence together creating relational harmony out of cacophony. In the rub between two vulnerable people, in commitment and self-sacrifice, “here I am” witnesses the restorative potential of human relationships.

With this perspective in mind, let me conclude by returning to a question that I posed early on in this chapter. Assuming as I have, that ethical responsibility is first and foremost a relational issue that has political, social, legal, and economic ramifications, what might it mean for us to prioritize the narrative relationship in our discussions about ethical collaboration in autobiography studies? How might we discern the ethical complications and possibilities that arise in the narrative product *through* those that emerge in the relationship signalled in and around the text? Based on my interpretation of Wiebe’s collaboration with Johnson, as well as my own collaborative experience, I want to suggest two things that a relational starting point offers our ethics. First, it complicates our ethical ideals of unilateral generosity and social justice toward the “marginalized other” by illustrating how difficult it is to put these ideals into practice. In *Stolen Life*, relational complications and narrative discrepancies arise precisely because of Wiebe’s attempt to uphold such ethical ideals. His overwhelming sense of guilt at his political identity, his attempt at unilateral generosity, and his goal of doing justice “for the other” bring these ideals of ethical responsibility into question by revealing their negative underbelly. While honourable as a model for human and narrative interaction, ethical responsibility—especially

when it is given unilaterally—proves problematic in practice: Wiebe loses his own ability for receptivity and challenges Johnson’s responsibility and openness toward him in the process. His response becomes unethical in its very expression of responsibility. He reveals that even benevolent attempts at ethical responsibility challenge narrative relationships and contribute to the ethical problems and generic dissonances we discern in collaborative texts. In autobiography studies, then, we need to be particularly aware of the ways that human relationships complicate our ethical appeals and expectations about how collaborators should give to others and do justice with and for others in narrative production.

This brings me to my second point. Upholding specific ethical ideals for narrative collaboration limits the ethical possibilities that do emerge in the collaborative relationship, possibilities that may or may not translate into the text itself. Beginning our ethical inquiry with the relational process rather than the narrative product of collaboration alerts us to these possibilities. In light of the human interaction and dialogue on which collaborative narrative depends, it is hardly surprising that the ethical possibilities that emerge in collaboration are reciprocal rather than unilateral in nature. As Wiebe and Johnson’s relationship reveals, ethical responsibility must go both ways: it is, in fact, Johnson’s receptivity and responsibility toward Wiebe that could be seen to usher in an alternative sense of justice for herself—a practice of mutual and equal responsibility between them oriented toward “a shared future” (Reynolds 11). Without a careful look at the text’s relational context, however, we miss this perspective entirely. To glean a more accurate conception of ethics for collaboration, then, we cannot simply consult the text and apply our ethical ideologies to it. We must also carefully examine the relational processes and ethical complications that shape the text as we come to witness it, the places where the world of collaboration touches the text.

Conclusion

The relational and dialogic processes of witnessing lives in narrative form—writing others in narrating oneself and writing oneself in narrating others—necessitates an ethics of responsibility in one’s interpersonal and narrative interactions. In this dissertation, I have suggested that beyond a set of moral codes to dictate these interactions, being ethically responsible refers to a radical orientation of subjectivity *otherwise* than being for oneself and a response of existential generosity to the alterity of other people. Following Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, I have relied on the phrase “here I am” to signify this orientation and response. To say, “here I am” means to locate one’s being in giving oneself, subjecting oneself, and choosing mutual vulnerability in one’s relationships with vulnerable subjects. It also means to witness these subjects *otherwise* in re-cognition and response-ability: to “see” and “tell” their lives beyond what can be seen or known about them and to respond to them as human beings beyond labels or categories. With this framework in mind, I examined three facets of witnessing *otherwise* through the life narratives of Etty Hillesum, John Howard Griffin, and Yvonne Johnson in collaboration with Rudy Wiebe: witnessing the other in every self and form of life (Hillesum), witnessing oneself as another (Griffin), and witnessing other subjects in relation to oneself (Wiebe and Johnson). In each case, witnessing “here I am” to alterity reinforces the subjectivity and responsibility of both the respondent witness and the vulnerable subject. Ultimately, as I have just discussed in Chapter Four, “here I am” is a response of generous reciprocity and reciprocal generosity that works itself out as a negotiation of space—making room for alterity, as it were—within each subject and in every relationship, and a mutual interaction of address and response in every narrative act. Both subjects and respondents must be mutually vulnerable and

interdependent in their relationships and mutually responsible for the way they live their lives and narrate the lives of others.

Without this sense of mutuality and posture of openness toward alterity, respondents may witness vulnerable subjects and write or read their lives with deeply ethical responses in mind (such as listening, empathizing, doing social justice, or even giving unilaterally), but these responses prove ineffectual for actually transforming the power relations between subjects and respondents. This seems especially true for scholars or writers who maintain positions of power as social advocates in their narrative relationships and whose ethical responses are motivated by guilt for their sense of participation in the other person's oppression. As *Black Like Me*, *Stolen Life*, and my own experiences have impressed on me, it is precisely in participating face to face with vulnerable subjects in the narrative process that our ethical ideals of unilateral generosity, our motivations of benevolence or guilt, our politics of recognition, and our power dynamics become dramatically unsettled. Whatever ideals, investments, or identity markers we thought we had intact are challenged by the other person's humanity and our own shortcomings in our actual encounters. We are made vulnerable as a result: our subjectivity becomes radically reordered in light of who other people are, their alterity challenging both what we think we know about them and what we think we know about ourselves. It seems to me that only from this position of vulnerability and re-ordered subjectivity can we begin to witness others *otherwise*—beyond our presuppositions, ontological categories, and power structures—and move toward “a shared future” in which we can assume generous responsibility for one another in such transformative acts as reconciliation and forgiveness (Reynolds, “Toward Forgiveness” 11).

Naturally, as I have suggested throughout my work, numerous complications arise in this face-to-face interaction, in the processes of relating to each other and bearing narrative witness to

the other's life. However, rather than view these complications simply as ethically suspect, I have come to see them as opportunities to revise our idealistic conceptions of ethical responsibility and new avenues to explore in our thinking about the nature and practice of response. I want to conclude, then, by briefly revisiting three of these relational complications and offer them as openings to rethink responsibility for the context of relational life writing.

Ownership and Self-Possession

The first complication is the sense of ownership and self-possession of the story that attends any writer who authors the life narratives of others, whether that writer's own life is explicit in the narrative or not. In relational life writing, as Wiebe tells Johnson, "no story is ever only yours alone," but is "entangled" in the stories of many other people (Wiebe and Johnson 24; Ricoeur, *OA* 107). And yet, both contributors to the writing relationship assume ownership of the story. Vulnerable subjects who disclose their life story, as Johnson does with Wiebe, are likely to share Johnson's position that "[o]thers maybe won't agree, but I want to tell *my* life the way *I* see it" (24, my emphasis), while the writers I have studied are hard pressed not to tell the other person's life the way *they* see it, though not without some anxiety or inner doubt. Wiebe, Griffin, and Hillesum may well be adamant that the stories they tell are not *only* their own stories; indeed, the point of each story is to reveal the oppression and suffering of others, whether an individual person, a racial community, or even "an age" (Hillesum 273). However, they still consider their stories their "own" in a fundamental way, as they experience, witness, and author these other lives in relation to themselves.

In what sense, then, "[d]o we . . . own our selves and the stories of our lives" (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* 93)? A feeling of ownership of one's life and story is significant for determining and authoring oneself as an individual: Who am I as distinct from others? Indeed,

the journal genre reifies this sense of self in distinction from others; its very process of self-narration affirms one's possession of oneself for oneself. I not only tell myself, but I do so in a form that is for myself alone—a private and personal narrative—despite my being inextricably linked to the lives and stories of others. Inevitably, even these stories written for oneself alone reveal the lives of other people, and if they are published (and thus made public), they can easily violate the privacy of these others with the “liberty” one has taken in writing one's own life. Life writing therefore raises the ethical dilemma of truth telling while respecting the rights of other people: At what point is one's liberty and obligation to tell the truth about oneself infringing on the rights and privacies of others?¹⁸⁴

From my perspective, these problems of liberty, privacy, and truth telling are symptoms of a more fundamental ethical dilemma—the clash between the two Western cultural ideals of how to be in the world: possessive individualism and responsible relationality. Logically speaking, an ethics of responsibility that conceives of a subject as dependent on its relations with others is irreconcilable with the ideals of self-possession and independence: I cannot exist by means of others and still own my own life. Levinas confronts precisely this problem with his alternative sense of subjectivity beyond self-possession (or a dispossession of the subject) in the “here I am,” a response that is counter-cultural in the extreme. I say “in the extreme” because Levinas takes ethical relationality to its logical conclusions and describes the responsible self without any of the complications of possessive individualism getting in the way. In doing so, he

¹⁸⁴ A number of autobiography theorists, including Eakin, Freedman, Miller, and Mills have explored this issue of ownership in terms of each person's right to liberty and to privacy in writing relational stories. Eakin discusses this dilemma in “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration.” He examines Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* (1997) and asks, “[s]hould respect for the privacy of others have taken precedence over an otherwise commendable allegiance to telling the truth? Or did Harrison fail to respect her own privacy in disclosing her story?” (119). See also Freedman's “Decent and Indecent: Writing My Father's Life,” Miller's “The Ethics of Betrayal: Diary of a Memoirist,” and Mills's “Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life” in *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004).

does not simply challenge one's right to self-possession (individuality, liberty, and privacy) but reconstitutes what it means to be a self altogether.

While avoiding this extreme in Levinas's ethics, I am convinced that practicing responsibility in one's narrative relationships with others does require letting go of one's right to oneself and releasing one's possessive ownership of one's life. In the narrative process, one cannot respond to a vulnerable subject without also having to break repeatedly with one's desire for power and possession. Especially in the process of narrative collaboration, where one's life is explicitly interwoven in the other's story, subjects and respondents must constantly struggle against the desire for power and possession that occurs between them. To negotiate this space of narration is always an endeavour fraught with personal and political friction. And yet, this "salty rub" can be seen as a gift and an opportunity for ethical engagement in two particular ways.

First, this struggle can be seen as a gift to deal with the burden of individualism. While possessive individualism or self ownership can be seen as a necessary outworking of agency, especially for those who have suffered trauma and lost a sense of selfhood, this agency is dangerous without an equivalent responsibility to direct it.¹⁸⁵ One cannot simply be an agent without also being responsible in one's agency. And to discern and enact this responsibility on one's own is a terrible burden to bear. Neither agency nor responsibility should be one's *own*. As anthropologist Marianne Gullestad observes:

Modern secular society puts increasing pressure on individuals by investing the individual self with profound importance and making each person solely responsible for the development of his or her own self, on the one hand, and on the other hand, by

¹⁸⁵ Agency without responsibility, as I have highlighted in my last chapter, is seriously problematic. It assumes that facilitating a vulnerable subject's agency in listening to his or her story equalizes the power hierarchy between subject and respondent, between oppressed and oppressor. In fact, it often works to reinstate the respondent's power as a facilitator or "giver" or affirm the subject's self-possession, which carries its own dimensions of power and control. The goal of responsibility is to challenge power inversions and revolutions with peace, through mutual vulnerability and mutual responsibility.

divorcing the individual from forms of communities which give that development direction and meaning. (*Everyday Life Philosophers* 287-88)

Like Gullestad, I am convinced that a sense of ethical responsibility for ourselves as well as for each other cannot be our own to bear—a weight that can be seen through Levinas’s writings as itself an excessive and impossible trauma—but must be aided by the particular communities in which we live and interact. Both agency and responsibility are gained interdependently. We need one another to be ourselves.¹⁸⁶

Second, this struggle can be seen as a practical opportunity to engage in the mutuality and negotiation required to live our lives and tell our stories. Without having personally grappled with the relational dynamics of writing another’s life, listeners or readers can be idealistic about the possibilities of ethical responsibility and too easily judge the shortcomings of the author, the vulnerabilities of the subject, and the power relations involved in producing stories of suffering. The “salty rub” between oneself and others is precisely the challenging experience of “up closeness” that both stings and heals our relationships; it has the potential to preserve our interactions while, at the same time, bringing out their most dynamic flavours and demanding processes. In short, it functions as the basis for narrative communion and reflects the ethical potential of genuine interaction.

From this perspective, I suggest that the language of ownership and possession limits our ability to understand living and writing lives with others because it frames our relationships solely in terms of power. Rather than ask in what sense we *own* our selves and the stories of our lives (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* 93), scholars in autobiography studies may want to consider how subjects and respondents “enter the word” or participate in the process of creation in writing narratives, “as though [one] did not put the word into [one’s] own mouth” (Buber qtd.

¹⁸⁶ My thinking here is deeply indebted to Eakin’s discussion of Gullestad in his third chapter of *Living Autobiographically* (2008).

in L'Engle, *Walking on Water* 27). We do not own our stories or the stories of others by our authorship; instead, we participate with one another in their creation. A life story and its processes of human interaction always take on a life of their own beyond one's narrative control, as both subjects and respondents move beyond themselves to participate in the world of the word. While the discourse of power may be one way to understand relationality, alternative expressions like "participation" in narrative creation (beyond ourselves and our sense of ownership) may well offer new ways to examine the nature of life writing, the role of relationship in writing lives, and the ethics of responsibility in narrative form.

Unilateral Generosity

A second relational complication for life writing is the ethics of unilateral generosity as a means to right the wrongs of oppression and bring peace and restoration to broken communities and relationships. As Levinas posits it, unilateral generosity—giving without taking or expecting something in return—is the ethical response *par excellence* whose paradigm is self-sacrifice "for the other." Respondent witnesses are summoned by the suffering of another person to give up themselves for the other's sake. Such a response requires vulnerability, the ability to open oneself fully to engage with the other person or group of people no matter the cost, as is evident in each of the three life writers I have examined. Respondents cannot give themselves in a genuine or meaningful way unless they are involved in a face-to-face relationship with a vulnerable subject, responding to his or her vulnerability with their own. Without being mutually vulnerable, the respondent's giving—even of him- or herself—is too interlaced with power to be relationally transformative. To be a subject at all *is* to be vulnerable, open to the reality of others, whether suffering under them or enjoying intimate connection with them.

While an ethics of unilateral generosity impels mutual vulnerability between subjects and respondents, I have suggested through the work of Ricoeur that pursuing *entirely* a practice of unilateral giving and self-sacrifice is deeply problematic. Not only is such giving unsustainable (the only truly generous witness is a martyr), it is also pathological to the self, devalues the suffering subject, and undermines the possibility of genuine community. I find John Milbank's discussion in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* particularly illuminating in this regard. Responding to the ethics of unilateral generosity posed by Derrida, Levinas, and Marion, Milbank suggests that such a sacrificial ethics culminates in the death of the self: to give self-sacrificially erodes the very self "which is alone able to offer itself" (146). If the self is truly sacrificed, how can it continue to give itself? The summons to give from this position becomes an ethical tyranny whose demands the respondent feels he or she must obey (often out of guilt) rather than a call to participate in the excess of generosity already given in the form of human life. This is what I think Milbank means when he suggests in theological terms, "sacrifice is only ethical when it is also resurrection" (154). Generosity must begin and end in an excess of life and participation in the gift of life rather than in an ethics unto death.

Beyond its pathological relation to the self, unilateral giving devalues the sufferer. As an ethical exemplar, unilateral generosity addresses human interaction with others in the abstract rather than in the concrete. If only "the dead person . . . can be a true giver," then giving does not take seriously a living communication with another person: "There is no true respect for the other involved here" (Milbank 156, 155). The nature and question of generosity cannot be divorced from the messiness of being involved and connected with other people. With an abstract paradigm of the good in view rather than the reality of another person, the respondent witness can easily make the other person into a project for social justice or a mission for other

forms of political or narrative do-gooding. Projects of giving voice and doing justice reinforce the power hierarchies that ethical generosity is meant to overcome and lose the reality of the other person in the process. Only by engaging with the other person in his or her specificity can ethical giving be realized for the social practice it is and the relational renewal it can bring.

Without genuine social and proximate interaction, unilateral generosity undermines the possibility of community. Giving is a social responsibility; it is *the* mode “of social being” (Milbank 156). As I discussed in Chapter Four, a respondent cannot give himself unilaterally for others without also taking away the responsibility of others to give in return. Respondents must be willing to give responsibility and be able to receive the responses of vulnerable subjects. As Ricoeur argues, genuine interaction calls for reciprocity, both in dialogue and in responsibility (OA 193). Or, in the words of Milbank, “If there is a gift that can truly be, then this must be the event of a reciprocal but asymmetrical and non-identically repeated exchange” (156). Generosity must be reciprocal for a dialogue or a relationship to function, for vulnerable subjects to gain agency and responsibility, and for community to be restored between those who have suffered and those who have harmed.

What kind of generosity, then, is in order for life writing? I want to suggest a generosity in which subjects are mutually vulnerable to receive and mutually responsible to give to each other in the narrative process. Vulnerable subjects must be seen as having something to give *besides* their story. The purpose of sharing stories of suffering is not simply for vulnerable subjects to reclaim their voices and reframe their lives, or even to impress the memory of suffering on readers in hopes that it will not reoccur, although these are significant motivations. Beyond these reasons, stories of suffering are modes of narrative being shared for the sake of relationship: to restore broken communities and to create communities where none exist. This

purpose is perhaps best illustrated in *Stolen Life*, where Johnson shares her story precisely as a summons to relational reconciliation and renewal. “Help me share my shame and pain, so that others will do the same, and so awaken to themselves and to all the peoples of the world,” she prays at the outset of the story, and reiterates this desire in her closing epigraph, “that we may learn humility and pitifulness, so that no one needs to suffer alone, but can find spiritual union with all humankind.” Vulnerable subjects, respondents, and readers alike are meant to find themselves in this narrative mode of communion and reconciliation. The process of doing so, however, is no simple matter. Perhaps such mutual generosity is only possible *beyond* the ethical, because it suggests the consummation of community, a restoration of life meant to be celebrated by vulnerable subjects and guilt-ridden respondents alike through the life writing process. And yet, I saw glimpses of this conviviality in my own collaborative work with Rhodea Shandler. Between her story of Holocaust suffering and the messiness of its telling was the simple delight in drinking tea with a friend.

Guilt and Martyrdom

This brings me to my third and final point of complication. What motivates many respondent life writers to ethical responsibility, including Griffin, Wiebe, and me, is guilt for being implicated in the oppression of the vulnerable subject. From Levinas’s perspective, guilt *is* the necessary basis for ethical responsibility: not guilt for one’s offences but guilt for the complacency and self-satisfaction that keep one from responding to the needs of others. As he explains in an interview with Philippe Nemo:

You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: ‘*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.*’ This is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offences that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others. (EI 98-99)

We are never responsible enough, Levinas argues. Indeed, each person is guilty of being too lax in his or her responsibilities for others and in facilitating the responsibilities of others.

However, I have found that guilt—whether for committing offences against others or failing to respond to them—is only an effective motivator for ethical responsibility to a point. As I showed in Chapter Four, guilt impedes responsibility. It constrains the respondent (Wiebe) and turns him inward, creating a sense of anxiety, self-doubt, and distrust in himself as well as impeding the fullness of forgiveness and relational restoration with Johnson. Respondents motivated by guilt are eager to give, but their giving is often meant to ease the burden of a guilty conscience. And further, they may even *need* the suffering of others in order to enact their martyrdom and feel as though they are doing something good for others. Such respondents may feel they can never give enough or be enough and become burdened by their own self-centred need to sacrifice themselves. Guilt, then, may well initiate ethical responsibility, but it cannot sustain a “here I am” response. It compels devoted responsible action for others, especially in political contexts for the sake of social justice, but it also impedes respondents from participating fully and vulnerably with suffering subjects in face-to-face relationships. In short, guilt lacks the life-giving and regenerative impulse to genuinely transform one’s relationships with others.

In contrast to Levinas, then, I suggest that “here I am” is not a response to the other in guilt but a posture of openness to the other in faith. In the biblical text from which Levinas borrows this concept of responsibility, “here I am” functions principally as a response of faith in God that works itself out in obedience to the commandments in the Torah to love God, one’s neighbours, and the strangers in one’s midst (*KJV*, Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Deut. 10:19), and in the gospels, to love one’s enemies (Matt. 5:44). As I proposed in Chapter One, the prophets do not respond “here I am” to God as to a cosmic policeman whose call is inseparable from

condemnation. This model of subjectivity leads ethical responsibility straight back into an economy of guilt. Rather, “here I am” is a response to God as a cosmic lover, as Rosenzweig postulates in *The Star of Redemption*. He writes of God’s command to love as “the sum and substance of all commandments ever to leave God’s mouth” and goes on to argue that “the commandment to love can only proceed from the mouth of the lover. Only the lover can and does say: love me!—and he really does so. In his mouth the commandment to love is not a strange commandment; it is none other than the voice of love itself” (176).¹⁸⁷ As Rosenzweig sees it, what spurs one to respond to the alterity of others is divine love itself. The divine lover draws me from myself in love, an excess that summons and motivates me to ethical responsibility for other people. From this biblical perspective, to say, “here I am” to God is to take on faith that one is participating in a cosmic love that one can “pay forward” to other people, one’s neighbours and even one’s enemies.

Each one of the life writers I examine in this dissertation exhibits this faith in divine alterity, a mystical or spiritual connection to God, which draws each one to the alterity of others and motivates them all to ethical responsibility and interaction. Their faith in alterity offers them an alternative way to see themselves and other vulnerable subjects beyond the power structures that would normally divide them. Their witness of others, as Hillesum so aptly puts it, is a “hearkening unto” God: “the most essential and the deepest in [them] hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God” (204). Harkening unto “God,” which she cannot see but takes on faith in herself and others, gives her the capacity to respond in peace to those

¹⁸⁷ Notably, as Rosenzweig presents it here and as Levinas and Ricoeur concur, faith comes in *hearing* (the summons, the voice of love itself) beyond what can be seen. Indeed, faith is witnessing that which cannot be seen—the alterity of an other—in what can be seen: the infinite in the finite. Faith depends on a phenomenon given in revelation (a word) beyond what is made available to one’s senses or cognition (Levinas, *EI* 87-88; Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics of Testimony” 136). And of course, this is the reason why Levinas and Ricoeur use the language of *response* in describing their ethics. To respond to what is *heard* (beyond what is seen) is ultimately a matter of faith.

fellow sufferers and oppressors whom she can see. For Griffin, faith in alterity begins in a “Great Yes” to God that motivates his radical response to the racial injustice against blacks in the Deep South that he sees around him. He is compelled to witness the *res sacra* of blacks and whites alike beyond their racial identity markers and prejudices, and his own. And for Johnson, faith in “the Creator of all” transforms her witness of herself from victim and murderer to “Medicine Bear Women,” the one who heals. Faith in alterity gives her the courage to respond, “here I am” to Wiebe, witnessing him beyond *his* sense of perpetration and guilt, and to seek familial restoration and racial reconciliation between her Cree people and those Canadians who have oppressed them. Their narratives suggest that faith in divine alterity, cosmic love, and the goodness of life, precisely in the midst of bearing witness to suffering, can indeed transform their lives and their relationships. Their narratives also suggest that such faith is always a grappling with alterity: a struggle between opening to another and revolving around oneself and one’s own story, as well as a negotiation between the reality of guilt, fear, and power and the possibility of *hessed*—existential generosity through love in their relationships.

How, then, do we account for the role of faith and spiritual receptivity in ethical responsibility for our scholarly discussions of life writing? I am reminded here of a question posed by Lawrence Vogel in his Introduction to *Morality and Mortality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*: “Does faith add anything to the ethical sensibility that is already available to a secular culture?” (36). Perhaps it does not. But in their life narratives specifically, Johnson and Wiebe, Griffin, and Hillesum appear to affirm what Jesuit spiritual director, Thomas Green, calls a “necessary link between witnessing to faith and promoting social justice” (34). For them, witnessing alterity *is* an act of faith in what cannot be seen that informs their ethical responses to what can be seen. Such a position of faith does not involve a particular set of religious dogmas;

rather, it is one way for these life writers to challenge the tyranny of self-possession, the problem of human suffering, and the dominant systems of power and being in the world. In witnessing alterity, they propose alternative motivations for justice, peace, and love that exceed those that can be generated by the self alone—either in guilt or in benevolence. Indeed, it appears that without faith in alterity, ethical practice is essentially self-interested, a return to the self. With this in mind, it seems to me that we, as scholars of life writing, need to examine more carefully the role of faith in the practices of witnessing and ethical responsibility, and to acknowledge the theological hyperethics—the love for one’s neighbours and one’s enemies—that underpins our secular conceptions of ethical responsibility. If ethical responsibility is not essentially a politics but a witness of faith, then how might we understand the politics of life writing alternatively in relation to spiritual views of otherness? How might a closer look at the issue of faith open new avenues for exploring the nature of ethical responsibility in life writing and the role of narratives in restoring the lives of vulnerable subjects and reconciling communities across political divides? And finally, how might our scholarship about the lives of others bear witness to alterity in ethically responsible ways and open out to further dialogue?

I am convinced that faith adds a significant dimension to the ethical sensibility that is already available to a secular culture. Being vulnerable, being receptive to the generosity and responsibility of others, participating in the creation of life stories, and living out the possibilities of cosmic love are all acts of faith in the other. These are the seeds of ethical responsibility that bear the fruits of relational transformation precisely because they undermine the power of self-possession, political oppression, and personal suffering that ethical responsibility as a moral duty cannot. Faith is witnessing the resurrection dimension of existential generosity, a life giving response through the suffering and sacrifice that are part of being and writing with others. From

this perspective, relational life writing can be seen not simply as a practice of writing our lives in relation to the lives of other people but also as a practice of genuinely embracing life—its deep complexities, pains, joys, and loves— in our relationships with others in writing.

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