Particularly Responsible: Everyday Ethical Navigation, Concrete Relationships, and Systemic Oppression

by

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Sociology and Equity Studies in Education,
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Abstract

In this dissertation, I articulate what I call a personal-is-political ethics, suggesting that the realm of human affairs long called ethics is inseparable from that which is today normatively called psychology. Further, I suggest that these names for this shared realm are situated in different discursive traditions which, therefore, provide different parameters for possible action and understanding. In my exploration of what it is to be human, I strategically centre ethical transgressions, particularly those that are mappable onto systemic forms of oppression. I explore personal-is-political enactments of sexism, ableism, racism, colonization, classism, ageism, and geopolitics, including situations in which several of these intersect with one another and those in which therapeutic, pedagogical, or parenting hierarchies also intersect with them. Without suggesting this is ‘the whole story,’ I closely read people’s narrations of ethical transgressions that they – that we – commit. I claim that such narrations shape our possibilities for harming others, for taking responsibility, and for intervening in others’ lives in an attempt to have them take responsibility (e.g., therapy with abuse perpetrators and critical pedagogy).
I work to demonstrate the ethical and political importance of: the impossibility of exhaustive knowledge, the illimitable and contingent power relations that are ever-present and give shape to what we can know, and the ways our possibilities in life are constituted through particular contact with others. I explore ethical transgressions I have committed, interrogating these events in conversation with explorations of resonant situations in published texts, as well as with research conversations with friends about their ethical transgressions and how they make sense of them. I tentatively advocate for, and attempt to demonstrate, ways of governing ourselves when we are positioned ‘on top’ of social hierarchies – in order to align our responses and relationships more closely with radical political commitments.
Acknowledgments

Speaking of “illimitable others,” “lives joined together,” and so on, I could never do justice to all the people who made this possible. I’ll name a few that come to mind, knowing fully well that doing so will be an injustice to countless others not named.

Thank you to my dissertation committee members, Kari, Tanya, and Rinaldo, and my additional exam committee members Sherene and Robert. I could thank you all for any number of things, but I’ll specify that each of you has asked me difficult but really, really good questions that brought me to new destinations I never would have found without you. Your persistence, patience, and pushing are all greatly appreciated. One of the topics in the pages that follow is how relationships of “guidance” can be done without domination. Kari’s supervision is one of the most inspiring examples of this that I’ve come across, and I can’t say how much I’ve learned from her in this regard. I hope to pass on “something like” your example to my students.

Thanks, too, to my son who (in very different ways from Kari, Tanya, and Rinaldo!) reminds me how little I know every day. Even if I don’t, I hope you come to inhabit a world with considerably less preventable and predictable injustice. And I hope you play a part toward that.

Thanks to my partner, who has read every page of this thing, providing invaluable feedback, and helping out in many other thankless ways. Fifteen months ago we had a shared loss that threw us off course for a time. Here’s to less tumultuous waters ahead, but also to getting ever better at going with the flow and enjoying the ride.

Thanks to all the others, too, who have read or heard some part of this and provided assistance in many ways: Amy, Barbara, Kim, Olimpia, and Rochelle; as well as Rod and the rest of the 2010 Advanced Research in Disability Studies seminar he led at OISE. Thank you too to all the people I’ve had as students over the last few years and as social work clients in the years. Some of you may recognize some of what’s in here as I was working to make sense of things when we knew one another. Know that your responses and engagement pushed it along. Thank you.

Thank you, too, to the friends and family who’ve played less central roles in my process of writing, as such, but who’ve significantly made me who I am today. I’ll trust you all to know who you are. I ‘know’ who I am, and I am who I am, because of you.
And a very special acknowledgment to two particular groups of people, without whom this never would have been possible, and toward whom I know I could never fully do justice. First, the friends who agreed to participate in this research: Devi, Griffin, Hannah, Patty, Ruth, Shaista, and Tina. I have only begun to scratch the surface of the richness each of you shared with me, and I promise to return to it. Perhaps we’ll do so together, if you wish. Thank you for sharing your life and your wisdom, as both a friend and a researcher/author/theorist. I hope I haven’t said anything that will have you regret participating, and I look forward to journeying along with you further in the future. And finally, I wish to acknowledge all of you who remember me as someone who’s done you harm. Whether you find yourself in here or not, you may find me doing this totally outrageous and laughable, or you may find it welcome and appreciated. Or perhaps you’re response is one I can’t imagine right now. If you are represented in these pages, explicitly or implicitly, I hope you don’t feel misrepresented or otherwise further harmed from what I’ve done here.
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Chapter 1
Psychology and Ethics: The Same River Twice

How do we Make Sense of Times we Hurt Others?

The basic question guiding this project is: how do people make sense of times that we hurt others? Often when asked to explain why I am interested in this, I describe two of my past jobs in the ‘helping professions.’ In one, I worked with men who perpetrated violence against women and children (Chapman 2007). In this work, I was struck by the gap between what these men said about their lives, selves and relationships, and what ‘the literature’ on abuse perpetrators said about these things. I say ‘these things,’ purposefully leaving the suggestion that these men and their relationships are ‘things,’ because that is how they’re often portrayed: fixed in time, clear and successful in singular ethical purpose to do harm, exhaustively knowable, clearly differentiated from the rest of us, and most definitively differentiated from those of us who devote our lives to the taxing work of trying to fix such fixed and unfixable things.

In another job, previous to that one, I worked in a residential treatment centre where almost all the staff were non-Native and almost all the residents were Aboriginal youth. Almost all the kids were, furthermore, described in terms of labels or suspected labels of intellectual and developmental disabilities, psychopathologies, learning disabilities, attachment disorders, and so on (Chapman forthcoming 2012). Many of them were also ‘violent,’ which clearly differentiated them from those of us who worked there. That ‘goes without saying,’ but perhaps with real effects on what we do and think: this workplace was the only context in my entire life where I used physical violence. I restrained kids and locked them in what we called a ‘safe room.’ How could I do this? I still do not know. But according to just about any literature you’ll consult outside of this project, how I did it had little or nothing to do with how the men I later worked with came to abuse their partners and kids.

The process by which domestic violence perpetrators come to use violence, make sense of their violence, and be at peace with their violence is – as the story goes – entirely distinguishable from the processes by which, for example, residential counsellors, prison guards, police, or military do so. My violence and everything surrounding it is distinct from
that of the men I worked with, as from that of the kids I worked with. Because I am normal. Well, that is a bit of a simplification. Perhaps being normal would not be enough: normal people today cannot use violence against kids, disabled people, or racialized people without becoming rendered abnormally immoral. So how is there so much generally unproblematized violence against these three groups and against people who live within various intersections of them? I would like to suggest that my violence was rendered immune to a denigrated immoral abnormality, through the discursive work of an exalted immoral abnormality (Thobani 2007). I was discursively constituted as morally abnormal, but in a way structurally similar to how professional athletes and geniuses are discursively rendered abnormally outside of their respective norms. Lennard Davis discusses normalcy by attending to the uneven valuation of extremes of the bell curve known as the “ogive” (1995, 34), by which abnormals constituted as such by the left of the curve are denigrated, 

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1 Reading an earlier draft of this project, Sherene Razack asked what the figure of the person of colour does in my text. This is a tremendously complex question. Reflecting on it, I concede that I am constituted by white norms, including strategies of interpretation and representation of ‘others’. The figure of the person of colour therefore does many things that such figures tend to do in white texts, including mine. Above, I can identify two dangers of my use of the figure of the person of colour (and of the disabled person on this same page): first, there are the children I worked with – disabled and aboriginal. What do their figures do here? They are background characters in a story that is all about me: what I did, and my journey toward accountability, justice, and ethicality. I’m not sure this is an ethical or politically just writing practice, to be honest. And yet I’m not sure how else I would go about interrogating what I did in this setting. It’s consequential that I did the things I describe to children. It’s consequential that I did them to Aboriginal children. And it’s consequential that I did them to disabled Aboriginal children. I suppose my hope is that the potential value in interrogating my participation in ageism, racism, colonialism and ableism outweighs the potential harm in rendering them background characters in my account of this setting and my violence within it. Ultimately my hope would be that future workers in such sites would be less freely able to render real people as ‘background characters’ in their own life journeys or narratives of good intentions or that, indeed, such places will cease to exist altogether. In addition to these backgrounded children, there are other figures of the person of colour and figures of the disabled person on this page as well. These are many of the authors I draw upon and name as influences on my work. In interrogating my participation in ableism and racism above, I draw upon a prominent Critical Race scholar and a prominent Disability Studies scholar, one sentence after another. What work do these figures do, and how is this work dangerous? This project would not have been possible at all, and would certainly not be what it is, had I not drawn upon Critical Race Theory, Disability Studies, Queer Theory, anti-colonial critique, feminism, and so on. Drawing upon these fields provides something of a political grounding or accountability, in a way that I think is absolutely necessary and at least partly legitimate. But the flip side of this is that I thus represent myself – by citing Thobani and Davis here, for example – as morally and politically grounded in this project. And the danger in this is that it might very well obscure those times and places where I do participate in ableism and racism in my writing practices. At best, citing Thobani here may prevent that from happening, or prevent it from happening so frequently or so severely. But at worst, it may act as a buffer to legitimate critique in the way that the defensive phrase ‘I’m not racist; my best friend is black’ is often said to do. Pulling Thobani and Davis into my project here as secondary characters, supporting my protagonistic work to think through narratives in which other disabled people and people of colour are rendered background tertiary characters is, perhaps, at once inevitable, politically indispensable, and potentially violent and dehumanizing.
and abnormals created by being positioned on the right of the curve are exalted. I am viewed as exceptionally ethical by virtue of having sacrificed my life to work with poor, disabled, Aboriginal kids, and then later to work against patriarchal violence. Not everybody has people regularly tell them, “It takes a special person to do the work you do.” I had dozens of people tell me that over a ten-year period, and not a single person has said it since I left the ‘helping professions.’

To speak of me, by virtue of the work I was doing, as a ‘special person’ is to remain entirely “within the true” of the “rules of discursive formation” that govern what we tend to take for granted about professional helping, ethics, and social justice (Foucault 1972). In this project, I suggest that such exaltation is as common and fundamental to structures of domination as are the denigration and marginalization that always accompany it – sometimes even by using the same word, “special,” to fix their denigrated abnormality (Michalko 2002). As in Homi Bhabha’s (1994, 62) account of Fanon’s discussion of colonial relations, it is not that exalted abnormality is “confronted by” denigrated abnormality; there is rather a discursive interdependency distributing various bodies and identities according to the structure of the bell curve and the ogive: my exaltation is “tethered to” their denigration. Adrienne Chambon writes that “Institutional activities simultaneously create clients and workers, as two sides of the same coin” (1999, 68), and that “those who are served [are divided] from those who serve, the helpers, establishing a particular structure of relation … ‘an unbroken unity, a “couple”’” (1999, 67, citing Foucault). These activities and divisions produce my exalted moral infallibility; when you read stories about me in the pages that follow, this is not what you’ll encounter.

Related to this, I do not polemically ‘disagree’ with bell hooks (2003) when she writes that anti-racist white people are heroic and deserving of recognition as such. But her articulation of this as a black woman and me doing so as a white man would be two totally different actions, with completely distinct effects, even if we were to use all the same words. Hers is a reflexive critique of concerns about the actions of some anti-racist people of colour. My concern about such accounts of heroism is, at once structurally likewise and distinctly, a reflexive critique of concerns about the actions of some anti-racist white people. Our reflexive critiques are structurally similar in a way they would not be if I were to reiterate her concern point by point – because we are materially and discursively positioned...
differently. She and I are both engaged in reflexive self-critique of ‘our people,’ and are both orienting these efforts toward anti-racism and different ways of doing anti-racism across racialized difference. For me to critique anti-racist people of colour for being too hard on anti-racist whites would be distinct from her doing so. And so, again, although I do not polemically ‘disagree’ with her (Foucault 2006f), hooks seems to me to be ‘too hard’ on other women of colour, ‘too easy’ on Zillah Eisenstein and other anti-racist white people, and – although I hesitate to say so, out of respect for her work – perhaps too sure about her own account of things and its one-to-one congruence with how things really are. Consider the following: “Accepting Zillah and other white women comrades as anti-racist in their being does not mean that I or they ignore the reality that we can all be as anti-racist as we want to be and still make mistakes” (hooks 2003, 60). Following Chrisjohn, Young and Mauran (2006), and bringing to mind the way the word ‘mistake’ circulated in my conversations with men who had abused, I worry about the “ethical practice” (Mahmood 2005) of narrating participation in racism as mistake. For me to conceptualize myself ‘as anti-racist in my being,’ and then to reformulate people of colour’s experience of me as racist into a ‘mistake’ is, structurally, mappable point-by-point onto what Chrisjohn et al. (2006) call “the standard account” of Indian Residential Schools: the Canadian government, priests, nuns, teachers, and others involved were – “in their being” – good, caring, benevolent Christians, who only wanted the best for Aboriginal children and communities; we know that harm happened in these sites, however, and we acknowledge this harm, and we understand it – however widespread – as so many cumulative “mistakes.” Like Chrisjohn et al., I do not think this account is going to serve us very well in understanding how these harms happened or in working toward preventing similar things from ever happening again. hooks continues from above: “There are individual women of color who work with Zillah yet who do not see … her as I do. I can only say that they do not know her as I know her.” What she does not acknowledge is that she does not know Eisenstein as the other women of colour do either. Rather than discerning between the truth of Eisenstein’s being, on the one hand, and what constitutes aberrations to this truth, on the other, what prevents us from imagining that Eisenstein might be – for the most part – anti-racist in her relationship with bell hooks and – predominantly or at least frequently racist in terms of the effects of her actions on her women of colour colleagues? This is distinct from framing her as racist “in her being.” To facilitate such a framing, in the following quote, note hooks’
agentive interpretive work of exalting some emotions, experiences, and interpretations, and
denigrating others – in support of her account of Eisenstein as fundamentally anti-racist:

I could see that [the women of colour] brought to this encounter a pent up
impatience and rage at white female racism that was not simply about Zillah’s
action. I understood their rage even though I did not share their interpretation.
Realizing that something was ‘wrong,’ Zillah was both hurt and disturbed. Like
any of us who take courageous stands against racism it was hard to accept being
lumped, even if just for a moment, with all the unenlightened white folks who
have no intention of unlearning their racism (hooks 2003, 60).

Although we could never know with certainty, how might these other women of colour be
expected to read this account? Is it not the case that they probably were experiencing
themselves – in the encounter hooks describes in which they confront Eisenstein’s racism –
as ‘taking a courageous stand against racism?’ And is it not likely that they would
experience hooks as ‘lumping them in’ with the people of colour she critiques in this
chapter as irrationally and counter-productively anti-white? She continues:

Engaged in critical dialogue about this encounter, Zillah and I were painfully
reminded of the damage white supremacy has done to our capacity as women to
trust one another. Most black women encounter racism from white women.
That remembered assault may leave us feeling guarded, feeling we cannot allow
ourselves to trust any white women (hooks 2003, 60).

I want to highlight what hooks agentively does here with ‘pain,’ ‘damage,’ ‘assault,’ and
‘feeling.’ The other women of colour are, at least implicitly, granted agency for ‘painfully
reminding;’ white supremacy and (presumably) other “white women” (that is: other than
eisenstein) are granted agency for damaging “our capacity as women to trust one another” –
but whose capacity has been damaged specifically? The women of colour. White women’s
racism against black women is clearly named, but it is positioned as occurring elsewhere – a
“remembered assault” that has lingering consequences on these black women (rather than
being narrated as potentially living on in Eisenstein like in any other white person). This is
troubling to me, because of its familiarity. Many men I worked with told me that the real
reason their behaviour had ever been identified as ‘abuse’ at all was that their partners had
been abused as children and that those ‘remembered assaults left them feeling’ guarded, suspicious, and sensitive. And Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s (2008) apology for Indian Residential Schools acknowledges the legacy of harms done then by other Governments, but he in no way acknowledges “colonial continuities” (Heron 2007) in Canadian policies today. Someone else’s historical violence is why I or we are experienced as harmful, abusive, or oppressive today. It is urgent that we find other ways of narrating these things.

And so how can my own “ethical practices” (Mahmood 2005) be put in fruitful conversation with those of the men I worked with? Without suggesting that any two of us navigate our relationships, choices, and harms-done in the same way, without even suggesting that any one of us navigates any two situations from our own life in the same way, how do people cause harm and how do people do what we call ‘taking responsibility’ for harm we’ve done. When we craft narratives to make sense of these experiences, what possibilities for ethical navigation do different ethical narratives ‘enable,’ and what do they render impossible?

These are important questions for political struggle, ethics, psychology, and how we account for historical developments and social structures. They’re important to everyday living, and my sense is that we think about them all the time – although perhaps often without thinking about how we think about them. People are often surprised that someone would devote an entire doctorate to it, that I’d have that much to say about it, which may be because we tend to experience our own reflections on these things as fairly self-evident. Often when I tell people what I research, they respond by telling me their theories about how people make sense of times they hurt others. They tend to do so in a way that conveys that they have something to teach me – that I should write what they believe. That is worth thinking about. And doing so is fairly central to my research. We all have theories about ethics, politics, and psychology. They do not all get branded ‘theory’ but they all do the work of theory: they give shape to our parameters of freedom for thinking and living, and they determine the particular options we have available in navigating those parameters. They all matter, and in many ways they ‘matter’ much more than a brilliant book on ethics, politics, or psychology that is never read and applied. Translating gun-rights bumper stickers claiming “Guns don’t kill:” theory doesn’t shape the world, people do. But the distinction is false. It is a lot easier to kill with a gun than with most other things, and the particular theory we mobilize matters to what we do and the ease with which we do it. We
all theorize based on our experiences and we all experience based on our theories. We also all live our lives, hurt others, and respond to having hurt others. Sometimes our responses are experienced by those we’ve hurt as ‘responsible,’ and sometimes as further injury. And we can all say something about how all this happens.

For this project, I’ve collected various kinds of accounts of “how all this happens.” Many of them seem to have found me as much as I them. A prime example is that I discuss several examples from children’s entertainment. I never set out to find these; I simply read books and watched shows and movies with my son. Although it was not my purpose at these times, I often read or watched and found this project and its concerns being ‘brought to mind.’ And this, in fact, is not so far off from my recruitment of research participants. Each of my participants knew of my research and my own self-reflexive explorations before we ever talked about their participation, and I believe that this went some way in setting the stage for the conversations between us which directly led to their involvement. Knowing each of them as classmates, colleagues, or comrades, it was most often in the context of non-recruitment-oriented conversations about our lives, work, struggles, and so on, that the decision was made for them to participate in this research. I say “the decision was made” because frequently the line between my invitation and their volunteering was blurry. Perhaps the ‘average’ of these encounters would work out to something along the lines of: the two of us conversing with no explicit purpose; the other person saying something in the course of the conversation that brought this project to my mind; me responding by telling them about the project and what kinds of accounts I was hoping to gather (implying a potential invitation but without extending one explicitly); them responding by expressing interest and perhaps asking if I would like to interview them; and me responding by more formally inviting them to do so, describing some of the logistics, and so on. This was usually then left for a time, for them to think about further, and I later contacted them with a more formal written invitation to participate. I have many other friends with whom the subject was never broached, of course, and this blurry invitation/volunteering only occurred when I heard specific stories or phrases that complimented or complicated what I was already working toward. As one illustration, I had previously considered that I might like to interview Tina about a different particular relationship about which she is very thoughtful. I believe I had not yet shared this with her, because I was not sure how it would ‘fit.’ Then
one evening we were chatting in my living room about various things, including her relationship with Carlos, and I was struck by her articulation of her ethical struggles in their relationship relating to his poverty and what it meant for the two of them. I responded by saying something like, “That’s exactly the kind of struggle I’m hoping to collect for my research” (which she already knew about), and we proceeded from there. In each such conversation, I described what I was seeking as people’s willingness to talk about times when they’ve harmed others or been complicit in harm, where such harm is mappable onto systemic forms of oppression, and I mentioned my own self-reflexive explorations, which each of them was previously aware of. I also made certain to describe the ways that these projected conversations would be both similar and distinct from the therapy I used to do with men who perpetrate abuse.

In terms of published materials I’ve worked with, those I most purposively set out to read for this project have not featured as prominently as I imagined: Jean Hatzfeld’s (2005) interviews with perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide and Hannah Arendt’s (1964) account of Eichmann’s trial, alongside several studies of the narratives of domestic violence perpetrators, were absolutely key in me thinking through and planning this project, but this has not translated into much direct engagement with them in actually doing it. It has been largely theoretical accounts that I was already familiar with that kept calling me back to them while I was writing – that of Sara Ahmed, Michel Foucault, bell hooks, Saba Mahmood, and Gayatri Spivak, as well as that of Alan Jenkins and Michael White. Often I found myself struggling to think something through and would find myself rifling through something I’d read several years earlier that I recalled might address what I was thinking about. I hesitate to describe this ‘methodology,’ which was usually exactly that haphazard, but I also imagine it may not be so different from what many of us do and then feel the need to translate into more formalized processes. Among many other things, I theorize some of what happens at times such as these in the three hundred pages that follow, imagining there is something to be said for ‘going with the flow’ and for attending to those things that are ‘brought to mind’ when we encounter other things.

As for the stories from my own life which are included in these pages, they are clearly not the only times I’ve ever hurt others or been complicit in oppression. An earlier sketch of this project had nearly twice as many topic areas, most of which included stories from my
life. I have explored those that seemed to resonate with the theory I was developing, the stories from my participants, and so on. My decision to use my own examples, as well as those from others not part of any population widely held as perpetrators of violence, is most decisively not to minimize the seriousness of such violence. It is, rather, to contribute to the possibility that we may all become more accustomed to taking our own perpetration seriously. All too often, I think we imagine this should be possible for high-ranking officials of, say, the International Monetary Fund or the military, without realizing that perhaps we all participate in resonant practices of irresponsibility when our transgressions are named or confronted. Not all transgressions are equal, of course, but I am skeptical that those in positions of the most power and influence will ever forge paths of greater responsibility and accountability for the rest of us. In fact, it seems to me that it’s largely feminists of colour that have been working toward forging such paths. If Ahmed, hooks, Mahmood, Razack, and Spivak can study their own participation in others’ oppression, then surely a white guy like me can do so too. And perhaps, perhaps, this might even ‘trickle up’ to those toward whom we aim our activism and critique, so that they might become more responsive to the concerns of those whose lives they’re affecting. Perhaps my work is even evidence that their methodology is already starting to trickle up.

I’d imagine that this effect is generally intentional on the part of those who do such reflexive critique. This is certainly true for me when I do it. When I reflect upon incidents from my own life in these pages, it is not primarily in order to understand my own life better, as an end in itself. Or perhaps I should say that this, in itself, would not be sufficient justification for including these reflections in this particular project. Such reflections are included, largely, because of the ethical and political work that I believe they have the potential to do. I return to this in my final chapter, but here I’ll say that I believe that exposure to one another’s self-reflexive critique frequently seems to invite readers’, listeners’, or witnesses’ own resonant and yet particular self-reflexive critique. This can be considered a kind of ‘technology of power,’ where what we do, write, or say, creates possibilities for those who witness, read, or hear us. If I write a scathing critique of other staff that worked in the Residential Treatment Centre where I once worked, I think this is most likely to invite similarly structured critique – other scathing critiques of other ‘thems,’ where the author is a protagonist, motivated by values and commitments, and those
critiqued are positioned as objectified antagonists. However, if I write a critique of my own participation in the violences of this setting, it seems to rather invite others to consider their own violences. Again, this effect is intentional. I want you to think about your participation in violence. That’s really the most immediate purpose of this entire project.

But this is an incredibly complicated purpose. I don’t know who you are, and it could certainly be legitimately asked, ‘who am I to invite such things of you?’ How does my whiteness, maleness, and so on, give shape to this invitation, to what it means, and to what it does? For example, how would it be an entirely different invitation, with a different kind of moral grounding among other things, if I were a woman of colour? So a question that has come up in discussions about my project is related to who I imagine you to be, or with whom do I imagine this project to be an intervention? My hope is that many diverse readers might take something from this, and that those somethings might point you all in divergent directions I could never foresee. But it’s also true that I’m strategically positioned to invite such critique from people that share at least some of my positions of moral exaltation: other helping professionals, other professors or teachers, white people, men, men who date women, adults, parents, fathers, class-privileged people, cisgendered people, Global North citizens, non-Aboriginal settlers, people who have never been incarcerated, institutionalized, or removed from their families or communities, and people who have never experienced significant ableist oppression or marginalization due to how their bodies or minds are rendered deficient. Some readers will share all of these positions, some one or two, and some none at all. I ultimately imagine my work to be one small part of a collective project toward greater responsibility-taking for the effects of what we do everyday, and I imagine that it may be possible that some white people, for example, will find my invitation to do their own self-reflexive work easier to take up than, for example, Saba Mahmood’s. There is nothing natural or inevitable about this, but I suspect that it will nevertheless frequently be the case, due to the ways that we become ethical subjects in our time and place.

A Flow by Flow Account of this Journey

In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce a number of things that are carried throughout this project in various ways: I return to my reading of hooks’ account of Eisenstein, and I later engage a story from Tanya Titchkosky, in order to start to tease out some lessons we
can take from particular accounts of relationships, ethics, politics, and accountability. I problematize the distinction we normatively make between psychology and ethics, in order to make room to engage diverse alternative traditions for understanding what it is to live our lives and be human. Following Gayatri Spivak, I suggest these diverse traditions have “something like a relationship” with one another when contrasted with liberal individualism and the professional psychologies. This is most certainly not to say that all of these traditions are ‘the same.’ Rather, I am interested in very particular points of resonance amongst them, which occur alongside many other points of divergence. As one example, each of the non-liberal traditions I discuss offers an agentive account of listening, reading, or witnessing, rather than conceptualizing these activities as passively ‘receiving.’ Some of the traditions also mobilize water or music to represent what it is to be human, and I attempt to think with these non-scientific representations and what they ‘enable.’ I critically engage how a psychological orientation to our emotions affects how we conceptualize and operationalize “ethical practices,” in part through a reading of ableist language in some of the authors I otherwise closely follow in this project. I suggest such language can teach us something about the “dividing practices” by which we imagine some emotions to be useless and nonproductive, which I situate within normative processes of disablement. I introduce several resonant orientations for making moral judgments, in which the key factor is how a given practice or tradition positions practices or traditions that differ from it, distinguishing what I do in this project from ‘moral relativism.’ I also introduce Saba Mahmood’s language of “ethical practices” as describing the practices we engage to navigate our flows of becoming; and I describe Spivak’s reading of Michel Foucault’s pouvoir/savoir as, at once, power/knowledge and also ‘ability to know.’ I begin to articulate how Spivak and Mahmood’s approaches to ethics can help us along.

Chapter two explores ways of doing and conceptualizing the ‘government of others’ through the ‘government of self’ when we are on top of hierarchies. I describe having cherished certain ways that those positioned ‘on top’ of me governed themselves and governed me in so doing, and I describe how others have done so in ways I have found unpleasant and unhelpful – all in conversation with reflexive explorations of having governed myself in dominating and sexist ways when positioned ‘on top’ as a male partner of a woman, and as a therapist. I draw upon Spivak’s suggestion that, when we are positioned ‘on bottom’ of
hierarchies, certain kinds of ethical navigation on the part of those ‘on top’ force us into highly constrained parameters of freedom. She calls these constrained parameters ‘being a political person,’ as distinguished from ‘being an ethical person:’ we are forced to ethically navigate those relationships as a political struggle. I propose that there may be “something like a relationship” in some, highly selective, aspects of how ‘the government of others’ occurs as domination amongst various different social stratifications, specifically exploring male/female partnerships, therapy relations, and teaching relations. Having previously advocated that we acknowledge the impossibility of ever communicating exactly what we intend, at this point I explore the importance of approximately-shared or resonant understandings of concepts and language when we engage with others, especially across difference and hierarchy, suggesting that this significantly contributes to the possibility of collaboration rather than domination. I then turn my focus toward the possibility and existence of collaboration, even in hierarchical contexts – following Foucault in suggesting that power and hierarchy are not bad, but that we have to be very careful about what we do with them, especially when we are ‘on top,’ which he calls the “hinge point” between ethics and political struggle.

My third chapter strives to ‘perform’ some of what I theorize in earlier chapters about collaboration across hierarchy and so on, by sharing selections from my research conversations. In this section, my research participants do a lot of ‘theorizing for me,’ but some of this theorizing was generated collaboratively – out of their responses to my responses to them, and from ‘the stage I set’ for their reflections. I explore how Devi Mucina’s account of the relative contingent availability of Ubuntu understandings of humanity ‘speak to’ others’ accounts of competing discursive traditions in professional helping and parenting contexts. Following this, I give a critical reading of the “discursive tradition” (Mahmood 2005) implied in codified approaches to ethics, as well as in the assumption that collaborative peer co-supervision, in itself, is more ethical, diverse or just. I theorize my role as researcher, and implicitly the role we play in other occasions where we are ‘on top,’ drawing upon Spivak’s “learning to learn from below,” and I discuss how the structured hierarchy of researcher/researched seems to have been wanted and helpful to my research participants – in that, at least at times, I navigated this hierarchy and these relationships so as to maximize partnership and collaboration and avoid domination and
control. I suggest that embracing the danger of domination as ever-present may be a way toward what Sara Ahmed might call more “performative” political commitments and practices, and I suggest that this involves treating each hierarchical relationship in its uniqueness and contingency, as a counter-practice to more homogenous or institutionalized ways of approaching ‘the government of self and others.’ In this, I suggest that one danger is assuming that we can achieve a destination point at which “the colonist inside every one of us is surgically extracted” (Sartre 2004, lvii). Finally, I discuss the relationship between political consciousness raising, critical pedagogy, or political theory, on the one hand, and everyday ethical struggle on the other, suggesting that this can be considered as structurally “something like” the relationship between learning and practicing musical formalities and improvisation. I discuss both the importance and danger of theoretical and abstract accounts of ‘otherness,’ and I advocate for attention to particularity and contingency, rather than individuality and (capital O) Otherness, in our personal-is-political ethical navigations. I offer that this is particularly important when we are confronted with the allegation that we’ve caused harm, and I suggest that we should be wary of allowing our theoretical critiques to undermine others’ accounts of what we’ve done.

In chapter four, I explore how our lives are joined with one another’s, using the language of “collective flows of becoming” and “forking flows of belonging.” I describe some dangers associated with representation – of others and of humanity, and I introduce the terms “straiten” and “straighten,” as descriptions of the two simultaneous discursive processes by which our parameters of freedom are constrained and our means of navigating those parameters are directed. I describe Spivak’s use of Foucault’s ethical ‘hows’ and contingencies alongside and against Jacques Derrida’s ethical impossibility and illimitability, and I critically engage the imperative to reconcile ‘what one does’ with ‘who one is.’ I then speculate on how ‘the personal is political’ for perpetrators, and what this may mean for ethics and politics, suggesting it may be strategically necessary in the formulation of critique that those critiqued may be more likely to attend to. I suggest that we have to engage people’s own understandings of how and why they do what they do, even when they commit harm or oppression (this is Foucault’s ethical ‘hows’ and contingencies), rather than imagining that those who are harmful or oppressive ‘are’ harmful or oppressive ‘kinds of people.’ I then offer a counterpoint to hold in tension with
this necessary (but dangerous) engagement: Derrida’s critique of the possibility of exhaustive knowledge and straightforward cause-and-effect.

My final chapter explores how we can purposively acknowledge and cultivate the already-existing ways our lives join with others’ lives, rather than each of us being radically discrete beings. I introduce the Narrative Practices of “re-membering” and “outsider-witnessing,” and discuss an “ethical practice” we all do, which I call ‘reflexive accountability,’ showing how important this practice is, how complex it is, and how it serves to show that what Spivak calls our “ability to know” and what I call our ‘inability to know’ are necessary when engaging in ‘the government of others’ in contexts such as critical pedagogy. I offer one way forward for such pedagogy – sharing our own self-reflexive critique – and I explore this by drawing upon the work that happens through “overtones,” “countersignatures,” and “resonance” when we encounter others’ self-reflexive critique. I conclude by connecting all of this to a way of imagining that society does, can, and perhaps will, change on a large scale – in part by attending more purposefully to the ways our lives are already joined with one another, personally-is-politically, and to the ‘other worlds’ that are already all around us and available for our tending.

Interdependent Flows of Becoming

There is a phrase that has found its way into my thoughts many times. I always thought Buddha and Heraclitus were both credited with having said it, until I Googled it so I could cite it here. It seems I was wrong and only Heraclitus said it, but lots of contemporary Buddhists cite him. It goes like this: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he’s not the same man.” Even though this translation uses ‘man’ and ‘he’ to mean all people, it is the only version I have found that spells out the second part so explicitly. I suppose this has found its way into my thoughts so frequently because it feels ‘experience-near’ for me. Well, that is what I wrote in my first draft (when I was a different man, according to Heraclitus), but it does not ‘ring true’ today. I might say, rather, that I experience it as true at the same time as I experience it as expansive of what I experience as true. It is within what Michael White calls what is “possible [for me] to know” (2007, 278). I ‘know’ it sometimes more readily than others, and probably in relation to some aspects of life more consistently than others. When I think about my childhood or adolescence, it is
fairly self-evident that I am not now that little boy or teenager. ‘I am’ does not adequately convey my relationship to either figure, both of whom I cannot help but objectify in my memory. And I am not sure ‘I was’ does any more justice to my relationship with that little boy or teenager. But furthermore, even day-to-day, moment-to-moment, I experience the Heraclitus quote as somewhat true. For example, as I type, my face feels tight and I have the slightest headache, both of which I attribute to not having a good sleep last night. As I type on my bizarre-looking ergonomic keyboard, I am aware of the dull feeling of repetitive strain injury in my right wrist. I am hungry and utterly disinterested in the food on my desk. My stomach is acidic, and I feel slightly nauseated. These things are fairly central to my sense of who I am, at this moment, but are only who ‘I am’ in a larger sense through contrast and comparison with other things, and through organizing these various ‘things’ into narrative form. I ‘know’ I am not prone to headaches, but I also know that nausea and disinterest in food are frequent and familiar companions in my life. And yet, even then, I recently had an uncharacteristic string of headaches over a few days and I actually caught myself beginning to think of myself as someone who regularly gets headaches, which I am pretty sure is untrue. It is even possible that they went away when I caught myself and narrated this as untrue, although I do not imagine it was a matter of simple cause-and-effect.

It is not just bodily sensations that are in flux and yet subjected to rigidifying interpretation. Before opening this chapter’s word processing document, into which I am typing these words, I first read over a more general document containing ideas about the overall structure of this entire project as I conceptualized it only recently. Presumably when I initially wrote those ideas I thought they were important, but I almost deleted the whole file just now because it is clearly garbage. I only stopped myself because I thought “maybe you’ll read this as valuable again … maybe on a day when you had a better sleep the night before.” What is obvious to me, as a reader today, is entirely outside of even my own experience at another time. One reading’s treasure is another reading’s garbage. And many readings will be somewhere in between, or some other variant. Noticing such situatedness and contingency of perception, as a means of critically evaluating our actions, is a valuable skill known as ‘reflexivity’ (Butler 2005; Foucault 2006e; White 2004a). In this project, I call this ‘skill’ and many other things we do “ethical practices” (Mahmood 2005). When I use
this term, I am not morally evaluating the practice as ‘good;’ I rather mean to convey that the action I refer to gives shape to our ethical and relational becomings. We become what we become through ongoing “ethical practices.”

The quote from Heraclitus flies in the face of the things that, in our time and place, we tend to consider the most legitimate knowledges about what people are and how people operate: individualism and psychology. Yet there seem to be countless traditions that ‘know’ what Heraclitus knew. We are more process than product. We are more becoming than being. Even around the time that Freud was crafting compelling tales of normal psychosexual development and the subsequent fixed organization of ‘the adult psyche,’ William James, another early psychologist, was participating in the practice of using flowing water to represent what we are and how we do what we do. Coining the phrase “stream of consciousness,” he wrote, “Consciousness is in constant change…. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described” (1892, ¶ 15). Such flowing water representations open up fruitful avenues for understanding what we are and what we do, which are unavailable to the more fixed understandings found in most liberal individualist and psychological accounts of what humans are. In this project, I draw upon representations of life as a flowing river or stream, and to variations on this image, to work toward what Spivak calls “an ethics inaccessible to liberalism” (1993, 37). My work at once questions some of what we know about ethics and some of what we know about psychology, but I work well within what is possible for many of us to know – and within what I suspect many of us sometimes know clearly.

I centre experiences people have of hurting others, especially where these harms are mappable onto systemic forms of oppression. I do not claim this to be a relatively pure or central aspect of being human, any more so than being harmed, happiness, sadness, or nausea. I rather focus on doing harm because I believe it is politically and ethically strategic to do so, as a compliment or supplement to political and ethical work that centres the effects of harm and oppression on people subjected to them and work centring people’s resistance to harm and oppression. Following Edward Said (1994a), I would like my work to be read “contrapuntally” with such explorations. Reading “contrapuntally” allows that
distinct bodies of work might compliment one another, and might enrich what we can do with each one, without needing to neatly map onto one another point by point.

I conceptualize this project as a consolidation of previous efforts to centre experiences surrounding perpetration and participation or complicity in oppression – both my efforts and others’ – in order to work toward a new starting point for future work in these endeavors. In order to develop this new starting point, I have interviewed friends about ethical transgressions they’ve committed, have read published works for resonant explorations, and have thought through transgressions I have perpetrated.

Psychology and ethics: it seems to me that these two apparently distinct disciplines occupy the same area of human experience – the area in which things occur such as perception, deliberation, affect, cognition, learning, development, behaviour, and interaction with others and with our environment. I want to unsettle what it does for us, today, to most frequently call these things psychology and to most frequently house ethics, instead, in abstracted codes or maxims. This organizing of human experience into discrete disciplines contrasts with approaches to ethics that go back thousands of years, before anyone had ever used the word ‘psychology,’ but which centre things that today we usually call psychological. Describing developments originally confined to Western Europe in the 1700s, Foucault wrote that humans “experience things – at the level that will soon be called psychology” (1970, 224). And only a few hundred years later, it is hard for many of us to imagine that we could call that “level” of experience anything but. These developments in understanding occurred alongside European colonial impositions, the world over, and therefore these recent and very specific ways of understanding and operationalizing what humans are, how humans best learn, what to do when humans harm others, how much care is reasonable to give any one person, etc., was a part of what was imposed upon people all over the world (Chapman forthcoming; Chapman, Ben-Moshe, and Carey forthcoming; see also Connell 2007). We are improving our recognition of the violence of imposing religious understandings onto others, but we are not so good at recognizing the violence of imposing other kinds of knowledge and practices. But the secular psyche is no more politically and culturally neutral than the Christian soul.
When I use ‘we’ in the previous paragraph, I mean to include all of us who find ourselves – however inconsistently – flowing along ‘orientations’ dating back to ‘modernity’ in Europe, *and its colonial imposition the world over*, which Ahmed (2006b) calls “whiteness:”

When I refer to whiteness, I am talking precisely about the production of whiteness as a straight line rather than whiteness as a characteristic of bodies. Indeed, we can talk of how whiteness is “attributed” to bodies *as if* it were a property of bodies (121).

Alan Jenkins, a white Australian therapist, uses the word ‘colonization’ to describe acts in which therapists impose interpretations or normalizing judgments onto clients. He does not say therapy is ‘like’ colonization; he says it *is* colonization (2011). He admits to being unsure whether or not this is appropriative, and my initial impression was that it certainly is. But if Aboriginal critics, in Canada and Australia alike (among many other places), are right that colonialism is alive and well in the intimate details and assumptions of everyday life (Chrisjohn et al. 2006; Churchill 2004; King 2003; Lawrence 2002; Smith 2005b; Turner 2006), then perhaps there is no reason to identify ongoing colonialism *only* in institutional sites such as governmental, educational, and church structures, which are understood to have something to do with colonialism in even relatively mainstream accounts of Canadian history (e.g., Guest 1997). Perhaps colonialism *also* exists in our everyday interactions and assumptions. Perhaps acting on the assumption that every human has ‘self-esteem,’ a ‘locus of control,’ and ‘life skills’ is *as colonial* as assuming that all children will learn best by sitting in classrooms or that our current version of electoral politics necessarily equals democracy. This is how Jenkins put it recently (2011):

Colonisation was justified as … ‘for the good’ of indigenous people and that one way of living … was superior to the indigenous way…. It strikes me that in any context where there is a set of power relations, whether we like it or not … there can easily be a tendency to see our ideas – our moral ideas – as superior to the other. [When we approach counselling in this way,] our job is to teach them how to think. I see that as a form of colonisation.

Likewise, models of ethics that assume all people navigate their lives in the same way – or that we all *should*, by following a generalizable wisdom or set of rules – are as much an
imposition as models of psychology that assume a universal psyche. There are many models of normalizing ethics I have no interest in reinforcing here, and I am most definitely not advocating for ethics and against psychology. I am advocating against both, when they’re imagined as applicable to all people at all times. Neither one is ‘all bad;’ both are terribly, violently, dangerous. As an alternative, then, taking the operationalization and conceptualization of ethics in Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2005) and Foucault’s research on communities of ethical self-cultivation in Ancient Greece and Rome (2006e; 2006b; 1994d; 1994c; 1994a; 1991; 1990b; 1988b; 1982), we can imagine that all places at all times have a contingent and specific range of possibilities within which particular people cultivate who they become, collectively and yet heterogeneously imagine what a ‘good life’ might be and how it might be pursued, negotiate agency and relationality, understand what it means to learn, care for, and grow, and so on. I see no objective reason why Mahmood and Foucault’s work has to be called ethics rather than psychology – and I’d advocate that it could serve to undermine how we tend to hold these as two separate spheres of life.

Even then, though, I am not suggesting that ethics and psychology are identical. I’d propose they’re very much distinct, but that their distinction results from their situatedness in distinct “discursive traditions” (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005) and their relationship with these traditions’ internally normative practices. I might conceptualize the relationship between ‘ethics’ and ‘psychology’ as, structurally, “something like” the relationship\(^2\) we could draw between Arctic Red River and *Tsiigèhnjik*. Arctic Red River and *Tsiigèhnjik* are the English and Gwich’in words for the same body of water; they do not therefore describe the same body of water or, even more generally, the same ‘thing’ or same ‘kind of thing.’ The knowledges and practices that come together in the materialization of what this river *is* differ based upon whether white settler or Gwich’in “discursive traditions” are called upon. These distinct, parallel, understandings ‘matter’ (Butler 1993): they create contingent possibilities for the materialization of what Arctic Red River/*Tsiigèhnjik* is, what it can ever be, what it has ever been, what people’s relationship to it is, and what its relationship is to the earth, other bodies of water, or the Universe. In reading this, you may have already

\(^2\) I discuss Spivak’s “something like a relationship” later on in this chapter.
considered various distinctions this may involve, and I’d ask you to consider how these various distinctions accrue value and legitimacy through “the process whereby some differences come to matter [through] the implication of differences in relations of power” (Ahmed 1998, 192). This differential materialization of what this particular ‘thing’ is is also inextricably situated within understandings about humans’ relationship with other humans, and with animals, land, nature, and aspects of what is that go beyond materiality and beyond what we know. All of these aspects of the “discursive traditions” that house the two names are given value within relations of power. And each aspect has “ethical practices” associated with it – practices that humans do, in the pursuit of valued ends, which generally make sense to others who share a discursive tradition. Such practices could include adventure tourism and making an offering to a body of water before fishing in it. These two acts are normative in one tradition, foreign to others; and they’re both “ethical practices” – ‘performances’ of self, contingent on understandings of how to become a valued person.

I think we therefore need to situate the question of differential interpretations as a question of ethics and a question of power. One way to formulate this question is to ask of discursive traditions and the ethical practices associated with them: ‘what does a tradition do to and with contradictory traditions?’ That is how the Zapatistas seem to formulate the question. Rather than spelling out how we should all live, they dream of “a world in which all worlds fit and grow,” which I continue to find the most compelling articulation of a guiding political orientation, a decade after first reading it on a child’s t-shirt in Chiapas. This world that we are working toward (however purposefully or inadvertently), what does it do with worlds that differ from it? The Zapatista slogan does not advocate simple relativism, because there is room to discern whether other worlds allow other-other worlds to “fit and grow,” but neither is it clear upon specifics of how such a world might be achieved or organized, or what the relationship between one and another world might look like. It is certainly unclear about what one world might do if it understands another world to be disallowing the flourishing of other-other worlds. I believe such a lack of articulated and generalizable prescription is only a good thing: it seems to me that details of negotiating what to do with difference are most likely to be non-violent and non-impositional when navigated directly by those most intimately involved. The phrase comes from Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos; and he continues immediately with his dream: “where
the differences of color, culture, size, language, sex, and history do not serve to exclude, persecute, or classify, where the variety may once and for all break the grayness now stifling us” (2001, 276).

Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze, Jenkins has a similar orientation that he applies both to his reflexive critique of his power as a therapist and to what he conceptualizes as the “parallel, political” work of the men he works with relative to partners and children they’ve abused. Jenkins describes “a passionate interest in otherness as the antithesis of violence,” clarifying this is “not just a tolerance of others.” He cites Deleuze, describing what he calls “generous love” as an “encounter with an other that opens up to a possible (new) world” (2011). And Henri-Jacques Stiker, in his History of Disability (1999) advocates “something like” Jenkins’ and Marcos’ orientations, using disability as a point of reference rather than men’s violence, colonization, or neoliberal capitalism: “let’s love the difference,” Stiker writes, so we can “live everyday life as an everyday thing, with and in the presence of special, specific human beings who are our disabled equals” (11). And for Stiker the historian, and Jenkins the therapist, this orientation is every bit as political as for Marcos the revolutionary. Stiker calls his “love of difference” “revolt because it takes back to the drawing board the whole enormous, vast, imposing specialized social organization” (1999, 11, emphasis mine):

Whatever you do, whichever battle you fight, whichever course of action you attempt, with what are you going to inform it all? The love of difference or the passion for similarity? The former – especially if it becomes socially contagious (through education, cultural action, political action) – leads to human life. The latter leads, in full-blown or latent form, to exploitation, repression, sacrifice, rejection. Yes or no, can we live together in fundamental mutual recognition, or must we exclude one another (1999, 11)?

He writes, furthermore, that we need to reconceptualize what difference is, in order to love ‘it’ according to “something like” Jenkins’ “generous love” (Stiker 1999, 11-12):

Not to convince another to be like ourselves and not to force another to conform to a model presupposes that … difference is not an exception, not a monstrosity, but something that happens in the natural course of things…. I simply believe that disability happens to humanity and there are no grounds
for conceiving of it as an aberration…. [T]he tragic … lies in the conditions and the figurations in which we receive what is born and what appears.

The tragic of ableism, colonialism, men’s violence against women, or capitalism – according to the various formulations above – “lies in the conditions and the figurations in which we receive” difference, otherness, other worlds. But not all is tragedy. There are examples from our own and others’ lives that can be drawn upon for alternative ethics, politics, psychologies, and relationships.

I want to return to the example above from hooks. She has done incredibly important and groundbreaking work, drawing upon and articulating such examples – as she does with Eisenstein in this chapter I am discussing. But because, like the rest of us, at times she treats experiences such as participation in racism and anti-racism as psychological, rather than ethical or political experiences, in Stiker’s phrasing, hooks ‘forces Eisenstein to conform to a model’ as “anti-racist in [her] being” (hooks 2003, 60). This state of ‘being’ then naturalizes and accounts for Eisenstein’s experience of being “hurt and disturbed” by the suggestion that she’s racist. On the same page, hooks says that white women who “strive to prove [their] worth by exaggerated gestures” of anti-racism “usually [have] an underlying problem of self-esteem;” and on the next page, getting back to the possibility that anti-racist white people might “make mistakes,” she says, “This could always happen on an unconscious level” (61). What happens when we use such psychology to describe racism and antiracism? Tethered to this anti-racist psychologized fixity, in hooks’ account, are the other women of colour whose experiences are psychologized as the trauma of “remembered assault,” again from other white women. Such psychologization is an example of what Stiker describes as “the tragic:” “the conditions and the figurations in which we receive what … appears.” But this does not mean we should not follow hooks’ example of working to describe and disseminate examples of commitments to struggle against one’s own participation in oppression. We should, and we must; she’s led the way.

Unable to find much hope for professional social work on the whole, Amy Rossiter describes a “victory when her [daughter’s] disabilities and abilities journey alongside the abilities and disabilities of her clients.” But, even then, she notes that this anti-ableist ‘victory’ is “located within multiple trespasses of the marginalization and management of
difference” (2001, ¶ 19). Agreeing with her, I think that ableism and anti-ableism often coexist in the same spaces and interactions. I think the most important task of ‘ethics’ might be recognizing this in all its complexity and trying to figure out what to do with it – over and over and over again. And there are victories to draw upon, for admittedly complex, contingent, and uncertain ways forward, from the past as well as from the present. For example, violent colonial imposition was not the only kind of relationship that existed (or that exists) between Aboriginal and non-Native people on this land. Daniel Paul (2006) describes harmonious relations between Mi’kmaq and Acadian peoples, and Bonita Lawrence (2002, 33) writes that in the 1600s the Mi’kmaq Nation negotiated an agreement with the Catholic See that recognized Mi’kmaki as an independent Catholic Republic (which only dissolved due to subsequent political changes within Europe). And Thomas King writes that the Royal Proclamation of 1763 “allowed that each tribe was an independent nation subject only to tribal law and exempt from British law” (2003, 130). Alongside these negotiations of non-imposing relationality that drew upon pre-existing European political practices, some European/Aboriginal negotiations employed pre-existing indigenous political practices. Grand Chief Michael Mitchell of the Akwesasne says,

When the Haudenosaunee first came into contact with the European nations, treaties of peace and friendship were made. Each was symbolized by the Gus-Wen-Teh or Two Row Wampum. There is a bed of white wampum which symbolizes the purity of the agreement. There are two rows of purple, and those rows have the spirit of your ancestors and mine. There are three beads of wampum separating the two rows and they symbolize peace, friendship and respect.

These two rows symbolize two paths or vessels, traveling down the same rivers together. One, a birch bark canoe, will be for the Indian people, their laws, their customs and their ways. The other, a ship, will be for the white people and their laws, their customs and their ways. We shall each travel the river together, side by side, but in our own boat. Neither of us will try to steer the other’s vessel (cited in Turner 2006, 48).
Suggesting the Gus-Wen-Teh could inform a more just indigenous sovereignty today, Dale Turner notes that the parallel paths here are not characterized by non-relationship, but rather by non-imposition – by a relationality driven by “peace, friendship and respect” rather than by “try[ing] to steer the other’s vessel.” In Haudenosaunee/Iroquois political traditions, such relationships of non-imposition require ongoing care. “For the Iroquois it is important to periodically recognize, affirm, and renew a relationship in order to revitalize it so that peaceful coexistence can be preserved” (2006, 50).

An Iroquoian conception of justice centres on the idea that all people can live in peaceful coexistence provided they respect the moral autonomy of the other…. For the Iroquois, justice has to be put to use in the everyday world; that is, a just society is not something that happens on its own…. Political relationships require renewing – if they are left alone they die. Political relationships, by their very meaning, cannot escape the problem of power…. [T]he two participants in the relationship – Europeans and Iroquois – can share the same space and travel into the future, yet neither can steer the other’s vessel. Because they share the same space they are inextricably entwined in a relationship of interdependence – but they remain distinct political entities…. Respect, peace, and friendship are pivotal to maintaining the relationship, not to establishing it. These principles need to be renewed if they are to function properly: healthy political relationships are dynamic, and the participants need to have certain attitudes if the relationships are to evolve in a respectful and peaceful environment (Turner 2006, 54).

The psychologies, ethics, and politics that have been most readily available to me, in my culture and time, are not capable of enabling the kinds of relationships that the Zapatistas and Stiker dream of, or that the Haudenosaunee negotiated and Jenkins uses in his therapy work. I am not saying the four accounts of non-imposing relating are the same. Surely they are not. But perhaps according to any one of them, these distinct traditions of nonviolent and non-imposing relationality would be welcome into conversation with one another, to develop future relationships of interdependence and mutual transformation, so long as none attempted to steer another’s journey. The relationship between two discursive traditions, the conversations between them and the possibilities they engender, in this “generous love” or
“love of difference” orientation, also resonates with Rinaldo Walcott’s articulation of what “diaspora sensibilities” demand of the nation: the relationship between distinct traditions needs to be “remade in a constant and restless ethical search” in which each tradition makes a place for the other that “is an ethical place, not a narrative of containment” (2003, 23). As I discuss in the following chapter, when we are not granted such an ethical place, when we are met instead with others’ narratives of containment, we are very likely to respond to what we’ve been granted through political struggle, rather than ethically travelling together on what Jenkins calls “parallel, political journeys” (2009).

Taking this into account, I imagine Eisenstein’s women of colour colleagues might read hooks’ account of them and respond in a reactive, politically-charged way – perhaps fixing Eisenstein and/or hooks as particular kinds of people positioned as antagonists in their own accounts of struggling against (Eisenstein’s) racism. We can imagine this as a predictable effect of what Homi Bhabha calls the “textual process of political antagonism,” of “reading between the lines” (1994, 35), when any of us encounter representations of ourselves in what Walcott calls a “narrative of containment.” No representation of anyone or anything is going to be exhaustive, as Spivak articulated in Can the Subaltern Speak? (1988; and later reengaged [1999]). According to her double sense of representation:

1) A representation represents in the way that a politician is said to represent the electorate: although people and things are flows of diverse experiences, subject to illimitable interpretation, etc., in the act of representation we position one partial and contingent account as the fixed stand-in for “what something is” in a way that is always a tremendous simplification; and

2) A representation also (and therefore) represents in the sense that an artistic creation represents: as when I draw a tree or write a poem, when I represent why I did this or that, for example, I craft an image of who I am, and perhaps of what humans are more generally.

The particular women of colour who are Eisenstein’s colleagues have been narratively represented in a (partial) way so that they are thus (creatively) contained as antagonists, as psychologically traumatized in a fixed way and so therefore acting irrationally, and as wrong in their assessment of Eisenstein. As a result, upon reading this representation of
themselves, they might be expected to ‘react,’ rather than being “invited” into a “parallel, political journey” with hooks (Jenkins 2009; 1990). And yet, hooks’ chapter seems (in part, anyway) to be a strategic attempt to invite people of colour to reflexively critique their own participation in fixing white people as antagonists – it is what Jenkins calls an “invitation to responsibility” (1990). In my MSW research interview with her, Vic Hill described this chapter from hooks as having had exactly that impact on her: “I read something in Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope by bell hooks (2003), where she says: if I always see them, being the white people, as the oppressor, I will always be oppressed. And I do not want to live my life like that” (Cited in Chapman 2006, 87). I would imagine that hooks’ chapter may have had a resonant impact on other people of colour as it did on Vic, in part through their reading of the story about Eisenstein’s colleagues. But I would also imagine that this would unlikely be the effect on the actual women who work with Eisenstein and who would encounter themselves in hooks’ “narrative of containment” as objectified and irrational antagonists. Such complexity in the actual effects of what we do, following Ahmed (2004a; 1998) and Derrida (1995; 1994), led me to include “concrete relationships” in the title for this project. Relations of such concreteness link ‘ethical practice’ with ‘systemic oppression,’ and often in ways we fail to account for. The concrete relationship between Vic and hooks is not the same as that between one of Eisenstein’s colleagues and hooks. And if Eisenstein’s colleagues might read hooks’ account of them as framing them as something along the lines of the “figure of the angry black woman” (Ahmed 2010, 68), then hooks’ important insight that “we can all be as anti-racist as we want to be and still” participate in racism (2003, 60, emphasis mine) can help us think this through – perhaps pushing us to get outside of the discursive tradition of psychologization and what it enables.

Drawing upon the Haudenosaunee Gus-Wen-Teh, one major concern animating my work is: what needs to happen within my vessel, personally but also among my people (however contingently defined), so that we might live interdependently, peacefully, and respectfully, without trying to steer others’ journeys. Perhaps the language of protagonists and antagonists can help us here. If my reading of hooks’ account is useful, perhaps it could be said – contingently, in this one particular story – that she positioned Eisenstein as among ‘her people,’ travelling along a parallel journey with her against racism, and that she inadvertently positioned Eisenstein’s colleagues outside the category of ‘her people.’ Vic
seems to have read the account experiencing herself, as a woman of colour, as among hooks’ ‘my people’ who were being invited to reconsider their framing of white people, which suggests that hooks was (at times, at least) successful in her invitation. But are there ways to do such political work, without having some other people predictably experience themselves as othered antagonists in our accounts? How would we navigate *that*?

Journeys, rivers, and vessels: Entirely distinct discursive traditions have represented life and ethics with these images. Foucault attends to the language of “navigating” or “piloting” a vessel in his study of Ancient Greek and Roman ethical practices, and we can situate such navigation as living responsibly on one of the parallel rows of the Haudenosaunee Gus-Wen-Teh. Foucault writes that in the texts he studies, “the government of self” and “the government of others” (including practices of spiritual direction and medicine) are not structured as radically distinct areas of ethical (or psychological) life, in the way we tend to imagine them today: “Governing is … like medicine and also navigation: Steering a ship, treating a sick person, governing [others], and governing oneself all fall under the same typology of rational and uncertain activity” (2006e, 404). So we can imagine that the *hows* of governing others, and inseparably the hows of governing oneself, are going to shape the possibilities for what it means for our journey and others’ journeys (or our people’s journey and other peoples’ journeys) to coexist in the same space and time. He also shows how even “the government of oneself” is, in a different sense, relational: it is contingent on relations of power and social context. He only reads the ethical writings of class-privileged men, but he attends to the distinctions they make about their respective parameters of freedom and the relevant ethical and political considerations in how to navigate those parameters, depending on whom they govern themselves in relationship with. These men were socially sanctioned as ‘free’ to have sex with three categories of person: slaves, women, and young male citizens. But the ethical considerations were distinct for governing the “use of [their own] pleasure” in relation to these three differently stratified categories of potential sex partner (1990b). Each was framed as how to ethically use one’s own pleasure – how to navigate one’s own desires and actions – but this was done in such a way that held the ethicality of ‘using pleasure’ as contingent on the other person involved. Even in governing oneself, the governing/governed ‘self’ is fundamentally relational and contingent.

Foucault (2006e, 248-249) describes several aspects of ethics as “navigation:”
there is, of course, the idea of a journey, or a real movement from one point to another [and] … this movement is directed towards a certain aim.... During the journey you encounter unforeseen risks that may throw you off course or even lead you astray … [and] this dangerous journey to the port, the port of safety, implies a knowledge (savoir), a technique, an art, in order to be undertaken well and to arrive at its objective. It is a complex, both theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as being a conjectural knowledge [a speculative, uncertain, imprecise, and contingent one], which is very close, of course to the knowledge of piloting.

I think the idea of piloting as an art, as a theoretical and practical technique necessary to existence, is an important idea which might be worth analyzing more closely, inasmuch as at least three types of techniques are usually associated with this model of piloting: first, medicine; second, political government; third, the direction and government of oneself [often in specific reference to a particular other]. In Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman literature, these three activities (curing, leading others, and governing oneself) were regularly analyzed by reference to the image of piloting. And I think that this image of piloting picks out quite well a type of knowledge (savoir) and practices between which the Greeks and Romans recognized a certain kinship and for which they sought to establish a tekhne (an art, a reflected system of practices referring to general principles, notions, and concepts):

The Prince, insofar as he must govern others, govern himself, and cure the ills of the city, of citizens and of himself; the person who governs himself as one governs a city, by curing his own ills; the doctor, who has to give his views not only on bodily ills but on the ills of the souls of individuals.

In this discursive tradition, activities and knowledges associated with governing oneself, and with curing “the ills of the souls of” yourself and others (which we would today consider various dimensions of psychology) all fall under the umbrella of ethical navigation. And so, although he’s a ‘psychologist,’ when Jenkins describes therapy as a mutually political and ethical journey, he’s closer to this Greek and Roman conceptualization of ‘the government of self and others’ than he is to most contemporary psychology. This
conceptualization allows him to make the following claim (which is far outside of what is normally said of therapy, and even further outside of what is said in particular about working with men who perpetrate abuse): “development of new skills and intervention strategies is beneficial. However, it is our own ethical becomings which inevitably promote the cessation of violence and the development of respectful ways of relating by our clients” (Jenkins 2009, x). Our navigation of ourselves is inseparable from our relationships with others and inseparable from the (political, ethical, or psychological) impact we have on others, whether such impact is intended or not. How we navigate our own becomings determines possibilities available to those journeying along with us.

An Archaeology of Ableist Architectures of the Self

In *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Salles 2004), a film adaptation of the book by Che Guevara,

At the San Pablo leper colony, [friends Ernesto Che Guevara and Alberto] spend three weeks helping treat patients, [and] they learn that the doctors and nurses all stay on one side of the riverbank and the leper patients on the other. Right away Ernesto and Alberto break the rules and get in trouble—they shake hands with the patients without wearing gloves. This does not go well with the head catholic nun, who supervises the patients and makes the rules. But the two friends quickly bond with the patients—they play soccer together and have a spirited drum session with them (Cañero 2004, ¶ 32).

Shortly thereafter, Che swims across the river to celebrate his birthday with the patients rather than the doctors and nurses. It is a representation of his radicalization: he leaves behind the life of a privileged medical student and aligns himself with the poor and disadvantaged – not tethered to them through hierarchical helping, but symbolically becoming one with them, in their space, through activities characterized by mutuality.

I am pretty sure I cried when I watched this, finding it beautiful, and yet I also worry about its representation of becoming radical. Certainly there are material lines dividing rich from poor, disabled from nondisabled (Foucault 1988a), colonizer from colonized (Fanon 2004), and so on. Work that identifies and works against these lines is crucial. But I am less sure that our personal-is-political alignments relative to legacies of oppression are most helpfully
mapped onto such dividing lines, as per concerns I raised about hooks’ positioning of Eisenstein. These longstanding material and discursive dividing practices often separate those construed as good from bad, and those deemed capable of independent responsible living from those in need of constraint and surveillance. And I wonder if these lines have somehow become part of how we make sense of responsibility versus irresponsibility, intent to harm versus mistake, oppressive versus benevolent, racist versus anti-racist, and so on. Even with a figure such as Che, it may be dangerous to imagine anyone as always and only aligned with justice and the oppressed. hooks writes of the importance, for example, of “a gathering of women, predominantly black, where we discussed whether or not black male leaders, like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, should be subjected to feminist critiques that pose hard questions about their stance on gender issues” (1991, 5). And the documentary Ghandi: The Road to Freedom (E. Davis 2009) raises troubling questions about Ghandi’s relationship with the “untouchable” caste, and about how leaders from within that community felt about his activism. Che, Ghandi, King and X should be recognized – and followed – for their important work. We can learn so much from each of them. But perhaps this is not best facilitated by positioning them as always and only on the side of justice and righteousness, as exemplified by Che swimming across the river.

Thomas King cites a different representation of water, implying a different ethics:

within the Pueblo world, evil and good are not so much distinct and opposing entities as they are tributaries of the same river…. [T]here are other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on cooperations, and that raise the tantalizing question of what else one might do if confronted with the appearance of evil (2003, 109-110).

It seems to me, furthermore, that King’s final chapter even raises “the tantalizing question” of what to do when “confronted with the appearance of” his own evil. Maybe that is stating it too strongly, but he certainly takes the consequences of what he did, and what he did not do, very seriously. He writes that he’ll never tell this particular story out loud (it is the only chapter which was not presented as a lecture) because of his shame surrounding it. And yet he feels it is a story worth telling. It is about how he abandoned a family of friends and left them to suffer. It is here that he explicitly engages “ethics” for the only time in his book.
And as a result, when he closes the chapter with the same phrase with which he closes every chapter – “Do not say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you’d heard this story. / You’ve heard it now” – the challenge in this phrase is distinct from earlier times he said it (when he was not ashamed to say it out loud). The same phrase takes on a new significance. For example, in the chapter “What is it about us that you do not like?” he describes Canadian legislation working to end Aboriginal identity, and he puts this in conversation with a story about deer culling. In that chapter, his challenge is therefore to those of us listening as non-Natives to think about how ‘our people’ treat ‘his people.’ But in the final chapter, that is not the challenge. It is structurally distinct, because it centres his own inexcusable ethical transgression. The same challenge is reconstellated. The same phrase is part of a different “assemblage,” making it distinct (Deleuze and Guattari 2000).

Perhaps he’s offering us a different world, perhaps “something like” the Pueblo rendering of good and evil. Maybe care and disinterest, responsibility and irresponsibility, friendship and betrayal, and work toward justice and participation in injustice are all tributaries on the same river, rather than opposing one another like riverbanks. Perhaps this could open other possibilities when we encounter “evil” – whether our own or other peoples’. Maybe distancing ourselves from perpetration, privilege, and complicity are not our only options. What would it mean for our ethical journeys, if there were no other side on which to arrive?

Spivak, too, draws upon flowing water in a critical account of responsibility and complicity:

The mainstream has never run clean, perhaps never can. Part of mainstream education involves learning to ignore this absolutely, with a sanctioned ignorance…. [T]he apparently crystalline disciplinary mainstream runs muddy if [we] do not provide a persistent dredging operation. Because this dredging is counterproductive when it becomes a constant and self-righteous shaming of fully intending subjects, deconstruction can help here…. I keep hoping that some readers may … discover a constructive rather than disabling complicity between our own position and theirs, for there often seems no choice between excuses and accusations, the muddy stream and mudslinging (1999, 1-4, sequence modified).
Part of the responsibility of the critic and activist is to “provide a persistent dredging operation” of the mainstream. However, “this dredging is counterproductive when it becomes a constant and self-righteous shaming of fully intending subjects,” and so she suggests that participation in mainstream, normative, systemic oppression is not always done by “fully intending subjects.” Therefore, our accounts of others’ participation in oppression should not represent “fully intending subjects” doing what they do in order to achieve a desired harmful end, with full awareness of how they affect others. Like King in his final chapter, in Spivak’s reflections on her own participation in oppression elsewhere, and here in her hopes for how she’ll be read, she takes complicity very seriously. And, like King, this leads Spivak to politicize shame and the work it does. How can our “persistent dredging” be free from “mudslinging?” How can we avoid “excuses and accusations?” How can we critically engage a fruitful “complicity between our own position and theirs?”

Ahmed invites us to concretely trace “how racism operates to shape the surfaces of bodies and worlds … [so that] we become ‘us’ as an effect of … it” (2004b, ¶ 49). She traces how racism and other forms of oppression have shaped her body and her world, how she has become her as an effect of them. I am going to follow her suggestion here, but in tracing disablement: I’ll trace one way that disablement shapes bodies, minds, and worlds, so that we become us through it. And I’ll begin with a curiosity. I am curious about Spivak’s expressed concern, in the quote above, that some experiences of complicity are “disabling.” I’ll trace this and related terms – in three authors whose work I love and centrally rely upon. This is also true of hooks, as I hope is clear even though I have read her critically. Critique of those I align myself with is strategic on my part, in order to mitigate tendencies toward “mudslinging.” I also wish to mitigate such tendencies by following Mahmood’s approach to agency, in my reading of these authors. Of her research participants, Mahmood writes, the activities and operations they perform upon themselves are [not] products of independent wills; rather, my argument is that these activities are the products of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable. The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these
traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts. Self-reflexivity is not a universal human attribute here but, as Foucault suggested, a particular kind of relation to oneself whose form fundamentally depends on the practices of subjectivation through which the individual is produced (2005, 32).

Mahmood invites us to consider that the possibilities we each have for forming ourselves – the possibilities we have for ethical self-governance, through which we become who we become – are rooted in particular discursive traditions that give shape to what she calls ‘architectures of the self,’ the structures of which vary from context to context rather than being shared by all people at all times and places. She writes: “Thus any exploration of practices of freedom must consider, not only hierarchical structures of social relations, but also the architecture of the self, the interrelationship between its constituent elements that makes a particular imaginary of freedom possible” (2001, 845). If I believe that the most important thing in life is to live in accordance with a particular scripture, then my parameters of freedom and means of exercising agency will differ from those I’ll live by if I guide my actions along the lines of liberal individualism. If I subscribe to a model of individualism that values being the most generous person possible, then I’ll have different parameters of freedom than if I subscribe to a model that values being the richest. If I believe that good and bad oppose one another like riverbanks, that will provide different parameters of freedom and means of exercising agency than if I believe that good and bad are “tributaries on the same river.” And so on. Deviating from Mahmood somewhat, I imagine there are countless intersecting discursive traditions which we all draw upon in order to live our lives, become who we become, make choices, evaluate what we witness, and so on – so that we might have different architectures of the self available to us in different contexts depending upon which one gets called upon by the situation at hand. Attempting to externalize and reflect upon such contingent and fleeting architectures informs my reading of hooks’ discussion of Eisenstein and her colleagues. It also informs my reading of ableist language found in Spivak, Jenkins, and Barbara Heron.

Jenkins (2009, iii) makes a move similar to Spivak’s above: he advocates that men face their shame for abuse they’ve perpetrated, and he distinguishes productive shame from what he
calls “disabling” shame. (And, although he draws heavily on feminist analyses that are not radically deterministic, he also characterizes as “disabling” accounts that position people as radically determined by gender norms.) This divisibility of productive versus disabling shame (or productive versus disabling feminism or complicity) is ableist in that it draws upon and perpetuates the notion that disability equals inaction, inability, uselessness, lack, worthlessness, and so on (Michalko 2002). One type of shame is productive, and another kind is not. I do not believe such abstract normalization or valorization of emotions does what we intend. But the point I want to make first is that the discursive context in which it makes sense at all to call non-productive shame disabling is the context in which, as the story goes, one type of person is productive and another type is not, and the non-productive type of person is often called disabled. In terms of what dictionaries say, the words I am discussing here and below – disabling, crippling, and paralyzing – all have acceptable usages about things other than people. Nevertheless, we cannot use these words without evoking people. Whatever dictionaries say, today we cannot say ‘gay’ and only signify ‘happy;’ and we cannot say ‘disabling’ without evoking and implicating disabled people.

In our society, a dividing line separates certain types of people who have intense emotional experiences from other types of people who are understood to have a more moderate range of emotional experiences. Those attributed a more moderate range of emotional experiences are much less likely to be forcibly incarcerated, drugged, removed from their homes as children, have their children taken from them as adults, and so on. So there are “dividing practices” (Foucault 1988a) separating certain kinds of emotional embodiment from other kinds of emotional embodiment. After hundreds of years of living with these material and discursive divisions, however they first came about, is it possible that today they contribute to the shape of what Mahmood calls the ‘architectures of our selves?’

Barbara Heron’s use of ableist language occurs in the thick of what tend to be called psychological processes, but which again might be reconstellated if named “ethical practices.” We do not know exactly how ‘in the thick’ this account is, because her research method prevents us from knowing if she’s describing her own experience or someone else’s. But if this is not her own account, then it is one she seems to have felt strong resonance with: she supplements the account with evocative emotional language more so than with theory, distinguishing it from most other interviewee accounts in her book.
Heron worked for over ten years in Zambia before returning to Canada where she confronted her own implication in what she calls “colonial continuities.” She then interviewed other white Canadian women development workers who’d also worked in Africa, and she had one of them interview her as well, mixing her own pseudonymed ‘data’ with that from her participants. This was an attempt to reflexively navigate what Spivak calls a constructive “complicity between our own position and theirs.” But as a result, we do not know if the participant discussed here, pseudonymed Kris, is Heron or not. Either way, it is Heron the author who uses ableist language in the following selection (2007):

the moral certainty … that she should not have been a development worker … deeply torments Kris’s view of self…. As a consequence, Kris faces a paralysis in her [relationship with her self or her account of herself] ‘… I have been thinking of it in so many different ways that … I do not have a conclusion. I do not know. I do not know.’ [This ‘not knowing’ is what Heron characterizes as paralysis.] … ‘I have gone through … almost three years of feeling increasingly that I really made a mess of my life – I really made a huge mistake with it. I should not have gone there. I should not have done that. I should not have … and, I can’t bring back those years….’ So crippling is this narrative [that it] … illustrates the dire consequences … of recognizing the harm of the choices … [she] made (138-139).

Kris is described as crippled or paralyzed because she confronted her own implication in global white supremacy. But what is interesting about the work done by these terms – here used to denote immobility as per their dictionary definitions – is that this was not an unproductive or stagnant process. Heron characterizes this period of uncertainty and pain as untransformative, but she narrates its effect on Kris’ life as anything but: Kris “has reached a new view of self … a more tentative and accountable self…. [S]he reframes the meaning of [her development work] in terms of her impact on African peoples” (140).

Kris’ transformation to where she is today happened as a result of, rather than in spite of, her anguished and not knowing responses to recognizing her complicity in global white supremacy. In fact, her transformed self is characterized by continuing to live with uncertainty and a heightened sense of the harm she’s done – rather than this having been a
stagnant stage from which she’s only later “moving forward” (140), which is what Heron’s interpretation says. What is described as crippling and paralysis, then, were not immobility. Perhaps we could even imagine a less ableist account of literal paralysis as being more in line with what Kris actually went through: if I was to literally lose mobility in my legs today, my life won’t not stop, but I’ll be fundamentally changed in enormous ways I could never anticipate beforehand. It is only ableism that situates paralysis as signifying only immobility in every aspect of life. Perhaps, then, the affective experience of three years of reconceptualizing one’s life as having been largely about colonial domination could be compared to the kind of change that I’ll say really happens when one acquires a disability – as opposed to the imagined ableist account of all transformation and life stopping. By all accounts, Kris was never again the person she’d been, in really significant ways. But her life and growth did not end. An acquired disability – like graduating from high school, losing a loved one, surviving a natural disaster, and so many other experiences of fundamental transformation – puts an end to certain aspects of life, to be sure. It also marks a beginning in other aspects of life and marks many different kinds of changes in others.

So Heron both suggests that Kris is now a more ethical person, by virtue of living more accountably with her white and geopolitical privilege, and also strangely describes the painful process that brought her there as non-transformative. If she could do this, after having lived either what Kris describes or something very much resonant with it, then our imagined framework of such painful experiences as always and only worthless and unproductive must be difficult to get outside of. When Spivak, Heron, and Jenkins narrate the experiences of extreme emotions associated with implication in oppression as crippling, disabling or paralyzing – with the connotations of worthlessness and non-movement that are hinged to these terms in our culture – they do so following Foucault’s (1972) “rules of discursive formation” that govern what can and cannot be said about perpetration and complicity, about disability, and about intense emotions, as they intersect with one another. I believe this gives us a glimpse of the architecture of our selves through which we navigate everyday emotional self-regulation, particularly when we’ve harmed or been oppressive.

So I agree with Jenkins and Heron, who both write that part of moving toward becoming ethical and accountable is embodying and accepting painful emotions such as shame for what we’ve done. And I think their inadvertent ableism in describing these processes is
inadvertently *helpful* in working toward more intentional navigations of them. Within Disability Studies, there is a fairly taken for granted critique that disability, in general, is erroneously – but with material effects – situated ‘outside of normal human experience.’ And by erroneously – but with material effects – situating extreme emotions as ‘outside of normal human experience,’ we actively steer ourselves away from emotions that are a part of what it is to be human – rather than a part of what it is to be some specific type of human.

This resonates with a challenge from Mad Studies. Louise Tam writes that, in psychiatry, obsessive thoughts are irrational and arbitrary, should not be analyzed, and should be removed…. [But Mad Studies counters that] “There is much in our world to be angry, anxious, and sad about” (Mitchell-Brody, 2007, p. 143). Her view is that people diagnosed with depression are actually an indicator species in humanity, showing us how our society is unhealthy as a whole. Madness here is understood as useful knowledge for directing social change (2010, ¶ 3).

If we situate shame, guilt, obsession and anxiety as ethical and political experiences, rather than psychological ones, perhaps they ‘indicate’ not only that society is unhealthy but also that we may be struggling with our own participation in that unhealthiness. Journeying with, rather than neutralizing, these ethical and political affective experiences may therefore be necessary to do the things that Heron and Jenkins call becoming accountable and ethical. If we allow ourselves to feel the anguish associated with confronting harm we’ve done or are still doing, then this anguish will have an impact on our political and ethical choices.

Perhaps, then, in responding to others’ suffering that we’ve brought about, the problem is not so much that we normatively ignore, repress or disavow the factual *knowledge* of others’ suffering, but that – at least some of the time – we actively and consciously perceive others’ suffering; however, perhaps this active perception is shaped by an architecture of the self that parallels the societal dividing practices of ableism or sanism, through which certain emotional experiences are cordoned off in advance as having no value, as worthless, and as unproductive. Perhaps we all ‘know’ what Heron means when she calls certain narratives crippling and what Jenkins means when he calls some shame disabling. And because we already ‘know’ there is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, from embracing those aspects of being human, we work to keep ourselves away from them, as a reflex, without
even really having to think it through. If Heron and Jenkins are right that we need to embody these unpleasant emotions, in order to become ethical and accountable, then perhaps internalized ableism or sanism in the form of ‘affective dividing practices’ may significantly contribute to the perpetration and perpetuation of oppression and violence.

This may help to explain why it is that many critical accounts of what and how we know – and how our knowing relates to power and oppression – credit psychology and psychiatry with a central role in determining what can and cannot count as legitimate knowledge. Describing the effects of growing up subjected to physical violence, ageism and sexism, within a family and community that were subjected to racism and classism, hooks names the central role that the threat of psychiatry also played, intersectionally, in her childhood:

[M]adness…was the punishment for too much talk if you were female…. [The] fear of madness haunted me…. I was sure [it] was the destiny of daring women born to intense speech…. Questioning authority, raising issues that were not deemed appropriate subjects … was crazy talk, crazy speech, the kind that would lead you to end up in a mental institution. “Little girl,” I would be told, “if you do not stop all this crazy talk and crazy acting you are going to end up right out there at Western State” (1989, 7, sequence modified and emphasis added).

Foucault and Derrida, for their part, had a heated exchange about the location of ‘madness’ relative to ‘reason’ in their respective accounts of philosophy’s relationship to oppression (see Spivak 1993) – both of them considering this a central enough concern to write about and get emotionally worked up about. Deleuze and Guattari (2000; 1989) give schizophrenia such an esteemed place in their work that they too clearly consider the normalizing practices of psychiatry central to maintaining the status quo. And elsewhere (Chapman 2010a), I describe how psychiatric othering silently policed possibilities for ‘responsibility taking’ in a treatment centre where I used to work – so that if staff were too concerned about our own use of violence, this signified that we were psychologically ‘not right’ or not healthy enough to ‘be’ a helping professional. In this workplace, this limitation on ‘appropriate’ affect constrained our ethical and political ‘talkings back’ to what we ourselves were doing, on a flow parallel (but distinct from) the threat of psychiatric confinement used to silence hooks’ ‘talkings back,’ and parallel but entirely distinct from
the children ‘in our care’ who were already confined in this setting, and were sometimes further placed in locked confinement within it – for variations on ‘talking back.’ In terms of us as staff being affected by this, albeit non-violently and non-coercively, it is noteworthy that if we were too emotional then our exaltation as ‘able to’ help would be undermined. Foucault wrote “that in our society the main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality, is our feelings” (1984, 352).

“Authentic mad man” Iggy Pop sings, “I can’t help, ‘cause I am not right” and “she can’t help, ‘cause she’s not right” (The Stooges 1969a). Perhaps parallel to Bhabha’s expression of the limitations on colonized people’s possibilities for full ‘civilization’ in his “not quite/not white” (1994, 131), flows an ableist/sanist (and perhaps inextricably sexist, transphobic, homophobic, ageist, and racist) policing of emotionality by which we work to avoid being perceived as ‘not quite/not right.’ Given that divisions of those deemed capable of helping versus those ‘in need of help’ exalts: white development workers (Heron 2007), white social workers (Thobani 2007), male social workers (Hébert Boyd 2007), nondisabled charity donors (Barton 2001; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Stiker 1999), the Global North (Ahmed 2004b; Heron 2007; Spivak 2004b), and colonial nation states (Thobani 2007), internalized regulations of who’s ‘not right’ enough to ‘help’ may be no small factor.

This relates to the central concern in this project, which is tracing how people know and govern ourselves in variable and particular ways, and thus constitute ourselves as ethical and political agents. This is what Spivak, discussing the final period of Foucault’s work, describes as exploring “how close you can get to pouvoir-savoir degree zero in order to think ethics in its ‘real’ problems” (1993, 42). How do people ‘really’ go about ethically governing themselves, and how can we make sense of how this happens in relationship to norms, systemic oppression, and so on. Spivak translates the French word pouvoir as “of course ‘power.’ But there is also a sense of ‘can-do’-ness in ‘pouvoir’” (1993, 34). It is the

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3 He’s called this in a voiceover from a short video clip I found on YouTube. This appears to be taken from a longer movie on the history of punk rock, but I do not know the original source. The title of the clip is “IGGY POP (Authentic Mad Man),” and I retrieved it on November 12, 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWPuaOMtTs&feature=youtube_gdata. Iggy Pop was the earliest performer known to cut himself on stage and was perhaps centrally responsible for the trend in punk lyrics to openly express diverse ‘extreme emotions,’ from those animating his band’s “Search and destroy” (The Stooges 1973) to those animating their “No fun” and “I wanna be your dog” (The Stooges 1969b).
verb used to say, “I can do X,” so she suggests that an important aspect of power/knowledge is “being able to do something – only as you are able to make sense of it” (1993, 34, emphases added). She’s offering ‘ability to know’ as a viable alternate translation for what we are accustomed to reading in English translations as “power/knowledge.” (“Je veux pouvoir savoir” translates as “I want to be able to know.”) She – notably the translator of Derrida’s (1997) Of Grammatology – explains: “I believe this to be so much an ordinary-language aspect of the doublet [pouvoir-savoir] that most French interpretations simply take it for granted” (1993, 290 n40). Working with this, Spivak describes Foucault’s ethical studies as “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” (1993, 41) – where pouvoir-savoir means, at once, both power/knowledge and ‘ability to know.’ In this project, I try to trace how “power passes through individuals” (Foucault 2003b, 29) through our ‘ability to know’ or our ‘ability to’ make sense, narrate, perceive, and feel. One way this seems to happen is that we receive experience in certain ways based upon things we’ve long taken for granted, such as assuming that shame, anxiety, etc., are worthless experiences best avoided. This shapes what we are ‘able to do’ with them and even how we are ‘able to feel’ them. I have suggested this may be due to an architecture of the self, an ‘affective dividing practice,’ which parallels the material and discursive lines whereby people representing those same discursively-rendered extreme and useless emotions are cordoned off from the rest of us. I might even suggest that we could play around with Spivak’s translation a bit and call this affective dividing practice our ‘disability to know’ – ‘disability’ here not indicating lack or worthlessness, but indicating that disablement “passes through individuals,” and constitutes our “architecture of the self,” whether we are predominantly identified as disabled or not. As Ahmed says, whiteness orients us in such a way that it appears to be an attribute inherent to certain bodies (2006b, 121), and perhaps this is also true of disablement – we become us as an effect of it. Furthermore, our ‘ability to’ even notice this is obscured by disablement too, through the naturalization that Robert McRuer calls “compulsory able-bodiedness” (2006).

Reading, Writing, and Responsibility

A related and complex aspect of our ‘ability to know’ pertains to what we take away from one another’s words or actions. This too relates to Spivak’s concern that we find ways other than “mudslinging” when we engage in political critique or attempt ‘the government of
others.’ Whether we are telling a story or witnessing it, the story only ‘materializes’ as ‘what it is’ or ‘what it is about’ when it is heard or read. As communicators, we cannot know whether our stories will matter to others, how they’ll matter to others, which others they’ll matter to, what others will do with them, etc. I’ll call this situation our ‘inability to know,’ again playing with Spivak’s translation of pouvoir-savoir. But the ‘inability’ to accurately know or predict what we do does not mean we never tell stories with an end in mind. We often tell stories or formulate ideas because we want certain things to be more (or less) “loose in the world” (King 2003, 10) – whether these ‘things’ are behaviours, ideas, questions, feelings, etc. “If a book does not make us better then what on earth is it for?” asks Alice Walker⁴ I imagine she’s referring to both her purposes as a writer and the effects on her as a reader. From our experience as listeners and readers, we know we can be changed through exposure to others’ accounts (Chapman 2011). Occasionally we hear stories or ideas, read them, or witness them, and we know they’re transforming us; we can feel it. hooks expresses this well: “Angela Davis spoke these words. They moved me. I say them here and hope to say them in many places. This is how deeply they touched me” (1989, 10). More often, such movement happens without such reflexive awareness. But, either way, when we are the teller or writer of an account, there is no reliable way of predicting how others will take it up. I cited Foucault above describing “navigation” in ancient Greek and Roman accounts of ‘the government of self and others’ as “a complex, both theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as being a conjectural knowledge” – meaning we can never know with any certainty what we are dealing with, as we imprecisely and tentatively apply this “theoretical and practical knowledge” (Foucault 2006e, 249). We do not have direct access to what others experience before we offer them something, and we do not have unmediated access to how they respond to what we offer – during or after. We also do not have access to all that is going on for others in a given encounter, all that is relevant to the situation in the environment, or even all that is going on for us. Bhabha conceptualizes the unknowable and fleeting but nevertheless consequential context as the “Third Space,” suggesting encounters between two people – or two peoples – are mediated by this “space between,” which only exists in its specificity in the moment of a particular encounter.

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⁴ This is used as somewhat of a slogan for the Toronto Women’s Bookstore, which is how I know it.
It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew⁵.... [B]y exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves (Bhabha 1994, 55-56).

These “conditions of enunciation” are why Spivak describes the crucial work of finding effective ways of bridging political and cultural difference “a task for which all preparation can only be remote and indirect” (2004a, 118): we cannot predict or exhaustively know what our efforts do. In the next chapter, I put this analysis to work in reflecting upon concrete relationships I have had where the gap between what I and another have experienced from each other’s words or actions has been navigated with various degrees of collaboration or domination. Here, I introduce what this analysis enables in relation to various relationships of stratification, including that of reading and writing – which is “the space between” you and I right now. Bhabha writes that, because of the indeterminate gap between what we intend and what we do, our critique can even have the exact opposite effect from what we intend, when those on the right attend to arguments of those on the left, or vice versa:

one cannot passively follow the line of argument running through the logic of the opposing ideology. The textual process of political antagonism initiates a contradictory process of reading between the lines; the agent of the discourse becomes, in the same time of utterance, the inverted, projected object of the argument, turned against itself⁶ (1994, 35).

The speaker, signer, writer, or other “agent of discourse” cannot reliably prevent this. For example, when I hear pro-war rhetoric or poor-bashing, my take-away is anti-war or anti-poverty; it is strengthened – rather than undermined – by exposure to “the logic of the

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⁵ e.g., King’s challenge in his final chapter being distinct from the challenge he offered with the same words in earlier chapters, and my suggestion that if I made the same critique as hooks it would not be the same critique.

⁶ I use selections of this above, speculating about Eisenstein’s colleagues’ reading of hooks’ account of them.
opposing ideology.” And, like the impact of their accounts on us, our accounts too may invite, from some others, the opposite experience of resultant reflection, feelings, or critique than that which we intend. If this is so, then we surely may also invite illimitable other responses that are neither what we intend nor its opposite. It seems to be the case, then, that what is taken-away from witnessing another’s narrative or actions is, in actuality, unique to the particular listener, reader or witness – and even to the particular telling or reading, for those who’ve heard it or read it before. Derrida (1985) calls this the “countersignature” (the image being that a couriered item is signed for, upon arrival, and is only then considered ‘delivered’): it is only when heard, read, or observed, that a message has any meaning at all.

Derrida influenced therapist Michael White (2007, 210; 2003; 2000b, 36-37), who I draw upon frequently throughout this project, but this influence came after White had already developed the core components of Narrative Practice. Even before reading Derrida, White was already conceptualizing listening as an active, agentive, creative process: one of his earliest papers was called “The process of questioning: A therapy of literary merit?” (1988). It has been about ten years since I read that paper, but its content and title were brought to mind when I recently read the following (Bruner, cited in White 2007, 77):

> Stories of literary merit … are about events in the real world, but they render that world newly strange, rescue it from obviousness, fill it with gaps that call upon the reader, in Barthes’s sense, to become a writer, a composer of a virtual text in response to the actual. In the end it is the reader who must write for [her or] himself what [s/]he intends to do with the actual text.

This understanding of “the reader” being called upon “to become a writer,” and its operationalization in “the process of questioning,” is also foundational to Jenkins’ “Invitational Practice” (2009; 1990) with abuse perpetrators. Jenkins’ work is often considered Narrative Practice, and it maps neatly onto it, although he never calls his work “Narrative.” Jenkins and White were friends, they both lived and worked in Adelaide, Australia, and they seem to have developed their ideas and practices interdependently,
rather than either one consistently following the other. The basis of Jenkins’ Invitational Practice – since 1990, when White too was coming to terms with what he was doing and what to call it (White used “literary” or “literate” [rather than “narrative”] until 1990; and he stopped using “therapy,” for the most part, by 2000) – is the practice of asking perpetrators to appraise their own behaviour, “inviting” them to articulate their ethical positions on abuse, and calling this “Invitations to Responsibility;” in 1988, White called this same basic questioning/inviting conversational practice “A therapy of literary merit.”

I have long found the notion of the active agency of the reader compelling. It became even more exciting to me when I discovered Jenkins and White and how they applied it. And it then became even more fascinating, yet again, in terms of thinking about it as an externalized ‘thing’ after speaking about it in a graduate class I was taking one day, referencing Derrida (1985). Devi Mucina, another student in the class, pulled me aside at break and told me that this understanding of interpersonal living and the sharing of stories that I’d attributed to Derrida is central to longstanding Southern African Bantu traditions of philosophy and pedagogy. Derrida grew up in Northern Africa and, in reflecting upon my conversation with Devi, I initially rendered it intelligible by imagining Derrida to have been exposed to sub-Saharan African philosophies by virtue of geography (which may be roughly equivalent to someone assuming the same thing about my exposure to Andean indigenous philosophy! – I cannot say; but see Ahluwalia 2005). Whether or not this is true, though, this has continued to intrigue me as I encounter still more expressions of traditions that consider listening, witnessing, or reading an agentive process akin to co-authorship. Is it possible that the attribution of creative agency to a listener, witness or reader tends to be shared (in diverse specificities) by many cultures’ psychologies, pedagogies, or philosophies about what it is to be human? Is it possible that the taken-for-grantedness that a fixed core meaning rests ‘in’ a story is no more universal than the notion that a fixed core self exists ‘in’ a person? Spivak (1999, 429) writes of various philosophical traditions that she describes as “not quite ‘the same thing’ as deconstruction” and yet in which “the ex-

\[7\] In the next chapter, I give an account of being interviewed by each one separately, in training contexts.
orbitancy of the sphere of work in the ethical as figured by Derrida has something like a relationship with them:"

many so-called ethno-philosophies (such as the Tao, Zen, Sunyavada, the philosophy of Nagarjuna, varieties of Sufi, and the like) show affinities with parts of deconstruction. This may relate to their critique of the intending subject. In so far as they transcendentalize extra-subjective authority, they are not quite ‘the same thing’ as deconstruction. But insofar as they locate agency in the radically other (commonly called ‘fatalism’), the ex-orbitancy of the sphere of work in the ethical as figured by Derrida has something like a relationship with them.

I appreciate her care in saying “something like a relationship with them,” and I hope to be following this care. Because it is Spivak writing this, in a chapter called “The setting to work of deconstruction,” I think it is very possible that she means to convey (at least “something like”) what I read in her “something like a relationship:” that the relationship between any one tradition and any other is a différantial one. Différance is a word coined by Derrida, which is pronounced exactly like the French word for both difference and deferral but misspelled. It is now in the definitive French-language dictionary as a word – for which his mother apparently chastised him for “spelling différence with an a” (Dick and Kofman 2002). Différance is illimitable differentiation and deferral. We only know things through their differential relationship to other things. Red is distinct from all other colours and colours are distinct from all things that are not colours. Derrida was not the first to formulate a differential approach to meaning-making. But what he did with it, perhaps for the first time in European thought, is that, taken to its logical conclusion, differentiation endlessly defers a centre of meaning or self, which is what makes for a différantial or deconstructive approach. Differentiation illimitably defers any centre, bottom, or end point. This has greatly influenced critical theory in the last few decades.

As mentioned already, Spivak (1999) explores how oppressed people’s experiences are obscured through the very practices that attempt to represent them. She differentiates people’s experiences from representations of them, deferring judgment on whether or not it is possible for subaltern others’ experiences to be attended to by dominant groups. That deferral of final answers is part of what makes an analysis deconstructive or différantial.
Butler writes, “gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but as copy is to copy” (1990, 31). We all constantly copy from, and differentiate ourselves from, the various possibilities available to us, and this is how we become who we become. Gay and straight are known and enacted only through differentiation, so that any fixed or originary sexuality or gender is a myth. Through differentiation, the centre or origin is permanently deferred. This account of meaning-making as differentiation and infinite deferral is différance.

Through a reading of Fanon’s “the Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority,” Bhabha describes the exaltation/denigration stratification of racism as “post-Enlightenment man tethered to, not confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man.” This tethering, according to Bhabha, “splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being” (1994, 62). Here he’s clearly drawing upon Derrida’s articulation of a differential relationship, and Bhabha also uses the term itself in critiquing the political spectrum and its sparse possibilities for intervention: “If I have argued against a primordial and previsionary division of right and left, progressive and reactionary, it has been only to stress the fully historical and discursive différance between them” (1994, 38). He is clearly aligned with radical politics and, at the same time, is attempting to reflexively critique the left from within. As is Spivak, as is Butler, as is Derrida. And as is Ahmed.

Ahmed (2004b) studies the self-representational language of white supremacists, in which they describe themselves as motivated by love, rather than hate. Instead of taking this as purposeful misrepresentation, Ahmed attends to how love and hate are held as opposites in their (and our) discourse, creating affiliations and possibilities for an internally coherent pursuit of ‘justice’ – however outlandish and offensive this may be for those of us outside this tradition. Alongside her critical engagement of anti-racism (2006a), Ahmed exposes the differential relationship between racism and anti-racism, showing that neither is what we assume. By approaching racism deconstructively, she may be opening possibilities for work against racism outside of “paths well trodden” for analysis and action (Ahmed 2006b).

Andrea Smith’s (2005a) “Beyond pro-choice versus pro-life: Women of color and reproductive justice” is similarly structured: reading the words, practices and effects of those aligned with pro-choice or pro-life politics, Smith shows that the relationship between
the two self-evident positions is one of active and ongoing differentiation with no fixed centre of what anti-sexist justice is. And Stiker (1999) does a structurally similar reading and operationalization of disability justice. He unsettles the common-sense distinction and politicization of disability exclusion versus disability inclusion – suggesting we need to more critically attend to the ‘hows’ of the rationalizations, practices, and consequences of contemporary disability inclusion, which may be as ableist as disability exclusion.

I am suggesting there is “something like a relationship” between certain aspects of these various analyses, and that we can map these particular points of resonance onto the structure of Derrida’s différance. And I am suggesting that this partial and particular structural ‘mapping’ is “something like” what Spivak suggests of the “something like a relationship” between deconstruction and “many so-called ethno-philosophies:” however carefully we study what Iroquois philosophy, Taoism, or deconstruction is, any of these traditions is heterogeneous. Studying exactly what any of these traditions is will therefore inevitably take parts of that tradition for the whole and will thus simplify and fix the tradition, resulting in a creative, fictitious rendering of what it ‘is.’ This is again Spivak’s deconstructive double sense of what all representations are. By differentiating a given tradition of thought from another tradition, we cannot help but secure this differentiation. But ‘in the end,’ there being a fixed ‘thingness’ to what any of these traditions ‘is’ is infinitely deferred by virtue of them being living traditions, which are still evolving, heterogeneous in their contemporary manifestations, and whose pasts remain, forever, open to illimitable interpretation. She continues from the quote above to suggest that, so long as relationships between deconstruction and other philosophical systems do not “remain caught within the descriptive and/or formalizing practices of the academic or disciplinary calculus,” deconstruction “may be of interest for many marginalized cultural systems” (1999, 429). This is not because they’re ‘the same,’ as she explicitly clarifies, but rather, in “the setting-to-work mode,” they have “something like a relationship” in terms of what they do. This “something like a relationship” is structural: the “ex-orbitancy of the sphere of work in the ethical;” their resonant “critique of the intending subject;” and how agency, contingency and relationality are operationalized (however divergently they may be conceptualized). The approaches to agency and relationality they enable are “something like” one another: we are not fully in control of what we do or the effects we have on others; we are never
fully aware of what we do; we are not separable from one another to a greater extent than we are connected with one another. In a later article, Spivak again suggests that a widely divergent number of cultures have “something like a relationship” with one another (and, again, with deconstruction), characterizing diverse cultures’ local understandings of responsibility “as a call of the other – alterity – [that comes] before will [or deliberation]” (2004b, 562). She therefore suggests that Levinas and Derrida provide an ethics that, in terms of what they enable, is structurally “something like” what is enabled by what she calls “so-called ethno-philosophies” or “marginalized cultural systems.” When I use her phrase “something like” or “something like a relationship,” I never mean equivalence, or even multiple points of similarity or resonance. When I use this phrase, I am pointing to very particular points of resonance in Spivak’s setting-to-work mode, in terms of what they do rather than how they might be categorized. And I am situating this resonance within a differential structure of making sense of difference. Differentiation has real, concrete, material effects on the world. Some differences come to ‘matter’ and some do not, which is again related to operations of power (Ahmed 1998). But how a given difference comes to matter is variable and in flux, and therefore deserves to be studied in its illimitable and contingent particularity, rather than according to taken-for-granted abstract frames of reference.

For example, returning to her account of Eisenstein and her colleagues, hooks reflexively unsettles the work that race normatively does in differentiating affiliations, but she does not treat friendship with the same caution. Her navigation of how race and friendship matter to her story gives shape to her story: her friendship with Eisenstein is described, but it is never critically interrogated for how it informs her reading of the situation – in fact, it is used as straightforward evidence that her reading of Eisenstein is a better reading than that of the other women of colour, who are described as not knowing Eisenstein like hooks does. As a result of aligning herself with Eisenstein, within an interpretive structure in which Eisenstein is either racist or anti-racist “in her being” – the structure of which dictates that someone has to be wrong – hooks’ account agentively others the other women of colour in the story. hooks unsettles their affiliation (with only people of colour) and their acts of othering (of Eisenstein) as ‘a problem’ for anti-racist struggle, but not her own affiliation (with Eisenstein) and acts of othering (of them). But her othering of these other women of
colour is structurally “something like” what hooks describes as these women of colour’s othering of Eisenstein: there is a shared structure of alliance and othering, tethered together, each making the other possible. hooks says the other women of colour did wrong, which seems to me to be informed by her alliance with Eisenstein; the other women of colour say Eisenstein did wrong, which (according to hooks’ analysis) was informed by their alliance with other women of colour and against white women. These two acts of interpretation, the actions they enable, and their consequences, are not the same. But they have “something like a relationship” with one another in this particular instance. Of course friendship and racial solidarity are not ‘the same.’ But perhaps, in some situations, it may be fruitful to discern “something like a relationship” between particular structures of practices of friendship and particular structures of practices of racial solidarity. These particular structures are not inherent to friendship, or to racial solidarity, in part because friendship and racial solidarity are each illimitably heterogeneous – which allows them both to accommodate many diverse specific structures of practice. And so a given structure of practice may materialize across diverse contexts, which does not mean there is otherwise ‘equivalence’ when this happens.

Furthermore, illimitable heterogeneity does not mean that categories or traditions are inconsequential. For example, Spivak points to the usefulness of Levinas and Derrida, two Jewish philosophers, in working with “so-called ethno-philosophies” and “marginalized cultural systems.” Judaism is illimitably heterogeneous, and is also a discursive tradition that, in some ways, for some purposes, is distinguishable from other discursive traditions.

I wrote above that, relatively late in his writing career, White found Derrida useful in making sense of what he’d already been doing and theorizing. But an early and longstanding influence on White was Barbara Myerhoff’s research with elderly Jewish people in California. In describing the extraordinary conversations that Myerhoff documents amongst this community, White suggests that perhaps those involved were ‘able to’ engage in the reflexive and relational meaning-making work of actively constructing their identities due to “the Hasidism in their cultural history” that he calls “non-structuralist” (2000b, 68; a term I read as unsettling the implicit timeline and geography situating ‘post’-this-or-that approaches within ‘Great Books of the West’ trajectories).
Even before White brought the distinct work of Derrida and Myerhoff into conversation in the space of his own writing, there was “something like a relationship,” in what Spivak calls “the sphere of work in the ethical,” between Myerhoff’s research participants’ conversations and Derrida’s reading of texts. Perhaps this can be attributed to a shared “Hasidism in their cultural history,” to their shared positioning within discursive traditions of Judaism. But to say that this “something like a relationship” is *différantial* is to imagine that lots of Jewish people may diverge from those particularities Derrida and Myerhoff’s research participants seem to share, and that lots of people outside of Judaism may resonate with them.

As an illustration, discussing Iroquois philosophy, Dale Turner (2006, 50-51) writes that narratives function in the context of respect, reciprocity, and renewal. For example, a story would be recited to children and it would be up to the children themselves to think about the story. They could confer with other people, especially elders, about its meaning and significance, but each child had to reach an understanding of its meaning on his or her own.

It seems to me that this account has “something like a relationship” with Myerhoff’s research participants, with Derrida, with Devi Mucina’s account of Bantu philosophy and pedagogy, and with my project. Once again, this “something like a relationship” is about specific points of resonance only, rather than suggesting sameness or equivalence – which again is following Spivak’s use of it. When each of us identified two sentences back highlights the agency involved in listening, witnessing, and reading, we may not all mean the same thing – and we would not all mean the same thing even if we used the same words. But we all attend to an aspect of our relationships with others, and with others’ accounts, that is relational, particular, and agentively negotiated, rather than meaning residing ‘in’ a narrative itself – and rather than our identities residing in a fixed way in any one of us. I can never know what you’re taking from this right now as you read. My words flow into your “stream of consciousness,” intermingling with other thoughts, feelings, and sensations – and *only then* become meaningful *to anyone* other than me. I do not know what aspects of your life are coming to mind, or what other things you’ve read or thought that are playing around in your consciousness alongside my words. William James, in *The Stream of Consciousness*, describes these interminglings of (sometimes) distinguishable thoughts,
sensations, or memories, using music to illustrate what we all know from our own experience. Like water, music has often been used to illustrate what it is to be human. I am interested in thinking with these representations of humanity too, exploring what they enable. James writes, of multiple thoughts or sensations that we experience all at once,

> It is just like “overtones” in music: they are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it; and even so do the waxing and waning brain-processes at every moment blend with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect (1892, ¶ 32).

For me, this is an ‘experience near’ description of processes I notice right now as I write, and which I assume you too may notice right now as you read: alongside my words, in your consciousness, are there not other thoughts, sensations, feelings, or memories, that interact with my words? Have you ever read something only to later be unsure whether a memory of it was written by the author or something the author had ‘made you’ think? Is it not clear that nobody else would ever have those exact same experiences as you’re having, and that there is no way I could ever take what you’re currently experiencing exhaustively into account? This is what makes these various traditions’ accounts of hearing and reading – and of any associated “ethical practices” for navigating the “space between” a story-teller and a witness – a “conjectural [imprecise, uncertain, and tentative] knowledge,” “both theoretical and practical,” for writers and anyone else wishing to communicate.

You and I, Here and Now, in our Respective Vanishing Presents

However many people ever read these words, no two people will ever read the same words twice, because the words I am typing will only become the words they ‘are’ for readers once they flow into “streams of consciousness,” intermingling with “overtones” I have little to no influence over, no matter how many times I edit this one important but partial aspect of what you’re currently experiencing, and no matter how I intend this to be read.

This is just as true about our recollections of incidents from our own life. Ahmed, discussing an event in which she was complicit in racism against Aboriginal Australians – which she’s written about in four different places I am aware of – writes (1998, 193-194):
Events that move us, move away from us. They do not stay in the place where we give them life as signifiers… [I]t is the act of remembering, an act that is both critical, affirmative and selective, that places boundaries and edges around the story, giving it its seeming internal coherence…. My story entails its own elisions, its own figurations, its own forgettings. It also entails re-writing…. I keep writing and speaking about this event. In fact, it has become a compulsion: it keeps cropping up everywhere. In repeating itself, it has moved. Why does this make a difference? We must return, yet again, to the event.

Ahmed’s use of the word “compulsion” may bring “overtones” to mind of Tam’s “obsessive thoughts,” cited earlier, in which she counterposes psychiatry’s lesson that there is nothing to learn from such things with Mad Studies’ situating of madness as an “indicator” that something (other than one person’s psyche) is wrong. Following the quote above, Ahmed continues to, yet again, re-consider the event from her life, her previous telling of it, and its lessons. Perhaps it is significant that this story she’s so compelled to work and rework is one in which she participated in oppression. These moments have the potential to unsettle our certainties about what oppression, harm, or abuse is, but only if we allow ourselves to be moved along (Ahmed 2006b). Could her “compulsion” about her own racism have contributed to her ‘ability to’ critically engage taken-for-granted of racism and anti-racism?

Also engaging the movement of stories, and the fresh “overtones” subsequent re-tellings can bring to mind, Jenkins says the following of his work with men who’ve abused: “I am particularly interested in [conversations about] an abusive encounter, in what is seen, what is that image, and what [overtones] that brings to mind,” so that this image of what was happening can be further explored and re-worked. Jenkins describes how, when people remember things, there are always aspects of these memories that are outside of what is said – the “excess” which can be explored for what White calls “what is possible to know” (2007, 278) about that memory or event. (This is distinct from traditions that suggest that we already know these other things ‘on some level.’) An Invitational Practice from Jenkins (2011) that maps particularly well onto Ahmed’s reflection about her compulsive reflection is the “Statement of Realization.” In this, Jenkins has a man articulate and write down what the man himself has realized about the effects of his violence on others. This is not a letter
to be given to anybody, it is only for the man to read and revise, reading his earlier realizations and struggles once he’s further ‘down river’ and thus able to notice different ways he might have previously been continuing to blame, demand forgiveness, position himself as the real victim, and so on. Like Ahmed does in her scholarly work, Jenkins has his clients write and re-write, editing what they previously wrote, to further flesh out what they can take from their earlier letters in an ongoing flow of “becoming ethical,” articulating what that means uniquely for them, uniquely in that moment of time. Their “realization” is contingent on that particular reading; it is responsibility-taking as a tentative, unfinished “perhaps,” rather than a final word, oriented toward an unknown and illimitable “to come” (Derrida 1994).

Some of our re-evaluations result from our interaction with others. In the “Statement of Realization,” Jenkins actively invites the man to consider certain kinds of things. But it is also possible that a man may re-think something he had previously taken for granted after hearing something his partner said, or after hearing something a male friend says about his own partner. All of this is part of what Jenkins calls “becoming ethical” (2009).

Tanya Titchkosky, in Disability, Self and Society (2003), represents this aspect of our becomings, in which we re-consider previous conclusions, actions and beliefs, through new possibilities for engagement enabled by ongoing interactions with others. In Titchkosky’s narrative, we are strung along on her journey of “becoming ethical,” by her invitations to read her actions according to the information and analysis she had chronologically had available to her. As a sociologist, disabled person, Disability Studies scholar, and partner of a blind man (Rod Michalko), Titchkosky writes about her own “passing as blind” and states: “It is illegal to pass as blind. Whether it is ethical is a different question” (249 n1). At this point in her narrative, although she leaves the ethics of passing as blind open to interpretation (179), she appears to be inviting us to consider that, at least perhaps, there is nothing unethical about it. I believe she’s inviting us to consider that her role as sociologist and disabled person and, even more centrally, her relationship with a blind man, enables her to ethically pass as blind. She at least leaves open this possibility – largely through articulating her specific relationship with blindness, for which Michalko unproblematically ‘stands in.’ (Note that what makes my phrase ableist – that standing is being used to mean substitution, which of course does not require the ability to stand – is not structurally
completely dissimilar from the ableism of one disabled person ‘standing in’ for all disabled people. They’re not the same thing, but there is once again “something like a relationship” between the two: they both follow the structure of metonymy.) Titchkosky invites us to consider that her passing as blind is not only morally ethical, in a passive sense of being un-unethical, but rather, at this point, it is positioned as aligned with blindness and against normalizing sightedness. She uses her sight to observe sighted people’s visual responses to her and Michalko, who both appear to be living their everyday lives blindly. Her passing is about knowledge-generation, but it is also a political gesture. It is not only un-unethical; it is on the side of justice. And, because we are told that Titchkosky and Michalko are partners, we can infer that her gesture is also on the side of love. Her passing is aligned with her love of Michalko and, through him, with her love of disability and blindness. She invites us to consider that, as a result of such relations, purposes, and orientations, perhaps her passing as blind ‘is’ ethical. And Derrida (1994) might say that such a “perhaps” is all we’ve ever got to go on, which therefore requires of us what Iroquois philosophy calls “renegotiation” and “renewal” (Turner 2006), within the orientation of Derrida’s “to come” – toward an illimitable future without end or pause.

By the end of her chapter, Titchkosky suggests that her passing was, in fact, unethical. She demonstrates this (structurally) “something like” how she had initially justified what she did: through a concrete relationship between her and one other blind person. Ethicality, in her narrative, hinges on a politics of accountability (MacLean 1994; Razack 1999; Waldegrave et al. 2003): no matter what language Titchkosky puts to her intentions or practices, the feedback from blind people is the measure of what is and is not ethical. Titchkosky’s relationship to Michalko seemed to ethically preclude any possible ‘harm against blindness,’ but only through erasing potential responses of other blind persons with different relations to her, to blindness, to the world, etc. This is again Spivak’s representation: Michalko represented blindness and blind people in Titchkosky’s practice of accountability; this representational gesture ‘created an image’ of what blind people ‘are’ and what blindness ‘is.’ It was this partial and creative representation to which Titchkosky held herself accountable. Perhaps we cannot help but do this in practices of accountability. This does not mean they ‘are’ unethical; it rather underscores the importance of Derrida’s “perhaps” to ethics. Maybe practices of accountability can be morally or politically valued.
as “perhaps” ethical, with the line between ethicality and unethicality only ever contingently constituted in our discernment, which will inevitably rigidify and simplify both categories. Still following Spivak, we can therefore recognize discernments of ethicality as “strategic essentialism.” Derrida (1995) writes that “every other is wholly other” and that, related to this, the most everyday and most impossible aspect of ethics is that to align ourselves with anyone is inevitably to align ourselves against others. This is an important deconstruction of accountability; accountability is “something without which we cannot do anything,” which makes the critique of it “the most serious critique in deconstruction” (Spivak, cited in Butler 1993, 27). We can never assume that any one blind person can speak on behalf of all blind people. Titchkosky knows this, and she knew it previous to meeting the other blind person who she describes near the end of her chapter. But we navigate our lives without all the necessary information and understandings that would be required to never do harm, and the information and understandings we do have will sometimes cancel each other out or create predicaments with no clear ‘right answer.’ Titchkosky’s passing as blind was a defiant political gesture against sightedness, aligned with Michalko and with blindness, enabling her to study how sighted people respond to blindness when they believe they’re not being observed. It was that. That never becomes fixed as untrue. But she later found herself sitting with a woman who was going blind and who wished to talk with her about their apparently shared experience as blind people and, following this encounter, Titchkosky never passed as blind again. She suggests this was an ethical trespass against this other blind person and, perhaps, therefore against blindness (2003, 205). I think she’s right. I also think that what she was doing previous to this encounter may, nevertheless, have been ethical – in the mode of “perhaps” – as ethicality was “strategically essentialized” by practices of accountability she’d engaged to that point.

In my research interview with Ruth Pluznick, a narrative practitioner, social worker, and member of a Narrative Co-supervision Group I attend, Ruth described recently meeting with a young man whose family she’d worked with years ago. This young man expressed to her that he’s still angry that his mother abandoned him. This was surprising to Ruth, because nothing of the sort had happened. Rather, helping professionals and the boy’s father had made the decision that the mother’s home was not the right environment for him; the mother had had very little say in the matter. Moving the boy to his father’s home – according to
everyone, including the boy – had made positive change in the boy’s life possible. Ruth had always ‘known’ it to be ‘the right thing to do.’ And what I’d like to suggest is that it was indeed ‘the right thing to do,’ but only in the mode of Derrida’s “perhaps.” It was discerned as ‘the right thing to do’ according to what she knew about how everybody involved was affected. Now, however, she knows it was not the right thing to do, or at least there should have been more care in how it was done. This is because, without cancelling out the positive consequences for the boy, it also had the negative repercussions of his anger at his mom for something that was not her doing. There is no need for this to have resulted from Ruth’s work with his family, and Ruth takes this harm very seriously. Alongside of that, I’d like to consider that the ethicality of this intervention – like Titchkosky’s passing as blind – hinges on practices of accountability that are always going to remain open-ended. Ruth cannot go back and change what she did. She can do things today to address the harm (or prevent further harm against this family or others) that she now knows she participated in.

These kinds of experiences are what my project is all about. All the theorizing and so on would not amount to anything without them – which does not exactly mean it is less important. I hate experiencing things like Titchkosky’s encounter with the other blind person, or Ruth discovering after a decade that she’d damaged this young man’s relationship with his mother, but I also love thinking with these moments of uncertainty and panic, with anxiety when I imagine they might be on the horizon, and with compulsion and shame when I have already done harm. I do not love that they happen, but I find them compelling and deeply disturbing. And so contributing to what Ahmed describes as the “resources” available when we have such experiences is a major purpose animating what I am doing here (2006b, 19).

But how am I trying to do this? I could never position myself in this project as structurally “something like” the other blind person in Titchkosky’s story or the young man in Ruth’s story, providing precisely the experience you – the reader, in your variety – will need at this exact moment, by writing exactly that. So how do I position myself? That is an ethical question. How am I steering my vessel? How am I attempting to govern you in my navigation of my self? Sometimes I imagine my position as “something like” Jenkins’, as he invites the men he works with to reconsider their abuse. That is one way I think about what I am typing right now. Other times, I am positioned more like one of the men in his
groups – such as when I discuss my own experiences of doing harm; in the next chapter, for example, I try to think with a situation in which I was controlling of my female partner. Like King’s final chapter, this is not a story I am proud to tell or am totally comfortable telling, but it is one I think is important to tell.

However I position myself here or there, or however you understand me to do so, perhaps all I can hope is that something I write will overtone with your ‘stream’ in a way you find useful ‘down river’ – in what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2000; 1989) call your subsequent “flows of becoming” – again using moving liquid to describe what humans are and do. As for their hopes for those who read their work, like James and so many others have done in representing humanity, Deleuze drew upon music: he said you should “read [A Thousand Plateaus] as you would listen to a record” (Cited in Massumi 2008, ix):

How should A Thousand Plateaus be played? When you buy a record there are always cuts that leave you cold. You skip them…. Other cuts you may listen to over and over again. They follow you. You find yourself humming them under your breath as you go about your daily business…. [A Thousand Plateaus] does not pretend to have the final word. The authors’ hope, however, is that elements of it will stay with a certain number of its readers and will weave into the melody of their everyday lives (Massumi 2008, xiv).

This account of what it is to read – and to read philosophy even – has certainly become a part of the melody of my everyday life. (I think I have shared it with every class I have taught since reading it.) These melodies, made up largely of countless interactions with many, many different people, are, as King would say, “all we are.” White puts it like this: “people’s lives are shaped by their personal narratives, and … these personal narratives are coauthored in the context of people’s relationships with those significant to them” (2007, 178). He also notes that these “personal narratives are shaped by the socially constructed norms of culture, by the institutions of culture, and by the power relations of these institutions” (179). This is why, although we must be careful with the stories we tell (King 2003, 10), it would not be responsible to just stop telling them – as if that were even possible. This understanding of the connection between the agentive, creative work of witnessing stories and our flows of becoming is, rather, cause for a careful and tentative
orientation to responsible living with others – highlighting how “power passes through” us when we actively witness or share stories, in whatever capacity. White continues from the citation above, making a link between power relations, norms, and the possibility of structuring local relational and collective spaces of solidarity, resistance, and meaning-making:

our therapeutic conversations were contributing to the development of personal narratives that contradicted these socially constructed norms and that shaped action that challenged these power relations. In these circumstances we found that it was very important to engage an audience that would play a role in verifying these alternative personal narratives. Apart from other things, this contributed to building a sense of solidarity with regard to the values and aspirations for life reflected in these personal narratives (2007, 179).

My hopes for this writing project have “something like a relationship” with White’s account of what can happen politically – and usually does not – in therapy conversations. Reading a book and going to a therapist are very different from one another, but perhaps there is “something like a relationship” between them structurally. Both are sites of interpersonal communication in which we tend to imagine one participant having the knowledge that matters and the other in need of the first one’s knowledge – and both can be plotted onto Paulo Freire’s “banking education” (2000), recognizing that such plotting will never be exact, and will always simplify each plotted ‘thing’ (being here education, writing, and therapy) as fixed and homogenous. Such plotting should therefore be done différentially. Bhabha suggests that diverse and distinct interpersonal and political encounters share “symbolic and spatial structures – Fanon’s Manichaean structure – articulated within different temporal, cultural and power relations” (1994, 79). And so one thing I tentatively propose throughout this project is that the theoretical, practical, and uncertain “navigation” of any one of these particular relationships of inequality (whether “something like” racism or “something like” teaching) may hold lessons for the navigation of any other relationship of exaltation-tethered-to-denigration. Being white is clearly not “the same as” being a teacher, but they have a much less clear, structural, “something like a relationship.” if we consider that many kinds of relationships share “Fanon’s Manichaean structure,” but in always unique hybrid manifestations, then there is no reason to dismiss a skill of personal-
is-political ethical navigation in one arena of life as necessarily irrelevant for another arena. Furthermore, if Bhabha is right that each specific encounter of domination, resistance, and navigation is unique, then there may be no basis for assuming that a skill I develop in a particular situation of navigating ableism, say, will ever be applicable to any other navigation of ableism. It may, however, turn out to be useful in thinking through what it means to be male, white, a parent or a researcher. (An example of this is the ethical practice that one of my research participants and a fellow doctoral student in my department, Patty Douglas, calls a “willingness to be interrupted” during our research conversation (which I cite and discuss in later chapters). Patty developed this skill positioned as a mother and then describes using it as a teacher. It strongly resonated for me as both a father and a social worker. And I cannot think of any ‘structural’ reason why it might not be potentially transferable to her, or I, in navigating whiteness.) But it is also possible that an ethical practice I develop may never be useful again, for me or anyone else. All of these seem to me well within the realm of possibility, and well within the realm of everyday life and what we are all already doing and thinking about some of the time – “just not [in a way that is] steady. Not dependable. Ethics of the moment. Potential ethics” (King 2003, 165).

Perhaps some things I am trying to sort out in this project will make some of these practices a little more dependable in our lives, although they’ll never be totally dependable. We can depend on the potential, we can depend on the perhaps, and we can depend on ongoing flows of illimitable “vanishing presents” (Spivak 2004a; 1999) to come. I suspect that is it.

Taking that into consideration, one of the relationships with the potential to exalt me (what I know and what I do), and to denigrate others in so doing, is the author/reader relationship. If it is true that this relationship can be situated upon “Fanon’s Manichaean structure,” as an instance of Freire’s “banking” approach to sharing knowledge, then I need to be aware of this risk as I type, re-read what I have written, and edit. If what I have written about meaning residing in specific readings of a text rather than in a text itself is true, then perhaps one of the ways of trying to write ‘democratically,’ or ‘anarchistically’ in the sense that anarchists use the word – meaning ‘with great care and ongoing reconsideration’ rather than ‘chaotically’ – or along the lines of bottom-up accountability, is to attempt to write in a way that takes into account the knowledgeableness and “overtones” you bring to your reading. How to do so, I am not sure I can say, but wondering about it informs my writing.
Following a citation I used above about Iroquois philosophy and pedagogy, Turner (2006) writes,

Narratives, or stories, do ‘contain’ messages and morals, but they are offered to listeners in ways that allow the listener to decide for himself or herself what the story means and whether it contains an important moral lesson. Because stories are retold many times, and by different people, a kind of communal moral landscape develops, and by participating in this landscape a community develops a shared conception of morality (51).

It seems to me that the issue of exactly what ‘containing’ means here, if listeners decide for themselves what those messages are, is – at the very least – open to interpretation for readers to decide for themselves what Turner means. Whatever messages and morals I put into this project (and believe me, I try), your contingent reading of it is all you’ve got. Your reading of it is at least as accurate an account of ‘what I have done’ as anything I might say about ‘what I meant.’ And so I do not even hope that you’ll get precisely what I mean for you to get out of reading this thing. What I hope, rather, is not only that elements of what you take from your reading will weave into the melody of your everyday life, but also that elements of what you take from your reading will resonate with what others take from their reading (or other experiences) and that – cumulatively – this project may contribute (on however small a scale) to a reengagement of Turner’s “shared conception of morality” in the communities in which you and I live. On such a collective scale, King’s “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (2003, 164) moves from seeming hyperbole to, perhaps even, self-evidence.
Chapter 2
Personal Responsibility: You Cannot Dispense with the Other

Embracing Responsibility: A Different Kind of Politics of Sides

A few months ago, during a monthly ‘co-supervision’ group of Narrative Practitioners, I interviewed fellow member Ruth Pluznick about a family she was working with. Other members then described resonance they’d felt with Ruth’s account, as well as any images that had been brought to mind about Ruth and the family she described. One member shared an image that had been brought to her mind of the family’s mother and her adult daughter coming together as a bridge, to ‘bridge’ their different experiences of the daughter’s childhood. Hannah Fowlie, another member of the co-supervision group, then shared an image that came to her mind while hearing this other member’s bridge image: Hannah described a memory of standing on a bridge as a child, watching the currents underneath through the gaps in the boards. As I listened to Hannah, the following quote from White came to my mind as an overtone or countersignature:

I was recently teaching in Zimbabwe with a group of workers who respond to children who have been affected by HIV/AIDS. Within this group, a metaphor was offered that beautifully describes [working to facilitate others’ reflexivity]. This metaphor was of assisting people to ‘stand on the riverbank’ in order to look at the river of life (2006, 87).

While Hannah was talking, another member said something aloud that Hannah’s image had brought to her mind. The other member said, “Bridge over Troubled Water” (Simon 1970).

When these images were named, they were connected in a slippery way to both the particular mother/daughter relationship and the particular relationship between Ruth and the

8 Ruth is also one of my research participants. I cited and briefly described her interview in the first chapter; what I refer to here is not her research interview. Hannah, named in this same paragraph, is another one of my participants whose interview I explore in chapter three.

9 These are the first two categories of inquiry in Michael White’s ‘outsider witness’ practice, which is referred to again in two pages and then more fully described and applied in chapter five.
family. Listening to Hannah’s account of the bridge from her childhood, with the overtone of the ‘standing on the riverbank’ metaphor from White shaping how I heard her, as well as the overtone of the Simon and Garfunkel song, two images came to my mind as well. The first was of the family relationship and the role the therapist was playing with the family; the second was something somehow related, which my son had been doing recently.

The first image was an illustration of the line from the cited song: “like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.” I pictured a mother lying down spanning a stream, like a bridge does, embracing her daughter – both of them initially facing up, the mother shielding the daughter from the troubled water. Together, they tentatively twist around to look at the flows of life below. This is only bearable for the daughter because the mother is there to support her, and because of that support they can reflect together. I shared this with the group and then told them that my son had recently been asking to go to bed by asking me to walk upstairs holding his hand, with the lights off. My understanding was that he actively wanted to experience his fear of the dark, while feeling safe. It seemed to me that this resonated with what the adult daughter and her mother were trying to sort out in their therapy work, so that they could make sense of some of their past experiences as a family in order to flow more agentively and purposefully. There was also a way that this seemed to be akin to the role that Ruth was playing with them: holding their hands, or embracing them, while they tentatively made sense of their difficult past. We tend to think of agency and responsibility as relating to individuals, but in this chapter I consider how these are ‘enabled’ relationally, through support, collaboration, social history and context, even when we countersign them with individualism and ‘experience’ them accordingly. We significantly limit people’s ‘ability to’ take responsibility, exercise agency, and so on, when we erase the nuanced recognition of the significant role others play in these processes.

I told the group that the above would probably find its way into this project, because I had already begun to explore the water representations I work with in other chapters. But I did not know then what would come to me yesterday, sitting on a bus thinking about how to put this experience to paper. I will now describe what came to me that yesterday, in order to further introduce the relationality of responsibility taking.
Throughout this project, I draw frequently on Michael White and Alan Jenkins. White co-founded Narrative Practice, and Jenkins originated Invitational Practice with abuse perpetrators. I have had the privilege of being interviewed by both of them: by Jenkins for a role-play, and by White as an “outsider-witness” following a therapy conversation he’d had with a family. These were both transformative experiences for me – each in ways I could not have predicted – and they enabled me to get more in touch with the kind of therapist, and the kind of person, I endeavored to become. Playing around again with Spivak’s ‘ability to know,’ these concrete relational experiences ‘enabled me to know’ things I would not have come to know in isolation – at least not in the same way. I told the stories of being interviewed by these two renowned therapists many times to other therapists, and I always did so using the images of handholding and being embraced, respectively, as I do below. But only yesterday on the bus did I connect them to the ‘bridge over troubled water’ conversation. Our understandings are ever flowing, in part through newly engaging old memories with fresh overtones, even when we are doing everyday things like riding buses.

During a training workshop, Jenkins asked a volunteer to role-play a man who had abused his female partner, who he would interview. I put my hand up and was beside myself with excitement when he chose me. His work had been incredibly influential on me and I was eager to ‘feel what it was like’ to have him interview me, even though I was only pretending. I was working with men who perpetrated abuse at the time and so it was relatively easy to access the kinds of accounts I was hearing in my work – although this “access” was characterized by Spivak’s (1999) double sense of representation: it was both partial and fictional rather than being an accurate amalgam of all men I had worked with. During the time he interviewed me, I do not remember a single word he or I spoke, but I had the strongest image of the journey he took me on. This image has stayed with me and it went like this: he took me by the hand and slowly walked me into a well of terrible shame where we stayed for a while, him holding my hand the entire time, and then, still holding my hand, he walked me back out to a place where I could once again be okay without his hand. Even now when I think about it, the image immediately comes to mind. And it really helped me position myself in my work when I asked men to face what they had done.

This image concretized, for me, the extent to which my preferred relationship with the men I worked with was clearly aligned against sexism and abuse, but not against the men
themselves. This resonates with an image that Ahmed cites as evocative of a different orientation for political critique: She cites a poem about a black boy and a white boy walking arm-in-arm, suggesting it offers “a different kind of politics of sides: one is not asked to ‘take sides’ when one is ‘beside’” (2006b, 169). This “different kind of politics of sides” is what I experienced when Jenkins interviewed me. Entering my shame was not his agenda; it was ours. Taking responsibility was not his agenda; it was an agenda we shared. I felt that ‘our-ness’ or ‘shared-ness.’ It was ‘mine’ to the very extent that it was ‘ours.’

I was strongly moved by this experience, and I told it many times. I only stopped when another experience displaced it from my storytelling repertoire. I was embarrassed to tell them both. It seemed to cheapen them, even though they were very different and had both been powerful. I also downplayed the significance of the Jenkins interview because it was ‘just a role-play.’ If, however, we orient to this by way of how it affected me rather than differentiating it from what it was not – characterizing it primarily as ‘not a real therapy conversation’ – then there is no reason to call it ‘just’ anything. A differential reading of the work done by this ‘just’ reveals how complexity is simplified and power relations are obscured in my embarrassment to have been transformed through ‘just’ pretending.

Through discursive differentiation and rigidification, the qualities of one kind of conversation (and relationship) are held as distinct from those of another: therapeutic conversations are distinct from pedagogical ones; affective from intellectual; and genuine from make-believe. This differentiation solidifies ‘therapeutic’ conversations and relationships as fixed and consistently therapeutic (as a quality, meaning ‘effective in bringing about personal transformation or healing’), as consistently oriented around affect rather than learning, and as consistently genuine. But many of us know that many therapy conversations are ineffective, many are intellectually oriented, and many feature one or all participants ‘playing the game’ rather than being earnestly caught up in a process of transformation. Even then, we nevertheless normatively imagine that a kind of conversation that we call therapy ‘normally’ has these qualities and that these qualities distinguish therapy from other kinds of conversation or interactions. But such stable qualities of ‘therapy’ are endlessly deferred; they do not exist in any given body of what ‘therapy’ ‘is.’ In Of Grammatology, Derrida puts the verb ‘to be’ “under erasure,” which he represents by doing “something like” this: “what ‘therapy’ is” (see 1997, 44). By including the “is” but
crossing it out, the presence of ‘being’ is situated as both false and consequential. It does something: imagining ‘therapy’ as a discernable fixed thing, distinguishable from other discernable fixed things, has concrete effects on us, but ‘therapy’ is not what we imagine it to be, and it is not finally discernable or fixed at all. Our roughly shared representation of what therapy ‘is’ has effects on us, even though there is no objective therapy that neatly maps onto that representation. Derrida calls the present-absence of such representations, and their workings in the world, “the trace.” He writes that the “movement” of the trace proclaims as much as it recalls: difference defers-differs…. The concepts of present, past, and future, everything in the concepts of time and history which implies evidence of them – the metaphysical concept of time in general – cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace (1997, 44).

There is no ‘is’ of therapy that is either a fixed thing or an internally consistent legacy. There is only Spivak’s “vanishing present” of discontinuous experience, which she defines as a differential account of time: “the differantiating moment as the present becomes past indefinitely” (2004a, 121). But we countersign our experiences of therapy – as if it were continuous – through the “trace” of partial and fictionally represented continuities of being, presence, and time. We are ‘able to know’ therapy when we encounter it, not because it is objectively identifiable but because the “trace” gives the impression of objectively knowable, internally coherent, and historically continuous things. The qualities we imagine to inhere in ‘therapy’ are not inherent to ‘therapy.’ And at the same time, ‘therapeutic’ qualities can be found – however inconsistently, which is also how they can be found in ‘therapy’ – in lots of conversations or relationships that nobody would call therapy. I have taught help-line volunteers ‘therapy skills’ (of Carl Rogers’ [1951] variety), while clearly differentiating what volunteers do from therapy. We trained them to ‘be not-therapists’ because they were not ‘therapists.’ But we taught them what are consensually regarded as ‘therapy skills’ when taught to ‘therapists.’ Further solidifying this endlessly deferred differentiation, such training often employs double-speak in which ‘therapy skills,’ developed for therapy by a therapist who’s often named and credited for developing them, are re-branded ‘active listening skills.’ Any person who hears, in any conversation with another who speaks, can use ‘active listening skills.’ The relationship between ‘active listening’ and ‘therapy’ is erased. And just as this is related to our ‘ability to know,’ so is it
related to power. The finally arbitrary differentiation of therapy from all other things legitimizes the therapist and the notion that therapists tend to be particularly curative, good listeners, caring, and so on, which obscures therapeutic inefficacy and the violences of therapy that many clients and patients experience. In fact, if it is believed that therapy ‘is’ caring, effective and genuine, and if therapists therefore ‘are’ caring, effective and genuine, then clients who find therapy unhelpful or harmful must be responsible for this.

A year after being interviewed by Jenkins, I attended training with White. He did a ‘real’ therapy interview with a family, followed by an outsider-witness conversation I volunteered to be a part of. My dad had recently died, and I was taken aback when I saw that the father of the family looked like him. Approaching my reaction as a psychological thing, rather than as contributing to my ethical and political experience, I ‘put it aside’ and listened.

When White interviewed me as an outsider-witness to the conversation, he was ‘in control’ – which is good, because I was not ‘able to’ be. I commented on the support the parents gave their daughter, but when he asked why I was drawn to this, much to my shock and embarrassment, I started sobbing and blabbering about my relationship with my mom since my dad’s death. I ‘knew’ this was ‘inappropriate’ in a professional context like this, and so I immediately, unsuccessfully, tried to stop – but without trying to do anything different. I had no alternative grounding with which to reorient myself; I simply tried to stop. This attempt to simply stop resonates, in a very limited and particular way, with Angela Davis’ (2003) critique that when slavery, lynching, and legal racial segregation were each respectively abolished, that the removal of specific injustices was only one aspect of the work toward anti-racist justice, which will involve not only such removal, but also the creation of new social infrastructure. Stopping something that was clearly ‘bad,’ however important a gesture, was not ‘good enough’. In my situation, simply trying to stop crying was not what was ethically required of me in this situation; I needed to find some other way of reorienting what was going on for me so as to take the various relevant power relations into account. Stopping crying – or trying to do so – didn’t take me any closer to the ethical and political work that was required of me in this situation. This has, structurally, “something like a relationship” with a number of other diverse critiques of political critique and activism. I am again not suggesting that the following critiques and interventions are equivalent to one another; I’m rather suggesting that they share a very particular point of
resonance – each one takes a movement that removes a particular barrier and suggests that this removal didn’t do justice to the pursuit of justice that was required: Emma Goldman (1917b) critiqued the narrow focus of women’s emancipation for only removing limited barriers to select kinds of political and social participation and, therefore, did not do justice to “emancipation;” there are ‘something likewise’ queer critiques of the narrow political work toward gay marriage, rather than much more diverse and open-ended work toward diversifying possibilities for love and sex (Butler 2004b; McRuer 2006); and these critiques also resonate with Foucault’s concern that power is productive rather than only repressive (2003a; 1990a) – where again his ‘power’ is also ‘ability to.’ I tried to ‘repress’ my tears, which drew upon a very narrow and particular analysis of what was going on, making no effort at all to govern myself with any alternative purpose.

I knew I should not centre myself in my response to the family’s therapy conversation, and so I attempted to stop doing so, but that is as far as my efforts went – to stop doing one thing. I do not know what White literally did or said from there on, but again I have a powerful image of it. (This entire time he was sitting in his chair, I was in mine, and we were not physically touching.) My image, my experience of what he did, was this: he cradled me in his arms, like a baby, and let me know it was perfectly okay to cry; he then asked me a few questions about my tears and my relationship with my mom; and then he gently placed me back on my chair and asked me what it was that I had heard that had me thinking and feeling these things, at which point I was now ‘able to’ connect it back to some of the things the mom and dad had said about their daughter. Even then, I felt very embarrassed. But when the family members were later asked about what they had been drawn to in our witnessings, they all commented on how powerful it was to have been inspirational for helping professionals in the pursuit of our personal lives. More than anything else that had taken place over the course of several hours with one of the world’s most renowned therapists, they said that our witness expressions of resonance and resultant transformation stood out for them – because this ‘enabled them to’ experience themselves as knowledgeable, skilled, resourceful, and so on – as protagonists not only of their own lives,
but also as agents or protagonists in others’ lives. We all ‘are’ this, but the ‘ability to know’ it about ourselves (and one another) is unequally distributed. In a social context in which clients are ‘tethered to’ therapists through respective denigration and exaltation, clients’ experience of themselves as skilled and knowledgeable enough for professional therapists to learn from – not about therapy skills or professional knowledge, but about things like my relationship with my own mother – was what they described as the most transformative aspect of the entire afternoon. Had I just continued to cry, or just stopped crying, this would not have been ‘enabled.’ White directed me in such a way that was considerate of both the family and me, accountable to both me and the family, positioned at once ‘on top’ of both therapy and teaching hierarchies.

These experiences with Jenkins and White are significant in thinking with experiences of being positioned ‘on bottom’ that I have relished, and in thinking about how we may ‘take responsibility’ with someone else’s assistance. When Jenkins interviewed me, I had a powerful sense that I could do the work of ‘taking responsibility’ because of his presence in a way that would not have otherwise been available to me. With White, this played out in ‘real life:’ I ‘really’ felt irresponsible and potentially harmful to find myself sobbing about my dad’s death in front of a family who had ‘real problems.’ This is not considered ‘professional conduct’ and I had no right to centre my own difficulties. Now as then, I have a critique of the first part of the last sentence, but I still think the second part is politically sound in those contexts where ‘helping’ maps onto “Fanon’s Manichaean structure.” But my initial responses were only ‘siding against’ crying: I should not have volunteered, I should have known I was still grieving, I should just get out of here – which did not help me to either stop or do anything different. My attempts to make my feelings go away might

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10 The importance of this can be inferred from the opening scenes of Disney’s Aladdin (Clements and Musker 1992). Aladdin is introduced to viewers as a ‘criminal,’ and is thus potentially ethically denigrated. This is contextualized by his refrain “Gotta steal to eat, gotta eat to live.” But a simple explanation of his stealing would not clear sufficient ground for him to be the exalted protagonist of the story – a prince in disguise, the one person in the entire world worthy of retrieving the Genie’s lamp, etc. It is when he redistributes his hard-earned stolen bread to two poor children, choosing to go hungry himself so that they can eat, performing himself an active agent who feeds other poor people, that his ethical exaltation as ‘charitable’ outweighs his ethical denigration as ‘criminal.’ This also relates to my discussion in chapter one linking ‘not quite/not right’ to the ‘ability to’ help through the Stooges’ (1969a) “I can’t help, ‘cause I’m not right.” It is in the act of helping that Aladdin works the uneven valuation of the ogive (L. Davis, 1995), which I also discussed in chapter one; initially appearing abnormally immoral, he demonstrates himself to be, in fact, abnormally moral.
have even had the power/‘ability to’ denigrate the father’s work to be supportive to his daughter in non-traditionally masculine ways. It also may have reinforced unhelpful norms to the entire family about ‘appropriate’ expressions of hardship. White did bring the focus back on the family, as I think was legitimately ‘appropriate.’ But he first helped me to explore and articulate those feelings a little bit more in the context of my own life at the time, and then helped me to re-centre the family ‘in conversation with’ my tears, by articulating the role the family had played in my new reflection upon what was going on in my life at the time. When I note that they found this helpful, I am not ‘taking credit’ for what I did for them. I am highlighting what White was ‘able to’ do, and how what he did ‘enabled us’ to do something I was ‘unable to’ do on my own. This had everything to do with how he navigated his position ‘on top.’ He did not side against me, or against what I was doing. He went with the flow – with my flow – but agentively, responsibly. He ‘enabled’ me to journey with the experience I was having, rather than bringing it to an end, but he ‘enabled’ me to redirect it in a way that was more accountable to the hierarchies and other contingencies shaping the encounter. If the ‘not quite/not right’ dynamic described in the previous chapter can be said to have been structuring my discomfort with my tears in this context, then this could be thought through as another example of disablement constraining and directing my ‘disability to know.’ And the therapeutic stratification and its contingent ‘architectures of the self’ played out in totally different ways when I was positioned as a therapy client, which is part of what I explore in the following section.

**Particular Bodies, Particular Relationships, Particular Ethical Practices**

I worked with men who’d abused their female partners for about seven years, right up until my son was born. I’ll now discuss one way, among many others, that I responded to my partner’s pregnancy, while doing this work. I wish I could un-do what I’ll describe, but of course I cannot. What I can do is try to glean learnings from it that may contribute to the resources that other men and I have when we find ourselves in such situations.

My partner and I both have multiple food allergies, although we sometimes ‘cheat’ by taking prescription medicine that minimizes the reaction. Following a doctor’s advice, she decided to not take this medication, or eat anything she’s allergic to, while pregnant. Following parallel histories of seeking out many doctors for various health concerns, going
back to before we met one another, we discovered our allergies together when things got so bad that she vomited or passed out every time she ate. Since that time, I have often done more things such as experimenting with new recipes. I often play a role of ‘taking care of’ our food difficulties, like one partner will often take care of paying bills. In our relationship, as we’ve negotiated it, we both cook and shop, but there is a certain primary role I play in relation to navigating our allergies.

Like many women, she also had food aversions during her pregnancy. Several times, I consulted her about what she could eat, then cooked, and then she could not eat it. This was stressful for us both. With the allergies, our food options are restricted. With the allergies and the aversions, sometimes we could not find anything at all she could eat.

Another embodiment is relevant to this story: my mother describes herself and I as ‘worriers.’ White (2006, 10) would call this an experience-near definition, rather than an experience-distant one that other families or doctors use. This non-medical narration of our relationship with anxiety is similar to how some people in my family are ‘drinkers.’ Most adults in my family drink alcohol, but not all are ‘drinkers.’ Whether ‘drinker’ is equivalent to ‘alcoholic’ is complicated: at the very least, the two terms are grounded in different discursive constellations and thus have distinct effects on those described and on those using the terms to narrate their loved ones’ identities. Same with us ‘worriers:’ everybody worries, and some of us have a relationship to anxiety that seems to be qualitatively and quantitatively different from others’. Neither my mother nor I have consulted a doctor for ‘anxiety,’ which for me has been on purpose. I have a differential relationship with both non-worriers and people who have “Anxiety Disorder” diagnoses. By non-worrier, I mean people who experience their anxiety as ‘normal.’ I experience sadness or depression like that – sometimes I am sad, but I am not prone to sadness like I am prone to stress. I have distinct relationships with sadness and anxiety, so I do not resonate at all with the song “My old friend the blues,” but I might if it was – say – ‘my old friend the jitters.’

So I have a particular relationship with stress, and this intersects with and shapes my relationship with food and allergies (which often means I plan carefully and can avoid reactions, but it also means my allergies are worse when I am stressed). This all intersects with and shapes my relationship with my partner and with her relationship with food and
allergies. All of these relations are both unique and also informed by discourses of gender, embodiment, and disability that also shape other people’s unique relationships with one another, with food, with stress, etc. And all of these intersections interlocked and took on an entirely new shape when she was pregnant. All of my feminist critique, work with abuse perpetrators, and effort to be a ‘certain kind’ of man and male partner notwithstanding, I became obsessed with the nutrients that reached her and our unborn child and became controlling of what she ate. This word choice – ‘controlling’ – played a significant part in what follows. I’ll come back to this, but I’ll note here that this was my chosen word. My partner never weighed in on its appropriateness either way; she said I was making her feel bad – a phrase that does work framing the situation much more structurally “something like” ‘drinker’ or ‘worrier,’ perhaps, than like ‘controlling.’ I chose ‘controlling,’ in part, because it held what I was doing as serious but was not hyperbole; if I’d called it ‘abuse’ or ‘mental torture’ it would not have felt ‘experience near’ to me. But I was trying to control what she ate, and I understood that she felt controlled among other things. It is unlikely that I could have approached very many helping professionals with a description of what I was doing, without using this word, and had them call what I did ‘controlling.’ It was an entirely appropriate word for what I was doing, and it also complicated my efforts to get help.

When I was trying to control what she ate, I felt like it was the only responsible thing I could do so that they’d both be okay. When I reflected upon it, outside of a difficult moment, I knew I was going about things all wrong, but ‘in action’ I sometimes could not stop (Schön 1983). I could not make myself stop. Today – just a few years later – I cannot imagine why or how I could not stop, but I was somehow living within different parameters of freedom. I was not okay with these parameters and my navigation of them, and neither was my partner. After I initially suggested it might be helpful for me to see a therapist, and after then not following through, she suggested I actually do so – which I only then did. This resonates with how many men who came to me for therapy described ‘deciding’ to come to therapy. I put ‘deciding’ in quotes not to convey that in truth we were non-voluntary, but to earmark how decisions are often not made individually. In addition to being ‘collaboration,’ it is noteworthy that this ‘collaboration’ was oriented along gendered lines: with her caretaking even though it should not have been her responsibility. As I
recall, it was my idea and I never decided to not act on it. But her collaboration/caretaking moved me from “contemplation” to “action” (Prochaska and DiClemente 2005).

Further to relational and collaborative responsibility taking – and to collaboration being oriented along “Fanon’s Manichaean structure” – I was ‘able to’ stop controlling, and surely this was related to work with my therapist. But it felt like what was therapeutic happened outside of our sessions. I do not mean to say that this fruitful work could not have happened with a therapist or other person. It would have been possible to do this work with a therapist, but I somehow could not do so with this therapist at this time. Every work day, during this time, I’d go for walks on my lunch break and talk aloud to myself about what was going on. I’d often use my sessions with my therapist as a starting point for talking; but often my discomfort with our sessions was the starting point – ‘talking back’ to him, rather than flowing with what he’d ‘enabled.’ Said writes, “there is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available, starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to enable what follows from them” (1994b, 16). My therapy sessions ‘enabled’ my change process, but not in the way I imagine he intended. They were part of what transpired, and so they ‘enabled’ what I went through, but there could have been alternative enablings of different processes. Our work together both enabled a flow of becoming that worked out well and enabled our relationship as me working against him.

I should admit that I am not a very good therapy client. Since initially writing this chapter, I had a single session with a different therapist for an entirely distinct struggle. In this other session, I felt like – once again, but distinctly – I was being ‘told what to do,’ rather than feeling the belonging and collaboration that I’d hoped for and I know is possible. There is “something like a relationship” between these two therapy sessions, and this “something like” is structured differentially: because I was the client in both situations, I am the common denominator and therefore I am surely the responsible and non-productive one. I cannot deny that, as least not polemically. But if I am ‘the problem,’ if ‘I am not a very good therapy client,’ then what is it about me – personally-is-politically, perhaps – and what is ‘my problem’ contingent upon? In terms of the first half of this question, White’s (2000a) “absent but implicit” can be helpful. According to this, ‘my problem’ only exists in relationship with other things particular to me; these other things must be there in order for this ‘problem’ to exist; and what must be there are values, political stances, etc. How is ‘my
problem’ reconceptualized when situated as informed by my critique of domination and coercion in institutionalized hierarchies? As a therapy client, what am I responding to? How are my possibilities constrained and directed to ‘enable’ how I am ‘able to’ respond?

Without suggesting equivalence between distinct manifestations of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure,” there might be “something like a relationship” between them and what they do to us. And I think there is something resonant in what is required to be normatively considered ‘good’ at being ‘on bottom.’ This project you’re reading, and my work in identifying how domination shapes professional help when I am the helper (forthcoming 2012; 2010a; 2007) contributes to my ‘ability to know’ so that my feelings of being ‘done to’ rather than ‘doing together’ are relatively easily put into words, and folded into other stories, experiences and analyses. This sometimes ‘enabled me to’ be a relatively ‘responsible’ therapist, but it also ‘enables’ me to be ‘not a very good therapy client,’ according to norms about such goodness. When I am the client rather than the helper, I believe it is just to hold the other person (the therapist) as more responsible for establishing trust, collaboration, and belonging, which White describes as “the special responsibility” of the therapist (2007, 281). When I am the professor, I believe I have greater responsibility than my students for establishing the conditions in which collaboration is ‘able to’ happen; when I am the student, I hold professors more responsible for it. I am not saying students or clients have no responsibility for how teaching or therapy goes, but responsibility is not distributed evenly in these relationships, and it cannot be without fundamental material and discursive reconfigurations of these hierarchies. In normative discourse, when all goes well, the therapist or teacher tends to get credit; if things go poorly, responsibility tends to rest with clients or students; one person is understood to have the requisite knowledge and skills, the other person to lack them. We are tethered together through exaltation and denigration.

There have likewise been situations in which I was not a very good student – although I think I tend to be a fairly ‘good’ one. With one prof, I was not a good student at all. Resonating with my experience in therapy, my energy went into trying to carefully and respectfully ‘talk back’ to what I experienced as unhelpful direction. The direction felt like it took me ‘off course’ rather than ‘enabling’ my journey, so that I directed my efforts toward ‘staying true to my course’ in a reactionary way, rather than flowing collaboratively
in unexpected directions. I’d have learned and grown more if I had ‘been’ a better student. And I think my quality as a student was largely contingent on the stage this prof set for me.

Although the contexts are drastically different, Spivak says of struggle against violent state repression that such states “do not allow me to be an ethical person; they drag me into being a political person” (Spivak and Dabashi 2009). Without drawing an equivalence between unhelpful feedback from a professor or therapist and state repression, which would be ridiculous, there may again be structurally “something like a relationship” between this ‘dragging’ and the stage that is set for those ‘on bottom’ of more subtle power relations: when we are positioned ‘on bottom’ of whatever instance of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure,” the contingent parameters in which we are ‘allowed to be ethical person’ are constrained by the stage set for us by those contingently ‘on top.’ In some cases, we are ‘dragged into being a political person’ and are only ‘able to’ navigate political struggle in response – taking up the role of antagonist rather than collaborating in shared ethical ‘flows of belonging’ in Ahmed’s “different kind of politics of sides.” This does not always mean openly ‘talking back’ or ‘fighting back,’ of course. Sometimes we engage political struggle more covertly, or without direct confrontation. In the interview in which she draws this distinction, Spivak includes Gandhi as a “political person” rather than an “ethical person:” he embarrassed colonial England through his strategies, rather than simply living the life of a holy man, and he also did things like disrupting traffic, antagonizing ‘business as usual.’ He positioned himself antagonistically relative to colonialism, which I think is sometimes minimized in how he’s caricaturized in liberal critiques of what is deemed ‘violent’ protest today. In mass protests today, sometimes there are structured ‘green zones’ where people engage in narrowly defined ‘non-violent’ protest and ‘red zones’ where there is a wider variety of ‘tactics’ endorsed. But those participating in both zones are equally ‘dragged into being a political person,’ or antagonist, relative to the state, international body, or event that is protested. Both ‘zones’ are often walled in with lines of riot police and neither positioning is about being ‘an ethical person’ in the sense of contributing to alternative collective flows of belonging. I do not intend to critique any of these political gestures; I am rather teasing out how our possibilities for political and ethical living are contingent on the stage that is set for us. Furthermore, alongside this ‘political’ antagonism, the organizing of such protests is often done in efforts toward collective ethical flows, through
direct democracy models of planning and shared responsibility for things like food preparation and medical care. Such political antagonism alongside relational and collective ethical flows can be found widely in radical discourse, whether in contexts such mass protests, in the work of scholar activists like Spivak or Foucault, or in more popular radical discourse. As an example of the latter, Dead Prez (2000) rap of navigating highly constrained parameters of freedom when they advocate to “attack and not react” and say “If we don’t get them, they gon’ get us all” in their song Hip-hop, and they articulate similar antagonistic ‘political’ stances in other songs such as They Schools. But there are songs on the same album, such as Be Healthy and Mind Sex, which articulate a vision of ethical self-governance, as Spivak differentiates this from ‘being a political person.’ These two Dead Prez songs can even be plotted onto two of the three sites of self-cultivation Foucault studied in The Use of Pleasure (1990b): the importance of what we eat and how we treat our body more generally, and the form we give to our sexual relationships. Dead Prez’ reflexive explorations of what Foucault’s source materials call ‘dietetics’ and ‘erotics’ are alongside other songs advocating armed struggle. These two positionings can be found in other radical music as well: on Public Enemy’s Fear of a Black Planet (1990), Fight the Power and Burn Hollywood Burn are ‘political’ or ‘antagonistic,’ while Brothers Gonna Work it Out is an articulation of collectively ‘becoming ethical’ and working together to solve the problems of systemic injustice, while their Revolutionary Generation is an antagonistic critique of systemic sexism against black women and also an ‘ethical’ call upon fellow black men to relate to women non-antagonistically. The punk band the Dead Kennedys similarly articulates an antagonistic political relationship to systemic injustice, alongside ethical orientations for punks and activists. In their Stars and Stripes of Corruption (Dead Kennedys 1985), an antagonistic relationship to the state is clear in the refrain “Let’s bring it all down!” alongside articulations of prescriptive flows for becoming ethical, such as our need to “change ourselves first from the inside out / We can start by not lying so much / And treating other people like dirt,” and their advocacy that “kids learn communication / Instead of schools pushing competition.” Also noteworthy is that all three groups of radical men reflexively critique systemic sexism: Dead Prez in Mind Sex, Public Enemy in Revolutionary Generation, and the Dead Kennedys in Chickenshit Conformist, in which “eliminat[ing] rape” is included with “get[ting] rid of the bomb” and “bring[ing] down the banks” as politically crucial goals (Dead Kennedys 1986). In Foucault’s Use of
Pleasure, (1990b) the Ancient Greek problematization of men’s sexual relationships with young men destined to be citizens is accounted for as having been about sex with an equal in social stature, and so it was considered irrelevant to sex with slaves or women in that context. This problematization is, therefore but counter-intuitively, structurally “something like” the concerns about men’s sexual relationships with women in Public Enemy, Dead Prez, and the Dead Kennedys: what does a radical commitment to women’s equality mean for normative male ways of navigating sexual and romantic relationships with women? And, again, these questions are raised and explored alongside antagonistic stances toward the state and systemic injustice; in fact, in all three examples, alongside concerns of self-governance, an antagonistic relationship to systemic sexism is narrated as part of becoming ethical as a man. We thus need to think of Spivak’s differentiation between “ethical” and “political” positionings using, again, her “strategic essentialism” (1993). Ethical flows of self-, relational-, and collective-cultivation can be distinguished from political antagonism, but the line is différential rather than clearly separating two radically distinct ways of being. Assuming this distinction will be strategically useful sometimes, what differentiates one from the other is whether we are positioned as roughly equal to the others most immediately interdependent with us in our ‘flows of belonging,’ or whether we are ‘on bottom.’

Perhaps being ‘dragged into being a political person’ as a therapy client worked against my ‘ability to’ ‘be an ethical person’ toward stopping controlling my partner. If this resonates at all with others’ experiences of therapy or pedagogy, then it is important to think through.

Although I’d carefully chosen this therapist for his approach, how he spoke about his work, and the ways people I trusted talked about him, I did not feel he collaborated with me in evaluating my life; it felt like he had already determined any relevant evaluation. This evaluation was that what I was doing was not okay, which was frustrating because I already knew I was ‘against’ how I was treating my partner; I did not need someone to orient me to that. I did not need someone to ask about how she was being impacted by what I was doing, at least in the ways he did, because I already knew that too: she would tell me, and I believed her. I needed something more particular to my context, to our context. Among other things, our context included me ‘knowing better,’ her communicating with me how I was impacting her, and me believing her and feeling terrible about it. But somehow that was not helping me to consistently prevent my controlling. I needed to explore how I was
doing what I was doing in concrete and particular detail, how I was making sense of it, how this shaped the parameters of freedom in which I was struggling, and how this directed my means of exercising agency within them. All of this was only generally and abstractly taken into consideration in his evaluation, which felt like an imposition, even though I agreed with him. One thing I needed and did not get was space to externalize and evaluate my anxiety-infused and defensive ‘yeah, buts’ to the things I already knew to be ‘right answers.’ These ‘yeah, buts’ were unethical, from the standpoint of moral judgment – they led me toward irresponsibility, blaming and controlling. They were also what Mahmood calls “ethical practices” in that they contributed to how I governed myself. I’ll call them ‘ unethical ethical practices,’ a term I’ll return to again, to highlight both their ‘productivity’ and their immorality. In my ethical work at this time, I needed to engage these ‘yeah, buts’ as both morally reprehensible and as productively ‘enabling’ my controlling.

My therapist once asked me, “but isn’t your partner a competent, intelligent, adult who can take care of herself?” I took this to mean that, logically, there was no need for me to determine what she does and does not eat. We both knew there was a right answer to this question, and so I said “yes.” But on my subsequent walk alone, that is not all I said. What I said there – worked up and defensive about what I experienced as unhelpful moralizing – was along the lines of, “Yes, of course she’s ‘a competent, intelligent, adult who can take care of herself’ – but that doesn’t mean she does take care of herself.” This is not because she’s individually ‘unable to’ do so, it is because in real relationships we all rely on one another to take care of various aspects of our lives. McRuer (2006, 101) critiques discourses of ‘independence’ using feminism and Disability Studies, and Titchkosky (2003) illustrates how interdependence plays out with her partner Rod Michalko. Titchkosky shows how her particularities, and Michalko’s, her dyslexia, and his blindness, intersect so that each factor is contingent on each other factor: Michalko’s blindness only exists as it exists in relationship to her, her dyslexia, and their relationship; her dyslexia only exists as it exists in relationship to Michalko, Michalko’s blindness, and their relationship, etc. Each of

11 This framing suggests that some people – more normatively judged today as incompetent or unintelligent – may be appropriate to control (Carey 2009; Drinkwater 2005); when women were also normatively judged as such, John Stuart Mill described sexism as men’s “power [and] privilege” and women’s “disability” (1869, 1).
these things would likely exist in other contexts, but they would then be different from how they materialize in the context of their particular relationship and their navigations of it.

I recently reminded my partner about this interaction with my therapist. She laughed and said that if it were not for me she would eat food she’s allergic to all the time and suffer the consequences. Even while I was sometimes controlling her eating, I offered to stop having anything to do with what she ate, and she rejected that, saying she wanted my support to have a healthy pregnancy. This is not because she’s ‘incompetent,’ it is because of our history of how we’d worked through food difficulties. We also both had a relationship with my controlling that was not totalizing: we knew that my controlling was not the dominant theme of our relationship or our negotiation of food. We also knew it was serious.

No two relationships are exactly alike. The particular ways that we negotiate relationships are related to social norms and power relations, and are related to these things – and to other intersecting factors – in specific and non-generalizable ways (Bhabha 1994). The role I play in relation to our allergies and eating is particular to our relationship – even though it intersects with gender and disability in an “assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari 2000) that is at once entirely unique and shares many characteristics with lots of other people’s unique assemblages of gender and disability. It was from within the particular assemblage of our relationship, as it materialized at the time, that I needed to evaluate my unethical ethical practices of controlling. I could not do that with my therapist who could not imagine that my partner rejected that I would ‘butt out’ of her food navigations, even when I told him so.

While working with other men about their controlling behaviour, in an attempt to ensure that women’s experiences were adequately accounted for, I sometimes did “something like” what my therapist did with me. With one man in particular, having lived in his home culture for a time, I believed I thus had relevant knowledge of women’s responses to men in his culture, which I then foregrounded in our therapy conversations (Chapman 2007). In doing so, I represented women in his culture partially and fictionally (Spivak 1999), which is perhaps inevitable (at least in my own stream of consciousness). However, I assumed that my partial and fictional representations of women from his culture were more accurate and more aligned with ‘responsibility taking’ and local feminist understandings within his culture, than were his partial and fictional representations of women from his culture. This
went so far as believing that my guesses about his own partner’s responses to him – and I’d never met her – were more accurate accounts of her experience than were his accounts of her words and experiences. *This was not* inevitable. Sometimes I simply did not believe his descriptions of her responses to his controlling. I now wonder if it is possible that her responses and experiences *may have* been less clearly and cleanly ‘against him’ than I assumed. Thinking back on this today, I was doing structurally “something like” what my therapist did with me – which I found so unhelpful and frustrating when positioned as client. Noticing this structural and practical resonance is helpful in thinking about how we come to do what we do. I hope it also goes someway in countering the risks of objectifying and caricaturizing my therapist. How did my work to centre *this man’s partner’s* experience result in decentring *both her experience and his*, and instead centring *my own* assumptions, knowledges, and narratives? How we are positioned relative to one another, contingently within available discursive traditions, ‘enables’ how we are ‘able to’ relate to one another. Chambon writes, “social workers do not really start from ‘where the client is at.’ Clients do not exist outside the historical activity of social work; they are the result of that activity” (1999, 52-53). I was “the result of that activity” in my work with my therapist, and in a different sense I was also “the result of that activity” when doing something resonant with a man positioned as my client, who too was “the result of that activity.” As was my therapist.

Although the relevant discursive traditions are distinct, there is “something like a relationship” between the “historical activity of social work” and the “historical activity” shaping other instances of Fanon’s Manichaean structure. Said notes this structural resonance in his account of orientalism (1994b, 207, emphases added):

> Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but *as problems to be solved or confined* or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over. The point is that *the very designation of something as Oriental involved an already pronounced evaluative judgment.*
If I approach a social work client as a “problem to be solved,” due to an “already pronounced evaluative judgment,” this strongly shapes the possibilities available for our work together. This is, again, a consequence of Chambon’s “historical activity of social work” that, as Said says, both drew upon and reinforced a “system of truths” (although not exhaustively, as I discuss later) which is determinate of what my therapist, other social workers, and I are ‘able to know’ about our social work clients. Said writes,

For any European during the 19th century – and I think one can say this almost without qualification – Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche’s sense of the word. It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric (1994b, 203-204).

It is interesting to note that Said immediately goes on to, as he puts it, take “some of the immediate sting” out of this statement. Doing so is, perhaps, an important political gesture, not to be confused with compromising our critique. Said is clearly critical of orientalism, racism, and imperialism, and he’s also (perhaps even therefore) concerned with taking “some of the immediate sting” out of readers’ reading of his critique. I’d like to align myself with my therapist in order to take some of the sting out of my critique of him. I think that positioning his therapy and mine within Chambon’s “historical activity of social work” goes some way in moving us away from him and I as individually objectified and objectifying social workers, even though I am aligning my critique of our resonant therapy with Said’s critique of racism and imperialism. I also wish to align my critique of our resonant therapy practices with a resonant critique of my own sexism and controlling.

Although the relevant discursive traditions are once again distinct, my controlling can be situated as “the result” of “the historical activity” of men’s violence and domination. However, I’d like to complicate my use of Said’s critique of “every European” by folding in an account of other ‘historical activities.’ At the same time as I was sometimes controlling my partner’s eating, the ways she and I negotiated and responded to my controlling was also “the result” of “historical activity” in which my ‘care’ and ‘concern’ were not controlling. This too was particular to our relationship. At this time, she rejected my non-involvement in what she ate, because she wanted my assistance in having a healthy pregnancy. But she
did not want ‘my assistance’ in the controlling manner in which I sometimes offered it. This *want*, and the “historical activity” that informed it, was particular to our relationship and distinct from what I called controlling. This other “historical activity” was not meaningfully taken up in my therapist’s approach, as is equally true of the work I describe a few paragraphs above in which I was the therapist. I believe this again resonates with Angela Davis’ critique of “negative abolition,” Goldman’s critique of suffragettes, Butler and McRuer’s critiques of gay marriage, and my attempts to ‘stop crying’ rather than re-orient my emotions and tears in a purposive way as an outsider-witness. Like some slavery abolitionists, suffragettes, gay marriage activists, and me – relative to my own tears and also relative to the therapy client’s controlling behaviour I mention above – I am suggesting that my therapist took too narrow an approach to what was clearly and consensually a problem. My partner’s rejection of my non-involvement did not make sense to my therapist because my partner is “a competent, intelligent adult,” which again I gather he equated with both her desire for independence and her successful ‘ability to’ achieve independence. I imagine he wanted to ensure that we were taking a clear stance against my controlling, but *how* this stance materialized did not allow me to do the specific work, *with him*, that would help me to stop controlling. I already knew, in a generalized way, that it is wrong for men to control women. He and I knew this was the focus of my everyday work. I knew it very well – in theory, but also in many practice contexts. And I needed to consistently govern myself from within that inconsistent stance, in my relationship at the time, which was evading me.

I did stop controlling and making my partner feel bad in the way I was doing, and this process involved my therapy – however against the grain. My point is not that he did a particularly ‘bad job,’ which I have tried to highlight by aligning my own therapy practice with his. I believe that what he did is entirely *normative* in therapy. What I think may be useful to consider, then, as a reflexive critique of the ‘my people’ who work as therapists, is that (as a client) I was not ‘able to’ do the ethical and political work required within a moral framework based upon a generalized critique of sexism, rather than a particular and contingent one. I was enacting sexism, and it would have been irresponsible of us both to leave sexism out of our conversations. But I was doing what so many men do – domestic violence increases with pregnancy – and yet experiencing it as unique. It was this personal
and particular relational experience that I needed to reflexively inhabit, in order to do the ethical and political work required of me at that specific moment for that specific purpose.

**Beyond Word Choice Versus Real Life (Or: Les Mots et les Choix)**

In ‘Beyond pro-choice versus pro-life: Women and reproductive justice,’ Smith (2005a) explores how discursive and material conditions prevent marginalized women from having viable reproductive ‘choices’ and viable ‘lives.’ Certain choices are more readily available to women with money and privilege than to marginalized women, and the choices marginalized women make are normatively judged according to differing standards than the choices privileged women make. Although me controlling my partner is entirely distinct from a woman’s decisions about reproduction, Smith’s attention to the complexities and contingency of seemingly simple concepts such as ‘choice’ and ‘life’ can help my work here. I think my agency or responsibility in my work with my therapist needs to be partly attended to by attending to the differing meanings attributed to the word ‘controlling’ – perhaps by following the word around and noticing what it did, as Ahmed might say (2010).

My therapist seemed to countersign this word by representing me as irresponsible and out of touch with both my partner’s experience and the abstract knowledge and practical know-how that would ‘enable’ me to stop controlling. This ‘out of touch-ness’ was not untrue, but it seemed to become who I am in my therapist’s countersignature, which seems to have resulted in our conversations most immediately orienting me further away from being ‘able to’ get ‘in touch’ with knowledge and know-how that I had potentially available to me. My flows were most immediately straightened toward ‘talking back’ to him, rather than more straightforwardly working on my relationship with my partner. This representation of me – in my therapist’s countersignature of my representation of myself – was fictitious in that it was partial. I was indeed out of touch with my skills, knowledges and partner. But I was also in touch with those things in other ways and at other times. It was the partiality of his countersigned representation of me that may have rendered me a caricature with no hope of responsibility – unless I abandoned my own path and embraced the one he had in mind.

While I was seeing him and feeling that our work together was frustrating and pointless, I approached a feminist Narrative Practitioner friend, as a friend, to discuss what I was doing at home. Just as I’d carefully chosen my therapist, I went through the various people in my
life who I thought might be ‘able to’ provide what I sought. This particular friend was an obvious choice – even though I felt a lot of shame about telling her about my controlling. When I told her about it, she said I should not give myself such a hard time and that my partner probably felt lucky to have such an involved and caring partner. This, frustratingly, was true some of the time, but my explicit identification of myself as ‘controlling’ somehow did not register at all. Again, I think we can think this through as her partial representation of me constituting a fictitious fixed ‘me’ who was incapable of controlling. What she knew of me – doing the work I was doing, aligned with feminism, publicly self-critical about my participation in racism, ableism and classism, etc. – seems to have fixed me as ‘the kind of person’ or ‘the kind of man’ who does not ever control women. This was as frustrating as my attempts with my therapist. I responded by re-stressing what I was doing – which she again dismissed. I suspect she heard it as hyperbole, whereas it seems the other therapist could only hear it as the totalizing characterization of my relationship, behaviour and being.

This response from my friend brings to mind a lecture I once gave. I described falsely interpreting an African man’s critique of individualism as blaming his partner (Chapman 2007), and I called my actions racist. When I finished, a student responded that it had just been a misunderstanding, certainly was not racism, and that I should not be so hard on myself. Only because I think he’s likely to be countersigned as having been defensive, I’ll add that the student was a man of colour. Although I could not say for sure, my sense is that he was not responding defensively but was rather attempting to ease my conscience. That my guilt about perpetrating racism might be something appropriate to ‘ease’ is, again, informed by what I have called the ‘affective dividing practices’ of our ‘disability to know.’

For me, it is important to think through what I have done using language such as ‘controlling,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘perpetration’ – and it is important in that this has an effect on how I feel about things I have done. I think my word choice is entirely distinct from hyperbole, which I do not think is helpful in ethical narration. But I think that what is ethically crucial in my language choice is how I relate to it; it is not language I could prescribe as appropriate for anyone else. There is a whole history of becoming that continues to evolve as I devote so much of my time and attention to the questions of this project, which informs why I use language that I understand as accountable to normative experiences of being subjected to racism, sexism, and so on. I have purposefully directed
my personal ethical flows in ways that I understand to be politically accountable to experiences of survivors of abuse, anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist critics, psychiatric survivors, disabled critics of rehabilitation, and so on. In order to address my controlling, I think what I needed was someone to collaborate with my ongoing flows of becoming – for them to flow alongside of me, without trying to steer me toward their flow (Turner 2006, 48), and yet to agentively assist me to find ways to re-orient myself. One thing that could have potentially been helpful – as a starting point from either my friend or my therapist – would have been to ask something like, “can you say more about what you mean by controlling?” or “how did you come to this word to account for what you were doing?” Perhaps this would have ‘enabled’ a collaborative exploration of my historical flows, skills, experiences and knowledges, which may then have provided us with a foundation for our subsequent work together. This fits neatly with Narrative and Invitational Practice, and so it was not unrealistic for me to imagine it might have been possible with the two people I approached. White writes that the preferred positioning in Narrative Practice, relative to clients and their lives, is “decentred and influential” (2005, 9). This involves joining with clients’ flows of becoming and understandings, without attempting to direct or change them based on one’s own sense of what’s what. The attempt to change or direct them, which is there, is approached by working within clients’ sense of what’s what. And it was my sense of what is what that made my word choice fit. For me, ‘controlling’ was the appropriate word to accurately name what I was doing as serious, without being excessive (as, again, would have been the case had I said ‘mental torture’). My word choice, and the commitments associated with it, is related to my belief that we all play a part in perpetuating and perpetrating systemic injustice, and so holding myself accountable for my own part in these injustices is unpleasant but not unbearable.

On Christmas Eve, my son approached me to clarify that ‘bad kids’ do not get Christmas gifts. My response, among other things, was that there is no such thing as a bad kid. I said to him, “All of us do things that hurt other people sometimes.” He replied, “Like me hitting?” “Yes,” I said, “and like me raising my voice with you.” “And like me raising my voice with you,” he said. This was a tremendously complicated exchange, and I am not sure it would be doing justice to the complexity of it to claim it as a ‘good’ or ‘just’ one. But, bracketing some of that complexity for the moment, I’ll offer a snippet of the ‘cultural
context’ in which this conversation took place. In *Frosty’s Winter Wonderland* (Muller 1976), which he’d watched that day, Jack Frost stands in for all things evil, causing harm with no apparent intent other than to cause harm. And in *Dora the Explorer*, Swiper steals things without even keeping them or using them. In contrast, Dora ‘finds’ and ‘uses’ things like submarines – which clearly do not belong to her – in order to complete her adventures. As far as viewers are concerned, Swiper’s sole purpose in life is to inconvenience Dora, which provides an opportunity for ‘exaltation’ (Thobani 2007) for Dora, and for viewers who are invited through audience participation cues to engage in ‘crime prevention’ and ‘rehabilitation.’ In one episode (McWane 2009), Dora takes Swiper to Christmas past, present, and future, to teach him not to steal so that he’ll get off of Santa’s naughty list. There are a few episodes like this one, where Swiper is a ‘secondary character’ who is taught not to steal as a passive recipient of Dora and her viewers’ banking education (Freire 2000). But generally, like Jack Frost, Swiper is a totally objectified antagonist. In everyday life, we do a terrible disservice to our ‘ability to know’ when we narrate harm, violence, and oppression by employing these antagonist character types as explanations.

Many theorists inform my analysis that we all participate in oppression, but my personal-is-political comfort with it is perhaps most directly ‘enabled’ by White’s externalization of problems. I do not think racism is inherent to me, at least not any more than it is to white people more generally in our time, but I do think there are concrete and identifiable ways I actively participate in racism. In the following, White (2007) describes how we’ve come to understand certain characteristics to inhere in some people and not others:

The development of these dividing practices, of this scientific classification, and of this mechanism of normalizing judgment fostered the objectification of people’s identity [so that] many of the problems that people encounter in life come to represent the ‘truth’ of their identity…. [I]t is not uncommon for therapists to refer to a person as ‘disordered’ or ‘dysfunctional,’ and in wider culture it is not uncommon for people to consider themselves or others ‘incompetent’ or ‘inadequate’ by nature.

Externalizing conversations in which the problem becomes the problem, not the person, can be considered counter-practices to those that objectify people’s
identities. Externalizing conversations employ practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people.

When the problem becomes an entity that is separate from the person, and when people are not tied to restricting ‘truths’ about their identity and negative ‘certainties’ about their lives, new options for taking action to address the predicaments of their lives become available. This separation of the person’s identity from the identity of the problem does not relinquish people from a responsibility to address the problems that they are encountering. Rather, it makes it more possible for people to assume this responsibility. If the person is the problem there is very little that can be done outside of taking action that is self-destructive. But if a person’s relationship with the problem becomes more clearly defined, as it does in externalizing conversations, a range of possibilities become available to revise this relationship [with the problem] (25-26).

“Something like” White’s externalization features in Ahmed’s writing on ‘whiteness.’ She writes, for example: “Proximity to whiteness creates a point of alienation” (2010, 156). She discusses whiteness as if it is something ‘out there’ that we can alter our relationship with, even though, “something like” in White’s externalization, this ‘out there’ is often located in our shared social institutions, our language and behaviour, and even our ‘inner’ experiences. And “something like” this is also at work in some usage of the word “blackness:” Chuck D raps, “Radio stations I question their blackness / They call themselves black, but we’ll see if they play this” (Public Enemy 1988). He’s clearly referring to a quality that is more politic than pigment. He is not questioning whether or not the staff or owners of radio stations are African American; whether or not they are, he’s questioning their commitment to anti-racist struggle. Following Ahmed (2006b), he’s questioning the acts of alignment that ‘straighten’ diverse bodies toward the reproduction of white supremacy and white normativity.

While my partner was pregnant, I sought to revise my relationship with ‘controlling,’ which I saw as a normative practice of masculinity that I was not immune to any more than other men are. It ‘aligned’ my worry about her and the baby’s health – ‘straightening’ me, and what I did, along the lines of dominant and dominating masculinity. My controlling had become a significant problem – which I understood to be unprecedented in my life – but this
did not mean I was now a fixed/unfixable ‘controlling person.’ It also did not mean it was therefore ‘no big deal.’ It seems to me that these are the two options most freely available to us about behaviours such as controlling: either I am a controlling person, period; or I am not and any controlling I do is aberrational and therefore ‘no big deal’ – or is even someone else’s fault. But my controlling was a big deal, it was not any one else’s responsibility, and I was intent to change it. However, in how I directed my efforts to get assistance, I did not fully appreciate how the collaborative revising of a relationship with a problem requires a rough consensus about what the problem is and how we relate to it. My qualification “rough” is meant to convey that exhaustive consensus is not within our grasp, but there can be enough of a resonant understanding amongst two or more people that collaborative work can proceed, even with heterogeneity. Ahmed’s (2004a) “ethical demand … that I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know” is politically crucial, particularly when we are ‘on top’ of whatever instance of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure,” but such acting may require a ‘roughly shared’ resonant understanding. If I did not believe this was ‘roughly’ possible, I would not write about important things. I would not ever bother trying to have a conversation. What I can realistically hope, I think, is that my sense of what I mean to convey is Spivak’s “something like” what you take from reading my work, at least some of the time. This differantial “something like” makes any conversation or reading possible, even though the people involved in a conversation – or readers of the same text – differ in understandings of what was meant. Books are read, and conversations happen, because of the ‘ability to’ of the resonant ‘rough consensus’ of “something like.”

Folding this into my work with my therapist, although I think that what I am about to write is politically dangerous, I think I’d have received better therapy – contingently, from him at that particular time – if I’d called my struggles “anxiety.” Perhaps he would not have felt the urgency I suspect may have contributed to him not really listening to me – even when I was quoting my partner’s words to him about what I was doing, how she was impacted, and how she wanted to proceed. My representation of her could not be trusted, because I was controlling. I know my previous sentence reads as sarcastic and defensive. But I am still frustrated by this: I always said I was controlling, and yet what was meant to be ‘taking responsibility’ was countersigned as ‘irresponsibility.’ I responded to him defensively, but I never felt defensive about whether or not I was controlling; I knew and said I was. I
responded defensively to feeling misrepresented and misjudged, rather than to the suggestion that I was controlling my partner. I do not think I responded defensively to my partner at the time, and the entire time I was seeking therapy I was struggling to change what I was doing. Mostly outside of therapy. “In spite of it,” I said to myself.

So it was in my ‘conversations’ with myself that I was left to figure it all out. ‘Left to’ or perhaps ‘chose to’ – depending on how I choose to narrate what I did, centring contingency or agency. This was a predictable (contingently, rather than inevitably) outcome of representing myself as “controlling.” I can therefore take some responsibility for this past situation, if I wish to find some way of flowing with it, by thinking about words and what they do in specific relationships and contexts. The work he might do to take responsibility for what happened would be completely different – and if what I am saying is useful at all, it would not be up to me to steer his journey, but he might benefit from my account, through bottom-up accountability (MacLean 1994; Razack 1999; Waldegrave et al. 2003).

Whether or not stories are “all we are,” they definitely matter. And however impossible it is to convey exactly what we mean to another person, we can learn from misreadings and misrepresentations that we know we’ve experienced. It seems to be the case that, whatever my intentions were in ‘holding myself accountable’ by using the term ‘controlling,’ this had distinct – but identifiable and parallel – unhelpful consequences with both people I reached out to. N. Scott Momaday writes, “A word has power in and of itself … it gives origin to all things” (Cited in Turner 2006, 46). I chose a word purposefully from a tradition for making sense of men’s violence against women, because I understood myself to be participating in exactly that – but, importantly, I intersected this tradition with that of the externalization of problems. My friend, it seems, could not position me within that tradition of understanding at all, and my therapist seems to have understood me to ‘be’ only and exactly what that tradition says about men who control women – that men control and abuse “because they want to [and] because they think they have a right to” (Itzin 2000, 378), for example. This tradition acknowledges that men who abuse describe things differently, but this is treated with suspicion and understood as evidence that they’re “dangerous and deceptive” (Pence and McDonnell 2000, 252). The word “controlling,” whatever I meant it to convey, given the discursive “rules” into which I spoke (Foucault 1972), set the stage for both of my ineffective requests for help. I imagined the tradition of men controlling women as
something I was participating in – and was horrified to be doing so – but it was not who or what I was, and I still believe this would have been a helpful orientation if I’d found someone to join with it. But it was not available to us – to either of the us-es I tried to collaborate with – as a ‘roughly shared’ orientation with which we could walk arm-in-arm together. And again, ‘on paper,’ I had every reason to expect they both would have been ‘able to know’ what I meant when I “externalized” controlling. It is because they were both such ‘sure bets’ that I gave up on other people when neither one countersigned in a way I found useful. I am not saying I was ‘powerless;’ I was agentively navigating, and my possible navigations were contingent on all sorts of intersecting contextual factors.

Contextual Communities and Collaborative Conceptual Development

White’s use of Lev Vygotsky can help make sense of the importance of word selection in collaborating toward agency. He writes that Vygotsky “encourage[s] us, as therapists, to acknowledge and honour the special responsibility that we have to provide the conditions for the development of personal agency for the people who consult us” (2007, 281). He continues, elaborating on this “special responsibility” (2007, 281):

if a person’s response to therapeutic inquiry is a not knowing response – ‘I do not know the answer to that’; ‘I do not know how to respond to that’ – our attention will be drawn to the responsibility that we have to further scaffold the conversation…. We also have a responsibility to avoid falling prey to conclusions that a person is ‘simply lacking motivation,’ is ‘hopelessly irresponsible,’ is ‘resistant,’ is ‘incapable of foreseeing the consequences of her or his actions,’ is ‘unable to reflect on her or his behavior,’ or is ‘incapable of abstract thought.’ In fact these conclusions can serve as a wake up call. They reflect the extent to which this person is mired in the known and familiar and is not experiencing the sort of social collaboration that would support the scaffolding of her or his [agency].

Collaboration toward agency requires negotiation of ‘experience near’ language, he writes:

Language and word-meaning evolution is crucial to this conceptual development, the pathway to concept formation is the development of word
meanings…. ‘Real concepts are impossible without words, and thinking in concepts does not exist beyond verbal thinking. That is why the central movement in concept formation, and its generative cause, is a specific use of words as functional tools’ (2007, 274, citing Vygotsky).

Illustrating this with one family he worked with, White writes that the word freedom was known to Peter, but it had not been developed as a conceptual form. In my meeting with Peter and Trudy, the ‘word meaning’ of freedom was developed and redeveloped, and in this process it was abstracted from concrete and specific circumstances to become a guiding concept of life. It is this concept formation that establishes … the foundation of personal agency and responsible action…. [I]t is social collaboration in the development of word meaning that is essential to the attainment of personal agency and responsible action (2007, 280).

Unlike White, I am not writing predominantly to therapist-readers in order to train them to do therapy. I am thus going somewhat against the grain in trying to find grounding for my responsibility as a client, although importantly as being a client intersected with controlling my female partner. I was positioned, at once, on different ends of two distinct poles of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure:” ‘on top’ as male; ‘on bottom’ as client. As therapists, following White, have a “special responsibility” for what happens in the context of the therapeutic hierarchy, and so too do men have a special responsibility for what happens in the context of patriarchal hierarchy. What I want to suggest, in citing these passages from White on Vygotsky, is that what I needed at this time was a social collaboration that would have contributed to the “development” of my agency in relation to my sexist controlling. I can imagine therapy with this particular therapist in which he’d have been ‘able to’ scaffold such development and ‘enable’ a greater sense of agency in controlling my controlling. But a considerable portion of what prevented this from happening is, I think, outside of my sphere of immediate influence and within what White calls the “special responsibility” of the therapist. However, one of the things I can take responsibility for is the ‘stage I set’ for my therapist’s response, when I used the word ‘controlling’ to describe what I was doing. Because his past flows of “conceptual development” with the word seem to have been
oriented along lines that hold domestic violence perpetrators as only ever navigating their lives using ‘unethical ethical practices’ that are distinct from those used by the rest of us, I suspect that my therapy with him may have been more effective if I’d instead called the problem ‘anxiety about our unborn child.’ Had I done so, I might have found the social collaboration to find new ways to move along; but of course the danger would have been doing this work in a political vacuum. We could have also taken up my partner’s ‘experience near’ account of the problem, that I was making her feel bad. I am not confident this would have produced better results with my therapist, but perhaps it would’ve been a better route to go with my friend who was not ‘able to’ take my identification of what I was doing seriously. Perhaps she could have understood that my partner – who she knows – was feeling bad as a result of what I was doing. And perhaps she would have been ‘able to’ collaborate with me on my concerns about not wishing to continue to make her feel bad. I suspect that when I said ‘controlling,’ my friend countersigned and translated my description so that the ‘real problem’ was my anxiety. Perhaps any of these namings could have potentially been taken up in a social collaboration that would have enabled me to exercise greater agency in the situation. Although starting with the problem defined as ‘anxiety’ would have resulted in less certainty that the work would have been sufficiently politicized and accountable, it might have nevertheless been more productive with this one therapist. And of course the “accountability for change” that Solution-focused Therapists prioritize in their domestic violence work (Lee, Sebold, and Uken 2003), while not the only kind of accountability I think is crucial, is nevertheless crucial. I imagine my partner would have chosen a quick and effective cessation of what I was doing over my therapist’s attempts at holding me accountable for my sexism – at least as this actually materialized.

The one helpful session I recall with my therapist (that is, in the direct way I assume he intended) was one in which we achieved a temporary ‘rough consensus’ for the duration of the conversation. My therapist pointed out to me that the stress I was causing my partner had physiological effects on her and the baby, just like what food she ate did. Out of this, he and I had a very helpful conversation about the effects I was having on them both, explored by flowing with my already-there anxiety about their health, so as to reflexively re-engage what I was doing with my anxiety. The right term, then, perhaps does not turn out to be simply what the right term is for me, but is perhaps rather what is right for the ‘us’ to
which I am *right now* belonging. In that session, we collaborated in a flow of belonging, based upon a rough consensus of what we were talking about. Any of the various namings of the problem could have potentially led to similar explorations about what I was doing, how she felt as a result, how I felt and what I did and said before and after, and how to change what I was doing – but this requires ‘roughly shared’ understanding. “[A]ny [initial] description can be rendered experience-near and particular” (White 2007, 42) and can thus lead to greater parameters of freedom and more diverse means of exercising agency:

> It is in the rich characterization of problems that people’s unique knowledges and skills become relevant and central to taking action to address their concerns. During this process, people become aware of the fact that they do possess a certain know-how that can be further developed and used to guide them in their effort to address their problems (43).

I did get in touch with my know-how, talking to myself using the word ‘controlling’ and sometimes even taking turns with myself, acting out what I might ask myself if I were listening as a therapist. But it would have been easier if I’d had someone to collaborate with, to face the hurtful things I was doing, which was terribly difficult to do alone.

But this might sound like a terrible prescription. I seem to be advocating for safety and support for perpetrators, to make their work *easy*. This *is not* what I am saying, at least not exactly. Parts of what I needed to do felt terribly unsafe and risky. I needed to ‘face what I was doing’ in more painful ways than I was doing, I needed to confront my normatively male sense of entitlement to direct her actions, and to situate what I was doing within patriarchy, differently than I was already doing. So I am not advocating safety for safety’s sake. We need to foster conditions in which unsafe, painful, and unsettling work can be contingently possible *at all*, and can be oriented along flows toward responsibility and accountability. It is painful to acknowledge harm we’ve done. And, as Ahmed writes,

> It is not that disorientation is always radical. [People] that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the “aims” of their gestures, depending on how
they seek to (re)ground themselves. And, for sure, [disorientated people] might need to be orientated, to find a place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world (2006b, 158).

But because I did not feel I had any other viable options, I ended up doing this reorientation work alone, on the path near my work, struggling on my own against the reactionary and defensive unethical ethical practice responses that I’d sometimes give in my internal struggles. And I am not saying this to drum up sympathy for myself or for others when we cause harm. Relative to other things pertaining to systemic oppression, my difficulty in being ‘able to’ find a ‘good fit’ therapist is a marginal concern. But I think that this personal struggle was political, that it was not ‘just about me,’ and that if it might have “something like a relationship” with other instances of participation in oppression, then its careful consideration might not be so marginal after all. I do not believe it is realistic to imagine everyone will do the work I did, alone, in the way I did. I do not believe many people would be ‘able to.’ Recalling again Spivak’s situation of ‘ability to’ as a component of what power is and what power does (1993), I do not think I’d have been ‘able to’ do this work if I did not have an isolated path near my work place where I could go for walks everyday and talk to myself; I do not think I’d have been ‘able to,’ had I not rejected the idea that we should not talk to ourselves (particularly as therapists ten minutes’ from the office). But I was also only ‘able to’ do this work ‘on my own’ because of my training and experience in having similar conversations with others, so that I was ‘able to’ play “something like” the role of therapist in these monologues. This also raises that, for those therapy clients for whom I was not ‘able to’ play this role, the result of my not scaffolding their work in the particular and ‘experience near’ way that they needed may have resulted in them not being ‘able to’ do (or at least to sustain) the work of taking responsibility at all. Not because I am so special as a therapist, but because this social collaboration is so hard to come by. I remember how lost I felt going through the social supports I had available, and how none of them seemed to be a place where I would be ‘able to’ fruitfully discuss this – each person for distinct reasons. And relative to many men I worked with, I had remarkably plentiful social resources, especially in relation to feminism and Narrative Practice.

I also want to say something about the social context in which ‘I’ was ‘able to’ “feel comfortable and safe,” as Ahmed says, to do this work ‘alone’ during my lunch breaks.
Reading this accomplishment and the labour it involved using Vygotsky’s account of social collaboration in conceptual development and agency, there is a very real way in which I did not, in fact, do this work alone. Among illimitable others, I had the specific support of all of the people I’d ever done training with – including the experiences of being interviewed by White and Jenkins. And, perhaps equally or more significantly, I also had the specific support of all the people who’d ever consulted me as clients. I think the men who consulted me about their own abuse and controlling, at this time and previous to it, played an especially helpful role in my ‘ability to’ stop controlling. It was not that I took direct words or skills from any one person and cut and pasted them into my life, although I probably did “something like” that now and again. More often, rather, their flows of becoming, and the stories they shared with me, as a result of the agentive process of witnessing their accounts, became integrated into my own flows of becoming as overtones that I wove into the melody of my everyday life. And just as I can borrow words from Deleuze and Guattari, James, and Massumi in my ‘ability to’ articulate this in the previous sentence – an important step in concept formation, according to Vygotsky – I can also cite Jenkins and White for ‘enabling me to’ journey with clients’ stories as they were shared with me (Jenkins 2009; White 2004b; 1997), as well as for ‘enabling me to’ engage with people in a way that ‘enabled’ their sharing of their ‘experience-near’ and ‘particular’ stories with me:

the therapist supports people in the negotiation of the definition of the predicaments and problems for which they are seeking therapy. In this negotiation, these predicaments and problems are richly characterized. It is through this characterization that ‘experience-distant’ and ‘global’ definitions are rendered ‘experience-near’ and ‘particular’.

An ‘experience-near’ description of the problem is one that uses the parlance of the people seeking therapy and that is based on their understanding of life (developed in the culture of their family or community and influenced by their immediate history). In using the word particular, I am acknowledging the fact that no problem or predicament is perceived or received in identical ways by different people, or in identical ways at different times in a person’s life. No predicament or problem is a direct replica of any other predicament.
or problem, and no predicament or problem of the present is a carbon copy of the predicament or problem it was in the past (White 2007, 40).

Following Jenkins and White, then as now, the word controlling was rooted in an “understanding of life” in which I experienced my life as joined with the men I worked with, but this joining was not totalizing of my identity or theirs. We journeyed side by side, on our own particular flows away from abuse, coercion and domination, toward respect and collaboration, with our respective flows harmonizing with and feeding one another. Although I felt resonance with these men and their “political journeys” (Jenkins 2009), which I believe significantly contributed to my ‘ability to’ put an end to my own controlling, I never considered any aspect of any one’s life “a direct replica” of any aspect of anyone else’s. Rather, some words, phrases, or analyses that particular men used resonated for me, as I translated them into my own context through my overtones.

All of this contributed to my growing sense that the ways we’ve structured responses to men’s violence and other personal-is-political systemic oppression are totally inadequate.

Outside of the Therapy Room

The subtitle here is taken from an interview I did with Narrative Practitioner Natasha Kish-Sinesh for my MSW research (Chapman 2006, 42). She says this while discussing a conversation she’d had with a young man about his experiences of racism and police harassment, and she says it is important to provide possibilities for action “outside of the therapy room.” This relates to my choice to leave therapy and turn to research.

I wrote above that the men I worked with contributed to my ‘ability to’ do the work of putting an end to my own controlling behaviour. It may be worth clarifying that I never once had conversations with any of them about my controlling. They rather helped me through the agency that witnessing others’ stories involves. I do not think this active witnessing and resonance ‘just happens naturally’ and consistently, but neither do I think it is abnormal. What I speculate in the previous chapter, touching upon various accounts from African and North American indigenous traditions of understanding life, narrative, and pedagogy – as well as some of those within Jewish traditions – is that perhaps this recognition of the active engagement of listeners, witnesses or readers is something that has
been widely ‘roughly shared’ in unimaginably diverse contexts, however heterogeneously, and that it is the ‘modern’ European notion that meaning resides in a fixed way in a text or story that is the aberration. That said, however aberrational, the fixity of meaning continues to play its part in my flows of becoming, however much I problematize it. But, that said, we can find traditions of recognizing agentive witnessing all around us, even here and now.

For example, this can be extrapolated from what I understand to be the norm in groups that are run in contemporary Canadian social services. Please understand that my reading of what I believe to be normative in these settings is not part of the normative understandings in these sites. But even then, I think I could tell the following account to most people who run social service groups in North America today and they would experience some degree of resonance, however much it might intersect with defensiveness, dismissal, or Heron’s (2007) “containment strategies.” Group facilitators, in a variety of settings to address an even greater variety of concerns, most commonly run educational groups today, with a heavy emphasis on the teaching of skills. The educational approach is predominantly what Freire called a “banking” approach (2000), although there may be more democratic educational processes woven in. Even when there is space allotted for the sharing of client knowledges, these groups almost always centre a professional who takes an abstractly generated ‘skill’ and teaches it. This is done with countless ‘skills’ – budgeting, parenting, sweeping, assertiveness, positive self-talk, problem solving, job searching, asking to join a game, managing anxiety, leaving an abusive relationship, controlling one’s own anger and violence, etc. The perhaps illimitable diversity of skills taught in such contexts, all remaining firmly “within the true” in contemporary social service discourse (Foucault 1972, 224), suggests to me that the only common denominator is an overarching analysis that understands social service recipients’ problems to be rooted in ignorance, and which understands social service providers to necessarily have the necessary knowledge and skills required for any needed transformation. This somehow holds true no matter the amount of training or experience a particular social service provider brings to the role of facilitator. Any person’s positioning as a service provider brands them skilled and knowledgeable in illimitable areas of living; any person’s positioning as a service user brands them lacking. This structure of service delivery can be traced back at least as far as the Charitable
Organization Societies of over a century ago (Richmond 1899)\(^1\), and the discourse of defining diverse problems as ignorance and diverse solutions as teaching can be traced back even further – to at least British debates on slavery abolition and the New Poor Law, both of which passed in 1834 (O’Connell 2009) and held that tutelage would ‘enable’ paupers and slaves to be ‘able to’ achieve “economic freedom.” Around this same time, “something like” this discourse and structure (Chapman forthcoming; Chapman, Ben-Moshe, and Carey forthcoming) informed Indian Residential Schools (Chrisjohn et al. 2006; Churchill 2004; Fournier and Crey 1999), the earliest specialized schools for intellectually disabled people (Carey 2009; Rafter 1997), and the emergence of the prison as we know it today (Ben-Moshe 2012; A. Davis 2003; Foucault 1995). The punch line to this story comes at the end of a contemporary skills training group, which, like in University classrooms, is often the only time feedback is solicited from participants. Every time I have ever read comments from group participants, including those about groups I have run, one of the most common things group members write is something along the lines of, ‘I got a lot from listening to other group members.’ They may also comment on the facilitators’ qualities, such as being knowledgeable or approachable or supportive, but it seems to me that other group members are often credited with having more directly contributed to what was concretely taken away; remember these groups most often centre the professional facilitator teaching concrete skills and strategies intended for take away. I call this the “punch line” because the joke is that we keep running groups that assume that professional facilitators hold the most important knowledge in the room, that the most effective way of disseminating such expertise is through top-down teaching, and, implicitly, because we are running a “skills-based” group, that the cause of countless difficulties is people’s ignorance. Otherwise, why ‘teach’ them? The joke, then, would be on us service providers for continuing to do what we are doing, except that this process exalts us while denigrating service users. Spivak’s “learning to learn from below” (2008; 2004b) can help here: first, by simply paying attention to this frequent feedback, and letting it guide our flows of becoming, we would make structural changes to the ways we run and think about social service groups; second, we could use the

\(^{12}\) And, as with the prison (Foucault 1995), the critique of this goes as far back as its birth (Addams 1902a).
orientation as an alternative way of positioning facilitators, so that clients’ knowledges and skills would be centred and “sutured” to the knowledge and skills that facilitators bring.

We could read from this normative feedback that group members feel more resonance with one another’s accounts of their real lives then they do from the abstractly-generated ‘skills’ offered by the professional in the room. Like White and Jenkins, I therefore think there is something to be said for trying to cultivate other ways of embodying what it is to be a helping professional – or professor, or researcher; or cisgendered, class-privileged, white, male, nondisabled, and so on. hooks (2005) says that we need to move beyond “dominator” models of masculinity and toward “partnership” models, and I think this resonates with the work that is needed in alternative becomings for helping professionals and other sites of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure” – along the lines of Jenkins’ “parallel, political journey” (2009). While surely not the only starting point for enabling the cultivation of partnership models, one useful place to start seems to be attending to the commonplace sharing of stories as a means of relating, reflecting, and transforming – perhaps because this is such a widespread feature in understandings of what it is to be human, even in its inconsistent, diverse, and contingent specificities. This ‘starting point’ has significantly shaped this project, as I hope will be clear. Some readers will experience fruitful resonance with the stories I share from my own and others’ lives, and others will not. Such is life. But what I am most fundamentally pointing to is fairly simple: we hear or read or witness one another’s accounts; this contributes to our available options for navigating life; and this is an important component of what we call ethics (as well as what we call psychology); I have intersected this starting point with the everydayness of our harm of others, rather than, say, the universality of being harmed and mourning (as found in Butler 2004a, and which I should say I believe is a strategic orientation in relation to the war on terror and Palestine), as well as with relational understandings of what it is to be human that go beyond the structure of dyadic relationships (as are centred in Butler 2005). I believe that this intersectional starting point offers wide parameters of freedom for people to work within, although I also take responsibility for the particular stage I am setting for overtone responses.

There are a number of discernable kinds of accounts that we engage in our lives, which can be “strategically essentialized” for the sake of externalization, conceptual development, and
the fostering of agency, even though doing so is a tremendous simplification of everyday narrative forms that are *differentially* related rather than objectively distinct. Sometimes we have conversations in which, like in White’s Narrative Practice, others ask us questions that “scaffold” our own stories so that we are ‘able to’ generate new knowledges and skills; such questions are only possible through the existence of the other person’s overtone accounts that they may not ever directly share with us. Other times, like when White describes *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) for other practitioners, or when we read theory, we may experience resonance and a resultant increase in possibilities for navigating our own lives as a result of exposure to these ‘meta’-level abstracted accounts. And probably much more often than either of these things happen, people simply tell stories about themselves to one another, as my clients did with me (although this was generally a one way street), or as some friends and I will do back and forth over supper tonight. Even this form of collaborative flows can make us more knowledgeable about life and how to live, because of the agentive work we do as witnesses, readers, or listeners – creatively, partially and fictitiously representing, resonating and responding, co-authoring the accounts we witness with unique overtones or countersignatures, and harmonizing what we take from this ongoing process into the melodies of our everyday lives.

It was largely my growing awareness of this aspect of life – that the sharing of stories can make a difference in our possibilities for living ethically or responsibly – that fed my growing frustration with the narrow parameters and inflexible options of ‘the therapy room.’ At my last therapy job, there were men in groups we ran who said they would be happy to speak publicly about their abuse, what had helped them to realize what they’d done, what they did to change, and so on, but there was no way that this would ever have been possible (in the context in which I was working) with ‘clients.’ The taken-for-granted legal risk, relating to the universally imposed right to confidentiality, trumped the possibility that these

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13 My son approached me yesterday, saying something about zombies. I told him I knew a great song called Zombie (Kuti, 1977), and I played it for him. The song is a critique of the military, and the first few minutes are upbeat and instrumental. During these first few minutes he asked, “what does it mean?” After clarifying what he meant, I was relatively confident he was asking for the ‘meaning’ of the instrumental music. Although nothing like this question had ever occurred to me, his question scaffolded or ‘enabled’ what I was then ‘able to know’ about ‘the meaning’ of the music. However undesigned, his social collaboration enabled me to move from a previous “known and familiar” to what was newly “possible to know” (White 2007, 278).
men’s stories, disseminated through television or radio, might play a part in undermining men’s violence and irresponsibility collectively – “something like” the work by the Storytelling and Organizing Project (Creative Interventions 2010). We could not do anything of the sort, because our job was personal change, not political change. Lip service was paid to deconstructing the line between the two, but in such a way that ultimately reinforced the line and positioned us firmly on one side of it. This has happened in social work practice since its emergence (Chrisjohn et al. 2006; Haynes 1998; Olson 2007; Richmond 1899).

What I experienced when we brought men together to talk about their relationships, their abuse, and what ‘enabled’ their work toward ending their abuse, confirmed for me that these accounts mattered and were useful to these men when they shared them with one another. This is in contrast to their accounts being countersigned as evidence of the men’s abusive aberrational nature, which is often ‘evidenced’ from groups in which the facilitator is held as the one with the requisite skills and knowledge to bring about change. If it is possible that participants in such groups might be partly responding defensively to the immediate structure and approach – which Jenkins suggests “invites” irresponsibility (1990) – rather than only to the suggestion that they’re harming others, then this is very concerning for both violence intervention and research. And what is relevant for all of us is that these conversations were useful for the men to be ‘able to’ take responsibility individually. Foucault can help make sense of this as an everyday aspect of what it means to be part of a community or group: “the main characteristic of our political rationality is the fact that this integration of the individuals into a community or in a totality results from a constant correlation between an increasing individualization and the reinforcement of this totality” (1994c, 417). My sense is that being a part of a group of other men who were taking responsibility – or even initially a part of a group that was oriented toward taking responsibility – ‘enabled’ individual responsibility taking. But the constitution of such a ‘norm’ cannot happen through imposition. If group members experience an orientation as an imposition, then what will be reinforced and aligned with will most likely be resistance to it. As I describe above of my own experience of therapy, orienting one’s efforts toward ‘talking back’ to those ‘on top’ is entirely distinct from journeying together on collaborative ‘flows of belonging.’ When we think of ‘taking responsibility’ in isolation from the
nuanced recognition of others and their relative responsibility, we significantly limit our ‘ability to’ ‘enable’ agentive and contingent responsibility taking.

White (2004a) gives an account of his work with a teenage boy who threatened to stab his mom. White structured this work so that he met with the boy, together with three other male family members: a cousin, his dad, and his grandfather. As a ‘contextual community’ (Chapman 2011) of boys and men, the other three male family members shared the gendered and collective responsibility – with White and the boy – for creating the conditions in which the boy could contingently ‘take responsibility’ for ending his violence against his mom. One of the mother’s responses to this was relief, saying that she’d always felt overburdened with her role in trying to get him to take responsibility for what he did (including for what he did to her), given the normatively gendered division of parenting labour. But even if a mother is relieved of such a burden, which is politically important, the social conditions which lead teenage boys to use violence against their moms much more frequently than against their dads are positioned as secondary when these boys are expected to ‘take responsibility’ in isolation. In this account, then, White created a contextual counter-culture community, in which boys and men worked together, arm-in-arm, side-by-side, embracing the personal-is-political work of taking responsibility. Their work, in part, involved conversations in which other men from the family and community were speculated upon and described in their efforts to respect women and children, going against the grain of normative masculinity and thus performing alternative masculinities (Butler 1990; 1997).

When any of us do the work of ‘taking responsibility,’ our efforts are ‘enabled’ – both constrained and oriented – by the examples we have to draw upon. As mentioned previously, hooks drew upon her great-grandmother in order to ‘talk back’ to adults as a child and in order to ‘come to voice’ as a black feminist (1989). This seems to have led her to conclude that “something like” such a figure might be necessary for us all in our personal-is-political ethical practices. She writes, therefore, that the “story of a white liberal acquiring a radical consciousness is a needed representation for many indifferent or uncertain white folks who do not know that they have a role to play in the struggle to end racism” (1990, 188). “Something like” this, the teenage boy White worked with was ‘enabled to’ draw upon the examples of his three loved ones and other men who resisted sexism (however imperfectly and inconsistently). However counter-intuitive this may be
(contingent on our taken-for-granteds), this is “something like” what I got too, when I had conversations with men about their attempts to move away from abuse and toward more respectful and accountable ways of relating. Their attempts, struggles, purposes, values, critiques and know-how harmonized with mine and wove into the melody of my everyday life. To be clear, though, I am not romanticizing the men I worked with as ‘particularly responsible’ in the sense of relatively more responsible than most men or people. I am rather noting that the particularities of their contingent – and imperfect – flows toward responsibility and accountability, as well as their struggles, defensiveness and so on, gave shape to my ‘ability to’ live ethically and to that of others who also witnessed them. It is not that they were ‘particularly responsible’ as a moral judgment, but their particular responsibility taking had effects on others’ particular efforts toward responsibility taking. In contrast to articulating heroic accounts of anti-racist white people or pro-feminist men, it seems to me that attending to particular, imperfect, and inconsistent efforts and actions can help us attend to the everydayness of responsibility and irresponsibility, or patriarchy and pro-feminism, as tributaries on the same river. In the account of White’s work with the teenage boy and his male family members, when he originally asks about the father’s stance on sexism, the man is presented in less than a heroic light by his wife (who was only there for this initial meeting, and then later once the boy’s violence toward her had stopped). She says the father “is not always that tuned in to what is happening, and we have had words about this. But in the end I do get his attention, and he’s always been respectful” (2004a, 108). This was enough for White to work with, not because the father was particularly respectful, anti-violence, or pro-feminist, but because there was something there that could be more fully known, more fully articulated, more fully lived. That ‘something,’ which could not have been predicted by a radically deterministic account of patriarchy, is what White calls “unique outcomes,” following Goffman (White and Epston 1990, 15). “Unique outcomes” are things about a given person that lie outside of what tends to be believed about them or about people ‘like them.’ In White’s work, there are always unique outcomes to be found. These often provide a starting point for working against the problems that bring people to therapy. We can attend to “something like” unique outcomes on a societal
level as well: although Foucault used the term “heterotopic” differently in previous writing (1986; 1970), during his *Psychiatric Power* (2008) lectures he gave while writing *Discipline and Punish* (1995), and so the last time I am aware of his use of the term, he used it to mean power relationships other than those characterized by discipline, the model of the panopticon, self-surveillance, normalizing judgment, hierarchical comparison, and so on. He’s not evaluating these “heterotopic” power relations as ‘better,’ he’s rather interested in their immunity to the influence of homogenizing (“utopian”) disciplinary power. This is “something like” what Goffman and White call “unique outcomes,” on a personal level. And Jenkins, referring to Deleuze, says: “what is produced is always in excess of what we can perceive” (2011). He describes working with a man who’s giving an account of his relationship which is highly “reactive,” doing things like “pushing my point,” “correcting others,” “judging,” “criticizing,” and so on. In such a conversation, Jenkins says, even then “we might find some excess there” – something other than reactivity, that might instead be (or become) oriented toward “listening,” “correcting myself,” and “respecting different views.” On a societal level, in relation to personal-is-political male performances of patriarchy, we can follow Foucault and consider any non-reactive possibilities for a man “heterotopic.” We can also focus on the constitution of a particular man through discourses about what men are and what we can be, and we can consider them, following Goffman, “unique outcomes.”

Or we can follow King (2003, 165) and say these Deleuzian “excesses,” however inconsistent and undependable, are there, available in some form as “potential ethics” that – just like in White and Jenkins’ work, could be more fully known and elaborated, as “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 2003b, 7, which White cites on page 32.

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14 In fact, earlier he uses it to mean societal ‘unique outcomes’ characterized by the emerging disciplinary power; he earlier describes early developments in disciplinary power as heterotopic. He later uses the term to describe power relations that defy disciplinary power, when disciplinary power is becoming widespread – and in a few cases he describes the same phenomena in two different places, but using the term to mean opposite things. I am not aware that the archival material is there to test this theory, but it seems that his reconstellating this term to mean what appears to be its opposite – but is structurally the same thing, held within a different framework with a different norm as reference point – points toward what seems to have been his gradual discovery of the extent of disciplinary power. At first he seems to have been attuned to these developments as aberrational, which is clearly not how he wrote about them in *Discipline and Punish.* Then again, perhaps he meant for the term to be, in fact, this flexible. Who knows? It is possible that he consistently meant it to describe any local power relations that defy contingent normative power structures at a given time and place.
of the book cited above in which he uses “unique outcomes”). In fact, where Foucault uses this phrase, it is interesting to notice everyone whose knowledge he considers “unqualified or even disqualified,” which – in the example he provides – is “parallel to, marginal to, medical knowledge.” We expect him to include “the knowledge of the psychiatrized, the patient” – and he does. But he continues immediately and includes the “unqualified or even disqualified” knowledge of “the nurse, the doctor” (2003b, 8). Foucault is attuned to the “excess” beyond what we tend to think about “the psychiatrized,” but also the “excess” beyond ‘being a doctor,’ or a social worker, that might provide possibilities for alternate politics and ethics of resistance. And King’s attention to “potential ethics,” interestingly, takes place in the context of the story that he’s too ashamed to say out loud – the chapter I describe earlier which centres his own ethical transgression. It is in that immediate context that he challenges us, saying “we should not be displeased” with the ethics we have.

After all, we’ve created them. We’ve created the stories that allow them to exist and flourish…. Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.

We could tell ourselves stories about community and co-operation. We do that you know. From time to time…. So perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps we do have the kind of ethics we imagine we have. Maybe they’re just not steady. Not dependable. Ethics of the moment. Potential ethics (King 2003, 164).

I am wanting to consider that such ethics “of the moment,” however fleeting, offer valuable resources in “becoming ethical” and working for justice. Following Foucault, it seems that such “potential” is not distributed evenly amongst all people or relationship structures.

Above, I cited Spivak’s suggestion that the ways those ‘on top’ navigate their lives impact the possibilities open to those ‘on bottom’ – including whether we are ‘able to’ navigate that relationship as “an ethical person” or if we are ‘dragged’ into being “a political person” (Spivak and Dabashi 2009). This is one factor, among illimitable and largely unknowable factors, that impacts our ‘ability to’ call upon King’s “Potential ethics.” Please read the following, from Foucault, keeping in mind Spivak’s alternate translation for ‘power’ as ‘ability to’ – not cancelling out the reading of ‘power,’ but rather nuancing what it does:
We can also say … “We all have some element of power in our bodies.” And power does – at least to some extent – pass or migrate through our bodies. We can indeed say all that, but I do not think that we therefore have to conclude that power is the best-distributed thing, the most widely distributed thing, in the world, even though this is, up to a point, the case. Power is not distributed throughout the body in democratic or anarchic fashion (2003b, 30).

One of the things that distributes power/‘ability to’/potential is our relationships with concrete others, perhaps especially when those relationships position the other person ‘on top.’ How those ‘on top’ navigate their positions ‘on top’ plays a part in the distribution of power/‘ability to’/potential to those ‘on bottom.’ Some kinds of relationships tend to be more ‘institutionalized’ or ‘disciplined’ than others, which does not mean that any structure of relationship is radically determined, and it does not mean that any structure of relationship is radically open-ended. But each ‘structure of relationship’ plays some part in contributing to Bhabha’s vanishing Third Space, the navigation of which uniquely gives shape to the parameters of freedom and means of exercising agency for those participating in a concrete relationship. For example, without generalizing this as always the case, the ‘structure’ of friendship tends to be more malleable and varied than the ‘structure’ of prison guard to prisoner. We might even find that, where guard/prisoner relations exceed what is expected in such relations, they do so by drawing upon resources more freely available in other relational structures, such as friendship. If King is right that “we do have the kind of ethics we imagine we have [but] they’re just not steady,” and if Spivak is right that others’ navigation of our relationships affects whether or not we are ‘able to be’ “an ethical person,” then these structures of relationship – and what they do – should be explored further.

The Ethics of Friendship as a Practice of Freedom

Much of Foucault’s research leading up to his death revolved around the phrase “care of the self,” which we tend to countersign as describing an individualistic process. However, this is a result of our ‘roughly shared’ culturally-contingent overtones, rather than what the ancient Greeks or Romans meant by it previous to the formulation of ‘the self’ we tend to take for granted today. In fact, undermining the individualism of ethical practice seems to
have been one of Foucault’s central concerns in his final research. Rather than being a *private* practice, he observes, “the care of the self always takes shape within definite and distinct networks or groups…. [T]he care of the self is expressed and appears in this splitting into, or rather this belonging to a sect or a group…. It can only be practiced within the group, and within the group in its distinctive character” (2006e, 117). He said this in 1982, the same year he gave his ‘political technology of individuals’ lecture, cited a few pages back, in which he theorized that individualization and the totalization of a group that an individual belongs to are mutually constitutive. In his source materials on the “care of the self,” it was particular *belongings* that made resonant but particular *becomings* possible, and vice versa, through his “rule of double conditioning” (1990a, 99). The purposefully constituted contextual communities of the “cultures of the self” (Foucault 1990b) were a significant component in ‘enabling’ members’ ‘ability to’ become ethical.

Alongside his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures and his second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault attested to his interest in ethical practices as relational practices in various interviews and guest lectures. I would suggest, for example, that his advocacy for a certain orientation for gay culture was along the lines of what he was encountering – and which had happened reflexively or purposefully – in the histories he was studying. He was therefore keen to actively direct what was or was not *done* with these histories, how they were ‘performed’ in our representations of them, and what contingent pedagogical possibilities these performances might ‘enable.’ He suggests that, where this is not knowable, historical same-sex friendships and intimacies should *not* be studied primarily through speculation on whether or not they involved sex (2006c, 138-139). He advocates, instead, a careful study of what *we know* of these relationships, which may provide heterotopic alternatives to masculinity and heteronormativity, among other things. And so, for example, he says of Marcus Aurelius and his spiritual guide Fronto (2006e):

> it would be completely out of place – I mean, wholly inappropriate historically – to ask whether or not this is a sexual relationship. It is a relationship of affection, of love, which thus involves a whole range of things. We should just note that these things are never expressed, spelled out, or analyzed within these repeated, intense, affective affirmations of love: ‘my love, my delight’ (159).
Foucault leaves open the possibility that Fronto and Marcus Aurelius had sex; he’s not saying they did not. But either way, what he knows from their correspondence is that their relationship has other pedagogical “potential” for us today, in a number of ways. These two men referred to one another as “my love, my delight,” they wrote “I love you” to one another, they sent each other kisses on the neck, and so on. Such exchanges, were they supplemented to normative masculinity in our time and place, would fundamentally transform what men are, and I believe Foucault may have been concerned that the radical potential of what we could do with these histories would get unfruitfully overshadowed by speculation met with polemic counter-speculation (Foucault 2006f). Staying ‘experience near’ to Marcus Aurelius and Fronto’s accounts can significantly undermine what we take for granted about masculinity and sexuality. There is no political need to speculate on what they may have left out of their letters. There are many other men in history that we know had sex with one another. This is politically and ethically important, and Foucault attends to ethical discourse surrounding some of these relationships during this same period of research (1990b; 1988b). But what we know of Marcus Aurelius and Fronto—without knowing if they had sex—is still potentially politically and pedagogically important.

We can read Foucault’s concern as having “something like a relationship” with the various accounts of the sharing of stories I have described above—it is in this period of his work that Spivak (1993) suggests he addresses the gap between his own work and Derrida’s. We can possibly imagine that Foucault might have felt that reading Marcus Aurelius and Fronto’s own words of affection, love, delight, their own expressed exchanges of kisses on the neck, would more likely be experienced as ethically significant and resonant—perhaps validating, troubling, or some combination of the two—than a debate about whether these gestures implicitly signify the existence of sex. What is important, perhaps, is keeping us close to the experience of reading these ‘first hand’ accounts of love between two men, of trying to approach “how close you can get” to Marcus Aurelius and Fronto’s own accounts of their love (Spivak 1993, 42), rather than reading them for what they may or may not leave out.

What is also very interesting about this particular relationship, which Foucault would likely have wanted to keep from being lost to speculation, abstraction, and polemics, is that alongside the reciprocal love, kisses, and so on, it is an explicitly and unapologetically
hierarchical relationship, which unsettles some of what we tend to take for granted about hierarchy and power. Fronto was older and was originally Marcus Aurelius’ teacher of rhetoric. This has nothing intrinsic to do with ‘guiding’ the ‘care of the self,’ but it is an institutionalized relationship of inequality that set the parameters for their initial relationship building. Out of this thus contingently-built initial relationship, and alongside the mutual friendship that grew from it, they developed a distinct explicitly hierarchical relationship – that of ‘direction’ or ‘guidance.’ This was perhaps of interest to Foucault because he’d earlier devoted attention to where this trajectory of ‘guidance’ or ‘direction’ led in European history (to be then imposed, the world over). He states of 19th Century psychiatry that “from Pinel to Leuret, the term that recurs most frequently … is the notion of ‘direction’…. The history of this notion should be studied, because it did not originate in psychiatry – far from it” (2008, 174). He himself studied the “history of this notion” eight years’ later in his Hermeneutics of the Subject lectures. In Imperial Rome, direction or guidance, was becoming, or had no doubt already become for some time, a completely normal and natural experience. You make your examination of conscience to a friend, to someone dear to you and with whom you have intense affective relations. You take him as your spiritual director, and it is quite normal to take him as a guide regardless of his qualification as a philosopher – and [Fronto] is not a philosopher – simply because he is your friend (Foucault 2006e, 163).

Taking on someone as a guide “simply because he is your friend” seems outlandish to us today: ‘what are their qualifications?’ we might ask, ‘won’t the friendship bias their objectivity?’ But again are we the exception, both historically and globally? Even amongst social service providers in contemporary Canada, there are diverse ‘outside relationships’ that are considered appropriate between service users and providers. For example, “when you live in a small community you tend to get to know people before they come to you, ‘meaning that relationships can be based on greater authenticity’” (Rosemary Crews, cited in Carniol 2005, 76). And when I worked with young people in a smaller Canadian city there was a very strict policy on what was to be done if staff and service users ever found themselves at a party or bar where drinking was occurring: the clear policy was that staff were to leave immediately. But some of us knew that there was one (usually only ever whispered) equally clear exception to this policy. Every weekend, select staff and residents
shared the space of the one local gay bar. Prohibiting this was not reasonable, given the size of the local queer community. Although a certain distance was maintained by all involved, this had a real effect on the working relationships between those staff and those service users who found themselves sometimes drinking, sometimes dancing, alongside one another. In the context of social services in contemporary Canada, this is non-normative (discursively, if not statistically). And yet the belief that less intimate relationships enable better help is a fairly recent one, and it was critiqued a century ago, as it was first developing. Jane Addams critiqued the new model of professionalized helping, even as she was credited as among its founding figures by those she critiqued (see Richmond 1899, vii):

Let us take a neighborhood of poor people, and test their ethical standards by those of the charity visitor, who comes with the best desire in the world to help them out of their distress. A most striking incongruity, at once apparent, is the difference between the emotional kindness with which relief is given by one poor neighbor to another poor neighbor, and the guarded care with which relief is given by a charity visitor to a charity recipient. The neighborhood mind is at once confronted not only by the difference of method, but by an absolute clashing of two ethical standards (Addams 1902a, ¶ 8).

And an unpublished 1919 manuscript about the Halifax Explosion and the responsive relief efforts makes a resonant critique (Johnstone, cited in Hébert Boyd 2007, 95):

efficiency embodied in expert investigations, card catalogues, involved indexes, multifarious office equipment, and what not, is often treated as a fetish. The means to an end is taken for the end in itself. Sentiment, the salt that preserves the humanness in Social Work is squeezed out between the pages of the card catalogue; and the work often denigrates into a cold professionalism where the heart interest in any “case” is conspicuous by its absence.

These developments happened later in small North American cities like Halifax than in big cities like Addams’ Chicago, and so in 1902 Chicago and 1917 Halifax alike (the year of the Explosion), they were much more noteworthy, much less normatively taken for granted, than they are today. Their importance had to be proven. Michelle Hébert Boyd (2007)
documents how professional social workers – from large centres like Toronto and Boston – converged on Halifax following the Explosion, in order to demonstrate their importance:

Although Friendly Visiting was not a new concept to Halifax’s charity workers, the bureaucratic rigour required by the leaders of the Rehabilitation Committee was quite novel. Prince (1920: 81) notes: “The Halifax disaster was the first of great extent that had occurred since the principles of relief have been authoritatively written. No other community has experienced their application so fully or so promptly.” The need for a wide variety of relief efforts and social-work interventions among such a large segment of the population offered social workers an unparalleled opportunity to prove the profession’s young theories and methods. Indeed, the Director of the American Red Cross wrote to Falk in early 1918: “You will understand that more than the reputation of the American Red Cross is at stake. The progress of social work in Canada may, I believe, be vastly advanced by the thorough-going completion of the work.”

With social work’s credibility on the line, the social-service experts who had arrived to take charge were keen to establish procedures and office routines that would show the public the value and skills of social workers. More importantly, social workers were eager to distinguish their work from that of mere charity workers, as an unsigned February 1918 document suggests that “…the public should learn the difference between the systematic work of the Rehabilitation Committee and the indiscriminate giving of the emergency period.”

The Rehabilitation Committee sought to distinguish itself from common charity work by presenting its social workers as modern, efficient professionals who conducted their work in an organized, scientific way. The social-service experts who trained and supervised local workers emphasized the importance of the principles of scientific social work and thorough investigation (82).

The extent to which helping or guidance is thought to rely on objectivity (etc.) is fairly novel, is not shared across all cultures, and has never been shared by all service users or providers. In my first chapter, I wrote the following:
Suggesting the Gus-Wen-Teh could inform a more just indigenous sovereignty today, Dale Turner notes that the parallel paths here are not ones of non-relationship, but rather of non-imposition – of a relationality driven by “peace, friendship and respect” rather than by “try[ing] to steer the other’s vessel.”

Peace, friendship, and respect – but, actually, not the absence of power relations: the Gus-Wen-Teh was a treaty made with other Nations who were made to embrace the Great Law of Peace, as a condition of joining the Confederacy. Then, other details of governance were left to the Nations. With Spivak’s “something like a relationship” with Turner’s advocacy of Haudenosaunee political philosophy, when read alongside his ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’ interview, it seems that Foucault’s interest in Marcus Aurelius and Fronto’s particular relationship was partly about what they could teach us about what a relationship of guidance and hierarchy could be: an uneven relationship does not need to be one of domination; one person can be in a relationship of institutionalized ‘power over’ another, and this hierarchy can – even then – be done in ways consistent with friendship, mutuality, love, and respect. Whether Fronto or the Iroquois Confederacy achieved this some or all of the time, I cannot say definitively, and I don’t wish to suggest that Fronto’s approach to guidance can be mapped onto Iroquois political treaties point by point. I rather simply wish to point to a shared point of political imagination in which to be in a position of power is distinguishable from domination, but only through ongoing care, negotiation, and even mutual “friendship.” If there’s no ‘outside of power,’ which approaches the self-evident if we read power as also ‘ability to,’ then such reconsiderations of power and hierarchy are crucial. In an interview about his Hermeneutics of the Subject lectures, Foucault (2006a) says,

power relations are not something that is bad in itself…. I do not think that a society can exist without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others…. I see nothing wrong in the practice of a person who, knowing more than others in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them. The problem in such practices where power – which is not in itself a bad thing – must inevitably come into play is knowing how to avoid the kind of domination effects where a kid is subjected to the arbitrary and unnecessary authority of a teacher…. I believe that this problem
must be framed in terms of rules of law, rational techniques of government and
ethos, practices of the self and of freedom…. [T]his is, in fact, the hinge point of ethical concerns and the political struggle for the respect of rights, of critical thought against abusive techniques of government and research in ethics that seeks to ground individual freedom (298-299, emphasis added).

Foucault is teasing Imperial Roman practices of ‘direction’ apart from practices in contexts such as early psychiatry where the word is still referenced: in one practice of ‘governing oneself and others’ there is mutuality, friendship, sometimes even kisses and love, and in the other there is the violence of forced confinement, a doctor who personifies the power of medical knowledge, and a patient who’s understood to have no relevant knowledge whatsoever (Foucault 2008)\textsuperscript{15}. It is easy to say ‘no’ to all hierarchy, in theory, but Foucault suggests in the quote above that perhaps there is nothing wrong with one person directing or teaching another – and that the “hinge point” between personal ethical navigation and political struggle is how we go about performing our roles when we are positioned on top of social stratifications. Fronto advised Marcus Aurelius, and never the other way around, while Marcus Aurelius reported his struggles to Fronto, soliciting feedback and advice; in this aspect of their relationship, there was no mutuality, no equality. But this unevenness flowed alongside mutuality and equality in other aspects of their life and, we can assume, this shaped how Fronto governed Marcus Aurelius – and how Marcus Aurelius experienced being governed by his love, his delight. And this relationship of friendship-alongside-direction seems to have been no exception in the histories Foucault was studying at the time. Just as he said that communities of shared orientation were common in constituting and sustaining reflexive ethical practices, so too does he suggest that the hierarchical relationship of ‘direction,’ and the power it purposefully effects, was understood by some as

\textsuperscript{15} I am not suggesting it would be good for contemporary psychiatrists to kiss or have sex with their patients, nor guards with prisoners, social workers with clients, etc. What would make this assaultive and exploitative is precisely the gap between Marcus Aurelius and Fronto’s hierarchical relationship and the ones we have institutionalized since their time. This is a structural gap as well as a discursive one. No relationship – even those where sex is consensual and enjoyable by all involved – is radically free from hierarchy, from one person knowing more than the other(s) in specific areas, etc. The problem is where these hierarchies become institutionalized, generalized to all areas of life, and totalizing, through the tethering of exaltation/denigration. A fundamental discursive and material reconstellation would be required – beyond psychiatry, madness, and medicine – for sex between a psychiatrist and a patient to be non-assaultive and non-exploitative.
indispensable: “the need for a spiritual guide is, as it were, structural. We cannot dispense with the other…. Everyone who wishes to conduct themselves properly needs a guide…. [And] what we require of the guide are certain moral qualities” (Foucault 2006e, 398-399).

On this last point, it seems to me that people most often voluntarily expressed interest in participating in my research project not when I told them about it, but rather when they experienced resonance upon hearing me struggle to make sense of harm that I have caused. If we situate “moral qualities” as flows of becoming, as something that we ‘do’ or ‘work on’ rather than fixed states of being, then I can relate to this sense of being drawn to people who are doing this kind of work that I, too, want to do more of and want to do better – and I think that perhaps some people (including some of these same people) are drawn to me for “something like” the same reasons. This relates to Foucault’s observation about what some sources he was studying considered the “structural” need for a guide. Whether it is necessary is a whole other thing, but it can certainly help to have another person from whom to learn and be ‘directed’ in this way or that – depending, of course, on how that other person navigates that role. Barbara Heron played something like this role for me while formally in the position of professor, as I read her work and applied it in my own self-reflexive writings (Heron 2007; 2005; 2004). And, previously, Art Fisher played a ‘structurally’ similar role while formally in the position of supervisor and co-facilitator, so that I learned how to work with men who perpetrated abuse alongside learning to interrogate my own power relative to these men and their families (Fisher 2005). I was not an equal in these two distinct relationships, but my sense is that they were nevertheless reciprocal in certain ways. I might even speculate that I may have touched their lives in ways (structurally) not unlike the male clients I worked with touched mine, even though the focus with both Barbara and Art was fairly consistently on my learning. I’d even go so far as to say that this inequality was helpful for my learning, rather than being neutral or inconsequential. They knew more about what we were doing and exploring together and, although they both shared their ongoing struggles and uncertainties with me some of the time, much more time and attention was given to my growth and transformation. Each of them positioned themselves as “decentred and influential” in many of our conversations that centred my learning. My process was centred, in terms of identifying concerns, evaluating and analyzing those concerns, etc., but they guided or directed it. This is distinct from what
happened with my therapist who centred his own evaluation and analysis and from the professor with whom I was not a good student, who centred hers. I am suggesting that Art and Barbara “allow[ed] me to be an ethical person” (Spivak and Dabashi 2009); they allowed me to be a good student; they ‘enabled’ what I could (quote) ‘be.’

One structure of relationship that can be helpful for sustaining and transforming ‘ethical practices,’ then, is hierarchical but non-coercive, centred and influential, and another type is of a community of roughly-equals learning and struggling together (with illimitable, heterogeneous, non-institutionalized hierarchies internally at play; such a community sometimes also features a teacher or guide positioned ‘on top’). As noted above, Foucault found both relational structures in the writings on self-cultivation from Ancient Greece and Rome. In a multi-site study of contemporary ethical practices amongst Ontario social service workers, Amy Rossiter, Isaac Prilleltensky and Richard Walsh-Bowers also found these two structures of relational ethical practice. Their respondents said that when clinical supervision did not provide a place where practitioners felt comfortable exploring ethical struggles (which some did, and which tends to be the institutionally structured forum for working through such things), workers often responded by turning to their peers for support, which often had to take place behind closed doors and ‘off the clock’ (Prilleltensky, Rossiter, and Walsh-Bowers 1996; Rossiter, Walsh-Bowers, and Prilleltensky 1996; Walsh-Bowers, Prilleltensky, and Rossiter 1996). This is my experience too of what people tended to do for support and struggle in almost every social service setting I have worked, although I have also had one-on-one clinical supervision where I was ‘able to’ do such work. Where such work is not possible, where supervisors did not “allow me to be an ethical person,” I was “drag[ged] into being a political person” (Spivak and Dabashi 2009) and found that I would carefully plan my supervision sessions so as to cause as little harm as possible to my clients. So I would disagree with Foucault’s source materials (from one select tradition among the many he studies) that advocate the structural necessity of top-down guidance. I think it can be incredibly helpful, but it is by no means structurally necessary or necessarily helpful. I do believe that we “cannot dispense with the other” in our ethical practices, but that our relationship to such indispensable others can be ‘structured’ in any number of ways – one of them, again, being a relatively egalitarian community. In fact, this is what Foucault describes in his overview of the many different kinds of relational contexts in which the
“care of the self” or “soul practice” is practiced in Ancient Greece and Rome: “What is remarkable in this soul practice is the variety of social relations that can serve as its support.” He names communities, and what he here calls “private counselors” such as Fronto, and then he continues: “But there are many other forms in which this soul direction is carried out … [including] relations of friendship between two persons rather close in age, culture and situation” (2006d, 98). He cites the example of Seneca and Lucilius, whose mutual guidance he describes earlier on the same page: Seneca “gives counsel to Lucilius but asks him for advice in return and is thankful for the help he finds in this exchange.”

In my research conversation with Hannah Fowlie, a member of the Narrative Co-supervision group I attend, she describes the importance of a community of support in helping to stay on track with her values and politics in her social work practice. She began our conversation describing a treatment centre where she constantly fought against the system and felt she could not prevent the people she worked with from being harmed. Eventually she left because she could not live with herself, working in that environment. She now works at the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Aboriginal Education Centre, which she describes as working more in ways directed by youth and their families, as well as working toward changing oppressive systems. It is not without its ethical challenges, but she feels that her colleagues, and the most immediate structures in which she works, fit better with her ethics and politics. She’s also, though, navigating the larger TDSB, normative ideas about ‘help’ and pathology, and colonialism. Some of this came up at a recent conference, which brought back feelings she’d had every day at the treatment centre. A major difference, however, is that now she’s no longer so isolated in her struggle.

Hannah: Another moment of silence I guess I can talk about was [a conference] ... about Evidence-based Practice with depression. No context, it was just about how Evidence-based Practice works for different people, and evidence for CBT [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy] and psychotropic medication. That was the extent of it. Nothing about anything else. Nothing about context. Again I did not say anything or do anything and I came out just feeling the complete futility. All of those feelings come back [and remind me of the treatment centre]. Another colleague from [the] Equity [Office, who’s] like my ‘in-house therapist’ ... said, “You’ve gotta make some noise, you gotta speak up and make some
noise.” So there is that constant feeling that I am letting everybody down if I do not make noise, but … everybody else in that room was so excited about … the certainty, the manualized knowledge, so that you never have to sit in discomfort. The way I see things it is messy, people are different … I just don’t think it’s that simple….

There is a small group of us that are social workers that have partnered with [the] Equity [Office] and we are trying to talk about ways to shift things, we are going to do a professional development session in the Fall and try to work with other people that want to shift the way that we work with students. It is a very small group of people. So there’s moments, there’s little … moments of resistance….

Chris: When you were at the treatment center you were pretty isolated.

Hannah: Uh huh.

Chris: What difference does it make for you to have the “in-house therapist” at the Equity Office? [both laugh] And the [Aboriginal Education Centre staff]?

Hannah: It makes a huge difference. I don’t think you can do this kind of stuff yourself. Honestly, if I don’t have people to talk about it, it’s impossible for me. I just wouldn’t.

Chris: What do you mean you wouldn’t?

Hannah: I think I’d just be silenced.

Hannah says she’d “just be silenced” if she did not have a community of like-minded, like-valued, like-politicized colleagues with whom to work through her struggles, which resonates for me. One of the many reasons I chose to do research interviews is that, since leaving my therapy job, I missed having this particular kind of structured ‘contextual community’ in my life. I missed what membership in such a community contributed to my life. I miss the everyday experience of being the person I was as a result of experiencing daily resonance with men who were struggling to move away from abusive practices. Even outside the acute period of controlling I discuss above, it frequently happened that the
details of a man’s struggles or transformations struck a chord in my life – either about my relationship with my partner, my mom, a friend, a service user, etc. And I believe that, as a result, I was ‘a better person.’ I believe I was more self-reflexive, I had concerns about being accountable to others’ experiences more consistently at the forefront of my mind, etc.

This points to something I do not believe Foucault ever explicitly names, which perhaps was not found in his source materials: the inherently hierarchical relationship of guidance or direction has reciprocal benefits, not only in terms of the pleasures associated with friendship or a ‘job well done,’ but also in supporting the work of ethical self-governance, so that being positioned as such a ‘guide’ can also be an experience of “something like” being ‘guided’ (White 2004b) – through the agentive experience of resonance, where the performative and the pedagogical work at once: as another performs efforts toward becoming ethical, even when I am positioned ‘on top’ of them in some hierarchy or other, I experience resonance in a way that has pedagogical effects on me, which contributes to my parameters of freedom and means of exercising agency when I navigate my own life. Perhaps “something like” this may have been true for Art and Barbara, while they ‘guided’ me, and it may have also been true for Fronto, as he guided Marcus Aurelius. And although Hannah describes her colleague at the Equity Office as her ‘in-house therapist,’ they’re ‘colleagues,’ ‘friends’ – there is no institutionalized hierarchy placing him ‘on top’ (other than gender). And I suspect that, although I do not know him, he might even experience Hannah in a similar way. The issue of guides receiving guidance is raised by Foucault, just not in the way I am doing; he (2006e, 136) describes Epicurean accounts of

the only sage who never needed a guide: Epicurus himself. Epicurus is the divine man (the theios aner) whose singularity – a singularity without exception – consisted in the fact that only he was able to extricate himself from nonwisdom and attain wisdom on his own…. [A]ll the others needed guides.

Presumably this included other guides in the Epicurean tradition. But from whom did they receive guidance? There were Epicureans after Epicurus’ death, and so he could not have been the only answer. And so who? As I cite above, Seneca was asked by Lucilius to guide him in reciprocity, but this was in a context of roughly equal social standing. Neither was institutionally positioned ‘on top,’ as with Hannah and her colleague from the Equity
Office. However, when Seneca acted in the formal role of guide to others, such reciprocity was never named. Or that is my reading of Foucault’s reading. Whether or not it is the whole picture, there is perhaps “something like a relationship,” again structurally, between Seneca seeking out mutual guidance with an ‘equal’ and yet not acknowledging mutuality with those he ‘guided,’ and the contemporary notion that helping professionals should be ‘able to’ be unchanged and unaffected by their clients, but should seek direction from supervisors (and colleagues, although this is not institutionalized to the degree ‘supervision’ is). But to devote one’s time and energy to ‘helping others’ cannot help but have an impact on us. Their stories and struggles become woven into the melodies of our everyday lives. Spending an hour doing this is distinct from spending an hour cleaning, reading, or shopping. It is not ‘the same as’ being guided by someone who purposively collaborates with us toward our becomings, but to suggest that it is therefore not transformative can perhaps be deconstructed along “something like” the lines I traced above in relation to Jenkins’ role play and its differantial relationship to a ‘real therapy conversation:’ if guiding someone is taken as what it ‘is,’ rather than being primarily differentiated from what it is not, then it can be understood as a particular and contingent flow of becoming that is not ‘the same as’ being guided or having a roughly egalitarian conversation (none of which is actually fixed as anything at all), but which is nevertheless shaping of us and our ‘ability to.’

In a certain way, this resonates with Foucault’s approach to research. He positions himself and his works-in-progress in “something like” the positioning that White (2004b) and Jenkins (2009) advocate relative to clients, which I believe allowed me to learn so much from my clients – to be touched by them in transformative ways – without centering my own life and struggles in our conversations. Of Foucault, Frédéric Gros (2006, 518) writes,

> it is never a matter of explaining texts, but of inserting them within an ever-changing overall vision. Some general frameworks guide the selection and reading of texts, therefore, but without these texts being instrumentalized thereby, since the reading may lead to a reconfiguring of the initial hypothesis…. [This has] … more the appearance of a living laboratory than of a final balance sheet.

Foucault’s often-cited early plea comes to mind: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in
order. At least spare us their morality when we write” (1972, 17). Engaging with questions pertaining to how we know, power, ethics and so on – through reading about others’ lives or talking with others about their lives – cannot help but shape our becomings. Or perhaps it cannot help doing so only when we have the freedom for that to happen. Foucault may be suggesting that critics and publishers sometimes do not allow us to be ethical. He politicizes certain kinds of academic criticism by comparing it to policing and bureaucracy, and he’s struggling for freedom from these forces that are, at once, political and moralizing. Spare us their morality, so that we are ‘able to be’ free to pursue the ethical work of becoming.

I set out to construe such a reflexive and purposeful ‘living laboratory,’ for all involved, in my ‘community’ of research participants, just as I had some sense of this, and felt its impact on my own ethical becomings, when I had daily conversations with men who abused.

And if we can say something like, ‘agentive witnessing and resultant ethical transformation happens to all of us all the time,’ which I think we can say, I do not think it follows that the intentional construction of spaces where this can happen more reflexively and with particular orientations in mind is therefore unimportant. Most often, when we witness, resonate and grow, our resonance and resultant transformation is oriented along normative flows of abdicating responsibility, individualizing others as ‘antagonists’ who are fully to blame, etc. Consider, again, the care with which King writes of his own transgression, unwilling to talk about it aloud. He knows he’s transgressing the boundaries of normative speech, in a different way from how he does so in his other chapters. What we mean by ‘taking responsibility’ does happen ‘all the time’ – I believe that – but it happens heterotopically, unreliably. It is outside the norms of our society to sustain the difficult work we call ‘taking responsibility.’ Go to any busy café and eavesdrop for a few hours. There is a good chance you’ll witness the ascription of responsibility to partners, parents, children, strangers, and lots of others. There is less chance you’ll hear a prolonged account of an encounter with any other that is framed in terms of, say, ‘this is what I did to contribute to the situation’ and ‘if I had perhaps done this other thing the results might have been better for everyone.’ Contingent on these irresponsible norms – as in my therapy practice – I structured research conversations in which the starting point was ‘taking responsibility.’
In the following two citations from Foucault about the ‘critical function’ of the care of the self in Imperial Rome, please keep in mind Spivak’s notion of “unlearning privilege” (Spivak, Hutnyk, McQuire, and Papastergiadis 1990, 42) and Ahmed’s account of whiteness as a “bad habit” (2006b): “the care of the self must completely reverse the system of values” (Foucault 2006e, 96); “The practice of the self must enable one to get rid of all the bad habits, all the false opinions that one can get from the crowd or from bad teachers, but also from parents and associates. To ‘unlearn’ (de-discere) is one of the important tasks of self-cultivation” (Foucault 2006d, 97). We need to unlearn the habits of abdicating responsibility for harm we’ve done, which are of particular concern in relation to systemic injustice. Alongside this, we also have to tend the unreliable and heterotopic ways that we also, sometimes, take responsibility otherwise. Returning again to Foucault’s notion that power constitutes our ‘ability to’ rather than only repressing, to A. Davis’ critique of historical abolitions, Goldman’s critique of women’s emancipation, and Butler and McRuer’s critiques of gay marriage, our ‘unlearning’ of normative unethical ethical practices is, as Foucault writes above, “one of the important tasks” but it is by no means the entirety of “self-cultivation” towards becoming ethical. Perhaps the political struggle against unethical habits contributes to our freedom to “be an ethical person.”

Streams of ‘Concerted Effort’

I mention in chapter one that I was wrong about the ‘stepping in the same river twice’ quote from Heraclitus, having thought that Buddha was also said to have said it. Something similar occurred a few months later, when I was about to use the phrase “concerted effort.”

Or is it “conscientious effort?” What is the phrase? I did not know. I wanted to refer to the deliberate labour in purposefully setting out to do something and working hard at it. But is this called a concerted effort or a conscientious effort? And so I Googled “concerted effort or conscientious effort” – as I have done for indeterminate, tenterhooks, flesh out, and deep seated. The hits for my search came up not only with both of these terms being used as I intended, but also with “conscious effort” being used to mean the same thing. But the most interesting of these hits, countersigned in the context of working on this project, was a post from about a week following the much publicized death of Bin Laden, which reads “Fight back terrorism. Let’s make a conscientious and concerted effort to change the name of
Osama Bin Laden to Osama Bin-here-no-longer, or Osama Bin long gone, or USAMA” (Brown 2011). In the context of this project, there are multiple angles I could explore this from, in terms of its content, but I’ll restrain myself, leave those to your countersignatures, and only note that Brown could be read as using the two terms I searched (this was the only first page hit that used both of them) either redundantly or as supplementary to one another – by the latter I mean that he could be saying ‘let’s all be purposeful and also collaborative in what we call Osama Bin Laden from now on.’ An even more generous reading, which I think is unlikely, is that he’s playing around with the common error I am also pointing to, in order to suggest that all rigorous effort requires collaboration. But what is interesting to consider is that we cannot know what he intended, in part due to the existence of several different words starting with a hard ‘c’ and followed by ‘effort,’ which circulate in our time and place to mean the same thing and so which, in practice, therefore all indeed signify the same thing. Another interesting hit is called, “Can one person make a concerted effort?”

Q: Can a single person make a concerted effort? The dictionaries I have checked say a “concerted effort” is something that is done collectively. But I often hear the phrase being used to mean a strenuous or serious effort by one person.

A: We suspect that most people who use the phrase to refer to a strong or energetic action really mean “a concentrated effort,” which makes more sense…. [P]eople use “concerted” to mean strenuous or serious. But none of the standard dictionaries we checked include this sense (O’Conner and Kellerman 2011).

Like O’Conner and Kellerman, I did not find a single authoritative source to legitimize using ‘concerted effort’ to mean ‘serious effort.’ This an interesting illustration of the gap between regulations and authoritative sources, on the one hand, and people’s ‘ability to know’ and actual practices on the other – which resonates with my interest in exploring ethics as practices rather than codes or maxims. I also think that perhaps this ‘talks back’ to the suggestion that an authority figure is a structural necessity. Brown’s intended use of the terms cannot be discovered by consulting dictionary definitions, because there are lots of phrases circulating and signifying that, at once, are technically incorrect according to dictionaries, and are also widely used and understood in everyday conversation to mean
‘strenuous effort.’ How could we ever know that another person’s intended use of a frequently misused term follows the narrow norms of the experts rather than societal norms?

Through this Googling process, I also found the following definition for “concerted” from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: “arranged in parts for several voices.” Synonyms this source lists include collaborative, collective and public; antonyms include individual, one-man, and one-sided. Upon reading this, I reflected: maybe it is “concerted effort” that I mean after all, even though I did not mean to mean it like that. Maybe ‘concerted effort’ is a lovely way of describing the collaborative aspect of what it is to take responsibility or exercise agency. O’Conner and Kellerman (2011) note, “The verb ‘concert’ originally meant to unite or agree when it entered English in the late 1500s” and “The noun, originally meaning agreement or harmony, came along in the mid-1600s, and by 1689 it meant a public performance.” And so, nuancing this only slightly, and countersigning it in the context of this project and this chapter in particular, I’ll put forth the following: when we make what lots of people normatively call a ‘concerted effort’ (which authorities would call a ‘conscientious,’ ‘conscious,’ or ‘concentrated’ effort), we do so precisely by uniting the many perspectives and people that have cumulatively contributed to our flows of becoming, by harmonizing them, and by performing ourselves according to values, preferences, and politics that have been constituted through this uniting and harmonizing. It is now become so normative as to be correct that we say a single musical artist performs a ‘concert,’ even though this word originally meant several instruments or voices being brought together, as if making one harmonious voice. And, if you’ll allow that the common use of ‘concerted effort,’ in everyday communication, carries the signification ‘conscientious effort’ – rather than ‘collective effort’ – then this too probably has a (perhaps more recent) traceable historical development that ‘resonates’ with that of the noun ‘concert’. When we make a ‘concerted effort’ to do something, our conscientious performance is only possible because of the many people who’ve harmonized in some way with our flows of becoming. Those people’s contributions, however, are most often discursively rendered unimportant so that only my work and commitment is noted. Such is life, when constrained and oriented by liberal individualism.
Chapter 3
Forms of Reflexivity that Constitute the Subject:
I Think, There Forms my ‘Am’

Watching the River Flow, it will Speak to You

“I thought it would be good for me to be closer to the river. If you hang around with it long enough, it will speak to you” Bonnie Louie

“I’ll just sit here on this bank of sand and watch the river flow” Bob Dylan

Bonnie Louie is a First Nations teen who tragically died shortly after the filming of the movie that this quote is from (Broad 2009). I do not think she’s saying or meaning the same thing about rivers as Dylan. Whether Dylan’s literally on a bank watching a river is unlikely in his first verse, at least, and perhaps is not important to the song as a whole. I am pretty sure ‘the river’ he’s watching is life. But I am less comfortable speculating on what Louie means. She’s specifically and literally speaking about the Fraser River, but is she attributing pedagogical agency to it, or is she doing what Dylan does: locating agency in the activities of ‘hanging around’ or ‘watching’? I also wonder how secular liberal readings of materiality, perception, and agency constrain and direct my wonder. If so many different discursive traditions have found inspiration for reflection on the human condition from flowing water, how is it self-evident that the ‘agency’ driving this reflection is not somehow located in flowing water? I am not sure what that would mean, but what does it do to assume it simply is not, or even that such things are objectively knowable and clear?

Ahmed describes a fundraising letter that obscures human agency by describing harm done by landmines: the people who put the landmines in the ground, intending to injure and kill – as well as others who contribute to the social and political context in which landmines make sense – are not attributed any responsibility (2004a). She suggests that attributing agency to a certain thing at a certain point in time has effects on what we are ‘able to’ know, which has “something like a relationship” with Butler’s (2004a) exploration of the effects of imagining that the September 11 attacks came completely out of the blue. How a narrative arc starts “enables” what its account is ‘able to’ be (Said 1994b, 16): it is one aspect of what ‘enables us to know.’ Might Ahmed and Butler’s accounts also have “something like a
relationship” with how power relations are embedded in our attribution of ‘agency’ to only the viewer or thinker when water or music are used to illustrate what it is to be human? In contrast, when scientific diagrams or digital imaging is used to illustrate what it is to be human, we tend to believe in a one-to-one relationship between the image and what it is said to represent. There is a certain way, then, that our normative reading of DNA images or brain scans is “something like” Louie’s account of the Fraser River. If you observe a brain scan for long enough, it will speak to you. This is self-evident within our taken-for-granted understandings. A brain scan ‘contains’ knowledge and is ‘able to’ convey it. To suggest this is culturally contingent, relational, or related to power – other than acknowledging we need training to read it correctly (which we also say of wine and body language) – seems silly. Of course brain scans accurately represent the brain. And thus the human.

However, in his “archaeology of medical perception,” Foucault (1994b) suggests that it is a partial and therefore fictitious representation of history to suggest that the fundamental shift in European medical knowledge and practice around the time of the French Revolution was the result of seeing new things for the first time. Or, rather, the ambiguity of the previous statement is illustrative: he suggests there was a change in ‘ability to know’ and ‘ability to perceive’ so that observing the same things was no longer observing the same things, because of the shift from one discursive tradition to another. The contingent discursively constituted experience of observing was distinct, and so what was contingently observed was distinct as a result. “What has changed is the silent configuration in which language finds support: the relation of situation and attitude to what is speaking and what is spoken about” (Foucault 1994b, xi). And, if this is a worthwhile representation of our ‘ability to know,’ then therefore our taken-for-granted contemporary medical knowledge “is only one way – in all likelihood neither the first, nor the most fundamental – in which one spatializes disease. There have been, and will be, other distributions of illness” (Foucault 1994b, 3).

To have suggested that medical knowledge is contingent, it is not nearly as ‘out there’ to suggest this is also the case with reflexivity and ethical deliberation. There are other discursive “rules” governing questions of morality, which I am not referring to. At least not directly. What I believe is not so difficult for most of us to accept, in our time and place, is that how we go about ethical deliberation is not universally shared.
During my work with men who’d abused their partners, a man once told a story in which he told his partner she was acting just like her mother. I assume you’ll have countersigned this with “something like” how I did at the time, given that we likely share enough of a discursive tradition. What astonished me then, during a group session, was that he and some other men in the group did not countersign his story with the normatively and freely available understanding of where this statement is most likely to lead. He and several other men in the group countersigned it, instead, with surprise and indignation about her responsive anger because – they explained to me – his statement was true. I found this troubling, of course, and also fascinating. How were they unable to know something so knowable in our time and place? What enabled their ‘ability to know’ something else?

In response to this, I asked the man who’d told the story to imagine he was watching the television show Everybody loves Raymond. “If Raymond and his wife were disagreeing, and Raymond told her she was acting just like her mother, what would you guess might happen next,” I asked. The man laughed and said “oh, he’s gonna get it now.”

Clearly this response was not one I’d characterize as a critical engagement with gender; there was more of White’s “scaffolding” of “conceptual development” to do. But, right now, I want to stay with his ‘ability to know’ Raymond’s wife would respond angrily (as had his, to his surprise and indignation). This suggests something about one aspect of what we tend to mean by ‘taking responsibility’ or ‘reflexivity’ – the ethical practice of anticipating what might be expected to follow from things we do. When this man imagined watching another husband and wife arguing, the man was ‘able to’ predict the outcome. I wrote the previous two paragraphs above assuming readers would be able to do so too, in order to make a point: it is normative to the point of cliché. But when this cliché actually transpired between this man and his wife, he was surprised and indignant about her unsurprising response.

This brought to my mind – at the time – something David Barsamian (1995) said at a “People’s Summit” in protest of a G7 meeting in Halifax. His speech advocated the need to bring non-activists into the critique and restructuring of the global economy. In response to a question from an audience member about the general public’s lack of critical thinking skills, Barsamian said something like this: It is clearly not a lack of skills. Have you ever
heard people talk about sports? People are able to take a play and describe who went wrong and where. Others, in response, debate this with them. In doing so, each might connect this one play to countless other factors which do not appear to be immediately connected, such as salaries, coaching, and injuries. They might connect this play to a number of historical plays that were similar or distinct in key ways, in order to shed light on a particular aspect of what went wrong or right this time around. If the number of people who can do this in relation to football were to apply these highly developed critical thinking skills to global economics, we’d live in a very different world today. That is the gist of it, whatever details have been altered by my countersignature, my previous tellings of it, etc.

I remember the gist of his answer seventeen years later, because I have been thinking with it ever since – on and off, of course. This response from Barsamian is very different from the statement of Foucault’s that Spivak (1999, p. 255) reads critically, in which Foucault says, “the masses know perfectly well, clearly.” Spivak is right, I think, that Foucault’s statement obscures power and the contingency of ‘ability to know.’ Barsamian might say “the masses critically think perfectly well, clearly” but this is not to say that this thinking or knowing is clearly articulated in relation to economics, oppression, domination, and human suffering.

If Barsamian is onto something in his suggestion that there are skills that could potentially be taken from watching sports and applied to critiques of global capitalism, then surely what a man is ‘able to know’ when he watches Raymond say “you’re acting just like your mother” could potentially be mobilized when the same words pass through his own mouth. The biggest difference between him saying this and Raymond doing so is whether he’s caught up in the immediacy of his own perceptions, affect, and so on, or is witnessing someone else’s relationship from a distance. But it is possible to externalize events from our own lives, most often in the form of stories we remember or tell, and to reflect upon them, either outside of their immediacy or while they’re taking place (Schön 1983). White writes,

There appears to be in intimate link between narrative structures and the fantastic capacity that people have for reflexive engagements with life. This reflexivity is the capacity to achieve distance in relation to the immediacy of life.... This reading of our lives through narrative structures provides the
opportunity for us to render meaningful that which previously was not, and to re-conceive of that which has already been rendered meaningful. This generation and regeneration of meaning allows for a sense of narrative authority, and for an experience of living that people describe as akin to stepping in and out of the flow of life (2004a, 91).

I believe we all do this, but inconsistently, heterotopically. As Barsamian suggests, nobody does this about all aspects of their life in the same way. What White describes as the “generation and regeneration of meaning” of “the flow of life” is contingent on which ethical practices or skills we bring to bear on an event, as overtones, when we “render” it “meaningful.” This is how Narrative Practice and Invitational Practice are distinct from Carl Rogers’ non-directive “Client-centered Therapy” (Rogers 1951), even though they all aim to centre the client. Taking the positioning model from White (2005) that I described in the previous chapter, Rogers’ advocated therapeutic positioning is decentred and non-influential (he believed that people have a natural ability to heal, if provided a non-coercive context to do so) whereas White and Jenkins’ advocated positioning is decentered and influential. This is “something like” the distinction between the statement from Foucault that Spivak critiques (which I am here aligning with Rogers’ approach and assumptions) and the implications for positioning that could be taken from Barsamian’s account of normative critical thinking (which I am aligning here with White and Jenkins’ approaches).

When it comes to the “generation and regeneration of meaning” about injury we’ve caused, or with which we’ve been complicit, we most frequently and consistently countersign such events with analyses that harmonize with them so as to represent our own innocence, others’ culpability, the constraints or impact of outside influences or historical circumstances, and so on. And, furthermore, any inconsistent overtones that do hold us responsible unfortunately often hold us responsible in an objectified way, as “the bad guy.” This objectifying structure of ‘responsibility’ is no more ethically operationalizable than minimization, denial or blame, because it closes down options for ‘flowing’ and is thus frequently followed by defensive overtones re-positioning us as – in fact – not responsible. Such is life, perhaps, but only ‘as we know it’ – only contingently. It is ‘enabled’ by what Heron calls our culturally contingent “unifying narratives of a moral self” (2007, 154). If this is so, we might expect there to be more dependable ethical positionings available within
other discursive traditions, and there may also be more dependable ethical positionings heterotopically available to us, as excess or unique outcome, within normative traditions here and now. In this chapter, then, I attempt to externalize and think about different “forms of reflexivity that constitute the subject as such,” as Foucault puts it (2006e, 462): how do divergent analyses, grounded within respective discursive traditions, make particular and contingent flows of becoming and ethical practices more or less readily available.

I Just Knew Right Away that it was the Right Fit

In thinking with ethical transgressions and personal-is-political participation in systemic oppression, I am interested in ‘hows’: how people take responsibility; how harm is understood to have happened in the first place; how specific efforts to think about harm or act upon it turn out; and so on. One thing to consider in these hows is: what ideas or accounts of life – the ‘theory,’ however ‘high’ – do people draw upon in our ethical narration and navigation. How does this ‘drawing upon’ ‘enable’ our ‘ability to’ ethically navigate our lives, relationships, and participation in oppression? In my MSW research interviews, for example, each participant mentioned theoretical perspectives that allowed her to re-engage and re-contextualize past events, which contributed to a greater sense of agency in the present. The subtitle for this section comes from Vic Hill, one of my MSW research participants, in her account of first becoming acquainted with Narrative Practice:

[What attracted me to Narrative Practice, then,] was a privileging of that person’s story and how they make sense of that world, of their world, while also [locating] them within larger systems of oppression. And when I found that in Narrative, it was like coming home in lots of ways, ‘cause I’d never seen that before. And I guess that’s driven by my lived experience, and also sharing lived experiences with other people of colour or other people who were marginalized in their everyday lives, and [who experience that] their voices don’t count. Their voices don’t count anywhere. There are so many places where my voice hasn’t counted, but to see a [helping] practice that really wants to understand how [service users understand] the world. I just knew right away that it was the right fit.

Immediately after citing this in an article recently, I comment:
This sense of ‘coming home’ or ‘fit’ when being exposed to new theories and ideas was a common theme of the interviews – and it seems to be the case here that Narrative Practice was ‘the right fit’ because of the way that it intersected neatly with Vic’s lived experience and her political analysis, both of systemic oppression and of the need for marginalized voices to count. But here I would like to highlight instead what seems to be an analogous experience that the participants described through witnessing one another’s responses – a sense of ‘fit’ when hearing one another’s accounts (as opposed to when reading or learning of institutionalized theories and practices) (Chapman 2011, 736).

This is an ongoing part of living: exposure to new accounts of the world – both ‘personal stories’ and meta-level ‘theories’ – that we harmonize into the melodies of our everyday ethical navigations. As described above, Ahmed describes reengaging a particular event from her youth, and Jenkins invites the men he works with to do something similar, over and over again. I here engage my recent re-engagement with an earlier engagement, in order to highlight the contingency and ‘vanishing presence’ of a particular “sense of ‘fit’” when exposed to others’ accounts – whether ‘personal’ or ‘theoretical.’ I may come back to this same quote from Vic again at some point in the future and – following Heraclitus – when I do, I’ll no longer be the same person. It may or may not strike a chord for me at that time, but it will not ever strike the exact same chord as it does today or has before. The exact chord it strikes will bring particular countersignatures that will result in a new lived experience. This will also result in new knowledge or theory, enabling new parameters of ‘ability to know.’ This is significant, because the particular theory we bring to bear on our own and others’ actions matters: As Foucault (2006e, 461-462) observes, there is a variable relation between knowledge of the self and care of the self…. [C]are of the self is always strongly linked to the problem of knowledge, even in its most ascetic forms, those closest to exercise…. It is a complex practice, which gives rise to completely different forms of reflexivity… [Self-knowledge, therefore,] … will not always open up or deliver the same contents of knowledge in every case. Which means that the actual forms of knowledge put to work are not the same. Which also means that the subject [her- or] himself, as constituted by the form of reflexivity specific to this or that type of care of the self, will be modified.
Let me repeat his last point: “the subject [her- or] himself, as constituted by the form of reflexivity specific to this or that type of care of the self, will be modified;” the subject, the person, will be modified by the knowledge s/he’s drawing upon and generating at a given moment. Accounts of such ‘modification’ featured in my research interviews with Devi Mucina and Patty Douglas, two fellow doctoral students in my department, as well as in my research interview with Hannah Fowlie, a member of the Narrative Co-supervision group I attend, and in a joint presentation I gave with Michal Er-el, a former student of mine (Chapman and Er-el 2010a). Each describes how drawing upon particular knowledges constituted them as ethical subjects whose “forms of reflexivity” were contingent on these particular knowledges. This ‘enabled’ their ethical navigations and, thus, their relationships with those with whom they were in contact and, thus, also their participation in oppression.

Devi Mucina perhaps accounts for this most explicitly, highlighting the distinctions between sub-Saharan African Bantu knowledges of self, relationality, and ethics, and those most freely and dependably available in Toronto. Devi grew up in various countries in Southern Africa and, at this point in our conversation, he’s described an incident in an Ethiopian restaurant in Toronto in which he immediately connected with the owner, swapping stories and talking African politics. Following this, another African man, who appeared to be homeless, approached Devi and his friends and asked them for money. The restaurant owner took the other man away, and Devi heard the restaurant owner beating up the other man. Although one of his dinner companions suggested they leave, Devi and his friends ate their food and only then left, not saying anything to the owner about it. Devi used this as the ethical transgression that provided the starting point for our conversation16. After telling the story itself, Devi describes his discursive dehumanization of the man who was beat up.

Devi: His blackness, his humanity, don’t count. They don’t matter at all. Ours is what matters…. We’ve made him an outsider. Obviously there are a number of factors that allowed us to make him an outsider. We’re assuming that he’s

16 Devi has also written about this incident (Mucina, 2010) and, in fact, it was upon hearing him present an earlier version of this paper at a conference that I invited him to participate in my research project. This is in contrast with most other participants, who volunteered after hearing me present my work and then describe the project, or with whom a conversation about shared interests resulted in their offer to participate.
poor, that he’s drunk. We assume that he probably has some mental health issues. And we’re saying that those things stand out of the norm. At least – I can’t say for anybody else – that was happening for me in that moment – and that allows me to marginalize that man…. [I]n that moment I was saying that it is more important that I maintain my alliance with this black brother, [the restaurant owner who beat up the homeless man] than with that particular black brother [the homeless man]. I mean, clearly I do not find this kind of behaviour acceptable, but I’m also not willing to jeopardize the solidarity that we’ve maintained, [the restaurant owner and I,] and I think that there’s a couple of things that allow me to do that, that I have already highlighted – that we’ve already deemed him outside of the normative realm of things. So in my silence, in me saying, “let’s just eat” [to my companion who suggested we leave]… I have not done anything … to challenge this abuse, to challenge this colonial behaviour that we are now imparting upon ourselves [as African people].

Facilitating his reflexive ‘ability,’ Devi positions both “blackness” and “colonial behaviour” as externalized ‘things’ that he navigates relationally – relationally in terms of his relationship with these ‘things,’ his participation in them, his use of them, and also relationally in terms of his relationship with other people. As in Chuck D’s use of blackness and Ahmed’s discussion of whiteness (cited above), Devi seems to be describing blackness as “‘attributed’ to bodies as if it were a property of bodies,” but this valued attribution gets differentially “reproduced through acts of alignment [assumptions that allowed him to “marginalize that man;” “colonial behaviour”], which are forgotten when we receive its line” (Ahmed 2006b, 121). This differentially valued attribution can be understood as part of, as also cited above, “the process whereby some differences come to matter [which] involves the implication of differences in relations of power” (Ahmed 1998, 192). One man’s blackness ‘comes to matter’ as exalted through a sense of solidarity, whereas the other man’s blackness is denigrated through what Devi describes as “colonial behaviour.” Continuing from above, Devi identifies that the “acts of alignment” which orient him differently to the two men’s blackness are foreign to his childhood cultural context:

it goes against everything I have been taught from my childhood – specifically from my cultural context – which is the idea that we are Ubuntu. And Ubuntu
means specifically ‘I am because you are.’ Which means that we’re all related and that there’s no perfectness of our blackness. All there is is imperfection. Yet, in that very moment, I was saying that ‘well, your imperfection is not desirable. It’s too imperfect. But our imperfection, this is acceptable.’ In that moment, I’ve already created a hierarchy of our blackness … [and] was enacting a colonial oppressive behaviour – one that, no matter how difficult the challenge, I don’t want to repeat.

Chris: Can I ask you a question? … I have some very basic outsider knowledge about Ubuntu and what it means. I do not recall ever noticing the piece about ‘we are all imperfect’ before. I probably have read that. I’ve probably heard that. But it’s never stuck out in my mind as significant before. And … it strikes me as significant in all sorts of ways. You know, contrasting it with … my own cultural upbringing and biases and so on – contrasting it with a sort of individualist model where there is this idea that we can be individually close to perfect. I see that, in Eurocentric cultural discourses, as getting in the way of people acknowledging harm they’ve done. So I’m wondering: do you think that part of your ability to reflect on all this might have something to do with this worldview that situates all of us – ourselves included – as imperfect, as a basis of understanding.

I want to highlight two things happening here, before I cite further. First, what we could call ‘data analysis’ is happening in our conversation itself. Devi has told me a story, and he’s also analyzed the story, by situating his actions as colonial and in contradiction with Ubuntu. In response, I ask him to thicken his description of the discordance with Ubuntu by telling me more about this “All there is is imperfection.” The knowledge centred here is Devi’s. It’s his ‘analysis’ of his story that I seek to collaboratively and relationally ‘enable’ through my questions. Had I countersigned his story with something other than an interest in what he said about imperfection, we would have moved on in a totally distinct direction.

The other thing I want to highlight is that I have just asked Devi a very direct question, and you’ll find that he never answers it – or that rather, as he says below, he answers it “in a kind of round about way.” His round-aboutness provides a fuller contextual analysis than if he’d simply answered my question by saying ‘yes.’ He “kind of round about[ly]” says
‘yes,’ but he first offers me another way of thinking about my own culture (and about cultures more generally). And then, the way he “kind of” says ‘yes’ is by situating ethical practices associated with Ubuntu within a creation story – suggesting the parameters of a philosophical discursive tradition are broader than what we tend to take for granted.

Devi: It is really interesting that you pose that question and I am going to try to answer it in a kind of round about way…. First of all, most cultures are indigenous, it is just that [some] migrate … and they forget to pay respect to the new places that they are. But initially, they come from a particular place. The knowledge that they have, the production of that knowledge, comes from a specific location, a specific experience. Encoding that into memory becomes history, which we then philosophize about. Those things are always happening, always changing. And … this idea about being imperfect – we [in Southern Africa] do not have a corner on it. Many cultures have tried to talk about it, have expressed it in many ways.

The starting position for this idea of being imperfect was that in the very beginning, in the beginning of creation as the Ubuntu understand it, there was Amai. Amai is the creator of all things; she’s the mother of all things – they all came from within her. Because she had so many things, she wanted life. She craved life, because she felt alone and isolated…. Amai was this imperfect immortal, [in] that [she] had these cravings, which then made her imperfect. And so in our cultures, we convey her as either having one large breast [or] one shorter leg than the other. So the things that we in the West would identify as disability, in the portrayal of Amai in many African cultures, you will see in her that something is not quite aligned. There is no alignment to her. In some communities she has an extra stomach. In some communities … she has a missing hand. This all is trying to say that she was not a perfect being. The feelings she had were not of a God. These were desires. These were feelings and an imperfectness that were given to us. We all embody them. And this becomes a guiding principle. I do not know if this helps to answer your question – but I think that because of my own experience of having to always think about where I am politically, socially, because of my experience with colonialism –
having grown up in Africa and then having to move from one culture into another; in one culture having been deemed quote-unquote ‘normal,’ in the other culture being deemed disabled, all these things have really made me reflect … how do I make sense of all this … how am I holding myself? And so for me the ways that have allowed me to do this is to … be centred in my Ubuntu-ness, both as a philosophical paradigm as well as a spiritual place, because it allows me to bring many things into tension, into contradiction, to challenge each other … whilst allowing me to regenerate. Because sometimes, some places [or traditions] will hold you, bound, and will say ‘this is it,’ that is all there is to it, you accept or you do not accept…. [But] for me, I have been able to find that I can have this place of engagement, of dialogue, with Ubuntu – with myself, our communities…. How am I basing this on teachings I have gotten? … They’re always challenging me when I find myself in roles where I am enacting oppression … especially the idea of imperfect human beings. For me it becomes central to my philosophy of being human.

Shortly following the above response, I ask another question. Again, I am influencing Devi’s answers but centring his analysis. My question here relates to my own interest in thinking about reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön 1983), and when I asked it, I recall that I was assuming he would respond by telling me about the conversation that followed amongst his friends when they left the restaurant, and so I was interested in how those particular relationships ‘enabled’ his reflection. His response took us in a different direction, which I never would have predicted or directed in isolation.

Chris: Can I ask another question? [Does] the reflection you’re able to do today [have] anything to do with the reflection that happened in the moment amongst the three of you as you were leaving, or [did you need] some more time away? …

Devi: I think it is the stepping away from the situation. In some ways I am grateful for being in an academic institution, because it is given me time to really think, to pay attention…. I am engaged with the stories of life as it occurs: what we learn from it, what were the experiences, what were we knowing? So, through my classes, [I was assisted in thinking about the
appearance of] disability, in that particular setting, and the assumption that we could see disability in the brother who was outside – we could make the assumption that disability was present because of the way he seemed not to have a sense of reservedness about his boldness, about his speaking out, and there was a sense of familiarity that went beyond what you’d expect in the West. Maybe if we were home [in Africa] and [even in Africa, if] you were not in the city where you’re trying to aspire to Western capitalist ideas, it would be very different. We would read that human being in a particular way. We would not be intimidated by him. We would not try to shoo him away. We would have responded very differently. But in this space where we are, I guess what I am trying to say is that the context – the cultural context of where you are situated – starts to shape how you respond. Right? It is so difficult to bring Ubuntu-ness [into my everyday life in Canada]. Even as I speak about it, even in my own work as I am writing about it, it starts to come on the margins. Do you know what I mean? It becomes a conscious effort to try and bring it in, to try and make that the space of critical reflection, the space of philosophizing, thinking, engaging, being present – because we are in a different cultural context. And this cultural context has its own way of engaging. This is the experience of all immigrants, who come in with a particular way of knowing the world and being in the world. And you come and you realize that in this certain space those ways of doing now have to be modified, whether you agree or not with the way things are done here – they start to influence you, because it’s all around you. It is the way that has currency. And so in that moment was I reflecting? I was using a different lens of reflection. When you think about it, from that first moment, that first encounter, I didn’t even need to look at this man to decide that he’s not relevant for our discussion. Right? That means that there’s something here that allows me right away to dismiss him, without even having to hear his position or his discussion. The assumptions that I make – “I can smell alcohol” – all those things have to exist … within the paradigms of this particular space that allows it to be doable and sayable. And so now, as I step away from it, as I am now reflecting and I am thinking, and I have the space to do that – which is what the academy has allowed for me, it’s given me the space
to say, okay, here is your everyday things that are going on … how are we doing this? What is guiding that moment of doing all this? … I am doing all this stuff, but I am not sure that all the stuff I am doing is the way that I want to be doing stuff…. I have experienced the world in this [other] space [in Africa] that says to me I can be different. The world can be different. I can interpret different. I can respond differently. Right? And so it is this space [of the University which ‘enabled’ my reflexivity about my responses to these two African men. But in everyday life] … I can afford not wanting to think about it, because there is already currency here that allows me not to think about it. If the currency was not here, I would not be able to make that move. And so my ability now to question and to say “no, I am going to be different, I am going to respond differently,” is [a] way of saying, “that is not acceptable.” … My ability to bring [Ubuntu here] and to make this way of being speak, to have meaning within this context, [furthermore, would be impossible if there were not] something in this context too [that] allows it to manifest. There must be some ideals and some philosophies and some interpretation of meaning [in Toronto] that allow me to bring it in. So somewhere in this milieu, in this hybrid mixture, there’s something there that when I start to speak about Ubuntu, I can say “yes.”

At this point in our conversation, I was completely surprised by several things that Devi was articulating: that he would have been a different person in relationship with this other man, were he in Southern Africa, but also that the discursive tradition that would have ‘enabled’ him to be a different person there also has some heterotopic “currency” here in Toronto. There is something here that perhaps he suggests has “something like a relationship” with Ubuntu. He further maps out this notion of heterotopic discursive currency, which again we can imagine as ‘data analysis’ folded right into the ‘data collection.’ This analysis is partly ‘enabled’ by my influence and collaboration, but it follows Devi’s flows.

Chris: You’re talking about Toronto [as having grounding for Ubuntu]?

Devi: Yes.

Chris: Yeah. What you’re saying about space and currency and norms [trails off]. You suspect that if you were with the same two people in Zimbabwe –

Chris: – at a restaurant, that if an impoverished man approached you smelling of alcohol, it would not have played out the same way?

Devi: No, but … it also depends on where you are [in Southern Africa]. If you’re in a capital city, there is more tendency for people to respond the same way [as is normative here]. But if you move into smaller towns, start moving into the rural area – very different response. And even if you were in the city, it depends where you were. If you were in the city and you were in the townships, it would be very different. If you were in the lower end suburbs, it would play out very different. Higher end suburbs, where everyone’s already aspiring to have the same kinds of values, and the same kinds of things that are valued in the West, it is very likely that people may – may – go like, well, okay. But it is also possible, it is more plausible, that someone might say, “that’s not Ubuntu.”

Chris: Someone would say that if witnessing [someone dehumanizing another]?

Below Devi again answers my question here in “a kind of round about way” by telling me two stories that do not neatly map onto the one about the transgression in the restaurant – or to my question. Both stories, rather, offer “something like” invitations for how to countersign his original story: each illustrates the relative availability of Ubuntu versus colonial relationality in Southern Africa. But the work required to connect these stories explicitly or linearly to his original story is left to me. He is, perhaps, trusting in the Third Space between us that I’ll connect the dots in “something like” the way he intends. This is a particular ethical practice of sharing knowledge. It resonates, perhaps, with King’s style in which he tells various kinds of story in the space of the same chapter – often without spelling out how he wants us to read them together. It also seems to resonate with some of Derrida’s work in which he published two parallel narratives, each taking up half of each respective page, without doing the work of explaining how he intended the two to speak to one another. Here is Devi’s response to my question above:

Devi: Yeah. It is very possible…. Back home … I was sitting in [a kombi (a small bus)], and we were all quiet. We were squished up like sardines…. And
someone said, “oh my god. We’ve become like the white person.” And everyone cracked. What they were saying was we are starting to isolate ourselves. Right? We are so caught up with trying to go to work, get our job done, go home, that we are forgetting that we are all in relationship. It was quite amazing: just the one comment had everybody laughing and talking and sharing. People saying, “goodbye, see you later.” We were probably never going to see each other again, but there was all of a sudden this remembrance of our values to treat each other with dignity and respect and that we are all relational … that we sit together in a familial relational bond. Whether we like it or not, it is there. So … we accept it, we embrace it, and we work with it.

I was just thinking, as I was telling you that, I remember going back and I am walking, and somebody simply says to me, “Hi brother” … and I say, “How are you, sister?” She starts to talk with me. I had just gone to the bank, and I am walking back, and we are having this conversation…. She starts to share about her family: …. “We’ve all saved up money, but things just are not – we are trying to get this license so that we can expand our farm back home. But it is taking up so much time” … We get to the fork where she’s going this way and I am going this [other] way. Clearly she’s going this way and I am going this [other] way, but … she says, “How far are you going this way? Well, I’ll come with you a little bit more.” And she carries on this conversation, and then she says, “Brother, thank you very much for listening.” Then she leaves and she goes in the other direction. I thought this was very interesting. It reminded me of growing up back home. You could be walking down the street and somebody would just start talking to you.

This story and the one about the kombi do not linearly demonstrate Devi’s suggestion that someone might have said “that’s not Ubuntu” if he were to dehumanize another person in Southern Africa in the way he did the homeless man at the restaurant, but they nevertheless gave me a sense of the “ethics inaccessible to liberalism” (Spivak 1993, 37) that is Ubuntu. One part of what he suggests is that Ubuntu is, indeed, more or less available depending on where you find yourself, but that this differential availability is also contingent on factors outside of ‘geography’ or ‘cultural context.’ I might suggest that the line separating the
relative availability of Ubuntu in Southern Africa and Toronto is *différantial*, so that particular and fleeting availability hinges on many factors, including geography and discursive traditions that have immediate relative currency, but also including factors such as what a person’s doing and – as Devi now goes on to describe – the stage a person sets *in anticipation of* a given context. The preparation he describes below is a form of “care of the self … which gives rise to [particular] forms of reflexivity” (Foucault 2006e, 461-462).

*Chris:* I almost want to map out visually all the different ways you’re talking about space. It is quite powerful…. From looking at the different norms that have currency even within a capital city in Africa and doing the same thing here in Toronto. It seems to be the case that you’re saying that in this [University] department, you’ve been able to find space [to engage Ubuntu. But] universities are very colonial spaces. Most of the knowledge that is generated and taught in the University of Toronto is coming from Europe, informed by Europe, informed by the idea that only certain ideas and certain bodies within Europe – most of them male, most of them able-bodied, etc., most of them wealthy – have *ever* been able to generate knowledge that is of any use. Yet in this incredibly colonial institution, you’ve been able to find space where you’ve been able to engage with Ubuntu in a way … that strangely was not available to you in an Ethiopian restaurant…. That strikes me as surprising.

*Devi:* Surprising and also not surprising. Because one of the things that I have found is that sometimes when you enter the colonial spaces, you’re very clear that you’re at war. Do you know what I mean? So you enter those spaces prepared for war. So you fortify yourself. You wear your armour. You’re ready to engage and you’re ready to fight to get what you need. When I enter the Ethiopian space, I am not ready for war. If you remember what I was saying, we were given the best seat in the house, right there where we felt like we were outside yet it is in the booth and so we are protected. So automatically I am disarmed, right? I feel like this is the place where I can take off my armour, I can be at rest. That in this space – this is an assumption – in this space, colonialism is going to be less impactful. And so … I am at ease. I am relaxed. But … colonialism approaches us when we are least expecting it. The
colonizer within becomes present. The external colonizer, who is exemplified by my brother who owns the restaurant, becomes present too. The structure of colonialism makes itself present. The external brother who is standing there becomes the force where we exercise all this oppression. He becomes the victim of all the marginalizing things that have been enacted on all of us, and we become the tools of that colonial expression in that moment. Fascinating, right? I mean, I am thinking you could almost play this out on a bigger system and say this is what happens when the colonizer leaves [a country]…. We become the legacy, the tools, and so that is why I say that the context of the knowledge system produced has power. Even when you’re saying you’re trying to avoid it, it is there and it leaves a mark. And so when you see the spaces where we say we’ve decolonized, or we are in the process of decolonizing, you still see the legacy of colonialism. Because it was there. We cannot erase it and say it was never there, right? It’s had an impact. This has changed all of us – physically, mentally, it has entered. These are the challenges.

Now, what is fascinating, as you were saying, we enter the space of the University where I’m clearly prepared for the expression of colonialism. I’m expecting its knowledge, its everything, to say to me, “You shall not. You should only know this, and you should produce in this particular light,” the time limits and everything, the structure of how we’re educated – all those things, I’m expecting them to come at me, so I have to be more diligent and to say, “How am I going to respond to this? How am I going to be subversive? In the face of this, what knowledge do I have?”

I now want to put Devi’s analysis here into conversation with selections from Hannah Fowlie and Patty Douglas’ research conversations, as well as with some of what Michal Er-el17 said in a resonant conversation. Each speaks about her professional relationships with young people and families, and about the relative availability of individualizing and

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17 Michal was a student in a Social Work Ethics course I taught. We co-presented twice on a methodology used in the course (“something like” the methodology of my research interviews for this project). We re-engaged the story she’d shared in class by me interviewing her again (Chapman & Er-el 2010a; 2010b).
pathologizing understandings of people versus more relational and less judgmental understandings. I hope Devi’s analysis will provide useful overtones as you read the following pages. His account of how “We become the legacy, the tools,” resonates with what Patty, Hannah and Michal say of professional knowledge and training – and how ‘we become’ the conduit of certain kinds of knowledge, ethics, relationships, and oppression.

Patty Douglas is a fellow student in my department. Her MA work (2010) critically interrogated her participation in ableism and normalization with her son who has Asperger’s. After having missed each other’s papers at a conference, we shared back and forth what we’d each presented and were excited by the resonance. If I recall correctly, I then told her about my research project and she offered to participate in it. Patty worked as a teacher before returning to school and, in the following selection from our research conversation, she describes two discursive traditions and associated ethical practices that are available to her in relating to children – her own kids, as well as those she’s paid to be with:

Patty: I am the mom and I love [my son]. In an institutional setting, because I have also been a teacher, how willing am I to be interrupted when there are a set of constraints and expectations – institutional constraints, institutional expectations, moral constraints and expectations … where you’ve been trained to respond to a particular interruption which might be an opportunity to re-think how we are coming to be together in this place…. You’re trained to minimize the interruption and to normalize the individual. So that is not a very caring relationship … that normative path of ‘I will put this in a little bundle and I will get rid of it so that my frame is not interrupted.’ That is actually a really interesting way to think through what is happening there and the kinds of relationships we have in which we are not willing to be disrupted. We are not willing, even, to reflect on why it is that we are frustrated with this moment. Or why it is there’s part of you that’s saying, ‘come on kid. You’re supposed to be doing this. What’s wrong with you’ – that you’re crumpled on my backseat floor and you won’t speak with me in words’ [Here she’s referring to an incident with her son from earlier in the week that I engage more fully in chapter five]. It’s not an easy thing to be interrupted…. [B]eing a parent of a kid who has – whatever it might be – anxiety, makes you a better teacher. It does not
necessarily work the other way around. I do not think that being a teacher makes you a better parent…. I remember moments of struggle as a teacher thinking, ‘this kid’s really annoying me, and I want him to go away,’ and then struggling through that and thinking ‘this is how my child presents, often, and so what is going on here?’ … So there is definitely a relationship there – from living with a child who has Asperger’s to negotiating these things in other areas of life. Yes.

“Something like” what Devi describes in his account, Patty describes navigating two distinct discursive traditions and the ethical practices that are available to her when she positions herself within each one respectively. Patty’s ‘willingness to be interrupted’ can highlight a distinction between Devi’s response to the homeless man in Toronto and his response to the woman on the path in Southern Africa. In one situation, Devi is willing to be interrupted, and in the other he’s not. And while he makes sense of this through the relative “currency” of Ubuntu, Patty attributes any heterotopic ‘willingness to be interrupted’ in her classroom to lessons from living with a child with Asperger’s. And, “something like” Devi’s situating of Ubuntu as heterotopically and différantially available in Toronto and Southern Africa, Patty’s neither consistently ‘able to’ be ‘willing to be interrupted’ with her son, nor is she only ever ‘able to’ pathologize and individualize students. In Devi’s language, the individualization of students and an unwillingness to be interrupted has “currency” when Patty’s a teacher, but even then there’s Devi’s “something [t]here,” Deleuze’s “excess” perhaps, allowing Patty to access her ‘willingness to be interrupted,’ sometimes. Her “What is wrong with you” was about her son, and yet she credits her relationship with him – and the ‘flows of belonging’ he’s ‘enabled’ – for her ‘ability to’ resist normative practices of individualization when she’s relating as ‘teacher.’

Devi is more ‘willing to be interrupted’ when Ubuntu has greater “currency” than colonial discourse; Patty when motherhood and love have greater “currency” than teacher training. The historical professionalization of social work involved white class-privileged women’s adoption of what were considered ‘male traits’ (Hébert Boyd 2007), which resonates with the history of white women becoming professional teachers, although this history was distinct for black women. Black women, who had been forced to do traditionally European lower class masculine labour in slavery, did not have to demonstrate their capacity to work
outside of the home. In fact, in order to achieve ‘respectability’ while white women were taking on traditional male jobs, black women often participated in Bhabha’s “colonial mimicry” (1994), modeling their behaviour on the then-conservative (within the context of white class-privileged society) “separate spheres” gender divisions (Morton 1993; Yee 1994). Parallel to this, white women’s social work and teacher training, and the respective histories of socialization within each one, were a form of gendered “mimicry,” which resisted those same “separate spheres” divisions, in order for them to achieve ‘respectability’ (Addams 1902b). All of this was contingent on material and discursive contexts in which particular people and groups found themselves. These distinct and sometimes intersecting forms of mimicry toward respectability are still living today.

Consider the following account of feminist social work, in which the trait “willingness to be interrupted” is named as a traditionally female one. It should be replaced with “assertiveness,” implies Saulnier, even though this suggestion is followed by a critique of traditionally male “confrontation, conflict, and competition:”

[Feminist social work] groups include consciousness-raising groups, women’s self-help groups, feminist therapy groups, and woman-specific skill-building groups, where women are trained in such skills as assertiveness.... [W]omen’s ... willingness to be interrupted ... [is] influenced by the sex composition of a group…. Additionally, feminists defined the confrontation, conflict, and competition that they perceived to be common in traditional groups as inappropriate male-identified approaches to group work (Saulnier 2008, 355)

If ‘one no and many yeses’ is a useful orientation, is it possible that its usefulness is due to how the colonizing of liberalist understandings of personhood involves Ahmed’s “straightening devices” which have denigrated traditional white European women’s ways of relating, alongside Ubuntu ways of relating, alongside countless other available traditions? And, given that these traditions are associated with specific practices relating to the ‘government of others,’ this has further denigrated those who’ve had no opportunity to exalt themselves through a “toehold on respectability” (Fellows and Razack 1998). For example, Devi and Patty each respectively illustrate how the colonial and sexist denigration of Ubuntu and motherhood/love/‘willingness to be interrupted’ relationalities results in the denigration of disabled people. This is not secondary; it is central to the colonial and sexist
replacement of ethical practices. Colonial and sexist discursive traditions bring with them normalization and particular forms of ableism. Patty says that as a teacher, “You’re trained to minimize the interruption and to normalize the individual,” which we can conceptualize as an ‘assertion’ of professional knowledge and authority, following Saulnier’s implicit suggestion that women’s “willingness to be interrupted” be replaced with “assertiveness.” I do not wish to reverse this and suggest that assertiveness is always ‘bad,’ and that letting oneself be interrupted is always ‘good.’ I would rather advocate that we approach these differently valued, gendered, racialized (etc.) traits *differentially*, as externalized ‘things’ with no naturalistic attachment to anybody’s embodiment. Perhaps, then, rather than exalting or denigrating any *practice* in the abstract, we can instead attend to how they may have very different effects based upon how their use maps onto “Fanon’s Manichaean structure” of the exaltation and denigration of *people*. What Patty calls “minimiz[ing] the interruption and normaliz[ing] the individual” is an ‘assertion’ of one’s identity as a competent professional, at the very same time as it is an ‘assertion’ of stratification and the denigration of students. The political *problem* of women’s “willingness to be interrupted” is contingent on the stratification of sexism, *relative to men*, rather than a generalized problem that plays out in all women’s relationships with all others. When a woman is ‘on top’ of a social stratification in a particular relationship, her “willingness to be interrupted” might instead be a resource for resisting her own complicity in oppression. But the historical legacy of sexism gives shape to teacher education, and the training of social workers and other professionals, aligning future professionals with certain traditions and practices and not others. As in Saulnier’s skill-building groups, in social work and teacher education classrooms, we actively denigrate ethical practices and traditions of “willingness to be interrupted.” Michal Er-el, a former Special Education teacher, describes facilitating a student’s assessment to get put on Ritalin, *in the face of* resistance from the student and his mother (Chapman and Er-el 2010b). She was not willing to be interrupted by this resistance; instead, she asserted *her* knowledge. I asked Michal how medical knowledge about Ritalin materialized as more legitimate for her than the knowledges informing their resistance.

*Michal:* There was a lot of resistance…. *[His] mom was very much opposed to it. I am not even sure why. I think it was maybe the label that comes with using*
Ritalin. Then there was his resistance: at that time he did not tell me that it makes him feel different, but I think he did not like the idea of being dependent on something external. I brushed those knowledges away, because the way I was taught to be a teacher is, ‘a professional says that you have this disorder and it is an easy fix.’ And in a way, with the mother at least, I felt almost as if I knew better, because of their family situation. And I knew him in the context of the classroom, where he has to (I thought) sit down, be quiet, listen, do his work. Although I fought for him to get the accommodations he needed, I never thought that maybe the environment should change. I do not think that would have been easy, but it never even crossed my mind to get involved in that. …

Chris: [You said you were] trained as a teacher to take up certain knowledges as expertise…. Is there anything [from your training] as a teacher that would have supported you in this idea that, in fact, their resistance should be discarded? … Was there anything in your training that prepared you for a mother and son who were resistant, and to deal with that in a certain way? …

Michal: There was a whole course about dealing with parents – resistant parents…. ‘Acknowledge what they feel, but you are the professional. You have the knowledge’ … There was no critical thinking involved. There was no ‘multiple knowledges’ involved. I think that is what probably led me to just discard what they were thinking.

This resonates strongly for me in terms of how I was taught to make sense of, and respond to, client and parent resistance as a helping professional (Chapman, forthcoming 2012). And I was also recently subjected to these familiar (from the other side) unethical ethical practices from my son’s daycare provider. Suggesting a psychologist should observe him, she said to me, “I know this is very difficult for parents to hear, but it will be good for him in the long run.” She seems to have countersigned my sense that I’d have equal or greater say in decisions about bringing in outside professionals, or that such involvement might be more than simply “good for him in the long run” with the taught structure of ‘resistant parent.’ She thus had a readily available blueprint to deal with me, and thus to shape our ‘flow of belonging’ and to constitute herself as professional and as ethical subject, as such.
This taught structure appeared to guide her response to *anything* I said. In response to what felt like the impossibility of this situation, my partner and I felt we had no viable option but to take him out of her care. As discussed in the previous chapter, this situation did “not allow me to be an ethical person; [it dragged] me into being a political person” (Spivak and Dabashi 2009). In Devi’s words, I found myself inadvertently “at war.” We did not feel we could live with a relationship with our son’s daycare provider that was characterized by political struggle, and we did not feel she was open to negotiating different terms of how we might collaboratively respond to her concerns. And so, as I say, we took him out of her care. I have no doubt this was the right thing to do, but that does not mean an end-point to critical engagement with the situation: my ‘ability to’ refuse to participate in this political struggle was highly contingent on my circumstances. If he were in grade school, it would have been more complicated: no law requires he go to daycare. If I did not work from home and have extended family support, it would have been logistically impossible to pull him out of daycare. If I did not embrace the critique of domination and normalization that I do, it may have been easy for me to wonder if she was right: maybe I was just ‘resistant?’ And if I did not have a partner with a ‘roughly shared’ analysis of these things, the required deliberation would have been more complicated. We pulled him out of daycare, almost without any deliberation whatsoever, and the negative consequences from doing so were not that significant, *because of these particular contingencies*. Sometimes, it feels like we need to get ourselves out of these contexts, these struggles, these wars. At the same time, the ‘ability to’ do so is not evenly distributed. Because of colonial imposition the world over, I do not think there are many Universities in the world, even in Southern Africa, where Devi would never feel he would have to ‘put on his armour’ in order to achieve legitimacy for his work. Whereas I, in the previous chapter, wrote about the one professor throughout my *graduate studies* at two different universities, with whom I felt I had no choice but to take on an antagonistic political stance to defend my work. Otherwise, I consistently go into such environments without any armour, and without even considering I might need it.

In the following selection from my interview with Hannah Fowlie, Hannah describes a treatment centre where she worked, which she left because she did not feel she could live with the person she was becoming through working there. As a person paid to be there rather than made to be there, she was ‘able to’ leave when she decided she could not take it
any more, when she decided she did not like what it was doing to her – which often is not possible for service users. Please consider the parallels between Hannah’s story and what Patty and Michal say about teaching, as well as the resonance between what Hannah and Patty each say about the impact of their work and workplaces on them as Moms.

_Hannah:_ I would always feel overwhelmed about all the systems that were set up to keep things the way they were…. The behavioural approach infiltrated everything – the ways that families were being discussed, and the ways that families were being seen and the things that were made invisible or were being left out. Problems were located within the kids and within the families. And the larger contexts of their lives were left out – things like racism, things like poverty, things like colonization, things like the day-to-day struggles of surviving … and what was really talked about was the psychological history, the need for medication…. [And] there were all these systems set in place to just deaden everybody and everything. That is what it felt like to me. I would do little things, little small acts of resistance. [For example,] at a case report, having a family _there_ and turning to a parent and saying, “Can you speak about this?” – instead of speaking about “mom” or “mother” while she’s sitting there. Little things like that. You know, going and visiting people. Making clear that I understood that if I came to their house that that might be triggering for people, so I’d go out for coffee a lot, which is nothing, but it is not something that people had done before…. Finding those little ways to – but in the end not feeling I was _able to_ – be with people in a way that felt at all helpful _for them_. It was very upsetting, and I had to leave that situation.

Lots of times I just gave in.

_Chris:_ Is that part of what was upsetting – the times you gave in?

_Hannah:_ Yeah. I find that, especially in isolation, sometimes it is impossible to hold onto ways of seeing things. _It even got me seeing my own son in other ways too:_ all of the pathologizing, all the diagnosing, and all the labeling…. It got me thinking about _him_ in different ways that I really did not like. And so it was not just professional. It was personal as well – the ways that kids were being [trails
off]. And the things that just never got acknowledged: I remember this one … mother who was convinced that when her son had a hotdog or anything with preservatives in it, or anything with sugar in it, it really affected his mood. They completely shut that down and would not hear it and would feed him that thing any chance they got – against her wishes. And just discounted that completely as being so ridiculous, but at the same time were pushing constantly to put him on [meds, so believing only certain biochemical things were relevant]. I remember lots of conversations with mothers … who had gone along with the program and put their child on whatever drug it was, and then telling me the horror stories of watching their child transform before their own eyes. The devastation of that, so taking their child off the medication and then being pushed, and pushed, and pushed, and pushed, every day being told the same thing. All of that is just yuck…. I just had to get out of that situation that was just impossible….

There is a housing project that a lot of families I work with now live at, so I was there one day visiting a family from this place when a family from the treatment centre just happened to be there. [The Mom] said to me, “Why’d you leave?” She was really upset with me that I left, that I did not say goodbye. She said, “nobody ever talks with us like you did, respectfully the way you did.” Which was ‘nice’ – it was affirming – but at the same time [it was] awful, because … I totally abandoned everybody by leaving. I could not have stayed. But at the same time I knew that that system won….

Chris: What did you take from that conversation with that mom? That is certainly something I have thought a lot about as well, when we find ourselves involved in contexts where we are working in systems where we are not able to be who we want to be with other people. That we experience as totally dehumanizing. And the futility of the everyday acts of resistance that – from our point of view, from a systemic point of view – they’re futile in terms of changing things. And yet her experience of you was [trails off]. Yeah. I guess the image I have is that she does not have a choice about whether or not she’s involved in the system, which is certainly true of places that I have worked as well with kids. Where the kids and their families did not have a choice about their involvement,
but when I got to a point where I did not feel like I could live with myself in that context I was able to leave. I have certainly had questions about what did it mean to *not* have [my] voice at staff meetings. Which is not to say I did not do harm in that context, because I did, but I think that [my harm] lived alongside … acts of resistance. Anyway, what did you take from [the conversation with the mom]?

*Hannah:* That relates to [an] email [I received from] a mom…. She says she does not want her child back in the system, and she talks about [service providers] who are racist and classist…. She says, ‘we are repairing the damage internal to our community but these are hard things for privileged classes to get’…. [Service users] do not live the way that they’re constructed…. Basically what that says to me, and what she said to me was that *they know.* People know. They know when they’re being pathologized…. I am thinking of this particular mother who was a single mom, three kids, living in a really, really hard place to live, a lot of violence, and just what she did every day just to survive that. It is incredible. It is heroic. [She] had an illness, a really debilitating illness. But they saw her as uncaring, abusing the system, trying to get away with what she could get away with, irresponsible, not showing up for meetings, resistant, all these ways that people are constructed. So when she said that to me, what I took away from that was that she knew exactly how she was being constructed. At every moment, she knew. So when someone came along that was genuinely trying to see her, first of all *she wanted to be seen* and second of all it was much more in tune with her reality. Because she was not uncaring, she was not resistant. She had really strong opinions about what she wanted for her children. Sure, she came from a life that had affected her and the effects were multiple. There were lots of different stressors she was living with that had their effects on her. But I think she walked into that place and she knew exactly how people saw her…. What she’s saying is people who are privileged, people who run the show, do not think that the people who they’re constructing in a certain way get it – that they’re being constructed that way. They know exactly how they’re being constructed. That is what it said to me – that she got it. And she got that I was
trying to see things differently, that she was being seen differently by me. Her word for it was respect.

Chris: And what was her word for you leaving?

Hannah: Abandoning. I just took off.

Chris: That must have been kind of hard to hear?

Hannah: Oh yeah! That was the part where I felt like – wow. I mean, I think that’s the hard part. These are jobs. Where you get paid, you get your benefits. [And if] you get a job that pays more [then] you need to revise. That is really the hard part. I was just thinking of a group that another social worker and I run in a school. She buys snacks for the group, and they asked who paid for the snacks…. She said, “I do,” and they were completely shocked that she actually paid for the food. One girl was like, “I thought this was government food. I was just eating as much as I could. It’s you? You’re paying for it out of your own pocket? That makes me feel completely different about how much I’m eating.” I think that kids – especially kids who’ve been in systems – they know it’s your job, they know you’re getting paid for it. Families, they know you’re getting paid for it…. [T]hey’re realistic about what they can expect from workers, and so when people go and do things like that – pay for something out of their own pocket or stay late – I have always found that kids notice that. They notice when I’m staying late or when I talk with them on the weekend. Because then they’re like, “oh, you’re not on the clock. You’re not being paid for this.” That, I think, is a really hard part of doing this for money … you’re trying to be helpful – for money!

I do not have any answers to the questions Hannah raises. I have also left jobs when I no longer felt I could “be an ethical person” while working them, in Spivak’s words. That is part of why I left social work practice and turned to research and social work education. In fact, it was the third time I left front-line social work practice for similar reasons (twice I returned to school, once I did international human rights work, all of which have their own political and ethical complications – and all of which I was ‘able to’ pursue contingently
because of opportunities that are not equally distributed amongst helping professionals and which were far outside of possibilities available to most clients I’d been working with).

Hannah, Michal and Patty all externalize and reflect upon the most freely available knowledges they had at their disposal to relate to children and families – knowledges they were trained to have, they were expected to have, that had “currency” in their professions and workplaces. For each of them, these knowledges, the traditions they were contingent upon, and the practices they made most freely available, were ethically and politically concerning. But the possibilities available to us for responding to such concerns are also contingent upon the discursive traditions in which we find ourselves – which are often the same discursive traditions we are finding concerning. Griffin Epstein, one of my research participants who’s a fellow doctoral student in my department, puts it like this: “the way in which we are given to understand our needs and desires and thoughts actually comes from a matrix in which we benefit from systemic oppression.” I now turn to a discussion of some ways that this happens – how, following Ahmed, our ethical concerns are “straightened.”

**Top-down Accountability as Unethical; Community Accountability as Contingently (Un)ethical**

In one discursive tradition of ‘what ethics is’ and ‘how we do ethics,’ we are believed to act ethically inasmuch as we defer to authority. This is both descriptive, in terms of accounting for ‘what we do,’ and also prescriptive, in terms of directing practices by which we attempt to govern others’ self-governance: ethical and unethical behaviour is best regulated through top-down accountability. Although this section focuses on social work practice and Codes of Ethics, this tradition and its associated practices are structurally “something like” the general ‘rule of law’ as an approach to the ethical governance of others’ self-governance. Top-down accountability is not the only way. It is simply one tradition. It appears to be universal, *only* because it’s been imposed everywhere through colonialism. It’s also been widely critiqued. For example, “Elizabeth Barker asserts that the problem with the criminal justice system is that it diverts accountability to the criminal justice system instead of the community” (Smith 2005b, 140). And Alanis Obomsawin, referring to Child Protective

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18 This statement, and the conversation in which Griffin said it, is discussed in more detail below.
Services – which again are structured through top-down accountability – says, “The answer lies in a return to traditional values in caring for our children and remembering that every child has many mothers” (1986). The Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council concur, both in relation to Child Protective Services and in relation to the criminal justice system: “We feel like social workers control the lives of our families” (1995, 81), they write:

A very big issue for us here in Davis Inlet is the social workers taking children from their homes. Many of us do not like how Social Services is separating families. Innu families used to stay together. This is damaging our families. Too many of our children are away, outside the community. It seems very easy for Social Services to take the children away. They do not listen to the parents and do not give any help to the parents with their problems when they take the children away…. When a child is taken away from parents, some of us feel it is like being sent to jail (1995, 81).

The “like” here, linking child apprehension to jail is Spivak’s structural “something like.” Of course there are countless ways that these two practices are distinct. But both removing children from their homes and removing people from their communities are reactive and top-down approaches to the government of others’ self-governance. Both also sever family, community, and friendship relations – which many other traditions hold as fundamental to ‘the ethical’ (Spivak 2004b). And, furthermore, the Innu Nation says it experiences both practices as outsiders interfering in what should be shared community concerns.

This point of view was given eloquent expression by Daniel Ashini when he appeared in court on behalf of an Innu defendant called Shinepestis: Shinepestis lives in a world of differences from Euro-Canadians. We know that because all Innu share Shinepestis’ experiences. The Innu experience is a collective one and it has little to do with genetic similarities or race and everything to do with similarity of meaning and feeling…. We ask you to look [at him] again…. Accept that he is Innu and that to be Innu means he has learned to live with pain and in reacting to his own hurt he has caused more pain for those he cares most about. We want to stop this pain from spreading even further. We judge Shinepestis as no different from the rest of us. He is our equal and we judge him to be a
worthwhile human being. We want for him and ourselves what he wants, to be a whole, healthy being. As a community of Innu, we accept our collective responsibility to have Shinepestis live among us, to receive caring and support from us and to show us caring and support. Shinepestis will be accepted back with us not in spite of what he did but because we need him to be a part of our healing (Samson, Wilson & Mazower 1999, 5).

One way that such critique goes unattended, by professions such as social work that it critiques, is that the structures and traditions mediating workers’ relationships with governing bodies and systems, as well as the structures and traditions mediating workers’ relationships with service users, are depoliticized and ‘ethics’ is situated as following rational, universal rules. None of what Smith, Obomsawin, or the Innu Nation critique falls within the radar of social work ethics. Removing people from their homes – to go to foster homes or jails – is only an ethical issue if it happens to coincide with one of the concerns set out by the Code of Ethics; this is in contrast to other practices, such as sex with clients or selling goods to clients, which are always judged to be ethical concerns; because they’re directly addressed by the Code. I am not saying these should not be concerns, I am saying we should be ethically concerned about what counts as an ethical concern and what does not. The structure and tradition of top-down accountability requires each social worker to ethically govern her- or himself primarily by following a universally applicable Code. If the Code does not address something, then it is not a matter of ethics. Although actually it is even a little worse than that: the Code is offered up as the way of ethically responding to even those things it does not neatly address. Beverly Antle (2005) articulates this tradition:

social workers need to keep a copy of [the Code] within easy reach … [and] need to familiarize themselves with ethical obligations where there is essentially no room for discretionary judgment [such as] … child abuse…. [When] Codes of Ethics … do not provide specific enough information to resolve a dilemma, it is important to link decisions to one or more of the core values in the Code (4).

The ethics of the Code is the ethics we must live by, whatever the situation. Accordingly, this tradition might even judge critical reflection to be unethical: in some cases “there is essentially no room for discretionary judgment.” Although Antle acknowledges “frontline
practitioners rarely use these … materials” (2005, 4), her *expectation* is that “social workers *need* to keep a copy of [the Code of Ethics] within easy reach for consultation.” And even in situations the Code does not neatly address, in which we are granted “discretionary judgment,” the Code of Ethics is positioned as a kind of ‘bottom line’ for navigating complexity and conflicting political demands of ethicality. Antle is writing to explicitly advocate the use of the (then) new Code, and so we cannot be too surprised to find her following the tradition that prioritizes Codes in this way. However, this tradition shows up – often presented as self-evident – in more surprising and insidious places too. Consider the following excerpt from a chapter about feminist theories for social workers:

> The problem in choosing which feminist theory to use [to guide our social work practice] is complicated by the inescapable reality that theories are value-laden. Some of us value pervasive structural change and see social justice as possible only in the context of profound redistribution of power and resources. Others value stability, predictability, and incremental change. Some theories question the very foundations of American society; for example, the heterosexual nuclear family structure upon which many social policies and services are built. For some social workers, the fundamental shake-up recommended by these theories is precisely what is needed. For others, that is taking self-definition and social justice too far, too fast. *Practitioners must decide what is most in-line with their reading of the code of ethics and with social work values* (Saulnier 2008, 359, emphasis added).

I worry about this particular “straightening” of ‘ethics as politics.’ Why would we defer to our “reading of the code of ethics” to navigate diverse feminist theories or approaches to social transformation? Why privilege our accountability to this one document? And what happens if and when we do so? This notion of the Code of Ethics as a bottom line for navigating our lives is pervasive, and it serves to de-politicize the work of social work. Such an unbalanced emphasis on obedience and deferral is, furthermore, partly a matter of a partial (and hence fictitious) representation of ethical practices. As Merlinda Weinberg (2005) demonstrates, for example, there is indeed “discretionary judgment” at play *even* in contexts prescribed by law, such as child abuse. She explores a situation in which two helping professionals have different takes on whether or not a child might be at risk and, in
a context in which Children’s Aid Society involvement is mandated, she shows that there are multiple possibilities for process, transparency, parental collaboration, etc. Following her and others, and in contrast to the discursive tradition that emphasizes us working rigorously toward the best possible ethics documents and the widest possible enforcement and internalization of their rules and regulations, I advocate that our attention be given to the ways people do ethics every day. As Ahmed (2006a) writes, one concern here is that “The work that goes into doing the document ends up blocking other kinds of action” (¶ 27).

In fact, even the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (2005, 2) itself cautions that it “does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations … [and] does not specify which values and principles are most important and which outweigh others in instances of conflict.” Presumably this statement was an accommodation made during the 2005 rearticulation of the Code, reflecting concerns from participants critical of the earlier Code19. But, for those who more uncritically abide by it, such as Antle above and Nikki DiFranks below, the deferral-to-authority tradition narrates only a problem in the “gap between the image of the professional who consults the code and makes a decision, and the reality that practitioners [need] reflective dialogue [and other processes that cannot be captured in a document] in order to deal with ethical dilemmas” (Rossiter et al. 2002). In this tradition, then, one of many diverse and intersecting ways that we govern ourselves – deferral to norms, rules, or authority – is all too often called ‘ethics.’

19 Other accommodations were also made, such as moving the value of social justice to a more prominent place in the Code and replacing the ‘best interest of the client’ with ‘self-determination,’ as our primary obligation. What is troubling, however, is that the Code is now supplemented with “Guidelines for Practice” which are concrete, whereas the Code itself now presents abstract values. In the Guidelines, social justice is placed at the end, where it was in the old Code – coming after guidelines specific to few social workers, such as those who do research or work in private practice – and, worse perhaps, the guidelines pertaining to social justice are the only ones which are stated in terms such as “social workers endeavor to” rather than stating that social workers ‘do’ such and such. ‘Best interest of the client’ also supersedes self-determination in the Guidelines, which is part of what, concretely, removes child apprehension, institutionalization, and incarceration from the realm of ‘ethics’ – or at least from the realm of ethical transgression. As long as we determine something to be in a client’s ‘best interests,’ it is ethical. Bonnie Burstow’s (1992) radical feminist “Counsellor Ethics” (47-50), in contrast, prioritizes self-determination even where this breaks laws, so long as a client harms nobody else – but we can, furthermore, note that she and the CASW are both operating within the confines of individualism when we compare her code with that of the (American) National Association of Black Social Workers (n.d.), who describe as their “primary obligation the welfare of the Black individual, Black family and Black community and will engage in action for improving social conditions.”
DiFranks (2008), for example, was surprised and concerned about her findings on the use of the (American) National Association of Social Workers’ *Code of Ethics*. Her reactions are entirely contingent upon the discursive tradition I am critiquing, which I believe ‘enables’ what we normatively ‘know’ about ‘social work ethics.’ However, her *findings* can be read *against* her interpretations, in order to facilitate a reflexive reconsideration of our conceptualization and operationalization of ethics – both within social work and in general.

“Belief in the code did not influence behavior congruent with the code,” writes DiFranks (2008, 167), which concerns her: “If belief in the tenets of the code is not matched by behavior that is congruent with the code, social work could face a problem of accountability” (2008, 167). Her “problem of accountability” that “social work could face” takes for granted a top-down model of accountability, by which we are accountable to codes, associations, funders, and bosses. Like conflating ‘accountability’ with ‘top-down accountability’ (and the erasure of other practices of accountability), the conflation of ‘ethics’ with ‘the Code’ (and the erasure of all other ethical practices) is largely taken for granted in mainstream social work. As a result, DiFranks perceives social workers’ marginal use of the Code as self-evidently increasing the risk of unethical behaviour. This, in turn, dictates an obvious solution: renew our efforts to “incorporate education about the code and its application into the curriculum” (2008, 168). If research shows that social workers do not use the code, then make us use it. But if we do not conflate ethics and codes, *many* other paths may be opened by the fact that most social workers never use the Code.

DiFranks’ findings, then, can help us “become more reflexive” about social work ethics, as Rossiter et al. recommend (2002, 534). Their research suggests that practitioners’ marginal use of the Code is rooted in the everyday ‘ability to know’ that other ethical practices are more relevant to complex relationships and situations. This does not seem to have been available to DiFranks, though, and so she’s surprised that “separate ethics courses did not increase belief in tenets of the code … [and that] the separate ethics course may [even] have led to the questioning and subsequent weakening of beliefs” (2008, 171). Rather than ‘think with’ this, she explains it away, using what Heron (2007) might call a “containment strategy” that is, once again, a psychologizing, individualizing, and depoliticizing move:
the social worker who has taken the separate ethics course may be uncomfortable about the ... discordance between belief and behavior ... and might be motivated to change (reduce) belief in the code, which then accommodates the inconsistency by reducing the overall discordance (DiFranks 2008, 171).

She’s saying an ethics course successfully teaches me how important codes are, which then increases my discomfort about acting at odds with the Code because I have learned to place such an emphasis on the importance of it; in response, I am motivated (consciously or not) to change my beliefs (that were originally taught to me in the course and which caused the discordance in the first place) so that I’ll experience less discomfort. Perhaps. But I think it is more likely – and much more simple – to suggest that any course devoted to ethics will address dilemmas that codes cannot exhaustively resolve. In response to studying these dilemmas, a student may put less faith in the Code – but s/he will not, as a result, be any ‘less ethical;’ I imagine s/he’d rather be more diligent. But this is outside of the tradition that Rossiter et al. call “restrictive” ethics, which “involve[es] the code of ethics and rules on its administration that are designed to resolve an ethical dilemma. [In this tradition, furthermore] ethics is [only] present when a conflict about ethical principles arises” (2002, 541). And these “ethical principles” are only those explicitly named by the Code. What the Code contains is conflated with what ‘is’ an ethical concern. The particular and contingent ethical practice of consulting the Code is naturalized as ethics, while other ethical practices – such as consulting clients about how they feel about our interventions, apprehending children, or calling the police – are positioned outside of the realm of ‘the ethical.’

This abstraction of ethics from daily living seems to perhaps be unique amongst world cultures, but we may not recognize its ‘restrictiveness,’ or Ahmed’s “acts of alignment” of “whiteness,” which constitute its self-evidence. Having “something like a relationship” with such restrictive understandings and operationalizations of ‘ethics,’ we abstract everyday learning, too, from classrooms, whereas Mi’kmaq pedagogy, for example, uses “more indirect methods than direct teaching [and] encourage[s] learners] … to observe, explore, and make judgments using their observations to reach a conclusion” (Marshall 1998, 4). And in They Schools, in which Dead Prez (2000) critique the American education system, they rap, “Observation and participation [are] my favorite teachers.” These counterpoints can facilitate a reflexive reconsideration of European-descent culture or
whiteness, allowing us to understand DiFranks’ finding that, consistent with Mi’kmaq pedagogy and ethics, “although a separate ethics course did not relate to disjuncture [as restrictive ethics would predict], absence of learning from modeling was significantly related to disjuncture” (2008, 171, emphasis added). Observation and participation are how most people learn most things – how to walk and talk, how to comport oneself as a social worker, client, activist, or academic, etc. It is not that classroom teaching does not work, but it is only a tiny aspect of ‘learning;’ likewise, Codes may sometimes be helpful, but they’re a tiny part of ‘ethics;’ they should therefore receive a more proportional representation of our time and attention. Based on DiFranks’, Weinberg’s, and Rossiter et al.’s findings, we could even call open-ended and participatory ethical approaches ‘evidence-based.’ Advocates of more democratic approaches to teaching (Freire 2000), therapy (Jenkins 1990; White 2003), and ethics suggest that top-down approaches do not only erase alternatives; they may enable unethical ethical practices, such as the following irresponsible response to an allegation of racism that is ‘enabled’ by the existence of a document claiming ethicity:

“This [allegation of racism] could not be further from the truth. The college prides itself on its levels of pastoral care”…. Self-perception of being good blocks the recognition of racism … it refuses to hear complaint in the moment it says that it does hear complaint…. Anti-racism can function as a perverse performance of racism … ‘you are wrong to describe us as uncaring and racist because we are committed to being anti-racist’ (Ahmed 2006a, ¶ 11).

Translating this to social work is easy: ‘It is “the only profession in which human rights, peace, and social and economic justice are integral to its code of ethics and practice” (Jennison and Lundy 2006, 1), we are therefore not racist as a profession;’ or – perhaps “something like” Heron’s (2007) development workers who all have a critique of colonial continuities in international development and who all imagine themselves exceptions to this critique – alongside a critique of other social workers’ oppressiveness, ‘I’m (exceptionally) an anti-oppressive social worker, I’m not racist;’ or, in terms of what we might actually say in response to an allegation: ‘I’m sorry you perceived that as racist, but I assure you that this agency and I are committed to diversity and social justice.’ We hear statements like this more often than we hear practices of accountability that accept others’ perception of our acts as racist and proceed from there. Heron (2005, 348-349) suggests that how we
operationalize being “an anti-racist or non-discriminating social worker may make it difficult … to interrogate … failings even when these are pointed out…. At stake … may be the desire to be a certain kind of social worker [and] a certain kind of White person.”

Restrictive ethics and other straightening devices of whiteness, professionalism, colonialism, and so on, unfortunately also haunt attempted alternatives, so there are no simple solutions. Codification-as-ethics is inadequate, but this does not solve the question of how to institutionally support a more rigorous and fruitful ethics. Rossiter and her colleagues found that the social workers they interviewed advocated instead for dialogue and reflection rather than a rule orientation.

Reflection and dialogue, however, were difficult to achieve in the political climates of hierarchical organizations where the job and professional security of workers could be put at risk by challenging the orientation of ethics as organizational protection (Rossiter et al. 2002, 541).

Their research participants said they would like more ethical processes of reflection and dialogue but that their workplace structures actively prevent such processes. I too have worked in settings where workers met privately with colleagues to discuss difficulties, experiencing supervision as a place where supervisors dispense directives ‘at a distance’ (Neu and Therrien 2003), without knowing the circumstances or people. As mentioned previously, this created an ethical dilemma of how to be supervised without harming clients.

All that said, even relatively democratic and collaborative ethical reflection is contingently ‘enabled’ by those discursive traditions available to a given group or community. As an illustration, I’ll describe a group supervision session in which I believe the primary ethical danger inhered in the limited discursive traditions available to the group. The same group of people, however democratically organized, could not have righted this. Rossiter and her colleagues, then, suggest that “authority for ethics should be relocated from prescription to a relational process … [meaning that] clients should also contribute to the definition of applied ethics” (Prilleltensky et al. 1996, 290). They might be said to agree, then, with DiFranks’ concern that social work faces a “problem of accountability,” but they would mean a much less “restrictive” version of “accountability.” I wholeheartedly agree with Rossiter and her colleagues that we need bottom-up accountability, and relationality more
generally, in our work toward becoming ethical. However, we also need to be aware – as they address in a later work (Rossiter et al. 2002) – how thoroughly contingent on discursive traditions our relational practices are. In the following story, a social worker experiences an ethical dilemma. It is very likely that she was prevented from consulting her client about this dilemma due to the same discourses that created the dilemma for her in the first place: racist and Islamophobic discourse about Muslim men, and sexist professional discourses about women who survive trauma or are in abusive relationships. These two discursive traditions – as they intersected with the therapeutic hierarchy here – would have prevented bottom-up accountability from being imagined as an ‘ethical’ ethical practice.

At a place I once worked, in a group supervision session, a fellow social worker ‘presented a case’ of a young woman who was a survivor of sexual assault. These sessions were meant to compliment the one-on-one supervision all social workers received at the agency, with the assumption that they would provide a forum for multiple perspectives and collaborative dialogue. This is a good thing, in theory, but it does not account for the limited range of ‘theory’ that may nevertheless be present in such a collaborative context. The young non-Muslim female therapy client ‘presented’ to us had recently began dating a young Muslim man. I understand this to have been the concern presented. In response, various staff gave input on this relationship and its relevance to the young woman’s history of sexual assault, with what seemed to be a consensus that dating a Muslim man meant being subjected to rigid gender roles, an increased risk of violence, and a generalized retraumatizing powerlessness. There were no Muslims in the room and I believe, following Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994), Mahmood (2005), and others, that this consensus was shaped by discourses about Muslim masculinity and gender relations that are most widely available in non-Muslim Canadian culture. Sunera Thobani calls these discourses “hyperpatriarchy,” and suggests they exalt white European-descent men and culture as pro-feminist or at least less-sexist (2007). In this group supervision session, I contingently had access to another discourse on Islam and gender, although as I have written elsewhere, I have actively participated in racism in my social service provision in other instances (Chapman forthcoming 2012; 2010a; 2007). In this particular situation, due to a particular life experience, I had contingent access to an account of the world that others in the room did not have: when I was growing up, my adult sister dated a Muslim man for six years. He
was like an older brother to me, and from him I gained some intimate, although outsider, knowledge of *his* knowledge of Islam, Canada, and gender. According to the account I learned from him, Canada *talks* sexual equality but *does* sexual objectification. Women are told they’re equal, but are primarily valued based on how closely their bodies resemble those in pornography. In contrast, his one Islamic account – as I recall it – said that men and women are different but both important, and that women should not be sexually objectified.

I do not want to argue for or against this account. Like any account, at best it is partial. But knowing *of* it made a difference for what I could perceive and say, which then made a difference in what was possible for the group supervision conversation that ensued and, in turn, *for subsequent ethical and relational possibilities between the social worker and her client*. I offered up this account and suggested that, as a survivor of sexual assault, it was *possible* that the young woman found in this young man respite from highly sexualized mainstream Canadian teenage masculinity – in which practices of men’s violence against women such as date rape are normalized. It was possible, then, that she was *reflexively and strategically*, rather than *self-defeatingly*, negotiating the various options she had available – probably none of which were perfect. Of course, I had no idea whether or not this was true, I said, but it was *possible*. The other social worker, as I understood it, did not go away certain that the account I’d provided was true, she instead left curious to explore the situation *with her client*: how did *she* experience and make sense of her new relationship. Perhaps I was right; perhaps those who saw the young man as exemplifying power, control and violence were right. More likely, this one young woman’s sense of her particular relationship did not fit neatly into *anyone’s* abstract account. But this story illustrates that more widely divergent perspectives tend to result in less constrained ethical practice – and all possible perspectives are *never* going to be at *any* table. It also supplements Rossiter and her colleagues’ advocacy for dialogue and bottom-up accountability; the worker presenting this ‘dilemma’ had not considered bottom-up accountability as an option, until the taken-for-granted racist, Islamophobic, and sexist framing of the young woman and her boyfriend had been problematized. What made it a ‘dilemma’ in the first place – assumptions that the boyfriend was violent and controlling, *and* that the young woman was not acting in her own ‘best interest’ due to her trauma history – made bottom-up accountability appear *unethical*. 
As disturbing as this story is, so is the following response I once got after sharing it. I shared this story with a white male Catholic social worker, and he responded by expressing surprise that I ‘got away with’ saying what I did at what he characterized as “a feminist agency.” I do not think this is an accurate description of the agency but, regardless, there appears to be “something like a relationship” between his imaginary of feminism and my other colleagues’ imaginary of Islam, again structurally – according to these distinct imaginaries, Islam and feminism both structure contexts so that only a very constrained range of possibilities are acceptable and, therefore, one cannot ‘get away with’ deviating from this limited range of possibilities. Tethered to these denigrating imaginaries are the exaltation of the discursive traditions out of which they make sense – which were perhaps Judeo-Christian/secular in the first instance and Catholic in the second, as these traditions interlocked in these contexts with white, colonial traditions of professional helping. Often these traditions are ‘roughly shared’ by the staff of a given agency, which is troubling in that there is no presence to ‘trouble’ them – even when there is collaboration and dialogue.

With Rossiter and her colleagues, then, I advocate a shift toward ethics as reflection and discussion – including the exploration of “what kinds of organizational forms are more likely to create the possibility of a central place for ethics” (Rossiter et al. 1996, 318). And I’d like to intersect with this a persistent worry that, like any Code, any organizational structure or discussion is ‘enabled’ by the discourses and practices available to those involved in its moment-to-moment performance. This is not to say that structures and systems are unimportant, but we also need to explore the ‘hows’ of navigating particular and contingent structures, systems, and traditions. We need more dialogue, and we need more bottom-up accountability. We also need to closely attend to the ‘hows’ of these practices. How do we dialogue with colleagues and with those ‘on bottom’ of social stratifications, in order to maximize ethical reflexivity and political accountability? How are we already doing these things, heterotopically, and how can we make these available practices steadier, more dependable? What knowledges, structures, and practices might ‘enable’ us to become more ‘able to know’ the consequences of what we do?
Learning to Learn from Below:  
The Supplementary Strategy as Ethical Practice

Rinaldo Walcott, one of my committee members, expressed the concern that at times I re-centre the liberal individual subject in my use of “I.” His concern then resonated for my other committee members, Kari Dehli and Tanya Titchkosky. My sense is that Rinaldo’s expression of this concern may have “scaffolded” what Kari and Tanya were then ‘able to know’ about similar misgivings that perhaps had not yet been fully spelled out for either of them. The resultant ‘roughly shared’ ‘concerted concern’ that was thus generated in that conversation has, in turn, ‘enabled’ my subsequent countersigned readings of these pages.

This ‘concerted concern’ is ironic: one of the central ways I orient myself to the question of ethics and self-governance is through an attempt to de-centre the liberal individual “I” and to reconstellate it as thoroughly, fundamentally, shaped through “we”s. And yet, it was “I” who read through the following fifty pages last night with this ‘concerted concern’ in “my” stream of consciousness, ‘enabling’ my countersigned reflexivity and anxiety. Rinaldo, Kari, and Tanya were reading along with me, in a sense – they haunted my reading, reflexivity, and emotional response – but I was reading and thinking and worrying ‘alone.’

Perhaps I do re-centre the liberal individual. Perhaps I even re-centre the heroic anti-racist I critique in my first chapter, implying that my ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ of such things are the way forward. And there is, clearly, a sense in which I am ‘alone with my thoughts’ as I write, and that we are always alone with our conscience in navigating ethics. I am tempted to counter this with a re-stating of the collective, concerted make-up of these thoughts and feelings ‘I am alone with.’ I am ‘alone with’ a ‘concerted conscience.’ The concerns animating my concerns right now as I type are directly traceable to this conversation with Rinaldo, Kari and Tanya. They would not have occurred to me, at least not as they have, had it not been for that very particular conversation with those particular people.

But what would it ‘do’ for me to leave it at that, implying that my “I” is our “I” – an entirely democratic, collective, accomplishment? This, too, would be a partial and fictitious account of my “I,” and of all of our “I”s more generally. Liberalism strongly shapes my ‘ability to know,’ however much I align myself ‘against it.’ It would be a heroic account of ‘overcoming’ to suggest that I have escaped its pull, not to mention being entirely
untrue. Perhaps, then, what I’ll do is simply invite you to read the following with this unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, tension among your overtones. It is informing mine too, as I re-read, reflect, and re-write. As I do so, I hope to situate any use of “I,” “me,” “my,” or “mine,” as a purposive act of strategic essentialism, rather than unpurposive, unreflexive essentialism – carrying me along liberalism’s flows unawares. I surely will not accomplish this every sentence of every page, but that does not mean that trying is inconsequential.

And as complex and irresolvable as the role of others in my ‘concerted’ flows are, so too are mine in theirs. As in my work with men who perpetrated abuse, I do not play a neutral role in relation to my research participants (or to authors I read). I, rather, purposively seek to draw out others’ work in externalizing and thinking about the practical effects of particular ethical narrations and navigations. I attempt to use my positioning of power within this project to ‘invite’ my participants (and the workings of some texts) to do just that, rather than having laissez-faire conversations with them. I direct or guide those conversations, attempting to govern my relationship with my participants, “but never exhaustively or coercively” (Foucault 1994a, 324). I follow White’s positioning as “decentred and influential,” and Jenkins’ “invitations to responsibility,” following the other person’s lead in subject matter, language, etc., attempting to construe a relational, conversational context “in which all worlds fit and grow” (Marcos 2001, 276). I try to govern myself so as to constitute parameters in which ‘all ethical practices fit and grow.’ This is impossible, but not therefore inconsequential; “one can tend” (Spivak 1999, 251).

I invited my participants to theorize their own transgressions, putting my own work to the test – “supplementing” my ideas and practices, to perhaps fundamentally transform them. Bhabha describes “the supplementary strategy” as follows (1994, 222, emphases added):

> Coming ‘after’ the original, or in ‘addition to’ it, gives the supplementary question the advantage of introducing a sense of ‘secondariness’ or belatedness into the structure of the original demand. The supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation.

I wanted participants’ flows and understandings ‘added to’ my flowing ideas, structure, and process, just as I ‘add’ mine to theirs through questions, structure, and what I share with them – and with the reader – about what I think or do. This supplementarity ‘enables’ flows
of becoming that would not otherwise be possible – both collectively and respectively. Spivak (2004b), like Bhabha, describes the relationship between her knowledge of global power relations and her rural Bengali colleagues’ knowledge of local power relations as ‘supplementarity.’ She and Bhabha also both use the term ‘suturing.’ These terms are taken from Derrida, borne from his philosophy of meaning making as differentiation and deferral. Derrida writes that the “supplement [is] another name for differance” (1997, 150; and “suture” is used on pages 103 and 105, to likewise articulate a differntial relationship). Spivak uses Derrida to inform her deconstructively politicized pedagogy, which is an ethical practice of ‘governing oneself and others’ in a particular way. She writes, “human rights activism should be supplemented by an education that should suture the habits of democracy onto the earlier cultural formation” (2004b, 548). She’s not advocating that she or anyone bring democracy or human rights to rural India (Spivak 1999, 251-252); she rather foregrounds the importance of such work being “noncoercive,” advocating “a suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happened, and that New York is necessarily the capital of the world” (Spivak 2004b, 532). The end-point should not be that rural Bengalis adopt solutions, strategies, laws, and structures from elsewhere. Rather, the end-point, or rather the starting-point, is “to resuscitate the lost cultural imperative to responsibility” (2004b, 533). As such, “the task of the educator is to learn to learn from below, the lines of conflict resolution undoubtedly available, however dormant, within the disenfranchised cultural system” (Spivak 2004b, 551). This is a task we can just as well – and just as importantly – take on as therapists or researchers, where we’ll likewise find local “imperative[s] to responsibility … undoubtedly available, however dormant.” As in Spivak, supplementarity goes both ways in my research: participants’ words, stories, and analyses supplement the knowledge “I” produce, the knowledge I am ‘able to know;’ I also contribute to their ‘ability to’ in many ways, setting the stage for their responses, and then in my responses to their responses.

This ‘both ways-ness’ is crucial to deconstruction, differance, the supplement, or the suture. Using Foucault to read Derrida, as Spivak (1993) advocates (both ways), Derrida uses many different words to mean essentially the same thing (différence) because he works to uncover Foucault’s heterotopic. There are normative “rules” shaping what we are ‘able to know’
about life, knowledge, thinking, doing, and so on. But even within these “discursive formations” (Foucault 1972), which only are our ‘roughly’ consistent performance of them, some doings defy the rules. Butler describes these doings, defiances, or troubles, which she calls “the excess,” presumably following Deleuze, and “the supplément,” surely following Derrida, an “illimitable et cetera” that she says “offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing” (1990, 145). Derrida could be described as reading for occurrences where ‘canonical’ authors are heterotopically ‘able to know’ of our illimitable ‘inability to know’ – and he attends to what happens at these times, what is possible to do with these times, and so on, in order to point toward new departures for political theorizing. He reads Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Marx, and many others, for such heterotopic moments – often in lesser known works or footnotes – performing what could be called an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 2003b, 7) within legitimated knowledges. This insistence on working, at once, within and against the canon is perhaps structurally “something like” Foucault advocating the insurrection of doctors’ and nurses’ subjugated knowledges, rather than only that of patients, as mentioned previously. Given the tension that existed between Foucault and Derrida (see Spivak 1993), perhaps they’d both turn over in their graves in response to the last few sentences. But I can live with that; I’d like to supplement it to the image of the mother and daughter I discussed in the previous chapter, turning around together in order to reflect upon the difficult waters of life below, so that the mother’s embrace ‘enables’ the daughter’s reflection. Derrida and Foucault embrace one another, in irresolvable tension, turning over in their graves and haunting us today, ‘enabling’ us to make sense of the flows of life; each one, however begrudgingly, better ‘able to’ do so because of the other’s presence: Derrida’s impossibilities embraced by Foucault’s contingent and particular ‘hows,’ and Foucault’s ‘hows’ held in a différential relationship to one another, deferring closure or exhaustive ‘ability to know.’ They might have read this as sleeping with the enemy, but I offer it as a fruitful representation of Ahmed’s “different kind of politics of sides” (2006b, 169). I am ‘able to’ theorize everyday life within the particular parameters I do because of the presence of the two of them in my life, just as the particular ways I am ‘able to’ do so are ‘enabled’ by directions I largely attribute to Ahmed, Spivak and White. But this is a very partial and fictitious account of how I have come to know what I know, which is so complex, contingent, and fleeting that it is impossible to exhaustively account for. Illimitable figures contribute to who we are. They
make who we are possible; and they make exhaustively accounting for who we are impossible. Accounts of our ‘ability to’ are always and forever limited by illimitability.

Another word Derrida uses to explore *différance* is “hinge” (1997, 65). I find this useful in thinking through the both-ways-ness of *différance*, because of how it differs from the hinge that most easily comes to my mind. When I think of a hinge, my first thought is a door hinge, one side of which is bolted to the doorframe, to the wall, to the house, and held in place because the house is secured into the ground. The other side of the hinge is only attached to the door and it ‘hinges upon’ the secure and fixed one. This is how we often use the term in English when we say that such-and-such ‘hinges upon’ whatever else. Whether I do *this* hinges upon whether you do *that*, we say. But in Derrida, the hinge goes both ways: neither side is permanently anchored, fixed, or stable. As one side swings about unfixed, or rather fleetingly and contingently fixed in the vanishing present, so too does the other side – but they’re nevertheless hinged *together*, constituting one another’s ‘ability to’ swing about and fix fleetingly. This is how I imagine my relationship with my research participants (and readers): each of us is bolted to our own respective frames of discursive tradition, personality, history, values, biochemistry, embodiment, political commitments, subject positions, religious or secular convictions, and so on, but never in a stable, fixed, final, or exhaustive way. These frames shape our ‘ability to know’ but in constant flux, as a result of ongoing hingings. The hows by which we hinge with one another are each specific, fleeting, and contingent on illimitable and unaccountable factors. We all hinge with *countless* others, from our past, present, and future, in ways that are ‘impossible to know’ exhaustively – so that singular ‘being’ is constituted by illimitable others, in what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “and … and … and” or the “struggle” between the French words *est* (is) and *et* (and) (2000, 109), a struggle articulated by Derrida as early as *Of Grammatology* and explicitly folded into responsibility, accountability, ethics, and politics through the absent-presence of illimitable others in *Specters of Marx* (1994), twenty seven years later. Deleuze and White and hooks, my partner and son and mother, and … and … and … an “illimitable *et cetera*” of other others – each one uniquely, intersectionally, contingently, and fleetingly – create possibilities for me to be and do and know today, and so too are the doings, knowings and becomings of each of my participants ‘haunted’ by the vanishing presence of illimitable others. Our ‘ability to know’ hinges upon specific others
and is contingent on relations and structures and histories, perhaps most precisely accounted for by our ‘inability to know’ them in anything like an exhaustive way. Derrida writes, “The hinge [brisure] marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plentitude of a present and an absolute presence:” the “present” is always deferred in what Spivak calls the vanishing present and our experience of “presence” is only an effect of differentiation (so he’s using the differencing-deferral of différance to explain the hinge). He continues immediately: “That is why there is no full speech [or exhaustive knowledge], however much one might wish to restore it” (1997, 69). This is one thing that differentiates (diffrangentially, I suppose) différance from dialectics (Bhabha 1994, 92; Derrida 1997, 67; Spivak 1999, 424): My research project does not aim toward a fixed conclusion. Believing this will only ever be deferred, however pleasant it might be to imagine, I am interested in differentiation, particularity, and contingency, as well as the work done by the suture or supplement as our lives hinge together with other lives.

Following Bhabha’s (1994) account of the supplement, then, the accounts I am told do not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master-discourse [that I bring to the interviews] with a contradictory or negating referent…. Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the [ethical or theoretical] solidity (223).

I try to reflexively mobilize research interviews, using the heterotopic work of the supplement that already haunts what we know and do, against fixity, solidity, universal generalization, and certainty. It is a way of attempting to structure accountability for my authority. It is not a refusal of that authority; it is an attempt to ‘do it’ in a certain way.

Perhaps, then, an important question is what I suture to the lives of my participants. What I get from them is important, but so is what I contribute to them. Or perhaps how I contribute.

Elsewhere (Chapman 2010b), I said that during an interview with Michal Er-el, I offered her an alternative way of approaching her reflection and importantly, I think, as you’ll see, she responds by kind of re-articulating the particularities of how I
frame it so that it fits more for her than what I’d offered. Also important, though, is that although this is her knowledge and experience being centred, and she does not take up what I say like a sponge, even she did not know what she says here previously[ly]. We are co-generating her particular ethical knowledges and skills that she’ll then have available to her in her social work practice and life.

Just as with Michal, I wanted my research participants to be ‘able to’ access and articulate something like what White (2004a) calls their ‘folk psychologies’ – their understandings of how people operate that can be expected to be at least partly outside of the highly-specific ‘enablings’ of liberalism and the professional psychologies. The understandings that participants articulate – like my own; like yours – are not static, of course, but are rather developed and transformed through personal reflection, exposure to other understandings, and social collaboration – such as our conversations. Knowledge of this process seems to have led some of them to participate in the first place; several of them expressed wanting to have a forum to reflect on the difficulties they brought to our conversations – imagining and hoping that our conversation would bring them to further understandings they had not been ‘able to’ come to on their own. In my conversation with Griffin Epstein20, another student in my department, I respond to an issue they raise, saying, “That is definitely something that I am wondering a lot of things about as well.” In response, Griffin says, “But I do not have any conclusions about it at all. I was like, ‘I’ll talk to Chris about this. On camera’” (and then laughs). And in my conversation with Patty Douglas, also a fellow student in my department, I sum up what I understood from something she’d said and say “so I’m excited about that,” to which Patty responds: “Me too. I just thought of it now. I’m like, ‘wow, this is cool – I like this!’” (then she laughs too). Griffin and Patty would have each agreed to participate in this research for their own reasons, and would surely have gotten different things out of our interviews. But I understand that perhaps most participants had “something like” Griffin’s motivations, which were to work through something concerning to them, in conversation with me – and I think ‘with me’ in particular. The previously mentioned ‘concerted concern’ about re-centring the heroic liberal individual comes to

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20 Griffin’s preferred gender pronoun is ‘they.’
mind. But it is my sense that this was partly ‘about me’ – due to qualities “I” conscientiously cultivate in my life. However, it is also my sense that no amount of ‘personal reflection’ on my part would have resulted in Griffin’s want to “talk with Chris about this,” were it not for the ‘concerted cultivation’ the two of us have done together – in relation to trust and friendship more generally and also in particular relation to discussions of our own personal-is-political participation in oppression. So the extent to which their interest in participating was ‘about me’ was the extent to which it was ‘about us.’ Trying to disentangle the two would be meaningless. A number of participants, without the camera running, said “something like” what Griffin said – about being interested in having this conversation with me in particular. But what is this particularity? The ‘withness’ with which one is with me is entirely contingent on the ‘flows of belonging’ of our relationship.

In addition to resonant motivations for participating in the first place, I’d also like to think that most or all of my participants may have had “something like” Patty’s experience of coming up with something entirely new through talking about her life and experiences in a new and particular way. This particular way would not have happened in isolation and, although it was contingent on our friendship, it likely would not have happened if we simply got together to chat, even if we then chatted about ethics and ableism. There are norms that govern how friends chat, such as roughly sharing the centre of attention, even though these norms are not fixed. For example, Patty and I recently had supper together and spoke about respective struggles in our personal lives. In this conversation, we each took turns responding to what the other had said, in part by sharing how it resonated. Yesterday, however, we met for coffee and much more of our conversation centred on Patty’s life, although this was truer at some points in the conversation than others. I also met with Griffin recently, and on that day our conversation almost entirely centred on my life, which is not consistently the case either. All of these conversations were distinct, but they all have “something like a relationship” with one another that we can “strategically essentialize” by noting that the norms governing friendship conversations are discernable from those that govern research or therapy conversations. It is generally expected, for example, that over the course of a friendship there will be mutuality and a back-and-forthness in terms of who shares the centre of attention, contingent on what is taking place in each person’s life at the moment. This flexibility and long-term mutuality is not the expectation in research,
teaching, or social work relationships, and we notice ourselves coming up against these and other friendship norms when they’re transgressed. For example, I have had lots of helping professionals as friends, and I always feel out of sorts when they ask me questions that ‘feel like’ therapy questions (which I have heard others complain about too). But I am not suggesting a hard and fast line between ‘friendship’ and ‘therapy;’ I am again offering Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” Friendship is dıfferentially related to the institutionalized hierarchical relationships in research, teaching, and therapy. As such, highlighting the gap between the two will sometimes be useful, and at other times troubling the gap will be more pressing. I strategically did a little more troubling of the gap in my discussion of friendship in the previous chapter, and here I strategically do a little more highlighting of it.

For Griffin, Patty, and perhaps others too, it was partly the hierarchical – or at least the role-designated and differentiated – structure that they imagined might be useful in our conversations, and that they found useful (some of the time). This is not to advocate hierarchy; it is to acknowledge hierarchy, all over the place in our world. Hierarchy does not have to be harmful, but its presence seems to exacerbate the everyday and constant potential for harm. Tina21, one of my participants who I know originally through international solidarity work, is a black Canadian who grew up in poverty. Our conversation centred on the geopolitical power-divide in her marriage with Carlos, a poor black man living in the Dominican Republic, about how this gives particular shape to racism and classism, how this impacts their relationship, and how she navigates this. Tina has worked in domestic violence intervention with both male perpetrators and female victims, and while we were talking about her relationship with Carlos, she used language that brought Lenore Walker’s Cycle of Violence (1979) – a popular professional representation of domestic violence – to each of our minds. We then explored this ‘roughly shared’ countersignature:

Chris: What would [the Cycle of Violence] look like in your relationship with Carlos in terms of … this financial stuff? … The parallel only goes we go so far, right? We’re not talking about domestic violence. It is just not what we’re

21 “Tina” is the only participant who chose to use a pseudonym. The description of her is otherwise accurate.
talking about. What we are talking about is great economic disparity. So it seems to me that it makes a certain sense that [the Cycle of Violence] came up in terms of that power differential, right?

Tina: … Maybe whenever there is a huge disparity in power in whatever way, whether it is in an intimate relationship … [or] the therapist-client relationship, maybe there’s just more potential for … either abuse of that power or somebody getting hurt…. I think there might be more likelihood for it to happen…. I think that’s just the way it is.

If this is “just the way it is,” then we have to be careful about how we live our lives when we hinge with others across such disparities. This is part of why I chose to interview friends. Although friendship, like any kind of relationship, is diverse and ultimately fictitious as a discernable ‘thing,’ the norms around friendship seem to be looser and to encompass more normative heterogeneity than many other relational structures. I believe that my relatively mutual and non-hierarchical friendships made possible enactments of research hierarchy that were perhaps easier to steer away from domination than if I’d interviewed strangers. I said above that my participants appeared to be interested in having these conversations with me in particular, and I think their interest was partly ‘enabled’ by our friendship. Because friendship sometimes centres me and sometimes centres the other person, we could have this structured hierarchical exchange without totalizing the terms of our relationship or the terms of how I would approach their interview, before, during, or after the fact. Such purposive navigations of the various structures and traditions available to us may be one way of working toward ethicality in our concrete relationships with others.

**Refusing to Refuse Power: Perhaps Approaching ‘Performative’ Political Practices**

At my first meeting about this research, my committee members Kari Dehli and Tanya Titchkosky asked what role I would play in my interviews, or what I would bring to them. I was surprised at my ‘inability to’ answer. I kept saying variations on already knowing my participants would give compelling answers. That having indeed been the case, I now supplement to it that I bring a particular conversational practice and positioning which leads me to try – to the greatest extent possible – to have my participants generate their own
analyses of how they came to act as they did, including articulating and evaluating the options they’ve had available for sense-making. This is not a refusal of role or orientation. It is a particular orientation informed by, among other things, Foucault’s concern about the role of “political rationality” in operations of power. I think he originally used this term in 1979 (1994a), between publishing the first and later volumes of his History of Sexuality, and so while transitioning toward his final research that Spivak describes as getting as close to possible to power/knowledge/‘ability to know’ “in order to think ethics in its ‘real’ problems” (1993, 42). He later uses this term again, shortly before his death, in “The political technology of individuals” (1994c), but in the 1979 lecture he says (1994a),

many factors determine power. Yet rationalization is also constantly working away at it. There are specific forms to such rationalization. The government of [people] by [people] – whether it is power exerted by men over women, or by adults over children, or by one class over another, or by a bureaucracy over a population – involves a certain type of rationality…. Consequently, those who resist or rebel against a form of power cannot merely be content to denounce violence or criticize an institution…. What has to be questioned is the form of rationality at stake…. How are such relations of power rationalized? (324-325).

When I was actively involved in mass protests, people would often say, “how can they live with themselves” – about police, World Bank executives, politicians, etc. I resonated with the moral outrage informing such sayings, at the same time as it always struck me that this was said, rather than asked. Perhaps due to overtones relating to work I was doing with abuse perpetrators, I countersigned such sayings with the question they are grammatically: How can they live with themselves? Through what processes are World Bank executives, police, war criminals, abuse perpetrators, CEOs – and the rest of us – able to live with harm we cause, the privileges we are born into, the consequences of our action and inaction, and so on? I never found a satisfying answer. Therefore, in my own self-reflexive work, much of my reading, and my interviews with research participants, I am guided by the question of how relations of power are rationalized by people in our navigations of our lives and particular relationships. It is this particular orientation – and plenty of implicit and sometimes explicit analysis – that I ‘suture’ to the analytic work that is already being done by my research participants so that, together, we co-generate an account of their lives and
actions that never existed previous to the conversation. This is not about me having no role or my refusal to play a role; it is my acceptance of a particular role, and a particular relationship of power, relative to my participants. Foucault writes, “Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals. Such relations are specific…. The characteristic feature of power is that some [people] can more or less determine other [people]’s conduct – but never exhaustively or coercively” (1994a, 324). He elsewhere (1982, 220) elaborates:

what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions; an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future…. [F]aced with a relationship of power, [then,] a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions may open up.

It would be irresponsible for me to deny my power as researcher, as author, and as interviewer – I more freely determine others’ ‘ability to’ than vice versa. It would also be irresponsible to deny that my nondisability, whiteness, cisgender, Christian/secular-heritage, class privilege and maleness intersect with these power relations, each time uniquely shaping the hierarchies at play in a conversation. It is not sufficiently ‘responsible’ to name this, but it may be a necessary starting point (Ahmed 2006b, 121; Said 1994b, 16) in order to ‘enable’ the potential for the work of reflexive, accountable, contingent and specific ethical navigation, without exhaustively determining that it will happen or how it will go.

After all: I determined who would participate in my research based on who I thought would have interesting things to say. I edit the responses, and no accountability processes will neutralize or radically democratize my influence in doing so. It is my decision to what

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22 Here is another passage that brings to mind the concern about re-centring the liberal subject. So what should be done with this concern here? Should I delete this paragraph? Change all the “I”s to more collective language? In the next chapter, I attempt to spell out how others’ streams flow into ours, how ours flow into theirs, and yet that we nevertheless experience “streams of consciousness” as personal, as “mine.” I’ll tentatively suggest that it is important to acknowledge that the work I describe doing in this paragraph was, at once, my ‘conscientious effort’ to shape this project and its representations in a particular way and also, inseparably, irresolvably, beyond what can be exhaustively described, it was a ‘concerted effort’ composed of illimitable others, each in specific ways, who’ve given shape to my ‘conscientious effort.’ In the very space in which he articulates the centrality of others to an ethics and a politics that is “just” – on the page preceding where he spells it out most clearly – Derrida writes that “to learn to live – alone, from oneself, by oneself … is ethics itself” (1994, xviii, sequence modified). This contradiction is part of what makes ethicality impossible.
extent I cite a given research interview, which parts I cite, where I replace this or that phrase with an ellipsis, add a clarification or alternate phrasing in square brackets, which authors I draw upon to juxtapose with it, and so on. But in addition to all of this, and before any of it, I co-generate the words my participants speak, that they’re ‘able to speak,’ as they say them and even think them. Their ‘ability to reflect’ is the *concerted* ‘ability to know’ of *pouvoir-savoir*. This is contingent on systemic power relations and discursive “rules of formation,” yes, but *as they intersect with my navigation of my position of power as researcher* (as this intersects with ‘as cisgendered,’ ‘as white,’ etc.). My actions act upon their field of possible responses, but never exhaustively – at the same time as I cannot exhaustively know all that their responses hinge upon at any moment. How I navigate this role is important – the *hinge point* of ethics and political struggle, according to Foucault (2006a, 298-299) – but it is not exhaustively determinate, which relates to our ‘inability to know’ all that shapes our interactional possibilities and decisions in a given encounter or conversation. (I am hinging Foucault’s “hinge point” with Derrida’s “hinge.”) As mentioned earlier, Bhabha (1994, 53-56) calls the assemblage of these illimitable factors the Third Space, the space between any I and any you that determines the parameters in which any ‘we’ is ‘able to’ hinge together, and what becomings and belongings are perhaps ‘able to’ flow from doing so – but “never exhaustively or coercively” (Foucault 1994a, 324).

We navigate this unknowable Third Space when we navigate our lives and our relationships, at once responding to it and constituting it – again, as per Foucault’s “rule of double conditioning” (1990a, 99) and Ahmed’s suggestion that flows “are both created by being followed and followed by being created” (2006b, 16). In navigating my life, I determine (never exhaustively, and usually non-coercively) others’ available parameters for navigating theirs. My possibilities, too, are determined by the ethical navigations of those with whom I am directly interacting, as well as those of countless others, which cumulatively constitute local and global power relations (and which cumulatively constitute you and I). All of this intersects, in what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage, constituting our entirely contingent and vanishing ‘ability to know.’ In part due to my past work as a therapist, I believe people are ‘able to’ articulate the ‘ethical narration’ or ‘political rationality’ by which they govern their lives, with purposive social collaboration toward this end. But nobody has done so about every aspect of their lives, or could ever exhaustively explore
even one select aspect of life. There is always the possibility of another resonating experience, reconsideration, or follow-up question inviting a previously unknown response, and this original response always has the potential to disturb *everything* that has come before, if we let it – through the work of the supplement. This is my divergence from the Foucault who (contingent on the Third Space at play in that one moment) said, “the masses know very well, clearly” (Spivak 1999, 255). “Of course,” I might respond to the Foucault of that particular vanishing present, were I there and ‘able to know’ what I know in *this* moment, “people *can* ‘know very well,’ but this ‘can’ is the ‘can-do-ness’ that Spivak writes is central to your *pouvoir-savoir*. It is dependent on local and global relations of power, past and present relations, and theoretical and other knowledges that are contingently available in a fleeting context. Derrida writes, “a context, always, remains open, thus fallible and insufficient” (1994, xvii), which does not mean it is therefore without consequence.

In the previous chapter, I shared an image of one person reclining over a river and cradling another person, and the two of them turning over so as to reflexively explore the sometimes difficult waters of life. I have supplemented this image once in this chapter, and I am about to do so again. The embracing of collaborative reflexivity does not happen in a political vacuum. Not all flows, difficulties, embraces, or contextual support for our efforts at interpersonal support are equivalent. Contingent factors include systemic injustice, which we should remember cumulatively flows from concrete actions resulting from people’s ethical practices of self-governance. Native educator Cindy Blackstock says,

> Governments, provincial and federal, build two bridges for children … [o]ne for non-aboriginal children that goes from one side of a rapid river to another side…. Most children are able to safely cross to a possibility of opportunity and life.

> And then governments build a bridge for First Nations children but it only goes halfway over the rapids. And when the children fall into the rapids and First Nations children and their families are screaming, the province of Ontario and the federal government say to First Nations, “Are not you thankful for the half of a bridge we built?” (cited in Talaga 2011).
Intersecting Blackstock’s image here with the one from my previous chapter, the particular support that is needed – and the particular support available to us and to those we are supporting, respectively, when we provide support – is contingent on disparate access to material resources, on “discursive formations” that exalt some and denigrate others, etc. This is more apparent in some contexts than others, but we always navigate our ‘government of self and others’ (which includes supporting others) while also navigating local and global relations of power. When we are on top of hierarchies, we give immediate shape to one of many relations of power, which is why Foucault called this the ‘hinge point’ between ethics and struggles against injustice. Sometimes our navigation of being ‘on top’ – as teacher, researcher, social worker, male partner of a woman, etc. – is the most salient feature of power due to its immediacy or due to how we do it. And sometimes it is not.

This is one of the social, relational, ethical, and political contexts of becoming researcher, author, and interviewer. Positioned ‘over’ each participant on the institutionalized researcher-participant hierarchy, as it intersects with race, gender, religion, ability, and so on, I act upon their field of possible actions; I set the parameters within which they navigate their responses; I create the context they respond to; I interrupt their stories with my responses – follow up questions, nods, laughter, sighs, silence, grimaces, uncrossing and re-crossing my legs – that they then respond to in turn; and, after the conversation ends, I edit interviews without much input from interviewees (I solicit their active involvement, but few choose to devote much time to this – just like I assumed and as happened in my previous research). So I am only really ‘accountable’ in so far as I do things in isolation and then give them the opportunity to respond. I ‘centre’ their knowledge and words and lives by providing structured parameters of freedom that set the stage for possible responses to what I have done. I determine what is possible for them, even if not “exhaustively or coercively” (Foucault 1994a, 324). The process is not democratic or anarchistic as anarchists use it (Goldman 1917a). So I’d better be clear about what I am doing, why, and how.\footnote{23 On that note, “I” is here again a “strategic essentialism,” although with a slightly different purpose. I mobilize my “I” here with an “invitational” end in mind, hoping you may countersign with your own “I,” relative to whatever positions ‘on top’ of hierarchies you navigate. This is related to a discussion of an ethical strategy in my final chapter which, suffice to say for now, is distinct from writing here that you had better be clear about what you’re doing, why and how. Concluding this paragraph by saying ‘I’d better be clear’ is an action intended to act upon your field of possible actions, but not exhaustively or coercively.}
For my research interviews, I structured a ‘contextual community’ (Chapman 2011) of people who share a preexisting interest in exploring their own involvement in systemic oppression, which is partly modeled on my past experience of groups of voluntary men coming together, each with a preexisting interest in changing his abuse. My research ‘community’ was carefully selected based on their interest in participating in such a project and my sense that they’d have something valuable to offer. Each person was drawn to the project for reasons that may have relatively little to do with our friendship, their interest in my work, or wanting to belong to a resonant group – but these factors nevertheless would have made some difference to them and their participation. And a significant aspect of what this group is ‘able to’ become is how I navigate my role as its organizer. After all, when I refer to this ‘contextual community,’ we never gathered together in the same space, all at once. Knowledge of the existence of this ‘community’ may have been significant to participants in that they each knew that there were other people going through the process, but each person was only directly linked to each other person’s participation through my mediation. Furthermore, everyone who agreed to participate had read or heard my own explorations along similar lines as what I asked of them, which was an action of mine acting on their field of possible actions: I believe this shaped people’s interest in participating in my project before I’d yet started my interviews, and I imagine it played a part in people trusting how I’d take up their accounts (as this ‘trust’ intersected with that which is characteristic of our friendships). When I described my research interests in the abstract, people often asked ‘how will you get people to participate?’ but when I did my own reflexive work and then described my research, some people volunteered to participate. I return to this practice of acting upon the field of others’ possible actions in my final chapter.

I wanted certain kinds of responses from participants and had no interest in generating countless other alternatives, and so I directed conversations accordingly. I wanted participants to critically interrogate how they were ‘able to’ harm others or be complicit in systemic oppression, and I wanted them to do this along the lines of articulating their own ‘political rationality’ or ‘ethical narration.’ My orientation determined their possible responses, but “never exhaustively or coercively;” it left open “a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions” on the part of respondents (Foucault 1982, 220). This “whole field,” however open it may be, was significantly shaped and delimited
by me. This is a practice of power I feel no need to ‘refuse,’ and it resonates with how I felt most comfortable as a therapist and how I feel most comfortable as a teacher. When I met with men who perpetrated abuse and we were ‘able to’ have conversations that brought us both to places and understandings neither of us had experienced before, it was then that I most loved what I did. But I played a major role in delimiting and directing these conversations; they were not ‘laissez faire.’ Left alone, many men I worked with were abusing – and they asked me to help them stop. I also felt that a man was most likely to carry what we’d talked about into his life when I “most loved what I did,” because part of what excited me was his excitement that what we were doing together was new, relevant, etc. I cited Patty and I sharing our excitement back and forth a few pages back; I wish I could capture her voice tone when she says, “wow, this is cool!” I might say she squeals it, and I shared her enthusiasm: we experienced that moment as creative, collaborative and exciting. I am not suggesting, though, that all conversations I had with men about their abuse were ‘exciting’ in this way. More often, they were difficult, somber, and so on. And yet there was a sense that things were flowing in new and fruitful directions. In my conversation with Shaista Patel, we exchanged concerns about the idea that ‘white guilt’ is unproductive, which validated one another’s unpopular critiques. Although this was just as generative as my conversation with Patty, it would have been totally out of place for Shaista or I to exclaim “wow, this is cool!” in the midst of it.

Shaista: I just feel really, really shitty [about my implication in colonization on this land]. I think we should all just go back home to where we came from [laughs]. Yeah, I quote Sherene [Razack], I quote lots of people, I talk about stopping this Race to Innocence, I use this beautiful theoretical language that I have borrowed from all these scholars to make sense of this experience. But [for me none of this is primarily an intellectual experience, it is more centrally affective]…. I was sitting in one meeting in which an Indigenous woman was talking about how the pipeline that is going through their territory is leading to children being born with deformities and the women are becoming sterile. Andrea Smith … talks about how babies were born like purple grapes, without any bones, and they were buried as soon as they were born. Those sorts of things are things that make me feel more guilty. The connections in my head are not
clear in terms of how I am complicit in that – that is why I say that the day when we really understand our complicity we won’t feel human again. I use the word guilty despite knowing that – especially in whiteness studies – there is a lot of critique of this word, “guilty.” People say guilt immobilizes. But I am like, “screw off … if guilt immobilizes, racism and colonialism kills people.” So I would rather feel guilty and try to think about my actions than say, “I cannot be guilty but I’ll participate in this activism work if and when I have time”…. I hate it when people tell me that guilt immobilizes – it is another Race to Innocence, because I think when you’re guilty, you’re not going to [trails off]. If I am guilty about colonialism, I am not going to order a Bollywood movie and hide my face. I am going to go out and think about doing something concrete or get a book from the library and read something. I think [such reading] is also good. Although I am not saying that is the only thing I should be doing.

But [deep sigh] I think where I am really, really lost, and where I think your thesis will help me…. How [can we] make sense of our complicity in ways that make sense? Because I say that I’m complicit, but I still do not understand. I know I’m complicit, but I don’t know how exactly. Especially as a first generation [immigrant], especially as someone who has not been on this land for 300 years…. I don’t understand it, so that’s why I feel guilty and I’m sort of doing what I think I can do and should do, but it doesn’t make sense to me. And despite you thinking you really need to interview me because you think I can articulate complicity, I really can’t. I really can’t.

Here, in my estimation, Shaista is articulating several important aspects of “complicity” – that our emotions are not to be dismissed or treated psychologically as separable from politics, that there are frequently limits to exactly how we are complicit, and so on. But her denigration of her own knowledge ethically calls upon me in a way I was never called upon in, for example, my conversation with Devi: Devi never explicitly expressed doubt that what he was saying might be useful. Shaista here could be said to be participating in the “normalizing judgment” and “hierarchical comparison” (Foucault 1995) of her own knowledge, suggesting that her knowledge will be of limited value to me and my project, whereas what I am doing will be of assistance to her. This maps neatly onto the discursive
distribution of expertise structuring the researcher/researched hierarchy, as it intersects with
gender, race, and religion in the Third Space between Shaista and I. In my response below,
I seem to have ‘enabled’ our conversation to steer away from Shaista’s denigration of what
she has to offer. Reading this retrospectively, this seems to have been enabled by my
joining with her concerns in a structure more “something like” ‘mutual support’ than
‘therapy.’ This was not a ‘calculated’ structural move on my part, as far as I recall, but we
could nevertheless follow Bhabha and say that Shaista’s self-denigrating supplement
“disturbed the calculation” of what I was doing. Responding to this, perhaps more as
“friend” for the moment than as “researcher,” I join her concerns with mine. It is perhaps
also noteworthy that her response to this is to re-state her previous concern about guilt, but
without the self-denigration, and to place it more squarely within politics. She does this in
two ways: she says that guilt is political, and she says that others’ dismissal of her guilt-as-
political is also political, that it happens within Ahmed’s “acts of alignment” of whiteness.

Chris: What you’re saying right now, for me, is so much more important and
relevant than if you were able to tie it all up in a little bow and say, “Complicity,
let’s define it: There are 3 points… point 1, this; point 2, this.” Because I think
the feeling of guilt is as important as the word “complicity” and the intellectual
understanding of complicity. I don’t think they’re both important for everyone,
but I think you’re right. I think that guilt is a driving force. Shame or trauma – I
think a theme throughout your interview has been that there [are] these
experiences you have, that are not intellectual experiences, even mostly, but that
inform your work that you’re doing. And I think that’s true for most of us. I
think we tend to focus on certain things because of, you know [laughs], the
history of the Enlightenment. At one point you talked about there being a
spiritual component to what you’re doing, right? And that’s part of our lives.
Our lives are about all sorts of different parts of who we are. I think some people
are primarily motivated by intellectual kinds of understanding. Other people are
primarily motivated by various different understandings of what spirituality
means to them, and relationships to this world and other worlds. But I think our
emotions are important there too. The idea that all experiences of guilt are
immobilizing is silly… It’s wrong. I think we can just say ‘no’ [to that].
Shaista: Me too. But you know what’s really frustrating? I know you’re [a white man] sitting and doing the interview, but it is white people … who tell me, “Don’t talk about guilt, because guilt is immobilizing.” … Honestly, you should write something about that because it’s driving me up the wall.

Chris: Well, you’re going to help me [Shaista laughs.] I am going to have a chapter, probably, on trying to make sense of emotional reactions to things and experiences of feeling bad. And this whole idea of immobilization is huge. One of the things I find fascinating is how often my social work students, in responding to the histories we read, name their guilt and shame and then say, “But I know that’s not helpful.” I always say, “Of course you should feel that about this stuff…. What would it mean to read [about suffering] without feeling bad…. [When we are positioned so as to never be subjected to what we are reading about, then] they’re not just stories about other people’s hardship, they’re also stories about our ease, stories about our privilege, stories about our exaltation….

Shaista: Also this notion of safe space [in classrooms]…. I understand [that] there should be space where there is no racism, sexism, but today I think safe space is used more – in activist circles as well – safe space is used more to protect white people’s vulnerabilities, to protect their feelings…. I think we should feel bad as settlers here.

This conversation between Shaista and I is distinct from the one between Patty and I. There is no delight, but there is resonance and mutual validation. We focus on different things, I govern myself distinctly in the two conversations, and so on. And of course the snippets I am sharing here do not represent either conversation in its totality. I believe that in order to approach the maximal creative, collaborative and ethical potential of the interviews –

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24 This is a reference to the budding articulations I was working through at the time that I call above ‘affective dividing practices,’ ‘not quite/not right,’ and how the politics of disablement shape our ‘disability to know.’

25 In my second chapter, I describe the need to feel safe, in a certain way, in order to do the normatively unsafe political and ethical work of interrogating our personal-is-political transgressions. I agree with Shaista that the creation of “safe spaces” often does not provide the context for this work and may, in fact, impede it.
however inconsistently – I needed to approach each moment of each conversation in its contingent, fleeting specificity. I am interested in relational- and self-transformation that is ‘able to’ take place through relational processes, in part by disorienting these processes from institutionalized “restrictive” “research ethics,” according to which my ethicality requires only that I abide by predetermined regulations. This, as mentioned in the previous chapter, resonates with Foucault’s “Friendship as a Way of Life” interview.

Foucault suggests that (in the early 1980s), the relative lack of institutionalized normative structure to gay relationships provided particular kinds of radical potential. Translating what he says to my research, alternative research practices – simply by virtue of being ‘alternative’ – are not in themselves transformative. “Therefore we have to work at becoming [ethical] and not be obstinate that we [already] are. The development toward which the problem of [ethics] tends is the one of friendship” (2006c, 136; I have replaced “homosexual” and “homosexuality” with “ethical” and “ethics”). What I understand from this interview is that the normatively diverse and non-institutionalized practices of friendship may be able to ‘supplement’ and thus transform romantic or sexual relationships more centrally in the case of less institutionalized forms of romance and sexual relations than in the case of more institutionalized ones. While of course many male/female couples, then as now, are also friends, the institution of heterosexual marriage and its gendered role differentiations can be conceptualized as intersecting and thus creating an assemblage with these friendships that cannot help but determine them – never “exhaustively or coercively,” but nevertheless along resonant gendered lines. This is why sociological and statistical research can be done at all using ‘male’ and ‘female’ as meaningful categories. Of course this needs to be queered, but queering is not dismissing. Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” invites us to recognize (sometimes; strategically) that such categories do shape us, affect our world, and determine our ‘ability to know.’ Male/female is not illusory, where this implies ‘non-consequential;’ gender is organized différantially, which organizes us and we it. The ‘illusion’ of fixed dyadic gender differentiates, and its widely variant contingent specificities always require ongoing performance. This is the everyday work of power/‘ability to,’ which endlessly defers closure and fixity. That does not cancel out the real effects of gender on us all. But where two women, two men, or some other combination of “men, women, and the rest of us” (Bornstein 1994) are outside of normative
heterosexual partnership some or all of the time, and they suture friendship to romance or sex, there is less of a rigid structure hinged to the romantic or sexual supplement. This is not to say such relationships are open-ended pure ‘flows of becoming’ but only that there is, relatively speaking, less of an institutionalized determination of what they can and should be, as compared with opposite-sex marriage-type partnerships. So this male/female versus queer line I am drawing should also be queered and understood as “strategic” and differantial – sometimes useful, but not fixed26. At any rate, as “something like” this, my hope is that by defying some institutionalized parameters of the researcher/research participant relationship, and by suturing pre-existing friendships to the institutionalized research structure, we were ‘able to’ more easily ‘tend’ something radically other than what research relationships normatively tend to be and do. I hope this relational process led to at least some of us becoming more adept at the ethical work we were already doing – whether through learning specific ‘skills’ from someone else, feeling something new by virtue of being in a community with this particular shared orientation, reflecting in a new way upon something we’d thought about a thousand times before, or some other means.

The relative potential for queer relationships to forge new paths for relating, according to my reading of this Foucault interview, comes from a looser assemblage of power/knowledge determining what queer relationships are ‘able to be,’ and also narrating what they should be. Although of course my translation of this to my research is a partial and therefore ultimately fictitious one, I think there is nevertheless Spivak’s “something like a relationship” between Foucault’s attempt to reflexively determine what gay relationships and gay culture would do and be (along purposive flows of becoming that he judged politically crucial) with my persistent and ongoing move “outside of the therapy room” discussed in the previous chapter – a move that preceded my leaving therapy and that continues today, as a persistent problematization of institutionalized norms for relating,

26 Maurice Poon’s (2000) research on inter-racial same-sex violence suggests that gay white male partners disproportionately abuse gay Asian men. One reading of this, countersigned by my discussion here, is that Ahmed’s “acts of alignment” of whiteness intersect with the romantic and sexual supplement in such a way that has material consequences. Of course, not all white male partners of Asian men abuse, just as not all male partners of women abuse their female partners. But such identifiable tendencies show that racial and gender differences “matter” (Ahmed 1998) in the ‘ability to know’ of the unethical practices by which power (sexism, racism, etc.) passes through people in their perpetration of abuse. We need to queer or unsettle the work these differences do; some of this work may be to work with these differences in more unsettling ways.
when ‘on top’ of whichever stratification of “Fanon’s Manichaean structure.” I am still working to get myself “outside of the therapy room,” even though it is been several years since I worked in one. Even my first job in a literal therapy room was a move in this general direction: it was motivated by getting away from even more rigidly institutionalized and hierarchical group homes, shelters, and treatment centres. The flow I am calling “outside of the therapy room” is not a ‘going’ that happens one day when a person is no longer called therapist and begins to be called something else. It is a practice – in Spivak’s “setting-to-work mode” that is structured “something like” how the term decolonization is used on a personal-is-political level. As an example, although one I’ll trouble, Jean-Paul Sartre writes in his preface to Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, “we, too, peoples of Europe, we are being decolonized: meaning the colonist inside every one of us is surgically extracted in a bloody operation. Let’s take a good look at ourselves, if we have the courage, and let’s see what has become of us” (2004, lvii). Immediately before this, he says his intent is “to carry [Fanon’s] dialectic through to its conclusion.” Sartre’s dialectical approach appears to have consequences that lead me to counter-offer a différantial one. Sartre suggests that what is required of “peoples of Europe” is “courage,” and I do not exactly disagree. But I worry about the risks of what Ahmed (2006a) calls nonperformativity (that our performance does not align with our stated commitments) when we position ourselves as courageous, brave, strong, allies. We need to face the facts, have the balls. I am not convinced this will lead to a world radically other than what we have. This maps fairly neatly onto the exaltation of political anger and the denigration of guilt, shame, anxiety, compulsion, and so on, in the “rules of discursive formation” that normatively govern what is stated about left politics and activism. These rules only make sense if we assume that colonization and other injustice only lives outside of our own actions. Consider the following crippling of the psychologization of anger, but not of these other emotions, in Robert Mullaly (2010): “Traditionally, theoretical understandings of anger have been dominated by psychological perspectives ... [but] anger is neither an inherently positive nor an inherently negative emotion and that just as it may be destructive, it can also be constructive. It depends on how we deal with anger and how we use it” (283); in contrast, “focusing on individual feelings of guilt is counterproductive because it makes us look at the issue from a psychological point of view rather than from a political or moral standpoint” (235). Does guilt “make us” do this, or do the architectures of the self by which
we navigate our guilt do so? Mullaly also performs a traditional masculinist exaltation and
denigration of emotions when he states that “feeling excessive guilt ... is also a coward’s
way out because it means that I can avoid the political and moral questions associated with
oppression and privilege and not have to do anything about my privilege or the harm that it
causes other groups” (235), even though – in response to a criticism of an earlier edition of
the book – on this same page he says he’s “not urging members of privileged groups to
become tough.” Clearly his intent here is not to exalt traditionally ‘masculine’ emotions
over traditionally ‘feminine’ ones. His intent, among others, is to scaffold people’s
“challenging oppression and confronting privilege,” as his title states. But, we can
nevertheless ask: how does power pass through him in his politicization of anger, his
psychologization and depoliticization of guilt, and his use of the phrase “coward’s way out”
in order to articulate his concerns? A further concern we can also ask, though, following
Dehli (2003), is how power is passing through me as I make this very critique. How can I
possibly give this reading without performing myself as ‘more profeminist than thou’ – or,
to use a phrase more particular to masculinist competition, without my critique becoming ‘a
pissing match’? Such a ‘match’ is unfortunately but tellingly exactly what occurred when
Mullaly and I met a decade ago. Since then, we’ve both softened in our respective positions
on whether or not ‘postmodernism’ is emancipatory. If we were each to try to map out
these ‘softening’ processes, I do not think we’d find masculinist language very useful.

Alongside Sartre’s masculinist image exalting courage over, say, compassion or humility is
the bloody image of – not war, explicitly, but surgery. Perhaps war as surgery. This
implies that the colonizer within, or the dominator within, can be cleanly and neatly
removed – however horrible the process – never again to resurface. But I worry that faith in
such surgery might be part of what feeds so many people’s belief that we are among the
very few who exceptionally and courageously fight poverty, racism, hunger, ableism,
sexism, and so on – whether we are situated within universities, governments, non-
governmental organizations, activist circles, etc.: a medical model of complicity; or perhaps
the placebo affect of nonperformativity. So I’d want to deconstruct this surgically
‘reformed colonizer,’ as “something like” the flip side of Devi’s coin, when he says that,
“The colonizer within becomes present…. The structure of colonialism makes itself
present…. We become the legacy, the tools…. Even when you’re saying you’re trying to
avoid it, it is there and it leaves a mark…. We cannot erase it and say it was never there…. It’s had an impact.” As I said above about gender, being of European versus African descent is consequential; but it is not a self-evident divide of radically distinct and fixed kinds of human being. Devi’s reflexive ethical work relative to African colonialism is to notice “the colonizer within” and “the mark” or “impact” that colonialism has on him and other Africans – “Even when you say you’re trying to avoid it.” In terms of Sartre’s surgical extraction, the ways that settlers and white people have “become the legacy, the tools” is certainly no more clean or simple than what Devi says of the process for Africans. Hannah Fowlie and I spoke about decolonization, in relation to her work in the Aboriginal Education Centre and, in contrast to Sartre’s prescription for all “people’s of Europe,” Hannah’s account of decolonization is much more particular to Hannah and her context.

Chris: I am moving into this role of social work educator, getting students to read a lot about colonization, ableism, and other things that are really present in social services, that a lot of students really struggle with – and I think it is a good thing to struggle – with what it means to be white, what it means to be class-privileged as a social worker. I understand that to have been an aspect of your [life] … since you started in this position.

Hannah: Absolutely…. The reason I am in this position is because there is not a single Aboriginal social worker in the [Toronto District School] Board…. So my privilege as a white person and the degrees I have allow me to be in this role…. [Making sense of this has] been a really interesting journey…. [Early on, I was asked], “What is a white Jewish woman like you doing working for the Aboriginal Education Centre?” At the time I really did not, I mean, I had some ideas…. I talked about having an anti-oppressive perspective, and how I work – but also my own history, coming from a family that survived genocide, and the parallels there. But that is complicated too. I mean, it is complicated.

Chris: Can you talk about that complication?

Hannah: Sure…. I mentioned [my family’s history] at the interview, and then I think I’ve mentioned it maybe one or two more times in the last three years. But I don’t talk about it much, because I find that it silences the people that are talking
to me…. I find that, in this role as an ally, it’s really important to talk about the experience of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people, and not say, “Oh, that is like” or “us too” – to keep it very distinct, and to have the discipline to do that. Because [the genocide of Aboriginal people] does get made invisible so much and silenced so much and left out of everything…. So I’m really careful not to forefront my own story. There are moments that it comes up, naturally and organically when we are talking. When we are talking about genocide, about the effects of genocide, there are some real parallels – but I rarely, rarely talk about that.

Chris: Do you think about it more often than you talk about it?

Hannah: Well, sure. Absolutely…. For sure, I do think about it…. The other piece of it is learning about the shared history of colonization. The shared history of colonization. And then work to decolonize is shared. And nobody really gets that piece. And I get it now. I get it down in my bones, and I think that is really important. But it is still hard! … I am supervising an MSW student. She’s Aboriginal and she … was supposed to go to a school this morning. She was going to do a Seven Grandfathers teaching. She was going to do some work with the kids. She could not make it and so she said, “So what are you going to do?” and I said, “Oh, I’ll figure something out.” And she said, “Well, why don’t you do the medicine wheel?” And I said, “I don’t really do that. I don’t feel comfortable coming in and bringing teachings to kids.” And she said, “But you work for the Aboriginal Educational Centre, and at some point you’re going to have to bring Aboriginal education to Aboriginal students.” … Those are the kinds of conversations I have all the time. And I don’t, I haven’t to this point, in any conversation, done that. And so I’ve been, I’ve been trying to be really disciplined. I may say, “Do you want to talk about the Seven Grandfathers … and how that relates to what you’re thinking about now?” I might ask a question, but I’d never say, “Here is something I’m bringing to you.” So that’s where the complexity is too, in interactions with students who are really, really, for the most part, hungry for that. And because now I have been in this role for three years, I tend to know quite a bit about [Aboriginal teachings]…. I think about this a lot.
and everything is just about being mindful in any moment. That is what it feels like, because every moment has the possibility for a rupture, the possibility for making a mistake, saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, and so being really careful all the time.

Chris: Would you say that that mindfulness, being careful all the time, is part or all of what it means for non-Aboriginal people to [practice] decolonization?

Hannah: Yeah, I think so… I have seen people who are not mindful … white people who … are working in the community and have appropriated. They’ve gotten spirit names, they sit at the big drum, they do things that I feel very uncomfortable with. But it comes down to even, if I ask someone a special favour and they do it, should I write Miigwech [thank you in Anishinabe] – because everybody else is sending emails and they’re saying Miigwech. Should I do that? Why would I do that? Why would I not just say “Thank you?” So that is what I mean by being mindful of every moment.

My new nickname around the office – it’s interesting that I got this at my third year of being here, because I think it demonstrates a certain level of trust – is Mashuganash. That is a combination of Jewish Mashugana, which means, “you’re crazy” and Sauganash, which is … the Anishinabe word for white person. That’s my nickname, which I love, I think it’s hilarious…. Jokes that couldn’t have happened three years ago, that represent a level of trust…. That short cut you can have with someone with whom you’ve done a significant amount of talking things through. You couldn’t do it outside your office…. But now we’ve got a certain amount of trust together.

Chris: I just want to pull some things together. It is all stuff that you’ve said in the last ten minutes…. You talked about living, experiencing, thinking about the relationship between the Nazi holocaust and the holocaust of First Nations. And you did not use ‘mindful’ yet, at that point in time, but basically being mindful about when you spoke about that, and specifically your concern about sort of taking up space and taking away from the experience of people. So you talked about that, you also talked about it in terms of whether to finish your emails using
Miigwech, and whether or not to go into classrooms and teach Aboriginal teachings…. There is a theme of being very careful about your position and of never forgetting it, and just now you talked about … this joke that, you’re right, could be viewed from the outside the same way that you – and maybe some First Nations – view white people at the drum…. This is all stuff you’ve just said and I’m trying to sort of thematize it…. There’s a theme there, that you said that you’ve learned a lot about what decolonization means, and just like there are ways that systems have to change I also think there are ways that people have to change, right? And the two are interrelated. And it sounds like you’re doing a lot of work, kind of every minute of every day, to try to be careful or mindful.

Hannah: Oh yeah…. Part of that … is an awareness that I carry privilege with me that I can … sink back into any time I want to. So that makes it really hard too, because most of the time … my role is to advocate, to be an ally to the families. But I don’t always do a very good job with this. Sometimes I get pulled into dynamics, just like I was talking about at that old job at the treatment centre, it’s very similar. If I walk into a school and there is this strong person in administration who has a strong perspective about that particular family, I don’t always do the greatest job not aligning with that person. I really struggle to be a good ally to the people that I work with. There are times, many, many times, that there is great resistance [from school staff toward] the Aboriginal person. Whatever hostility comes out, it’s focused on them, and it’s like trying to take the heat off them, take the heat on myself sometimes – as an ally. And sometimes I really fail at that; sometimes I do an okay job. I really struggle with wanting to please the person I’m with. If I’m talking to a Principal and that Principal is being a bully or … has a particular perspective on this family, it’s really hard for me to disagree and to have that courageous conversation. There are times I do, and I feel good about myself at the end of the day, but many times I do not…. There are moments when you’re up against a big system, and there are those in power, there’s a hierarchy there…. I push myself to try and have those kinds of conversations that I need to have. It’s difficult. It’s not always simple.
Like Sartre, Hannah calls her efforts at decolonization “courageous,” but she does not position herself as always courageous, or as having had her “colonizer within” surgically extracted. Perhaps the word ‘courageous’ even signifies differently when spoken by a woman than a man. But more operationalizable here, I think, and structurally perhaps more like what Devi describes than what Sartre prescribes, Hannah clearly aligns herself with decolonization, but part of that alignment involves recognizing that we cannot surgically remove colonization and its legacies from who we are and what we do. She says above that her “privilege … makes it really hard.” I do not think Hannah is saying that her privilege makes it harder than it would be for an Aboriginal person in her position. I think what she’s doing is tracing the ways that her “privilege,” or her “colonizer within,” shapes the particular difficulties she has. Decolonization, or the flow ‘outside of the therapy room,’ could also be thought of as a personal-is-political engagement in deinstitutionalization, or what Angela Davis calls “abolition democracy” in relation to the ongoing abolition of legacies of slavery (Chapman, Ben-Moshe, and Carey forthcoming). It is an ongoing struggle, at once personal and political, to become other than how norms and institutions would have us govern ourselves and others, including recognizing “how racism operates to shape the surfaces of bodies and worlds … [so that] we become ‘us’ as an effect of … it” (Ahmed 2004c, ¶ 49) – or, as Devi says, how we “become the legacy.” It is not whether we become the legacy. We are. There is no getting around that. “It is how we bear the past that matters, and it is all that differentiates us in many ways,” says Tim Wise (2005, 2).

An important part of approaching the ‘in versus out’ of the therapy room d”fferentially is to unsettle what it is to be ‘a therapist’ or to live the hierarchically differentiated role of ‘helper’ more generally. Translating Angela Davis and Fanon, even if we were to abolish the structures by which some members of our communities are paid to ‘help,’ and to ‘be helpers,’ the legacies of the exaltation and denigration that now characterize professional helping would not simply peter away. We’d still need to struggle toward other ways of helping those who want help, some of which will already be found heterotopically within contemporary practices of non-professional and professional help. To work as a therapist is not necessarily to always be “inside the therapy room,” where that room represents an entire discursive and material context of power/knowledge. In therapy, there is King’s “potential,” Butler’s “illimitable et cetera,” Deleuze’s “excess,” Foucault’s “heterotopic,”
and Goffman’s “unique outcome.” Therapy’s not ‘exhaustively’ determined by the institutionalization of “the therapy room,” any more than the institution of marriage ‘exhaustively’ determines male/female intimacies. White and Jenkins have long articulated orientations I am describing as “outside of the therapy room,” while working in therapy rooms. “Something like” this move could also be attributed to Fanon in his chapter on “Colonial war and mental disorders.” His anti-colonial “supplement” to psychiatry makes psychiatry something other than what it is; it makes psychiatry tend something other than what it tends to tend (Fanon 2004). But when Fanon, White, or Jenkins engage their flows “outside of the therapy room,” they’re not rejecting everything about what therapy could be, or everything it sometimes is. They supplement to access the excess that is there – potentially, heterotopically, and inconsistently. When we occupy these institutionalized roles and fail at aspects of them, or experience discomfort in relation to aspects of them, such ‘imperfect alignment’ may be politically and ethically important (Ahmed 2006b): it may point toward other ways of living with others, outside of institutional restraints:

Little bursts of real person keep popping out from behind the professional role: personality, idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes, and many other sorts of surprises…. Ethically speaking, it is impossible to separate real person from professional role…. You keep interrupting, you keep breaking in upon professional codes of ethics, patients’ bill of rights, or hospital policy manuals. It is you who live ethical decisions (Salladay, cited in Prilleltensky et al. 1996, 290).

I have some concern that quoting this will suggest that ethics is about being authentic or ‘true to your self,’ which is not what I am getting at. This is likely reading Salladay against the grain, but I’d like to offer Butler’s “illimitable et cetera” as the “you” in the citation above. There is always something in “excess” of the professional role, the policy manuals, etc., as well as something in excess of whatever other “positions [that] strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete” (Butler 1990, 143). The existence of subjugated and inconsistent ‘outsides’ within therapy and other relations of normative domination shows that other ways are indeed possible and can become more normative by externalizing and tending them. I hope this project might contribute to that.
Ethical Practice Makes Performative; Structured Parameters, Spontaneous Specifics

Interestingly, it is … rigorous practice that enables spontaneity – the expressions of life that seem most spontaneous to us are those that we have had the most practice in… As in the case for musicians who perform skillful improvisation, good improvisation in the context of therapeutic conversations is founded on meticulous attention to the development of therapeutic skills. And the possibility for the further development of our skills is never-ending (White 2007, 6).

We cannot know how our part of a conversation will be responded to. We cannot predict another’s agentive reading, listening or witnessing, and this is not at all unique to therapy. When we try to govern ourselves responsibly as cisgendered, nondisabled, white, male, etc., we can never know that the effects of what we do are what we intend or understand. As in Hannah’s account of her work at the Aboriginal Education Centre, and another reason that “the possibility for the further development of our skills is never-ending,” the work of becoming ethical relies on ongoing reengagement with the fleeting particularities in which we find ourselves – particular relationships, particular contexts, particular roles, and so on. There is no surgical extraction we can rely upon; responsibility requires ongoing and contingent care. Attending to particularity within ongoing flows of vanishing presence was a central theme in my conversation with Griffin Epstein, another student in my department:

Griffin: I think what is important to know is that I’m a white person, who lives with white privilege all the time. And I do a lot of thinking about that privilege. And I’m also crazy\(^\text{27}\). I think these are all important things. My defense mechanism that makes me functional in the world is constant talking, constant making narrative of my life.

I had a relationship, a very close friendship, briefly a few years ago, with someone who was a person of colour who had various different identity-based marginalities that I don’t have. In our relationship, I had a great deal of identity-

\(^{27}\) Griffin is using this term politically, like mad and queer are used.
based privilege. And in our relationship, we did a lot of talking about the way that race and those marginalities play out in our lives. For the first half of our relationship, this person was telling me that I was unique from other white people because of my ability to talk about this and that I had somehow wriggled out of the profound oppression that comes through ignorance of these implications of privilege – the way it was being talked about from this friend was that I’d succeeded in being a support, succeeded in being a good friend, succeeded in being present and thoughtful, where all the other white people in this person’s life had failed. And the second half of the relationship was us trying to come to terms with the fact that I had not succeeded in all these ways where other white people had failed, and my capacity to talk about things did not mean that I was able to act on them as well as I might have liked. I felt so conscious of my potential for harm that I was unable to find my own sense of what my boundaries were in the relationship, what my needs were in the relationship, and I inadvertently became really emotionally shut down…. I could speak, we could talk all the time, but I couldn’t make myself vulnerable, I couldn’t be vulnerable, I couldn’t be present. I couldn’t draw good boundaries and I ended up doing a lot more structural and emotional support than I had capacity for…. It became very apparent that I was taking on too much, that I was unable to make myself vulnerable and open, and the relationship stopped feeling mutual\textsuperscript{28} and then this person just cut me out.

We talked about it a bit, we processed through it a bit – in our inimitably open intellectual way. We talked through it, and the message I got, which I heard and think was right, was that I wasn’t able to be the things I would like to be, that I clearly wanted to be, that I was clearly trying to be. I wasn’t able to connect with my own emotions, I wasn’t able to draw my own boundaries and I was therefore not a good friend. And so the relationship ended with this person saying, “I don’t want to speak to you anymore.” I was left really aware that [this had resulted from] my awareness of my whiteness, and my inability to live accountably with

\textsuperscript{28} Please note that this is an instance of the ‘rules’ of friendship being transgressed, which I refer to above. “[T]he relationship stopped feeling mutual,” and that was the problem. \textit{This problem} is contingent on a norm or expectation of long-term mutuality. A therapy or teaching relationship would never end for \textit{this} reason.
it, and to balance a strong anti-racist sense with an ability to connect with myself – because those things cannot be separate from each other. We have to live with the responsibility that living in privilege gives us. We have to live with the recognition that our bodies do violence without our desire to do so. But there have to be ways within that, that do not cancel that out, that allow us to connect with own sense of what we can and can’t do for other people. That is been an ongoing struggle in my life, in many sites that have many different constellations of identities interacting with each other: I have a hard time drawing boundaries and saying, “No, I can’t” and feeling legitimate to do so. But in that relationship it was very, very clear to me that the lack of tools I had to balance those two things simultaneously, and the way that we were engaging, and the way that my sense of the relationship shut down my ability to be in the relationship, had to do with me being a conduit – my body, my whiteness, my class privilege – being a conduit for systemic oppression…. I didn’t have the tools and didn’t feel able to figure out what to do with that. And so in that circumstance I really let somebody – a real person that I really loved – I really let that person down. And the process of ending the relationship was very painful for both of us and I felt very strongly the pain that it was causing this friend to [say to me], “I loved you, I trusted you, you can’t do this and you can’t even tell me you can’t do this. You have to leave my life.” In the aftermath of that, I had that moment of recognition; but that didn’t change what had happened and didn’t give me a good map for where to go. In the aftermath of that, I have done a lot of thinking about how it is that we listen to ourselves and also recognize that the ways in which people – especially white, upper-middle class, college-educated, urban-suburban kids like me, the way in which we’re given to understand our needs and desires and thoughts actually comes from a matrix in which we benefit from systemic oppression. So I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, not conclusively really, about how it is that we balance respecting and loving yourself and owning your needs and your boundaries, and recognizing that they come informed by, and sometimes directly resultant from, the matrix of oppression that made us who we are.
As in Devi’s reflection above, Griffin is situating “the way in which we’re given to understand our needs and desires and thoughts” – and how this played out in their relationship with this friend, in particular – within a social and discursive context, which Griffin calls “a matrix in which we benefit from systemic oppression.” This, interestingly, comes at the end of their introduction to the trespass against their friend, which also underscores Griffin’s particularity in a number of different ways (identity categories they judge pertinent to the situation, but also what “makes me functional in the world”), the particularity of this one relationship (“our inimitably open intellectual way”), and also the way that resonant things have occurred in other diverse relationships “that have many different constellations of identities interacting with each other.” For me, this contextualization of both the social context of the possibilities for reflecting, the particularities that Griffin brings to this relationship, and the particularities of the relationship in its singularity, again resonates with Bhabha’s Third Space determining (but not exhaustively) the friendship that Griffin describes, and the transgression that brought it to an end. Griffin continues immediately, suggesting their flows have carried on since then, contingent on this experience: “I think that in having this relationship constantly in my mind in all of my other relationships in my life that I’ve been better able to give the people around me more of my self.”

Upon hearing this last statement, it struck me that the phrase “more of my self” might be signifying something for Griffin other than what it might often mean, because of the contextualization they’d already provided. This informed the following question that I asked, in response to which Griffin again attended to particularities.

*Chris:* Part of the problem in that relationship was about giving too much in a certain sense, so when you’re saying ‘give more of yourself,’ you don’t mean quantitatively; you mean [that] part of giving more of yourself would actually include recognizing your quantitative limits?

29 As stated previously, this is Griffin’s preferred gender pronoun.
Griffin: It’s different for everybody. For me, because I grew up as a caregiver, my family relationship made me into a caregiver, I’ve been in caregiver roles for the majority of my life, giving of myself is not quantitative. I’ve a lot of space to help people out with shit. I work in front line social work and I have been a caregiver in lots of different capacities – all complicated, clearly.

As seems to have been the case with Griffin’s friendship, perhaps we paint ourselves into what Ahmed might designate a nonperformative corner when we commit ourselves too straightforwardly and narrowly to antiracism, profeminism, and the like, in our understandings of our selves and in how we steer our navigations of relationships.

Elsewhere in our conversation, which I cite in the next chapter, Griffin suggests we have to be accountable to both a person’s ‘identity’ (as a person of colour, for example) and also to their specificity, pain, desire for reciprocity, and so on. But even this ‘both’ is one we have to work against the grain. We have to make it do work that it doesn’t just do on its own.

We cannot do accountability like a light switch – one moment being accountable to my (non-gendered, non-raced) “friend,” and the next moment being accountable to an abstracted “disabled person” or “poor person.” And, as I suggest above, I do not think dialectics serves us any better, in that it implies an end point when our work may be done and we satisfactorily resolve the problem of accountability – perhaps to one person, perhaps to an entire specific group, or in general. The relationship between being a part of a socially recognized ‘population’ and being an ‘individual’ is not a sometimes-one/sometimes-the-other relationship; it is one of mutual constitution. This is a mutual constitution of ongoing becomings, rather than a means to an end. Foucault encourages us, then, to closely attend to “the way by which, through some political technology of individuals, we have been led to recognize ourselves as … a part of a social entity” (1994c, 404), and that “the main characteristic of our political rationality is the fact that this integration of the individuals into a community or in a totality results from a constant correlation between an increasing individualization and the reinforcement of this totality” (1994c, 417, emphasis added).

Although Foucault clearly separates his own work from deconstruction (2006f, 389), I’ll nevertheless follow Spivak again (1993) in using him and Derrida together and suggest that it might be productive to approach the relationship between ‘individuals’ and their respective ‘communities’ as, at once: constituted mutually and contingently through
Foucault’s “rule of double conditioning;” and also as undoing the sanctity of both ways of categorizing/understanding people, and undoing the sanctity of the distinction between the two – which is to say, as differantial.

There is no ‘just being a person’ or ‘just being an individual’ that is not also living an ongoing legacy of becoming gendered, abled, raced, sexualized, classed, aged, etc., and there is no pure ‘being’ associated with subject positions such as man, Mi’kmaq, trans, or wheelchair user, that is not supplemented and ‘troubled’ by Butler’s illimitable et cetera of ongoing becomings characterized by intersectionality, singularity, contingency, and excess.

The field of possible responses from which you’ve been countersigning this project is one that you’ll have navigated according to your specific circumstances in ways neither of us could know in advance or could even know exhaustively after-the-fact. Among many other possible responses, a whole subfield of possible responses could stem from the possibility that you never experience any resonance whatsoever with the stories or analyses I share. And I can be at peace with that. Unlike the Roman authors who Foucault reads as saying “We cannot dispense with the other” because we all need a guide or director (in this case positioned as author), I think a person in such a role is potentially helpful, but it also carries a terrible risk of being harmful or just not at all useful. Perhaps the various explorations in this chapter and the one previous might do a reasonably good job of pointing toward some of that. But while I am not convinced that we cannot dispense with the other-positioned-over-us, I nevertheless believe that there are others with whom we unequivocally cannot dispense in our ethical practices, which I mean both ‘ontologically’ and ‘pedagogically,’ or perhaps both descriptively and prescriptively.

Always the punster (even though King calls him “cranky”) in Specters of Marx (1994), Derrida calls his ontology an “hauntology” (The two words sound identical in French.). According to Derrida, we are made up of illimitable others who are at once absent and present in our lives, haunting our becomings, undoing fixity or closure. We cannot dispense with others, because without others we’d have no grounding for any identity or action whatsoever. So as I have suggested, hooks’ personal-is-political account of “coming to voice” as a little girl, through evoking her great-grandmother, articulates what we all do “something like” – each vanishing moment of each passing day – with varying degrees of
reflexive awareness or directness: we learn from one another how to live ethically and politically, “never exhaustively” (Foucault 1994a, 324) precisely because of this same process: there are always other others, less immediately but simultaneously acting upon our field of possible actions and responses.

Such illimitable others are not only individuals and they’re not only subject positions or identities, as Griffin says. These are just abstract categories. Real people are neither. And they’re both at the same time, mutually constituting one another and mutually constituting our perceptions, our world, the taken-for-grantedness of these abstract categories, and our possibilities for responding. And so, in our reflexive navigation of relationships, we need to try to be accountable to the specifics of the particular and contingent others with whom we relate. This is the prescriptive or pedagogical sense in which we cannot dispense with the other: as an unconditional ‘should not,’ we cannot go about discerning how to go about living our lives without reflexively taking specific others into account.

We need to take others into account in their contingent singularity, rather than only as socially vacuumed individuals or abstract ‘Others.’ The abstract Other – at least at what I would suggest is its most ethically useful – is essentialized woman, blackness, disability, queerness (beyond this, where every other ultimately represents God, ones’ mother or one’s analyst, I think it moves further away from potential usefulness in navigating our lives). Essentialized figures are crucial to personal-is-political ethical navigation, but we cannot dispense with particular others. Spivak addresses something along these lines when she situates ‘culture’ in ‘the vanishing present.’

Bringing to mind Derrida’s countersignature, alongside Foucault’s concern that one of the roughly shared aspects of our here-and-now countersigned ‘political rationality’ is the “constant correlation between an increasing individualization and the reinforcement of [a] totality” (1994c, 417), Spivak asks: “Who sends, and who receives, when messages assuming collectivities are inscribed” (2004a, 115)? She’s not suggesting collectivities are not important, or that they do not determine our becomings, but she suggests that such determinations are “never exhaustive” (Foucault 1994a, 324). She questions the fixing of the vanishing present and the fixing of people, and her articulation can teach us something important about ethics and practices of accountability to particular others:
I question archivization, which attempts not only to restrain but also to arrest the speed of the vanishing present, alive and dying…. [I]n the face of class-divided racial diversity, who fetishizes culture and community? The only negative gesture that I have ever received from a black person in New York has been from a near-comatose drunken brother in the 96th Street subway station who told me to “take my green card and go home.” That is not culture turned racism but a recognition of the class division in so-called diversity. At the end of the day, my critical position (though, as he noticed, not my class position or my class interest) is the same as his (2004a, 116).

She suggests, of course, that it would be a mistake to take this one man as speaking for the collective of black people (which would be what she’s calling archivization or fetishization). But that is not all she’s doing. She counters this danger by closely attending to what this one black man says to her, and to the resonance she feels with it, even though it is said against her – she too is concerned with “so-called diversity” that often ignores classism and other forms of difference and power relations. She reads this one black man, perhaps, “something like” how she elsewhere in the article reads DuBois, in his singularity and yet without divorcing this singularity from his blackness and other contingencies. She values his critical position “that [is potentially] defective for capitalism” (Spivak 2004a, 118), and she even claims it as her own, without conflating her class position or interest with his. This is a practice of accountability that she elsewhere calls “learning to learn from below” (Spivak 2008). There are many other countersignatures to this man’s statement that could have been available to Spivak, but she chooses to attend to the legitimate critique discernable within it, “something like” Shaista’s focus on colonization and racism in which she’s complicit – rather than those forms of colonization and racism that oppress her.

Resonantly, during my interview with Tina, I asked if only poverty, classism, and geopolitical racism (all of which position her ‘on top’) affect her relationship with Carlos, or if she was focusing on those particular stratifications for the sake of our conversation:

Chris: Would you say that sexism or patriarchy also plays out in your relationship?
Tina: Yeah. Of course. Of course. Of course. Do you want me to talk about that? I can talk about that! I just have not because I have been thinking lots about how class and classism and poverty [have] played out in our relationship. But for sure. It is actually a way where Carlos – this is my analysis, I do not know if it would be his analysis – but I think it is a way he can assume more power in our relationship: through gender and his gender, and his masculine identity. And he does. So some of the gender stuff that is really fucking unhealthy that I talk to women about every single day in a room, plays out in our relationship. And that is hard for me to feel and find myself in a situation where I feel like I am being fucked around because of my gender: things like him giving me the silent treatment – a very easy and powerful way for him to take back – take power in the relationship. And he knows it. I hate it. Every time it happens, I am like, “You’re being abusive. Every day, the women that I talk to, their husbands, their partners, this is what they do to them – the silent treatment.” … I can also see it as a way of, you know, his taking back control, but also his way of dealing…. He withdraws. With anybody – man or woman. So I can see that too. It is complex. But I know that he knows [it bothers me] and I know that it is his way of taking back power, in our relationship, and exercising power in our relationship – very clearly, to me. I see it as that, as him doing that. When he does not answer my phone calls, when I am calling him, he knows. And when he does [answer,] he’s like, “You can’t run down my phone,” like the mother of his children [does]. Because I know that’s what she does. She’ll call him ten times in a row, and [he hates it]. So he’ll compare me to her, totally genderizing me: because I’m a woman, I’m like his baby mother, and this is what women do – they run down men. And I’m like, “What!? I am not that kind of woman!” … So yes, it plays out….. He’s Dominican and he’s been brought up in a culture that’s very macho. And while he does not embody that in many ways, like he’s very gentle with me – and I need that in a man, especially doing the work that I do, I cannot handle too much stereotypical embodied masculinity. It wouldn’t go over very well if he was rough with me, or he raised his voice to me, or anything like that. That would be very triggering for me considering the work I’ve done and the experiences I’ve had. So he doesn’t do that. But in other ways, he’s very
macho…. I let that be in the relationship, because I do see it as a way of him feeling powerful – or like he has power in the relationship. And that’s okay with me, because it’s in ways I don’t feel threatened. It’s not coercive. He’s been brought up to ‘be a man,’ and he’s often saying things like “I’m a man; this is what men do,” or “that’s a woman’s thing; that’s what women do.” As a feminist, some of my feminist friends would be horrified to hear him say those things, and I’m like: “you know what? If that’s what makes him feel good in his world, if that’s how he’s been brought up to see [gender] and it’s not harmful in my relationship with him, then I’m going to leave that. I don’t need to deconstruct every single thing in our relationship around gender.” So in relation to your question, gender does play a big role in our relationship, in addition to economics and classism.

Chris: I appreciate that you were able to answer that so fully and so passionately! [both laugh]. And that you’ve chosen up until this point, not to mention it…. That’s noteworthy, for me, that you’re saying, ‘for this, I’m gonna talk about the stuff where I’m ‘on top” – and not get defensive about it. Because it would have been easy at any point over the last hour and a half to say, ‘Yeah, well, I did that, but you know what he does?’

Tina: Yeah! [both laugh] That’s true. Yeah, yeah.

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As discussed above of the words “concert” and “concerted,” the word “deconstruct” has come to signify differently than it does originally in Derrida. Tina’s intended use of it here would appear to be synonymous with, say, “critique.” But what she does in her interview “around gender” maps nicely onto Derrida’s deconstruction. She’s most certainly not prescribing her own take on Carlos’ masculinity as one that all women in relationships with men should follow. What she is doing is carefully contextualizing her ‘take on’ it. For one thing, it is not “rough,” or “harmful,” she says. And it exists in the context of the enormous disparity in geopolitical and class power that also shapes their relationship. As a result of this other simultaneous context, she characterizes Carlos’ participation in sexism and patriarchy (my words, but she said yes) as “taking back” power, rather than as consistently lording it over her. She even says of it, “I let that be,” which could be read as her having all the power. But I don’t think this would be a just reading of their relationship and the impact on her of some of what he does. She situates her experiences of him – including those that personally-is-politically resonate with those she hears from women who are subjected to abuse in her counselling practice – within an assemblage of contradictory and shifting power relations. It’s within this assemblage, which is particular to the two of them and their relationship, that she discerns “I’m going to leave that.”
Chris: It would have been easy to do that. So in some ways I think it’s even more noteworthy that you have that experience with him as well, and you’re leaving it aside as [pause] thoroughly as you are.

Tina: [laughs]

When I asked Tina about gender and sexism, we’d already been talking for an hour and forty minutes. During that entire time, she’d described being financially controlling, untrusting of Carlos, reading him with stereotypes about poor black men, and falsely accusing him of taking money from her. We even plotted some of her behaviour onto Lenore Walker’s Cycle of Violence (1979), as I mention above. But alongside Tina’s concerns about how she navigates being ‘on top’ of an enormous economic disparity (as this intersects with geopolitics and race in particular ways; she suggests that although they’re both black, he’s racialized differently by virtue of his poverty and being Dominican than she is by virtue of having successfully come out of Canadian poverty to class privilege), she simultaneously navigates being ‘on bottom’ of patriarchal gender relations. She says that the lines she draws are not shared by all feminists, but she navigates what is okay for her and what is okay for Carlos – which is “something like” me figuring out how to navigate my particular circumstances when I was being controlling of my partner, rather than grounding myself in generalized abstract feminist analysis. Tina’s choice to centre her critique on being ‘on top’ for one hundred minutes, until I explicitly asked about her being ‘on bottom,’ like Shaista’s choice to focus her work on colonization of indigenous peoples here, can be conceptualized as a counter-practice to Fellows and Razack’s Race to Innocence (1998) and mapped onto Butler’s (2004a) ethical recommendations for the US and Israel, as a Jewish American. This is another ethical applicability of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism,” where we can put complexity, intersectionality, and impossibility aside for the moment, strategically, in order to think through specific power relations in a more manageable way. As long as we recognize that doing so is a simplification, then there is nothing wrong with doing this strategically. In fact, perhaps we do do this every time we discuss power, and so perhaps there is something to be said for doing so “strategically” and reflexively. It is dangerous, but in the context of impossibility and illimitability, it may be necessary. There are times – contingent, fleeting times in the vanishing present – when it is crucial to consider the ways that poverty, for example, shapes how a particular person acts.
in a particular moment. Poverty is not ‘what’ a person is, and it never exhaustively determines their options, but I might be able to attend to what someone has to say differently if I bracket certain factors for a moment and only for the moment consider class, or only for the moment consider the ways that class informs race or some other intersecting factor. That seems to me “something like” what Spivak did in relation to the man at the subway station, what Tina did for a hundred minutes until I asked specifically about sexism, and what David Denborough (2001), a prison employee at the time, did in taking prisoners’ ridicule of him as an opportunity to learn about what it means to be middle-class and white.

In these examples, each one particular and contingent, the poverty of the specific men does not totalize them. It is a politically crucial element of making sense of what they’re ‘able to know’ and what they offer, but it is not who they are. This is again distinct from Foucault’s “the masses know very well, clearly:” it is not romanticizing what ‘the poor’ know, or what any ‘they’ can teach ‘us.’ It is, rather, a certain orientation to our everyday encounters with diverse others, as we come into contact with each one, each fleeting moment.

This orientation requires us to hold ourselves accountable contingently and always tentatively, according to the people and circumstances at hand, which may change from one moment to the next, rather than according to abstractions and the assumption that our ethical work will have ever been done. As cited above, when Ahmed describes a school’s response to allegations of racism as countering that this cannot be true because of the school’s commitment to diversity (2006a, 104), we get a glimpse of the danger of only ethically governing ourselves in the abstract. This placebo effect of Sartre’s surgery is all too common: in response to allegations of racism, homophobia, sexism, abuse, etc., I have known countless people who’ve turned to friends – sometimes friends who shared a position of marginality with the person making the allegation – and asked, ‘you know me; I am not racist (or abusive, or homophobic, etc.), right?’ And in response to this, because of the normative fixing of moral and political positions, this is often met with an affirmation that the person did not do anything wrong because they’re not that type of person. Responsibly and carefully responding to such ‘invitations’ to irresponsibility (Jenkins 1990) requires improvisation, because we have to respond in the moment, but our on-the-spot responses require a thorough theoretical, ethical, and political grounding – which probably cannot develop outside of some generalization and abstraction involving partial and fictitious
representations of Others – again perhaps “something like” a musician needs to know musical formalities and structures in order to be ‘able to’ improvise. It is worth noting, though, that these formalities and structures do not have to be from any one discursive tradition, just as some jazz, blues, hip hop and punk are done by people without ‘classical training,’ but who nevertheless draw upon learned musical structures and tendencies.

The above also applies when we ourselves are the ones experienced by others as homophobic, sexist, or otherwise injurious. To be ‘able to’ attend to critiques from those who do not share our positions of exaltation, to be ‘able to’ learn from them, grow from them, and have them supplement what we previously knew, “is a task for which all preparation can only be remote and indirect” (Spivak 2004a, 118). Preparation, critical education, and abstract reflection are important. We cannot do without it. But we also cannot imagine it to be an end in itself. Rigorous preparation and practice is what prepares us for the improvisation and spontaneity of everyday encounters with people whose lives are always going to be more complicated than the caricature that their ‘social location,’ however nuanced and rigorously intersectional, paints of them. Like any other representation, such ‘locating’ of people is partial and ultimately fictitious. That does not make it false; it is politically important and should not be dismissed as ‘only’ fictitious, but it is not the whole picture. We’ll never have that.

As a result, it is impossible to successfully and consistently prevent inflicting harm by working in the abstract. This is why we cannot dispense with the other: we cannot dispense with particular others who are concretely affected by what we do. Our political commitments, in Ahmed’s language, are nonperformative when we are not responsive to the pain we cause, especially where this is experienced and narrated by the other person as us having been oppressive. And so, as important as the abstract, remote and indirect preparatory work of critical consciousness-raising is, the work of taking responsibility “at ground level,” of doing “ethics in its ‘real’ problems” (Spivak 1993, 42) entails responding to others’ responses to us that we could never have predicted and may not even understand. Our responses to such everyday encounters, given that they’re responses, can only be improvised. There is no other way, because we cannot know what to respond to before it happens. How we respond is all there is to many ethical struggles.
Spivak advocates, then, that we orient our lives along the lines of Derrida’s “perhaps:” it is, she writes, “the ‘perhaps,’ the undecidability of the future on which we stake our political planning. Nothing may come of it. But nothing will survive without this effort” (2004a, 132). Because of the unpredictability and instability of meaning – the ‘inability to know’ that fleetingly and contingently shapes and cancels out our ‘ability to’– we cannot assume that we are fixed as profeminist or antiracist any more than we can fix woman or blackness as a knowable, universal, and unchanging ‘thing.’ We cannot because it is not true; and we cannot because it does not do, ethically, what we need antiracism and feminism to do.

It is only when the terribly important abstract and theoretical work of trying to live politically responsibly is coupled with moment-to-moment specificity and spontaneity, that our political commitments can be said to approach the performative, in Ahmed’s (2006a, 104) use of it rather than Butler’s (Butler 1997) – or perhaps as Ahmed’s use supplements Butler’s, more fully articulating Butler’s articulation by “adding to” and thus further ‘troubling’ or “disturb[ing] the calculation” (Bhabha 1994, 222).

If we are to take seriously what is said in critical theory about transphobia, homophobia, ableism, classism, racism, sexism, etc., then we are all implicated in these operations and there is no politically sound reason to deny our transgressions when they’re brought to our attention. They’re true, whatever we do to problematize ‘truth.’ They’re a partial and fictitious representation, yes. But the truth about truth is that’s all we’ve got. It’s what our denials are too. It’s even what our theoretical problematizations of truth are – unless we align them with metaphysical traditions such as those in Plato (2007) and the Upanishads (1990). So what are we doing when we selectively flow with some representations and not others? Such is life, yes, but we need to carefully consider how we navigate such a life as this. Which fictitious representations do we consent to journey with, and which ones won’t we? What does it do if we respond to an allegation of harm with a response of relativity, perspective, or multiplicity? Even if the allegation was somehow empirically discernable as ‘false,’ even then our defensiveness, dismissiveness or “containment strategies” (Heron 2007) are very likely to be experienced – and therefore very likely to be – enactments of whatever form of oppression we’re denying having enacted, problematizing, or nuancing.
What I am suggesting, then, is that our anti-racism, for example, requires us to inhabit the *inevitability* of our racism as comfortably as we possibly can, which entails inhabiting the considerable discomfort of doing so. I might even suggest that if we believe we are working against oppression and it is not uncomfortable, and we are not unsure, and we do not feel bad some of the time, then we are probably under the influence of the placebo effect of Sartre’s decolonization surgery, flowing with Ahmed’s nonperformativity. Perhaps such is life, but perhaps other lives are possible.
Chapter 4
Collective Flows of Becoming, Forking Flows of Belonging

Representing Others, Representing Humanity

As mentioned many times now, Spivak (1999) invites us to consider that a representation is, at once, an act of creativity in the sense that a painting is an interpretive representation of its subject-matter (rather than being a tree), and is also representational in the sense that an elected leader is said to ‘represent’ the people (there is a ‘standing in for’ which everyone knows is distinct from the representative being what it is said to ‘represent’). Her careful concern – at once theoretical, political, and ethical – applies to representations in this project as much as any other. It is perhaps a particularly pressing concern when applied to the ways we represent those we’ve harmed or those positioned ‘below’ us on social stratifications. It is therefore something I need to think about in terms of my representation of my research participants, given the researcher/researched hierarchy, and also in terms of how my research participants represent people against whom they’ve transgressed in their stories.

In fact, five out of seven of my research participants expressed misgivings about their representation of others in our research conversations. Most of these concerns were expressed to me in informal conversations without the camera running, over coffee or lunch, previous to their finally agreeing to participate. Having already had such a conversation with her previously, Patty Douglas nevertheless brought this concern up again as the starting point of our research conversation – suggesting that representation is a significant ethical and political concern for her. Patty’s concern is about how she represents her son.

*Patty:* Coming to an interview like this about writing about, thinking about, autism through my relationship as a mother with my son, is full of tensions and full of dangers….

*Chris:* Can you say something about what you … see as the danger of having a conversation like this, or writing about your relationship? …

*Patty:* One thing that comes to mind is his erasure. It is a process of representation and even of translation, in a way – even though I try to focus on
my own implications, my own implication within processes and taking up
technologies and practices as a mother that seduce me into being a particular
way with him. That in itself, [my focus on] the practice of mothering with a
disabled son, verges on my son’s erasure: [erasing] my son’s uniqueness and his
… irreducible singularity. There is something about him that is in danger of
being eclipsed … even though he and I are in conversation and he says, “yes
Mom, write about it; yes Mom, talk about it.” But as he gets older, [I worry
about the effects on him]…. He’ll be the son who I wrote about, right? [So] at
a certain point, I may not write about [him anymore] … as a sort of protection of
his own being in the world. That is one way I think it is dangerous. I also think
that there is a danger of romanticizing [Asperger’s]…. Rod Michalko talks
about ‘disability as teacher,’ and … I like that metaphor. But I also think it
verges on these dangerous territories of romanticizing living with disability. I
don’t think that [Michalko would] go that route, but I do think that there is that
danger there, of ‘disability always has something to teach us.’ And though I
believe that’s true, and want and desire disability in my life, I also think there’s
a dangerous point there, where you have to tread carefully [to not romanticize
disability or represent one side of it]…. And here’s another danger: we’re
saying there’s something essential, we’re saying there’s something there, that is
different – that we notice as different [and call disability]. So I also struggle
with that in my work, in my thinking about “What is this difference that we call
disability and autism?” How am I understanding my son’s presence as this …
radical difference, and yet in my work I don’t want to essentialize, and so
there’s this danger in saying “there, that’s disability, that’s our teacher.”

Patty expresses two sides of the danger of representation: objectified, totalized, capital O
Otherness, and romanticization. In my research conversation with Griffin Epstein, Griffin
expressed a concern that is, at once, “something like” Patty’s concern and also distinct.
Griffin’s ethical transgression that served as the starting point for our conversation was of a
friendship with a person of colour that’s now ended, which means Griffin cannot get the
accountable go-ahead to “write about it” or even “talk about it” as Patty does with her son.
Griffin expressed this as a significant ethical concern, and it is one distinction that
distinguishes Griffin’s particular and contingent concerns from Patty’s. Another distinction is that Griffin expresses their concern about representing this friend, not only in our conversation or other public spaces, but also in their self-reflexive explorations: what are the ethics of representing someone – even in our own stream of consciousness – once harm’s been done and the relationship severed? As cited in the previous chapter, Griffin says they’re better ‘able to’ navigate relationships because of lessons from this friendship and from the transgression that ended it. And, structurally ‘something likewise,’ in the previous chapter Patty describes mobilizing lessons from her relationship with her son in order to facilitate reflexivity in her teaching. Mobilizing past encounters in this way is a crucial practice of reflexivity, which I explore more fully in the next chapter. At the same time, however, this ethical practice requires us to represent others we’ve harmed as decentred secondary or tertiary characters (and sometimes perhaps even as antagonists) in our narratives of “becoming ethical.” Spivak writes of the danger of “a rewriting of accountable responsibility as narcissism, lower case” – referring to the popular use of the word to mean ‘self-centred’ (1999, 251). And Heron, in her self-reflexive critique, also cautions against the risk of centring ourselves as “larger than life” (2007, 141). And again ‘something likewise,’ Patty’s concerns about romanticization and totalization were both framed as potential consequences resulting from Patty centring her own processes, implications, and so on, in her work. Spivak, Heron, Griffin, and Patty seem to ‘roughly share’ some common ground in relation to the dangers of representing others in our ethical narrations.

Such “ground,” if we follow the word around as Ahmed (2010) advocates, often seems to signify a personal-is-political ethical foundation: Chrisjohn et al. (2006) contest what they call “the standard account” of the motives behind the perpetration of Canadian Indian Residential Schools, and they call this contestation “ground sternly disputed;” Stiker (1999) writes that “there are no grounds for conceiving of [disability] as an aberration” (12); Ahmed (2006b) cautions that disoriented people may be defensive and reactionary, depending on how they “reground” themselves (158); Foucault’s (2006a) “hinge point,” referred to earlier, hinges struggles against injustice to “research in ethics that seeks to ground individual freedom (299); Spivak (1993) calls Foucault’s ethics “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” (41); and Jenkins claims that work with abuse perpetrators should not be about “standing our ground because we think he should stop violence, it is finding a way for
him to stand *his* ground” (2011). Noticing the resonance in ‘roughly’ common ground is important, and it is also important to recognize that each person grounds her or his ethical practices and narrations in *particular* personal-is-political foundations, the constitution of which are ongoing and ‘concerted.’ Out of specific and contingent concerns, then, grounded in particular ethical foundations and ongoing historical flows, Heron, Spivak, Griffin, and Patty ‘roughly share’ a resonant recognition that we might objectify people in our narratives about ‘us and them.’ Heron and Patty each express a concern that others might be backgrounded in stories in which we are protagonists. Patty calls this the danger of ‘erasing’ her son, suggesting ageism and ableism make this a particularly pressing danger. Heron tells a disturbing story about a film in which a white development worker’s story is foregrounded over the background of an African man who was falsely accused and imprisoned (2007); Said studies the commonplace literary backgrounding of colonized peoples in European literature (1994a); and Ahmed describes this as *positioning the other as furniture*, which she maps onto heterosexism and sexism: “To be a good girl is to give up having a will of one’s own. The mother can thus love the daughter who is becoming like furniture, who can support the family by staying in the background” (2010, 62-63). We should be cautious about how others “support” our *journeys* “by staying in the background,” but we can also note that the danger inherent in backgrounding is not evenly distributed. Perhaps backgrounding is a normal, everyday part of life that – however dangerous – is not *always harmful*. For example, as he was climbing up my back this morning, my son said that he was Catwoman and I was a building. This was totally harmless, very sweet, and it brought us closer together if anything. Although this required my active involvement to make sure he did not hurt himself, my agency was erased in his narrative, which represented me as a fixed object. And, in fact, it is often ethical and just to “support” “by staying in the background” when we are ‘on top’ of social stratifications – relative to clients, children,

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31 Tanya Titchkosky, commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter, made the interesting comment that my son may not experience furniture or buildings as fixed background objects. I’d like to situate this possibility, once again, as undermining some of the taken-for-grantedness about how we relate to the world, rather than “containing” it through – for example – psychological stages of development. There are a wide range of locally normative ways that humans experience things like rocks and trees and rivers. Perhaps this may also be true of other things I have been trained to ‘know’ as innate background objects. That said, my point remains: my ‘involvement’ in this play was less evidently *active* than when he and I are both superheroes, for example.
etc., in order to let them “be an ethical person” rather than steer their journeys.

Backgrounding, then, may not always be ‘bad’ – we require secondary and tertiary characters in our sense-making, at least following norms of storytelling I have been raised to adopt, and I was happy to occupy this position in my son’s play. But, nevertheless, such objectification is dangerous: it always carries the danger of dehumanization. This risk or danger is a structural one, in that secondary, tertiary, and antagonistic characters are not narratively humanized; they tend to be represented using objectifying “internal state psychology” explanations of what they do and are, whereas protagonists tend to be represented as motivated by more flowing and purposive “intentional states,” such as values and commitments (White 2007). But perhaps this ever-present structural risk only materializes as dehumanization when intersected with other ‘structures’ of dehumanization. Maybe it is when the normative (and perhaps necessary) narrative device of secondary and tertiary characters intersects with Fanon’s Manichaean structure of exaltation-tethered-to-denigration so that the exalted figure occupies the position of protagonist, that the danger of backgrounding others requires our most careful consideration. There is a greater risk of harm when I background my son than when he backgrounds me. If he cares for me in my old age, this relative risk will be reversed, but the Manichaean structure of ageism will persist, unchanged, having merely substituted denigrated childhood with denigrated old age.

In addition to perhaps being necessary in sense-making more generally, centring ourselves as protagonists may be politically and ethically necessary in our reflexive navigations of being ‘on top’ of instances of Fanon’s Manichaean structure. I am not sure how we’d go about ethics-as-politics and practices of accountability without holding our abuses, transgressions, and complicity as serious. Heron, for example, after all gives a critical account of whiteness rather than decentring whiteness (2007). Perhaps, then, this is another instance where we can follow Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” We centre our ethical practices and an attention to the impact we have on others “strategically,” reflexively tuned into the risks of representing others, remaining (politically and ethically) anxious about this danger, and remembering that our reflexivity and anxiety will not consistently prevent harm.

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32 I work with this distinction more fully later in this chapter.
Patty’s concern that backgrounding others can be dehumanizing, whether as ‘problem object’ or ‘romanticized object,’ resonates with Spivak’s (1999) concerns about Foucault and Deleuze romanticizing prisoners and ‘the masses.’ Griffin too points to two opposing dangers. But interestingly, Griffin identifies two different opposing dangers. Griffin’s concern is about representing their friend as an ‘individual’ versus as a ‘social location.’ Perhaps we navigate any number of dichotomies in a given situation, and perhaps the ‘how’ by which we reflexively tune into this one rather than that one is fully contingent on countless factors. This suggestion, on my part, may be read as particularly ‘post’-this-or-that. But this too is a representation that may be dangerous. Spivak, for one, in addition to suggesting there is “something like a relationship” between deconstruction and various “so-called ethno-philosophies” unsettles the chronological, theoretical, and geopolitical positioning of ‘post’-this-or-that by describing her navigation of two opposing dangers as “steer[ing] ourselves through the Scylla of cultural relativism and the Charybdis of nativist culturalism” (1999, 6). Scylla and Charybdis are two monsters Odysseus avoided while navigating a narrow strait in The Odyssey. This phrasing would be understood by classicists to mean “something like” what her ‘post’-whatever readers would take from it. If we represent the relationship between post-whatever approaches and everything else, or between radical or critical approaches and everything else, as différantial, then we have an ethical imperative to attend to the work that goes into holding the two sides apart and fixing each side in ways that are less complex and heterogeneous than they are. Attending to this work gives us different options about how we might like to participate in it, if at all.

Whether it is a concern about ‘modernist dichotomous thinking’ or about navigating Scylla and Charybdis, the specifics of what particular dangers we navigate may be contingent on countless factors contingent on unique and fleeting contexts. There is no reason Griffin could not be concerned about representing romanticized ‘people of colour,’ versus capital O Other ‘people of colour;’ this could perhaps even scaffold a viable reading of how they came to transgress against their friend – perhaps it is within the realm of White’s “what is possible to know.” And there is no reason Patty could not be concerned with treating her son as an ‘individual’ with no relationship to disability, versus treating him as ‘the disabled.’ But – who knows why? – each of them expressed the particular concerns they did, in the context of those particular conversations. Griffin’s concern is about
how we live with ethical trespass when we can’t make specific amends to the person [but also] how we keep it particular and systemic when we lack access to the actual person. I feel like we’ve talked a lot about … trying to de-individualize situations, because individualizing them takes them out of the context of broader oppression, of systemic oppression, and of thinking of yourself as a node or a conduit through which systemic oppression makes itself particular. But it is also really important to not lose the fact that when you particularly hurt somebody or cause harm to somebody, that is a real wound in a real person in a real situation…. How do we think about being accountable to somebody, knowing that systemic oppression makes both all ‘somebodies’ really unique sites so that you can’t see the system, but also takes the particularity out of people and just makes them, like, ‘identities’ [e.g. ‘person of colour’] – as opposed to humans who have complex hearts and minds?

I could perhaps situate this entire chapter within the questions Griffin raises here. The question about our “lack [of] access to the actual person” is one that – as Devi says in the previous chapter, perhaps I answer “in a kind of round about way.” As Griffin discusses elsewhere in our conversation, sometimes such access is impossible even if the relationship has not been clearly severed: due to effects of harm we’ve caused, Griffin says it may be unethical to pressure others to participate in our practices of accountability. The situation of “lack [of] access” is therefore one that should not be positioned as aberrational. We also cannot afford to imagine that any “access” we do have is exhaustive. Those who we harm, or those in whose oppression we are complicit, flow in an ongoing way just as we do. And so even in relation to harm against a particular person, accountability to her one day may not be what it is the next. And, furthermore, as discussed in chapter one, sometimes our practices of accountability suggest a given action is ethical at one point in time, only to later be reconstellated as unethical due to particular new encounters. Ruth Pluznick’s example in that chapter involved new information from the same person (a young man whose family she’d worked with when he was a child), whereas Tanya Titchkosky’s example in the same chapter involved a new encounter with a different particular blind person. In both cases, what was previously judged ethical was reconstellated as unethical through a subsequent encounter. Discussing all this, I suggest that we orient our practices of accountability along
the lines of Derrida’s “perhaps,” without ever imagining that the work of accountability will be resolved. At any rate, here or there, I never answer what to do “when we lack access.” Perhaps what I do, instead, is offer explorations with which you might find it fruitful to countersign Griffin’s question – a strategy I attribute to Devi in the previous chapter, relating it to King and Derrida. The truth is that I simply don’t have a more straightforward answer, but it’s a very good question – which can be just as consequential as a good answer.

I do, however, more directly explore the question of “keep[ing] it particular and systemic,” even if I remain guilty of doing this “in a kind of round about way” too. Working to unsettle and reconstellate the relationship between the particular and the systemic is, more or less, the overarching theme of this chapter. And then – again, more or less – the final chapter could be said to address ways of working with this reconstellated relationship.

So, again, Griffin asks: “How do we think about being accountable to somebody, knowing that systemic oppression makes both all ‘somebodies’ really unique sites so that you cannot see the system, but also takes the particularity out of people and just makes them, like, ‘identities’ – as opposed to humans who have complex hearts and minds?” I have been teaching a course called Critical Perspectives on Society, and I cannot help but countersign Griffin’s question here with the old tension between individualism and social determinism. How is it that we are ‘enabled to know’ that these are our options? Should I be accountable to this one person in a social vacuum, or should I make myself accountable to ‘her people,’ with no regard for her specificity? How do the illimitable possibilities for how to proceed or make sense of the world get flattened out and mapped onto these two possibilities?

Foucault called the very few legitimated representations of humanity “scientific fabulations” (2003a, 238), highlighting the degree to which we engage in acts of creative fantasy whenever we generate accounts – and that only in very rare cases do these get called ‘truth.’ Elsewhere he pointed to the importance of such “rarity” to the production of knowledge: “The analysis of statements and discursive formations ... sets out to establish a law of rarity ... based on the principle that everything is never said” (Foucault 1972, 118). He elaborates:

to analyze a discursive formation is to seek the law of that [rarity], it is to weigh it up, and to determine its specific form. [In this analysis, discourse] … from the moment of its existence (and not only in its ‘practical
applications’), poses the question of power…. [It is] the object of a struggle, a political struggle (Foucault 1972, 120).

Deleuze and Guattari (1989), for their part, state that when they use language such as “bodies without organs,” “flows of becoming,” and even “flows” of things like “piss,” that these are not metaphors. In an earlier draft of this chapter, I wrote, “I hope one day to understand what they mean by this insistence” – knowing it was important but not grasping what made it important. Now I think I know, or at least my particular and contingent overtones have contributed to this making sense to me, and this sense may or may not be what they intended. (Again, such is life.) What I take from their insistence is that the words “flows of becoming” and even “flows of piss” play the same role, structurally, as the words “self-esteem,” “the unconscious,” or “depression.” Each of these terms is a creative and imperfect human fabulation, intended to represent what we are and how we do what we do, without any one of them being more or less ‘metaphorical’ or ‘literal.’ Each one is equally “fabulation,” and the “laws of rarity” that brand some of them “scientific” are flows of power, of political struggle, that relate to other flows of power in complex ways.

It is almost always taken for granted in the most freely available representations of what it is to be human that I have tended to encounter in my life that – first and foremost – to be human is to be an individual. In liberal political philosophies and the professional psychologies, which could not have emerged as they are outside of liberalism’s flows, ‘the individual’ is assumed to be the ‘base unit’ by which humans can be understood. Families, societies, communities, movements, couples, coalitions, and so on, are framed as ‘congregations of individuals,’ so much so that we tend to find it hard to imagine that others do not experience the world this way – and that just a few hundred years ago, it seems that nobody ever had. This difficulty of ‘imagining otherwise’ can have serious consequences in terms of what we perceive and what we do. Once, in a group I was running for men who’d perpetrated abuse, there was an African man who was steadfastly committed to never use violence again. This was unequivocally clear when he spoke about his use of violence, his family, and his own childhood. However, over the course of the group, he frequently raised questions about our use of phrases such as “take 100% responsibility.” As I only came to discover after the group had finished, he was not blaming his wife when he raised these concerns, which is how I’d always understood him. He was rather expressing that he
thought it was ludicrous, and unhelpful, for us to divide up the family unit in this way. Had I realized this before the group had finished, I could have used the opportunity to invite him to articulate a version of ‘taking responsibility’ that did not assume the individual as ‘base unit.’ This might have been extremely helpful to other men in the group, who may very well have found it fit better with their understandings of the world, as well as for the other facilitator and I, both professionally and personally. But instead I shut him down, over and over again. I perceived his critique of liberal individualism to ‘be’ blaming his wife – even though he never made this critique in a way that blamed his wife. He only raised questions about what Chrisjohn et al. (2006) call “methodological individualism.” Only in my overtones did his blaming exist at all, which I think is entirely attributable to me being unable to imagine ‘responsibility’ outside of liberalism (Chapman 2007). Thinking with this troubling story of my own racism, I am not sure that individualism is always ‘bad,’ but believing that individualism is the only viable way of thinking about people, and about responsibility or agency, is terribly dangerous. It is also intimately connected to the exaltation of white, nondisabled, and class-privileged adult men (and in some particular cases to other lines of social stratification, such as the kind of jokes that sometimes circulate around an adult gay or Jewish man living with his parents). It exalts those who are generally understood to be capable of achieving ‘independence,’ and denigrates all those who are assumed incapable of this always-impossible trait (‘always-impossible,’ in part, because those who grow up isolated from humans do not grow up to fit our image of the successful ‘rugged individual’).

At times, because we erroneously imagine some people to achieve independence, we translate socially denigrated people’s work in providing exalted people’s basic needs into an act of generosity flowing from the exalted to the denigrated (Addams 1902c; Ahmed 2004b; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Thobani 2007). And so it is important to question individualism and its apparent self-evidence. However, how do we do so without giving up what is useful in sometimes, strategically, attending to specific people and their particular experiences, actions, and so on – as per Griffin’s concerns above. Liberal individualism is a relatively

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33 I mention this story in chapter two, and I reengage it from another angle in the final chapter.
recent and geopolitically-specific way of thinking. But surely there have been other ways of attending to particularity, ‘the personal,’ or ‘the psychological.’ Perhaps we can take William James’ important work, in which he places a river of fleeting life in each of our immediacies of perception, and work to imagine our divergent personal rivers flowing alongside and within other flows of becoming – as so many “tributaries on the same river.” Consider the following images, countersigned with James’ “stream of consciousness:”

“Though the river’s current never fails, the water passing, moment by moment, is never the same. Where the current pools, bubbles form on the surface, bursting and disappearing as others rise to replace them, none lasting long. In this world, people and their dwelling places are like that, always changing” Kamo no Chomei

“How could drops of water know themselves to be a river? Yet the river flows on” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Both of these images question the now normative self-evidence of positioning the individual as the base unit for understanding history or human experience. I am interested in thinking with these accounts alongside James’ attention to each person’s particular immediacies of perception. Maybe it is because of the liberal individualist and psychologized culture that I grew up in, but I do tend to experience myself as first an individual and only secondly as a member of any given group. That said, though, I can easily find countless examples in which I unreflexively speak with a ‘we’ that are too easily glossed over by a sentence like the previous one. I wonder if I “tend to experience myself as first an individual” because I most frequently think using ‘I’ as the base unit of relating to the world, or if I just interpret this as my default positioning because I have been raised to perceive myself as doing so through Foucault’s “law of rarity.” Perhaps I inadvertently actively cultivate what materializes as my default individualism. If so, is it possible that I might unreflexively narrate my relationships to the world from a ‘we’ position more often than I recognize? Perhaps. But either way, perhaps frequency is not even the important issue. Perhaps my question should be: given that I sometimes do heterotopically narrate my experiences of the world from a ‘we’ position, at all, what is happening there? Why doesn’t my doing so, in itself, disrupt the self-evidence that I am only (or predominantly) an individual? What can this tell us about what humans are, and how we do what we do? And what do these ‘we’
positionings have to do with what we call ‘taking responsibility,’ agency, or ethics? What do they have to do with relationality and with systemic oppression?

The Politics of Having a “We:” Intending Some Streams but not Others

In thinking about these things, I have become aware of how frequently I say ‘we’ when talking with my three-year-old son – when I am perhaps exceptionally aware of the role I play in performing and teaching social norms. This is true of things like potty training, in which I am about as invested as the next parent, but it is also true of norms in which I have strong political and ethical investments. When I am talking with my son about hitting, for example, I often find myself saying ‘we’ do not do such things. I have often noticed this and wondered who the ‘we’ is but, upon reflection, I do not think it is a fixed group. Or rather: it only becomes a fixed group through the work of thinking about and reflexively articulating ‘what I meant,’ which is a largely original representation of highly selective and fictitious intentions, rather than an accurate rendition of what is now past. I think that when I use such a ‘we’ unreflexively, or un-self-consciously, it just does not really require a border around exactly who I am referring to. And it seems to me like this observation opens up possibilities for thinking about the way I (and perhaps we) live in the world as relational beings who are, at once, singular persons and also members of countless different particular congregations. Perhaps there is no ultimately justifiable reason to grant permanent priority to either singularity or membership in any one of these congregations. I wonder if what we do, in the everyday ethical navigation of our lives, might be a constant repositioning of our positionings of reference. We might all, in an everyday sort of way that gets flattened out into liberalism through Foucault’s “law of rarity” do “something like” what Andrea Smith advocates we do in our analyses of violence. Writing of Beth Richie, Smith says, “She is not suggesting that we have a permanent category at the center of analysis (i.e., women of color), but that we constantly shift the center of analysis to multiple perspectives to ensure that we are developing a holistic strategy for ending violence” (2005b, 153). This is a radical suggestion for radical scholarship and activism, but is it nevertheless possible that it is “something like” what we all constantly do in our ethical positioning of our selves, in making sense of the world, deciding what to attend to, how best to respond, and so on?
In a previous chapter, I cited Ahmed’s compulsion to re-work and re-work a story from her life and Jenkins’ practice of having men he works with do the same in relation to harm they’ve caused partners or families. I was drawn to these two accounts, in part, because of how strongly they resonate with my process in writing all the words you’re now reading. Every time I sit down to edit, I am surprised by things I previously wrote, seemingly without giving them nearly enough care and consideration. For example, following one of the sentences in the previous paragraph, in an earlier version of this, I wrote:

Depending on the situation at hand, either aspects of ‘who I am’ (e.g. I am a graduate student, a social worker, a father, a white person, etc.) or else congregations I am a part of (e.g. as narrative therapists, in the family I grew up in, those of us who were active in anti-capitalist mass protests a few years back) are called upon in my positioning of myself, which enables me to ground myself in some legitimacy for thinking and feeling about things that are happening. And, perhaps, when we catch ourselves having a ‘we,’ we might be getting a glimpse of this everyday practice. There might, then, be an ‘ethical practice’ we could cultivate in noticing these ‘we’s before we let them out, stopping them and thinking about how to best proceed when they catch us unawares, and reflecting back on past inadvertent ‘we’s so as to prevent future ones.

Reading this today, especially the first sentence, I feel I seriously underestimated what I was saying. Every single thing I categorize above as “aspects of ‘who I am’” relate to “congregations I am a part of” every bit as much as those things that I call “congregations I am a part of”. This leads me to wonder if perhaps there are no (or very, very few) times that I appraise a situation, decide how to respond, reflect upon something that occurred earlier, prepare for something in advance, etc., when I do not position myself (at least implicitly) within some congregation in order to facilitate discerning what to do or how to do it. I do not want to overstate this either, but I was shocked to read that I listed “I am a graduate student, a social worker, a father, a white person” as aspects of “who I am” rather than as “congregations I am a part of” – when each of these examples is clearly a congregation I am a part of. This has me wondering if even those times that I (or others) might say “that is such a Chris thing to do” that, even then, if there might not be ways that my doing them relate to norms within my family (either ‘of origin’ or as it is presently configured), amongst
Narrative or Invitational Practitioners, amongst this or that friend group, or amongst people who read this or that author or listen to this or that album. I guess I am moving toward a sense that maybe the idea that we can hold the personal and political, or the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’ or ‘relational,’ as distinct is all just a matter of what we notice about our ‘individual’ level and what we do not – again through Foucault’s “law of rarity.” If so, perhaps ‘the personal’ and ‘the political’ need to be approached différantially.

As with other différantial relationships, this does not mean we treat the normative distinction between the two as illusory. We rather mobilize Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” It will sometimes be useful to attend only to James’ stream of consciousness, and to hold this as distinct from societal level flows of becoming. Other times, it will be more important to attend to the relationship or interplay between one stream and others flowing alongside it, into it, from it, and so on. We need to try to account for experiences of consciousness, alongside and intersecting with accounts of historical or social flows, even when we do not recognize ourselves as contributing to them, as de Saint-Exupéry puts it above.

When I think about my articulation of the word ‘we’ with my son, I can identify some of the ways that various power relations play out and pass through me through my usually unreflexive selection of pronouns. Before going there, though, I’ll describe another example of power passing through pronouns. I once worked in a residential treatment centre with disabled Aboriginal youth, and I recall a particular staff person who would frequently say to the kids “We don’t do that” about many different things. Because of the Native/Non-native, disabled/nondisabled, and poor/class-privileged dynamics that were ever-present in this setting, I recall being deeply troubled by her use of this moralizing ‘we’. It seemed to me, even then, that colonization, normalization, and the imposition of middle-class values were ‘passing through her’ or ‘flowing through her’ – in her use of a phrase that she likely used just as liberally with her own white children. While this phrase is arguably both moralizing and normalizing, no matter the audience, I think it was different in its effects – and even in what it ‘was;’ it mattered differently (Ahmed 1998; Butler 1993) – when she said it to her own non-institutionalized white children, versus when she said it to disabled Aboriginal children ‘in our care.’ This difference between what the exact same statement ‘is’ in two different utterances is due to what Deleuze and Guattari would call the
“assemblage” in which it flowed and intersected with other practices and discourses (2000, 81). According to Chrisjohn et al., “When carried out by an oppressive society upon the members of another society (or societies), there is another word for normalization: genocide” (2006, 122). And I think this white staff person’s ‘we,’ when used in this particular setting, needs to be read in light of this distinction; however, I am not saying her pronoun usage ‘was genocidal.’ I do not think the United Nations Genocide Convention would back this up – it would be hyperbole on my part, if that were what I was doing here. But this recognition may be much more complicated than we might tend to assume. Personally, I would tend to worry that such hyperbole might be ‘too left,’ ‘too anti-colonial’ or ‘too critical’ – or somehow-or-other comfortably at one extreme of ‘the political spectrum’ – at the end with which I tend to relate. It is perhaps interesting, then, that this hyperbole would be what Chrisjohn et al. critique as “methodological individualism,” given that theirs is an anti-colonial critique coming from ‘the left.’ To say of this one staff person, then, that ‘she’ or ‘what she said’ was genocidal is an example of what Jenkins might call “responsibility overload” (2011), where she is, in effect, bearing individual responsibility for a collective phenomenon that we were all responsible for – “all” staff at the centre, at the very least.

Perhaps, then, a way forward is that we were all, as staff (at least), participating in what many Aboriginal critics describe as ongoing genocide – some through a close reading of the internationally agreed upon United Nations Genocide Convention (Chrisjohn et al. 2006; Churchill 2004; 1998) – and that this pronoun usage, like so many other details of what we did (Chapman, forthcoming, 2012), cumulatively streamed into flows of genocide that defy liberal conceptualizations of ‘individual responsibility’ or agency. It is not that she and I should not be accountable for what we did, but it is not useful for this to happen in such a way that I might make her out to be solely responsible for everything that happened in that space. Like the drops of water in de Saint-Exupéry’s river, perhaps it might have been nearly impossible for us to recognize our shared complicity –

I share Ahmed’s (2004a) difficult insight that there is an ethical and political imperative to not exclusively hold responsible those most immediately responsible for systemic injustices, which she discusses in the context of the Australian Stolen Generation. However, given that in this particular case I was one of those most immediately responsible, I am implicated differently than she is in the Stolen Generation by virtue of being Australian. For me to prioritize her insight in this context, therefore, would be structurally distinct from her doing so – “something like” what I described in chapter one as the distinction between what hooks and I would be doing, even if we used all the same words to describe anti-racist white people.
but only because Foucault’s “law of rarity” governed what would and would not count as legitimate knowledge, as this played out in the assemblage that Chrisjohn et al. call “the standard account” of colonization in Canada (2006). I believe that most of us, as staff, would have been able to generally accept something like ‘some people believe that the Indian Residential Schools constituted genocide’ – but this would have been treated as less than fully valid, and its critique would not have bled into our ‘care giving’ work at all. This relates to Heron’s discussion of development workers’ comparison of themselves with ‘the real racists,’ which I (as one part of a ‘we’ of co-authors) have elsewhere (Chapman et al., forthcoming) translated into staff of contemporary institutions comparing ourselves with ‘the real institutions’ that Goffman (1961) describes as ‘total institutions’ (and which Chrisjohn et al. [2006] write accurately characterizes Indian Residential Schools in Canada). Reading the distinction and the resultant representations of ‘us and them’ in these ‘real oppression’ comparisons *differentially* invites an ethical imperative to be cautious here. Comparing the place I worked with past asylums or Indian Residential Schools, or comparing my work there with that of other workers I judge to be ‘worse’ than I was, creates a selective and fictional representation of what I did in that role. And, however complex this all is, it is also fairly clear: the assemblage in which we each acted agentively was one in which there was an almost consistent positioning of those ‘on top’ relative to those ‘on bottom,’ across the various flows of stratification that intersected in that space.

With my own son today, the intersecting power relations do not fit so neatly onto Fanon’s Manichaean structure of unevenly distributed exaltation and denigration, but there are nevertheless power relations at play beyond adult/child. As a man saying “we don’t hit” to my male child, my straightforward intent is to support him to grow up to be an adult who’s non-violent, considerate of others’ feelings, and so on. But Ahmed invites us to queer such ‘straightforwards’ and to consider that they might follow paths that secure and obscure domination (2006b). Following Bly Frank (1992), I might even say that the strait of my straightforward flows might straitjacket the complexity of life into severely constrained becomings – which McRuer (2006) might then invite us to crip and queer.

Literal straitjackets are much less distant from the treatment centre I worked in (although they were not used there), as compared to everyday conversations between my son and I, but perhaps there is something in our cultural context that constrains my efforts to align our
father-and-son becomings with a ‘straightforward’ pursuit of justice. Citing Deleuze, Jenkins asks, “how do we become worthy of what happens to us in our lives” (2011) – which I take to mean, knowing what I know of Deleuze and Jenkins: how can our becomings defy the constraints, and diverge from Ahmed’s “paths well trodden,” that are constantly steering our lives in directions we can never know or choose? A strait, unlike a river or a stream, is a constrained body of water between two larger bodies of water. Perhaps one way, then, of representing the workings of what is sometimes called ‘internalized’ oppression or norms is to imagine that they ‘straiten’ our flows – that they constrain them – in addition to also ‘straightening’ them or steering them in a given direction. And the straitjacket is a particularly violent example of the ways that our culture has an entire history of very literally constraining what people can and cannot do, an ‘ethical practice’ of ‘the government of others’ grounded in the belief that such violently imposed constraint will ‘help’ them become certain kinds of people – including, notably, nonviolent people. The straitjacket is also an example of a reform of past horrors that is today widely understood as a horror: it was developed as a humane alternative to chains. Violent constraint was reformed, but retained, with the ongoing violence seemingly imperceptible to those perpetrating it, because of the constraints imposed by the, at once, straitening and straightening stories they told about being progressive, helpful, humanitarians. This history of reform as reformulation certainly haunted the treatment centre where I worked, up to and including not using straitjackets (or chains) but having a locked confinement room. Such histories haunt us, usually in less direct ways, all the time.

Perhaps ‘something likewise’ in some ways, there is a straightforward, and a strait and narrow, purpose to my “we don’t hit,” as well as to other related things I say to my son about other people’s feelings and so on, which all relate to an orientation I might identify as ‘pro-feminist’. At the same time, however, there is a certain experience of privilege and entitlement that ‘enables me to’ imagine that it is possible to live a life, having been born male, in which using violence as self-defense is never necessary. In addition to what felt like fairly constant harassment, I was subjected to minor incidents of homophobic physical violence as a teenager, but fighting was not as common in the community in which I grew up as it was in neighbouring communities. This seems to have been related to the influx of tremendously wealthy people that moved into the town I lived in when I was about ten,
making it so that our Nova Scotian town had the highest average income East of Westmount (and it is telling that we knew this). My frequently recounted storying of this demographic shift is that I hated most of the people who moved there at that time and I (erroneously) experienced myself, my family, and most of my friends as poor, because of the lavish displays of wealth and privilege that became locally normative. (However erroneous the notion that we were poor in any real sense, and it is erroneous, Richard Wilkinson’s [2011] descriptions of relative poverty may have arguably been at play.) However, reflecting back on this time today, I imagine that if this demographic shift had not taken place, there might have been more physical violence in our school, which would have changed the social context in which I constituted my self, and in particular my ‘masculinity:’ the ridiculously wealthy people that I went to school with did not have to use violence in order to assert their dominance, they had lots of other ways of doing so; and they did. But, even though I experienced some limited harassment from some of these wealthy peers, all physical violence or threats of physical violence that I was subjected to came from less wealthy schoolmates (which is not to say from poor ones). Thinking about all this, although I want to raise a pro-feminist, considerate, non-violent boy, I am also aware that my sense of this as possible and something he and I are entitled to is not ‘outside’ of other power relations.

Class privilege, which is strongly associated with racial privilege nationally and globally, feeds my sense that this is possible for him. This does not mean I do not think it is a good or attainable goal; I want him to be non-violent, loving, sweet and politically astute. But I might need to be vigilant about the possibility that my intentionally pro-feminist ‘we’ might not always be radically discernable from a class-privileged ‘we’ or a racialized one. And the fact that my son is partially Filipino, and that my partner and I have political concerns about some things expressed by some Filipino members of our family, complexly interlocks with our father-to-son-ness, constituting an assemblage I find difficult to navigate.

Police and prisons were imposed on the Philippines and on Filipinos, as on others outside of Europe the world over, by white colonizers. And traditions of anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian resistance in the Philippines date back at least to Lapu-Lapu’s army killing Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 (Briney 2010), through to the People Power revolution of the 1980s that ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos (MacDonald and Dunlap 2011), and surely live on in countless ways. That said, bringing to mind Ahmed’s account of whiteness (2006b)
as not inhering exclusively in the bodies of white people, some of our Filipino family members have an uncritical appraisal of police and prisons. This is just as true of some of our white family members, but they are more distant family with whom our son has less of an ongoing and close relationship. So, although it is possible that he heard my partner and I talking about police violence during the G8/G20 protests of 2010 and translated what we said into more-or-less its opposite, I assume that some other loved one presented him with a different account of what had taken place. The following week, we took him with some friends to the ‘Take back the dyke’ Pride march. When people started marching, he and I were off waiting to the side and playing. He turned to me and said that the bad people were coming, but it was okay because the police would come to put them in jail. The responsive flows from my tear ducts were every bit ethical and political flows, which is not a metaphor.

Like any group, Filipino people have widely diverging understandings of what the police are all about, and I am aware of the dangers of racist representation in this story. (A Filipino family member who was once visiting told my son a children’s rhyme that described throwing a rock at the head of a police officer. Suffice to say, as is true of anywhere, the Philippines contain many different accounts of appropriately relating to the police.) It is also true that lots of our white relatives have incredibly racist, sexist, homophobic (etc.) views. But those relatives do not live near us and our son would not even recognize them. And so, in the context of family he has everyday access to, it is only on the Filipino side that any of his loved ones are uncritically pro-“law and order.” And I find it very troubling when I find myself working to un-do lessons he’s learned from Filipino loved ones. How can my ‘we’ in such circumstances be only the ‘we’ of a critical political community and not a racialized, classed, or geo-politicized ‘we’? And how do I navigate this, specifically, with a four-year old? I have no idea, but it might be political and ethical ‘work’ to keep wondering.

Foucault (1984, 385) suggests that the boundaries of a given ‘we’ are never fixed and are only ever a result of our formulations of concerns or questions:

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35 At times I say he’s three, other times that he’s four. I am aware of this discrepancy and have decided to leave it as is. It reflects the age he was while I was actually struggling to make sense of the things I describe.
the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible, by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result – and the necessarily temporary result – of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.

I want to question things, along with my son and in tune with his age and understanding, in a way that will open up possibilities that may serve him critically in his life – without effecting an exaltation of whiteness and a denigration/distancing from his Filipino/racialized ‘side’ (as Sara Ahmed describes having occurred in her own and others’ experience growing up ‘mixed race’ [2006b; 2010]). But if even my formulation of concerns or questions is – furthermore – void of what Foucault above calls “result” until it is given meaning by my son, then how could I ever be able to navigate the overtones with which he countersigns a given articulated ‘we’ (Derrida 1985)? I am fairly confident you will not find a conclusive answer to this question in these pages. But I know that the questions I am formulating will continue to have relevance, and to become other than what they are now, for me, in my life, for a long time – and will continue to defer conclusive answers. And it is my ‘ability to know’ this that keeps bringing me back to Derrida and Spivak as I get taken along in the flows of this project.

**How is the Personal Political for Perpetrators?**

According to Spivak: “The ethical aporia [impasse or impossibility] is not negotiable. We must act in view of this” (1999, 287 n135). We cannot act with full knowledge of what we are doing, but we cannot therefore not act. To live is to ‘act.’ To live is to participate in ethics and politics, just by virtue of living. And yet we cannot exhaustively know the nature of our participation, how we affect others, or how we contribute to, rearrange, and contest social norms and power relations. So how can we possibly live our lives, knowing we can never know? Spivak advocates possibilities for proceeding, without providing answers.

She writes, “work with deconstructive approaches to the subject and with the ethical concerns of the final Foucault have made me more and more aware of the importance of the neglected details of the everyday” (1999, 238). The “neglected details of the everyday:” I
take this to mean the ways that “power passes through” us (Foucault 2003b, 29), as we go about ordinary life – making decisions based upon information that is more or less readily available; sometimes making decisions without giving them much thought, sometimes only after careful deliberation; sometimes feeling particularly tired, or stressed, or frustrated; sometimes experiencing ourselves as more ‘done-to’ than ‘doing;’ sometimes just trying to get through the day; sometimes doing one thing while thinking about another; sometimes feeling competent, content and even joyful; and so on. We play a part in shaping the world around us, regardless of what we are attending to at a given moment. Tim Wise writes that “for us, whiteness simply is, it becomes the unspoken, uninterrogated norm, taken for granted, the way a fish takes water for granted” (2005, 2-3). And like water for a fish, whiteness and other aspects of the power that passes through us is always present:

We are never merely individuals; we are never alone; we are always in the company, as uncomfortable as it sometimes can be, of others, the past, of history. We become part of that history just as surely as it becomes part of us. There is no escaping it, merely different levels of coping. It is how we bear the past that matters, and it is all that differentiates us in many ways (Wise 2005, 2).

Mark Trudinger, like Wise, explores his family history in order to open up possibilities for better understanding, and acting in light of, his whiteness. He writes that “white family history is often something that sits on shelves, rather than something that creates a sense of belonging; our ancestors live in family trees, rather than with us in our everyday lives” (Trudinger 1996, 20). Here, we find yet again this sense of the importance of “our everyday lives.” White, too, subtitles one of his books, “resurrecting diversity in everyday life” (2004c), and Ahmed suggests that following willfulness (or whatever concept) around, moves us out of the history of ideas and into the everyday (2011). But for none of these authors is “the everyday” what it is most commonly taken to be.

Spivak brings Derrida’s *différance*, in which meaning is only ever achieved through differentiation to the extent that any ‘true meaning’ is illimitably deferred, into conversation with the importance of focusing on the everyday:

Of what is history made as it happens? Of the differed-deferred ‘identity’ of people in the differed-deferred ‘unity’ of actions…. [I]t is the bits and pieces
founded unspectacular ... that are most rich in educative promise.... I am speaking of a history that can attend to the details of the putting together of a continuous-seeming self for everyday life (Spivak 1999, 238).

This resonates strongly with my aims for this project. Following Spivak and Derrida, I do believe that our identities and actions are only seemingly unified through the differing-deferring (or differential) process of meaning-making. And yet I do not believe that reading Derrida, or Spivak, in itself, offers much “educative promise” for making the world more just. I am just not sure how it would. I share Bhabha’s “commitment to theory” (1994), but I do not really think anybody imagines that theorizing is sufficient as an end in itself. Like Trudinger’s account of white history, theory too often “sits on shelves, rather than ... creat[ing] a sense of belonging [that is] ... with us in our everyday lives.” And, following Wise, I would say, “It is how we bear [theory] that matters, it is all that differentiates us in many ways.” It is what theory or knowledge ‘enables’ us to do that matters. So, with Spivak, I agree that different ways of attending to the details of everyday life may offer educative, political, and ethical promise. I also agree that there is some urgency, too, in attending “to the details of the putting together of a continuous-seeming self.”

Although I think we always need to critique the self-evidence of liberal and psychological accounts of the ‘self’, we also need some version of singular person as a unit of meaning making. We need it, but we cannot accept it as it is generally accepted. Spivak says that “the most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything” (cited in Butler 1993, 27). We cannot do without some unit of ‘singular person’ in our accounts of ethics, psychology, politics, or history. To say that identity is unified through meaning making is not to say that nobody was controlling of my partner or that nobody restrained disabled Aboriginal kids (Chapman 2010a). I did. It was me. But how can I be accountable for having done so, how can I try to be responsible for this sexism, ableism, ageism, and colonial racism, without thus ‘representing’ myself (partially and fictitiously) through the rules set out by liberalism and psychologism? This question is important, practically in an everyday way, rather than ‘just theoretically:’ the rules set out by liberal individualism force me to reconcile ‘what I did’ with ‘who I am’ (Foucault 1990a; 1978) – a distinction that is commonly recognized (“I am not mad at you, I am mad about what you did,” says the parent to the child; “love the
sinner, hate the sin”) without being taken to its logical *différantial* conclusion, which would require us to fundamentally undo (rather than reform) normative social structures such as prisons, unequal resource distribution, and so on.

If I were to reconcile ‘what I did’ with ‘who I am’, and if my work against sexism, thus reconciled, would position ‘who I am’ as ‘a pro-feminist,’’ then my participation in sexism must therefore be an exaggeration or an aberration (allowing me to indeed ‘be’ a pro-feminist), or perhaps must be evidence that, in truth, I ‘am’ rather an anti-feminist or a sexist. Following Foucault’s description of the historical shift by which “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species,” “a personage,” “a singular nature” (Foucault 1990a, 43), I might suggest that the ‘singular nature’ versus ‘aberration’ interpretive conflict is alive and well in contemporary considerations of ‘what to make’ of actions that contradict what Heron calls “the moral self” or “moral coherence” (2007, 81-82). This interpretive conflict provides pathways for how I think we most often deal with details of life that are at odds with our constructions of our own fixed selves.

Perhaps she was just too sensitive, I could easily say. Perhaps I have changed since then, or perhaps I was somehow ‘not right’ in those specific aberrational moments of lapse of character. Or: perhaps this entire project and my interest in feminism are *really* self-serving and duplicitous, whether ‘consciously’ or ‘unconsciously’ – notably, both levels are imagined to be ‘in me.’ I either totalize myself as ‘sexist,’ period – which not even those who the rest of us imagine as sexist or racist at their core seem to do (Ahmed 2004b; Arendt 1964; Goodrum, Umberson, and Anderson 2001; Jenkins 2009; 1990; Wood 2004) – or I have to “contain” a woman’s experience that I am sexist as either untrue or as somehow unrepresentative of who I *really* am (Heron, 2007). Of this latter option – which in the abstract most of us might agree is ‘irresponsible,’ but which nevertheless seems to frequently occur when even very thoughtful and politically savvy people are accused of racism or sexism – Spivak offers: “One responsibility of the critic might be to read and write so that the impossibility of such individualistic refusals of the institutional privileges of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously” (1999, 264-265).

I hope to further invite consideration that none of these options that reconcile ‘what I do’ with ‘who I am’ will suffice for what I am conceptualizing as a personal-is-political ethics that might contribute to our living our ‘everyday’ lives in ways that might contribute to
radically transforming society. We need to rely on some version of ‘singular person’ as a unit of understanding, without allowing ourselves to get caught up in the allure of the particular historically- and culturally-specific ‘self’ that exists in liberalism: one which is internally coherent, continuous and consistent, which is either good or bad, responsible or irresponsible, etc., and which needs to be known in order to properly understand either a given human or humanity. And so, struggling with this in her own writing practice, Spivak does something she recognizes the need to do – naming her subjective positioning of power as a class-privileged author in the Global North – while also needing (just as urgently) to draw attention to the impossibility and inadequacy of doing so: “Calling the place of the investigator into question remains a meaningless piety in many recent critiques of the sovereign subject. Although I attempt to sound the precariousness of my position throughout, I know such gestures can never suffice” (1999, 247-248). A few pages later, as I cited above, she warns of the risks of “a rewriting of accountable responsibility as narcissism, lower case; perhaps we cannot do otherwise, but one can tend” (1999, 251).

One can tend. Great word, tend. It means, at once, to participate in a tendency and also to ‘care for’ – like one tends a garden. I think Spivak is perhaps suggesting that in our care for such seemingly abstract theoretical details, we do some of the work toward constituting practical tendencies for everyday living that might not yet exist or might not yet be as ‘freely available’ as they could be – “something like” Ahmed’s paths and lines (2006b; 2010) and Deleuze and Guattari’s flows. Spivak uses “tending” in a similar way elsewhere, describing Derrida’s attention to the deconstruction of ‘knowing,’ and thus his creation of orientations for others to attend to this too. Immediately following doing so, she again brings his theoretical work into conversation with the everyday, initially by suggesting that Derrida’s différential approach to knowledge and truth may appear to be fundamentally at odds with Foucault’s work which historicizes knowledge and truth. Having named this divide, she then suggests that Foucault himself addressed it in his final research, by working “to measure the plurality of ethics by researching the ways in which the subject ‘subjects’ itself through ‘ability to know’ (pouvoir-savoir)” (1993, 39). Earlier I cited Foucault on the language of ethical ‘navigation’ and his attention to its ‘conjectural’ (or uncertain) character – and I think it may be this aspect of Foucault’s ethics that Spivak is suggesting can be fruitfully brought into conversation with Derrida’s impossibilities.
This, then, is the model that I’d like to think I most consistently try to follow in my own conceptualization – and operationalization – of ethics in this project: Spivak’s reading of Foucault’s ethics, as she intersects it with a differential approach to knowledge, identity, ethics, and responsibility. I attempt, therefore, to touch upon the everyday ‘ground level’ workings of the ways that “power passes through individuals,” in the very moment that we make sense of the world around us – without ever being able to accurately know what we are doing in an exhaustive way. I intersect with this a Disability Studies and Mad Studies interrogation of how sanism or ableism intersects with our ‘ability to know’ – through the affective normalization I describe above as navigating the ‘not quite/not right’ through our ‘disability to know’ with which we police our emotional responses to the world, especially in situations where we’ve harmed another. I try to do this in a way that is thoroughly relational, exploring various ways that the personal is political. These various factors, intersecting, are the assemblage in which the flows of this project make sense.

I try to use them to make sense of things that do not make sense to me, such as the following.

I went to high school with a girl who never really crossed my mind following graduation. This changed a few years ago, when a mutual friend told me that this other woman thinks of me more frequently. Her memories of me, I was surprised to hear, are among her worst memories of high school. I made fun of her, saying she had a moustache. Since being reminded of this, I can certainly remember doing it – and on more than one occasion. I even remember doing it with full awareness of what I was doing: she was not an equal or willing participant; we were not ‘teasing each other.’ I knew I was causing her harm. And yet, I do not think it is accurate to say I intended to cause her harm. I knew I was doing so, but it was not my aim, if it might be useful (albeit dangerous) to separate the two. Whatever fleeting thing I meant to do (make myself or someone else laugh, make myself feel better, maybe even flirt with her), I was able to comfortably live with the harm I was causing, but I did not ‘set out’ to cause her harm, as I recall. It is more like I did not really care about that particular consequence; I did not really pause to consider it significant.

I can also say I liked her, or at least I did not dislike her. She was an acquaintance rather than a friend, but I considered her more-or-less a part of my ‘us’ group. There were people
at school I hated, to differing degrees and for various reasons, and she was far from being one of them. And yet I seem to have been unambiguously at peace with causing her harm.

Alongside the personal injury I was comfortable knowing I was causing, even though I was already familiar and aligned with (a) feminist critique at this age, I was somehow also able to live with contributing to a local cultural climate that reinforced rigid gender norms – at least as they applied to girls and facial hair. It was, again, not my thought-out purpose to police gender norms, but I was doing so and I knew enough at the time about feminism that this way of reflecting upon what I was doing should have been available to me.

I knew about the injury of reinforcing narrow gender norms through exposure to feminist critique – both in my home and in my peer group – but I also knew about it through experiencing it from other boys in my school, and through a sense of solidarity with other ‘femme’ boys and ‘butch’ girls who were exposed to similar gender norming peer abuse. In fact, it is possible that this particular girl’s long hair and make up played some part in me not thinking more critically and carefully about what I was doing. She did not look like the girls with whom I felt solidarity. Subjection to gendered peer abuse was a common experience for those of us in my ‘us’ group, both in and out of school. And so friends from various schools tended to congregate together in localized safe spaces of, among other things, an interest in the arts, left-wing politics, and greater gender and sexuality variation. And when we shared our experiences of peer abuse and the policing of rigid and narrow norms of gender and sexuality, the victims were those of us who were ‘femme’ boys or ‘butch’ girls, and the perpetrators were, as the story goes, invariably from outside of our ‘us’ group.

I was not, generally speaking, a bully – although I cannot be sure she’s the only person who remembers me like this. I’d always described myself, rather, as having been bullied, within an understanding in which people were divisible into one or the other. And I think it is true that most people at my school would have considered me more a victim than a perpetrator. But thinking about these particular acts of perpetration toward this girl, it seems to me that my shifting positions of perpetrator and victim were intimately connected. I think my own perpetration might have often happened when I bumped into her immediately following being victimized myself, although I cannot be sure this is an accurate memory; I worry that
I made this detail up after hearing about her experience of me, in order to “contain” my response to her memory (Heron 2007). But however my victimization and perpetration were or were not connected as connection, they were certainly connected by their disconnect: I only ever paid attention to my experiences of victimization, which I talked about all the time, thought about all the time, and ‘felt’ about all the time – from stress and fear, to anger and frustration, to politicized moral outrage and solidarity with other victims of gender norming peer abuse (other than her). I think this may have contributed to me not really thinking – or feeling – about what I was doing to her. Exactly how this all happened, I cannot say. I did not feel bad about it, even though it is inconsistent with ‘who I was.’ It is certainly inconsistent with who I thought and said I was. From today’s vantage point, I cannot imagine how I would not have felt bad about it. It does not make any sense. The details, the ‘hows,’ evade me today, perhaps because it was not stuff I thought or felt about much. Maybe my not feeling bad about it, and not thinking about it, contributed to my doing it – to my ‘letting myself’ do it. I’d never want to suggest that all people who cause harm to others do so out of “something like” this dynamic, but it seems to be at least partly how I did what I did to this particular person at this particular time. And maybe there is something about looking for particularities like this, rather than looking to find the ways that all people do all things to all other people in all contexts.

So I hurt this girl about twenty years ago, and today I can only speculate as to what was going on for me. If I really wanted to, I could convince myself that I am onto something with her long hair and make up rendering her gender norming victimization illegitimate, alongside my focus on my own gender norming victimization which was rendered legitimate by more closely aligning with the normative model of what we recognized as gender norming peer abuse within my peer group. If I stayed steadfast to this theme, I could give a compelling account of exactly why I did what I did. I even know who I’d cite in theorizing this representation. But I’d just be making it up. I do not remember why I tormented her. I did not even remember having done it until our mutual friend reminded me. I do not remember why this was okay by me. I do not remember how I never made the connection between what I did to her and what other boys did to me. I just do not know. But what I suspect is that, if I were able to go back and ask my-past-self, perhaps I would not have been able to answer then either. And I think my not knowing might be worth
pausing to consider. Perhaps one of the consequences of experiencing our lives as flowing rather than fixed is that we frequently do not have access to the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of things that are now gone – even sometimes minutes or seconds later. Those particular minutes, seconds, or years, are now gone. And if I am called upon to account for something I did ten minutes or twenty years ago, the responsive account that I come up with will be generated in the new, previously uninhabited context, which was partly formed through the conditions of the particular call to accountability (Butler 2005). My generation of interpretation will be an entirely new experience, rather than the accurate description of a past experience. As Heraclitus said, I am not the same person as I was back then and neither is the world I inhabit. And so, again following Spivak’s provocations about representation, my representation of ‘why’ even I did such and such, or how I came to do so, crafts an image of who I am, and perhaps even of what humans are more generally. Although my life is a flow of diverse experiences, when I account for how and why I acted as I did, I position one partial and contingent account of myself as the fixed stand-in for “who I am” in a way that is always a tremendous simplification. Inseparably, I also perform the same simplification of what it is to be human. My speculation on how I came to enact sexism will always be somewhat fictitious – in that it will always be somewhat partial – and it will also always risk fictitiously representing how all humans act or are.

There are lots of different things that could be said about this story, of course. I could say, “it was no big deal,” or “she just didn’t have a sense of humour.” I know how to say these things, because I have heard them said many times and have probably said them myself. I cannot remember if I said them at the time or not, but we can notice that these things being said about a particular situation easily gets cut and pasted to explain other situations. Another thing that can be said about this story is that, for her, this was sexism (as Kari Dehli pointed out upon reading an earlier version of this, it may have also been other things, such as humiliating, painful, irritating, annoying, and stupid). When I say it was sexism, I do not just mean I was being sexist, although of course I was. But I’d like you to consider that leaving it just like that might risk what Chrisjohn et al. call “methodological individualism” (2006), and what Angela Davis calls “dangerous individualism” (2007), by which we look to the individual to account for things that are not best (or not only) understood through
positioning individuals as the base unit of what humans are. So I want to approach this personal story as a sociological one, a political one, a collective one.

But then: is not there a risk of obscuring my responsibility and her experience of injustice, if we only read this story sociologically? Is there a way of attending to specificity, injury, and agency, without rendering all human affairs as only individuals’ interactions with other individuals? Well, following Spivak again, perhaps “one can tend:” in order to make this more of a tendency in future concrete ethical practices – both mine and others’ – I need to care for this seemingly ‘theoretical’ concern; I need to cultivate this possibility, to make it perhaps one day what Ahmed calls a “path well trodden” (2006b, 16). And, along these lines, here is what I’d like to propose: the girl from my high school has a particular lived experience of patriarchal, gendered and sexist culture, just like we all do, and she has made meaning of this in her own somewhat unique way, as we all do. And, drawing upon these experiences and how she’s narrated them, perhaps when she hears other women’s experiences of sexism today, her particular experiences give shape to her sense of solidarity or connection with those other accounts and the people who tell them. I do not mean to suggest that my torment of her was any kind of ‘gift,’ and I imagine it was probably not her sole experience of sexism, patriarchy, or peer abuse. What I think may be the case, though, is that this particular experience, along with others, shapes her understanding of sexism, gender relations, and so on. I think that this shaping effect would be distinct if I had been another girl, it would have been different if I had been a male teacher, and it would have been different if I had been a boyfriend or a guy more clearly outside of her peer group. Any of these variations would likely have also shaped her resonance with other women’s accounts of sexism, but what she did in fact experience and describe as amongst her worst memories was me doing it – and so that is what features in her memory. Vic Hill describes her personal-political experiences of racism and sexism as follows: “I think that what I have been through in my life connects me to the experiences of so many other people of colour and so many other women, which speaks to the white supremacy and the

36 That said, Derrida’s (1995) notion that we give a “gift of death” to countless others, such as those starving or being bombed while I type or you read, and that we give such “gifts” every moment of every day, could potentially offer a fruitful deconstructive reading of my use of “gift” here. Aligning purposes, thoughts, and feelings with certain others or things, giving them our time and attention, also affects those not attended to.
patriarchy that are so pervasive and acceptable in our society” (cited in Chapman 2011, 735). Vic does not thank any of the people who perpetrated racism and sexism in her life for this sense of connection; what I think she articulates, rather, is that her sense of connection enables her to understand these violences as “pervasive and acceptable in our society.” It seems to me that a major component of how we all come to make sense of things like sociological patterns of injustice is by putting them in conversation with the narratives we tell about our own personal experiences. While there are surely dangers to this, when we impose our meaning onto others (Ahmed 2004b; Boler 1999; Grillo and Wildman 1991; Razack 1999), I do not think that these dangers are rationale enough for us to stop “bringing to mind” (Jenkins 2011) our own experiences when we encounter new stories or ideas. In fact, I do not think we could choose to not do this even if we wanted to do so. This may be a fundamental part of how we interact with others, as per Derrida’s countersignature, James’ overtones, and understandings that may be normatively taken for granted – heterogeneously – in Bantu, Cherokee, and Iroquois philosophies. But, even if this is a normative means of relating, we need to bring our own narratives and experiences into conversation with others’ carefully, reflexively, and without assuming that what we know is right.

If this is all true, or at least useful, then my understanding from what our mutual friend told me is that I figure prominently in this other woman’s personal-is-political first-hand knowledge of sexism. Her personal experience of being scrutinized based on how closely she adheres to dominant standards of femininity is politically connected to the experiences of countless other women. It does not take away from her unique experience to place it in this collective context, but it may offer up different ways of thinking about it and different ways of doing things to respond to, or prevent, such occurrences – along similar lines as Chrisjohn et al.’s (2006) critique of transforming the collective and political impact of Indian Residential Schools into a psychological ‘syndrome.’ And, parallel to this woman’s personal-is-political experience of this gendered scrutiny and torment, my personal experience of perpetrating this particular harm is also the political experience of perpetrating and perpetuating sexism – connecting me to countless other men who’ve perpetrated sexism. (“Countless?” Dare I say ‘all’? How might I expect such a statement to be countersigned? What are the various ethical concerns at play in choosing such wording?)
Although this is far outside of the immediacy of my experience, one of the ways we can notice the kind of political ‘connection’ I am describing is through cumulative sociological effects – by attending to societal patterns such as sexism. “If oppression exists, then there must also be oppressors” (Razack 1999, 23). But Razack’s sense that there is a need to bother saying this suggests there is a gap between our participation in oppression, on the one hand, and our stories about our participation in oppression, on the other. Following de Saint-Exupéry, then, I was not aware that I was a part of the flow of systemic sexism or patriarchy. In fact, then as now, I explicitly positioned myself as an opponent of these things, which I understood to be located only in people like the boys that tormented me at the time (who I had no problems objectifying without concern for the political effects of doing so). But, like theirs, my perpetration of sexism and gendered peer abuse, however I made sense of it, perpetuated the acceptability and the taken-for-grantedness of discourses of sexism and practices of gendered peer abuse. So power was passing through me. Sexism was passing through me, while I was busy attending to other details of life, including my own positioning of myself against sexism, it would seem.

But: is this a way of minimizing my responsibility, to say that sexism ‘passed through me’ as if I was a passive vehicle? I think this risk is great, and I also think that in light of my concerns about the risks of dismissing her concerns or containing my responsibility, this personal-is-political account of my participation in collective flows of becoming may be fruitful in working toward more practicable approaches to taking responsibility than those based upon models of liberal individualism (Butler 1997; Jenkins 2009; Spivak 1993).

Foucault writes, “I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger” (Foucault 1984, 343). And, although this may or may not be “the main danger,” a significant danger with individualistic notions of responsibility – however accurate they seem to be when we are positioning others’ responsibility for their actions – is that they do not usually feel ‘experience near’ to us when we commit harm or are complicit in oppression. And what this seems to often lead to, in practice, is that people who are asked to ‘take responsibility,’ in the ways that we have a tendency to ask other people to do so, respond by ‘becoming’ defensive and point to all the factors they had no control over – other people’s actions, physiological factors, social or environmental factors, others’ frames of intelligibility which might highlight their fault rather than someone else’s,
etc. One day I plan to conduct a comparative analysis of descriptions of domestic violence law and sexism on men’s rights websites alongside statements that have been made by people who have been internationally charged with offenses such as crimes against humanity, in response to their charges. Today, however, I’ll just say that there is, structurally, Spivak’s “something like a relationship” between these two sites – and I do not think this is only, or even primarily, about the ‘kinds of people’ who perpetrate domestic violence or war crimes. This is not to minimize the seriousness of either, and neither am I suggesting that the two are equivalent or that we’re all guilty of systemic oppression in homogenous ways. Responsibility for oppression is no more evenly distributed than experiences of oppression. What I am advocating for is particular accounts of situated and contingent responsibility, in opposition to “discursive traditions” of dividing people into (only ever) culpable or innocent, and in opposition to those interactional ethical practices that live within these traditions, which again Spivak describes as “mudslinging,” “excuses and accusations” (1999, 4). Jenkins suggests we inadvertently “invite” defensiveness and irresponsibility when we do the work of naming others’ responsibility (1990). And, unless we accept liberal models of how humans operate, however much we might not like to admit it, defensive responses, as representations in Spivak’s double sense, are partially true: there are complex factors that contribute to any choice or action. Following Spivak, we might say that pointing to context as causal or framing people as 100% responsible are both ultimately fictitious in that they’re partial. Perhaps one of the crucial challenges for ethics and politics is to work toward contexts and conditions in which perpetrators’ partially true responses highlighting contingency do not preempt responsible and accountable responses and actions.

In terms of the societal flow of gendered peer abuse, which I both drew upon and actively fed in the concrete act of doing particular harm to this one girl, I did not invent the notion that only males should have facial hair, or that boys should tease girls about their appearances, or that I should more carefully attend to the pain that others cause me than to the pain I cause others. This is not to say I was ‘not responsible’ for what I did. Furthermore, I had nobody around me, so far as I was aware, who understood me to be anything other than a victim in relation to the phenomenon of ‘gendered peer abuse’ (see Arendt 1964, 116). And so there are aspects of what I did that cannot really be said to have
been my individual originary doing, but that were nevertheless very much my doing in that I navigated my context and its many diverse possibilities for living and – in so doing – acted agentively and perpetrated and perpetuated sexism. There was a flow available to me – boy’s sexist tormenting of girls – and I chose to ‘go with the flow’ rather than going with any number of countless alternative flows, many of which I actively ‘went with’ in other relationships at the time. My participation in this flow had concrete effects: I caused this girl’s suffering; I contributed to gendered peer abuse being reinforced as normal and acceptable in the cultural climate of my high school – and of our world even, on however seemingly small a scale (Foucault 1990a, 99). Just like the boys that tormented me at this same time drew upon rigid ideas about gender and sexuality in order to make my life miserable, I did “something like” this same thing to her. My tormenting took a specific form of sexism; theirs took a specific form of homophobia. This is one of many distinctions that could be made, and so I am again not wishing to suggest that these two instances of gender norming peer abuse were equivalent when I point to specific aspects in which they were “something like” one another. Taking this analysis out of my comfort zone even further, just like I did not invent these practices or the ideas that support them, the boys who tormented me also did not. I ‘chose’ to act this way just as ‘responsibly’ or ‘agentively’ as they did, however unpleasant it might be for me now to connect my life to theirs in this way. Like other ideas and practices all around us, gender norming peer abuse was freely available for the taking, and some of us chose to take it up and pass it on, so that it would both harm specific others and also continue to be freely available for others to harm other particular others. There were other ideas and practices of gender norms that I did not take up, even though they were also available to me. And as a result of these other navigations of gender norms, I faced minor incidents of violence, threats of serious violence, and lots of harassment. And yet I continued to not take up ways of being that did not ‘fit’ for me – so it was not that I intentionally weighed out and chose available alternatives for performing ‘masculinity’ that would serve me best or bring me closest to prevailing norms. So what did I do, in order to navigate these norms? How would I get to what Spivak calls “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” – where sexist power passed through me, in the moment of ethical deliberation, as I made partial and creative meaning of my world, my place in it, and what was important to me?
Although I cannot remember all the specifics that I wish I could, I am interested in how I, concretely, achieved these various navigations of the vast array of available ways of being, acting, perceiving, reflecting, etc. I am interested in how we all conceptualize and navigate our parameters of freedom, without wishing to suggest that we all do in the same way. When we approach these kinds of questions using singular subjectivity as a base unit of analysis, attending to detail and ‘thick description’ rather than abstraction and generality, it is clear that we do not all navigate our lives in the same way. And so it is perhaps a bit strange that enough of us can navigate our lives with enough of a ‘concerted’ or ‘roughly shared’ orientation that the cumulative effects, on a sociological level, result in identifiable patterns such as sexism or homophobia. I think this strangeness may be what leads us to imagine that people who do participate in oppression must be very different from us. But the crucial gap that we need to attend to is not between those of us who are guilty and those who are innocent. The politically crucial gap is between what we represent our lives as being and the various impacts that we have on our world, on a cumulative level, as de Saint-Exupéry’s drops of water – in flows of becoming that we may not be aware of. I have no reason to assume that the boys who tormented me navigated their lives in the same way as I did, in terms of subjective details of living, but we all collaboratively contributed to the normalization of gender norming peer abuse – as if we were working together on purpose. If we are all going about our lives with unique perceptions, doing distinct and uncoordinated things, how are there identifiable patterns of inequality and injustice? How do our personal experiences of the world and our political effects on the world coexist? Perhaps this question could even be described as approaching the crux of what it means to live ethically.

We might not be aware that we are shaping society, making history, or contributing to systemic forms of oppression, but we are nevertheless always attuned to some aspects of what it is to live – which points to an aspect of living unaccounted for in de Saint-Exupéry’s powerful image of us not realizing we are contributing to history (or society, systemic oppression, etc.). I think it is therefore ultimately untrue to say that we are unaware of what we are doing and how we fit in. Most of us are aware and cognizant of our lives and what we do. We are keenly aware, and reflexively engaged – but we are only aware of, and engaged with, certain select aspects of life. Perhaps this can be thought of as another instance of King’s “tributaries on the same river,” in which we may be attuned to one
tributary, flow of becoming, or effect on certain others, and at the same time not tuned in to others. Derrida writes that the most ordinary ethical situation is one in which choosing to act ethically relative to one other is to act, in that very act, unethically relative to another other – or even to countless others. Every action that is loyal to someone is disloyal or harmful to others. “What binds me to … this one or that one … rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable…. How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people?” (Derrida 1995, 71).

What is much less ‘ordinary,’ though, is reflexive awareness of this (which we might say Derrida is ‘tending’ here) – because again we are often only attuned to (some of) the effects we have on some others and not others. Elsewhere, I call this an ethics of “selective intentionality,” attempting to account for histories in which people perpetrated terrible atrocities while maintaining representations of themselves as ethical and just (Chapman, forthcoming). And this is why I think we need to attend to both James’ and de Saint-Exupéry’s rivers of life flowing on. How are these different flows interconnected?

In addition to King’s multiple tributaries, another necessarily partial and creative representation that might be useful here is a river fork, where multiple rivers merge to become one – such as where the North Saskatchewan and the South Saskatchewan Rivers become the Saskatchewan River. I think that, if we conceptualize each person as having her or his own stream of consciousness, we can also imagine that there are countless ways that our particular flows fork with one another. I had coffee with Shaista Patel yesterday, and we each talked about the work we are doing. Perhaps because I talked about my approach in this project, one of the things we both self-reflexively commented on toward the end of the conversation were ways that statements the other person had made earlier in the conversation had made a difference for us. Usually this forking happens without this kind of reflexive engagement, but it happens whenever we interact with others. Understood through the earlier discussion of agentive reading, listening or witnessing, whether or not we are reflexively tuned in, when our flows fork with others’, we are far from passive.

However reflexively engaged and purposive, or however unaware, we always actively navigate these forking. You’re doing so right now, as my flows fork with yours. Your overtones set the stage for, and also respond to, my words. Your overtones give shape to
my words, as they exist uniquely for you in Spivak’s vanishing present, their fully articulated presence vanishing as soon as you move on to the next line, never to be read in the same way again. Some of these overtones may be reflexive, such as: “I am not sure I buy what he’s saying, but let’s see where he goes with it;” others may be less so, such as a sense of annoyance with this sentence you’re reading right now (to which you may respond more reflexively almost immediately, but the initial feeling can be distinguished from purposive or reflexive engagement). Whatever the details, right now you’re actively and creatively co-authoring as you read, rather than passively receiving what I unilaterally transmit. And if this is anything like an accurate description of our most ‘everyday’ encounters with one another and with one another’s accounts, then this seriously complicates what it is to ‘be’ responsible, to ‘be’ agentive, or to ‘be’ accountable. How could we possibly attempt to live our lives ethically in the face of not knowing how we impact others, or exactly how and why we did things in moments past, in the presence of illimitable others?

“It’s Hard for me to do What’s Right When all I Wanna do is Wrong.”

Scattered Speculations on Values and Other Intentional States

One thing we have to recognize, think with, and work with, is that people tend to try to live ethically. This is evidenced even in places where we might prefer not to find it, such as Hannah Arendt’s account of Adolf Eichmann (1964), Jean Hatzfeld’s research with perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide (2005), Ahmed’s reading of white supremacist materials (2004b), Alice Miller’s historical source materials advocating child abuse (1990), and narratives of domestic violence perpetrators (Goodrum et al. 2001; Wood 2004). In each of these studies of accounts from groups that we tend to imagine as navigating their lives very differently from the rest of us, people describe themselves acting within moral parameters and reflexively navigating their available options – to purposively align with a given version of the good life, to try to do a little less harm than others might do in the same situation, even to ethically distinguish themselves from others who they discursively place unambiguously on the side of unethicality. Their accounts do not provide the whole picture

37 (Prince 1991)
of course, but we cannot afford to dismiss their significance. My attempts to care for my partner and our unborn baby were consequential to my response to her pregnancy, and not all of my attempts to care were controlling. My positioning myself as helping disabled Aboriginal children with whom I worked was consequential for how I ‘lived with’ restraining them and so on (and, in fact, I have never suggested I was never helpful). And if I could access what I was imagining I was doing in relation to the girl from my high school, this would give us a ‘thicker description’ of how it was that I enacted sexism in that context. This would not provide the full picture of what happened, and I would not want it to be used to counter her experiences, but a fuller picture of how I was ethically navigating my life and relationships at that time would tell us more about how power passed through me – which might tell us something about one way that this might happen in other particular instances too (which is not to say ‘in all’ instances). It seems to me that the danger of highlighting such intentions or aims is that they frequently become embroiled in debates about the exhaustive truth of situations – where my “I was only trying to…” is used to counter another’s “this is how you made me feel” or “this is what you did.” But holding multiple perspectives on a given event as each partially true and partially fictitious, in irresolvable tension with one another, might provide more options for understanding and operationalizing ethical practices than narrating the effects of harm using fixed understandings of what it is to be human to explain those who cause harm. Ahmed writes, to be touched in a certain way, or to be moved in a certain way by an encounter with another, may involve a reading not only of the encounter, but of the other that is encountered as having certain characteristics. If we feel another hurts us, then that feeling may convert quickly into a reading of the other, such that it becomes hurtful … the ‘it hurts’ becomes, ‘you hurt me’, which might become, ‘you are hurtful’, or even ‘you are bad’. These affective responses … not only create the borders between selves and others, but also ‘give’ others meaning and value in the very act of apparent separation (2004a, 28, emphasis hers).

38 Not all of these researchers, I should say, would agree with me. But their ‘data’ fits my claim.
As with so many other things we tend to think and feel, there are subjugated histories to our ‘ability to know’ that those who cause harm do so because they are particular kinds of people. And, also as with so many other things, these historical developments in Europe have been imposed on people all over the world through colonialism. For example, according to what we might call Innu ‘psychology,’ “Human beings are not seen as fixed and unalterable individuals who can be expected always to act in the same way and to take full responsibility for any lapses, but as part of a much wider and more fluid social, natural and spiritual reality which may influence their behavior” (Samson et al. 1999, 5). Our perception of humans as “fixed and unalterable individuals,” which sometimes approaches self-evidence is again, then, something we might fruitfully attend to as a highly particular “architecture of the self,” contingent on particular “discursive traditions,” or – as White says below – “traditions of understanding.” Following White, I’ll briefly explore one archaeology of the architecture of the self through which we interpret harm-done as being done by certain kinds of individuals. Following Bruner, White calls such interpretations “internal state understandings” of what it is to be human:

Internal state understandings portray human action as a surface manifestation of specific elements or essences of a self that is to be ‘found’ at the center of identity. For example, in the context of internal state understandings, human expression might be interpreted as a manifestation of any number of unconscious motives, instincts, needs, desires, drives, dispositions, personality traits, personal properties (like strengths and resources), and so on. According to this tradition of understanding, these elements or essences are universally present to different degrees in the human condition, and life is derived from either the direct expression of these elements or essences or from distortions of these elements and essences. Such distortions are often called ‘dysfunctions’ or ‘disorders.’

These internal state understandings are often associated with ideas about intrapsychic processes that construct an account of the mechanisms by which the

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For other archaeologies of the emergence of this development, see Foucault (1978) on “the concept of the ‘dangerous individual’ in 19th-century legal psychiatry,” as well as his Abnormal (2003a) and Psychiatric power (2008) lectures, and also Nicole Rafter’s Creating born criminals (1997).
elements and essences of the self are transformed into human expression. At the turn of the 20th century, these conceptions of internal states and intrapsychic mechanisms gave rise to a specific concept of the ‘unconscious mind.’ This achievement represented the culmination of a number of ‘modern’ and interlinked developments of the preceding century or two, which included:

• The development of humanist notions of the presence of a human ‘nature’ that is considered to be the foundation of personal existence and that is understood to provide the source of human expression.

• The evolution of the concept of a ‘self’ as an essence that is understood to occupy the center of personal identity. Although this idea of self is a relatively novel idea in the history of the world’s cultures, it has been a hugely successful idea and is today quite taken for granted in the West.

• The progressive development, from the 17th century on, of a new system of social control in which ‘normalizing judgment’ steadily displaced moral judgment. [Note that he’s highlighting this development in the realm of ‘the ethical,’ without distinguishing it from the other ‘psychological’ developments.]

Over the past century, these internal state understandings of human expression have become pervasive in Western culture – so much so that internal state understandings have achieved a taken-for-granted status in much of the professional and popular psychology of this current era (White 2007, 101-102).

William James’ ideas, which are not of the ‘internal state’ tradition of understanding, were in development at the very same time as “the culmination” White describes above. According to White (2004c, 69), James’ work is more closely aligned with a different tradition of understanding what it is to be human, with which White aligned his own work and which Bruner called “intentional state psychologies” or “folk psychologies.” The traditions of ‘ethics’ Foucault studies in ancient Greece and Rome (2006e) and those Mahmood studies in contemporary Egypt (2005) are also aligned with what Bruner called “intentional state” or “folk” psychologies: Foucault and Mahmood both attend to the ways that people are actively involved in the intentional forming of their identities toward preferred directions, drawing upon contingently available discursive traditions, and always in communities of resonant purpose. (And elsewhere White describes the relevance of
In contrast to internal state conceptions, intentional state conceptions of identity are distinguished by the notion of ‘personal agency.’ This notion casts people as active mediators and negotiators of life’s meanings and predicaments, both individually and in collaboration with others. It also casts people as the originators of many of the preferred developments of their own lives: People are living out their lives according to intentions that they embrace in the pursuit of what they give value to in life; they are going about the business of actively shaping their existence in their effort to achieve sought-after goals.

According to Bruner (1990), the significance that is assigned to notions of intention and purpose, the weight that is given to notions of values, beliefs, and commitments, and the emphasis that is given to personal agency constitute a theory of mind that is characteristic of a centuries-old tradition of folk psychology: “All cultures have as one of their most powerful constitutive instruments a folk psychology, a set of more or less connected, more or less normative descriptions about how human beings ‘tick,’ what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated action to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on”…

Bruner traced the history of the displacement, in professional and popular psychology, of these intentional state understandings about life and identity through the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. In this development, the mind of folk psychology significantly gave way to the ‘unconscious mind’ of the internal state psychologies (White 2007, 103-104).

There is something in all of this, though, that I have always found a bit unsettling. It seems to be the case that White is suggesting that all other cultures, ever, have had essentially the same “folk psychology” as an organizing framework. Surely this is not the case. One thing that may be helpful to hold in tension with this concern, though, is that White is here largely concerned with displacing the normalized self-evidence of internal state psychologies; if what he writes above is read as what he elsewhere calls “exotici[zing] the domestic” (White
2004c, vi, citing Bourdieu), or making our familiar strange, then perhaps my concern is not so pressing. I think the point of these explorations is to ‘exoticize’ what we, in our time and place, take for granted about what humans are. And perhaps our taken-for-granteds about what humans are, relatively speaking, really are so very exotic and abnormal that nearly every other tradition of understanding *that is ever existed* can be said to differ from them, even in their perhaps infinite heterogeneity. One no and many yeses, again – which also brings Foucault’s description of genealogy (Foucault 2003b, 9) to mind:

> a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge, in the name of the rights of a science that is in the hands of the few.

White and Bruner’s distinction may also resonate with Foucault’s account of his own laughter in the Preface to *The Order of Things* (1970). He writes that the entire book – which is also concerned with working against the self-evidence of how we think humans operate – emerged from his laughter at a description of a “certain Chinese Encyclopedia” (xv, citing Borges). As I read this the first time, I remember cringing at the racism. But what unfolds is that his laughter was not ‘at’ the Chinese Encyclopedia’s list of types of animals, but was rather at his own inability to render the list intelligible. And so, according to his account, it spurred his entire investigation of what we, in our time and place, *are ‘able to’* render intelligible. The Chinese Encyclopedia’s list, which had probably been laughed at very differently by many Europeans, was here evidencing that we simply do not have it all figured out. Our knowledge, as impossible as this is to really believe, is just as contingent or situated as is the knowledge informing the list in the Chinese Encyclopedia. And that is, I think, how we can think about White’s “internal state” versus “intentional state” distinction. Along these lines, White clarifies that for him the most important thing is not which approach is right – which would be impossible to discern if all knowledge is contingent. What is important is what each approach *makes possible* (White 2007):

> In drawing this distinction between internal state understandings and intentional state understandings and in privileging the [reflexive] development of intentional state understandings … I am not dismissing internal understandings
of life and identity. There are many cherished internal understandings of life that are quite beautiful and that can be seen to have positive consequences…. However, these internal understandings are unlikely to yield the sort of rich story development that is routinely an outcome of the generation of intentional state understandings. This is because internal understandings tend to:

- Diminish the sense of personal agency (according to internal understandings, people’s lives are lived by the elements and essences of the self, not shaped by actions taken under the influence of the intentions and values that one is embracing)

- Be isolating (according to internal understandings, human expression is conceived as one of a singular self, not as an expression of life that is the outcome of the story of one’s life being linked with stories of the lives of others around shared and valued themes)

- Discourage diversity (internal understandings are shaped by global norms about life that promote a modern ideal of the ‘encapsulated self’ – one that valorizes notions of self-possession, self-containment, self-reliance, and self-actualization) (104-105).

He’s concerned with the kinds of stories we can tell about our lives when drawing upon these two differing traditions. He privileges ‘intentional state’ understandings because of their usefulness in generating narratives highlighting agency, relationality, and particularity. I draw upon his work throughout this project, largely because of his care and consideration in relation to these themes. Like White, following him, and as a result of his presence in my flows of becoming, I am interested in generating and thinking with accounts we give of our own lives and how these relate to our flows of becoming who we become.

There is one more thing that White touches upon above that I feel the need to at least mention, but about which I’ll defer further elaboration; a fuller articulation falls outside the parameters of this project at this time. He mentions the invention of “the unconscious” as part of this history of the displacement of age-old “intentional state” understandings of humanity. I believe that the unconscious, in practice, tends to signify all things outside of what is possible to narrate at a given point in time, so that it might sometimes be substitutable for something like ‘outside of consciousness.’ But, however that may be, it
evokes a sense that this ‘outside-ness’ is located within individual psyches, rather than, say, in Bhabha’s illimitable vanishing Third Space or an account of relationality or some version of the sociological. I have encountered this popular use of the word in dozens of social work students’ papers: frequently after reading accounts I have assigned about normative complicity in oppression, many students subsequently write in their papers that they had previously participated in racism or other forms of oppression *unconsciously*. I find this concerning.

Surely there are things outside of conscious experience, but we do not need to situate all of these things within individual psyches, and I worry about the political and ethical consequences of doing so. It seems to me that invocations of the unconscious often seem to play a role in our accounts that is structurally “something like” the role played by the phrase ‘God works in mysterious ways.’ These two meaning-making practices ‘contain’ the unintelligible within a frame of reference that assumes that the world is fully intelligible – other than the odd exception that we can exhaustively know *about*. In both practices, the containment goes something like this: there are admittedly things we do not know, even though we are able to accurately know many things with certainty; those things that fall outside of our knowledge do so *because* they’re the kind of knowledge that we already know to be unknowable, so they do not evidence our lack of knowledge; our not-knowing this particular thing only proves what we already know about what not-knowing means. The similarity of the two discursive traditions ends there. And where God’s mysterious ways or the mysteries of the unconscious are invoked, I am not saying they’re ‘wrong’ or never useful, I am rather suggesting that we should orient at least some of our ethical and political attention to what gets *done* by these invocations, in terms of our resultant or related relational ethical practices involving other people. I am advocating that we leave the unintelligible unintelligible, and that we work toward working with unintelligibility as one condition for proceeding – whether we believe such unintelligibility is a spiritual aspect of life, an intrapsychic aspect of life, a physiological aspect of life, some other specifiable aspect of life, or something we can never know the categorization or location of any more than we can know its content. Although there are specific ethical practices associated with these various traditions of interpreting unintelligibility (such as praying for the end of war, writing psychoanalytic accounts of military homophobia [Butler 1997], or researching
serotonin levels of abuse perpetrators), I largely leave these out of my analyses. I am more interested in practices that can be ‘roughly shared,’ however contingently and partially, across diverse discursive traditions that accept some limits to human knowledge as a fundamental aspect of what human knowledge is.

“It’s Hard for me to do What’s Right When all I Wanna do is Wrong,” Revisited: The Difference that Différence Makes (Also Revisited)

But does not this complicate my advocacy of ‘intentional state’ understandings of what it is to be human? If there are limits to what we can know, how can I then advocate narratives that privilege intentionality, relationality, social context, and so on? That is a good question. And my necessarily inadequate answer is that I do not think we have a better option. Again, Spivak writes these limits are non-negotiable, and yet we must proceed (1999, 287 n135).

After telling several difficult stories from his own life, King writes:

    So what? I have heard worse stories. So have you…. [W]hat makes my mother’s sacrifice special? What makes my father’s desertion unusual? / Absolutely nothing…. [T]he only people who have any interest in either of these stories are my brother and me. I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live (2003b, 8-9).

He does not say he’ll be chained to his mother’s sacrifice or his father’s desertion as long as he lives; he says he’ll be chained to his stories of them. And the distinction between the two is no small one, especially in the context of his proposals about what “we are.”

He begins every chapter with a story about the world resting on the back of a turtle, who rests on the back of another turtle, who rests on the back of another turtle, and so on. And every chapter, just before he writes “The truth about stories is that is all we are,” a listener to the turtle story asks how many turtles there are and gets the same response: “It’s turtles all the way down.” King may well be describing something that Cherokee philosophy holds as matter-of-fact when he writes this. I cannot say. What I am confident in saying, though,
is that this is an expression of Derrida’s *différance*, and that he’s very likely purposively doing so: King names Derrida on page twenty-five – one of the very few non-storyteller authors he names in the book.

What does it mean that “it’s turtles all the way down” or, as I am suggesting this suggests, ‘it’s stories or meaning-making all the way down?’ Derrida never said the intelligible world is an illusion, as Upanishadic Philosophers (Upanishads 1990) and Plato (2007) clearly did. Derrida’s more closely aligned with Pascal’s (1995) understanding of understanding than Upanishadic or Platonic ones – although he makes different conclusions about how to proceed. What Derrida offers is that our experience of the world is mediated through meaning-making and, like King’s turtles, these illimitable layers of meaning-making ‘all the way down’ are all we have. It is the only experience of the world we have access to.

*Différance* is not a cause for despair. As what Butler calls “a new departure” (1990, 143), it does not suggest we cannot or should not proceed; it rather invites us to only ever do so with great care, never assuming we can know the consequences of what we do in an exhaustive or accurate way. In Derrida’s terms, we can only orient our efforts toward the “perhaps” (1994), unable to predict the “to come,” only ever acting in Spivak’s “vanishing present.” This demands great caution, care, and responsibility. King writes, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. / So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (2003, 10).

Derrida invites us to consider, furthermore, that no amount of care can guarantee ethicality. The demand of his ethics is a demand that will always be impossible but that we cannot therefore choose not to pursue. For example, because First Nations children are disproportionately apprehended from their families by social workers, my teaching today in social work classrooms needs to somehow be accountable to First Nations children that may one day be apprehended by my students, although those children are not materially present in my classroom. My attempt to achieve this is inseparably an attempt to be accountable to children who were stolen from their homes by social workers in the Sixties Scoop that replaced Canada’s Indian Residential Schools – a reform led by social workers (Fournier and Crey 1997). How can we take account of those children in our practices today, in a way that might approach ‘justice?’ And, inseparably, how can we be accountable to First
Nations children who are born today or even fifty or a hundred years from now? How will I, and the next generation of social workers that I play a role in constituting, contribute to whether or not some children will be born already statistically likely to be apprehended from their families – or incarcerated, homeless, suicidal, etc.? Derrida writes (1994, xix),

no ethics, no politics … seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principal the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice … seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility … before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.

How can our relationship with illimitable others be a new kind of starting point for politics and ethics? Are there ways that we might occasionally already acknowledge this complexity, in some fleeting way, perhaps without fully articulating what we are doing and why we are doing it? How can a radical distinction between effects and intentions, and a recognition of the unknowable effects on countless others push us toward more politically responsible and accountable ethical practices? An exhaustive answer to these questions is beyond me, beyond any of us, but we can begin to orient our lives toward fleeting and partial answers by tending the heterotopic sites of King’s “potential ethics.” One site to tend (which is perhaps both to honour and critically engage, as partially and fictitiously ‘true’), as described above, is our purposive efforts to live ethically, however imperfectly. We cannot afford to dismiss these intentions and replace them, polemically, with the effects of actions. Doing so makes it very difficult for those critiqued to take critique seriously, as I suspect we are all ‘able to know’ by reflecting on times we’ve been the object of such critique. We have to work toward better ways of holding intentions and effects together as shaping lives and worlds, recognizing that all such attempts will be partial and ultimately fictitious if positioned as ‘the whole story.’ Another site to tend, also referred to above, are emotional responses to things we’ve done – which should be ‘tended to’ as ‘ethical’ and ‘political’ experiences to flow with, rather than ‘psychological’ experiences to overcome. And yet another crucial site to tend, which I have discussed previously and which I now
return to in my concluding chapter, are ways we are ‘able to’ recognize that our personal lives are politically connected with other lives. What I am calling a personal-is-political ethics is one in which we are fundamentally relational in our ethical practices, which is one part of what makes it, in Spivak’s words again, “an ethics inaccessible to liberalism.”
Chapter 5
Tending the Personal-is-Political

Re-membering

In chapter one, I mentioned White’s work on the theme of lives joined together, in which he drew upon Myerhoff’s studies of an elderly Jewish community in California – suggesting it was perhaps the “non-structuralist” cultural legacy of Hasidism that could account for what the community did. Myerhoff’s studies were tremendously influential on White’s operationalization of the ways that our lives are interconnected with others’. I’ll review his account of her work here, beginning with a description of the community she researched.

As children and infants, at the turn of the 20th century, many of the elderly Jews of this community had left the shtetls of Eastern Europe and migrated to North America. Later in life, in their retirement, they had been drawn to the mild climate of Southern California, which was kind to their health, and to the inexpensive housing in Venice, a beachside principality of Los Angeles. A large number of these elderly Jews had become relatively isolated as a consequence of losing their extended families to the Holocaust and as an outcome of outliving their children. For many of these people, this isolation had led to the development of uncertainty about their very existence, an uncertainty fueled by a sense of invisibility in the eyes of the wider community, in the eyes of those in their more immediate network, and in their own eyes.

With the assistance of a highly devoted and talented community organizer named Maurie Rosen, these elderly Jews built a sense of community in Venice. It was in the context of this community that they recuperated and reenergized their sense of existence (White 2007, 180-181).

This is already noteworthy as a story of collective accomplishment. But what is even more interesting – and much more politically, ethically, and ‘psychologically’ useful – is Myerhoff’s careful attention to how they accomplished this.
These identity projects were characterized by a special self-reflexive consciousness. In this consciousness, community members were aware of their participation in the ongoing construction of their own and each other’s identities. In this consciousness, they were alert to the life-shaping effect of their own contributions to the production of their own lives (White 2007, 181-182).

Myerhoff’s observations of these collective ‘identity project’ ethical practices allowed her to theorize human life in non-individualistic terms, according to which

a person’s life and identity [can be conceptualized] as an association or a club. The membership of this association of life is made up of the significant figures of a person’s history, as well as the identities of the person’s present circumstances, whose voices are influential with regard to how the person constructs his or her own identity (White 2007, 136).

These theorizations were ‘enabled’ as a result of observing and thinking about the ways this community was already operationalizing non-individualistic understandings of life and identity. White, then, was drawn to Myerhoff’s characterizations of life, but also to the practicalities of how these characterizations were already located in relational and conversational practices. In a public lecture recently, Ahmed (conveniently, for my project) said, “conversations are also flows” (2011). And the flows that Myerhoff describes, which she called re-membering conversations, are of a particular kind – characterized by a reflexive awareness of the extent to which they’re identity projects or conversational flows of becoming. White (2007, 129) writes that, according to Myerhoff,

identity is founded upon an ‘association of life’ rather than on a core self. This association of life has a membership composed of the significant figures and identities of a person’s past, present, and projected future, whose voices are influential with regard to the construction of the person’s identity. Re-membering conversations provide an opportunity for people to revise the memberships of their association of life: to upgrade some memberships and to downgrade others; to honour some memberships and to revoke others; to grant authority to some voices in regard to matters of one’s personal identity, and to disqualify other voices with regard to this.
This actively engaged renegotiation of the “membership” that constitutes our identities, he continues to say, does not happen consistently or normatively. According to Myerhoff, “Re-membering, [rather], is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness” (cited in White 2007, 136).

One of several conversational practices that White developed through his engagement with Myerhoff’s research, he too calls ‘re-membering conversations.’ Originally articulated as a way of responding to the death of a loved one – through a critique of the notion that ‘successful grieving’ is achieved by ‘saying goodbye’ and ‘closure’ (White 1988) – Re-membering is now used in a wide variety of Narrative conversations (White 2007).

Although I did not set out specifically to use this ‘conversational practice’ in any of my research interviews, it played a part in my navigation of my interviews with both Patty Douglas and Shaista Patel. In each of these conversations, it was the other person that brought the other relationship into our conversation, rather than me doing so. When they evoked the other’s presence, White’s work on re-membering (as well as hooks’ [1989] “re-membering” of her great-grandmother) helped me to respond in a way that I thought might invite further conversation characterized by attention to: agency, specificity of Spivak’s “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” (1993, 41), and relational articulations of identity.

I’ll now share selections from my interviews with Shaista and Patty in which our conversations could be characterized as “re-membering.” I’ll start with Shaista. The primary figure from her life being re-membered is a dog (which is one kind of relationship White always described as among potential relationships to re-member). What Shaista articulates is the presence of her dog in her life, but also the ongoing presence of her relationship with her dog or her positioning of herself, relative to her dog. She is, in a sense, both re-membering her dog and re-membering who she was in relationship to her dog and in relationship to other figures in her story, which is always true of re-membering.

Shaista’s research interview centred on her growing sense of complicity in the ongoing colonization of First Nations, positioning herself as what she calls “a settler of colour.” Shaista, who identifies as a Muslim feminist, described her shifting scholarly and activist
interests from looking at sexism in Chitral, Pakistan, to then looking at Islamophobia in Canada, to finally exploring how people of colour are mobilized in ongoing colonization.

Chris: [One thing] I am interested in, if this is comfortable for you, is what you’re saying about being in the room with Six Nations people and feeling uncomfortable to look them in the eye, and not being able to even put a word to that feeling that is going on for you then. The word that came to my mind is ashamed, but that is not your word. It is just what came to my mind as you were talking. Because I think ‘complicit,’ [the word you used, which you said was inadequate] is a political word, but what I hear you describing is an affective … an emotional experience. [You’re not describing] a political choice to not look them in the eye…. I do not know how to formulate this question, but … if there is a way that you could just sort of stick with that feeling and how it may or may not be productive in your life in terms of keeping you on the track that you’re on. Because you are involved actively in First Nations solidarity with Six Nations…. I know that you have political commitments that you could articulate … in a sort of ‘book smart’ way why you do that, but … I am always interested in our emotional experiences as well, and how [they relate to how] we come to do things. So, I do not know, is there anything in there that you can answer? …

Shaista had described her own characterization of her experience as “inadequate.” I read this as potentially her being unable to find a word within the vocabulary we tend to use in describing activism, and so I sought to expand the parameters in which she might account for her experience. My sense was that she was describing an affective experience, and I had already been working on some of the ideas expressed earlier in relation to emotions and ethics, and so that is what I asked about. I was not purposively clearing a path for a remembering conversation. But, outside of what I could have anticipated in asking my question, she responds by evoking her childhood dog. It is worth noting, perhaps, that this is a fairly good example of being “decentred and influential,” or attempting to create new possibilities for her journey without trying to steer it: I am playing a very active role, reading her words and body language subjectively, using my countersignatures to guide what I ask about, and acting upon her field of possible actions. But she has enough of a “field” of possibilities within which to respond that her answer to my question is within her
own flow of consciousness, rather than seeming to govern herself in an attempt to \textit{answer my question well}. If we were to evaluate her response in terms of how closely it aligns with my question, I suspect we might find somebody ‘lacking’ – either me as interviewer or her as respondent. But if we imagine my role as trying to influence her journey without steering it, then this is a nice illustration. What follows is her immediate answer.

\textit{Shaista:} I’m really weird, I think…. This solidarity work also makes me feel better about myself. If I don’t feel less complicit, I do feel better about the work I’m trying to do…. One of the things that often crosses my mind is this incident which happened way back, … I was … probably four, in Pakistan. We were living there at the time, and we had a dog and I lived in a joint family…. This is really weird, and I haven’t made sense of how it’s connected. But it’s something that haunts me…. And it’s haunted me for all these years…. My dad’s older brother was really sick and he was really close to his death. And he did die at that time…. And my dad was very, sort of, frustrated and angry with everything. He had just lost both of his parents at that time and now his older brother was dying. And so, we had a dog – I know this is going to sound weird – but we had a dog and I loved that dog, it was really precious to me. And I remember one day my dad beating that dog. I don’t know what happened and why my dad was beating that dog, but I just thought my dad was a horrible person. And it’s \textit{not} that I have ever reconciled that. But anyway, my dad was beating that dog, and then the dog disappeared. They left the dog somewhere…. I still go to the mosque sometimes and I pray for that dog…. I know it’s going to sound really weird, and probably wrong as well. It’s my privilege as well…. I’ve never seen poverty, I’ve never seen hunger…. And so coming from that place of relative privilege … even given my experiences of racism, I would never equate that racism with the genocide that is happening on this land as far as indigenous peoples are concerned. I would be ashamed to equate … the racism against me with that. But … that feeling of beating that dog, [is that] I feel like I could have done something to stop it. Mind you, I was three years old or four years old and so I probably wouldn’t have been able to. But it haunts me, and that’s like the biggest injustice in my mind. So now when I try to connect that with what is happening
to people here, I do feel like somehow if I do my solidarity work, I … will somehow get forgiveness for not saving my dog…. I will be doing good, and there will be some forgiveness for me, whether it’s [for] not having saved the dog … or being complicit in colonization here. I know those are very disconnected, but I think that how people make sense of their complicity, in very real ways, it’s very personally. Politically I am a colonizer here, but … how I understand it, in very personal terms, would be different for a white body, probably, who grew up here and has a very different history…. There is a difference.

It is exactly such differences that I am interested in exploring – including the differences we can draw between, say, a white person and a person of colour, but also including the differences between every one of us, following Derrida’s “every other is wholly other” (1995). Shaista’s clearly right to say that her family and community history of being subjected to colonialism in India and Pakistan, and her experiences of Islamophobia and racism in Canada, impact how she’s complicit in Canadian colonialism today. And what also impacts her place within colonialism and her understanding of that place is details she does not share with any other people, such as this story of her dog. In the following citation from her, note that she’s both re-membering her dog, or her positioning of herself to her dog while it was being beaten, and also re-membering Six Nations people and her positioning of herself relative to them. And she takes these two very different relational experiences and draws upon them in her navigation of responding to a white man’s racism toward her.

*Shaista:* What helped me quote-unquote ‘forgive’ him was how gracious Six Nations people have treated me … accepted us … let us into their territory…. If they can be so generous, and so gracious and forgiving, who am I to not forgive this white man? … I feel that if I forgive people then my dog will forgive me as well. I understand myself and my complicity in very weird and twisted ways.

Shaista is clearly ‘able to’ articulate her ethical operationalization of what she’s learned from Six Nations, as well as the role that the story of her dog has played in her ethical becomings. But it is also noteworthy – in terms of what I have described as ‘not quite/not right’ – that she dismisses the ethical work she’s done by calling it “weird and twisted.” I wonder if the liberalist and psychologist straitening and straightening of what ethics and
politics are might lead many of us to denigrate the work that goes in to trying to live a responsible or just life, as well as the role that other people and beings play in this work.

Chris: I think you described your experience as weird or as twisted maybe ten different times in the last ten minutes. I think there’s something interesting about that. I’m very interested in the particular ways that people come to do the various things that we call ‘taking responsibility’ ... so I actually think that the story of the dog … when you were a child is a powerful one – not because it is anyone else’s experience but because it is yours. And this experience when you were three or four, one in which you were witness to an injustice, witness to another being being harmed – by your father no less, with all the complications that brings. It wasn’t a stranger doing it; it wasn’t another child who you could have reasonably been expected to stop….

One of the things I am really thinking about a lot these days is this idea from Saba Mahmood (2005) in her [Politics of Piety], where she talks about discursive traditions creating different architectures of the self. So what she’s saying is that secular ways of being human, and parameters of freedom, and ways of exercising agency … are distinct from what she encounters in the piety movement in Egypt. But I think her work can also be taken and kind of like ‘particularized’ (I do not want to say it is individualized because I think it is a critique of ‘the individual’ in lots of ways to do this). That you can connect your political activism today to something that you witnessed when you were three of four years old, that does not relate to anyone else’s experience in any direct way, I think is really kind of beautiful in terms of what it means to be human, and in terms of what it means to try to live our lives and … how we go about kind of fueling the things that are important to us [within our own particular architectures of the self]….

It makes me sad that you call it twisted and weird while you’re talking about it…. It makes me politically sad, or like politically angry in a certain way – I mean I’m not really feeling angry – but I wonder if we all think we’re a little weird. And maybe that’s unevenly distributed. I mean, maybe as a white man, with all the privilege that comes with that, I’m just more likely to accept my idiosyncrasies.
Shaista: (laughing) Well, white men are good at that.

Chris: Yeah, maybe racism and sexism are at play in that.... There are all sorts of different ways of understanding what humans are in which our connection with other beings is central, in a way that’s not true of individualism, right? And … there’s lots of ways to make sense of what it means to be witness to something like that, and then to be able to carry it with you for this long in your life….

Ahmed writes: “affect aliens are those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world. [And she asks,] How does alienation relate to the possibility of revolutionary consciousness?” (2010, 164). She advocates for an orientation “something like” the ‘one no and many yeses’ I have evoked, in which alienation or disorientation from society’s normative flows can be taken up in any number of directions, and she stresses the affective dimension of such alienation while also noting that these affective responses are immediately interpreted by the options available to us, including those most freely available within normative flows. Ahmed might therefore situate Shaista’s description of coming to her own revolutionary consciousness as “weird and twisted” as *something that can teach us something* about how we are all oriented. It is probably valid to have offered that imagining our idiosyncrasies as “weird and twisted” is unevenly distributed and that this distribution may roughly follow intersectional subject positions of exaltation and denigration. That said, I also suggested above that the ‘affective dividing practices’ of disablement affect all our navigations of affect, as well as the ‘ability to know’ and ethical practices that are associated with them. Through this “architecture of the self” we immediately ‘know’ (through the ‘disability to know’) certain affective experiences to ‘be’ useful, associated with ‘the good life,’ productive, and so on, and others as ‘psychological’ phenomena best avoided or ‘worked through’ so as to minimize their impact on our lives. On the page following her description of affect aliens, Ahmed writes,

> We learn much from how the very idea of alternatives to global capitalism comes across as silliness. David Graeber argues in his phenomenological anthropology of anarchism that “faced with anything that remotely resembles creative, nonalienated experience, it tends to look as ridiculous as a deodorant commercial during a time of national disaster” (2007: 410). The silly or ridiculous nature of
alternatives teaches us not about the nature of those alternatives but about just how threatening it can be to imagine alternatives to a system that survives by grounding itself in inevitability (2010, 165).

Like global capitalism is normatively understood as inevitable in our time and place, so too is liberalism and psychologism. Shaista understands her own transgressions of liberalism, in which she situates her political journey as one informed by “trauma” and “the story of my dog” as “weird and twisted,” or in Ahmed’s words “silly or ridiculous.” I might suggest that part of what enables the twisting of such ethical practices and histories into weirdness is that they defy easy articulation – which we then have to struggle to ‘enable.’ In the following, from Shaista’s conversation, I offer up a much too linear cause-and-effect analysis of the role her dog plays in her ethical and political life and she initially says “no” to it. She then proceeds to a qualified and tentative ‘perhaps’ that transcends my linearity and causality.

Chris: [In your process of moving from focusing on Pakistani men’s sexism, to Canadian Islamophobia, to settlers of colour’s complicity in colonization,] did that memory [of your dog] come back to you for the first time during … the particular crisis [you described earlier in our conversation, in which you started to think about colonization on this land more seriously] … or was [the memory] there throughout, kind of as something that was kind of guiding you along?

Shaista: I don’t know if it was guiding me along, but it was present as trauma…. Every time anybody’s hunger or suffering would come up, I would bring my dog back. And I said “weird and twisted” because people are dying. And [my complicity in colonization] makes sense to me in a lot of different ways … on a political basis, and in an academic way as well, in a spiritual way as well, but that story of the dog is present in a way that I really don’t know how to articulate, but every time I see suffering, he comes back. Like, he comes back…. It’s been present. It’s been present…. So it’s been there always as trauma.

It has not necessarily guided me to taking any action…. Like other ‘good’ people – good in quotes – I went to Chitral with really shitty politics, thinking I’d help the people there…. [The memory of my dog] was probably present in … making
me leave my job in Texas, and so maybe it helped me … or guided me in that way.

“It has not necessarily guided me” but it “was probably present … so maybe it helped me … or guided me in that way,” she says. Maybe. Her “maybe” is about what concrete role it played, but she’s unwavering that it was “present” “It’s been present … always as trauma.” Again this defies what we tend to take for granted in linear causal accounts of learning and ethics. She now doubles back and clarifies what she’s equating and what she’s not. As per one of the fundamental kind of tenets of re-membering, she’s equating how she was and is positioned relative to violence, rather than equating the forms of violence.

Shaista: [I want to clarify that] I’m not equating real human beings with my dog, but I’m just saying that in terms of violence that’s done to anybody – when you understand that you’re doing that violence too…. That’s a powerful feeling…. Because your point of entry into understanding those feelings of violence are the violence that was done to you…. And that story is my entry point. I’m beginning to understand that the violence that was done to the dog is something that I’m now doing to people. And in very different ways. I’m not necessarily going out and killing indigenous peoples, but I’m part of that machinery…. I’m one of the people through whom this continues.

Her childhood experience was traumatic, she suggests, in part because she was ‘in it’. Because she witnesses her dog being beaten, and did not stop it, she experienced herself as complicit in that beating (whether or not this was a ‘reasonable’ experience for a three or four year old is immaterial to her feeling complicit). What I understand her to be saying is that this aspect of her relationship with her dog haunts her today. She’s haunted by the feeling that, sometimes when violence occurs, it has something to do with her and she’s not outside of it or innocent of it. She put it like this: “in terms of violence that’s done to anybody – when you understand that you’re doing that violence too…. That’s a powerful feeling…. Because your point of entry into understanding those feelings of violence are the violence that was done to you…. And that story is my entry point. I’m beginning to understand that the violence that was done to the dog is something that I’m now doing to people.” This has, structurally, Spivak’s “something like a relationship” with Ahmed’s
exploration of what it means to be “a settler of colour” in Australia. Please note that there is an important difference here, in that Ahmed is describing the history of Australian colonization and her reading of testimonies of the Stolen Generation. The resonance between the two accounts is in the operationalization of ethics and complicity, rather than the content of being “settlers of colour” in white settler societies. What I’d like to highlight here — in terms of Mahmood’s ethical practices or Spivak’s “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” — is what Ahmed says about being ‘in’ the history of colonization she reads and how this resonates with Shaista’s articulation of being ‘in’ the story of her dog getting beaten.

Neither of them did the violence they attend to, but they both describe themselves as implicated in it. By witnessing violence, Shaista was “‘in it’, which means [she was] not ‘not in it,’” as Ahmed puts it:

Knowing that I am a part of this history makes me feel a certain way; it impresses upon me, and creates an impression. Of course, these impressions are not only personal. It is not just me facing this, and it is certainly not about me. And yet, I am ‘in it’, which means I am not ‘not in it’ (Ahmed 2004a, 36).

Following Ahmed, Shaista’s personal-is-political story of childhood complicity in violence created an impression on her, it makes her feel a certain way in the present that she describes as “trauma” — which I would suggest is yet again more fruitfully considered an ‘ethical’ experience than a ‘psychological’ one. This impression, this trauma, has given shape to her subsequent flows of becoming: the story of her dog has provided overtones when encountering new injustices, which has shaped her life in diverse ways – from leaving a well paying job to ‘help’ people in Chitral, to praying for her dog, to forgiving a white man’s racism, to her current anti-colonial activism and scholarship. She’s hesitant to say that her dog has “guided her” – which was probably poor language on my part, perhaps overstating the presence of a relationship that is at once present and absent. Shaista says her dog “haunts” her – playing a hard to define role in her ethical navigation of life; she says that the “story of the dog is present in a way that I really do not know how to articulate, but every time I see suffering, he comes back” – her use of the word “haunting” and this difficulty in clearly articulating her dog’s presence echoes Derrida’s (1994) ethics and “hauntology,” in which others are at once present and absent in ways that defy our attempts to fully articulate either their role in making us who we are, or our responsibility to them.
Another illustration of this might be the last few pages you’ve just read. You’re reading my writing, but my efforts here are ‘concerted efforts:’ others have been very clearly present – most notably Shaista, Ahmed and Derrida, as well as Shaista’s father, dog, the white man she forgave, Six Nations, and Fiona (the author of the account of the Stolen Generation Ahmed reads). White and Myerhoff have also been present in a different way. If any of these others had not been present in the last few pages, it would have fundamentally transformed what I would have been ‘able to’ write, think, theorize, and know. This is also true of hooks, Mahmood and Spivak who are less present but nevertheless explicitly ‘there.’ And we can take this further and I could surely articulate how, say, Butler, my thesis committee members, former clients, or my partner “haunt” the last four pages. Following Ahmed however loosely, their (and illimitable others’) active presence in my life means that they are somehow ‘in’ what I have just written, which means they are not ‘not in it.’ Part of ethically navigating life involves noticing and naming some others’ presence, and thinking with that presence, and not putting that same energy into other others’ presence. This is one component of the partiality of representation when we represent ourselves.

In the following exchange from my research conversation with Patty Douglas, she re-members her son. Unlike Shaista’s dog, Patty’s son is materially present in her life. Nevertheless, Derrida’s work on others’ absent-presence is applicable in that Patty’s son is not ‘a part’ of her in the way that her heart and skin are ‘a part’ of her. (Re-reading what I’d written here, I laughed at having written the last sentence without thinking it through. Deleuze and Guattari’s [2000; 1989] “body without organs” unsettles this notion that we ‘are’ our physical beings and are only secondarily our relationships, what we say and do, what local discourses allow us to be, etc., as does Butler’s Bodies that Matter [1993]. They

Part of what is cited here is more briefly cited in chapter three to illustrate contingently available discursive traditions. Here I reengage what Patty says, in order to highlight a slightly different point – or perhaps the same point from a different angle – that her ‘ability to know’ and her ethical practices have been shaped through her specific relationship with her son. She re-members him, and she also re-members who she contingently is in her relationship with him, in her navigation of being a teacher. In my reengagement here, I left in more of my part of the conversation as well, because part of what I want to highlight is the role I play. My role is very much distinct from her son’s role, but it’s another example of the ways we are haunted by others or fork with others. In fact, as I explicitly name, others from my own past haunt how I countersign her story, which gave shape to my particular engagement with her words, which then ‘enabled’ her to articulate new narratives of her life. I also cite one other line from the following, again in chapter three, in order to illustrate that these conversations were generative for participants.
might say that even our embodiment is a present/absence, so my point remains – however much its original articulation came out of a line I’d rather not draw.) Even when we have everyday intimate contact with people, the extent to which we affect one another’s becomings is not one of simple ‘presence’ but is perhaps again more helpfully thought of through the agency of reading and relating I have explored previously. We actively navigate the limitless and yet contingent possibilities through which others may haunt our lives. In our interview, Patty articulates the role her son has played in her ethical navigation of difficult situations as a teacher. Before the following, she described two difficult situations with her son. In one, she described a distinction between what she might think and feel when her son’s ‘out of control’ versus what she suspects a teacher or other professional might think and feel in the same context. In the other situation, she describes “something like” these two discursive traditions of thinking and feeling as at play in her own subjective experience, as a personal-is-political ethical struggle – where one available discourse is concerned and loving, the other frustrated and oriented toward normalization and discipline.

*Chris:* One of the things that I struggle with, in terms of my own history and implication, is having worked in an institutional setting where I did restraints… It’s definitely not a closed issue for me. I still have lots of questions about it. One of my questions is whether [my concerns are] about restraints in specific, or whether it’s about the task of care giving more generally. I was really struck by you describing these two [situations. In one situation, you described an internal conflict:] on the one hand you’re thinking, ‘just get out of my car kid’ (and of course you are). On the other hand, you’re thinking, ‘this is someone who I really love and I’m very concerned about what’s going on for him right now’….

[In the other situation] when you talked about [your son being restrained], you talked about, ‘this child is violent, this child is biting me,’ and so on, from the perspective of someone who might be less personally connected with him, that’s more professionally involved in that moment. Whereas when you talked about it being you [there], there was more of a focus on his pain and his anguish and his anxiety. And I guess I’m wondering if there’s anything you might speculate on, in terms of what sort of difference [your reflection] makes in terms of the whole
politics of institutional child-rearing…. Our son right now is going to a daycare and … he’s only three, but he talks with us about who’s family, who’s not family, and so [in answering his questions about this,] I drew a line that was, like, ‘blood.’ And he dismissed that, and he said that actually our friends David and Sarah count as family, but that his daycare provider does not. And so he’s drawing a line that’s kind of about institutional roles versus intimacy roles, if I had to make sense of the line he’s drawing, as a three year old saying, no, this is who I’m going to say is family and who’s not. Of course his daycare provider cares for him, but her primary role is that from this time [in the morning] to this time [in the afternoon] she’s with him [outside of our home]. So I think he’s onto something. When he’s with my friend David, it’s not like being with his daycare provider, and it’s more like being with an Uncle or whatever. I don’t have a question exactly, but what are your thoughts on that?

Patty: I think that the struggle in the backseat between ‘get out of my car kid’ and ‘what’s going on for him’ is a struggle internally, with me, with all sorts of things – I’m tired, I have other things to do, it’s sort of my own agenda or narrative. But I think it’s also a struggle, and it’s always this for me – I shouldn’t say ‘always;’ but it’s often this struggle for me – that there’s this expectation, there’s this normative expectation, so those frames that I was talking about ‘this is what is supposed to occur’…. It’s a really interesting point for me. In thinking through those two things, or those several things that are going on, in that moment when there’s an interruption. And in thinking about those things that occur within

41 In fact, his distinction here could be said to foreshadow the subsequent event I described in chapter three, in which I felt the need to pull him out of her care because she wished to further ‘institutionalize’ his care by bringing a psychologist in to have him observed. At this early point in his experience with professional childcare, when Patty and I had our research conversation, he already had a sense that there was something unique about his relationship with that daycare provider that had to do with a particular kind of ‘care’ that he had never otherwise encountered. It would be dangerous to draw a line suggesting that family and chosen-family would never collude with institutional forms of care – because of course this happens all the time – but we can nevertheless imagine that more institutionalized and bureaucratic approaches to childcare are more likely to seamlessly fork with other institutionalized and bureaucratic approaches to childcare than are the more heterotopic approaches to childcare that exist in diverse families. This is very close to Foucault’s use of “heterotopic” in his *Psychiatric Power* lectures (2008), where he distinguishes between disciplinary power and the relatively diverse “heterotopic” power relations that continued to exist in families and communities, which I have followed more loosely or conceptually elsewhere in this project.
institutional settings – whether daycare or schools – those moments, similar moments, where a child might just kind of all of a sudden interrupt the normative frame of expectation. And so, for me, I think about how I wrestle with a willingness to be interrupted. So with all of these kinds of constraints that I’m negotiating in my life as a single mom, and the cultural expectations to have my house ready for Christmas … there’s all sorts of negotiations that are happening … but really for me a big part of what that moment is composed of is a wrestling with a kind of willingness or openness to alterity, I suppose, and a willingness to be open to an interruption that it brings to me. So here’s an opportunity to be interrupted and to think through something differently.

Now, I’m the mom and I love this child. I mean, I suppose in an institutional setting, because I’ve also been a teacher, how willing am I to be interrupted in that way when there are a set of constraints and expectations – institutional constraints, institutional expectations, moral constraints and expectations, all sorts of things happening for that teacher or worker in an institutional setting, whether a social worker, teacher, day care worker – where you’ve been trained even to respond to a particular interruption which might be an opportunity to re-think how we’re coming to be together in this place. And instead you’re trained to minimize the interruption and to normalize the individual. So that’s not a very caring relationship, in my view. And as a teacher I often shut my door and told my kids, I’m not going to send anyone to the office, we’re going to work it out right here because we’re a community, together. So, unless I need a break – which I will sometimes – we’re going to work it out right here. And I found that that worked with my autistic students and my ADHD students, and all sorts of labeled students. That worked. As opposed to the kind of unwillingness to be interrupted, and sort of going down that normative path of ‘I’ll put this in a little bundle and I’ll get rid of it so that my frame is not interrupted.’ That is actually a really interesting way to think through what is happening there and the kinds of relationships we have in which we are not willing to be disrupted. We are not willing, even, to reflect on why it is that we are frustrated with this moment. Or why it is there is part of you that is saying, ‘come on kid. You’re supposed to be
doing this. What is wrong with you – that you’re crumpled on my backseat floor and you won’t speak with me in words. It’s not an easy thing to be interrupted.

*Chris:* I need to reflect upon what you’ve just said…. When I originally asked the question … I was thinking of it in terms of having fairly discreet categories of resources that you were able to draw on – that the normalizing order has [available to us] that as parents we can draw on, [and other resources that] as social workers or teachers we can draw on, etc. And that by virtue of – what I was thinking was – your relationship, your love, that kind of thing, that you had another set of resources to draw upon…. I think there’s some truth to that.

*Patty:* I think there is too.

*Chris:* But what you actually described, and then talked about it in terms of your role as a teacher as well … where there’s not necessarily love there, but there can be something else that can provide different resources, that you talked about as a willingness to be interrupted, disrupted. And a willingness to sort of … journey and question, and to become different than when you started. What feels hopeful about that answer, which … is not what I expected, is that it does feel like something that can be taught, on the one hand, and that also can be honed in our own practices, that doesn’t necessarily rely on having to have a loving, intimate relationship with the other person, the other. And so I’m actually kind of excited about that.

*Patty:* Me too. I just thought of it now. I am like “wow this is cool – I like this!”

*Chris:* And so now my question is … would you say that it’s true that when you closed the door and you said to your classroom [“we are going to work this out together”] … would you say that your relationship with your son and having to sort of work through what it meant to be in relationship with him, in all of these diverse ways that you’ve thought about, has provided you with additional resources when you’re a teacher?

*Patty:* Yes.
Chris: Yeah. And is that something you’ve sort of thought about in those moments…. You named Asperger’s and Attention Deficit Disorder and so on. Is it that you’ve specifically thought “this child is like my son” or that “the normative things at play are like the ones that [are at play with my son]”?

Patty: Yes. Definitely…. A teacher friend and I say that being a parent of a kid who has – whatever it might be – anxiety, makes you a better teacher. It does not necessarily work the other way around. I don’t think that being a teacher makes you a better parent…. I remember moments of struggle as a teacher thinking, ‘this kid’s really annoying me, and I want him to go away,’ and then struggling through that and thinking ‘this is how my child presents, often, and so what’s going on here.’ So being willing to dwell in some discomfort until you get to a place where you figure out what’s going on, what’s happening for this child who won’t stop disrupting? What is that? What is that disruption speaking, I guess. So there’s definitely a relationship there – from living with a child who has Asperger’s to negotiating these things in other areas of life. Yes.

Patty describes being ‘able to’ allow her son, and her relationship with her son, to ‘haunt’ or ‘inform’ her teaching and her relationship with interruptions coming from her students. Her “willingness to be interrupted” is an example of what Mahmood calls an ethical practice; it is an example of what Spivak describes as “pouvoir-savoir at ground level.” Patty is ‘able to know’ things as a teacher because of the (immaterial) re-membered ‘presence’ of her son in these difficult moments. I believe this is, although infinitely diverse in its specificities, also incredibly common as a structure or pattern of relating. Although I would not want to diminish the particularity of Patty’s relationship with her son and what it gives to her life, or the particularity of Shaista’s relationship with her dog and what it gives to her life, I’d suggest that they structurally have Spivak’s “something like a relationship” with one another. And, again not wishing to diminish the specificity of what these relationships do in each of their lives, their stories about these relationships have now forked with my flows of becoming as a result of my listening to them, which relates to another aspect of White’s work that came from his reading of Myerhoff.
Outsider-witnessing

Another Narrative Practice is called “definitional ceremony” or “outsider witness practices” – both terms White takes from Myerhoff. These are conversational practices, modeled after the elderly Jewish community, that again invite articulations of “purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness” (Myerhoff, cited in White 2007, 136). If conversations are flows, then outsider-witness conversations are structured, purposively oriented flows that ‘enable’ particular things. How conversations are flows can be gleaned from what Ahmed writes about paths (2006b):

I have always been struck by the phrase “a path well trodden.” A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground “being trodden” upon. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys. The path is made out of footprints – traces of feet that “tread” and in that “treading” create a line on the ground. When people stop treading the path may disappear. And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path “clears” the way. So we walk upon the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon…. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view (16).

In addition to all having lived in Adelaide Australia, White, Jenkins, and Ahmed also all seem to share “something like a relationship” in their attention to the ways that humans become who and what we become. Ahmed’s recognition of the work that performativity requires is, I think, necessary for more purposive engagements with what it means for gender, race, and so on to ‘be’ performative. But what can such an engagement be or, as

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42 In chapter two, I gave an account of being interviewed by White as an outsider-witness. In that conversation, he would have followed this structure I describe here, however spontaneously.
Butler asks, “what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible” (1990, 146)? And although I do not know White or Jenkins to have read Ahmed or Butler, there is significant overlap in the authors the four of them reference regularly, and both White’s Narrative Practice and Jenkins’ Invitational Practice can be said to “interven[e]” by purposively engaging the “often hidden” work of conversational flows. Invitational Practice and Narrative Practice are both very structured. White’s last book before his death, Maps of Narrative Practice (2007), is yet another attempt to break down and clarify the structures and traditions that guide his work – which he earlier did through long lists of possible questions and then through more dense philosophical writing. In all three approaches to teaching the practice he developed collaboratively through doing it, as well as through conversations with other therapist friends, and through reading Foucault, Myerhoff, Goffman, Derrida, Bruner, Vygotsky, and other non-therapists, he consistently describes his approach as anything but haphazard. There are illimitable specifics that fill in the structures that continued to evolve until his death, which are provided by clients’ or communities’ responses to his questions, but in his questioning he takes responsibility for structuring the conversation in ways that ‘tend’ agency, relationality, and a critical appraisal of social context, norms, and power relations. This tending, I believe, can be read through Ahmed’s attention to the work that goes into making “lines of thought as well as lines of motion” performative; “To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view” (2006b, 16). In White and Jenkins’ conversations, this work is done and is acknowledged as ‘being done.’ In White’s outsider-witness practices, in particular, people are invited to articulate and reflect upon the overtones that we often seem to experience unreflexively in the witnessing of one another’s accounts. He structures these conversations so that people will tend to their overtones (which are always there, but usually considered unremarkable), and will account for what these overtones can suggest about how the witness’ life and the storyteller’s life are connected together by shared “intentional states” of values, political commitments, and so on. White articulates the outsider-witness structure as follows:
1. **Identifying the expression**
   As you listen to the stories of the people who are at the centre of the conversation, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you?

2. **Describing the image**
   What images of people’s lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people’s purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

3. **Embodying responses**
   What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

4. **Acknowledging transport**
   How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you had not been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have (2003, 55)?

To illustrate this a little more fully, I’ll respond to each of these categories of inquiry as a witness to Shaista and Patty’s interviews. These two interview selections are very different, and they have taken me on distinct trajectories of reflection and transformation. I articulate this in order to highlight the degree to which I, as researcher, am transformed through my research conversations – which is an aspect of the representation of what humans are that is important. As suggested above, there is political urgency to noticing how our lives are fundamentally shaped through forking with one another’s flows. This is one example.

Shaista’s interview:

1. **Identifying the expression**
   As I listened to Shaista’s interview, it was not so much a word or phrase that stood out for me as much as the sense that what she was describing as the impact of her dog was actually
who she was and who she knew herself to be in that moment of watching her father beat her dog. I was also very powerfully struck by the sense that her engagement with colonialism on this land positioned her as knowing something similar about what it means to be her and what it means to be here, as witnessing her dog getting beaten had done.

2. Describing the image
It would be easy to imagine a little girl watch her father beat a dog and feel nothing but anger at him, without in any way feeling a sense of shared responsibility. As a three or four year old at the time, this would have been a more accurate account of Shaista’s agency, power, or responsibility. She was not materially responsible for her dog’s beating. The image I am given of what is of value to Shaista, then, from her sense of responsibility for having been present to this beating, is that she’s concerned about others’ suffering, that she’s willing to tease out aspects of others’ pain that she can take some responsibility for – rather than putting all the blame on others – and that even valid contingencies like age and power differentials do not preclude her ethical imperative to prevent and confront suffering.

3. Embodying responses
The ‘right’ answer to this question might be noticing that I too feel a sense of complicity for things that I am not ‘directly’ or ‘immediately’ responsible for. This answer is true, but it is not what loomed largest in my overtones when I listened to her. Her story brought to mind a very different one from my own life, in which what has stayed with me for all these years is, similarly, how I was positioned relative to others in the memory. My older sister was home alone with me and, while she took a shower I stole $20 from the top of her dresser. Who knows why? When she came out of the shower, I proudly told her that I’d gone for a walk and found the money. Later that evening, after denying having stolen the money several times, my mother or father said to me something like “given that you found $20 today and Kathy lost $20 today, don’t you think it would be fair if you gave her the money you found?” What I recall is a great sense of relief for this ‘way out’ that allowed me to ‘save face.’ The connection with Shaista’s story, I guess, is having had an early experience that has stayed with me all these years – and which has been present in my life in a way that, as she says, “I really do not know how to articulate.” But also that what is important to me in remembering this story is how I felt relative to the interpersonal dynamics at play.
4. **Acknowledging transport**

I never ‘forgot’ about this story from my childhood. It was always with me. But I never before considered how it shaped my life trajectory. Since my conversation with Shaista, I have been re-thinking many events from my life in view of this early experience – for example: this research project, my work with men who abuse, and being ‘Mr. Switzerland,’ as a friend used to call me (sometimes appreciatively, sometimes not) in describing how I would navigate myself when she and her partner (both close friends) were fighting. In all of these cases and more, I think that I am very attuned to people’s need to find a dignified way of trying to make things right. I think that my behaviour as a little boy was terribly ‘irresponsible,’ of course, in that there was no demand whatsoever for me to admit culpability, and I would not ever want to have a conversation with a man who had abused his partner in which *this kind* of way forward was negotiated (which relates to concerns I have about Solution-focused Therapy approaches to abuse intervention [Lee et al. 2003]). But I think this was probably totally appropriate for a four or five year old; and the more general need for some version of a consensual, dignified way forward, in order to pave the way for some kind of taking responsibility, is something that has been very centrally important to me – perhaps for as long as I can remember. I do not think I ever would have made the connection between this story from my childhood and these other aspects of my life if I had not heard Shaista’s articulation of her dog’s presence in her life.

**Patty’s interview:**

1. **Identifying the expression**

   The expression from Patty’s interview that has most struck a chord for me is her articulation of the ethical practice she calls a “willingness to be interrupted.”

2. **Describing the image**

   I have an image of Patty going about her life according to whatever plan she has for it that day, when she is stopped in her tracks by behaviour that appears to be totally out of the blue, unwarranted, and inexplicable. Although ‘thrown off’ by this, she collects herself and allows herself to be at peace with the discomfort, confusion and frustration until she has a better understanding of how she can move forward *with* the other person, rather than in spite of them – very likely *not* according to the plan she had earlier been following. This relates to Ahmed’s (2006b) description of what happens in queer or disorienting moments:
Such sideways moments might generate new possibilities, or they might not…. What happens when we are “knocked off course” depends on the psychic and social resources “behind” us. Such moments can be a gift, or they might be the site of trauma, anxiety, or stress about the loss of an imagined future. It is usually with the benefit of “hindsight” that we reflect on such moments, where a fork in the road before us opens up and we have to decide what to do, even if the moment does not present itself as a demand for decision (19).

This passage from Ahmed may have been brought to mind when I responded to Patty’s articulation by using the word “resources” (I do not recall if I was thinking of it at the time) – or it might be more coincidental or have played more of a difficult to articulate ‘haunting’ role in how I navigated myself in that conversation. Either way, I think that Patty’s articulation is itself a resource that can more purposively engage the phenomena that Ahmed describes here. I think that Patty (and perhaps Ahmed) might agree that these moments are, at once, “the site of trauma, anxiety, or stress” and “a fork in the road” to further connectedness, ethical becomings, and social justice. I do not imagine that such moments are easy for Patty, but I imagine she’s able to go with them, to flow with them, in part because she values allowing herself to be accountable to the other person in this way and she values the lessons and transformation involved when she does allow herself to be “knocked off course.” These lessons and transformations are ethical and political.

3. Embodying responses

As soon as she articulated this in the interview, I had a very clear sense of how it ‘fit for me’ in terms of providing language for struggles I sometimes have today responding to my son, as well as how these struggles with my son resonate with concerns I have about institutional practices of domination I have perpetrated in the past. The schedule is such a valued aspect of institutional life – as well as such a necessary aspect of juggling home and work responsibilities with a young child (or at least it seems that way, contingently perhaps) – that it is very often only inconveniences and interruptions of already-planned schedules that lead to me acting in ways I’d rather not as a father today, as was frequently also the case for me as a professional. I am sure Patty would agree that this is one element among many others that can contribute to our disrespect and violence, but I think it is a really important one.
4. Acknowledging transport

This phrase has subsequently come to me in very concrete ways in my navigations of difficult moments with my son. If he refuses to brush his teeth, does not tell me he needs the potty, or is cranky because he’s jumped up and down on his mattress for the entire duration of his nap time, it can be incredibly frustrating. But Patty’s phrase has (sometimes) concretely ‘enabled’ me to catch myself in these moments and recognize that what is actually going on is only that I am being slightly inconvenienced. This has, at times, allowed me to collect myself and be less frustrated with him, more sweet with him, and so on. I also shared a selection from Patty’s interview, and how I have been transported with my son as a result of it, as part of a presentation of my research for a job interview recently. As a part of this talk, I applied Patty’s ethical practice to a story from my past work in a homeless shelter. I have yet to return to that story since that time, but I look forward to reengaging it and to the learning and transformation that will surely result from doing so, following Patty. Engaging with my research participants through what Bhabha calls “the supplementary strategy,” as I describe in chapter three, has demanded that I be willing to be interrupted by them and to flow in directions I had not yet anticipated pursuing before interviewing them.

Patty and Shaista are both classmates of mine, pursuing their doctorates in the same department as I am. Another classmate is Sheila Stewart. Sheila is a poet and a great reader of poetry, which I am not. Although I respect poetry greatly, in theory, I never feel like I ‘have time for it,’ in practice. This is also true of most fiction for the past several years. Most of the time I am ‘okay’ with this – sometimes totally okay, even proud – and sometimes more ‘resigned.’ At any rate, I have enjoyed being in class with Sheila, hearing her poetry and recognizing that she and I share “something like a relationship” in our orientations to the world, to what it is to be human, and to what language is and does. After she read a selection from her work in class, in which she cited the following quotation, I asked her to email the citation to me because it resonates with what I am attempting to explore through outsider-witnessing practices, the language of overtones, and so on:

in poetry … sound will initiate thought by a process of association. words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into
utterance… [it is] a form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction. a drawing, a pulling toward (Marlatt 2008, 10).

Sheila knows a little of my work from our class together as well, and it is interesting that she chose to send another selection from this same piece by Marlatt, along with the selection I’d requested. In the following selection, “something like” the flows of becoming I have used de Saint-Exupéry to convey is articulated by Marlatt. Sheila did not send anything other than these two things: one which I requested, and another that she was, following Marlatt, perhaps “nudged” or “provoked” to send along, after having heard other aspects of my work and going through her own “process of association.” I think it is also fair to comment that both the above and below come from Marlatt, and even come from adjoining pages in the same piece of writing, although they articulate two ideas that I’d previously articulated as distinct. There is, then, perhaps Spivak’s “something like a relationship” between the representations of particular lives joined together through narrative or poetry (or forkings, overttones, or countersignatures) and the representation of collective flows of becoming that de Saint-Exupéry conveys. The second citation Sheila sent reads: “language is larger than us and carries us along with it…. if we are poets we spend our lives discovering not just what we have to say but what language is saying as it carries us with it” (Marlatt 2008, 11).

Language carries us with it. I think this happens when we witness those narratives that we consider ‘personal’ stories, and I think it may be just as true when we engage those narratives that we call theory or philosophy.

I had outsider-witness conversations with my MSW research participants, and they responded by expressing feeling connected to one another through this process. I anticipated as much, given that the process is a structure specifically designed to facilitate exactly that – although the particularities were unanticipated, interesting, and lovely. But what I did not anticipate is that each of these participants also expressed, in somewhat similar terms during their initial individual interviews, analogous connections to new theory that they had encountered at key points in their lives – as I describe in chapter three. Each described how this new theory enabled them to reengage with past experiences in new ways – which again ‘brings to mind’ Spivak’s “ability to know.” Thinking about these past
research conversations more recently, and being carried along by the flows they made possible for me, I have begun to consider that perhaps there is something resonant in how we are drawn to others’ ‘personal’ narratives, in an everyday sort of way, and how we are drawn to narratives in which people express philosophy or theory. I wonder if it might be useful to think of both of these seemingly utterly distinct practices through representations of outsider-witnessing or ‘river forks.’ Like I have met some people who I had no interest in getting to know, there is some philosophy I just cannot be bothered with. But at other times we persist, even when these relationships are hard going: I tried to read Foucault five or six times before doing so with any comprehension whatsoever, and I also had to put Spivak down after trying to read her for the first time – and when I finally first read her fruitfully, it involved frequent dictionary consultations and a bookmark made of my list of new vocabulary that I added to every time I sat down to read. When theory resonates for us, on the first or twenty-first attempt to make sense of it, our overtones actively re-engage with other thoughts, feelings, and stories from our lives – and this is what makes it worthwhile (it seems to me, anyway). My consciousness-level experience of reading stimulating philosophy or theory has “something like a relationship” with being engaged in a conversation in which I have to bite my tongue because I am so excited to respond to what the other person’s saying. And, in fact, I do take my conversational turn while reading stuff I really enjoy – I stop scanning text as my mind rushes off on some countersigned flow that only became available to me through my engagement with the text. I’d love to imagine that you might have had this experience once or twice while reading this – that is what I take from Massumi’s articulation that elements of A Thousand Plateaus will “weave into the melody of [readers’] everyday lives” (2008, xiv). For me, that is perhaps what I most love about the experience of reading – when the already-present overtones overcome the text itself and become reflexively engaged in an ‘internal’ creative, uncharted conversation, as if dialoguing with the author. (I shared the last few pages with Sheila Stewart, to show her how I was taking up what she had sent me and to check out how she felt about my representation of her in it all; part of her response was this: “Maybe I read poetry for some of the reasons you read theory” [personal communication, March 17, 2011]). Perhaps very different kinds of reading, and ‘forking’ more generally, can ‘enable’ similar processes.
Two of my MSW research participants – Linda Pawluch and Vic Hill, both of whom are social workers influenced by Narrative Practice – described early negative understandings of feminism, which resulted in no interest in feminism at the time even though they each had a sense that “something was not right.” Later in life, they both found words for that “something” in feminism. Following Heraclitus, they were not the same person later in life as they had been earlier in life, specifically in terms of the ways they were ‘able’ or unable to allow feminism to fork into their flows of becoming. Power passes through us, as we are able (or not) to connect with this theory or that, this poem or that, this person or that, or this practice or that, in this way or that. It is likely that, when unable to let feminism into their lives, Vic and Linda may well have passed on the negative stereotypes about it that already circulated in their social contexts at the time, contributing to others, in turn, being unable to let feminism into their lives, as this passing on passed through them, carrying them along. Once again this is Foucault’s “rule of double conditioning” and Ahmed’s “Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (2006b, 16). This applies equally to their subsequent embraces of feminism: They both described the “lines” which opened up new possibilities for understanding (Linda from University courses, Vic from her father saying he considered himself a feminist) and, now that Linda and Vic have allowed feminism into the flow of their lives, they now speak of this in a way that may invite others to do so for the first time. This relates to Spivak’s “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” where what we are ‘able to know’ and what we are ‘able to’ become are difficult to radically disentangle. In the following section, I explore how this relates to our forkings with particular others, especially those to whom we are tethered together through exaltation and denigration, and we are positioned ‘on top,’ as exalted, on the respective stratification.

**Reflexive Accountability**

I have told the following story to many social work students, therapy ‘trainees,’ and clients to illustrate what I have called ‘reflexive accountability:’ the ethical practice by which we orient our self-reflexive efforts toward imagining how another might experience us, knowing we can never know for sure. With people with whom we have an ongoing relationship, this imagining can be shaped by our recollections of what they’ve said and done in the past. With people with whom we do not have an ongoing relationship, this practice can be partly informed by what other others have said to us in the past. So this
practice that I am calling ‘reflexive accountability’ often relies on an internal practice of ‘re-membering,’ which Griffin suggests above may be ethically questionable – along the lines of “something like” appropriation. I suspect Griffin might agree that this does not mean we should not do it, but that rather we owe it to those we care about, and to those we hurt, that we somehow, tentatively, try to ‘do justice’ to their experience. But what that might mean is elusive. Patty and Shaista both describe practices of ‘reflexive accountability’ during the conversations I cite above: Shaista in drawing upon her relationships with Six Nations in order to navigate how to respond to a white man’s racism, and drawing upon the memory of her dog to think and feel about her complicity in colonization; Patty in using her relationship with her son to inform her teaching. In these examples, significant figures are brought to mind in order to ethically and politically navigate challenging situations. Griffin knows that there’s a danger of injury inherent to this ethical practice; Patty and Shaista seem to honour their respective brought-to-mind relationships in ways suggesting that perhaps this danger can be averted. Such injury or justice, though, perhaps again needs to be approached différentially rather than as two radically distinct and distinguishable things that are always and only what they ‘are,’ no matter the social context, way of thinking, concrete relationship, and so on. If we take “something like” Derrida’s non-negotiable illimitable and impossible ethics and politics as a point of departure, then the doing of justice or injury, potentially effected through bringing someone to mind, can only ‘be’ a ‘vanishing presence’ of justice, or injury, or both, with justice and injury each forever haunting our impossible efforts as absent-presences. It is entirely possible, for example, that Patty or Shaista may have another encounter, or thought or feeling, that reconstellates the work they’re now doing as, ‘in fact,’ unethical or unjust – as the examples from Ruth Pluznick and Titchkosky in chapter one illustrate. And again, if this were to happen, this would not necessarily mean that the work they’d previously been doing had always been unethical or unjust. We can furthermore again notice the heterotopic recognition of this non-fixity of ethicality in Patty’s struggle with whether or not it ‘is,’ or ‘will be’ (as he grows older), ethical to think through ethics, ableism, and childrearing through her relationship with her son. “Perhaps,” as he gets older, it will no longer ‘be’ ethical. There is no way of knowing today, either way. She checks in with him, practicing accountability, which ‘makes it ethical’ today. Later on, he may ask her to stop. But it is also entirely possible that he or she may one day decide that what she’s doing today was, ‘in fact,’ unethical all along. This too is non-negotiable, and it
applies equally (although always distinctly, heterogeneously, etc.) with my representations of Ruth, Patty, Griffin and Shaista, as well as my representations of my partner or son. So: yes, of course I have checked out everything I write about my partner with her and, yes, she’s given me the go-ahead. But that go-ahead, that concrete practice of accountability, is non-negotiably haunted by the real possibility that she may no longer feel that way in the future.

I often say to social work students and other trainees that, as social workers or therapists, we will all have the opportunity to hear stories of other social workers’ abuse of power, as well as of clients directly confronting us about our own unethical ethical practices. While this is generally incredibly unpleasant, it is also ethically valuable as Ahmed’s “resources [that are then subsequently] ‘behind’ us:” although we cannot imagine that one person’s experience is going to be shared in its particularity, these experiences teach us something about particular ways that some people experience being a social service client, and that people experience the presence of social workers in their lives. These accounts can therefore help us navigate our words, thoughts, and actions, in our subsequent interactions with these and other clients, as well as in reflecting upon our work, lives, and relationships. We can do “something like” this, too, with our engagements with accounts we hear, read, or witness, in which we are not directly involved. In chapter three, I gave an example of working to facilitate this practice, with a client who said his partner was acting just like her mother. And this same practice can potentially be mobilized in white people’s navigations of whiteness, cisgendered people’s navigations of transphobia, etc. The purposeful mobilization of past experiences of accountability in our present reflexivity is the practice I am calling ‘reflexive accountability.’

And the following story illustrates how tremendously complicated this is in practice.

In some approaches to working with men who perpetrate abuse, the Duluth Power and Control Wheel (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project n.d.) plays a central, primary, and ever-present role in educating men about the effects of men’s violence against women. The aim of this strategy is to have the men accept that their own behaviour is like that described on the Power and Control Wheel, so that ‘taking responsibility’ ‘is’ accepting that they’re mappable onto the Wheel, which is a particular operationalization of what it means for
someone to ‘take responsibility,’ rather than the only possible way that someone might do so. My experience of the Power and Control Wheel being used early on and in a recurrent way is that it invites men’s defensiveness rather than their responsibility. There is often defensiveness in response to the suggestion that the Wheel is an accurate representation of them. Admittedly, surely my ‘experience’ of this has to do with my Invitational Practice training and community, including things I have read of others’ experience that I myself then resonantly also ‘experienced’ in turn (Augusta-Scott 2009; Fisher 2005; Jenkins 1990).

Be that as it may, I think this is not a fruitful use of what can nevertheless be a potentially useful tool. The Power and Control Wheel can be more ‘invitational’ used, alternatively, later in a group as a way of working toward preparing men for practices of direct accountability in which they attend to their partners’ specific experiences of their particular violence. (This preparation for direct accountability is one aspect of abuse intervention work that I believe we have a responsibility to prioritize and facilitate, as much as we also have a responsibility to prepare the men to be ‘able to’ do this work. Above I mention concerns with the very promising work that has been done with domestic violence perpetrators by Solution-focused Therapists [Lee et al. 2003]. Because they leave the goals of transformation totally up to clients to decide, I have some ethical concerns about their approach. The subtitle of their book, “Accountability for Change,” is telling, in that it is the only accountability that seems to be prioritized. Now, change is no minor detail of course: I have no doubt that partners are very relieved when violence stops or is reduced, and I trust the authors’ measures demonstrating that they achieve this in their work [although their solution-oriented measures should not be read as equivalent to measures taken by researchers following other approaches, many of whom believe that abuse perpetrators will never change, and who accordingly use different measurements which tend findings confirming that assumption]. Accepting that their approach probably does work as well as they claim, to do what they claim, I think that upon the reduction or elimination of abuse, intervention workers then have a responsibility to attempt to prepare [former] perpetrators to be ‘able to’ attend to others’ accounts of what they’ve done. We should not assume this attending will be the same practice for all people, or that the pathway ‘there’ is the same for everyone, but being ‘able to’ attend to the impact of one’s actions may be something that should be prioritized.)
The Power and Control Wheel was originally developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (n.d.) as a composite account of many different women’s descriptions of the impact of many different men’s abuse, and so there may be some accounts on the Wheel that will resonate with a given man’s relationship and others that will not. I think most people who use the Wheel would readily agree with that. But I think that, taken to its logical conclusion, this raises the concern about what it means for such a tool (however comprehensive) to be presented as ‘truer’ than the man’s own experiences of his relationship (and implicitly, perhaps also as ‘truer’ than his partner’s experiences). I do not think it is effective to present the Wheel as containing ‘the truth’ about domestic violence or about every man who attends such a group, especially where these ‘truths’ are then considered necessary for a man to embrace, in order to work against his abuse at all. In addition to being ineffective, it is also politically dangerous, as suggested by my story of the African man’s critique of my liberalism. Spivak (1999) says “struggles against patriarchal measures are altogether admirable in her location; but dire when ‘applied’ globally” (251-252); and Smith writes that “the lives and histories of women of color call on us to radically rethink all models currently developed for addressing domestic violence” (2005b, 152):

As the antiviolence movement has attempted to become more ‘inclusive,’ attempts at multicultural interventions against domestic violence have unwittingly strengthened white supremacy within the antiviolence movement. All too often, inclusivity has come to mean that the ‘domestic violence model,’ which developed largely with the interests of white, middle-class women in mind, should simply add a multicultural component to it. Antiviolence multicultural curricula are often the same as those produced by mainstream groups, with some ‘cultural’ designs or references added to this preexisting model. Most domestic violence programs serving communities of color do not have dramatically different models from the mainstream’s (Smith 2005b, 152).

This concern can also be taken “from margin to center” (hooks 1984) to raise questions about the use of mainstream tools even with men and women in mainstream groups. If ‘one no and many yeses’ is indeed a fruitful orientation for critique – that there are countless radically heterogeneous traditions out of which we can make “something like” resonant critiques of liberalism and psychologism because the latter are so exceptional in the history
of conceptualizations of what it is to be human – then there is no reason whatsoever to assume that mainstream approaches are going to be useful for all mainstream people. They may be useful for some, but if they’re framed (through ongoing colonial approaches to knowledge, ethics, and helping) as ‘the truth,’ then they’ll be marginalizing and potentially oppressive of all those for whom they do not ‘ring true’. Because of these political, ethical, and theoretical concerns, which affect the ethical ‘take up’ of men and women who use these programs, I think the Power and Control Wheel (if used at all) is more effectively represented as containing ‘a specific group of women’s accounts of their particular experiences of certain men’s violence.’ One of the distinguishing features of representing the Wheel in this way is that there is no suggestion that it contains ‘the truth’ of the particular men’s identities, relationships, or their partners’ experiences and identities. This resonates with my critique of medical imaging as ‘the truth’ of what it is to be human, from chapter three. The Power and Control Wheel can, instead, be used in the spirit of Spivak’s “something like” to prepare men to attend to things their partner might have experienced from them, based on other women having relayed these particular experiences of other men’s violence and abuse. This seems to invite less defensiveness and it opens up more divergent possibilities for men to express the specific overtones that are brought to mind for them while they study the Wheel, some of which may be memories of things that their partners, exes, or others have said to them. And if these overtone-inspired responses begin with something along the lines of, “This is nothing like what my girlfriend says to me. She says…” then this is a perfectly fine response, because there is no investment whatsoever in the universal applicability of the tool. The investment is rather in the men’s reflection on, and attention to, what particular people they’ve harmed have said or done. The Wheel is prioritized as one possible and imperfect approach to that prioritized ethical tending.

All of that being a certain kind of context, the more immediate context to the story I’ll share is that I was co-facilitating a voluntary group for men who had abused their partners. None of the men had outstanding criminal charges and none of the men were mandated to attend the group by the legal system. Often in these voluntary groups, one or two attendees had previously attended other agencies’ mandated groups after having been charged with domestic assault, and this was true of the man who’s the protagonist of this story. Several years following this other mandated group, he and his partner came to the decision that he
should get more help about his behaviour, which is how he ended up in our group. About two-thirds of the way through our group, after doing considerable preparatory work that often started with centring and critically engaging ‘experience near’ accounts from the men themselves about their own violence, we shared the Power and Control Wheel with the men. We contextualized it as I describe above, so that we were presenting it in order to prepare the men to think and feel about some of the ways that they may have impacted their partners—with the purpose of them becoming more attuned to their partners’ or exes’ experiences of what they’d put them through, rather than imagining tuning into the Wheel as an end in itself assumed to map neatly onto each of their relationships. We also perhaps notably shared the Wheel with them the week immediately before an exercise called ‘internalized other’ interviewing (Nylund and Corsiglia 1993), which is another re-membering-inspired Narrative Practice by which we would interview a man as his partner, carefully contextualizing that he could never know how she really feels, but encouraging him to use words he has heard her use as much as possible. This could last up to an hour with a single man and would then be followed by the other men ‘outsider-witnessing’ the account, attempting to do so positioned as their own partners or exes. Where possible, appropriate, sought after by their partners, and so on, this was in preparation for actual conversations that men might later have with their partners or families about the impact of their violence.

In that context, then, one night we passed out copies of the Power and Control Wheel and there was some initial defensiveness, in spite of our careful preparation and timing. This was within the realm of what we expected, as was the fact that different men in the group might have divergent responses, and that relatively more ‘reflexively accountable’ men might play a part in inviting relatively more defensive men to reconsider their initial responses (which is not to say that any of the men were fixed in one or the other of these positions). It is not that we knew this would happen, but we knew it was a possibility among others. This is indeed what happened this particular night, but it happened with an intensity and a specificity that we could not have predicted. The initial defensiveness expressed was not particularly intense, but one man’s challenge to it was very much so. It would be appropriate, I think, to say that he initially “tore into” the men who had made initial defensive comments (with a degree of aggressiveness I do not ever recall in another one of these groups, which I ran for seven years in three different agencies). He then
stopped himself, apologized to the men he had targeted and to everyone else, and gave an account of how he now understood what he’d put his wife through, in ways that he’d never before understood. He was lavishly thankful to us for having provided the Wheel and he said things like “I see myself in here”, “this is exactly what she’s said to me”, “I’ll never be the same again after seeing this.” Because of our belief in the power (*pouvoir*) of witnessing others take responsibility, much of the remainder of the night brought his articulated experience into conversation with the Wheel itself, and the other men were largely invited to participate in the conversation, through their experiences of witnessing what he expressed or what was stated on the Wheel – especially as either brought to mind statements from their own partners or other memories from their lives. When group ended, my co-facilitator and I were very pleased with the unexpected developments. Over the next week, we frequently expressed to one another how curious we were to hear about his conversation with his partner when he arrived home; at the end of group, he had said that he’d go home and share the Wheel and his resultant newfound understandings with her.

The next week, we began with a check-in, and we were happy that he quickly volunteered to go first. He had indeed gone home, eager to talk with his partner. He said to her that he finally understood what he had put her through as the result of a handout we had given him. He showed her the Power and Control Wheel, and she replied that he’d taken the same thing home two years previously, when he did his court-mandated group.

So what does this story mean? Or what am I going to *use it* to mean (a question more centring of the ethics of representation)? I had never previously understood the degree to which even the same person can have very different engagements with the same thing at different times in their lives. He was not the same person he had been two years ago. He *had not read the same thing* then, even though it is a standardized tool that was surely identical in content with that he’d previously been given. It was not the same ‘thing,’ *because* he was not the same. He did not perceive the same thing in looking at it and reading the same words. He did not feel the same things or have the same thoughts accompany the words that he read to himself. His partner’s remembered words did not act as ‘overtones’ in the same way while he read. And the exact ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of this difference will never be exhaustively known. As Spivak suggests, this too is non-negotiable (1999, 287 n135).
It would be tempting to say that we played some role in his ethical becoming, leading to his greater reflexive accountability. Perhaps the overtones provided by my words invited him to become a different reader and partner than had his group facilitators from two years’ past. Of course I’d like to think I may have played some role. But perhaps that is simply not true. Perhaps the difference was not having been mandated to attend group this time, not having been arrested this time, having agentively volunteered and sought out help by his own volition this time; perhaps it was rather something his wife had recently said to him, or even something that he saw on TV or overheard while buying coffee; perhaps the last time he brought it home, two years ago, his wife had then said something about it which instigated a transformation for him, even though he does not remember those details, or perhaps one of his former facilitators was a now-forgotten catalyst. It is even possible that serotonin, blood sugar, hormones, amount of sleep the night before, or some other physiological thing played an important part in the difference between his two readings. Probably it was a combination of many factors, and maybe I have not touched upon a single one of them.

But what I want this story to invite us to consider is that the interplay between the theories that inform our perceptions, the presence of others in our ‘associations of life’, and the ‘overtones’ that are present in the vanishing present of our flows of becoming are ever changing and far more complex than I will be ‘able to’ exhaustively account for here. They are more complex than I will be ‘able to know’ – which I think is why Spivak suggests that we need both Foucault and Derrida together, in a sense canceling each other out generatively: Foucault’s ‘hows’ and contingencies with Derrida’s impossibilities “all the way down.” However we might wish otherwise, I might even say that the truth about ethics is that it’s all we’ve got.

**If Only you Knew: Living the Dream**

The idea that straightforward exposure to others’ hardship will make us more responsible and accountable, which seems to inform the most common use of the Power and Control Wheel with perpetrators, is an idea that has been around for a very long time. But perhaps this is another straitened ‘straightforward’ that needs to be queered andcripped, so that the ways it constrains and directs our ethical becomings can be rendered more available in our ‘ability to know.’ Kamo no Chomei, a 13th Century Japanese monk who I quoted in the
previous chapter along with de Saint-Exupéry, conveys the idea of the straightforwardness of exposure in his account of natural disasters: “People respond to these disasters in terms of their own experience. Unless the disaster has struck them personally, their circumstances, their environment, it is dismissed as a superficial thing” (Kamo No Chomei 2011, ¶ 24). According to this, it is whether or not we have had personal experience of a given thing that radically determines whether or not we’ll deem it serious when another person experiences it. This is also how Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack articulate the ‘hows’ of what they call the Race to Innocence (1998), mentioned previously, in which people highlight their own experiences of oppression at the expense of recognizing their own participation in other’s oppression. Like other unethical ethical practices, such as blaming victims for what we’ve done to them, giving hollow apologies, and mobilizing our good intentions to justify injury, these practices give shape to who we become and our possibilities for living and relating, and are ‘unethical’ in that they steer us away from agency, reflexivity, and accountability. Of the Race to Innocence, which they describe as occurring amongst feminists in the very course of struggling for justice, Fellows and Razack (1998) write:

> Because we do not experience the specific forms of oppression that other women do, and are in fact privileged in that respect, we are likely to consider their claims as unfounded…. [W]e utilize dominant explanatory frameworks to explain to ourselves the meaning of their lives. Although we may be able to resist these frameworks when they concern our own particular marginalized positions, they effectively regulate how we view women who are marginalized in different ways…. The fact that each of us knows and feels the inaccuracy and injustice of the dominant group’s representations of ourselves does not immunize any of us from giving credence to the inferiorizing constructs applied to others (340).

I think that Fellows and Razack, and perhaps also Chomei, would agree that it does not have to be this way and, in fact, it is not always this way. I imagine all three may have chosen to write about this unethical ethical practice in order to ‘tend’ alternatives. This is also true of Jane Addams who slightly extended this tradition of understanding, suggesting that we also have a tendency to deem something serious if it has affected those closest to us: “we have been carefully reared to a sense of family obligation, to be kindly and considerate to the
members of our own households, and to feel responsible for their well-being [as well as for that of a] … limited circles of friends” (1902c, para. 2). This less-self-centred supplement she offers contains an implicit flow, path, or line for generating alternative ethical practices: for Addams, the path toward what she calls “social ethics,” a path contingent on what she says above, is that people (especially exalted people) “must be brought in contact with the moral experiences of the many” (1902c, para. 7). If we develop these tendencies for caring for those close to us and not for others, then as a corrective we need to bring more others into our everyday experience. She elaborates: “social ethics is not attained by travelling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another’s burdens” (1902c, para. 9). Greater exposure to diverse suffering increases our sense of responsibility for others’ suffering.

I do not disagree with Addams, at least not polemically, but I wonder if this is the whole picture. For example, according to this ‘path’ and its assumptions, there does not seem to be any good reason why I would not have understood my actions toward the girl in my high school as “something like” (or as bad as) what other boys in my school did to me at the same time. I suppose it is possible that all it would have taken is for someone to have told me that her experience was analogous to mine and I would have stopped what I was doing immediately. That may have happened; I have no idea. But even then, why did not I know that already? It was not simply an absence of knowing; it had to be more like an active obscuring; it is much too incongruent with the things I know I knew at the time for it to simply be lack. What kind of ‘ability to know’ was going on for me, so that I knew other things about the situation, my identity, and my relationship with gender norms and peer abuse? Or, as another example, if the Power and Control Wheel is, in and of itself and in a fixed way, useful in inviting men to consider how their partners might have experienced their abusiveness, and if all that is therefore needed is exposure to this tool, then why would the man in my group have responded so differently the two times he was shown it?

Chomei’s “experience” and Addams’ “contact” and “mixing” therefore need to be thought through more carefully. Our “experiences” and our relational “contacts” certainly significantly ‘enable’ who we are and what we do, but there is also always a way that we are removed from the immediacy of these experiences and relationships, so that the meaning we
make of them is, in the end (or in the vanishing present), all we’ve got. We perceive some experiences of hardship as valid, and others less so. That seems clear. But this is not always or only about how closely aligned we are with the person suffering, or only about whether we know a resonant experience first-hand, or whether it evokes something that feels familiar. Sometimes, even when our closest loved ones tell us about their suffering, and even when someone experiences a category of difficulty or pain we’ve experienced first-hand, we perceive their story as one in which they brought it upon themselves, or exacerbated the situation by responding the wrong way. Other times we might understand their complaint to be illegitimate whining about something that is not that big of a deal.

These judgments are not ‘in’ the sufferer’s narrative account, but they rather flow into the original account through the agentive work of our countersignatures. Our “experience” or simple exposure to others’ suffering does not always lead us to be more understanding of, or concerned about, their plight, or to be more actively involved in the pursuit of justice related to their concerns. In fact, Addams’ own life history, as presented in contrast with her contemporary Mary Richmond’s life history – as they are frequently positioned relative to one another in anti-oppressive accounts of social work history (Abramovitz 1998; Carniol 2005; Haynes 1998; Lundblad 1995; Olson 2007) – undermines the self-evidence of Addams’ prescription: Addams was born and raised wealthy; Richmond was a poor orphan; but Addams is credited as a symbol and early figure of anti-classist forms of social work, while Richmond is credited as contributing to more classist forms. Although this account is a tremendously simplifying one, which is more fruitfully read *differentially* (both were, however divergently and specifically, at once classist and anti-classist), it is nevertheless ‘true enough’ that – according to Addams’ logic – Richmond should have been the less classist one, because of her early exposure to poverty and other poor people.

Addams’ prescription for social ethics was connected to what she was ‘able to know’ as a turn-of-the-century white feminist radical. She believed, among many other things, in the purity or truth of experience, just as she believed in the truth of science. Today I can almost cite the following quote without comment and assume that it will only ever be read (at least by anyone who I imagine might bother to read *this* thus far) with an irony that would have shocked her: “We do not believe that genuine experience can lead us astray any more than scientific data can” (1902c, ¶ 10). And of course the scientific data of her day led her and
her comrades in struggle to advocate for eugenics (Rafter 1997; Lombardo 2003), in which frequently data was supplemented by helping professionals’ and family members’ “experiences” of people deemed feebleminded, defective, and so on (Carey 2009). We cannot trust “genuine experience” to facilitate Addams’ admirable dream of “social ethics.”

**What’s Possible to Know about our ‘Inability to Know’**

Razack, almost a century after Addams, responds to what is often still taken to be the self-evidence of Addams’ suggestions – at least implicitly – in terms of how to go about pedagogical approaches attempting to bring about change in others (which is again one aspect of Foucault’s ‘government of self and others’). To be clear, I am aligning Addams’ suggestion that we’ll be more ethical in relation to diverse others if only we are exposed to their suffering, on the one hand, and the practice in contemporary critical pedagogy of reading or watching representations of diverse others’ suffering, on the other. Resonance may also be clear between both of these approaches and what I described as the most common use of the Power and Control Wheel, which shares women’s experiences of being abused with men who abuse to get them to take responsibility for their abuse. Razack says,

> the emphasis in critical pedagogy on voices silenced through traditional education is now being met with calls to interrogate more closely the construction of subjectivity. That is, the complex ways in which relations of domination are sustained, lived, and resisted call for a more careful examination of how we come to know what we know as well as how we work for more just world across our various ways of knowing.

When we depend on storytelling, either to reach each other across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one

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43 One reason to read Addams and Richmond *différantially*, rather than in dialectic opposition mapped onto a straightforward normative political spectrum, is that remembering to intersect contemporary eugenics activism complicates the simplified picture we often paint in radical social work classrooms. People aligned with *Addams*, Katherine Bement Davis and Josephine Shaw Lowell, were the primary Americans responsible for incarcerating ‘feebleminded’ women for the duration of their child-bearing years, and in so doing were among the primary figures in the advent and operationalization of eugenic criminology more generally. Lowell, notably, also defies Addams’ own prescription, in that she herself was a single mother – which clearly did not make her any more generous and loving toward the plight of other single mothers (Rafter 1997).
difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it (1999, 36).

She therefore suggests of the sharing of stories that their “potential as a tool for social change is remarkable, provided we pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups” (Razack 1999, 37). One of the things that appears to make a difference in such perception and ‘take up’ – whether the story is told, written, signed, acted out, etc. – is how the story-teller is positioned in the account that is actively generated through the co-authoring/meaning-making performed by the witness of the story, which is to say: in the witness’ countersignature or overtones. As Ahmed shows in the reading of a fundraising pamphlet on landmines (2004a), mentioned earlier to make a different point, stories of people’s suffering can easily be told in such a way that those centred as suffering are denied agency. The named and humanized (in certain ways) victims of landmines are not represented as protagonists or primary characters in the letter she engages. It is ‘we,’ the potential donors, who are positioned as agentic protagonists, the primary characters who can act and make a difference in other people’s lives. The people whose lives have been affected by landmines, in this reading, are rendered no more responsible for what happens in their lives than are trees at risk of being clear-cut or a river that might be dammed. This narrative positioning is not exclusive to international fundraising. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes a man’s inability to perceive a story as a woman intends: “Her (story) remains irreducibly foreign to Him. The Man can’t hear it the way she means it. He sees her as victim, as unfortunate object of hazard. ‘Her mind is confused,’ he concludes. [Whereas s]he views herself as the teller ... the moving force of the story” (cited in Razack 1999, 36).

Following Ahmed, in her chapter which opens with the landmines letter in particular, I want to try to hold in tension that this situation of impossibility – an ‘inability to know’ or an ‘inability to empathize’ – is both an aspect of relations of power/oppression and also something that characterizes all relationships between all people, however ‘demographically’ similar to one another. We can say that men are unable to truly understand women, in particular, and that nondisabled people are unable to truly understand disabled people, in particular, and so on. And, on a populational level, I think we could probably demonstrate that these relative degrees of ‘inability to know’ are probably
statistically significant. They likely are. But, even if they are, it does not follow that all men as a group can accurately understand all other men, all lesbians all other lesbians, and so on. It does not necessarily follow that even one single wheelchair user will ever exhaustively understand every experience, pain, joy, and statement of another wheelchair user, however intimately they know one another, however many other demographic characteristics they share, and so on. One aspect of this impossibility is that other factors inevitably intersect, and there are no two people who share every demographic feature that we could imagine. As a result, even accounting for a thorough intersectionality, there is always going to be what Butler calls an ‘exasperated etc.’ following lists of identity characteristics; we can never fully account for who any of us is by any such list, however comprehensive. But she writes that “This illimitable et cetera … offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing” (1990, 143), as I have cited above. Like Ahmed, Spivak, and Derrida, Butler is advocating that we base our ethical and political work in the ‘knowledge’ that we cannot exhaustively know or understand one another, or even ourselves.

This ‘inability to know’ informs a comment I find myself frequently writing while grading papers by social work students. (Such comments, too, are ethical practices. They are acts of self-governance and flows of becoming [what kind of teacher do I wish to be?] and are also centrally oriented by an attempt to influence the self-governance of others, like the uses of the Power and Control Wheel I discuss above.) In my social work classes, frequently students with a given experience of hardship or marginalization write in their papers that they will, therefore, understand what their future clients who share this experience will experience. There is, of course, a certain way that this is true. But there is also a danger in believing that we can know what someone else has been through, feels, or needs.

The everyday person-to-person ethical transgressions that cumulatively add up to sociological patterns of institutionalized oppression are sometimes grounded in good intentions, or at least in intentions other than to specifically do harm. Barry Stuart, a retired Judge with concerns about systemic oppression in the Canadian criminal justice system, seems to agree. He says, “I do not know of a single justice person I have ever met who entered into the system wanting to increase the number of Aboriginal people in jail, to increase the number of illiterate people in jail, to increase the number of people who are
mentally challenged in jail – but that is what we are doing as a system” (Rowlands and Stuart 2008). If we think about this, then, as the cumulative effects of many, many people making dozens or even hundreds of decisions every day, grounded in the knowledge that they have about ‘justice’ and ‘responsibility,’ and their resultant contingent ethical practices and ‘ability to know,’ then I think we have to realize that our ‘experiential’ knowledge can ‘ground’ oppressive practices as much as ‘scientific’ and ‘social scientific’ knowledge can. And so we have to be careful what we ‘do’ with any of these kinds of knowledge. I have had several white female students who went into social work because they were survivors of sexual assault and they wanted to help other women who have been through the same. This is an honorable, admirable motivation to choose a demanding path in life, and the way that ‘the personal is political’ fits for them as women is relatively clear. But how is their personal-is-political complicated, if we also consider their whiteness, class-privilege, or even simply their subsequent positioning as a helping professional? How is their ‘personal,’ in relation to these things, a ‘political’ concern? In addition to the chapter from Ahmed I mentioned earlier (2004a), and the Fellows and Razack article cited above (1998), for a number of these women, reading Smith’s (2005c) rigorous analysis of the way that gender violence intersects with racism and colonialism has fundamentally changed their sense of what it means to ‘share an experience’ with someone. It is not that I want students to feel unknowledgeable, or that I want to steer them away from working with other survivors of sexual abuse, it is that their knowledge – whatever its content, source, or theoretical leaning – is not always going to fit for other people and their lives. (This is, again, Spivak’s [1993] bringing Derrida’s impossibility to bear on Foucault’s ‘ability to know.’) And, especially when positioned as counsellor or social worker, such impositions of our experiences holds an enormous danger for people to be harmed by what we do, even when we have nothing but good intentions. Practices of accountability require us to bracket our good intentions, and our abstract theoretical and professional knowledges, in order to attend to the actual relationship(s) in which we find ourselves at a given vanishing moment. With my social work students, then, I want to intervene in what they are ‘able to’ do with their knowledge, in their “pouvoir-savoir at ground level,” rather than primarily orienting my pedagogy toward ‘adding to’ the facts or perspectives they know (Freire 2000).
I wonder, then, if perhaps we can start with the assumption that nobody can really understand any one else’s experience of the world – this is what Ahmed suggests in her chapter that opens with the landmine letter. She writes that “the ethical demand is that I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know” (2004a, 31) and: “I want to suggest here, cautiously, and tentatively, that an ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel” (2004a, 30).

We live with one another and we need to try to respond ethically and justly to others’ pain or experience, and we need to try to respond ethically and justly to the impossibility of knowing someone else’s pain or experience. But how do we do justice to others’ suffering? How do we do justice to our inability to really know it? This is another sense of Spivak’s “The ethical aporia [impasse or impossibility] is not negotiable. We must act in view of this” (1999, 287 n135). Ahmed suggests that the assumption that accurate empathy is possible can feed our perpetration of oppression. Sometimes, of course, it is perfectly harmless for a person to believe they know how another person is thinking or feeling. Sometimes we might be more-or-less right, or at least close enough that it does not really register as significant. Other times we might be wrong, but even then there is no significant consequence. We might offer a hug that is appreciated, and the details of what we did or did not understand never even come up. Surely this happens all the time. But sometimes misreading a person’s needs, wants, thoughts, or feelings does cause injury. Even the simple statement, “I know how you feel” is one that I have heard dozens of suffering people complain about being told, by presumably well intentioned and concerned others. And, if we accept that these complaints are a result of having felt some kind of injury as a result of being told this statement, then the specific effects of this injury are perhaps going to be contingent on the relationship between the two people (which is where, again following Spivak [1993], there is a need to bring Foucault’s contingencies into conversation with Derrida’s illimitable and impossible ethics, but here in the opposite direction from that mentioned in the previous paragraph).

For example, if a student misunderstands a professor, it is much more likely to have negative repercussions for the student than for the professor. But, if a professor misunderstands a student, it is (still) likely to negatively impact the student more often and more seriously than the professor. We can make sense of this because the ‘doer’ of the
misunderstanding is only one factor in a relationship that is institutionalized as unequal, and where this inequality is seen to be necessary and politically neutral. The ‘institutionalized’ assumption is that the professor knows more. The default onus is always on the student to prove herself to the professor. And we can say roughly the same thing about social workers or therapists and their clients, as well as about bosses and their employees, although there are variations in terms of ‘hows’ and consequences and of course there is heterogeneity to any of these kinds of relationships. These relations of hierarchy are all institutionalized and generally considered to be good, or at least necessary and neutral. As I have cited already, Foucault suggests that the navigation of our ethical becomings while positioned ‘on top’ of such hierarchies is “in fact, the hinge point of ethical concerns and the political struggle for the respect of rights, of critical thought against abusive techniques of government and research in ethics that seeks to ground individual freedom” (2006a, 298-299) – and I think this is fairly clear when we are applying it to structures of stratification such as those exalting professors, counsellors and bosses. What is a little more complicated to think through is how these same dynamics feature in relation to hierarchical tetherings of ability, gender, class, race, sexuality, and so on. Elsewhere (Chapman 2011), I suggest that one way this happens is through intersectionality in perhaps the simplest sense: because systemic forms of oppression contribute to the statistical overrepresentation of white, male, nondisabled, class-privileged, etc., professors, social workers, and bosses (as well as other such ‘higher up’ positionings institutionally exalted as ‘competent,’ ‘knowledgeable,’ ‘responsible,’ etc.), then those dominant bodies are discursively infused with ‘institutionalized’ and unproblematized competence (and so on) by virtue of their occupying the structural position of social worker or boss. Because this hierarchy is structurally necessary to the preservation of the status quo of the work place, university, or social service system, this hierarchy is left unproblematized in any fundamental way, even when racism, heterosexism, and so on, are problematized. As a result, when acknowledged, racism, heterosexism, and so on, are assumed to exist in specific individuals, rather than in the system – and these scapegoated individuals are much more likely to be those whose institutionalized ‘power over’ others is not deemed necessary and politically neutral for the smooth running of things. Angela Davis, for example, describes a ‘progressive’ jail with an anti-oppressive policy (2008). She shows, though, that homophobia and racism, according to its policy, are conceptualized as problems in the behaviour of prisoners but never of
guards or ‘the system.’ And we can imagine, further, that if a guard or small group of guards is found to be ‘homophobic,’ then this will be cast as an aberration that has nothing to do with structures of the state, the prison, and society that are fundamentally shaped through homophobia (Thobani 2007).

Rather than countering this with ‘no, it is in the system,’ or with an ‘it is both/and’ that imagines this ‘both/and-ness’ to be an end point, I am interested in trying to trace out the ongoing constitution of systems/structures/discourses and individuals, interactionally, as per Foucault’s “rule of double conditioning” and Ahmed’s “Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (2006b, 16), both referred to several times now. Whiteness creates what I can become, at the same time as my enactment of whiteness gives shape to available possibilities for whiteness. This is almost self-evident in small groups, but it is these enactments – cumulatively – that give shape to societal flows of becoming too. In the previous chapter, I described perceiving an African man’s critique of my liberal individualism as blaming his partner. Without a doubt, this was racist of me. This was racism, personally-is-politically, and part of what shaped its possibility was the way that race and racism intersected with the stratification of social worker/client. When I had earlier encountered a critique of liberal individualism in a class on Africentricity, I found it very useful and generative – but in that classroom context, whiteness intersected with the professor/student hierarchy in such a way that I attended to critiques taught to me by my black professor as legitimate and transformative. Before hearing the African man in my group speak, then, I already ‘knew’ Africentric critiques of liberalism, found them useful, and believed I’d incorporated them into my sense of what is what (which is not to say that this client’s critique can be mapped onto my professor’s, point by point, but there is “something like a relationship” between them). This previous exposure to Africentricity ‘enabled’ me to later hear my client critiquing liberalism rather than blaming his wife, when he and I met individually, following the end of the group. But it did not allow me to attend to his critique during the group. This man could very likely share this experience with a group of Africans who had been social service users and we might expect that some others present might be able to respond with resonant stories. He could possibly even share this experience with a group of Africans who had contact with diverse sites widely acknowledged to be locations of systemic oppression – the criminal justice system, the
educational system, the work force, the immigration system – and we might expect that some others present would be ‘able to’ respond with, again, resonant stories with only slightly more variation in the details.

**Self-reflexive Critique and Others’ ‘Ability to Know’**

According to Mahmood (2005) and Thobani (2009), even Butler’s work (which so powerfully challenges our taken-for-granted) is constituted through liberalism and Whiteness. I am interested in Butler’s *response* to this. At least in her response to Mahmood, she seems to acknowledge that she may never have been ‘able to’ perceive this in her own work autonomously. On the back cover of the book in which Mahmood makes this critique, Butler writes, “My enthusiasm for this brave and stunning book is unqualified, and I learned something on every page.”

Of the African man who critiqued my liberalism, I have said it is not hard to imagine him sitting around with other Africans swapping resonant personal-is-political experiences of being subjected to racism. But perhaps the experience of me, a white person reading Butler’s “enthusias[tic]” accountability to Mahmood’s critique, is an equally personal-is-political experience that ‘enables’ what I am ‘able to’ know and who I am ‘able to’ become. Her response provides a certain kind of support, example, ‘path,’ ‘line’ or ‘flow,’ to navigate my own participation in liberalism and racism (and perhaps other forms of oppression and harm). I wonder if my connection here to Butler, structurally, is not completely different from the kinds of connections that are made when people swap resonant stories of experiencing racism. I made “something like” this point in relation to how my gender norming peer abuse worked collaboratively (however inadvertently) with that of the boys who subjected me to gender norming peer abuse, whereas here I am pointing to strategies of resistance rather than complicity, as well as a greater degree of purpose and acknowledgement of collaboration. One person may start the conversation and it ‘brings to mind’ overtones of others’ resonant experiences, however distinct in their particularities.

When I have presented self-reflexive work in which I name and explore my own participation in colonialism and ableism, I have been tremendously nervous to do so, worried that people would be angry with me for things I have done. But this has never been
expressed to me (which is not to say it has never happened). In terms of what’s been shared with me, the overwhelming response has been people seeking me out afterward and sharing their own stories of complicity and personal-is-political participation in systemic oppression. These stories have been widely divergent and have come from many people positioned differently from me in terms of race, gender, ability, and so on, but each one shared stories with me that they implied were “something like” what I’d shared – several of them saying they’d never talked about these things with anyone previously. My understanding of this is that my sharing ‘enabled’ their ‘ability to know,’ ‘ability to trust,’ and ‘ability to become’.

Stories shared with one another can enable the re-engagement of our private meaning making. I have used the word “resonance” frequently already, but let me stop now to think about it. Resonance is yet another representation of what it is to be human taken from music. White writes that the most evocative expressions of connection between people are “not so much about empathy and sympathy but about resonance – outsider witness responses that are most effective are those that re-present what people give value to in a way that is highly resonant to these people” (2007, 187-188). He’s referring to the effectiveness in bringing about transformation for those who initially share their stories, but I think he’d also agree this is a ‘two way street.’ I am also transformed by those times I witness others’ expressions through the “work” of resonance. For example, I do not know how Butler felt when she wrote her ‘accountable enthusiasm’ for Mahmood’s work, and so it is not empathy or sympathy that “pulls” me to it, and “carries” me with it (Marlatt 2008). It is not ‘knowing’ her experience that pulls. I suppose I am aware, in my experience of being pulled, that she ‘could have’ felt defensive and responded defensively, but this is not exactly a connection through a shared or even ‘roughly shared’ experience of defensiveness – it is more along the lines of the ‘image’ I have of the situation. This image is fairly close to the image I have of Patty’s “willingness to be interrupted” by her son and students. I do not “feel” Patty’s frustration, or Butler’s defensiveness. I imagine they’re there or could have been there. But what pulls me is their response to those feelings, their response to the dangers of where those feelings could have carried them. In reading Butler’s response to Mahmood, I feel alignment with what I imagine might have driven her to respond as she did – White’s “intentional states.” And even then, I flow immediately to my own overtones of
how this resonates for me, rather than speculating on ‘what it was like for her.’ Speculating upon her experience of it feels very much secondary to my experience of being pulled toward her. This is the work of “resonance.” It is a kind of contact, a kind of learning from or relating to another, which leaves my journey at the centre of my experience – but by temporarily blurring the radical distinction between us as distinct people.

Deleuze and Guattari describe resonance as contact between distinct systems, where each system has a sense of sameness with the other, and where this sameness is transformative but leaves both of the systems intact (2000, 147) “because subjectification essentially constitutes finite linear proceedings” (148), they explain. When two people, or two peoples, come into contact and experience “resonance,” they share a fleeting, particular, and contingent experience that is “something like” sameness, but across difference. This is transformative without being an imposition of either one onto the other, so that each person, or people, continues on their own finite linear journey, neither trying to steer the other.

If we accept what I described above as Jenkins’ account of the interpretation and normalizing judgment of others as colonial (and as an example of what I have called an unethical ethical practice), then perhaps resonance is an available alternative ethical practice of relating that is in fairly direct distinction from such colonial imposition. If it is true, for example, that contact with North American aboriginal cultures’ social and philosophical systems played a significant role in the emergence of the self-reflexive European/white settler “Age of Revolution” (as constituted by diverse “revolutionaries,” from Benjamin Franklin to Friedrich Engels [Engels 1884; Johansen 1982; Paul 2006; Turner 2006], then we might imagine that this happened through resonance. People in Europe and the colonial US already had preexisting concerns about the normative order in which they lived. Surely many Europeans had had concerns about many practices and social structures in Europe for some time, as has probably been the case in all cultures at all times. But exposure to alternative ways of going about everyday life then ‘set something off’ that led people within Europe and white settler colonies to do something about their concerns (Chapman forthcoming). Their response, however, was not to individually join aboriginal societies, as some other Europeans did (Paul 2006; Smith 2005b), but was rather to stay within their own people’s flow of becoming to work to transform it. This experience I am trying to articulate
– reflecting on reading Butler on Mahmood and on the “Age of Revolution,” seems to map nicely onto White’s description of what resonance is and what it does (2007, 189):

It is this resonance that contributes significantly to rich story development [which is no small detail if we think about Spivak’s “pouvoir-savoir at ground level” as what we are ‘able to know.’] Such resonance contributes] to a stronger familiarity with what one accords value to in life, and to the erosion and displacement of various negative conclusions about one’s life and identity.

A “stronger familiarity with what one accords value to in life” seems a fruitful way of imagining how Franklin and Engels took from the example of the Iroquois Confederacy without simply attempting to imitate Iroquois social structures. This is in contrast with Bhabha’s (1994) analysis of colonial mimicry, which is perhaps a result of the ways that the tethering of exaltation and denigration straitens and straightens options for transformation, and is distinct from what I am describing as resonance. Franklin and Engels both appear to have been very significantly inspired by the Iroquois Confederacy, but their interventions were within white settler or European society – rather than, again, joining Iroquois society or, for that matter, advocating that white settlers or European nations join the Iroquois Confederacy according to the already existing guidelines and practices of the Great Law of Peace\(^44\). Either one of them could have oriented their energies in either of these directions, but instead Iroquois social structures, the Great Law of Peace, and so on, resonated in such a way that led them to work for transformation within their own societies. This “stronger familiarity” with already existing values is similar, again, to my reading of Butler on Mahmood, and to my thus being pulled to reflect on my life rather than on hers.

As for White’s articulation of the “displacement of various negative conclusions about one’s life and identity,” it may seem not to apply here, but I believe it does so – and centrally. When I have shared my own self-reflexive work, and others have then approached me to

\(^{44}\) That said, during the first two centuries of the colonization of the Americas, several early Treaty agreements were made between the Iroquois Confederacy and various European or white settler political bodies, following longstanding political practices of the Gus-Wen-Teh and the Great Law of Peace (Anderson 2001; Chapman forthcoming; Turner 2006). These Treaties, it should also be remembered, were contemporaneous with brutal colonial violence (Smith 2005b; Paul 2006; 2009).
discuss experiences from their own life that were clearly painful to talk and think about because of what they had done or participated in, there was a fairly consistent sense of relief expressed in their accounts. I think the stories shared with me in these contexts were stories that – perhaps for the first time – were not framed by questions such as ‘am I therefore a racist or not.’ Several people approached me over the few days following my presentation of a paper in New York a few years ago in which I described my work in a residential treatment centre with disabled Aboriginal children (Chapman forthcoming 2012). Several of those who approached me were disabled people who had worked in the ‘treatment’ and ‘rehabilitation’ of other disabled people, who described feeling terrible about their participation in ableism, as disabled activists, and also described feeling alone in their reflexive critiques. But what most people who approached me spoke about was working in similar settings with African American youth. Although this was not what I had described, my exploration of colonialism and the specific legacy of Indian Residential Schools in relation to working with Aboriginal children resonated with a number of white people’s concerns about what they had done and participated in, in a few different contexts, with black youth. When these stories were shared with me, not a single person consoled me or told me that they knew how I feel, or anything like that. And none of them seemed to be asking for this from me. Some of them thanked me, although this seemed like more of a formality than anything else. What they all did was tell me stories about where they had worked, what they had done, and to whom they had done it. They all struggled to articulate the ways that they knew and felt that it was wrong, even at the time, without being able to accept the legitimacy of these feelings and thoughts. I think that the language I had put to my own experiences gave them a way forward to make sense of, and to share, their own.

It is also important to note that, although there seemed to be relief expressed in these accounts, this was not what I might call the (potentially) unethical ethical practice of “confession,” as it is institutionalized in the Catholic Church. People were not confessing

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45 I should clarify that there is nothing ‘unethical’ about confessing sins to God through the figure of a priest. What I believe is unethical is when this is taken as a sufficient ethical practice in response to having harmed another person. Many Catholics practice parallel ethical trajectories where they tend their souls alongside tending their relationships and social justice within the material world. This use of the confessional would not be unethical, by what I am laying out here. What would be unethical, according to the orientations I describe, is doing harm in the material world and making no effort whatsoever to address that harm in the material
to me, in this sense. They did not ask for my absolution; they did not seek closure. That is not the figure I represented, it was not power I had to give. The people who approached me, rather, seemed to seek out the following connection: we had both done harm, real harm, and we were joined together through having done so and through being very troubled about having done so. There was no ‘it’s okay’ in these conversations. Neither of us sought or offered this, in any of these conversations. I, for one, always left these conversations with a stronger sense that what I had done was not okay, and a stronger sense of responsibility to continue to struggle to address this, as well as a sense that such struggle would be possible. This all maps much more neatly onto White’s description of resonance in outsider witnessing than it does onto what happens in the confessional. He writes, for example, “resonance also facilitates an experience of being knowledged about how to proceed in addressing the dilemmas and predicaments being faced” (2007, 189). I am interested in the hows of all this, in the pulls that are at once flows of belonging and flows of becoming.

For outsider witnesses, attending to what they are most drawn to in people’s expressions usually heightens awareness of their associative thoughts and of the images of life and identity that are triggered by these expressions…. Such images have the potential to set off reverberations into the history of their lives. Much in the way that the surface of the eardrum resonates when touched by the reverberations of sound waves, aspects of our own personal experiences can resonate in response to these reverberations of the image. These experiences, many of which have previously been neglected, ‘light up’ and come into memory. We therefore experience a sense that, in some way, the stories of our lives are joined with the stories of the lives of the people [who gave the original account] (White 2007, 194).

Again I want to note the poetic imagery here. There is something here ‘roughly shared,’ or resonant, with James’ description of multiple thoughts and sensations as ‘overtones’ – so world. This also applies to certain protestant practices of being ‘reborn’ and leaving one’s sins behind, which has happened en masse amongst perpetrators of recent atrocities in Guatemala, where the Catholic Church has predominantly aligned itself with those victimized – both during the height of violence and since (Pico 2002).
that when I read Butler’s response to Mahmood, part of what I experience in my reading is a kind of rendering of ‘what drove her’ to respond in that way, and part of what I experience, all at the same time, is thinking about whether I might respond as accountably, or even as graciously, and why it would be important for me to try to do so. Those things are all present when I read these words, which is noteworthy. It is, after all, a short passage on the back cover of a book. I cannot recall a single other passage, on the back cover of any other book, by any author. I am aware of who commented on a few books, but I do not recall any specific details. And so there is a way that this particular blurb, from Butler about Mahmood’s book in which Mahmood gives a critical reading of Butler’s liberalism, has particularly resonated for me and – like Deleuze and Guattari hoped for readers of *A Thousand Plateaus* – it has become woven into the melody of my everyday life.

And, as I have said before, this is really all I can hope for in this writing project: that perhaps it may play some role in tending others’ responsibility, practices of accountability, reflexive accountability, and so on – through the work of resonance. There is so much we do everyday that causes such harm. (After close to 300 pages, I am still not sure whether I can afford to be so direct as to say, “yes you too. Whoever you are.”) What can we *do*, concretely, to do less harm? It is hard to say, but perhaps no one of us has to have all the answers. Ward Churchill speculates on what might be required to decolonize North America. He writes that one way forward would be if “significant sectors of the colonizing populace joined hands with the colonized … eliminating colonialism in a common project that had the effect of reducing the magnitude of violence experienced by all concerned. Surely, such a project is worthy by any and all conceivable moral, ethical and legal standards” (2004, 82). He does not say *how* this would happen, only that it would have to be collaborative and would have to span the power differential of colonizer and colonized. hooks (1990; 2003; 2004a; 2004b) too, as I have mentioned previously, has long attended to what it means for men to join struggles to end sexism and for white people to join struggles against racism. It seems to me that “such a project” as Churchill’s is not impossible. With hooks (2005), I believe that – *perhaps*, anyway – “non-violent revolutions can take place when they have the right PR.” I think she’s making a bit of a joke to describe this as Public Relations, but her attention to how revolutionary work is framed and understood is serious – deadly serious, for many denigrated within the current social order.
I think hooks is right that such representations matter, which of course brings Spivak to mind yet again. Spivak (who advocates that her work should sit on shelves alongside hooks’ books [1999, xi]), like hooks, knows that the process of bringing about radical social change is not what we most often imagine it to be. She writes: “Repeating slogans, even good slogans, is not the way to go, alas. It breeds fascists just as easily” (Spivak 2004b, 560). And as cited earlier, she therefore suggests that working with others’ local political analyses toward the tending of critical consciousness – “something like” what Alan Jenkins (2009) calls the “parallel, political” work of “becoming ethical” – “is a task for which all preparation can only be remote and indirect” (Spivak 2004a, 118). And she shares with us a glaring example of Jenkins’ “parallel, political” becomings in which she publicly shames a local man she’s working with – in front of his community – in response to him doing something morally reprehensible within the tradition of understanding that she and I ‘roughly share’ (2004b). Perhaps when we share stories of our own complicity or perpetration, this is one “remote and indirect” way that may “bring to mind” others’ resonance and “tend” others’ responsibility. Myerhoff too – like Churchill and hooks – suggests that the work of resonance can take place on a societal scale:

Sometimes conditions conspire to make a generational cohort acutely self-conscious and then they become active participants in their own history and provide their own sharp, insistent definitions of themselves and explanations for their destiny, past and future. They are then knowing actors in a historical drama they script, rather than subjects of someone else’s study. They ‘make’ themselves, sometimes even ‘make themselves up’, an activity which is not inevitable or automatic but reserved for special people in special circumstances (Myerhoff, cited in White 1995, 4).

When this happens, she writes, a person’s “story is not wholly their own but lives on, woven into the stuff of other people’s lives” (cited in White 1995, 5). She seems to be suggesting that there is a relationship between experiencing ourselves as “woven into the stuff of other people’s lives” (and experiencing them as “woven into” ours) and one way that people “become active participants in their own history” – which is required for radical social change. Flows of belonging are not difficult to bring about. They’re an inevitable part of interacting with others. But how we think of them and what we do with them are far from
inevitable. I have attempted to tend our acknowledgment of such belongings, as well as some potential directions for mobilizing them in the everyday navigation and narration of life.

**Becoming to a Conclusion:**

“All Streams Run to the Sea, but the Sea is not Full; to the Place Where the Streams Flow, There they Flow Again”

In my fourth chapter, I used a phrase from Prince (1991), taken completely out of context, to articulate two different things that are fundamental to what I offer in this project: “It’s hard for me to do what’s right when all I wanna do is wrong.” In the first instance, I mobilize this to suggest that working to do “what’s right” is important. It is consequential. It is something we seem to care about, generally speaking, which is not to say it is the sole factor fueling every decision everyone makes. But I do think that most of us, most of the time, want to do “what’s right” – although this is contingent on discursive traditions which straiten and straighten our sense of “what’s right” and of what’s right to do. Some sense of what’s right often features as a part of what fuels what we do, even when other considerations intersect with this, and this aspect of our deliberation often features centrally in our own (necessarily partial and creative) explanatory narratives of why we do what we do. My reading of diverse ethical narratives of those who’ve harmed – my own, those of men I have worked with who perpetrated abuse, those of fellow helping professionals who were experienced as harmful by their clients, those of Heron’s development workers (2007), and even those of white supremacists (Ahmed 2004b) and mass murderers (Arendt 1964; Hatzfeld 2005) – suggests there is often some articulation of an attempt to participate in some version of what’s right, again however skewed it may be to those outside of the discursive tradition in which a given pursuit of what’s right is internally coherent. It seems to me, then, that exploring our ethical narrations in relation to these contingent traditions is a fruitful way forward. Without suggesting that such “intentional state” narrations are ‘the whole story,’ they seem to feature prominently in normative accounts of how we come to harm others. The danger in this, as mentioned above, is that taking these accounts seriously often leads to the analysis that a given harm or enactment of oppression was done by

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46 Ecclesiastes 1:7 (English Standard Version).
“something like” a “mistake,” in which “I didn’t mean any harm” (Chrisjohn et al. 2006) is often pitted against another’s experience of having been harmed. Such pitting is frequently encountered, on the part of people representing both sides, as a form of political struggle that straitens and straightens us away from either side learning and transforming through engagement with the other (Ahmed 2006b; Bhabha 1994; Foucault 2006f). One problem with such back-and-forth pitting, where I am the one accused of having done harm, perhaps of intentionally having done harm, and perhaps of being ‘the kind of person’ who tends to do harm (Ahmed 2004a, 28) is that it leaves it up to me to decide whether to believe my own account of what transpired or another’s. And it seems to me that it is very difficult to sustain a belief that someone else’s account of my motivations is truer than my own. Therefore, perhaps because such ethical practices of noncoercive polemic persuasion are so ineffective, often outside forces – police, children’s aid societies, bosses, international tribunals, etc., are called upon to enforce whatever narrative of the situation currently has normative currency, which tethers the pursuit of justice to enactments of injustice in ways we cannot afford to accept as inevitable (Creative Interventions 2010; Jenkins 1994; Smith 2005b). We have to find ways of moving beyond this if we want to intervene in normative violence more effectively and without using other forms of normative violence to do so.

I also believe it is politically urgent to find alternative interventions into normative violence without reverting to deep psychic explanations, as Alice Miller does in relation to child abuse (1990). I’ll defer a more sustained exploration of this for the time being, but consider this: Miller offers consolation for the fact that we – her readers – may ourselves abuse children; she explains it as a psychic response to our own experiences of being harmed and feeling powerless – especially as children ourselves. This is incredibly dangerous. I do not think consolation is what is needed for someone who harms another, but what I believe is even more dangerous in her orientation is that it answers the question of responsibility (in a way that I’d suggest unhelpfully simplifies the question) without doing much at all in terms of the question of taking responsibility, in what I have referred to as ethical practices or the operationalization of responsibility. I did this because of that earlier experience I had. This may relieve some of my shame for harm I have done, because it is ultimately someone else’s fault that I acted this way. I would argue against relieving such shame, because of the importance of recognizing emotions as ethical and political experiences, but here I want to
make different points: How will someone I have harmed experience this explanation; and will it provide me with any kind of foundation to assist in not doing the same harm again? I think these are two important ethical questions about the structure of narratives used to describe unethical ethical practices. And so while I am not advocating that we take perpetrators’ accounts at face value, I also think we cannot afford to dismiss them as irrelevant or even secondary to the question of how harm, abuse, and oppression happen. They need to be centrally engaged, alongside critical engagement of them and accounts of the effects of our actions.

I have therefore attempted to follow Mahmood (2005) and Foucault’s (2006e) careful attention to the ways that people narrate their practices of self-governance and ‘the government of others,’ believing with Mahmood and Foucault that such narratives are consequential to what we do. I believe they’re consequential to what we do when we cause harm, I believe they’re consequential to what we do when we try to take responsibility for having caused harm or for preventing doing so, and I believe they’re consequential when we try to engage in various kinds of activity aiming to have others become more responsible. They’re consequential in that they’re one fundamental aspect of what we are ‘able to know’ in a given moment and thus of what we are ‘able to do’ – where, again, our ‘ability to’ is shaped by power passing through us. With Mahmood and Foucault’s methodological approach to accounting for ethical practices, I have intersected White and Jenkins’ orientations to intervening in others’ ethical practices. Rather than taking perpetrators’ accounts at face value, they approach their conversations as intervening within the language, logic, and coherency of these accounts, as the politics of intervention intersect with “something like” Freire’s critique of “banking education” (2000). This all comes out of political and theoretical concerns, but also very practical ones: pitting accounts of those who suffer atrocity or harm against those of people who perpetrate atrocity or harm, as we often do – with the best of intentions, of course – rarely brings about the change we intend.

The Stages of Change or Transtheoretical model (Prochaska and DiClemente 2005; Prochaska and DiClemente 1983) is based upon empirical research of people making measurable changes such as quitting smoking and using safer sex practices. It evaluates what kinds of intervention are helpful or unhelpful at various ‘stages of change’ – from what they call “pre-contemplation” (rather than calling it ‘denial,’ and thus discursively
reconstellating it) through to “maintenance.” One thing the researchers found, much to their surprise, was that most advertising and educational materials that aim to teach about the dangers of smoking or unprotected sex often have either no effect or the opposite effect intended on those who are smokers or who engage in unprotected sex. Those who have already quit smoking or always use protection, according to their research, often are supported in maintaining an already completed change by materials that appear to try to get people to quit smoking or practice safe sex – shock tactics, statistics, tragic stories, etc. – but those who still smoke or have unsafe sex seem to be very unlikely to become any closer to quitting smoking or using protection as a result of such materials. They may, in fact, move further away from change (from “preparation” back to “contemplation,” for example) out of defensiveness or as a response to the stress that such materials induce (see also Oakley 1989). There is an important lesson here for work toward political change, although I am not offering a one-to-one equivalency between quitting smoking and radicalization; there may, however, be “something like a relationship” between various flows of personal transformation that would be strategic to think through. Statistics or horror stories, whether about deaths caused by smoking or about the injustice of prisons, unfortunately do not have a transformative effect on smokers or those who believe prisons are just or inevitable. When we are in “the maintenance stage” or are already ‘radicalized,’ when we already know that prisons are unjust for example, we read statistics, critical accounts, or horror stories about the system as solidifying what we already believe and so it is hard for us to imagine that not everyone will read them this way. But what the Stages of Change researchers found was that the kinds of intervention most likely to help someone quit smoking, move toward quitting smoking, or make other significant transformations, are those that allow them freedom to reflect on their own lives on their own terms. What they also found is that, as people move from “pre-contemplation” to “contemplation” to “preparation,” and so on, relatively more directive interventions become relatively more effective.

But what lesson can that possibly give for working against racism, ableism, transphobia, and so on? I am not sure there is a direct lesson, but it at least problematizes much of what we take for granted in ethical practices of activism, critical pedagogy, and intervening with perpetrators of violence. As cited earlier, Bhabha too suggests that we often read accounts
from the other side of the political divide, through the work of Derrida’s countersignature, in an agentive way that secures our original account rather than unsettling it: “one cannot passively follow the line of argument running through the logic of the opposing ideology” (Bhabha 1994, 35). I think we often have this very experience of reading ‘the logic of the opposing ideology,’ without it ever occurring to us that we might be read the same way by those who within that ‘opposing ideology.’ And those of us who are or have ever been smokers might recall memories of our own ‘agentive reading’ when horror images and messages were first printed on Canadian cigarette packages. I remember lots of jokes, products created and bought that would cover these messages up, and defensiveness circulating in my social circle at the time, but I do not recall a single person saying, “Gosh, maybe this is not healthy for me after all.” It is not that we did not know. That is not the kind of knowledge that seems to be most relevant to making fundamental changes in our lives. And so I am suggesting that we need to find ways of intervening in knowledge differently, of intervening in the power/knowledge that Spivak translates as also our ‘ability to know.’

Clearly we cannot just leave the world be, as is, assuming that classism, sexism, and so on, will resolve themselves. That would be the very opposite of responsibility. But if much of the effort to bring about radical change may be just as cleanly opposite, in its effects on some of those who desperately need to make changes in how they go about their lives – as Bhabha and the Stages of Change researchers invite us to consider – then this is a very serious concern. This is where various dimensions of White and Jenkins have been useful in my thinking through how we might more effectively ‘govern ourselves’ in an effort to ‘govern others.’ Resonating with the critiques from Bhabha and the Stages of Change above, Jenkins writes that when we do the work of responsibility-taking for others – such as naming their abuse and its effects – we inadvertently invite their responsive irresponsibility. Following his therapy work, I have tried to craft this project oriented by his “invitations to responsibility” and “parallel, political journeys” (Jenkins 1990; 2009) – which, incidentally, others have mapped onto the graduated directiveness suggested by Stages of Change advocates (Brownlee, Ginter, and Tranter 1998). I think this approach I take to writing and organizing ideas is one of the contributions of this project. I have tried to write in a way that leaves questions of the relevance to your life open, always assuming there is the
potential for some relevance. This is not exactly the same as what Jenkins does in his therapeutic “invitations,” it is rather my attempt to translate them into writing practices, also following White’s work on resonance, outsider-witnessing, and so on. For his part, in *Becoming Ethical* (2009), Jenkins does a more direct translation of his conversational practices into writing ones – but this is partly enabled by the kind of book it is, *loosely* a how-to guide to practicing therapy, which is therefore structurally distinct from my project. I have attempted to do some of what he does, by asking questions that only you the reader will know the answer to – questions about your particular overtones as you read, about situations in your life where you’re positioned ‘on top,’ and so on. But there is only so much of this kind of thing I can do in this context. Another aspect of my “invitational” orientation in this project, like Jenkins’ in his, has been working to undermine objectifying ideas about people who cause harm. It is highly unlikely that those who cause harm (can I yet safely say that this includes you and I both?) are going to recognize ourselves in accounts of us as singularly motivated to do harm, or even of singularly having *the effect* of harming others. My impression is that very few people, if any, understand their own lives in these terms – and that we cannot afford to not take this into account in our accounts of harm done. My implicit invitation, when I work against objectifying ideas about those who cause harm, is twofold: I want readers to be more likely to recognize the sites in your life where you may cause harm or participate in oppression, and I’d also like to invite you to consider the ways that you put *others’* unethical ethical practices into narrative (Dehli 2003) – so that you may, in turn, perhaps become more effective in working against violence and oppression. I certainly do not have all the answers, but I think these questions are important to consider.

Another contribution, which I understand to be invitational and democratic or anarchistic, has been to try to mobilize the unpredictable, but perhaps ever-present, work of overtones, countersignatures, and resonance. My primary strategy here was simple: I tell a lot of stories about harm that is done, and I give a lot of examples of reflection on such harm by those who did it. Some of these are from my life, some are from my research participants, and some are from already published accounts. I think this strategy may be the most effective way to invite others’ resonant self-reflections, following a number of authors I have cited in relation to this, but also following my own experience of hearing, reading, and
telling such stories. I believe this is effective, in part perhaps because it is so non-directive, which fits with the suggestion of the Stages of Change research, without being irresponsibly *laissez-faire*. Readers will take lots of different things from the stories I tell from my own life, for example, but I think that most readers will experience some variation of countersignature or overtone that has them re-thinking responsibility, harm, or perhaps even a resonant incident from their own lives. If all I did was theorize, I do not think this would be as effective an invitation in this regard – not because theory is ineffective, but because it tends to invite different kinds of overtones. I’d love for some of what I write to have had you thinking differently about your engagement with Bhabha, for example. That would be great, and I do believe that theory is consequential and all that. But if I had to choose, I’d much rather have you thinking differently about your engagement with students, therapy clients, people of colour, disabled people, or whatever denigrated others you are tethered to through “Fanon’s Manichaean structure.” This is one of my central contributions in this project, and I would align it with the work done by the Story-telling and Organizing Project (Creative Interventions 2010). In addition to publishing stories online about ways that communities have responded to interpersonal violence without bringing in agents of state violence, they give workshops in order to share and collect these stories. When they collect these stories, they start by first sharing other stories they’ve collected, in order to mobilize the work of resonance that they assume will have people reflecting more effectively than if they instead gave a presentation on, say, the effects of interpersonal or police violence. For whatever it is worth, they too are somewhat affiliated with Narrative Practice.

Another methodological contribution I make is an interest in the *theoretical accounts* that relatively ‘ordinary’ people tell, and I put ‘everyday’ analyses into conversation with that of published authors, holding both equally likely to contain knowledge and know-how that will contribute to increased possibilities for personal-is-political ethical navigation. Such engagement with ‘everyday’ theory is not unheard of in critical theory – it features in writing by Ahmed (2004a; 2006a), Mahmood (2005), Smith (2005a), Spivak (2004a), and many others, but it is something I also offer, and perhaps more centrally than many. I believe that there are a lot of good books written that are crucial for our working together for a more just world, but I also think that there are even more good ideas out there that will never make it into books, journal articles, or even ‘zines. I also think that we have a
responsibility to think about how straitened and straightened our audience might be, and therefore perhaps how straitened and straightened our impact may be, as a consequence of stylistic writing choices. Although I think *some* sections of this project are readable for a relatively large number of people, as compared to some of the authors I draw upon, I have not tended this concern as centrally as I might have liked. Which brings me to Derrida.

The second time I use Prince’s “It’s hard for me to do what’s right when all I wanna do is wrong,” I mobilize it differently – intending a different reading of the “all I wanna do is wrong.” In the first instance, I attempt to problematize the framing of others as singularly wanting to do what’s wrong, as discussed above. In the second instance, I want to convey that it is perhaps impossible to do “what’s right” without also doing “wrong.” Derrida writes that the most ordinary of ethical situations is one in which our privileging of one responsibility is at odds with responsibilities to other people, and I think that my taking this as a point of departure rather than reading it as an endpoint is an important contribution (although he always framed it as such). Derrida’s ethical starting point resonates in some ways with Fellows and Razack’s concerns in *The Race to Innocence* and *The Difference Impasse* (1998; 1994), as well as with Butler’s intervention into American and Israeli military violence (Butler 2004a). When Fellows and Razack describe white women minimizing the seriousness of racism, this manifested itself through these women’s efforts to advocate for a former sex trade worker who’d been silenced. Some of the effects of what they did were racism, but their intentions had nothing at all to do with racism. And, indeed, their advocacy for the former sex trade worker was *perfectly ethical* (morally speaking), if we only explore the ethicality of the silencing of the former sex trade worker. What rendered it *also* unethical – racist – was the ordinary, everyday, occurrence of affecting more than one person, divergently, by what we do. Framing this as “the most common thing” (Derrida 1995, 67) may make it easier to take up when it is our own actions being problematized, which I suggest should be one of our considerations when we structure our political critique. So, when Butler writes that the US missed an opportunity to reconsider its actions in the world following the September 11 attacks, she nowhere suggests that most Americans are purposefully invested in war or torture as *ends in themselves*. She rather studies the conditions by which military violence is discursively rendered just. I think it is hard for people who believe they’re on the side of democracy or feminism to take the
allegation seriously that they’re on the side of imperialism or racism, which means that – as cited above – our acts of ‘the government of others’ intending to tend others’ reflexive critique is “a task for which all preparation can only be remote and indirect” (Spivak 2004a, 118). This resonates too with my earlier discussion of Titchkosky’s (2003) politics of accountability to blindness and how what she did was both ethical (on the side of anti-ableist justice) and unethical (ableist), depending on the particular blind person she was in relationship with. And these three resonant examples of what Derrida describes as the ethical dilemma resulting from the fairly simple fact that “every other is wholly other” are all structurally “something like” men I worked with telling me that they wanted to protect their teenage daughters (as an ethical narration of their controlling) or be heard by their wives (as an ethical narration of yelling). I am not taking any of these statements of ‘intentional states’ at face value, but I am suggesting they make a difference, they’re consequential, they’re important to what we do – as perpetrators – and to how we understand what we are doing as we do it. Trying to work out how to think that through, and how to go about collaborating in revising unethical ethical practices and their accompanying narratives or “political rationalities” (Foucault 1994a), has been a major focus of this project. And I think that my notion that we may need a ‘rough consensus’ to do such work collaboratively, so that the other person may be allowed to join with us as an ‘ethical person’ rather than engaging us in an adversarial political struggle (Spivak and Dabashi 2009) is an important contribution that I hope will be seriously taken up by people with political concerns resonant to mine. I think this is a useful, operationalizable supplement to Ahmed’s advocacy for a different kind of politics of sides, Bhabha and Foucault’s critiques of the political spectrum and polemics, and the provocations of the Stages of Change.

Another element of what I have offered which is helpful to this venture is my attention to what various authors call potential ethics, excess, the heterotopic, and so on. If Derrida is right that even our most ‘ethical’ actions are never singularly ethical, then perhaps (as Jenkins offers) the corollary is also true: that there are always more to our unethical ethical practices than may appear to be the case. Again, this is not to take minute expressions of respect or ethicality as truer than simultaneous disrespect and harm, it is rather to recognize in such minute expressions the potential for some kind of collaborative engagement in
alternative directions. Trusting that such excess will be there, however subjugated, is strategic: I suspect it is indispensable in achieving the ‘rough consensus’ that enables a different kind of politics of sides, one that collaboratively flows toward justice and away from domination and violence – for all involved, in particular and contingent ways. Such flows, if Deleuze and Guattari are right about flows occurring in multiple directions all at once, are available for our collaborative and tentative tending. But we have to orient ourselves to the ethical ‘potential’ that is already there in the others’ flows, “learning to learn from below” (Spivak 2004b; 2008), rather than attempting to steer others onto our flows toward justice. We have to remember that our flows, too, are particular and contingent – to “parochialize [our] own political certitude” (Mahmood 2005, xii). We have to remember how much devastation and pain has resulted from people imposing one conceptualization of what’s right onto others.

There is one final aspect of how I have gone about writing this that I think is a significant contribution. I have tried to write in a way that is mindful that you and I live in distinct moments of Spivak’s vanishing present. In committing any narrative or idea to paper, I press pause on this inevitable vanishing, and inevitably translate ongoing flows of becoming and complexities of belonging into some version of ‘this is how it is,’ however much that ‘is’ might be problematized or problematizing. Putting Walcott’s words on “diaspora sensibilities” to work here, I have tried: to stay “fully aware of the fluidity” of what it is to be human, of what it is to try to live an ethically and politically responsible life, and of what it is to read and write; to note the ways that we are all particularly and contingently “written out and written into” imaginary representations of the moral and the just; to “do something to that [normative] writing that is active and resistant;” and to reflexively arrest the flows, complexities, and impossibilities of life so as to strategically “make ethical claims and demands for social justice.” My hope is that I have set the stage for you to read the inevitably closed and linear structure of my dissertation as an open-ended, invitational, “ethical place, not a narrative of containment” (Walcott 2003, 23). Dehli asks how researchers can “tell stories that can be true to what we (think we) see and hear, stories that can engage and persuade readers, while simultaneously questioning our certainties and commitments, our innocence” (2003, 137), and when she describes her process in writing the paper in which she poses that question, it resonates with Walcott’s description of “a
constant and restless ethical search.” The writing of my project, too, has been a restless ethical search, at times due to tensions between my commitments and my uncertainties, as Dehli suggests, and so my linear rendering of it, page after page, chapter after chapter, pausing and simplifying flows to rest and record, is but a simplified snippet of an ongoing, much less linear, and even more restless search – resonating with Dehli’s question as I position myself as researcher and, as importantly, as I position myself in the diverse contexts of life which are not research (see Deleuze and Guattari 2000, 14-15). This restless search is one I anticipate will continue to carry me along for a very long time, and I have tried to invite you to join me on it, forking with me as you wish, or going on your own utterly distinct parallel, political trajectories. I extend the invitation, I set the stage (in response to illimitable stages others have set for me, rather than doing so as a self-contained liberal individual), but it is not up to me to determine how you take it up. I also do not imagine for a second that your ‘response’ – anyone’s response – to my invitation will involve forging an entirely new trajectory in your life. What you’ve read here may perhaps weave into the melody of your everyday life but, if so, this is only because you already had a respective stream or orientation into which my words were ‘able to’ flow.
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