A POLITICS OF SINGULARITY:

IDENTITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND STORYTELLING IN A

NEW POLITICAL ETHICS

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To talk about justice, now. What does one mean, or what does one do, to talk about justice, *now*? I begin by posing this question because I think the answer, as I intend to argue, is that in this current historico-political moment, talking about justice is to begin by talking about identity in some way, whether identity serves as the terms of debate or the implicit and explicit points of departure. The theme of this work is the question of justice and its relationship to identity politics. In some form or another, contemporary political and cultural theorists now have recognized that identity is invariably a political question, and so a discussion of identity politics is normally threaded through their work in some fashion. But they have all encountered the problem, in different ways and to different degrees, that identity politics is oftentimes an essentializing project, and this essentializing effect has unwanted implications. Identity politics reduces the individual to a particular instance of a de-historicized essence, and as such, creates an ethical conundrum that signals the closure of normative ethical discourse. Cultural and political theorists brush up against this theme in a variety of ways, becoming mired in discussions about coercion,[1] authenticity, or freedom.[2] The thought that adheres to this theme is that if identity politics is fundamentally an essentializing project, then identity politics is (on their terms) a politically flawed project.

I do not want to necessarily dispute this theme. I believe it is a compelling critique on many accounts, and I will make clear as I continue that it is a critique that current proponents of identity politics must consider. But, instead of taking identity politics in its current form and disparaging its effects, ask instead: in what specific ways

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[1] See Mansbridge 1996.
[2] Appiah, 1994 provides a good overview of the relationship between authenticity, freedom, and collective identity, and the role of essentialism in the debates about identity.

is identity politics essentializing, and *must* identity politics be essentializing? In the following chapters, I argue that identity politics has an essentializing effect that is undeniable but not inexorable, where this essentializing temptation indeed conjures forth an ethical conundrum, and that identity politics can be reconfigured into a politics that eschews this paradox by taking its aim to be the negotiation of identity in the face of responsibility. This negotiation represents the recovery of oftentimes marginalized and fringe voices and narratives that adhere to individual ethical demands. A new configuration of identity politics can provide new avenues for trying to answer questions of justice in a non-hostile, non-essentializing manner, and would represent the transformation of identity politics into a fundamentally ethical project. I write, then, to disturb the current discussion of identity politics and attempt to re-orient that discussion to understanding two things: that identity politics was always a fundamentally ethical project, and that it can be transformed into a politics that lives up to the ethical commitments built into its own theoretical foundations—what I call a politics of singularity.

To focus on what identity politics looks like in *this* particular historical moment is to allow us to conceive identity politics as an ongoing and transmutative political project. It allows us to see that its given form is a product of historical and socio-political developments, opening it to genealogical critique. As a methodological move, it prevents us from de-historicizing identity politics, as if its contours have not evolved and shifted over time. However, to focus on its form *now* also allows us to offer a normative theory of identity politics because recognition of its transmutative qualities indicates that

its form is malleable, and that its commitments, its assumptions, can all be transformed, and that the questions of justice negotiated in its terrain can be of a different kind in the future.[3]

It is within this crudely delineated dialogue that my project thus also addresses this fundamental puzzle that I will call the question of ethics: how can we live ethics in identity politics? The question intimately tethered to this thought is the question of responsibility: why be responsible for others? Various thinkers have signaled that there exists a conundrum in the question of ethics, because discriminating ethically requires foisting historical constructions upon another, thereby enacting a kind of social and ethical violence. I call this William Connolly's "ethical conundrum." The question thus spurs a further query: can we live ethics in a non-violent mode? Various figures have suggested the answer is "no." Jacques Derrida, for his part, argues that the question of ethics necessarily induces an economy of exchange, and thus *must* be violent even whilst it is necessary to pursue ethics as a political imperative.[4] William Connolly suggests that ethics must be necessarily violent precisely because our epistemological categories, themselves historically constructed/delimited, have an inability to capture the living singularity of its subject.[5] Again, ethics *must* be violent. For Etienne Balibar,[6]

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[3] Here, I heed Pierre Bourdieu: "For example, historians of art and literature, victims of what I call the illusion of the constancy of the nominal, retrospectively transport, in their analyses of cultural productions prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, definitions of the writer and the artist which are entirely recent historical inventions and which, having become constitutive of our cultural universe, appear to us as given." In an analogous way, my analysis also warns against allowing the way in which identity politics has "become constitutive of our cultural universe," to become something understood as given. Recognizing the necessity of political identity is not the same as assuming its current configuration is a given, historically immutable. See Bourdieu 1993, 162.
[4] Derrida 1999
[5] Connolly 2002
[6] Balibar 1995; I expand on Balibar's understanding of antagonism later in this text.

Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau,[7] among others, the question of a violent ethics is somewhat unproblematic because ethics' necessarily violent nature simply reflects one dimension of political antagonism/agonism—a trait of a healthy democracy. And then there are those writers for which the question of ethics fails even to register when discussing identity or community in politics.[8] Apparently, we are simply to concede that living ethics in a non-violent manner persistently reaches impossibility with each attempt to fulfill a normative ethical commitment.[9]

These thinkers, on my analysis, have arranged the puzzle improperly. I argue that the question of how we can be ethical itself already betrays the very possibility of living ethics as non-violent. The argumentative aim is twofold: we are to dislodge the question of responsibility from the realm of freedom (of identity), and we are to rearticulate it, indeed *provoke* it, elsewhere—in identity's constitutive formation through storytelling as ethical response. I am not offering a complete rationalization for social responsibility and justice, nor will I try to work through responsibility in the terms of debate that provoke Connolly's ethical conundrum. I cut through these issues by theoretical displacement—a displacement that will change the context of the questions, and their responses, themselves. Once the question of responsibility and the possibility of living ethics non-violently undergo this displacement, we recover an account of responsibility in identity politics lying in our inescapable failure of living identity fully and with closure. I show that an account of responsibility is recuperable within identity

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[7] See Laclau and Mouffe 1995
[8] Mansbridge 1996.
[9] Kwame Appiah seeks to solve the problem of ethical violence through judiciously distinguishing between morality and ethics in *Ethics of Infinity* 2008. I address this separation in the final chapter and offer a cross-comparison between my own approach and his efforts.

politics once we rearticulate how to live community such that it cultivates the possibility of ethical singularity; such a community is lived as multiplicity and becomes the milieu in which the notion of responsibility can be articulated as metonymous with the claim of identity, and importantly, our responsibility is at once inexhaustible as well as constitutive to the formation of identity. It is in this new stage for identity politics that the possibility of living ethics non-violently surfaces, albeit in the very impossibility of ever "finishing" living ethics itself.

Identity politics needs to be critiqued and transformed. To rework identity politics is to rework the terrain upon which questions of justice are adjudicated. A question of justice, today, often is a question that, once it emerges, enters the arena of identity politics in order to be contested and negotiated. Whatever the conditions may be which allow a question of justice to be queried, it appears that question will likely arrive in the scene of identity politics, and that the game of identity politics will intimately shape the outcome of the question by setting the terms of its debate. What is at stake is the terrain upon which social transformation can unfold and the viability of ethical discourse within this terrain. A study of identity politics thus becomes a study of praxis, of politics, of stories and representation, discipline and normalization. A new framing of identity politics means a shift in how questions are posed, stories are told, and how we each come to form an intelligible self from which these questions and stories can be articulated.

The first chapter begins by making a few claims about identity politics—how it works, some tensions within it, and the nature of the ethical conundrum that prompts us

to rethink how identity politics can be organized and conceptualized. As a preliminary diagnosis that articulates the infrastructure of identity politics, I centralize the question of who "we" are and who "they" are as a locus of interest. Beginning with the second chapter, I begin a discussion on the intellectual edifices upon which identity politics sits, about how various intellectual traditions have tried to negotiate identity, and how their discussions have insinuated themselves into identity politics as assumptions about either the Self or how identity politics should unfold. This discussion serves to provide a brief historical narrative explaining how the identity claim, "We are," assumes its current form in our "late-modern identity politics." This narrative does not maintain the pretense of a complete story, for it is necessarily idiosyncratic. I do not seek to fix the emergence of late-modern identity politics in a linear reading of history, which is itself a problematic political act. This chapter shows its emergence and relationship to the identity claim without compressing together all of the parallel and superimposed genealogical lines which leave their trace in this late-modern identity politics.

In the third chapter, I offer an alternative story to identity's formation in politics than the ones informing late-modern identity politics by explicating the work of Emmanuel Levinas; the aim is to given an account of subjectivity emerging within an ethical modality. Beginning with the fourth chapter, I articulate a partial theory of subject formation centered on scenes of address, storytelling, and responsibility, while indebting myself to Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler, and Adriana Cavarero for provoking me to ask these questions about storytelling and response. By arguing in this chapter that storytelling is a political practice offered as justification for my identity claim, I proceed to

illuminate the ethical underpinnings of storytelling and narration while departing from the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his apolitical account of responsibility, alterity, and freedom. My hope is that while explicating this theory of subject formation and emergence, and jumpstarting from Levinas's concept of the dwelling in the third chapter, we can begin to see a picture of subject formation as a creative ethical project that, as the fifth chapter will argue, can be installed into a new mode of identity politics—a politics of singularity. These chapters are arranged into a constellation of questions and provocations, argued by way of theoretical and literary digression, and it is my hope that in the final chapter, these passages will, as Cavarero suggests, reveal their relationship to one another in a moment of insightful unity, their meaning erupting in a narrative climax. In the denouement of this climax, I hope the conclusion makes the compelling argument that identity politics was always about you, about my responsibility for you, "for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all."[10] The deepening of responsibility will be the key to articulating a fundamentally ethical politics of identity.

So I move forward with a commitment to affirm identity's pervasive role in our current quest to answer questions of justice, and I move forward with a sense of appreciative irony in acknowledging that my attempt at reorienting identity politics can only occur on the already presupposed terms of the discourse I am attempting to transform. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," mutters Stephen Dedalus, that famously uncreative creator.[11] Surely we can view our creative limitations more optimistically.

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[10] Levinas 1985, 89
[11] Joyce 1990

I. Who Are We, and Who Are They?

- *Fascism has many faces, and insisting upon binaries is one.*

Adele Clark, Situational Analysis

Social transformation through feminist activism. If we understand feminist activism in the broadest sense—that is, the pursuit of ending disenfranchisement, discrimination and marginalization, or whatever forms these may assume, then feminist activism certainly is a good point of departure to see how identity politics sets the terrain for negotiating social change and, ultimately, how many attempts at social transformation within identity politics encounters a conundrum of ethics.

I will begin with my own example from the early part of the 2008 fall semester, when I proposed to the administration a gender-neutral housing initiative. This initiative sought to create spaces on campus that ignored gender and sexual politics of exclusion by breaking down the binaries that informed conventional dormitory arrangements. In short, the initiative sought to establish a housing situation in which students of any gender or sexual disposition could room with any person they chose, so long as both consented to the arrangement. This transformation meant that students identifying as male and female could room together, and students of transgender identity, queer sexualities, or any number of alternative[12] ways of sexual embodiment could freely

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[12] I avoid using the term "subaltern" here, in order to heed Spivak: "Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the

choose to room with whomever they wished, assisting them in a dormitory arrangement that imposed heterosexist or exclusionary norms. Although this initiative has since built considerable momentum, the initial response from the administration is a paradigmatic example of the all-permeating influence of identity politics when questions of justice emerge.

After multiple meetings with various directors of housing, academic deans, and student leaders, I receive an e-mail from an administrator saying the following:

As I mentioned to you in our meeting, I spoke w/ the [administrator], [name of administrator], and he would like for you to work w/ [name of another administrator], Director of LGBTQI, on gathering more information. [The Director of LGBTQI] is currently working on some research that is along the lines of what you are interested in and will serve as your new point of contact moving forward.

What I found problematic about this e-mail upon reception, and conceptually intriguing afterwards, was that the administration had assumed my proposal *de facto* fell under the penumbra of LGBTQI issues. Nothing I had put in the proposal suggested that I was doing all of this work on behalf of an LGBTQI organization. I had, in fact, emphatically explained that this initiative was in the interest of the *entire* student body, LGBTQI or not. I had explained that my proposal was not an attempt at wading into student interest-group advocacy, but rather a proposal emerging from a diverse student body committed to principles of gender and sexual equality – committed to the feminist

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pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern" – from Leon de Kock, "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa." *A Review of International English Literature*. 23(3) 1992: 29-47.

goal of reworking gender/sex relationships.[13] Although the proposal, by its sheer political scope, encompassed LGBTQI interests, it certainly was not drafted to be narrowly concerned as such.

My university's response to the proposal betrays a few interesting assumptions. The most obvious seems to be that issues concerning gender non-conformity are not concerns of the student body as a whole, but of a particular marginalized group, and that the burden of working through this question of justice lies on the marginalized group. This is most apparent in the conceptual leap made from "gender-neutral" housing to "LGBTQI-friendly" housing. Of course, the administration may have thought that the LGBTQI community simply "got it" when it came to activism concerning sexual identity and practice. However, even if such a justification was offered, there remains the assumption, which remains uninterrogated, that the LGBTQI community "gets it."[14]

The more pernicious of the presuppositions, however, seems to be that as a student advocating for institutional changes, I, individually, am not a sufficient ground on which to demand this change. I must resort to a "new point of contact" through which communication can be funneled in the future. Thus, a particular identity group can endorse my proposal. My initiative will not, or cannot, become a serious item on any political agenda until it garners the support of an identity group who will advocate for its enactment. I, myself, can only have my concern voiced when that voice conforms to a

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[13] Here, the concept of feminist politics is not conceived as an identity position, or a particular political ideology, but rather as a nodal point for a mode of inquiry that stresses *coalitional* politics and social transformation, in contrast to identity politics' focus on specific group interests that are levered *against* others.

[14] By critiquing the idea of "getting it," I do not deny that living in the margins does not allow one to see mechanisms of discrimination and marginalization in places where those in the mainstream do not. Rather, I am problematizing the *funneling* of communication that does not let the mainstream be put into question, or see invisible forms of exclusion.

collective identity that has been recognized by a body politic to have legitimate claims for reformation. The administrator's e-mail implicitly suggested that *I* am not a legitimate political voice until I belong to the LGBTQI voice.

The pernicious quality of this conceptual move does not solely stem from the lumping of the "I" into a "We." Politics, for both prudential as well as strategic reasons, should not be a politics of just the individual *alone*, and I do not think a politics based on the individual *versus* the community is a productive politics, either. The perniciousness of the administrator's response lies here—in the way it conceives of collectivity: as an interest-based politics where the individual's relationship to the community is one of antagonism (or the community's relationship to the universal). This kind of politics forecloses my voice from joining politics until I join the antagonistic chorus of a very *particular* type of political collective. This is the classic reproduction of the problematic relationship between the individual and the community that Liberalism attempted to resolve. Political community not need be conceived in this Liberal way, as the administrator assumes it should; the concept of community itself need not be so univocal.

Why this conceptual leap—that a proposal for gender-inclusive housing become an LGBTQI proposal? On the surface, the proposal did not explicitly adhere to any political or ideological group, except perhaps broadly to students of politically progressive dispositions. (Although this surface assumption became problematized once I discovered that the proposal had wide support from the more socially conservative quarters of the campus as well, thus showing that my attempts at

maintaining a stable perception of the political beliefs of conservative or progressive

students failed upon scrutiny.) This conceptual leap from gender-neutral housing to

LGBTQI-friendly housing requires as a prerequisite that issues of unconventional

housing practices be perceived as *essentially* an issue belonging to the LGBTQI

identity. That is, the LGBTQI community is culturally understood to be a unified and

stable identity group that has the responsibility of adjudicating problems of gender non-

conformity, because such issues constitute part of the essence of what the LGBTQI

community embodies. The LGBTQI community "gets it" because of an essential nature

to their sexual deviancy that gives them natural insight into the concerns of sexual

deviants. Thus, the LGBTQI "identity" makes the identity claim for gender-neutral

housing.

This personal example elucidates how I would like to use the term "essentialism,"

which often becomes vacuous, acting more like a swear word then an actual political

charge in many pop-political discourses. By essentialism, I mean the notion that

identities are stable and uncontestable, because they refer to a prior reality preceding

their social emergence. These essential identities break from history, if we understand

history to be a retroactive process of meaning construction and signification. Their

essential nature rests on their ability to transcend history and culture. Thus, the ways

that these essential identities negotiate problems of difference are also uniform in a

given space and time. The result is also a uniform, essential political and social agenda

for each essential identity. The issue of gender-neutral housing automatically becomes

an LGBTQI issue because solving problems of gender deviance constitutes part of the essential LGBTQI political agenda.

Essentialism may best be understood as an *effect* of identity politics, versus understanding identity politics to be constructed upon essentialist attitudes. This causal relationship arises from the pathology of difference necessary to establish identity. William Connolly describes this pathology thus:

> An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies…to congeal established identities into fixed forms…[expressing] the true order of things… Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.[15]

In order to establish identity, one pathologizes difference as otherness, and through this distancing of difference, a subject attempts to reassure itself of its identity's integrity. However, this difference-turned-otherness is often a transformation of difference into something "*intrinsically* evil, irrational, abnormal, mad, sick, primitive, monstrous, dangerous, or anarchical…"[16] The idea of otherness as invariably evil, undesirable, or abnormal, can take multiple forms that are homologues of one another—Kristeva's figure of the *abject*,[17] Solzhenitsyn's menace of the camp[18], Joyce's articulation of

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[15] Connolly 2002, 64
[16] Connolly 2002, 65
[17] See Kristeva 1982
[18] See Solzhenitsyn 1998

feminine language.[19] Always and in each case, difference *that matters* is difference that is evil, oppressive, stupid, dirty, something to be *purified*, whether through conversion, containment, masking, or violent extermination.

Essentialism is one of the predicates to identity politics. If difference founds identity, then identity founds essentialism by attempting to disguise its own tension-riddled and fragmented existence. If someone converts difference into otherness in order to secure their own self-certainty, essentialism seems to be the tool in order to give the façade of unity and self-certainty that identity requires in order to be politically manageable precisely because identity is *not* stable and unified. As Connolly writes, identity "belongs to difference," and different narratives and histories, all in various states of tension with one another, constitute those differences.[20]

Essentialism, then, also refers to the violent (whether corporal or symbolic) attempt at stabilizing identity and reassuring itself that the original othering of difference was justified *despite* tensions within the boundaries of that identity. As identity emerges in politics, so does an essentialist discourse emerge in order to mask the subsequent tensions produced by identity's arrival in the first place. Such is the irony that essentialism, which promulgates the prior reality of essences, is a by-product of the multiplicity of irreducibly unique existences preceding and enabling its genesis.

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[19] Joyce 1990, See final chapter, Molly's soliloquy. There is dispute within the academy of the *mood* of the final chapter; the two mainstream positions suggest that the final chapter is either one of monotonous droning or a kind of passionate pain; the stream-of-consciousness is deployed by Joyce specifically to prevent an unambiguous engagement with the language. Regardless of how we choose to interpret the mood of the chapter, I can without reservation suggest that this chapter is Joyce's attempt at expressing a fundamental feminine *mood of ecriture*. Helene Cixous herself, not without controversy, has said that Joyce was one of few male authors to explore the possibility of *feminine ecriture*, and Kristeva herself indicates as much in *Powers of Horror*.
[20] Connolly 2002, xiv

We see instances of essentialism in our politics of identity and difference almost everywhere. The politics of identity negotiation looks like an evolving dialectic, with binaries of us/them, man/woman, nationalist/terrorist, and straight/queer, etc. informing our discussions on difference. Within these dialectics of identity, we see an obsession with binarism, an internalization of post-Enlightenment sensibilities and a fixation on separating good and evil, culture and nature, truth from fiction. Essentialism and its associated binaries adjudicate the norms of gender, of sexuality, of nationalism, and of almost major aspect of social life. The politics behind sexual identification upon birth that Fausto-Sterling reveals, for instance, cannot maintain itself without an essentialist and dichotomous conception of sex.[21] The decision by doctors to "correct" the sex of an infant at birth, in order to restore the child to her "true" sex, and the ideologies of sexual bodies that drive their decisions, are less objective directives of medical knowledge than the reproduction and manifestation of essentialist (and sexist) conceptions of sexual bodies. That there are even politics behind the production of medical knowledge on sexuality underscores both the contingency of sexual identities upon social norms as well as the deep and persistent presence of dichotomous epistemologies governing the sexed/gendered body.

Essentialism is an indispensable tool to nation building and sovereignty as well. The creation of a unified and stable national narrative plays a key part in the development of modern states like China, where poor working conditions and low wages are justified and normalized by invoking an essentializing narrative about

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[21] Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

national "progress," largely defined in macroeconomic terms.[22] The historical and essentializing narrative of women as domestic child-rearing bodies provides the foundation upon which their husbands can leave the home, join the military, fight wars or create jobs, and construct a nation whose identity proudly defends its masculine emergence—wars, growth in capital, and the defense of the domesticated women and children.[23] Nations are built on economizing bodies and families, and this economizing takes as its jurisprudence the dichotomous conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Essentialism does not strictly function on broad social terms like sexual identity or nation building, either; its binaries penetrate into every domain of social existence, structuring our bodily habits and customs as well as our relations with one another in the home, at school or the workplace, during coffee breaks or in the privacy of bathrooms. Essentialist discourses do not constrain themselves to either individuals or broad social categories, but provides the terms upon which the two interpolate.

However, recognizing the sheer overwhelming presence of essentialism does not automatically conclude that essentialism cannot be eradicated. Essentialism relies not on universals but *binaries*, and essential identities remain dehistoricized, averse to contextualization and contingency. Instead of assuming essentialism's inexorability, appreciation for essentialism's ubiquity points us towards the necessary persistence of *identity* in social existence despite its contextual contingency. Essentialisms, and the broad binaries upon which they rely, *are* in and of themselves problematic to the extent that they refuse contestation. In contrast, *universals* may be a necessary persistence

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[22] Enloe, Cynthia H. 2004, 43-55.
[23] Enloe 2004,148-152

for identity formation[24], and notions of universality certainly offer resources for meaningful social constructions by providing the political and ideological horizons for social resistance and organization.[25] The new narratives promulgating a universal dimension to humanity provides some of the grounds upon which human rights can claim to be transcendental rights that cut across space and cultures. After carefully distinguishing between universalism and essentialism, we must let the theme of any critique of identity politics be essentialism's persistent presence in politics, and the way in which it is deployed as violent monolithic exercises of subjugation, marginalization, normalization, or coercion which are fictitiously dehistoricized. Even so, not all forms of coercion, normalization, etc., are incontestably undesirable; they are, simply, rarely innocuous and arbitrary, and almost never immutable.

Essentialism and identity may not be disappearing from politics anytime soon, and they are providing the terms with which we negotiate our questions of justice. Which binary emerges as the dominant tool for political negotiation transforms and mutates across histories, cultures, and conversations, and although we can retrospectively criticize these binaries or essentializing categories, often even caricaturizing them and wondering how anyone could sincerely commit to such a false dichotomy, we are frequently trapped within our own invisible binaries informing our own

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[24] This argument is made most clearly by Etienne Balibar: "Cultural identity is often described as being what expresses the singularity of "groups," peoples or societies, what forbids conflating them in a uniformity of thought and practice or purely and simply erasing the "borders" that separate them… But at the same time cultural identity poses the question of universality or universalization. First of all, because cultures cannot be thought in their social or anthropological diversity except by comparison with universals (whether natural or logical). Next because this very diversity induces a communication "between cultures" or between "bearers" of singular cultures which at least potentially crosses all borders. Finally and above all, because the identity of each culture would have to be recognized as containing a *value* that, as such, is universal." From "Culture and Identity (Working Notes)" in *The Identity in Question*.
[25] See Ernesto Laclau 1995

analysis.[26] I do not think anyone can claim to always resist and evade the temptation to

rely on these essentialist discourses, and I certainly cannot claim to do so. However,

and as I will elaborate later, recognizing the constant threat of essentialist discourses in

identity politics and committing oneself to the project of resistance, even while perhaps

inevitably reinscribing the terms of discourse being subverted, must become an ethical

imperative. Even as we move against and within essentialist discourses, and perhaps

producing new identities that will then violently unite a new group, we must shift the

terms of debate.

So, essentialism is an effect of identity politics that is both ubiquitous as well as a

source of meaning to the individuals who rely on that essentialism for identity formation.

However, essentialism's ubiquity also ensures the sustaining of an identity politics that

prevents the *I* from having a voice demanding social change, tell a particular story, or

simply participate in a political agenda, until that *I* becomes *we*, where that *we* is

produced by first constituting an evil, abnormal, unholy *they*. This process is recursive,

dynamic, and its specificities are historical and contingent.[27]

To return to questions of justice, then, is to return to the scene of identity politics

upon which essentialist discourses are the major actors. As identity politics relies upon,

sustains, and perpetuates essentialist discourses, a question of justice also relies on a

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[26] Admitting that the pressures to submit to binary thinking are powerful does not suggest that we always think in a dichotomous fashions all the time, and in the same way each time; thus, the practice of critique never ends, because we must always seek to find new ways of relating to binaries in non-essentialist ways.

[27] In talking about collective identity, I am thinking of something similar to how Appiah defines it: "…To say that *collective* identities—that is, the collective dimension of our individual identities—are responses to something outside ourselves is to say that they are the products of histories…they are social not just because they involve others, but because they are constituted in part by socially transmitted conceptions of how a person of that identity properly behaves." In Appiah 2007, 21.

social scene with a *me* and a *you.* Or, to be more judicious to how identity politics actually functions and to foreshadow my own analysis, questions of justice address a "they" and a "we." Who are we, though? And who are they? This is less a metaphysical question than a political and, as Emmanuel Levinas teaches us later, an ethical question.

Identities are not crafted in vacuums, and individuals do not have the radical freedom that many existentialists and liberal philosophers might lead us to believe. Identities are certainly stylized and individuated by the creative energies of the individual, but these identities are inaugurated by negotiating norms, available possibilities, avenues for subversion, which are themselves made available by culture and history. In short, identities are not created *ex nihilo.* How exactly they are created will be the subject of my subsequent chapters, but for now, I want to highlight a problem in the concepts of "we" and "they."

The questions of who "we" and "they" are, invariably conjures forth the spectre of Connolly's paradox of ethics, a similar paradox that Derrida identifies in Levinas's work.[28] Connolly describes this paradox as arising because, "without a set of standards of identity and responsibility there is no possibility of ethical discrimination, but the application of any such set of historical constructions also does violence to those to whom it is applied. Such standards are indispensable constructions rather than either disposable fictions or natural kinds…"[29] When we speak of a "we" and a "they" in a question of justice, we become complicit in a kind of ethical violence because we too

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[28] Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. New York: University of Chicago P, 1980.
[29] Connolly 2002, 13

often rely on an underlying essentialism produced by identity politics. Or, as Derrida

suggests, ethical violence becomes inevitable precisely when we *speak* of others, for

speaking of them necessarily thematizes them, reducing them to knowledge, and

consequently to an object *for me*. Investigating the same paradox which Connolly

stumbles upon with his own critique of Levinas, Derrida argues that "the expression

'infinitely other' or 'absolute other' cannot be stated and thought simultaneously; that the

'other' cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be the other…"[30]

Thus, to even *speak* of others in an ethical relationship requires reducing others to

figures in language, a reduction which is an unavoidable violence. bell hooks articulates

this paradox poignantly:

> Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your
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> voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No
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> need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story.
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> And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way
>
> that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still
>
> the author, authority. *I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are*
>
> *now at the center of my talk*. (emphasis added)[31]

Connolly, Derrida, and hooks approach this paradox from different perspectives[32], but

they each inevitably approach and wrestle with this paradox when speaking of the

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[30] Derrida 1980, 126

[31] hooks, bell 1990, 151-152

[32] Important differences to note between the three: hooks is primarily addressing social pressures that tempt us to eroticize and exoticize Otherness for our own identity formation through *consumption* of the Other (see her essay *Eating the Other*). hooks shows how the exaltation of other *as other* can serve to simply reinforce the egoism of the Self; the other is not to be appreciated as *other*, but as *other who serves my interest*. Derrida, here, is specifically referring to a formal constraint of language when

relationship between self and other—which, as a social relationship, will be situated

within politics. In identity politics, to speak of identity, to deploy identity in politics, is to

commit ethical violence because the ethical relationship always collapses back *to me.*

For Levinas, this betrays the infinity of the Other. In politics, this suggests that identity

politics cannot accommodate a radical ethics always oriented towards others, which

appreciates them as *singularly Other* instead of being a blip in a larger identity category.

Rather, identity politics rests on the paradox that without historical constructions upon

which to conceptualize others, we cannot craft strategies for relating to them, and yet at

this very moment, *we* foist upon *them* these very historical constructions.

This ethical conundrum provokes a question: is ethics necessarily violent?

Violence here is construed broadly to include physical violence or symbolic violence (as

Pierre Bourdieu might ask us to understand it)[33]; when we ask if ethics is necessarily

violent, what we are asking is if ethics necessarily demands that we impose or intrude in

upon the Other in a way that reduces them to *my* terms of discourse, or *my* particular

epistemology, or *my* conception of the good. This intrusion may be an intrusion of

bodily integrity or a transgression of political and economic rights, or an assumption of

identity that the Other never agreed to uphold. *Must* ethics be this way? Although

some political theorists and philosophers have suggested that this is so[34], we might ask

ourselves: what is the status of this "must"? As I will argue later, the status of this

"must" arises because too many people assume that identity politics "must" take the

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speaking to the Other, and less about social forces. However, I think underneath Connolly, hooks, and Derrida's work lays the belief that Levinasian *singularity* is near impossible to achieve.

[33] See Bourdieu 1999

[34] In Derrida 1999, he speaks of the impossibility of the "pure gift," arguing that pure altruism, or an act of gift giving that does not immediately create an economy of exchange, might be an impossibility, and in an analogous sense hints at the inevitable failure of ethics that makes ethical inquiry insistent and necessary.

form that it currently assumes. Too many people assume political community "must" be constituted in this contemporary way. Too many assume "identity" cannot be established and deployed in any other way—as violent and reductive claims.

To recapitulate, we now have two related stories unfolding as we investigate the scene of a "we" and a "they" within identity politics. The first is that identity politics functions off of *collective* identities, and oftentimes effaces the individual demand in favor of a group demand. These collective identities operate under pressures to pathologize others as unholy, primitive, abnormal, etc. Thus, we have a social scene in which agents often take the form of "we" and "they,"[35] and the tenor of this encounter is aggressive, hostile, and curiously reminiscent of colonialist and imperialist sensibilities; we are reminded of Fanon's musing, "It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility."[36] This is the scene in which essentialist discourses take stage. The related second story is that, as collective groups work within the terms of collective identity, the ethical conundrum is encountered where relating and interfacing with a "they" is an encounter that oftentimes asks us to apply broad historical constructions—themselves the product of essentialist discourses—that pressure us to reduce the Other *for me* in some way or another. This notion that the Other is *for me*, and in fact the entirety of the world is *for me*, can be found in the contemporary dialogue between communitarians and liberal political philosophers.[37] The liberal assertion that

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[35] Appiah 1994
[36] Frantz Fanon 1994, 211
[37] A good discussion of this can be found in Connolly 2002, 68-75

the individual must be ensured basic rights (or capabilities[38], or resources[39], or dignity) assumes that the world exists to be mastered by the individual and for the sake of the individual's flourishing. The communitarian, on the other hand, asserts that people should harmonize with their communities and environment in order to achieve a teleological conception of the good life, and in this way they still assume that the world is either simply out there for us to harmonize with, or contains enough plasticity so that such a harmonization is possible.[40]

All of these debates are not dialogues operating in political vacuums. On the contrary, these discussions are distinctly political in many ways. We certainly see these dialogues relying on the language of "we" and "they." We hear, between the lines of all these arguments, "We liberals…while those communitarians…" and vice versa. Does this delineation between "we" and "they" not reflect particular political and intellectual imperatives? This modernist notion that the world, and the others who inhabit it, are in some way or another *for me*, is an intellectual habit within our current political milieu *because our identity politics, now, already treats all of these things as being "for me".* That is, the form of our identity politics—its social scene with we and they, its relationship to, and production of, essentialism—has created a climate in which the

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[38] In Nussbaum 2002, she does differentiate mastery over others in a different sense than Liberals, insofar as she wishes to challenge the notion of "mastery" and exploitation of others by establishing her "capabilities" as a floor below which no human can fall. However, her argument that capabilities are necessary for a substantive *human* existence conjures forth the spectre of mastery over *non-humans* (read: animals, although probably not environment). She does circumvent the mastery that I think more conventional liberals and communitarians use, but on my reading she simply relocates mastery somewhere (and over something) else—that in the realm of animality. We have not yet abandoned mastery. Gayatri Spivak offers a similar critique in footnote 14 of Spivak 2005.

[39] Dworkin's equality of resources concept comes to mind here, in Dworkin 1978 and later work.

[40] Michael Sandel in *Public Philosophy* along with Alasdair MacIntyre and friends often betray this concept of harmonization when they, rather explicitly, treat communities are fairly homogenous groups.

notion that others somehow, in the end, must be *for me* informs our most basic discussions on identity, rights, legitimacy, autonomy, and responsibility.

The political and social force behind the concept of freedom and rights makes our tendency to reduce others *for me* explicit. Thinkers such as Connolly uncover the pressure to assume that freedom must be bound with attunement and mastery,[41] and Costas Douzinas himself argues, "We acquire our identity in an endless struggle for recognition, in which rights are bargaining chips in our *desire for others* (emphasis added)."[42] Arguments about the productive qualities of acts of coercion, although not directly using the language of rights and freedom, still implicitly assume that others are *for me* to the extent that I can, and many times should, coerce them into accepting certain norms or values, in order for a democracy to be healthy.[43] Despite the diversity of language used, this form of identity politics (with all of its instruments such as rights[44], freedoms, coercion, debate and argumentation) teaches us to form our identities in precisely the violent ways articulated earlier—that *they* are for *me*, *they* are a broad and stable category, and *they* are probably not just different, but different-as-other.

This is what it means to say that identity politics is the scene upon which much of our questions of justice, or questions of the good, unfold, and that it sets many of our terms of debate. Here, we can offer a preliminary diagnosis of identity politics, then:

- Identity politics is a scene upon which many of our contemporary questions of justice—and its numerous surrogates and homologues—arise, and the actors

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[41] Connolly 2002, 305
[42] Costas Douzinas 2007, 7
[43] Jane Mansbridge 1996. See also Chantal Mouffe 1995.
[44] Important to note is that, unless otherwise indicated, the concept of rights I am critiquing is a very specific articulation of the rights claim as entitlement. Rights discourse can, and should, be open to a radical reconceptualization as responsibility, I will argue.

implicated in these questions take the form of a "we" and "they." The actors are collective identities and political communities, formulated to be homogenous.

- The seductive quality of identity politics is twofold: that "they" are somehow not only different from "us," but mad, sick, primitive, and impure, and that their status as *other* also feeds into pressures that give the appearance that "they" are *for us*.

- In order for these collective identities to sustain themselves, essentialist discourse are generated that recursively constitute and justify their existences. These essentialist discourse are ubiquitous, have considerable social and historical meaning to the individuals who rely upon them for identity formation, but inevitably lead us to an ethical conundrum where relating to others requires that we foist upon them historical constructions. Hence, even when trying to act ethically in identity politics, "they" end up being *for us* in the final instance.

I mean for this preliminary diagnosis to set the terrain upon which we can try to think through the related questions of how a non-aggressive and non-violent ethics can be articulated, and what form identity politics should take in order for its ethical possibilities to be liberated.

II. Claims of Identity, Claims of Love

> *- The metaphor of "voice" implies a speaker…we are not born with a "self," but rather are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical "selves." A unified identity, if such can ever exist, is a product of will, not a common identity or natural birthright… A multiple consciousness is home both to the first and second voices, and all the voices in between.*
>
> *Angela Harris*, Race and Essentialism

The curious thing about identity is that we do not know exactly what it is, and this ignorance (or ambivalence) is a kind of grey zone on multiple levels.[45] What is identity? Does it refer to a core and pre-social essence installed in each being? Is it your race, gender, sexuality, political disposition, or academic discipline? Do political groups gathered together for collective bargaining count as a new identity, or are they just a collective of individuals doing interest-based liberal politics? Does group solidarity count as an identity? The term is popular enough that one would think that, as a political society, we would have established definitively what identity *is*. Of course, some people might offer the answer that it's just "who you are."[46] Maybe. But I do not think anyone

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[45] I do not mean to suggest that no one has tried to answer the question. Rather, I mean to point us towards its persistently ambiguous use in identity politics. For example, the Hispanic "identity" suggests that it points towards a group of individuals with a shared language. However, an increasing number of Hispanics do not even speak the language any longer, especially the youngest generations. In addition, the way in which "Hispanic" represents an identity dramatically differs with how the LGBTQI identity is configured, since LGBTQI people refer to no language, no particular heritage, but rather to a hugely *diverse* array of social customs, practices, and sexual habits.

[46] While Connolly writes that identity is "what I am," he adds how identity is a "slippery, insecure experience, dependent on its ability to define difference…" From Connolly 2002, 64.

is quite sure what *precisely* constitutes an identity, in any concrete and static sense.
What we *do* know is what constitutes a claim of identity, at least at the grammatical
level. "I am…" An infamous clause with a sneaky intransitive verb that also *declares*
"You are…" A two-fold accusation.

I want to proceed with a tentative thought, a thought that will gain elaboration as
we move forward: that in today's identity politics, what identity *is* becomes established
by what individuals *claim (for)* in the name of that identity (and the community
constituted by the claim). To put simply, identity *is* the adhering identity claim itself; the
claim is a performative utterance.[47] "Identity" functions as a floating signifier, with an
ambiguous and anomalous predicate.[48] Its amorphous nature assumes a more formal
character when tightly tethered to an *identity claim*—the indicative, active, first person
statement "*We* are…" This notion of what constitutes identity is not an ontological fact
about its nature, immutable and uncontestable. Rather, I offer a descriptive claim
arising from parsing the intellectual and political histories supporting and perpetuating
today's tactics and strategies of identity politics. By describing this history of identity
politics, we can more thoroughly describe the identity claim, what it entails, the response
that it elicits, and the contingency of its form and structure.

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[47] A performative utterance is one in which the vocal invocation of a statement creates and gives rise to
the very content of the invocation itself. For example, when someone says "I now pronounce you
husband and wife," the pronouncement itself is performative in that the actual *act* of the pronunciation
also created its content. Another popular example would be a judge's declaration "You are found to be
guilty." Judith Butler treats the performative utterance in detail in her own work, especially in *Excitable
Speech*: A Politics of the Performative 1997.
[48] Etienne Balibar, for his part, describes something similar to what I am signaling here: "..Better [still, the
terms of culture or identity] designate an *empty place*, vacant for a multiplicity of contents and objects,
and determined by the intersection of discourses that are in turn structured by the categories we have
singled out." *Identity in Question* 176.

The two dominant intellectual traditions that undergird identity politics'

contemporary form, or at least two of the most influential traditions, are the traditions of

the Foucaultian subject and the Liberal subject, and they culminate in what William

Connolly and Wendy Brown call "late modernity."[49] The ways in which these two

intellectual traditions wrestled with identity and its formation, and broadly the formation

of the subject, have left residues in the form of assumptions about what constitutes a

subject and how politics must approach the question of identity.

The Foucaultian subject's story begins (arguably) with Nietzsche's argument that

the Self is inaugurated solely through the internalization of systems of justice, of juridical

institutions obsessed with punishment, negative rights, and the suppression of freedom

and power.[50] Although this may certainly represent a part of the equation, I want to also

keep in mind Foucault and Butler's lesson that teaches us that the internalization of

social norms, public morality, and "regulatory grids of intelligibility,"[51] also play a role in

the formation of identity. Although I will also argue that their account is incomplete as

well, it will serve as a good point of departure to understand part of the process by

which "we" and "they" come to form themselves in their solidarity and distinctiveness.

In Foucault's account of subject formation, "I" am reflexively produced not by

internalizing punishment, as Nietzsche argues, but by also internalizing social norms

and norms of morality. We are not produced a-historically, as Hobbes might have us

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[49] Connolly first coins the term in *Identity/Difference*, with Wendy Brown elaborating its contours in *States of Injury*.

[50] A good discussion of this can be found in Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 10-22

[51] Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, coins this term to encapsulate her own understanding of Foucault's regulatory discourses of the body.

believe[52], but rather we emerge in a particular history and culture, and that this social

milieu provides the terms upon which we form our subjectivity. Specifically, the

available options to us are constrained by regimes of truth, where these regimes of truth

have historical specificity, represent the political victories of certain individuals reified

into a sort of objective (or at least neutral) truth,[53] and these regimes of truth delimit

what qualifies as legitimate forms of identity embodiment. These regimes of truth

determine what counts as biologically man and woman (apparently, being neither

seems to be beyond our cultural pale),[54] what can count as desirable, tasteful, and

aesthetically competent,[55] who counts as worthy of being protected by law, and who is

excluded from the juridical order.[56] What is at stake in the regimes of truth is everything

from what shoes I put on in the morning, to whether my body will be made to live, or be

left to die—that is, whether I lead a liveable life.[57]

What "I" am, then, is limited, although not in any concrete sense. These limits

are limits in as much as they operate on the level of culture and norms, and the

instruments of enforcement are marginalization, silencing, coercion, exploitation, and

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[52] As Seyla Benhabib points out, we do not spring out of the ground like full-grown mushrooms, as Hobbes argues. Rather, we are born, and we must mature together, with others, and this is a political reality.

[53] See McClure 1990 for an account of religious toleration's politically contestable nature and how it became normalized in the modern liberal tradition.

[54] Fausto-Sterling 2000, *Sexing the Body*.

[55] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* – Bourdieu effectively argues that taste and preference are largely determined by one's position in the "literary field," where one's position within the field of social existence is decided by regimes of normalcy, success, etc. Thus, one's taste and preferences are contingent upon the prevailing institutions and discourses of truth that declare what is valued and what is not valued.

[56] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* – although Agamben does not use the explicit language of regimes of truth, we might understand the logic of sovereignty, bare life, and the discourses surrounding who and what a camp consists of, as a regime of truth in its own right.

[57] "Liveable life," here is a term consciously borrowed from Judith Butler's canon. It refers to a life that is not always caught in the act of being delimited as a life that falls outside of the boundaries set by regulating social discourses. An example of an *unliveable* life is that of the transgendered individual, whose body lives outside of the social field of what is considered acceptable "deviance."

violence. In Foucault's account, as well as those who build on his work, these limits are perpetuated and sustained through regimes of discipline, of biopolitics, of discourses of truth and confession. However, as Foucault's later work emphasizes[58], "I" am not conceived in any deterministic way, arrested and confined within these discursive cages. Individuals have limited creative capacities in negotiating these norms, and to choose whether to accommodate, resist, or transform them. We have the capacity to take these norms as the object of our criticism, and to transform them into avenues of resistance, of embodiment, and by these acts inaugurate new possibilities for identity. Although Butler's example of drag culture as a project of resistance is certainly a compelling example[59], instances of productive transformation and resistance to norms is a common theme among international and cross-cultural social movements.[60]

This possibility of creative self-formation, and the refutation of any theory that supports identity's emergence *ex nihilo*, assumes a variety of forms in diverse intellectual circles—the notion of life scripts in Appiah,[61] or of the different but "authentic" voices of Gilligan,[62] or Dasein's *being-in-the-world* for Heidegger. Although the precise diction varies between these constellations of thinkers, the thought is that "I" do not emerge into a limitless horizon, but I am (to briefly appropriate Heidegger's language) *thrown* into the world, and when I arrive, I am thrown into history, culture, politics—I am thrown into power, and power can take the form of discourse, knowledge, norms, subconscious drives, and politico-juridical systems. The result is that in each

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[58] Foucault 1988, see "Cultivation of the Self."
[59] Judith Butler *Gender Trouble*, See "From Parody to Politics."
[60] See Enloe.
[61] Appiah 2007
[62] Gilligan 1982

individuated "I", there lies a trace of the universal as it establishes and constitutes the particular. That is, there is a trace of the *they* in each *I*.

In the Foucaultian story, an identity in the disciplinary society is the idealization of one's own interpretation of subjectivation. We are subjected to regimes of power and morality, but we also have capacities for resisting and subverting our own subjection, and in the constant struggle, we produce a constellation of self-inscribed norms and beliefs that we understand to be our "identity." This identity functions both to continue disciplining our bodies and identities[63] as well as providing the momentary discursive grounds in order to contest ways of being and living.

Foucault and friends offer us one way of construing how subjects are individuated in their embodiment, their capacities, and their potentialities. There is another influential intellectual tradition that serves as an edifice of how some people today articulate how a subject is formed. This is the liberalism tradition as it concretely assumes the form of law and legal theory—think Locke, Hobbes, and H.L.A. Hart. Hobbes casts the individual as a subject springing into the world as fully formed (men), as atemporal subjects who just sort of step into existence in rather unremarkable ways[64]. These subjects are, as I interpret them, animalistic in many ways[65], and only through the power of contracts—that is, the power of law in its codified form—do individuals emerge in any politically intelligible sense. Thus, "we" here are necessary

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[63] See Foucault's genealogy of confession in *The History of Sexuality.*
[64] Here, I am thinking of the highly abstract fiction of male heads of family "agreeing" to a social contract in an anarchic pre-political past in Hobbes' *Leviathan*.
[65] They are animalistic in the sense that they continue to reiterate Aristotle's definition of human as a "political animal." Bracketing Aristotle's rather sophisticated understanding of what "political" meant, insofar as the liberal subject pre-social contract is not yet in political society, he is construed to be an animal or "beast" in the Aristotelian sense.

constructs of the state which "we" formed and which recursively legitimates the "we" in its final instance. The law, in some form of temporal paradox, gets to decide in advance who gets to be a subject and who lacks the legitimacy to be a subject. I will not dive into the internal difficulties of this doctrine, except to say that its tenants have embedded themselves into American constitutional law, where its influences on our ways of thinking about individuality are difficult to understate. Specifically, the language of rights, which was borne from liberalism, represents one of the crucial historical developments that has allowed identity politics today to rely so heavily on the language of rights *as aggressive claims*, where these rights were historically derived from the essential natures of, for the most part, white heterosexual men.[66]

H.L.A. Hart, rejecting legal realists such as Justice Cardozo and Oliver Wendell Holmes, was crucial in forging the doctrine of legal positivism in the mid-20th century. Although the rise of Hart's legal positivism coincided with the fading influence of legal realism[67], a feasible mantra arising from his evolving work could be formulated as such: there is no such thing as ambiguous law, only procedural law and substantive law.

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[66] Jennifer Nedelsky thus writes, "There are good reasons to believe that all contemporary systems of constitutional rights draw on a powerful legacy of liberal political thought. What is wrong with this individualism is that it fails to account for the ways in which our essential humanity is neither possible nor comprehensible without the network of relationships of which it is a part. Most conventional liberal rights theories do not make relationship central to their understanding of the human subject… Mediating conflict is the focus, not mutual self-creation and sustenance. The selves to be protected by rights are seen as essentially separate and not creatures whose interests, needs, and capacities are mutually constitutive. Thus, for example, one of the reasons women have always fit so poorly into the framework of liberal theory is that it becomes obviously awkward to think of women's relation to their children as *essentially* one of competing interests to be mediated by rights." Nedelsky, in her own way, embarks to rearticulate the language of constitutional rights and thus parallels, in a separate and delimited space, my efforts to rearticulate the identity claim. I read Nedelsky to be supplementing my own efforts to reconstitute the *relationships* founded on rights discourse as non-hostile. From Nedelsky 2008, 149.

[67] Legal realists such as Holmes and Cardozo argued that the law was inherently ambiguous, and that in its final instance, law was the law of the sovereign, or the law of the judge, and that this determination was almost completely arbitrary.

Although Hart did express a particular hierarchy of law[68], implicit in his discussion on enforcement is that in the final instance, law's applicability does not have to be ambiguous. Perhaps except for a few exceptions like legal theorist Duncan Kennedy,[69] legal positivism construes law to be a set of codes applied in a uniform manner to a particular instance, and any difficulties resulting from ambiguity in applying the law is simply an incidental, if unfortunate, result. The individual subject, in the legal positivist tradition, is a subject who is equally unproblematic and unambiguous, and collective entities, such as corporations, are assumed to have the status of a "person," with no internal tensions, difficulties, and competing interests. The same was true of the family, until the United States Supreme Court issued a series of cases dispelling the fiction[70]. Before then, the wife and husband became one single entity under the law, and a new subject emerged upon marriage. That is, a new *singular* subject, arising from the *collective* of wife and husband. The consequence is that a collective identity emerges.

These two accounts of subject formation, the Foucaultian subjects and Liberal subjects, provide the landscape upon which identity politics now sits; at least, they are two of the largest contours of that landscape. From the notion of the Liberal subject, those of us immersed in identity politics today assume a certain unity in collective identities. Hobbes's depiction of the Sovereign figure provides a case in point. When citizens in the State of California hosted a special election for Proposition 8, a referendum negating an earlier state Supreme Court decision to allow same-sex marriages, the media had no problem portraying this issue as an identity politics

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[68] Hart 1997; he distinguishes between substantive and procedural law.
[69] See Duncan Kennedy's 1986 *Freedom and Constraint in Adjudication: A Critical Phenomenology.*
[70] See Frontiero v. Richardson, 411 U.S. 677 (1973), and Reed v. Reed, 404 U.S. 71 (1971).

phenomenon, of gays v. anti-gay advocates. Or, there was the (slightly) more nuanced media outlets, primarily online news communities and blogs, who would refer to the struggle as a clash between the younger progressive demographics moving against the grain of the more rigid older demographics within the state. Some even framed the issue as a fight between the city of San Francisco and everyone else. What specific language used in the fight differed somewhat between commentators, but the habit of classifying Proposition 8 as a battle waged between *two, and only two*, collective groups, was difficult not to notice.

The fact that much of the LGBTQI community was inflamed over the leadership of the opposition to Proposition 8, because the leaders (mostly from the Human Rights Campaign) were upwardly mobile white gay men, went largely unnoticed. That many constituents of the LGBTQI "identity" viewed gay marriage as the obsessed issue of privileged white gay men, only broke through the largest media outlets infrequently. One only has to go to transgender community groups to find that their primary issue is oftentimes the issue of physical safety and *not* marriage. In addition, LGBTQI organizations who operate on the local level, like the Tennessee Equality Project, bemoan the obsession from the leaders of the LGBTQI "identity" with gay marriage, and shifting their focus away from discrimination in the workplace, in schools, in employment and in healthcare. The normalization of the concept of the Liberal subject, its insinuation into our institutions and social norms, allows many of us to wage identity politics without paying attention to these inner tensions that make each collective identity so dynamic and so contestable.

The notion of the Foucaultian subject and its effect on identity politics is somewhat subtler. Although the following link is not strictly a direct link between Foucault's work and the contemporary form of identity politics, it is an attempt at describing the social and intellectual milieu which informs and enables individuals engaging in identity politics to use the technologies and apparatuses that they do, and the assumptions built into their claims. Broadly, the story of the Foucaultian subject— that she is not formed *ex nihilo*, but rather by internalizing and negotiating regimes of truth, of relations of power, of available identities—is a story that also speaks to the individuated subject, in her own unique way of stylizing her identity in relation to these norms.[71] Broadly speaking, the concept of the Foucaultian subject offers a social milieu which legitimates the project of demanding recognition for unconventional and marginalized ways of living and being, because the struggle for recognition of an othered identity has been given political value—that of political resistance. Again, this is less an attempt at crediting Foucault and friends for humanizing the project of resistance (of identities) than describing a transformation within how resistance manifested in politics.

Ernesto Laclau's describes this proliferation of recognized identities as a partial result of post-structuralist work thus:

I am a subject precisely *because* I cannot be an absolute consciousness, because something constitutively alien confronts me; and there can be no pure object as a result of this opaqueness/alienation which shows the traces of the

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[71] Here, we see a similarity to Butler's account of performative stylization and John Stuart Mill's love of the individual and non-conforming life. There is overlap between the political liberalism tradition and the post-structuralist tradition, and this is an overlap to be celebrated.

subject in the object… the possibility of [a] second death: "the death of the death of the subject"; the reemergence of the subject as a result of its own death; the proliferation of concrete finititudes whose limitations are the source of their strength; the realization that there can be "subjects" because the gap that "the Subject" was supposed to bridge is actually unbridgeable… This is not only abstract speculation; it is instead an intellectual way open by the very terrain in which History has thrown us: the multiplication of new—and not so new— identities as a result of the collapse of the places from which the universal subject spoke—explosion of ethnic and national identities in Eastern Europe…struggles of immigrant groups in Western Europe, new forms of multicultural protest and self-assertion in the USA…[72]

There are academics who tirelessly sling their arrows at post-structuralist attempts at undermining and threatening terms of discourse[73], arguing that such a deconstructive project fails to produce productive and normative theories that bolster our understandings of good democracy, activism, etc; I do not claim that this criticism is wholly untrue. However, those who work and use the concepts of Foucaultian subjects are frequently attempting to do precisely what Laclau suggests is happening: give humanity (or dignity, or any number of homologues) back to those social practices and modes of being that could never make it mainstream otherwise. It was not the radical feminism[74] of Catherine MacKinnon, or even the suspiciously essentializing (although

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[72] Laclau 1995, 94

[73] It seems almost silly to footnote this, as creating an exhaustive list of critics would consume voluminous space. However, for a prominent and articulate critique, see Seyla Benhabib 1992.

[74] The term "radical feminism" is MacKinnon's own adopted label, and not of my own descriptive choice.

important) psychological theory of Carol Gilligan[75], that ended up legitimating the social practice of drag. Rather, the practice of drag became a practice that can be defended in identity politics when the practice of drag was given political value as a way of living a life, of identity embodiment, as a mode of being; this result is in no small part indebted to thinkers such as Butler, Fausto-Sterling[76], and Haraway for replacing the totalizing ideologies of the Subject with theories of multiplicity and proliferated subjects who themselves are fragmented, hybrid, and finite.

The Foucaultian account of subject formation emphasizes the immense creativity needed to emerge as an intelligible subject, where the limits of the self are inscribed, reinscribed, and permutated in relation to the context that conditioned its emergence. The self, in this account, is a piece of artwork, where I am meant to labor over its development, its stylization and individuation, where my paints and pastels are the instruments of culture and history—of power and its institutions and mechanisms.[77]

This account of the Foucaultian subject is not the origin of identity politics' presupposition that newly proliferated collective identities can, and should, strive for legitimacy, dignity, or humanity, but it certainly reinforces it. "We have rights, and they entitle us to x, y, and z" can, in one sense, be read as "*We are* an identity, with certain

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[75] Although Carol Gilligan never explicitly endorses any kind of essentialism (indeed, her writing shows great ambivalence towards it), her choice of the names "Jake" and "Amy" for her case analysis does not even represent an attempt at using pseudonyms devoid of gendered connotations. For critiques of Gilligan's essentialism, see West 1991.

[76] Fausto-Sterling 1993 and 2000 "The Five Sexes Revisited."

[77] See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Also *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*. Foucault's hallmark argument that power does not *only* subjugate and suppress, but it *produces*, is well rehearsed by his academic conversation partners like Butler or Fausto-Sterling. Agamben 1998, however, does attempt to refute this claim with his figure of "bare life," who has his *bios* potentiality stripped. The nuances of this debate are important, but would require an extensive theoretical digression that I cannot afford to offer here.

ways of living and being, that should be accorded respect and dignity," because each

identity category should have its own place from which to speak. This is the

contemporary celebration of multiplicity coinciding with the discrediting of God and his

surrogates (Truth for Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, Pure Reason for Hegel).

These two stories of subject formation—the legal theorist's story informed by

liberalism and legal positivism, and the Foucaultian story—dovetail and integrate into

one another in today's identity politics, which I will call *late-modern identity politics*.

Kwame Appiah places the first emergence of this late modern identity politics around

the 1950s, affirming my observation of its relatively recent emergence:

> The contemporary use of "identity" to refer to such features of people as their
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> race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality first achieved prominence
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> in the social psychology of the 1950s—particularly in the work of Erik Erikson and
>
> Alvin Gouldner. This use of the term reflects the conviction that each person's
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> identity—in the older sense of who he or she truly is—is deeply inflected by such
>
> social features.[78]

We have these collective identities that are essentialized monoliths, stable and neat

categories that have sympathetic claims to dignity, humanity, and legitimacy because of

their newly recognized potentialities as valued forms of embodiment. The result is a

politicization of identity that assumes a few things: that collective groups can assume a

singular identity, that this resulting identity is an *a priori* point of departure to make

claims on *behalf* of that identity, and that these identity claims can proliferate because

we recognize that identities should be diverse and multiple (because of the alleged

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[78] Appiah 2007, 65

collapse of our trust in totalizing ideologies like Pure Reason and Truth). Only in late modernity, in our liberal disciplinary societies, can the identity claim *so assuredly* take the form "We are--."

These assumptions are often contradictory and paradoxical, but people do not prevent such tensions from manifesting in our politics.[79] LGBTQI activism, for example, oftentimes makes claims towards diversity and plurality even whilst seeking comfort in the biological explanations of sexual orientation that is itself an *a priori* point of departure for their claims of identity. The usual LGBTQI claim for having new voices heard in the era of contingent multiplicity trusts in the dehistoricized and unproblematic discourse of biology that asserts itself as foundational.

These tensions within identity politics are multiple. Laclau describes one of these tensions as the horizon of the universal residing within the domain of the particular, where the constantly receding goal of universality provides the space for the particular to define itself in terms of this unachievable horizon.[80] Appiah describes these tensions in identity politics well:

> In our liberal tradition we see recognition largely as a matter of acknowledging individuals and what we call their identities… As has often been pointed out, however, the way much discussion of recognition proceeds is strangely at odds with the individualist thrust of talk of authenticity and identity. If what matters about me is my individual and authentic self, why is so much contemporary talk

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[79] I do not intend to argue that these contradictions and tensions are not productive for an identity's emergence or for meaning construction. I do, however, want to highlight that these tensions lead to a fractured understanding of how the Self relates to both its identity, as well as the relationship of that (collective) identity to the universal community.

[80] Ernesto Laclau 1995

of identity about large categories—gender, ethnicity, nationality, "race,"

sexuality—that seem so far from individual?[81]

Wendy Brown more directly links Foucault's disciplinary regimes with Liberalism's

atomistic politics when she argues that "together, [liberalism and the disciplinary society]

breed the emergence of politicized identity rooted in disciplinary productions but

oriented by liberal discourse toward protest against exclusion from a discursive

formation of universal justice,"[82] and in this way echoes Laclau's articulation of the

identity's unique dependence on particularity and its relationship to the universal. This

synergistic marriage in identity politics, between Liberalism's universal individual (and

universal politics) and the Foucaultian normalized and regularized subject, is what

allows Connolly to argue that identity is established in relation to a series of differences,

and powerful pressures operate to shape those differences as *other*. The

transformation of difference into *other* lets the "*We are…*" statement be a *universalized

claim to particularity against universality*, a universality too often transformed into

oppressive hegemony. The "We" gives the claim its particular subject(s), but this

particular subject is conjoined with "are" (*esse, to be→essence*) which, at both the

grammatical and political level, gives the "we" its universalized and dehistoricized edge.

The structure of the claim discourages probing the historical contingency of the "We," at

whose expense the "We" was constituted and defined, and does not lend itself to the

opening of dialogue. Instead, a narcissistic soliloquy ensues.

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[81] Kwame Appiah 1994, 149
[82] Brown 1995, 58

There are good reasons why agents of late-modern identity politics have not wished to probe this contingency of the "We" on a frequent basis. If we are indeed produced by our subjectivation through regimes of truth and norms, if the Self is that creative product of struggling within and against the regulating and disciplinary discourses of its given social milieu, then the Self also has an investment in those very norms and truths which coordinated its emergence. Butler writes, "Thus if I question the regime of truth, I question, too, the regime through which my being, and my own ontological status, is allocated."[83] This aversion to putting *oneself into question* represents one of the pressures that Connolly hints at when he writes that there are powerful pressures to induce us to pathologize and make evil *difference* so that it becomes *other*. Demonizing the other deflects attention away from questioning the contingency of the "We," to question its integrity and solidarity—what thinkers like Appiah have described as the result of multiculturalism.[84]

The identity claim, however, is more than just "*We are*…" because it is also the simultaneous declaration "*You are*…" This second statement built into an identity claim cannot be withheld from the utterance and invocation of "We," for to establish and delimit a group "we," those exterior to the "we" are automatically posited, and they are posited as *more* than not-we. *They* are *not us* because of *differences*, and as sexual difference theorists, sociologists, and queer theorists have reiterated over and over,

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[83] Judith Butler 2005, 23

[84] Appiah writes: "Indeed, when multiculturalists…say that there are so many 'cultures' in this or that country, what drops out of the picture is that every 'culture' represents not only difference but the elimination of difference: the group represents a clump of relative homogeneity, and that homogeneity is perpetuated and enforced by regulative mechanisms designed to marginalize and silence dissent from its basic norms and mores." *The Ethics of Identity* 152.

difference is almost never *just* difference, but a relation of power that calls difference into its very being.[85]

I call "identity" a floating signifier because of this two-fold claim. We do not necessarily know what "identity" is, but we *do* know that making an identity claim constitutes and shields my social integrity by simultaneously invoking difference and using that difference to pathologize you as foreigner, as enemy, and as something to be conquered *for me* (even though this would eliminate the very difference that constituted my identity in the first place; again, the contradictory marriage between the tradition of Liberal subjects and Foucaultian subjects emerges).[86]

Claims of identity conform to the semantic quality of the "I am…" invocation, but we must take care to notice the diverse articulations that these claims may take. "I love you," *can* be a claim of identity insofar as it assumes a unitary "I" with a solidified identity, and makes a claim of who "you" are—the "you" that I love. The recipient of "I love you" is re-described in terms of the "I," reduced to something *for the I*, despite its romanticized interpretation. We only need look at the history of "love" as a historical justification for men "protecting" women on their behalf, to place them on the pedestal, and realize that all too often that pedestal is the domesticated space of the home or

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[85] This, of course, is one of the hallmarks of Judith Butler's work. Sexual difference is not an unquestionable dimension of human bodily existence, but the product of the heterosexual matrix. Heterosexism, in a sense, calls sexual difference into facticity, which is why homosexuality is considered so threatening. It does not simply threaten heterosexuality, but it calls into question the fundamental paradigm of sexual difference itself.

[86] Homi Bhabha stumbles upon this antagonism without recognizing it as problematic. He writes, "These contingencies [of late-modern identity politics] often provide the grounds of historical necessity for the elaboration of strategies of emancipation, for the staging of other social antagonisms." This is all said as a matter-of-factly, and although I too appreciate a politics that uses antagonism to rupture dominant hegemonic ideologies or discourses, I cannot subscribe to such an ambivalence towards our dependency on political antagonism, without any appreciation for coalitional politics, cooperation, and political kinship. See Bhabha 1995, 47.

private sphere, a space of imprisonment. Too often "I love you" is invoked to justify the status quo social arrangement, and too often that status quo arrangement is an arrangement of subordination or subjection.[87] Claims of love are claims of identity, and thus political claims, when they are made operational through regimes of discipline. Claims of love not need always have this effect, but to avoid such an effect, we will need to rearticulate identity politics so that the word "I" can be used without making an identity claim; we need to divorce the "I/We" from its conjunction with grammatical intransitivity.

This analysis of the "We are…" clause brings a contention immediately to mind: that the identity claims "We are," and its adhering claim "You are," are indeed attempts to redescribe the subjects, but sometimes, this redescription is an attempt at cutting through distorting nationalisms or fundamentalisms. *You* might say that you are a hero, but I am trying to redescribe you more accurately as a terrorist or a murderer. The nationalist language deployed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq saw the transformation of Iraqi citizens into terrorists, where the local citizens heralded the U.S. soldiers as saviors; the perpetual invocation of the "national interest" in public discourse saw the disincarnation of this abstract and idealized term from the interests of political elites whose agency shaped the contours of this "interest."[88] In this context, the identity claim attempts to contest the inaccurate depiction of another identity—the description of U.S. soldiers from heroes into invaders, from "national interest" into "elite interests."

To this contention, I am skeptical of whether this project of redescription will reveal the "true" character of the previously distorted identity, and what this "true"

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[87] Pearl Cleage's play *Flyin' West*, in the scene where Minny is beaten by Frank while he relates his love for her, provides a visceral literary example of this use of claims of love.
[88] See Faux 2006 for a recent account of the political construction of national interest.

character *is*. Although defending identity claims as an attempt at describing who *you*

are—as a terrorist, for instance—might be a strategy for contesting violent idealizations

and nationalisms, the logic works in reverse as well. *We* might try to redescribe *you* as

inhuman, impure, unholy, and thus *justify* your subordination. We might try to

"redescribe" your activism as inauthentic or disingenuous.[89] This is identity politics as an

identity free-for-all, as a politics of authenticity and imposition. Ethics has no role to play

on this political stage. There only remains room for the monologue of the "We."   "You"

are just in the audience, constrained by the violence of *our* speech as we try to

redescribe you to reveal your "true" or "authentic" nature. Your voice was co-opted by

our identity claim to the extent that we are describing you in describing ourselves. Your

speech is colonized in our pursuit of identity politics; you have, in an organizational and

structural sense, become the subaltern for whom I speak. Or, in other words, the

subaltern (you) are a by-product of my very act of *making* the identity claim "We are."[90]

Connolly's ethical conundrum rears its head in late-modern identity politics precisely

because the identity claim takes this specific articulation.[91]

This defense of identity politics will not do, if only because of its insistence of

revealing "true" identities. This is an identity politics that remains too tempted to

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[89] Uma Narayan makes the counter-productive qualities of a strategy of "redescription" clear in the first chapter of *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*.

[90] Here, I consciously am thinking alongside Spivak's concerns in her 1998 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Although I use the term "subaltern" with caution, I think it appropriate here because the claim "We are" is the political claim that undermines the agency of the "They" from speaking. "We are…" is not an invitation to dialogue, but the demand for recognition of a monologue.

[91] This politico-grammatical analysis suggests that "We are…" is, functionally, always a reductive identity claim. I contend that this is so *in late-modern identity politics*. The semantic implications of "We are" depend, of course, on its discursive context. As an analysis of storytelling shows, "We are…" can have an antecedent that is itself contestable, negotiable, and heterogeneous. However, so long as we remain within the rules of late-modern identity politics, the attractiveness of the "We are…" claim is derived from its ability to make operational the reductive political grammar I am critiquing.

reinscribe and perpetuate dehistoricized universalisms as oppressive essentialisms. "Culture" becomes falsely idealized, and political communities risk exaggerated homogeneity with fictitiously uncontestable histories accompanied by "authentic" traditions.[92]

The Foucaultian subject, disciplined and regularized, seeks to politicize his individuation with the Liberal subject's demand for recognition from others through claims of identity. The influence of these two traditions have shaped the claim of identity to take its contemporary form by exacerbating the individual's antagonism with the universal while provoking the claim through the revealing of the contingency of the universal at the same time. We can be concise in describing this tension: late-modern identity politics sees the advent of a subjectivity that brings with it a critique of the very subjectivity that was supposed to be inaugurated. "We are a *subject* (not just an instance of Subject) so let us *assert our particularity against the universal*." These claims reiterate a Sovereign "We" constituted by its protest against an exclusion from the universal; the "We" is not understood as relational and responsible, but private and autarkic. This claim becomes intelligible by implicitly exploiting the tension that late-modern identity politics brings between the inauguration of identity and its simultaneous crossing of itself through political critique.

It is the claim of identity's two-fold accusation that functions to constitute the political community (and thus the identity collective) as the homogenized and univocal "We" that is prone to soliloquies and monologues. Community is not lived as

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[92] Sarah Song's 2005 "Majority Norms, Multiculturalism, and Gender Equality," makes clear that these "authentic" traditions are frequently *select* social norms that are simply social norms in a minority culture that reinforce and reflect the values of the dominant culture.

multiplicity, but lived as a struggle to lay claims of right, claims of love, claims of entitlement—and as Wendy Brown make all too clear, claims of *injury*. So conceived, identity's anomalous body remains too easily co-opted by essentialisms, too often consolidated against those who are different-as-other, and as my later analysis will show, too tempted to be deployed as a strategy of violence that forecloses dialogue. If identity was not deployed as the identity claim, but articulated as responsibility through and upon difference *for you*, then "We" might be consolidated not in opposition to "They," but consolidated as community as multiplicity, seriality[93], or as affinity[94] - as a home for the first person voice, the second person voice, as well as those in between. "I love you" might take back its place as the ideal ethical gesture, divorced from its epistemic violence.

This is only a brief intellectual genealogy of the dynamic and sometimes contradictory nature of our politics of identity now. What is clear is that this politics partially results from the histories of the Foucaultian subject and the Liberal subject, that we have a politics obsessed with identity and rights, and these two ideas intersect to form identity politics whose actors define themselves against others, simultaneously asserting their particularity while reinscribing claims of universality. The form of this claim, the "*We are…*" statement (while, importantly, a contingent form) is what tempts these claims of identity to transform into essentialist claims.

Combined with the diagnosis of identity politics articulated in the first chapter, we see that identity politics is a complicated terrain. However, even as this complicated

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[93] Young 1997
[94] Haraway 2003

terrain makes it difficult to cleanly work through the ethical conundrum articulated in the first chapter, what is at stake is the formation of the subject and its identity, its heterogeneity, opacity, and relationality. Creating and individuating one's identity is important for us to be in the world, for us to emerge as subjects, to establish ourselves as unique individuals with our own stories and narratives to tell, and with our own unique relationships that reflect back to us the meaning of what our stories articulate—in a sense, who "We are."

III. Beyond Taking Care of Your(Self)

> *- Prior to the return to itself proper to consciousness, this hypostasis, when it shows itself, does so under the borrowed mask of being. The event in which this unity or uniqueness of the hypostasis is brought out is not the grasping of self in consciousness. It is an assignment to answer without evasions, which assigns the self to be a self… It bears its name as a borrowed name, a pseudonym, a pro-noun.*[95]

> *Emmanuel Levinas,* Otherwise Than Being

Up until now, I have been unearthing the stories of identity formation that inform and sustain the mechanisms of ethical violence in late-modern identity politics which ensconce Connolly's ethical conundrum as a seemingly permanent fixture on the theoretical landscape. The mainstream stories that inform subject formation, like the Foucaultian and Liberalism stories, construct a political space governed by norms and mores that, in turn, inform our understandings of identity. To cut through the conundrum, I now suggest that we need an account of responsibility that traces through our political narrative of subject formation.

What of responsibility in identity politics? At least in the United States, it appears the notion that as subjects, we are *bound* by responsibility for others, that an ethics-of-the-other is constitutive to politics itself, is a politically inconceivable idea. This is not to say that *obligation* represents a foreign concept; indeed, if our peculiar obsession with

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[95] Levinas 1998, 106

contract law is any indicator, we are more than familiar with the idea of obligation. Here, we will begin with a differentiation between obligation and responsibility, and begin to give context for this differentiation by exploring the role of responsibility and ethics in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. This chapter moves through his work by first giving an account of transcendence and situating it as a point of departure for understanding his concept of infinity and alterity. Next, it will move towards his analysis of the face of the Other, the role of language and the opening up of speech, and finally explicate his account of the "dwelling." My goal is to construct an interpretation of how the possibility of ethics traces through these areas in his work, and how we might draw parallels between his account of "dwelling" and our own understanding of identity.

I choose to use Levinas as a theoretical springboard because he offers a different story about identity formation that will help us negotiate the question of ethics and responsibility in late-modern identity politics. Unlike Connolly whose identity-formation story is one of pathology and othering, unlike the story of the late-modern subject who emerges in a protracted antagonism between the universal and the particular, and unlike the Foucaultian story where identity is the constant imbrications of disciplinary, confessionary, and biopolitical regimes, Levinas's subject emerges through the assignment of responsibility. By using his thought to jumpstart a new story of identity formation, I will then begin to depart from his work by threading an account of responsibility into storytelling, and then develop a partial political theory based on storytelling as an ethical gesture in the following chapter.

By illuminating an ethical dimension in the inauguration of subjectivity, I am arguing in these two following chapters that the act of storytelling in the consolidation of identity is a fundamentally *ethical* gesture, and that this ethical dimension of storytelling can be a resource for us to rearticulate the identity claim in identity politics. I accomplish this by pushing Levinas's account of the dwelling to reconceptualize *political community*, and then by critiquing the dwelling on feminist grounds. This critique will allow me to articulate a conceptually precise notion of political community that is responsive and dynamic, hospitable towards others, and where meaning is derived in my being-for-others.

Levinas is, by many accounts, an elusive ethicist, if we can call him as such. His work is grounded in the phenomenological tradition, so I think it necessary to understand his ethics as grounded in this particular discourse, as opposed to conventional moral theory or ethical work.[96] One of the key differences between Levinas and other intellectuals who "do ethics," can manifestly be understood as the difference between responsibility and obligation. While the latter refers to a duty established by consent, whereby the subject has the capacity to accept or refuse such a duty, responsibility for Levinas is that which cannot be evaded or denied. One cannot evade the assigning of responsibility, but we can certainly ignore it or fail to live up to it (as we do always). Unlike obligation, responsibility does not operate within the realm of a subject's freedom, but precedes and enables that very freedom. We might articulate Levinas's distinction between the two thus: I have freedom because I am responsible,

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[96] By normative ethical work or moral theory, I am thinking of utilitarian ethicists like Peter Singer, or psychologist Carol Gilligan and her "ethics of care." Nothing prevents Levinas's work from being put into dialogue with thinkers such as these, but for now, this is not my direct goal.

where that freedom from its first instance is scored through with demands by the Other. Importantly, unlike how obligation ceases when its terms have been met, responsibility for Levinas never ceases. Instead, it reiterates itself *ad infinitum* in each attempt to discharge it.

We can come to understand this notion of an infinite responsibility by first understanding Levinas's position on transcendence. However, as we move forward, it should become clear that Levinas is not trying to necessarily offer normative ethical schematics. Some have described him as advocating for a "normativity without norms," or an ethical theory with normative *force* that is open ended, in contrast to being prescriptive.[97] He is not interested in "how should we live life?" but in "what makes it possible, and what does it mean, to live ethics?"

Transcendence

On the first page of *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, Levinas makes his position on transcendence in comparison to thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger clear:

> If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being… Transcendence is passing over to being's *other*, otherwise than being. Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*. And not to not-be; passing over is not here equivalent to

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[97] Perpich 2008, 126

dying. Being and not-being illuminate one another, and unfold a speculative

dialectic which is a determination of being.[98]

Levinas defines the problem of transcendence differently from either Husserl or

Heidegger. The problem of transcendence, as is formulated by Husserl and Heidegger,

is a problem of "knowing." How does a subject move beyond the immanent subjective

sphere and "know" real phenomena? In a sense, how specifically does consciousness

come to access its object?[99] For Levinas, transcendence does not consist in moving

beyond being *to somewhere else*. Unlike Heidegger, who understood transcendence as

Dasein's already-passing-over to World, our thrown*ness* into World, Levinas maintains

that the subject transcends him or herself *within* finitude. What the subject transcends

is not into a world of objects, separated from the subject, but rather into immanence.

We can make this problem clearer by briefly turning towards his work on what we

might call *mere being*. Levinas claims that being is a burden, an inescapable condition

where we are riveted to being. Being is, to sum up, hard to do. We must constantly

nourish ourselves with food, shield ourselves from danger and maintain our bodies.

There is a doubling-over in being, for our very capacity for *action* immediately crosses

itself because our actions must focus on sustaining the very body needed for that

action. Even mere being, then, takes *effort*. Drawing from *De l'existence á l'existant,*

Bloechl articulates a description of the difficulty and horror of *mere being* in Levinas:

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[98] Levinas 1998, 3

[99] We need not dwell on how Husserl and Heidegger try to answer these questions; their answers are well articulated in their own works as well as the secondary literature. See Diane Perpich's *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* 23-30. It will suffice to say that Husserl and Heidegger reached the conclusion that the Cartesian habit of rigorously separating subject and object was flawed, because consciousness does not preside and lord over transcendental objects, but it remains constantly immersed with its objects, together; this is the classic formulation of intentionality: consciousness never *is*, but rather consciousness-*of-something*.

According to Levinas, few experiences bring home to us a sense that our very being is effort better than insomnia… It would be short-sighted to identify insomnia with a mere slackening of attention, a word that still 'presupposes the freedom of the ego that directs it'. Rather, one watches when there is nothing to watch or, better, watches without focus or pattern. The insomniac is reduced to naked vigilance, to a gaze that is helplessly exposed before a night without stable shape or texture. If subjectivity must include freedom and the power to act, then strictly speaking this is a vigilance and a gaze without a subject. It is therefore also a vigilance and a gaze that does not open out onto objects… In insomnia, the effort of being is reduced to helpless protest—for, after all, insomnia is a torment. Levinas writes of 'horror' at a presence without perspective, at the positivity of what remains after every negation. 'Horror', then, is his name for an affection that signals the approach of anonymous being, of being in general.[100]

Insomnia induces us into a kind of paralysis at the sheer fact of being, the 'there-is.'[101] As we lay in bed, with focusing *on nothing in particular*, we are overcome with a horrifying paralysis of the fact that we *cannot* escape being, that we are riveted in place by the sheer facticity of our existence. In terms of visceral phenomenology, this is one of Levinas's most enduring and compelling accounts of how we might understand what sheer being might feel.[102] We remain trapped within being because even inducing death is not an option. Death, as an event, is not something within a subject's control.

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[100] Bloechl 2005, 80
[101] Levinas terms this fact of 'there-is' as "*il y a.*"
[102] It is important to note that Levinas is not technically offering a description of what sheer being might feel like, for access to such a feeling is impossible. Rather, physical states like fatigue and insomnia *approach* the feeling of sheer being, and points towards the difficulty of being's positivity.

The subject can surely arrange to increase the probability of imminent death, but in the very moment of death itself, the subject is negated. There is no agency in suicide. Rather, death *comes to me* in Levinas's account.

The difficulty and entrenchment of being, for Levinas, is made perhaps most lucidly in his account of the extreme case (or limit case) of the entrenchment of being—that of torture. Suffering is, for Levinas:

> Suffering is, of course, a *datum* in consciousness…but in this very "content" it is in-spite-of-consciousness, *the unassumable*. "Unassumability" that does not result from excessive intensity of a sensation…but an excess, an unwelcome superfluity, that is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating, as suffering… It is not only the consciousness of rejection or a symptom of rejection, but this rejection itself: a backward consciousness, "operating" not as "grasp" but as revulsion.[103]

Because suffering is unassumed, because it is in-spite-of-consciousness, I do not will it away or manage it through some sort of strategic mastery. Torture, extreme suffering, *useless* suffering, the "ache of pain—woe," reveals to me the structure of *passivity* that characterizes the original pre-transcendent dimension of being.[104] It is more than just an ordinary passivity, where I actively process stimuli and *choose* non-action. This is passivity before passivity, an immobilization of being that lies before my very freedom. It shows, in a similar manner as insomnia and fatigue, my submission to being, my inability to do anything but *resign* myself to being. The depth of this resignation, in the

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[103] Levinas 1998b, 91
[104] ibid 92

limit case of torture, is described by Levinas with the diction of absorption (of consciousness), bordering intoxication. It is not a performance or an act of consciousness, but the originary limit or threshold of being. Torture and suffering induce psychological states of anxiety.[105]

Enchained by the fact of our being, and without recourse to death[106], the problem of transcendence for Levinas can then be formulated as the question, "how do I escape, or transcend, the sheer horror and burden of *mere being*?" Robert Bernasconi puts it this way: "I must get out but I can't get out."[107] Levinas's answer to this problem, to how being escapes its own imprisonment, is the ethical command of the Other whose arrival is an interruption of immanence and the original source of meaning:

> Is not the evil of suffering—extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment, and solitude—also the unassumable whence the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the half opening that a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh slips through—the original call for aid, for curative help, help from the other me whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation?[108]

At this stage, identity remains formal: I am I. There is not yet the opening of discourse and meaning that instantiates the responsible subject, because there is not yet "you."

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[105] Interestingly, it is not coincidental that as torture and suffering for Levinas signals an originary threshold of being, an inescapable limit through which we depart with the help of another, the same is true for Giorgio Agamben and his concept of the *bare life* in the camp who is exposed to the absoluteness of law, made *mere zoe*. A reduction, or unraveling, of subjectivity to the level of *bodily* existence-as-pain conjoins these two accounts, despite hailing different intellectual traditions.

[106] To further elaborate, there is no recourse to death because, for Levinas, this cannot be a kind of transcendence. When one dies, there is no subject left, no subject *after* transcendence. Since transcendence is the *movement* of being, and not its negation, and because death negates the subject, death cannot be the event which frees the Self from immanence, because it was not freed *to somewhere else*.

[107] Perpich 2008, 33

[108] Levinas 1998b, 93

The Face of the Other and Alterity

The Face of the Other, for Levinas, is not simply a metaphor, but the real, concrete face of another person. It functions as the fulcrum upon which much of his thought turns, for a few related reasons[109]. Perhaps underlying all of these reasons is the fact that the Face of the Other *speaks*. Unlike mere objects, inanimate and part of the environment, the Face commands language by being the *source* of language.[110] The argument here is that I am not given to the World with language having been already installed in me. Rather, it is given to me, allocated to me *by* the Other. Such an argument is the simple recognition that I am *spoken to*, taught language and speech, by the Other. My first words are not of my own freedom, but *elicited* from me. This is a concise way of quickly getting to Levinas's now-famous argument: that "I" am actually not a subject proper, until I am *addressed* by an Other. I am addressed as *moi*, in the accusative, and only then can I *respond* as "I" afterwards. The first grammatical case is not nominative, but vocative.

Even here, I can begin to briefly put Levinas in dialogue with the practice of identity politics. An identity's content is not a pre-objective unity or essence, but it is content that is produced in the moment of response to the Other who asks "Who are you?" My identity arises not on the level of mere *being*, but as *response*. In Levinas's story, I do not yet have my identity story proper until having been called out by the Other, singled out to justify my identity claim (and my freedom of identity). My freedom

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[109] Reasons include the opening up of discourse as ethical responsibility, as well as his important distinction between *the saying* and *the said*.

[110] In Derrida's words, the Other as source of language is also the Other as the origin of World. Origin here is understood as both the *giver* of World as well as its central coordinate. All things in World are defined in relation not to Ego but the *Other*. See Derrida 1980.

to make such a claim is immediately scored through with having to defend my freedom before the Other. As Lisa Guenther argues, I defend my freedom by *investing* it in the ethical response to the Other.[111]

The Face, for Levinas, approaches me from a dimension of infinity, and we encounter this infinity because of the Face's capacity for language. As an Other who is speaker, I can never fully grasp the Face through any sort of epistemology of ontology. In "its [the face's] epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp," because any attempt at grasping the Face, any attempt to reduce it to something *for me*, is impossible; at any moment, the Face can *speak* and rupture any previous understanding or conception I had of her.[112] As the source of language, the Face draws me out of immanence, out of *mere being*, by calling and singling me out among many. Thus can Levinas say that the face is epiphany, for it is an event (the *first* event) that is overwhelming and sudden, which effectively shatters my world. The Face shatters a pre-ontological solipsism. To put concisely, I am not given to consciousnesses, but I (*moi*) am *encountered*, and it is this unpredictable encounter that represents the first moment for discourse. He writes that "Better than comprehension, *discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent."[113]

Important to keep in mind is how Levinas understood the structure of knowledge. Following, and refuting, his phenomenological predecessors, Levinas argues that the story of how the Ego obtains knowledge by positing himself *against* World and grasping its object, reducing that object to the plain of knowledge, is violent. Knowledge,

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[111] Personal correspondence.
[112] Levinas 1969, 197
[113] ibid 195

conceived in this way, is violent for Levinas because this grasp is necessarily *for me*, and yet the Other is never *for me*. An object of knowledge is for me to control and regulate; knowledge *possesses* its object and denies it its independence. However, because the Other is a *subject* who precedes my own emergence in the encounter, the Other is not something for me to possess, not something to be denied independence. The Face constantly evades the grasp of the Ego, and in this sense, approaches me from a dimension of infinity.

We can better understand this notion of an infinite Other by returning to storytelling. For Levinas, the Face eludes grasping not because we cannot describe the face on the order of knowledge, but because every time we do so, there is still *something more*. This is, in a similar way, how the act of storytelling cannot interiorize the moment of its narration, that storytelling cannot account for the here-and-now of its telling. The Face is not an object that I patiently describe, an object for my knowing, but is my *interlocutor*, to whom I respond and engage in dialogue. It is characterized by a kind of plenitude, which allows him to argue, "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed."[114] This is also how we might understand Levinas's use of "alterity." Alterity is not the fact of mere *difference* between myself and Other, for even difference still maintains and presupposes a relation between myself and Other, which violates the infinity of the Other. Only infinity can allow the Same to relate to the Other without everything collapsing into Sameness, for "the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the

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[114] ibid 194

other with respect to the same, despite this relation."[115] Without infinity, the mere

relation between the Other and the Same establishes a relationship *of relation* which, for

Levinas, represents an untenable relation, because mere relationality cannot sustain the

alterity of the Other.

Alterity, then, is that fact that the Other is *more* just an alter-ego of mine, whose

only differences are because of the space and time between us. Rather, alterity refers

to the fact that the Other is irreducibly unique and separated from me, and does not

exist only in relation to me. Alterity is the very content of her being, which is to reiterate

Levinas on how she "is a being and counts as such."[116] She is not a being *for me*, and

never will, for each time I try to contain her, she speaks and denies my attempt to

encapsulate her. She speaks and shows that there is always *something more* to her.

Levinas continues, describing "the face of the Other [as] destitute," and it "is the

poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all…"[117] The Face of the Other is

destitute, nude, poor, because it resists *ad infinitum* contextualization. It is not one of

many objects in my vision, but breaks from the anonymity of mere being of everything

else by capturing me, taking me hostage, with the first word in the vocative. Thus,

although it can be described as being a mere arrangement of a nose, a mouth, eyes,

cheeks and forehead, the face is always something *more*—it is to whom I respond, who

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[115]ibid 196
[116] Peperzak 1996, 6
[117] Levinas 1985, 89

speaks and thus renders incomplete any account of her face by me, and who commands me to responsibility.[118]

This notion of a subject being born not from freedom or *ex nihilo*, but born by being *assigned responsibility* by an Other, is perhaps the argument for which Levinas is most famous. Here, we can recapitulate quickly the scene of address: as a being in *mere existence*, I am called out by the Other in the vocative, I am *addressed* in the accusative, and I turn and *respond* as an "I" in the nominative. The profundity of this argument should not be lost because of its simplicity. Levinas is making the simple and important observation that language, sociality, our capacities for self-reflection, are not sprung for our mere fact of being. Rather, these things inevitably happen when we are encountered by others. We brush up against the Other, and are called out to respond, and in the act of response, we affirm the primacy of the Other. Transcendence is the very act of being interrupted and drawn out to respond in this moment.

As "The face speaks…it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse,"[119] where the first word, or expression, uttered is the command: "you shall not commit murder."[120] The first expression by the Other must take the form of the dictum "do not murder" because she is "sole being I can wish to kill."[121] This is again a provocative claim, but the argument for it is simply observant. The Other, as a subject who represents the only thing I cannot possess and to reduce *for me* with knowledge,

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[118] I think it is worth noting the etymological connection between "response" and "responsibility." Both words come from the Latin word "respondere," which means "to respond." The general idiomatic deployment of the word, however, is more than the mere practice "to respond." It carries with it the meaning of "to answer," or, if we like, to justify.

[119] Levinas 1985, 87

[120] Levinas 1969, 199

[121] ibid 198

also is the only figure who *threatens* my mastery over the world. As a subject who denies mastery, the Other renders precarious my own totalizing grasp. As a consequence, the Other is also the only thing I could ever desire to murder, because she is the only thing which I can find threatening.[122] But, language itself also presupposes a kind of pacifism, albeit even if only the most temporary kind. After all, language is rendered somewhat ridiculous if before language is given, the Other has been murdered; discourse, as an act, becomes impossible in any proper sense.[123] This pacifism is why the first expression of the Other is the command "do not kill me." It is the underlying expression that underscores the very opening up of language itself, even as this expression is an accusation in the double sense.[124] As the origin of our transcendence from mere being into subjectivity, Levinas poetically cites Dostoevsky "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than others."[125] We are all accused of killing the Other, and I more than others because I am here, now, addressed and positioned before her.

It is this command, along with Levinas's emphasis on proximity, that grounds his argument for singularity. This command, to which I must respond, is a command *to me*, not that person, but *this me* in the here-and-now. The Other, by speaking to me, has singled me out, drawing me out of immanence and elicits response from me. Diane

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[122] It is helpful here to note how Levinas understands murder not as the mere damaging of bodily integrity. For Levinas, murder refers specifically to the killing of another *subject*.

[123] By proper sense, what I mean is that language does not refer to the simple act of speech. Rather, it consists in speaking *to* someone, who presumably has the capacity to respond and answer. Language is understood as *discourse*, and not mere sounds which lose any cogency and meaning without sociality.

[124] It is accusation because its predicate is, grammatically, in the accusative case, and it functions as *accusation* that charges me with the threat to murder the Other.

[125] Levinas 1998,146.

Perpich explicates singularity's meaning well by differentiating it from particularity and generality:

> But even the most original description of the face will inevitably be general, portable from once face to another; *there is simply no way to do justice to the singularity of a face in a description…* We negotiate the move from the particular to the general in every case of intentionally relating in an object that appears spatially or temporally… However, it is not *particularity* which is at issue here, but *singularity*, and the difference is crucial. The idea that I can give a proper name to a tree as readily to a human being—even if we ordinarily have little call to do so—indicates the troubling fact that at a certain level *language renders all others the same*… Levinas's point is that…at the level of description, language seemingly cannot render the "fact" that in relation to a face I am in society with someone…the categories available to us in describing and understanding our world are unable to capture the crucial dimension of the social relationship between human beings.[126]

Singularity denotes how the Other cannot be completely understood as a particular instance of a larger epistemology, or in relation to an overarching whole conception of the World, but exceeds and breaks away from any conclusive attempt to do so. She is the Other, here-and-now before me with whom I am in a dynamic and unpredictable[127]

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[126] Perpich 2008, 47-48

[127] Levinas's characterization of the Other is of an eschatological kind. The Other who arrives and radically disrupts my *being in general* is like the coming of the Messiah; I can never *anticipate* the coming of the Other, and with her arrival, my world is shattered and transformed. Thus, history is also not understood as synchronic, but diachronically constituted by the arrival of the Other which repeatedly draws me away from the past, and who signals a break from history.

dialogue. She signifies not knowledge in a system, but rather singularity that assumes the form of the unique ethical relationship between us.

We can be even more concrete here by looking at the cultural function of *assigning* a *proper name* to a child when she is born. At birth, the child is given over to language and sociality by way of designating the child with a "sign" that binds the individual to her idiomatic representation. It is this *assigning* of the proper name that *presents* the child into the field of language, of positioning the child into a sociality where she is perpetually *dependent* on others. Levinas might say that this *naming*, despite how many individuals might share the same name, still designates *this* subject, and not *that* other.[128] That is, our common practice of *assigning* proper names represents one dimension of how we come to denote the singularity of each one of us.[129]

Thus, Levinas argues that my subjectivity is assigned to me by the command of the Other, and this is a command that does not work within the level of freedom. I do not choose whether this command is dispensed or not, for it precedes my own agency.

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[128] An underemphasized nuance in Levinas's own work is his choice of using *alterity*. Etymologically, there are two words that refer to the concept of "other," and it is the latin adjective *alterus* and *alius*. The former designates the other *of two* with great specificity, whereas the latter designates a generic *other* among many. The proper name designates *alterity* in that it is not an *other in general*, but a very specific and concrete other who is *this* other.

[129] Etienne Balibar goes into greater detail about the act of naming, drawing from Derrida although not in a Levinasian context: "the proper name [is] precisely not originally *one of the language's signs*. On account of this fact it is not possible to say rigorously that the subject of the language 'belongs' to the language linguistically. That he is constantly reinscribed here, for example in the form of the signature, testifies to the fact that the language operates as a power of dissemination of statements or indefinite transformation of meaning, in other terms as a generalized *ecriture* and not as the 'expression' of a universe of thought." The significance of "naming" someone, and the need to reiterate and reinscribe the name is thus a way of fixing the individual's singularity in place, in light of the dynamic discursive field of sociality. That is, we give names that themselves are not original signs within a language as a way of bringing the subject into the world *rooted* and *oriented* with perspective, and not lost and anomalous; to transpose back into Levinasian language for my own argument, it is an act of the Other which brings me from *being in general* to a subjected individuated by the Other, now given grounds for meaning and language *by* the Other. In 1995 "Culture and Identity (Working Notes)" from *The Identity in Question* 185-186.

The command that "assigns the Self to be a Self," assigns *this me* to be a responsible *I*.[130] To recapitulate, the responsibility we are describing here is a responsibility based outside of my self while also being *in* my self; it is always being archived and installed in me without completion and without knowledge, and therefore not directly accessible. When I speak of an identity politics that encourages identity formation alongside responsibility, this is the sense of responsibility to which I refer.

I do have the agency to choose *how* I respond to the Other, even though I never properly chose to do so. It is in this moment of response to the command that, as our account of storytelling also affirms, a space for *meaning* is created. Meaning for the Ego, and meaning for identity, erupts precisely in my ethical gesture *towards* the Other who elicited my response. My response might be silence, ignoring, storytelling, support, or any kind of action. *But it is a response to an ethical demand*, a demand that provokes and conditions my response. This scene of address is unfolding within an ethical modality, and because I am called to respond to the Other, to justify my freedom before her, she founds freedom as responsibility. My freedom, my very Ego, is called into question, and I am taken hostage by the vocative interdiction and demanded to justify my very freedom by being responsible for her; "The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles."[131]

To foreshadow the next chapter, I first suggest here that storytelling is one kind of response. It represents a response of *justification* for one's freedom of identity, a justification elicited by the Other, who in our speech together asked "Who are you?" If

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[130] Levinas 1998,106
[131] ibid 117

identity does not stem from an eternal essence, but is a product of willful construction

through storytelling (reiterated and 'put into play' by identity claims), then we might

understand identity proper as being *elicited* by the Other who first encounters me. And,

importantly, it is in storytelling's act as the ethical gesture towards the Other that

generates meaning for my identity, puts my 'identity' in society. Trapped in the

formalistic "I am I," caught in the suffering of mere being, it is in the movement from this

formal solipsism to ethically being-for-the-other that we find meaning.

Elaborating on the dimension of infinite responsibility is crucial to understanding

how identity politics can be rearticulated as a politics of ethics and responsibility. As the

Other forces me to respond, drawing me into an ethical relationship in there here-and-

now before my interlocutor, we must understand that her demands are not coercive.

These commands to responsibility are not backed by threat or force. Rather, my

responsibility towards the Other is revealed as a trace in my act of *saying*.[132] As the

face's ethical relation concretely assumes the form of language, Levinas distinguishes

between the *saying* and the *said* in order to prevent this recourse to language from

slipping back into the order of knowledge. Precisely because the ethical relationship is

beyond knowledge, and yet assumes itself through discourse, Levinas argues that he

has "always distinguished…between the *saying* and the *said* [where] the *saying* must

bear a *said* [as] a necessity of the same order as that which imposes a society with

laws, institutions and social relations." The two are intimately related, and yet

distinguishable, for only the *said* operates in the realm of knowledge. The *saying*

remains fundamentally ethical. The *saying* is the opening up of the *said*, which is why

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[132] See *Ethics and Infinity* 88.

the face-to-face is the opening up of ethics. Only in an encounter with the Face of the Other am I forced to respond, and I must respond with language.

Continuing a differentiation between the *saying* and the *said,* Levinas argues "*saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other."[133] Here, we might formulate his argument to say that, as a matter of fact, I do not and cannot stand before an Other without having been already given over to response. I can stand before her and remain silent, and thus convey a kind of response. I can begin speech, offer a gift, or—in the case of late modern identity politics—I can tell a story to *justify* myself before her. However, in the act of *saying* I already reveal that the Other has passed my way and has left her unrepresentable trace in my having responded. My having been assigned responsibility is not recoverable as an operation of memory, then. Responsibility was pressed upon me in an anarchic past, in a kind of pre-history, if we understand history to be a retroactive process of signification and meaning-construction. One does not reflect and *find* the moment of responsibility in a personal history, because the act of self-reflection already presupposes having been encountered by an Other, forced and put into question *by* an Other. Even in doubt and skepticism in the face of responsibility, I reveal the trace of the Other in myself.

In short, my "freedom" to speak already illuminates my having been encountered by the Other and assigned responsibility. I *speak* because I am called to justify myself, and as I try to make good on this justification, the Other—as my interlocutor—continues to press me for justification, drawing me towards the limit of my own Self. I justify my

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[133] Levinas 1985, 88

freedom by taking on the ethical relationship assigned to me, denoting my own singularity as well. By giving over to response, I show that I have already been assigned "to be a Self," a responsible *je* who has been challenged to invest his freedom in an ethical relationship.[134]

The Dwelling of the Self

Levinas's account of the dwelling and the home represents a topic that serves as a compelling bridge between our response towards others and the consolidation of identity because, as I see it, they both concern an interactive scene where a Self becomes constitutively exposed to an Other (to use Cavarero's language). In the chapter "The Dwelling" in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes:

> The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human
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> activity, but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement. The
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> recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over,
>
> for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished as the home. Man abides in
>
> the world as having come to it from a private domain, from *being at home with*
>
> *himself*, to which at each moment he can retire… Concretely speaking the
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> dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated
>
> by relation to my dwelling [emphasis added].[135]

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[134] Important to note is that part of my "freedom" is to kill the Other. Thus, part of my commitment to the ethical relationship is a commitment to not kill the Other, to justify my freedom to murder at my whim by holding myself back—that is, to be *responsible*.

[135] Levinas 1969, 152-153

The dwelling, for Levinas, is a presupposed space that allows a being to contemplate the world; it is a space of *withdrawal* in which a person is "at home with himself," comfortable and secure. By putting up walls, and shoring up the barriers of his dwelling, the Ego shuts himself from the harsh elements of the World. Having constructed the boundaries of the dwelling, the Ego maintains his possessions while hiding safely from the world within this home[136]. Here, in the home, there is not yet an "Other," in any ethical sense (a claim which will be problematized with the welcoming Feminine shortly). In Levinas's narrative about subject formation (at least in *Totality and Infinity*), "the isolation of the home does not arouse magically, does not 'chemically' provoke recollection, human subjectivity," but rather "recollection, a work of separation, is concretized as existence in the dwelling, economic existence."[137] In identity politics, this isolation in the home, in a sense, is being at home in one's own 'identity.' We have sufficiently problematized the term "identity," so that I think it necessary to reiterate here that the shoring up of dwelling in Levinas requires constant effort. I am not referring here to a stable and immutable term 'identity', when I draw connections between identity and dwelling. Both require effort to maintain, and both are dynamic, but identity's given anomalous and dynamic state does not prevent us from intelligibly using it in our analysis.

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[136] Tina Chanter has compellingly shown how the dwelling is constituted by an invisible exploitation of the Feminine in Levinas's work in a lecture given at Vanderbilt University in the Spring of 2008. Although this problem is a significant one, which unsettles and disturbs Levinas's claim that the dwelling is maintained only by repelling the elements, there is not space here to delve too deeply. It will suffice to say, as I will later allude to briefly, that the problem of the Feminine in Levinas's account of dwelling likely translates over to a problem with the constitution of identity in late-modern identity politics as well. An example that immediately come to mind is the consolidation of "masculine" modes of identity in public spaces through the unspoken reliance on female labor in the private "dwelling."

[137] Levinas 1969, 153-154

On one level, albeit incomplete, the consolidation of the dwelling is an inaugurating event of the subject. It is being comfortable in one's own personal sphere (indeed, for Levinas, in one's own *skin*) because we have not yet been put into question by the Other. Thus, in the Levinasian story, the dwelling is the place in which we contemplate the world, but it is necessarily an incomplete inauguration of subjectivity because no matter how well the subject has shored up his dwelling, it is always vulnerable to the arrival of the Other. In his account of the dwelling, the home or shelter is a place where at any moment, and completely unanticipated, the Other might knock on my door and announce her arrival. She arrives and despite my own desire to escape from the elements, I cannot help but to respond to her arrival. I can keep the door shut, or I can let her into my own dwelling. This is not abstract speculation on Levinas's part, but a specific articulation of his own historical moment. As I read his passage on dwelling, I cannot help but mentally re-enact the person in Germany who is protected within his own house. As he moves about, solipsistic and unaware of any Others while mired in his own self-sustaining activities, his "economy of being,"[138] he hears a knock on his door. As he opens the door, he find that it is his neighbor, a stranger nonetheless, a woman who requires protection in his own dwelling from the SSI. The dwelling is thus not a metaphor for my identity in an anomalous and ambiguous sense, but a fairly concrete metaphor for my *ethical* identity; that is, what Levinas might call subjectivity proper.

The fact that at any moment, the Other might arrive at my door unanticipated and require my response, points towards the insecure and slippery qualities of my dwelling.

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[138] Levinas 1969, 166

It is, thus, incomplete in the sense that my dwelling, before my being interrupted by the Other, is precariously vulnerable and exposed. Connolly might complement Levinas's account here by suggesting that dwelling is not constituted *only* in relation to the harsh elements. The dwelling, now understood as my identity, is consolidated against *evil others*. Those who are barbaric, primitive, abnormal, and sick are the harshness of the world in which I withdraw by shoring up the walls of my own identity and, in turn, establish those outside my dwelling as defined by my very act of exclusion. The building of the walls of the dwelling are cemented and arranged by our identity claims. The arrival of this concrete Other, who interrupts my solipsism and commands me to help her, thus puts me into question by demanding that I justify my action. Do I open the door, or do I shut her out? Why do I shut her out? No matter my action, I must respond as a subject who has now been inaugurated as a responsible subject, who had no say in whether this responsibility was placed or not. I am unsettled, no longer at home with myself, with the interruption of the Other.

For my coming argument, it is important at this juncture to introduce and work through a critique aimed at Levinas and his account of the dwelling. This critique, first instigated by Luce Irigaray[139] and elaborated by others[140], is the role of the welcoming Feminine whose presence in the dwelling is yet not that of an Other that is recognized as an ethical relation. This is a relationship that is not acknowledged, but a relationship that makes possibly my autonomy that can later be placed into question by the stranger. Levinas writes:

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[139] Irigaray 2003
[140] Tina Chanter in lecture at Vanderbilt University in Spring 2008.

The Beloved…the feminine, essentially violable and inviolable, the "Eternal Feminine," is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity…the Virgin remains ungraspable, dying without murder, swooning, withdrawing into her future, beyond every possible promised to anticipation. Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia…"[141]

That the "Eternal Feminine" is not yet an other is signaled by her comparison to the *il y a*, the "there is" of mere anonymous being. A rustle in the night, a *not-yet* within the realm of anonymity, she is a figure whom my "caress aims at neither person nor a thing."[142]

As his critics have indicated, it is precisely this figure, who is neither person nor thing because no ethical relation exists, that maintains and provides for me in my dwelling. My mother, who gives me into the world, names me, and calls me into being, nurtures me and takes care of me until I can stand on my own and, later, be put into question by the stranger and his command to be responsible. The dwelling, then, is not *just* consolidated against the elements. It is made warm and comforting because of an Other who I do not yet recognize as such. In short, we are cared for before we can care for someone else.

What Levinas fails to do here is to continue drawing forth the account of the dwelling into his account of politics. The dwelling here describes *more* than just my adult egoism being interrupted. It is, in fact, a metaphor for the development of my

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[141] Levinas 1969, 258
[142] ibid 259

embryonic identity. Unlike the Liberal and Foucaultian notions of identity, this *ethical* identity relies on others to prop me up so that I can care for others. There are, then, *two* modes of otherness in Levinas's story of subject formation, and this story is neither Liberalism's autonomous subject nor Connolly's oppositional subject. The role of these two modes of otherness, the "Feminine" and the "Stranger" will serve as the centerpiece of my analysis of storytelling to come.

For Levinas, and this is the important lesson at this stage of analysis, to "become oneself" requires *more* than simply having a dwelling or identity. Rather, "becoming oneself" generates meaning, represents the full sense of my subjectivity's first moment, when I open that door and answer the Other. Becoming oneself is an affective process. In that ethical gesture, the "I" is inaugurated by opening up one's identity to the demands of the Other, to listen to her plea, and to negotiate the very walls of my own identity in response. Put slightly differently, my very opening up to the Other is the reorganization and rearrangement of "who I am." This ethical gesture refers to the interruption by the Other, to the transition from an anonymous being to a responsible subject, properly and fully constituted. The inauguration of identity here is conceived not in *opposition* to the Other, as late-modern identity politics facilitates and encourages, but as the very opening up of myself *to* the Other, my being-for-the-Other. Humbled before her alterity, my 'identity' emerges in my meaningful ethical gesture towards her command. She elicits my response and draws me out of my dwelling and into *society*

with her within this ethical drama.[143] The movement from "I am I" to "I am for you" is the

original eruption of meaning.

A few possible concerns about Levinas's account of ethical self-formation can be

addressed here. The first is the worry that *being in general*, or *mere being* for Levinas,

sounds curiously similar to the "state of nature" concepts in political theorists like Locke

and Hobbes. That is, both might initially seem to describe some kind of pre-social, pre-

political hypothetical world, and that methodologically, we are deriving ethical questions

from a hypothetical fiction and thus incur all of the problems of doing this kind of

idealized normative theory. However, to characterize Levinas's starting point, of *being

in general*, as a state of nature is to miss how Levinas understands sociality. *Being in

general* for Levinas is not a state of nature, with a war of all against all, as it is in

Hobbes' case. Rather, it is more akin to being in a large crowd, walking down the street,

and being in a kind of mental paralysis that one approaches in insomnia or fatigue.

Levinas's mere existant here melds into the crowd, anonymous and faceless, just

another figure among many other equally shifty, anonymous beings. Then, as one is

mindlessly walking on the sidewalk, someone from behind calls out to you. And, all of a

sudden, one turns around and finds herself faced by a *singular* and *concrete* Other. At

the same time, one's being *called out to respond* changes the perception of the crowd

dramatically. No longer am "I" anonymously flowing through the crowd, but all of a

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[143] Here, we return to Caverero's notion of subjects being "constitutively exposed." To have subjectivity proper for Cavarero is to be a narratable self *to an other*, and to be able to have that story told back to me *by an other*. To be a subject is to already have been exposed to those around me, to subjects who perceive my actions and can assemble those actions into a story *about me*. Otherwise, there is no possibility for my own self-reflection which attempts to create a momentarily united "I" who is discursively held together by *one's own story*.

sudden, I stand *apart* from the crowd, because I have been *singled out* by this person before me; and yet, importantly, I am still in the crowd, too.

This is not a state of nature that Levinas is describing, but a political existence that lacks orientation, lacks perspective, where the borders between myself and my environment is ambiguous and volatile: the borders of myself are vague and ill-defined in relation to the crowd. Theories of states of nature do not capture this crucial social dimension along with the scenes of address. In contrast to the idealized abstraction of states of nature, Levinas's *being in general* describes a concrete description of what it means to be *individuated in society with others*, where I am vulnerable to the address of others who unsettles me, prevents me from being at home with myself (walking mindlessly through the crowd, hiding safely within my 'identity'). It is a an account of a *particular* type of sociality, one that we do not "remember" because it precedes the operation of memory, but a kind of sociality we can approach in places like dense crowds, insomnia, fatigue, and torture. It is not, on my reading, a pre-political sociality, but it is indeed a sociality with no ethical singularity, and it is this crucial difference between ambiguous and unguided politics versus a politics oriented by ethical singularity that is important. Instead of deploying some kind of social contract (Locke, Hobbes, Rawls), or a strictly theological account of the birth of political sociality (Aquinas and Augustine), or even transcendental reason (Hegel), Levinas is using the concrete here-and-now of the Other to signal the shift from anomalous sociality to one with concrete actors relating to one another within an ethical modality. We might understand the "event" of the Other's arrival to be Levinas's version of the social

contract, because it acts as the pivot between two kinds of societies, even though the society on either side of the pivot is radically different for Levinas than other contractarian or theological political theorists.

A possible additional concern is one that I have already started to address, but it is worth recapitulating: this is the concern of the moral skeptic. Why should I be responsible for others? Nothing Levinas has said has convinced me why moral claims by others should have any binding force outside of prudential or utilitarian concerns. To the moral skeptics argument, I think Diane Perpich is right to point us towards Levinas's account of moral conscience.[144] In order to even *ask* the question of whether I am responsible or not, I have already shown myself to have been opened up to the world by an Other. Perpich writes:

> When the skeptic asks "Why be moral" or "What is the other to me?" she demands a reason for acting in one way rather than another. Far from casting doubt on the possibility of ethical life through such questions, skepticism is in fact its prolongation. It is the *enactment* of ethical life. If it were not for the other who opens the world to me, I would not be able meaningfully to ask the skeptic's question. Thus, being chosen before I can choose is the condition for all of my later choosing, for all my affirming or denying. I cannot without contradiction deny my ability to engage in the process of critical reflection, and, by extension, I cannot without contradiction deny my exposure to the other.[145]

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[144] Perpich 2008, 140-145
[145] ibid 145

Moral conscience, understood as the capacity to reflect on questions of ethics and morality, already betrays the trace of the Other within the Self. Moral conscience, the interior and deep hollows within my mind, are hollows created by my reflexive critical thought, but the inaugurating event for this interiority is my freedom having been called into question by the Other. I question my freedom and myself because the other has put me into question, and as I continue to question myself, I develop, mature, and give birth to what we might call a moral conscience. The skeptic, then, is already engaged in ethical inquiry and living ethics, even as he seeks to evade it (as he does never).

There still remains a concern, however: even if I am shown to have been assigned responsibility that founded my own freedom and agency by the Other, this is certainly a weak sense of "responsibility." This is responsibility as almost nothing more than a literal capacity to "respond." This final concern demands elaborate attention because it lies at the crux of questions of normativity, and thus will be the subject of the next and final chapter. What we need is an account of how Levinas might substantively challenge identity groups in identity politics to invest their freedom as social responsibility and justice towards others, and thus give us an entirely new account of what identity might mean, how It is consolidated, and what communities emerge from its articulation.

IV. *Me Voici* – The Hero and the Bard

> Rei Ayanami*: Who am I? Ayanami Rei. Who are you? Ayanami Rei. You are also Ayanami Rei? Yes, the thing called Ayanami Rei. All these are the things called Ayanami Rei. Why are all of these me? Because Others call us Ayanami Rei. Why do you (I) have a false mind and false body?*
>
> Rei Ayanami*: They are not false, for I am I…*
>
> Rei Ayanami*: You are a false object pretending to be human. Look, you have a dark, invisible, and unintelligible presence within you…*
>
> *Rei Ayanami,* Neon Genesis Evangelion

In order to work through the problems presented by the ethical conundrum and its dependency on the identity claim "We are," I use the practice of storytelling and narration in this chapter to argue that storytelling is the political act which generates meaning for identity in politics, and that its theoretical structure betrays its function as *ethical response* before the Other. By illuminating this ethical dimension of storytelling and departing further from the thought of Levinas, I set up my argument to examine the ethical dimensions of identity formation that allow us to articulate a new theoretical framework for identity politics that centralizes the role of responsibility in identity formation. I examine storytelling because it is a practice that is prevalent in late-modern identity politics, as well as phenomenon that, upon scrutiny, represents a constitutive

project of identity formation. I argue these points by first using a case study of taxicab

drivers in downtown Nashville, and then by moving through literary theoretical

digressions. The aim is to examine why we tell stories and how meaning generated

from stories erupts from the relationship practice of storytelling.

In downtown Nashville, TN, in the United States, there is a growing social

movement picking up considerable movement in late 2008 and early 2009. This social

movement involves the exploitation of the taxi cab drivers both socially and

economically. The mechanisms of their exploitation are complex, and are the products

of the intersection of their poor economic position, cultural and language barriers, prolific

nationalisms that demonize immigrants, and the politics of an unpopular war. To

simplify a difficult situation, their plight can be described in the following way: most of

the taxi cab drivers in Nashville, TN are immigrants from east Africa and the Middle

East. They hail from places as disparate as Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, and

Jordan. Forced to immigrate from their respective homes, and too often because of

increasing political instability directly due to U.S. foreign policy, some ironically come to

the United States in search of new homes. Nashville is designated as one of many

refugee "dump sites" in the country, where newly admitted immigrants into the country

are sent for settlement; the city consequently has a robust Somalian, Afghani, and

Iranian community.

Many of the (male) immigrants find jobs as taxi cab drivers. Through conducted

interviews by local University students, these drivers reveal that they work twelve to

sixteen hours a day, driving their taxi. In order to operate a taxi as a licensed driver, the

men are contracted under a larger taxicab company (in Nashville, the largest company

is *Allied Cab*) who offers to the drivers a license (just a sticker that pastes onto their

windows) for a weekly fee ranging from $250 to $300. Only with owning the license can

the taxicab drivers work in a recognized employed capacity (given a meter,

communication hook-ups, and GPS navigators). Despite driving for twelve to sixteen

hours a day, the taxicab drivers are barely able to make ends meet at the end of each

week after paying their license fee. Many drivers lament that their income barely keeps

their family fed. Their hours prevent them from spending time with their children, which

only increases their frustration. The magnitude of difficulty varies between each of the

drivers, but their collective exploitation has driven the Nashville taxicab drivers to

(attempt to) coalesce into some form of union for collective bargaining. Unfortunately,

language barriers prevented them from formally organizing until late 2008; many of

them still speak broken English at best, because their work hours prevent them from

attending the English instruction programs for immigrants, hosted by local community

activists. In addition, their long workdays prevent them from dedicating too much time

to organization and lobbying for higher wages. Although the current mayor, Karl Dean,

has promised to spend a day "as a taxi-cab driver," in order to learn more of their plight

(due to pressure from social workers and activists), no report has indicated that he has

yet made good on his promise.[146]

    Although slow to organize, the culturally and linguistically diverse taxi-cab drivers

managed to organize themselves efficiently enough to enlist the help of local university

social justice organizations, as well as the broader community advocacy group Jobs For

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[146] This is as of February 11, 2009

Justice. Their first request for the activists: to create a public (political) front for the taxi-cab drivers for the purposes of applying pressure to the local government as well as to have an *identity* with which to tell a story about their collective plight. This story, constructed from the diverse and somewhat fragmented experiences of the drivers, in combination with their new political front (image, really) would be used to make *claims* for economic justice on behalf of their new identity as well as mobilize their constituents. What they sought was not assistance in any project of collective bargaining. Rather, they sought to *invent* a cogent identity with which we, the students, could tell their stories and press their claims of identity.[147] We did this through the creation of a pamphlet (with a front cover featuring a lone Afghani man looking out at the street; he had become the face of the movement) that featured excerpts from their stories that wove into a larger narrative about their collective exploitation.

There are several elements of this account worth exploring, but they are tied together through the act of storytelling. These stories, these canvasses of selfhood, these little accounts of subjectivities… Let us proceed with two thoughts: we forge identities in order that we become intelligible, so that self-recognition and recognition by others becomes possible (even if this process is, at the moment, conceived in ethically violent ways because of the identity claim), and we tell stories in identity politics. What is the role the storytelling and narration, of listening and recanting anecdotes and mythologies, in the analysis of late-modern identity politics previously outlined? Somehow, in our obsession with using identities as essentializing weapons, as

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[147] The transcripts of the student interviews reveal a consistent deployment of "The taxi cab drivers are…" and "We drivers are…" That is, they were invoking the "We are…" identity claim.

weapons that reduce the "they" to *for us*, we forgot why we tell stories about these identities in the first place. The notion of the Liberal subject, which provides so much of the theoretical infrastructure for identity politics, has few important things to say about storytelling, except perhaps that storytelling is just another weapon individuals can use to reduce others *for us*, or as some form of deliberation and argumentation, or what have you. (Feminists such as Iris Marion Young tend to treat storytelling in much less aggressive manners, although the thought still remains that storytelling is for deliberation)[148]. The notion of the Foucaultian subject, and the diverse thinkers and traditions that reject the notion of the subject *ex nihilo*, although to a lesser extent than the Liberal subject, attend less to *why* we tell a story, then *what* story and *within which* regimes of truth and power, do we tell these stories.

Why our relationships with others open up the possibility of language, why we tell stories, and why these stories are so integral to our subject formation and the congealment of collective identity—these are not incidental questions, but rather questions that pull us towards a possibility built into identity politics: the possibility of a non-violent ethics, of a new political ethics which denies the seemingly inexorable logic of the "they" being *for us*.

How has diverting our attention away from *why* we tell stories in identity politics enabled its actors to shape its agenda and organizing principles? Its actors, which I think often includes many of us, are engaging in a politics largely informed by the historical and intellectual traditions of the Foucaultian and Liberal subjects. "We" collect

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[148] Young 1996

ourselves into collective identities to make claims of group rights[149], of nature or biology, claims of culture and tradition; we collect ourselves to make claims of identity on behalf of "us," and in that act inaugurate the very "us" which tried to lay that claim. It is thus a process that is more than a discursive or rhetorical move—more because the claim itself is an attempt at inaugurating a new identity, and the success of its recognition (largely dependent on the prevailing regimes of truth) provides new modes of being and embodiment. People do not simply adopt new labels for the sake of a new label. Rather, these new labels recursively offer new vectors upon which their can identities mature and unfold. We can collect ourselves into collective identities because many of us still, whether consciously or not, rely on the fictional artifact from the Liberal subject tradition that says that collective groups can be reduced to singular juridical/legal subject, with no serious issues of inner tension or ambiguity.

That the structure and process of storytelling is, to a large extent, left out of the theoretical edifices of late-modern identity politics mutely points us towards a critical investigation into how identity politics might transform were the implications and challenges that storytelling offers be taken seriously.

Foregrounding the story of the taxicab drivers prompts a few related questions: is this identity politics? Why do they insist on telling us stories, and what is the role of storytelling in relation to identity and responsibility? I argue that what this is indeed a particular kind of identity politics—the identity politics that relies on "We are…" claims. I also wish to argue, however, that storytelling is not unique to this form of identity politics,

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[149] Will Kymlicka, *Three Forms of Group Citizenship in Canada* provides, perhaps, the standard example of liberalism's attempt at conjoining individualism with the concept of "group rights." See Kymlicka 1996.

but is a critical part of identity congealment and subject formation. Then, I intend to analyze why the taxicab driver movement is not gaining ground, and explain that their inefficacy is due to identity politics' current weak commitment to responsibility. One of the goals, then, is to help the taxicab drivers by articulating new rules and mores of identity politics so that coalition building, reaching across boundaries of identity, and letting identity's anomalous nature, can be a source of responsibility.

Are They Doing Late-Modern Identity Politics?

First, can we characterize this politics as late-modern identity politics, as opposed to a superficial form of collective bargaining—a kind of strategic politics with weak commitments to constituting a new community? If collective bargaining is understood as a strategy that simply increases the chances or probability of the individual members achieving their goals, we might be tempted to answer in the affirmative. After all, are the taxicab drivers not simply collaborating to try to get increased financial security with higher wages and employment benefits? We might think that they are not trying to establish some new way of being, but they just want higher wages, and thus dismiss their efforts as largely unrelated to identity politics.

Although this thought might be applicable to some forms of collective bargaining, labeling the taxi-cab driver movement as simply strategic politics ends up being overly reductive of their investment in the movement, in the goals and aims of their efforts, and in the consequences of their politics. Yes, the cab drivers may have been prompted to work together because of individualist desires for securing better lives for themselves.

But their desire to work together, to overcome their language differences, to contact external groups to help them create a story and push for wage reform—this is not *just* an effort to increase their probability of success. The request to have some form of political front, to have an "official story" about the movement indicates that they sought to, however temporarily, establish a new political community in order to make claims of identity. That the drivers sought to create a pamphlet, with the lone Afghani man on the front page, is not an innocuous detail. It points towards a desire to create—willfully—the pretense of a more unitary community, the "We," in order to declare "We are…" The lone man on the front cover serves to nudge the reader towards falsely thinking and interfacing with their collective efforts as the efforts of that singular man. The (also singular) story in the pamphlet—the story of the taxicab drivers—is the lonely monologue of the man on the front cover. Despite their laudable efforts at fighting for higher wages, we might raise an eyebrow at this forceful creation of the unified story written in the pamphlet, behind the solitary face of the Afghani man.

Collective bargaining and identity politics need not be mutual exclusives; oftentimes collective bargaining shifts into identity politics, and sometimes identity politics might transform into collective bargaining. The efforts of creating a "post-partisan" political community in early 2009 in the U.S. hastily degenerated, amidst discussion over an enormous financial stimulus package for the economy, into collective bargaining and interest-based politics. A new political community, which was the initial aim of many political actors, was scrapped only a couple of weeks into negotiation. Once the goal of creating a new political community was scrapped, we might say that

this politics shifted into collective bargaining. However, at the same time, the collective

bargaining largely took the form of congressional Democrats against Republicans—

identity groups in their own right. Thus, although collective bargaining and identity

politics might be differentiated in terms of their relationship to community, the

relationship between the two is dynamic and intimate. For the purposes of

understanding the cab drivers, however, I venture to say that the concept of "collective

bargaining" does not accomplish much work as an analytical tool, and that the way to

approach their efforts is through an analysis of identity politics.

The leaders of the drivers, who came to speak to the university students and

activists, decided to rely on claims of identity, "We are…", as their tool for improving

their situation. They sought to make claims based on injury, and consolidated their

identity around this injury. They sought to create the image of a univocal community

with an equally univocal story behind their mascot of the singular man. "Listen to us,

listen to our monologue of the We." Thus, they also constituted an antagonistic

community with which to oppose themselves, in binary opposition. "You are…" remains

mutely tethered to their politics. This is the identity politics of late modernity. The "We"

here refers to the identity group of taxicab drivers, and the "They" is the Nashville

government, Allied Cab, and all who collude to sustain their exploitation.

I realize that I am treading on tenuous grounds, and risk sounding radically

counter-productive. Isn't a huge part of the problem that *nobody is listening* to the

voices of the marginalized today in the first place? Am I not critiquing their very desire

to be heard, critiquing their very desire to raise their voices and be taken seriously as political participants?

As I intend to make clear, I am not critiquing their desire to be heard, to voice themselves in a polity that is deaf to their concerns and problems. Too often the voices from the fringes of political space are violently suppressed, or their stories co-opted and rewritten to serve the interests of the elite[150], or their voices turned into truths that serve to discipline and normalize those very same fringe voices[151]. I simply want to use the particular methods of their identity politics to ask why it is they are not succeeding and to highlight what identity politics needs in order for the efforts of the taxicab drivers to be more successful: an account of responsibility towards others that cannot excuse itself because of exclusionary communities constituted by politicized difference.

Why tell stories to us?

The fact that the taxicab drivers approached us with stories, and asked that we tell a story about their collective plight to the Mayor by weaving together a broader singular story about their exploitation, should not be surprising. Storytelling often serves to bridge connections between people, to cultivate empathy and understanding between irreducibly unique lives and stories. As a political act, storytelling builds communities while trying to connect that community to others. Community events, like "Take Back

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[150] The way that "common stories" in the United States are often used in electoral campaigns is a good example. We need only to look at John Edwards' constant co-option of health care stories on the election campaign trail and the story of "Joe the plumber" for candidate John McCain to see ways in which stories are extracted and co-opted to serve elite interests, thus sustaining the silencing of weaker political voices—those of the electorate. This phenomenon is not specific to the United States, but prolific in international political stages like the UN.
[151] Foucault 1988

the Night," where women who have experienced rape and abuse narrate their stories to the audience, are storytelling events that attempt to form and consolidate community, nurture intimacy among participants, and create grounds with which find context for their suffering. Thus, in one sense, we might understand the taxicab drivers to be telling us their stories so that they could bridge their community to ours, to draw our attention towards their plight while binding our communities together more intimately. This is what many feminists understand to be the goal of consciousness-raising[152] and to be the solution to redressing social marginalization. Storytelling is understood to be a form of activism and praxis, of a way of grounding theory while enriching our political dialogues and developing kinship.

In a different sense, and perhaps more importantly, storytelling and narration are ways of giving meaning to identity by consolidating its many elements and putting that identity in relation to other stories. When we tell a story, we pick and choose what events syncopate that story, and we choose the way in which these disparate elements relate to one another. When the taxicab drivers narrated their stories to us, they necessarily chose the elements of their experience that they thought could be arranged together to tell us the *meaning* of their story. Certain details were useful, while some were ancillary. How much they were paid became part of the story, while their favorite breakfast foods were decidedly unrelated. By arranging a particular constellation of events and details, and through their own storytelling dynamics like narrative framing, they sought to give a certain unity to their otherwise dispersed lived experiences, and

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[152] Bartlett's 1991 article "Feminist Legal Methods" articulates three principle feminist legal strategies: feminist practical reasoning, asking the "women" question and the question of the excluded, and consciousness-raising.

with that act rendered meaning to their story. Because their particular stories were about their identities (or identity claims), these stories were stories meant to give meaning to their identity. I will explore the relationship between storytelling, identity, meaning, and responsibility by way of literary digression; it will be the use of stories and literature that reflects back to us how we have come to understanding the complex implications of narration.

In the (First) Case of Lily Briscoe, in the (Second) Case of Gerty MacDowell

Consider Lily Briscoe's contemplations to herself, "What does it mean, then, what does it all mean?" when Mrs. Ramsay passes away in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.[153] The entire book, up until the last chapter, revolves around the Ramsay family and their preparations to go to the nearby lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay, the principle caretaker of the home, remains throughout these chapters a central character, even as the narrative voice shifts between various peoples. However, in the final chapter, readers discover that in the intermittent time interval between the final chapter and the rest of the book, Mrs. Ramsay has died. The final pages of the book are spent reminiscing about the effect of Mrs. Ramsay's life on each of the characters—how she both directly and indirectly influenced their maturation, their growth, and their individualities. They nostalgically reflect and tell stories about Mrs. Ramsay's life in a way that is unique to the final chapter. The effect is something like traveling in a car, for during the entire book, one is caught in the movement of Mrs. Ramsay's flittering around the house and town as she goes about her affairs. Her actions and movements are

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[153] Woolf 1989, 145

blurred and unfocused, like looking out the side of a car. In this final chapter, as the characters reflect on her absence, the effect is of turning to look out the *back* of the car—as things move away, as one reflects upon things moving away from *this very moment* and looks back, things come into focus, gain context, gain a moment of clarity. Only by listening to the family members' reflective stories do we gain the perspective and framework with which to give *meaning* to Mrs. Ramsay's day-to-day affairs. It is during the final chapter that we realize the contours of Mrs. Ramsay's character had hitherto been largely unintelligible because we, too, were caught in the present, the here-and-now. For Lily Briscoe, the answer to "What does it mean, then, what does it all mean?" is that, in a higher register, we can now inquire about the meaning of Mrs. Ramsay's life and death in the first place—something not possible when we were in the here-and-now of the lived experience of the Mrs. Ramsay.

Whatever story might result from the life of Mrs. Ramsay could only be framed and given meaning upon reflection, upon recalling select and particular events of her life and coordinating them into a story. In a sense, the taxicab drivers must do the same: they must look into their histories, select and weave together elements to create a story that has necessarily *passed* (already-lived). Storytelling cannot quite capture *this* moment, the moment of the stories' narration. This temporal dimension of storytelling, its constant yielding to the past, its inability to capture the very moment of its invocation, has a two-fold significance.

The first is that storytelling is necessarily reflective, a kind of personal reading of history. It is necessarily idiosyncratic and incomplete, and despite this (indeed, *because*

of this), a story can generate meaning. Importantly for identity politics, *whose* story is told in a given identity collective is a highly political act. As several cultural and political theorists have signaled, oftentimes the story promulgated by an identity collective is a story that, by its very narration, leaves an absence that largely falls along gendered, nationalist, racist, and socio-economic vectors.[154] The same point is poignantly made by Joyce in *Ulysses* when he begins shifting writing style between each of the chapters. Made especially clear in the chapter written from the perspective of the feminine Gerty MacDowell, Joyce shows that each style of storytelling both reveals certain dimensions of experience while *suppressing* others; that is, for each thing revealed in a story, something else his hidden away as absence.[155] Gerty MacDowell speaks in what Joyce has (arguably) believed to be a "feminine" voice. Her chapter speaks to transient fashion advertisements, obsessed self-critical examination of appearances, hyperbolic romanticized imagery, and flowery diction. This "feminine" language paints the beach scene in a glossy light, and not until the perspective returns to Leopold Bloom do we see the beach as mundane. The same beach described by two different narrative styles, with each revealing and suppressing different qualities of the scene—this nature of storytelling has profound implications for identity politics. If the taxicab drivers seek to form one story for the collective (the story that went into the pamphlet), then we should ask whose voice was left out of the story. Storytelling both is meaning-generative as well as an act of homogenization in late-modern identity politics – it has the capacity to be a double-edged sword, to be sure.

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[154] See Narayan 1997, Song 2005, and Enloe 2004.
[155] Joyce 1990, 346-382

The second significance is that the subject of the story—whether the taxicab drivers or Mrs. Ramsay—can never be *fully* contained or captured by the story. Because the story must be assembled as a bouquet of *selected* details, and posited together into a univocal fiction, its subject will always be incomplete. We can never know the taxicab drivers or Mrs. Ramsay in the fullest sense. Indeed, we might suggest that "knowing" some experience or object *fully* is a metaphysical impossibility if that experience or object happens to be neither, but rather a *speaking subject*, my interlocutor to whom I respond with my story. This will be one way of understanding the dimension of infinity in Levinas's account of the Other, as well as his account of transcendence. For now, we can formulate the temporality of storytelling thus: meaning erupts from a story *precisely because the story is finite*, where that story requires effort and work to be made into a cogent narrative that is idiosyncratically unified, and often at the expense of internal difference.

We exercise our imaginative and creative capacities to craft a story that will generate meaning that is really a Gestalten product, for the meaning of the story indeed exceeds the sum of its parts. The meaning of a story depends on how we arrange its smaller elements together, the relationships that we draw between those narrative elements, and importantly, *to whom it is told*. That is, part of the meaning of a story is tied in to whom is in the audience. The taxicab story was arranged with the audience already in mind: the Nashville community. Its particular exposition, its narrative development, climax, and denouement were all crafted and oriented in relation to the

listener. The *meaning* of their story of exploitation would have been largely lost and rendered pointless were the listener not already part of the equation.

This is all done in tandem between a subject and an Other, between the story's Hero and its Bard. We might say that without the Bard's story, there is no Hero at all. Without James Joyce, there is (in both literal and metaphorical modes) no Leopold Bloom, without Virginia Woolf no Mrs. Ramsay. In the same vein, there is no speaker and storytelling Woolf or Joyce without Mrs. Ramsay and Leopold Bloom. There are no students-helping-taxicab drivers without the drivers, and there are no exploited drivers without the students who tell their story. The Hero and the Bard are not independent and autonomous subjects—they are constitutive of one another, and the practice that binds them in mutual interdependence is narration and storytelling.

Storytelling, then, is also a *relational* project, told unto a unique Other. Storytelling puts that identity in society with others. This is what allows Adriana Cavarero to argue that "between identity and narration…there is a tenacious relation of desire."[156] Meaning does not unintentionally spring from storytelling. Rather, we *desire* it. We tell stories because we want meaning generated; we want our identity's story to be given cogency, perspective, and context; and we do this by telling these stories *to others*. Here, even the constraints of language makes it difficult to speak of storytelling as meaning-generative, because in a sense, the only thing I *can* want is meaning. My being in society has no compass, no direction without some strong form of meaning[157];

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[156] Caverero 200, 32
[157] Heidegger's fundamental insight that Dasein was not pre-World, but already *in the World*, and that this quality establishes Dasein as being full of World (whereas animals are poor-of-World), is pertinent here. See *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. It seems pointless to talk of being in the world *without*

instead, it remains anomalous, apolitical, and wildly arbitrary.   This social disorientation

is exacerbated in late modernity because of the proliferation of what Connolly calls

"increased global contingency," the recognition that much of our personal desires,

habits, characters, and values are not transcendental truths but contingent incidents.[158]

Wendy Brown writes that "In the absence of orienting instruments, to avert 'existential

bewilderment' inhabitants of postmodernity…resort to fierce assertions of 'identities' in

order to know/invent who, where, and what they are."[159] In a real political sense, we

want to be in society with others, because only then can we tell and create stories for

others that generate meaningful identities. Otherwise, the concept of identity itself

seems to unravel.

    If we begin to critically engage Caverero's account of the subject who *wants* the

story told to her by an Other, and of Levinas's subject who is *provoked* to respond *to* the

Other, we produce a specific tension that can be framed in the following way: in

Levinas, the stage is set so that the relationship between *moi* and the Other is one of

height, one of asymmetry. The Other is the origin to which all things orient themselves,

including World. However, in Caverero's concept of subjects being *constitutively*

exposed, the relationship between self and other is more lateral. Hero and Bard are

both intertwined[160], whereas in Levinas's story, I am intertwined with/by the Other and

yet the Other is independent of myself. I argue this is a productive tension between the

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already being thrown into the world, thrown into *desiring meaning* from World. Meaning, for us, isn't
something secondary or incidental to being-in-world, but rather its constitutive dimension. We are in the
world to the extent that we *desire* meaning from it. Thus, we are always caught in this act of engaging
with it.
[158] Connolly 2002, 24
[159] Brown 1995, 35
[160] Cavarero 2000, the chapter of "The Necessary Other," especially 81-85.

two accounts, as such a tension points us towards a theoretical wedge that is specifically *political*. The tension is a supplement of the kind that only emerges when we move between the ethical and political (and the literary), which will become clearer as we move forward.

In the Case of Rei Ayanami

The constitutive interrelation between bard and hero is beautifully depicted in Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (NGE). A series that acknowledges the importance of hybrid and fragmented identities, NGE helps us clarify the necessary *distance-from-oneself* (the distance between hero and bard) that is necessary for identity's meaning to emerge. Both Cavarero and Levinas, at least superficially, share this understanding of *distance-from-oneself*. Until now, I have portrayed storytelling and the consolidation of identity to occur between two physical bodies, two materially separate entities. However, storytelling and identity do not presuppose stable and unified egos. Just as the "We" in identity politics is never a univocal and homogeneous subject, neither is the "individual," conventionally understood. NGE offers fruitful artwork that ties together the dispersed and unstable constitution of the Ego, the role of narrative voice, and the effort of storytelling to consolidate and organize these parts. The epigraph to this chapter belongs to this piece of art.

A twenty-six episode animation series, NGE recounts a science fiction story of a secret international organization (SEELE) seeking to force the next stage of humanity's evolution by manipulating the main characters Shinji Ikari, Rei Ayanami, and Asuka

Sohryu, a fictional UN organization called NERV, and a host of other fictional figures culled from the Christian bible and Jewish mysticism. SEELE's goal is to initiate the next stage of human evolution by forcefully collapsing every single human's Ego barrier so that the entirety of humanity ascends to a unified World Consciousness (this is called Instrumentality). The name of the final stretch of the series is appropriately named "Death and Rebirth." Hegel and Lacan's influence in the animated series is easy to notice, as well as the existential overtones (exemplified in the episode "From Sickness Unto Death, And….", a clear reference to Kierkegaard's own text). In the final moments of the series, the character of Rei Ayanami appears in a large body of red water, her lower half submerged. A copy of her figure hovers in front of this first form, levitating above the water. In addition, there are multiple other homunculi that take the form of her friends populating the space. This is the interiority of Rei Ayanami's mind, and her conversation is between herself-as-other and herself-as-other. There is, in fact, no objective "Rei Ayanami" vantage point. At this juncture, Rei Ayanami has no identity in any strong sense, for the eschatology of the plot has already been put into motion. As ego-barriers begin dissolving, characters' minds begin dissolving into *pure being*, completely undifferentiated from other minds/bodies.[161] This movement is depicted as everyone dissolving into red primordial fluid, forming oceans of dissolving bodies.

Rei Ayanami thus imagines herself in dialogue with various forms of herself, and they begin to recount stories. They recount the way in which Rei has formed human bonds with others, and how those bonds allow her to be *more* than just a being. Those

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[161] NGE goes to great lengths to disrupt the Cartesian dualism of mind/body; when I describe the melting together of minds/bodies, I *literally* mean the melding of individuals on a unified body/mind dimension.

bonds differentiated her, singling her out from *being in general*. As the conversation

continues, one version of Rei refuses to forfeit her own individuated existence,

concluding that she is more than "I am I" because of her unique bonds *with others*.

Once the conversation ends, we do not see Rei's character until the finale—it appears

that her ego, too, has been consolidated through storytelling; she has successfully held

onto her ego-barrier along with the other characters. By having stories *about herself*

told *to herself*, she forces a unity upon her dispersed *alter egos* and recounts a unique,

meaningful story of Rei Ayanami.[162]

Cavarero, mistakenly on my reading, considers this narration to oneself the act of

madmen, writing "only madmen tell themselves their own stories out-loud, making of

themselves their only listener."[163] Rei Ayanami is neither mad nor insane.[164] In spite of

her "false" being, her self-narration to herself is only possible *because she has formed*

bonds to others, who put her ego into question. Rei's identity is not *originally*

fragmented (in whatever sense of originality is appropriate here), but its fractured

texture is the result of her forming human bonds over time, where the others in her life

continually and persistently question and re-question her life-story. There is no

possibility of solipsism in storytelling, even to oneself, where "the other (if there is one)

functions only as a spectator to be dazzled," because the act of storytelling betrays "the

uniqueness that exposes itself" which "brings to the scene a fragile and unmasterable

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[162] Neon Genesis Evangelion raises important questions about the role of fhe Mother in this whole process, as well as the issue of intercorporality. Literature that adds context to my own reading of the ending of NGE can be found in Mariana Ortega's *My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in Neon Genesis Evangelion*, as well as Susan Napier's *When the Machines Stop*.

[163] Caverero 2000, 85

[164] Here, we will go ahead and foreground all of the issues with claiming "madness" in any sense, especially in light of Foucault's genealogy of insanity.

self."[165] The "Other" who questions Rei is both other characters *as well as the viewer*. This series is a story, after all. We would not be able to relate to the story and to the characters if we, too, were not interacting with the story in such a way as to split open the cogency of egoism on both the level of the hero and the bard.

Rei Ayanami's self-narration can be understood as an interiorization of a kind of politics of identity. It is a politics for the simple but important fact that the discussion between the Rei alter egos is one of compromise and deliberation. It is a politics of identity because what is at stake is the question of "who are you?" The danger of Instrumentality lies precisely in its aim to exploit the necessarily unstable identity that characters like Rei (which is to say everyone, incidentally) express. To overcome the dissolution of Self and the boundaries between Self and Other, Rei Ayanami's act of self-storytelling teaches us two important things: that she has othered herself in response to *other others*[166], and that the success of her character's identity in the finale testifies to the possibility of identity politics (albeit interiorized) *reaching across difference and forming communities of difference*. When Rei Ayanami says "I am I," she means for "I" to include all of the shadows and half-visions of self-difference included.

The autobiographical practices of Rei Ayanami reveal to us the "uniqueness of an identity which, *only in relation*, is *bios* instead of *zoe*."[167] We will have to disagree, then, with one of Rei's alter ego's claim that she is nothing but a material puppet; the very

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[165] Cavarero 2000, 84

[166] By other others, I mean her not her alter-egos as others, but the other characters—those with whom she has been in society.

[167] Cavarero 2000, 85; the difference between *bios* and *zoe* is first investigated by Aristotle, but its development, as a distinction, is given greater substance with Hannah Arendt's treatment. *Bios* is the life story, the life lived with meaning—think biography—whereas *zoe* is *mere life*. This is the distinction which foregrounds Giorgio Agamben's own analysis of bare life, not coincidentally.

capacity of that alter-ego to speak to another alter-Rei illuminates the trace of her

unique and singular life story (while simultaneously a finite and idiosyncratic one) that is

itself the provocation of *other others* (her peers like Shinji Ikari).

In the Case of Shinji Ikari

Shinji: A boy who has been (as typical of characters in this genre to which NGE

belongs) assigned responsibility unwillingly—that of ultimately preventing the

Instrumentality of all egos, the dissolution of "Self" and "Other." He is a character who

centralizes Schopenhauer's "hedgehog dilemma" within the series. In the first few

episodes, a character named Ritsuko discusses with Shinji's mother-surrogate (Misato)

about the hedgehog dilemma, describing it as the phenomena where one wishes to

become close to others, but as one becomes close to others, we prick ourselves and

wish to retreat, to isolate, to shore up the walls of our *identity* (I am consciously moving

back and forth between Levinas's dwelling and my account of storytelling). The

Hedgehog Dilemma, which traces itself throughout NGE in the lonely figure of Shinji,

represents the crux of the entire drama because SEELE wishes to absolve the ego-

barriers of each "Self" so that the distance between "Self" and "Other" is closed,

foregoing the possibility of emotional pain. The manifestation of Hegel's "World Spirit"

takes the form here, then, of a subject's final salvation from a life of emotional suffering.

NGE is offering an alternative to the call of the Other as salvation from pain and

the possibility of meaning. While Levinas argues that it is our helpless plea in the

moment of torture that is the half-opening to the Other whose alterity provides the only

possibility of meaning and aid, for Hideaki Anno, it is *psychological solipsism* which might rescue the Self from the pain of being. Schopenhauer's hedgehog dilemma can be understood as an antithetical statement to Levinas—the Other is not ethical salvation, but the source of all pain and suffering.

The case of Shinji Ikari, in fact, reveals traces of both the Levinasian and the Schopenhauer stories. These two stories are the two options presented to Shinji in the final moment of Instrumentality, and it is a very real question in identity politics: do I open myself to others, or do I shut them out? Which will offer me a way *out of myself* and into the realm of meaning? *Meaning* here is understood as *bios*, and not mere *zoe*. Hovering in the sky, faced with the absolute blank whiteness of Shinji's interiority, the final minutes of NGE unfold based on the decision that Shinji chooses.

"I was the beast that shouted 'I' at the heart of the world." This is the subtitle for the final fifteen minutes of the series. Such a name is appropriate, on my reading, because Shinji chooses in the final moments to reject Instrumentality. He chooses to preserve Self/Other relations and to embrace the hedgehog dilemma for all of its woes. His choice shatters (literally) the empty white space that occupied the interiority of his mind and, instantaneously, his interiority is filled with the presence of others. The now-famous final fifteen seconds of the animated series depicts Shinji, standing in the center of the sky, surrounded by characters from the story, all clapping and saying one after another, "Congratulations Shinji!" Rei Ayanami is among the crowd. The final second of the series flashes words on the screen in white font with a black background, saying "Congratulations to all of the Children!"

"I was the beast that shouted "I" at the heart of the world." In the moment of choice, in a moment of *absolute freedom*, Shinji chooses to forego his arbitrary and radical freedom and to challenge himself to be with others. He foregoes *being-in-general* and chooses to invest that very freedom in the finitude of being with others. There is, in the final episode, a beautiful scene where Shinji's obscured body floats in the white space, and as he converses with other beings about the possibility of meaning, he draws a floor within the space in which he floats. All of a sudden, Shinji stands on this floor. A disembodied narrator speaks to him: "now you can walk on the ground, although you have less freedom." In the final moment, when Shinji rejects Instrumentality, when he shouts "I" at the heart of the World, he forcefully reconstitutes the various dissolved Egos of the world because for Shinji to shout "I" *meaningfully* he already presupposes and re-asserts the being of Others. To shout "I" within the story of Shinji is to affirm singularity, but to affirm singularity is also to affirm sociality with others. In the end, then, even Hideaki Anno's *NGE* arrives to the conclusion that Levinas does: the possibility of living a *bios* as opposed to *zoe*, and the possibility of meaning for identity, is not found in solipsism, but is located in my moving from totalizing egoism to being with and for others. Put another way, the pain of being with others is what offers the original condition for meaning generation.

A final note on *The End of Evangelion* that will gain significance in the final chapter of this argument: as egos repopulate the world, the lone person with whom Shinji sees in the eschatological aftermath is Asuka Soryhu. While the animated series ends on the scene of the crowd, the film, which provides the capstone conclusion to the

tale, has Shinji alone with Asuka in a sea of Christian crosses, surrounded by the wake of the destruction caused by the Hegelian eschatology. Asuka is the person whose personality most opposes Shinji; unlike Shinji's introvert personality, Asuka is confident, forward, and in many cases the most emotionally volatile of the characters. It should seem obvious now why she is the only person present in the world besides Shinji; if Shinji is to reject instrumentality and to choose to maintain the possibility of Self/Other relations in the world, then the final character to be at his side is the person who makes the pain of being-with-others most apparent, and most meaningful. Asuka's opposition to Shinji testifies to the necessary tension and difference that makes ethics possible within community. To make the first and fundamental ethical decision—to be in armistice with others, to be in community with them despite the pain of being-with-others—is to be for others *despite* difference. *NGE*, then, hints at a new sense of community "to come," the possibility of choosing to be for others in spite of (indeed because of) difference. Congratulations to the children, indeed.

The Hero and the Bard

These literary digressions teach us a few things about storytelling and responsibility.

- *Distance-from-oneself*, the space between myself and the Other, is the theoretical core of storytelling that lies at the threshold of meaning's emergence for identity. Narrating to others thus appears to represent a

constitutive project of ego-formation if we tether ego-formation to our desire for meaning in society.

- The relationship between identity and storytelling is such that with each encounter by an Other, we must respond. No matter how we respond, the successive responses we are constantly forced to offer *result* in a story, and it is our unique quality of being singled-out each time for response that lets the resulting story be our *unique* story. A subject's story thus affirms our singularity while also betraying our constant exposure to others, from which that story emerges. This notion is driven home in the unique "human bonds" Rei Ayanami establishes in her own autobiographical efforts.

- Meaning for identity cannot be extricated from a sense of community, even as the specific articulation of that community mediates what kind of meaningful identities are possible.

To return to the tension between Levinas and Cavarero, we now understand this tension to be a symptom of the fact that the opening of ethics, the assignment of responsibility in Levinas, has a story too. It is a *political* story. The difference between Cavarero and Levinas is not a difference arising because they offer conflicting stories on identity formation. Instead, it indicates that identity's formation is more complicated than what either of their independent stories suggest. The opening of ethics in our affection by an

Other is part of an on-going project of *resulting*[168] a story. Our telling stories, and our hearing stories told back to us—the intertwinement of the Hero and the Bard for Cavarero—indicates to us that the ethical moment in Levinas *is* a political moment. The assignment of responsibility is also the opening of a story that betrays our very need for communities.

I explore storytelling here because in order to talk about responsibility in identity politics, we do not have the luxury of obsessing over the moment of encounter between the Self and the Other in Levinas (as useful as it has been to show the opening of ethics and responsibility). There is a political story for that moment of encounter. When someone encounters the taxicab drivers, and they offer their stories, we have the opening of ethics and of meaning, but the *content* of the meaning is constrained by the formal structures of storytelling, where these constraining structures are themselves the product of regimes of power. As Lily Briscoe's example signals, storytelling *even as response to the Other* is retrospective; it is hindsight, even while it is the commitment to armistice, a commitment to responsibility. Even while identity's justification in identity politics is ethical response, it is not immune to attenuation by social norms, historical delimitations, and regulatory regimes of intelligibility. Although exploring the *why* of storytelling has let us uncover the ethical possibilities in identity politics, the *how* of storytelling remains in play. Thus why the final chapter addresses the notion of community, for it is in a new articulation of community that the *how* and *why* of storytelling (and by extension, responsibility) become themselves intertwined.

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[168] I use "resulting" as the verb here consciously. To use "producing" would indicate that the story's emergence is an act of agency, rather than something that happens because of our unchosen and elicited responses which precede agency.

One contention should be addressed here. If identity assumes itself into identity politics as the identity *claim* "We/You are, who is the speaker of the claim? Or, more specifically, to whom or what does the "We" refer? Initially, we might think, at first, that late modern identity politics is waged with these We are/You are claims, and the antecedent for these speakers (We) are *stories* about identities. In the background of these "We are…" claims are narratives about each identity.

The relationship between the identity claim and storytelling is slippery, both politically and grammatically. If identity is contemporaneously understood as the "We are…" claim, the "We" does not appear to be an ambiguous pronoun with no proper antecedent if identities have been given meaning from stories. The obvious question seems to be: what ambiguity resides in late-modern "identity" if it has a story? Put another way, how do we understand this articulation of identity to be little more than its identity claim if it *already had a story*?

To answer this question, understanding how storytelling and the identity claim are different semiotic technologies of the self is necessary. The identity claim is our *political* act of deploying our identity as a univocal claim. It is the act that posits the sovereign "We" while also setting the terms for how "You" can be described. We tell stories in order to consolidate the fragmented community that must maintain a pretense of unity to make the "We are…" claim. Stories, however, do not provide the pre-political identity with which claims utilize for grounding. Stories cannot reflect some sort of "essence" to an identity, because no story is ever quite the same—even a written story. Anyone who tries to tell a story orally knows that in each recitation, the story comes out slightly

differently. Even when reading the same *written* story, the reader draws out different dimensions and nuances.[169] Each recitation is more than just a patient description of some kind of essence, or an immutable fact about an event or person. Rather, it is a willful and forced idiosyncratic interpretation of its topic, an effort to *create* meaning from finititude in the here-and-now with the Other who is here-and-now, demanding my story.

Stories in late-modern identity politics are offered as forced and willful attempts to generate meaning for identity in *defense* of the identity claim. It is a *response* to "Who are you? What is your identity, which you possess in order to make this claim against us?" Each time the identity claim is dispensed, an Other calls upon its speaker for justification, and often this justification is a story about that identity. It is a story that is crafted and tailored for the moment, arranged so that the meaning generated suits how the speaker wishes to relate to the audience. It is a *response* to the Other, who demands the subject to justify her claim of identity, and her response (in Levinas's language) will be *me voici*, or "here *I* am."[170] The taxicab drivers narrated their stories to us to generate meaning for that identity, because implicit in their desire in asking us for help was the hidden yet understood knowledge that justification for who they were, must necessarily be demanded. As Judith Butler writes, the subject has been demanded by an Other to give an account of her or himself.[171]

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[169] This is also how we might defend the *act* or *practice* of storytelling from always being an essentialist project. Although the *content* of the story might reflect essentialist attitudes, the act of storytelling itself always fails to reflect some dehistoricized essence for identity because each act of storytelling is itself idiosyncratic, unique, and singular. Thus, as a practice, it cannot claim to describe an identity's essence, for it would negate itself, cross itself in the very narration of that essence.

[170] *Me Voici*, or "here I am," is the specific formulation of the primary response to the call of the Other in Levinas. Here, I am borrowing its semantic quality as a response rooted in the here-and-now, but will offer considerable elaboration in the following chapter.

[171] Judith Butler 2005, 19-23

Meaning from our stories, then, are also constitutively generated as *responses* to the Other, to her demands for justification for the consolidation of my identity, and in a sense, this is why Cavarero insists on calling subjects as "constitutively exposed," as I have been doing. To be a subject with a story is to be *exposed* to an Other, to recognize that "we perceive ourselves and others as unique beings whose identity is narratable in a life-story," and to recognize that the inaugurating disclosure of our identity depends on being opened-up and exposed to the Other.[172] Pushing past Levinas, then, we see that storytelling is *ethical response* even whilst that response itself is situated in a greater story; this is now more than a trace of the "They" in the "We." This is a trace of "You" in each "I." This is the ethical intertwinement of Hero and Bard in the act of narration.

We see in Levinas's concept of the dwelling that there are two modes of otherness at play in the formation of identity: the figure of the Stranger and the Feminine. The act of storytelling in identity politics is in fact an ethical interplay between the subject, the Stranger, and the Feminine. We tell a story that both harbors the subjects within the dwelling, *within* itself, even while it is told *to others*, and it is only through this complex interaction on multiple levels that makes the story *both* ethical response (as responding to others who demand me to justify myself) as well as a meaningful gesture. The story (ethical response) is always told oriented towards someone outside of my dwelling/identity even as the very practice itself is enabled and conditioned by those who support me, who discipline me and shape my desire. Those enabling figures support my very capacity for freedom that is always

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[172] Cavarero 2000, 33

being put into question by Others. Storytelling as ethical response illuminates how identity is constructed upon invisible Others (like the Feminine), so that the "We" in identity politics (like We students) cannot be constructed without the help of supporting subjects (like the Taxicab drivers), and at the same time this "We" has no meaning, has no orientation without being provoked to ethical response (storytelling) to the Stranger. The key to a new identity politics is to recognize that our responsibility extends to the taxicab drivers as well, and that they are as much the Stranger to us as they have been the exploited Feminine within our dwelling/identity.

To entirely invert the previous understanding of the taxicab driver movement, it is *our* identity as students that must be put into question by our encounter with drivers, to understand our complicit exploitation in their plight by our political apathy. Here, it is in our mutual acts of storytelling which ethically intertwine "We" and "They" that lets difference here becomes the provocation to responsibility (by being the provocation for storytelling.) They are the heroes of the story, and we become the bards to recount their stories to others and, our role as bards is one of responsibility. By telling stories to us, they both recognize and reiterate the interdependence and constitutive relationality of hero and bard, author and reader, *I* and *you*.

Storytelling is not always a violent homogenizing process. To the extent that Rei's storytelling reiterated the fact that her identity had always been scored through with tension and difference, and at the same time affirmed her living singularity, we can buttress this point by returning to "Take Back the Night" events. At these events, women recount stories to one another about cases of abuse. Such a storytelling event

provides women context for their abuse, provides perspective that helps them cope with their own experiences while building coalition and community, bound together by their stories. Yet, even while these stories bring them together into community under a shared experience of abuse, these stories *also* affirm the uniqueness of their lives. Each person tells their story not because they are all the same, but precisely because each of their stories is singularly unique. Their stories reveal the complex relationship between race, glass, gender, age, socioeconomic class, neighborhood, and marital status, among other things, and how they all intersect in a unique story. Importantly, these unique, singular stories, which underscore their unique differences, are also precisely what *bring them into community with one another*. Rei Ayanami recounting stories to her various "selves" can be interpreted as an effort to consolidate her identity that is itself hybrid and fractured by bring them into community with one another, in order to understand who she *is*. Participants of "Take Back the Night" also affirm their community *through* difference. Just as Lily Briscoe is the bard for the hero Mrs. Ramsay, the women are each others' heroes and bards, Rei Ayanami is simultaneously hero and bard (by encountering and refracting others through herself), Shinji refuses to have *only* either hero or bard, and the university students and the taxicab drivers are each other's heroes and bards. What is at stake in each of these examples of storytelling is the formation of identity that is mediated through a community scored through with difference, where difference serves as the necessary *distance* from which narration derives its capacity for meaning as well as the assignment of responsibility.

To recapitulate, narration offers several important insights for us about how we understand identity politics to be founded upon responsibility because the practice of storytelling lies at the nexus of the relationship between meaning, identity, community, and constitutive exposure between a subject and others. Storytelling generates meaning for identities by putting that story in relation to others, so that the story gains the perspective and distance necessary for meaning to be formed. Storytelling is also offered as justification before an Other who demands explanation for the identity claim, and importantly, if this story is told as a collective story, its necessarily *finite* structure necessitates that narrators mask (or produce) absences within its interiority, and these absences are often absences of marginalization and exclusion. Storytelling, as a political practice however, retains the capacity to form new kinds of community that uses the very difference within the community to create meaning for identity while also affirming the singularities of its constituents.

Why are the taxicab drivers not succeeding?

If storytelling is constitutive to subject formation and the inauguration of identity, and if such a practice is necessarily relational, it is a practice that affirms and reiterates the "We" as not sovereign and autonomous, but a "We" that is always already in society, dependent on others who enable and coordinate its emergence, structuring a complex field of relations between identity, otherness, responsibility, and the stories that interweave them together. The practice of storytelling is the opening up of an identity, a dwelling, to the call of the Other, while also intertwining the speaker with her Feminine

others as well as Stranger others. We are now in a position to posit that storytelling is not only constitutive to my own subject formation, but it is a fundamentally *ethical* gesture *towards* the Other who is here before me, demanding my justification for my freedom (of identity). Storytelling betrays my assignment "to be a Self" while also situating that assignment within the history that adds context to that assignment. Meaning-generation in identity politics is bound up in this complex ethical interaction towards Others, other Others, the Feminine *and* the Stranger.

Why, then, do the taxicab drivers encounter such resistance in late-modern identity politics if they are using storytelling and narration as political tactics?

The taxicab drivers have had little success in pressing for increased economic security, in the form of benefits, higher wages, or even social support; local government administrators cite the lack of any explicit responsibility for the taxicab drivers. While admitting that the drivers were certainly experiencing "hard times," to argue that they were "exploited" was to suggest that someone had intervened in the free market to deflate the "natural" wages that they were earning. But, due to the leading Representative Jim Cooper's strong commitment to free market principles, not much evidence of market interference existed. Thus, the drivers were not "exploited," but rather served as the necessary and important losers in the greater game of free market fundamentalism.[173] No obligation or responsibility existed to help the drivers.

This is the failure of an identity politics based on claims of identity that function as claims of entitlement, of right, and of injury. It is a politics with an ethical vacuum, filled

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[173] Free market fundamentalism is a term deployed in the work of William Finnegan, Jeff Faux, Joseph Stiglitz.

instead with ideologically-derived game rules that declare that the only notion of responsibility needed in politics is the responsibility to make sure no one changes the rules of the game.[174] It is a rigged game where claims of identity are only heard if they conform to the hegemonic discourse, if they conform and reinforce the dominant values of the politics instead of putting those very values into question. The identity claim that succeeds is the identity claim that does not open up into dialogue. This is the "gender-neutral" housing initiative succeeding only upon conforming to the already-accepted "LGBTQI" identity politics; it was a political victory that reinforced the university's commitment to diversity without seriously putting into question the rampant heterosexism that created the discriminatory housing policy in the first place.

Narration is not a practice limited to identity politics. Just as the ubiquity of universal discourses and concepts point us toward the necessary persistence of *identity*, identity's persistence in turn points us towards storytelling's similar status. However, despite how the theoretical implications of narration rupture the contemporary articulation of identity politics, it does not yet produce a new kind of politics. That identity politics contains storytelling does not ontologically necessitate an instantiation of political rules of mutual interdependence and responsibility. Recognizing that the taxicab drivers are using storytelling does not abstractly force our politics to also manifest the role of responsibility in redressing their plight; the reality of their slow progress only makes this point apparent.

At this juncture, it might seem as if I am unfairly blaming the taxicab drivers for using storytelling and the identity claim "We are" because, in a way, they are complicit in

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[174] Paul Krugman offers an analysis of these "rules" in *The Return of Depression Economics*.

late-modern identity politics because they are coalescing around an injury and seek

entitlement. After all, why *shouldn't* they use storytelling to build coalition and to use the

tools of identity politics to better their lives marked by insecurity and exclusion? If they

cannot pressure the local government to force Allied Cab to increase their wages, then

some form of identity politics is necessary to move the broader community to come to

their side, it seems. By critiquing their late-modern identity politics strategies, am I not

undermining the fact that they *are* exploited, and are pursuing economic and social

justice, and rightfully so?

To clarify, it is *both* how the taxicab drivers need to succeed *and* the fact that

they are failing, that necessitates a rethinking of contemporary identity politics and the

notion of political community it entails. Storytelling is a double-edged weapon; it can

homogenize community *and* it can affirm difference and singularity within a community.

I am referring here to something like the difference between storytelling for the national

platforms for the Democrats and Republicans, and the storytelling in "Take Back the

Night" events. One homogenizes, and the other discloses heterogeneity. By

understanding these polar affects of storytelling, we can cut cleanly into the plight of the

taxicab drivers and seek to create an identity politics that cultivates a new type of

political community that lets their storytelling affirm their difference *and* make that

difference the source of our responsibility towards them. That is, we want the effects of

storytelling at "Take Back the Night" events. If the problem is a kind of political apathy

that prevents us from empathizing with the taxicab drivers across socio-economic,

racial, and national lines, and this apathy is derived from late-modern identity politics,

then it is their continued exploitation that provokes us to change the rules of the game so that responsibility is part of the equation. If the problem is that *they are they and we are we*, then the "they" and "we" need to be completely rethought as intimately and complexly intertwined, as the act of storytelling signals.

Instead of strictly *deducing* from the implications of storytelling's relation to identity an ethical dimension to identity politics, we should instead look to storytelling as a resource to articulate an alternative vision of identity politics—one that might live up to the ethical commitment bound up in the formation of identity itself.[175] What we want is a viable political stance that lets us contest the form of the identity claim, so that the Hero and the Bard can relate to one another, form a community with one another, and all the while cutting through Connolly's ethical conundrum.

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[175] Although "deducing" an ethical dimension from identity politics might appear to be my aims thus far, such a practice would be rather disingenuous to how we live politics. Well-reasoned arguments or "deductions" from ontological facts about Being do not necessitate their own politics. People do not always heed "the best argument," or the soundest position. I am concerned with a concrete transformation of politics, and as such, I do not intend to frame my thesis as "the best argument" that will magically reshape our political sphere. Such is why I have chosen to frame my thesis as articulating an "alternative vision" or *position* with which we can take hold of in politics, and use this new position to do politics itself—to engage with others with the hopes of seeking to transform our lived community. It is not just a counter-move, but also a disturbance and reorienting of what I see as the dominant vision of how we should engage in identity politics.

V. I Was the Beast That Shouted "I" at the Heart of the World

> -*The true mark of the monster lies, rather, in Man… 'Man' is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it applies to no one. It disincarnates itself from the living singularity of each one, while claiming to substantiate it. It is at once masculine and neuter, a hybrid creature generated by thought, a fantastic universal produced by the mind. It is invisible and intangible, while nevertheless declaring itself to be the only thing 'sayable' in true discourse. It lives on its noetic status, even though it never leaves behind any life-story, and impedes language with the many philosophic progeny of its abstract conception.*[176]
>
> *Adriana Cavarero,* Relating Narratives

With a grand total of three pages in *Totality and Infinity* dedicated to "the Other and the Others,"[177] we can say without exaggeration that Levinas's work is curiously averse to the question of politics. After all, except for these three pages that address the not-insignificant problem of other Others (read: politics and community), almost the entirety of Levinas's ethical drama unfolds as a play with two characters. However, despite his scant work on politics, his work still offers resources for us to try to engage the question of politics with new perspective and fresh insight. Although I have already begun to do so, my explicit goal from this point forward is use Levinas's thought as a tool to cut through the ethical conundrum of late-modern identity politics. The aim is to

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[176] Cavarero 2000, 9
[177] Levinas 1969, 212-215

recuperate identity politics' ethical possibilities and to iterate a political ethics that might

let us rearticulate how we can come to understand and congeal identity as multiplicity,

as a community of singular subjects whose differences are not a source of protest

against a universal community or universal theory of justice, but are the strength of a

new identity politics.

To talk of community might seem counter-productive since Levinas's own thought

is really a philosophy of ethical singularity, and we might wonder whether the concept of

an identity politics still rooted in community is itself at odds with something we might

term a "politics of singularity." By a politics of singularity, I denote the notion of a politics

whose central theme is that individuals are not *particular instances* of a universal, but

are individuals *who count as such*. A politics of singularity can perhaps be understood

as a politics that attempts to do away completely with essentialist discourses—that

individuals are little more than dupes of essences, understood in terms of their

relationship to the dehistoricized, disincarnated, and abstract universal. We must be

careful and not think that, put this way, a politics of singularity is a politics *on the*

individual alone, and whose participation in a community already itself violates that

individual's singularity. Our temptation to oppose the two in this way only accrues

currency if we remain within the rules and assumptions of late-modern identity politics,

however. Community must be understood as homogenous, univocal, essentialist, and

resistant to reconfiguration for it to be opposed to the notion of singularity.

What we miss by opposing community and singularity is that singularity only

becomes possible *in* community, albeit not the community of late-modern identity

politics. Singularity becomes possible because I have been singled out by an Other, and have been drawn into sociality in an ethical modality. Singularity is not a radical *individualism*, but instead a radical emphasis on my being called *out* to respond to the ethical claims of others who live with me, together. Importantly, this is not a community of sameness. This is a community of ethical responsibility despite and through difference of race, sexuality, nationality, age, or anything at all. It is a community that is established on the singularizing ethical relationship, where the meaning of our identity is generated in my being-for-the-Other, together, with difference in hand. The aim is to foreclose the possibility of letting the group's identity label be disincarnated from the living singularities of each one of its constituents—what Cavarero admonishes the universal "Man" for doing in the epigraph of this chapter (although perhaps not carefully distinguishing between universalism and essentialism).

Once we manage to hold essentialist discourses at bay (which, of course, takes constant renewed efforts), we can let the universal, which is so important for the establishment of identity, function as to suffocate neither singularity nor let singularity become so radical and misunderstood that it becomes an atomistic politics. Instead, as Laclau and Balibar also argue, the goal is to let the relationship between the universal and the particular become a resource for the reiteration and multiplication of difference.[178] Let us not *forget* difference, but to engage ethics *despite* difference. It

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[178] Etienne Balibar articulately argues, "The…desirable path would put communication in the service of the reproduction of differences, that is, it would affirm singularity *by the mediation* of the universal. And, reciprocally, it would affirm the reality of the universal by the mediation of singularities." This is, in my view, what Human Rights claims do, in contrast to identity claims. This is not to preclude how human rights *can* function as identity claims, but to point out that properly articulated, Human Rights serve not to create a community of sameness, but rather to facilitate and mediate the creation of a global community

matters not to me whether the taxicab drivers are Afghani or Iranian, nor does it matter whether the war prisoner is an 'enemy combatant' or not, when it comes to my being responsible for them. Difference will, of course, help us discriminate strategies of how to help *this* Other before me, but difference does not yet enter into the formula of whether I am responsible or not. I do not read Levinas's ultimatum to not even "notice the color of their eyes"[179] as a command to *ignore* difference, and (in a hypocritical way) treat everyone the same, but a command to bracket off the color of their eyes when being assigned responsibility.[180] It is the ultimatum to be responsible to them not *because* of the color of their eyes, or *because* they are my family, or *because* they are poor, but to eschew the very word "because." It is to realize that my being was always a being-ethically-for this Other. It is living with and through community difference that ethical singularity (and hence a hospitable conception of identity) becomes possible.

Ethical singularity, to return to the example of the dwelling, arises in my having committed myself to the opening up of my identity to the Other. That is, singularity is only possible in a community that is lived as multiplicity, where those who are different from me (that is to say, everyone) can, without my anticipation, approach me and found my identity, which is inaugurated *and* transformed in the encounter itself.[181] This is the gender-neutral housing project from my university that, literally, opened up our dwelling to transgendered student demands and, thus, concretely changed the constitution of our

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scored through with difference. See "Culture and Identity (Working Notes)" in *The Identity in Question* 175.
[179] Levinas 1985, 85

[181] This kind of temporality is possible because of how we have come to understand the dwelling as establishing an incomplete sense of identity, where its full inauguration emerges from our being-for-the-other in ethical response.

dorm's identity. It was in each of our residents' ethical gesture towards one another and towards new residents that let us, now in the Levinasian sense, opened the possibility of a new meaningful identity not based on exclusion, but on a cosmopolitan sense of difference. Our dorm's ethical identity becomes understood as living community already scored through with difference.

A community whose identity emerges with the "We are…" claim is a community that maintains a pretense of an uncontestable *commonality.* It hides its inherent internal differences with its storytelling. When confronted with the demand for justification of the "We are…" claim, "We" tell an idiosyncratic story that masks difference. Because only by selecting *certain* details of the community can a story generate meaning, and because the details chosen attempt to iterate how there is unified and sovereign "We", the community formed is one of commonness and sameness. It is this conception of community that is capable of making the identity claim, and on a disturbing level, it is their story that renders everyone the same within that community. This is why the threat of essentialism remains so pressing in late-modern identity politics.

What is surprising when we interpret Levinas right alongside late-modern identity politics is that we find, deeply embedded in the politics' theoretical structure, that it always had the seeds for questions of ethics. Even in late-modern identity politics, its obsession with identity is still an obsession *with the Other*, with my justifying myself before the Other. The challenge that we are faced with, then, is whether we could articulate an identity politics that encourages us to commit ourselves to the ethical relationship assigned to us by our fellow beings who live with and alongside us.

The key to this question, which is the same key for cutting through Connolly's ethical conundrum, is the rearticulation of what we mean by community, as well as how we live it—of community that is not a monologue of the "We," but a community of difference where the "I" and "We" are not static and sovereign, but dynamic and responsive to others.

So, to dismantle Connolly's ethical conundrum... How do we ethically discriminate between others without foisting upon them the very historical constructions which enact a kind of social and ethical violence? That is, how do we understand ethics to be non-violent? As our analysis of the identity claim, storytelling, and ethical singularity shows, *the answer to addressing this conundrum lies in the invocation of the conundrum itself.* We now see that the problem of foisting historical constructions upon others is *more* than a "failure" of ethics. Rather, our constant failure of ethics is precisely what makes our ethical responsibility infinite. Connolly's ethical conundrum presupposes wanting to ethically relate to others in the first place, and such a presupposition already shows that the trace of the Other has passed by and has prompted me to respond. To want to ethically discriminate between and for Others, I have already been inaugurated as a responsible "I." For the conundrum, even for the moral skeptic, ethics has already been opened up, and it is our inevitable and persistent perpetration of social and ethical violence that makes our responsibility indefinite in nature. What the ethical conundrum shows, then, is not an inevitable failure and thus *closure* of ethics. Rather, it points us towards the never-ceasing ethical imperatives already presupposed in our politics of identity. Even if questions of justice are now

revealed to be contestable and contingent, we have not lost the grounds for asking those very questions, and we have not lost the grounds for ethics. Ethical inquiry, just like the practice of political critique, does not ever come to closure.

Connolly's ethical conundrum does not appear to be a conundrum, *per se*, because the answer sought not only is *how* to have a non-violent ethics. Rather, the answer lies in recognizing the already presupposed opening up of ethics by the trace of the Other by the very formulation of the conundrum, and our need to rearticulate community so that ethical singularity is possible. The community lets the "how" and "why" of ethics become intertwined within the act of storytelling, like two hands touching, two lips touching, where one opens out into the other, always touching the touch of the other, meaningfully and hospitably and necessarily different-yet-together.[182] Connolly's conundrum thus unravels because this new "We" is a "We" that does not emerge from the identity claim "We are…" and "You are…" but a "We" made possible precisely from irreducible difference—of the singularity of the "I" and "You." The monologue of the "We" has become a dialogue to and for others.

In terms of concrete steps, I am hesitant to offer prescriptive ethical demands in our politics, because I am attracted to and compelled by Levinas's normative *force* that is not fully prescriptive, but open-ended. As Charles Mills teaches us, theory need not tell us where to go, but simply tell us that we need to go in the first place, and to admit that our theory's incompleteness is also a strength.[183] However, I recognize that such a commitment to open-ended ethical politics might lead some critics to suggest that I have

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[182] I am drawing this metaphor from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's chapter "The Chiasm" from *The Visible and the Invisible*.
[183] Mills 2005

too judiciously been, albeit implicitly, giving an account of procedural politics, rather than offering an identity politics with any substantive ethical content. The thought here is that by focusing so much on the *opening* of ethical inquiry, and the various ways of living ethics, I have ceded too much ground for making justifiable normative *content* claims. To this, I admit that my "content" commitment might leave much to be desired by critics bent on having explicit, numerically listed normative ethical commitments that arise from my ethical rearticulation of identity politics. I stand by this move, however, because we should have little fear in fostering such a dynamic politics. Some critics might suggest that not to specify detailed and content-full normative criteria for an ethical politics is to necessarily cede to ethical and moral skepticism/relativism. However, we need not approach this problem with such a dichotomous understanding of full normativity opposed to total relativity. In between these two polarities is politics; hence why I call this a *political* ethics. It is a call to persistent ethical inquiry, oriented by the universal concept of the ethical singularity bestowed by the Other, that conjoins itself with politics to negotiate issues of particularity, of *this* Other who is before me and faces me:

> The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. *To see a face is to already hear "You shall not kill" and to hear "You shall not kill" is to hear "social justice"* (emphasis added).[184]

Let us be clear on what precisely a Levinasian rearticulation of late-modern identity politics is doing. I am recognizing that identity's formation is an ethical project of a subject that is constitutively *responsive*, affirming the primacy of others. However,

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[184] Levinas 1997, 8

because late-modern identity politics proliferates group differences with identity claims of "We are," claims of identity also *hide* difference within the group itself, enabling Connolly's ethical conundrum. Breaking through this conundrum requires recuperating the ethical undercurrents of identity politics so that ethical inquiry and responsibility can serve as resources for identity consolidation.

Thus, in a sense, there *is* a normative content dimension to this account of identity politics, although this content does not represent prescriptive moral or ethical axioms. Rather, the content dimension is this new sense of community necessary for ethical singularity and identities to be responsive to others. Even while laying the question of ethics bare to politics, in order to enable political identity to be formed in light of ethical responsibility and inquiry, we have to get at this new sense of community that is not homogenous and univocal, but populated by small, finite, and different subjects *whose very differences enable living ethical singularity*. The content dimension of this open ended political ethics is thus not conventional axioms of "how to live the good life," but a demand for a cosmopolitan democratic polity that makes investing freedom as ethical responsibility a viable avenue for identity formation. "We" are now taking a stance towards democratic deliberation and contestation as fundamentally *ethical* in nature, and to let such a stance guide our identity and community formation. In the same vein, this is a call to collective action. In this articulation of identity politics, responsibility is not a question localized within just my immediate "private" sphere. Instead, responsibility necessitates that I join politics to fight for collective and community action and transformation. It is not enough to welcome the Other into my

home; this new identity politics comes about when I join politics to fight for higher wages for taxicab drivers who have been excluded from enjoying economic and social security regardless *and* because of difference. In this political milieu is where we approach articulating identity in a way different from late-modern identity politics.

We can get a thicker concept of responsibility that is more than just *responsiveness* at this juncture. If Levinas can at least make clear the *opening* of ethical responsibility rooted in identity politics, than we can make the following argument: in order for me to be able to live *my* identity meaningfully, and in order for my identity not to be crafted in essentialist discourses, but through and upon my own dynamic life, I need a community that enables ethical singularity. This is because only through being individuated by the Other can I cultivate a meaningful identity, tell a story about my own dynamic and ongoing process of self-formation, and in a sense, express my own individual uniqueness. Late-modern identity politics suffocates this possibility of meaning *within* my community, however. My identity in contemporary identity politics is an identity that gains legitimacy only if it conforms to the "sameness" of the broader collective, and so my identity, in a sense, has no real meaning *within* this community, but only *opposed* and *against* others who are excluded. Thus, if I want my identity to have meaning for myself, my friends, my colleagues, all of us counting as people who ethically count as such, and not just as members of a broader identity collective, I need a thicker sense of responsibility towards others, a responsibility to open and *keep* open a persistent critical ethical inquiry towards/for others.

In short, an identity politics that lets responsibility and ethical inquiry shape identity's formation lets that identity be formed as constitutively *responsive* to differences within the broader community, and thus, in a double-movement, also allow my identity to have meaning for myself. My freedom of identity becomes meaningful *within* community, and not only to those outside of it, when community is lived as multiplicity, and to cultivate such a community requires responsibility.

Now, it seems here that I might still be begging the question. There is still no full normative grounding that demands that I take on more responsibility to foster this community; after all, this whole account of a new identity politics is simply an alternative vision, and presupposes a whole constellation of values, which I will simply label "social justice", in order to make it seem desirable. But, I think to continue begging the question here is to miss, again, the point in a similar fashion to the moral skeptic: the begging of the question points towards how the moral cannot be fully (justifiably) normative. There is also nothing wrong with this; having to use explicitly moral and ethical discourse, *without* full rationalization, to articulate responsibility only illuminates for us a real, concrete relationship between theory and practice. The elusiveness of full normativity points us towards the importance of *living* theory, because so long as we cultivate a political practice of living community as ethical responsibility, we will continue to split open the question of theoretical justification. By arguing that self-formation and identity politics has always been possessed by an ethical undercurrent, I am offering a conceptually precise political *stance* for living a kind of practical (and critical) politics. This is not to avoid the question of normative justification, but to recognize what Spivak

sees as "the contradiction [of] the necessary relationship between two discontinuous begged questions… proof that we are born free and proof that it is the other that calls us before will."[185] The elusiveness of full normativity points us towards the indefinite and infinite nature of ethical response and critical reflection, a trace of the Other's perpetual questioning of my freedom. Why do we be responsible? Because the Other calls us to be so in our desire for meaning. This answer is not deductively contiguous with the question, and it *is not supposed to be*.

So, what does an identity claim look like now? I suppose "claim" is no longer the only proper word choice, so we might say "identity question." Let the identity expression be a question, and not always a claim, so that identity does not reiterate and reinforce an essentialist "We," but be an invitation to dialogue, with people opening up their dwellings to one another and willing to listen to their neighbors needs and demands. This, of course, has not undermined the role of rights discourse in identity politics; as Nedelsky has argued herself, rights discourse, once made clearly relational, becomes a discourse of *responsibility*, and not always of entitlement.[186] Rights then operate in service of cultivating ethical singularity, instead of excusing oneself from investing freedom into that very ethical singularity.

I can at the least postulate about how we might reconfigure our understanding of political community to capture this crucial political-ethical dimension illuminated by co-reading Levinas with late-modern identity politics. One possibility is an enshrinement of constitutional responsibilities; think of the Canadian Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, in

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[185] Spivak 2005, 146
[186] Nedelsky 2008

contrast to the U.S. Bill of Rights. Such a move might help us cultivate political community based on our ethical relationships with others, and serves as an institutional way of creating new social norms that are less about entitlement and more about responsibility towards others.

Small things like renaming employment "benefits" to employer "responsibilities," or some variation of this kind, would also represent a subtle but important change in the way that we think of the relationship between employer and employed (maybe a little less exploitation and master/slave dynamic and a little more community of ethical singularity).

The most important change, by far, that is demanded by a new ethical identity politics, however, is actually methodological. In our politics of identity, we need simply to hold at bay the question of who we are while not opening up my response to the Other with a sovereign I or We, and instead be listening to what others speak. The point of a new identity politics is to *let identity's anomalous body be its strength*; that is, we should be ready, at any moment, to put our identity into question, and upon critical reflection and attending to those who beseech us to be responsible, be ready to see how our identity might be complicit in their suffering, and how I might need to rearticulate who I am in response. It is in this willingness to listen to the other, and thus change who "I am", that I, in a concretely political sense, *respond to the Other*. Although it might be difficult, we must never let ourselves be certain of who we are, because as late-modern identity politics' practice of storytelling shows, being certain of who we are and authoring a conclusive story about identity is to write out difference

within community. Our ethical response to the other is not abstract speculation, but an

orientation of thinking and being in politics. It is to take a particular stance towards

identity and its articulation and formation as fundamentally *ethical* and bound up with my

relationship to the Other. The result is the emergence of a real political possibility of not

always demonizing the other through difference, as Connolly warns against; it is

achieving what Spivak herself attempts to secure through "suspending oneself into the

text of the other—for which the first condition and effect is 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..."[187]

   If this sounds like a variation of a cosmopolitan ethics, that is because such an

account of a political ethics does share some similarities. I explicitly share broad

similarities between my own position and what Appiah has called "rooted

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[187] Spivak 2005, 148; for what it is worth, Spivak herself attempts to secure a culture of responsibility through her own literary Derridean deconstruction methodology. She explicitly suggests that a Levinasian approach relies too heavily on a messianism that Derrida himself could not fully rupture (p. 153-154). However, I think it ironic that she wishes to refute the Levinasian approach to responsibility while she herself blames poor "American-style" education for "[building] on the loss of the cultural habit of assuming the agency of responsibility in radical alterity," which makes creating "the responsibility-based subaltern layer by the ethics of class-culture difference altogether impossible, consolidating class apartheid (p. 160)." For someone who argues that "Our greatest problem was negotiating the difference between ethics as imagined from within the self-driven political calculus as 'doing the right thing' and ethics as openness towards the imagined agency of the other, responsibility for and to [the other]," I question whether Spivak is herself not heavily relying on Levinas to give an account of a culture of responsibility (p. 161). Indeed, her characterization of the openness of ethics and the suspension of oneself before reading the Other is practically an identical homologue of the eschatology of alterity that I have used in my own argument. I speculate that Spivak's unappreciative reading of Levinas is largely motivated by her unwillingness to read Levinas secularly, as I have attempted to do so. Along with Nedelsky and Spivak, however, it should be clear that no one is seriously attempting to transmogrify an essentially ethical argument into full normativity by any way except a politics of rights/responsibility. In addition, I agree with Spivak that in this over-rehearsed debate that reason's role in ethics is an honorable and instrumental role, but by no means a privileged role of rationalizing ethics *fully*. An attempt to rationalize ethics fully is to miss entirely the point of infinite ethical inquiry and its necessarily and persistently incomplete status.

cosmopolitanism."[188] I share the general cosmopolitan commitment to difference *within* community, to formulating this community as global, instead of being constituted along national, economic, or anthropological vectors. Ethical responsibility does not predicate itself upon arbitrary differences (indeed, in my own position, all differences are ethically arbitrary), but persists and renews itself *through and upon* such difference. Put this way, I have no qualms with drawing constructive similarities between an ethical identity politics to a cosmopolitan political philosophy. What differentiates my own account from cosmopolitanism, crudely delineated, is that the emphasis is not only on cultural differences and community diversity. Rather, having *my own identity* be put into question, to be responsive to the demands of others, and thus to allow difference to score through the community *and* myself, is something cosmopolitanism sometimes forgets is necessary to eschew late-modern identity politics. Levinas would have us always open the door of our dwelling and to let our identity be sensitive to all voices, and such an imperative lets both identity and community be dynamic and contestable.

A new identity politics with a new politics ethics might give entirely new meaning to the gesture "I love you," so that its meaning is less a claim than a reprise and twist on Paul Célan's verse: *I am (for) you, if I am.*

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[188] Appiah 2007, 213-272

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