BEING AND SUFFERING: TOWARD AN EXISTENTIALIST UNDERSTANDING OF
MEMORY, SUFFERING, AND VIOLENCE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This is an application of existentialist and phenomenological philosophy to the psychology and ethical concerns of memory, suffering, and violence. The primary goal is to take up the recent resurgence of existentialist/phenomenological thought and apply it to the fields of memory studies and trauma studies, broadly conceived. The methodology blends those of literary studies and philosophy, given that the subjects of the current investigation themselves blur the lines between literature and philosophical production. This work likewise explores the role of violence and counter-violence as formative of identity among marginalized groups and asks what the psychological and ethical consequences of such violence are. Finally, via a theorizing of limit-experiences, a sketch for a kind of existentialist ethics is sought.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

i. A New Direction for Existentialism

The recent resurgence of interest in existentialism has already taken several paths

in various fields, and I predict it will take many more before this wave completes its

journey from trough to crest. My own project here is an analysis of existentialism's roles

in the way we might theorize memory, suffering, and violence. I describe what

existentialist philosophy and literature offers us when theorizing individual and

collective experiences of suffering and the attendant issues of memory, collective and

personal. The question of how suffering, transgression, and violence form, deform, and

reform the very self that experiences and enacts violence is likewise central to my

investigations here. And, finally, the scope of my inquiry includes the problem of

constructing an existentialist ethics in the face of suffering and violence.

The aforementioned resurgence in interest in existentialism is evidenced by the

recent translations or re-releases of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Verso, 2004),

The Imaginary (Routledge, 2010), *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Yale, 2011), *Saint Genet*

(Minnesota, 2012), *The Freud Scenario* (Verso, 2013); of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second*

Sex (Vintage, 2012), and several new works on Beauvoir such as *The Philosophy of Simone*

de Beauvoir: Critical Essays (Routledge, 2011); of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*

(SUNY 2010), and Indiana University Press has undertaken a massive translation and

scholarly project concerning Heidegger's work, with over thirty new translations of his works having appeared in this series, as well as several scholarly monographs on his work. Likewise, between 2012 and 2015, nearly all of Norman Mailer's books will have been re-released, and a new major biography of Mailer was published in 2013, as were his Selected Letters in late 2014. And the list goes on.

This pronounced renewal of interest in existentialism does not have a singly defined direction, but the appearance of these books promises a wave of scholarly responses in the coming years. It is my hope that my intervention here will offer some of the directions this research might take. Already, there have been several studies on the nature of violence in the Sartre's work. Just to mention a few: James Dodd's *Violence and Phenomenology* (2009) explores Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in fruitful juxtaposition with Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*; Ronald E. Santoni's *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (2004) compares Sartre's and Camus's differing views on the uses of violence. Likewise, Sara Heinämaa's *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* has begun a fruitful discussion of existentialist-phenomenology in the field of Body Studies. And the intersections of existentialism and postcolonialism are likewise garnering renewed interest—e.g., the work of Yoav Di-Capua, concerning the Arab world, and that of Jonathan Judaken concerning race and postcolonialism vis-à-vis Sartre. Given that much of the work in Memory Studies and in discussions of violence overlap with the

postcolonial world, there are already others beginning to channel this surge in existentialist thought in similar directions to those I propose to take it.

ii. Why Existentialism?

Existentialism was born from the triple violence of the First World War, the Second World War, and the more diffuse violence of modern alienation. Due to this gestation in suffering, I argue, existentialism is the philosophy of suffering and violence *par excellence*. It should also be noted that Arthur Schopenhauer is frequently cited as one of the progenitors of modern existentialism—in fact, philosopher Richard Schacht names him the primary forefather of existentialism, not Kierkegaard as many claim. Given that suffering serves as the bedrock of Schopenhauer's philosophy, we can say that even before 20th-century existentialism emerged from the above-mentioned triple violence, its roots were already firmly planted in a philosophical consideration of suffering.

In my dissertation, I attempt to rejuvenate discussion on some of the twentieth and twenty-first century's greatest thinkers and writers—Franz Fanon, Martin Heidegger, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates, Jean-Paul Sartre, and William T. Vollmann. Most of the authors I cover lived through the Second World War. I therefore place them within this historical context. The traumatic effects of the war are particularly salient for Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre, who lived in occupied France and engaged in varying degrees of resistance, including Sartre's time as a soldier and as a

prisoner of war. Emmanuel Levinas was likewise a POW when he drafted his first notable existentialist work, *Existents and Existence* (1947). And regarding American existentialists covered here, Norman Mailer fought in the Second World War, on the Pacific Front, and wrote *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) about his experiences there. He also wrote several other books on various forms of violence—ranging from boxing matches to the Vietnam Conflict—from an existentialist viewpoint. The details of these authors' individual traumas and how the overall trauma of the Second World War affected them will be enumerated later, but I would briefly add here that their thinking was forged in the suffering and violence of these world events, and they each placed these events at the center of their literary and philosophical efforts. Joyce Carol Oates and William T. Vollmann did not experience the Second World War, but they have made it either the central or peripheral subject for several of their works, and Vollmann has worked as a war journalist during recent conflicts around the globe, thus making the experience of suffering and violence key to his writerly output.

Another salient similarity between all of these authors is that they blur the distinctions between literature and philosophy. My efforts here will therefore likewise blur the distinctions between philosophy and literary studies. As Sara Heinämaa writes,

> [The philosopher's] inquiry may be advanced more by a close inspection of a fictitious case than by a survey of actual instances […] Beauvoir's rejection of systematic philosophy is inspired by Kierkegaard's mockery of the Hegelian system. But Beauvoir was also influenced by Husserl's

idea of philosophy as a radical inquiry that proceeds with the help of the

imagination and fiction. Both these sources give literature a philosophical

task and encouraged Beauvoir to experiment with her own writing.

(Heinämaa 13-15)

And a similar claim can be made about all of the authors I investigate in this project. For

existentialist writers, literature is often the linguistic laboratory where philosophical

notions are dramatized and tested, explored and expanded; and literary language holds

a particularly important place in the philosophy of Heidegger and Mailer.

iii. Chapter Two: Authenticity and Suffering

This chapter focuses on the relationship between authenticity and suffering in

the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, with occasional references to Heidegger, Lacan, and

Levinas.

An aspect of Jean-Paul Sartre's thinking on authenticity that has been left largely

untheorized is the question of how the experience of suffering can be a path to Sartrean

authenticity. My contention is that the suffering of the subject brings together the

requisite elements of transcendence and facticity needed for Sartrean authenticity. This

is not to say that this is the only or the most desirable path to Sartrean authenticity, but

merely that it is a path, and one Sartre repeatedly depicts in his literary works and

explicates in his philosophical works. I also want to clarify at the outset that while

authenticity sounds like a positive state of being, though suffering is clearly not, in

Being and Nothingness Sartre claims that the emotional state that most frequently

accompanies authenticity is *angoisse* (anguish) — that is, the achievement of authenticity

is not necessarily pleasant and is often accompanied by suffering of one sort or another.

As he writes in his war diaries: "Authenticity requires one to accept suffering" (*The War

Diaries* 51).[1]

      Being and Nothingness is a philosophical touchstone throughout this chapter, but I

focus more on Sartre's short story "The Wall" (1937), his novels *The Age of Reason* (1945)

and *Troubled Sleep* (1949), and his memoirs and essays written in the years just after the

Second World War which were published in *Situations III*. I have selected these works

not only because they include depictions of suffering leading to a state of authenticity,

but also because they span many years and multiple genres, thus offering a wealth of

material on the topic and allowing us to identify a consistent thread throughout Sartre's

thought.

iv. Chapter Three: A Practical Ethics of Violence

      In Chapter Two, I explore how Frantz Fanon by turns takes up, alters, refutes

and furthers Sartrean existentialist thought, particularly vis-à-vis suffering, violence,

and the notion of lived-experience. This chapter takes violence and counter-violence as

constitutive of identity and, using William T. Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down*,

attempts to find those areas in Fanon's work on violence that find him justified or

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[1] "L'authenticité exige qu'on accepte de souffrir" (*Carnets de la drôle guerre* 241).

unjustified in his promotion of counter-violence as a legitimate political tool for struggling against oppression.

I take Fanon's position vis-à-vis violence to be tripartite. One part of his position is about the ways in which violence creates the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed alike. The second part is about the efficacy of violence—or, to be more precise, counter-violence—as a means of resistance against oppression. And, finally, the third part of his position is about the ethics of enacting this counter-violence. I ultimately endorse Fanon's reworking of Sartrean philosophy to include the lived experience of non-whites as a special case of the violence of the gaze. I likewise endorse his and Sartre's theorizing of identity formation via systemic violence. I diverge from his thinking in certain regards vis-à-vis his promotion of violence, without outright eschewing violence as a legitimate political tool. Here again Vollmann proves valuable, particularly the Moral Calculus he develops in *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

Given the recent protests in Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD, as well as recent uprisings throughout the world, the question of oppression and attempts to combat it— both violently and nonviolently—these questions are as salient as they were in Fanon's lifetime. I therefore bring the thought of Fanon, Sartre, and Vollmann to bear on these current issues to show the continued importance of their thought and to work toward a coherent understanding of violence in the contemporary world, especially an understanding of which sorts of violence in which situations are effective means of

combating inequality and oppression, as well as when these tactics are ethically permissible.

v. Chapter Four: An Existentialist Analysis of Knots of Memory

As mentioned above, we have seen an explosion of renewed interest in existentialism in recent years—ranging from dozens of new translations or re-releases of works by Beauvoir, Heidegger, Levinas, Mailer, and Sartre to a spate of scholarly monographs and articles on existentialist philosophy and literature. Likewise, we have seen a prodigious amount of work done in the field of Memory Studies. I propose to find a common ground between these two trends and, more specifically, to undertake an existentialist analysis of *les noeuds de mémoire* (knots of memory), a concept inaugurated as a major new point of inquiry in a 2011 special issue of *Yale French Studies* dedicated to the topic. My primary goal is to establish a philosophical-theoretical foundation for understanding how these knots of memory emerge. I also argue for existentialism's privileged position in the theorization of knots of memory.

I employ Badiou's notion of the Event as described in *Being and Event*, Heidegger's investigations, from "Origin of the Work of Art," into how Being is gathered around public structures, and Sartre's concept of *le groupe en fusion* (the fused group), from his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, to explicate how these knots of memory form. Fused groups are, Sartre claims, formed almost exclusively under duress from a third party. In the dialectics of sociality and individuals who are thrown into and co-

constitutive with sociality, we will find part of the answer to our question of how these knots of memory form, since these knots at once belong to the realm of the social-historical and gather individuals as groups (fused or otherwise) together against a horizon of sociality.

I analyze Sartre's under-discussed play, *The Condemned of Althona* (1959), and John Edgar Wideman's *Fanon* (2008), a novel that at once exemplifies a knot of memory and presages the theoretical concept itself. These works will therefore serve as examples of knots of memory and will aid me in establishing the philosophical-theoretical foundations that allow for an emergence of knots of memory. In situating these works in relation to the concept of knots of memory, we will thread through multiple Events, displaying how these various Events and literary testimony and allegory build on and entangle with each other, thereby forming knots of memory and aiding in the creation of the conditions of possibility for their emergence.

vii. Chapter Five: Joyce Carol Oates, Violence, and Identity

Unlike Vollmann, Oates is in fact an existentialist in many ways, a fact I establish via her journals, her various literary works over the decades, and other evidence. But like Norman Mailer, Oates is not an existentialist in the sense that she has adopted wholesale any previous existentialist's system. Following philosopher Richard Schacht's genealogy of existentialism, I consider Arthur Schopenhauer (as opposed to Friedrich Nietzsche or Søren Kierkegaard) the progenitor of modern existentialism. The only

philosopher mentioned more often than Sartre in Oates's work is Schopenhauer—and, here again, references to him span her entire career, from her earliest journal entries to her 2007 novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. This is entirely fitting, given Schopenhauer's preoccupation with pain and suffering.

This chapter explores violence as an identity-forming force, both for the individual and for the collective, keeping in mind an existentialist dialectic between the two. In Oates's work, personal violence is often the response to systemic violence and is often the only recourse left to her characters. Here, as stated above, she shares common cause with Sartre. Additionally, memory's relationship with suffering and violence is explored, as these are central themes for Oates across her entire career. Chapter One focuses on public or collective notions of memory in my attempt to philosophically ground the knots of memory concept; here, through Oates's work, a more personal version of memory vis-à-vis suffering and violence takes center stage.

Oates is also specifically interested in those forms of violence peculiar to gender relations. She consistently depicts both personal and systemic violence in terms of gender relations. This chapter therefore echoes in many ways Chapter Two, which focuses on Beauvoir's feminist-existentialist project and Body Studies.

vii. Chapter Six: Limit Experiences and Ethics in the American Existentialism of Norman Mailer

Existentialism, with its grounding in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, places experience as one of its central concerns. The way human experience is treated, however, changes notably between various authors of the loosely defined existentialist movement. This is doubly so in regard to pain, suffering, and violence. Sartre largely focuses on the experience of suffering and its connections to authenticity—particularly in his novel trilogy *The Roads to Freedom*—while, famously, Camus's character Mersault, in *The Stranger*, shoots a man for seemingly no reason, giving us at least one sort of existentialist murder, *l'acte gratuit* (the gratuitous act). Camus is also concerned with the issue of suicide in various essays. Sartre's focus on the immediate phenomenological experience and Camus's focus on the absurd barrier of death (one's own or another's) perhaps the two key modes of existentialist literary writing. Mailer's greater affinity for Sartrean literary tactics comes as no surprise when one notices how frequently Mailer references Sartre in his nonfiction writings—from as early as 1957 with *Advertisements for Myself* to his 2001 collection of essays and interviews, *The Big Empty*. That said, Mailer is no mere acolyte of Sartre. Hazel E. Barnes, in her *Existentialist Ethics*, includes Mailer in her category of "existentialist rebels," a direct reference to Camus's *The Rebel*.

For Mailer, it is the limit-experience that leads to authenticity, not pain or suffering per se (though, since these are often parts of limit-experiences, they also fit this schema). This is why we see extremity of drug use, sexual intensities, violent transgression, and physical exertion as paths to authenticity in Mailer's writings. Credit

for the notion of the limit-experience is often given to Foucault or Bataille, but it is worth noting that Karl Jaspers, one of the great philosophers of existentialism, first coined the term *Grenzerlebnis* (limit-experience) to describe such experiences. The notion of the limit-experience is therefore originally an existentialist idea and thus fitting for an existentialist project such as Mailer's.

There is another way in which Mailer fits into the world of existentialist thought. As mentioned earlier, existentialism was born out of the triple violence of the First World War, the Second World War, and a more generalized modern alienation. Mailer fought in the Second World War and took aim at modern alienation in nearly all of his works. It is worth noting that all of the authors I discuss use the very philosophy that emerged from these world calamities to theorize violence and suffering. This is a sizable portion of my overall argument for reintroducing existentialist thought into current discussions on suffering and violence. The philosophy that emerged from these events enjoys a unique position to theorize them.

In summary, Mailer's work fits into the existentialist movement in the ways it depicts and deals with violence and suffering. Mailer is interested in a Sartrean style of phenomenological depiction of these subjects, and he brings existentialist literature forward by focusing on a wider range of limit-experiences as possible alternatives for violence, even as he includes violence and suffering among the possible paths to existential authenticity. He also brings the existentialist problematic into the American sphere, which means applying it to the hyper-consumerist society that is the United

States. And, even though existentialism was always connected with counter-culture and alternative lifestyles, Mailer introduced it to the particular counter-cultures of the American 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

This chapter shows how Mailer fits into the existentialist movement, given his affinities with Camus, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre. I also argue that he brings existentialist literature and thought forward by further embedding it in counter-cultural movements and by further theorizing and making use of the notion of the limit-experience. Mailer's work is distinctly American, arising from post-war counter cultures and reactions to the social conservatism of the 1950s, as well as the American fixation on the rugged individual standing out against the masses.

vi. Chapter Six: The New Universalism, Finitude, and William T. Vollmann

In recent years, there has been, in the words of Malini Johar Schueller, "a major intellectual impetus in Europe and the US: to produce paradigms of […] global theory, based on the assumption that the contemporary moment calls for a resurgence of some form of universal theorizing." Schueller includes Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek among those thinkers who have aimed at a new universalism. There are others as well, such as Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Ernesto Laclau—and the subject of my inquiry, William T. Vollmann. Despite having gone largely unnoticed by major theorists, *Rising Up and Rising Down* fairly begs to be situated among recent discussions on universalism and ethics. It was a finalist for The

National Book Critics Circle Award, and a 750-page abridgement of the 3,200-page

original was published by Ecco in 2004. Steven Moore, writing in *Washington Post Book

World*, praises the book as

> a monumental achievement on several levels: as hair-raising survey of mankind's
>
> propensity for violence, as a one-man attempt to construct a system of ethics, as a
>
> successful exercise in objective analysis (almost non-existent in today's partisan,
>
> ideological, politicized, spin-doctored, theory-muddled public discourse), and a
>
> demonstration of the importance of empathy […] beyond the realm of mere
>
> mortals.

But, despite accolades in the popular press and Vollmann's nearly fanatical followers

who have made him into something of a cult literary figure, his work has not been

taken up by many scholars. I argue that he makes a significant contribution to one of the

most important theoretical debates of the past decade, and that his contribution is best

understood via an existentialist problematic.

Rising Up and Rising Down is at once an example of anthropological field

research, cultural criticism, literary theory, memoir, political science, travel writing, war

reportage, and, finally, ethical philosophy. But despite this nearly exhaustive

methodology, Vollmann admits the finitude of anyone attempting to create a

universalist ethics. He attempts a proverbial third way between strict relativism and

dogmatic universalism by insisting on such a multitude of information and

methodological approaches, and then deriving his universalist Moral Calculus from

that pluralistic approach. In doing so, he has offered a new approach to solving one of the longest running ethical debates in modern philosophy.

Heidegger's notion of finitude and Sartre's attempts at formulating a universalist ethics in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* are key to understanding Vollmann's project. In this one instance, the subject of my inquiry is not, I would argue, an existentialist; rather, it is the injection of existentialist philosophy into his system for understanding violence that helps clarify his efforts, and it is existentialist philosophy that can best explain the situation-bound universalist ethics he aims to develop. In effect, here I argue that even when the author does not identify as an existentialist, it is still existentialism that best supports and furthers his project.

viii. Intersections

Being and Suffering investigates several fruitful intersections of memory studies and the ethics of suffering and violence by using an existentialist-phenomenological problematic to stage its intervention. The project itself rests at the intersection of literature and philosophy, much like the work of the authors discussed here. I have therefore made use of philosophical and literary texts in equal measure, and my own methodology blends those of philosophy and literary studies. By probing these intersections, I hope to offer a direction to take the study of existentialist thought in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER TWO

SUFFERING AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE WORK OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

i. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of authenticity and bad faith are well known, but an aspect of his thinking on authenticity that has been left largely untheorized is the question of how the experience of suffering can be a path to Sartrean authenticity. I argue that the experience of suffering brings together the requisite elements of transcendence and facticity needed for Sartrean authenticity. This is not the most desirable path to authenticity, but it is *a* path, and one Sartre repeatedly depicts throughout his work. Also, while authenticity sounds like a positive state of being, though suffering clearly is not, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre claims that the emotional state that most frequently accompanies authenticity is *angoisse* (anguish)—that is, the achievement of authenticity is not necessarily pleasant and is often accompanied by suffering of one sort or another. As he writes in his war diaries: "Authenticity requires one to accept suffering" (*The War Diaries* 51). ["*L'authenticité exige qu'on accepte de souffrir*" (*Carnets de la drôle guerre* 241).]

Sartre occasionally discusses this path to authenticity in his philosophical texts, and it constantly returns in his literary works. Indeed, Sartre uses his work in different genres to reinforce the others—at times to cover the same territory in another way, but also to cover territory better suited to one genre than another. As American philosopher

Richard Rorty phrases it, "No other philosopher [than Sartre] has had such success in using stories, plays, novels, critical essays, and philosophical treatises to complement and reinforce each other" (Detmer 4).

I will isolate Sartre's thought on suffering and authenticity as discussed in his philosophical treatises *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1961), as well as his short story "The Wall" (1937), his novels *The Age of Reason* (1945) and *Troubled Sleep* (1949), and his memoirs and literary essays written during and just after the Second World War, particularly those found in *Aftermath of War* (*Situations III*, 1946). I have selected these works not only because they include depictions of suffering leading to authenticity, but also because they span nearly three decades and multiple genres, thus offering a wealth of material on the topic and allowing us to identify a consistent thread in Sartre's thought.

ii. Authenticity and Suffering in "The Wall"

Appearing in 1937, "The Wall" was Sartre's first published short story and one of his earliest publications of any sort. Sartre's preoccupations with the Spanish Civil War and with the effects of suffering on the psychology of his characters—themes which return in his largest fictional effort, the novel tetralogy *Roads to Freedom*—are already present in his first published work of short fiction. The protagonist of "The Wall" is Pablo Ibbieta, a fighter in the Spanish Civil War who has been taken prisoner. He does not experience physical torture—that is, he does not experience pain as I am using the

word for the purposes of this essay—but his experience is nonetheless one of suffering. Already at the story's opening, he and his compatriots are left to suffer the elements. We are told: "For the past 24 hours we hadn't stopped shivering" (*The Wall* 1). ["…depuis vingt-quatre heures, nous n'avions pas cessé de grelotter" (*Le Mur*, 3).] They are also able to hear the gunshots that kill their comrades in the executions taking place just outside their prison cell, thus forcing them to contemplate their impending death. The suffering is therefore less pronounced in physical terms, but of a tremendous magnitude psychologically speaking. Sartre depicts the effect through rich detail.

> "Doesn't it seem cold to you here?" He looked cold, he was blue.
>
> "I'm not cold," I told him.
>
> He never took his hard eyes off me. Suddenly I understood and my hands went to my face: I was drenched in sweat. In this cellar, in the midst of winter, in the midst of drafts, I was sweating. I ran my hands through my hair, gummed together with perspiration; at the same time I saw my shirt was damp and sticking to my skin. (6)
>
> *« Vous ne trouvez pas qu'on grelotte ici? »*
>
> *Il avait l'air d'avoir froid ; il était violet.*
>
> *«Je n'ai pas froid » lui répondis-je.*
>
> *Il ne cessait pas de me regarder, d'un œil dur. Brusquement je compris et je portai mes mains á ma figure : j'étais trempé de sueur. Dans cette cave, au gros de l'hiver, en plein courant d'air, je suais. Je passai les doigts dans mes cheveux*

qui étaient feutrés par la transpiration ; en même temps je m'aperçus que ma

chemise était humide et collait à ma peau. (Le Mur, 8)

Hearing his comrades shot, believing he himself will soon be shot, being confined in

this room with the other prisoners, and so forth—all of this makes Ibbieta sweat

profusely despite the cold. As Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*:

> Pablo Ibbieta's experience in "The Wall" is close to if not identical with
>
> that of a person subjected to great pain […] But he is sentenced to be
>
> executed, and is then suddenly released, and so in fact undergoes what
>
> has been in the recent past a form of torture common in places like Chile,
>
> Brazil, Greece, and the Philippines—the "mock execution" or, as it was
>
> called in the Philippines, "the process of dying." Of course, no particular
>
> form of torture is required to make visible the kinship between pain and
>
> death, both of which are radical and absolute, found only at the
>
> boundaries they themselves create. (Scarry 30-31)

 Scarry is right to emphasize the mental suffering over the physical suffering; however

even though the physical aspect is present, it does not quite reach what we might dub

pain. Ibbieta's physical situation is one not only of discomfort but utter powerlessness

and terror in the face of his captors, and this physical/psychological situation reveals

the facticity into which he is thrown—the historical conditions as well as his personal,

psychological, and even biological conditions. This physical discomfort and this mental

suffering, which lead to a revelation of the narrator's facticity, likewise lead to Sartrean authenticity.

> In the state I was in, if someone had come and told me I could go home quietly, that they would leave me my little life whole, it would have left me cold: several hours or several years of waiting is the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal. (12)

> *Dans l'état où j'étais, si l'on était venu m'annoncer que je pouvais rentrer tranquillement chez moi, qu'on me laissait la vie sauve, ça m'aurait laissé froid : quelques heures ou quelques années d'attente c'est tout pareil, quand on a perdu l'illusion d'être éternel.* (14)

Ibbieta accepts the facticity into which he is thrown and acknowledges his situation by realizing both his facticity and his ontological freedom—and all this as a result of his suffering and imprisonment. As Jacques Lacan says in his 1949 lecture "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" when discussing Sartre's work: "[E]xistentialism can be judged on the basis of…a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of a prison" (Lacan 8). ["{L}'existentialisme se juge…en effet: une liberté qui ne s'affirme jamais si authentique que dans les murs d'une prison" (96).]

Even though Lacan's statement is meant dismissively, the fact that he sees this as an aspect of Sartrean thought is still pertinent, since his judgment on this is less important to our current investigation than the fact that he also sees its presence in

Sartrean thought. Sartre, having spent time as a POW, likely has a different perspective

on imprisonment than Lacan, who never had such an experience. That said, using Sartre

to support Sartre's position has something of a tautological character to it; turning

briefly to an author who is generally not associated with the existentialist movement

can help us to corroborate the Sartrean position further. Ruth Klüger, author of the well-

known memoir about her childhood experience in Nazi concentration camps, *Still Alive*

(1993), takes a position nearly identical to Sartre's, thus suggesting that this notion of

one's ontological freedom being cast in stark relief during imprisonment, is not unique

to Sartre, but rather has documented analogues in the phenomelogical experience of

others.

> I think it makes sense that the closest approach to freedom takes place in
>
> the most desolate imprisonment under the threat of violent death, where
>
> the chance to make decisions has been reduced to almost zero […] In a rat
>
> hole, where charity is the least likely virtue, where humans bare their
>
> teeth, and where all signs point in the direction of self-preservation, and
>
> there is yet a tiny gap—that is where freedom may appear like the
>
> uninvited angel. (109)

> *Und deshalb meine ich, es kann die äuβerste Annäherung an die Freiheit nur in*
>
> *der ödesten Gefangenheit und in der Todesnähe stattfinden, also dort, wo die*
>
> *Entscheidungmöglichkeiten auf fast Null reduziert sind. In dem winzigen*

> *Spielraum, der dann noch bleibt, dort, kurz vor Null, ist die Freiheit […] In*
>
> *einem Rattenloch, wo die Menschenliebe das Unwahrscheinlichste ist, wo die*
>
> *Leute die Zähne blicken und wo dennoch ein kleines Vakuum bleibt, kann die*
>
> *Freiheit als das Verblüffende eintreten.* (135)

The event which evokes these thoughts on the nature of freedom in imprisonment is that of a woman risking her life to save Klüger's own. Klüger is in a *Selektion* line; a Nazi soldier is picking those who will go on to perform labor duty and those who will go to their deaths; another inmate is performing secretarial duty for this soldier, helping with the *Selektion* process; at risk to her own life, she argues that Klüger, who is three years too young to be selected for labor, is fit to work, thereby saving Klüger's life (108). As it turns out, the soldier accepts the woman's arguments and Klüger is sent to labor, not to her death. Klüger depicts this woman as having freely chosen, unlike the soldier who had all the power in the situation: "I think his action was arbitrary, hers voluntary. It must have been freely chosen, because anyone knowing the circumstances would have predicted the opposite" (108). ["Ich meine, seine Tat war willkürlich, ihre frei. Frei, weil man bei aller Kenntnis der Umstände das Gegenteil vorausgesagt hätte. (134)]

This focus on the notion of freedom is essential to understanding authenticity, since freedom is the condition of possibility for authenticity. We are constantly in a state of abyssal freedom, Sartre tells us, but under certain circumstances, this fact is thrown into powerfully stark relief. Under such circumstances, when our innate freedom is so clearly shown to us, the possibility of authenticity is greatly heightened (though by no

means guaranteed). What's more, Klüger's description of her experience aligns with Sartre's thinking on the subject. Thus far, I have pointed out a pattern in Sartre's work, but Klüger's corroboration suggests that, at least for some portion of people who have suffered, the Sartrean model obtains.

Likewise, when Scarry discusses suffering, she uses theoretical language heavily indebted to Sartre, which further supports his point that suffering can lead to authenticity.

> The two [pain and death] are the most intense forms of negation [and] of annihilation […] though one is an absence and the other a felt presence, one occurring in the cessation of sentience, the other expressing itself in grotesque overload. (Scarry 31)

Her language of "negation" and "annihilation" here could be Sartre's own. And isn't the "grotesque overload" of suffering precisely an overload of facticity, an inescapable encounter with facticity? Or as Sartre himself phrases it in *Being and Nothingness*: "In pain facticity invades consciousness" (518). ["*Dans la douleur, en effet, la facticité envahit la conscience*" (470).] It is through this forced encounter with facticity, through this invasion of facticity into consciousness, that suffering can lead to Sartrean authenticity. Klüger's and Scarry's corroborations do not unqualifiedly prove the correctness of Sartre's position, but it does suggest that his thought is portable into others' thinking on the subject of suffering and violence.

iii. Sartre's Experience of Suffering

To understand how Sartre developed his thinking on the relationship between authenticity and suffering, it is illuminating to look at the history of the development of his existentialist philosophy and his own experience of suffering as a prisoner of war during the Second World War. While it would be inaccurate to depict Sartre's imprisonment as suffering on the scale of other instances of imprisonment under the Nazis, it would likewise be misguided to dismiss it as trivial. Jonathan Judaken tells us that on the day of Sartre's capture, "there were at least 92,000 French soldiers killed and approximately 200,000 wounded. Sartre was one of about 1.8 million soldiers taken prisoner in June 1940" (Judaken 59-60). And after their capture, these soldiers were transported to various nearby Stalags. The conditions were anything but pleasant.

> For many of the soldiers it was the transfer from Rambervillers in France to Trier in Germany that made the defeat concrete. They were transported in cattle cars into a camp surrounded with Nazi flags, and Sartre's "home" there for almost a year was Stalag XII D, named after the military division of the territory of Trier-Petriberg. (Judaken 67)

Sartre himself downplayed his experience in the Stalag, and, famously, he even wrote and staged his first play while a prisoner of war. But this gives an overly rosy picture of the situation in which he found himself. As Judaken writes:

> The U.S. Ambassador's report in August 1940 described the conditions of the prisoners […] With over 15,000 prisoners, "the camp…exceeded its

capacity." The crude wooden barracks were divided into small rooms

with double- or triple-deck wooden cots, with some men forced to sleep

on concrete floors. There were washrooms in each barrack and open pit

toilets, and the "kitchen was extremely dirty and full of flies," as was the

infirmary […] After describing the camp's inadequate provisions and

overcrowding, the report concluded that "the general impression of this

camp was rather unfavorable in comparison to most other camps visited

heretofore." (68)

Sartre was eventually moved to better quarters in part due to his ability to speak

German and therefore to act as an interpreter, and in part due to his captors having

learned he had published a novel (*Nausea*). It would, however, be wrong to shrink the

suffering caused by his imprisonment, especially in the early months when he was

housed in a Stalag deemed worse than others inspected by the US Ambassador's offices.

While Sartre did have access to books (e.g., Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and was

usually allowed to write and receive letters, these privileges exist in many prisons with

deplorable conditions.

My point is not to compare his experience with others who suffered more or less

than he did, but rather to establish that he did experience suffering as a prisoner of war

and that, by his own accounts, it profoundly changed him. I also want to connect this

experience to his thinking on existentialism and authenticity. As I mentioned before,

Sartre read Heidegger's *Being and Time* while he was in the Stalag. He had encountered

Heideggerian philosophy before, but it was only after his experience as a POW and reading *Being and Time* under those conditions that he began making heavy use of the Heideggerian philosophical idiom (most notably, of course, in *Being and Nothingness*, which was published just two years after his release). I don't want to make too much of the fact that he read *Being and Time* as a POW, but it seems like more than a coincidence that he developed many of his philosophical notions of authenticity from his reading of Heidegger under such conditions and later developed these ideas more fully under the conditions of the Occupation. In effect, Sartre's experience of imprisonment and his revisiting of Heidegger's philosophy led to his own philosophical treatise including his most developed thought on authenticity. The influence of this time spent in the Stalag on Sartre's work was substantial.

> "Although I had wanted to dramatize certain aspects of existentialism," Sartre later said of the play [*No Exit*], "I was not forgetting the feeling of the Stalag of living constantly and totally beneath the eyes of others, and the Hell which naturally set in under such circumstances." (Judaken 95)

He was therefore thinking not only of a general existentialist position but also of the sort of suffering that comes from living day-in and day-out in what amounts to an overcrowded sewage tank, which must be classified as suffering if the word is to have any meaning.

Interestingly, Sartre rarely discussed his experiences in the Stalag, and so his most notable depiction of the suffering of imprisonment is still his first published

fictional work, "The Wall," which was written before he himself experienced imprisonment during wartime. This story depicts the felt experience of suffering, but Sartre, who was interested in equal measure by absence as by presence, also wrote at length about the absence of suffering and how that absence can be a contributing factor to the lack of authenticity.

His novels *The Age of Reason* and *Troubled Sleep*, as well as his literary nonfiction written in the aftermath of the Second World War, where he discusses the lack of authenticity which can be facilitated by bourgeois comforts and the various side-effects thereof, are perhaps most useful in discussing this absence of suffering and its potential for the creation of bad faith, the opposite of authenticity in the Sartrean philosophical system.

iv. The Place of Suffering in Sartre's Post-War Fiction and Literary Nonfiction

The protagonist in Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, Mathieu, longs for the realness of war, the authenticity of suffering. His middle-class life, his unimportant daily activities, the flimsiness of his convictions—all of this and more conspire to make him detest the quotidian routines and the bloodless symbolic order in which he conducts his affairs. But he occasionally gets a clear sense of what he seeks vis-à-vis suffering and authenticity:

> Something of the threshold of existence, a timorous dawn of anger. At
> last! But it dwindled and collapsed, he was left in solitude, walking with

the measured and decorous gait of a man in a funeral procession in Paris, not Valencia, Paris, haunted by a phantom wrath. The windows were ablaze, the cars sped down the street, he was walking among little men dressed in light suits, Frenchmen, who did not look up at the sky and were not afraid of the sky. And yet it's all *real* [emphasis in original] down yonder, somewhere beneath the same sun, it's real, the cars have stopped, the windows have been smashed, poor dumb women sit huddled like dead chickens beside actual corpses. (*The Age of Reason* 145)

Quelque chose s'apprêtait à naître, une timide aurore de colère. Ça y est! Mais ça se déglonfa, ça se raplatit, il était désert, il marchait à pas comptés avec la décence d'un type qui suit un enterrement, à Paris, pas à Valence, à Paris, hanté par un fantôme de colère. Les vitres flamboyaient, les autos filaient sur la chaussée, il marchait au milieu de petits hommes vêtus d'étoffes claires, de Français, qui ne regardaient pas le ciel, qui n'avaient pas peur du ciel. Et pourtant c'est réel, là-bas, quelque art sous le même soleil, c'est réel, les autos se sont arrêtées, les vitres ont éclaté, des bonnes femmes stupides et muettes sont accroupies avec des airs de poules mortes auprès de vrais cadavres. (*L'âge de la raison* 139)

The accumulation of the adjectives "real" and "actual" (or more literally translated, "real" and "true") almost overwhelms the passage, and their effect couldn't be clearer. Mathieu is fairly obsessed with the realness and actuality of the suffering in the war in Spain. They are real in a way that his life and the safe goings-on of Paris are not.

Mathieu sees those people who live amidst the violence in Spain as real, and he sees his friend Brunet—who has joined the Communists and has fought at the front in Spain—as real. Brunet has an aura of authenticity about him; he has seen death and engaged in potentially fatal battle in a way reminiscent of Hegel (and Sartre's use of Hegel in *Being and Nothingness*); and Mathieu is envious of Brunet's authenticity.

> There he was, extremely real, with an actual savor of tobacco in his mouth, the colors actual, more intense, than those which Mathieu could see, and yet, at the same moment, he reached across the whole earth, suffering and struggling with the proletarians of all countries. (155)

> *Il était là, bien et réel, avec un vrai goût de tabac dans la bouche, les couleurs et les formes dont il s'emplissait les yeux étaient plus vraies, plus denses que celles que Mathieu pouvait voir, et cependant, au même instant, il s'étendait à travers toute les pays, souffrant et luttant avec les prolétaires de tous les pays.* (148)

Notice that here again the words "real" and "actual" (or "true") show up. Here, Sartre uses precisely the same words to describe yet another instance of suffering and struggling in battle. Part of Mathieu's admiration for Brunet is his committed struggle against oppression, but there is something additional here. Brunet has suffered, seen suffering, been immersed in a world of violence and death. Sartre therefore offers us a window into part of his thinking on how authenticity can be achieved via the

experience of suffering. And this thinking is not isolated to the characters from this 1945 novel.

Here is Gomez, a character from *Troubled Sleep*, who fought in the Spanish Civil War and is now living in New York City on the day after the 1940 invasion of Paris:

> Do these people [the Americans of New York City] even realize that Paris has fallen? […] They are not real at all, he thought […] Well then, where are the real people? he wondered, and, answering himself, mused: Certainly not here. And I am no more genuine and real than the rest of them. A make-believe Gomez took the bus, read the paper, smiled at Ramon, talked of Picasso. (*Troubled Sleep* 33)

> *Est-ce qu'il savent que Paris est pris?* […] *Ce ne sont pas les vrais, pensa-t-il, ce sont les sosies. Où sont les vrais? N'importe où, mais pas ici. Personne n'est ici pour de vrai; pas plus moi que les autres. Le sosie de Gomez avait pris l'autobus, lu le journal, souri à Ramon, parlé de Picasso.* (*La Mort dans l'âme* 31)

Gomez goes on to imagine where he might be instead of in New York City: "and Gomez walked alone through the streets of Paris. Through Paris, through the truth, the *only* Truth, through blood" (34). [*Gomez marchait seul dans Paris. Dans Paris, dans la vérité, la* seule *Vérité; dans le sang*" (31).] These two novels were published four years apart, and the characters in question are quite different in terms of background and

education—yet both see the violence and suffering of the war zone as "genuine," "real," and "true."

Sartre himself, writing in his war diaries, speculates on the possible effects war might have on an inauthentic bourgeois (which we are given to understand Mathieu ultimately is):

> For example, I can imagine someone being called up who was a highly inauthentic bourgeois, who used to live inauthentically in all the various social situations into which he was thrown—family, job, etc…the shock of war may suddenly have induced him to a conversion towards the authentic, which leads him to be authentically *in situation* [italics in the original]. (220)

> *J'imagine, par exemple, un mobilize quit fut un bourgeois fort inauthentique, qui vivait inauthentiquement dans les nombreuses situations sociales où il était jeté, famille, métier, etc…le choc de la querre l'ait soudain déterminé à une conversion vers l'authentique, ce qui l'amène à être authentiquement* en situation. (*Carnets* 448-449)

Mathieu, in *The Age of Reason*, is depicted as a bourgeois through and through, even as he hopes not to be one. Here Mathieu is talking with Ivich, with whom he is romantically infatuated and with whom he desires a "real" connection. She has just cut her hand deeply (no mere scrape, but a real wound).

And she added with a savage laugh: "I ought to have guessed that you would find that too much for you. You are shocked that anyone should enjoy the sight of his own blood."

Mathieu felt himself growing pale with rage. He sat down again, laid his left hand flat on the table, and said suavely:

"Too much for me? Certainly not, Ivich, I find it charming […]"

He jabbed the knife into his palm […] the knife remained embedded in his flesh, straight up, with its shaft in the air. (255)

Elle ajouta avec un rire insultant: J'aurais dû me douter que vous trouveriez ça excessif. Ça vous scandalize qu'on puisse s'amuser avec son sang.

Mathieu sentit qu'il blêmissait de fureur. Il se rassit, étala sa main gauche à plat sur la table et dit suavement:

— Excessif? Mais non, Ivich, je trouve ça charmant […]

Il planta le couteau d'un seul coup dans sa paume […] le couteau resta fiche dans sa chair, tout droit, le manche en l'air. (240)

This is of course, in part, mere showiness on Mathieu's part, but I want to bracket Mathieu's showy self-importance as well as his ulterior romantic motives vis-à-vis Ivich. Mathieu's desire for the realness of suffering is a desire for existential authenticity. Sartre goes on to write, quite incisively, that:

It was not only to defy Ivich that he had stuck the knife into his hand, it was as a challenge to Jacques, and Brunet, and Daniel, and to his whole life. "I'm a ghastly kind of fool," he thought […] But he couldn't help being pleased. Ivich looked at Mathieu's hand, nailed to the table, and the blood gathering around the blade. Then she looked at Mathieu; her expression had entirely changed. (256)

Ce n'etais pas seulement pour braver Ivich, qu'il s'était envoyé ce bon coup de couteau, c'est aussi un défi à Jacques, à Brunet, à Daniel, à sa vie.: "Je suis un con, pensa-t-il […] mais il ne pouvait pas s'empêcher d'être content. Ivich regardait la main de Mathieu qui paraissait clouée sur la table et le sang qui fusait autour de la lame. Et puis elle regarda Mathieu, elle avait un viasage tout changé. (240-241)

Notice how Mathieu thinks of his act of self-wounding in relation to Brunet and others who have experienced "real" events and suffering. At least in part, he is trying to recreate their experience so as to live up to their degree of realness. It might seem that Mathieu (and Sartre) are conflating quite different types of pain—that inflicted upon us by others and that which we inflict upon ourselves—but to return to an earlier quote from *Being and Nothingness*, pain causes facticity to invade consciousness. Sartre does not distinguish between sources of pain. Clearly, the ethical aspect changes drastically depending on who administers the pain, but the effects on one's authenticity are much

the same. Whether Mathieu stabs himself, or whether Ivich had stabbed him in exactly the same way, facticity equally invades his consciousness, thus putting him equally *in situation* and thus allowing for the factors necessary for Sartrean authenticity. Mathieu therefore experiences his first moment of authenticity in *The Age of Reason*.

But why should the blunt fact of bodily pain be able to lead to authenticity? First, we must recall that recognition of one's facticity is a condition of possibility for authenticity. And, as Dermot Moran rightly notes,

> For Sartre, paradoxically, while the body is that which necessarily
> introduces the notion of perspective and point of view, at the same time
> the body is a *contingent* viewpoint on the world. Our body is the very
> *contingency* of our being: our facticity. (*Sartre on the Body* 53) [All italics in
> the original.]

Bodily pain, therefore, brings one's necessary embodiment and the contingency of one's particular embodiment to the fore, thus bringing one's facticity to the fore. Facticity certainly concerns more than the body—including one's historical situation and all the facts of the world one is thrown into—but as Moran points out, the body is the perspective and point of view from which and through which all aspects of facticity must flow. This is precisely why, as quoted above, Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* that in the state of pain, facticity invades consciousness.

But that is not all we should take away from this scene of mutual self-wounding. Until this point in the novel, Ivich has endured Mathieu's affections (and at times his

very presence) with grudging forbearance, but now things change and the two have their first and only intimate moment. They have achieved mutual recognition via their simultaneous achievement of (fleeting) authenticity here.[2]

This desire to escape the banality of daily life and to experience authenticity via suffering makes further appearances in Sartre's literary writings. Here he is, writing about his own and other Parisians' experience under the Occupation. His discussion of the artificiality of symbolic events versus the realness of fighting or forced manual labor is insightful:

> It was the purpose of the artificial existence the Germans maintained there—the theatrical performances, the horse-races, the miserable, lugubrious festivals—to show the world that France was intact because Paris was still alive. A strange consequence of centralization. The British, for their part, while flattening Lorient, Rouen or Nantes with their bombs, had decided to respect Paris. Thus, in this dying city, we enjoyed a symbolic, funereal calm. Around this islet of peace, iron and fire rained down; but, just as we were not permitted to share the labour of our provinces, we were no longer entitled to share their suffering. (*Aftermath of War* 22-23)

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[2] This is not the place to develop the idea, but since bad faith is so often the cause of the failure to recognize each other (in the Hegelian sense) as fully human, the clearing away of bad faith—that is, the attainment of existential authenticity—is necessary to achieve recognition.

L'existence artificielle que les Allemands y entretenaient encore, les

représentations théâtrale, les courses, les fêtes misérables et lugubres se

proposaient seulement de montrer à l'univers que la France était sauve puisque

Paris vivait encore. Les Anglais, de leur côté, tout en écrasant Lorient, Rouen ou

Nantes sous leurs bombes, avaient décidé de respecter Paris. Ainsi jouissions-

nous, dans cette cité agonisante, d'un calme mortuaire et symbolique. Autour de

cet îlot, le fer and le feu pleuvaient ; mais, de même que nous n'étions pas admis à

partager le labeur do nos provinces, nous n'avions plus le droit de partager leurs

souffrances. (*Situations III* 27-28)

By juxtaposing the descriptors "artificial" and "symbolic" with his later phrasing "not

permitted to share the labour…no longer entitled to share their suffering," Sartre speaks

to my point about the authenticity of the experience of suffering. Somehow the lives led

by Parisians were merely symbolic and artificial, not authentic and real as were those of

people suffering directly and physically. This symbolic or artificial aspect of life is

present under regular circumstances, but having the authenticity of suffering so near

brings to light what normally remains hidden behind the multi-folded curtains of the

symbolic order.

In the above passage, Sartre also speaks to a shared humanity or a true bond

formed during shared suffering, a solidarity that forms among those who suffer

extreme experiences together such as war, torture, imprisonment, etc—much as

Mathieu and Ivich achieve a bond via their self-inflicted wounds, coupled of course, in

their case, with debaucherous activities. An entire study could be done on the bonds

between those who have experienced extremes of pleasure (drug use, sex acts, etc), and I suspect the results would show striking similarities to those who have experienced comparable extremes of displeasure. The primary difference being that pain seems to allow a greater extreme than pleasure does, perhaps because, as Arthur Schopenhauer suggests in his famed essay, "On the Sufferings of the World," pleasure is rarely as pleasurable as we anticipate, and pain considerably more painful (Schopenhauer 215).

But as with Mathieu in *The Age of Reason*, the life of the Parisians still lacks full-out battle, though there is suffering—occasionally of an individual and acute nature, but more often of a collective and generalized sort.

> Everyone knows those sick individuals who are termed 'depersonalized', and who suddenly come to believe that all human beings are dead because they have stopped projecting their own futures forward and have, as a result, lost any sense of other peoples'. Perhaps the most painful thing was that all Parisians were depersonalized. Before the war, if we happened to look sympathetically on a child or young person, we did so because we sensed their future, because we obscurely divined it from their gestures and the lines on their faces. (*The Aftermath of War* 24)

> *Tout le monde connaît ces maladies qu'on nomme «dépersonnalisés» et qui s'avisent soudain que «tous les hommes sont morts» parce qu'ils ont cessé de projeter leur avenir au delà d'eux-mêmes et parce que, du même coup, ils ont cessé*

de sentir l'avenir des autres. Ce qu'il y avait peut-être de plus pénible, c'est que

tous les Parisiens étaient dépersonnalisés. Avant la guerre, s'il nous arrivait de

regarder avec sympathie un enfant, un jeune homme, une jeune femme, c'est que

nous pressentions leur avenir, c'est que nous le devinions obscurément dans leurs

gestes, dans les plis de leurs visages. (*Situations III* 28-29)

During these same war years, Sartre wrote *The Age of Reason*, wherein the main

character longs for the realness of war; Sartre was working through his notions of

suffering and authenticity in two different literary genres, fiction and creative

nonfiction amid the suffering of war. Many have tried to find insights into the inner life

of Sartre himself by reading Mathieu as a stand-in for Sartre, and I don't doubt some

insights of that nature could be found, but for my current investigation, I am more

interested in how Sartre developed the relationship between suffering and authenticity.

In order to understand this relationship, we need to explore a third notion—bad

faith—and look at how it functions, its patterns, and see how suffering renders bad faith

considerably more difficult. Bad faith is, in effect, a sort of semi-conscious half-lie to

oneself about one's facticity and situation; one glances with a degree of clear

recognition at the state of affairs and then just as quickly turns away, refusing to see the

facts at hand. Sartre himself gives a wonderfully quotidian example of one of the

primary patterns of bad faith:

Take the example of a woman who has consented to go out with a

particular man for the first time. She knows very well the intentions which

the man who is speaking to her cherishes regarding her. She knows also

that it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision. But she

does not want to realize the urgency; she concerns herself only with what

is respectful and discreet in the attitude of her companion…If he says to

her, "I find you so attractive!" she disarms this phrase of its sexual

background…This is because she does not quite know precisely what she

wants. She is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the

desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her. (*Being and

Nothingness* 96-97)

*Voici, par exemple, une femme qui s'est rendue à un premier rendez-vous. Elle

sait fort bien les intentions que l'homme qui lui parle nourrit à son égard. Elle

sait aussi qu'il lui faudra prendre tôt ou tard une décision. Mais elle n'en veut pas

sentir l'urgence : elle s'attache seulement à ce qu'offre de respectueux et de discret

l'attitude de son partenaire […] elle ne veux pas lire dans les phrases qu'on lui

adresse autre chose que leur sens explicite, si on lui dit : « Je vous admire tant »,

elle désarme cette phrase de son arrière-fond sexuel […] C'est qu'elle n'est pas au

fait de ce qu'elle souhaite : elle est profondément sensible ai désir qu'elle inspire,

mais le désir cru et nu l'humilierait et lui ferait horreur.* (*L'Être et le néant* 94)

The choice of what, in the face of human suffering, might seem like an unserious

example of quotidian life is in fact the best example. The luxury of this kind of self-

deception is simply not available to us in the midst of suffering—such as in the above-

cited scene where Mathieu is imagining the bombing in Spain and the people there crying mutely in horror. The social and symbolic orders wherein discretion and respectability exist are no longer present, and there is no room for deceiving ourselves about what is happening—that is, we cannot deny the facticity of ourselves and the world around us during a bombing in the way we can during a casual date in a Parisian café (to contrast Sartre's examples). The literary works discussed here suggest that bad faith of the sort Sartre depicts in this example from *Being and Nothingness* is rendered nearly impossible in the face of suffering. His exploration of authenticity via suffering began before the creation of his philosophical system, and the dual theme of suffering and authenticity continued in his literary output after writing *Being and Nothingness*. In all of these works, however, we find his interest in the question of how one might partake of a mode of being that is authentic, and we find over and over again that suffering can be a means to that authenticity.

Let's look once more at the above example from *The Age of Reason*. Mathieu's and Ivich's wounds are not severe, but neither are they entirely superficial. And directly following their self-inflicted injuries, they are more authentically present and achieve mutual recognition for the only time in the novel. This is also the moment of greatest clarity for Mathieu, whom Sartre has set up as a glowing example of bad faith for the rest of the novel. I want to be clear that I do not think these wounds are somehow grand or hugely meaningful; they are more closely related to a cheap Romantic gesture than anything truly grand. That said, I still argue that the wound focuses Mathieu's mind on

the facticity of his situation in a way congruent with Sartrean authenticity. It also brings into focus his transcendence in a way congruent with Sartrean authenticity. As it always is in Sartre's thinking, this authenticity is fleeting and is gone shortly after Mathieu achieves it, but he does achieve it and precisely due to the self-inflicted wound.

And even more so than this act of self-wounding, the facticity revealed to someone by being bombarded in a war zone or the "sheer facticity of dead bodies" (Scarry 134), as depicted both in *The Age of Reason* and *Troubled Sleep*, force one to recognize one's facticity and one's freedom, thus creating the necessary conditions for Sartrean authenticity.

v. Individual Authenticity in *Being and Nothingness* and the Fused Group in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*

There has been much debate about how much of the early Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* remains in the later Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, with some claiming that Sartre made a clean and total break from his earlier work, while others claim that even though there is certainly a development in his thought, a contiguity and continuity obtain whereby we can see influences of the earlier work on the later. This debate has played out in many publications over the years, so I will not recreate it here. I will simply admit that I find the latter argument considerably more convincing, and I hope to add to the reservoir of data supporting this position by delineating a structural similarity between Sartre's connection of suffering and authenticity in his early work

and his connection of adversity and the fused group in his later thought. I will, however, limit my brief discussion here to this single overlapping aspect, since it is the only part of his *Critique* that serves the purposes of my current investigation.

What do I mean by *a structural similarity* between these two ideas? The early Sartre conceives us as predominantly existing in a state of bad faith/inauthenticity from which we emerge into authenticity only rarely and only with the most painstaking effort—or, as I have suggested in this essay, via suffering itself. And we only experience this authenticity for a brief period before returning to—or to use Heideggerian language, falling into—our more common state of bad faith or inauthenticity. I propose that seriality and the fused group structurally mirror the relationship between bad faith/inauthenticity and authenticity.

Seriality is, Sartre tells us, an "attitude of semi-unawareness" which requires that one "turns his back on his neighbor" (256). ["cette attitude de demi-ignorance"; "il tourne le dos à son voisin" (309)]. This is an echo of bad faith's semi-unawareness and one's turning away from the situational facts. The choice of the word "semi-unawareness" is particularly apt here. Unlike Heidegger who conceives of falling into the They as a largely unconscious act, Sartre, who is much more interested in individual choices, conceives of bad faith as acknowledging (however briefly) the facts at hand and then quickly turning away from them in an act of semi-aware self-deception. This is mirrored by the semi-unawareness of seriality and the turning away from one's neighbor.

And what extricates us from this state of seriality? In nearly every example Sartre gives in his *Critique*, it is an external adversity, scarcity, or violence—in effect, it is suffering in the broad sense I have been using it. Sartre tells us that a fused group forms under adversity at the hands of a third party (361-363). This adversity has the potential to change a series of subjects into a fused group. Our most common state in society, Sartre tells us, is that of seriality—an undifferentiated series of subjects treading socially pre-ordained paths. But when a third party threatens such an amorphous group, it becomes a fused group in response to the threat or violence, thus creating a group identity and perhaps going so far as to form a fraternity or pledged group (419).

One deviation from this structural mirroring, a deviation particularly salient for my current investigation, is that Sartre conceives of the fused group forming due to an external duress or violence exclusively. Unlike his earlier work, where he is more focused on the individual, self-inflicted suffering cannot lead to the formation of a fused group. This does not ultimately change the point that there is a continuity in his thought, but rather merely points to the fact that his thinking became more social as his rapprochement with Marxism became more complete, thus causing his later philosophical system to focus less on the individual.

vi. Conclusion(s)

We have looked at several works spanning Sartre's career, each dealing in its own way with the connection between suffering and authenticity. In "The Wall," we see

psychological suffering lead to a state of Sartrean authenticity. In *The Age of Reason*, Mathieu desires the suffering others have experienced in order to achieve the authenticity he attributes to them, and we have seen how this desire for authenticity via suffering leads him to inflict pain on himself. In *Troubled Sleep*, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War longs for the realness of that conflict while surrounded by the flimsiness of his safe life far from the fields of battle. We have seen Sartre write about his own wartime experience in his literary nonfiction, describing how he and those around him felt left out from the real suffering that might give them a sense of authenticity. And, finally, this connection obtains in his first major philosophical treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, as well as in his later magnum opus, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, albeit in somewhat different forms. It is perhaps most significant that this connection between suffering and authenticity appears repeatedly over the course of Sartre's writing life, making it a central and constant theme in his work—a theme that has been largely overlooked to date in Sartre studies.

I have attempted to identify a thread in Sartre's work that has gone largely undiscussed, a thread which ties together one of Sartre's most central philosophical ideas—existential authenticity—with investigations into the nature of suffering. And here my secondary goal is revealed. My project here and elsewhere is to investigate how Sartre's work relates to more recent discussions of suffering and violence. Sartre was the most discussed and revered thinker of his time. We are seeing a renewed interest in Sartre's work and existentialism in general, as is evidenced by recent

anthologies, monographs, new translations, and re-releases such as Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Verso 2004), *The Imagination* (Routledge 2011), and the aforementioned *Aftermath of War* (Continuum 2008), along with several new studies of Sartre and existentialism such as Jonathan Judaken's *Race after Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, and Postcolonialism* (2008) and *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context* (2012). There have likewise been several studies on the nature of violence in Sartre's work. James Dodd's *Violence and Phenomenology* (2009) explores Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in fruitful juxtaposition with Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*; Ronald E. Santoni's *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (2004) compares Sartre's and Camus's differing views on the uses of violence while working through the relationship of violence and freedom across Sartre's career; and there are dozens of articles concerning the perpetration of violence, generally inspired by Sartre's controversial and well-known statements justifying violence as a means of resistance (most famously in his introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*). I could go on listing, but suffice it to say that there is a clear trend of increased interest in existentialism in general and Sartre in particular, and one thread of this interest is the intersection of Sartrean thought and violence.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EFFECTS AND ETHICS OF VIOLENCE: A PRACTICAL INVESTIGATION

> "We revolt simply because, for many reasons,
>
> we can no longer breathe."
>
> —Frantz Fanon

> "I can't breathe."
>
> —Eric Garner

> "We must immediately take the war to the
>
> enemy, leave him no rest, harass him. Cut off
>
> his breath."
>
> —Frantz Fanon

i. Introduction

Franz Fanon announces in the opening sentence to *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that no matter what terminology we might choose to describe it or what new formulas we might concoct to explain it, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 35). Decolonization, he tells us, cannot come about via "a gentleman's agreement" because it is the meeting of two intrinsically

opposing forces whose "first encounter was marked by violence" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 36).[3]

Fanon ultimately makes three interconnected points about violence—one about its function in the formation/deformation of identity (individual and group), one about its efficacy as a liberating force in the struggle against oppression, and one about its ethical permissibility as a tool against oppression. In this chapter, I show how Fanon's thinking both takes up and expands upon that of Jean-Paul Sartre's on the subject of relations with others in general and violence against others in particular; I show the pitfalls of relying overmuch on violence as well as those of eschewing its efficacy entirely; I then use William T. Vollmann's Moral Calculus from *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003) to discuss when Fanon's positions meet ethical standards; and, finally, I synthesize all of this analysis and focus it on issues facing us today in the United States and around the world.

William T. Vollmann's 3,200-page treatise on human violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, has as its ultimate aim the creation of a Moral Calculus that would allow us to determine on a case-by-case basis when violence is ethically permissible and when it is not—when violence would mean *rising up* and when it would mean *rising down*, to make use of Vollmann's terminology—the former term denoting a legitimate use of violence for the improvement of one's situation and the latter meaning an illegitimate

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[3] It is not central to my argument, but it is worth noting that Fanon makes what is known as the genetic fallacy here, which states that it is erroneous to assume that a concept or action necessarily retains the attributes of a preceding concept or action from which it arose.

use of violence, even in cases where oppression is clearly present. Or, as Vollmann himself defines the terms: "**Rising up:** A just act of violence. Both means and ends are legitimate. **Rising down:** An unjust act of violence. Means, ends, or both fail to meet legitimacy's requirements" (Vollmann 453). It is perhaps worth noting that he qualifies these definitions extensively. One particularly salient qualification is the following: "A just end may be served by a just or unjust means. Either way, the end itself has not been compromised in and of itself" (ibid). That is to say that even if we find violent action unethical in a given circumstance, we are not necessarily condemning the goals of those who enacted the violence, merely their means of achieving a just goal.

And Vollmann, like Fanon and Sartre before him, concludes that there are in fact times when violence is the proper reaction of an oppressed group or threatened individual. Given that he has perhaps developed the most extensive manifesto on the subject in the history of theorizing violence, I propose to apply his system of thought to the question of anticolonial violence when the subject of the ethics of violence arises. I then apply Fanon's, Sartre's, and Vollmann's thinking to the current situation in the United States.

With the protests across the United States—from Ferguson to Baltimore to New York City—concerning racial violence on the part of police officers, along with the counter-violence enacted by some against police officers or in the form of property destruction, the questions of when violence is effective or ethically permissible remain

eminently salient, and theorizing how violence forms the identities of the oppressed and the oppressors alike also remains of paramount importance.

ii. Identity and Violence

Violence as formative of identity is so central to Fanon that he employs metaphors of "new men" and even "new species" many times throughout *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon goes so far as to claim that it is the settler who "has brought the native into existence and perpetuates his existence" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 36). In effect, the violence of colonization has created the native as a subjugated subject who has internalized this subjugation, and the violence of decolonization will re-create the native into a liberated subject. It is therefore violence and counter-violence that form the existence of the colonized. It is the violence of colonization that has brought the colonized into their current existence or identity as colonized, and it is counter-violence, Fanon tells us, that will convert them into a "new species" of liberated men (Fanon rarely mentions women).

Fanon is a proponent of organized violent resistance first and foremost, but he is also a brilliant documenter and theoretician of the inchoate and directionless violence that surges up in the psyche of the oppressed. He instructs on the intense and unbidden desire to enact violence on the oppressor.

> The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to

sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible […] The violence which

has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly

drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms […] that

same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment

when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the

forbidden quarters. (*Wretched* 39-40)

And violence is the means by which the colonized dream of taking the place of the

colonizer, Fanon instructs us. Norman Mailer likewise instructs us on the nature of such

transgressive violence in his seminal essay "The White Negro," wherein he claims that

transgressive violence is almost always violence against the status quo, against the

existing system of violence ossified in its place. He tells us that the criminal enters into a

new relationship with authority and thus is transformed into an existentially different

individual with a radically altered situation.[4] And we can hear something similar in

Fanon's discussion of the native's envious and violent wish to supplant the settler.

In both Mailer's more domestic example of two young, oppressed men robbing a

store and killing its owner as a sort of localized rebellion against their oppressed state,

and in Fanon's larger, more political example, we find violent transgression of the

existing order via violence—perhaps seemingly inchoate in its intentions—depicted at

the most effective tool at one's disposal. It would not be enough to write a strongly

worded letter, Fanon and Mailer appear to be telling us; destructive and violent action

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[4] For more on Mailer's engagement with violence and on this essay of his, see Chapter Five.

must be taken. I will argue, however, that Fanon (and the early Mailer) have perhaps put too much faith in the efficacy of violence.

     Sartre, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, explains how colonial violence is formative of the identities of both the colonizer and the colonized.

> The son of the colonialist and the son of the Muslim are both the children of the objective violence which defines the system itself as a practico-inert hell. But if this violence-object produces them, if they suffer it partly as their own inertia, this is because it used to be the violence-praxis when the system was in the process of being installed. It is man who inscribed his violence in things as the eternal unity of this passive mediation between men. (*Critique* 718)

Via violent praxis, a system of practico-inert violence is put into place and creates a violent inertia that carries all actors along in its wake. As James Dodd describes it:

> Sartre's idea of the practico-inert as the inscription of "violence in things" is important, since it points to an aspect […] which leads to a more fundamental appraisal of the constitutive nature of violence. For if we understand the praxis of violence in terms of the potential that violence can have a hold on us in the form of an embodiment in materiality, then we can begin to understand in what sense violence could be taken to be "constitutive." (Dodd 72)

It is therefore everything from roadways to buildings to military supplies to fashionable or professionally acceptable clothing and so forth that constitutes the violent practico-inert that produces the violent systemic inertia that forms and deforms the identities of the colonized and the colonizer.

But, aside from the obvious ethical issues, what precisely makes this a problem? In the terminology of the *Critique*, this practico-inert violence forms an anti-dialectic, preventing the progress of the dialectical historical process. It becomes therefore necessary to enact a new dynamic violence, as opposed to the frozen practico-inert violence, in order to move forward again. As James Dodd offers a succinct summation of the problem in Sartrean terms:

> Following Sartre's reflections, we have seen violence in the form of a distortion that flows immediately from the negating freedom of a subject encountering the world of things and other free consciousnesses […] in the form of the practico-inert, this distortion itself can shape the landscape of human action thanks to an inertia that no longer flows simply from the facticity of human freedom, but borrows a permanence and a force that lies on the side of things as such. (Dodd 73)

And so, like a social tectonics, the practico-inert layers upon itself like a coastal shelf, reinforcing and reinforcing existing institutions and authorities. It clogs the dialectical movement of history. It stops progress and blocks freedom. Fanon and Sartre therefore condone a counter-violence to explode these blockages, a sort of revolutionary

demolition of the practico-inert. Fanon describes this new dynamic violence in *Wretched of the Earth*.

> But it so happens that for the colonized this violence is invested with positive, formative features because it constitutes their only work. This violent praxis is totalizing since each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer. Factions recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people, i.e., it pitches them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back. (*Wretched* 50)

In effect, Fanon calls for a counter-violence that would dislodge the anti-dialectic, cracking the ossified reifications within the colonized society. This would allow for the flow of the historical dialectic to move to a place of liberation for the colonized. Fanon and Sartre obviously support this type of counter-violence, and, as we'll see, Vollmann lends a tentative support to it as well, but there are problems that already arise at the level of conceptualization of such a counter-violence. The idea of a "future nation" that is "indivisible" belies Fanon's monolithic thinking on the subject, and this "single direction" that Fanon describes is another aspect of his monolithic thinking with which we might want to take umbrage. Are there more complex and more accurate ways to conceive of counter-violence? Are there slippages that Fanon does not allow for here?

How would we assess the ethical permissibility of such a counter-violence? These are the questions I want to pose and for which I propose to offer tentative answers.

As Mary G. Dietz writes in the edited volume *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995), individuals are always "speakers of words and doers of deeds" (Dietz 31). And as Bonnie Honig in that same volume points out, for Arendt these deeds are "action in concert that is also always a site of struggle […] with and against one's peers" (Honig 159). In effect, Arendt's theorizing of violence is an intellectual antipode to that of Fanon's—and she famously criticized Sartre for abandoning the existentialist dialectic of society and self when he full-throatedly and unequivocally endorsed Fanon's program of violent resistance.

We will return to these criticisms from Arendt, criticisms which call for a more complex understanding of the effects and ethics of violence, largely via Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down*, later in this chapter. But before we can move to the criticisms of Fanon's program, it is necessary to offer an analysis of it in fuller complexity. One of the most effective aspects of Fanon's work is the way he brought existentialist thought forward by including different subject-positions, particularly those of black and colonized subjects. Here he makes admirable use of Sartrean philosophy while bringing it forward in notable and important ways.

iii. Correcting/Furthering Sartre

For a time, many marginalized figures who were influenced by Sartre were confined to a revered but particularly dark area under his massive shadow. Then there was a righteous backlash against this notion that they might be reduced to footnotes—no matter how extensive—to a white European of notable privilege. I hope that we have reached a point in history where we can, via a bit of Hegelian three-step maneuvering, acknowledge how hugely influential Sartre was for many marginalized writers and activists, while allowing them their individual contributions and importance. In this section I intend to argue that a sizable portion of Fanon's oeuvre is dedicated to acting as a corrective to and a furthering of Sartre's work, though even when it serves to correct errors or fills gaps in Sartre's work, it without a desire to supplant Sartrean thought in its entirety. Fanon often continues to assume Sartre's basic premises, though he adroitly details the shortcomings and blind-spots in Sartre's theories.

In many ways, Fanon's project is a corrective to Sartre's, and in other ways it is an extension of it. Already in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre theorizes the gaze of the Other and how it reifies us into beings-for-the-others—that is, we become objects when put under the always-oppositional gaze of the Other. In what way does Fanon further this notion? In what way does he offer a corrective to it in the case of the colonized? Sartre's notion allows for both parties to be reifying forces, alternately objectifying each other. It also allows for an end to the reification for both parties. Fanon argues that the colonized are permanently reified because "the black man has no ontological resistance

in the eyes of the white man" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 90). In effect, there is no reciprocal reification in the inter-subjective transaction between a black person and white person—indeed, the term "intersubjective" could be contested, given that subjecthood is denied the colonized in this situation. Or as he writes later: "the white gaze, the only valid one, is dissecting me" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 95).

Fanon likewise adds to Sartre's theorizing by highlighting the differences in how the Sartrean gaze functions when one considers skin color. Of course visuality is a present factor in the gaze when a white man looks at another white man, but a new and more ubiquitous element enters the equation, Fanon argues, when one's skin color causes one to stand out—and to stand out with a negative cultural valence—in nearly every public situation. Fanon points out that blackness is "dense and undeniable" in the visual field (*The Wretched of the Earth* 96). It is inescapable in a way that other differentiated groups' qualities are not. To make his argument, Fanon takes Jewishness as his example, saying that Jewishness can be hidden in a way that blackness simply cannot.

While it is undeniable that the immediate visual distinction of skin color adds to black oppression, and precisely in the immediacy of the gaze as Fanon suggests, here we find Fanon's tendency toward monolithic thinking leads him to a disturbing conclusion, when he compares the oppression of Jews in Europe to the oppression of blacks.

The Jewishness of the Jew, however, can go unnoticed. He is not integrally

what he is. We can but hope and wait. His acts and behaviors are the

determining factor. He is a white man, and apart from some debatable

features, he can pass undetected. He belongs to the race that has never

practiced cannibalism […] Of course the Jews have been tormented — what

am I saying? They have been hunted, exterminated, and cremated, but

these are just minor episodes in the family history. (*Black Skin, White Masks*

95).

First off, Fanon ignores anti-Semitic claims that Jews drank the blood of Christian

children, which is a form of cannibalism. Secondly, to call the Holocaust a "minor

episode in the family history" is not only offensive and insensitive, it misses the point

that many forms of otherizing can be just as devastating as racial otherizing.

However, this is not to say that Fanon's point about skin color doesn't have

validity; he does however, I would argue, take it too far in a monolithic-thinking

direction. Fanon further argues that "ontology does not allow us to understand the

being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience" (*The Wretched of the Earth*

90). Fanon retools Sartre's notions and uses them against him; in other words Sartre

developed the notion of lived experience to a great degree, but he failed to discuss how

it could be differentiated along lines of gender and race. Here Fanon doesn't so much

refute Sartre's theorizing, but rather points at a gap in his theorizing. We can find a

corollary move in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, where she develops many of her own

theories, but also takes certain Sartrean notions and shows how they may be retooled to be more inclusive and accurate.

iv. Applying Fanon Today, in the United States and Elsewhere

With several recent race-related protests and riots in the United States, the question of when violence is politically practical or ethically permissible is more than a merely theoretical concern. It is in fact one of the most urgent questions concerning what our actions should be, considering the multifaceted and deeply interrelated and socially integrated problems facing us in this country today. As our media commentators have pointed out, much property damage has followed from some of these protests, and there are police officers injured or killed who have not, as far as we know, directly involved in any police brutality. But of course there have been many more cases of racially motivated violence against minorities by police in this country than have been reported in the media—less sensational perhaps, but no less devastating to the victims and to the communities in which they occur. It is therefore incumbent upon us to read Fanon and Sartre and Vollmann (and others) on the matter with our fullest attention and most discerning judgment.

Vollmann poses what is perhaps the most salient question for our efforts:

> More fundamentally, *is poverty absolute, or relative?* […] A statician informs
> me that technology has now put the labor power equivalent of nineteen
> slaves, or nineteen megawatt-hours per year, at the average human

being's disposal […] In 1860, the comparable figure was less than one megawatt-hour per year. A sweatshop laborer in Los Angeles has access to food, clothing and entertainment that ancient kings could never have hoped for. (Vollmann 190)

In effect, Vollmann is asking whether there is an absolute tipping-point where a person has enough caloric intake, healthcare, clothing, housing, and pleasurable distractions beyond which complaint is rendered invalid. It is true that even the impoverished in the United States today have longer lifespans, better dental health, greater travel options, and more venues for distraction than the wealthy in previous centuries would have enjoyed. But does this invalidate a claim to improved conditions? The question may seem odd in its basicness, but this is precisely why it must be asked, in order to help establish some base from which to make practical and ethical judgments.

Another strength of Vollmann's massive work on the subject of violence is that he takes great pains to give every individual and every group their day in court, as it were. He shows equal respect for pro-gun members of the ad hoc citizen border patrol on the US-Mexico border as he does socialist resistance fighters in France under Nazi occupation. His methodology strongly suggests that we eschew preconceived notions to the best of our abilities and honestly analyze each individual's or group's claim to the right to use violence in defense of themselves or their cause(s). I intend to do the same here. In any discussion of violence today in the United States, we would have to address racialized violence and the recent protests against police brutality and the

murder of black Americans. There is much debate about the means one might ethically use to protest this state of affairs, such as mainstream media's coverage of property damage in Baltimore.

But there are also members of the Tea Party who likewise advocate violent means to achieve their goals of a libertarian or libertarian-Christian society. As much as it might be tempting to dismiss these individuals or subgroups out of hand, we would be remiss to do so. In a spirit of intellectual honesty and fairness, their claim to the right to use violent means ought to be met with the same practical and ethical investigations as other groups that we might immediately assume have a stronger claim to such political tactics.

Firstly, it should be admitted that many of the pro-gun, anti-government members of the Tea Party are impoverished and uneducated; we do not see the billionaire backers of the Tea Party strolling around Wal-Mart parking lots with automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. These are, therefore, underprivileged members of American society grasping at an immediate form of power they can, quite literally, feel. In a society that bars the supermajority of opportunities for good education and good employment from the poor, to say nothing of public services and healthcare, these people have real grievances. The question is: does this inequality and wealth disparity warrant the use of violent means as a corrective to their situation? And a corollary question is: what would be the most effective and ethically permissible means, if not violence?

Here we should consider another aspect of violent demonstrations, one that does not have as its final goal the overthrow of an unfair or oppressive government. The situation in the United States and other western countries is notably different than in the colonized world. Sometimes the goal is not and should not be the overthrow of the government, but rather a bid for recognition in the eyes of the society in which the oppressed or under-represented are often invisible casualties of racism or classism or sexism.

> The riots were simply a direct effort to gain visibility. A social group which, although part of France and composed of French citizens, saw itself as excluded from the political and social space proper wanted to render its presence palpable to the general public. Their actions spoke for them: like it or not, we're here, no matter how much you pretend not to see us. Commentators failed to notice the crucial fact that the protesters did not claim any special status for themselves as members of a religious or ethnic group striving for its self-enclosed way of life. On the contrary, their main premise was that they wanted to be and *were* French citizens, but were not fully recognized as such. (*Violence* 77)

The rioters in France were largely destroying their own neighborhoods, as occasionally has happened in protests in the United States, but even when the property is public property or businesses owned by the oppressing class, the point is not the destruction itself, but rather a bid for recognition. The protests in Baltimore and Ferguson and

elsewhere in the United States and Europe do not, as of yet, seem to have the overthrow

of any government as their goal. Raising awareness of the issues is front and center, and

the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag movement is a clear cry for recognition. Black humans

are humans too, the movement is saying, and they should be treated as such. This is,

therefore, one more complication to Fanon's theorization of violence, its uses, its

efficacy, and its ethical status.[5] But even though the members of the Tea Party do not

suffer the racism that black Americans suffer, they do, as enumerated above, have a

lengthy list of real grievances against the structure of our society (even if they

misunderstand what those grievances may be). They are therefore calling for a

recognition of their situation as well, a situation that includes perennial poverty, lack of

education opportunities for their children, a wage disparity that astounds, and a future

that grows ever bleaker by the day. And we can find yet further corollaries in recent

history of violent demonstrations, though in a different countries with a different

groups calling for recognition. Here is Slavoj Žižek discussing the riots in France in

2004:

> The message of the outbursts was not that the protesters found their
>
> ethnic-religious identity threatened by French republican universalism

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[5] It is worth noting that Fanon himself attempts to bring thinking on Hegelian recognition forward, such as when he writes: "I want to be recognized not as *Black* but as *White*. But—and this is the form of recognition that Hegel never described—who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of white love […] Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 45).

but, on the contrary, that they were not included in it, that they found

themselves on the other side of the wall which separates the visible from

the invisible part of the republican social space […] This is why violence

was necessary. Had they organized a non-violent march, all they would

have got was a small note on the bottom of a page. (*Violence* 77)

It is therefore a practical tactic, even if it is not consciously articulated as such, to bring

attention to a disenfranchised group that is not receiving recognition (in the Hegelian

sense) from its society.

Following Hegel, Sartre's ethics has recognition of the Other at its core. He does,

however, spell out how and why this is the case in different terms—namely in terms of

bad faith and authenticity.

A person who has lived in bad faith who begins to assume his freedom is

said to have undergone a radical conversion to authenticity. In his

Notebooks for an Ethics, Sartre suggests that in affirming his own

freedom an authentic person would also respect and affirm the freedom of

other people. Thus, he indicates a possible link between authenticity and

ethics, suggesting that ethics is other-related authenticity. (Cox 85)

And part of this recognition of others is a recognition that they do not merely have one

determining attribute or play merely one role in life. Recall Sartre's famous example

from *Being and Nothingness* of the waiter is too eagerly playing his role as waiter, as

though his-being-a-waiter were his essential nature and not merely a job he performs

for certain hours of the day; he becomes a caricature of a waiter by over-identifying with his role of waiter. In effect, he is exhibiting bad faith by not recognizing himself as a free agent who is only contingently a waiter and also much more than a waiter even while he is a waiter as well. An other-oriented authenticity would require that we admit the contingent nature of whatever role another person, even our oppressor, is playing and that we admit this is not the sole role she plays. It is, among other things, a call to admit the interior complexity, not merely the exterior role of others. Fanon's model fails to admit such complexity, or at least grants it little importance in regard to the ethical considerations of violence even when acknowledging it.

In effect, we ought not only ask when violence is an effective and ethically permissible form of protest; we should also ask what level that violence can reach before becoming a *rising down*. When is it effective and ethical to overthrow an unfair government and when is reform the proper response? How much property damage and how much violence against our fellow humans are permissible to achieve our goals of liberation? Here again I want to emphasize that there will not be a final, immutable answer to these questions. Following existentialist philosophy, particularly that of Sartre, these questions will have to be answered in situation and with the knowledge that our existential finitude forces us to forego the hope of perfect, monolithic answers. But as Sartre and Vollmann demand, recognition of the Other must be central to any such analysis, and our actions must be based on a good faith effort to limit violence,

reduce retaliation, and to find non-violent solutions when they are available, only resorting to violence when it is the last recourse and when it will truly be a *rising up*.

In Chapter Six, I discuss Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down* in terms of recent calls for a universalist ethics that nonetheless eschews essentialism. One element I put particular focus on is that of historical time—that is to say, I argue that an argument for a universalist ethics will necessarily have to include a caveat that at some given time "t" an action might be considered universally ethical whereas at another time "t2" it might not be. Hannah Arenndt, in her seminal work *On Violence*, likewise points to the ways historical time and conditions alter the way we perceive ethics, particularly in regard to violence.

> The pathos and the *élan* of the New Left, their credibility, as it were, are closely connected with the weird suicidal development of modern weapons; this is the first generation to grow up under the shadow of the atom bomb. They inherited from their parents' generation the experience of a massive intrusion of criminal violence into politics: they learned in high school and in college about concentration and extermination camps, about genocide and torture, about the wholesale slaughter of civilians in war without which modern military operations are no longer possible even if restricted to "conventional" weapons. (Arendt 13-14)

Arendt sees the historical conditions in which members of the New Left of the 1960s came to political consciousness as determinant of their relationship to violence. With

genocide and the killing of civilians on all sides of recent conflicts at the time, it was an uncritical acceptance of such tactics as the new norm of warfare that these members of the New Left were practicing.

> The strong Marxist rhetoric of the New Left coincides with the steady growth of the entirely non-Marxian conviction, proclaimed by Mao Tse-tung, that "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." To be sure, Marx was aware of the role of violence in history, but this role was to him secondary; not violence but the contradictions inherent in the old society brought about its end. The emergence of a new society was preceded, but not caused, by violent outbreaks, which likened to labor pangs that precede, but of course do not cause, the event of organic birth. (Arendt 11)

Arendt's point is therefore about the historical process of violence and its place in the revolutionary consciousness of the time in which she was writing, as opposed to a strictly ethical analysis of violence as such. This adds another contingent-historical aspect to our considerations of the role of violence in politics, much as Vollmann's analysis admits the contingent-historical into his consideration of the ethics of violence. What is key here is the eschewing of eternal, essentialist notions of the ethical and practical aspects of violence. It is therefore entirely fitting that Arendt should take her argument to Sartre, who was at the time of her writing the most prominent public intellectual in the West (and rather prominent in the East and in Africa as well). Fanon is likewise her chosen interlocutor in the debate about violence as a means of resistance,

leading her take both thinkers on in equal measure. She also has a third target for her

critique of political violence: an amorphous group she associates with the New Left. She

therefore has three targets: Sartre, Fanon, and the general mindset among leftists

worldwide at the time of her writing. Among her key criticisms is that while Sartre and

the New Left—and Fanon to a lesser degree—use Marxist theory, they have missed a

central tenet of Marxism.

> Sartre, who in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* goes much
>
> farther in his glorification of violence than Sorel in his famous *Reflections*
>
> *on Violence* […] This shows to what extent Sartre is unaware of his basic
>
> disagreement with Marx on the question of violence, especially when he
>
> states that "irrepressible violence…is man recreating himself," that it is
>
> through "mad fury" that "the wretched of the earth" can "become men."
>
> (Arendt 12)

Arendt admits that Marx is not unaware of the existence and effects of violence, but she

maintains that for him it does not function as a direct catalyst in the ways that Sartre

and Fanon propose. Furthermore, she argues that "it cannot be denied that a gulf

separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring from all deeds of

violence" (Arendt 13). Arendt argues that Hegel put forth thinking as the primary

means of effecting progress, whereas Marx made the praxis of thinking into the praxis

of laboring, though ultimately this does not change much for Arendt in terms of

considerations of violence. Both thinking and laboring are ultimately peaceful praxis,

and violence is merely a side-effect of the inherent contradictions of capitalist and exploitative societies.

But even as she critiques Sartre and Fanon, she attempts to understand how their misstep in thought, to her mind anyway, came about. For her it is a subtle and non-malicious error. As she writes:

> I quoted Sartre in order to show that this new shift toward violence in the thinking of revolutionaries can remain unnoticed even by one of their most representative and articulate spokesmen. (Arendt 13)

In effect, Arendt seems to be saying, the revolutionary leftists of her time had lost sight of both Hegel's and Marx's views on the efficacy of violence without realizing the error. But what's more, Arendt points out that this shift toward an aggrandizement of violence fails at the most basic level of function. Arendt not only critiques the fascination with violence but also its efficacy. It is not just that she finds the overzealous faith in violence disturbing; she finds violent revolution unlikely to succeed as a means for political change. She does not doubt that violence can in fact overthrow an existing government, but rather doubts that the change this overthrow effects will in fact improve the situation.

> In no case, as far as I know, was the force of these "volcanic" outbursts, in Sartre's words, "equal to that of the pressure put on them." To identify the national liberation movements with such outbursts is to prophesy their

doom—quite apart from the fact that the unlikely victory would not result

in changing the world (or the system), but only its personnel. (Arendt 21)

We merely have to think of dozens of revolutions in the Middle East and Africa, as well

as Asia and Russia, to see the accuracy of her complaint. Moreover, we don't have to

look too far in the past to see a striking example of violent revolution compared to

peaceful political evolution. Let us take the example of Venezuela, where in 1992 Hugo

Chavez attempted a violent revolution that failed and ended with him in prison. He

went on, however, to be elected by democratic process to the position of president in

1999. This is perhaps the strongest recent evidence that Hegelian political evolution can

often succeed where violent revolution will fail. And, as Arendt points out, the results

of revolution are often little more than a changing of the guard, not a changing of the

system of oppression.

And it is already at the level of language and conception that the error finds its

origin, Arendt tells us.

> Sartre with his great felicity with words has given expression to the new
>
> faith. "Violence," he now believes, on the strength of Fanon's book, "like
>
> Achilles' lance, can heal the wounds it has inflicted." If this were true,
>
> revenge would be the cure-all for most of our ills. This myth is more
>
> abstract, farther removed from reality, than Sorel's myth of a general
>
> strike ever was. It is on a par with Fanon's worst rhetorical excesses.
>
> (Arendt 20)

Here Arendt critiques the concept that violence can have an equally ameliorating effect

as it can a destructive one. This conception is from the start erroneous, given violence's

much greater capacity for destruction and given the greater ease with which destruction

can be made manifest than positive creation can be. But it also the rhetorical excess of

the believers in violence that she takes to task. It is too simplistic a way to express the

realities and exigencies of resistance to simply praise violence and prescribe it as the

cure for the ills caused by violence itself. The conceptualization of the effects and ethics

of violence should be raised to the level of a calculus, not blunt arithmetic. And the

language we use to discuss when violence is permissible or desirable should be equally

complex and nuanced.

　　To return to the question how to apply these thinkers today in the United States

and elsewhere, I would like to introduce one more element into consideration. The

LGBTQ community has been marginalized and often brutalized in the United States

and elsewhere. It is telling that over the past two decades, thirty-six states and the

District of Columbia have legalized gay marriage, while according to a Pew Research

Center poll from June 2015 shows that 57% of Americans support gay marriage

compared with only 39% who oppose it, and these massive gains in civil liberties have

been achieved without violence on the part of the LGBTQ community. This is not to say

that every struggle can be won in the courtroom and in the arena of public discourse,

but many can, and ultimately changing the laws that institutionalize oppression must

be the final goal—whether one wants to achieve that goal by overthrowing the entire

government and putting in place a new legal constitution or whether one wants to work within the current system and change it via a political evolution process. Following Vollmann's theorizing, I will add here that nonviolent political evolution seems to be the preferable model, when it can work. Arendt would agree with Vollmann, and she seems to go even further in advocating political evolution over political revolution. Minimally, ethics demands that one give a full nuanced reading of every situation and not eschew any means—violent or nonviolent—out of hand. We must be as sure as possible that we are in fact rising up when we use violence, and not actually rising down.

v. Conclusion(s)

It is too simplistic to claim violence has no place in the struggle against oppression. It is likewise too simplistic to see it as merely a destructive force. It can and has been a useful tool, and it forms identity as much as it deforms it. But to aggrandize violence as a means of struggle likewise simplifies the issue. As James Dodd writes:

> There are at least two ways to become the dupes of violence that should
> be of paramount concern. First, there is the tendency to expect *too much*
> from violence, to look to violence either to express a decisiveness of
> purpose, or to provide proof of authenticity that violence cannot in fact
> sustain […] Second, there is a tendency to come to expect *too little* from
> violence, to believe that violence will simply wither away, due either to

the weight of our moral vigilance or the effectiveness of the political, legal, social, or ethical instruments that we employ. (Dodd 1)

We must therefore seek a careful balance in our expectations of violence. We must also be certain violence is the only option available before we endorse its deployment. William T. Vollmann's treatise on human violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, offers us a Moral Calculus by which to determine when violence is justified — that is, when it allows us to rise up instead of rising down, as he phrases it.

There are also myriad dangers in the ways that identity is formed via violence, particularly when we're talking about group identity. Too often the groups aim for a homogeneity that excludes more than it includes and attempts to erase or eradicate differences that would enrich the group.

Fanon's position that violence is a constant in the lives of the oppressed and the oppressor alike and that it shapes the identities and social conditions of both seems at once accurate and useful in theorizing the place of violence in the identities of both groups. It seems likewise accurate, as he contends, that counter-violence is sometimes the only workable measure to take in the face of so much systemic and acute violence; the question is merely one of answering when counter-violence is ethically permissible and and practically applicable . As Vollmann discusses, when he investigates the limits of Gandhi's principle of nonviolence, Hitler's policy was one of "unremitting mercilessness" (Vollmann 74). Vollmann concludes that indeed, in the face of Hitler or another dictator with no regard at all for the lives of others, especially nonviolent

resistors, violence is morally permissible. But as with all of his calculations on the subject, there are limits to violence just as there are limits to nonviolence. Fanon seems, however, to fall into Dodd's category of expecting too much from violence, and his justifications for violence have not achieved the complexity level of a calculus, but rather seems more like a simple arithmetic.

As we will see in the following chapter, there are ways to blur the lines of identity fruitfully in order to avoid an overly rigid us-versus-them paradigm, which almost invariably leads—if history is any indicator—to entrenched violence that perpetuates itself like a virus, solving little while creating greater injustice and violence. By taking a more intersubjective approach, via a multidirectional approach to memory and history, as well as insisting on the permeability of identities, thus finding common ground instead of creating an anti-dialectic of ossified identities stuck in the violence of the practico-inert, we might be able to find, at least in some instances, a solution to violence that is not necessarily counter-violence.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARD AN EXISTENTIALIST ANALYSIS OF KNOTS OF MEMORY

i. Introduction

In recent years, we have seen an explosion of renewed interest in existentialism—ranging from dozens of new translations or re-issues of works by Simone de Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre to a spate of scholarly monographs and articles on existentialist philosophy and literature. Likewise, we have seen a prodigious amount of work done in the field of memory studies. I propose to find common ground between these two trends; more specifically, I propose to undertake an existentialist analysis of *les noeuds de mémoire* (knots of memory), a concept inaugurated as a major new point of inquiry in a 2011 special issue of *Yale French Studies* dedicated to the topic. My primary goal is to establish a philosophical foundation for understanding how these knots of memory emerge. I also argue for existentialism's privileged position in such a philosophical grounding. Employing Alain Badiou's notion of the Event as described in *Being and Event* (1988), Martin Heidegger's investigations from "Origin of the Work of Art" (1960) into how Being is gathered around public structures and how literary allegory dis-closes Being, and Sartre's concept of *le groupe en fusion* (the fused group) from his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), I explicate how these knots of memory form. Sartrean fused groups are formed under duress from a third party or other external pressure. In the dialectics of sociality

and the individuals who are thrown into and are co-constitutive of sociality, we will find part of the answer to our question of how knots of memory form, since these knots belong to the realm of the socio-historical and gather individuals as groups together against the horizon of sociality.

Sartre's under-discussed play, *The Condemned of Altona* (1959), and John Edgar Wideman's *Fanon* (2008), a novel that at once exemplifies a knot of memory and presages the formal concept itself, serve as the primary literary texts throughout my investigations here. These works serve as examples of knots of memory and will aid in establishing the philosophical foundations that allow for an emergence of knots of memory. In situating these works in relation to the discourse surrounding knots of memory, we will thread through multiple Events, demonstrating how Events, literary testimony, and allegory build on and entangle with each other, thereby forming the conditions of possibility for the emergence of knots of memory.

ii. Events, Testimony, and the Gathering (Knotting) of Being around Institutions

How do knots of memory emerge? This is the central question of our current investigation. There are, of course, several corollary questions: For whom do these knots emerge? Is it meaningful to attribute a spatiality or a locus to these knots? What is the dialectical relationship between the socio-historical and the individual in these knots? Do they require an Event in order to emerge? Are they Events in themselves?

To begin to sketch possible answers to this series of interrelated questions, we should first ask after the conditions of possibility for the emergence of these knots of memory. And we should distinguish between necessary conditions and supporting conditions here. I maintain there is no singularly sufficient condition for the emergence of a knot of memory, given that a knot of memory is, per force, the interweaving of various conditions and contingencies. A knot of memory therefore requires multiple necessary conditions and is aided by supporting conditions; a confluence of these two types of conditions forms a sufficient condition-set and allows a knot of memory to emerge.[6]

Let us turn now to Badiou and his notion of the Event, which is perhaps the foremost necessary condition of possibility for a knot of memory.

While it would be somewhat inaccurate to categorize Badiou strictly as an existentialist, it would likewise be remiss to ignore his connections with the existentialist tradition. He announces himself as belonging to the existentialist lineage with the title of his magnum opus, *Being and Event*, placing himself as the third in an ad hoc trilogy of books on Being (*Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness* being the first two). He likewise titled the intro to his 2010 book, *The Century*, "Search for a Method" — an obvious homage to Sartre. But perhaps more important than his strategic self-placement in the tradition by echoing the titles of major existentialist texts is his

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[6] I am using the language of formal logic here (*necessary condition*, *sufficient condition*), but since the socio-historical eludes such a neat analytic formulation, I have added the term *supporting condition*. As in the analytic endeavors of logic, mathematics, and science, we are in the business of explaining occurrences after the fact and attempting to predict them beforehand.

(somewhat contentious) claim in *Being and Event* that "Heidegger is the last universally recognizable philosopher"(1). And his project in that book is primarily one of ontology, like Heidegger and Sartre before him. My purpose for suggesting that we treat Badiou as firmly within the existentialist tradition is that I want to establish the privileged status of existentialist philosophy (particularly that of Badiou, Heidegger, and Sartre) in theorizing knots of memory. All of which brings us to the first station in our investigation: how can we make use of Badiou's notion of Events to elucidate the emergence of knots of memory?

As the metaphor of knots implies, these are not merely the regular flow of memory, but rather a gathering up of memory, or an entangling of memory. What causes such a gathering or entangling? I argue that multiple Events of the type Badiou describes are a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the emergence of a knot of memory — that is, there must be at least two Events, though no number of Events guarantees the emergence of a knot of memory.

But we should pause to clarify our terminology. I have been using the term "Event" without having properly defined it. Here is Badiou explicating the French Revolution in terms of his notion of the Event:

> The historian ends up including in the event 'the French Revolution' everything delivered by the epoch as traces and facts. This approach, however — which is the inventory of all the elements of the site — may well lead to the one of the event being undone to the point of being no more

than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things and words that

co-existed with it. The halting point for this dissemination is *the mode in*

which the Revolution is a central term of the Revolution itself; that is, the

manner in which the conscience of the times — and the retroactive

intervention of our own — filters the entire site through the one of its

evental qualification […] Of the French Revolution as event it must be said

that it both presents the infinite multiple of the sequence of facts situated

between 1789 and 1794, and, *moreover*, that it presents itself as an

immanent résumé and one-mark of its own multiple. (*Being and Event* 180)

[All italics in original.]

For the sake of clarification, let us turn to Slavoj Žižek's succinct and clear description of

what a Badiouian Event is:

The Event is the Truth of the situation that makes visible/legible what the

'official' situation had to 'repress', but it is also always localized — that is to

say, the Truth is always the Truth *of* a specific situation. The French

Revolution, for example, is the Event which makes visible/legible the

excesses and inconsistencies, the 'lie', of the *ancient régime* situation,

localized, attached to it. (*The Ticklish Subject* 148-149)

An Event is therefore a culmination of a set of socio-historical factors. But even as an

Event is a culmination, it is also a hermeneutic.

An Event thus involves its own series of determinations: the Event itself; its naming (the designation 'French Revolution' is not an objective categorizing but part of the Event itself […]) […]; and, last but not least, its *subject*, the agent who, on behalf of the Truth-Event, intervenes in the historical multiple of the situation and discerns/identifies in it signs-effects of the Event. What defines the subject is his *fidelity* to the Event: the subject comes *after* the Event and persists in discerning its traces within his situation. (ibid) [All italics in original.]

By this reckoning, the Holocaust would be the culmination of the Truth of German anti-Semitism (or to think more broadly, the culmination of European-Christian anti-Semitism up to the point of the Holocaust); the Algerian Revolution would be the culmination of the Truth of French colonialism in Algeria (and throughout Africa); and September 11th would be the culmination of the Truth of the United States' role in global politics and the Truth of radical Islam.

But the occurrence of multiple and potentially relatable Events does not by any means guarantee that a knot of memory will form. As Žižek reminds us, the naming of an Event is part of the Event itself. We should also note that, according to Žižek's reading of Badiou's conception of the Event, the subject only emerges out of the Event afterward, via fidelity to the Event. I argue that the primary mode of fidelity, vis-à-vis the concept of knots of memory, is that of testimony, in all its myriad forms—juridical testimony, literary production, public memorials, and so forth.

The concept of knots of memory brings Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) forward by freeing it from a particular site (among other advances). By Badiou's account, however, place is key to the originating Events which I argue make the emergence of knots of memory possible. We must therefore reference the places associated with these Events in order to properly understand a knot of memory, or the concept itself. The knot of memory is not, however, bound to any single place in the way an Event is. We might rightly say that the sites of Events condition the knot of memory that emerges, but they do not bind the knot there.

But there is another way in which place must be thought of as affecting the formation and valence of a knot of memory. In "Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger discusses the gathering of Being around such institutions/objects as temples. He also distinguishes the effect of a work of art (e.g., a painting or a poem) from that of a public-architectural structure, while admitting the two share many traits. The work of art, as conceived by Heidegger, meshes well with Debarati Sanyal's contribution concerning allegory and knots of memory in the aforementioned issue of *Yale French Studies*, as well as with my own contention that testimony is a necessary condition for the emergence of a knot of memory. As Heidegger writes: "The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory" (19). It is this making-public that allows for a knot of memory to emerge in sociality, thus making it possible for individuals to find themselves entangled in it. But what role do physical institutions and architectural objects play in this drama?

Heidegger tells us that they gather Being unto themselves, becoming centers of sociality and Being. They gather Being unto themselves, creating a locus of Being. In this way, they contribute loci for knots of memory, even though knots of memory do not, properly speaking, have a place (*lieu*). To rephrase Heidegger's notion a bit, I propose that these memorial institutions knot Being around and in themselves, thus aiding in the formation of knots of memory. Here is Heidegger's description of how this takes place:

> The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. (40-41)

Heidegger seems to conceive of this gathering of Being predominantly (though not solely) in terms of architectural structures and works of art which perform a key cultural function.[7] I would like to focus, for now, on this Heideggerian concept of cultural-architectural structures gathering Being. We will return to other forms of art shortly.

I invite you to think of memorial monuments to the Holocaust as our point of investigation into how such a locus of Being-gathering conditions the emergence of knots of memory. While there are certainly monuments and memorials at the historical

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[7] On my reading of Heidegger, a small shack would certainly gather Being unto itself, but not with anything like the magnitude of a church or courthouse or museum.

sites of Nazi concentration camps, frequently no concentration camps were located at the sites of these monuments. The same is true of other atrocities or wars (e.g., the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.). The sites of these latter monuments and memorials therefore cannot be considered the site to which the Event of the Holocaust is bound, as Badiou tells us all Events must be bound to some site—yet I argue these distant sites are salient for a discussion of knots of memory that include memories of the Holocaust (as well as other memories of suffering and violence). Why should this be the case?

Since one of the interventions offered by the concept of knots of memory is the displacement of Nora's sites of memory, we will focus solely on monuments located at sites other than the geographical location of the Event they memorialize. These monuments gather Being unto themselves and, to use Heideggerian language, they clear and illuminate Being. In effect, these memorial sites offer one mode of resistance to the natural tendency of forgetfulness and of world-withdrawal, though they cannot stave it off indefinitely. The memorial sites and their monument structures serve as a *techne* for dis-closing Being, in the way Heidegger discusses it in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology." Heidegger also conceives of a process by which a work of art or architecture can experience a receding of Being, which is why such monuments can only hope to stave off forgetfulness, not to abolish it entirely. This seems salient to the discussion of knots of memory, not for a discussion of how they emerge but rather of how they might dissolve. As the institutions, located in sociality,

experience this recession of Being, once they no longer gather Being unto themselves, they lose their ability to help the process of memory-knotting, and this in turn is part of the unraveling and forgetting process. For now, I will abandon the discussion of this gathering of Being and of world-withdrawal, having merely established that there can be loci which serve as supporting conditions for the emergence of knots of memory, even if they are not necessary conditions for that emergence.

We also must realize the dialectic between the individual and sociality in the formation of knots of memory. These knots must exist in sociality, but individuals get caught or entangled in these knots, and via fidelity to the Events which gave rise to the knots, they are interpolated by the knots into subjecthood—or, minimally, into one aspect of their subjecthood. A key site for this dialectic is that of testimony.

Before moving on to literary allegory and its relationship to knots of memory, allow me to recapitulate the thread of our argument to this point. Here are the conditions of possibility for a knot memory to emerge, as we have established them thus far. At least two Badouian Events must occur, a Sartrean fused group must be formed, then testimony must occur for each of the Events in question, and finally, someone or some group of people must connect these testimonies together; and all the while, various memorial institutions can aid in the emergence of a knot of memory, though they are not, strictly speaking, necessary.

iii. Crabwalking Through History

> "To search for beginnings, you turn into a crab.
>
> The historian looks backwards; in the end he
>
> even *believes* backwards."
>
> —Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Debarati Sanyal writes:

> Allegory opens what I will call here a kind of crabwalk history, in which
> distinct yet proximate genealogies of state violence are evoked to
> constitute a *noeud de mémoire* that helps us better read the aims and effects
> of both as an embodied confrontation and as the outcome of a structure of
> relations. (Sanyal 53)

Literary allegory is therefore seen as, if not quite a necessary condition for a knot of memory, then at least one of the primary modes of such an emergence, because it allows for this crabwalking through history which *is* a necessary condition for knots of memory to emerge. While there are perhaps other means by which a knot of memory can emerge, my current investigation focuses on the means by which knots of memory form and how allegory and, more broadly speaking, literary works of art participate in the formation of knots of memory.

The following passage is central to understanding what a knot of memory is, as well as the intellectual genealogy of the concept:

Thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, probed the affinities between Nazism and imperialism, as well those between the concentrationary and colonial experience, identifying analogies, continuities, and even intersections between these distinct legacies of racialized violence. (ibid)

A knot of memory, therefore, should be understood as the affinities and intersections between distinct legacies of violence or oppression. But why do we need such a concept? What does the concept of a knot of memory add to already existing discourse, largely coming out of Nora's groundbreaking work on *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory)? There are several reasons we might want to shift our thinking on memory to the knots-of-memory model, perhaps foremost among them being that it expands the conceptualization of how memory works from the sites-of-memory model which has a "conception of the nation purged of many of its imperial adventures and minoritarian inflections—purged, in short, of phenomena that trouble the linear narrative of historical progress and the stark opposition between history and memory" (Rothberg 4). The concept is therefore useful for its capacity to accommodate the multidirectional reality of memory. It likewise does not privilege history over memory, nor does it define these in opposition to each other, as Nora does. And, finally, it is a geographically movable concept. New knots may form at practically any site where the requisite conditions are met, and that site does not bind these new knots of memory. The concept therefore is considerably more flexible than its predecessor.

Having established, in the previous section, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a knot of memory, and having established in the previous paragraph why the concept is a productive intervention into memory studies, let us look at some of its specific features, as explicated by Sanyal.

It is worth noting that Sanyal focuses on collective or state violence, and violence that is aimed at a collective. Here her choice of Sartre's play *The Condemned of Altona* as her case study is perhaps even more fitting than she realizes. In 1961, just over a year after *The Condemned of Altona* enjoyed its first production, the first volume of Sartre's *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* was published. Even though Sanyal does not reference it, Sartre's *Critique* is particularly useful in clarifying for whom a knot of memory emerges, since it is not the case that all groups will share all knots of memory; one's entanglement in and interpellation by a knot of memory depends on one's membership or (af)filiation with a group whose sociality contains and conditions the knot. The Sartrean concept from his *Critique* that is salient for our purposes here is the fused group. Earlier I stated that fused groups are a necessary condition for the emergence of knots-of-memory. We should look more closely at the concept itself and how it functions vis-à-vis knots-of-memory.

Sartre, using the French Revolution as his example, describes the situation prior to the formation of fused groups which eventuate the revolution.

> After 12 July 1789 the people of Paris were in a state of revolt. Their anger had deep causes, but as yet these had affected the people only in their

common impotence (cold, hunger, etc., were all suffered either in resignation—serial behavior falsely presenting itself as individual virtue—or in unorganised outbursts, riots, etc.). On the basis of what exterior circumstances were groups to be constituted? (*Critique* 351)

Dès le 12 juillet, le peuple de Paris est en état d'insurrection. Sa colère a des causes profondes mais qui jusqu'ici n'ont attaint les classes populaires que dans leur impuissance commune (le froid, la faim, etc., le tout subi dans la resignation, cette conduit sérielle qui se donne faussement pour une vertu individuelle, ou dans des explosions inorganisées, émeutes, etc.). A partir de quelles circonstances extérieures les groups vont-ils constituer? (Critique 386)

Firstly, Sartre distinguishes between amorphous directionless revolt, which takes place in seriality, and an organized resistance, which can only happen when fused groups are formed. Secondly, Sartre tells us that a fused group forms under adversity at the hands of a third party (*Critique* 361-363). This adversity has the potential to change a series of subjects into a fused group. Our most common state in society, Sartre tells us, is that of seriality—an undifferentiated series of subjects treading socially pre-ordained paths. But when a third party threatens such an amorphous group, it becomes a fused group in response to the threat or violence, thus creating a group identity and perhaps going so far as to form a fraternity or pledged group (*Critique* 419). I propose that it is fused groups and their members who are interpellated by the knot, and it is fused groups and

their members who are called to Badouian fidelity to the Events which form the condition of possibility for a knot of memory.

But how do literature and allegory fit into this process? Sanyal suggests that allegory can harken back, thus translating one Event back to a preceding Event. I propose that we combine Sanyal's contention with two Heideggerian points: 1) Literary language discloses Being to us, thus allowing us to recognize Being—that is to say, without this process of disclosure, we would be unable to recognize the truth of an Event. 2) Works of art always refer us to something else in an allegorical fashion. They therefore aid in the formation of a knot of memory precisely because they aid in the referring-back-to a preceding Event. As Sanyal writes:

> In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the legacy of Nazi genocide was woven into other histories in the making, and formed memorial knots that bound together distinct legacies […] Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, probed the affinities between Nazism and imperialism, as well as those between the concentrationary and colonial experience, identifying analogies, continuities, and even intersections between these distinct legacies of racialized violence […] Allegory, or speaking otherwise, evoked one history through another and bound them into a *noeud de mémoire*. (Sanyal 54)

According to Sanyal, Sartre's play *The Condemned of Altona* represents a knot of memory in itself. Literature can therefore, via allegory, form a knot of memory, and the space of

this knot is moveable—wherever the play is read or produced, the knot has the capacity

to emerge, since the audience has the potential to be transposed back through the

Events and subject positions of those who experienced them.

iv. Historical Threads, Knots of Memory, and Blurring the Subject-Subject Divide

National Book Award finalist John Edgar Wideman's novel, *Fanon* (2008), is a

brazenly "experimental" novel that approaches its titular subject from nontraditional

angles. Using metafictional techniques, Wideman tells the story of Thomas, who

receives a severed head in a box after 9/11. The identity of the author, the narrator,

several characters, and even the reader blur, thus undermining rigidly distinct

identities. This is a standard postmodern trope, but particularly useful for the concept

of knots of memory, though other blurrings are perhaps even more useful, such as

when Wideman uses the texture of his prose to intermix the struggles of Fanon in Africa

and the struggles of Africa.

> It's 1961. Fanon's last year on earth, the year in whose first month,
>
> January, Fanon's new acquaintance Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister
>
> of a brand-spanking-new Republic of Congo, will be kidnapped, tortured,
>
> executed by Belgians and Congolese, his body burned in an oil drum, the
>
> year in whose last month, December, Fanon will succumb to leukemia in a
>
> hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, 1961 the of this journey we're shadowing
>
> that begins in a Guinean town, Kankan, crosses the border to Bamako in

Mali, then goes to Ségou to Mopti to Gao and north, always pushing north

toward Algeria's war of independence from France, following the North

Star or whichever star's luminosity and lustrosity beams hope, a beacon

and benediction, Uh-huh, oh yeah, don't yeh hear me talkin to yeh,

chillen, don't youall just adore that star shinin bright, oh, oh, oh, you are

my shining star, the old, the new star leading Frantz and his crew in SUVs

humping north across Mali. Good golly, Miss Mali, you sure love to ball.

Blasts from the past in my earphones, not Fanon's. (Wideman 38-39)

Via the use of free indirect discourse, Wideman weaves together Fanon's story and the

larger story of African independence in the 1950s and 1960s with the story of black

resistance in the United States at the same time, along the "we" of the present

"shadowing" Fanon on his revolutionary journey and the narrator of the narrator of the

novel itself. It is also worth noting that this weaving seamlessly blurs the decriptions of

each of these subject positions, thus refusing neat distinctions between groups, thus

continuing Wideman's project of blurring the subject-subject divide.

One last note about Wideman's prose tactics: notice that he writes in the present

tense, even when he discusses events of the past. He is therefore present-ing the past,

suggesting that it is always with us, woven into the fabric of our current events (and

current Events).

And it is precisely these literary tactics that allow Wideman to make what must

be considered a substantial contribution to our possibilities of thinking of and through

knots of memory. Likewise, *Fanon* is an ideal example of Sanyal's discussion of allegory or "speaking otherwise." It interesting for our discussion for another reason as well. The novel takes up the knot of memory formed by Sartre's play *The Condemned of Altona* in that it links Nazi Germany and French colonialism in Algeria, but it weaves a further Event-thread into the knot (thus forming a new knot) by including the Event of 9/11 to the bundle. It should also be noted that not only does *Fanon* lend itself to an analysis via the knots of memory concept, it presages the notion by thematizing threads, unraveling, and interwovenness in regard to multiple Events of suffering/violence three years before the formal concept was inaugurated.

> Always too late too late to change what you struggle to learn. What you
> don't learn no help either. Crazy old crones haggling over your fate, then
> forgetting you as soon as they dispense your portion. So what if you
> believe that myth or some other myth. Yes, all threads connect […] The
> same step leads everywhere, nowhere. To France. Back home to his island.
> Hitler's fatherland. The motherland. War. Peace. The bottom of the sea.
> (149)

This passage indicates that both the things we are conscious of (those things we struggle to learn) and those things of which we are not conscious (those things we don't learn) are subject to and condition our social and historical fate in equal measure. To put this in Heideggerian terms, we are thrown into a historically conditioned sociality and our lives are determined to great degree by that historical sociality. And to put it in Sartre's

terms from *Being and Nothingness*, which echo and alter Marx, we are free to choose, but we are not free to choose the conditions in which we choose. And, of course, the ending of Wideman's paragraph insists that we end in the abyss, in death, no matter how the threads of history and our personal fates interweave. In effect, its depiction of life is fundamentally existentialist, as is its view of death.

To move from how this passage is steeped in existentialist thought to the insight it lends to our investigation into the notion of knots of memory, we can start with the metaphor of connected threads. These knots formed by the threads of one's fate are historical in Wideman's writing. But it would be facile to stop merely at the level of metaphor here. What is most striking is that he explicitly connects France, Martinique, and Hitler's Germany, suggesting, as both Sartre and Sanyal do, that these histories of violence are neither distinct nor disconnected.

Moreover, Wideman's prose style is steeped in postmodern wordplay, and in his linguistic playfulness, Wideman continues to make the point of our interconnectedness and continues to blur subject positions as they knot together in memory. Here is the aforementioned dialogue between the novel's John Edgar Wideman and Godard, which Wideman gives us in the form of a screenplay:

> JLG: (whose English is excellent) Very good grit.
>
> JEW: (whose English is heavily accented) Blah-blah-blah.
>
> JLG: *Bien sûr*.

JEW: There are some advantages to balance the disadvantages of being from the hood. Especially when I'm in the hood. Like a seat at the closest thing to a table in this joint, for instance. Or like the way these reporters, your fans, Mr. G., fawn over me, hang on my every word. Clingy as starlets. They desire more than anything access to the top, and for a minute, while here in the hood, I'm the top. Observing behavior you'd assume, if you didn't know better, each of them is my best friend. They all want to eat and drink and rap with me. (*Fanon* 108-109)

Do we see a variation on Levinas's point about inter-subjective substitution here? Levinas, in a move typical of his overall project, attempts to outdo Heidegger's blurring of the subject-object divide; Levinas wants to blur the subject-subject divide as well. To return to my earlier terminology, this would not be a necessary condition for the emergence of a knot of memory, but it is a strongly supporting condition. The ethical-imaginative effort of substituting oneself for an other is perhaps one of the key supporting conditions for the emergence of a knot of memory, and in this case, this subject-substitution is what allows for the "crabwalking through history" which Sanyal argues *is* necessary for a knot of memory to form.

And, as Sanyal explains, the use of allegory allows us some degree of this subject-substitution as well as Event-substitution. Literature blurs the lines between subjects and Events by disclosing their Being and thereby inviting and making possible

an imagining or translation across the divisions between them. Sanyal isolates two

moments in *The Condemns of Altona* that salient to the topic of subject-substitution.

> Frantz finds the mad and frightened rabbi wandering about the property
>
> and hides him in his room, in a gesture that prefigures his own mad
>
> sequestration. (Sanyal 58)

And later she quotes the following passage from Sartre's play: "I have supreme power.

Hitler has made me an Other, implacable and sacred: himself" (ibid). Frantz is therefore

intersubjectively transposed with a Jewish victim at one moment in the play and with

the leader of the Nazi regime at another moment. This mirrors the French transposition

from victim during the Occupation to perpetrator during the Algerian War. It is

precisely this literary language and allegorical crabwalking that makes possible the knot

of memory that *The Condemned of Altona* represents. And Wideman crabwalks his way

back from the position of an African-American in post-9/11 America through the

Algerian War to the position of Jewishness during WWII.

There is, on the one hand, something utopian about this ability to transpose

Events and subject positions, since it allows for larger opportunities for solidarity

among disparate groups (as Jim House explains in his article "Memory and the

Creation of Solidarity During the Decolonization of Algeria" in the aforementioned

special issue of *Yale French Studies* on the concept of knots of memory). Sanyal warns us

that there is, however, also a danger inherent in the use of allegory.

> Throughout Sartre's writings, the colonized subject and the Jew are evacuated of their historical, religious, or racial specificity […] Yet as Walter Benjamin has observed, this hollowing out of bodies and histories is a feature of allegory itself, a rhetorical figure that unmoors image and meaning and whose structure of substitution turns its objects of representation into so many ghosts or "phantom proxies" that can be pressed in service of other times, bodies, and places. (68)

The specificity of each Event is often lost in the allegorical crabwalking process that allows for a knot of memory to form, so what at first seemed like a utopian melding suddenly shows elements of erasure in regard to atrocities. "The allegorical registers of Sartre's play erase the particularity of the Final Solution […] Yet it is this betrayal of testimonial specificity that opens up a politics of memory in the play" (68). In effect, as we will explore further in Chapter Five, we must admit our existential finitude and admit there is no perfect solution here. There will be gains and losses in the process of allegory; we must simply do everything in our (finite) power to amplify the gains and mitigate the losses. We must also admit, as Sanyal tells us, that "the traumatic nature of experiences such as detainment, torture, and extermination often prompt the displacements of allegorical inscription in order to become legible and transmissible" (52). Allegory is sometimes the primary way such experiences can be transmitted. Will something be lost in translation? Yes; there always is. But there is also much gained.

The spatial figure of the crabwalk invites us to read time allegorically,

such that Nazism and imperialism, genocide and colonialism, the

Holocaust and decolonization are addressed side by side by side in

relations of proximity and mutual illumination rather than of petrified

equivalence and identity. The crabwalk suggests a circuit of

communication that travels forward and backward in time […] it offers a

mode of reading that brings different histories into proximity and

adjacency without reducing one to the other. (Sanyal 70-71)

Various histories and Events overlap and intertwine, and despite whatever dangers

allegory presents, encouraging knots of memory to emerge is one of our best hopes of

learning from these disparate histories and Events. And, as Jim House argues, knots of

memory can facilitate solidarity among disparate groups, such as white French citizens

and black Algerian revolutionaries.

v. Conclusion(s)

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to deploy an existentialist problematic

to describe knots of memory, and to explicate the conditions of possibility for the

emergence of thereof. To summarize the key points of my investigation, I will recount

briefly the order of operations, as I see them, for the emergence of a knot of memory. I

will then summarize the application of my thinking on the novel *Fanon* by John Edgar

Wideman, as well as summarizing how his fictional exploration of such

interconnectedness across time and events presaged and can inform the theoretical investigation inaugurated by the 2012 special issue of *Yale French Studies* on the topic.

We should review the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a knot of memory. First, at least two Badiouian Events must occur, but this is not enough to ensure that a knot of memory will emerge between them. The nature of the Events must be that Sartrean fused groups emerge by virtue of each Event. This means that the Events must be violent or oppositional, thus limiting the types of Events that can lead to a knot of memory. But since Sartre instructs us that fused groups do not necessarily stay fused, that they in fact often dissolve back into mere seriality, something more is needed. What is this something? Testimony of some sort is the next necessary condition of possibility for the emergence of a knot of memory, since it allows for what Sanyal calls "crabwalking through history."

And here I would like to take a brief detour and move to the effects of monumentalizing in the public-architectural sphere. I do not consider these monuments (be they literal monuments or museums) necessary conditions for the emergence of a knot of memory, but they are supporting conditions for such emergence. How does this work? By what means do such monuments support the emergence of a knot of memory? Here, I turn to Heidegger's notion of the gathering of Being around such culturally salient structures and restage his gathering of Being as a knotting of Being. By this gathering/knotting of Being by such monuments, attention is drawn to the Events they monumentalize—they are an allegory of sorts for the Events—and thus the

monuments and the events they monumentalize begin to condition the historicity of a given epoch. One effect of this is that they ease the process of the formation of a knot of memory.

Something that has been left undiscussed is the causal process by which various Events share sufficient affinity to allow or even encourage such memorial knotting to occur. Sanyal nicely points out that in the case of Sartre's play *The Condemned of Altona*:

> Postwar French cultural production abounds with figures that put the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust in dialogue with other bodies and histories. Figures such as the victim-turned-executioner or the enemy whose is one's own sought to shore up anticolonial dissent by underscoring France's paradoxical turn from victim of Nazi occupation to perpetrator of internment and torture in service of colonial occupations. (53)

Here we see a nearly perfect historical contiguity between the Events which serve as the basis for the particular knot of memory Sanyal discusses, but this direct historical contiguity is not present in Wideman's novel. The paths of history's garden have forked many times between Fanon's revolutionary efforts in the 1950s and the neo-imperialist wars waged in the wake of 9/11. There are, of course, connections and perhaps even certain threads of contiguity we could find here, but the historical and geographic distances in this case are considerably greater and more tenuous than in the case Sanyal investigates via Sartre.

My hope has been to offer a philosophical-theoretical grounding for the emergence of knots of memory and to prove existentialist philosophy holds a privileged position in the formation of such a grounding.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE 10,000 EVIL VISIONS: TRANSGRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND IDENTITY

FORMATION IN THE WORK OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

i. Introduction

"Why is your writing so violent?" Since it is

commonly understood that serious writers, as

distinct from entertainers or propagandists,

take for their natural subjects the complexity of the

world, its evils as well as its goods, it is always an

insulting question; and it is always sexist.

> —Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So
> Violent?"

It seems that I write about things that are violent and

extreme, but it is always against a background of something

deep and imperishable. I feel I can wade in blood, I can

endure the 10,000 evil visions.

> —Joyce Carol Oates, from the 1972 *Newsweek* feature
>
> on her and her work, "Love and Violence: A Vision of
>
> America"

Joyce Carol Oates is widely known for her dark themes and violent subject matter. As Margot Livesey wrote in the March 7, 1999 edition of *The New York Times*, "In Oates's fluent grasp, the grotesque becomes a map of the mind's dark places." And Mary Kathryn Grant puts it even more forcefully:

> Joyce Carol Oates's fictive world is violent, replete with nightmare,
> destruction, and futility, with a catalogue of horrors […] Any
> understanding of her fiction is contingent upon an understanding of the
> place violence has in her tragic vision. For Oates, life, conceived in terms
> of a brutal struggle for survival against the world and against one's fellow
> human beings, can only be conquered through violence. The one recourse
> man has to achieve a sense of self-affirmation in the "cheap, flashy
> wasteland of modern America" is violence. (Grant 31)

We should notice not only Grant's interpretation of violence in Oates's literary vision, but also its kinship to Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of our relations with others and the place of violence in human interaction. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre conceives of the primordial interaction between individuals as antagonistic and offers violence and hatred as possible forms of self-affirmation. German philosopher Willi Maier summarizes Sartre's position on the inherent and ubiquitous conflict of human existence thus:

> But insofar that it is, on the other hand, an absolute necessity, that
> consciousness "has" a body (la nécessité «d'avoir» un corps pour le pour-

soi…), man finds himself, as a result of this "necessary" body, in a
constant threat from other men: Man, coming to consciousness, finds
himself, according to Sartre, in a situation characterized by a primordial
conflict.[8]

*Aber indem es somit auch umgekehrt eine absolute Notwendigkeit ist, daß das
Bewußtsein einen Leib „hat" (la nécessité «d'avoir» un corps pour le pour-soi…),
befindet sich der Mensch infolge dieses „notwendigen" Leibes in einer ständigen
Bedrohung durch die anderen Menschen: Der zum Bewußtsein kommende
Mensch findet sich nach Sartre in einer Situation vor, die durch einen
ursprünglichen Konflikt gekennzeichnet ist.* (Maier 11)

Notice here Sartre's focus on the body as central to this primordial conflict. Oates's
engagement with the body, particularly the female body, is likewise primordially
oppositional and violent.

As the quotes I have offered (and the many more one could offer) prove, violence
is perhaps the central theme of Oates's work. I am therefore introducing nothing new in
terms of proving that her prodigious literary output has violence at its center.
Additionally, I am introducing nothing new when I claim that she is particularly
(though by no means solely) interested in the way violence affects women's lives. My
intervention here is to suggest that we read these well-documented aspects of Oates's

---

[8] All translations from the Maier text are my own, since there is no English translation.

work through the prism of existentialism. My goal is twofold. Firstly, I will establish the influence of existentialism on Oates's literary production and show her lasting intellectual interest in the questions raised by existentialism. Secondly, I will argue the corollary point that existentialism is not only a major influence on Oates's work but likewise the most fruitful means of interpreting it.

There are, however, several obstacles to my efforts here, obstacles I hope to turn into helpmates. First among them is Oates's massive output. She has published nearly one hundred books, ranging across all genres and often enormous in size. There are years in which she produces four or five books. To keep track of all this production proves difficult. As Erica Jong phrases it, "Her gift is so large, her fluency in different genres—poems, short stories, novels, essays—so great, that at times she seems to challenge the ability of readers to keep up with her" (*Expensive People*, x). This also means, however, that a scholar of Oates's work has massive amounts of data to work with. And, I hasten to point out, this outsized productivity fits with Sartre's dictum that *action* and *doing* are the sole means of bringing one's self into existence. While it is perhaps a superficial connection, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Norman Mailer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and William T. Vollmann—all of the subjects of my investigation in *Being and Suffering*—are likewise massively productive and also have works in many genres. This is what a court of law might call mere circumstantial evidence, insufficient to establish beyond a doubt a salient connection between all of these writers in terms of the volume and genre(s) of their output, but

circumstantial evidence can be useful in shoring up the more substantive evidence. We should also note here that both the prodigious output and the range of genres fits perfectly with an existentialist worldview. We are constituted by our actions, existentialism tells us; we are not essentially any single thing—essayist, novelist, philosopher, playwright, or poet—but rather whatever we make ourselves via our actions, our daily doing. It should therefore come as no surprise that these existentialist writers would produce so prodigiously, and it should come as no surprise that they should reinvent their writerly projects so freely.

Finally, I will discuss Oates's contributions to an understanding of how human identity is formed through and by violence and in conflict with the Other. Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, explicates how the primary relationship with the Other is one of conflict. He likewise explicates how we form our identities via our relationship with the Other. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he describes how fused groups form under external duress of either a direct and personal or indirect and systemic nature. I will argue that, for Oates, conflict with the Other and violence (both personal and systemic) are central to the formation of the subject's identity as well as of the identity of the group, collective, or community.

ii. Is Joyce Carol Oates an Existentialist?

One need look no further than the first entry in *The Journals of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973-1982* (2007) to see how central existentialist thought is for Oates: "Query: Does the individual exist? What is the essential, necessary quality of (sheer) existence…." (*The Journals* 2, emphasis in the original). And her interest in existentialism continues throughout her career, ranging from her 1973 article in *The Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry* to several references to Sartre in her 1978 novel *Expensive People* to an epigraph from Sartre for her 2001 novel *Blonde*. Her engagement with existentialism extends into her role as teacher as well. As she writes in an entry dated November 22, 1974: "Had taught my freshman class at 11 o'clock—dealing with the subtleties of 'existentialism' in Kafka's writing—if indeed he is an 'existentialist'—yet who isn't?" (*The Journals* 39). And later, in an entry dated January 26, 1977: "…and weren't we studying Dostoyevsky and Sartre and Camus and Céline and Nietzsche in my course?" (*The Journals* 170). And even beyond her professional and public endeavors of writing and teaching, she seems to have considered her own identity in existentialist terms.

> …On one side of the looking-glass one tries to create himself. An almost Sartrean project. ("I choose to be a hero. I choose to be an Olympic diver. I choose to be a novelist. I choose to be a high-wire artist." Etc., forever.) Then life, day by day, is an attempt to answer the terms of that project; an attempt on the individual's part to grow into it. Very sensibly. However—

one can look at it from another angle, or from the other side of the looking-glass. I am Joyce Carol Oates and this, this, and this are happening to me; innumerable things <u>have</u> happened; my own (strenuous?) activities are in a sense things that have happened to me; so if I observe carefully (and this journal stimulates careful, relentless observation) all this…this galaxy of bits…I will come to some idea of who I am, after all. Not as a project, a willed phenomenon…but as a creation of some sort (a creation impersonal as anything in Nature). The one exalts the will, the other undervalues it. (*The Journals* 268-269)

While Oates sees the one side of the looking-glass as Sartrean and the other as opposed to the Sartrean model, the combination of the two is in fact a fuller description of Sartre's position. In effect, she unknowingly recreates a near-duplicate of Sartre's position on the matter, where we are individuals with individual wills, yet we are also historically and culturally and biologically conditioned by our facticity. Sartre's description of the individual includes both sides of Oates's looking-glass, as she seems to want as well in her notion of the individual. And perhaps just as importantly, Sartrean philosophy is the starting point of her inquiry into the nature of the individual and how she understands herself.

But like Norman Mailer, Oates is not an existentialist in the sense that she has adopted wholesale any philosopher's system. Following philosopher Richard Schacht's genealogy of existentialism, I consider Arthur Schopenhauer (as opposed to Friedrich

Nietzsche or Søren Kierkegaard) the progenitor of modern existentialism. The only

philosopher mentioned more often than Sartre in Oates's work is Schopenhauer—and,

here again, references to him span her entire career, from her earliest journal entries to

her 2007 novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. I find this is entirely fitting, given

Schopenhauer's preoccupation with pain and suffering. Oates is therefore not only

consistently interested in existentialism in general but also Schopenhauer himself, the

progenitor of modern existentialist thought and the philosopher of suffering *par*

excellence.

And I am not the first reader to notice Oates's existentialist engagement. Mary

Kathryn Grant, in *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (1978), likewise engages Sartre

and Heidegger to explicate Oates's theme(s) of violence.

> Jean-Paul Sartre maintains in his highly controversial introduction to
>
> Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that "this irrepressible violence is
>
> neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even
>
> the effect of resentment: it is man re-creating himself."
>
> This twofold aspect of violence, the ability to destroy the "enemy"
>
> and the ability to transcend the trivial, Joyce Carol Oates continually
>
> explores in her writings. Throughout her works, however, she insists on
>
> the ability of violence to help the individual achieve a sense of identity
>
> and wholeness. (Grant 34-35)

Notice here that the violent act is the act that can most define the individual. In order to find one's identity as a marginalized group, some form of violence—physical, psychological, or metaphorical—must occur against the dominating force(s). Grant goes on to outline the similarity with Heidegger's view on violence in regard to the world. (Recall here, of course, that the world for Heidegger is not solely the world of physical objects but also the social world.)

> Violence is also part of man's efforts to exercise some control over his world. "'To be safe from violence you have to be violent yourself,'"— Lowry explains to Clara [in Oates's novel *Garden of Earthly Delights*]. One is violent first, before he becomes a victim. Violence is an escape from passivity; even if one is destroyed in the end, it is better to have taken the first step of being violent oneself. Martin Heidegger in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* elaborates on this principle. Violence is the direct result of violated being, he philosophizes. "Man is the violent one…He uses power against the overpowering." (Grant 38)

Grant has singled out an important aspect of Oates's thinking as well as its salient complement in Heideggerian philosophy, though I do want to take issue with her interpretation that Oates's characters "[are] violent first." In nearly all of her works, they have already suffered structural trauma (in the sense Dominique LaCapra uses the term) as well as personal or systemic violence—be it economic, familial, racial, or random. And in many cases, they have already been victims of direct violence in the

form of rape or other physical assault, or they have been systemically downtrodden via economic, gender, or racial disadvantage(s). I would therefore merely rephrase Grant's contention to state that they use violence to transform themselves from passive victims to active agents, even when, as Grant points out, this does not necessarily improve their material conditions. In effect, I argue, "the overpowering" that Heidegger speaks of must be present first before a counter-violence on the part of Oates's characters comes into play.

And, as Oates tells us, personally enacted violence "is always an affirmation" (*The Edge of Impossibility* 11). For the majority of her works, I would argue violence is the affirmation of the self in particular, but sometimes it can be the affirmation of a worldview (religious, political, etc.), though that too has much to do with one's identity, and affirming one's religious or political views is affirming some aspect of the self as well.

Oates can therefore not only be considered an existentialist in general terms, but also in how she deals with violence and identity specifically. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will explore how an existentially understood violence and sense of identity plays out across several of Oates's works. This dialectic of violence and counter-violence not only plays a key role in the identity formation of individual characters but also entire communities, and, Oates hints at times, the entirety of the United States; violence and counter-violence therefore determine both individual identity and the sociality into which individuals are thrown (in the Heideggerian sense).

iii. Limit-Experiences and Transgression

> "I want to write about people *in extremis*."
>
> —Joyce Carol Oates, in discussion session at Kelly
>
> Writers House, University of Pennsylvania

The title of Oates's short fiction collection, *Faithless: Tales of Transgression* (2001), already admits to her interest in the transgressive in human existence and literature, though this collection is by no means the only or even the primary example of her efforts at exploring transgressive behavior. Oates, I argue, is much like Norman Mailer in that violence is central to both authors' work, as is transgression in general, with violence being a special case of transgression that carries extra import. (For further discussion of Mailer's relationship with transgression and violence, see Chapter Six.)

It will therefore prove fruitful to look at Oates's engagement with transgression before focusing on her special interest in violence per se. I will trace the theme of transgression through several key works in multiple genres that span several decades of Oates's work, thereby establishing a long-term pattern of engagement with the subject and showing several modes by which Oates depicts and meditates upon transgression.

§ *Expensive People*

Expensive People (1968) tells the story of the Everett family, which consists of a father who is a conservative businessman, a mother who is a literary author, and a son who is a child genius (and murderer). The Everetts are upper-middle class and utterly alienated from their lives and the lives of others. In somewhat unreal terms, the family moves from city to city, always meeting nearly identical or literally identical neighbors whose names they forget or mix up horribly due to their total lack of human connection with these perennially returning people.

Richard, the son in the family and the narrator of the novel, acquires a rifle, though at first he has no concrete plans as to what he might do with it. On the first outing with his rifle, he shoots at Mr. Body, a banker who lives in his neighborhood and who is a friend of his parents. (Mr. Body often attends the bourgeois dinner parties Richard's mother organizes.) Richard raises the rifle and shoots at Mr. Body reading his newspaper in his living room. The window shatters, a window which had previously "shielded Mr. Body against the night air," and Mr. Body drops to the floor in fear (*Expensive People* 198). Richard does not end up killing Mr. Body. Instead, he keeps him pinned down by shooting at the wall just above his head. Finally, his transgressive game over, Richard runs home in a kind of existential ecstasy.

> If you want to guess at my feelings, run along and pretend that all of
> Cedar Grove and Pools Morgan are pursuing you. Though you know no
> one is there (as I knew), run faster all the same, delirious with joy, until
> your legs are carrying you faster than any skeptical gym teacher of your

youth would have believed—and you will have some idea of what you are! Why hadn't I guessed at myself before this? What had I done to Mr. Body, what had I committed? I ran, and through my mind thoughts ran also, new, alarming, refreshing thoughts. But legs carried me on without error, without any lapse in rhythm, carrying me forward, back to Broad Road and across into the darkness of Cedar Grove, and in five minutes I was back home again […] I slept well that night; it seemed to me that at last I had discovered myself. (199)

It is worth remembering that Richard has described himself as an unhealthy child plagued by asthma and other ailments. In fact, the offhanded reference to school gym class is doubly worth noting, since earlier in the novel, he describes his inability to participate in certain school sports due to his physical frailty. Notice how none of these appear in this passage of extreme physical exertion. It is as if his ecstasy in transgression has overcome his usual physical shortcomings.

And what's more, the action of shooting at Mr. Body seemed real in a way the flimsy quotidian goings-on in Richard's life did not. As Richard writes: "This was real! This was reality!" (198). The similarity to Sartre's novels in the *Roads to Freedom* series, discussed in Chapter Three, should not go unremarked.

The protagonist in Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, Mathieu, longs for the realness of war, the authenticity of suffering. His middle-class life, his unimportant daily activities, the flimsiness of his convictions—all of this and more conspire to make him detest the

quotidian routines and the bloodless symbolic order in which he conducts his affairs. And as also discussed in Chapter Three, Gomez from *Troubled Sleep* misses the realness and authenticity he experienced during the violence of the Spanish Civil War when he is exiled to the safely distant New York City. We therefore see Oates incorporating a similar notion of violence as a pathway to a sense of authenticity—though, as I will argue later in this chapter and pick up again in Chapter Six, where I discuss Norman Mailer's brand of existentialism, it is perhaps more about transgression of social norms than violence as such for the American existentialists. I will also address the ethical dimensions of transgression in Chapter Six.

At the culminating moment of *Expensive People*, Richard finally commits the act of murder he confesses to in the opening line of the novel. But unlike his previous outings, this one does not exhilarate him, nor does it allow him greater self-knowledge.

> I suppose there is no need for me to say that when I pulled the trigger that time the world cracked in pieces around me? I did not come alive as I had in the past. No great heaving clots of blood rushed to my heart, to stir it to activity. I felt no surge of strength. What had been the innermost hollow of my being dimmed to a spark, pinpoint, and very slowly went out.
> (*Expensive People* 211-212)

This might at first seem to contradict the earlier exhilaration of committing a transgressive act, given that the murder of one's mother must rank among the most transgressive of acts, but in fact Oates offers us here further insight into the nature of

such transgression. Let us compare this act of murder to two other famous murders in the annals of existentialist literature—Meursault's murder of an anonymous Arab in Camus's *The Stranger* (1942) and Mathieu's killing of an anonymous German soldier in Sartre's *Troubled Sleep* (1949). Richard kills his mother whom he adores to the point of distraction, whereas Meursault and Mathieu kill people unknown to them. There are also the further distancing effects of the victims in Camus's and Sartre's novels being members of a different race or a different nationality, respectively. That Richard knows his mother so closely and cares for her so deeply explains the difference in his reaction.

In effect, the exhilaration that comes from enacting violence upon another has to come from a sort of bad faith position whereby the perpetrator must dehumanize the victim, must fail to recognize (in the Hegelian sense) the victim as fully human. This bad faith is at the core of such dehumanization, Sartre teaches us. Perpetrators know that the other person has a full interior life with rich wants and needs similar to ours, yet they look away from that fact in order to allow themselves to enact violence upon their victim. Oates's depiction of Richard killing his mother, taken side-by-side with the killings described by Camus and Sartre, seems to suggest that if we do in fact recognize the Other in a Hegelian sense, then enacting violence upon them becomes more difficult.

Interestingly, in this case, Richard failed to recognize his mother until after he had killed her. Only once his deed was complete did he realize he had killed an actual human being. Previous to that moment, his mother was an abstraction to him, an

abstraction he adored and which held considerable sway over him, but an abstraction nonetheless.

Richard's final act of violence in the novel is to be his own suicide.

> Here is my problem: I am afraid to die, and when I finish this memoir I will be faced with suicide. I have made up my mind. There's turning back. But still I am terribly afraid, which is why my memoir keeps going on, going on. But no matter. I had several other digressions in which I will not indulge; I will be concise […] Though my criminal act was committed with all freedom, still it might have been influenced by one or two things in my environment. (It is difficult to analyze yourelf.) I know I am completely to blame for what I did; I was free then and I am free right now. As Nada said, "I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it." Well, yes, I do stink. And I am free also. (*Expensive People* 178)

Notice here the emphasis on freedom, along with its ambivalent nature. In Sartre, one feels anguish or nausea in the face of the abyssal freedom that is human fate; here, Oates uses the verb *to stink* to qualify how Richard experiences or exhibits his freedom. Oates's ambivalent depiction of freedom here is therefore resonant with Sartre's, as is her focus on freedom in the first place.

As previously mentioned, I maintain that for Oates in some cases (and for Mailer in nearly all cases) violence is merely a subset of transgression, which can take many forms. And Oates's interest in transgression as an invigorating experience is not limited

to her narrative prose. She also explores this theme in her lyric poetry. Here is her short

poem, "The Forbidden," in its entirety.

> The relief not to be uttered,
> the syllables not mouthed.
> The mirrored door that flies open so swiftly
> you see yourself in flight.
> *How alive, how alive,*
> *how unexpected.* (*Invisible Woman* 23)

This poem can fruitfully be read alongside the passage of Richard running from the site

of his transgressive act in *Expensive People*. In both instances, something forbidden is

done, some transgression enacted, and in both instances a flight occurs, and in that

flight one feels more alive than usual. While the narrative description of Richard fleeing

the scene of his transgression might be seen as limited to his case specifically, the lyric

mode of "The Forbidden" gestures toward a more universal claim about transgression

in general. As Barbara Hardy writes in *The Advantage of Lyric*:

> Lyric poetry attaches personal experience to the world outside, colouring
>
> events and ideas with individual passion, or transmuting particulars into
>
> symbol and metaphor. Most lyric writing involves some shift from the
>
> particular to the general, from the bed of sleeping love to the meditation
>
> on Love's aspiration and weakness, from a crowd on London Bridge to
>
> the sense of modern devastation (Hardy, 112).

I maintain that Oates is after precisely this sort of general claim about transgression and

crossing the boundaries of the forbidden. Even as she constructs specific situations for

her specific characters to illustrate the ways in which transgression and violence

function psychologically, she also seems to want to make gestures toward a larger

claim—perhaps not exactly a universalist claim, but something that transcends the

particular individual experience she describes.

iv. Transgenerational Trauma and Identity Formation

Another area where Oates adds to the literature of existentialism and suffering is

her investigation, via narrative, into issues of traumatic memory and transgenerational

trauma. In Chapter Three I argued that the existentialist problematic is the most fruitful

for theorizing knots of memory, which are larger cultural convergences of memory;

here I will argue that the existentialist problematic, particularly Oates's version of it, is

likewise useful for understanding the more personalized memory of trauma

experienced by the individual.

§*Son of the Morning*

The main plot of *Son of Morning* (1978) is set in motion by the brutal rape of Elsa Vickery

by a group of anonymous men. As a result of this rape, Elsa becomes pregnant and

gives birth to Nathanael Vickery, who ultimately becomes an Evangelical preacher and

emerges as the protagonist among the ensemble cast of the novel. Elsa's father, who is

an atheist and a medical doctor, attempts to find a fellow doctor who will perform an

abortion for his daughter, thinking it unwise for a fifteen-year-old to bring to term a

fetus which resulted from rape. He is, however, unsuccessful, given the laws at the time

and the religious ideology surrounding him. It is a group of anonymous men who enact

personalized violence on Elsa; it is the more diffuse societal oppression of women via

constrictive laws and religious dogmatism that prevents her from being able to (at least

somewhat) ameliorate her situation. We therefore see the existentialist dialectic between

individuals and sociality, personal experience and historicity.

Elsa grows deeply depressed in the months following her rape, but the

anonymity of her assailants and the depersonalized nature of societal constrictiveness

wreak a fracturing havoc on her personality.

> Of course someone did weep, often. Curled beneath the bedclothes;
>
> brushing the tangles out of her hair; trying to shake herself out her numb,
>
> bruising sleep. Sometimes in the early morning there was the simple
>
> excitement of Elsa, an Elsa-as-always, who broke away from her and
>
> dressed quickly and eagerly for school, paying no heed to *her* tears, and
>
> this Elsa rushed about like the cat foolishly frantic for his supper and took
>
> hardly any time to eat and hurried outside […] But most of the time there
>
> was just the person pretending to be Elsa, who lay in bed stubborn and
>
> cold and fixed and hard, who didn't give a damn about Sarah Grace or
>
> Gina or anyone else. (*Son of the Morning* 58-59)

Her trauma causes her to bifurcate her identity and to alienate herself from *her self* in

various ways. Notice that "someone did weep." That *someone* depersonalizes Elsa's

experience. And there is a person pretending to be Elsa, the old Elsa, whereas the new

Elsa, whose identity has been formed in various ways by the violence she suffers and the burden of pregnancy she suffers and the pain of childbirth she suffers, is not fully present either. And this new Elsa is alienated not only from herself but from others, as she imagines they cannot recognize her, not the real her anyway. As we will see in our analysis of Oates's award-winning and best-selling novel *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996), as well as her less-well-known novel *Carthage* (2014), violence is not only a force that forms identities; it also deforms or erases them before re-forming them. Elsa is in the throes of this annihilation of self that precedes the new self which emerges in the wake of violence in Oates's universe. I will bracket this aspect of *Son of the Morning* for now, and take it up again later in this chapter when I discuss these other two works.

Elsa's depression continues after her baby is born, and what's more, there is a direct transferal of the violence she experienced at the hands of her rapists.

> Why was the baby's food so slow in heating up?—ah, she saw that she'd forgotten to turn on the burner. Damn it, she thought.
>
> "Damn it and damn you," she said aloud. (*Son of the Morning* 59)

Elsa blames her son Nathanael for destroying her life. He is a symbol and constant reminder of the violence she experienced. She eventually abandons him and moves to New York City, changing her entire demeanor and lifestyle from the rural New York State farm life she was accustomed to. Her mother takes over Nathanael's upbringing, attempting to some degree to regain the child she has lost in Elsa, but she is more domineering with this child, fearing the risk of violence that Elsa experienced—yet

another way violence shapes the family and all its members in various ways, reverberating forward and backward generationally.

§ Community (De)formation via Violence in *Carthage* (2014)

As earlier mentioned, in Oates's universe, the process of identity formation is often a process of deformation via violence followed by a re-formation of identity in the wake of that violence, conditioned by the nature of the violence experienced and enacted, as well as the (re)actions taken after the initial deforming violence. But one thing that is constant in Oates's work is how new versions of ourselves emerge through and after violent experiences.

Juliet, the fiancée of Corporal Brett Kincaid, an Iraq War veteran who has returned with severe injuries, notices a different person residing in the body of her beloved. She pleads with him at one point:

> I *love you* and so sometimes this other—it's like *this other*—is staring at me
>
> out your eyes…
>
> It is very frightening to me. For I don't know what I can do, to
>
> placate *this other*. (*Carthage* 17)

Even before Corporal Kincaid confesses to the murder of Juliet's sister Cressida, this other person he has become causes the ruination of their engagement, despite Juliet's heartfelt efforts to save it. He at one point strikes her, something that had never happened before his traumatic war experiences, and in her desperation to save their

future together and to cling to the person he once was, she lies to the ER nurses, saying

that she had an accident. Here we see the confluence of two of Oates's themes in

Carthage: 1) Kincaid is so changed by the violence and trauma he has experienced that

he has been transformed (and literally deformed) into another person, one more

possessed by violence, so much so that he would abuse his fiancée, something the old

Kincaid would never have done. 2) This violence he has experienced reverberates out

into his community, ruining family connections and friendships—that is, the violence

and trauma he has experienced and perpetrated during the Iraq War have not only

altered his identity but also that of those around him.

Juliet's father, Zeno Mayfield, notices what is going in his daughter's life, though

lacks the appropriate words to protect her from the sea change that has occurred in her

relationship:

> The shock to Juliet had been so great, Zeno thought, she hadn't altogether
>
> absorbed the fact that her fiancé was a terribly changed man—and the
>
> changes weren't likely to be exclusively physical. (43)

This passage does more than merely reiterate Oates's point about how Kincaid's

identity has been changed; it thematizes the alienation those around him feel in the face

of each other due to the transformation violence and suffering have wrought upon him

and his community. But it is not simply the individual who experiences violence

directly who is affected; rather the entire community is altered by the violence suffered

by the individual.

Cressida's mother, Arlette, while looking through Cressida's room after her disappearance, finds a drawing her missing daughter has done. The image could stand as a visual microcosm for Oates's notion of how the members of her family are re-formed by the violence they have experienced.

> White humanoid figures that evolved by degrees into abstract shapes and became "black"—then evolved back to their original shapes, and their original "whiteness"—but profoundly altered. (115)

Notice the similarity to Elsa's depersonalized state, her transformation into a "someone." Cressida's family is metaphorically turned in vague and abstract white figures via the drawing. (Even though the drawing was done before the violent event, the mother is interpreting it after the fact, and so it is still reflective of this bleaching of individuality, this annihilating phase in the violent re-formation of subjects Oates repeatedly depicts.)

But it is not that people are utterly and totally changed by such events, Oates seems to be telling us, but rather sent through a stage of precarious mutability on their way to becoming new versions of themselves, which do resemble the old selves, though profoundly altered. Kincaid himself thinks about the atrocities he witnessed and was a part of in Iraq and concludes: "Better to die. To have died […] He'd been killed but hadn't died—exactly" (145). His old self was not totally erased, had not exactly died, but rather been sent through a crucible of violence and deformation, emerging on the

other side profoundly altered. Though again, Oates zooms her investigative lens out to take in the larger community.

> It came to her then: the wars were monstrous, and made monsters of those who waged them.
>
> The Iraq War, the Afghanistan War.
>
> In time, civilians too would be monstrous, for this is the nature of war.
>
> Even before Brett Kincaid had returned from Iraq disfigured and broken, Cressida had believed this. (369)

And so, before Kincaid is physically and mentally disfigured, Cressida is already cognizant of the ways war can change soldiers and even the civilian community for the worse.

What's more, collective culpability in violence is depicted. Kincaid's confession seems to indict his fellow officers, even as it depicts the lasting effects of war trauma.

> It was said that no other suspect in the history of the Beechum County Sheriff's Department had given such a long disjointed candid and self-incriminating confession as Brett Kincaid. He'd seemed to be speaking of numerous murders, and not just the murder of Cressida Mayfield.
>
> He'd given the names of his platoon leaders. He'd given the names of his fellow soldiers. He'd had to be reminded he was no longer a soldier in Iraq but a civilian in Carthage. (459)

The threads of trauma and the guilt-threads of war entangle everyone, Oates seems to

be telling us. One is immediately reminded of theoretical notions of postmemory and

transgenerational trauma when the collective and reverberating damage of trauma and

violence are mentioned, and Oates does not leave these areas of investigation by the

wayside, but instead dedicates several full novels to the effects of postmemory and

transgenerational trauma, both focused on the most common subject matter for such

investigations: the Holocaust.

§ *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007)

The novel by Oates that deals most directly with transgenerational trauma is *The

Gravedigger's Daughter*. Rebecca Tignor (née Schwart), the titular character of *The

Gravedigger's Daughter*, is a high-school dropout whose father was forced to take the

demeaning job of gravedigger when he and his family arrived in the United States,

despite having been an educator in Germany before the Nazis came to power.

Rebecca has inherited some of the violence her father was steeped in during his

life in Nazi Germany: "The meanness in her, taking after her gravedigger father" (36).

And she transfers the violence he transferred onto her.

> *Don't* touch the child. The terrible rage in you, let it stay in you. What
>
> most scared her, she might hurt Niley [her son]. Shake shake shake the
>
> obstinate little brat until his teeth rattled, eyes rolled back in his head. For
>
> so she'd been disciplined, as a child. She wanted to recall that it had been

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her father who had disciplined her but in fact it had been both her mother and her father. She wanted to recall that the discipline had been deserved, necessary, and just but she wasn't so certain that this was so. (45)

Here we see the transference pattern of violence through the generations. Rebecca's parents suffered during their time in Nazi Germany, which led to their unwarranted "disciplining" of her as a child, and now she feels a similar urge to "discipline" her own child. Oates does, however, construct the narrative such that Rebecca has a choice; she prevents herself from throttling Niley despite her urge to do so. This passage therefore thematizes transgenerational trauma while holding to an existentialist model of individual choice. Part of Rebecca's facticity is her family history, which conditions the moment of her choice to continue the pattern of violence, but does not determine it utterly.

There is another way in which her childhood punishments return to her—in the form of domestic abuse after she is married.

She would not try to elude him. Vividly she recalled her father needing to discipline her. Not once but many times. And Tignor [her husband] had been sparing with her, until now. Pa's way had not been to slap but to grab her by the upper arm and shake-shake-shake until her teeth rattled. (288)

Here Tignor beats her severely enough for her to miscarry, yet she "knew she'd deserved it, her punishment. You always know" (289). It is telling that she immediately

thinks of her childhood punishment when confronted with this new domestic abuse. It is likewise worth noting that Oates uses the same language ("shake-shake-shake") in this passage as she does in the much earlier one in which Rebecca considers "disciplining" her own child. The transference and repetition of violence emanates in multiple directions.

Oates therefore explores the various ways transgenerational trauma might present itself based on the class, gender, and education level of the subject suffering from it. It is also worth noting how in each case, the violence in the characters' past shapes their current identities. In fact, it might rightfully be argued that violence—be it personal or systemic—is the largest factor in identity formation in Oates's writing.

v. Collective Identity and Violence

Thus far, I have largely focused on individual identity de- and re-formation by and through violence, but Oates's work often takes up collective identity formation by and through violence. Oates's work dramatizes the existentialist dialectic between the individual and society, or the communal collective. As Gavin Cologne-Brooks writes:

> Oates's world is a world of paradox […] But as several critics have
> stressed, it is above all communal […] Her ongoing preoccupation with
> identity, with her "self," personal though it may have been at the outset,
> ends up being a profoundly insightful analysis of just about every area of
> her nation's and culture's life. (Cologne-Brooks 228)

Given her engagement with existentialism and identity, politics and literature, Oates should be ranked with Norman Mailer as a uniquely American existentialist. In both cases, they do not merely repeat the European philosophy, but rather alter it by sending it through the prism of American intellectual, literary, and quotidian life. Many of her works focus more on the individual and how external and internal forces collide, but she also has a body of work that privileges the communal aspects of human existence, while never losing sight of the individual and the personalized aspects of trauma and violence. In effect, she always considers the existentialist dialectic between individual and collective identity, sometimes emphasizing this node in that theoretical dyad, sometimes emphasizing that one, but never forgetting that both exist.

Her lauded 1990 short story, "Heat," recounts the murder of young twins Rhea and Rhoda Kunkel at the hands of a mentally challenged man and the effects their deaths have on their community. The story is narrated by a seemingly omniscient first-person plural narrator, the *we* of the townspeople in the small Florida city where the double-murder occurs. We are given facts that could be known and others that could not be known by the townspeople. This epistemic impossibility should not, however, be read as merely an indictment of how the townspeople tell the story of the twins' deaths; it should be seen as integral to the story they tell themselves about themselves, a story that is partially accurate and partially fictionalized. It does not, however, matter for the purposes of identity formation which "facts" are accurate and which are confabulations

or outright fabrications; what matters is the story they tell themselves about themselves, thereby constructing their identity.

As Oates's fiction often does, the story weaves several types of violence together. Across her many works, Oates frequently depicts children as particularly vulnerable to adult violence, female characters as vulnerable to male violence, and the disenfranchised as vulnerable to the violence of the privileged. She also insists on the complexity and multi-directionality of violence — that is, there are no simple victims or simple perpetrators in Oates's universe; all of her characters enact some form of violence at certain times of their lives, and everyone's life is shaped to some degree by violence, both the violence they enact and that which is enacted upon them. "Heat" incorporates all of these Oatesian themes, adding to them the way violence alters the collective identity of a community.

There is, however, a different way the collective can be shaped by violence, one in which they ostracize and blame the victim of violence. In her novella *Rape: A Love Story* (2004), Oates employs the collective narrative point of view as well, but this time in order to "explain" why Teena Maguire is raped and to condemn her character and her actions.

> Provoked them. Bad judgment. Must've been drinking. The way she was
> dressed. The way Teena Maguire often dressed. Summer nights,
> especially. Partying all over Depew Street. Party spilling out onto the
> street. Loud rock music. That kind of behavior, she had it coming. Where's

her husband? Doesn't that woman have a husband? What the hell is she doing out alone with her twelve-year-old daughter? Endangering the safety of a minor? Endangering the morals of a minor? Look: Teena Maguire probably was having a few beers with the guys. Smoking dope with the guys. Maybe she was hinting at something she'd like to be paid for? In cash, or in dope. A woman like that, thirty-five years old and dressed like a teenager. Tank top, denim cutoffs, shaggy bleached-blond hair frizzed around her face. Bare legs, high-heeled sandals? Tight sexy clothes showing her breasts, her ass, what's she expect? […] One of her boyfriends […] He's married and has four kids. Separated from his wife, must be Teena Maguire's doing. That woman! What kind of a mother would drag her young daughter with her to a drunken party and then on foot through Rocky Point Park at that hour, what kind of poor judgment, she's lucky it wasn't worse what happened to her. (*Rape*, 5-6)

It is worth noting that the collective narrator in "Heat" is a fused collective—or, to used Sartrean language, a fused group—brought together by the shared trauma of losing two if its young community members. The collective narrator speaks as a unified and even quasi-omniscient consciousness. The townspeople, while horrified by the violent goings-on in their community, are brought together by the violence, are formed into a fused group by it.

The collective narrative voice at the opening of *Rape: A Love Story*, on the other hand, is fractured and polyvocal, casting about for explanations or rationales for such a violent event. We see this reflected at the level of content but also in the texture of the style. The collective voices are jaggedly fragmented just as the community is. Oates explicitly signals that the various utterances by the collective are separate and that her technique was to create a kind of gossip-pastiche to express what these various people said. Oates even gives us an italicized warning of sorts that there will be an intrusion on the unity of the omniscient narrative voice by this fragmented community of speakers.

> *Some of the things that would be said of your mother Teena Maguire after she was gang-raped, kicked and beaten and left to die on the floor of the filthy boathouse at Rocky Point Park in the early minutes of July 5, 1996.* (*Rape*, 6)

Oates therefore depicts the collective's reactions to individual suffering, though in a way that excludes the victim and fragments the community.

There is another way in which violence can bring a group together, via Sartrean fused groups. It is hard to imagine a more complete literary dramatization of Sartre's notion of the fused group, from *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, than Oates's 1993 novel *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. It is likewise perhaps an ideal depiction of the Heideggerian notion, mentioned earlier in this chapter, that humans enact counter-violence to combat external violence and thereby assert themselves in their world. The novel details the lives of five teenage girls in upstate New York in the mid-1950s. Each member of the gang has been put under duress of one or several varieties—bullying,

economic destitution, systemic gendered oppression, parental neglect, physical violence (including but not limited to sexual assault), and a more diffuse alienation in a society to which "[they] didn't belong and never would" (*Foxfire* 7).

The gang of girls therefore meets the definition of a fused group almost perfectly. Due to the external duress under which they suffer, they have formed a Sartrean fused group in order to combat these external factors. And there is yet another way that *Foxfire* follows Sartrean thought on violence and the Other. One of the most vulnerable and abused members of the gang, Rita, is described thusly: "[…] she had a tendency to squint and blink in her sweetly cowering way as if the fact of another's intimate gaze, another's consciousness, were daunting" (*Foxfire* 25). Here, Oates directly channels the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, even using his language. When we experience the gaze (*le régard*) of the another for-itself (*pour-soi*)—that is, another consciousness—we are shrunk to our bodies and feel confrontationally put-upon, according to Sartre. Oates's description of Rita's experience fits perfectly with the Sartrean theoretical model, but she goes a step further. The following sentence reads: "Rita was not truly fat but only plump and even delicately boned inside her plumpness" (25). Rita therefore feels the confrontational nature of the gaze of an Other's consciousness, as Sartre suggests we do under such circumstances, and she is immediately reduced to her physical form by the description that follows. The passage is therefore practically an exercise in translating Sartrean philosophy into literary prose.

Sartre likewise theorizes that the external violence and the counter-violence that opposes the initial external violence are not the only violences to be contended with. There is also an internal violence, usually the constant threat of violence if a member of the fused group betrays the groups, that works as a cohesive binding agent, thus forming a fraternity (*fraternité*). This is true of the Foxfire gang.

At one point, the narrator of the story, Maddy, speaks "in a vague and rambling and wondering" way about wishing she could be someone else, anyone else at all, trade her life for another and leave the less-than-pleasant existence she leads behind (21). She is with the two other members of the gang at the time, including Legs, the leader. The three girls continue walking for a short time before Legs explodes, attacking Maddy.

> "Maddy, you'd trade places with anybody?—just anybody? *Is that what*
>
> *you said?*" advancing upon me as if we'd been quarreling, as if I'd
>
> challenged her […] "You'd betray your friends, huh, not giving a shit
>
> about anybody who knows *you* and is *your* true friend not some fucking
>
> stranger, huh?" her voice rising, I couldn't follow her words, she was
>
> shoving me backward with the flat of her hand, I couldn't believe this
>
> quicksilver change of mood […] I stumbled backward into the gutter,
>
> "Legs don't, hey Legs that *hurts*," but she kept on […] "Traitor!—you love
>
> *them* so much, go suck to *them*, get out of my sight and away from *me!*"
>
> and I didn't see her arm swinging, her fist cracking me in the face, my
>
> nose began to bleed, icy-eyed and furious Legs would not relent even

when I burst into tears, just pulled Lana [the other gang member present] away with her. (21-22) [all italics in the original]

Notice here the innocent pondering way Maddy's musing about being someone else is described. She is no actual traitor, but even the hint that she would be happier in another group, that she would leave the fused group of the Foxfire gang, is enough to warrant a violent response from Legs. This constant threat of internal violence fits Sartre's model to the letter.

As Sartre writes in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*:

But this Terror, as long as unity has not been destroyed by circumstances, is a terror *which unites* rather than a terror which separates. Indeed, in so far as these men have constituted themselves by their pledges as *common individuals*, they find their own Terror, in one another, as *the same; here and everywhere* they live their *grounded* (that is to say, limited) freedom as their being-in-the-group, and their being-in-the-group as *the being* of their freedom. In this sense, Terror is their primary unity. (*Critique* 434)

The group is therefore formed by an external duress, then held together by both this external violence and an internal one. Both the external and internal violence are constitutive of the identity of the members of the group.

Despite there being no direct mention of Sartre, nor any direct reference to existentialism in general—references that appear in many other works by Oates—*Foxfire* can be safely named the most Sartrean-existentialist novel by Oates.

vi. Conclusion(s)

My goal here has not been to shrink Oates and fit her neatly within the intellectual parameters of existentialism, but rather to expand our understanding of her work and thought by explicating her engagement with suffering, transgression, and violence using an existentialist problematic. And Oates's idiosyncratic deployment of existentialist thought helps us to further existentialist thought with regard to suffering and violence and their attendant roles in identity formation.

In the dialectic of violence and counter-violence, identity is formed—but this process includes reforming and deforming of identity, which existentialist philosophy does not see as an immutable essence but rather an ever-changing existence. Or, to use the words of Sabbath McSwain from Oates's novel *Carthage*, "I am just what I—what I *do*. I move from one habitation to another like one of those—is it hermit crabs? Taking up residence in others' shells" (209). The notion that we are what we do is one of the most central tenets of Sartrean existentialism, and the notion that we can wear alias shells is thematized in *Carthage*—in fact, Sabbath McSwain's real name is Cressida Mayfield.

I have argued that identity formation via suffering and violence is a central theme across the entirety of Oates's career, as is her engagement with existentialist philosophy. In Oates's universe, violence shapes individual and collective identities in myriad ways. In her story "Heat," the community is brought together in a way

reminiscent of a Sartrean fused group by the murder of two young girls; in *Rape: A Love Story*, the community is torn apart by a gang rape of one its members, leading to a police officer taking vigilante justice on the perpetrators and causing the victim and her daughter to end up leaving the community permanently; in *We Were the Mulvaneys*, the Mulvaney family *is* no longer but rather *were* that family before the rape of the youngest daughter destroyed their previous identity and replaced it with a new one; in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, postmemory and the Holocaust emerge as the violence that shapes the identities of Oates's characters, thus moving her engagement with violence beyond the merely individual toward the historical; likewise, in *them* and *The Falls*, systemic violence as formative of both individual and collective identity emerge; and so forth throughout all of the works discussed in this chapter — as well as many not discussed here. Suffering and violence are perhaps the two most important themes central for Oates, if we take her works in the aggregate.

It will take many years and the work of many scholars to properly mine the wealth of material Oates has produced in her long and distinguished career. There have been and certainly will be other fruitful veins of exploration than the one I have suggested here, but I argue that without considering the influence of existentialism on Oates's work and without considering how she adds to the existentialist tradition in literature, we would fail to grasp a central aspect of her work and a large part of her contribution to American letters.

CHAPTER SIX

EXISTENTIAL COURAGE: VIOLENCE, LIMIT-EXPERIENCES, AND ETHICS

IN THE WORK OF NORMAN MAILER

i. Introduction

Norman Mailer's central theme, from his first book to his last, is violence and its

attendant philosophical and psychological concerns. He broke onto the literary scene

with his novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), a graphically described account of the

Pacific Front during the Second World War. The novel became a run-away bestseller

and elevated Mailer to the first tier of American novelists. He went on to win a Pulitzer

Prize and National Book Award for *Armies of the Night* (1968), his account of the 1967

protests against the Vietnam Conflict; he won his second Pulitzer Prize for *The*

Executioner's Song (1979), his account of Gary Gilmore, who murdered two people and

then demanded his own execution; his classic essay "The White Negro" (1957) describes

the type of courage required to commit transgressive and violent acts; his novel *An*

American Dream (1965) is a tale of Nietzschean excess in which the protagonist, an

existential psychologist, kills his wife and goes on a spree including alcohol, drugs, and

indiscriminate sexual adventures; and the list goes on, with nearly every work by

Mailer having violence specifically, or limit-experiences more broadly, as a central

theme. And, as I will argue, these themes are treated by Mailer with an idiosyncratically

existentialist problematic.

It would be easy enough to categorize Mailer as an existentialist author, given his own proclamation that he was the first existentialist novelist in America and given that he refers to himself as The Existentialist in *Armies of the Night*—to say nothing of the fact that Jean-Paul Sartre's foremost translator Hazel E. Barnes declares, in *An Existentialist Ethics* (1967), that Mailer is the foremost American existentialist. But my goals here extend beyond literary and intellectual taxonomy.

I will argue three main points: 1) Norman Mailer was an existentialist, though not in the sense that he adhered to some preexisting notion of existentialism, but rather in the sense that he took up the mantle of the movement in America and brought it forward in his own way, altering it to suit his violent vision of living to excess in a world slowly losing its vitality. As George Cotkin writes in *Existential America* (2003): "An existential consciousness, for Mailer, betokened a new reality for postwar America, a reality untainted by conformity and complacency" (Cotkin 185). 2) In a kind of interpretive feedback loop, existentialism is the best means of explicating Mailer's engagement with violence and limit-experiences, and Mailer's work helps us to understand existentialism's fascination with violence, the limit-experience, and the gratuitous act (André Gide's *l'acte gratuit*). 3) We can, by tracing the development of Mailer's existentialist problematic of violence and limit-experiences, come to a more ethical means of achieving the existential authenticity sought by the thrill-seeker and the agent of violence. This last contention will prove the most important, because it is not merely descriptive of trends in Mailer's work, which might be of interest only to

Mailer fans and scholars; it is, instead, a prescriptive claim about how we might better live our lives and experience existential authenticity without transgressing ethical boundaries.

ii. Existential Courage

> "The secret for harvesting from existence the
>
> greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment
>
> is—to *live dangerously*!"
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (283)

A soldier, a boxer, and a compulsive risk-taker, Norman Mailer was obsessed with what I will call *existential courage*—that is, the confrontation with one's fears and with the constraints of quotidian social norms, as well as confrontation with laws and conventional morality. Here he is, writing about the hipster movement of the 1950s in his classic essay "The White Negro":

> …for the heart of Hip is its emphasis upon courage at the moment of crisis, and it is pleasant to think that courage contains within itself (as the explanation of its existence) some glimpse of the necessity of life to become more than it has been. (*Advertisements for Myself* 355)

In effect, Mailer has responded to J. Alfred Prufrock's question of whether he dares to bring the moment to its crisis by suggesting that, yes, one must do so in order to

improve one's existential status. "We must, in other words, resist the world of cowardly compromise and limitations known as society." (Fuchs 8)

Notice also the future-oriented nature of courage for Mailer. Courage entails life "becom[ing] more than it has been." This recalls the future-oriented nature of Sartrean projects as well as Heidegger's notion that Dasein and its concern/care (*Sorge*) are necessarily future-oriented. Existential courage contains, therefore, elements of Sartrean and Heideggerian thought. Though well-versed in Sartre's writings, Mailer admits at various points of his career that he is not well-versed in Heideggerian philosophy, having read only small amounts of Heidegger's work. We should not, therefore, see this affinity as Mailer working through Heideggerian thought, but rather as a synchronicity of ideas born from Mailer's engagement with existential thought in general and his own philosophical inquiries into the subject.

What sorts of crises might one encounter that require existential courage? In the same essay, Mailer speculates about the act of murder in these terms:

> The strength of the psychopath is that he knows (where most of us can only guess) what is good for him and what is bad for him at exactly those instants when an old crippling habit has become so attacked by experience that the potentiality exists to change it, to replace negative and empty fear with an outward action, even if—and here I obey the logic of the extreme psychopath—even if the fear is of himself, and the action is murder. The psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge

his violence […] Still, courage of a sort is necessary, for one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life. The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and so no matter how brutal the act, it is not altogether cowardly. (*Advertisements* 347)

Notice again his focus on action, which resonates with Sartrean existentialism, but notice as well his focus on courage in the face of these acts. There is also risk involved here. This "new relation with the police" radically changes the life of the perpetrator and "introduces a dangerous element into one's life." Though it is not frequently discussed, this introduction of risk or danger into one's life is entirely in line with the existentialist thought which traces its genealogy back to Nietzsche, insofar as it is concerned with confrontation and triumph and other existential intensities.

For the existentialist […] the commanding value in life is intensity, as manifested in acts of free work. And according to him these various forms of intensely lived experience are impossible without anguish, suffering, and risk. (Olson 19)

At this juncture, I want to emphasize the element of risk that Olson has identified as central to the existentialist value system. This notion of intensity and intensely lived experience will prove necessary in our discussion of Mailer's particular brand of

existentialism, which thematizes limit-experiences perhaps more than any other variation on existentialist thought.

I want to be clear here that Mailer does not aggrandize murder as such, but rather transgressive intensities and limit-experiences more broadly, and his point about courage plays out over and over in his work in various forms. And what's more, his interest in the story of Gary Gilmore is without a doubt informed by his long-running interest in existential courage. As Mailer phrases it: "[Gary Gilmore] appealed to me because he embodied many of the themes I've been living with all my life long" (*Conversations with Norman Mailer* 228).

His fascination with existential courage also explains his love of boxing and rock-climbing, both of which repeatedly appear in his work, fictional and nonfictional, spanning several decades. Mailer's interest in boxing is well known, as are his writings on the subject—e.g., his nonfiction book *The Fight* (1975), about Muhammad Ali and George Foreman's famous 1974 match in Zaïre, and his essay "King of the Hill," on Muhammad Ali's loss to Joe Frazier in 1971, included in his collection of essays *Existential Errands* (1972).

From the latter essay, we get one of Mailer's most direct depictions of existential courage.

> There was one way in which boxing was still like a street fight and that in
> the need to be confident you would win. A man walking out of a bar to
> fight with another man is seeking to compromise his head into the

confidence that he will certainly triumph—it is the most mysterious

faculty of the ego. For that confidence is a sedative against the pain of

punches and yet is the sanction to punch your own best. The logic of the

spirit would suggest that you win only if you deserve to win: the logic of

ego lays down the axiom that if you don't think you will win, you don't

deserve to. And in fact, usually don't; it is as if not believing you will win

opens you to the guilt that perhaps you don't have the right, you are too

guilty. (*Existential Errands* 22)

Here, in particular, we can see the Nietzschean strain of existentialism that Mailer

develops. Existential courage for Mailer is the courage to act, which parallels Sartre's

concern with action, though it is not merely a rephrasing of the Sartrean position.

Mailer adds psychoanalytic and Nietzschean valences to the Sartrean notion. It is not

just that one must act in order to assert one's freedom; it is that one must have a will-to-

courage which ultimately allows one to act—that is, Mailer is concerned with action and

the underlying psychological conditions of possibility for action in equal measure. He is

also concerned with a particular sort of action, that sort which transgresses acceptable

social boundaries, which is steeped in violence and the potential for physical and

psychological harm or death—in short, that sort of action which exists at the limits of

human experience.

I would like to turn now to *The Fight*, specifically to Mailer's own experiences, which he meditates on vis-à-vis the fight between Ali and Foreman he was in Zaïre to cover. Here is his description of jogging with Ali one morning:

> Jogging was an act of balance. You had to get to the point where your lefts and your lungs worked together in some equal state of exertion […] if no hills were there to squander one's small reserve, and one did not lose stride or have to stop, if one did not stumble and one did not speak, that steady progressive churning could continue, thorough-going, raw to one's middle-aged insides, but virtuous. (87-88)

This passage is more about pushing oneself to a physical brink—"to be close to overexertion"—than it is about violence; it is therefore more akin to the existential status of rock-climbing, which we will investigate later as the culmination of Mailer's thought on limit-experiences and existential authenticity.

Later in *The Fight*, Mailer describes a risk-taking antic he engaged in that is particularly salient for the notion of existential courage.

> That night, after drinking with [Don] King, Norman found himself on the balcony of his room. Maybe it was in the original design or perhaps the railings had gone up in price before the Inter-Continental [hotel] was done, but every room had an architectural conceit—its balcony was without railing. Call it not a balcony but a shelf […] From the unprotected lip, you look down into a fall of seven stories. (*The Fight* 123)

Mailer goes on to describe that by holding onto the partition, one could swing from one un-railed balcony to the neighboring one.

> On this Saturday night, long after the weigh-in, not dead drunk, but good and drunk, his mind clear, his limbs functioning [Norman] came back into his room, opened his window without ado, stepped out on the balcony—it was 4 A.M. Sunday morning—put his hands on each side of the partition, worked around to the next balcony, nodded, swung back to his own balcony, performed much same crossing to the balcony on the other side, nodded again, came back, climbed through the window, got into bed, and before falling asleep, had time to say to himself, "It was so fucking easy."
> (125)

It is worth noting that the task of swinging himself back and forth from terrace to terrace is not physically demanding. What makes the feat one that demands existential courage is that there is a real possibility of dying. The act requires confronting death head-on, thus resonating with Heidegger's contention that the only way to achieve authenticity is to face the fact of one's ultimate death, though Heidegger suggests a more passive, meditative admission of one's eventual demise, whereas Mailer, ever concerned with aggressive action, demands that we must confront death more actively. Despite this difference in valence, here Mailer and Heidegger are more in agreement than Mailer and Sartre, since Sartre is considerably less interested in the moment of

death as such, though in instances of extreme physical exertion or pain, Mailer's and Sartre's thinking resonate more.

And the above passage describing his risk-taking balcony antics is not the only instance of Mailer living his philosophy. Of course volunteering to fight in the Second World War as an infantryman, instead of at a safer distance as an officer which his Harvard degree in engineering could have earned him, speaks to his eagerness to take risks, but he continued to push himself throughout his life.

> Carol Stevens, Mailer's fifth wife, describes Mailer always testing himself, walking for instance on the narrow railing outside the living room of their summer home in Maine, high above the rocks and sand below. Mailer himself cites walking the dangerous ten inch catwalk outside his third floor Brooklyn apartment, and earlier walking narrow ledges in San Francisco as the source for Stephen Rojack's negotiation of the parapet in *An American Dream*. (Broer 138)

It is through facing fear that we gain existential courage. Let us look briefly at existential psychologist Rollo May's succinct summation of courage's place in the tradition of existentialism in *The Courage to Create*:

> [C]ourage will not be the opposite of despair. We shall often be faced with despair […] Hence Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Camus and Sartre have proclaimed that courage is not the absence of despair; it is, rather,

the capacity to move ahead *in spite of despair*. (May 12, italics in the original)

And here is how Mailer defines courage in *The Spooky Art* (2003):

> You can't speak of true bravery in combat for such a good soldier until he has exhausted his code to that point where he feels, Yes, I may lose — I may lose my heart, my dignity, my honor. I'm scared. I'm terrified. I can't move. If, at this point, he still proceeds to press forward, then his behavior is courageous. (*The Spooky Art* 132)

The similarities between Mailer's definition of courage and what May outlines as the existentialist definition are immediately apparent. And what's more, Mailer's depiction of existential courage remains almost perfectly constant across his entire career. This theme begins in his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, about soldiers in the Second World War, and continues in his fiction, nonfiction, and poetry throughout his career. But Mailer's work on courage and its philosophical and psychological attributes are not a simple restatement of those existentialists who came before him. He certainly agrees with them that courage is not the opposite of fear or despair, but he goes further into the aspects of how existential courage works, which situations call for it, and its necessity for the improvement of one's state of existence.

If there is one contribution to existentialist thought that is quintessentially Mailer's, it is that of existential courage, which is inextricably bound with violence or other limit-experiences. Existential courage is a trait he sees in Gilmore at times (though

not at others), especially in his willingness to die with dignity and of his own choice as opposed to with humiliation and after long years of incarceration.

But what is perhaps most worth noting here is that this begins the transition for Mailer from violence as the primary limit-experience that can lead to authenticity to limit-experiences as such that can lead to existential authenticity, therefore allowing for non-violent limit-experiences as vehicles for authentic existence. As will become increasingly important in my analysis of Mailer's engagement with existentialism and limit-experiences, rock-climbing appears as a courage-requiring and quasi-mystical undertaking in *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and *Why Are We In Vietnam?* (1967).

With this particular, nonviolent version of a limit-experience in mind, we will now move on to the question of ethics more centrally.

iii. Limit-Experiences and Mailerian Existentialism

Existentialism, with its grounding in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, places conscious experience as one of its central concerns. The way in which human experience is treated, however, changes notably between various authors within the existentialist movement. This is no less true in regard to the specific experience(s) of pain, suffering, and violence. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Sartre largely focuses on the experience of suffering and its connections to authenticity; and, famously, Camus's character Mersault in *The Stranger* shoots a man for seemingly no

reason, giving us at least one sort of existentialist murder, that of an absurd act. Camus is also concerned with the issue of suicide and the base absurdity of existence in several of his works. Sartre's focus on the immediate phenomenological experience and Camus's focus on the absurd barrier of death itself (either via murder or suicide) are but two approaches Mailer adapts or recreates in his own work, though his affinities with Sartre certainly outweigh those with Camus.

Mailer is interested in the psychological underpinnings of pain, suffering, and violence. This parallel between Sartre and Mailer comes as no surprise when one notices how frequently Mailer references Sartre in his nonfiction writings—from as early as 1957 in *Advertisements for Myself* to his 2001 *The Big Empty*. That said, it is not a perfectly neat parallel; when I say that Mailer reflects the concerns of Sartre (and, to a lesser degree, Camus), we should imagine that he reflects these concerns in the way a funhouse mirror reflects—by reshaping the object of reflection based on the mirror's own shape and constitution. Likewise, it must be remembered that Mailer does not limit himself to any single existentialist model and enjoys a combative relationship with Sartre, the existentialist whose work he was most familiar with and whom he most admired. As Cotkin observes: "Norman Mailer liked to spar with Jean-Paul Sartre in the boxing ring of his mind. Mailer considered Sartre a worthy adversary, perhaps the only thinker in the world who could match him as a novelist, essayist, and public intellectual" (Cotkin 184). And Mailer would pay a kind of left-handed homage to

Sartre in *Le Monde* on the occasion of Sartre's death, offering both praise and an analysis

of the limitations of Sartrean existentialism. However:

> Despite his protestations, Mailer shared much with Sartre in terms of
>
> intellectual range and artistic reach, as well as politics. And both of them
>
> were fascinated with the underbelly of polite society, raging against the
>
> bourgeois culture that had spawned them. Moreover, Mailer's image of
>
> the hipster closely mirrored Sartre's presentation of the thief, sexual
>
> predator, and writer Jean Genet. (Cotkin 193).

And even in their basic understanding of existentialist notions, Mailer and Sartre share

much in common, particularly on the way authenticity functions. In a television

appearance in the 1960s, which is reprinted in *The Time of Our Time* (1998), Mailer claims

that the greatest moment of existentialist authenticity one could ever feel would be

falling out of a building but being caught safely in a net. In that moment of falling,

Mailer claims, one would be in a state of utter authenticity. He has captured an essential

element of Sartrean authenticity here—namely, the fleeting nature of it. It is sometimes

wrongly assumed that authenticity is a state like Buddhist enlightenment, whereby one

achieves it and then remains in a state of existential grace from that point forward.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Sartrean authenticity requires an alignment of

one's facticity and one's transcendence, which is a rare and fleeting state of affairs.

Mailer has therefore grasped an essential part of Sartrean authenticity, and he has done

so not merely by apprehending the fleeting nature of authenticity, but also by realizing

what sort of situations practically force authenticity upon a person. Throughout Sartre's fiction, from "The Wall" to *Troubled Sleep*, we see depictions of pain or suffering leading to a state of authenticity. The intensity of that experience aligns one's facticity and one's transcendence such that authenticity is achieved (not that this is a pleasant process or even a pleasant state of being).

For Mailer, it is the limit-experience that leads to authenticity, not pain or suffering per se (though, since these are often parts of limit-experiences, they also fit his schema). This is why we see extremity of drug use, sexual intensities, and physical exertion as ways to authenticity in Mailer's writings. In his 1991 novel, *Harlot's Ghost*, rock-climbing is the activity of authenticity. Its mixture of physical exertion and awareness of one's possible death makes for authenticity. In many ways, this shows a sort of ethical growth for Mailer, whose earlier works depict violence as the primary way to existential authenticity.

Mailer's most overtly existentialist novel is perhaps *An American Dream*. Our protagonist, Rojack, is an existential psychoanalyst who ponders existentialist themes throughout the book. It is a novel predicated on violence. But it is also predicated on more than this violent act; trespass, transgression, and limit-experiences are also thematized—even the murder ought to be considered the sort of transgression that Mailer theorized in "The White Negro." Early in the novel, Rojack murders his wife in a fit of drunken rage, an act not judged as completely wrong, since he was fully in the moment and acting on the emotions of the moment. Throughout the rest of the novel,

Rojack goes on a spree of transgression and violence, yet the novel seems only to judge those faked or bad-faith acts as wrong, while a fully owned act of depravity is often shown in a positive light. This fits excellently with Sartre's play *The Flies*, wherein Orestes owns his ghastly murder of his mother in a way Electra will not. As numerous critics have pointed out, Sartre's claim here is that we must acknowledge our freedom to act and must take responsibility and not regret our actions if we are to achieve existential authenticity vis-à-vis those actions, even when they are horrifying or violent—in fact, particularly when they are transgressive.

This also fits with Mailer's work throughout his career, which is concerned with breaking with conformity and unsettling the norm. His term "the Hipster" spoke directly to this. Hip is existentialist, Mailer tells us. Hip is also willing to enact violence, thereby sacrificing bourgeois safety in order to prevent the total ossification of society into neat and tidy roles which serve as prisons for the self. To put this in Sartrean terms (from *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*), bourgeois roles form an anti-dialectic which prevents dialectical progress, and revolutionary (or to use Mailer's language, hip-existentialist) destruction must take place to rid ourselves of this anti-dialectic, otherwise stagnation will occur.

Rojack is a former US Congressman, a successful author, and TV personality with a prestigious university appointment. He is also married to a woman from one of the wealthiest families in New York. In short, he has achieved what can only be viewed as the pinnacle of the American Dream, and this is precisely the problem. The trappings

of success are just that, a trap, and one he must violently break free from. Mailer

certainly makes use of pain and suffering in his work to show the achievement of

authenticity, but he takes a slightly different approach to experience and authenticity

than Sartre does. Mailer writes with inspired vitality in *An American Dream*, attempting

to make the reader experience the extremes Rojack does, whereas Camus takes pains to

create an almost total psychological opacity during scenes of depravity or murder. The

reader hits the absurd wall of these actions in the works of Camus, whereas we

experience a deluge of phenomenological minutiae in Mailer's scenes of this nature,

showing yet again his greater affinity with the Sartrean literary model.

Switching gears somewhat, I want to turn to another way in which Mailer fits

into the world of existentialist thought. As I state in the Introduction, my contention is

that existentialism was born out of the triple violence of the First World War, the

Second World War, and the more diffuse violence of modern alienation, thus making it

the philosophy of suffering and violence *par excellence*. Mailer fought in the Second

World War, and he took aim at modern alienation in nearly all of his works, particularly

technology's role in this alienation, putting him squarely in line with Heideggerian

thought on the matter. It is also telling that existentialist thinkers use the very

philosophy that emerged from these world calamities to theorize violence and

suffering. This is a portion of my overall argument for reintroducing existentialist

thought into current discussions on memory, suffering, and violence. The philosophy

that emerged from these events enjoys a unique position to theorize them.

The Naked and the Dead is often seen as too graphic in its depictions of the experience of suffering and killing. Bracketing the literary tactics, this book serves my overall project in that it shows the existentialist problematic as applicable to the Pacific front in addition to the European front during the Second World War. In effect, this is yet further proof that existentialism emerged out of a worldwide calamity as both a literary and philosophical movement on a worldwide scale.

It is worth noting that existentialism is a philosophy that judges its adherents based on how they live their lives. Sartre and Beauvoir lived in an open relationship for decades, at least in part out of a conviction about the nature of human freedom and out of dedication to their philosophy. Mailer likewise lived according to his brand of existentialism, seeking out limit-experiences in nearly every form he could. In one of the darkest moments in his life, at a raging party where Mailer and his wife were hopped-up on various drugs and alcohol, the two played a mock game in which they simulated bullfighting, as they often did, but this time Mailer stabbed his wife and nearly killed her. He also had outbursts of violence against various people, most famously Gore Vidal. And this attraction to violence stretches back to his choice to enter the war as an infantryman despite his Harvard degree which could have kept him safely in an office somewhere. He said that he assumed fighting in the war would give him something he needed to become a great writer. Here I would like to reiterate my point that in Mailer's later work, extreme physical exertion is privileged over violence as a means to existential authenticity.

In summary, Mailer's work fits into two of the main strains of the existentialist movement in the ways he depicts and theorizes violence and suffering. Mailer is interested in a Sartrean style of depicting the phenomenological details of these subjects. He brings the literature forward in that he focuses on a wide range of limit-experiences as possible alternatives for violence, even as they include violence and suffering among the possible paths to authenticity. He also brings the existentialist problematic into the American sphere, which means applying it to the hyper-consumerist society that is the United States. And, even though existentialism was always connected with counter-culture and alternative lifestyles, Mailer introduced it to the particular counter-cultures of the American 1950s, '60s, and '70s.

Mailer adds one further aspect to the existentialist literature. He attempts to violate the reader and upend genre expectations with his writing. Mailer depicts limit-experiences as a way to break free from the They (*das Man*) that Heidegger warns us against. Without the radical jarring of our sensibilities, we'll simply fall into inaunthenticity, into the They. Foucault once said that reading Bataille could be considered a form of limit-experience in itself. It seems as if Mailer attempt to achieve this effect as well, a tactic none of the French existentialists used. Even when they depicted violence or sexual activity, they didn't do so with such pornographic zeal.

I have shown how Mailer fits variously in the existentialist tradition. I have also argued that he brought the literature forward by further embedding it in counter-cultural movements and by further theorizing and making use of the notion of the limit-

experience in the larger canon of existentialist thought. The range of experiences he brings to the table, as well as the range of literary techniques, expand the repertoire of existentialist literature and thinking as a whole.

iv. (Transgressive) Language and Existential Courage

Thus far, I have focused primarily on physical acts of courage in relation to Mailer's engagement with existentialism, but it would be a mistake to imagine his engagement with existential courage as confined to physical acts in the world. He also conceived of existential courage as the courage to think in new ways, not to conform to ideological norms, and, especially, to write as ambitiously and ecstatically as possible. Here we find an interesting parallel between Martin Heidegger and Mailer. Heidegger writes in the introduction to *Being and Time* that

> With regard to the awkwardness and 'inelegance' of expression in the analyses to come, we may remark that it is one thing to give a report in which we tell about *entities*, but another to grasp entities in their *Being*. For the latter task we lack not only most of the words but, above all, the 'grammar'. If we may allude to some earlier researches on the analysis of Being, incomparable on their own level, we may compare the ontological sections of Plato's *Parmenides* or the fourth chapter of the seventh book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* with a narrative section from Thucydides; we can then see the altogether unprecedented character of those formulations

which were imposed on the Greeks by their philosophers. (*Being and Time* 63)

Mit Rücksicht auf das Ungefüge und »Unschöne« des Ausdrucks innerhalb der folgenden Analysen darf die Bemerkung angefügt warden: ein anderes ist es, über *Seiendes* erzählend zu berichten, ein anderes, Seiendes in seinem *Sein* zu fassen. Für die letztgenannte Aufgabe fehlen nicht nur meist die Worte, sondern vor allem die »Grammatik«. Wenn nein Hinsweis auf frühere und in ihrem Niveau unvergleichlichte seinsanalytische Forschungen erlaubt ist, dann verglieche man ontologische Aschnitte in Platons »Parmenides« oder das vierte Kapitel des siebenten Buches der »Metaphysik« des Aristoteles mit einem erzähelenden Abscnitt aus Thykidides, und man wird das Unerhörte der Formulierungen sehen, die den Griechen von ihren Philosophen zugemutet wurden. (*Sein und Zeit* 38-39)

Mailer would agree with Heidegger that new language is necessary to a new philosophical task. He writes: "It is impossible to conceive a new philosophy until one creates a new language" (*Mind of an Outlaw* 59). While there is no evidence that Mailer received this notion from Heidegger directly, it is an position that fits elegantly in the existentialist worldview.

We find another point of consonance between Heidegger's thought and Mailer's, this time regarding the relationship between literary efforts and philosophical ones. Both Heidegger and Mailer see literature as ultimately the greater form of philosophical inquiry. To use Heideggerian terminology from his post-*Kehre* period—that is, after his "turn" to language—literary language discloses the world more generously than does formal philosophy. As Mailer writes:

> […] the novelist is the only philosopher who works with emotions which are at the very edge of the word system, and so is out beyond the scientists, doctors, psychologists, even—if he is good enough—the best of his contemporaries who work at philosophy itself. (*The Prisoner of Sex* 124)

But what is the purpose of working "at the very edge of the word system"? American existentialist psychologist Rollo May describes the role of the artist in *The Courage to Create* thus:

> Dogmatism of all kinds—scientific, economic, moral, as well as political— are threatened by the creative freedom of the artist. This is necessarily and inevitably so. We cannot escape our anxiety over the fact that the artists together with creative persons of all sorts, are the possible destroyer of our nicely ordered systems. (76)

Mailer's own view of the role of the artist could not be more resonant with that of May's. Mailer insists on being "the possible destroyer of our nicely ordered systems." As Daniel Fuchs writes: "[it is] Mailer's view that through obscenity a man can

discriminate between himself and society" (Fuchs 8). Obscenity, which transgresses

agreed-upon social norms of verbal conduct, can work as an antidote to Heideggerian

fallenness into the They. I would argue that Mailer thematizes this belief that

transgressive language can have this effect, and on both reader and writer. One Mailer's

central concerns is "obscenity as it relates to literary art, an issue that many of his novels

confront in one way or another" (Ryan 18).

Additionally, as is the case with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, Mailer

also uses literary language in order to conduct philosophical investigations, a trait that

might be the foremost hallmark of the existentialist movement. In this way, they are all

transgressing the boundaries between genres in addition to whatever transgressions

exist at the level of content or the aesthetic texture of their literary language. And, of

course, Mailer's groundbreaking forays into New Journalism and creative nonfiction

are another example of his dedication to transgressing genre boundaries.

v. Conclusion(s)

I have attempted here to establish that Norman Mailer is not only among the

foremost American existentialist writers, but that his idiosyncratic version of

existentialism brings the overall movement forward in cultural and ethical terms. I have

also outlined how he is indicative of the existentialist movement in America. But what

ought readers to take away from all this? I would propose that three key theses

comprise my intervention here.

Firstly, Mailer is well known for his involvement with the counter-cultural movements of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s (e.g., hipsters, hippies, anti-war activists, etc). I contend that these counter-cultural movements served as the vehicle(s) of Mailer's shepherding-in of existentialist thought to American literary and popular culture. They also conditioned his version of existentialism to include transgressions of any sort, ranging from drug use to non-traditional sexuality to violence to transgressive modes of literature. Speaking to this last point, Cotkin writes: "He wanted to be, through his fiction and essays, a voice in the wilderness, a writer shaking the foundations of his era" (Cotkin 185).

Secondly, I argue that Mailer's main interventions in the history of existentialist thought are concerned with the existential status of violence and limit-experiences in light of what I have dubbed *existential courage*. This will-to-courage locates Mailer in a particularly Nietzschean and vitalist vein of existentialism.

Thirdly, there is an ethically prescriptive aspect to my investigations into Mailer's existentialist thought. By blurring the lines between various types of limit-experiences, which I have shown that Mailer does throughout his career, moving slowly away from violent transgressions toward non-violent ones, Mailer's work gives us insight into how we might seek out these limit-experiences, which many so desperately crave, without crossing ethical boundaries. His shift from boxing to rock-climbing shows a shift from a sport which requires enacting violence upon another to one that pits the individual against nature in an intense physical exertion. Mailer's later work

shows a healthy progression away from violence toward other kinds of limit-experiences. If we can achieve the existential authenticity we so frequently seek as readily by engaging in a bit of extreme sports (e.g., rock climbing) as we can by enacting violence, then the choice is clear. And his interest in intense sexual experiences stayed constant throughout his entire career. In effect, what we can learn from the trajectory of Mailer's thought on limit-experiences and existential authenticity is that we should retain those extreme physical exertions that test our physical integrity and existential courage, and we should retain intense sexual pleasure, but we should jettison violent acts against others as a means of achieving existential authenticity. This is not to say that such acts would not lead to such a state; indeed, they could, but the ethical cost is too high, and given that there are myriad ethically permissible limit-experiences available to us, we ought to simply select those in our pursuit of existential authenticity.

It is worth noting that this ethical dimension is fraught with masculine overtones, given the fact that Mailer—a famously hyper-masculine figure—is the source of the ethical theorizing and given that historically roles of the adventurer, the presser-of-boundaries, the athlete, the soldier, and so forth have been largely occupied by men and the discourse has largely privileged masculinity. I do not deny this historical aspect of the ethical theory I have put forth, but as someone making use of existentialist philosophy, I eschew the idea that any such ethics would necessarily be masculinist and further eschew the idea that limit-experiences or transgression are essentially masculine activities. I maintain, rather, that they have contingently-historically been such, but that

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they are not permanently or essentially masculine or feminine or any other gender type. They are, as all human activities, what we make of them. I would therefore call for an effort to create more gender parity within these activities as opposed to jettisoning them as essentially masculinist and therefore not worthy of our engagement.

Mailer's place in American letters has long been solidified, and with the recently renewed interest in his work, there are many opportunities for investigation. Given his career-spanning interest in existentialism and limit-experiences of various sorts, I argue that finding an intersection between these topics ought to be of central concern to scholars of Mailer, existentialism, and the place of violence and limit-experiences in American literature and thought.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEW UNIVERSALISM AND WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S *RISING UP*

AND RISING DOWN

> "No one engaged in thought about history and
>
> politics can remain unaware of the enormous role
>
> violence has always played in human affairs, and it is
>
> at first glance rather surprising that violence has been
>
> singled out so seldom for special consideration."
>
> —Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

i. Introduction

In recent years, there has been, in the words of Malini Johar Schueller, "a major intellectual impetus in Europe and the US: to produce paradigms of […] global theory, based on the assumption that the contemporary moment calls for a resurgence of some form of universal theorizing" (Schueller 236). Her list of contemporary thinkers partaking in this trend includes Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek. I would add Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, and Ernesto Laclau to that list. Another author she does not include, in this instance probably because he is off the academic radar, is William T. Vollmann. His *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003) fairly begs to be situated among recent discussions on universalism and ethics—though the

book has, like its author, largely escaped discussion in the academy. *Rising Up and Rising Down* has not, however, gone unnoticed. It was a finalist for the National Critics Circle Award, and a 750-page abridgement of the 3,200-page original was published by Ecco in 2004. It has also received accolades from *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Steven Moore, writing in the 17 December 2003 edition of *Washington Post Book World*, praises the book as

> a monumental achievement on several levels: as hair-raising survey of mankind's propensity for violence, as a one-man attempt to construct a system of ethics, as a successful exercise in objective analysis (almost non-existent in today's partisan, ideological, politicized, spin-doctored, theory-muddled public discourse), and a demonstration of the importance of empathy […] beyond the realm of mere mortals. (Moore)

But despite literary awards, accolades in the popular press, and Vollmann's nearly fanatical followers who have made him into something of a cult figure, his work has been mostly ignored by academic scholars. I will make the case that not only is his work worthy of scholarly attention, but that he makes a significant contribution to one of the most important theoretical debates of the past decade.

The task of developing a universal ethics is Himalayan in size and incalculable in importance from economic, philosophical, and political perspectives. It is therefore incumbent upon us to make use of every intellectual tool available in service of this (likely impossible) task. Vollmann, perhaps more than any thinker I name above, has

employed a nearly exhaustive multiplicity of methods in his effort to solve the insoluble problems of violence and ethics. *Rising Up and Rising Down* is at once an example of anthropological field research, cultural criticism, literary theory, memoir, political science, travel writing, war reportage, and, finally, ethical philosophy. In *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann attempts nothing less than to understand the nature of human violence, in a historical-descriptive sense, and to outline the speculative-descriptive circumstances under which violence is justified (or not). I will argue that his methodology of exhaustiveness is an effective tactic for bridging the philosophical and political gaps between relativism/nominalism and universalism/essentialism.

Furthermore, situating Vollmann's Moral Calculus, which he develops throughout *Rising Up and Rising Down*, within the recent discussions of universalism will be mutually beneficial in that Vollmann's methodology of exhaustiveness will bolster these academic discussions, while the application of certain professional philosophers' and theorists' work to *Rising Up and Rising Down* will advance our understanding and application of Vollmann's efforts as well.

"We do not fear being called meticulous," Thomas Mann famously wrote in *The Magic Mountain*, "inclining as we do to the view that only the exhaustive can be truly interesting" (Mann vi). Vollmann's tactics and overall enterprise strongly suggest that he not only agrees with the fictional narrators of *The Magic Mountain*, but that he also maintains that only the exhaustive can be truly ethical. In effect, Vollmann has found a proverbial third way between strict relativism and dogmatic universalism by insisting

on such a multitude of information and methodological approaches—and in doing so,

he has offered a new approach to solving one of the longest running ethical debates in

modern philosophy.

ii. Terminological Landscapes and Clarity as a Universalist Notion

"I am a total Enlightenment thinker."

—Slavoj Žižek, from the documentary *Žižek!*

"The real philosopher will […] resemble a Swiss lake

which by its calm combines great depth with great

clarity, the depth revealing itself precisely by the

clarity."

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Four-Fold Root*

of the Principle of Sufficient Reason

I want to clarify our terminology as best I can, but before I do, I want to discuss

what such a move might mean—both for Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down* and for

the discussion of universalism. Vollmann not only offers clear definitions of eighty-

three terms in his Moral Calculus but also gives abundant examples to illustrate or

dramatize each definition he gives. This move is one readers of Žižek know well, since

he is famous for, among other things, qualifying his terms clearly and then illustrating

them insightfully (and entertainingly). Let's look at the above epigraph from Žižek,

wherein he names himself an Enlightenment thinker. His larger claim in the interview

from which I have extracted the quote is about terminology and the clarity of ideas.

Discussing Lacan, Žižek calls Lacan's style "a total fake" even though many of his

underlying ideas are quite productive. Žižek says that he himself wants to express

clearly those Lacanian notions which he finds useful, dispensing with the rhetorical

flotsam that accrues in Lacan's style. This commitment to clarity of idea and expression

is, just as Žižek claims, an Enlightenment notion and one that is more than a mere

accident. The impulse for universal comprehensibility is at the core of this style, and it is

telling that Judith Butler, whose earlier work is composed in a difficult style akin to that

of Jacques Derrida, writes her most lucid prose to date when discussing universalism

and developing her version of universalist thought. As Noam Lupu put it in his review

for *Flak Magazine*:

> Butler is not known for reaching out to wide audiences with a political
>
> message. A professor of comparative literature at Berkeley, she is best
>
> known for her work on queer theory and widely criticized for her obtuse
>
> language and academic stardom. In what is by far her most accessible
>
> book to date, however, Butler's message is clear: liberal criticism and
>
> theory must reemerge from their post-Sept. 11 hibernation. (Lupu)

Something similar could be said about Vollmann's prose in *Rising Up and Rising Down*

in comparison to the prose in most of his fiction, which is often compared to Thomas

Pynchon in terms of its lyric difficulty and exulting density. Vollmann's and Butler's

switch to a more accessible prose indicates an interest in a wider readership for their

works in ethics, which is entirely appropriate, since not only academics and the elite

literati are concerned in such matters. It is not, however, the focus of my essay, so I will

bracket issues of clarity and (attempted) universal intelligibility, sufficing merely to

suggest that they bear a strong relationship with universalist efforts in general. I will,

however, honor Schopenhauer's dictum about clarity and move on to defining the

parameters of the terminology in this chapter.

§RELATIVISM

> "…the skulls on the shelves, the skulls stinking and yellow (almost nine thousand of them at Choeung Ek Killing Field alone). If you are a moral relativist, I urge you to study these murderers' example and then rethink your position. 'The Skulls on the Shelves' [from vol. V of *Rising Up and Rising Down*] proves that anybody who thinks and cares about the world bears an urgent necessity to construct a moral calculus."

The first and most ideologically dominant term, *relativism*, can be misleading in multiple ways. First off, outside of the realm of philosophy, we rarely distinguish between what is known as *weak relativism* and *strong relativism*. The latter term is much more radical in that it applies to every sort of knowledge and all truth-claims—aesthetic, ethical, experiential, mathematical, scientific, and so on. This means that if one person claims that two plus two equals seventeen, that claim has the same purchase on truth as the claim that two plus two equals four. The same would hold true for the belief that objects fall when dropped, or any other scientifically verifiable events. And this applies to all ethical claims as well. Jeffrey Dahmer and the Dalai Lama have the same authority on whether murdering and eating people or treating them with compassion would be the ethically preferable action.

Weak relativism pertains largely (though not exclusively) to what is generally dubbed *cultural relativism* (or sometimes *moral relativism*, as Vollmann has it), which posits a much less radical position about the nature of ethics, knowledge, and truth-claims. Weak relativism states that certain beliefs carry identical truth value even when they are not identical in terms of content—or even, conceivably, when their content is diametrically opposite. Cultural relativism is a subcategory of weak relativism, and since it is most salient for our current discussion, I'll limit myself to this form of weak

relativism. Cultural relativism states that ethical norms are culturally determined such that what is ethically permissible (or obligatory) in one culture may not be in another, and that neither culture can claim a greater ethical footing. This leads to the conclusion that no culture can judge another culture, since its ethics and means of determining truth values and ethics are different and perhaps incompatible. Since we cannot extract ourselves ideologically from our own culture, we cannot find that view-from-nowhere that would be necessary to form objective judgments about cultures, and thus all of our judgments will be, at least to some degree, determined by our own culture, thus invalidating those judgments vis-à-vis another culture.

The obvious advantages of this system of belief are numerous. First and foremost, it precludes value judgments that arbitrarily belittle the cultural practices of others. It thereby demands a kind of tolerance which deserves admiration. This is among the top reasons it has been the dominant mode of thought in humanities departments for several decades and continues to enjoy large numbers of adherents. So, why would anyone want to supplant or supplement such a noble and popular theory? The short answer is that cultural relativism creates a host of problems for the political activist and the philosopher alike. Cultural relativism also contradicts its own noble goal(s) in a number of ways.

Let's take a move from Hegel's playbook in *Phenomenology of Spirit*—testing to see if a philosophical doctrine can live up to its own standards—and begin with what will strike most readers as the least damning flaw of relativism, if only because it is the

most abstract and formal. Since relativism is a product of the Western cultural tradition, it is therefore limited in its scope to the culture that gave rise to it (by its own standards, that is), thus meaning it would not be applicable to other cultures. Yet this universal applicability is the very basis of the theory, without which it makes no claim at all. And so, formally-philosophically speaking, it is either self-contradictory or merely non-applicable.

There is a second, related paradox: if it is universally applicable and true, then its claim that there are no universally applicable theories or truths is necessarily false, since relativism itself achieves both universal applicability and truth. The central (philosophical) goal of relativism is to deny universal answers to ethical problems, yet it offers exactly this. The answer to every ethical quandary within the framework of relativism is precisely the same—namely, "Whatever the culture says is ethically correct is ethically correct." It therefore offers a universal answer which is the very thing it is meant to deny.

Perhaps more problematic for the theory is that relativism also fails to acknowledge differences *within* a given culture, thus treating cultures as monolithic entities—yet another (ironically) totalizing feature of relativism. Within a culture, certain laws or norms are controversial among a subset of the population. Many (perhaps all?) cultural norms are disputed within the culture that gave rise to them. A serious relativist would have to explain what percentage of the population believes a certain action to be ethical before it is admissible under the aegis of relativism. This

leads to some rather absurd possible outcomes—e.g.: "If 51 percent believe it, then it is acceptable within that culture"; or "It is necessary that 100 percent believe it before it is acceptable in that culture"; or "So long as one person alone believes it, then it is acceptable in that culture." And so on.

Etienne Balibar points indirectly to another problem with relativism in his homage to Jacques Derrida in *Adieu Derrida* (2007).

> …on the tracks of dialecticians, structuralists, and post-modernists such as Hegel, Benveniste, and Derrida, you realize that the alleged conflict, or incompatibility, between universalism and particularism […] is a smokescreen and a children's game for logicians. (*Adieu Derrida* 79)

I maintain that Balibar points to the problem indirectly because he points to the distinction or supposed incompatibility of the two modes of thinking. (Note: he uses the term "particularism" to mean what others have meant, which I will mean throughout this essay, by "nominalism.") Vollmann, in my view, sets himself the task of bridging these supposedly incompatible sides of the philosophical chasm between relativism/nominalism and universalism.

I cannot outline every philosophical problem with relativism here, but suffice it to say that it is ultimately unsatisfying, both in terms of its philosophical undergirding and in terms of satisfactorily giving us a model by which to conduct our affairs in a global society—enough so that we are now experiencing a return of interest in universalism. Vollmann offers us an excellent and elegant method for retaining the best

aspects of relativism/nominalism while likewise retaining those elements of universalism that will allow us to theorize in a globalized world and to make ethical decisions in that world.

§ESSENTIALISM AND UNIVERSALISM

Reading *Rising Up and Rising Down*, one gets the sense that Vollmann treads dangerously close to essentialist claims, given his penchant for crossing cultures and centuries to formulate his examples and ethical maxims, yet he likewise makes many claims that sound relativist in nature, despite his explicit dismissal of moral relativism. What Vollmann is after in many instances where he seems to contradict himself, I would argue, is the distinction between *essentialism* and *universalism*. (In the next section of this essay, I will discuss Vollmann's relationship with this theoretical terminology. For now, I will limit myself to discussing the terms themselves.) The terms *essentialism* and *universalism* are often conflated to mean the same thing and used interchangeably, but it is more than mere philosophical hairsplitting to insist on separating these two terms and their attendant conceptual bundles.

In a similar move to the one I made above of teasing apart the terms *weak relativism* and *strong relativism*, I'd like to distinguish between *group essentialism* and *global essentialism*. Group essentialism claims that the members of some subcategory of humanity, such as women or Chinese and so on, share certain essential traits common to the entire group. This is the way we tend to use the term in the humanities today.

Global essentialism claims that there are certain traits common to all of humanity, regardless of race, gender, class, education, etc. Put most simply, essentialism of either sort maintains that certain immutable traits obtain among the portion of the human species for which it makes its claims—whether that be a single group within the human species or the entire human species. And for both sorts of essentialism, these traits obtain immutably across time. Essentialist notions of, for example, Europeans do not allow for change across generations, and essentialist notions of what it means to be a human likewise do not allow for change across generations. For global essentialism, this means that human traits across all cultures and all centuries remain—at their fundament, in their *essence*—the same; whereas for group essentialism, this means that all members of a certain nationality or ethnicity have always and will always have the same traits. These notions of essentialism are well known, of course. So, how does universalism differ from essentialism?

Universalism—or again, to be precise, let me say *the bundle of ideas that universalism contains*—includes aspects of essentialism. It claims that certain facts of human behavior and certain rules of ethics cross national borders, cultural distinctions, and language differences. But the category that I suggest we put pressure on in order to understand the distinction between essentialism and universalism is that of temporality. The primary distinction between essentialism and universalism, is that essentialism insists that whatever characteristic or fact about humanity (or some group within humanity) is from its very essence true and therefore cannot change without

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changing the essence itself. To change an essential fact about humanity would mean that, in very real terms, humanity would no longer exist (but instead would have become some other thing).

Universalism today claims that there are facts that obtain for the entire population of humanity but only at a given time or across a limited window of time. In a different time frame and under different circumstances, the universals that obtain could very well be different. In effect, essentialism claims facts about humanity from within—that is, from the inner essence of humans themselves—whereas universalism makes claims from without, about the state of human affairs in the world at large. This jibes well with the Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, when he argues that even though "the objective Culture" is historically determined, the individual is an interiorization of the object Culture and that "the Whole" permeates and mediates the individual, thereby allowing us access to a totalized Whole (*Critique* 54). "Thus, when we claim that *anyone* can carry out the critical investigation, this does not mean it could happen at any period. It means anyone *today*" (*Critique* 50). This means at any given historical moment, we can have access to a totalized Whole, to a universalism, but each era will have its own objective Culture, and therefore different universal claims will obtain in different eras; and insofar that the same cultural facts obtain across time, the same claims will be supportable, though the factor of temporality is the mutable element here.

In effect, I argue that, in adherence to the Enlightenment notion of continually perfecting an idea, today's universalism takes on the notions of relativism and essentialism in so far that it wants to create universals yet allows for change in these universals instead of setting them as immutable metaphysical truths. The issue of course is how these universals are determined, who determines them, and how our definitions and discourses might differ, even when we are working in tandem.

iii. Essentialism or Universalism in Rising Up and Rising Down

> "I don't understand a lot of it [post-modernist theory]. I studied Comparative Literature at Cornell. Structuralism was real big then. The idea of reading and writing as being a language game. There's a lot of appeal to that. It's nice to think of it as this playful kind of thing. But I think that another way to look at it is, 'Look, I just want to be sincere. I want to write something and make you feel something and maybe you will go out and do something.' And it seems the world is in such bad shape now that we don't have time to do nothing but language games."

—William T. Vollmann, from an interview

in *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and*

Seven Interviews

"I am not a theoretician."

—William T. Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising*

Down

Vollmann is not a philosopher or literary scholar by profession, even though he is prodigiously well-read in many fields, and such thinkers as Freud, Hegel, Marx, and Wittgenstein, among many others, make appearances in *Rising Up and Rising Down*. He is also an incredibly sophisticated philosophical autodidact, and it could easily be argued that his freedom from professional constraints is precisely what allowed for his contributions discussed in this essay. But, nonetheless, his outsider status sometimes makes it difficult for a scholarly effort to pin him down on certain points, since he does not traffic in the discourse of Critical Theory or the generally agreed-upon terms of literary and philosophical scholarship. For example, the terms "essentialism" and "universalism" do not appear in *Rising Up and Rising Down*—while "relativism" makes several appearances, though only meaning *cultural/moral relativism*, never *strong relativism*.

Vollmann, therefore, does not make the above distinctions between these terms, nor any distinction at all, between the concepts of essentialism and universalism. At times, he seems to be asserting what we might call essentialist claims about humanity and ethics, and at other times, he seems to be making universalist claims about them. As we have already seen, Vollmann explicitly eschews moral relativism, but it is unclear in what ways and on what matters he is an essentialist, and in what ways a universalist. In order to arrive at Vollmann's stance(s) on these matters, I propose we do close readings of several key passages and translate, so to speak, into the terminology I describe above.

Let's begin with a passage that places the ethical right to self-defense squarely within the biology of the human organism, thus making it an essentialist claim and thus putting him somewhat at odds with existentialist philosophy.

> Given the agreed-on right of the self to defense and preservation, it would seem clear that the legitimacy both actual and perceived of violent defense in the above situations would vary in proportion to the number and intensity of force-vectors in one's path […] we could not blame the Nazi war criminals from exercising this right and using lethal force to escape, if they could; of course, it was the responsibility of the prison to make sure that they could not. They'd been outlawed and remanded to the executioner, like Robespierre; we had decided that they were not entitled to live, but the struggles of the body to live must be taken for granted just

as much as the need to defecate; that is why there are soldiers, walls and

manacles. (326)

But while this passage seems to mark Vollmann as an essentialist, not a universalist,

since this biologically grounded right would obtain across all cultures and all eras, he

does not always strike this note. In his section on "moral yellowness," he insists on a

decidedly non-essentialist position in regard to intrinsic evil within a group or an

individual.

Trotsky's colleague Krestinsky once remarked that Stalin was "a bad man,

with yellow eyes." After that, Trotsky thought to perceive what he called

the *moral yellowness* of Stalin […] Being able to spy out moral yellowness

would certainly simplify our task of determining when violence is

justified; for that very reason, a misperception of moral yellowness would

be a very serious error. Stalin's belief that he saw it in the class of kulaks

or rich peasants—for the science of Marxism-Leninism proved that it must

be there—gave him the confidence to direct the repression and outright

extermination of millions. In my experience, *there is almost never any moral

yellowness*. (I say "almost" because no one's experience, including mine, is

wide enough.) (416-417). [All italics are Vollmann's.]

There is much to unpack in this passage, but let's begin with the notion of moral

yellowness. Vollmann has kindly offered us a definition of the term (in a spirit of

universal clarity, one might say). "MORAL YELLOWNESS is the outward appearance

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of evil or violence in the attitude or expression of a human being" (418). He goes on to give examples of many of the world's greatest atrocities and their perpetrators' attempts to divine inner evil from their victims' outer appearance. And, as he states it, "sooner or later, all of us who actually meet the morally yellow must experience the uneasy sense that they may be grey underneath" (419)—that is, they may have the same ethically ambiguous personality that all humans have, not the intrinsically evil one we might have supposed due to racism or nationalism or religious bigotry, etc. He also adds that violence against others based on a belief in moral yellowness is never justified (419). And so, while the above statement about the defense of the self as embedded in the very biology of the organism seems to take on an essentialist position, this passage about moral yellowness rejects the notion of intrinsic evil within an individual or group, thereby denying one of the most common (and dangerous) essentialist claims throughout history. It also reduces the conflict with an existentialist problematic, since existentialism eschews the notion of absolute essences in individuals.

We are therefore left either to make Vollmann into a universalist or an essentialist, and then square all the circles we find throughout his text to make them fit our categorization, or we can say he is an essentialist about some issues and a universalist about others. I propose that this latter approach is more accurate and more productive. We could even argue that despite his distaste for a certain subcategory of relativism, Vollmann even maintains certain notions which could be perceived as

relativist, though I would argue they are less about relativism and more about existential finitude, and that he holds these positions for a very specific reason.

Let's look at that final sentence in the quoted passage on moral yellowness, where Vollmann mentions his own experience and its limits, leading him to admit that moral yellowness might indeed exist despite his having never seen it. Here we have to introduce one more element into Vollmann's overall program of ethical investigation: the constant admission of human finitude and fallibility. This is central to Vollmann's effort precisely because of the status he asks that we give the maxims in his Moral Calculus. They are all potentially flawed and all open to perpetual revision. He therefore seeks an *ought* but never an *Ought*, by which I mean that he certainly derives rules for how we ought to act, but they are mortal and fallible rules and do not pretend to be of divine origin or from a perfect Reason; they are built in the muck and mire of human events, derived by a fallible mind, and applied imperfectly and permeated with all the vicissitudes of finitude.

And this focus on the individual creating or applying the Moral Calculus is not an isolated event. Upon closer inspection, the two above passages raise several theoretical questions that are left largely unexplored. Vollmann certainly attempts to place the self into a larger social context, in a spirit of something akin to Heideggerian thrownness into sociality and historicity—indeed the purpose of *Rising Up and Rising Down* is to determine how we may act socially—but Vollmann privileges the role of the individual in his ethical investigations. As he writes: "Trotsky and Lenin might not

value my own visualizations, since collective force interests me only insofar as it related to personalized ethical decisions about violence" (49). But this focus on the individual and the personalized, while anathema to many theorists today, need not remind us of some naïve individualism. It is, if anything, one of the strengths of Vollmann's Moral Calculus, since it demands that he take all human interests and every individual's place in the world into account (to the best of his ability) and even informs his dedication to exhaustiveness. It likewise takes into account the dialectic between interiorization and external factors, which is part and parcel of the existentialist problematic. Furthermore, Vollman seems to sugest, it is only by attempting a full consideration of every extant individual that one might derive a universal ethics such as his Moral Calculus.

I have written *his* Moral Calculus several times so far, but the following passage might give us reason to put pressure on that seemingly innocent possessive pronoun.

> For another instance, in "The Jealous Ones," when poor people rob or harm people who are less poor, does the class-based aggression for which jealousy is a shorthand possess any legitimacy whatsoever? Trotsky would say yes; Burke would say no. What about you? It is your duty and prerogative to apply a moral calculus, mine or yours, as you see fit. (149)

Here again, the individual agent is privileged, and we even have something akin to relativism offered in this passage. As I mentioned earlier, this is not an instance of Vollmann contradicting himself in his stance on relativism. He is not suggesting that all moral calculuses will be equal when he says it is our duty to apply either his or ours; he

is, rather, pointing to the individual's ethical duty to construct a moral calculus or take up the one he has devised for us. In effect, he is saying that you cannot stand neutral and inactive in a world with so many atrocities (to refer to his statement about the Killing Fields being a moment of re-evaluation for a moral relativist).

iv. Ought from Is

> "In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. […] For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it."

To return for a moment to my earlier point about the ethical aspect of Vollmann's methodology of exhaustiveness, I want to investigate the famous claim from David Hume which has become a tacit assumption of most ethical philosophy on both sides of the debate between relativism/nominalism and universalism/essentialism. Hume claims, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that one can never derive an *ought* from an *is*, and to do so is generally dubbed among philosophers *the naturalistic fallacy*.[9] The relativist grants this claim credence by claiming that one must merely observe all the *is*es there are yet never derive any universal ethical claims from them. The old universalists (essentialists) will tell us that we cannot look to the *is*es in the world to derive an *ought*—indeed, according to Kant, we don't even have access to any real *is* out there. We must derive our *ought* from abstract Reason, the old universalists tell us. But Vollmann finds an interesting bridge between the two sides of the debate by eschewing their (tacitly or explicitly) agreed-upon adherence to Hume's dictum. His methodology of exhaustiveness leads him to collect as much information about all the *is*es of the world, making use of texts of anthropology, economics, history, and politics. He then, in direct contradiction with Hume's dictum, derives the maxims of his "Moral Calculus."

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[9] There have, of course, been various philosophers who have tried to challenge this notion, most famously the analytic philosopher John Searle. But these challenges are generally conducted via various minor instances of philosophical hair-splitting, mostly because they have allowed "ought" to continue to mean an immutable ought. Vollmann joins their ranks but adds the further innovation of altering what "ought" might mean. It is also worth noting that no Continental philosopher or critical theorist, to my knowledge, has attempted to challenge the naturalistic fallacy (at least in part since they are not usually interested in universal "oughts").

And then, we come to what he calls "Case Studies" in *Rising Up and Rising Down*. These

"Case Studies" are his own experiences as a war journalist, traveler, and adventure-

seeker. Or, as he describes them:

> The second part of this book owes more to my own experience, and
>
> comprises a series of case studies in violence and perception of violence:
>
> Inuit seal hunting and animal rights, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and
>
> Cambodian gangs in the United States; the civil war in Bosnia, U.N.
>
> peacekeeping in Somalia, cattle rustlers and street robbers in Madagascar,
>
> child prostitution in Thailand (and how and why I kidnapped one girl
>
> engaged in that trade), teenage suicide on an Apache reservation in the
>
> U.S., opium politics and ethnic guerilla movements in Burma, the Libyan-
>
> funded PULO terrorist organization in Thailand and Malaysia, the
>
> Guardian Angel movement in the U.S., the Christian Patriot movement in
>
> the U.S. (with some references to neo-Nazis and the Militia), the Baraku
>
> ("Untouchable") class in Japan, and voodoo and folk religion in the
>
> American South as a means of "dealing with" violence. (47)

And here again, we see the exhaustiveness of his effort—not only in the range of his

archival research, but in the extremes he will go to gather experience and the invaluable

knowledge he claims that comes with that experience. In effect, he argues for a kind of

extreme field anthropology as a key element in our ethical investigations.

Vollmann ends his "Case Studies" with "applications of the Moral Calculus to strike at a brief ethical evaluation of each of the situations describes" (48). In sum: instead of refusing to derive any ethical maxims, as the relativist/nominalist would have him do, and instead of deriving them from pure abstractions as the old universalist/essentialist would have him do, Vollmann collects an massive amount of information, derives his maxims from that information, and then tests these maxims in the laboratory of his massive personal experience. And all the while, he admits that he cannot possibly gather enough information or have enough experience or be infallible in his understanding of either—in short, he (and his ethical system) admit the fact of human finitude and fallibility. Sartre tells us that we are free to choose but not free to choose the conditions of our choosing; I would add, channeling Vollmann, that one of those conditions is human finitude, and that we must take that into account when we attempt to outline a system of ethics or a series of moral maxims. In this, Vollmann follows Heideggerian thinking on finitude quite precisely.

But even if we admit human finitude and fallibility in our system, as I think we must, we have not solved all of our problems. Perhaps the most charged issue in deriving an *ought* from an *is*, however, is of course which *is* do we include and which do we exclude; which do we put as a paradigmatic example and which as a periphery case, worthy perhaps of no more than a footnote. As we'll see in the next section, most attempts at universalizing have, paradoxically, been more about exclusion than inclusion. This is the point of greatest danger in constructing universals—we may fall

victim at every turn to ideological pitfalls and prejudicial pratfalls. Vollmann's

methodology of exhaustiveness is perhaps the best defense we have against these

dangers, albeit an imperfect one. But for now, let's move on to how we construct

universality.

v. Constructing Universality

> "On ne se demandera pas ce que sont les principes
>
> mais ce qu'ils font. [*Don't ask what the principles are,*
>
> *but rather what they do.*]"
>
> —Gilles Deleuze, *Philosophie Virtuelle*

> "Experience alone, and theoretical grounding alone,
>
> are insufficient foundations for any moral calculus."
>
> —William T. Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising Down*

Here is where it gets difficult. At this point we've established that the old

essentialist notions of morality were too metaphysically dogmatic and generally

Eurocentric. But the alternative, relativism, is equally unsatisfying. So now we've

moved to the need for a new sort of universalism that has learned the lessons of

tolerance and inclusion from relativism. As Fredric Jameson, discussing Adorno and

somewhat channeling the Žižek of *Looking Awry*, describes one possible variation of the dialectic in *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009):

> The negative dialectic still seems to retain something of the Absolute that figured so powerfully in the Hegelian version, and even in the Marxian "absolute historisicism." […] It is about this possibility that Žižek's dialectic will have something to say.

Jameson then shows the tripartite movement he has illustrated:

> stupid first impression as the appearance; ingenious correction in the name of some underlying reality or "essence"; but finally, after all, a return to the reality of the appearance (Jameson 57)

In effect, we begin with a naïve notion, make an ingenious complicating antithesis, but then return to the first notion—though now it is no longer naïve, but rather informed by its dialectical journey through its antithesis. But how do we set about forming such a universalist vision of morality?

As Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek agree in their book *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2011)—a book designed around their disagreements—the most common means (historically speaking) of creating a universal has been to exclude more than you include, usually beginning with an ideologically formed notion of what (and who) is right, and then excluding everything that does not fit these ideological preconditions.

Another point of agreement, which bears a certain relation to my earlier

distinction between essentialism and universalism, is that they all

> maintain that universality is not a static presumption, not an a priori
>
> given, and that it ought instead to be understood as a process or condition
>
> irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance. (Butler, Laclau,
>
> Žižek 3)

They go on to say:

> Whereas we sometimes differ on how the emphasis is to be made, we each
>
> offer accounts of universality which assume that the negative condition of
>
> all political articulation is 'universal' (Žižek), that the contestatory process
>
> determines forms of universality which are brought into a productive and
>
> ultimately irresolvable conflict with each other (Laclau), or that there is a
>
> process of translation by which the repudiated within universality is
>
> readmitted into the term in the process of remaking it (Butler). (ibid)

Žižek is particularly interesting in this case, since his three main intellectual influences

are Hegel, Lacan, and Marx. Hegel and Marx are clearly universalist and teleological

thinkers, and psychoanalysis is always negotiating the back-and-forth of essentialism

and cultural particularity. Žižek quotes Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (1995) on the

question of Marxist critique in the age of identity politics. Brown asks

> to what extent a critique of capitalism is foreclosed by current
>
> configuration of oppositional politics, and not simply by the loss of 'a

socialist alternative' or the ostensible 'triumph of liberalism' in the global

order. (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 96)

Žižek and Brown seem to be warning us that the excessive fragmentation of our ethical

vision causes us to miss the overarching structural issues of capitalism. We therefore

need an equally overarching ethics with which to critique the global system of capital.

But, as Deleuze invites us to do with his injunction to ask what principles do instead of

what they are, we must ask what a universal ethics does (and how it is made) as much

as we ask which contents would constitute such a system. We must be careful to notice

unwanted side-effects or exclusions such a system might allow. It is also necessary to be

able to make decisions in a world in motion and in which we are moving. Here is where

Vollmann's Moral Calculus enters the fray most usefully.

vi. Vollmann's Moral Calculus

> This is a tricky domain because, unlike simple
> arithmetic, to solve a calculus problem—and in
> particular to perform integration—you have to be
> smart about which integration technique should be
> used: integration by partial fractions, integration by
> parts, and so on.
>
> —Marvin Minsky, *HAL's Legacy*

The Moral Calculus is Vollmann's seventy-six-page set of interrelated ethical maxims. As already stated, Vollmann derives his Moral Calculus from his exhaustively collected archive of anthropology, economics, history, and politics—thereby eschewing the long-running dictum that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. He tells us that the idea first occurred to him when he read that Benjamin Franklin kept a Moral Arithmetic, whereby he would divide a sheet of paper into two columns and write out the reasons for and against a given action. About this method of decision-making, Franklin wrote (and Vollmann thought worth quoting) that

> tho' the Weight of Reasons cannot be taken with the Precision of Algebraic
> Quantities, . . . I have found great Advantage from this kind of Equation,
> in what may be called *Moral* or *Prudential Algebra*. (Vollmann 445)

Notice the first clause and its admission that in moral reckonings, we cannot expect the precision of the mathematical discipline from which either Franklin's Moral Algebra or Vollmann's Moral Calculus take their names. Vollmann does not offer us an explicit reason as to why he names his system a Moral Calculus, though we can assume, minimally, that given the increased complexity—seventy-six pages of interconnected and interdependent premises and conclusions as opposed two to columns, pro and con—that Vollmann thinks the formation of a universal system is more complex than one man's decision process about a single action. In fact, though Vollmann may not have intended it, his choice is entirely accurate in regard to creating a universal system

that takes into account all the relative moving parts. Calculus itself was constructed to

calculate change and objects in motion. This is perfectly fitting, to my mind anyway, for

the task before universalist thinkers today.

It is by use of a Moral Calculus that we can determine when violence is justified

or not, according to Vollmann. It is how we decide if a person or group is, to use

Vollmann's titular concepts, *rising up* or *rising down*. Rising up is the justified use of

violence to ameliorate one's situation, and rising down is the unjustified use of violence

to ameliorate one's situation. But what does his calculus look like? A complete and

thorough analysis of it would be an essay unto itself, but it is worthwhile to get even a

brief sketch of his seventy-six-page Moral Calculus, along with a few examples from it.

Vollmann has constructed a series of maxims, each one derived from the rest of

his massive book, which covers multiple national histories, his own exploits as a war

journalist and adventurer, and so on. As examples, I offer a few maxims, each named

after the person or idea that inspired Vollmann to construct them.

> **Martin Luther King's Maxim**: *A law is unjust which requires from the*
> *governed acts or allegiances not required from the legislators.*
>
> **The Whale-Hunter's Maxim**: *What is forbidden, allowable, or compulsory in*
> *one group need not be in another.* (476)

Some of these maxims are, as Vollmann admits, incompatible under certain

circumstances, and so he creates a system of hierarchy as to which ones take

precedence. He also includes, along with this hierarchized set of maxims, certain

dilemmas, such as the following one:

The Pelasgian Dilemma: *Do I express who I am, and thereby cause harm to myself and others, or do I protect myself by becoming one of them?* (477)

He goes on to set limitations and qualifications, subrules that cancel other subrules, and

so on. But what is most important about his achievement is its massive flexibility, which

is in fact yet another part of his methodology of exhaustiveness. Some maxims seem

rigid, whereas others are very flexible, and nearly every rule can be superseded by a

series of other limitations or counter-rules. In effect, it is not a strict set of rules

partaking of a metaphysical Ought. Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's ethical system

was based precisely on his distaste for this Ought. In his *On the Basis of Morality*,

Schopenhauer's position is that

> Kant's idea of an imperative, 'you ought', is a theological notion in
> disguise. The language in which Kant speaks here has biblical overtones,
> and, to the atheist Schopenhauer, the very idea of an absolute command
> either trades surreptitiously on the assumption of an absolute being who
> may issue it, or it is unfounded. (Janaway 54).

For Schopenhauer, all ethics are derived from various subjects' will to life (Wille zum

Leben) and must be negotiated as the interplay, the confrontation, and the sympathy

these subjects exhibit upon encountering one another.

If we are going to have a universal ethics today, it must not consist of strict dicta based on a metaphysical Ought; it must be a calculus that takes into account the ever-changing and movable parts of humanity. But it must also follow Deleuze's injunction to be less concerned with what our principles are and more with what they do (*faire*). Vollmann's Moral Calculus admirably avoids the strict Kantian Ought, as Schopenhauer would have him do, and he is ultimately concerned with the effects produced by one's ethical maxims, as Deleuze instructs us we must be. For these reasons and for the massiveness of his research and personal experience, as well as his refreshingly curious investigations, we should make *Rising Up and Rising Down* a centerpiece in the discussions of universalism and ethics.

vii. Conclusion(s)

I have argued that Vollmann's methodology of exhaustiveness in *Rising Up and Rising Down* offers a merger of the philosophical demands of relativism/nominalism and universalism/essentialism. It likewise offers a solution to the long-running problem of deriving an *ought* from an *is*, which thinkers on both sides of the debate have either explicitly or tacitly assumed is impossible. He does not, however, derive the old universalist version of an *Ought*, insofar as he is not deriving immutable and infallible laws by which one must conduct one's life. The necessary facts of any situation are always in motion and each situation will call for the application of any number of (potentially conflicting) maxims from the Moral Calculus (or indeed might

require adding more maxims to it). In effect, Vollmann has taken up the Heideggerian notion of Dasein's existential finitude and applied it to the realm of ethics.

My primary goal here has been to suggest Vollmann's inclusion into one of the major critical-theoretical discussions of the past decade—that of a new universalism—and to suggest how his efforts might further those of professional theorists and philosophers, while their efforts might help us to better understand and apply Vollmann's work. The almost total lack of academic attention given to Vollmann's work is not only disappointing but also quite surprising, given the nature of his enterprise and the sheer quantity of it. His exhaustive output is exhilarating and exhausting in equal measure; it merits our serious attention, and, what's more, it might serve as one of the most profound ethical models available to us in the age of globalization.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for an existentialist intervention into Memory Studies and investigations into the effects and ethics of violence and counter-violence at their various points of intersection. I have likewise argued for an approach that blends the methodologies of philosophy and literary studies, given that existentialist authors are often philosophers and literary authors in equal measure. Existentialism, I maintain, is best equipped to theorize the dialectic of the individual and sociality, and thus the dialectic between acute personal suffering and systemic violence, as well as collective suffering and violence.

Existentialism also offers us a means of constructing an ethics, as well as the means of admitting the limits of such an ethics. And here again, the dialectic between the individual and the collective comes into play, since any ethics will necessarily include both. Sartre's own attempt at developing an existentialist ethics is incomplete — literally, since his book on the matter was never finished. It is my hope that by injecting Vollmann's Himalayan study on violence/ethics and Mailer's work on courage and limit-experiences into the Sartrean/existentialist discourse on the subject of ethics that we might make strides toward completing that incomplete Sartrean project. We must, however, admit our basic finitude in any given project of developing an ethics and not seek to set down a coda of immutable ethical Oughts; rather, any existentialist ethics

will perforce be a situational one, a mutable one, a fallible one. And this might represent the greatest contribution of existentialist thought to ethical philosophy: the jettisoning of lists of commandments and rigid philosophical dicta about how one ought to act— always and unquestionably—and replacing it with a dynamic situation-oriented ethics. It is also worth noting that an existentialist ethics, as discussed in chapters two and six, must be other-oriented, via Sartre's reworking of Hegelian recognition.

There are many directions the current swell of interest in existentialism can take, but given its unique position in theorizing memory, suffering, and violence, I argue that forays into those subjects should be first and foremost among the various directions scholars take. Of particular interest would be the intersections of these subjects and postcolonialism, since existentialism likewise holds a privileged position in postcolonial (and anti-colonial) thought. Given its stature as the only truly global philosophical movement, there are practically no limitations in terms of geography on which topics one could explore via the existentialist problematic.

There was a time when existentialism was utterly dominant in Western and even world thought. This dominance led to a backlash, an oedipal killing of sorts, to clear the field for other modes of theorizing to emerge. The current emergence of existentialism is not so outsized as to be threatening to other theoretical modes of thought. It can, therefore, be safely and thoroughly utilized in all the ways I suggest and many more without concern for academic fashion or avoidance. The slow, important work of

understanding the topics I have covered here and others can and should continue in

earnest.

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