

Abortion as the Work of Mourning

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I have two biological children. I also do not have at least two biological children. That is to say, in addition to the numberless children that I do not plan to, yet might still bear in my body, or the ones I cannot imagine yet perhaps will come to love as (if) my own; in addition to all the ones I will not in the end be able to bear, will not have been able to bear; the countless other children I will never come to have loved as (if) my own, though I might have, had I taken that possible legacy on, perpetually and with an unplanned openness to wherever I might have found them, which is everywhere; that I, a woman of 40 years of age, have been pregnant more than once.

Some of those pregnancies continued on until two children were born to me, mostly of and through my body, and they/we continue to be my mostly continuous *here I am* parent work. In the case of some of those pregnancies, in the case of these two, I took on the work, and continually take on this work, this ap-proximate legacy, as my own inheritance (Kamuf 2000a, 8). They are now young women whose blood is (no longer) my blood, and their proper names are Kuusta Laird and Cézanne Houle. That is also to say that some of those pregnancies were not continued on, and at least two others were not born to me, in and of mostly my body. There are at least another two who were not carried, were not parented, were not avowed. Given how things work, I know nothing in particular about (any of) them: not who they were or what they would have become; not what each would have preferred to eat for breakfast or whether either would have my crooked eye teeth, what their particular foreignness would show itself as. Nor did they, will they, nor can they know any one thing of the me who would have been their mother, and likely would have been *with* them, now. Nor can any of us, including you, ever know anything. We cannot even bring them to mind, look in the direction they came from, or might come from. We cannot invoke them. They had no proper names. Each one arrived, announced their arrival, and then left or were refused further entry. I confess those ones still have no names, not even euphemistically, recuperatively. I cannot tell you or me anything about them because all I end up saying is something about the *me* who was unwilling and incapable of taking on the work of parenting them, of finding place for them, in and at those two times in the past. Or I babble about human beings in general, which they were not. They were me and also altogether other than me, in the same manner as all others are. Yet nothing of that precarious otherness/sameness took up in (a) life as its own anchor(ing): at 20 years of age,

and then 32 years of age: an arrival and then a "passage to something like an absolute past" (Krell, 143).

True. They do not call me (by) anything.

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But they did call to me. Or, more accurately, "there was calling." There was something to be done, an urgent and monumental task, and it was my work to do it, or mostly my work, and mostly in the body, my female body. There was an im-possible decision for me to make.

And: I *responded*.

I said: "At this very moment in this work here I am."

Yes, even as I signed the abortion consent forms, and yes, still now "there is calling." I hear it saying what it was saying then, again each day, never quite in the mode of repetition. With them, I am perpetually, "intimate, without hesitation ... open" (Krell, 143), in responsiveness to an "it is."

This essay is an attempt to honor the force and shape of that responsiveness. I want to write so as to draw out the unique *character of responding* that is the on-going, painful/joyous work of mourning connected to *not* carrying and *not* parenting (those) children: the response which was the decision to abort and then to grieve that choice, a response which we are involved with still. Abortion and its possible mourning work, its *kind of dying* perhaps has things to teach us, individually and collectively, about *how to live*, about who this *we* is. We seem prepared to try to learn, collectively, about *how to live* from other grief-laden human events: Auschwitz, 9/11. Here too is another possible teacher to attend to by way of cultivating "moral and political responsibility" (LI, 16). To begin with, a teaching coming mostly to and through women. Let us not put that to the side, for a change.

[S]ome say that the time of ... feminine writing is absolutely past, that the fire is quenched, that the charred remains of bitterness ... alone survive as the elements germane to feminism. Yet there are cinders of a more fecund variety ... and I suspect that these ashes of ... feminine mourning, will be with us for quite a while yet, which would be good for people like me who are so slow to read even the best of books assigned by the most gracious and talented and inspiring of teachers (Krell, 143).

Background Preparation

Derrida's philosophy is ethical philosophy. In almost all his writings, in one form or another, he gestures toward responsibility as a site, an event, from which, by which, with which human responsiveness might occur. In this brand of ethical philosophy "responsibility" is not characterized by way of the degree of correspondence of an autonomous, rational agent's life to a list of particular prohibited and required actions, nor to whether those choices bring about or hold in abeyance overall human ends. Nor is responsibility a kind of universal rule to which to set the collective human heart's clock. Nor does responsibility have to do first and foremost with *my* powers and *my* freedoms, especially with my reasons and my choices, as we have come to expect in a secular, individualistic, liberal culture. Responsibility is not indexed to what is strictly measurable between and about us: to the radial structures of kinship; to the shared lengths of geopolitical boundaries; to the discernable, attributable causal relations one has with the conditions or circumstances of any other; to the degree of understanding or ignorance one has regarding another (another life, another aspect of one's own); to the proximity of a self to its intentions to give or receive harm or good; nor even to the size of its gifts and debts. The degree of obligation that stands between us, and the quality of its fulfillment, is not and could not be given through any such measure.

Responsibility is a site, an event, a forming/dissipating possibility, from which, by which, with which human responsiveness might occur. This new concept of *responsiveness* touches on receptivity, openness, capacity to be moved, postures of expectancy vis-à-vis encounters with the world, but it also touches on what those encounters give rise to, give off, render, inaugurate, might say in their turn. Responsibility is a site or an event of activity, force, intervention, power, transformation, intensity, even especially the intensity of unbearable situations we find ourselves bearing. A quote from Kierkegaard orients us well: "I should like to say that in making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses" (1944, 141). In the event of responsibility we encounter what it would mean to be worthy of a response, and we only find that out in an undertaking.

Ethico-political possibility rests upon my responsiveness to and in encountering alterity. The ethical *is* the relation to the other, with alterity. It occurs, if it occurs, to and in the constitutive interval between you and me, the gap that absolute otherness reveals and confirms—the

absolute, pure strangeness which is always coming toward me, always so near, so near in fact that "I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am ... is the enigmatic traces of [unknown, countless] others." Yet "my very formation implicates the other in me, my very own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (Butler 2004, 46).

A Derridean perspective draws heavily on Levinas: "Ethics is the name that Levinas gives to the relation to the Other that does not totalize, or render similar, that Other" (Roffe, 39). Yet while Derrida and Levinas begin from roughly the same place they do not end up in the same place:

On Levinas' account, the relationship between the self and the other is structured absolutely hierarchically: the other transcends the self, precedes and makes the self possible. For Derrida, this hierarchy itself, just like the traditional self-other dyad, must be undone: there is no fundamental, transcendent asymmetry between self and other in either direction, but a radical and universal disequilibrium.... [T]hey emerge together through ... the work and peril of interrogation (Butler 2004, 46).

Derrida's use of the terms "alterity," "marginal," or "other" are not as tightly tethered to "human" others as they seem to be under Levinas' treatment. Thus I take "other" to refer to all the unwelcomes and all the strangenesses that arrive unannounced, uninvited, to us: unwelcome advice, news of Leslie's death, unwelcome illness, unwelcome failures, unwelcome pregnancies, unwelcome tasks, uneasy silence, awkward noxious jokes, unfamiliar smells and sounds and faces: all manner of arrivals which place us immediately in a position of receptivity, of reply.

Replying, even trying not to reply, to these arrivals is labor. Replying, the work of responsiveness, is what Derrida calls decision. Undertaking a reply—deciding, responding—is a different matter, is of a different order and runs on a different logic than what(ever) comes before replying: having thought long and hard about, having studied the rule for, having made careful measurements about (even up to the second one starts to reply) how one will reply. The decision comes up and out of these, yet in the instant of deciding, responding, being responsive, actually breaks with all these, opens up something radically new: in the subject, in the relation to the arrival, in the future which follows, which "comes from" that eventual present. It must, otherwise it would not be a genuine reply but only the unruptured continuation of the practice for the arrival: an

imperialistic continuation of the process of imaging what might happen in a future, into that future, thus refusing rather than actually welcoming that future. For it to be a response it must be an answer to the unwelcome question for which reply is now precipitated as possible *qua* answer.

The act of decision must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision [making the reply] not know everything.... [T]he decision, if there is to be one, must advance toward a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated (Derrida 2002, 231).

Replying is always situational and particular: these people, in this place, with these connections and these limits, especially the limits of this human knowing.

No subject's knowledge has ever been sufficient in itself to make decisions ... which do not merely unfold the consequences of knowledge and calculation, because they have to step off at some point into an unknown, beyond the subject's knowledge or ability to calculate outcomes (Derrida, 1994, 90).

Derrida, drawing on the Biblical example of Abraham, wants to say that all ethical moments have in them an irreducible particularity which cannot be gotten around by recourse to preparatory notes, strategy, rule, or even reference to some previous instance in which one decided one way rather than another. Each event contains or makes manifest irreducible elements of the unknown, the incalculable, the limitedness of the participants, the multifaceted maybe, the utterly singular. Yet these features are not what prevent ethicality; they are precisely the horizon that makes it possible. That is because in replying, despite the incapacities of knowledge and personal power afflicting the decision, the human agent, acting within this aporetic tension, is actually opening up and setting in motion the conditions for the possibility of something new happening, something to occur, to come to pass, which was not entirely foreseen by nor contained in what any willing and well intentioned subject endeavors: "the coming about of something that did not fall within the existing space of the possible and that was therefore, strictly speaking, impossible" (Patton, 29). Derrida names this formal, activating gesture the impossible, and what it opens upon, the "to come." High-

lighting this undertaking is among the most profound and moving of Derrida's gifts for he is doing nothing less than teaching us how we might participate in change, how we might hope for progress; for it is, as Patton reminds us, a basic belief in change that animates "the political" or "the ethical" in the first instance. It is by being responsive to the to come that we might participate in the building of genuine community, the giving and receiving of gifts entirely greater than ourselves, the interventive critique of an intolerable present.

This, if anything, is the possible site of ethical practice. In these "visitations" to me, to us, the work of responding is mine, is ours, despite and even by virtue of the impossibility of responding well or fully, or in a timely manner, or without suffering losses. That is to say, the ethical is not a human project guaranteed by the security of the moral law and underwritten by the regulative idea, nor the soothing trudge of Absolute Spirit. Nor does "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" let me fob off this work. Its traction on me, on us, is urgent, is immediate and forceful, coming from an altogether different economy than equivalencies, calculation, exchange, reciprocity, substitution, judging, bargaining, reward, or closure. One way human beings often attempt to demonstrate their virtue is in a willingness to "own up to" events, to take possession of them antecedently, and to name them as one thing rather than another. That is, in giving account, and then judging or weighing one's culpability in terms of that account—settling the accounts. But Derrida's theory of responsibility resists all thinking of ethical behavior in terms of the giving of accounts of one's power and knowledge in relation to events, since as his concept of decision insists, when we are being responsible we are often furthest from reason and the economies of measure. By contrast, being responsible involves the aneconomic, the economy of gift, of event. These are happenings which release a complex of possibility, the possible site for ethical being. I do not choose these sites. I cannot make those events happen, nor should I wish to any more than I would choose the death of my best friend. Yet those conditions are structurally built into our lives, inevitable, will arrive. It is only a matter of time. Derrida's theory of responsibility thus articulates the complex of conditions that are the conditions of possibility of this site of possibility. These include singularity, finitude, openness or receptivity to the call of the infinite Other, operating in an absence of justifications, non-recuperable loss attending all decisions, failure shaping the attempt, ominipresent before I begin yet not inscribing the outcome so completely such as to annihilate the possibility of not failing, a possibility ominipresent to any undertaking,

an end causing me to begin. It is to this element of mortal loss that I now turn.

The Ethical and Death: The Gift?

In this section the focus will be on those features of human death that Derrida draws upon and elaborates—inevitable loss, the sequence of betrayal which is friendship, eulogizing and grief work, death as gift—by way of preparing us for the encounter with death in abortion, which I address in the next section. Recalling the previous section, we will see how the structure of mortality is the structure of im-possibility from which the ethical and the political as features of a mortal and finite human subject emerges: a me who is, and who can be responsible, who can respond in and to the world, in and to the others with whom I share a world, or whose world I will never know or share, yet which still somehow depend upon my very responsiveness.

Derrida qua phenomenologist thinks the rejection of the independent human subject, in line with Heidegger and Husserl. Phenomenologists, like other strains of thought, including much feminist ethics, reject a vision of ourselves in which what we are is what we choose to notice, read, organize, or depend upon according to a generic principle of selfhood: either as individuals or as a collective—the human. In contrast to this vision is the view that there is always something "given" prior to my or our coming to be which nevertheless makes that coming to be possible and the range of possibilities as existent beings, among and with his pre-given, radical otherness. Derrida's "proof" for this view, following Heidegger, draws from the structure of mortality, from death. It is out of my death, which lies immeasurably ahead of me, that I even have a present, a me. Human experience involves knowing the inescapable fact of one's own death and of it being one's own alone. My first sense of "me-ness", "I-ness," and "my-ownness" arises primordially through this structure and fact. A complex feature of me is that I am and I endeavor to be with others, all the while facing the impossibility of the completion and enjoyment of my endeavors as my own. The only thing I can do which is mine alone is to die my death. But I cannot enjoy that moment as the sole moment which affirms my unique and individuated capacity because I am no longer around to claim it. I can only anticipate it as a fact but know that I will never know it, as an experience of mine. It remains secret. This living-toward-death, which is what all humans do and are, is, across the whole of life, not merely in a site of life, a constitutive and generative im-possibility. What is crucial about thinking

about death is not so much the detail of any one death or the feelings it might invoke but the structures it reveals about life and the possibilities it enables to be taken up, within and by virtue of that structure, that "horizon." The chief structure that is revealed by thinking about our being-toward-death is the structure of the gift. Another word for the "structure of the gift" is "with."

We all understand these ideas even if we do not call them by those terms. We undertake friendships, we undertake love, we undertake planning, we trust men and women to love us for the right reasons, we try to root and branch out in the world though we have not the means to make secure, to vouchsafe, to protect from danger, to remove the final removal (death). Is this folly? Is this sheer animality? Or is this strange "as if" of ours constitutive of what we can hope for? Heidegger might say that these daily undertakings are not always undertaken naively as if such death or inevitable contingency were not a factor in our motivations and consciousness as we take up these relations. I conceive of these as futures and take them on in ways that I hold myself to now, and have a conscience about now, shaping my doing of a life. It is as if human life can be lived via the structure of promise. This entails a way of being toward a future, in a more present present, a more hope-ful now which has been given to me, and which I can take on, by virtue of my being-toward-my-death, being really future-less, hope-less. What is important is that we see how this taking on of life, taking up of life, turning toward the future which is not future but "as if," could not be detected or described using a rationalist, liberal, or even theological conception of human life. This is not "choice," this is not fallen, this is not pleasure, this is not utility, this is not calculation, this is not even sensible. Yet we do it, or we are, for the most part, this way, even under the thought of death. Why? Because of what it gifts us.

Death is a "gift" because it offers without hesitation, the first opening for responsibility. Although one's first responsibility is to this gift of death, it is a responsibility that is initially received passively, like a question posed, not in a posture of preparation or of choosing. One's first responsibility, then, is to the reception of responsibility. This is also the reception of one's ownness, the taking up of one's self, as it comes. Death is also a gift because it is the condition of selfhood. My very self is made possible and shaped by and toward that unachievable but unavoidable "work" of assuming my death by responding to it, as life. We exist already in the element of responsibility, not merely responsible for my self alone but always selfed by responsibility, and thus a self for responsibility itself. Like all gifts qua gifts, however, its structure of

offering and reception, the generosity which could come of it, is perilous. It is a gift that could be refused in perpetual inauthenticity. I cannot refuse death, nor can I accept death, but I can refuse or be receptive to what it offers me as me. There is decision here. I must assume or adopt my singularity, that is, I must be receptive and take on, with the proper attitude and energy, the reception of this extravagant gift, the kind of gift that cannot be explained away or justified. This constitutive relation between death (a radical otherness, my own radical otherness, omnipossible), life, and responsibility is offered by way of my always standing in prior relations to that which shapes me and shapes my possibilities. This is what Heidegger motions to by the evocative phrase, "it gives."

Everyone must assume his own death. That is the one thing in the world that no one else can either give me or take from me. Strangely enough, "therein resides freedom and responsibility." Death is always a death, my death; it individuates, it singularizes in its very force and inescapability. Responsibility requires "uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution" (Derrida 1995, 43–4, 61), not a selfless self or a collective of universal types. A rule that is not fully for me or about me, not fully between one clear singularity and another, at best offers a matrix under which we operate as a kind of thing (a cog) or mote (a citizen), the weak forces of response neither mine nor yours, not ours. Only the singular self is fully freed to respond, freed *for* response, free to initiate and make a change. An example that Derrida gives is hospitality: "I can invite others in, host them within my home, be generous with what I have, only insofar as it is *my* home, and they are *my* possessions" (2000, 135). Being with, primordially, the one possibility which is mine and mine alone, thus gifts me to be the kind of self who can be held responsible, a site to whom its relations can pass and from which emanate. This means, among other things, the kind of self who can always be mourned and mourned uniquely. Even if there are two funerals in one day. Even if there are three lovers in three years, each ending in vats of tears. Even if there are four abortions in a row. All of us, an each.

Which amounts to more than just my singularity. More even than the infinite singularity of each to the other. Each death bears a possible teaching for us all. Surviving one (an)other brings forth and makes visible the horizon, the unthinkable yet utterly forceful horizon of total and infinite belonging. Like the Abrahamic moment, immanent to each of our moments, yet entirely beyond, otherwise, greater than what any one of us, any one(s) present amounts to:

Survival is structural, it seems a nearly unpoetic way of replacing the dream of immortality. But what he [Derrida] is saying, I think, is that from the beginning language carries traces of those who are gone, irrecoverable, and that there is a kind of relation that exists between language and both life and death that remains insuperable. We inherit traces of the dead even when we were not the intended recipients, but in the moment that we give away our own words, we participate in a certain wild future of inheritance, one for which no framework for kinship exists (Butler 2005, 32).

Let me try to connect this last idea—the glimpse of an uncloseable totality of connectivity—with a last gift of death given through the work of mourning. In attempting to respond to the death, for instance, in eulogizing my friend as my friend, we run up against the limits of the reasonableness of our so-called choosings, our choosing this friend for our friend, and not that one. Having spent the time I have, the way I have, and not another. What gives us pause, what brings forth delay, is that we see that we simply cannot supply reasons, give satisfactory accounts to defend ourselves against the charge that any other might still level against us, asking us to be responsible to and for them. Why not Isaac's brother? Did he have sisters? We do not know, but if he did, Abraham certainly could have not killed them too. One cannot know. Since it is possible to be loved without knowing it, there are always more friends of the beloved than the ones at the funeral, more friends I might have befriended if I had not befriended this one and that one; thus more citizens to our citizenry than these; more children I might have parented; more tasks I might have undertaken than writing this paper—infinite and equally worthy yet unfathomable others to whom I have obligations that I could oblige, or try to oblige. As Derrida writes of this im-possible plurality of obligations:

I can respond only to the one, that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other(s) to that one. I am responsible to anyone (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice. I must always hold my peace about it. Whether I want to or not, I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. I will always be secretive, held to secrecy in respect of this, for I have nothing to say about it. What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is

Abraham's hyper-sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages. How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at each instant? Not to mention other people (*The Gift of Death*, 70–1).

What the gift of death reveals to us as constituted, embedded, and responsible beings is the primordial fact of our standing in an undischageable and unmappable position of responding to the to come. It shows us that, just like Abraham during the knife trick, we are always and everywhere simultaneously moral and immoral. But it also tells us, mercifully, that ultimately it is not within us, not even within this vast realm to know, to judge, one way or another, finally.

Being responsible cannot, as liberal ethics would have it, be conceptually exhausted by what humans can be said to know or explain, or do or avoid doing, because it would have nothing to say about how we can be deeply ethical and responsible while we are, mortal imperfect human beings, when we find ourselves engaged in failing and in losing what we love. The work of mourning, like the work of death itself, like all genuine deciding and all genuine responsibility, is an undertaking in the absence of the security of sufficient reason. Any assessment of the ethicality of those constitutive moments cannot directly take the route of judgment; they will first have to pass by the "experience of the impossible," its perilous "oscillations" about the axes of unanswerable questions. Derrida concedes in "Violence and Metaphysics" that this account of responsibility might not seem promising: "This is very little. Almost nothing, but within in, today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable dignity and duty of decision. An unbreachable responsibility" (1977, 116, 80).

Abortion as a Site of Responsible Mourning?

Knowing that few of us get a chance to hang our cutlasses over the throats of our sons on Mount Moriah, Derrida explored common and familiar experiences of death in order to locate and highlight for us possible moments for ethical being in the kinds of deaths we do generally face as mortal human beings. He focused on the "death of the friend" and on eulogizing those friends as key sites for the ethical work

of/in mourning. This was never a "strictly theoretical" exercise for Derrida. Like all of us, he survived the deaths of many whom he counted among his beloveds friends—Barthes, Levinas, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, to name a few—and in response tried to bear witness to them and to the unique nature of each of the bonds, to have fidelity to the relation and to the person. In turn, many more dear friends, following Derrida's lead, delivered to him in the wake of his death in October of 2004 their labors of commemoration. Butler writes in her public mourning of Derrida that in *The Work of Mourning*

he tries to come to terms with the deaths of other writers and thinkers through reckoning his debt to their words, indeed, their texts; his own writing constitutes an act of mourning, one that he is perhaps, *avant la lettre*, recommending to us as a way to begin to mourn this thinker, who not only taught us how to read, but gave the act of reading a new significance and a new promise.¹

I, too, have been following his lead, though perhaps improperly.
I, too, have survived the deaths of countless beloveds.
I, too, have mourned publically in such acts of im-possible fidelity.
I, too, have written and delivered eulogies at funerals, at the funerals of loved ones I *could* call my own.

But so too have I survived altogether different sorts of death, deaths of an altogether different sort of relationality, deaths of an altogether different sort of loved one, deaths no less intimate and no less difficult than the ones I *could* enact, in their wake.

I am speaking about abortion, the deaths of abortion.
I keep turning toward those deaths.

This paper, what I am trying to say, what will not stop calling/writing to me, the vivid and concrete conditions of its forming (in) me, the force of the undischageable impulse, the sense of urgency that sweeps wider than myself, the looming, undiminished failing that feels itself along these thoughts and words, the way hope and even joy wells up around this project, my perpetual struggle "to avoid bad taste, to refrain from using a death for my advantage" (2001a, 6); nevertheless my body, the deaths of what I carried within in, the lives of what I carried within it, the bodies of an estimated one in three women who have abortions each year; the miscarriages, the pill, the choosing not to have children; the

way that no one much talks about those experiences²; experiences of deaths, infinite and infinitely equal, uncommemorated, uncommemorable, most common deaths.

Is the death that is the constant comings and the constant not-comings of children not another site of the annihilative/constitutive im-possible, and thus, of and for, responsibility?
Is abortion not a kind of gift?

A phrase Derrida offers in *The Gift of Death* permits an initial, tentative affirmation of what, I am sure, strikes us as nearly unthinkable: abortion as gift. Of the impasse that is responsibility he writes that it is in fact "the most common thing." The impasse of responsibility is what all of our relations always involve, whatever the conditions of their making or the outcome of their enacting: small, perpetual deaths in life, not just one final, big death. In a more punishing phrase he writes, "day and night, at every instant, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love" (1995, 67, 68). Here we are very far from Moriah. We are even far from a room in which a cold coffin lays, bearing a name, at some distance from a polished podium, an us who is giving the eulogy, addressing the beloved, now dead. Where are we? Who are we, here? Might we not even try to say?

In this phrase, "day and night," I heard/felt an opening, and I went through that opening; it took me up to here. I hear a description of my relation at all times to all the ones we might love but do not as intertwined with and inseparable from all the ones we might love, and do. Our ethicality inheres across these possible/impossibles, in the strange appositional logic of their heterodox relations. While Derrida and Derridean scholars like Krell, Butler, and Nass focus on some of these ethico-political heterodox relations (friends, across the death of one of them, the *sans-papiers* within a state, Israeli and Palestinian relations) as sites of collective responsibility through the work of collective mourning, another productive focus could be the heterodox relation of the ones we do not bear and the ones we do bear, in our bodies. They are not simple contraries either.

Is responsiveness to and in those deaths not also the ethical labor of mourning?
Whose work is this work?
Is it not also *le deuil collectif* and hence work *for us all*?
Where are the students of this teaching? Who are its teachers?

Keeping within the perspective of Derridean responsiveness which I have sketched so far, let us think these deaths and lives as im-possible, think them through "the law of desire, or of love" (2001b, 118). If abortion is im-possible then some good may actually come of it. Even if what also always comes of it is a certain death, by virtue of the certain death.

Decision, not Choice

Can we not understand this? Getting pregnant during an act of sexual intercourse when having that sexual intercourse involved no motive or wish to get pregnant ought not to be thought of primarily as a matter of "choice," even as a stupid choice. Sometimes one *gets* pregnant, by accident, then finds out one is pregnant, and then forms the wish to be pregnant, which one finds, happily, instantaneously fulfilled. Was that a "choice" she can be fully credited with, retroactively? Surely not. Sometimes one has sexual intercourse with the wish or intention to get a woman pregnant, alongside or entirely independent of the intention to maim or to pleasure her. Being pregnant here too, the eventually discovered outcome, ought not to be characterized as a "choice" or the result of a choice. The unwelcome or welcome fact of being pregnant "arrives" well after and well removed from any delights or tortures of intercourse that might have been "chosen" or even "risked," as in the famous getting pregnant as like spores getting through a screen analogy offered by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1974). Alongside an infinite number of other possible facts which "follow" from such intentional acts. Alongside an infinite number of other reasons which "precede" such intentional acts, and which could be given by way of accounting for it. These "other possible" facts cannot simply be bracketed from our view if what we are seeking is to understand:

[T]o understand our situation in reality is not to define it, but to be in an affective state. To understand being is to exist.... To think is no longer to contemplate, but to be engaged, merged with what we think, launched—the dramatic event of being-in-the-world.... The comedy begins with our simplest gestures. They all entail an inevitable awkwardness. Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor, and dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did a thousand and one things I hadn't willed to do (Levinas, 3).

We are responsible beyond our intentions. What is meant is not that we are responsible as well for all the things we intended and did not intend, something large but in principle measurable. What is meant by the term "beyond" is that the responsibilities of beings-in-the-world involve something other than intention, something other than choice, something beyond any of our actions. That includes acts of intercourse.

Even planned intercourse which leads to a wished for pregnancy cannot really be nailed down as "a choice" since it is more true to say that there is affirmation of the fact, once it arrives, than there was choice of that fact. As in love, as in hurricanes, as in ideas, one responds to the fact more than one wills and controls its arrival. Wishing does not make that fact happen, but affirmation of the fact, once it happens, does make something happen: it opens up a new field of possibility not strictly foreseen by or contained in whatever came up to that point. Under any possible circumstances, with any possible combination of approbation, intention or with, and using any possible strategies leading up to it, discovery of the fact of being pregnant is a fact that ruptures what came before it. The fact of the fact is a rupture on the continuum of physical possibility (one is now two); and receiving the fact of the fact is a second-order rupture. Being and knowing that one is pregnant is always an event; it always changes everything. Since being pregnant always has this structure, it is disingenuous either to credit the preparations by way of lauding the choices of the individuals involved or to discredit them by way of blaming them for those choices.³ What one is hoping for, wishing for, intending, or even "risking" during intercourse certainly is not irrelevant from the point of view of the law, or from the point of view of the social, the system of moral norms and rules. Choice is not entirely irrelevant to the situation of finding-oneself-pregnant, but what I am claiming is that from the point of view of the ethical labors given to the one who finds herself pregnant, choice is beside the point.

To be with child is a question posed by and to oneself. It shows an opening. It shows that affectively we are always already receptive beyond our intended welcomings. It also shows that something, rather than nothing, might be done, and that it might be done now rather than later. It does not tell you how or what to do. It does not show you two clear, workable options. It does not even name whose doings these are going to be. It asks that something be done, that it be carried out in the absence of full justification or promise of success. It calls out that something might now be done. A response, on our part, is now possible. One can undertake a decision. One either affirms what one is now and continues a pregnancy or one affirms what one is now and discontinues

the pregnancy. One cannot not respond to the announcement of being pregnant because, on the one hand, like death and love and hurricanes and ideas, it *does* change everything.

Yet somehow it is a little different than these. It does so in an absolutely unique way by virtue of the structure of life-in-life that is pregnancy. I cannot imagine a woman for whom that particular fact, that "said"—the fact of being pregnant—proffers no occasion for a complex response. The response to that fact always involves her more intimately than any other prompting can or will. The body that is the means and the site, the condition for the arrival of the fact in the first place is also the means and the site of both its removal and/or its continued reception, afterwards. Moreover, the subject who is the condition of affirmation of the arrival is also a subject who is negated, in both the affirmation of the arrival (the child-to-be as me and not me, us and not-us) and affirmation which takes the form of a refusal to give hospitality (the child-not-to-be is not me and us). Here one seems to be loving something deeply while putting it to death. Much more needs to be worked out regarding the intricacies of affirmation and negation, decision and delay. For the moment, let me simply mark the fact that what we have especially in the case of unwanted pregnancy and abortion is, like other deaths we have seen so far, an occasion for the work of mourning and for responsiveness in and to what comes. Let us also mark that insofar as this involves becomings unique to women's lives and bodies, there are, along this route of deaths and their absolute losses, lives and their immeasurable gains, different decisions being made. The examples of abortion and its close relatives (miscarriage, putting up for adoption, taking birth control pills, even monthly menstruation, menopause, drying up of breast milk) are examples of death which qualify and expand "the ethical" sites Derrida shows us. Is this "expansion" for and about women? For and about the individual responsibilities of women and the collective responsibility of woman? That cannot be quite right. Not one of us has not been touched, formed, selfed without these receptivities. Their overwhelmingly common occurrence and the size of losses and gains of the possible attached to these, match if not exceed the force of occasions for responsibility mapped out by Derrida's teaching: at Abraham, or the funerals of famous white male intellectuals. There is something about the human condition not easily revealed by those instances of death but which is entirely within our grasp: one always both loves the self deeply and puts it to death. Putting it to death is not the opposite of love, but is the very horizon which enables us to rupture the proximity of self to self; hence to introduce, to in-vent, by our very

engagement in and with this perhaps most im-possible, most im-mediate task: ourselves. An us for the to come.

I should like here to signal that this folds the beautiful thought of the democracy to come inwards, backwards as it were. It is the work of preparing for ourselves an opening toward a perpetual and collective (re)becoming which is itself the condition for the opening toward, the becoming of the democracy to come. That possibility suggests that in the wake of abortion is the work of, and for, us all.

Infinitely Deeper and Wider Than Two: Absolutely Alone

Is it true? Nothing happens alone; nothing happens to us alone. Everything we do is always already dependent on others, many others we will not ever, cannot even, know. Similarly, immeasurably many others will come in turn to depend on us, to happen because of us, without our permission, without our having contracted it, without our express intention to take them on or even to refuse them. We cannot and do not do anything alone. We are not even anything alone. All we are, and all we might be, involves the doings of an infinite excess that gets beyond us. Responsibility goes beyond discernible me, an us. Similarly, getting pregnant in the first place, like un-getting pregnant, is the doings of more than one or even two. One does not miraculate toward conception and one does not unpregnate in a vacuum vacuum. Moreover, when one continues a pregnancy and takes on the parenting work of a child, recognizing that child as one's own, and recognizing oneself as the parent of that child, one disregards and fails to recognize, even without meaning to, all the other possible children that might have come, might ask to have been recognized by me, by us, in time. Even more, when we initiate one answer to what arrives rather than another we respond as one kind of me, as one we, rather than another possible me, another possible we. In the taking on or refusing to take on, in the recognition of and willingness to be recognized as these parenting relations, we are taking up one particular route of becoming of our own immeasurably possible selves and refusing others. That is to say, we intervene in the possibility of our engagement with our own future responsible selves; we change our own unfathomable futures, our own possible otherness, in what we take on or refuse, now, vis-à-vis this other. Here is Butler again:

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as

we already are, as we have always been.... Instead, in the asking ... we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other ... one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other (Butler 2004, 44).

Being found pregnant and the hovering decision to abort or not thus reveals the same primordial truth as the death-decisions Derrida described to us: that we are infinitely embedded, that we are in fact with others, and yet that betrayal of responsibility is integral to its being taken up. In this respect parenting work, including the work of abortion, is a candidate for the "work of mourning."

Yet it is also true that while nothing happens to us alone, I alone am the ethical work that is mine/me. True, responsibility is a structure that goes beyond us and yet, strangely, it is still ours, addresses us, addressed *me* those times. Derrida names this sort of widespread non-mutualist and non-reciprocalist constitutive schema "dissymmetry" (1997, 13). Once a decision had been made to have an abortion and the whole medico-surgical apparatus was put in motion, the massive and impermeable aloneness of each step of the way forward, from then on, even until now, is what I remember the most about those experiences. I remember to the depths of my cells the infinite intractability of the fact of being pregnant when I did not welcome being pregnant. It felt more mine and more solid even than the fact of being pregnant when I welcomed it did. It felt more mine and solid even than an unwelcome diagnosis did. Yet it was the same again the second time I was pregnant, and did not want to be pregnant. What it felt and feels like, not to be able to be "relieved" of what I alone had to decide, to endure, to survive, to respond to, in my way—and you, if, in yours. Even knowing that the whole of the situation had been "made" and "unmade" by many others, there was my absolute aloneness cutting through, carrying the mine-ness of it. Recall, though, that this is an unbearable burden and allegedly a most generous gift, for in not being able to substitute myself for any other, I am uniquely constituted, and continue to be uniquely constituted, as that *me* to whom some unshareable part of that arrival belongs. Like the death of the beloved and the eulogizing of the friend, there is in the work of mourning that is abortion the im-possible complications of absolute singularity and absolute embeddedness in which

we find ourselves. One is able to be responsible by virtue of prior and richer others; one responds to and for others, yet one is also only able to be responsible insofar as one is a painfully non-generic non-fungible me.

Yet somehow a little different. Recall also that I just reported that those facts seemed to have had a different kind of delivery, mark out a different sense of belonging, expressed a slightly different singularity. If being unexpectedly pregnant and unwelcoming that particular knowledge, and in that particular bodily state, was/is experienced as more solid and more mine than anything else before or after it, what is unique about that kind of event? What does that kind of event uniquely announce to us about ourselves, or asks of us?

The two one finds along here has a strange kind of one. Of the two different bodies, two different sets of parts necessary for intercourse or impregnating—the male and the female—it is only through one—the woman's—that the fact of being pregnant can be read, announced from, signed off on. That is true in the case of wanted and unwanted pregnancy. Of the two bodies that partake in a birth—the child body and the parent body—it is only through the body of the one—the woman's—that the child passes. Never the other way around. Of the two bodies which might endeavor to remove the fetus—the surgeon's and the woman's—it is in the body of one—the woman's—that a cut is made. Of the two different bodies required for nourishing human growth—the child's and the mother's—it is in the body of one—the woman's—that nourishment is made, and through that body, given to the other. Not, at that time, the other way around. What this looks like is a local variation on the multiple, singular dysymmetry described above. Even if that were all it was, it would still give us pause, noticing the way that bodily difference—sexed difference and age difference—marks the singular, marks out limited options for particular genres of singularities, in their relations. But there is still more to this: whatever is posing the question to a woman (and to her partner, should he be involved in the response) in one's uterus, s/he/it is not fully non-self. Not strictly speaking, it is an(other). But not just not an(other) the way that human others stand to us in a relation of introjection and complication. In the case of a fetus (a one), in a woman (a second one), conceived of two (+ another one), the alterity of this Other(s) is chiasmatically, bodily, the alterity of the self, to self plus the even more complicated alterities of ourselves to ourselves. I find I cannot get a nice geometry going, trying to figure in the ones and twos across the fetus and mother's body, and the fetus and the father's body, and the fetus itself, and, hovering in light of the indecision, his or her own futures, as ones and twos, and the futures of the woman and

the man, hovering as more ones and twos, in the balance. In the sheer difficulty of expressing these "qualitative multiplicities," to use a term from Deleuze (1990), I suspect we are in the region of a novel encountering of/with otherness not fully developed in Derrida or Levinas. The perception of a being happening in the self-touchant-touchant-l'autre-l'autre that is a pregnancy under question, results not strictly in the im-possible sense of infinite otherness of an(other) in connection with a being (me), but the acute condition brought on by a fractal co-dawning of possible beings: me: you; us: other(s); me: it; it: not me, it: not you; not quite me: not quite you: not quite usness: not quite it; more than simply me but not infinitely other(s): just me. Once the decision is made not to proceed with a pregnancy, or to proceed with a pregnancy, what welcomings they ask of us, and who that us is—that fractal nexus of beings in encounter—also shifts into other sets of relations. Abortion is not the opposite of these; it is another configuration. What I am suggesting is that in the event of this death we can see the geometries of otherness unpacked by Derrida in his work of mourning, but that we can also get a glimpse of an even more complex geometry of our being-in-the-world than we would otherwise see.

Further Implications?

Abortion has been pawed over and smudged beyond recognition by left and right politics, by religious and philosophical dogmas. Liberal culture has asked that we think and speak of abortion in the language of rights, reason, and choice. In masculinist culture we are neither inclined nor encouraged to explore what might be unique and valuable about the experiences of females. Feminist explorations of abortion work against that presumption. Feminist debates on abortion have done a critical job of bringing abortion into the light of political purview, showing just how much is at stake, above all for women, in how we understand and decide about the rights and wrongs of abortion as a complex and morally peculiar experience of rights, reason, and choice. We are more than certainly indebted to these thinkers.

But as a philosopher unsatisfied by a liberal framing of the ethico-political landscape, and as a woman looking, but not finding, her complex experiences of parenting articulated by most feminist accounts of pregnancy before abortion,⁴ I was inclined to push a little harder, to see whether the situation of unexpected pregnancy when termination or non-termination still hangs in the balance could teach us something more about responsibility in general, not just responsibility as it pertains to the

woman as (if) "autonomous agent" and not just responsibility to the fetus as (if) a person or not, as if the "fetus is no more personlike than the average fish, the removal of it, the moral equivalent of a hair-clipping" (Warren 1975, 137). None of these accounts addresses what seems to have been required of me. Derrida's writings on the ethicality of grief did resonate most deeply with my complex parenting experiences and my philosophical training. But its route was to pass by way, first, of the kinds of deaths that women are first given to: unwanted pregnancy, abortion, adopting out, even monthly contraceptive taking. The thinking on death that is given to us by Derrida is not, strictly speaking, going to see these other kinds of common deaths, let alone the promises and the lessons lying in there. We have to see for ourselves. Thus, I am following his lead, though perhaps improperly. I am also working in the spirit of Luce Irigaray, seeking to begin with a solid fact of what seems true of me as a singularity, in this case as a sexed being, and what it might mean to be addressed through the experiences of and as a fecund sexed being: specifically, the experiences of two abortions and mothering two children, and the occasion to mourn the other children I might have welcomed which emerges from thinking of these others. But this project, like those of Irigaray, does not have as its overall aim to say something only to or about women. A project is not antifeminist if it does not "stay" with the phenomenon of maternity, nor with what the ethicality of abortion as a work of mourning means strictly for women, politically or ethically. Nor, however, is it antifeminist and anti-woman in moving entirely away from maternity, to neutralize if not disavow maternally inflected moments as if not among humankind's "highest expressions of devotion", sites of "covenant with, and responsibility for, the Other." Many feminists, perhaps in the wake of de Beauvoir, are inclined to see a focus on female-specific, experienced, and embodied moments as nothing other than the move of subsuming women under a general category of man's other and as strictly potential, actual or failed mothers (Diprose, xi).⁵

Looking at abortion through the lens of Derridean philosophy relieves us from thinking in terms of these oppositions; these moments of female humanness are neither distinct nor in conflict. Abortion is not a negation of the feminine, but neither is refusing to bear children, or to speak to that. Nor, in the event of mothering or refusing to mother, is Woman Man's other. An(other) of the many others one encounters there is the self's own temporal othernesses, its standing in a relationship not of impossibility to a masculine ideal but of impossibility to its own possibilities.⁶ My work has implications for these sorts of tensions in feminist

scholarship in that it does not ask that we choose between these two—either nothing but maternity or that which is strictly beyond maternity.

Yet implications beyond the feminine, the feminist: the big, universal lessons, we are told time and time again, come in and through the endeavors and experiences of males, experiences where males (can be made to) figure centrally: military moments, terrorist attacks, funerals of great public figures, the “unknown soldier,” Vietnam, 9/11. Those events are without question possible teachers. But surely “universal lessons” about how *we* might live can also come in and through the endeavors and experiences of females, where females (can be made to) figure centrally too. What happens to females is not merely local or regional variations on what happens to the human, at least no more than what happens to males is, or ought to be thought and treated as. That we continue to treat abortion and its clan as if it is at best a female or feminist issue and at worst something never to speak about, or to, or from, tells me that we are indeed content to imagine that there are no big lessons there, no special ethical truths for anyone at all, let alone for “humankind.”

This essay stakes the audacious claim that we all might learn something—perhaps we must begin to try to learn—from these death experiences of many women, even if merely by listening to what we cannot or will not exactly know with our lives and our bodies, about lives and bodies other than our own. What is a singularly female lived and embodied experience of death—abortion—certainly offers many women first a certain “gift of death” from which, and out of which, ethical moments can be fashioned. Of course, women may or may not reply, and their replies may be adequate or inadequate to the task of responding. But from that unique set of attempts and their attendant failures, we all might learn something new about ourselves. Being responsible involves or perhaps just is receptivity to kinds of deeply difficult features of every human experience seen vividly in abortion. Reception always involves the fleshiest bits of us. In deciding not to carry a child to term, we are loving ourselves while putting ourselves to death(s). That is surely the “most common thing.” Abortion is perhaps nothing more than a certain form of the accident of love, nothing more than a certain form of the act of refusing to love; it is a form of the act of not taking up one’s (proper) inheritance (what comes to one, what is coming to one, what one comes from). It is a form of the common species of act of disavowal; it is not being able or willing to accept and to give hospitality to what arrives, to what is offered, at the moment, with

whatever one is or has at the time. It is hope, the hope for unimaginably better futures for unknown and unknowable recipients in a space left to them. Addressing the character of responding that is the work of mourning abortion is thus an ethical project which connects this ethical labor to the wider work of mourning immanent to all dying in all life.

This grief work thus starts with but is not just for or about maternally-inflected beings. Not just for or about women who have had abortions or who might have abortions, or persons closely connected to abortions. Perhaps it also has something to say to:

One who has a child and does not have another child, *also*
 One who wishes to have a child but that wish is thwarted by accidents of love or health or distance or bad character, *also*
 One who had a child but gave the child up for adoption, *also*
 One who never engages in intercourse with a spermy or eggy member of the opposite sex, *also*
 One who practices birth control for the whole length of one’s fertile delta years, *also*
 One who, by default ends up with 4 children but could have had 2 more or 4 more, but did not, *also*
 One who has a child but only one who is killed in a car accident at 11, *also*
 One who might love anything at all that might come along, but nothing comes along, *also*
 One for whom something arrives and asks for what one cannot give it, *also*
 One who ever, even for a brief spell, wished for and then manages to respond to, to love even, what does arrive, and it stays, it keeps coming? Perhaps.

In trying to speak about, in my not being able not to speak what responsibility involves in relation to abortion, in saying something unthinkable and unheard of about those very particular events, the hope is that something resonant about responsibility in general, about love even, will be heard or felt by us all. Abortion is a sharply cut lens to see through to such strange hearing and feeling with. Such features are the very ones that the current abortion debate does not let speak, does not even let us think about thinking. They are, however, rich sites upon which to constitute individual and collective responsibility—to use Derrida’s phrase, “gifts”—not only sites for the exercise of rights or reason, neither tragedy nor comedy, nor in the end strictly moments of triumph

or shame. In unwanted pregnancy and in the decision to abort we glimpse a unique constellation of human withness, of immanent multiplicity: what is always everywhere asking for hospitality just where we are not yet ready for it. There was or perhaps there is calling here. A calling for a unique form of response: what might come forth in the wake of attending to these sorts of deaths? Perhaps the featureless, nameless Face of the democracy to come?

Irigaray argues that "our principal task is to make the transition from nature to culture as sexed beings" (Irigaray 1996, 30). If transitioning to a better culture, a less noxious world, a more liveable version of democracy, depends upon our being maximally responsive to otherness—which I believe it does—and if the kinds of difficult, beautiful withness we can glimpse and struggle with, in experiences like abortion, are opportunities for our practicing, or at least attempting to practice, a particularly complicated kind of responsiveness to otherness, then the work of mourning that abortion entails is in fact "a question of collective grief and its relation to the political" (Nass, 549).

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Notes

1. Judith Butler, *London Review of Books* 26, No. 21, November
2. *New York Times*, February 10, 2006. "Debate on Abortion Pill in . Becomes Personal", by Raymond Bonner.
3. Even my friend A, who had four abortions, was not merely in a repetition any more than my attending four funerals in a row was
4. Iris Marion Young's "Pregnant Embodiment" (1984) and MacKenzie's "Abortion and Embodiment" (1992) are exceptions. my critique of Irigaray's treatment of abortion, in "A Bridge Between Forever Irreducible to Each Other(s)."
5. I am thinking of Catherine Chaliel's work, "Ethics and the Female" (1991) as an example. Chaliel firmly rejects Levinas' view that "ethical feminine achievement means to be a mother and nothing else Excellent. But then Chaliel goes on to provide a "better" version of feminine ethical in the story of Rebecca, in Genesis. Chaliel embraces this option in that it presents "the feminine as the disruption of gender *beyond maternity*" (128).
6. Nor is the fetus a woman's, a human's, radical other. But neither do we get to say that the fetus is *the* beloved. We do not get to say