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WITNESSING SUBJECTIVITY

Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst interviewing survivors as part of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, remarks on a tension between historians and psychoanalysts involved in the project. He describes a lively debate that began after the group watched the taped testimony of a woman who was an eyewitness to the Auschwitz uprising in which prisoners set fire to the camp. The woman reported four chimneys going up in flames and exploding, but historians insisted that since there was only one chimney blown up, her testimony was incorrect and should be discredited in its entirety because she proved herself an unreliable witness. One historian suggested that her testimony should be discounted because she “ascribes importance to an attempt that, historically, made no difference” (Felman, 1992, p. 61). The psychoanalysts responded that the woman was not testifying to the number of chimneys blown up but to something more “radical” and more “crucial,” namely, the seemingly unimaginable occurrence of Jewish resistance at Auschwitz, that is to say, the *historical truth* of Jewish resistance at Auschwitz. Laub concludes that what the historians could not hear, listening for empirical facts, was the “very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination” (Felman, 1992, p. 62). The Auschwitz survivor saw something unfamiliar, Jewish resistance, which gave her the courage to resist. She saw something that in one sense did not happen — four chimneys blowing up — but in another made all the difference to what happened. Seeing the impossible — what did not happen — gave her the strength to make what seemed impossible possible, surviving the Holocaust.

While the historians were listening to hear confirmation of what they already knew, the psychoanalysts were listening to hear something new, something beyond comprehension. While the historians were trying to recognize empirical facts in the survivor’s testimonies, the psychoanalysts were trying to acknowledge that the import of these testimonies was unrecognizable. Although undeniably powerful in their impact, the empirical facts of the Holocaust are dead to the process of witnessing, that which cannot be reported by the eyewitness, the unseen in vision and the unspoken in speech, that which is beyond recognition in history, the process of witnessing itself. The process of witnessing, which relies upon address and response — always in tension with eyewitness testimony — complicates the notion of historical

truth and moves us beyond any easy dichotomy between history and psychoanalysis.

The tension between recognizing the familiar in order to confirm what we already know and listening for the unfamiliar that disrupts what we already know, is at the heart of contemporary theories of recognition. How is it possible to recognize the unfamiliar and disruptive? If it is unfamiliar, how can we perceive it or know it or recognize it? These questions are related to the question of how we experience anything new or different. Conceptually, these questions seem to lead to paradoxes or aporias that can leave us with the belief that we experience newness only through what we already know and therefore we cannot experience newness at all. Of course, we *do* experience newness and difference. How could we possibly become functioning adults if we didn't? If we always experience the world only in terms of what we already know, then we couldn't learn anything at all. We would remain infants unable to make distinctions and therefore unable to function.

Many of the paradoxes of difference or newness are the result of how we conceive of ourselves. First, we end up with paradoxes if we believe that we encounter difference and newness only or primarily intellectually, especially if we believe that the intellect is distinct from perception, sensation, passions, or embodiment in general. After all, how can we both know and not know something at the same time? The intellect and reason notoriously lead us into contradictions. This hermeneutical problem has troubled philosophers from Plato's *Meno* to Derrida's *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. Second, we end up with paradoxes if we believe that we are self-same and our identities are unified, especially if we conceive of identity in opposition to difference. How can a unified self-contained being ever come in contact with something or someone wholly other to itself? If the self is bounded and experiences only that which is within its boundaries, then how can it encounter anything outside of its own boundaries?

Certainly, how we conceive of ourselves determines how we conceive of others, and vice versa. If we conceive of ourselves as self-identical, and we conceive of identity as opposed to difference, and we conceive of anything or anyone outside of the boundaries of ourselves as different, then we will conceive of anything different or outside of ourselves as a threat to our own identity. Identity will be pitted against difference. Relations will be hostile. Hostile relations will lead to hostile actions and the result will be war, domination, and torture. All of this is to say that our conceptions of ourselves determine our conceptions of others and our conceptions of our relationships with others. Moreover, our conceptions of our relationships determine how we behave

towards others and ourselves. There is an intimate and necessary correspondence between how we conceive of others and how we treat them.

As a philosopher who is interested in social and political problems, then, it is important to examine and diagnose our self-conceptions as they affect our conceptions of others and relationships, and our actions towards and in them. Julia Kristeva says that any philosophy of language presupposes a particular notion of the subject. So too, any social or political theory presupposes a particular notion of the subject. In fact, our actions, policies, stereotypes, fantasies and desires also presuppose notions of what it is to be a subject and to “have” subjectivity. How we conceive of ourselves as subjects and how we conceive of our subjectivity, are at the foundation of what we believe about ourselves, the world, and other people ; and we act accordingly. This is why in order to begin to understand domination and oppression it is imperative to investigate who we think we are and how we imagine others.

Relations of domination and oppression presuppose particular notions of subjects and others, subjectivity and objectification. Elsewhere I argue that the dichotomy between subject and other or subject and object is itself a result of the pathology of oppression (Oliver, 2000). To see oneself as a subject and to see other people as *the other* or objects not only alienates one from those around him but also enables the dehumanization inherent in oppression and domination. It is easier to justify domination, oppression, and torture if one’s victims are imagined as inferior, less human, or merely objects who exist to serve subjects. Within this familiar scenario, to see oneself as a subject is to imagine oneself as self-sovereign. This sense of myself as a subject gives the impression that *I* am an individual who possesses a sovereign will, while this sense of my own subjectivity gives the impression that I have agency and that I can act in the world. To see other people as objects or *the other* denies them the sovereignty and agency of subjectivity. To see other people as objects or *the other* is to imagine them as unable to govern themselves as subjects.

Since the Enlightenment a lot of attention has been paid to the subject and his agency. Since World War II, however, attention has been turning to the one who has been marginalized, oppressed, enslaved, and tortured as objects or as *the other*. Attention is turning to the effects of this marginalization and objectification on the subjectivity and agency of its victims. What happens to someone’s sense of herself as a subject and her sense of her subjectivity or agency when she is objectified through discrimination, domination, oppression, enslavement, or torture ? Some contemporary theorists argue that subjectivity and the process of becoming a subject is itself a process of subordination and enslavement.¹ This neoHegelian position makes it difficult to distinguish between domination and enslavement inherent in the process

of becoming a subject and oppression that is not necessary. This is especially problematic for theorists, like Derrida and Butler, who maintain that social oppression and domination are manifestations, or repetitions, of the oppression and domination at the heart of subjectivity itself.

Contemporary theory is still dominated by conceptions of identity and subjectivity that inherit a Hegelian notion of recognition. In various ways, these theories describe how we recognize ourselves in our likeness as the same or in opposition to what is (or those who are) different from ourselves. Relations with others are described as struggles for recognition. But, if we start from the assumption that relations are essentially antagonistic struggles for recognition, then it is no wonder that contemporary theorists spend so much energy trying to imagine how these struggles can lead to compassionate personal relations, ethical social relations, or democratic political relations. From the presumption that human relations are essentially warlike, how can we imagine them as peaceful ?

Theories of identity and subjectivity based on recognition are implicit if not explicit in almost all types of contemporary theory. It is difficult to find a contemporary social theory that doesn't in some way employ a notion of recognition. In spite of its prominence, most of the time recognition is used its meaning is assumed, but not defined or analyzed. In general, in work that relies on a notion of recognition there is the sense that individual identity is constituted intersubjectively, that we come to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents through the recognition of the other, that a positive sense of self is dependent upon positive recognition from the other while a negative sense of self is the result of negative recognition or lack of recognition from the other. Some post-structuralists employ theories of recognition against enlightenment notions of autonomy : if our subjectivity or our sense of self or agency is dependent upon relations with others, then autonomy is an illusion. For example, Judith Butler concludes that “[the subject] can never produce itself autonomously” and moreover only by forfeiting the notion of autonomy can survival become possible (Butler, 1997, p. 196). On the other hand, some critical theorists employ theories of recognition to explain how we develop a sense of our own autonomy necessary for survival. For example, Alex Honneth believes that we see ourselves as autonomous only by virtue of relations of positive recognition with others : when others trust us, only then can we trust ourselves ; when others respect us as capable of judgment and action, only then can we respect ourselves as autonomous agents.

1. Two of the main representatives of this position, I argue, are Derrida (see Oliver, 1995, 1997) and Judith Butler (see Oliver, 2000).

Regardless of their stand on autonomy, most of the time both of these groups insist that subjectivity is dialogic because the subject is a response to an address from *the other*. For example, Charles Taylor insists that “[t]he crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character...We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (Taylor, 1994, pp. 32-33). Axel Honneth says that “the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee” (Honneth, 1996, p. 92). And, Judith Butler maintains that “the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject.... I can only say “I” to the extent that I have first been addressed” (Butler, 1993, p. 225).

While theorists of recognition like Taylor, Honneth, and Butler, not surprisingly, discuss subjectivity or identity in terms of recognition that comes through dialogue or discourse, they don't realize the full import of thinking subjectivity as response-ability, or response to address. As different as the discourses of critical theory and post-structuralist theory seem to be, they are both populated with subjects warring with others, often referred to as *objects*, subjects struggling to deny their dependence on others. Subjects still dominate in spite of their dependence on dialogue with their “others” and “objects.” I will argue that by insisting that subjectivity is based on antagonism, these theorists undermine the deep sense of response-ability implied in claiming that subjectivity is dialogic. While subjectivity is necessarily intersubjective and dialogic, it is not necessarily antagonistic. The tension at the heart of subjectivity need not produce antagonism between people. More than this, I will argue that we cannot conceive of subjectivity as both fundamentally antagonistic and fundamentally dialogic in the rich sense of dialogue and response-ability that I propose using the notion of witnessing.

As much as my own thinking is indebted to post-structuralist theories, with post-structuralists it seems that the other is sometimes mute, impoverished, unavailable, still to come, almost worshipped (*a la* Derrida and Levinas), or the other is the invisible, unspoken, nonexistent, the underside of the subject (*a la* Foucault and Butler). With critical theorists the other is usually either the one who confers recognition on us (*a la* Honneth and Habermas) or the one on whom we confer recognition (*a la* Taylor and Fraser), but in all cases an object *for* the subject. Whether these theories celebrate the presence of an autonomous subject produced through intersubjective relations, or mourn the loss of that presence produced through the absence inherent in intersubjective relations, the subject — as presence or absence — still dominates its others.

On the one hand, I want to challenge the Hegelian notion that subjectivity is the result of hostile conflict — Axel Honneth's struggle for recognition or Judith Butler's subordination that makes the subject's turn inward possible. On the other hand, I want to challenge notions of subjectivity based on a logic of exclusion — Butler's foreclosed object of desire or Julia Kristeva's abject. In various ways contemporary theories that propose a hostile conflict between subject and other and theories that propose that identity is formed by excluding the other continue to define *the other* in terms of the subject. The rhetoric of *the other* in itself denies subjectivity to those othered within dominant culture.

The meta-critical question is, then, in what ways do these theories of subjectivity centered on the other work against the other whom they privilege? And, how might we think of subjectivity outside of these exclusionary frameworks within which subjects exist only at the expense of their others? Can we think of dialogic subjectivity as noncontestatory conversation? Can we conceive of the intersubjectivity of the subject without relying on the Hegelian warring struggle for recognition that dominates contemporary theory? To answer this question affirmatively, I engage some of the work of various contemporary theorists of recognition, subjectivity, and abjection, moving towards an ethics of witnessing.

I suggest that by examining othered subjectivity — the subjectivity and subject positions of those othered within dominant discourse — we learn that subordination, oppression, and subjectification are not necessary elements of subjectivity itself. Rather, subordination, oppression and subjectification undermine the very possibility of subjectivity. At the extreme, torture and enslavement can destroy essential parts of subjectivity that must be revived or reconstructed in order for the survivor to be able to act as an agent. Being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured, affects a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render individuals or groups of people *other* by objectifying them. Objectification undermines subjectivity: to put it simply, objects are not subjects. Through the process of witnessing to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subject. What we learn from beginning with the subject position of those othered is that the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of addressability and response-ability. Address-ability and response-ability are the roots of subjectivity, which are damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination.

Address-ability and response-ability are what I identify with the process of witnessing. Subjectivity is the result of the process of witnessing. Wit-

nessing is not only the basis for othered subjectivity, but also witnessing is the basis for all subjectivity ; and oppression and subordination work to destroy the possibility of witnessing and thereby undermine subjectivity. Against theorists who maintain that subordination or trauma is necessary in order to become a subject, I argue that subordination or trauma undermine the possibility of becoming or maintaining subjectivity by destroying or damaging the possibility of witnessing. Thus, while I accept that what is at stake in being a subject is overcoming objectification and enslavement, I do not accept the Hegelian thesis that enslavement is necessary for becoming a subject. In other words, while I agree that subjectivity and freedom are undermined by enslavement, I do not agree with the Hegelian thesis that enslavement is the very prerequisite for subjectivity.

While trauma undermines subjectivity and witnessing restores it, the process of witnessing is not reduced to the testimony to trauma. So too, subjectivity is not reduced to the effects of trauma. One important implication of this thesis is that those who have been othered suffer from traumas directed at their subjectivity : traumas directed at their identities and sense of themselves as agents. In other words, oppression and subordination affect their victims at the level of their sense of themselves as subjects, at the level of subjectivity.

Oppression and subordination are experiences that attempt to objectify the subject and mutilate or annihilate subjectivity — that is to say, one's sense of oneself, especially one's sense of oneself as an agent. Rendered an object, the victim of oppression and subordination is also rendered speechless. Objects do not talk. Objects do not act. Objects are not subjects or agents of their own lives. So, witnessing to the ways in which one was or is rendered an object is paradoxical in that objects cannot testify. While the act of witnessing itself is a testimony to one's subjectivity, the narrative of oppression tells the story of one's objectification and silence. How can we speak the silence of objectification ?

This paradox takes us back to Derrida's use of J.L. Austin's distinction between the performative and the constative. In the case of witnessing to your own oppression, the performative is in special tension with the constative element of speech. The performance is one of a human subject in a dialogic relation with another human subject while the constative element — what is said — tells the tale of dehumanization and objectification. The content of testimonies of oppression reinscribe the survivor as victim and object even while the act of testifying restores subjectivity to the experience of objectification.

It is the paradoxical nature of witnessing to oppression that makes it so powerful in restoring subjectivity and agency to an experience that shamefully lacks any such agency. The act of witnessing itself can help restore self-respect and a sense of one's self as an agent or a self even while it necessarily recalls the trauma of objectification. Witnessing enables the subject to reconstitute the experience of objectification in ways that allow her to reinsert subjectivity into a situation designed to destroy it. Even so, the paradoxical nature of witnessing to one's own oppression makes it difficult and painful to testify.

Although witnessing to torture or enslavement may be necessary for working through the trauma and avoiding merely repeating it in forms of the repetition compulsion, witnessing to one's own oppression and degradation also recalls the trauma of that experience. Along with the pain of remembering physical abuse and torture, there is a special pain involved in recalling the ways in which one was made into an object. Most victims of torture and abuse feel ashamed to tell their stories. Holocaust survivors, rape survivors, and survivors of slavery all report shame in the experience and shame in witnessing to it. What is the source of this feeling of shame? Why would a victim feel ashamed of a wrong committed by the victimizer?

I suggest that the feeling of shame is caused by being made into an object. Even in a situation where one has no choice, where one is not strong enough to resist, the experience of becoming a mere object for another produces feelings of shame. Along with the memories of physical pain and torture, witnessing recalls memories of being an object, of losing one's sense of self as agent, of losing one's subjectivity and ultimately one's humanity. The shame involved in experiencing and testifying to one's own oppression is the result of being something not human, an object for another. The experience of testifying to one's oppression repeats that objectification even while it restores subjectivity. Therefore, insofar as on the constative level witnessing makes one an object over again, the act of witnessing can also produce shame. In addition to the more obvious reasons why it is painful for victims of violence and degradation to testify to their experiences, there is also the paradox of subjectivity inherent in witnessing to one's own oppression. In a significant sense, it is impossible to witness to becoming an object, since objects have nothing to say. Becoming an object means becoming inarticulate. Only by testifying, by witnessing to objectification, can survivors reinscribe their subjectivity into situations that mutilated it to the point of annihilation.

In order to understand the effects of oppression on someone's sense of herself as a subject and her sense of her subjectivity, we need to understand more about how subjectivity is formed and functions. What does oppression do to compromise a subject's sense of agency and thereby the ability to act?

What elements of subjectivity are the targets of oppression and enslavement? How are victims rendered docile or speechless? And, on the other hand, how is agency and subjectivity restored to survivors? What are the effective and affective differences between hearing inaccuracies, unreliability, and hallucinations in the testimony of a woman a Jewish uprising at a concentration camp and hearing the possibility of agency and resistance in her testimony? What are the effective and affective differences between listening for what we already know and recognize in her testimony or listening for what we don't know, beyond recognition? What kind of recognition, if any, do survivors want and need?

Contemporary debates in social theory around issues of multiculturalism have focused on the demand or struggle for recognition by marginalized or oppressed people, groups, and cultures. The work of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, in particular, have crystallized issues of multiculturalism and justice around the notion of recognition. I want to challenge what has become a fundamental tenet of this trend in debates over multiculturalism, namely, that the social struggles manifest in critical race theory, queer theory, feminist theory, and various social movements are struggles for recognition.² Testimonies from the aftermath of the Holocaust and slavery do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen. Rather, they witness to a pathos beyond recognition and witness to something other than the horror of their objectification. They are also testifying to the process of witnessing that both reconstructs damaged subjectivity and constitutes the heart of all subjectivity. The victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witnesses to horrors beyond recognition. The demand for recognition manifest in testimonies from those othered by dominant culture is transformed by the accompanying demands for retribution and compassion.

If, as I suggest, those othered by dominant culture are seeking not only, or even primarily, recognition but also witnessing to something beyond recognition, then our notions of recognition must be reevaluated. Certainly notions of recognition that throw us back into a Hegelian master-slave relationship do not help us to overcome domination. If recognition is conceived as being conferred on others by the dominant group, then it merely repeats the dynamic of hierarchies, privilege, and domination. Even if oppressed people are making demands for recognition, insofar as those who are dominant are empowered to confer it, we are thrown back into the hierar-

2. I am especially grateful for Cynthia Willett's comments, which gave me a new perspective on the impact of my project on multicultural ethics. Much of what I say about multicultural ethics in the introduction is indebted to her insights.

chy of domination. This is to say that if the operations of recognition require a recognizer and a recognizee then we have done no more than replicate the master-slave, subject-other/object hierarchy in this new form.

Additionally, the need to demand recognition from the dominant culture or group is a symptom of the pathology of oppression. Oppression creates the need and demand for recognition. It is not just that the injustices of oppression create the need for justice. More than this, the pathology of oppression creates the need in the oppressed to be recognized by their oppressor, the very people most likely not to recognize them. The internalization of stereotypes of inferiority and superiority leave the oppressed with the sense that they are lacking something that only their superior dominators have or can give them. The very notion of recognition as it is deployed in various contemporary theoretical contexts is, then, a symptom of the pathology of oppression itself. Implied in this diagnosis is the conclusion that struggles for recognition and theories that embrace those struggles may indeed presuppose and thereby perpetuate the very hierarchies, domination, and injustice that they attempt to overcome.

The notion of recognition becomes more problematic in models where what is recognized is always only something familiar to the subject.³ In this case, the subject and what is known to him and his experience are once again privileged. Any real contact with difference or otherness becomes impossible because recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar. When recognition repeats the master-slave or subject-object hierarchy, then it is also bound to assimilate difference back into sameness. The subject recognizes the other only when he can see something familiar in that other ; for example, when he can see that the other is a person too. Only when we begin to think of the recognition of what is beyond recognition can we begin to think of the recognition of difference.

Some contemporary theorists seem to think that we can begin to move beyond recognition by focusing on misrecognition. But, insofar as misrecognition presupposes an ideal recognition we are still operating within an economy of recognition.⁴ The move to misrecognition can be read as the displacement of a nostalgia for an ideal of successful recognition and recuperation of the self against otherness or nostalgia for an autonomous subject who creates his own world. While theories of misrecognition have the advantage of challenging us to be vigilant in exposing the illusion of familiarity or sameness, most of them also propose an antagonistic subject-object/other re-

3. I argue that Charles Taylor and Maria Lugones present such models (see Oliver, 2000).

4. Some examples of theorists of misrecognition are Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan (see Oliver, 2000).

lationship. Influenced by Lacan's account of misrecognition in the mirror stage, theorists like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler propose that identity and one's sense of oneself as a subject come from abjecting or excluding otherness, which operates through misrecognizing unwanted features of the self and projecting them onto others. Otherness and difference are abjected in order to secure the subject's always precarious boundaries against the threat of fragmentation. In this type of scenario, we fortify ourselves on the level of individual subjective identity as well as group and national identity by drawing artificial but strict boundaries between ourselves and others. Whatever characteristics we prefer not to associate with ourselves — those characteristics we deem unacceptable, dirty, or improper — we project onto the others. Others and otherness become threats to our very sense of ourselves as subjects.

While this neoHegelian model is very effective in *explaining* the existence of war and oppression, if *normalized* it makes it impossible to imagine peaceful compassionate relations with others across or through differences. Kristeva tries to get around the absolute alienation and impossibility of relationship suggested by Lacan's notion of misrecognition by insisting that otherness is always internal to subjectivity and encounters with others and otherness can become an embrace of the return of the repressed. Because of the otherness within, the boundaries of subjectivity are always shifting and precarious. Kristeva maintains that only by elaborating and interpreting our relation to repressed otherness can we come to terms with difference, even love it. Suspicious of any discourse on love, Butler, on the other hand, focuses less on how we can imagine peaceful and compassionate relations and more on how to diagnose warring oppressive relations. She argues that the boundaries of subjective identity shift because of performative repetitions that open up the possibility of transformation in the spaces where the operations of abjection and exclusion fail. While Kristeva's theory as she presents it in *Powers of Horror* seems to oscillate between the merely descriptive and normative, Butler's theory seems dangerously normative on the question of abjection and subjugation.⁵

What is lacking in Butler's account of performative repetition, and suggested in Kristeva's insistence on elaboration and interpretation, is the Freudian notion of working-through. In order to imagine peaceful and compassionate relations, we must be able to imagine working-through whatever we might find threatening in relations to otherness and difference. A social theory of transformation needs a notion of working-through. More than this, it is necessary to reconceive of subjective identity in a way that does not

5. For a sustained critical analysis of Butler's theory of subjectivity see Oliver (2000).

require abjecting or excluding others or otherness in order to have a sense of oneself as a subject. Subjectivity is not the result of exclusion. If it is, it is certainly not only the result of exclusion, but also of relationship through difference. None of us develop a sense of ourselves as subjects with any sort of identity apart from relations with others. Neither the notion of recognition nor the notion of misrecognition can provide a model of subjective identity that opens beyond the deadly antagonistic Hegelian model.

We need a new model of subjectivity, a model that does not ground identity in hostility toward others, but rather one that opens onto the possibility of working-through hostilities. With regard to subjectivity, theories that describe the nature of subjectivity as violent and antagonistic work as normative theories insofar as within their framework there is no escaping violence and antagonism. We need to describe subjectivity in ways that support the normative force of ethical obligations to be responsible to others rather than exclude or kill them. With the notion of witnessing, I propose an alternative description of how subjectivity is formed and sustained that implies within it the normative force of ethical obligations.

One of the main reasons that recognition always either returns us to the recognition of sameness or becomes misrecognition that leads to hostility, is because recognition seems to depend upon a particular notion of vision. Whether or not they employ a notion of recognition explicitly, many contemporary theorists of society and culture talk about power in terms of visibility.⁶ To be empowered is to be visible. To be disempowered is to be rendered invisible. To be recognized is to be visible. To be misrecognized or not recognized is to be rendered invisible. Dominance and marginality are discussed in terms of visibility and invisibility.⁷ Contemporary theorists of recognition conceive of recognition and misrecognition in terms of visual metaphors. Philosophers such as Levinas and Irigaray have challenged this emphasis on vision in the history of philosophy, specifically with regard to recognition. The problem, however, is not with vision *per se*, but with the particular notion of vision presupposed in theories of recognition or misrecognition.

From Sartre's accusing *look*, to Jacques Lacan's insistence that the *gaze* necessarily alienates through misrecognition, through Charles Taylor's embrace of an *examination* of other cultures' worth in order to confer recognition, vision is reduced to an objectifying gaze. Recognition or misrecognition supposedly result from vision attempting to bridge the abyss of empty space be-

6. Two examples of theorists of visibility are Judith Butler and Patricia Williams (see Oliver, 2000).

7. Ironically, since Foucault focused on discursive analysis and subjugated discourses, this obsession with visibility in social theory seems to be in some sense a Foucaultian legacy.

tween the subject and its object. Vision supposedly fixes the object in a gaze either in order to examine it or as the result of misrecognizing itself. Either way, the seeing subject is imagined as cut off from its object by the abyss of empty space across which vision must span in order to reconcile subject and object. In this way, on the one hand, vision is presumed to be a distancing sense that requires a gap between subject and object, and on the other hand, vision is presumed to link subject and object through the vector of the subject's (in terms of recognition) or object's (in terms of misrecognition) gaze.

It is this notion of vision as both alienating and bridge, and the notion of space as empty abyss, that give rise to many problems with theories of recognition/misrecognition. Only if we imagine ourselves forever cut off from others and the world around us do we need to create elaborate schemes for bridging that gap. We create an impossible problem for ourselves by presuming to be separated in the first place. By presuming that we are fundamentally separated from the world and other people by the void of empty space, we at once eliminate the possibility of connection and relationships even while we make desperate attempts to bridge the abyss. Moving from vision back to subjectivity, by presupposing that relationships are fundamentally hostile, we doom any attempts to formulate the possibility of cooperative relationships. The impossibility of solving the problem is, then, already built into any solution that we attempt.

Space, however, is not an empty void. It is full of air, light, and the circulation of various forms of electrical, thermal, mechanical, and chemical energies that sustain us and connect us to each other and the world. If space is not empty, and if vision connects us rather than separates us, if vision is indeed a proximal sense like touch, then visual recognition is neither the assimilation of all difference into sameness nor the alienation, exclusion or abjection of all difference. Rather, since vision connects us to the world and other people, then we can imagine an alternative to recognition and an alternative form of recognition, which give rise to an alternative conception of subjectivity and identity. We need not give up on vision, or turn from vision to some other sense; rather, we can reformulate vision and what it means to see.

Most psychologists and neuroscientists agree that we don't have just five senses (cf. Gibson, 1966, p. 48). In addition, many psychologists have concluded that the senses are intermodal and that the motor system is central to perception (cf. Hurley, 1998; Meltzoff and Moore, 1977, 1983; Gallagher and Meltzoff, 1996).⁸ If we don't have five separate senses, but rather systems of

8. Susan Hurley concludes that "[n]ot only are creatures with perspective, who perceive and act, essentially situated in environments. Perception and action are also co-constituted" (1998, p. 400).

sensation and perception that operate through the entire body, then vision operates in conjunction with more seemingly proximal senses. More than this, the visual system is coordinated with the vestibular and motor systems.⁹

The work of psychologists Meltzoff and Moore has shown that newborn infants can imitate the facial and manual gestures of adults (1977 ; 1983). Their studies show that imitation of facial and manual gestures by infants is not the result of either conditioning or of innate releasing mechanisms ; rather it is the result of an inherent coordination between visual systems and motor systems that pre-exists any conditioning or demand for recognition. They hypothesize that neonate imitation

is mediated by a representational system that allows infants to unite within one common framework their own body transformations and those of others. According to this view, both visual and motor transformations of the body can be represented in common form and directly compared. Infants could thereby relate proprioceptive motor information about their own unseen body movements to their representation of the visually perceived model and create the match required...the proclivity to represent actions intermodally is the starting point of infant psychological development , not an end point reached after many months of postnatal development (Meltzoff and Moore, 1983, p. 708).

The implications of this research for my project are significant. Meltzoff and Moore show that sensory, perceptual, and motor systems are linked from birth. Specifically, visual systems work in conjunction with motor and proprioceptive systems such that imitation is not the result of some sort of recognition but rather it is the result of coordinated sensory systems. This conclusion suggests that infants are responsive to their environment from birth and that socio-somatic interpersonal interaction is innate rather than acquired through any Lacanian mirror stage recognition. Primitive social interactions such as imitation are the result of complex sensory-perceptual systems that are inherently responsive. Gallagher and Meltzoff conclude that “recent studies of newborn imitation suggest that an experiential connection between self and others exists right from birth” that “is already an experience of pre-verbal communication in the language of gesture and action” (1996, pp. 212, 227).

Psychologist J.J. Gibson maintains that we have perceptual systems that rely on coordinated information reception by different regions and organs in the body. For example, vision is dependent upon a basic orientation and responsiveness to the force of gravity, which is possible through the coordination of the responsiveness of hairs in the inner ear along with tactile sensations in the feet and other parts of the body. In order to see, we first have to

9. Thanks to Shaun Gallagher for helpful comments and citations on the connection between motor systems and sensation.

orient ourselves and keep ourselves steady in relation to the force of gravity. Vision, touch, and basic orientation to the earth, work together to produce sight.

In addition, all perception and sensation is the result of our receptivity to energy in our environment — electrical energy, chemical energy, thermal energy, mechanical energy, photic energy or light, magnetic energy, etc. Vision, like other types of perception, is a response to energy, specifically differences in photic energy. Air, light and various forms of energy are the mediums through which we experience the world. We are connected to the world through the circulation of energy that enables our perception, thought, language, and life itself. In deed, we are conduits for energy of various sorts. Our relations to other people, like our relations to the environment, are constituted by the circulation and exchange of energy. With living beings, especially human beings, in addition to chemical energy, thermal energy, electric energy etc., we exchange social energy. Meltzoff and Moore's research suggests an exchange of social energy between adult and infant. Following Daniel Stern, we can interpret the imitation of facial and manual gestures between adults and infants as what Stern calls *affective attunement*, which suggests the circulation of affective energy between adult and infant (Stern, 1985).¹⁰

In a recent article entitled "Social Pressure," Teresa Brennan argues that what she calls *social pressure* operates as physical energy. She suggests that social pressures are pressures to conform but also pressures exerted on the psyche in the same way that physical pressures are exerted on the body. She finds corroboration in Durkheim's discussions of social energy, forces, and pressure. In his discussion of religious life, Durkheim identifies social energy as a sort of "electricity" generated when people are gathered together (1995, p. 217). The experience of social electricity should be familiar to anyone who has attended a powerful religious service, a rock concert, a political rally, or even an aerobics class. The sum of collective energy is greater than its individual parts. This is why group experiences can be so powerful. This is also why we can feel energized by being part of a group. So too, we can feel energized, or drained of energy, by interpersonal relations.

Durkheim's analysis of religious experience suggests that social energy operates as, or like, physical energy. He says "the heat or electricity that any object has received from outside can be transmitted to the surrounding milieu, and the mind readily accepts the possibility of that transmission. If religious forces are generally conceived of as external to the beings in which they reside, then there is no surprise in the extreme case with which religious forces

10. For a discussion of Stern and the notion of affective attunement see Oliver (1997).

radiate and diffuse” (1995, pp. 326-327). Durkheim also proposes “the radiation of mental energy” (1995, p. 210). Just as our bodies radiate heat and electro-magnetic energies, our psyches radiate affective energy. Just as thermal energy from our bodies can warm the bodies of others, affective energy from our psyches can effect the psyches of others.¹¹ In important ways, the psyche is a material biological phenomenon, a bio-social phenomenon.¹²

Vision, like all other types of perception and sensation is just as much affected by social energy as it is by any other form of energy. This is why theorists can talk about the politics of vision or the visibility or invisibility of the oppressed. To see and to be seen are not just the results of mechanical and photic energies, but also they are the result of social energies.¹³ What we see is influenced by what we believe about the world. So too, what we see is influenced by how we feel about the world and other people. What people around us believe and feel about the world and others also influences what we see. This is why, for example, Patricia Williams can talk about the invisibility of the homeless or the hypervisibility of black males in crime statistics and Judith Butler can talk about the invisibility of homosexuals and the hypervisibility of gay men in media coverage of AIDS. Vision is the result of the circulation of various forms of energy, including social energy. Social and political theorists can't afford to ignore the importance of social energy on sight.

All human relationships are the result of the flow and circulation of energy, thermal energy, chemical energy, electrical energy, and social energy. Social energy includes affective energy, which can move between people. In our relationships, we constantly negotiate affective energy transfers. Just as we can train ourselves to be more attuned to photic, mechanical, or chemical energy in our environment, so too we can train ourselves to be more attuned to affective energy in our relationships. The art critic trains her eye to distinguish between subtle changes in photic energy or light. The musician trains her ear to distinguish between subtle changes in sound waves or tone. The food or wine connoisseur trains her palate to distinguish between subtle changes in chemical energy or taste. So too, some people, usually women, are “trained” to be more attune to changes in affective energy or mood.¹⁴

11. The work of psychologist Richard Restak suggests a type of psychic energy that moves between people. In one of this studies two people were connected to an EKG and while having a conversation their brain-waves converged into the same pattern (see Restak 1984a, 1984b, 1984c).

12. For more developed analysis of the psyche as a bio-social phenomenon, see Oliver (1997). See my discussion of the psyche as bio-social in the work of Julia Kristeva in the introduction to *The Portable Kristeva* (Kristeva, 1998). See Brennan (1997).

13. Teresa Brennan (1997) talks about social energy in terms of social pressures.

14. Teresa Brennan (1992) argues that women are more likely to give what she calls directed attention to others ; directed attention, she argues, is necessary for ego stability.

If vision is the result of the circulation of various form of energy through the mediums of air, light, and other elements, including language, then it is not an alienating but rather a connecting sense ; language, like air and light, is a medium through which we respond and connect to each other. Approaching otherness and difference through vision as one part of a dynamic system of perception opens up the possibility of address beyond the humiliation, subordination, and objectification of the gaze. Vision, along with other perceptual and sensorial systems, conceived as circulation, allows for an openness and connection to otherness and difference not possible in neoHegelian struggles for recognition. With this alternative conception of vision, we can begin to transform the notion of recognition beyond its limited visual based metaphors. Vision as the result of circulation of energies opens up the possibility of addressing the subjectivity of those othered within dominant culture as more than either another version of the familiar or something wholly alien and alienating. In deed, this conception of our relationship and responsiveness to the environment and other people suggests a fundamental ethical obligation.

We are fundamentally connected to our environment and other people through the circulation of energies that sustain us. The possibility of any perception or sensation associated with subjectivity is the result of our *responsiveness* to the energy in our environment. Our dependence upon the energy in our environment brings with it ethical obligations. Insofar as we are by virtue of our environment and by virtue of relationships with other people, we have ethical obligations rooted in the very possibility of subjectivity itself. We are obligated to respond to our environment and other people in ways that open up, rather than close off, the possibility of response. This obligation is an obligation to life itself ; human life is dependent upon responsiveness — the ability to respond to the environment and especially other people. Insofar as we are fundamentally dependent upon each other for survival, and more than that, for what we might consider a particularly human life, we have a fundamental obligation to sustain each other. More specifically, insofar as we are human life is dependent upon the ability to respond and the ability to respond comes through relationships with other people, we have an obligation to sustain the ability to respond for ourselves and each other.

Subjectivity requires the possibility of a witness and the witnessing at the heart of subjectivity brings with it responsibility, response-ability and ethical responsibility. Subjectivity as the ability to respond is linked in its conception to ethical responsibility. Subjectivity is responsibility. It is the ability to respond and to be responded to. Responsibility, then, has the double sense of opening up the ability to response — response-ability — and ethically obli-

gating subjects to respond by virtue of their very subjectivity itself. Reformulating Eva Kittay's analysis of relations of dependency, a subject who "refuses to support this bond absolves itself from its most fundamental obligation — its obligation to its founding possibility" (Kittay, 1998, p. 131). Response-ability is the founding possibility of subjectivity and its most fundamental obligation.

This ethical obligation at the heart of subjectivity is inherent in the process of witnessing. Moving from recognition to witnessing provides alternative notions of ethical, social, and political responsibility entailed by this conception of subjectivity. Our conceptions of ourselves as subjects, our subjective identities, along with our conceptions of others hang in the balance. Witnessing as address and response is the necessary ground for subjectivity. Yet, this witnessing is always in tension with another dimension of witnessing, "seeing" for oneself.

Witnessing is defined as the action of bearing witness or giving testimony, the fact of being present and observing something ; *witnessing* is from *witness*, which is defined as to bear witness, to testify, to give evidence, to be a spectator or auditor of something, to be present as an observer, to see with one's own eyes (OED 3904). It is important to note that witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or *bearing witness*. It is this double meaning that makes witnessing such a powerful alternative to recognition in reconceiving subjectivity and thereby ethical relations.

The double meaning of witnessing — *eyewitness* testimony based on first hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other — is the heart of subjectivity. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness both positions the subject in finite history and necessitates the infinite response-ability of subjectivity. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness, between historical facts and psychoanalytic truth, between subject position and subjectivity, between the performative and the constative, is the dynamic operator that moves us beyond the melancholic choice between either dead historical facts or traumatic repetition of violence.

The double meaning of witness takes us back to the example with which I began, the example of the Holocaust survivor testifying as an eyewitness to the Jewish uprising at Auschwitz. As an *eyewitness*, she testifies (incorrectly) to the events of that particular day when prisoners blew up a chimney. In addition, however, she *bears witness* to something that in itself cannot be seen, the conditions of possibility of Jewish resistance and survival. As an eyewitness she occupies a particular historical position in a concrete context that

constitutes her actuality as well as her possibilities. She was a Jew in the midst of deadly anti-Semitism. She was a prisoner in a concentration camp. She was a woman in the mid-Twentieth Century. Her position as a subject is related to the particularities of her historical and social circumstance. In order to evaluate her testimony as an eyewitness, it is crucial to consider her socio-historical subject-position and not just the “accuracy” of her testimony. Indeed, the “accuracy” of her testimony has everything to do with her subject position. It is, in fact, her subject position that makes historians particularly interested in her testimony as a Holocaust survivor. Her testimony is unique because she was an eyewitness; she was there. But, it is not just because she was there, but why and how she was there that makes her testimony unique. The testimony of another eye-witness to the same event — a Nazi guard at the camp, or a someone outside the camp who noticed flames in the air — would have a very different meaning, even if he also claimed to see four chimneys blowing up. Perhaps within the context of the Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, surrounded by mostly male professors, the fact that this witness was a woman makes a difference to how she speaks and how she is heard. Only by considering her subject-position can we learn something about the “truth” of history even from the “inaccuracies” of her testimony.

Moreover, insofar as she is also bearing witness to what cannot be seen, she testifies to the process of witnessing itself. From his work with Holocaust survivors, and being a survivor himself, Dori Laub concludes that psychic survival depends on an addressable other, what he calls an “inner witness”. It is the possibility of address that sustains psychic life and the subject’s sense of its subjective agency. If the possibility of address is annihilated, then subjectivity is also annihilated. To conceive of oneself as a subject is to have the ability to address oneself to another, real or imaginary, actual or potential. Subjectivity is the result of, and depends upon, the process of witnessing — address-ability and response-ability. Oppression, domination, enslavement, and torture work to undermine and destroy the ability to respond and thereby undermine and destroy subjectivity. Part of the psychoanalyst’s task in treating survivors is reconstructing the addressability that makes witnessing subjectivity possible.

Our experience of ourselves as subjects is maintained in the tension between our subject positions and our subjectivity. Subject positions, although mobile, are constituted in our social interactions and our positions within our culture and context. They are determined by history and circumstance. Subject positions are our relations to the finite world of human history and relations — what we might call politics. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in

the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical. And, although subjectivity is logically prior to any possible subject position, in our experience, they are always profoundly interconnected. This is why our experience of our own subjectivity is the result of the productive tension between finite subject position and infinite response-ability of witnessing.

The paradox of the eyewitness is the productive tension at the foundation of the notion of witnessing. The tension between history and testifying to what one knows from first-hand experience, on the one hand, and psychoanalysis and witnessing to what is beyond knowledge or recognition, on the other, produces the possibility of getting beyond a mere repetition of either history or trauma. History and psychoanalysis, testimony and witnessing, are necessarily strapped together to create the tension that supports historical truth and the very structure of subjectivity itself. Witnessing means both testifying to something you have seen with your own eyes and testifying to something that you cannot see. We have both the juridical sense of witnessing to what you know from experience as an eyewitness and the religious sense of witnessing to what you believe through blind faith. Subject positions and subjectivity are constituted through the possibility of witnessing in this double sense. The tension inherent in witnessing is the tension between subject positions, which are historically determined, and subjectivity, which is an infinite response-ability. Oppression and domination work on both levels to restrict or annihilate the possibility of subject positions and to undermine or destroy the structure of subjectivity, both of which are necessary to a sense of agency.

The question is : how can we witness and bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture in ways that open up the possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence ? How can both acknowledging subject positions and acknowledging the response-ability inherent in the process of witnessing mobilize a different nonthreatening, compassionate yet critical, relationship to difference ? How can we move beyond an “us versus them” or “every man for himself” image of relationships ? Vigilance in elaborating and interpreting the process of witnessing, both in the sense of historical facts and historically located subject positions on the one hand, and in the sense of the response-ability opened or closed in the performance of bearing witness on the other, enables working-through rather than merely the repetition of trauma and violence.

Addressability and response-ability are the conditions for subjectivity. The subject is the result of a response to an address from another and the possibility of addressing itself to another. Oppression, domination and torture undermine subjectivity by compromising or destroying response-ability nec-

essary for subjectivity. Witnessing can restore subjectivity by restoring response-ability. Restoring response-ability is an ethical responsibility to our founding possibility as subjects.

This notion of subjectivity begins to go beyond the categories of subject and object, self and other, which work within scenarios of dominance and subordination. Like Derridian undecidables — pharmakon, hymen, supplement, etc. — the notion of witnessing with its double sense opens up the possibility of thinking beyond binaries — subject-object, psychoanalysis-history, constative-performative. The relation between historically determined subject positions and infinitely response-able subjectivity insists that we reconceive of history, objectivity, and the constative in relation to subjectivity, psychoanalysis and the performative.

The double meaning of witnessing, as both eye-witness testimony based on first-hand knowledge and testifying to something beyond recognition that cannot be seen, is at the center of subjectivity, which is maintained in the tension between these two meanings. The oppositional pull between the force of historical facts and the force of historical (psychoanalytic) truth both positions the subject in history and necessitates the infinite responsibility of subjectivity. Subjective agency is produced between knowledge and truth. The double meaning of witnessing can be exploited as the productive tension at the center of subjectivity, the tension between historically determined subject positions and infinitely response-able subjectivity. Insofar as this productive tension between forces opens up the possibility of subjectivity itself, it should not be conceived as a rigid binarism.

Witnessing to one's own oppression works through — both operationally and in the psychoanalytic sense of *working-through* — the forces whose oppositional pull work together to make subjectivity possible and ultimately ethical. Subjectivity is held together by the tension between forces of finite history and infinite responsibility. The paradoxical forces of witnessing are not the forces of oppression and domination that pull subjectivity apart and undermine agency. On the contrary, the paradoxical forces of history and analysis, of historically determined subject positions and infinitely responsible subjectivity, of the constative and performative, provide the productive tension that moves us beyond the melancholic choice between dead historical facts or traumatic repetition. The paradoxical forces of witnessing maintain subjectivity through their equilibrium, which is never static and only precariously stable.

In order to conceive of peaceful social relations, democratic political relations, and compassionate personal relations, we must reconceive of ourselves. That is to say, we must reconceive of what it means to be a self, a

subject, to have subjectivity, to consider oneself an active agent. If we are selves, subjects, and have subjectivity and agency by virtue of our dialogic relationships with others, then we are not opposed to others. We are by virtue of others. If subjectivity is the process of witnessing sustained through response-ability, then we have a responsibility to response-ability to the ability to respond. We have an obligation not only to respond, but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others. This is what I take Levinas to mean when he says that we are responsible for the other's responsibility, that we always have one more responsibility. We are responsible for the other's ability to respond. To serve subjectivity, and thereby humanity, we must be vigilant in our attempts to continually open and reopen the possibility of response. We have a responsibility to open ourselves to the responses that constitute us as subjects.

There are, of course, responses that work to close off, rather than open up, the possibility of response. There are *false witnesses* and *false witnessing* that attempt to close off response from others, otherness, or difference. And, there are various ways to engage in false witnessing, many of them encouraged within cultures of dominance and subordination. Identifying, elaborating, interpreting, and working-through our own blind-spots that lead to false witnessing require constant vigilance in self-reflection — including reflection on what it means to be a self and what it means to reflect. For example, that claims of “reverse discrimination” by white students when they are not admitted to Universities is a form of false witness.¹⁵ To claim that affirmative action is a type of reverse discrimination both ignores the differential socio-historical subject positions of whites and racial minorities and ignores our ethical responsibility to open up rather than close off responses from others. The double axis of subjectivity — socially determined subject position and witnessing as response-ability — is denied in the current discourse of reverse discrimination. In deed, the discourse of reverse discrimination presupposes a problematic conception of subjectivity that leads to ethical and political problems.

There is a direct connection between the response-ability of subjectivity and ethical and political responsibility. The way in which we conceive of subjectivity affects the way that we conceive of our relationships and responsibilities to others, especially others whom we perceive as different from ourselves. This is why in order to get to the root of social, political, or cultural analysis, it is necessary to examine and diagnose the conceptions of subjectivity presupposed in various discourses, institutions, and practices. How we

15. For a developed version of this argument, see Oliver (2000).

conceive of ourselves determine how we act and how we conceive of, and treat, other people. If we conceive of subjectivity as a process of witnessing that requires response-ability and address-ability in relation to other people, especially through difference, then we will also realize an ethical and social responsibility to those others, who sustain us.

Rather than seeing others with the objectifying gaze of a self-sufficient subject examining, subordinating, or struggling with *the other*, we can see others with loving eyes that invite loving response. Reconstructing subjectivity entails reconstructing notions of self, self-reflection, relationships, and love. What is love beyond domination? What is love beyond recognition? It is love as working-through that demands constant vigilance towards response-ability in relationships. The loving eye is a critical eye, always on the look-out for the blind-spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to otherness and difference. Love is an ethics of differences that thrives on the adventure of otherness. This means that love is an ethical and social responsibility to open personal and public space in which otherness and difference can be articulated. Love requires a commitment to the advent and nurturing of difference.

Love is the responsibility to become attuned our responses to the world and other people, and to the energies that sustain us. Loving eyes are responsive to the circulation of various forms of energy, especially psychic and affective energy, that enable subjectivity and life itself. Just as the various parts of the body cannot function without the circulation of blood and oxygen, the psyche cannot function without the circulation of affective energy. When response is cut off, the circulation of affective and psychic energies that sustain the process of witnessing, subjectivity, and life itself, is cut off. We have an ethical and social responsibility to be vigilant in our attempts to open up the circulation and flow of affective energy in all of our relationships. Subjectivity itself is the circulation of energy sustained through the process of witnessing. Witnessing is the heart of the circulation of energy that connects us, and obligates us, to each other. The spark of subjectivity is maintained by witnessing to what is beyond recognition, the process of witnessing itself.

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