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## THE RELATIONALITY OF DISAPPEARANCE

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We do not make contact with ourselves any more than we make contact with others. Thus, no absolute privilege of the I. [A] world with several compossible entrances. We are one for the others. Me-others hinge, which is common life, like me-my body hinge, which for me is not just weight, a curse, but also my flywheel.

*Merleau-Ponty, Institution and Passivity*  
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**T**here are many ways to destroy a person,” Lisa Guenther writes, “but one of the simplest and most devastating is through prolonged solitary confinement” (xi). Guenther’s research illustrates that solitary confinement, far from acting as a vehicle for “thought reform” or “behaviour modification,” as many behavioural scientists would have it, succeeds only in creating the experience of “social death,” where the relational is annihilated almost to the point of no return. “Deprived of meaningful human interaction,” she continues, “otherwise healthy prisoners become unhinged” (ibid.). For victims of solitary confinement it is not simply the disappearance of a significant other but the disappearance of all others that *unhinges* the subject from any meaningful social existence. Solitary confinement thus becomes, to borrow Guenther’s words, an “experiment in living death” (3).

People can disappear from our lives in a number of ways. Previously important relationships can fall apart or disintegrate over time, and the death of a significant other brings about an irreversible disappearance. But some people also disappear from wider society in violent, subversive, and often invisible ways. They go missing, are forcibly disappeared,

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institutionalised in prisons, refugee camps, or detention centres, displaced or killed by colonisation and war. Furthermore, the exertion and protection of geopolitical power is often dependent on the disappearance (or annihilation) of those deemed a threat to that power. This is the central logic of the necropolitical era in which we find ourselves, where putting unknown others to death, making them disappear, reinforces the desired attributes of national sovereignty and invulnerability.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, disappearance here does not mean simply the killing of unknown others. It also includes those others who do not appear in my life, but whose existence enables me to live the life I do. I am thinking here of the

subaltern, the precariat, the migrant worker, whose existence I might be aware of but whose life I do not experience as a co-presence – they are the *living disappeared*.

This article contends that the disappearance of others can challenge habituated patterns of relational behaviour, imploring us to find new forms of relationality in that disappearance. These habituated forms of relationality are concretised by our immersion in neoliberal ideology, which encourages us at every point to turn away from the other, to seek shelter in the self, to prioritise our capacity to accumulate capital over personal or societal health, and to rely on an elaborate legal and economic bureaucratic infrastructure for our well-being. On a personal level, these habituated relational patterns might involve pursuits of self-protection and invulnerability in the face of other people; on a political level, they might include predictable procedures of prosecution and punishment – for example, the exoneration of police brutality, the acquittal of the wealthy for fraudulent practices, the remittance of sexual violence – or structured and staged displays of private and public emotion. Turning to such accustomed patterns of relationality, I suggest, negates the potential for disappearance to transform relationality on a personal, social, and political level. The disappearance of others presents an opportunity for us to question the relational behaviours that preceded that disappearance – relational behaviours that play out not only in our own lives but in the wider power dynamics of social and political life. Without questioning these behaviours, we might facilitate the conditions for the repetition of relational and ethical violence.

While the disappearance of others might present an opportunity to question and potentially transform relationality, we must also acknowledge the often damaging effects of disappearances, both personally and politically. We suffer when specific others disappear from our lives. We are not and cannot ever be the same as we were before. Likewise, there is a reason why practices of enforced disappearance remain an evocative reminder of the potential for political and state violence. Yes, the

disappearance of the other is something we all experience at some point in our lives. But to *disappear* the other is to rob us, both individually and collectively, of the capacity to suffer this disappearance, to grieve, and to construct a new world in the aftermath. To insist on the opportunity of disappearance is not to deny the important struggle against the disappearance of the other or to suggest that those who are violently disappeared, like in the example of solitary confinement, should embrace their disappearance from the lives of others. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that some people are more likely to experience both the disappearance of others from their lives and their disappearance from the lives of others because of their social, political, or legal status. However, it is precisely because of the damaging aspects of the disappearance of the other that we must be willing to examine and confront disappearance. The reason that disappearance represents such an opportunity for imagining a transformative relationality is that there is a relationality in the disappearance of the other, one that enables that disappearance to endure in the present and not recede into the past. If we return to habituated relational patterns – out of fear of vulnerability – then not only do we risk repeating problematic relational behaviours but we also imply that the disappearance of the other has not registered in any lasting form and therefore does not matter. That is, if the other's disappearance does not affect us in ways that transform our behaviours then we entrench the conditions in which certain others are deemed dispensable.

In order to map what might be learned from the disappearance of others I move from the ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty towards the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas via the critical theory of Judith Butler. What I hope to show is that, in understanding the ontological conditions of relationality – in particular, through Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "hinge" – we can generate a movement beyond ontology to think about how the disappearance of the other, any other, exposes us to an ethical responsibility that is at once immanent and infinite. To do so, we must consider the vulnerability of

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relationality, which is often brought about by the disappearance of a specific relational tie and exposed through expressions of grief, mourning, rage, denial, and so on. Using Butler as an interlocutor, I consider how contemporary US foreign policy, in the name of national security, undermines this vulnerability by differentiating between those lives that are allowed to disappear and those that are not. This scenario leads me to revisit Levinas's ethics and his much discussed notion of the "face" – the source of the ethical demand. What happens when a physical face disappears? What responsibility do I retain to that face? This missing face, I argue, retains a trace of the original affective encounter with the other – a trace that upholds the ethical command. By way of example, I explore how the image of the disappeared face sustains campaigns for victims of enforced disappearance. Ultimately, my intention is to illustrate that while we all experience the disappearance of the other from our lives in many shapes and forms, this need not lead to an apathetic or predictable response, one in which the other is re-disappeared through attempts at personal invulnerability and palliative justice. Instead, this disappearance can live on in ways that transform our relations with others, particularly those others who are more likely to fall victim to disappearance.

### becoming unhinged: from ontic to ontological relationality

If we are to examine the relationality that emerges in the disappearance of others we must begin by considering what ties us to these others in the first place. This is where Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "hinge" is useful. The "hinge" (or "pivot") is an important term in Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, particularly in the notions of flesh and reversibility. The hinge represents the site of non-coincidence where the visible and the invisible, the touching and the being touched, the self and the other, blend with one another in the "flesh" of the world without being totally subsumed into one another (*Visible* 147). It is precisely this non-

coincidence that underpins Merleau-Ponty's understanding of relationality. "*I accompany the other: distance at the same time as connection,*" he writes (*Institution* 120; emphasis in original). The capacity to retain distance while in connection pushes phenomenology beyond egoic conceptions of intersubjectivity, freeing the other from its status as captive – as "alter ego for an ego" – and allowing subjectivity to be conceived as an "openness to the world" (Barbaras 31). This openness is dependent on the elasticity of the flesh, in which the hinge plays a vital role. While the flesh is a "texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself," the hinge is the mechanism around which the flesh folds, facilitating an accompaniment that is both connection and distance (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 147). In terms of relationality, the hinge binds me to the other – to the point that we exist intersubjectively but where I am never fully allowed to possess the other or the other to possess me. For, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, "there is no reception of the other person, nor perception, which reaches the other; it would be necessary to be the other" (*Institution* 34). In facilitating a connection with the other in the flesh while also ensuring a distancing between us, the hinge enables me to retain "a 'respect' for the freedom of the other" (120).

In his course notes from his lectures at the Collège de France (1954–55), Merleau-Ponty occasionally uses the term "me-others hinge" (or similar) as a means to describe the relational (81 n. 22, 131, 134). It is difficult to know whether "hinge" is a verb or a noun in many of these cases (perhaps it is both), but what is important is that the term itself implies reversibility. As his quotation in the epigraph to this article illustrates, "me-others hinge" gestures towards the ambivalence of relationality, to the fact that in touching and exposing ourselves to the touch of the other we not only generate energy ("flywheel") but carry a responsibility ("weight") that can at times feel beyond our capabilities ("a curse"). There is a certain generosity to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the other here which rests on a corporeal openness where my body as an "I" is, in relation, also

instituted as a “you” for the other. Thus, as Rosalyn Diprose notes, “I do not build this body alone: I only have an identity because as a body I am given to, and take place in, the world of the other’s body” (*Corporeal Generosity* 70). The embodied self, for Merleau-Ponty, is therefore fundamentally an *exposure* – or what Levinas might call a “subjectivity incapable of shutting itself up” (*Collected Papers* 151). It is for this reason that Anya Daly concludes, in reference to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, that “subjectivity itself includes an anticipation of otherness and so the self must contain the seeds of alterity” (78). The “me-others hinge” means that I am exposed to the other in a way that obliterates any notion of a monadic “I.” I do not merely exist in community with other monads, as Husserlian phenomenology insists, but I am open to a change that is beyond my control, which is to say, I am exposed in ways where there is the potential to become *unhinged*.

To become unhinged entails the exposure of a *primary relationality* – the fundamental ontological relationality that underpins all being – through the deprivation of a secondary relationality or what we could call an *ontic relationality*: a “me-others hinge” that is so fundamental to one’s existence that, without it, the present makes little sense and the future becomes almost unimaginable. The loss of this ontic relationality – the hinge that not only connected me to that other but also gave me a particular sense of being an “I” – seems to put the survival of the “I” in doubt. This loss foregrounds the fact that we are fundamentally relational beings and that, as such, we are vulnerable to wounding and psychic damage from the disappearance of certain others from our lives. The loss of an ontic relationality ensures that the “I” can never be the same as it was before, but it also accentuates that we cannot disavow our ontological relationality – without which the “I” could never be. We *feel* this loss so sharply precisely because we are first and foremost ontologically entangled with others.

Simone Drichel argues, drawing on Donald W. Winnicott and Judith Butler, that

the “I” is composed of its various entanglements with others; it only emerges in response to and as a result of these primary entanglements with others: entanglements without which it would not survive (and hence come to be an “I”). (“Introduction” 16)

The loss of an ontic relationality might lead to fantasies of complete solitude, the desire to entirely disavow our relations with others, but we can only entertain these thoughts precisely because the loss has radically exposed us to a primary ontological necessity: that without the other, I could never come to be an “I.” It is for this reason that the other can never fully disappear from our lives because, while an ontic relationality might be disavowed or destroyed, that other is already structured into our primary relationality. The disappeared can never be non-relational beings because the relationality between the “I” and the disappeared other cannot be severed at the level of ontological relationality, and this is exactly why there is a lingering relationality in disappearance. The relationality of disappearance can be a transformative one – that is, one that keeps us open to others in ways that can create new forms of relating – rather than one that attempts to return the “I” to a previous and habitual relational state. If it is the latter then we mistake the disappearance of an ontic relationality for an ontological one or, perhaps more precisely, we believe that in controlling our ontic relationality we can prevent exposure to our ontological relationality. The disappearance of others matters because of the chiasmic relationship between ontic and ontological relationality, and while most disappearances might not affect us individually on an ontic level, they are a continual reminder that we are ontologically entangled with others. As a result of this ontological entanglement we always carry a responsibility to the other that exceeds our ontic relations with specific others.

“who ‘am’ i without you?”

The disappearance of an ontic relationality need not be an experience that turns us inwards and

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“returns us to a solitary situation,” although this might feel like the most logical course of action (Butler, *Precarious Life* 22). Rather, it can be one that turns us outwards into the world, searching for something, someone, to hinge upon. In many ways, I am following here Butler’s analysis of grief and mourning in *Precarious Life*, part of which warrants being quoted at length:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I without you? [...] On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related. (Ibid.; emphasis in original)

Rather than conceive of grief and mourning as the loss of a transaction between an ego and its alter ego, one in which the status of the ego (and the alter ego) is never under threat, Butler underscores the extent to which the disappearance of a certain other also precipitates the partial disappearance of the “I,” to the point that “I become inscrutable to myself.” It is clear here that what Butler calls “*the tie*” is a similar mechanism to Merleau-Ponty’s “me-others hinge” in that it keeps the “I” and the other “differentiated and related.” This mechanism allows Butler to approach the fundamental crisis of relationality brought about by the

disappearance of the other and to situate the grief and mourning within the world itself rather than in the isolated mind of the “I.” “What grief displays,” Butler writes later, “is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us [...] in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (23). It is grief and mourning that often expose the myth of solitude, revealing that I am only in control to the extent that the other empowers me, leaving me with the sense that I am lost, not only to the world, but to myself.

Of course, the kind of scrutiny that the “I” comes under also depends on how that other disappears (and whether they are likely to reappear) – that is, whether disappearance was, to varying degrees, expected or unexpected. It goes without saying that the disappearance of an other is felt most vividly at the moment when the other’s appearance seemed most assured. The sudden loss of a significant other – whether it is in an accident, a natural disaster, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, etc. – means the “I” is affected in a way that it could not have foreseen. This specific hinge is ripped violently from the flesh of the world, leaving the “I” floundering in a shapeless and seemingly infinite space. In the case of an expected disappearance – such as the death of a loved one from a terminal illness or the gradual disintegration of a long-term relationship – the other disappears in front of the “I.” The hinge slowly loses its dexterity, and the flesh of the world develops new contours in response. The “I” is burdened by the painful inability to halt these contours or to stop this particular hinge from eventually breaking. In these instances, it is not only the disappearance that affects the “I” but the bearing witness to the act of disappearance.

The relation with a specific other enables us to lead a meaningful existence, and the disappearance of that other threatens to render our life meaningless. It is the awareness of our vulnerability to this loss of meaning that can lead us to reject the relational, even if we know that it will add value to our lives, because the spectre of its disappearance looms too large.

The concept of vulnerability is thus key to any kind of transformative relationality. If we are paralysed by the fear of vulnerability and in response pursue invulnerability, then we can only remain wedded to habituated forms of relationality, ones that might attempt to disavow our primary entanglement with others. This is the dominant cultural logic of our times, in which recurring forms of cruelty are justified in the name of defence against vulnerability. Drichel notes that vulnerability is most often conceived in contemporary political and social discourse as “signaling the openness to wounds and wounding,” and, consequently, “the experience of vulnerability [...] leads to efforts to transform openness into closure by creating and protecting proper – impermeable – boundaries” (“Introduction” 5). We need look no further here for illustration of these efforts than contemporary anti-immigration rhetoric – which is closely aligned with heightened security and defence measures – particularly in the United States, parts of Europe, and Australia. This rhetoric demands the protection of a vulnerable national body from the polluting force of the foreign other. The palpable desire for invulnerability, Drichel notes,

comes to justify just about any degree of retaliatory violence in the name of self-defense, with the result that vulnerability comes to be inextricably caught up in a short-circuit of violence, where the fear that one’s own vulnerability – openness to wounding – will lead to the experience of violation is warded off by pre-emptory or retaliatory violence against the other who may (or may not) violate and wound. (6)

The popularity of Donald Trump’s promise to build a wall between the United States and Mexico – a wall, it must be added, that can never fulfil its fantasised promise of total invulnerability – attests to the extent to which “self-defense” and the fear of vulnerability lie at the heart of contemporary political concerns. Likewise, in 2013, when discussing Australia’s ethically indefensible imprisonment of refugees on Nauru and Manus Island, the Minister for Communications (and later to be Prime Minister)

Malcolm Turnbull said: “Our policy is a harsh one, it really is. All the policies to deal with asylum seekers and people smuggling are harsh, cruel in fact [...] You have to work out the least cruel, most effective, most efficient means of depriving the people smuggler of a product to sell” (Maley and Ireland n. pag.). If we leave aside the reduction of asylum seekers to “products,” Turnbull openly argues that cruelty is a justifiable expense in the pursuit of invulnerability. To be vulnerable, he implies, is a much worse alternative to being cruel. Of course, vulnerability in this instance is not a panhuman concept but a territorial phenomenon, where the promotion of the vulnerability of the “I” that exists inside the border leads to the negation of the vulnerability of the other outside this border. The protection and fortification of the territorial border thus become the representation of a more personal corporeal boundary in a gesture that infers that *you will not spoil me; you can only be a weight, never a flywheel.*

### “shatter their sense of invincibility”

At its worst, the hopeless and destructive pursuit of invulnerability leads to the desire for complete annihilation of the threatening other, because that other reminds us of our potential vulnerability to the disappearance of an ontic relationality. Here, again, we can point towards the United States and its approach to tackling Islamic terrorism, which was described in 2017 by then Defense Secretary Jim Mattis as an “annihilation campaign” that sets out to “shatter their [Isis’s] sense of invincibility” (Pengelly n. pag.). Of course, the desire to “shatter their sense of invincibility” is an attempt to redistribute that sense towards the subject that is perceived as vulnerable. That is, by exploiting the vulnerability of the other, the subject – which Butler points out is not “always [...] an individual” but “a model for agency and intelligibility, one that is very often based on notions of sovereign power” (*Precarious Life* 45) – can reinforce its own sense of invulnerability, making the other’s vulnerability “other to” the subject (7).

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“The notion of the subject produced by recent wars conducted by the US,” Butler writes, “is one in which the US subject seeks to produce itself as impermeable, to define itself as protected permanently against incursion and as radically invulnerable to attack” (*Frames* 47). The production of this impermeable subject is what allows Mattis to argue simultaneously that “civilian casualties are a fact of life” (by which, of course, he means non-American or non-Western citizens) in such a campaign and that “anyone who kills women and children is not devout” (Pengelly n. pag.). One can imagine that, if Merleau-Ponty were still alive, he would describe this policy as the very definition of unhinged.

Butler anticipates such acts of cognitive dissonance through what she calls “the differential distribution of recognizability,” which is sustained by “schemes of recognition that determine in a relative sense who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition” (Butler and Willig 140). These schemes “emerge and fade depending on broader operations of power” and determine what constitutes a life and, indeed, who can be called to live this life (*Frames* 4). What often occurs in expressions of nationalism or anti-immigration rhetoric is a radical defence of who can be deemed recognisable, which is produced by the privileging of one experience of vulnerability over another. It is no surprise, therefore, that perceptions of the violence enacted to defend nationalism differentiate between the civilian deaths of those outside the national border and those within it. Furthermore, violence itself is differentially conceived, where the one in pursuit of self-defence (or invulnerability) is perceived as nobler, more “devout,” than the violence perpetrated by those who are subjected to this violence. Or, as Butler puts it, these policy makers “are able to render the subject’s own destructiveness *righteous* and its own destructibility *unthinkable*” (47; emphases in original).

The disappearance of these unrecognisable lives (the “civilian deaths”) leaves little, if any, imprint on the national subject – they disappear without a trace. “There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts,”

Butler observes, “and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition” (*Precarious Life* 34). What is imperative to note here is that the right to be recognised as a life is the right not simply to appear in the lives of others but also to *disappear from* those lives in a way that matters. It is, in this sense, the right to be grieved, for, as Butler proposes, “without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life” (*Frames* 15). Thus, when Mattis claims that the “American people and the American military will never get used to civilian deaths,” he fails to understand that these casualties are rarely recognised as “deaths” in the way that recognisable lives are in the United States. What people cannot “get used to” is not that lives like theirs are disappearing, precipitating an outrage that attends to a shared vulnerability, but that their lives are dependent on unliveable lives, ones that are simply collateral. It seems to me that not getting used to such a scenario is the least we can do.

## disappearance and vulnerability

If disappearance engenders an unhinging between the self (whether this is a national subject or an individual “I”) and a specific other, then might this lead the self to turn away from the other as a form of protection against the potentiality of the other’s disappearance? And, even more troublingly, might it lead to the classification of some others as unrecognisable – particularly those lives that are more likely to disappear – in order to protect the self from the intensity of the emotions engendered by their disappearance? What seems extremely important, in this context, is to think of vulnerability, as Butler and Driichel imply, not as an experience to be purged from one’s present experience in search of a return to a more secure state but as one that has a transformative potential. The self, as it is structured by a primary relationality, “owes its very existence to its vulnerability, a vulnerability it cannot wish away without undoing its own

conditions of emergence and ongoing existence” (Drichel, “Introduction” 17). The disappearance of the other brings about a crisis of the “I,” a crisis that emerges not simply as a result of the loss but that is latently formed in the vulnerability of ontological relationality itself. The hinge facilitates vulnerability, by acting as the mechanism that can precipitate both connection and loss, appearance and disappearance. The attempt to deny vulnerability is essentially a desire to control the hinge on an ontic level, to regulate with whom one consents to be in relation. But in regulating our vulnerability at the level of ontic relationality, we end up disavowing (but not destroying) our ontological relationality, which depends on a vulnerability that we “cannot wish away.” We thus become locked into habituated and repetitive forms of relationality, which permit vulnerability under certain predictable conditions but disavow vulnerability as soon as those conditions expose us to the ontological relationality of the “I.”

The important question here – and one that must always be answered in the affirmative if anything truly transformative is to happen – is whether some forms of ontic relationality are risks worth taking, given their potential to expose us to the vulnerability of our primary ontological relationality. For Butler,

ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness [...] when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance. (*Giving* 136)

This “chance” exposes us to what Diprose calls, in distinctly Merleau-Pontian language, the “intercorporeal foundation of human existence,” which “means that we are vulnerable to loss and violence for sure, but, on the other side of the ambiguity, it also renders us open to new possibilities for existence” (“Corporeal Interdependence” 185). These “new possibilities for existence” cannot be self-produced, despite what exponents of neoliberal self-sufficiency would have us believe.

In his pithy book *The Expulsion of the Other*, Byung-Chul Han notes that neoliberal rationality and the ubiquity of digital communication have collapsed the distance between self and other: “Today, by means of digital media, we seek to bring the Other as close as possible. This does not give us more of the Other; rather, it causes them to disappear” (65). When the distance between the self and other is flattened out, then “the I drowns in the self. For a stable self only comes about in the face of the other” (21). Neoliberal rationality tells us that we are supposed to turn inwards and welcome this self-infatuation as the height of human achievement. Dependency equals failure; relationality hinders productivity; responsibility is only towards one’s self.<sup>2</sup> Under such conditions, the face of the other is always menacing, viewed as a threat to the self’s survival. There can be no “willingness to become undone in relation to others” and therefore no “new possibilities for existence.” Instead, we turn away from the face of the other, and we are left with the monotonous and predictable rhythms of competitive self-production. For a transformative relationality to emerge, we must re-find the face of the other. We must realise that our primary relationality, and thus the very existence of the “I,” is grounded in the face of the other, and no amount of turning away from the other in ontic relationality can escape this fact. In fact, turning *towards* the face of the other might be the very thing that can free us from the debilitating effects of always having to depend on ourselves.

### facing disappearance

For Levinas, the face of the other differs significantly from the one that appears in conventional phenomenological understandings of relationality. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty suggests that “to see a face [...] is to take a certain hold upon it” (295). He elaborates on this definition in a later work, in which he writes, “I live in the facial expressions of the other as I feel him living in mine” (“Child’s

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Relations” 146). The face, for Merleau-Ponty, is a phenomenon that reveals the presence of the other; it is an invitation that precipitates self-reflection, an invitation that can reassure or discourage me. For Levinas, however, the face is an altogether more enigmatic concept, something that exists beyond phenomenality. Levinas’s philosophy is thus an attempt to push phenomenology beyond the world of appearances into a shadowy world that exceeds perception, consciousness, and being towards the ethical plane that allows such ontological terms to emerge in the first place.

This attempt to push phenomenology beyond the language of consciousness and ontology is the reason why Simon Critchley describes Levinas’s work as a “*phenomenology of the unphenomenologizable*” (*Ethics* 184; emphasis in original). In fact, Levinas states in an interview, “I do not know if one can speak of a ‘phenomenology’ of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway (*d’emblée*) ethical” (*Ethics and Infinity* 85). The face, Levinas suggests, is not something I can “take a certain hold upon,” as Merleau-Ponty proposes, but an ethical command that exceeds my experience of the face as a phenomenon. This is to conceive of the face as the other’s “expression,” akin to a “conversation,” but “in which at each instant he [the other] overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity” (*Totality* 51). The face is the “ungraspable” aspect of the other; it is the overflowing “expression” that constitutes my condition as an “I” but is beyond the epistemic or ontological (Levinas, *Basic Writings* 19).

If the other’s face is “straightaway ethical,” then how should I respond? That is, how can I take responsibility for something that is ungraspable, that disappears before it appears? It is this dilemma that pushes Levinas to distinguish between ethics and ontology. For Levinas, Western philosophy’s preoccupation

with ontology means that the other becomes subjugated to the “I.” As Critchley helpfully puts it, “ontology is Levinas’s general term for any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding” (“Introduction” 11). By reducing the other to a form of “comprehension” – even if that comprehension is a non-comprehension, as is the case with Merleau-Ponty – I am always responding to my understanding of the other. The important point here is that the face addresses me on the level of ethics and not once I find myself as a thinking ego. Rather, the face addresses me preceding the establishment of the “I.” The face is an “impingement” that “goes behind the back of consciousness” to establish an affective encounter between the self and other (Bernasconi 246). And, as Drichel outlines, this encounter is “the precondition for ethics: exposed to and defenceless before the other, the ethical subject is pure affectivity; unable to shut itself off against the other, it cannot evade the responsibility it is assigned by (and for) the other” (“Radical Acceptance” 53). Thus, the ethical impingement of the face means that ethical relationality is not something that I possess and can do with whatever I please. Rather, it is a pre-ontological field of transcendence from which I as a subject emerge and can never escape. Consequently, I am responsible for the other, not because I decide to be responsible but because my existence depends on it (I cannot exist otherwise). Or, to put it in Levinas’s words, “I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief” (*Otherwise* 13). The face of the other calls me into ethical subjectivity, and any pursuit to defend myself against this impingement misunderstands that, in building a wall to keep the other out, I am actually building a wall that keeps the other in.

### *i will haunt you forever: the missing faces of the disappeared*

Levinas tells us that the face is the exposure to “the extreme precariousness of the other” (*Basic Writings* 167). He writes elsewhere that

to expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other. (Levinas and Kearney 24)

This "ethical edict" is prompted by the irreconcilability of the other's alterity – the fact that the other is that which brings me into existence as an ethical subject but remains that which I can never possess because the other always retains its own ontological beginnings. The independent ontological origin of the other is crucial for Levinas, as he is careful not to characterise the self's relation to the other as one of dependence and need. Rather, the independent origin of the other – its insurmountable alterity – is the condition of "ethical" or "metaphysical desire" and that which necessitates the self's "need to escape," where it is "impelled to seek refuge in something other than itself" (*On Escape* 58). Ethical desire "is not a desire that can be satisfied," such as the everyday desires to eat or have sex, but rather "it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it" (*Totality* 34). Ethical desire necessitates a form of transcendence where, in seeking refuge from itself, the self is lifted beyond being. Again, here we touch on the difference between ontology and ethics in Levinas's thought. He views ontology as the wish to comprehend the other, as if it were an everyday need, with murder being the ultimate expression of this wish: murder is an attempt to bring the radical alterity of the other into one's own possession. But since murder annihilates the other, any possible possession of that other is annihilated with it. And if ethics depends on the affirmation that "the other's right to exist has primacy over my own," then the inclination to kill that other is essentially an attempt to absolve myself of ethical responsibility. But instead of absolving myself of this ethical demand I take on a responsibility of another kind: the culpability of a murderer.

Murder might seem like the most assured way to remove oneself from the ethical demand

brought about by exposure to the face of the other. Yet while the murdered other might not have a living face, the ethical command of the other's face remains as a trace in the lives of those who have been commanded to responsibility by that face. Murder cannot extinguish the priority of the other to me; I cannot evade the ethical command simply by killing the biological face. "The dead face," Levinas writes, "becomes a form, a mortuary mask" (262). And while Levinas himself argues that any form of representation cannot carry an ethical impetus – to the point that he contends that the dead face "no longer appears as a face" – it is notable that the image of the dead face has become an important tool in campaigns for social and political justice (Ibid.). On a political level, that is to say, the face as a "mortuary mask" is an extremely powerful reminder of the lasting effects of violence. This implies that, while it is ultimately the trace of the ethical command of the face that continues to haunt the present, the image or representation of the dead face is not void of that ethical force but retains an affectivity that can intimate towards this ethical command, that can remind us that this was once a living other. To illustrate this point, I would like to look briefly at cases of enforced disappearance.

The United Nations International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted in 2006, defines the practice of enforced disappearance as

the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law. (N. pag.)

This convention establishes enforced disappearance as a "crime against humanity" that can be prosecuted under international law. However, it is important to point out here that this crime is not limited to "agents of the State" but can also



Fig. 1. A ceremony to commemorate the National Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances in Guatemala City. Photo: Johan Ordonez; permission licensed from Getty Images.

include paramilitary groups struggling against the state (as is the case in places such as Columbia and Northern Ireland).

Enforced disappearance is one of the most evocative and abiding legacies of state violence and armed conflicts, as we can see in Fig. 1 from the Guatemalan “National Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.” While the faces in this photo might not be alive in a biological sense, they are certainly *ethically* alive. That is, they portray an ethical charge, a power to evoke responsibility. Rather than saying “you shall not kill,” these faces convey the message “you *cannot* extinguish my ethical command by killing me.” This is an important distinction, because these faces have always been beyond possession, and killing them seals their infinity. These faces say “my ethical command will haunt you forever, even though I no longer live.” These faces refuse to disappear despite displaying their mortality. And in this refusal they uphold a demand for justice in an ethico-political sense, which is preserved by those for whom these faces were once a living face.

In her book *Missing: Persons and Politics*, Jenny Edkins observes that

we forget, too easily perhaps, that behind every face, even our own faces, is a vast untapped landscape – in many cases a landscape of horror concealed – that continues the seeds of the past. Those of us nurtured in peacetime forget at our peril the precariousness of life and of personhood. (5)

To exemplify this point she devotes a chapter to Argentina’s “Dirty War,” where up to 12,000 men and women disappeared. In this chapter we find the extent to which the disappeared can haunt the political present. Edkins discusses the famous Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, an organisation set up by the mothers of the disappeared, whose motto is “they took them away alive, we want them back alive” (159). She notes that, in one protest, the Madres “festooned [trees] with photographs of the disappeared; tables were set up where material mementos from their lives – diplomas, possessions, souvenirs – were displayed” (ibid.). She quotes one of the Madres, who remarked of the children: “How and when they died is something too many of us still don’t know, but no one, no one, shall deny that our children *lived* [...] Their disappearance was someone else’s crime, not our children’s identity” (ibid.;

emphasis in original). Since the authorities in many cases attempted to expunge all traces of the children's existence, including from official records, Edkins points out that the Madres had "no choice but to act," because "if they did nothing, did not protest, did not act, then it would be as if their children had not only disappeared but had never existed, never *lived*" (ibid.; emphasis in original). By acting and protesting, the Madres

refuse to allow the trauma of disappearance, the unmaking of the world, to be covered over or forgotten. They refuse to be silenced, or to accept the incorporation of their children into categorizations that form part of the authorized account of the dirty war. They insist on their children as people, with all their faults, and as people who lived their lives – their *political* lives. (Ibid.; emphasis in original)

In refusing to let the faces of their children disappear, these mothers refuse to allow their children to be ethically murdered.

### the relationality of disappearance

As the examples above illustrate, some people are more likely to disappear or experience the disappearance of others. The recent separation of children from their parents on the US–Mexico border exemplifies the fact that undocumented migrants are more likely to endure the disappearance of loved ones – through practices such as deportation or refusal of entry – than those who have citizen privilege. Civilians in countries under attack from other nations are more likely to witness the death of significant others than the civilians in the countries who sanction these war campaigns. The subaltern and precariat are more likely to suffer the imprisonment, disappearance, and death of an other than those in a more socially, culturally, and economically secure position. While we could say that we are all vulnerable to the disappearance of significant others from our lives, there is no doubt that this vulnerability is distributed differentially across political and social groups. Critchley notes that this understanding forms part of "Levinas's polemical point," which

argues that "the relation between myself and the other only appears as a relation of equality, symmetry and reciprocity from a neutral, third-person perspective that stands outside that relation" (*Infinitely Demanding* 59). What, then, is the ethical responsibility of the I once it abandons the "perspective that stands outside" a particular relationality?

To answer this question we must insist on the hinge between our immediate relational ties with specific others (ontic relationality) and our primary entanglements with the other (ontological relationality), because this hinge can facilitate a relationship between politics and ethics. When ontic relationality is ruptured by the disappearance of a specific other from the life of the "I," ontological relationality persists in the aftermath. The loss of an ontic relationality is of course painful, debilitating, and ensures that the "I" can never be the same as it was prior to the disappearance of that other. But this loss also reveals to us that we are inextricably tied to others in ways that transcend our immediate ontic relationality. It is in these moments that there exists the potential to transform relationality in ways that extend beyond the localised life of the "I." That is, the experience of the disappearance of the other at the level of ontic relationality exposes us to a more fundamental relationality, one that we all share. The pernicious cultural rhetoric of neoliberalism teaches us to ignore this exposure, to disavow our ontological relationality in the pursuit of complete self-reliance. But in ignoring exposure to our ontological relationality we miss the opportunity to see that while others might cause us damage they also give us life. That is, this exposure can illustrate that to live is not to surrender to a socio-economic cultural logic that cares only about our potential to accumulate capital but to relate to others, to rely on them, and to potentially suffer their disappearance. Life might not feel worth living after a significant other disappears, but life is incapable of being lived without our fundamental ontological relationality.

While the disappearances of certain others will affect us more sharply because they mattered to us in specific ways, *all* disappearances

## relationality of disappearance

matter because they remind us, contrary to the dominant worldview, that to be is *to-be-in-relation*. There is no amount of self-sufficiency, no amount of wealth accumulation, no number of border walls that can escape this ontological necessity. The disappearance of the other, any other, discloses the fraudulent anti-relationality of neoliberal life by revealing the ties that connect beings together. Even if that disappearance does not affect us directly, it still exposes us to this ontological fact. Our job is to face this exposure, to acknowledge its facticity, and to use it to transform the ways in which we and others relate to one another. Otherwise we perpetuate the debilitating effects of total self-reliance, give ourselves over to a cultural logic that exploits our self-sufficiency, and facilitate the conditions for the disappearance of more others.

To face the exposure to the disappearance of the other is not to diminish the pain, grief, and anger brought about by that disappearance. On the contrary, it demands that we allow space for this suffering not only for the people directly affected but also on an ethico-political level. For, as Butler contends,

when grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. (*Precarious Life* 29–30)

The campaign of the Madres in Argentina, for example, is a refusal to allow the fantasy of a return to a former order. It is an attempt to use the loss of an ontic relationality to accentuate the ontological relationality that underpins all our lives. In doing so, they force us bystanders to witness their suffering, to question our relational behaviours, to reflect on our own vulnerability to the disappearance of the other, and invite us to think of new ways of relating that can help us avoid the repetition of such violence.

The fear of suffering is part of the reason why it is convenient to keep unknown others unknown, so that their disappearance does not threaten to throw us into the depths of grief.

These others are deemed dispensable precisely because they do not appear in our lives; they are the collateral damage that enables us to live the lives that we do. Furthermore, we are encouraged to keep them unknown because they present a threat to our fantasy of self-sufficiency. Even when we do acknowledge the disappearance of these unknown others, we often do so in prescribed and restrictive ways. For instance, perpetrators of the crime of enforced disappearance are tried in court under international law. But while those responsible must obviously be held to account, a trial establishes performative and oppositional modes of relation, whether this takes the form of accused/victim, prosecutor/defence, innocent/guilty, and so forth. These binaries lock us into habituated forms of relational behaviour, which reduce every event that goes through this legal process to the same. We lose the potential for each event of enforced disappearance to matter in its own way and for it to challenge the relational behaviours that enabled such an event to occur. The predictable relationality of the legal process can often be used to apportion blame onto an individual or group, to appease the vulnerability of bystanders, and to negate the potential for that event to reflect on us as individuals, groups, or societies in ways that might require us to question and transform our behaviours. In these forms of prosecution and punishment, the face of the other becomes identifiable and knowable, either as a perpetrator or a victim; it becomes a phenomenon. Ethics is negated precisely at the moment it is needed, and responsibility towards the other merely requires separating between the good and the bad, as defined by the legal system. We could argue, therefore, that the legal process seeks to overcome the ethical by operating on a level that requires the reduction of the other to a certain role within the legal system. This form of relationality can produce only limited and repetitive forms of justice, because the infinite ethical command of the face cannot be exhausted in the phenomenal field. The court room seals the disappearance of the other, whereas ethics ensures the other's enduring affectivity even in disappearance. In finding

our way out of the suffering of disappearance of others and in creating the space for others to witness and relate to that suffering in ways that confront established social, political, and cultural norms, we can ensure that those who have disappeared are not re-disappeared through the desire to return to the world as it was previously. Perhaps, then, if we are to learn anything from the disappearance of others, it is the importance of the *relationality of disappearance*.



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1 For an in-depth explanation of necropolitics, see Mbembe. A similar notion occurs in Michel Foucault's "regimes of bio-power," where bodies that exist outside social and political norms are "driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did [they] not exist, [they] had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon [their] least manifestation" (4).

2 For more on neoliberal rationality and its narratives of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, see Brown (esp. 131–34); Dean (ch. 1); Fleming (ch. 5).

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