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Building an Ethical Architecture:
Judith Thompson's *Habitat* and the Shape of Radical Humanism

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[E]thics is not about finding solutions, but about creating openings in and through the uncertainty of strange encounters. (Shildrick 7)

[W]hat am I supposed to be feeling here? Is there something I'm supposed to be feeling? (*Habitat* 5)

Habitat first drew me in with its title. I was moved by the contours of the word: on the surface clinical and precise, it nevertheless echoes an activism motivated by a deep compassion for the shared living spaces of our world. Then, after visiting and revisiting the play, I was struck by something else: characters in *Habitat* never use the word "habitat," though it hangs over their story. It ghosts their choices and haunts the action, spectral yet central to their dilemma, and to our experience of it as readers and viewers. The word is, for those of us on the outside, a lens but also a question mark. What is a "habitat," to you and me? Better yet: what *could* it be?

For those of us in the developed West, "habitat" is a value-loaded term. I think of the fight to save the habitats of endangered species; I think of environmental concerns over the increasingly rapid degeneration of human habitats (our water, our air, our atmosphere); I think, perhaps think first, of Habitat For Humanity, the community-building program that engages volunteers from across the social spectrum to work with needy families in building those families a home of their own. Although superficially a scientific marker for dwelling-place, "habitat" is most resonant in its social iterations: it proposes dwelling to be a shared enterprise, a collective experience of vulnerability and risk (habitats, ours included, seem perennially under siege), yet one marked by a utopian

potential, by the hope that, working together, we might overcome the threat and build a better life for all. Unlike a house or even a “home,” both of which imply security-in-exclusivity framed by closed doors and mediated by private capital, a habitat is a profoundly inclusive, ethical architecture.

Thompson’s *Habitat* is a call to ethical architecture: the play is about our need for it, about our failure, in our psychic and social solipsism, our increasing personal and political isolation, to make a place for or a priority of it, but *Habitat* is also, most critically, about the potential for and the possible shape of it. Below its rather cynical surface, the play proposes a discrete but compelling model for communal dwelling, what I will call an *intercorporeal architecture*, which gestures toward the possibility of an entirely different encounter with intersubjectivity than the one offered by either Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis or poststructuralist metaphysics. The play laments our failure to build such a space, yet proffers in turn a way that we may come together, may be with rather than against – or of necessity apart from – one another in the Real.ⁱ

At its most basic, *Habitat* is an issue-driven play, conjuring up the distasteful spectre of NIMBYism in suburban Toronto. Raine loses her mother to cancer and rejects the prospect of living in Cornwall with her father and his new wife; suddenly homeless, she ends up in a brand-new group facility run by Lewis Chance on Mapleview Lanes, a prosperous street in Etobicoke. The neighbours make good on Lewis’s predictions of fear and loathing: they begin a campaign to have the facility shut down that lands them before City Council and ends in a spectacular blaze, as Raine and her fellow resident Sparkle set fire to their former home. Ultimately, however, the play is about more than a neighbourhood’s ploys to protect its borders; it is about the very organization of our

shared spaces, and it represents an attempt to rethink and to restructure in specifically material terms Thompson's by-now conventional interests in the spatial dynamic of the psyche, in our obsessive anxieties over the borders of body and self, and in the insistent, inevitable disruptions of our seemingly sealed interiors (see Nunn). Framed by a literal land battle – for the shape of a community, for a place for its outcasts – the play poses in real space and real time many of the questions that are latent in Thompson's earlier works: how are we supposed to come to feel, not just *for* one another but *with* one another? (How do we transform condescending sympathy into a genuine encounter with our others, recognized in their proper alterity?) Why must our personhood be defined by distance, by an obsessive guardianship over our selves and/as our spaces? If we either fetishize our isolation or let ourselves be terrorized by a pervasive fear of loneliness, what hope do we have of building what Arthur Frank has recently termed a "relation of care": "a dialogue not only of words but of touch" (27)? The "spatial metaphors" that drive our supposed experiences of subjectivity (as well as our experience of much of Thompson's own *oeuvre*, as Robert Nunn has convincingly argued) have serious ramifications in actual space, and it is therefore not enough, this play argues, for analysis to remain entrenched at the level of metaphor: we must also realize the extent to which our psychic models have in turn modeled every inch of our material world on the stultifying play of plenitude (we are complete in ourselves) and lack (we exist at a distance from all others, as from ourselves), on an agon that admits no middle ground, no shared space between where we can encounter, and honour, one another.

Before I excavate what I believe to be *Habitat's* implied ethical architecture, I want to telescope its central social dilemma (this community isn't big enough for the both

of us; there simply *isn't enough space* here to accommodate our differences) by reading its summative first scene through the recent writings of a trio of female ethicists. Luce Irigaray, Kelly Oliver and Margaret Shildrick share my dissatisfaction with conventional subject-object relations as well as *Habitat's* dissatisfaction with the suffocating material effects of those relations: a total lack of space within a neighbourhood of plenty. Irigaray, Oliver and Shildrick each re-theorize our most pervasive current beliefs about the self/other dynamic and pose an alternative model of intersubjective experience that is, I argue, in its focus on the physicality of embodiment and in its privileging of a metaphysics of touch over a metaphysics of sight,ⁱⁱ specifically architectural. These women revise subject-object relations by posing those relations in overtly spatial terms, and by arguing that more generous, more ethical relations with our others can only be imagined by rethinking our relationship with shared space through what Shildrick and Price have called “the intercorporeal” (see also Oliver 199). With these insights in hand I will go on to examine two key moments in Thompson’s play where the suffocating experiences of the first scene are refocused through an intimate, empathetic, even intercorporeal encounter between two characters, an encounter which is ultimately destroyed by the intervention of apparently sympathetic human hands. The intimacy *lost* in these moments is salient: the loss to some extent explains the root of the problem on Mapleview Lanes, the deep disconnect of each group of residents from the other. Yet, critically, this loss is figured in these moments as redeemable (though not necessarily redeemed), a “Real” we can and must access: *Habitat* insists that an intimate yet respectful physical connection with others is not only possible but essential if we are to build a true habitat – a genuine community.

The Space-Between of Radical Humanism

Air, that which brings us together and separates us. Which unites us and leaves a space for us between us. (Irigaray, *i love to you* 148)

Habitat opens without air: Cath is in hospital, in the last stages of cancer, fighting to breath. Raine fights the image as well as the idea of her dying mother, focusing her attempt at conversation on mundane matters, asking Cath if she may go and live with her friend Crystal, if she may have money for new jeans. Cath cannot answer, except with the sounds of struggled breathing, and, for Raine, this uncanny exercise in mother-daughter communication becomes the catalyst for an entirely typical teenage response: rage against the perceived injustice of her situation, against the parent with whom she can no longer connect nor from whom yet fully separate. Raine is in limbo, so she accuses her mother of faking the severity of her illness (5), vents her rage at having to perform grief at the funeral (6), and reminds Cath that her own suffering, too, has been intense and worthy of reaction. She fights to overcome her mother's overwhelming corporeality, fights to forge a place for herself in its (her) place.

This (literally) suffocating first scene is divorced from the main action of the play, and functions both to foreshadow the troubling animosities of Mapleview Lanes and, more importantly, to contextualize them. Raine's behaviour toward her dying mother is both unforgivable and understandable; it is, as I have suggested, conventional despite its startling circumstance. We may feel inclined to ask how Raine can say such things, how a mother and daughter can be so far apart in this shared moment of intimate bodily and emotional struggle, but the better question – the question I think the play would prefer us to ask, sets the scene so atypically in order to ask – is how they can be otherwise, how

any other arrangement is possible. Cath is dying; isn't that kind of pain and suffering supposed to be deeply isolating, segregating? Aren't mothers and daughters always divided, combative, cut off from one another's experience in the birth moment, never to regain the intimacy of the womb? Aren't Raine and Cath just acting out in extremis the experience of so many mothers and daughters – including that of Margaret and Janet, Maplevue owners both, later in the play? Both Cath and Raine are suffocating, both are alone, but the chasm between them, paradoxically, confirms their humanity.

Much of Luce Irigaray's work in the last decade has been dedicated to overturning the supposed normalcy of this gulf between loved ones. In place of the chasm she theorizes a space "between" bodies (between men and women, between hierarchized interlocutors) through which she posits the emergence of a self both intimately connected to and yet separate from its others, a self that defies the creation narrative of modern Western metaphysics by neither assimilating the other to its own image, nor estranging it for failing to assimilate.ⁱⁱⁱ One of her earliest articulations of this space "between" can be found in "Belief Itself," an essay in which she links the myth of the chasm directly to the myth of normative mother-child relations, the myth that Raine need be so far away from Cath in the moment of Cath's last breath. "Belief Itself" is an extended riff on Freud's fort/da scene from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (12-17), and on Derrida's reading of it in *The Postcard*. Freud watches his grandson play with a reel of string and concludes that he is using the game to symbolize his mother's absences, to manage her material disappearance (she, like Cath, will die) by assimilating her into a language he can manipulate and control. Derrida, re-reading the scene, reveals that the boy's play involves not only the reel and string but also the curtain of his bed, into which he throws the string

as he happily shouts “fort” (there, or gone); he concludes that the curtain must symbolize the boy’s mother’s hymen (308), returning her absent spectre forcefully and materially to the scene, but goes no further.

At the curtain Irigaray enters and makes the connection Derrida will not: beyond hymen (space of primal terror) to womb (seat of primal comfort). In her appropriation, the missed and dismissed curtain – or veil, as she terms it – is folded back on itself, doubled. One veil separates bodies and psychic lives, as Freud would have it; the other veil forges connections between bodies, taking its power as metaphor from the connective membrane of the womb. Irigaray’s move “beyond” the veil that separates, and toward this second veil that connects, defines her renovation of the psychoanalytic Imaginary: for her, it is neither a space of undifferentiated corporeality nor a space where the empathy forged by intimate corporeal connection need be followed by cathartic rejection at the mirror. In place of the tyrannous spatial dynamic envisioned by modern psychoanalysis, in which one must settle either for no space in which to breathe (self recognizes other as a version of the Same), or for an unending abyss of air (we exist only in our distance from one another), Irigaray imagines a space where the dynamic energy that circulates between bodies maintains their separate selves, yet knits them together in a mutually beneficial dependence.

Like Irigaray, who rescues the over-mythologized space of the womb in order to return it to its proper material status as a psychic and bodily architecture, Kelly Oliver and Margrit Shildrick develop new models of ethical relations by refiguring the elided space between subjects, replacing the chasm or “empty void” (Oliver 12) of philosophical and psychoanalytic myth with a space made magical by the physical properties of air,

light, and energy generated by touch. Taking issue with the distancing eye, the now-pervasive theory that identity is a product of (mis)recognition, Oliver rehabilitates vision itself as a tactile sense that has been misrecognized by theory as necessarily distancing. Vision is circulatory for Oliver, vital and communal like blood, and the space in which vision circulates is, therefore, conjoining rather than “alienating,” the medium through which we both connect to our others and recognize ourselves as fundamentally connected to them (14-15). Shildrick, meanwhile, takes Irigaray’s metaphysical refiguration and Oliver’s social-scientific re-materialization of the space-between to another level, imagining it as a space bridged by literal touch and allowing us to see its deeper relevance to the issues Thompson raises in *Habitat*’s first scene and beyond. Shildrick argues that physical encounters with our others set our “mutual becoming” in motion because they occasion, simultaneously, a personal encounter with our own essential vulnerability (102). For Shildrick, the space between bodies is a space of personal risk we must cross in order to grow; our bodily differences imply an ethics precisely because we are all fragile (see also Frank 8-9), and our very fragility is what makes connecting with others scary or embarrassing, and therefore potentially also rewarding, a gift as well as an obligation. Raine is scared, and embarrassed, but she will not make the ethical leap for which Shildrick calls: she will not reach out and touch Cath (*Habitat* 8), will not confront her own fear of the connection such a touch would imply. For Shildrick, thinking through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the reversibility of touch,^{iv} of skin against skin, marks a crucial moment of crossover between bodies, when the doubleness of sensation muddles the question of precisely where I end and you begin (see also Shildrick and Price), but this “chiasmatic relation to the other does not imply a merging in which all

sense of self is forfeit, but rather *a space of holding together* in which radical difference replaces pale reflection” (Shildrick 119, my emphasis). This “space of holding together” re-imagines the gap between myself and another, myself and the person I “see” myself to be, peopled not just with the bodies of others to whom I am indelibly linked and with whom I share fragments of a world, but also with aspects of myself sensed in their own alterity: we all “hold together” in a space in which I can freely sense the limits of my bodily experience, and sense also the freedom those limits engender in the very fact of my recognizing them. The space-between as a space of shared touch makes room for me to reposition my body alongside the bodies of others, and to reframe the “lack-to-be” of my subjectivity as the limit that marks the beginning of another world (Irigaray, *i love to you* 41), a world of shared vulnerability and mutual risk we build together.

Irigaray, Oliver and Shildrick argue that the narratives of possession and abjection on which contemporary theories of subjec(tiva)tion pivot both fail to capture the material, phenomenal complexity of intersubjective relations (Shildrick 103) and, as a result, compromise our ethical responsibility to our others. Reclaiming the communicative, identity-forming power of touch is central to their work, as is theorizing the physical shape of the implied tactile relation. The resulting intercorporeal architectonic, based on the image of two bodies connected in their individuality, differentiated yet touching, serves as a physical model for “being-in-the-world-with-others” (Shildrick 108). Raine, trapped in Cath’s room at the moment of Cath’s failing breath, cannot find a way to be with her mother as her mother’s world ends because she cannot bring herself to take the risks implied by Cath’s ending, by her new, monstrous corporeality. But, as the above writers would teach us, fear of touching the “strange” is not what marks us as subjects; it

is precisely what prevents us from *becoming* fully-fledged, ethically motivated subjects. (Inter)corporeality is the third term Irigaray, Oliver and Shildrick insert between “subject” and “object,” “self” and “other,” “same” and “different”: it represents the radical alterity of physical bodies in space, so easily elided by theories of identity based on visual recognition and psychic assimilation, and it positions us all in relation to a set of shared obligations that are the glue that connects us in the space-between. For these writers, as well as for others working under the banner I have here termed “radical humanism,”^v subjectivity cannot be acquired outside the encounter with our collective physical alterity, with the material fact of our different experiences of a shared embodiment, and with the responsibility to one another that shared embodiment, our mutual yet non-identical corporeality, occasions. When Raine fails to reach for her mother, she fails fully to embody her own self – and she sets the stage for a series of catastrophic failures that will culminate in a fire, a house destroyed, a *literal* gulf ripped through the fabric of a street that had believed itself a community.

Complicating the Material

As an intervention into the failure, and the promise, of an intercorporeal ethics, *Habitat* signifies foremost in the material. This marks something of a departure for Thompson; critics, too, have up to now been reluctant to engage too deeply with the material dimension of her plays. Although a social agon is central to her work, as many have pointed out, even those committed to exploring that agon tend finally toward psychoanalytic or spiritualized readings. Jennifer Harvie makes a salient comment in connection with her own choice to read the early plays through the lens of psychic

fantasy: her reading, she explains, will endeavor to treat the “reality” of the plays “as something more than the purely material and obvious” (252). The “material,” however, is neither “obvious” nor (as Shildrick would remind us) in any way “pure,” and the genius of *Habitat*, as Cath and Raine’s opening two-hander aptly demonstrates, lies in its ability to pose material relations, the stakes of our “being-in-the-world-with-others,” precisely as a function of the vexed relationship of the material to the psychic (the Real to the Imaginary), a relationship determined in large part by choices we make based upon beliefs we have internalized about what constitutes proper subject-object relations. Just as in the seminal Thompson works of the 1980s, characters in *Habitat* patrol their borders and organize raids on one another’s – only, this time, the borders are made of wood and stone, and the raids are a contravention of private property underwritten by legal guarantees. The play deftly dramatizes how this normalized intersubjective landscape manifests itself in the annexation, the privatization, and the commercialization of communal, lived spaces, and, now that space is an actual, rather than merely a latent, character in the drama, the effects our psychical impulses have on the shape of our lived experience can be explored in depth, and alternative relations may be modeled in that very space as a shift in the physical dynamic between characters.

For every character in this play private property operates as a manifestation of private trauma. The irate owners guard their land from the encroachment of the psycho-social underclass: everyone worries that the children at Lewis’s home are messed up, perhaps even criminals, but they seem most dangerous in their lack of boundary-sense. Margaret protects her home as a storehouse of memories of her late husband, Ian; when Raine barges in, she assumes Raine is a thief but appears not to fear her. Instead, she

transforms Raine into a mirror of her loss, appropriating Raine's memories of Cath as a version of her memories of Ian and her beliefs about motherhood (18-19). (Raine subsequently becomes a favourite of Margaret's because Margaret sees Raine as, at bottom, middle class: Raine isn't someone she needs to get to know, to encounter as different, because she is already a child Margaret could *imagine* rearing [36-7]). Sparkle and Lewis, meanwhile, regard the private homes on Mapleview Lanes as theirs for the taking, acting out long buried slights and wrongs they have felt at the hands of the upper classes (9-11; 29). There seems to be no room between "mine" and "yours" in this play: "ours" is a choice refused at each turn.

Yet it is not a choice unimaginable, and to find its first potent trace we need to return to Cath's hospital room at the top of act one. Raine, raging against the encroaching darkness, invokes a long-ago trauma, and the realist frame of the scene is suddenly broken as Cath and Raine fall into a trance to rehearse their shared memory of Raine's infant illness, "[t]hat Sunday night when I was a baby [...] when you tried to breast feed [and] I fell off your breast!" (6). Cath "*takes RAINE in her arms*" (6) as the narrative shifts to another hospital, where Raine is promptly torn from her mother's body, against which she has been lying, "breathing with" Cath and yet "dream[ing]" she is "drowning" (7). The intimacy and protection of the intercorporeal bond of mother and child is both shaken and made more acute by Raine's fall and Cath's late recognition of her illness, but when the two reach the hospital it is completely severed, their space of common breath and tactile comfort replaced by "nurses with gowns and with masks" and "all the needles inside [Raine] for breathing" (7). This is the moment when the communicative value of Cath and Raine's shared touch is lost, when the mutual vulnerability of two female

bodies engaged in the reciprocal acts of breathing and nursing morphs into literal as well as figurative isolation, into life made sustainable only by the invasion of foreign objects, gloved hands, a refusal of intimacy masquerading as a modern standard of care. The doctors and nurses will not permit Cath to hold or breastfeed Raine because she might “lose” her (7): fearing the risk of contact with another’s vulnerable body they protect Raine from her mother for her “own good,” thus precipitating her supposedly necessary movement out of early childhood intercorporeal embodiment and into a mature separation marked as normative, desirable, healthy.^{vi}

The centrality of the mother-child bond as well as its deep ambivalence in Thompson’s work has recently been remarked upon by Ric Knowles; it is often read as psychically significant (Nunn), or as broadly redemptive (Nunn, Toles, Harvie), but it is rarely engaged in its materiality. This critical elision is worth remarking, because the essential disruption of the physical bond between mother and child is something we assume as axiomatic in the West, something we remark upon frequently enough but rarely engage at depth.^{vii} I am not arguing here for greater mother-child tactility; I am not a clinician and am not equipped to present evidence for or against such an argument. I am, however, suggesting that *Habitat* reflects, via its rough severing of Cath’s physical bond with Raine at the top of the play and in the authoritative environment of a hospital, the sterile manner in which we, as a culture, choose to normalize our relations with our others and force the resulting divisions to assume prominence everywhere. The assumption that the isolation of the mirror-stage moment is either typical or inevitable is just that – an assumption. We *choose* to value isolation over connection; we are the authors of our own break with others, of the transformation of physical interdependence

into something dirty, disgusting, hygienically as well as psychically unacceptable.

Brecht-like, the disconnect of Cath and Raine's depressing opening exchange embeds its opposite: they perhaps cannot regain their lost intimacy, but their re-enactment suggests with telling force that the loss is by no means inevitable.

If the first scene of act one demonstrates the loss of an intimacy we can (perhaps) only dream of beyond early infancy, the final scene of act one models a radical connectivity in terms accessible to all post-natal humans. Echoing Cath and Raine, Lewis recounts the story of rushing his young brother to the hospital, carrying him miles through a winter snowstorm in his coat (46-7). He and his brother share the breath inside their fabric cocoon; his body keeps William's warm, alive, while William's warmth and breath remind Lewis that his numb legs have a purpose, an obligation. Their two bodies are quite literally conjoined, made stronger by their mutual incorporation for the duration of their difficult journey. Then, as Cath is from Raine, Lewis is severed from William when they arrive at the hospital; the nurses and doctors regard Lewis's presence as a distasteful liability and throw him out while they care for William (47). Nevertheless, it is the space of the journey – the space of shared breath and warmth forged by skin against skin, inside Lewis's coat – that gives this scene its primary dramatic force, and that is designed, I would argue, to be a model for the recognition of mutual vulnerability and the obligation to mutual care Maplevue Lanes is unable to imagine for itself in the main body of the action.

Lewis, too, must share the blame for this lack of imagination: he ultimately turns his and William's story into a fetish narrative of personal oppression that makes it impossible for him to recognize the critical differences between that early experience and

the one in which he currently finds himself. The story is less his model than his mask: it distracts him from the individual needs of the children in his group home and makes it impossible for him to respect or appreciate the gestures of opening extended by Janet on behalf of the Mapleview owners at the top of act two. Acknowledging difference is an essential component of the space-between of radical humanism: only by acknowledging you in your specificity can I appreciate the nodes of connection between us; otherwise, I risk folding your experience into my own, cutting off your air.^{viii} For Lewis, difference is cruel and hateful, its valuation in any form heretical; his refusal to acknowledge the separate interests or individual needs of Janet, Margaret and the other owners ensures, ironically, that the home will fail, that no shared space may be forged between them, no place made for the “we” that results from the encounter with others respected in their alterity (Irigaray, *i love to you* 104).

No one can hope to change the world without changing themselves.
(Harvey 235)

Lewis is a deeply unsympathetic figure, not only because he may be a thief, but because he will not risk the “uncertainty” of “strange encounter” (Shildrick 7) that lies at the core of his own ethical investment in the group home. Lewis makes space for nobody; instead, he assimilates both friend and foe into his pre-existing worldview: all owners are bastards, and all his kids are a version of William. His refusal of encounter is, of course, mirrored in the similar refusal of most of the Mapleview owners, and forces us to wonder where, in (post)modern (sub)urban communities, we might generate a genuine relation of care, build a space-between that is more than a memory. The structure of middle-class

residential neighbourhoods mirrors relations known to us through binary theories of subjectivity: they are “privatopias” (Harvey 239), fortresses of individualism knit together by our only reluctant acknowledgement of group interdependence. Yet, as Raine emerges to close the play, she suggests that such disconnection may be shifted by our simple willingness to make a different choice, to re-imagine our shared space under a different set of assumptions. Her final monologue recalls the electrified space of shared embodiment proposed by Shildrick, Oliver and Irigaray, as she transforms her traumatic memory of separation from her mother into the possibility of a lived, life-long, intercorporeal connection between her and her others, her past and her future. Raine dreams Cath into air, into the breath she constantly takes from and gives back to the world around her – into the element that, as Irigaray writes, both separates and connects us, makes in the flux and flow of its currents “a space for us between us” (*i love to you* 148). If *Habitat*’s first scene chronicles breath’s failed exchange, foreshadowing the suffocation of its title’s promise, this final scene offers its most promising argument: that the air between bodies is not a distance to be revered or eliminated; it is exactly what gives us life.

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ⁱ The “Real” is Lacan’s cryptic term for the inaccessible space beyond/before both Imaginary and Symbolic relations where those conditions Symbolic relations are meant to mask – the absolute failure of our desire to achieve its object, the finitude of our lack-in-being, isolation (from our others as from ourselves) as an essential condition of subjectivity – come glaringly to light. Characterized by nostalgia as well as loss, the Real is at once a utopia and a house of human horrors. My use of the term here is determinedly ironic; as I hope will shortly become clear, while I am influenced by and often in sympathy with Lacan’s teachings, I do not believe that the “reality” of our quotidian experience bears out his nightmarish vision of our founding isolation as a necessary condition of intersubjective relations. On the contrary: I believe our commitment as critics to the narrative of founding isolation is exactly what may prevent us from envisioning a new, more ethical psychical architecture.

ⁱⁱ Of the subject born in specular engagement with its imago, at an implied distance from itself.

ⁱⁱⁱ The “space-between,” although articulated through the writings of Bakhtin and in the context of his more general critique of generosity, is also central to Frank. See, for example, 114, 133, 140.

^{iv} There is, as Shildrick herself notes, a potential problem with the lionization of touch, particularly in relation to the vulnerable self, as an alternative to the often oppressive metaphysic of sight: not all touch is benign. Touch, too, can be deeply distancing, just as, in Oliver’s conception of sight, the visual becomes tactile, connective. My goal here is to draw attention to touch’s potential as an alternate sensory basis on which to theorize subjective experience; for the purposes of this argument I assume a touch that is willingly reciprocal.

^v Traces of this “radical” humanism – which could also be termed “posthumanism” (Shildrick 120), or perhaps ethical humanism – can of course be found in writings concurrent with or even predating humanism itself. I use the term in part to emphasize a break from both the tenets of modern humanism (the other is, of course, a version of the self), and the tenets of its poststructural critics (the self has an irritating but more or less irrevocable tendency to recognize its other as a version of itself). In our political moment, it seems more vital than ever to theorize alterity through other possible relational models. For a compelling example from contemporary performance theory, see Dolan.

^{vi} Arthur Frank’s recent *Renewal of Generosity* offers a useful assessment of the need for a standard of care that makes room for doctors and patients to relate to one another in their shared vulnerability; his wealth of anecdotal and literary evidence suggests that modern medicine continues to fail to treat the subject in the patient, preferring instead to objectify the ill in an attempt to maintain a safe and “professional” distance.

^{vii} The current trend toward what the popular press has called “SUV strollers” makes an interesting example of this peculiar cultural blind spot. The strollers often come with

removable seats that transfer to the car and house and, as one friend of mine remarked recently, could permit you to take your baby out for the day and back again without ever having to touch her.

^{viii}“The power of a negative prevails between us. I recognize you goes hand in hand with: you are irreducible to me, just as I am to you. We may not be substituted for one another” (Irigaray, *i love to you* 103). Ironically, substitution is exactly what Lewis has in mind when he insists upon the children’s “right” to call Mapleview Lanes “their” neighbourhood (*Habitat 56*): he prefers the possessive “their” to the inclusive “our”, assuming that victory is a privileging of one group’s rights over the other’s, rather than the discovery of a middle ground where both might be accommodated.