Contemplating Suicide: Responding to the Life and Death of Ashley Smith

Laura Colleen Rooney

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Contemplating Suicide:
Responding to the Life and Death of Ashley Smith

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By

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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The thesis by

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entitled:

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Abstract:

This thesis explores Ashley Smith's experiences in the Canadian Correctional Facilities, and attempts to explore the ways in which her experiences were enframed by a heavily biopoliticized system. I demonstrate the ways in which, when traditional avenues of recourse failed, Ashley used her body and the objects in her seclusion cell as a means of communicating her dissatisfaction. Several theorists have thought about the intersection of made objects and selfhood — Hannah Arendt and Elaine Scarry among them — and I use these theorists, along with Julia Kristeva and Jacques Rancière, to consider that 'speech' can manifest itself in many different ways.

Keywords:
Ashley Smith, prison, speech, testimony, self injury, Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Rancière
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Introduction

This thesis aims to consider a case that has gained prominence over the past few years. Ashley Smith was a young woman who inhabited some 9 prisons and endured 17 interdepartmental transfers because of her ‘oppositional behaviour’. The stresses she endured - namely, solitary confinement for twenty three hours a day – left her feeling bored, lonely and destructive, and ultimately, suicidal. It is the products of her destructive activities that I wish to examine as I explore what creative communicative potential her violent acts had.

In the first chapter, I lay out the theoretical underpinnings that influenced the care and control of Ashley Smith. Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt are two thinkers of the way modernity has served to constrain and control the individual. I explore their affinities, their shared penchant for exploring the ways disciplinary controls we use to regulate populations. These thinkers can teach us something about the way the move to a labouring society, wherein we are caught up in thinking the human as a combination of scientifically measurable reactions that can be brought under control. This has mitigated our capacities for true political resistance, as Arendt claims in On Revolution. Thus our ersatz politicking has focused on ensuring that all individuals – especially those that can be pitied -- have their baseline needs met. Violence, Arendt tells us, is pre political, a means to an end. It is borne of a ‘frustration of action’ in modernity, and this notion will become useful to us as a conceptual tool in the following chapters to consider Ashley’s violent behaviour. In the second chapter I explore the truly frustrated actions of Ms. Smith – the ways in which she engaged with her body and the few objects in her seclusion cell to alleviate boredom demonstrate that there are other ways for individuals to resist the systematization that the biopolitical imposes on the individual.

In the second chapter, I aim to demonstrate the significance of made objects in the creation of meaning when speech fails. Bodies in pain, Arendt and countless others have argued, are apolitical. Pain leaves the viewer in an epistemological bind. As a viewer, one cannot fully understand the depth of another person’s pain. How are we to ensure that these previously unrepresentable bodies gain political agency? Throughout this chapter, I rely on a recent political event, the suicide of Ashley Smith. Smith was a
19 year old girl incarcerated in various correctional facilities across Canada for what began as minor and petty crimes, but soon escalated when she began assaulting prison guards and destructing her confinement cells, piece by piece. It is these destructive acts that I examine throughout this project. Her final action in this world was the making of a ligature that would lead to her untimely death.

Hannah Arendt is, at best, ambivalent about the relationship of the human body to political action, though she believes that human birth and the newness inherent in that is the source of all human potential. In a similar vein, Julia Kristeva suggests that the desire to control the body, particularly the female body, with its fluids and other ‘abject’ matter is the result of a deep rooted fear of the generative. The capacity to create, with its inherent unpredictability, is what renders certain bodies ‘out of bounds’. With this in mind, the second part that I would like to illuminate in this chapter is the political significance of Ashley Smith’s attempts at creation: what was she trying to say though her destructive acts? What expressions of life where her caretakers trying to thwart in their attempts at control?

I aim to make the argument that those who are barred from the polis by virtue of their relegation to the position of mere animal life, without the capacity to make political decisions, can best communicate suffering through the use of made objects. To further my line of thinking, I draw on Smith’s use of the objects in her cell to illustrate the significance of objects to preserve and demonstrate human plurality, even when speech is not an option. Essentially what I have attempted to do here is demonstrate that Arendt’s speaking subject need not be solely confined to the spoken word. Arendt, as I will note in the chapter, also places a high value on the shared world of things; the objects in our world become a part of what shapes our experiences, both private and political and as such, they too, can have communicative value.

In my final chapter, I aim to further my critique of the Arendtian speaking subject and continue meditating on the concept of new beginnings [who has the capacity to begin?] by the introduction of a third thinker of the speaking subject, Jacques Rancière. He is known primarily as a theorist of equality. This equality has a different connotation than standard definitions of equality, which rely on distributive theories of justice in order to bestow an artificial equality upon the peoples (May 2008: 5-7).
Rancière’s theories, it is commonly thought, run in contradistinction to Arendt’s. While Arendt distinguished between two kinds of tasks which served to create two different kinds of people, those who showed themselves in the political world, and those who were relegated to the tasks of labour, which prove to create an inward turn towards the necessities of life. This focus on bodily activity detracted from her vision of the political which Schapp (2006:3) refers to as Arendt’s ‘existential achievement of public appearance’. Rancière, in contrast, eschews this kind of elitist thinking that engages in a rigid public/private split. Assuming that some people are more and less capable of political action based on their social positioning, such as Arendt gestures towards, is deeply problematic for Rancière. He defines politics in a way that is perhaps more amenable to considering ‘small’ actions, such as the resistant behaviors of Ashley Smith, as having large scale consequences.

His definition of politics is untraditional, insofar as he perceives that true politics only occur in moments when ‘natural institutional practises’ are disrupted by the people ‘who have no part’ (Rancière 2001: 11). This has far reaching consequences for thinking about the ways in which we think through and apprehend lives of our ‘others’. While Arendt might say that politics is participation in common life, Ingram (2006: 237) goes on to observe that this is a starting point for Rancière: the struggle to participate in public life.

This depicts Arendt’s thought as promoting an elitism that bars certain people, particularly those who are in some way disenfranchised, from the shared world of the polis. This is indeed true, but if Schapp (2009/11) is correct in referring to the Arendtian political as an ‘existential achievement’, it is the resistance that will allow those who occupy the space of mere animal life to overcome it. ¹ With the turn to the biopolitical, ¹ Indeed, this kind of criticism of Arendt is not specifically Ranciérain. Badiou also gestures at this so-called Arendtian elite, by suggesting that the common in Arendtian common sense is limited to a very few specific people. He argues that the dispute about what is common is limited, despite the fact that Arendt is very specific about asserting that a plurality of opinions make up the common world. Badiou states that “And yet everyone knows from experience that this is inaccurate, and that there is no place for debating genuinely alternative opinions, which at best are subject to dispute (Badiou 2005: 18)”
managed life, this is indisputably true. However, I argue that for Arendt, we are obliged to remove ourselves from the realm of necessity, however momentarily, to show ourselves up in the world of appearances. What she cites as the ‘victory of the animal labourans’, or the victory of the realm of necessity, creates for the animal laborans a situation where “birth does not signal for animal laborans a capacity to act or start something new’ (O’Bryne 2010: 89) and this for Arendt is a deep problem. It is one of the precursors to a totalitarian state (Arendt 1952: 477). It is precursor to totalitarianism, because it promotes solitude (Arendt 1952: 477). This problem that the biopolitical creates is that it creates human kinds. People become, in Arendtian terms, what they are, rather than who they are.

Rancière, in his own way, talks about the ways in which individuals have become organized into groups and argues (to my mind, partially rightly) that Arendt continuously reaffirms the maintenance of these hierarchies. This, I care to suggest, is misguided because it relies on a particular kind of subject that Arendt eschewed. She had no use for identity linked political action, acknowledging that she was a Jew, indisputably, but this had nothing to do with her as a political person. Thus, the designation of certain groups as incapable is misguided; the animal laborans, caught up in tasks that erase individual specificity, is not inexorably tied to her identity, but can choose to make herself visible, as Ashley Smith did.

Bureaucracies such as the ones which controlled the actions of Ashley Smith’s caretakers place limits on individual action. I discuss this foreclosure of human possibility is relation to the Eichmann trials because I feel, along with Arendt, that both cases serve to demonstrate the costs of working to maintain consistency at the cost of human life.

The moments of politics for Rancière, too, are the products of human initiative, and cannot be made visible in the world where everything is systematized and purposeful. Ashley’s behaviours were excessive, in no way economically or socially productive, and often were entirely unprovoked. As I note in this chapter, many people argue that Arendtian action is merely a response to events that have already occurred, and thus, in actuality, it produces nothing new, but I would like to differ (Vatter 2006). I believe that Arendtian action, as she intended it, was a radically new experience, wherein individuals
were obliged to show themselves, and be the creators of something new. Indeed, whether Ashley Smith’s final actions in the Grand Valley Institution, represented a true ‘new’ moment in time is a subject matter that could warrant endless discussion. The findings of the ombudsman, the results of the pending lawsuit all could be put under a microscope and parsed for potential flaws, but I would suggest that the answer lies not in the product, but in the process. I suspect that while there was much political potential in her actions, the ways in which her actions were interpreted ensured that she would continue to live on in an ‘infinitely complex red tape existence’, even after her death (Arendt 1993:26)
Chapter One

"I am more than ever of the opinion that a respectable existence is possible today only on the fringes of society where one then runs the risk of starving or being stoned to death..." — from a letter to Karl Jaspers (Arendt 1993: 26)

The Arendtian political subject is deemed an ‘existential accomplishment’ (Schapp 2009/2011). In this chapter I hope to illuminate the ways in which the Arendtian political subject achieves this space, in hopes that this will allow me to demonstrate the compelling aspects of Arendt’s political phenomenology to help us consider the heavily biopoliticized bodies that occupy contemporary culture. In the epigraph, I quote Arendt as saying that ‘a respectable existence is possible today only on the fringes of society’ (Arendt 1993: 26), but this is scarcely continuously demonstrated throughout her corpus. As such, in this chapter, my objective is to explore the shifting meaning of revolution: what does it mean to engage in revolutionary activity today? Who is entitled to engage in such activities? What place does violence occupy in the process of creating change? Can the subject of the Arendtian political, a classically educated white man, ‘truly’ be extended to those on ‘the fringes’? My hesitant answer is yes. Examining the ways in which Arendt and Foucault, one of Arendt’s contemporaries, converge on the ways in which the state has served to place regulatory controls on both the individual and the population at large suggests to me that both offer us the opportunity to consider alternative ways to engage politically. Extending the invitation to act in revolutionary ways to a more diverse subset of the population is something we, as actors, can choose to do. After all, coming out of one’s hiding place from the labouring private is a ‘courageous act’ (Arendt 1958: 186) and we obliged to do so. The engagement with the labouring private is, after all, a choice; labourers need not become one with their choice of employment. The problem is not the employment, per se, it is the fact that, in modernity, we reduce the ‘who’ of the individual to ‘what’ they are. As I will illustrate in chapter three with my discussion of Eichmann in Jerusalem, is that career begins to define the individual and constrain the choices that they have (cf. Arendt EJ: 1963; Robin 2007). While this may not be the most biblical interpretation of Arendt, it also serves to
bring those ‘on the fringes’ into the realm of consideration. With this in mind, I would like to move forward, bringing the reader to a discussion of the Arendtian political subject as it is traditionally understood, looking then at Arendtian subject as a participant in modern revolution and the role violence plays within revolutionary activities. Lastly, I will begin to weave violence’s significance in the modern biopolitical state through the eyes of Arendt and another thinker of bodies in modernity, the work of Michel Foucault. This will provide the grounds to examine a case study which I bring into appearance in my second chapter, that of Ashley Smith, a 19 year old girl who committed suicide while she was incarcerated at the Grand Valley Institution for Women on October 19th 2007.

The Arendtian Political

Throughout the work of Arendt, we are continuously given the impression that what we, in modern times, associate with the political is misguided at best. She disparages the realm of labour, or the ‘social’, throughout her work. She states that “[political] parties have long since denigrated into mass movements which operate outside of parliament and have invaded the private and social domains of family life, education and cultural concerns (Arendt 1963: 274).” This is in contradistinction to most traditional liberal understandings of politics. What I find compelling and thus useful is her focus on individual specificity. The Arendtian political subject is obligated to show one’s distinctness in the world of appearances. That being said, charges of elitism are almost always present on scholarship on Arendt. Canovan notes that “the brilliant sunlit world of the free and equal citizens in the agora [is paid for] by the dark, miserable degraded lives of the slaves (Canovan 1978: 6).” But, as Canovan tells us, even the undesirable activity of the labourers can turn into political action, as Arendt herself cites modern labour movements (“a rising up”) as being a form of political action (Canovan 1978: 6). While the claims of an Arendtian elite are well founded, and substantiated in many interesting ways, I wish to point out, following Fulfer (2010), that if we simply follow threads in her work, rather than ascribe to her entire political project as if it were the way, the truth and the life, we can develop a rich understanding of individual subjectivity and how one is morally obliged to show oneself in the ‘world of
appearances’. This emphasis on individual specificity, by and large a reaction to the horrors of the ‘amorphous horde’ that totalitarianism creates, helps us to understand and know individuals and events without a previously acquired schema. As Kristeva (2008) (among countless others) has noted, Arendt is preoccupied with the world of appearances -- we organize things through sensory input and make sense of them in that way. For Arendt, our ‘singularity is manifest through narration’, Kristeva (2008: 358) tells us.

What is, I think, the compelling and useful part of Arendt’s scholarship is her emphasis on the significance of human plurality, which I only feel is truly useful when one rids oneself of her preconceived understanding that not everyone can participate in the work of the polis. Individuals, we are told, have a distinctness, which speech and action reveal (Arendt 1958: 176). If one wanted to remain faithful to Arendt to the letter, we would hold that only certain people (classically educated, not women or slaves)’s specificity mattered, but this needent be the case. Considering ‘individual specificity’ while holding that only certain individuals can show themselves in the world of appearances seems contradictory, especially since she argues elsewhere in the *Human Condition* that equality is the condition of all men. Whether or not individuals *choose* to participate in the public sphere is another matter altogether.

*The Significance of Revolution in Modern Times*

In her 1963 work, *On Revolution*, Arendt traces the shifting meaning of revolution. As the ‘theorist of beginnings’, it seems appropriate that she would devote some time to considering how we create change and thus, start something new. With this framework in mind, she explores what it means to engage in revolutionary activity. The notions of revolution, she argues, have shifted. The word ‘revolution’ gained its meaning in 1789, Arendt claims, when the word was used to describe social change that occurred separately from the notion of revolt, which insinuates a ‘turning back’ as opposed to a moving forward (Arendt 1963: 41). Modern revolution, was preoccupied with the attainment of liberation, a freedom from the constraints of necessity\(^2\). Prior to this shift,

\(^2\) The focus on liberation (from necessity), Arendt would tell us, is endemic of a society that privileges the physical lives of people rather than their higher level functions (capacity for speech / decision making). She
only the ‘self actualized’, those who were already capable of political action, engaged in revolutionary behaviours. But with a shift in attitude, revolutionary behaviours became a way of securing political agency, a way of attaining the good life: “Meanwhile; the revolution had changed its direction; it aimed no longer at freedom, the goal of the revolution had become the happiness of the people (Arendt 1963: 55)”. This focus on happiness essentially rendered all revolutionary activity a means to secure ‘liberation’ for everyone. Arendt notes that freedom was a founding principle of the Greek city states (Arendt 1963: 22) and this freedom was not linked to democracy, but rather to isonomy, which is the etymological heir of the Greek words “iso”, or equal and ‘nomos’ or law. This equality was born, we are told, “not because all men were created equal, but, on the contrary, because men were not equal and needed an artificial institution, the polis, which by virtue of its nomos would make them equal. Equality existed only in this specifically political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private citizens (Arendt 1963: 23).”

The modern conceptions of equality, in contrast, she argues, have recourse to a sense of god given naturality, and this poses a problem – inequalities are thus the product of social institutions, and are thus mutable in nature, rather than just being accepted as part of one’s given world. Without this ‘gratitude for everything that is given (Arendt 1993: 393)’, we are doomed to focus on liberation from necessity as opposed to the true activities of the polis. As Duarte (2005) explains, “Politics depends on the human faculty of opinion, our capacities to agree and disagree, so that what is mysteriously given to us by nature ceases to be politically decisive.” Following that line of thought, what we consider the goals of revolution has shifted. At one point, the notion of revolution had highly lofty freedom affirming goals: increased capacity for speech and the extension of the space of public appearance to formerly oppressed others, as opposed to a more rigourous adherence to the status quo. But, in its present state however, revolution has resigned itself to what Arendt would consider pre-political efforts: those of liberation from necessity. Rather than encouraging individuals to ‘act’, then, the language of revolution has shifted to a rhetoric of compassion where people feel obliged to help perceives this as the fodder for the development of totalitarian thinking, as the focus on the bare life of the polis renders individuals superfluous.
others. These compassionate gestures detract from what she has referred to elsewhere as the idealized political relationship, where ‘a sober and cool humaneness’ is maintained (Arendt 1970: 3-13\(^3\)). This sober friendship, the only kind of politicized relationship that Arendt advocated allows individuals to maintain the in-between necessary for productive dialogue. Without the maintenance of this in between, people turn into an “amorphous horde” (Arendt 1952: 325). The ‘warm fuzzies’ of compassion that identity politics promotes, merely obfuscate reality. Emotional outbursts serve to ‘conceal factual truth’ (Arendt 1993: 393) and have ‘disastrous consequences’ (Arendt 1993: 393) when displayed in public. Pity, the logical outcome of these outbursts is, unproductive because it has ‘just as much of a vested interest of the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in existence of the weak (Arendt OR 1963: 84)’. Secondly, pity, Arendt observes, can be enjoyed solely for its own sake, without the possibility of change. Pity lends itself to ‘boundless sentimentality (Arendt OR 1963: 85)’. The alternative to this, she suggests, as she has suggested elsewhere, is a relationship of solidarity. A relationship of solidarity is more desirable because it is more objective. In lieu of a sole focus on misfortune, solidarity can provide a more disinterested eye. Hierarchies are not maintained through this interest, as solidarity can ‘can inspire and guide action (Arendt OR 1963: 84).’ Compassion and pity, she argues, detract from individual specificity and by extension, the political possibilities of friendship. A system of justice that relies on the story of Cain who slew Abel, or in other words, where violence is used to create a beginning (Arendt OR 1963:31), she argues, will only lead to more wrongdoing in the end. The perpetrators of violence, in a ‘compassionate culture’, she argues, become evil. This serves to hierarchically organize the good and bad, producing a fertile ground for the development of hypocrisy. The contents of the human heart, for Arendt, are not meant for public display. In revealing one’s inner desires to the world, they become a potential topic of discussion. In discussion, they can become perverted, subject to scrutiny and questioned for accuracy, becoming suspect (Arendt OR 1963: 91).

\(^3\) She relegates love and family to the private sphere.
This raises some questions about Arendt’s perspective on the possibility of bearing witness and providing accurate testimony. In true political action, we are told, individuals make themselves seen and known by ‘acting in concert’ (Arendt 1958: 271). Thus, the sight and participation of others is of paramount importance in creating stories about events. For her, as Birmingham (2008) observes, we are in a world of appearance, where humanity exists in the plural. Thus, testimony is only truly possible when there are a plurality of witnesses. In my interpretation of Birmingham’s assessment of various facets of Arendt’s work, I think it is fair to say that truth-telling happens in aggregate; a plurality of witnesses telling the same story begets something resembling ‘the truth’.

In an article on Arendt’s relationship with Mary MacCarthy, Deborah Nelson reminds us yet again just how dedicated Arendt was to this ‘sober and cool’ mode of relating. Arendt, Nelson tells us, believed in facing the “cold hard facts” and that we must embrace “the discomfort of uncertainty and the anxiety of unpredictability (Nelson 1999: 89).” With a shift to modernity, we have attempted to bring the world and its inherent unpredictably under control. According to Nelson, this insulation came in many forms. “National belonging”, Nelson states (Nelson 1999: 89), “protected individuals against the loneliness and isolation of mass society. Ideological solidarity eliminated unpredictability by providing a coherent theory of experience and a shared narrative of the future.” In modernity, the direct engagement between the members of the polis and the state is mediated through the position of the expert. Placing experts in the position of “the subject supposed to know” leaves ‘out of account the average citizen’s capacity to act and to form his own opinion. […] Wherever knowing and doing have parted company, the space of freedom is lost (Arendt OR 1963: 268).”

On Revolution then, like the rest of her work, is left in a messy and conflicted space. In part because of the time at which her work was written and also because of her reliance on a well defined subject who precedes the constraints of the social world, I argue that Arendt is catapulted into a liminal space between recognizing the seeming impossibility of escaping the constraints of the social (hence the shift to liberation focused revolutionary activity) and longing for the time of the Greek city states when

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5 This, a key aspect of what Foucault would later refer to as the ‘biopolitical’, reduces the knowledge capacities of the average citizen to mere superfluity.
liberation was not from the constraints of necessity, but rather emphasized the desirability of showing up one’s ‘thisness’ (Kristeva 2008) in the world. The ability to emphasize this kind of specificity in present times is lost. Increases in population size (and the amount of people who legally, at least, count as citizens) make the sort of activity that Arendt praises an impossibility. What we can do now, she says, which serves as a mere substitute, is assign people to councils. The rhetoric surrounding the modern attitude towards the selection of councils, however, – precisely that of ‘let the oppressed speak for themselves’ -- is misguided, because people are wont for certain positions.

According to Arendt, not everyone is capable of or desires a position wherein they get the opportunity to speak (Arendt OR 1963: 278). Arendt tells us, the political purist that she is, that ‘the workers’ wish to run the factories themselves was a sign of the understandable, but politically irrelevant desire of individuals to rise into positions that up to then had been open only to the middle classes (Arendt OR1963: 278): ”The characteristics found in the ability to work in a factory, manage a factory are seldom the same as those required to hold a political position. It is a game of statistical chance that the same person could fill both these roles with low odds “(Arendt OR 1963: 278).

Revolution, Arendt tells us in the concluding pages of On Revolution, has failed. Its failure in modern times to begin something new is a mere symptom of a much larger problem, that of what Foucault would term the biopolitical. Fearful of accusations of elitism, Arendt attempts to the claim that the political elite (those capable of political action) is distinct from the social and cultural elite. The ones willing and interested in engaging in political activity ‘constitute themselves’ and are not chosen through a process. It would seem that Arendt’s political actors have an almost messianic quality: they are called to ensure “public happiness’ and take responsibility for “public business” because they have a “taste for public freedom and cannot be happy without it (Arendt OR 1963: 283).” This participation, this ‘equality’, is something that they became “committed to, and now were engaged in, a joint enterprise (Arendt OR1963: 282).”.

The political focus on necessity, she tells us, is futile. In her case study, the French Revolution, we are told that “the masses of the poor, this overwhelming majority of all men, whom the French Revolution called les malheureux, whom it transformed into les enragés, only to desert them and let them fall back into the state of les misérables (Arendt
Despite the fact that this base level liberation did not prove successful, we keep striving for it. Arendt tells us this is because it is ‘irresistible’ (Arendt OR 1963: 110), a way of making one’s dissatisfaction known and made public, violence has a particular efficacy. Pre-political violence has an intensity to it that politically sanctioned violence does not, we are told. Politically sanctioned violence is more controlled and less ‘terrifying’ (Arendt OR 1963: 110). Revolutions, we are told, are not formed when the polis is in stasis. Revolutions, however, are not the simple result of a governing body in disarray. The individuals committed to acting together and working towards a common goal are what will force the new into appearance (Arendt OR 1963: 112).

From this, we are given the impression that Arendt’s vision suggests that political activity is an activity of self-actualization. Securing the necessities of life, she acknowledges, has become a substitute for political action. This is a condition that she refers to as ‘national housekeeping (Arendt 1958: 29)’. Individuals are reduced to numbers. Their engagement with the world ceases to be plural and unique. Arendt calls this state of being the ‘animal laborans’, or animal who labours. As O’Bryne notes (2010: 89),

“Animality [the condition of the animal laborans] is a state of privation. According to such thinking an ox can replace any other ox. The birth of a calf is not an event because this new animal is not any way singular, which is to say that oxen have merely numerical plurality. As a result, birth does not signal for animal labourians a capacity to act or to start something new or to show who one is to one’s peers (O’Bryne 2010: 89)”

The advent of totalitarian regimes, wherein the plurality of men was homogenized and represented politically as if it were one man (Arendt 1952: 465-466) was terrifying to Arendt. That being said, there is always the possibility that despite the regimes’ attempts to squelch human plurality, the capacity that all humans have for beginning can rise above attempts at erasure. But this nascent capacity is a mere annoyance under totalitarianism, she claims (Arendt 1952: 466). The power of the ‘machine’ rises above the individual.

*The place of violence in modern revolution*
Violence, while sometimes justified, leads to the probability of a more violent world, Arendt tells us. Creativity and action are synonymous. There is an element of the natal inherent in violence, as it is a form of action where men act in concert (power can only exist, for Arendt, in concert with others) but this is often thwarted by the fact that violence often begets violence. She goes on to suggest that “[violence’s] present glorification is due to the severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world (Arendt RV 1963: 24).” Indeed, violence for Arendt, is pre-political, a means to an end. Arendt traces the links between violence, bodily necessity and creativity in her article “Reflections on Violence”, citing Sartre’s introduction to The Wretched of the Earth, wherein he observed that through acts of violence, man could “recreate” himself, making the “wretched of the earth” into “men”. Arendt goes on to observe that the notion of man as self made is the foundation of all ‘leftist humanism (Arendt 1963: 10).’ The intersection between violence, creativity and natality is what I would like to meditate on. Can violence truly beget something new, cultivate a space of public appearance? Arendt considers the fact that violence requires implements, and indeed suggests elsewhere that the

“animal laborans could be redeemed from its predicament of imprisonment in the ever-recurring cycle of the life process, of being forever subject to the necessity of labor and consumption, only through the mobilization of another human capacity, the capacity for making, fabricating, and producing of homo faber, who as a toolmaker not only eases the pain and trouble of laboring but also erects a world of durability. The redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication (Arendt 1958: 236)”. 

So indeed, it would seem that the act of making is the precursor to a life of speech and action. The activities of the homo faber, in ‘erecting a world of durability’ creates the ground for the true political activities, those of speech and action. This is consistent with the use of violence to achieve ends. Arendt states that “Since the end of human action, in contrast with the products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals (Arendt RV 1963:3)”. Thus, in engaging in violent acts as a means to effect change, we are irrevocably, and maybe in some cases, regretfully changing our worlds. While revolution creates ‘an exhilarating awareness of the human
capacity of beginning,’ the new beginnings created inevitably turn into the ideological fictions of tomorrow (Arendt OR 1963: 225).

While Hannah Arendt seems to believe that violence is apolitical, caught up in the realm of necessity, she also acknowledged that the use of implements was integral in the ‘making’ of ‘successful’ revolutions, observing that “The emergence of a new society was preceeded, but not caused, by violent outbreaks, which [according to Marx] can be likened to the labour pangs that precede, but of course do not cause, the event of organic birth. (Arendt RV 1963: 3). The conclusions that Arendt draws are that while violence can be a source of action, as I have mentioned earlier, the violence is unlikely to start something worthwhile.

As mentioned above, one of the elements of totalitarianism which Arendt decried throughout her corpus was the ways in which totalitarian regimes serve to squelch human plurality. Acknowledging that we have diverse populations, each with specific requirements and capacities, is essential to preserve what Arendt believes to be the sine qua non of the political, the moment of natality. Humans, she states, ‘have the potential to bring something new into the world. This is a fact of every human birth. As she stated in an interview with Gunther Gaus, ‘We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it, we never know’ (Arendt 1993: 21). The political subject in Arendt has an obligation to show oneself in the world, to communicate one’s specificity and to assert one’s opinion in the public domain. This obligation can only be actualized when one has achieved these baseline needs. The public realm, she states, “rises directly out of acting and speaking together (Arendt 1958: 191).” Indeed, she argues in an earlier work, the Origins of Totalitarianism, that it was the decline of this public space – the production of lonely, isolated individuals [the result of the turn to labour as a substitute for work. Craftsmanship has been lost in the turn to more automated processes (Arendt 1952: 474), creating individuals who no longer turn to the light of the public sphere to gain community with others.

*Arendt and Foucault: A Convergence?*
Arendt and Foucault, a scholar who also wished to consider the control that modernity has imposed on the individual, are not frequently married in academic scholarship. Duarte (2005) offers us a potential bridge between the two theorists, noting that there is a potential point of convergence between Arendt and Foucault. Arendt, he tells us, does not make her link between the problems in modernity she demonstrates in the Human Condition and earlier in the Origins of Totalitarianism clear. Indeed, this leaves much space for confusion to develop. “Naturalising the political”, Duarte (2005: 31) tells us, “threatens the political artifice of egalitarianism, without which no defence and validation of human freedom and dignity are possible.” Indeed, the biopolitical risk that the animal laborans, focused on nothing but the maintenance of life, poses is the ease by which his life is turned into that of the homo sacer, that which can be killed, but not sacrificed. In giving up one’s share in the common world, as an acting and speaking citizen, we risk being turned into the homo sacer. Foucault, Agamben, Heidegger, and Arendt alike discuss the loss of the human in modernity — this loss of individual humanity rendered death meaningless (Duarte 2005: 25). Foucault, in his discussion of the biopolitical, illuminates how, in making concerns of life, race, and the species the center of contemporary politics, we also give the sovereign state the ability to “make live and let die” (Duarte 2005:28).

The gulf between Foucault and Arendt, however, is fairly sizable. Arendt’s project leaves us with a command: we are implored to resist, to leave the realm of repetition and routine, in spite of all the impediments to political action under modernity. She longs for the days before mass movements (ie. the biopolitical) took hold, whereas Foucault is more neutral about the status of the body, in and outside of political life. The ways in which the Greeks engaged the body, necessity, and politics, choosing to maintain a separateness was important to Arendt; but for Foucault, the Greek engagement with the body was something neither desirable nor fearful. Foucault tells us that in recent

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6 The term homo sacer is brought to us by Giorgio Agamben, author of Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. The homo sacer is the sacred man, existing outside the law, that can be killed but not sacrificed; it is the individual who occupied the camps, her body no longer mattering to those in power.

7 The biopolitical is the incorporation of statistical measures, that serve to normalize the body into our contemporary political regime.

8 "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in
history, politics is not a performance, as the Greeks suggested. Now, “we are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage”. Instead, the stage has become all seeing and knowing, a panoptic machine (Foucault, 1975: 217).

In the History of Sexuality, volume I, Foucault illuminates the ways in which the body has become a locus of state power. Foucault seems to suggest a certain sort of interpellation, a way of seeing oneself reflected, in this process. He acknowledges that the discourses of liberation are entirely misguided: that there is a certain way in which each epoch creates a certain truth of “sex”, of the species: a way of seeing, a sort of epistemic certainty about how to treat the ‘body’ in question. As he states,

“the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted ‘sex’ itself as something desirable. And it is in this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected – the dark shimmer of sex (Foucault 1984: 157).”

For Foucault, when discourses become institutionalized, they become power-producing: a whole new way of seeing and doing in the world. This is ironic because the discourses of sexuality (and by extension, of disability) are intended to be “liberatory”, designed to free people of prior repression, but instead they just become ensconced as a way of seeing and get caught up in all the trappings of normative power structures. This is ironic, he says, because every time we see the opportunity, or indeed, the need for the “deployment” of sexuality we falsely believe that questions of liberation are at stake. While there might indeed be a need for liberation, he argues, the means by which we achieve that liberation are misguided. Discursive change does not lead to social change: the confessionals, the

question.” (Foucault 1984: 142) However, later in his work he began a project about the “care of the self”, and this cannot be ignored.
repression, the scientia sexualis: all served the same end goal. We keep striving for this libidinous moment that never comes. Sex, the body, life all become subsumed under a sort of invisible but very effective power (Foucault 1984: 86), that made the body, which had formerly been considered, following Aristotle, just a mere part of human life that had no political implications.

Individuals and their private lives became cases, according to Foucault. The physician, barer of all secrets and the decision making party concerning all things good and sacred, is required to treat each case with an unparalleled fascination. The intensity of the focus on the individual, however, leaves the state with a wide breadth of knowledge to draw from when choosing appropriate mechanisms of discipline and social control (Foucault 1974: 202). So even the romantic notion we find in Arendt about haecceitas (Kristeva 2008: 358) or the 'thisness' of every individual comes to serve a potentially biopolitical end.

This is precisely where the Arendtian notion of revolution, which I have previously illuminated, goes wrong. Arendt, I think, fantasizes about a state wherein individuals show themselves, make themselves and their opinions known to the wider public, whereas Foucault has no such notion of a properly formed subject that can participate in public life once she or he is freed from the constraints of the social. That being said, Foucault's project is a genealogical one. His objective is to trace the shape shifting of social behaviours over time. And indeed, the project of biopower shifted to become more Arendtian in time, with a focus on the (almost totalitarian) regulation of mass populations. The move towards data collection, the regulation of populations via statistical methods was popular with the Nazi regime and continues to be so – if not more so – in contemporary times. In Society Must Be Defended, Foucault states that the disciplinary technique of managing bodies has shifted to a focus on the man as biological being, a member of a species. “The new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness and so on (Foucault 1997: 242). The biopolitical regulation of bodies en masse, as Agamben (1998 as cited in Duarte 2005) argued, made totalitarian regimes possible. His rationale, like Arendt’s, is
that with the development of the individual as species, mass eradications would have been impossible. Speciesism is a form of massification, after all, something that Arendt also emphasizes throughout The Origins of Totalitarianism. A turn to more nationalist discourses, a 'tribal nationalism' in Germany, cemented already fairly well developed distinctions between self and other (Arendt 1952: 241). Thus, the Jewish people became a source of threat to the German population in their position as an 'other species'. The Jews, it was thought, suffered from an 'innate devilishness' that led them to be more successful than their uncorrupt German competitors (1952: 241-242).

This notion of mass populations is also seen elsewhere in the Arendtian corpus, most notably in The Human Condition. Pitkin (1997) in her work The Attack of the Blob does an excellent job at demonstrating the development of Arendt’s thinking of society as a ‘blob’ intent on absorbing individuals’ specificity. In the reliance on adherence to social norms we “construe not one’s options, but one’s capacities too narrowly (Pitkin 1997: 182) and this translates into “actual opportunities for politics missed, denied or avoided (Pitkin 1997: 182).” Arendt herself takes up the concept of mass most often in Origins of Totalitarianism, telling us that “the masses grew out of the fragments of society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships (Arendt 1952: 317)” She tells us that even the intellectual elite is drawn to the thoughtless repetition of the mass movements, worn out from decades of atomization. This is precisely why she finds the ‘focus on the necessities of life’ characteristic of the social is so problematic: it promotes an ‘inward turn’ wherein people no longer have to give real thought to the decisions they make.

The social, for Foucault, is what constitutes the individual. The way I think about Foucauldian subjection is that it is like a feedback loop. The individual perceives herself through the eyes of another and is surveilled, not by one individual in particular, but by the culture at large. This is different from the population focused project of biopower, and is known as disciplinary power. This disciplinary power functions as a means of controlling the individual, whereas biopower functions more at the level of the
population. Arendt also touches on this, but seems to suggest that this disciplinary power can be escaped: “Society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules all of which tend to normalize its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement (Arendt 1958: 40)”. In the light of the public life of Greek times, she tells us, there was a public life where people felt connected. Gordon (2002: 136) tells us that the Arendtian conception of freedom is inextricably linked to Heidegger’s conception of freedom, which exists independently of a framework of rights. Freedom for Heidegger, Gordon tells us, is a space “that being requires to disclose itself (Gordon 2002: 136)”. That being said, because of the disciplinary constraints, one is left wondering where the Foucauldian subject gains a sense of agency. As Arendtians, we are taught that agency is ours to be had; our disengagement with the political world is entirely our own doing. In our fixation with labour and the social, we are divorced from the true work of the political. We become subjects through the gazes of others, but the consequences of this gaze are not exclusively detrimental to the preservation of human freedom. Through this reciprocal gaze we are recognized as individuals with a specific contribution to make. Through these ‘bonding experiences’ we gain the ability to act in concert. The work of intimacy is the floating spectre in the work of Arendt; the political sphere is referred to as ‘a web of human relationships’ (Nelson 1999; Arendt 1958: 322). As Gordon notes, considering “visibility not only as an effect of power but also as the condition of its possibility”, such as Arendt might, is productive because it allows us to understand power as both disciplinary and world changing. I actually think Foucault might contend with this. I don’t think he sees resistance as an impossibility, so much as he sees the ways in which we talk of resistance and social change as being co-opted by dominant discourses. The homosexual, we are told, assures us of his naturality using the same language that was previously used to disqualify his ‘life choices’ (Foucault 1984: 110). We learn the limits of acceptability through the eyes of others, and are thus made malleable in this way. Thus the potential for anything ‘new’ in the Arendtian sense is foreclosed by the all-seeing eyes of imaginary others.

However, Foucauldian bodies are not the amorphous horde that Arendt argues becomes apparent in a shift to a more social existence. Indeed, the means of ‘correct
training’ for Foucault are highly specific and appear tailored to each specific individual. However, the end is the same: these disciplinary practises produce these highly disciplined bodies that are well equipped for socially sanctioned activities. At one point in history, Foucault tells us, the individual was not very interesting. The individual was seen as part of a much larger conglomerate of folks at one point – the ‘mass mentality’ -- but then it was realized that the individual could serve as a wellspring of information from which to develop individualized and highly specific controls, which I suspect Arendt would see as producing a mass mentality as well. Power, Arendt tells us, always exists in potential.

“Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. Because of this peculiarity, which power shares with all potentialities that can only be actualized but never fully materialized, power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either of numbers or means (Arendt 1958: 200).”

Thus, power exists – like testimony and indeed, all forms of Arendtian existence -- as a condition of plurality. She tells us somewhat wryly in Reflections on Violence that thousands can be kept at bay by an individual who is heralding a weapon, so the group of people creating ‘power’ need not be large or be wielding instruments (Arendt RV 1963: 26). But the main difference is that for Arendt there is no epistemological problem in trying to figure out exactly where power arises and thus, sites of resistance can be forged. Arendt, for example, was frequently reproached for accusing the Jews of complicity, an accusation which she asserts was not true. That being said, she informed one of her detractors that there was always a choice: to do nothing (Arendt 1993: 394). Because of the ambiguous way in which Foucault understands and localizes ‘power, however, avenues of recourse are somewhat impossible to pin down. It seems that, however, power is only invisible and amorphous when it is functioning as a disciplinary mechanism for the so-called “normals”.

Power, Prisons and Contemporary Disciplinary Power
Prisons, because they serve as a microcosmic example of way in which contemporary disciplinary society functions and aim to normalize their members, are a unique and compelling way in which to examine power relations (cf. Foucault 1979). In prisons, such as in the case of Ashley Smith that I will present in the second and third chapters, Foucault (1980: 210) tells us, we “witness power in its naked state.” Deleuze, in his exchange with Foucault delineates a potential line of resistance that Foucault, it seems, would advocate:

“Against this global policy of power, we initiate localised counter-responses, skirmishes, active and occasionally preventive defences. We have no need to totalise that which is invariably totalised on the side of power; if we were to move in this direction, it would mean restoring the representative forms of centralism and a hierarchical structure. We must set up lateral affiliations and an entire system of net-works and popular bases; and this is especially difficult... (Deleuze in Foucault 1980: 212)

In response, Foucault tells us that the question of resistance is futile until we know exactly what power is and where it resides. “Isn't this difficulty of finding adequate forms of struggle a result of the fact that we continue to ignore the problem of power? [...]Rather, it is because to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalised networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets, is the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power. If the discourse of inmates or prison doctors constitutes a form of struggle, it is because they confiscate, at least temporarily, the power to speak on prison conditions-at present, the exclusive property of prison administrators and their cronies in reform groups (Foucault 1980: 13).” For Foucault, then, possessing the capacities for resistance is temporary and always shape shifting. There are gaps or ruptures in what Rancière will later call the sensible, but these quickly become absorbed in what Foucault refers to as the ‘tactical polyvalence of discourses’ (Foucault 1984: 101). The formation of a reverse discourse ensures that groups will “demand that [their] legitimacy or naturality be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary using the same categories by which it was [...] disqualified (Foucault 1984: 101).” Arendt, in contrast, refers to our language acquisition as being a “second birth” wherein our natural existence is reinforced
in the eyes of the social. Birmingham tells us that Hannah Arendt’s conception of this first and second birth are inextricably linked. She points out that “to be born is to be given a name” (Birmingham 2006: 32-33 as cited in O’Bryne 2010: 92-94). This moment of naming however is important for us - not only as a disciplinary mechanism, but as a means of inserting ourselves into a common world.

On the importance of the common world, Arendt states, “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in between, relates and separates men at the same time (Arendt 1958: 52)”. Around objects like tables, the contributions of *homo faber*, we develop a common world which we can discuss. This serves as a disciplinary mechanism and a pleasant commonality. Thus for Arendt, it would seem only natural that individuals would seek redress using the same language by which they previously had been subordinated. If we are to be understood, she would say, we need to speak using the language of others; indeed, she mourns elsewhere that bodies are somehow cut off from the shared logos. “Pain, in other words, truly a borderline experience between life as "being among men" inter-homines esse) and death, is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all (Arendt 1958: 51).” This is a huge problem for Arendt as it makes certain kinds of experiences unworthy of attention.

This concern for the bodies that are pushed to the sidelines of culture is the next and indisputably most important aspect of this project. What I would like to consider is the significance of those bodies that refuse to be fully immersed by the absorbent material of the Blob (Pitkin 2000), impervious to the gaze of the panopticon. While Hannah Arendt seems to believe that violence is apolitical, caught up in the realm of necessity, she also acknowledged that the use of implements was integral in the ‘making’ of ‘successful’ revolutions, observing that “The emergence of a new society was preceded, but not caused, by violent outbreaks, which [according to Marx] can be likened to the labour pangs that precede, but of course do not cause, the event of organic birth. (Arendt RV 1963: 3). The conclusions that Arendt draws are that while violence can be a source of action, as I have mentioned earlier, the violence is unlikely to start something worthwhile.
In the next chapter, I will continue considering these concerns, drawing the reader's attention to the case of Ashley Smith, which will provide us with the fodder to continue our consideration of violence, necessity, and the capacity of humans to begin.

Chapter 2

Introduction: Ashley Smith

In the first chapter, I attempted to illuminate the uses of violence, however passive, in the making of modern revolution. Violence, Arendt tells us, is borne of a frustration of action in the modern world—'the continuation of politics by other means'—and this has deep implications for how we deal with conflicts of all kinds in modernity. I will explore one contemporary conflict that exposes the depth of our biopolitical being and one young girl's attempt to change that.

In so doing, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the case of Ashley Smith. Smith was a 19 year old woman who committed suicide while she was incarcerated in the Grand Valley Institution for Women on October 19th, 2007 in Kitchener, Ontario (Richard 2008). This event spurred a significant probe into the mental health services provided to this young incarcerated individual. Blame was thrown in various directions, and various speculations were made as to why Ashley Smith was left to die in her cell alone while prison guards watched. As the story goes, their hands were tied by a restrictive bureaucracy that instructed them that Ashley was to be left alone unless it was apparent that she had stopped breathing. This is, of course, difficult to discern and they received no training about how to tell if someone had truly obstructed their airway (UCCO 2008: 7-10). Ashley Smith was described throughout the literature
on her death as being “a threat to staff, other inmates, and, above all, to herself” (UCCO 2008:7).

There were several ways in which Ashley Smith is by no means alone; incarcerated individuals are 3.8 times more likely to commit suicide than those in a general population (Bouchard, Laishes, Moloughney: 2003). Because of the active role Ashley Smith’s parents have played in advocating for an inquiry into her death, it has become a media spectacle, her last moments recorded on tape and showcased on the fifth estate: “As long as she’s breathing, we don’t need to go in. “Yeah, okay.” “Call a nurse for a healthcare assessment ASAP.” “Their livelihood was threatened.” (Caloz and Gartner 2010)

Ashley Smith’s criminal career began at a young age. When she hit puberty she began a slow descent into criminal behaviours, first beginning with more minor criminal activities, smoking marijuana, shoplifting small objects; her first interaction with the justice system, the result of an assault she committed, which was shortly followed by a charge of causing a public disturbance. The last straw was a split second decision to throw a crab apple at a postal worker (Richard 2008: 17-18). Her life in the prison system, in programs both for youth and dangerous female offenders, was highly tumultuous. When a particular prison grew tired of Ashley Smith’s seemingly incessant resistant behaviours, resources exhausted, staff on stress leave, and they could no longer submit official documentation in regards to the disciplinary measures, they simply sent her to another facility. Measures such as solitary confinement used to control Ashley’s behaviour often went unreported for fear that it would make them ‘look bad’, according to the fifth estate (Caloz and Gartner 2010).

Ashley’s “incessant resistance” was met with an even stronger apparatus: that of the state. Throughout all of the literatures on her life in solitary confinement, we are informed of the countless ways in which she was brought under control. In the documentary, we bear witness to her immobilization in a restraint device known as a ‘wrap’, advertised as being ‘the safest body restraint system in the industry’, one testimonial saying that they ‘loved the big straps / Velcro combo’, as if it was an
enjoyable experience for both parties. Like Arendt notes, modern warfare was brought to us by a revolution in toolmaking, and these tools are used to instill fear and thus, subtly control their victims (Arendt RV 1963) These tools of bodily control are inextricably linked to the biopolitical regime, as they serve to comport the body in space as well as normalize the individual in question.

*Ashley Smith as biopolitical subject*

Foucault emphasises the shift in our thinking in regards to the individual. Once singular, individuals are now members of populations, and the characteristics that made them unique are effaced. Indeed, even critical academic literatures on these kinds of topics rely on notions of populations – the only academic article on Ashley Smith relies on her role as a young Aboriginal woman incarcerated in a larger correctional facility. While consideration of the over policing of aboriginal peoples is a real problem, worthy of endless reflection, this is not my objective here. My rationale for avoiding this discussion is relatively simple, though I feel oft overlooked in a culture that is preoccupied with the “whats” of who people are. In describing the difficulties faced by incarcerated aboriginal women qua their subject position as ‘aboriginal women’, the story we have to tell about these lives remains one dimensional, their singularity effaced. In other words, in looking at populations, we deprive these groups of ‘the permission to narrate’ (Said 1984) and thus lose the ability to construct stories about singular, individual bodies.

In this chapter, my aim is to examine Ashley Smith’s silenced and subjugated body. I aim to demonstrate that when speech fails, Ashley Smith found other ways of making her unhappiness epistemologically available, harnessing the capacity to begin that Arendt asserts is inherent in every human birth. Following Scarry (1985) and Doyle (2001), I explore Ashley’s often destructive intersection with the made world, and argue that the act of ‘making a ligature’ was a way of making her pain known. This offers an alternative understanding to counter the efficient and depersonalized way we understand the pains of the mentally ill under a biopolitical system. The argument that I aim to build

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10 http://www.saferestraints.com/testimonials.php
in this chapter is one about the significance of made objects to those who are in pain or otherwise cut off from the shared world. These small objects - a tampon string, a shard of glass, toilet paper - gain a currency when one is in seclusion. The ways in which we can communicate displeasure, we learn from Ashley, become innumerable when given these remnants of the "world of the living' and the solitude required for creativity.\(^{11}\)

**Epistemological Considerations**

Drawing from the work of Elaine Scarry and Julia Kristeva, as well as some of the critical literatures on unconventional coping mechanisms like self injury, I want to think specifically of the fact that Ashley Smith made a ligature, and argue that Ms. Smith was also attempting to make something of her own life, an attempt at communication where words failed her.

As an object of theoretical inquiry lives such as Ashley Smith’s tell us much about what Foucault called the “power in its naked state” that exists within the penitentiary system. How we know and understand the lives of the incarcerated as being individual and specific is inextricably linked to power. The Arendtian political, whose fantasies of participatory democracy rely on the complicity of the labouring classes to engage in the unsavoury and debased activities of managing life (Pitkin 2000) demonstrates this fact wholeheartedly, and seemingly without shame on Arendt’s part. Thus, lives that we consider worthy of narration are political decisions, right from the start (Ingram 2009/2011). To demonstrate, the fact that there is currently a dispute regarding whether videos depicting Ashley Smith strapped to a gurney while being forcibly injected with anti-psychotics is a ‘legitimate’ source of evidence in the inquest surrounding her death is a prime example of the ways in which some sources of knowledge get undermined in the legal process.\(^{12}\) And of course, the use of the term ‘incidences’ to describe events such as these makes these events seem coincidental and conveniently unprovoked in nature.

\(^{11}\) As a guard noted, "She was also bored out of her mind. She was constantly accumulating data. But you couldn’t let her out – she was impulsive and would inevitably create an incident. (UCCO: 10)"

\(^{12}\) http://www.therecord.com/print/article/532365
A Toronto Sun article tells us that ‘force against female inmates’ has increased by a margin of 140% over the past year, with a total of 311 uses of force recorded during 2009. A former cellmate of Ashley’s informs us that assaults during these events are fairly common. Given that one’s natural inclination is to fight back when being restrained, this leads to further problems. This side of the story, however, gets effaced in the attempt to psychiatrize, know and control the population in question. There is an elegant parallel to be drawn here between how the prisoner’s knowledge is erased in favour of that of the statistician (Foucault 2003: 30). As I have mentioned earlier, individuals who are perceived as having ‘special interests’ often have their knowledge questioned. We are trained to seek out unbiased knowers (Code 1987 in Alcoff and Potter 1992) and those with a ‘bias’ remain subjugated in the knowledge gathering process.

Additionally, numerous theorists, including Foucault himself, have discussed the role that this ‘subjugated knowledge’, such as the kind Smith’s cellmate articulated, comes to play in our culture. Foucault defines “subjugated knowledge” as follows: “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as non-conceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity (Foucault 2003: 7)” In the concluding lecture of Society must be Defended, we are told that of the more pernicious roles of the physician in the position of sovereign is that he possess the right to ‘make live or let die’. “When you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line a biopower, and racism is the indispensible precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed (Foucault 2003: 256).” This killing, however, need not be direct., “When I say killing, I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on “ (Foucault 2003: 256). The instructions given to the prison guards – not to enter Ashley Smith’s cell unless it was clear that she had stopped breathing are a prime example of this. Ashley Smith, however, was not made aware of this change in her care instructions,

allegedly telling an officer “I know what I’m doing,” [...] “You [staff] will always come in.” But this time, no one came in until it was too late. Traditional high security protocols (video cameras) that ensured 24/7 surveillance, allegedly guaranteed to regulate and discipline had failed. The truly panoptic set up of her segregation cell did not serve its intended function as regulatory mechanism in this case. In fact, it may have exacerbated her behaviors, given that she knew she was always being watched and was thus afforded some ‘protection’. In the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers document on Ashley Smith, we are told how segregation can often be productive (UCCO 2008:29). Two problem inmates, we are told, can often feed into one another, exacerbating any underlying issues. I quote: “This is an important factor in this situation because girls like Ashley, who are motivated by social contact with her peers and who distrust those in authority or people who are involved in her care and custody, tend to make bonds with those around her. This represents a risk, especially when the person who is a peer is motivated by her own power and control issues (UCCO 2008: 29).”

This observation, that individuals, especially those deprived of human contact, are ‘motivated by social contact with their peers’ is not especially astute, especially considering the mass of literature cited in The Ashley Smith Report on the psychic cost of isolation (Richard 2008: 41).

Foucault, ever interested in space, emphasizes the importance of special partitioning in the development of the modern prison, where ‘each individual has his own place; and each place its individual’. The prison operators, not unlike those responsible for the ‘care’ of Ashley Smith, were told to “avoid distributions in groups, break up collective dispositions, analyze confused, massive or transient pluralities [...] its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able to supervise the conduct of each

16 Like inhabitants of Bentham’s ‘panoptic’ prison, Ashley knew very well that she could always be seen at any given point. However, the impact this had on her became minimal.
individual, to assess it, to judge it [...] a procedure therefore aimed at knowing, mastering and using... (Foucault 1979: 143)". Indeed, all of these mechanisms were at play in the care of Ashley Smith, though they were ineffective at controlling the remainder, the excesses of her resistance, try as they might to predict outcomes. Despite the fact that she was cut off from the larger group within the prison, and was under constant supervision, these mechanisms proved ineffectual in the end. Our epistemophiliac obsession with knowing the recesses of Ashley’s mind only developed when it was too late. If only, we are told, she had been properly diagnosed with a mental illness, the tragedy may have had a different outcome.

Questions of speech and political power -- ones that Arendt gestures towards and Foucault addresses directly -- are taken up by many scholars. In his unintentional commentary on subjugated knowledge, or “what we can hear” (Butler 2004: 1), Semprun (as cited Treize 2001: 59) states that “In short, you can always say everything. The “ineffable” you hear so much about is only an alibi. Or a sign of laziness. You can always say everything: language contains everything. . . . But can people hear everything, imagine everything? Will they be able to understand? Will they have the necessary patience, passion, compassion, and fortitude?... They’re speechless, unable to face me (Semprun in Treize 2001: 59).” Here, Semprun disputes the traditional understanding of the Holocaust as being something that defies language and expression. Rather, he argues that that all failures to understand or comprehend are due to the listener’s unwillingness to ‘hear everything, imagine everything’. Indeed, other well known theorists of trauma and testimony emphasize the importance of an empathetic ear in facilitating a recovery (cf. Brison 2001). Ashley Smith claimed repeatedly, both in her journal and in her statements to the courts, correctional workers that she was not understood.

“Ashley emphasizes the fact that contrary to popular belief, she was incapable of controlling her outbursts and behaviour although she was very conscious of their impact. A genuine sense of remorse is reflected throughout the affidavit and she argues that with time, she would be able to amend her wrongs and work towards, as she puts it, “get better and do something productive with my life (Richard 2008: 25).”

Hannah Arendt speaks of the permanence of the made object – ‘the objective of the work of work’ – without which we would have nothing to build our common world
around, because there would be no durability (Arendt 1958: 94). Elaine Scarry argues that
when the body is in pain, the individual is cut off from the world, a sentiment which
Arendt would contend with. In Ashley’s desire to ‘get better and do something more
productive with her life’ we can sympathize with the depth of the boredom and despair
she must have felt locked away in her seclusion cell. As a correctional officer noted,
“This girl was […] bored out of her mind. She was constantly accumulating data. Yet,
you couldn’t let her out. She was impulsive and would inevitably create an incident
(UCCO 9)”. This awareness that Ashley would ‘create an incident’ speaks volumes about
her desire for ‘productive activity’, a means of cathetizing her energies. Making ligatures
out of the resources she found in her small living space served as a psychic
accomplishment, a way of ‘getting high’ (UCCO: 10) that allowed her some temporary
escapism from her pain.

Some feel that pain can never be adequately conveyed in speech - the individual in pain
having a sense of certainty, however “bereft of the powers of self-description” (Scarry
1985) - while the viewer is left with a sense of doubt, as attempts to measure pain of both
the physical and mental variety – are by and large failures (Scarry 1985: Introduction).
Traditional epistemological approaches – ones that rely on a ‘disinterested knower’ fail
at answering questions that engage individual subjectivity. In a traditional ‘S knows that
P” framework – the benchmark of traditional epistemology -- where ‘S” is exchangeable
and can be replaced by any ‘knower’, that facts are objective and can be seen – the visual
becomes a language (Foucault 1963) . These ideas have been critiqued by many critical
theorists ( cf. Latour and Woolgar 1979). Feminist scholars are also particularly
preoccupied with the shifting position of the knower, and what ‘epistemic location’ can
teach a person about the world. For Arendt, perspective is essential. We are all imbued
with perspectives and this provides the stuff of public discourse. For Arendt, there would
be no such thing as a ‘disqualifying and polluting bias’ because we live in a world of
appearance where things appear to individuals qua individuals. Objectivity, then, is
inextricably linked to the individual’s subjectivity (Arendt 1975: 46). Thinking is a
solitary activity, a time devoted to making judgements about good worldly conduct.
These private thoughts can then become the stuff of public discourse should the
individual choose to bring these thoughts into the world of appearances. Thus, the status
of knowledge, as I have mentioned before, occurs in aggregate (Birmingham 2008). Our subjectivities come with inherent biases.

Because she is focused on lived experience, Hannah Arendt is not well suited to consider questions of knowledge, objectivity and truth. These questions are better handled by other individuals. To better understand how knowledge intersects with relations of power, I will briefly have recourse to some of the rich work done in feminist epistemology. Some scholars such as Harding (1993) argue that those in the most oppressed of positions have the most accurate perceptions of reality, and that people in positions of power have their insight clouded by their social position, because it is advantageous to those in powerful positions to be ignorant of the conditions of less fortunate others. Indeed, due to the power relations inherent in carceral facilities, there is almost a sense of wilful ignorance and a refusal by people in a caretaking role to connect to the individual in pain. Lorraine Code in her 1987 essay, “Taking Subjectivity into Account”, discusses the problems inherent in traditional epistemological approaches. In traditional epistemology, she states, "Knowers are detached, neutral spectators and the objects of knowledge are separate from them; they are inert items in the knowledge gathering process (Code in Alcoff and Potter 1995: 17)". Scientists, she notes, use that traditional epistemology in ways that serve to further political agendas, that our way of seeing is not neutral. Donna Haraway in her polemic 1988 essay, “Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, emphasizes the power relations inherent in questions of scientific authority in a much stronger — and seemingly more fitting way: as “The imagined "we" [oppressed others] are the embodied others, who are not allowed not to have a body, a finite point of view, and so an inevitably disqualifying and polluting bias (Haraway 1989:575)"

The connection between knowledge and embodiment is crucial here. Haraway acknowledges that those who are connected to their body in some way, be it through gender, ability, political affiliation are automatically disqualified from the gates of the scientific community. She emphasizes just how powerful vision is in the decision making practises of scientists by referring to their sight as being “a technological feast” appropriately enough given that Ashley Smith was continuously monitored by a surveillance camera. The gaze for Haraway is something that penetrates and claims to be
all seeing, 'the eye that fucks the world' (Haraway 1988: 582-583). Ashley, also not unawares of the power of vision, began to store useful ligature-making items in her vaginal cavity. An employee of Grand Valley informs us that "If someone hides something in their vaginal cavity they could have that there for a very long period of time and a very large amount. That's probably something most people don't understand is the amount of items people can keep in the area." The vagina, then, became the final frontier, the last site where Ashley could store these all important objects and ensure that they were unlikely to be seen. While the advent of new reproductive technologies as well as long standing gynaecological practises do render the vagina an object of visual inquiry (cf. Haraway 1997), in Smith's situation, because of our standards of propriety – what is also known as the "human factor" in security systems – the vagina remained a secure housing unit for Ashley's remnants from the "world of the living".

Butler argues that the depths of our epistemological blindness, or our willingness not to see certain parts of human vulnerability, stems to our very apprehension of the human:

"The epistemological capacity to apprehend a life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life. In this way, the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or indeed, guard against injury or violence...The "frames" that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject. (Butler 2008: 3)."

What Butler is telling us here is that the frame which we use to interpret and categorize lives is too limited. We need, she tells us, a bodily ontology that recognizes the ways in which we are all subject to bodily necessity. After all, we are all capable of being put in vulnerable positions. Traditionally, an awareness of these vulnerable states sets off a very primary alarm system which encourages us to cast off social abnormalities. This tendency to cast off bodies that are out of bounds, as she suggests, places comfortable limits on the seeable and the knowable. Elsewhere, Butler argues that recognition and identification –

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19 The body scanners at airports are also capable of detecting objects in the vagina. Cf. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/16/business/16road.html?_r=2
both epistemological concerns on some level – are a function of seeing oneself reflected in the other (Butler 2004: 19-43). This is why at the level of epistemology, affirming different styles of life becomes important and a condition of political agency. 

Other bodies, identities, and processes of abjection

Kristeva elaborates on our tendency to ‘other’ bodies that are slightly different from our own clean and proper bodies. These bodies that are not entirely familiar but not different enough to be completely ‘othered’ exist in a space that is somewhere in between subject and object, are known as the ‘abject.’ The process of abjection, the state of being ‘cast off in order to live’, that Kristeva argues that we all go through in an effort to become fully enculturated, forces us to refuse what is otherwise very familiar (a nail clipping, a piece of hair, etc) in order to construct proper self / other boundaries. This also serves as a convenient epistemological blind to the fact that that we are all subject to bodily necessity, to varying degrees.

Disability, not unlike some other abject states, as some have noted (Davis 2006), is a transient condition. We are all capable of passing in and out of this state over the course of a lifetime21. Judith Butler suggests that corporeal vulnerability is the precondition for our engagement with the social world – that we are always, already bound to one another through the exposure that our bodies create: “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well (Butler 2004: 27).”

Arendt also acknowledges the incommunicability of bodily pain, arguing that being in a state of bodily pain forces us to ‘blot out all other experiences’ and thus disengage from the goings on in the world. Pain is entirely apolitical, and not worthy of public discourse for this reason. Being in pain, she would say, does not allow us to move beyond our given world, and thus, it does not make for the stuff of compelling discourse. Her relationship to the given world is an ambivalent one, the facets of her

20 http://www.andrewpatrick.ca/passwords/passwords.pdf
21 He also argues that because of the transient nature of disability and the fact that we all will pass through disabled states, this should lead to the dissolution of disability ‘identity politics’ and the beginning of ‘dismodernism’. But this is mostly irrelevant, and I think, kind of insulting.
identity are ‘physei’,

given, the politics of solidarity something to be dismissive of 

Acknowledging this, poses a problematic for thinking about the mentally ill (and
indeed, the incarcerated) through an Arendtian lens. While we have an obligation to claim
identities in so called ‘dark times’ (Arendt 1970 3-33), we should not, as a matter of
course, love abstractions. She states that, “You are quite right – I am not moved by love
of this sort and for two reasons: I have never in my life loved any people or collective –
neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or
anything of that sort. I indeed love only my friends and the only kind of love I know and
believe in is the love of persons. Secondly this “love of the Jews” would appear to me,
since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything
which I know is part and parcel of my own person…”(Arendt 1993: 392). Arendt
believes that identity politics do not constitute an adequate way of knowing human beings
in part because she believes that ‘belonging to a group is a natural condition…you belong
to some sort of group when you are born, always’ (Arendt 1994: 16-17). People, however,
come organized into interests, which they have ‘in common’ and this can be the
grounds for a friendship (Arendt 1970: 3-33), which is distinct from love. Love is
“entirely unworldly” because it ignores the ‘whats’, or outworldly belongings of an
individual, and instead attempts to get at the ‘who’ of the individual (Arendt 1958: 242).

However, these identities have become the whole of what we are in modernity. I
believe considering the relationship between identity (the what of who we are) and
individual subjectivity has deep implications for how I will choose to think about
Ashley Smith. While it is impossible to deny that I feel some deep investment in the
work in part because of my own experiences with mental illness, both in personal and
professional contexts, I believe it is also important that I do not valorize – or fetishize -
the role of the speaking mentally ill subject. Indeed, in much disability studies
scholarship, a discourse to which this thesis is indebted, there is a real sense of what Ian
Hacking refers to as being “against inevitability”, the hope that we can change our world
by making changes to our social structure, the longings and ‘if only’s...’ of the academic

22 As Judith Butler (2007) defines it, physei means “naturally constituted rather than part of any cultural
order.”
world. While in some ways, my thesis is tied up in this discourse also — I do believe that things can and should be changed, that the ways in which Ashley Smith was treated during her time in prison were reprehensible and in need of some serious examination. However, I wish to also be careful of making grand statements about the possibilities of change under our current political system.

Concerns of identity — understanding individuals’ ‘who’ by recourse to ‘what they are’ are part and parcel of considering mental illness. We organize individuals in a rigorous and deeply limiting set of diagnostic criteria, and sometimes in these efforts, we lose sight of the meanings of individual symptoms. With that in mind, I would like to move forward and discuss the ways in which Ashley Smith’s last act in the world, the taking of her own life, might be ‘framed’ or made meaningful.

Attempted suicide among young women, Gilligan and Manichoan (2006) argue, is an attempt to bring the ineffable into existence. It is a sign of simultaneous desperation and hope. Given that it is well known that few women are successful at committing suicide, despite the fact that they make more frequent attempts than their male counterparts, the ‘meanings’ behind their attempts are largely the result of a desire to be listened to. Admitting one’s desire to kill oneself can often be the only way to get attention. Violence has a certain cultural currency, and it is deemed a way to get a message across when language fails, and individuals learn to use this as a method of communication (Gilligan and Manichoan 2006). Doyle also describes this method in her discussion of the prisoners, who ‘turned their bodies inside out’ by using their fecal matter to turn their cells into anuses’ (Doyle 2001:186) to communicate their dissatisfaction and also put the bodies that the guards had once forcibly probed on display.

In traditional psychiatric discourse, the language of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, frames these cries for help (and acts of resistance) as being ‘manipulative,’ and a potentially clear sign of having a ‘borderline personality disorder’. Borderline Personality Disorder, we are told, is a disorder characterized by feelings of insecure attachment that manifest themselves in a sense of persistent feelings of emptiness, turbulent relationships often characterised by paranoid accusations, reactions

23 And hence political engagement
against perceived abandonment, and self mutilatory behaviour (DSM IV-TR: 301.83). The act of diagnosis, it seems, provides a means to ‘enframe’ the being in question, to circumscribe a particular boundary around an individual. This is the exact antithesis of the moment of natality of which Hannah Arendt speaks: the new beginning that is inherent in every human birth and every human speech act given in the world. The extent to which we are enframed, or interpellated as subjects is demonstrated in the sizable of internet communities as well as real life support groups dedicated to supporting those living with mental illnesses of various kinds. These kinds of imaginary identifications create expected outcomes behaviourally; indeed psychology is based on outcomes, predictions, statistical probabilities, which, of course, many have critiqued, including Arendt herself.

Similarly, the diagnostic criteria for such disorders and the subsequent explanations for such behaviors – “manipulation” – “attention-seeking” become reductive, As Failler (2008), quoting Peterson (1999) in the film Surface Damage reminds us, like many before her (cf. Alcoff 1992, Scarry 1988), there is an injustice in trying to explain away the pain of others. Peterson intonates over a screenshot of an avalanche: “When someone says, ‘Don’t cry or I’ll give you something to cry about,’ you must continue to cry as hard as you can…. [T]he injustice of the phrase which indicates your participation in your own pain is precisely why you must continue to cry (Peterson 1999 as quoted in Failler 2008: 24).”

I would like to have a moment of pause in regards the sentiment that acknowledging one’s own participation in their own pain is inherently offensive. As Arendt would say, to do and to suffer are two sides of the same coin (Arendt 1958: 190). Furthermore, she would suggest that we have no control over the ‘who’ that comes into the space of appearance, as it is the inevitable result of being and acting in this world. Given that Ashley began her affair with the state apparatus at 13, starting with minor school yard infractions, moving into her first brush with the law at 14 (Richard 2008: 15), it is fair to deduce that she became politicized at a young age. Undeniably, the various journal entries that made it into the ombudsman’s final report reveal how Ashley Smith

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24. MindFreedom is a good example both of the kinds of independent activism that arise and the way in which mental health support groups are formed on the internet. And of course, the Canadian Mental Health
‗saw‘ herself: as an albatross, a ‘sick’ person with little control over her behaviours. To illustrate, I quote from one of her journal entries where she expressed suicidal intent. “Somehow I have to let her [mother] know that none of this is her fault. I don’t know why I’m like I am but I know she didn’t do it to me. People say there is nothing wrong with me. Honestly I think they need to fuck off because they don’t know what goes on in my head (Richard 2008: 23)”. In any case, this has some relevance to how we consider the ways in which children become ‘enframed’ as biopolitical subjects before they can become politically active in a formal sense.

Arendt seems to suggest that in a turn to ‘national housekeeping’ as the ‘proper’ mode of being political, we no longer have politics, or the ability to act, in the true sense; people merely recognize themselves in these already made, pre-packaged, bio-political categories. While we all can and should have the capacity to make judgements about the ‘good’, even if ‘we were not there’ (Arendt 1989: 9925), the proper ways of living ones’ life, as Arendt noted in Eichmann in Jerusalem get annihilated in the sole focus on career, as it is ‘is not conducive to thinking’ (Robin 2007). Thus it could be argued, that despite the fact that we try to place limits on what people can do with their bodies, and have an already-prepared sense of what the ‘clean and proper body’ (Kristeva 1993:72) is and should look like, the specific characteristics make a body clean and proper are left undefined. While specific diagnostic criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders gestures at criteria for various mental illness, viewed as organic in nature, it does not provide us with a clinical picture of what a ‘mentally healthy’ person looks like. Indeed, even within critical theory, the construction of the ‘clean and proper’ body is ambiguous at best26: we gain a sense of what the proper body through what it is not: the menstruating body, indeed, the female body in its capacity for generation. Women, individuals who can allegedly ‘wreck the infinite,’ represent the uncontrollable and seemingly inseparable boundaries between people. As I have mentioned previously, bodies in pain have their boundaries, their inner worlds ‘unmade’ (Scarry 1988).

Association is probably awash with local support group resources.
25 It was common during the Eichmann trials, for example, to suggest that the average person was not capable of judging the atrocities committed in the camps, because ‘they were not there’. Arendt rallied against this sort of thinking.
26 Though people like Schmitt (1985:19-22) inform us that “The exception explains both the general and itself. And when one really wants to study the general, one need only look around for a real exception...”
Language fails us in describing these situations, and with that in mind, I would like to turn our attentions to the work on Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*.

Kristeva (1993) attempts to define where the ‘body out of bounds (Braziel and LeBesco 2001)’ begins and ends. It is the role of the symbolic, language, the ‘law of the father’ that creates “frustrations and prohibitions, [turning the body into] a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is a “binary logic”, a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say, while being the precondition of language, it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found (Kristeva 1993: 72)” Thus, bodies that cannot be framed within the symbolic, described in culturally sanctioned language are purely semiotic, having nothing but sign value. As Failler (2006) notes, the move towards self injury is one of breaking the (skin) boundary, and by extension, the boundary between self and other. Those who self injure, it is said, often blame their injuries on the individuals who have caused them emotional pain, and this, of course, is often seen to be manipulative. To demonstrate, Ashley Smith’s behaviour was characterized as such, as being ‘attention seeking’ and ‘difficult’, the guards told not to respond to her calls of distress unless ‘she was in direct danger of hurting herself’, *the fifth estate* documentary referring to her as being a ‘time bomb waiting to go off’ (Caloz and Gartner 2010). Kristeva argues that abjection stems from the uncontrollable fear of women’s generative powers. Because of Ashley’s seemingly infinite talent for destruction, itself a form of beginning, she was sequestered away. Secluded in a segregation cell, her capacity for generation was closed off. True to form, it seems that while Ashley was deprived of the objects that ‘make’ a life, though she was often very creative with the objects she was given. She made curtains and surveillance camera coverings out of the toilet paper she was given, something that resulted in limits being placed on the amount of toilet paper she could have (Richard 2008: 22). A complaint form written by Smith suggests that she was only given four squares of toilet paper; something that she refered to as being inhumane27. The act of “making” a ligature, I argue, along with the other objects Ashley attempted to ‘make use of’ in her time in

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27 http://multimedia.thestar.com/acrobat/43/7e/58fb2da94c5a8e9631e6d90cb5a0.pdf
correctional facilities across Canada, should be read as a desperate attempt made by Smith to make something of her life.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt refers to speech and action as being a 'performance' where we reveal ourselves. This revealing is in some way alien to us; however, as we are entirely unaware of how we make ourselves known in public space. Arendt states that one can avoid some elements of 'disclosure of the agent in speech and action' but not entirely, that one cannot control what comes into appearance with absolute assurance. This disclosure is “implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same way that he has and can dispose of his qualities... (Arendt 1958:179)”.

Disclosure is always a risk (Arendt 1958: 150), but it is one we must take if we want to be part of world. In the small spaces that psychiatric patients and prisoners inhabit, their worldly objects are taken away from them. One of the prisoners cited in Doyle (2006: 193) observed that it felt like parts of his ‘identity [were] being stripped away’ when he entered the prison, each of his worldly objects taken now locked away.

While much recent (and not so recent) literature exposes the limits of the proper body, very little has discussed exactly what the proper body, unfettered by the markers of impropriety, is. Indeed, while bodily pain in the Arendtian world is entirely apolitical because it is a purely embodied experience that cannot be shared: an experience that is on the borderline of ‘life between men’ and death (Arendt 1958: 51), I think that one could make a case that self mutilatory behavior is, indeed, an action in the Arendtian sense. Many have made the case that acts of self harm or threats of suicide are a replacement for speech when the actual spoken word cannot be heard; not only is pain language ‘destroying’ (Scarry 1985); it can also be language replacing. Gilligan and Manichoan28 state that “When their speaking voices are not heard or when they have no words to say what they feel and think, children and adolescents will often speak in the indirect discourse of symptoms, enacting or saying indirectly what they want and know (Gilligan

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28 Gilligan was a pioneer in the study of women’s psychological development. She devised a method of discourse analysis known as the ‘Listening Guide’, which relies on acts of listening rather than traditional methods of quantifying the research participants’ speech. Other works she is famous for include *In A Different Voice* and *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development.*
and Manichoan 2002: 322).” It is in these acts of listening to these symptoms that the

task of making and maintaining trust, and thus, the act of making ‘a relationship’ is

completed (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch in Camic, Rhodes, Yardley 2003).
When these moments fail to occur, suicidal gestures become “communicatively valuable”
(Gilligan and Manichoan 2002: 333). Violence, as we are well aware, has a certain
cultural currency. It is the ‘continuation of politics by other means’ as Clausewitz (cited
in Arendt RV 1963: 5) suggested was the function of war. Suicidal gestures are the ‘other
means’ of communicating one’s unhappiness. Elaine Scarry observes that the outcome of
wars relying on which party can ‘out-injure’ the other (Scarry 1988: 163). This, of course,
can manifest itself as self mutilation, and is not solely connected to suicidal acts—
Ashley Smith taking her life into her own hands to respond to her own life, since all other
attempts to do so proved inadequate.

Elaine Scarry’s 1988 work, The Body in Pain, attempts to consider the

phenomenological and political aspects of bodily pain. Her central questions surround
questions of agency and politics – the political productiveness of pain, what it is used for.
How are we to respond to these cries for help?

Pain, she argues, and especially the pain inflicted with ‘intentionality’ as in used
in torture and war, hinges on a language of agency; indeed, the victim of torture is in
some ways the arbiter of his own pain. If you confess, we will stop terrorizing you. But of

course, this is not the case; the objective of politicized terror and indeed war, is about
who can ‘out injure’. While it is indisputably true that there is an irreconcilable difference
between the pains that Ashley Smith experienced and that of the organized, and
systematized torture that criminals of war have undergone, I would argue that it is a
question of degree, not of kind. As Scarry notes (1988: 60), “Besides the initial fact of the
pain, all further elaborations...all these seem trivializations, a missing of the point, a
missing of the pain.” Despite our most valiant attempts at ‘understanding’ pain, we
necessarily fail.

Scarry, like Arendt, believes that empathy as the endpoint of politicizing suffering is a
misguided one. For Scarry, empathy is inconcrete and thus, politically insignificant.
Thus, the best way to express one’s solidarity with the sufferer is to provide them with a ‘
made object’. Made objects are, for Scarry, an extension of the human body and human
consciousness. Turning one’s pain into a worldly object gives “a materialized structure of a perception; it is sentient awareness materialized into a freestanding structure…” (Scarry 1988:290). Scarry tells us that “[t]he advantage of [made-object] over sympathetic expression is that once it is in existence, the diminution of the woman’s problem no longer matters on the goodwill of whatever other human being cohabits her world. She may have a compassionate mate; she may have an indifferent one; it is not impossible that she has one that wishes her ill (Scarry 1988: 291).”

Creating made objects also has the added advantage of being a world building activity. This activity takes the individual outside of the insular world of their own pain and into the shared world of others. Objects make human care and compassion concrete and hence, they provide something to ‘cling to’ in times of distress. Scarry illustrates this, using an example of an imprisoned woman in Chile ‘who clung passionately to a white linen handkerchief slipped to her from another country’ (Scarry 1988: 291).

In her journal, Ashley stated that she was not worth the clean socks that she might use to strangle herself: “No I don’t fucking deserve a new pair of socks. I will use the old dirty ugly ones (Richard 2008: 23).” This example demonstrates the significance and meaning we attribute to made objects, even in dire circumstances. Her last made object lead to her death – a ligature made out of her state supplied “nightgown”, an object that was surely not made with loving care by the hands of another human being whose life was inextricably linked to hers; it was a mere signifier of the ‘hand holding her down’ -- in some ways her suicide was master’s tool dismantling the master’s house.

Ashley Smith, because of her talent for making ‘something from nothing’29, was even deprived of such necessities as menstrual products. Ashley’s female body and its excretions were often the site of state control, as she was often deprived of menstrual products and antiperspirant (UCCO: 24; Sapers 2008).

This fear of feminine is, in part, the result the fear of ‘the generative capacity of women’ according to Kristeva (1993: 78). The capacity for generation was a skill Ashley had in spades, and this is what her caretakers most desperately wanted to squelch

29Or, more accurately, ligatures out of tampon strings and other materials that crossed her path.
out of her. Women’s capacity for reproduction, their ability to make something, is
intimidating to men, Kristeva claims. This is due to the relationship of dependency that
happens between mother and child; it undoes the logic of the self made and independent
man that is deemed culturally valuable (Kristeva 1993: 156 – 159).

The foreclosure of the potential for action, however, turns humanity into an
instrument. The ‘juridical person in man’ is completely obliterated through the process of
denying certain groups citizenship. We can see this reflected, however obtusely, in
recent debates about whether prisoners should be able to vote. As Arendt notes (1952:
443), “The real horror of the concentration camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if
they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if
they died, because terror enforces oblivion.” Thus, making that ligature out of her state
assigned nightgown, a remnant from ‘the world of the living’ gave her that potential to
act. Arguably, was the only avenue of recourse she had to ensure meaning was made out
of her pain. As Kristeva argues, the fear of the generative is what creates prohibitions; for
Kristeva this is inextricably linked to the maternal – abjecting the maternal allows the
individual to become incorporated into the symbolic order. To refuse to ‘kill off one’s
parents’ is entirely abject, because it is seen a refusal to be sucked into the fold of social
life (Kristeva 1993:108). The experience of abjection, Kristeva tells us, is inherently
traumatic because it forces us to remember that we are not, in fact, “detached and
autonomous” (Kristeva 1993: 1), and by extension, clean. These fleshy bodies “expose
us” to a barrage of contaminants: our own excretions and the excretions of others. “These
bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are [sic] what life withstands, hardly and not
without difficulty. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body
extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live,
until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the
limit—cadere, cadaver (Kristeva 1993: 3)”.

Following Kristeva’s theory of abjection as outlined in Powers of Horror, Jacob,
Gagnon, and Holmes (2009) illustrate that the mentally ill can often exist in a space of
abjection, even among those who provide care for them. The feelings of disgust and
intense vulnerability that accompanies encounters with the mentally ill are therapeutically

http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/clips/9561/
significant, for the nurse and patient alike. Without being cognizant of these feelings of extreme discomfort, we are told, the nurse can unconsciously defend herself from the uncontrollable and horrifying aspects of the patient’s psychic life. These encounters are horrifying as they remind us that “the proximity of a cadaver to a living body emphasizes the frailness of the latter, whose physical and psychological boundaries are thus violated by the former (Holmes 2006 as cited in Jacobs, Gagnon and Holmes 2009: 157)”. Under guises of professionalism, what Arlie Hochschild (1982) famously termed ‘emotion work’, nurses manage to control their emotions. This, however, can have disastrous consequences, as the nurses’ desire to protect their sense of being ‘uncontaminated’ often leaves the patient feeling as if they are dealing with a façade, which can serve to “[intensify] the perceived threat by nurses working with mentally ill offenders (Jacobs, Gagnon and Holmes 2009: 159).”

Prison, made objects and the capacity to begin

The “restrictive” ways of contending with mentally ill offenders, often violent, serve to annihilate the prisoners’ capacity to begin, to show themselves as capable of anything other than deviant behaviour. Jacobs, Gagnon and Holmes (2009) remind us that this is a testimony to our culture of control. Anne O’Byrne, in an analysis of human cloning and its purported implications for natality, wonders at the clones’ potential to ‘eliminate difference’ (O’Byrne 2010: 154). O’Byrne (2010: 154) cites Kristeva who asks “What can that [sexually anesthetised] individual invent that is new, surprising or evolving?” According to O’Byrne, the answer for Kristeva lies in ‘our capacity for desire’ (O’Byrne 2010: 154). It is our continued wanting, rather than how we were born, that ensures that we will continue to want, make and do. Following this, it can be argued that despite Ashley’s circumstances, however limiting, all potential for beginning, to be seen and known in new ways, was not foreclosed. Ashley, after all, caused damage to a presumably indestructible showerhead that had been retrofitted especially with her in mind (UCCO: 24-25).

31 Emotion work is, loosely, the degree of emotional regulation that workers in the service industry must employ to maintain the employer’s positive, marketable image. Think of jingles like “Service with a smile.”
However, we must acknowledge that under a totalitarian regime this capacity to begin is thwarted. Arendt (1952: 452) states that the concentration camps, perhaps like correctional facilities, functioned by making death anonymous, “robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life”. Referring to the concentration camps, Arendt states that, “In a sense, they took away the individual’s own death, proving that hence forth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he never really existed. (Arendt 1952: 452).” Here Arendt is making a claim—however inadvertent—about the significance of made objects in the world. Ashley Smith, too, had all of her made objects taken from her when she was incarcerated; and even more so as she began to ‘misbehave’.

Four months prior to her death, the administrators of the correctional facility where Ashley Smith was housed stopped retaining records regarding her care. This demonstrates not only the desire to shield themselves from inevitable accusations of misconduct but also to deny Smith’s existence as an individual. Indeed, not only can we see some elements of totalitarian governmental thinking within the correctional system, we can also see just how significant it is when the ‘things’ that matter are stripped away.

Scarry argues that in giving a made object to a person who is suffering, or to make an object (art, a narrative) from that suffering is to offer permanence to a state which is inherently shape shifting and cannot be made worldly. This is not unlike Arendt, who believed that the only truly worldly object was speech— and following that, the only truly political art was theatre, as “the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others (Arendt 1958: 188)”. Perhaps their two positions on the ‘made world’ are not completely incommensurable, indeed, it is around our material world that a shared world, for Arendt, is created, and this the subject of our speech.


33 “Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively “objective,” concerned with the
Kristeva acknowledges the sacrifices we make (the separation from mother, and by extension, the body) to become part of the symbolic order, and this is the material that is the fodder for the process of abjection. The abject exists as a regulator of culture: “There, abject and abjection are my safeguards, the primers of my culture. (Kristeva 1993: 2) Abjection is what we must “thrust off in order to live (PH: 1993: 2”).

Failler (2008) in the article “Narrative Skin Repair: Bearing Witness to Representations of Self Harm” discusses the problems that people have when viewing instances of self injury, even in a film. What was the reason, the ‘latent content’; she asks, behind the desire of much of the audience – presumably feminist academics with some investment in studies of the body, to leave, to be unable to bear witness to these ‘horrifying acts’ and demonstrations of bodily injury?

Failler endeavours to explore ‘what might be accomplished psychically’ (Failler 2008: 12) by acts of self mutilation and why it is so painful to bear witness to these events. She argues that the language that surrounds the act of self injury that focuses on the self inflicted aspect of the wounds serves to undermine any attempt at getting at the underlying problem. The language that we use to describe self injury serves to make the attempts at communication that self injury entails invisible. Not unlike Gilligan and Manichoian (2008), Failler believes that these gestures must be looked at in order to fully understand and engage with the pains these bodies are presenting. To answer the question of why it is impossibly hard to bear witness to self injury, Failler (2008) uses Esther Bick’s idea that there are psychic skin boundaries that develop as the child grows, that set the boundaries between self and other. The psychic skin boundary allows us to ‘feel held together by a self containing object’, and when this original psychic skin boundary is damaged, it is replaced with a stronger, tougher skin that is less porous and thus, less susceptible to injury. Our problems with witnessing acts of self harm are not because of the sight of the abjected bodily materials, she states. Rather, following Kaplan’s (2004 as cited in Failler 2008: 12) ideas about the effects of the trauma of others, being a spectator forces one to absorb, to incorporate the other’s trauma, not

34 Or the Arendtian common world. While I don’t think the notion of the symbolic order is exactly commensurate with the Arendtian common world, speech is the lynchpin of both, and thus for simplicity’s sake, a parallel can be drawn.
necessarily the result of empathetic identification, but in a way that reminds of us of our own trauma. This occurs even if the trauma the spectator has experienced is far removed from that shown on-screen, as it puts the viewer in a position of vulnerability: vulnerable to our own losses as well as the losses of others. Quoting Judith Butler (2006), Failler notes that “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something (Butler 2006:27 as cited in Failler 2008: 17)”. This sense of being undone is a compelling one. Ashley Smith was on some level reduced to bare animal life, undone, as it were, through the loss of these seemingly small but meaning saturated objects. Her suicide, the result of a ligature made out of what was maybe her only worldly object, her state supplied nightgown, was an effort to do something, to ensure that she was seen and known as an individual, rather than just by her “inmate number”. Throughout The Ashley Smith Report, the ombudsman’s examination of the way Canadian Correctional Services handled the case, we see snippets of Ashley Smith’s intersection with made objects. A journal entry written by Smith dated September 4th 2006 states that “Maybe I will use a brand new pair of socks. Fresh for me. No I don’t fucking deserve a new pair of socks. I will use the old dirty ugly ones. Ha Ha that kind of explains me. Dirty and ugly. Two peas in a pot (sic) (Richard 2008: 23)”. The idea that one has to be made worthy of a particular made object speaks to the significance of made objects for human happiness.

Judith Butler, in her 1993 work, Gender Trouble, speaks of the subversive nature of mimesis, particularly in the context of drag. She argues that drag serves to undermine notions of origin stories, and by extension, it serves to provide a commentary on the naturalness of gender.

Perhaps Ashley Smith was attempting to perform a similar action to the one accomplished in drag performances in her repeated attempts to strangle herself; these continuous attempts to ‘perform’ suicide obviously accomplished something for her psychically. Arendt states that “...the specific revelatory quality of action and speech [...] is so indissolvably tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can only be represented and reified only through a kind of repetition... (Arendt 1958: 187).” Since

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35 [another incarcerated individual cited in Doyle 2006 commented that “First they write down all the details of you, then they take all of your personal possessions and seal them up into a packet, then they take your clothes off you and put them in a numbered box, and finally, you end up standing there with just a
the [human] actors’ identities are intangible, and thus resist all attempts at reification, drama, performance is the only way of ‘getting at’ a who.

In her attempts at feigning a suicidal gesture, it could be reasonably assumed that she was seeking recognition: “When I used to try to hang myself I was just messing around trying to make them care and pay attention (Richard 2008: 23)” she was performing in an effort to get what she most desperately needed. Indeed, like studies such as “On Being Sane in Insane Places” (Rosenhan 1973) show us, mental illness an be simulated, and in these instances we are reminded that there is no perfect example of a mentally well individual; that we are all capable of simulating the ‘signs’ of mental illness and wellness. For Butler, ‘bodies are not beings, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its ‘interior’ signification on the surface? (Butler 1993: 177)’ These styles of the flesh, she argues, are ‘historically contingent’, thus the way that we read bodies for gender, for illness, for wellness are all inextricably linked. Butler, relying heavily on the work of Mary Douglas in her 1963 work, *Purity and Danger* as well as Kristeva’s work in *Powers of Horror*, notes that while Mary Douglas’s work is structuralist and relies on a dichotomous notion of nature and culture, it has some value for describing the ways in which some cultural objects become designated as being ‘unclean’ or ‘unruly’, or otherwise out of control, and thus in need of regulation and socially imposed discipline. Butler quotes from Douglas: “the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious (Douglas (1963:30) cited in Butler 1993: 168)” The precariousness, something that I have attempted to illuminate earlier, seems to be ‘undoing’ (Butler 2004: 27), and it seems to me that this fear of the ‘unruly’ body exists almost exclusively as a fear of the generative (Kristeva 1993). While Kristeva places the locus of the generative in the female body, Hannah Arendt, in her classic repudiation of the feminine36 (Kristeva 2001) does not see man’s capacity for natality as being an

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36 Adrienne Rich said of Arendt: “The withholding of women from participation in the vita activa, the "common world," and the connection of this with reproductivity, is something from which she does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing. To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind
explicitly gendered event. This capacity for beginning is inherent in every human being: we are all capable of bringing something entirely new into the world, and it is this natality that totalitarian regimes serve to repress. While it is true that Canada’s correctional facilities are not exactly comparable in any way to the horrifying ways in which the Nazi regime tried to annihilate human plurality, in some ways the same sorts of methods - intimidation, threats – were employed. Ashley Smith’s response to these threats being: “If that was the taser, I'm going to do what I can to get it every day (Richard 2008:28)” Arendt tells us that the use of these methods to “[...] destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new, something that cannot be explained in relation to reactions to events (Arendt 1952: 455)”.

Under the rehabilitative system that the mental health and correctional facilities provide, it became clear that Smith was deprived of the faculty of beginning. Arendt characterizes the crowning achievement of the SS as being the ability to ‘lead the tortured victim to the noose without protesting’ (Arendt 1952: 455), to turn him into one ‘malleable” man, who no longer possesses a who, an individuality, or the capacity to generate the new. Arendt, in a footnote in Origins of Totalitarianism speaks of suicide as being ‘an astonishing rarity’ in the camps, explained by the fact that ‘every attempt was made to prevent suicides, which are, after all, spontaneous acts’, stating that most of the suicides that occurred happened before ‘arrest and deportation’ (Arendt 1952: 455), outside of the camps. While this comment was no doubt coloured by the loss of her friend Walter Benjamin who took his own life in an effort to avoid the inevitable loss of control (not being allowed on the boat at the Spanish-French border) that would have led to his deportation and presumable death, it is nonetheless compelling. Another ombudsman’s report this time examining the effectiveness of various changes in the

nourished on male ideologies. In fact, the loss is ours, because Arendt’s desire to grasp deep moral issues is the kind of concern we need to build a common world which will amount to more than “life-styles.” (Rich as cited in Benhabib 1995: 5)”

prison system, observed that the prison suicide rate, which has remained unchanged, even after various improvements (which were left un-described in the article, suggesting to me that this was nothing more than a bureaucratic sleight of hand). The meaninglessness of the bureaucratic aspects of the administration of the life of Ashley Smith, which I illuminate in my third and final chapter, ‘failed’ this young woman. Pain and its incommunicability, the so called ‘inconsistency’ of the bureaucrats and of the diagnostic process used by psychiatrists consulted in the Smith case, speak to the fact that the human plurality can never be fully extinguished.

Chapter 3

"Action as [Arendt] rightly understands it, is present in every human life...But the extent of our freedom to act...depends in large measure on the extent to which we are able to regard one another as acting beings...” (Tsao as cited in O’Bryne 2010: 102).

Introduction

“How do you finally respond to your life and your name?” This question, posed by Derrida in his final interview (as cited in Butler 2004), is also my guiding question for thinking about the life and (untimely) death of Ashley Smith. After examining the ways in which the 'body in pain' is ejected from the shared world in my last chapter, I intend to explore the ways in which these bodies, ones that are ejected from the shared world of the polis can and, I argue, should be made politically relevant:
Ashley’s response to her own life, made manifest in self injurious behaviour, embodied a form of action that only, sadly, registered as the stuff of public discourse after her death. Her failed attempts at communication beg for an examination of the role speech and political action played in her death. Why were her attempts at communication, both in speech and ‘written on the body’ so completely ignored? I argue that these attempts at speech, following Rancière, were politically significant and a form of Arendtian action; however the lived significance of Ms. Smith’s actions were brought under control by an all too powerful bureaucracy and this circumvented the full potential of her actions. In this chapter, what I aim to demonstrate is that that contemporary commentators forget when critiquing Arendt through a Ranciérian lens is the the complete newness that Arendt claims that action entails. Arendtian action cannot be explained as a chain reaction to events; it is a capacity that we all have as the result of being natal beings. The cloudiness that Ranciére and other commentators on the Arendt / Ranciére division point out, however, becomes apparent when we consider the climate in which we are born. Labouring culture renders us less specific and unique, and shifts our focus from politics to the necessities of life. Participation in this culture, it seems to me, needent be identity linked; Arendt herself distinguishes between the who and the what of the individual. Thoughout this chapter, I turn to some of the scholarship on Ranciére and Arendt, a rich body of work that demonstrates some of the flaws in Arendt’s conception of the speaking subject. The fallacy that I think is made in this literature is the assumption that Arendt’s conception of individuals and their places is a given, that the sensus communus was immutable. There are ways in which Arendt’s elitism can be interpreted differently and more charitably, especially since she continually made reference to the plight of the oppressed in politically sensitive ways. However, this criticism aside, what I think Ranciére attempts to explore that is the significance of politically explosive moments, where individuals like Ashley Smith attempt to widen our schema for common sense. The conclusions I draw are two fold: I argue that Arendt can indeed be understood in ways that give her project a more, in the words of Canovan (1978), ‘radically democratic’ edge. However, even given a more sympathetic
interpretation of Arendt alongside of Rancière’s work on the nature of democratic behaviour, I wonder how significant these shifts in the sensible world actually are. I argue that Ashley’s valiant attempts at being seen and known were merely reabsorbed into the ‘dominant distribution of the sensible’. We can see this most clearly in an examination of the bureaucratic form the examination of her death has taken on. She is a “failure of the Canadian Correctional Facilities”, a sign of institutional breakdown, rather than the loss of a human life.

The theoretical underpinning of my argument is that the Arendtian focus on natality, and the capacity of human beings to create something new is very similar to what Rancière refers to as ‘ruptures in the sensible’. Arendt emphasizes the upheaval of true political action: something that cannot be explained as a reaction to an event, and this, I argue, is also the intensity of a ‘rupture in the sensible’38. I argue that standard critiques of Arendt that rely on Rancière to demonstrate Arendt’s inadequacies at theorizing the ‘other’ are misguided. Authors such as Ingram (2006) and Schapp (2011) tend to assume that Arendtian notions of political equality suffer from an elitism. For Arendt, they argue, these fissures in the political strata are part of the given world rather than being a performative. Basically, the arguments that are commonly made about Arendtian conception of human rights and of the Arendtian political more generally is that she excludes the labouring or necessity-focused classes. This, we are told, limits political agency to very few. Her understanding of human rights is similarly flawed, as it is based on a very specific notion of a state linked, litigious human that loses all avenues of recourse once it is rendered stateless. These criticisms, admittedly, are not without merit. My concern is how, then, Arendt can be redeemed. I argue that it is through her concept of natality – the capacity to begin that is bestowed upon every human being at birth that will lead us out of this problem. In contrast, authors like Ingram and Schapp believe that Rancière’s belief that political action actualizes itself when “those who are not qualified to participate in politics presume to act and speak as if they are (Schapp 2011: 35).”

38 A rupture in the sensible is a seismic shift in “the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed (Rancière 2004: 85)”. It “[challenges] the established framework of identification and classification” (Rancière 2004: 90).
This logic also follows in the Ashley Smith case. Her behaviours were also seen as given, that she was a girl 'out of control'; rather than a girl who was simply left with no or few avenues of recourse -- or any way of receiving human attention -- and was in some way forced to act out, or perform, in order to gain the attention that she sought. Hannah Arendt believed that individuals have an obligation to show themselves in the world of appearances if they want to be more than 'dead to the world' (Arendt 1958: 177).

"This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative (Arendt 1958: 177)."

While I wish to illustrate the political potential of Ashley Smith's last actions in the Grand Valley Institution for Women, located in Kitchener, Ontario, I also wish to demonstrate that while her death did spur much discussion, debate and public distress, this translated into very little actual change for those who have been incarcerated and the systematized way of dealing with our incarcerated 'others' was maintained. The dire state of the Canadian Correctional Facilities has been continually illustrated, even after the many inquiries into the death of Ashley Smith, leaving one to wonder what political significance Ashley's death had in terms of effecting real change.

There are many potential ways these pressing problems could be analyzed. However, because I am interested in the significance of speech and other communicative acts and the role these played in the life and death of Ashley Smith, it makes sense to examine these issues using theorists who place a high value on the speaking subject. 

*Thinking about Equality: The work of Jacques Rancière*

39 Not surprisingly, some of the ombudsman's recommendations, namely one suggesting that the mentally ill shouldn't be kept in jails, were not translated into effective change. A judge recently ruled that the mentally ill can be kept in jails when there are not enough beds in psychiatric hospitals, a sign that the many recommendations made to prevent another "Ashley Smith" are being ignored. Cf. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ontario/ontario-judge-rules-mentally-ill-can-be-held-in-jails/article1988905/?cmpid=nl-news1
Rancière is a useful thinker of the nature of equality, and by extension, the position of the speaking subject in states of negotiation. His central concern, made most explicit in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, is about equality, the centre of his argument being that the shoemaker and the intellectual are equals, that the traditional logic of the intellectual (or in this case, the ombudsman, the lawyer, the Elizabeth Fry representative…) providing a locutionary go-between for the ‘poor’ is mistaken. Ashley Smith is a prime example of what Rancière believes to be the prime political activity: speaking out of turn. Instead of waiting patiently for some powerful individual to bestow ‘equality’ upon her, she asserted herself continually, even putting herself at risk. Thus, Rancière’s work calls into question our presuppositions about who should speak and for whom, and our assumptions about where knowledge authority is situated (cf. Rancière 2001; Rancière 2004). The moments where we have true political action are moments where ‘matter [is taken] out of place’ (Douglas 1966), when the worker attempts to try on the roles, and speech acts, of his superiors: “[Politics] makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise (Rancière 1999: 30)”. The notion of violating class specific rules of ‘decorum’ seems particularly salient in any discussion of the life and death of Ashley Smith. Even on a fairly rudimentary level, she violated traditional gendered norms for politeness. Indeed, it was not just impolite speech acts that did Ms. Smith in – though she certainly wasn’t above the ‘fuck off’ – but rather acts of destruction of shelter; spreading excrement on her cell walls, she certainly intended to provide a commentary on her ‘shitty’ treatment (Richard 2008: 21).

The “distribution of the sensible”, is the term Rancière uses to explain the way our most basic sense experiences are shaped. The social system, he says, which intersects with even the most rudimentary of ‘sense experiences’, is “first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise… (Rancière 1999: 29)”. The interpretation of Ashley’s repeated demands as noise was not uncommon; her repeated ‘officially’ documented complaints were not addressed, as I mentioned in my second chapter. What
we think of as being traditional political activity is absorbed in the logic of the 'police state', which it seems Rancière seems to draw from Foucault’s work. Rancière’s ideas are built around the suggestion that power does not stem from a hierarchical order, but rather a tacit understanding about what things are to be said and how and to whom. That is to say, the police order implicitly orders our symbolic universe, framing the agents whose speech we deem worthy of attention, and discarding the voices of people who we deem not worthy of attention.

The biopolitical, or the political system that is preoccupied with the ‘maintenance of life’, is a part of the ‘police’ system. The police, as Rancière defines it, is what we traditionally define as political activity. Broadly, the police system encompasses the states function as a regulator of culture, assigning people and their functions to “a particular place and task (Rancière 1999: 29)”. Policing, Rancière tells us, “is not so much the disciplining of bodies as a rule governing their appearing” (Rancière 1999: 29)

Like all state dictated organizations, this policing impinged on the way in which we treated Ashley Smith; not as a speaking being, but as an individual in need of 'care' – the failures of the system being bureaucratic ones. In the words of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, there was a “breakdown within federal corrections” that led to “the tragic death of Ashley Smith (Sapers 2008).” In this, we lose a sense of Ashley Smith as an individual. The reduction of a life, a young woman’s life, to statistics and as a failure of bureaucracy, obfuscates Ashley’s role as a speaking being with a capacity for agency.

The CBC telejournalistic show “The Fifth Estate” did an exposé on the life and death on Ashley Smith. A correctional officer was shown saying, “I got this tool [a taser] and it’s not hard for me...do you understand that?”. Questions of understanding, and the commensurability of speech across “worlds” (Rancire 1999: 42) are integral to Rancière’s theories. To ask the question, as the correctional officer did of Ashley Smith, is inherently condescending in Rancière’s view, because it suggests a hierarchical relationship: “In ordinary social usage an expression like "do you understand?" is a false interrogative, whose positive content is as follows: "there is nothing for you to understand, you don't need to understand and even possibly, "it's not up to you to understand, all you have to do is obey." “Do you understand?” is an expression that tells us precisely that "to
"understand" means two different, if not contrary, things: to understand the problem and to understand an order. In the logic of pragmatism the speaker is obliged, for the success of their own performance, to submit it to conditions of validity that come from mutual understanding. Otherwise, the speaker falls into the "performative contradiction", that undermines the force of their utterance (Rancière 1999: 45)."

The act of understanding for Rancière is an imposition: an imposition of police logic on the people 'who have no part'. To have comprehension, you have to be complicit in a certain 'distribution of the sensible', which is defined as "the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed (Rancière, 2004:85). The term "sense" in Rancière’s mind does not refer to questions of judgement, but rather to "what is capable of being apprehended by the senses’ (Rancière 2004: 85), or as he put it elsewhere, the difference between what registers as noise and what registers as speech in any given exchange (Rancière 1999;2001). There are two kinds of utterances that human animals make. They are defined as follows: the Greek phone, connected to our animality, and the political logos, and how we register them as such is inextricably linked to questions of power and privilege. It is with this in mind that I would like to acknowledge the seeming difficulty that both Arendt and Rancière illuminate: the problem of whose speech matters.

Speech and Politics: Whose Speech Matters?

The question of speech, that with which Arendt and Rancière are preoccupied, and that which Ashley Smith exemplifies, originates with an Aristotelian concern. To draw an explanation from Giorgio Agamben, “It is not by chance that a passage of the Politics situates the proper place of the polis in the transition from voice to ‘language (Agamben 1998: 7)” Our assessments of these are politically linked, not necessarily linked to content per se. Quoting from Aristotle’s Politics, Agamben provides us with the origins of contemporary concerns about the speaking subject and the distinction between speech and voice:
“Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure and this is why it belongs to other living beings [...] But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and the just and the unjust is proper to men as opposed to other living beings and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city (Aristotle as cited in Agamben 1998: 7)”

Rancière’s early work, *The Nights of Labour* and *The Philosopher and his Poor* discussed the artificial nature of the distinction between voice and speech. That is to say, the content of some people’s vocal intonations is registered – particularly those who deal with life’s sustenance – as being insignificant. It was thought by Plato that those who worked did not have time to participate in the activities of the polis. This of course had little or nothing to do with their inherent capacities, but rather their social position. Society places limits on the seeable, the sayable, and the knowable, and as such, politics occurs only when these boundaries are stretched. (Rancière 1999: 29;). As he goes on to summarize in *Disagreement*, “Over a generation, a group of sons was born to the slaves and raised with their eyes open. Looking around and the world, they reached the conclusion that there was no particular reason why they should be slaves, born with the same attributes as their masters.... (Rancière 1999:12).”

Accordingly, then, the individuals that Rancière studied, the socioeconomically and socially disadvantaged, began to seek out modes of resistance. The example Rancière cites was that of Herodotus’ slaves. Negotiation, the standard route of effecting change, was not the process that these individuals sought. Indeed, their method relied on a purely performative means. These ‘role taking’ experiences are ‘an interruption’, according to Rancière. These interruptions in state – or police – logic are “that which stops the current (Rancière 1999: 13)”.

Traditional refusals of political emancipation have centered around the public and private domain. As an example, Rancière makes reference to the way women were refused emancipation – based on the fact that they lived only in domestic spaces, and thus

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40 see the first chapter of *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Rancière 2004).
did not possess logos. Following this, the vocalizations they made, he argued, did not register as being meaningful (Rancière 1999:41).

**Arendt and Rancière: Who can begin?**

Stemming from these kinds of assertions, Rancière makes the claim that ‘politics is a rupture in the logic of arche’, which means ‘beginning, origin, and power’. Rancière suggests that there is a more pernicious connection between the nature of Arendt’s concept of natality with the focus on ‘beginning’ and the etymological roots of arche (as the etymological connection was one also made by Arendt). The notion of beginning, we are told, is inextricably linked to power, as the word arche eventually translates into ‘to lead’. He states that the linkages that arche inadvertently makes “[presuppose] a determinate superiority exercised upon an equally determinate inferiority (Rancière 2001: 4).” This association, Rancière argues, has the effect of “depopulating the political stage”, leaving some, if not most, people disenfranchised and incapable of political action (Rancière 2001: 301) This is a problem with which Arendt herself is complicit. To Arendt, political engagement is limited to very few. But as I will argue, this is not inevitable.

The intent to disavow and show the limits of Arendt, to move to newer and novel theorists is done quickly and without taking into consideration her later work, such as On Revolution. In On Revolution, she makes it clear that true political activity is indeed not the ‘stuff’ of liberal politicking. With the rise of the social, the focus shifts to population regulation. Regulation can take many forms, according to Arendt, intersecting with “family life, education, cultural and economic concerns (Arendt OR 1963: 274).” These forms of regulation are ersatz forms of politicking that distract from living a fully engaged life. For example, in On Revolution, Arendt argues that true political action gets shadowed by compassion. Compassion, we are told, is entirely unworldly and thus, it is

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41 To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word archein, “to begin,” "to lead,” and eventually “to rule,” indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin agere). It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started... (Arendt 1958: 177)
"politically speaking, irrelevant" (Arendt OR 1963: 86). Having compassion for people and by extension, "liberating them" is a bandaid solution. Compassion, and by extension, discourses of liberation do not allow the "oppressed" to speak for themselves, reinscribing them into a position where they still cannot advocate for themselves. When humans are reduced to the bare necessities of life, a politics of compassion often comes to the fore. But these gestures "speak only to the extent that [they have] to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world (Arendt OR 1963: 83)" and therefore it is not productive as a means of securing political efficacy. Violence, kept to the realm of necessity, becomes acceptable – even essential when there are basic inequalities that need to be dealt with. This is pre-political action but it creates the ground upon which later political action can rest. This potentially violent action based in necessity and the body, the focus on the sensory aspects of life, is the precursor to actual revolution. One has to be willing to risk speech in order to achieve the Arendtian end goal: it is not something that one can give to you, but you must claim for yourself. As Schaap (2009) notes, Arendt’s politics are an existential one; they prescribe how one should exist in a political world, not the proper outcome of ‘politics’. That being said, I suspect Rancière’s point -- about the linkage of beginning to power -- does hold some weight, though what I think he fails to take in to consideration is what the role of social identities mean, what ‘the rise of the social’ meant for Arendt: seeing people as their identities, as being ‘a Jew’, as being interpellated a being something other than an individual with untapped potential. Group related identities, for Arendt, are part of one’s given world they are not political and should not be made so, as they tell us little about actual living, breathing human beings who ‘do’ things in the world. Schaap (2009/11) tells us that Hannah Arendt’s assessment of human rights is inherently flawed because while she does justice to the descriptive element of human rights, she fails creating a new way of thinking about the ways in which human rights should be actualized, She leaves us with the sentiment at the end of Origins of Totalitarianism that the human capacity for beginning, inherent with every human birth is the only thing that we have.
What Rancière brings to the discussion, according to Schaap (2009), is an emphasis on the performative element of the demand for equality, observing that in a Rancière framework “the [struggle] of the sans papiers is exemplary because they make something of the right to make rights” and “by acting as if they have rights that they lack, the sans papiers actualize their political equality (Schapp 2009: 21),” in contrast to Arendt who sees the struggle for liberation (freedom from tyrannical structures) as being distinct from freedom (which is closely linked to the Arendtian ideal polity where speech and action reign supreme and can only be achieved after the individuals in question have achieved some base level liberation from the constraints of zoe)42. One thing that Schaap (2011) and other thinkers of the Arendt / Rancière relationship fail to acknowledge is that for Arendt, equality is artificially created (Badiou 2001: 10-25; Schapp 2011; Ingram 2006). While in the private sphere, men are unequal, predisposed to different bodily ills and capabilities and forced to exploit and alienate themselves from their bodies for (differing) wages, above and beyond the abjected Arendtian body, in the public space they are necessarily equal: “The equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being "equalized" in certain respects and for specific purposes (Arendt 1958: 251)”. Thus, it seems to me, that there is also a performative element in Arendt’s philosophy – indeed, she refers to the speaking, acting subject as being an ‘actor’, and she is regarded as an anti-biological thinker (Birmingham 2006), though as Birmingham observes, her entire philosophy is grounded in the indisputably biological event of natality. In spite of this, she refuses any recourse to the natural world, arguing that the sheer given world, the entire private sphere, is entirely apolitical. In this way Arendt differs from Rancière. For Arendt, the private sphere should never face the light of the world. However, for Rancière, it is these moments when the private, or the people who have no part, come into appearances that true politics occurs. Rancière, in his 1999 book Disagreement, cites the example of how women’s struggles in the domestic sphere became a political issue, changing the “very definition of the common to the community” (Rancière 1999: 41). Being in solitary confinement suggests a deep connection to the private, and entirely

apolitical sphere. Given that the Greek polis, for Arendt and Rancière alike, is based on a notion of the common, the notion of solitary confinement is of course antithetical to having a political subjectivity.

*Ashley Smith and the Institution: “There's a little Eichmann in all of us!”*

In spite of this, Ashley Smith, along with her mother, was insistent that her plight be acknowledged; submitting complaint forms—which were by and large ignored by the institutional hierarchy⁴³, proved ineffectual. Making herself heard in other, less direct ways, such as through damage to her body or her cell, however, sent a loud message. It was so disruptive that her ‘caretakers’ stopped reporting the many incidences she created, lest they cause an a rupture in the ‘logic’ of the bureaucracy⁴⁴.

The use of the language of institutional failure to describe the numerous ways in which the justice system had failed Ms. Smith serves to demonstrate what Arendt illustrated so succinctly in her 1963 book on the Eichmann trials, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

What Arendt tries to convey, in her depiction of Eichmann’s life prior to his work for the SS, is the sheer normality of his life, banal as it were, and the lack of critical thinking faculties that Eichmann possessed. Eichmann’s life, she demonstrates, was not one moment where he resigned himself to the fact that he was going to be the arbiter of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews. To defend himself at the trial, he was always “quick to inform” the legal team that “whatever he did he did [...] as a law abiding citizen. He did his duty, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law (Arendt EJ 1963: 135)”. He reassured the court that he had “read Kant”, and stuck by his “moral precepts”: to act in such a way that Hitler himself would approve if he were aware of his actions.

These same questions of duty, order, and law are ones that play into mental health care in general. As I have previously illuminated, we live in a biopolitical culture, and this is made manifest in clear ways in the penal system. As such, there are many rules,

codes of conduct, and relations of power that intersect with the way ‘difficult cases’ such as Ashley Smith’s are ‘handled’. It is the little bureaucratic details, rules, obligations that made the treatment of Ashley Smith and her death possible. Not unlike Eichmann who was doing his duty, and following orders, the correctional officers’ response to Ashley Smith’s final and ‘successful’ suicide attempt was one that was dictated by their superiors. They were given the instruction not to respond to her many suicidal gestures because ‘it didn’t make them look good’ to have so many disciplinary reports from one institution being sent to the bureaucrats in Ottawa (Caloz and Gartner 2010), The directive became, unless she was facing imminent death, ‘to ignore her even if she was choking herself’. The correctional officers were told that they were going to face punitive consequences if they did not follow orders. (Caloz and Gartner 2010). Hana Gartner, interviewing the ombudsman on the fifth estate, asked if the goal was to ‘go in when she’s dead’, further describing Ashley ‘a time bomb waiting to go off’, though as Smith’s mother said, ‘I never thought Ashley was going to die in prison’ (Caloz and Gartner 2010). The thoughtlessness of the guards and their complicity with the dictates of their superiors is indicative of the story that is told about Eichmann in Jerusalem in America, that there is a ‘little Eichmann in all of us’ (Greif 2004, paragraph 12; see also Milgram 1963).

Additionally, the codes of conduct that guide mental health workers, and indeed, all health care professionals dictate the kind of relationship that the recipient of care will have in some way foreclosed the possibility for action in the Arendtian sense, which is by nature openended and unpredictable. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, now on the verge of its 5th incarnation, systematizes the whole of human mental experience, into a set of criteria that can be hierarchically organized based on symptom severity and level of distress they cause the individual. Surrounding the political world (in which the patient is interpellated, always-already) with laws, rules, et cetera serves to foreclose any possibility of action whatsoever (Arendt 1958:195).

One learns to be a mental health practitioner over time, formal guidelines set in place to dictate the proper client patient relationship. As Gilhooly and Blackbridge observe, “Not all staff were remote or mean, but nice ones never seemed to last. They

might come in full of good intentions but unless they obeyed all the unspoken rules they
would get fired or squeezed out [...] It seems like the ones who stayed were the ones who
had learned that they had to tune out and pretend that we weren’t really human so they
wouldn’t have to care about us (Blackbridge and Gilhooly 1985: ‘this one nurse’). Indeed, dehumanizing strategies have been used to make the destruction of human lives possible. As Agamben notes, “The camp is the space that opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule. In the camp the state of exception is given a permanent spatial arrangement (Agamben 1998: 169)”\(^{45}\).

The treatment of Ashley Smith as a means without end

Heidegger, in his influential 1954 (in German) essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, tells us that under modernity, the traditional logic of means and ends has become perverted; that questions of use-value reign supreme, but as Arendt, citing Lessing, asks “What is the use of use?” (Arendt 1958: 154). Technology, Heidegger argues, is a revealing. But it is not a revealing in a traditional sense, in the sense of bringing something new into appearance. In modernity, what gets revealed instead is a ‘challenging-forth’ (Heidegger, 2008: 120). The objects in the world are viewed solely as forces to be controlled – there is no longer true poesis [a creative bringing forth] in a meaningful sense. Instead our engagement with the world is mediated through a focus on speed and productivity. The natural world is seen as a force that needs to be multiplied, thought of exclusively in relation to use value.

We can see this clearly in the case of Ashley Smith. Indeed, the concern about her health and wellbeing that was displayed after her death became inextricably linked to just the sheer fact of keeping her alive. The focus on how the suicide could have been prevented and the protocols that were not followed, renders this a mere failure of bureaucracy rather than a loss of a human life, the life of Ashley Smith. This focus on instrumentality in the desire to keep Ashley Smith alive, though not necessarily thriving, meant preserving her life for the sake of the system. As Hana Gartner, journalist from the

\(^{45}\) Which, given that incarceration has a rehabilitatory function for many, as the ombudsman’s report observes, Ashley Smith’s time in the prison cell should not have been permanent. But, as time went on, the
fifth estate put it, the high levels of suicide made the Correctional Services of Canada “look bad”. It seems that in some ways the “challenging of nature is always directed towards furthering something else i.e. toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense. (Heidegger 2008: 321).” The Ombudsman for the New Brunswick youth penitentiary, in his assessment of the problem of Ashley Smith, titled “The Ashley Smith Report,” states, “The youth criminal justice system should be administered and implemented as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Only then will it be clearly understood that youths who suffer from a mental illness or a severe behavioural disorder and who commit a crime punishable under existing criminal provisions have a right to a recovery. They must be given the proper tools to make, at the very least, an attempt at reintegrating society as productive members. (Richard 2008: 8).” The idea that recovery is an end point that can be achieved, as measured in recidivism rates, or therapeutic outcomes (most therapy recipients relapse at a certain point over their life course, indeed, the odds of having a recurrent depressive episode increase exponentially with each recurrent episode (DSM IV-TR 293 2004: Course).

While it is true that psychotherapy has many advantageous effects when the therapist / client relationship is a solid one, it is not as if one can ‘add therapist and stir’, as the ombudsman’s report suggested would be a solid solution to many of Ashley’s problems. Indeed, one of the main findings, if it could be called a finding, was that Ms. Smith was ‘never properly diagnosed’, but as Plantikow (2004: 2) notes, “Psychiatric disorders are not phenomenologically discrete. Correspondingly, attempts to organize them as such will always remain unsuccessful.” Indeed, in ‘enframing’ the natural world, attempts to convey the ‘who’ of a person by describing ‘what’ they are (a manic depressive, an obsessive compulsive), there is always a necessary failure that is part and parcel of traditional process of psychiatric diagnosis. Arendt further illuminates this failure in an elegant manner, stating that in our attempts to get at the who – we necessarily fall into describing the what of an individual rather than being able to describe something about their essence, and this is what the process of diagnosis does to individuals. In our preoccupation with making objects and ‘system maintenance’, if I
may, Arendt argues that we lose part of our capacity to apprehend individuals as imbued with specificity.

While this is, of course, significant, one might wonder whether these acknowledgements of the political significance of the domestic sphere actually translate into any actual changes in the way in which domestic labour is undertaken (indeed, the literature shows fairly consistently that women are still doing the brunt of the domestic labour, regardless of the lip service we pay to notions of equality; oppression shapeshifts and takes different forms (cf. Bittman and Lovejoy 1993). In other words, the shift in the way power functions creates 'equivalencies', but does not create an actual change in who holds the position of power. Acknowledging women's work as work doesn't change a whole lot in regards to who partakes in the work. Accordingly, then, ensuring that Smith's case was available to our shared 'sense experience' might have made it more politically available, but it still became an object of police inquiry, in the Rancièrean sense.

Ashley Smith: Has anything changed?

While this is seemingly irrelevant to a discussion of the life and death of Ashley Smith, what I am trying to consider is the impact of these ruptures in the distribution of the sensible. I think Rancière is correct in stating that equality cannot be granted by anyone or given to anyone, as that reinscribes a traditional hierarchy. I do wonder how much of these changes in the distribution of the sensible, or more accurately, the depth of public concern about the Ashley Smith case, have more to do with what Foucault referred to as what was 'in the true' at a certain point in time. Put differently, Foucault in “The Discourse on Language” suggests that knowledge can only be made meaningful when the surrounding environment is willing to accept it as a condition of ‘truth’ (Foucault as cited in Adams and Searle 1986).

Indeed, even the noises that Ashley Smith made had to be made communicable through the voices of other more powerful individuals. McGill (2008), in her examination of Ashley Smith's story, plays close attention to the fact that Ashley Smith was of

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46To clarify, he believes that traditional political logics that 'distribute equality' (May 2009) merely serve to constrain and control the individual subject. Thus individuals are more likely to effect change by acting and speaking on their own terms, or 'out of turn'.

Aboriginal descent [the ‘what’ of who she was\textsuperscript{47}], choosing to focus on the high rates of incarceration of Aboriginal peoples, noting that Aboriginal women are “14 percent less likely to be released into the community on conditional release than non-Aboriginal women (McGill 2008: 92) The Aboriginal body, McGill argues, is constructed as being “rapable and violable” (McGill 2008: 93), akin to those bodies that are rendered “living corpses”, stripped of their individuality, and that through the process of incarceration ‘lose their entitlement to personhood (McGill 2008: 93)’. Judith Butler argues that recognition is a key part of knowing who and what counts as a human being, and by extension what counts as a grievable life (Butler 2004: 19-49).

Ashley Smith’s life began in the most seemingly innocuous of ways. She was adopted at five days old; the \textit{fifth estate} documentary shows the house in which she would have grown up, had she not spent over a quarter of her short life in various Canadian prisons. Her mother, who only went up to the room occasionally ‘to dust’, remarked that Ashley was thought of as not being ‘a girly girl’. She then proceeded to open a closet door where all of Ashley Smith’s dolls, left over from her childhood, were kept, as proof that at one point in her life, Ashley was a ‘normal’ child participating in gendered norms and behaviours of the common world (Caloz and Gartner 2010).

Rancière, in contrast to Arendt, is committed to, in the words of James Ingram, incorporating “the part or share of those who have no part in the community (Ingram 2006)”. Making the lives of the “people who have no part” recognizable is part of his political project. The Arendtian political, in contrast, is made up of those who have ‘cast off’ their given identities (as they have ‘no part’ in the public realm) in favour of what she views as the proper activity of the public realm: ‘reserved for individuality [in contrast to group identities that are not very interesting or worthy of political consideration]; it was the only place in the world where men could show who they truly and inexchangably were (Arendt 1958: 41)”.

\textsuperscript{47}The Arendtian ‘who’ is separate from the ‘whats’ of an individual. The what of an individual is the stuff of an individual’s public and surface life. When we describe an individual, we often fall into describing what they are -- ‘19 year old Aboriginal woman who was incarcerated’. The who, however, is what makes the individual unique. [The disclosure of the who] “…is implicit in everything that someone says or does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities (Arendt 1958: 179)”
Rancière would argue that the way we are inextricably linked to these identities—our relationships with our group identifications are essential to our development of a sense of self—also becomes an essential way for the state to regulate and thus, distribute ‘equality’ among its peoples. This ‘equality’ that runs rampant in liberal democracy inscribes an inherent power imbalance, as there is an individual ‘distributing’ the means to equality, as Todd May, in an effort to explain Rancière’s fundamental opposition to distributive theories, observes (May 2009: 5-7). Thus equality under a liberal democratic society is not equality proper, but rather a very rigid regime of the ‘sensible,’ where people and things have their proper places, where they are assigned particular tasks (Rancière 2004: 85). Arendt, to be sure, was a participant in this sort of thinking, with her strict reliance on notions on the public and private realms. The public realm, she tells us, is the proper realm of politics, and the private realm the proper place of the natural and those associated with it. Arendt’s nostalgic longing for the Greek democratic system leads her to suggest that individuals should prefer the freedom of insecurity rather than the structured outcomes of a biopolitical, labouring organization (Arendt 1958: 31). With the birth of the scientific study of human behaviour, heavily reliant on statistical methods, we became focused on predictably, and this, Arendt argues, makes it impossible to see things as the result of being in a particular ‘historical time’ (Arendt 1958: 43). Instead human plurality gets subsumed as part of the machine of every day living, a means without end.

The world, to Arendt, is a ‘space for politics’ (Arendt 2003:16). The sensus communus, or common sense, is essential to the development of this space. The common world, she states, is shaped around the durable objects that are the products of work. These objects, the things of a life, provide us with a permanence to arrange the more important activities of speech and action around. Rancière, in contrast, is more interested in theorizing what he refers to as dis-sensus. He defines this as “not a conflict of interests, opinions, or values; it is a division put in the ‘common sense’: a dispute about what is given, about the frame within which we see something as given” (Rancière 2004: 304). It is not the common world that creates the political for Rancière but rather these moments of complete and utter rupture, where the world as we know it is reinvented. Traditional liberal theory, Todd May notes, “divides people into those who are politically active and
those who are politically passive. To be politically passive is not to be equal, in the
creation of one’s own life to those who are active (May 2009: 5)” and it seems to me that
this is precisely the world, or ‘the vita activa’ for which Hannah Arendt strove.

“However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of
natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because
the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting
(Arendt 1958: 9)”. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of
natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity
par excellence, natality, and not mortality, must be the central category of political, as
distinguished from metaphysical, thought (Arendt 1958: 9”).

Action, Hannah Arendt goes on to note, “is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is
to be deprived of the capacity to act (Arendt 1958: 188)”.

Indeed, the same case could be made for both the correctional officers and Ashley Smith.
In one of the many reports about Ashley Smith, the ombudsman is quick to cite numerous
studies that illuminate the problems of seclusion (Richard 2008: 41). As the
ombudsman’s report observes, “direct studies of prison isolation have documented an
extremely broad range of harmful psychological reactions, including negative attitudes
and affects; insomnia, and anxiety, as well as self mutilatory behaviours”(Richard
2008:41). Coralee Smith, the mother of Ashley Smith, stated in an interview with the
Toronto Star, “We had absolutely no idea...I think maybe some people look at the
situation and say, ‘Oh, they must have known. Where are the parents?... "And I'm
thinking, you have no idea – that once your child is gone into the system, you don't have
any control. You have nothing.”48. This is a testament to the depths of Ashley’s isolation,
as well as on the commentary on the systematization of the correctional facilities. The
Smiths were deprived of a lot of information about their child, and Ashley also chose to
keep her parents in the dark about many of her antics while she was incarcerated as part
of the shame she presumably felt about her actions49. She longed for a normal life, stating

in a poem that she wrote in 2006 about what she would do in her life post incarceration: “I’d wear a bra with underwire just for perks”\(^50\).

While Rancière and Arendt seem to agree that true political action occurs in the presence of a new event, what Ashley Smith was longing for was the common place pleasures of every day life. Her speech acts, often ‘out of turn’, were merely a means to an end. Thus, while she may have created a ‘dissensus’, the showing up of the two worlds in one, I am uncertain whether she had revolutionary intent. Indeed, in \textit{On Revolution}, Arendt suggests that violent acts stem from necessity and are thus pre-political (Arendt OR 1963: 86). That being said, in my view, disclosure is the Arendtian term for what Rancière perceives as speaking out of turn. Arendt states, “…courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self (Arendt 1958: 186)”. The suggestion that one comes out of a hiding place – presumably from the labouring private – to disclose a political agent suggest to me that everyone is capable of becoming an agent of political change. The final words of \textit{Origins of Totalitarianism}, oft quoted, “The beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man (Arendt 1952: 479),” suggest that indeed, every man\(^51\) is capable of creating something new.

It follows that “The political in Arendt, then, must derive stability from plurality; counterintuitively she argues that contention and difference yield stability, whereas attempts to achieve harmony yield terror and instability. (McGowan 1997: 267)” Totalitarianism, Arendt believes, served to annihilate human plurality; turn the plurality of human beings into “one man”; to lay claim any fundamental superiorities of one form of political action was to ‘elimin[ate] all contention’ (McGowan 1997: 266). In a letter to Karl Jaspers cited in Vatter (2006) she observes that the lynchpin of totalitarianism was to render human beings in their individuality and capacity for newness, “superfluous”.

\(^50\) http://www.thestar.com/fplarge/photo/708484

\(^51\) Sadly, she very well might mean this literally. Her relationship to gendered discourses is conflicted (and often very humourous – see “What Remains? The Language Remains: An interview with Gunter Gaus” in Essays in Understanding for a prime example of this). But for my purpose, I am going to pretend that she just (!) means the generic male. As she noted in a lecture cited in Canovan’s introduction to the Human Condition, “Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it what he pleases, and this is as it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself (Canovan in Arendt 1958: xvii)”.
While I will grant that Arendt does create hierarchies by virtue of her sharp distinction between the public and private, rightly illuminated by Rancière himself (Rancière 2001) as well as Rancière / Arendt commentators, the meaning of these hierarchies is arbitrary at best. The tragedy of modern political life, according to Arendt, is 'world alienation(Arendt 1958: 248)'. This inward turn translates into a focus on the necessities of life, which detracts from more active political engagement. In regards to this focus on life management tasks where 'homosexuals became species', as Foucault put it later (1984: 42-43), newness was replaced by systematicity. Thus, speaking subjects of all social strata were lost in a shift into modernity. These changes started harmlessly enough, as simple scientific curiosity, but have resulted in a shift in ways in which we apprehend and know individuals, as specific and capable of bringing something new into the world. A colleague of mine, Katy Fulfer (2010, unpublished essay), argues in one of her unpublished essays that the traditional public private split does forclose some of the potentials of Arendtian scholarship. While it cannot be disputed that there are tasks that Arendt considers to be private and ‘antipolitical’ (Arendt 1958: 242), Fulfer argues that Arendt’s perception of the public sphere as a place where humans form “a web of human relationships” (Arendt 1958: 181), where individuals show themselves as unique and specific, and as creators of new ‘things’. Thus, it follows that our relationships to the labouring world, what we deem to be important, can be continuously re-negotiated, and new meanings made.

Ashley Smith’s many pleas to the courts, usually the response to some infraction: ‘the risk you present to others as well as the risk you pose to yourself’ made promises of "I would like to say that I'm sorry for what I've done and that if I was released into the community again that I wouldn't – it wouldn't be gambling. I'd try my hardest, and go to counselling." Here, Ashley is telling us something about her intentions. The ombudsman’s report outlined many potentially useful ways of improving the Canadian correctional system’s ways of caring for individuals, for example, suggesting that the segregation of mentally ill offenders be prohibited and stressing the need for improved communication between ‘frontline’ staff and the clinical staff. Other improvements that

52 http://multimedia.thestar.com/acrobat/43/7e/58fb2da94c5a8e9631e6d90cb5a0.pdf
were discussed ad nauseam throughout the reports, like the need for an appropriate
diagnosis, obfuscates Ashley’s own assessment of her own behaviour and capabilities.
Furthermore, the ease with which one can slide into a diagnosis for the convenience of
others (Plantikow 2004) makes insuring that the mentally ill are cared for outside of
Canadian Corrections a dubious improvement at best. Psychiatrists, after all, understand
very well the consequences of their diagnostic actions and can thus make decisions about
diagnosing ‘mental illness’ accordingly (Plantikow 2004). And as “The Ashley Smith
Report” observes, the psychic cost of being in isolation or what is euphemistically called
‘therapeutic quiet’ is a high one, mentally ill or otherwise. Therapeutic quiet is used,
according to the “Ashley Smith Report”, to achieve “a change in conduct” (Richard 2008:
43). Under the rules at the time when Ashley Smith was incarcerated, a youth could
‘only’ remain in therapeutic quiet for five days. After the 5 days, permission from the
higher ups to keep the misbehaving youth in therapeutic quiet was required (Richard
2008: 43). In an effort to keep Ashley under control and to evade these policies, she was
transferred to 17 prisons in the 11 months she was incarcerated full time (Richard
2008:7). Richard acknowledged the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of
communicating with those living with high levels of emotional distress, as though there
was a rupture in the sensible.

Democracy, Rancière argues, is a term invented by ‘its’ opponents, in order to
c control those who have no part participating in the rule of people. Demos, he notes,
translates into a part of the community that has no part, more precisely the poor (Rancière
when “the one who speaks when s/he is not to speak, the one who part-takes in what s/he
has no part in -- that person belongs to the demos (Rancière 2001: Thesis 13)”. Ashley
Smith emblematizes this speaking out of turn. She continuously acted out, the disorder
that she was tentatively diagnosed as having an ‘oppositional defiant’ disorder, a disorder
characterized by such serious infractions such as: “often actively defies or refuses to
comply with adults’ requests or rules” (DSM IV: TR: 313.81). This active refusal to be
complicit in the dominant distribution of the sensible is an incredibly brave move to

55 further euphemized with the acronym TQ
make. “Only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution (1963: 27)”.

For Arendt, the stories we tell as well as our actions become part of the shared world. When we tell stories, we begin. Each individual is capable of telling a story that has some political import, but not every story will be weaved into our collective memory. Meanings have to be shared: thus, experiences that are only had by one person are not necessarily world changing. They are, however, “a necessary condition for transmitting the originary event into every subsequent age as a living bequest and lodestone, are not capable of insuring this (Gottsegen 1994: 101).”

That being said, it follows that “The political in Arendt, then, must derive stability from plurality; counterintuitively she argues that contention and difference yield stability, whereas attempts to achieve harmony yield terror and instability. (McGowan 1997: 267)” Totalitarianism, Arendt believes, served to annihilate human plurality; turn the plurality of human beings into “one man”; to lay claim any fundamental superiorities of one form of political action was to ‘eliminate all contention’ (McGowan 1997: 266) In a letter to Karl Jaspers cited in Vatter (2006) she observes that the lynchpin of totalitarianism was to render human beings in their individuality and capacity for newness, “superfluous”.

Questions of competence, the limits of human compassion, power and by extension, representability pepper The Ashley Smith Report, the author observing that many youth do not choose to appeal their sentences for infractions committed during their time in correctional facilities. This is because they believe that their attempts at appeal will not be taken seriously, thus she notes that avenues of ‘actual recourse’ within the ‘internal disciplinary system’ within the New Brunswick Youth Center (Richard 2008: 47) are virtually nonexistent. Richard (2008: 47) suggests that Ashley’s participation in the criminal justice system reified her status as a punishable offender. As Ashley Smith’s mother noted, when a child becomes a warden of the state, you lose your capacity to effect any sort of real change.

Not unlike Eichmann, our ways of treating the mentally ill are uncritical and often entirely career focused56. As one report suggested57, it was the “institutional failures”

that failed Ashley Smith, rather than the way she was treated as an individual: the
solution then, is fitter, happier and more productive bureaucracy. Thus, while there may
have been some serious revolutionary potential in the actions of Ashley Smith, the
potential to begin something new, in both the Arendtian and Rancièrian sense (which, I
have attempted to argue, amounts to much the same thing,) was almost entirely
foreclosed.

I suspect my conclusion will, as many conclusions do, leave us with more
unanswered questions. Did Ashley Smith succeed in making her life, and the depths of
her pain known? Did she make anything new? Has she taught us anything about the
nature of resistance? Our assessment of her is retrospective. As I conclude this thesis
chapter, she is the subject of yet another court battle. This time, the dispute examines
whether or not a video depicting Smith strapped to a gurney while being forcibly injected
with antipsychotic drugs, counts as evidence to be used that can unequivocally
demonstrate a shift in Smith’s psychic state prior to her death. Similar cases of highly
resistant young women, it must be noted, have gone unnoticed. Thus, I think it would be
unfair to attribute the legal battles that her death inspired to her actions alone; without
her mother’s insistence that her daughter’s death be acknowledged, Ashley’s death would
have been, in the words of Arendt, evidence that “nothing belonged to him and he
belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he never really existed.
(Arendt 1952: 452).” Indeed, while Ashley Smith’s life may have been short, she
certainly made certain that her life made its mark in the world of appearances.
Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, to put an end to a project that I was deeply invested in, seems an insurmountable task, especially in light of news that has surrounded the Ashley Smith case. The case, since I wrote this thesis, has undergone significant changes. Her death was ruled accidental, and not a suicide, something that might perhaps have had some implications for my interpretation, and was later ruled a suicide again. Most individuals who do successfully commit suicide, after all, don’t really intend to kill themselves, it is thought. This suggests, as I have suggested, that suicidal gestures are an ‘other means’ of communicating unhappiness. What I think we can draw from the theoretical component of this thesis is a different – though certainly not the only way – of interpreting the behaviours of Ashley Smith. The importance of seeing individuals in their singularity, with unique needs, as opposed to as a population, is emphasized throughout my project. Giving Ashley the space to provide some input into her own care – to speak for herself --might have led to different outcomes.

This project exists in opposition to the ways of knowing mentally ill individuals that is continuously affirmed in a biopolitical regime. Despite Ashley’s ardent attempts at being seen and known through what she communicated with the objects in her cell – attempts to speak ‘out of turn’ – our interpretive frame sputtered when it had to think of her as an individual in need of more than therapy, Seroquel and a nap.

Despite the fact that the Smith case did evolve over the course of the year, I think my major tenets, the significance of the made object for individuals who are under duress still remain true regardless of the intents of Ms. Smith. These private gestures, I argued, were intended to communicate both Ashley’s private unhappiness and to ensure that her case garnered some public attention. While I think (and have articulated) that Ashley’s case represents a site of change, where we are given the opportunity to transcend traditional biopolitical understandings of mentally ill individuals who are also incarcerated, I suspect that any opportunities for true change in the way we consider the mentally ill remain foreclosed. That being said, an area of inquiry which I did not delve into, except in brief gestures, was the curious ways in which the Canadian Correctional Facilities attempted to ensure some of the circumstances around Ashley’s death remained
opaque. The media served as an ally of the Smith family, though they themselves often relied on shallow conclusions, such as suggesting that Ashley Smith simply needed a proper diagnosis. As I have articulated, I don’t feel that having a deeply sympathetic media constituted a rupture in our sensible world or a dramatic shift; as Rancière himself notes, not all forms of policing are equally draconian.

Other recent news reports pertaining to Smith that did not worm their way into my project include the inquiry into the nature and amount of psychotropic medications Smith was taken (or sometimes, forcibly given via injection, something that is illegal in Canada.) An assessment done by an independent psychiatrist found that Ashley was prescribed medications that were inappropriate for her condition, as she was taking what appears to be a fairly high dosage of an antipsychotic medication daily, despite the fact that she had no psychotic symptoms. Thus, as he deduced, the medications were mostly given as a means of behavioural control (as I suppose all psychotropic medications are used) and sometimes even unnecessarily, the images on video cited by the psychiatrist showing two or three nurses holding a practically limp Ashley down. This is just another of many human rights abuses that Smith was subjected to during her time in the Canadian Correctional Facilities and thus, to fully treat this question would require another thesis length document. In this way, and especially given that the focus has been almost purely economic, with Bernard Richard, the spearhead of the ombudsman’s report noted that the care of seven youth cost the government nearly 1.3 million dollars, and thus, he made the case that better preventative measures could save money. Another thing that strikes me as relevant here is the importance of the visual in documenting the Ashley Smith; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation underwent a fairly rigorous legal battle to have access to the videos of Ashley Smith’s final moments. In this way, and especially given that the focus has been almost purely economic, with Bernard Richard, the spearhead of the ombudsman’s report noted that the care of seven youth cost the government nearly 1.3 million dollars, and thus, he made the case that better preventative measures could save money. Another thing that strikes me as relevant here is the importance of the visual in documenting the Ashley Smith; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

59 http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/2010-2011/behindthewall/
underwent a fairly rigorous legal battle to have access to the videos of Ashley Smith’s final moments. While the assertion that Ashley Smith’s death was an accident\textsuperscript{61} as opposed to a suicide committed with intent may indeed be true, and upon further reflection on my part, seems to make sense, it also deflects blame\textsuperscript{62}—though it did provide much needed comfort to Smith’s mother who refused to believe that her daughter would take her own life intentionally. Countless op-ed pieces littered the newspapers—this was not just a small case that made an sidebar headline, but rather front page news. People thought it was a tragedy, worthy of public outcry. We’ve become a slacktivist culture in many respects, our senses of self satisfaction derived from such serious displays of ‘activism’ to display such sentiments as ‘it gets better’ by wearing purple articles of clothing. The media’s preoccupation with Smith as a demonstration of the shoddy state of our prison system, and as a reflection of our governments’ endless desire to hide things from the prying public eye is noble, but given that they provide no real alternative routes to give Ashley what she really needed, they amount to little more than lip service.

\textsuperscript{60} \url{http://timestranscript.canadaeast.com/news/article/1421657}
\textsuperscript{61} \url{http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2010/10/29/ashley-smith-psychologist-inquest-lawsuit.html}
\textsuperscript{62} “We didn’t misinterpret her gestures— they were merely attention seeking gone awry.”
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