Encountering the Sacred in the Everydayness of Existence:
Oral History and the Phenomenology of Practice

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Abstract:

This thesis is an interdisciplinary endeavor combining personal narrative, oral history research methods and theory, and the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. It is based on a series of interviews conducted between 2015 and 2016 in New York City and Durham, North Carolina. The narrators featured are three unrelated individuals: Vic Ruggiero, lead singer of the punk ska band, The Slackers; Ed Shevlin, a New York City sanitation worker; and Wesley Hogan, the director of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Their stories are the thread that binds them in that their oral accounts work to illustrate the existential *encounter,* i.e. everyday encounters with the sacred—lived truth.

Table of Contents

A Childhood Encounter

The following vignette from my childhood nicely illustrates the topic explored in this thesis—the existential *encounter*. It was 1982, and I was eight years old. Dressed in my school uniform—seaweed green slacks, a yellow dress shirt, a green plaid clip-on tie, and brown penny loafers—I waited for my babysitter, Jennifer Benedetto, to pick me up from St. Roberts Parochial School in Bay Side, Queens. "You want to see the new KISS album I bought?" she asked upon arrival.

"Yes, let me see—oh please let me see," I said.

"Uh, not until you finish your homework," she replied.

Every Wednesday we'd go to her house to do homework and play games, until my mother came to pick me up at 6:00 p.m. for dinner. Jennifer was rock and roll obsessed. She'd jabber on and on about this or that band or concert. I didn't really know what she was talking about but her words fascinated me nonetheless. I'd listen intently. Jenifer was my first encounter with 'cool,' and while I really didn't know what that was either, somehow I knew she was it.

Jennifer often wore bellbottomed blue jeans, a beat up pair of blue and white J.C. Penny athletic shoes, and a faded KISS jersey—black with the remnants of white sleeves that had been cut off at her shoulders. The shirt featured KISS band members on the front and tour dates on the back. "I got it when I saw them at the Garden," she'd say. KISS was a late 1970s arena rock band; they frequently played at Madison Square Garden in New York City – a venue I associated with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus at the time. KISS was her favorite band, a heavy metal group known for their face painting

and theatrics. The band was comprised of four members: Paul Stanly the rock star, Gene Simmons the vampire, Ace Freely the space man, and Peter Chris the cat. I knew the band not for their music but because of a line of products that had been marketed to children: television cartoons, board games, action figures, and Halloween costumes.

At her home where she lived with her parents and brother, Jennifer had a large collection of KISS records. She'd always let me thumb through them if I finished all my homework. Some of them were double albums that opened up to pictures of the band members in fearsome poses or playing live in concert. Simmons was particularly animated: live images featured him sticking out his tongue and spitting blood or fire. "Can I borrow one?" I often pleaded.

"No way," was Jennifer's usual response. One afternoon I was particularly persistent. "Please, I promise I won't mess it up," I begged. To my surprise, she acquiesced. "Okay, but you better not fuck it up!" she warned. She handed me a KISS album entitled *Destroyer*. I gazed upon the spectacle in my hands with gratitude and wonder. The four members of the band were prominently displayed on the cover in full regalia. They were perched upon a rocky crag, lunging toward the heavens with their hands in the air. Behind them soared a dark blue sky and fiery clouds of orange and gold. Overhead, the KISS logo was prominently displayed—underneath it the title of the LP.

When I got home that night, I rushed to the downstairs foyer where my parents kept a large wooden armoire that contained a mid-1970s phonograph. I removed the shiny black record from the cardboard sheath, placed it on the turntable, and switched on the record player. The disk began to spin and the tone arm automatically sprang into

action. Seconds after the needle made contact with vinyl, a cacophonous clamor of metal objects gradually rose from the two stereo speakers that sat adjacent to the armoire. Suddenly I heard a television newscast—the anchor spoke of a fatal head-on collision and fugitives at large. With that, I heard a driver get into a car. The car and its radio started simultaneously. The driver then shut off the radio and revved the engine. The car then roared down a road – undoubtedly, the very car destined to crash.

"Detroit Rock City," the song proper began. A solitary undulating guitar riff rang out, followed by a harmonized second guitar—'na na na na…' 'Ba ba!'—the rest of the band entered, while the guitars continued in unison—'na na na na …,' this was followed by another group riff—'ba ba!' Stanly began to sing:

> I feel uptight on a Saturday night
> Nine o' clock, the radio's the only light
> I hear my song and it pulls me through
> Comes on strong, tells me what I got to do
> I got to
> Get up
> Everybody's gonna move their feet
> Get down
> Everybody's gonna leave their seat
> You gotta lose your mind in Detroit Rock City

The eruption of music announced itself as pure possibility and meaning—'truth.' 'This is rock and roll,' it said. In my estimation, this event was as good an example of encountering the sacred as any other, religious or otherwise—a true existential encounter. I was transfixed and transformed by the experience. Whenever freedom allowed, I would steal away and indulge in the precious gift bestowed upon me. I became thoroughly invested in my newfound ritual. I begged my mother for weeks to buy me my own copy. She begrudgingly agreed. The KISS record became my most prized possession—a

sacred object. Each time I listened to it, I was drawn back into a world of screaming guitars, thumping baselines, crashing drums and biting tenor vocals.

At eight years old, I knew nothing of phenomenology or oral history. I only knew that my encounter with rock and roll music was something special. As I have become acquainted with both academic disciplines, it has become clear to me that anecdotes such as the one I have presented above get to the heart of what both fields of study—in their respective ways—are all about: human experience. Let us now turn our attention to the study of phenomenology and oral history, as we shall explore what they are, what they may or may not have in common, and their corresponding roles in this thesis.

On Phenomenology and Oral History

The philosophical discipline of phenomenology, at least its 20th century, continental iteration, endeavors to "describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding," starting with the way each of us experience the world (Carman 2012, viii). Phenomenology puts forward a type of extreme subjectivism, in that the 'I' is the focal point of all possible experience; anything one can know about the world, even scientific knowledge, is highly perspectival (Merleau-Ponty 2013, XX). This, however, should not be viewed as some sort of solipsism, for phenomenology also advances a type of extreme objectivism, in that humans are fundamentally "'in' and 'of' the world" (van Manen 2014, 62). As Edmund Husserl famously said, phenomenology is a return "to 'things themselves'" (1970, 252). He is not referring to physical 'things' but to the phenomena or the "ideal contents of experience," as they are lived (*ibid*. viii). So it

follows that when we speak of 'the world' we are not talking about a physical object hurling through space but of "'lived space,' 'lived time,' and the 'lived world'" (*ibid*. XX). Rather than offering up causal explanations like those of the scientist, historian, or sociologist, its focus is on the world as humans experience it (*ibid*. XX). In practice, phenomenology is a descriptive discipline—its aim is to describe and not analyze, explain, or deduce (*ibid*. viii). It neither offers up testable hypotheses nor speculates beyond its bounds (*ibid*. viii).

On the other hand, oral history, as a method of research, is the production, analysis, and preservation of individual, first-hand accounts—reflections or memories—of past events, directly or indirectly experienced. Procedurally, it is the act of recording a formal interview with the intent of soliciting information about past experiences (Abrams 2010, 1). Alternatively, as the product of that creative process, it is also the physical outcome of such interviews. This can be in the form of audio recordings or written transcripts, which can then be analyzed and studied (*ibid*. 1). The work can then be presented to audiences in the form of a paper, book, web site, performance, etc. Alternately, oral sources can be archived for future researchers. It is true that unlike phenomenology, the oral historian is always analyzing the oral sources recorded and collected. That is not to say that the two cannot be used in tandem. For instance, in this thesis, a phenomenological approach is used to describe the experiences of my narrators, while more traditional oral history techniques and methodologies have been used to collect and analyze oral accounts.

Theoretically, oral history research is grounded in its focus on the subject or subjectivity. For oral historian Luisa Passerini, the notion of subjectivity has three distinct connotations (2007, 2-3). First, there is the question of *who* are the subjects of history, and how does their agency manifest? (*ibid*. 2). Passerini gives priority to the individual but notes that the collective can also present itself as the subject of history in the form of groups, family, race, community (*ibid*. 2). In this project we will see how stories told—recollections of various encounters—work to frame a certain type of subjectivity. They allow access to subjectivity through the narrator's choices. The events narrators choose to talk about say something about who they believe themselves to be, not only in relation to the occurrences described but also relative to the world more generally.

Second, for Passerini, there is an "inherited subjectivity or accumulated subjectivity" (*ibid*. 2). This, she emphasizes, is a "shared subjectivity" that spans "time and space" (*ibid*. 2). Passerini contends that subjectivity in this sense is the result of the process of cultural production, suggesting that subjectivity is cultivated by group members—passed down and renewed from generation to generation. In this thesis, shared subjectivity is implicit in the recollections of *encounter*, for these remembrances speak to the rootedness of the narrator. The stories my narrators talk about are intimately tied to a historical people in that they emphasize the narrator's relatedness or opposition to a cultural milieu.

Thirdly, what Passerini describes as "intersubjectivity" has to do with the dynamic relationship between the oral historian and narrator (*ibid*. 3). Narratives and their meaning are the product of interpersonal encounters. Oral historian Alessandro

Portelli concurs, pointing out that through the dialogical encounter—telling, listening, and the co-creation of meaning—oral historian and narrator together explore *the what*, *the why*, and the perceived *meaning* of past events (1990, 50).[1] Additionally, intersubjectivity has to do with the researcher's subjectivity. The oral historian's academic and cultural backgrounds—'world'—influence the work. Passerini further explains, "the subject is shaped through the relationship with the other" (2007, 8). There is an assumed tissue of experiences pre-existing the interview that the researcher attempts to capture while, ideally, being aware of his or her positionality (Passerini 2007, 4). It is clear that I brought a particular viewpoint to the interviews and this thesis as a whole—one might call it a phenomenological attitude (van Manen 2014, 32). It has undoubtedly influenced the work. Yet, consistent with Passerini's view, my approach is meant to tap into the existential meaning behind the encounters described by my narrators.

Passerini urges future researchers to explore the relationship between subjectivity and objects (2007, 12). In focusing on the nature of our encounters with things of the world—people, places, objects, and ideas—this thesis is a move in that direction.[2] I am essentially trying to understand the relationship between subjectivity and the things we happen upon in our everyday experiences. In the phenomenological view, the content of the world, to a large degree, is the content of our consciousness—where consciousness is generally equated to experience, which broadly encompasses "thinking, feeling and the

[1] Portelli's quote suggests, as we will see in the text, the oral history interview itself is an existential encounter, which is ironically the topic of this project. Your reading this text is also an encounter. We are encountering encounters described within encounters. We will see that they are not all the same.

[2] A notable difference between my work and Passerini's exhortation is that the encounters being examined in this oral history project might not always involve physical objects. Whether an idea, a person, or a place can be considered an object is an interesting question in itself, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

fact that a world 'shows up' for us in perception" (Noë 2010, 8). This view suggests that consciousness is a "joint operation of brain, body and the world…an achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context" (Noë 2010, 10). As such, consciousness, and by extension subjectivity, can only emerge as a result of what might be likened to "a dance that unfolds in the world with others" (Noë 2010, xiii). It is precisely this dance, or relationship in Passerini's terms, between subjectivity and encounterable phenomena of the world that this thesis looks to explore.

While oral history has been embedded in a wide variety of academic disciplines—including but not limited to sociology, anthropology, and psychology—it is particularly suited to phenomenology because of its emphasis on the "experience of experience" (Grele 2007, 53). Oral history—similar to phenomenology—aims to investigate past events as they were directly lived or experienced anew in the form of recollections or memories. This is not the first attempt to combine oral history and phenomenology. Kenneth R. Kirby is a notable example. In his view, the phenomenological approach to oral history focuses on the structure of human consciousness—on what particular individuals perceive and how they perceive it (Kirby 2008, 23). Kirby's description of the phenomenological method is edifying:

> Phenomenology assumes that we all have a prescientific, natural attitude toward the world around us, to the events we experience, and to the culture we have inherited, as these things appear to our consciousness; this natural attitude gives us a framework for interpreting our experience (*ibid*. 23).[3]

[3] It must be noted that this idea of a prereflective experience does not suggest that it is devoid of culture or context. The prereflective experience always presupposes a cultural milieu or world that is the object of our attention.

In Kirby's estimation, a phenomenological approach to oral history can minimize informant unreliability by focusing less on accuracy and more on the narrator's interpretation of an event, independent of whether it is true or false.

In this project we will be looking, indirectly, at the lived or prereflective moment as the happening of possibility and meaning—'truth' or a truth (van Manen 2014, 39). Lived experience, as such, has been systematically described as "a self reflexive or self-given awareness that inheres in the temporality of consciousness of life as we live it. 'Only in thought does it become objective'" (*ibid*. 39; Dilthey 1985, 223). The prereflective experience can never be captured because in thought we are always in the future or ahead of ourselves, but we can look back and reflect on the lived experience. This is precisely where oral history comes in. Oral history is mainly a reflective enterprise. In the oral history interview, the narrator reflects on and recounts past experiences. It is the objectification of lived experience in that it is the act of conceptualizing and verbalizing the lived past. Phenomenology has often looked to other disciplines such as literature, film, painting, and music in order to access lived meaning as it is evoked in the work (van Manen 2014, 41). That is precisely how oral history is being used here—as *illustrative of*, not *proof of* the existential *encounter*. Let us back up a moment.

What exactly is an existential? In this thesis the term is used in a strict Martin Heideggerian sense as it is laid out in his seminal work, *Being and Time* (2008a 32-35 §12-§15). The term is derived from the word *existenz,* which is designed to describe a

specific way Dasein[4] or the human being exists, i.e. human *Being* (Heidegger 2008a, 32 §12). To *Be* does not merely refer to one's physical existence but to the pure experience of *Being* and various features thereof. Derived from Latin, *existenz* means to "stand out" (Gelven 1989, 45). Existence in this sense is unique to the human animal in that existence "'*is an issue' for it*" (Heidegger 2008a, 236 §192; Polt 1999, 34). In other words, our experience matters to us. Human beings "stand out into future possibilities, into a past heritage, and into a present world" (*ibid*. 34). Unlike stones, we are not simply inert objects but entities that project ourselves outward towards a future and world that is full of meaning and of concern to us. Existence is tantamount to awareness—it is an existential characteristic of human experience rather than a substance that is *present-at-hand*[5] (*ibid*. 45).

Existentialia or existentials are said to round out and articulate our general mode of *Being*; these features of existence can be viewed as a set of qualities that make us who we are as humans (Wrathall 2013, 101). For Heidegger, existentials are universal characteristics of human experience, meaning all conscious people have access to them. To *Be* means to possess certain characteristics of existential potentiality. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger identifies several existentials, e.g. care, mine-ness, and angst. (2008a, 67-68 §42; 235 §191; 227 § 182). We should thus view these as existential care, existential mine-ness, existential angst, so on and so forth.[6] This thesis focuses on the

[4] Heidegger uses the term Dasein to describe human existence as such—*Being*. It translates to, "to be here," which emphasizes existence as lived time, lived space or a lived world. In this paper I will use human *Being* or experience, or human existence, throughout to facilitate understanding.

[5] Meaning inert objects we might encounter in the world: balls, cars, trucks, our bodies, etc.

[6] In its adjectival form, the term 'existential' modifies the meaning of a noun, as in the phrase existential philosophy. This means that we are talking about a specific type of philosophy.

existential *encounter*. It describes a particular type of human experience, i.e. an encounter characterized by meaning and potentiality. It has to do with our direct relationship or connectedness to the world. It is meant to describe the peculiar way we happen upon, get drawn into, and form relationships with encounterable phenomena. To use the term existential in its adjectival form in conjunction with the word encounter is also to suggest that *encounter* is a universal characteristic of human experience (*ibid*. 33). That is not to say that all human beings have the types of experiences featured in this project. Rather, it is to say that *encounter*, as such, is a possibility for all conscious human beings. The emphasis here is the way people experience things, not the details of any particular event. Existentials are distinct from the Greek philosopher Aristotle's categories (Heidegger 2008a 79 §54). Categories such as substance, quality, and quantity describe physical things, not qualitative processes as do existentials. The existential *encounter* is not a physical thing; it is an experiential event.

In order to facilitate understanding, let us turn our attention to an antonym provided by Heidegger. With its ending derived from the French language, the term e*xistenziell* or existentiell pertains to the ontic[7] world of particular things and specifics about them (2008a, 33 §13). This is closer to Aristotle's idea of categories. The difference between the two terms—existential and existentiell—is significant. In so far as existence pertains to the pure experience of *Being*, this, ontologically[8] speaking, is an existential issue. Existentiell, by contrast, is associated with the array of possibilities

[7] The term 'ontic' refers to physically existent entities and facts about them, e.g. the material world and facts about it.

[8] Ontology is a branch of metaphysics that deals with *Being*, not being as a physical thing but as experiential phenomenon.

available to human beings, the understanding of such possibilities, and the specific choices one makes or evades (Inwood 1999, 62). In other words, "If Dasein does what They[9] are doing, or alternatively chooses to choose and decides to become a soldier, a philosopher, etc., these are existentiell matters," not universal characteristics of human experience (*ibid*. 62). Existential matters are the array of facts related to such choices, e.g. historical facts.

In the following pages we will examine several excerpts from oral history interviews conducted with three individuals between 2015 and 2016. The events described correspond with the notion of the existential *encounter*, which we have been discussing thus far. The oral history selections are reflective illustrations that speak to the way we are ethically geared into a world of things that speak to us, touch us, draw us in, and in certain situations, reveal to us a sacred reality—sacred here meaning some kind of truth.[10] I will offer interpretations of certain events, but they are not to be taken literally—they are my interpretations. They are based on that which announced itself to me in the interview, for what is the oral history encounter but itself an existential encounter. Granted, an oral history interview might not be life affirming or life changing (that is not to say they cannot be), but like the events we will explore in this thesis, it is in the speaking of the narrator—the speech act—that a truth is revealed (see page 21). I see

[9] The "They" for Heidegger refers to the masses and the tendency of people to follow the crowd, so to speak (1962, 218 §174).

[10] I have omitted a more exhaustive definition of the term 'sacred' intentionally because in this thesis it is defined as anything that announces itself as such. It is a highly subjective view, based on personal experience. If something presents itself as having special meaning to my narrators or myself, or to you reading this text for that matter, it is enough to say that it is sacred. Sacred is whatever is deemed special, magical, truthful, unusually clear, or outright sacred.

oral history as an art form in that it is the artistic or poetic revealing of the *Being* of beings (see pages 34-37).

In the "Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger claims that true art—such as the Parthenon in Greece (completed in 432 BCE)—has the ability to gather and highlight significant relations, contextualizing and forming a special whole (2002, 20-21). For ancient Greeks, an encounter with the temple revealed what it meant to *Be* in the most general sense. Heidegger then goes on to ask if art can still reveal the truth of *what is* in the modern age. My work is an attempt to answer that very question. Today, in the era of cosmopolitan cities and suburban sprawl, perhaps we need not turn to great art for access to existential or ontological meaning. Everyday encounters with objects, people, places and ideas can be profoundly self-reflective, spiritual, and edifying. They can affect the choices we make and sometimes allow us to find a purposeful role to play in a complex and uncertain world. Oral history—a technological and modern art form—illuminates historically situated meaning by focusing on the experiences of people making their way through life in the everydayness of the postmodern world.

As you read the oral accounts featured in this thesis, take note of what announces itself to you, for each of us experiences worldly phenomena in a unique and personalized way. What announces itself to you reading the excerpted transcripts might not be what announced itself to me in the oral history interview. Similarly, what my narrators or I might see as sacred may not be to you. Regardless of how their stories speak to you, it is the relationship between things of the world and ourselves that is at issue. In being

attentive to the annunciative quality of the world—in this case the oral accounts—you are on your way to understanding the existential *encounter*.

"You go to Punk Shows, You Wear Boots"

I waited for Victor Ruggiero (AKA Bad Vic, Rugaroo, or Lord Sluggo), lead singer of the New York based, punk-ska band The Slackers, at 116th Street and Broadway—the front entrance of Columbia University. He resembled a modern-day, punk rock Bob Dylan—small in stature, thick curly hair, frizzy full sideburns, and a billed cap. Vic drove up in a beat up van—black primer paint job and belching black smoke from its rear exhaust pipe—an authentic rock and roll touring machine. I waved as I approached the vehicle. Vic leaned over and unlocked the passenger door; I jumped up into the cluttered cockpit. "Hey Jay, how ya doin'?" Vic said in a nasally New Yorkese.

"I'm good," I said, as I settled into the front seat.

The Oral Historian Ronald J. Grele emphasizes that "know[ing] something about the subject is at the heart of the interview" (N/A, 1). While I did do substantial research on Vic, I felt that I was at a disadvantage because it was our first face-to-face encounter. I did not know him personally, and I was unsure exactly how to position myself. I would have normally preferred to meet Vic for coffee beforehand, but because of his busy touring schedule, it was not possible. So as we drove to my apartment on 141st and Convent Avenue in Harlem—about five minutes from Columbia's main campus—I did my best to get acquainted with him. Fortunately, I found it easy to develop a rapport because in many ways I was an insider (Larson 2007, 111). Vic and I are both New

Yorkers and roughly the same age, he being two years older. While we differ in musical tastes—Vic having an affinity for the punk-reggae genre and I for rock and blues styles—we are both musicians. Vic is a multi-instrumentalist, singer songwriter and I am a guitar player. As we got to know each other, I laid out how the interview would proceed. I explained to him that we would start with his childhood and make our way to the present. As with all my narrators, I asked Vic to do his best to give me first person accounts of his life experiences. While I told him he should keep history in mind, I stressed that in recounting his past experiences he should always put himself at the heart of the story. I wanted his life story, not a history lesson.

Moreover, I chose to do a life history interview, with an emphasis on personal experience, because I wanted to connect Vic's oral accounts to the broad discourse of phenomenology, yet I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for. Generally, for this thesis, I knew that I was interested in meaningful events in my narrators' lives—transformative episodes that stood out in their memory—stories that might reveal who they see themselves to be and how they think they got there, i.e. existential encounters. It did not, however, seem appropriate to start by saying something like, "Tell me about an impactful event in your life." Or assuming my narrators new nothing of phenomenology, it definitely did not seem fitting to ask an esoteric question such as, "Describe for me your experience of an existential encounter." Rather, I wanted to tease out such stories within a contextualized understanding of the person behind the encounter (Starecheski N/A, 1). A life history approach seemed like the best way to bring out the phenomenological or lived meaning behind my narrators' experiences (*ibid*. 1). As such,

Vic and I started our first interview in the usual fashion. I asked him a two-pronged question:

> **GS:** Where were you born? Tell me something about your childhood.
>
> **VR:** I was born in the Bronx in 1971—in November. My parents were, um, civil servants. My mom was a teacher in New York public schools and my father was a cop. There's some funny stories even about my birth. You know, in that they are running out of the house. My dad always carried a gun and so he was, umm, so nervous that he was loading his gun on the way out of the house, and uh, dropped bullets all over the place—all over the floor. My mother always liked that story, so far as like, this was the entrance, you know, into the world for me—strewn with bullets all over the floor.[11]

The *who* in Vic's story quickly became apparent in this opening anecdote—he adopts and embraces the role of outcast. This self-Othering stands out, at least to me, as the core of his identity. The image of the floor strewn with bullets is a foreshadowing of what follows—the story of an unconventional and at times uncomfortable life.

> Uh, you know, I didn't have a carefree, uh, childhood. And school was really no pleasure because—I don't know why—for whatever reason—I didn't really get along too well with kids. I don't know, I was always, uh, the odd man out, you know. I always kind of felt like a little greasy, uh you know, funny looking kid that was on the sidelines.
>
> **GS:** What made you comfortable as a child?
>
> **VR:** Yeah, playing music was really the escape. I, umm, I started playing, uh, my grandmother's piano in the basement. I don't know, I must have been five—four, five years old. You know, because that's when I was down there doing it—five—six, I can't—I don't know. I, even, when I came into school—when I switched schools up into Westchester—because of this accent I got and because where I come from, everybody thought I was a tough guy, so everybody wanted to fight me, you know. I ended up fighting my way through the first year of my school—you know. And just really feeling like, 'God, just get me out of here!' Like I am, like, always in trouble—I'm always in enemy territory.

[11] There is little editing of the language in the transcripts. This is done in hopes that the reader might experience the orality of the narrator. Unfortunately, I do acknowledge how much is unavoidably lost of the oral in the text.

> [He later adds] Being in a band, being in the orchestra, is a great place to be because you have a large crowd of people—granted they're not tough guys and nobody's going to stand up for you, but there's a teacher there—you got something to do. You know, you kind of fall into a group and you can disappear.

Vic also found a sense of belonging among those whom he described as "juvenile delinquent types."

> They started to take a shine to me, and I realized, 'Oh, I could fit in with these guys.' Like, not to mention, these guys are scary and if somebody's got a problem with me, you know, which is usually one of these, like you know, these socially acceptable characters—that's a tough guy—baseball player, football player, you know, type that's gonna punch me or something. Well, I got this criminal guy that's friends with me now. Now, maybe, if I'm standing next to him, maybe this other guy—this football player's gonna think twice about it. I remember that. I remember once or twice, when we started to make friends with kids in high school. You know, that people would start to think twice about me. They were like, 'Oh, wow. Vic's like—he hangs out with these guys,' you know. And I thought, 'Yeah these are the guys I can learn from,' you know, 'these are the crazy people.' And I started to feel—that's when things started to look up because I started to have a connection with people.

A variety of encounters have already been brought up in Vic's accounts, but they are referred to indirectly. While the above excerpts are helpful in that they somewhat frame Vic's identity and his world, there are no first hand accounts that directly reference the type of phenomenon we are attempting to explore—the existential *encounter*. Roughly an hour into the interview, Vic related the following teenage experience:

> And of course I'm sixteen years old, you know. And I thought, 'God, you know I just look like a sucker.' Like everybody looks at me and they see sucker. They see pushover. Like, if I were a punk, nobody would fuck with me. If I had like a Mohawk, people would think twice. Like, if I had a chain hanging off my belt or if I had some kick ass looking boots. And that was a decisive moment. And I thought, 'You know what? I'm going to be a punk.' I'm like, 'This is over with—I'm tired of this,' and I slowly moved towards looking more punk and changing my dress and looking more militaristic.
>
> I think I was telling you about the boots. My friend gave me the boots. We were going to a show. I was just in my early days of going to punk shows and I went over my friend's house and he said, 'What size shoe are you? I got an extra

pair of boots I'll give to you.' They were these Vietnam jungle boots. So, not even really all leather, they kind of had canvas on the sides and stuff. And I said, 'Yeah okay, sure whatever.' You know, I was never that fashion conscious. So for me it was like ah, 'Yeah sure, I'll trust ya.' Boots—that's cool, you know. And, you say you know, you go to punk shows, you wear boots. This is what is supposed—it protects you too on top of it. Because you are going to be in this scary situation, with these punk rockers, you know. Who knows what can happen? You need steal caps on you boots. And I remember that they were a little small on me. And I was like, 'Yeah, but ok they fit.' He was like, 'You'll stretch 'em out, you'll stretch 'em out—just wear 'em everyday—get 'em wet and stuff like that.'

I must have worn them [the combat boots] for about two months straight. I don't think they ever fit perfect—you know? But I remember that that was my first key—it was like a magic item—you know, it was like a totem. Now you have permission man, like, you got invited in. You didn't go to the store and say, 'Yeah, give me those combat boots[12]—I think everybody's wearing them.' No these come from a guy that knows and he says they're cool and you can wear 'em and now you're cool.

It is thanks to Vic's boot story that the following phenomenological question arose: "What is the phenomenological meaning of such everyday encounters in the world?" The asking of such a question brought focus and order to Vic's narrative and to my oral history thesis project as a whole. The earlier fragments give us a rich account of Vic's personal struggles, cultural milieu, and of the historical period (1980s disaffected youth and punk rock music as a way to overcome adversity),[13] but the information in this particular story is presented in such a way as to highlight the impact and meaning of the boots. Vic's narrative suggests that our conscious experience is structured in such a way as to allow certain encounters to make indelible marks upon our lives. While such a claim

[12] Vic refers to the boots as Vietnamese jungle boots and combat boots. Here either the term 'boots' or 'combat boots' will be used, the former for its simplicity and the latter because it is a terms commonly used in the punk vernacular.

[13] Such details are bracketed as to get to the phenomenon, which is the encounter as it is experienced or recalled.

cannot be verifiably proven here—we are merely describing, not substantiating—such encounters nonetheless became the topic of this thesis.

While Vic's story is a reflection and not a direct example of the phenomenon being explored, there is enough in his account to pose the question: What is it in our conscious experience that allows for the springing-forth of *meaning*? Consciousness, in the phenomenological view, presupposes a world of encounterable possibilities. Borrowing the concept from his teacher, philosopher Franz Brentano, Husserl asserts that consciousness is characterized by what he describes as "intentionality" (2002, 41 & 79). This does not refer to *one's intentions* but to a kind of directionality or *aboutness* that is implicit in consciousness. In Husserl's view, "consciousness is always *consciousness of something*"—something to which our attention is drawn, whether it is actual or imagined (2012, 201; *ibid*. 62). Within the context of Vic's story, and others that will follow, this idea of intentionality is demonstrated as a kind of perceptual zeroing-in or a being-drawn-into. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides an appropriate analogy: when one is presented with certain elements of perception, whether they be seen, heard, touched or tasted, one focuses in on them, the way a camera moves in to provide a close-up view (*ibid*. 70). In this focusing in, the landscape or horizon of the event is closed off and the "object is opened up" (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 70 § 96).

Merleau-Ponty's observation, however, suggests that the zeroing-in is only half of the story. Combined with it there is also a springing-forth or, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, an opening up. Heidegger further explains:

> "*Phenomenon,*" the showing-itself-in-itself, signifies a distinctive way in which something can be encountered. "*Appearance*," on the other hand, means a

> reference-relationship which is in an entity itself, and which is such that what does the referring (or the announcing) can fulfill its possible function only if it shows itself in itself and is thus a phenomenon (2008a, 54 § 31).

In other words, encounterable phenomena in the world, like the pair of boots Vic describes in his story, have an annunciative quality—they "announce themselves" to us (Heidegger 2008a, 52 § 29). They announce themselves as contextualized possibility. This is in direct opposition to the classical western view that suggests that we are self contained, individuated subjects (Samson 1988, 16). Again, this view suggests a more fluid relationship between exteriority and interiority—beings and the world. For instance, one might encounter a pair of boots contextually as "*equipment*," for they have the characteristic of being "*ready-to-hand"* or ready to be utilized or worn (Heidegger 2008a, 101, § 71). Simply seeing a pair of boots, however, as Vic describes, does not reveal the equipmentality of boots (Heidegger 2008a, 98 § 69). This is only experienced in wearing or walking in the boots.

Human beings, however, are always and already thrown into a world of context and meaning. As such, the boots have an authoritative power because they are historically tied to a discourse or connected to an archaeologically situated group of statements (Foucault, 1982, 107). "You go to punk shows, you wear boots," is the advice Vic gets from his friend. This command and the boots themselves are "statements" in a strict Michel Foucaultian sense, i.e. "a modality that allows it to be in relation with a domain of objects, to prescribe a definite position to any possible subject, to be situated among other verbal performances, and to be endowed with a material repeatability" (*ibid*. 107). A statement, in essence, is the most elementary component of a discourse or a constellation

of speech acts or signs. It is a unit of content that is taken seriously—it has authority within an episteme or paradigm.

In bringing up the boots in the interview, Vic attests to their historical importance. The boots and the statement, "You go to punk shows, you wear boots," are situated among a vast array of statements that have authority within the punk culture. Yet they are also more than that. The discourse concerning 'what it means to be a punk' or 'what one wears to punk shows' is tied to a broader system of formations, which Foucault calls a "discursive formation" or "the principle of dispersion and redistribution...of statements" (*ibid*. 107). It is a continuum of discontinuity in which a multitude of discourses coexist, rupture, and mingle, e.g. the discourse of punk rock as it historically relates to or diverges from discourses concerning music, culture, and society. In a broader, ontological sense, the boots and the cited statement embody what it means to *Be* a punk, 'combat boots' being an outward expression of the punk experience. They stand out and exemplify what it means to be part of the counter-cultural community or world of punk, where being a punk is a way of *Being* in the world in that it is an available possibility for the historically situated human being. It is an established manner of actualizing oneself as an agent with meaning and purpose in a particular time and place, e.g. late 20th century New York City. Even if said manner of *Being* is a negative or antagonistic mode of *Being-in-the-world*.[14]

To give some historical context, the punk subculture is tied to the musical genre of punk rock, a derivative of rock and roll, which emerged simultaneously in the United States and United Kingdom in the late 1960s, with so called 'garage music' and bands

[14] The hyphenated term '*Being-in-the-world*' denotes the fundamental mind-body-world relationship (see page 9).

such as Iggy Pop & the Stooges, MC5, the Deviants and the Kinks (Stalcup 2001, 51). The punk genre gained in popularity in the 1970s with such notable acts as the Sex Pistols, the Dammed, the Ramones, and Sham 69.[15] Some suggest that punk was born out of boredom with, and a rejection of, the 1960s. While hippies espoused peace, love, an end to war, and the prevention of nuclear annihilation, the punks "behaved as if the nuclear holocaust had *already* taken place…Punks even looked like mutations. They were the radioactive rats who had survived the first strike" (Dalton 1997, 11-12).

Punk is still very much alive today, and while there are many permutations and differences of opinion, the punk esthetic or attitude can be described as irreverent, anti-establishmentarian, nihilistic, amateurist, and non-conformist (Prinz 2014, 84-586). Note the following quote by Billie Joe Armstrong, lead singer and guitarist of the contemporary punk band, Green Day: "A guy walks up to me and asks 'What's Punk?' So I kick over a garbage can and say 'That's punk!' So he kicks over a garbage can and says 'That's punk?' and I say 'No, that's trendy!'" (Heibert 2010, 1).[16] Always having seen himself as an "outcast" or "weirdo," it is its unconventional nature that attracted Vic to punk and to the boots his friend gave him, which were not bought in a store but given to him by a "guy who knows."

While there are many ways one can take on a punk style or look punk, and Vic certainly has his own view on the matter, body modification and mode of dress seem central to the subculture. Mohawks, shaved heads, non-traditionally colored hair, tattoos,

[15] Sham 69 was a big influence on Vic and his music.
[16] His statement is interesting also because one who considers him or herself a 'real' punk might consider Green Day trendy and conventional.

leather jackets, and decorative chains, are commonly associated with the punk mode of appearance. Often objects are worn in a way they are not intended to be, like wearing safety pins as jewelry or clothing adornments. Using an item in this non-traditional way can make them seem unique, genuine, or yes, sacred. This is especially the case if it is a gift by a fellow punk or, say, stolen, emphasizing more authentic or antisocial methods of acquisition over conventional consumerist modes of appropriation. The boots in Vic's oral account are a perfect example; they announce more than their mere situatedness as equipment or cultural artifact. They seem to transcend themselves, so to speak, and stand out in Vic's mind as something special—sacred (see page 38). Let us look again at the last two sentences of his oral account:

> But I remember that that was my first key—it was like a magic item—you know, it was like a totem. Now you have permission man, like, you got invited in. You didn't go to the store and say, 'Yeah, give me those combat boots—I think everybody's wearing them.' No these come from a guy that knows and he says they're cool and you can wear 'em and now you're cool.

According to Vic's account, there is something unique about the boots, i.e. their magical quality—totem. Are we to believe that the boots should be viewed in a similar light as say Gregorio Fernández's *Cristo yacente de El Pardo* (*reclining Christ*)? Commissioned in the 15th century by King Philip III, the sculpture was an erotic and violent rendering of the crucified Christ (Valis 2010, 58). Similar to other sacred relics of the period, patrons believed the sculpture to be "imbued with special powers" (*ibid*. 58). What's more, in the view of the Church hierarchy, the sculptural form itself was "held in higher regard" than painted works because "the art form spoke more directly to the spectator." (*ibid*. 58 &

McKim-Smith 1994, 23). In phenomenological terms, the sculptural form announced itself to its viewers as something holy—intimately tied to faith, metaphysics and God.

Vic's boots may not provide a direct link to the divine, or *Being* in general, as did religious artworks of the mid-Renaissance period, but it is in the speaking of the sculpture that the connection is made to the boots. In the same way the sculpture of the reclining Christ spoke the truth of *what is* to its onlookers, the boots announced some kind of transcendent truth to Vic—'totem.' Again, according to Vic, the boots were not simply purchased in a 'store,' i.e. acquired through an act of vacant or alienated consumerism, which is devoid of the connections to authenticity, community, and spirituality a gift might have. The boots, rather, were bestowed—a sacred gift. For Vic, it seems as though it is in the bequeathing of the boots that the sacrosanct is announced. To be clear, there is nothing inherently sacred about a pair of combat boots. In addition, there are a wide variety of socio-cultural reasons why Vic might experience the boots as sacred, all of which are related to his particular life world. What is significant is the way in which everyday objects—gifted or otherwise—can speak to us and transcend their ordinary modes of *Being*, in that we can experience such events in a variety of ways (one of which being as sacred) that have less to do with their physical reality and more to do with the context or life world in which they are encountered.

God and Country

In the spring of 2015 I had the opportunity to interview Edward Shevlin, a sanitation worker from the Rockaway section of Queens, New York. It was my first

experience with oral history. I had taken a class entitled, "Laborers of Waste," taught by Robin Nagle, the director of the Draper Program at New York University. The class was designed as an introduction to oral history with a focus on urban anthropology. Each student in the class was tasked with completing an oral history project and paired with a New York City sanitation worker.[17] I was assigned to interview Ed, who is somewhat of a celebrity sanitation worker—a recognized neighborhood hero, Fulbright Scholar, and patriot.[18] A quick Google search led me to several YouTube videos and articles that highlighted many of his accomplishments.

I was a bit uneasy about meeting Ed because it was very apparent from my research that he had right-leaning political views that were different from my own, which are anarchistic and leftist. Valerie Yow notes that differences in ideology, race, gender and social class can all have a great impact on an interview (1997, 72/78). I was suddenly aware of my own subjectivity and the influence it might have on the project. Luckily my initial fears abated as my first encounter with Ed unfolded at Café Reggio, an historic West Village coffee shop where we talked for roughly an hour. This initial meeting proved highly beneficial as it allowed me to find the equality needed to "reach a more open communication" (Portelli 1990, 31-32). I learned that aside from our political differences, Ed and I had quite a lot in common. We both had at least one parent that was a European emigrant; we both left school early in life; and we were both non-traditional students pursuing masters' degrees at NYU. Confident that our first meeting had

[17] This project culminated in a term paper entitled "Either/Or: Somewhere Between Individuality and Community," which attempted to demonstrate how individuals do not politically fit into strict categories, such as Democrat or Republican—Conservative or Liberal.

[18] In 2009 and again in 2011, the Irish Fulbright Commission awarded Ed scholarships to study at the National University of Ireland, where he studied Irish language.

provided me with a concrete plan to move forward, I met with Ed several weeks later and conducted a formal oral history interview. I settled on a biographical approach in hopes of understanding the ways in which Ed's identity informed the stories he told (Starecheski N/A, 1).

Ed was born at Peninsula General Hospital in Rockaway, Queens New York. He looked back on his childhood as a simpler time—a time of carelessness and comfort. He described his early years as "idyllic" (Scala 2014, 7). While I understood that the 1950s and 1960s were prosperous times for some white, working class Americans of European descent, this term 'idyllic' stood out in my mind. So I asked him to elaborate.

> GS: What was idyllic about it? Describe what that means to you—idyllic in what way?
>
> ES: Well as I said, there were loads of children. There were plenty of playmates. There was a lot more innocence when I was growing up. There were no broken families. Mom and Pop were both there. Most houses had a little slew of kids running around them at some time. You didn't have to worry. Children had a lot more freedom than they do now. There weren't as many influences from the media. If there were any kind of bad people around, we really didn't hear about it.
>
> GS: What time period, precisely, are you talking about?
>
> ES: Well, I was born in 1960, and I started playing on my own outside the house when I was three years old. As soon as I was old enough to ride a tricycle, I started asserting my independence. And, I would ride around the block—lap after lap.
>
> GS: So, it was an idyllic American cultural place to grow up?
>
> ES: Yes, it was fairly Norman Rockwellesque.
>
> GS: Right.
>
> ES: There were flags on most of the houses. Most of the fathers were either World War II vets or Korean War vets. When I was a very little kid, we weren't

> yet in Vietnam. So, it was a peaceful time and a time of relative prosperity, I guess. Because, my dad didn't make a lot of money, but we never went hungry and we always wore clean clothes. And, family was the most important thing.

Ed remembers no broken families, no hunger, no menacing media influences, and no "bad people." Maybe Ed really did have an idyllic childhood, at least that is the way in which it is remembered. Alternatively, it occurred to me that his sentimental musings of a simpler time might be an example of what Passerini describes as an interstitial space "between silence and oblivion" (2007, 16). In Passerini's view, silence—that which is not said—can lead to oblivion, a cultural or individual forgetting (2007, 17). So what is to account for the omissions in Ed's story? It could be, perhaps, one of two things: either he was reluctant to reveal negative childhood memories or Ed's memories were colored by the present. Ed claimed, "If there were any kind of bad people around, we really didn't hear about it." His stament itself is telling and culturally significant. It intimated to me that there might have been certain 'bad people around,' which simply weren't talked about. A 1997 study by the National Opinion Research Center concluded that 40% of Irish Americans reported that problems with alcohol existed in their homes during childhood, "reflecting a very high rate of alcohol related problems" (N/A; O'Dwyer 2001, 207-208). What's more, because of a culturally embedded sense of "malignant shame"[19] in Irish culture, "there is often a tendency to keep the behavior of problem drinkers a secret from the outside world" (O'Connor 2012, 3).

[19] It has been cited that the shame associated with alcoholism in Irish culture has deep historical roots, tied to 700 years of extreme poverty and occupation of European Irish by the British, which has produced a "national inferiority in Irish Catholics," hence the term "malignant shame," which is characterized by chronic fear, suppressed rage, self-loathing, procrastination, low self-esteem, false pride and a vulnerability to use alcohol as remission for suffering—past and present" (*ibid.* 3).

Ed himself is a recovering alcoholic. In a second interview focused on addiction, I asked Ed about the role of alcohol and drugs in his community (Scala 2015, 00:01:05).[20] His response is telling:

> ES: To the outside observer, that might not be immediately apparent but there certainly was a big drinking culture. And in the 1970s that led to a fair amount of drug use around the neighborhood, too.
>
> GS: Okay, describe, umm, describe some of the activities where drinking would take place when you were a child.
>
> ES: Yeah, my eighth grade graduation party. Umm, well it wasn't actually mine but our parties that took place at a lot of my friends' homes were keg parties, where thirteen year olds were allowed to drink beer. The parents bought the beer and the kids were allowed to drink it.

Ed was willing to talk about alcohol and drugs in this second interview, but he acknowledged that substance abuse might not have been "immediately apparent" "to the outside observer." This indicated to me that there was, in fact, a culture of silence at work in his community around addiction. And while Ed opened up about the use of alcohol and drugs, he was silent about other issues that are commonly associated with addiction, such as domestic violence, crime, automobile accidents, and overdose. Sure, there may not have been many "broken families," but this might have been due to the cultural stigma associated with divorce at the time. In Irish communities of the 1950s and 1960s, I imagine wives, and presumably husbands, preferred to suffer in silence rather than separate. As far as "bad people" go—that is a relative concept.

[20] This second interview was conducted for an oral history project focused on addiction entitled, "Socially Inclusive Approaches to Addiction: The Stories of Sanitation Workers in Recovery."

Alternately, based on what I knew about Ed's political views, I wondered if his recollections of the past were colored by the way he sees the world and his community today. According to Daniel Bertaux, "stories about the past are told from the present, from a situation which may have changed over the years and defines a new relationship to the past" (1982, 98). This idea allowed me to put Ed's comments into perspective. Perhaps it is the case that Ed's childhood memories are idyllic compared to what he sees going on around him today, i.e. the deterioration of white Judeo-Christian American values and culture. It is my contention that this is particularly apparent in Ed's description of an existential encounter with the American flag:

> So from 1993 to the present day, I've been rescuing American flags. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, umm, people were still cleaning up. And all the flags had been destroyed in the whole neighborhood—all the flags that flew off the front porches of my neighbors' homes—all the flags that were in their little flowerpots. Umm, they had all been desecrated. And they started turning up in the garbage. The people were harried. They had so much to deal with.
>
> On Flag Day of that year, I awoke with a premonition that I was going to be getting flags in the garbage. Now, this is June the 14th of 2013, and I know there's going to be flags there. And they weren't coming up as much anymore because the heavy cleanup had been done, umm, but some of the lighter work was still being done. And that day I got three American flags in the garbage. And I knew that they were coming. And I took pictures of them with my camera phone. Each day I would take pictures of the flags that I saved.
>
> Now, if someone threw them out—if they got thrown in the garbage—I took pictures at the back of the truck, by the hopper,[21] holding the flag. And I saved them; I put them on the side. People started coming out of their homes and handing me flags, and this was a very Norman Rockwellesque kind of thing. Mom and Dad and two little girls or a little boy and a little girl, each holding a flag—come out and say, 'Now give the flags to the sanitation man, Honey.' And they would give me the flags. And then I would take pictures of those flags in the front of the truck, at the end of the day. And if you go to my Facebook page, you'll see pictures in the back—flag pictures in the front.

[21] The 'hopper' is the mechanism on garbage trucks that compacts the refuse collected. It is traditionally located in the rear of the truck.

> The flag is more than a piece of cloth. When a flag flies over a house or an institution—whether it's a sanitation district, an army base, a hospital, a school, or the front porch of a family's home, that flag is said to be in service. It's different; it's not just a piece of cloth. It's the symbol of our nation, and it's sacred. And people go to war for that flag. People have laid down their lives for it. So this is not to be used as clothing. It's not supposed to be underwear or pants that one farts through. It's not supposed to be a shirt that your armpit sweat runs into—or you spilled ketchup on it. This is the one piece of cloth that we set aside, we salute it, we venerate it, and we fly it with pride.

Again, my own anarchistic political views negatively affected the way I interpreted Ed's story. He had received some local media attention for his, "Save Old Glory" campaign. And while Ed's acts were seen as noble and patriotic to many, I viewed them as largely symbolic and insignificant. They represented to me an example of what Slavoj Žižek sees as the nature of political subjectivity today: unable to concretely challenge the power structure or affect the lives of real people, we are reduced to the passive observer and left to resort to insignificant symbolic acts, like recycling paper, buying pink ribbons, and yes, saving American flags (2011, 423) It is not as though I thought the American flag is unworthy of respect; but, it struck me that his actions did not benefit anyone. Why not rescue actual soldiers? In 2014 there were reportedly 50,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who were either homeless or on the verge of homelessness (Zoroya 2014, 1). Gradually, I began to see things differently.

According to Ed, "The flag…[is] more than a piece of cloth." For him it literally represents the souls of soldiers. It is symbolic of the hallowed American landscape—the sacred life world. Looking upon the desecrated and tattered American flags, discarded in the trash, the decay of the white, Judeo-Christian American landscape announces itself in the encounter. In a strict Jacques Lacanian sense, the flag is the embodiment of the "Big

Other" or the symbolic order, i.e. the symbolic structure or law that governs the socio-cultural landscape (2007, 546). It is the fabric that binds the desolation of the present to Ed's "idyllic" past. What's more, in this act of rescuing the American flags, Ed seems to recover some remnant of his idyllic, Rockwellesque past, as he describes wholesome scenes of people—parents and their children—coming out of their homes to give him flags so as to be properly discarded. Once in his possession, Ed brought the flags to the United States Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York to be ceremoniously burned. Even reduced to a rag, for Ed, the flag still embodies what is best about American society and therefore merits a ritualistic cremation—a sacred object appropriately attended to, thus buttressing his idyllic scenes of the wholesome family with a cinematic style, dramatic reverence and honor for the flag. I pictured in my mind a twenty-one-gun salute and soldiers walking lockstep as if it were a ceremony one might witness at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.[22]

Ed's attitude towards the flag brought to mind a notion of the sacred explored by Herbert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly in their book *All Things Shining*. It can aptly be described as an attitude "of gratitude and wonder" (2011, 61). It is not a theological or metaphysical quality, yet individuals might experience it as such. Dreyfus and Kelly assert that this notion of the sacred was an intrinsic part of Greek life in the Homeric Age and is expressed in the Greek noun '*arête'* or 'excellence'[23] (2011, 61). Etiologically

[22] A tomb dedicated to unknown service men killed in battle.

[23] This idea of excellence has been somewhat bastardized in our modern age. According to Dreyfus and Kelly, Frederic Nietzsche was among those who partially got it wrong. Nietzsche was right to note that

related to the Greek verb '*araomai'* or 'to pray,' 'excellence' stresses the importance of an appropriate relationship between an individual and whatever a culture might view as sacred, e.g. the Greek gods, the world, or anything else that is beyond us (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011, 62). Dreyfus and Kelly claim that in the Homeric Age the best possible life required a sense of gratitude and wonder towards whatever a culture or society viewed as worthy of devotion (2011, 64/67). This is an attitude that Dreyfus and Kelly see as lacking in what they describe as our nihilistic secular age (*ibid*. 64/71).

One does not have to blindly believe in the Greek gods, however, to understand this view; it is enough to accept the idea that we live in a world of shared experience (meaning with others) that is constantly acting upon us (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011, 79). In other words, we are not the sole source of our actions. People, objects, places, or ideas are constantly affecting us in various ways. We can see this at work in Ed's oral history. Ed's attitude toward the flag—or more broadly the American landscape—is the type described by Dreyfus and Kelly, i.e. one of gratitude and wonder. The flag is the sacred object that founds a people, country, homeland, or life world. The flag is looked on and revered as a truth: America! The sacred shines forth in that which—at least among some—is symbolic of the ideal modern liberal republic.[24]

This, however, begs the question: What is the difference between a seemingly secular sacred object—like combat boots and the American flag—and actual sacred relics, such as Fernández's *Cristo yacente*? This opens up an entirely new question for

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the Judeo-Christian idea of virtue is totally different than that of the Greek notion of excellence, stressing humility over heroism. Yet, he failed to see that it not only refers to strength and nobility but also to the notion of gratitude and wonder, which is central to the Greek notion of excellence (2011, 62).

[24] Here I am using liberal in the classical sense as to denote the liberal form of government. I am not referring to the differences between political parties, such as Democrats and Republicans.

phenomenological inquiry, and while it cannot be fully addressed in this thesis, we may approach it, and the question of how exactly truth announces itself in the flag, by returning to Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." First we should ask what the objects encountered in Ed and Vic's respective stories, which are not strictly speaking works of art, have in common with Heidegger's conception of art. Heidegger explains, "The artwork opens up, in its own way, the *Being* of beings. This opening up, i.e. unconcealing, i.e. the truth of beings, happens in the work…Art is the setting-itself-to-work of truth" (2002, 19). This truth Heidegger describes is a lived truth; the work of art opens up or founds a world. In varying degrees, some kind of truth is being revealed in Ed's encounter with the American flag and in Vic's encounter with the combat boots. Before the connection is made, however, Heidegger's conception of art will require some further explanation.

Heidegger provides two examples of what he considers true works of art: the rendering of a pair of peasant shoes by the Dutch Post-Impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh and a Greek temple, perhaps best exemplified by the Parthenon in Athens constructed in the 5th century BCE (2002, 13 & 20). We will soon see how these two examples relate directly to the combat boots and the American Flag in Vic and Ed's respective stories. The former—van Gogh's Peasant Shoes—is an example of representational art. The work is meant to convey something, in this instance a pair of peasant shoes. For Heidegger, however, the painting is much more than a simple rendering of peasant shoes: it is an allegory or symbol, manifesting more than what is being represented (2002, 3). Transcending mere representation, the peasant shoes "speak"

or announce themselves (Heidegger 2002, 15). This 'speaking' is what Heidegger describes as an unconcealment; what is being revealed is "what the shoes, in truth, are" (*ibid*. 15).

Let us recall what the combat boots revealed to Vic—a truth about what it means to be punk. Heidegger is not talking about truth as in factuality; he is referring to a notion of truth borrowed from the Greek term "*aletheia,*" meaning "the unhiddenness of existing reality" or "the unconcealment of beings" (Jaeger 1958, 61; Heidegger 2002, 28). Truth in this sense is an event or a happening; it is the rising up out of concealment into the openness of being, i.e. the springing up of significant relations in a context or living whole (*ibid*. 61). Heidegger writes:

> From the out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely soiled heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening falls (2012, 14).

Again what should be gleaned from this excerpt is that truth is world revealing or world founding—van Gogh's rendering of the shoes opens up the world of the peasant.

Heidegger next goes on to explain just how the *happening of truth* happens in the work of art. To do so he refers alternately to the Greek temple (Heidegger 2002, 20). Again the temple is distinct from the van Gogh painting because it is not representational. It represents nothing but the work (as in the art work or work of the artist) "standing-in-itself" (Heidegger 2002, 19). In a true work of art, such as the Greek temple, the artist's historical vision is chiseled into the stone. It is embodied in the medium. This contextualizes the earth from which the art was made allowing the truth of *what is* to

shine forth, as in the world of a historical people, e.g. the Greeks of the Periclean Age. According to Heidegger:

> The temple first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expense of these open relations is the world of this historical people (Heidegger 2002, 21).

Again, we are talking about 'world' in an un-objective sense. Ancient Greeks had a world, as do Vic and Ed. Each of us has a world that delineates the coordinates of our historical being (Jaeger 1958, 62). For the Greeks, to be in the presence of a temple, such as the Parthenon—its towering columns, imposing pediment, and statue of Zeus, which sat within the great cella—was an encounter with what it meant to *Be* Greek: culturally, socially, politically, and metaphysically. Yet the world that emerges from the work of art is historically bound. In other words, the Greek temple no longer 'works' as a work of great art because the ancient world of the Greeks has long since faded away. We no longer look upon such structures as the opening up of truth. In its most general sense, they no longer embody what it means to *Be*. A work of art in this strict Heideggerian sense is only a work so long at it is world revealing in the eyes of its preservers or patrons—a historical people (2007, 47). This is precisely why I declared at the outset of this thesis that we need not look to such art works for truth in the postmodern age; it is my contention that it is present in our everyday encounters. The boots for Vic and the American flag for Ed work precisely in this way. In short, they are world revealing or world founding.

In elucidating this point, we can now attempt to take a stab at the question we setout to address earlier in this section: What is the difference between actual sacred relics and the seemingly secular sacred objects encountered by Ed and Vic? This is tied to the question of whether art in the modern age still works the way it did for our ancient Greek ancestors, i.e. revealing of our historical existence or *Being*, which Heidegger asks in the epilogue to, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Heidegger 2002, 51; Bruin 1992, 56). We can approach these questions by noting the difference between Heidegger's own examples of art: van Gogh's rendering of the peasant shoes and the Greek temple.

For Heidegger, the van Gogh painting is distinct from the Greek temple in that the painting only opens up a world in a narrow sense. What is revealed in the painting is the *Being* of a particular type of being, i.e. the peasant shoes within the context or world of the peasant (*ibid*.14). The Greek temple, by contrast, in Heidegger's view, reveals what it means to *Be* in its most general sense—the Gods were all present there—life and death, the essence of existence all shined forth in its structure (*ibid*. 21). This also seems true of Fernández's *Cristo yacente*. For Christians of the Middle Ages, the sculpture brought them face to face with, what was for them, their very real transcendent existence: life, death, and the hereafter. The American flag flying in its heroic greatness is identical to the Greek temple and the reclining Christ. While symbolic, the flag as the sacred beacon of the American life world gathers and founds the coordinates of the American ethos—freedom, liberty, equality, democracy, capitalism—and the socio-political world in which that all plays out. God and country are embodied in its majesty—"one nation under God,

indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."[25] Alternatively, the tattered and violated flags, encountered by Ed, announce the death pangs of the American Dream. They 'work' as a call to duty: "I want you for U.S. Army."[26] Ed answers that call (see page 44). Vic's combat boots, alternatively, are analogous to the van Gogh painting and highlight the contextualized interrelated realm of punk rock, situated within a world. Yet they fall short of revealing what it means to *Be* in a broad and general sense. An encounter with a pair of combat boots might stop and prompt one to reflect generally on life, and perhaps in Vic's case they do, but that is an all-together separate issue (see page 42).

One might contend that the above argument is false because flags and combat boots are not works of art. It is true that Heidegger views art as distinct from other encounterable objects, which he defines broadly as equipment, in that they are *ready-to-hand*, or objects that are available for people to use in various ways. Unlike a hammer that is specifically used for hammering, a true work of art has no other purpose than that of being art. Yet Heidegger goes on to say that all art can be reduced to poetry in two distinct ways (2002 45-47). In the broadest sense, art is poetic because it allows truth to shine forth in a unique and illuminating way (Stulberg 1973, 264). In a narrow sense, art is the poetic opening up of the world through language (ibid. 264). According to Heidegger, "language is the house of Being" (2008b, 236). It is only through language that human *Being* is illuminated. Language is the 'opening' that first opens up or founds a world.

[25] Quote from the United States Pledge of Allegiance, a pledge dedicated to the American flag.
[26] This slogan is from a United States propaganda poster used throughout the 20th century for military recruitment—a call to arms.

As such, it is Foucault's "speech act" or "statement" that raises ordinary objects—like flags or boots—to the level of the poetic, allowing them to transcend themselves, like when a young person puts on a pair of boots and says, "That's punk!" or when Betsy Ross stitched together the first American Flag and early Americans looked upon it and declared, "That's America!" (see page 21). It is in this way that such objects become symbolic or allegorical, referring to something other than themselves. Take for instance van Gogh's rendering of peasant shoes. One might be surprised to learn that they are not peasant shoes at all but a pair of shoes van Gogh found at a Paris flea market (Horton 2009, 1). They never fit him properly so he used them as a prop for painting. It is in creating the work and naming it that the *opening* or contextualization of the work occurs. The same is true of the flag. As Ed proclaims, [the American flag] "is the one piece of cloth that we set aside, we salute it, we venerate it, and we fly it with pride." This is equally true of Vic's combat boots: "You go to punk shows, you wear boots," is the poeticizing statement that raises the boots to the level of art. The American flag and the combat boots become more than mere objects—they transcend themselves, they found communities, sacred spaces, or worlds—worlds Ed and Vic can be part of—where they can see themselves as agents with a powerful role to play and a meaningful destiny. It is encounters such as those of Ed and Vic that suggest to me we need not look to great art for the opening up or founding of truth—the sacred. It is a phenomenon available to us in our everyday experiences. Even objectless encounters can allow for this type of opening, events to which we will now turn our attention.

The Body Sacred

I met Wesley Hogan, director of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, at a public event entitled, "Who Gets to Tell the Story?: A Fresh Approach to Collaborating with Activists to Create Archives," part of a bi-weekly oral history workshop series hosted by Columbia University's Oral History Master of Arts Program. She was accompanied by Charles E. "Charlie" Cobb, Jr., the Mississippi field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1962 to 1967. They had come to speak on the archiving and dissemination of oral history and documentary materials dealing with racism and activism. Wesley began her talk by relating a story about her first childhood encounter with racism:

> I'll tell a quick story about being seven. So I grew up in Philadelphia, umm, in a totally segregated community—all white community. It was in the city but it was—umm—you know, as a six and seven year old, I didn't know, but what was new was I was really athletic and I was in an all girls school and I was kind of the outcast kid [be]cause, you know, there were a lot of girly girls. And so, umm, in second grade I had a friend suddenly because she was a really good athlete, too, and we hung out a lot.
>
> And, umm, I had a birthday party in June and she [Wesley's great-grandmother] wouldn't let her come. And so that was my first indication of anything around, umm, race. And I suddenly had a, sort of, immediate fight with my great-grandmother who had, umm, set the parameters. And for the next ten years I was trying to figure out what the hell happened.

This story, and particularly one featured in the next section of this paper, inspired me to speak more with Wesley. So I arranged to meet her at Duke University and traveled to North Carolina to conduct the interview. While I would have preferred to take a life history approach with Wesley, it was not possible due to time and logistical constraints. I settled for asking some background questions and then some pointed ones having to do

with my main topic—the existential *encounter*. Her stories of *encounter* bring us back to questions of subjectivity.

Passerini, reflecting on contemporary feminist thought and culture, explores notions of subjectivity or becoming a subject in the face of what she describes as the "death of the subject" in contemporary thought and academic fields, such as the sciences and particularly Western philosophical thought (2007, 35-36). Rather than falling back on classical notions of subjectivity, she proposes a concept of the subject that is as "flexible and wide as possible in order to accommodate all possible devices and inventions of the subject" (Passerini 2007, 34). Such forms of subjectivity can be recognized in situations where women, and men I presume, have been faced with having to cope with various difficulties, e.g. having to do with gender, race, ethnicity, economic status (*ibid*. 34). Consistent with the phenomenological view of the subject, Passerini puts forward a notion of the subject that is embodied and fundamentally in a world with other people in intersubjective relations of recognition and self-reflection (2007, 36-37). Conflicts, Passerini asserts, are particularly important to the notion of becoming a subject and involve questions of ethics, power, and identity (2007, 41-43). An existential encounter can be the site where such conflicts take place and are sometimes resolved when the experience is so powerful that it might cause one to reflect and reevaluate one's place in the world, as we will see in Wesley's case.

What's more, Passerini's notion of becoming a subject is always a "historical process, a series of changes and not a static condition" (2007, 37). Becoming a subject is not simply a state of *Being*; it involves an expanse of life experiences that shape us,

broaden our understanding, and expand our self-awareness. This is particularly evident in Wesley's encounters. Moreover, what struck me about the conflicts Wesley describes in her oral accounts is her opposition to normalized forms of racism and sexism, particularly because she was raised in a community where negative views of African Americans and patriarchal values were commonplace. We saw the latter in the above story about a conflict between Wesley and her great-grandmother. I directly asked Wesley about her rejection of culturally entrenched racism:

> **GS:** I'm sure [I meant to say 'It seems'], like, you grew up in an environment that was very racist, in ways. How come you didn't just go along with that? Why did you choose to go a different route?
>
> **WH:** I had a really strong sense of fairness that—I don't remember where it came from.

Wherever it came from, this "sense of fairness" and justice seemed to be central to Wesley's self-identity. It is present in the encounters she described, and it speaks, in a phenomenological sense, to the ethical nature our conscious experience more generally. I presume the events Wesley described elicited this sense of fairness in her; it was certainly reproduced, and recognized by me, in her recollecting and telling of the stories. Take for instance the following anecdote:

> I was pre-med. I was at an institution that was renowned for its pre-med curriculum, and they had a really intense program. There were kids that wanted to be doctors and so you not only had to do this coursework but you had to do an internship. And the internship that they placed me in because of my gender was being a rape crisis councilor at a downtown hospital.
>
> So my gig was, I'd show up there on weekend nights and I'd have like a ten to ten—10:00p.m. to 10:00a.m. shift. And you'd sit in this small little room for most of the time, but if somebody came in that had been sexually assaulted, you were sort of their advocate. So you'd get them water. You'd call somebody for them. You'd tell them what was going to happen. You know, you'd just basically be there for them. And if you had a particularly bad call—if the person who

came who had a really bad experience and talked to you about it, you could call somebody who was a part of this organization and, sort of, debrief to get, uh, you know, some relief mentally.

So, one night I had a really really bad call. It was a child. And, umm, it was 3:00 in the morning and so I felt guilty calling the—the people on the list. And I knew that—someone had told me that inside of this little, like, waiting room where the volunteers would sit, that there was a closet that had journals in it—that you know, people sometimes wrote about their calls.

So I came back to the room, and I opened up one of these journals to write my story—call anyone—umm—I started reading the stories. And it was really, really hard because it was one little journal, and it was so many stories of people doing horrible things to other people, many of them vulnerable people, umm like, inexplicable human behavior.

And, so on the one hand I was this activist, and I was working for justice, and on the other hand, well, when I grow up I'm going to be a doctor and fix people and that'll also, you know, create more justice in the world. But then I saw this thing, and I put the book back in the closet. And then I realized that in the closet there were about thirty-five other journals filled with those stories.

And so I was a sophomore in college and I thought, 'I can't fucking do this. Like, I can't go be a doctor because I'm just basically patching people up. The bigger problem is that people keep getting sexually assaulted, or race keeps driving racist policies.' So, I had this crisis about—'I can't be a doctor anymore. What am I going to do?'

Nicely illustrated in the conflict Wesley describes in the above excerpt is the existential *encounter's* ability to pull us out of our everyday dealings with the world. Her experience seems to clear a space for a profound crisis of meaning, followed by deep self-reflection, and action (Polt 1999, 75). In Heidegger's view, humans, for the most part, are involved in the average *everydayness* of the world, which is characterized as "falling," i.e. we are thrown into a contextualized world of preexisting contingency—*averageness* being the "existential characteristic of the 'they'" (2008a, 164 §127). What this means is that in our everyday dealings in the world, we are not necessarily conscious of *Being*, e.g. our existence and finitude. We go about our business in a superficial and conventional way (*ibid*. 75). We go to school and work, engage in daily chores and

hobbies, and enjoy meals and entertainment. We are so enmeshed with our everyday dealings in the world and with the Others that co-inhabit our environment (this existentially understood as "care") that our own *Being* dissolves into "inconspicuousness and unascertainability," what Heidegger describes as the "dictatorship of the 'they'" (*ibid*. 164 §127).[27] The 'they' can be understood as 'anyone.' In one's everyday dealings, one melts into the crowd, so to speak. We are immersed in a contextualized life-world of shared patterns and norms.

Let us imagine one of Wesley's daily shifts at the rape crisis center. Even in this inherently unsettling job there is an element of routine daily activity. If on time, she gets to work at the usual designated hour. She attends to the needs of visitors to the rape-counseling center. She goes through the motions, following the rules that have been laid out for her. At the end of her shift, she goes home. She comports herself like any other rape counselor and might share in—with room for elasticity—the common attitudes towards the job. In Wesley's everyday activities and dealings with Others, she is not necessarily reflecting on existence, her place in the world, her finitude or fragility. In a Heideggerian sense, one might say in her everyday dealings she is fleeing in the face of potentiality (Heidegger 2008a, 229 §184). This is what Heidegger describes as an inauthentic mode of *Being* (2008a, 166 §128§). To be clear, this is not equivalent to 'insincerity;' rather it simply denotes an attitude towards the world that is non-self-

[27] It is unclear whether Heidegger's theory of the 'they' is an explicit attack on communism, but it certainly seems to be a critique of mass culture, consistent with the view of thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Alexis de Tocqueville.

reflective in the most general sense. It is life lived in the everyday forgetfulness of going-through-the-motions.

The life-world itself, however, constantly provides the potential for arousal—more times than not—through unusual and unsettling events. Heidegger explains that anxiety or angst is one of the ways through which the inauthentic mode of *Being* can be overcome (2008a, 232 §188). Heidegger is not talking about the fear of present-at-hand entities one might happen upon, like a bear in the forest or a mugger in a dark alleyway. Anxiety is neither here nor there; it is nowhere, yet it is simultaneously so close that it "stifles one's breath" (Heidegger 2008a, 231 § 186). It is an unease that individualizes individuals. In so doing, the inauthentic world of the "they" melts away, and one is brought face to face with one's own *Being,* which is characterized by the "obstinacy of the 'nothing and nowhere within-the-world'" (*ibid*. 231 § 186). In other words, in such a state of anxiety, one finds oneself alone with oneself.

Take for example the sense of anxiety and solitude that come through in Wesley's story when she is confronted with an awful and unsettling truth, i.e. journals full of appalling acts of sexual violence—one exercising their brute power over another. In this instant Wesley's world seems to melt away, and she finds herself alone and in deep contemplation of her place and role in the world. When she says, "I can't fucking do this," she is alone physically but also experientially. Moreover, in asking this question, Wesley—in effect—calls to herself. This, Heidegger describes, as the voice or call of conscience (Heidegger 2008a, 313 §268). According to Heidegger, "Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein [the human being] its *Being toward* its own most potentiality-for-

being—that is *Being-free for*…the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself" (*ibid*. 232 §188). While such moments can be jarring and uncomfortable, this inner call can allow for clear-sightedness and resoluteness, an opening up to what Heidegger describes as the authentic mode of *Being* (*ibid*. 232 §188; Polt 1999, 78). In answering the call, or in *choosing to choose*,[28] one opens oneself up to the self-awareness of one's own most potentiality for *Being* oneself (Heidegger 2008a, 314 §269).[29] In choosing, one is effectively taking responsibility for one's life and actions.[30]

Such an event can also cause one to reevaluate one's place in the world and choose an alternate possibility from the array of possibilities available—a turning point in one's "life story, so to speak" (Polt 1999, 79). Such a move is evident in Wesley's oral account. At the rape center she has an unsettling encounter with a rape victim: "a really really bad call." The confrontation leaves her unsettled. We can only imagine the awful details of the child's rape story. Disturbed and unsettled, she then goes to a waiting room for volunteers where she can call a fellow rape counselor or log her experience in a journal, as she was so advised by her colleagues. Reluctant to make a phone call because of the time, Wesley considers leaving a journal entry. As she began reading the stories left by other volunteers, she is taken aback. Wesley is suddenly hit by an even greater unsettling truth: a world of evil—a stack of notebooks—an anthology of evil deeds that

[28] Choosing to choose does not mean choosing one's profession or life's calling, although it can be a life changing experience. It is the recognition of the finite choices available and a taking responsibility for oneself, with the full knowledge of the finality and absurdity of life.

[29] To be clear, one can act on this clear-sightedness or not, i.e. one can *choose to choose*[29] or ignore such a revelation and go on about one's everyday dealings as before (Polt 1999, 79).

[30] Even when choosing to choose, one's everyday dealings are always conducted in the hidden everydayness of the 'they.' Even in accepting full responsibility for one's past and future onto death, one is still always and everywhere immersed in the day-to-day comings and goings of life—the 'they.'

point to a brutality and injustice that is thoroughgoing and ever present. This pulls Wesley deeper into her existential crisis. Let us recall Wesley's exact words:

> And so I was a sophomore in college and I thought, 'I can't fucking do this. Like, I can't go be a doctor because I'm just basically patching people up. The bigger problem is that people keep getting sexually assaulted, or race keeps driving racist policies.' So, I had this crisis about—'I can't be a doctor anymore. What am I going to do?'

In my interpretation, in that which announced itself to me, this is one of the instances where the sacred shows itself in the story: an awful truth is revealed and an unsettling question arises concerning Wesley's role or place in the world.[31] Indecision eventually led to decisiveness. In choosing to choose, she left medical school that year and started on a path that eventually brought her to her future present. It is not as if this were a linear progression from point A to point B. Wesley bounced around quite a bit and surely experienced innumerable events that have contributed to her self genesis. The things she chose to do with her life are existentiell[32] matters and not of particular importance here. What is significant is how her encounter at the rape center stands out in her memory as a personally affirming turning point in her self-narrative.

One criticism one might level on a strict Heideggerian interpretation of Wesley's story is that it is too Eurocentric or Western. It coheres to the classic ideological propaganda of the rugged individual, who in the face of life's challenges, overcomes his or her circumstances and redefines him or herself through a leap of radical freedom

[31] Now, she does not describe this revelation as a sacred occurrence. Rather, it is my philosophical background and interpretation that lead me to this conclusion, as I have described the sacred as a deep and meaningful truth.

[32] Remember the difference between existential and existentiell: the latter refers to historical or observable facts; they are not phenomena of experience.

(Guignon 2006, 268). This is more so the case if we consider the way the existentialist philosopher, John Paul Sartre, interpreted Heidegger, where subjectivity presupposes a type of absolute freedom to choose one's own destiny (1987, 20).[33] In Wesley's story she is not choosing her destiny, and it should not read in an individualistic, "Pull yourself up by your boot straps" way. Wesley makes a choice—a choice she takes responsibility for when she says, "I can't fucking do this." This to me simply signifies a change of course not triumph—agency and empowerment, not mastery and teleology.

Heidegger does distance himself from Sartre's brand of existentialism in that he is not necessarily concerned with freedom of choice or self-authorship *per se*, but with the truth of human *Being* as such and one's resoluteness to forge ahead with a clear understanding of one's own possibilities, which are always and everywhere, already given within the scope of a fully articulated and contextualized world (Wood 2013, 34). Yet even in light of his rebuke of Sartre, Heidegger's view is still unambiguously individualistic in that it proposes some sort of enlightened mode of existence—distinguished from the herd, so to speak. This is a self-centered view that seems to be

[33] According to Sartre, "existence precedes essence" (1987, 15). Man and woman first appear on the scene and then define themselves. There is no predefined human nature or moral code prior to our brute existence. For we are called on to choose for ourselves, and in so doing, we choose for all humanity (1987, 20). What's more, these choices are not mere abstractions; we all define ourselves by the actions we take, and in taking a certain action, we deem it acceptable for all to take the same action.

indifferent to the Other, which he dismisses as a dictatorial 'they' that is to be overcome—not acknowledged.[34]

In Wesley's case, the Other seems to be central to the anxiety and crisis described in her oral account. This suggests to me that there is an ethical dimension to her experience—a call emanating not merely from her conscience but also from outside of herself. For philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the ethical nature of experience is nowhere more evident than in the encounter with the face of the Other, which he sees as prior to comprehension or thought, i.e. prereflective (c1996, 7).[35] Levinas describes this encounter with the face as "religion," not in the theological or spiritual sense, but in terms of the *social event,* as an ethical summons (c1996, 8). Levinas explains:

> I wonder if one can speak of a look turned towards the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself towards the Other as towards an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his [or her] eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face cannot be reduced to that.

[34] Some suggest that for Heidegger this type of clear-sightedness is not universal, in that he sees it as the exclusive purview of the philosopher, whose anxious obligation to the truth of *Being* frees him or her to live authentically (Magerini 2016, 85). Moreover, partly due to Heidegger's wholehearted support of the Nationalist Socialist Party in Nazi Germany, and partly due to what is directly apparent in his philosophy, others believe it is evidence of an inherent metaphysical racism in his thinking. Some charge that Heidegger is of the opinion that only Germans are equipped to be philosophers and carry on the philosophical tradition of Greek metaphysics and that only Aryans—the naturally superior of the human species— are capable of answering the call of *Being* and living authentically (Rockmore c1992, 296).

[35] In Levinas' ethical phenomenology, ethics, he argues, is a first philosophy, meaning all other philosophical questions—e.g. science and social thought—are therefrom derived (c1989, 75). For Levinas, ethics is the primordial foundation of human existence, i.e. "preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane" (1991 201). This is in direct opposition to classical thinkers such as Aristotle who saw metaphysics—questions concerning the nature of *Being* and ontology—as a first philosophy. It is also opposed to Heidegger's phenomenological brand of ontology as well. It is beyond the scope of this paper to take sides on the matter; here, it is enough to simply note their differences.

> There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill (1985, 85-86).

Levinas likens the ethical summons, or the call of the Other, to a plea of the poor to the rich. The "nudity" or "poverty" of the face is the presencing of the Other's vulnerability and desire to be acknowledged (*ibid*. 85-86). This also can be understood as a command: "Do not kill me," which is prior to moral or institutional law (Levinas 1987, 21; Morgan 2011, 68). It can also be understood as a plea, "'Make room for me,' or 'Feed me,' or 'Share the world with me,' or 'Reduce my suffering'" (*ibid*. 68). For Levinas, to refuse the plea of the other—to kill or do harm—is *to be alone* in the world or to deny the face of the Other (1987, 18). Those one kills are faceless. To acquiesce to the plea—destitution or hunger—is to acknowledge the humanity of the Other, which in Levinas' view, promotes individual freedom by arousing goodness and civility (1991, 200).

Levinas' view of the subject and its relationship to the Other can be likened to those all too familiar television commercials where non-for-profit organizations solicit on behalf of children starving in third world countries (van Manen 2014, 115). Such commercials customarily feature the face of a sad, young child. As one looks into the eyes of the child one might feel a sense of guilt, regardless of whether one is to blame for the child's circumstances. This type of guilt stems from a deep sense of compassion for the child who has captivated us or taken us "hostage by the enigma of love" (*ibid*. 115).

A similar thing is at work in Wesley's encounter with the child at the rape center, is it not? Imagine her looking into the tear filled eyes of a child and listening to the dreadful words spoken—a story of abuse and torment—a cry for help. In acknowledging the child and her suffering, Wesley answers the ethical summons in her repudiation of the doctor's life, whose job it is to merely patch people up.

To be clear, in Wesley's account we are dealing with two distinct existential encounters: (1) a face-to-face encounter with a rape victim—a child, and (2) the journals full of stories left by fellow rape counselors. Now one might quite understandably argue that in the latter the face of the Other is not physically present. Yet, in referring to the 'face' Levinas is not merely invoking the human face but a socially and ethically experienced presence, whether it be physical or in abstraction. Moreover, Levinas argues that language presupposes a face or the face-to-face, i.e. an irreducible presence of the Other (*ibid*. 18). Some assert that this need not involve human beings at all, in that Levinas' notion of alterity has been even extended to animals and nonliving things (van Manen 2014, 117). The crucial element is the summons. So not only is this ethical presence present in Wesley's encounter with the journals but also in Ed's encounter with the American flag, in the form of a call to duty, which he wholeheartedly answers. We can even extend the argument to Vic as well. The combat boots present themselves as a presence to be acknowledged—accepted or denied. He accepts.

Perhaps problematic in terms of Wesley's story is Levinas' notion of infinite alterity. For Levinas, the Other is thoroughly Other. The Other is the presence of one who is not 'I'—someone else—other encounterable persons in the world. The Other's

infinite alterity is an issue for Levinas because he sees the world as the site of human "enjoyment," i.e. nourishment and fulfillment (Levinas 1991, 187). The extreme alterity of the Other is that which puts into question our worldly self-interest, desires, and sovereignty. The Other is one who wishes to share with us in the bounty of the world—the plea of the impoverished supplicant. It is for this reason the Other is experienced socially and ethically, i.e. as a "moral summons" to be acknowledged or rendered inhuman—faceless (1991, 196). Yet, is it correct to say that the Other is always experienced as some kind of beggar or a check on our worldly sovereignty? Is this the sense we get from Wesley's story? Can we not have ethical relations based on equality? One might argue that the Other's extreme alterity would render the ethical summons inaudible; it "risks not being heard" (Winkler 2016, 229). In listening to Wesley's story, rather, I got the sense that the Other is experienced as something all too familiar.

For philosopher Paul Ricoeur, to be attuned to one's conscience is to attest to one's own existence, an attestation that presupposes a "being-enjoined by the Other" or a recognition of a self-sameness in the Other (1992, 351). This does not suggest that one might have access to the minds of Others. Moreover, Ricoeur seems to have no estimation as to from whence this call of conscience might emerge. In fact, in Ricoeur's estimation, it can in no way be reduced to "other people" (1992, 355). Yet, while Ricoeur sees the call as self-assigned, it seems to be based on a sense of equality and responsibility:

> [T]he passivity of being-enjoined consists in the situation of listening in which the ethical subject is placed in relation to the voice addressed to it in the second person. To find oneself called upon in the second person at the very core of the operative of living well, then of the prohibition to kill, then of the search for the

> choice appropriate to the situation, is to recognize oneself as being enjoined to *live well with and for others in just institutions and to esteem oneself as the bearer of this wish* (1992, 352).

In this way, Ricoeur allows for an alternate understanding of Wesley's story and her relationship to the Other. It is a view that is free from Heidegger's self-centered indifference. It additionally allows for a closeness not available to the extreme alterity of Levinas.

What's more, for Ricoeur, regardless of from whence the call emerges, the self is always and everywhere in very real discursive and responsible relations with other people (1992, 165). This fundamental relationship to actual Others, for Ricoeur, requires that accountability and responsibility be consciously understood:

> Self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can *count on* that person. Because someone is counting on me, I am *accountable* for my actions before another. The term "responsibility" unites both meanings: "counting on" and "being accountable for." It unites them, adding to them the idea of a *response* to the question "Where are you?" asked by another who needs me. This response is the following: "Here I am!" a response that is a statement of self-constancy (1992, 165).

This is not to say that we all feel some kind of deep obligation to all people we encounter. It simply means we have the potential for accountability and responsibility. This stems from the understanding that all Others, like us, might be conscious and open to the ethical call of conscience as well—that Others want to live in peace and harmony as we do.

In listening to Wesley talk about her encounter with the distraught child, the ethical summons certainly seemed present. I did not, however, get the sense that she

experienced the Other as some foreign substance.[36] Rather, her story conveyed equality and closeness. In my interpretation, what announces itself in her story is the recognition of not only the Other's face but also the Other's body—a body like hers—the body sacred—the vessel through which one exists and experiences the world. Wesley's sense of anxiety is not the result of some alienated internal conflict but the product of an encounter with the Other in its self-sameness and mutual desire for sovereignty and safety. Moreover, her crisis of *Being* emerges not out of a turning away from the 'they,' but in her acknowledgment of its presence. She attests to the suffering of the Other—all those dreadful journals—a world of "inexplicable human behavior." In choosing to choose, she takes responsibility for herself, but it is a clear-sightedness and self-awareness based on empathy and the ability to be *counted on,* and *accountable to* the Other—innumerable Others—Others like you and I. Is Wesley unique because of her self-proclaimed "sense of justice"? Perhaps, but I like to think that it is a potentiality that is ever-present in us all.

Public Encounters

When I first heard Wesley speak at Columbia University, much of her presentation was edifying, but again there was one story in particular that stood out to me in relation to the existential *encounter*. When I arranged to meet her at Duke University, I

[36] Again, the following two paragraphs should not be taken literally. It is one possible interpretation of many—a phenomenological interpretation.

did so intending to have her retell that very story. Of course, we talked about a lot more than that, some of which has been presented in the previous section. Nevertheless, that particular anecdote really resonated with me at the time, so I was eager to have her retell it. She was happy to do so:

> And so I went out to San Francisco, and I bartended for a year. And in that year I heard a lot of stories. Umm, saw a lot of different new problems. And umm, the clear thing for me that emerged from that time of exploration, activism, and searching was a very strong sense that whatever people had learned in previous movements was not being passed down to current generations.
>
> So, it was, like, the Reagan and Bush era and that was privatization on a massive scale and cutting the social services net, which today looks like chicken shit in comparison—but at the time felt like a real, umm, crisis. And the people from the [19]60s were alive, but I was, like, 'What the hell are they doing?' You know, 'Why aren't they speaking out?' So I started to seek them out.
>
> And it was at that time that I came across, umm, the first person who told me about SNCC. And I was like, 'What's SNCC?' And they were like, 'What the hell! You're a history major, and you never heard about SNCC?' And so I began to try to figure out how do I meet these people.
>
> And umm, and so, the very first person that I met from SNCC was out in the Bay Area. I was out there, and they had some public event. And I remember going into this event. It was in Oakland and hearing this guy speak and just feeling this jolt of clarity. He was so clear in his head and his thinking—much more clear than the politicians or the professors that I've had.
>
> And so I just began to really try to find out what I could on SNCC. And at that point there was not really much written. And this would have been [19]93-[19]94. And so I read Clay Carson's book on SNCC, but it had a lot of the whats and whens and who, but it didn't have the how. So, umm, that kind of set me on the path of trying to build relationships and learn how to do oral histories so that I could go, then figure out how the hell did you do all this stuff. And that was really the first book project.
>
> 'I know we know already a lot of the—what happened and when it happened, who did it, but I need to know how you guys did this.' Because that was missing, and they seemed to know it. And so circling back to the question of, 'Why did it transform you?' Because they seemed to have sort of, like, secret keys to the kingdom of, like, how you organize for justice. And so I wanted to understand that better.

Here once again there are two distinct and meaningful encounters: first, the public event where she heard [unknown] a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the leading organizations during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, speak; and second, her encounter with a book written by historian Clay Carson. While both shed light on the nature of the existential *encounter*, we will focus on the former—her encounter with the speaker at the public event. This public encounter brings us back to the work of Dreyfus and Kelly and their notion of the sacred as an attitude of gratitude and wonder (see page 33).

Wesley describes the speaker at the event as unusually "clear in his head and thinking." I took this to mean that there was some kind of truth spoken. Dreyfus and Kelly describe such episodes as "shining" moments (2017, 193). They are events that not only allow for a certain truth to be revealed, but they also seem to take possession of and unite the spectators to the happening. Dreyfus and Kelly explain, "A great baseball game, for example, played in a ballpark that highlights the most beautiful or exciting aspects of the city, can gather people together and focus them on what is best about the season, the community, the game, and themselves" (2011, 193). They see nothing inherently sacred about a baseball game, yet for Dreyfus and Kelly, there are moments in the game that allow the sacred to shine forth (*ibid*. 193). For instance, imagine you were in attendance at AT&T Park in San Francisco, August 7, 2007, when Barry Bonds broke the Major League Baseball homerun record. All of a sudden the crowd goes wild, and you feel yourself being swept up in a wave of euphoria.

Dreyfus and Kelly describe this phenomenon as a "whooshing up" (2011, 200). They claim this is the best possible translation of the Greek term *physis*, from which our contemporary word 'physics' is derived, meaning *what is real*, nature, or *what there is* (*ibid*. 200). Dreyfus and Kelly, however, assert that this is unlike the contemporary conception of the word 'physics.' For the Homeric Greeks, *physis* did not denote a causal account of *what there is*. Rather, *physis* characterized the way "the most real things in the world presented themselves to us" (*ibid*. 200). Dreyfus and Kelly stress that, in the Homeric sense, the things that are most real or most important "well up and take us over, hold us for a while and then, finally, let us go" (*ibid*. 200). In such moments, people's sense of self and the world they inhabit, suddenly and briefly, come into focus (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 202). Think of how a San Francisco Giants fan might have felt when Bonds hit that record-breaking homer. In that moment one might feel lucid, alive and intimately connected to other fans at a game—as though at home among friends and family—united in ecstatic exultation.

Dreyfus and Kelly assert that the phenomenon of whooshing up is not limited to sporting events but equally possible within other contexts: for example, the public event Wesley attended (*ibid*. 202). They provide the example of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on the National Mall on August 28, 1963 but also point to family gatherings or classroom experiences (*ibid*. 202). In short, this notion of the sacred as a whooshing up is quite similar to the notion of existential *encounter* we have been exploring in this paper thus far, albeit a public or group oriented version. In Wesley's account, the clarity of thought with which the orator spoke seemed to grab hold of her. In

reflecting on the event she reported experiencing a "jolt." One gets the sense that it seems to center her. We must, however, not overstep our bounds. While Wesley's is a great example of a shining moment—a being taken in by the truth of the orator's words—the account reveals nothing about how others at the event felt about what was said or whether or not she felt the sense of unity with the others in attendance.

Let us turn to an account provided by Vic for a more explicitly communal example of what Dreyfus and Kelly define as a "whooshing up." In this vignette Vic describes seeing the New York City punk icons the Ramones for the first time in concert:

> I'll get some money together. I'll buy the tickets. Me and my girlfriend, we'll go down to see the Ramones on New Years. And holy mackerel was it the greatest. I feel like these were all small baptisms into the subculture, and into the truth that I was looking to find, you know. I went to this show. I probably could have snuck in, knowing how, you know, I got into the club. I had found a back door or something like that. But either way, I had bought tickets. We ended up in the middle of this hall. The kids that told me about it were standing a few feet away. Packed in like sardines, you know. And I was like, 'Okay, I guess this is it huh?'
>
> And then I remember the Ramones came on. And the Ramones—yeah were—I don't know if I got any of the music. I don't know if I could even hear the music. All I know is that the crowd went nuts and I was, like, pushed and pulled and smashed and, like, there was, like, no way to get out of it. Like, you were just wrangling for life in the crowd, but it was kind of great.
>
> And you'd look on the stage at some point, and then they [the Ramones] were like a military operation. And, you know, like, it was, like—you know, Dee Dee and Johnny Ramone were, like, on either side—they would, like, move up at the same time or move back at the same time. Or, like, they'd take their coats off at the same time. Like, the Ramones would play three songs, take a break, and then take their jackets off. And it was, like, wow—it was like, 'These guys are cool.' Like, I don't know what it is. They got these haircuts that don't make any sense—they're, like, Beatles haircuts, and they don't look like they're part of this species or this time. They're just something else.
>
> And uh, I didn't know anything, and even if you did know the Ramones songs—if you'd ever seen them live—the songs were unrecognizable live because they played them so fast, and you couldn't hear Joey Ramone singing. It was just a wash. And I couldn't figure out what the crowd was doing because the crowd was jumping up and down, but they weren't acting like hardcore kids. There wasn't a mosh pit—like a circle pit or anything. Everybody was just, like,

> jumping and grappling and grabbing on. And, like, I felt like people were, like, punching each other. And I thought, 'Well this is crazy, like, you could just, like—this is a place where you can, like, punch each other, and get away with it?'
>
> I couldn't make sense of it at first, but I know that I felt very free. I remember coming out of it with a feeling that I had seen something very unique and that it was still something that I needed to understand, and I would keep going back.

Again, in Vic's account, we get not only the shining moment—the spectacle of the punk rock band—but we also get that sense of communitas Dreyfus and Kelly are describing. All the core elements are present in the story, making it a perfect example of this particular type of encounter with the sacred. In reflecting on the event, Vic describes it as one of many small 'baptisms' into the culture, equating it perhaps metaphorically to a Christian purification ritual, which is also a way that new believers are brought into a community of Christians. What's more, one gets a sense that, at the event, Vic's world suddenly comes into focus. He says he had found himself amidst a "truth" he had always been searching for. Much of this, reduced to its essence, is similar to what Wesley describes. Both find themselves in the presence of some kind of centering 'truth' or clarity. Where Wesley experiences a 'jolt' Vic is taken by a sense of freedom. What is missing from Wesley's story, but overtly present in Vic's, is the idea of one's embodied presence being taken over by the crowd, an ecstatic communal Dionysian euphoria. Wesley mentions a 'jolt' but she never explicitly mentions other attendees of the event—only the speaker. While her story is significant, there is nothing to suggest that she and the other attendees experienced some kind of unifying connection. Vic's account is obviously a better and physically overt example of the ideal of *physis* or whooshing up.

This is, however, a cautionary tale. Dreyfus and Kelley are the first to admit that there is something inherently dangerous and repellant about the phenomenon we are exploring (2011, 202). Whooshing up, as in to be overtaken, suggests that one is no longer fully in control of one's actions (Dreyfus & Kelley 2011, 203). Think of doing the 'wave'—a metachronal rhythmic action where sequences of spectators stand, raise their arms, and cheer—at a baseball game. Physically, one's muscles move the body, but it is as if one is not the source of one's own actions (*ibid*. 203). One becomes fully enraptured in the moment. It seemed apparent to me that in the events Wesley and Vic described, they both seemed to have been taken over. For Wesley it is as though her consciousness is pulled in by the clarity of the SNCC speaker's message. Vic is experientially and physically swept up in an undulating sea of people. Dreyfus and Kelly point out that this is undoubtedly the same type of phenomenon experienced by Germans of the 1930s at a Nazi rally, enraptured by the spectacle of hatred, hands raised in an ecstatic salute to the dreadful truth espoused by their beloved Führer, Adolf Hitler (*ibid*. 203).[37]

Anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita, however, seems to see the situation today as far worse than in the 1930s, as the Postmodern "mediated" subject is reduced to an actor on the stage—a fusion of the real and the represented (2005, 6). Our roles, he contends, are shaped by a virtual media apparatus—what he calls the "blob," a pun on the 1959 sci-fi film about a menacing and expanding gelatinous alien amoeba from outer space—our

[37] One need not, however, go as far back as the Nazis to illustrate this point. It is a fact of the contemporary political moment. We all witnessed this when, in the 2016 United States presidential election, candidate—and now president—Donald J. Trump, led arena-sized crowds in chants of, "Lock her up! Lock her up!" the rapturous crowd calling for the imprisonment of his opponent Hillary Rodham Clinton in relation to a controversy regarding a private email server she used while secretary of state.

"lives shaped by a culture of performance," each of us actors in the "global show" (*ibid*. 6). In the postmodern world, life is experienced reflexively through commoditized representations (de Zengotita 2005, 9). Our most real moments are lived and shaped by mediating entities, constituting "a quality of being, a type of person—the mediated person" (*ibid*. 6). De Zengotita challenges us to imagine our lives stripped of such influences: Would we be able to conceive of our lives in the same way? (*ibid*. 9). It's a question well worth pondering but perhaps beyond the scope of this paper.

Pertinent to the topic at hand, however, de Zengotita contends that this mediation is particularly true in the public sphere, which he sees as characterized by a "dialectic of whatever," a fusion of reality and representation where you are free to choose from an array of unlimited options—whatever suits you (2005, 17 & 131). In the world of the 24-hour news cycle and perpetual elections, those in politics are reduced to method actors vying for attention in a paradigm of "relentless and ubiquitous representation" where political discourse is reduced to advertising, "getting the word out" or "giving voice to" (de Zengotita 2005, 142-143). Take for instance the 2016 Presidential candidate and now president Donald J. Trump. Trump managed to convince his supporters that he—a billionaire reality television star and real estate mogul—is the voice of the struggling middle class. In a monumental deception, he captivated crowds in packed arenas across the country, sweeping them up in fever pitched adoration, at times calling for the incarceration of his opponent, Hillary Rodham Clinton and other times straight-out inciting violence against dissenters who dared crash the party.

Is there a way out of this mediated world of representation and method acting? De Zengotita is hesitant to offer up any hard and fast solutions; he is more so attempting to capture the spirit of our age. It should be noted, however, that my narrators—Ed, Wesley, and Vic—are directly implicated in de Zengotita's analysis. Their stories point directly to the type of positionality and role-playing de Zengotita is describing: the right-wing hero/patriot, the liberal academic/activist, and the anarchist punk rocker/artist. Moreover, the practice of oral history itself is implicated as well.

As somewhat of a nascent discipline,[38] is oral history—the collection and dissemination of oral accounts—simply an exemplar of its time, i.e. another form of mediation and forum for actors vying for attention? Like de Zengotita, I am hesitant to provide any definitive answers or conclusions, and I think I would need some critical distance to know whether my own work is simply contributing to the blob, but I would like to think it has been the goal of this oral history project to focus not on what type of identity one might take on, but to show how everyday encounters can provide us with the opportunity to step out of the constant stream of representation and mediation, opening us up to more authentic experiences of gratitude, wonder, and self-reflection. Think of Wesley's experience at the SNCC public lecture or Vic's experience at the Ramones concert. Both encounters are examples not of experiencing something through some mediated version of it but of a more genuine and equal communion with Others—events that welcome the outcasts like Vic and illuminate meaningful ways of resisting racism

[38] The formal recognition of oral history as an academic discipline in the mid 20th century can be traced back in part to Allan Nevins who founded the Columbia Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in 1948. Today, it is known as the Columbia Center for Oral History.

and oppression for people like Wesley.[39] They are sacred, shining moments worth being a part of, public events that bring out what is best about a movement, subculture, or community.

So how are we to distinguish between public encounters that—like those described by Vic and Wesley—are worth being part of, and ones we should walk away from? Moreover, is there any protection from being drawn into a negative public encounter?[40] Dreyfus and Kelly contend that what they describe as *meta-poiesis*, "resists nihilism by reappropriating the sacred phenomenon of *physis*, but cultivates the skill to resist *physis* in its abhorrent, fanatical forms" (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011, 212). The latter term, *poiesis,* is derived from the Greek term ποιέω and can be understood as the nurturing poetic style of "bringing things out at their best." (*ibid*. 206). A prime example, as the term suggests, is the practice of the poet who crafts his or her verse with the intent of capturing the essence of a thing as authentically and vividly as possible. While Dreyfus and Kelly see this tradition as under attack in our technological age, they contend that it is a form of the sacred still available in certain domains, e.g. music, sports, crafts. (*ibid*. 206). It is through persistent repetition or the practice of exercises that the athlete or musician develops the ability to instinctively react to certain situations, like hitting a fastball or improvising over chord changes. Vic and I discussed something similar in how he would experiment with different chord changes so as to develop a unique type of sound for his music—a sound that best fit what he was trying to express.

[39] I know that this is my view and that it is colored by my anarchistic progressive beliefs, but to me, it is sad to think that in our day and age social exclusion and racism are still partisan issues.
[40] Nazi or Trump Rally.

The nurturing practice of *poiesis* can also be a more mundane part of our everyday lives. Think of one's morning coffee ritual (2011, 216). One might have a special coffee mug or brand of coffee that makes the mundane practice meaningful. For Dreyfus and Kelly, the question revolves around whether the practice is exchangeable (2011, 217). Can a paper cup be used in the place of a mug? How about if instead of coffee one took a snort of cocaine or a caffeine pill in the morning? If the answer is no, it is a domain in which the nurturing practice of *poiesis* is applicable. It is an opportunity to transform a dull and routine practice into something meaningful—sacred. By engaging in such practices each day, the simple act of drinking coffee is elevated into something meaningful, even sacred. One develops an intuitive understanding of how the practice should unfold and a meaningful relationship to the ritual itself. Returning to the example of Vic in writing his songs, he might develop a particular set of chords and phrases he feels are integral to his sound. He might even have a special place to write music or a precise place he likes to stand on stage when performing his songs live in concert.

Dreyfus and Kelly challenge us to take up this poetic attitude in the public domain, in those shining moments where one can be swept up in the spirit of the event. Dreyfus and Kelly explain that for Homer, the Gods were directly experienced by ancient Greeks as moods that attuned one to what matters most in a situation, allowing one to "respond appropriately without thinking" (2011, 84). Again, they are not proposing that we all become polytheistic pagans, but what they are suggesting does, in their estimation, require some courage. Now the term *meta-poiesis* can be properly understood. It is the direct application of *poesies* to *physis* or whooshing up, i.e. it is the skill of bringing the

notion of *physis* out at its best (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011, 220). So instead of rejecting *physis* out of hand because of its ability to manifest in negative ways (e.g. a Nazi or a Trump rally), what is needed is the ability to know when it is appropriate to be moved and drawn in by a public encounter and when one should simply walk away (Dreyfus & Kelly 2011, 219).

Dreyfus and Kelly are of the opinion that this involves taking risks, "only by having been taken in by the fanatical leader's totalizing rhetoric, and experiencing the devastating consequences it has, does one learn to discriminate between leaders worth following and those upon whom one must turn one's back" (*ibid*. 220). Dreyfus and Kelly suggest that the best way to learn is based on one's own mistakes. While this might be true, I am hesitant to agree that we should all seek out negative forms of *physis*—e.g. Nazi rallies, Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, Trump rallies—in order to learn such lessons. In ways, however, Vic's encounters in the punk world do support the position of Dreyfus and Kelly. For Vic, going to punk shows, sometimes meant encountering racism and xenophobia head on, as there are certain Nazi or Aryan tendencies within the punk subculture. In fact, it is in being exposed to such scenes—and he having always felt like an outcast—that allowed Vic to develop an aversion to such negative aspects of punk rock. In learning such lessons, an emphasis on social inclusion has become a big part of bringing his band's performances out at their best. Vic explains:

> I play for people that need to feel that it's okay—'You're not the biggest freak in the room. I'll be the bigger freak.' Like, 'I'll let you off.' Like, 'You're off the hook—don't worry about it.' Ya know, 'You got friends here.'
>
> Like, I remember one time we had a great time in Texas. We told everybody in the room—we said, 'Hey, you can be any way you want around the Slackers.

> You are allowed to be yourself. Nothing you're gonna do or say is gonna make us not like you.' Ya know, 'You just feel free. You hangout here—you're cool.'
>
> I remember we told the Mexicans—ya know—it was, like, one of those moments in your band life. How do you end up in these moments where you say things? You're like, 'I would like you to know—I would like the Mexicans to know in the room that we like you [Laughs].' That, like, 'We know that'—ya know—I live in a Mexican neighborhood, and I know that sometimes Mexican guys ask me, 'Do you like me?' 'And I want you to know the Slackers like Mexicans' [laughs]. Ya know, 'We're in Texas, and we want you to know everybody here is welcome, and you can be friends with us. It's cool. And we want to be friends with you.' Ya know, and it's like, that's what you wanna portray—a place where you can all be.

On the other hand, while there might be some benefit in experiencing the rhetoric of an authoritarian lead, or going to a Nazi or Aryan punk show, it is my contention that there is ample opportunity in our daily lives to develop the skills necessary for discerning between harmful and benign forms of being swept up in the moment. For example, Wesley developed a deep sense of justice by experiencing racism and sexual abuse vicariously. She then further cultivated her understanding of the issues through activism and academics. Ed explained to me that he developed a reverence for the flag and love of country through civil engagement and getting involved with patriotic institutions like the Boy Scouts and the ROTC program. And while I see a danger in nationalistic practices like flag veneration, I would like to think that when they are flown in honor of estimable ideals—like freedom, equality, and justice—and when they inspire people to truly uphold such ideals, it can be worthwhile. Without making any grand pronouncements, perhaps we might all develop an understanding of what forms of *physis* should be embraced and which should be rejected, simply by honestly reflecting on our own experience and the historical context within which it is situated.

The topics we have been exploring bring up an additional question regarding the practice of oral history itself. Can we think of oral history as a form of *poiesis,* a practice meant to bring out an understanding of ourselves as historically situated humans at its best? Or is it simply another form of mediation, i.e. yet another forum for performance and attention seeking? For Alexander Freund, this all depends on whether oral history is able to distinguish itself from the emergent cultural phenomenon of storytelling, perhaps best exemplified by StoryCorps, a popular forum for storytelling, which is broadcast on National Public Radio and other web-based platforms (2015, 2). This popular platform has been copied in innumerable ways.

Freund describes such emergent practices, inspired by Foucault's musings on neo-liberalism, as "a technology of the self," in that it lends itself to the neo-liberal ethos of consumerism, competition, and free-markets—the doctrine of the individual (*ibid*. 2). Freund contends that storytelling, in its popular form, does this by focusing on a common narrative arc—the individual who overcomes adversity (*ibid*. 2). In doing so, it fails to take into account not only the historical and socio-political situatedness of the narrator but also the "epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political aims of oral history" (2015, 3). For Freund, serious oral history work should always have such broader questions in mind. In focusing on questions of phenomenology, ontology, and ethics, in relation to the existential *encounter*, my work aspires to such broader questions—to historicity and *poiesis* over mediation. In focusing on the existential *encounter* we have explored questions of *Being* and experience, in that existence is fundamentally grounded and geared into a world of encounterable objects, people, places, and ideas that make up

the contents of our consciousness and summon us to make all those choices in life concerning right and wrong—good and evil. This oral history project has been not about the individual, and not even necessarily about the narrators featured herein, but about our collective relationship to the world as human beings and the possibility we are afforded—a possibility that will fade away when we and our world cease to *Be*.

Conclusion: an Exhortation

My mother, an immigrant from Bronte, a small town in Sicily, did not share in my enthusiasm for KISS. She was less than pleased that Jennifer lent me the record and regretted later buying me a copy. Often when I listened to it—particularly at the high volumes that bring rock music out at its best—she would charge into the downstairs foyer screaming, "Jay! Jay! What-a you do! Are you cra-zee?" her arms flailing in impassioned gesticulations. This only goes to show that what is sacred to one might be sacrilege to another. But that's just the thing—the world speaks to us all in different ways. We don't have to look to great art to find the truth of *what is*, that which is most real, brought out at its best, or sacred. Neither does the church, mosque, synagogue, or temple have full authority over such matters. Those shining moments can present themselves to us at any time in manifold ways. We simply need to be attentive to the call.

This thesis has been about the existential *encounter* but more so about encountering the sacred in the everydayness of experience—in whatever forms it might appear. I am not putting forward some grand theology or eschatology. My view of the sacred is practical and situated in a world of innumerable possibilities. I believe this

notion of the sacred is illustrated in the stories of my narrators and more generally in the representation of the worlds oral history provides. Sartre once wrote:

> I write and I will keep writing books; they are needed; and all the same, they do not serve some purpose. Culture doesn't save anything or anyone, it doesn't justify. But it's a product of man [sic]: he projects himself into it, he recognizes himself in it; that critical mirror alone offers him his image (1981, 254).[41]

This is precisely the way I see oral history, as a mirror just as Sartre describes. Granted, oral history might not serve some grand purpose or save us from our inevitable demise, but if oral history provides the human being with an image of him or herself, it at least serves that purpose. Oral history can be the poetic act that illuminates the *Being* of beings. Oral history allows truth to shine forth, a truth that is human and that we all share. It is experience itself! This is the notion of the sacred for which I am advocating. It is one that is grounded in the world and our intersubjective relations. I do not claim to have the solution to any of the world's problems, but I do believe that if we are attentive to the myriad ways in which the world speaks or announces itself; if we erect monuments that found worlds based on generosity, respect, and love; if we are able to see the Other as ourselves, worthy of compassion and respect; if we gather together in those shining moments to celebrate community and inclusion; and if we are able to see all of our encounters as part of a unified and meaningful whole, we might be better equipped to confront the ever-present problems we face. We just need to be attentive to the call of our age.

[41] Sartre's use of the androcentric 'man' is an unfortunate fact of Western intellectual thought. Sartre, a humanist and progressive, undoubtedly viewed women as included in his statement; nonetheless, his short sightedness requires a redress.

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