

## Article

# Attention, Representation, and Unsettlement in Katherena Vermette's *The Break*, or, Teaching and (Re)Learning the Ethics of Reading

Cynthia R. Wallace

Department of English, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0W6, Canada; cwallace@stmcollege.ca

Received: 24 July 2019; Accepted: 11 October 2019; Published: 16 October 2019



**Abstract:** Theories of literary ethics often emphasize either content or the structural relationship between text and reader, and they tend to bracket pedagogy. This essay advocates instead for an approach that sees literary representation and readerly attention as interanimating and that considers teaching an important aspect of an ethics of reading. To support these positions, I turn to Katherena Vermette's 2016 novel *The Break*, which both represents the urgent injustice of sexualized violence against Indigenous women and girls and also metafictionally comments on the ethics of witnessing. Describing how I read with my students the novel's insistent thematization of face-to-face encounters and practices of attention as an invitation to read with Emmanuel Levinas and Simone Weil, I explicate the text's self-aware commentary on *both* the need for readers to resist self-enlargement in their encounters with others' stories and also the danger of generalizing readerly responsibility or losing sight of the material realities the text represents. I source these challenges both in the novel and in my students' multiple particularities as readers facing the textual other. Ultimately, the essay argues for a more careful attention to which works we bring into our theorizing of literary ethics, and which theoretical frames we bring into classroom conversations.

**Keywords:** ethics; attention; representation; responsibility; decoloniality; indigenous writers; gendered violence; Levinas; Weil; pedagogy

Katherena Vermette (2016) novel *The Break* begins with the land. A mysterious first-person voice explains "the Break" as a "piece of land just west of McPhillips Street", a narrow field about four lots wide that interrupts all the closely knit houses" and holds the hydroelectric towers and wires that run through the city (3). The speaker explains the history of the land, how it "was likely set aside" when "all that low land on the west side of the Red River was only tall grasses and rabbits" (3), how houses were eventually built around it on lots just small enough to deny the Eastern European immigrant inhabitants voting rights, how in the 1960s Indigenous folks "started moving in, once Status Indians could leave reserves", and how now it is a neighbourhood full of both "big families, good people", and also "gangs, hookers, drug houses" (4). Thus contextualizing in time and place, these opening three pages also allude to "my Stella", one of the novel's central characters, and "everything she's been through" and to how it was snowing "when it happened" (5). The foreshadowing is foreboding, but the tone here is gentle, the voice a sort of knowledgeable welcome.

As I read the novel when it was first published, I suspected it would teach well. So far it has, in a first-year composition course, a second-year interdisciplinary course on social justice and the common good, and a graduate seminar on literary ethics. Part of the resonance derives from the novel's representation of places and people familiar to my students at the University of Saskatchewan; the setting is Winnipeg's North End, the characters mostly Métis. The novel's central conflict is the rape of a young woman, Emily, the police investigation of who is responsible, and a large cast of characters' attempts to care for each other and themselves in the wake of great wrong. While this content is

difficult (I include a trigger warning in class and on the syllabus and offer an alternative assignment) it also lends to the novel an underlying urgency to which most of my students respond very favourably.

*Formally*, however, I think students find the novel compelling in part because it is a bit of a whodunit.<sup>1</sup> After the mysteriously voiced introduction, the narrative opens with a scene of police questioning Stella, the witness of the crime, at her kitchen table. From there, the chapters skip around in time and place and are focalized through different characters. It is up to readers to put the pieces of these relations together, and to work alongside Tommy the police detective to figure out who perpetrated the assault. Because of both the unfolding mystery and the character-driven narration that invites emotional investment, students report that the book is hard to put down.<sup>2</sup>

The pleasure provoked by the page-turning mystery sets up a familiar tension between aesthetic enjoyment and ethical engagement. What does it mean to find satisfaction in reading a story about a character's violent assault? What does it mean to render in compelling prose a reality—the grossly disproportionate violence against Indigenous women—so prevalent that the Canadian government in 2016 commissioned an official inquiry into the crisis ([National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019](#))? How do we grapple with questions of mimesis and verisimilitude as we approach a text undeniably *about* a human experience so ethically and politically urgent?

Yet *The Break* is not a guilty bystander in these debates about ethics and aesthetics but a theorizing participant, for the novel is self-aware in this regard. This awareness manifests especially in the character Tommy, the keen young police investigator, who serves as a double for the reader, both exemplifying the need to pay careful, minute attention to another's story and also exposing the problem of finding pleasure in piecing together the parts in order to solve the crime. This, I argue, is one element of the text's ethics, which together with its insistent thematizing of face-to-face encounters and responsibility resonates with a great deal of the theorizing of literary ethics done over the last three decades. Through Tommy's metafictional exemplification of the dangers of using someone else's story for one's own pleasure and the text's insistent commentary on the power of *attending* to a suffering other, the novel suggests an ethics of reading that resists mastery, self-aggrandizement, and ultimately colonization while instead inviting self-suspending attention and being-for-the-other. In other words, Tommy's problematized role in the mystery plot seems to replicate an ethics of reading literary scholars developed in the 1990s, largely in conversation with the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

However conveniently such an interpretation aligns with much of the discourse of literary ethics, though, Vermette's novel both offers and undermines this ethics of reading through another character who may also act as a double for readers and a foil for Tommy—Stella, the witness to the rape. If Tommy can be read as The Reader of Western philosophy, furiously scribbling and rescribbling his notes and nearly laughing out loud with joy when he discovers more details of the crime, Stella stands for readers who find themselves responsible in the act of witnessing a suffering other yet in the particularity of their own position find this responsibility an impossible burden. In other words, the novel's ethics of reading is double-edged, implying *both* the critique of readerly mastery derived from Levinas (and, I add here, Simone Weil's celebration of self-giving attention) and *also* the risk of a generalized ethics of reading that assumes all readers are powerful subjects to begin with and that Western philosophy offers universally helpful conceptualizations. Ultimately, *The Break* reminds us not only that *how* we read, or what I have called elsewhere an ethics of readerly attention, but also *what* we read, or the ethics of literary representation, matters a great deal in questions of literary ethics. Even more crucially, *which texts we bring into our theorizing* of literary ethics makes all the difference in the world, a point we would do well to remember as the conversation continues.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, in addition to being an Amnesty International Book Club selection, the novel was also a *Sunday Times* Crime Book of the Month in February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> It may not be common practice to discuss pedagogy in scholarship theorizing literary ethics, but I am increasingly suspicious of this division, particularly given the importance of context and community for our reading practices. In this essay I will weave my own close reading of the text with accounts of classroom discussion.

## 1. Theorizing

Scholars have devoted significant effort to mapping the so-called ethical turn in literary studies that gained momentum at the end of the twentieth century (see Buell 1999; Gibson 2005; Eskin 2004; Eaglestone 2004). Many of these mappings share a sense of the tension between two main tendencies: one emphasizes literature's content, its capacity for complexity and the "particular" (Nussbaum 1990, p. 37), its implied authors (Booth 1988), and its ethical and political representations. Andrew Gibson (2005) calls this strand "Moral Criticism", and Lawrence Buell (1999) associates it with the tradition of Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, and also multiculturalism (7–8). Moral Criticism is concerned with representational content, with what readers' encounters with narrated characters and situations can change in them, a concern I see extended in more recent reconsiderations of empathy on the part of literary scholars like Suzanne Keen (2007) in *Empathy and the Novel* and both cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists turning to literature.<sup>3</sup>

Another strand, which Gibson terms "the New Ethical Criticism",<sup>4</sup> has tended to focus less on literature's content and more on readers' relationship to the text. This strand emphasizes vocabularies of "alterity, interpellation, call of the other, answerability, ethical responsibility, openness, obligation, event, doing justice, witnessing, hospitality, singularity, particularity, or the gift" (Eskin 2004, p. 561). It draws, as Buell notes, on deconstruction and Continental philosophy more broadly, perhaps most importantly on the metaethics of Emmanuel Levinas (8–11). Levinas' influence is notable in the vocabularies of responsibility and face-to-face encounter that permeate much of the New Ethical Criticism in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> Famously hyperbolic, Levinas [1957] (1993) writes of the way encountering an other's face confronts the self with an endless responsibility for that other; the other's vulnerable gaze "opens the very dimension of the infinite, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I" (110). Levinas begins his philosophy with this face-to-face encounter, insisting that "Justice well ordered begins with the Other" (112).

Doris Sommer (1994) exemplifies a common mode of appealing to Levinas when she turns to him in her essay "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers" to help her discuss how certain literary forms resist readers' propensity "to reduce otherness to sameness" (534; cf. Levinas [1957] 1993, p. 91). The point here is not modeled by two characters' relationship to each other but by the aesthetic characteristics that shape the relating of text and reader. Indeed, for all its emphasis on otherness, much of the New Ethical Criticism is effectively a structural ethics of reading; it describes (and at points prescribes) the relationship of a reader to a text. Derek Attridge (2004) book *The Singularity of Literature* perhaps most explicitly highlights this tendency, as does his contribution to the 1999 *PMLA* issue in which he writes, "Reading involves working against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work" (25). Reading thus leads to responsibility, Attridge (1999) claims: "Responsibility for the other involves assuming the other's needs, being willing to be called to account for the other, surrendering one's goals and desires in deference to the other's" (27). Again, Attridge draws on Levinas here not to describe the relation of two people but of a reader faced with a text.

While we may be two decades on from the heyday of the New Ethical Criticism, Levinas' influence continues apace, as do theories of the ethics of reading.<sup>6</sup> Many of these literary critical appeals to Levinas continue to blithely overlook the complexities introduced by both his philosophy's imbrication with Judaism and by feminist philosophers' criticisms of his gender-talk. In other words, as Adam

<sup>3</sup> I am thinking here, for example, of Hakemulder (2000); Iacoboni (2011); Koopman (2015); and Oatley (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Eaglestone (2004) also divides the field into two but calls the two sides "wings": "roughly, a more narrative-based neo-Aristotelian 'wing' and a more deconstructive 'wing'" (595).

<sup>5</sup> Early book-length studies of Levinas and literary ethics include Newton (1995); Eaglestone (1997); Robbins (1999); Gibson (1999).

<sup>6</sup> More recent examples include Hale (2009); Hughes (2010); Wehrs (2013); Attridge (2015); and Wallace (2016).

Zachary Newton (2001) argues, to do justice to Levinas means attending to the sum total of his writing, recognizing the way his philosophical and religious work are interanimating. Likewise, to do justice to the sum total of *humanity* means recognizing with Gayatri Spivak (1992) that for Levinas, the “subject-ship of ethics is certainly male” (76).<sup>7</sup> As I argue in *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering* (2016), when literary scholars deracinate Levinas’ writings on ethics from both his Jewish context and writings and the discursive context of feminist philosophers’ critique of his assumptions of male subjects and feminine passivity, we risk undermining the very efforts we make to be responsible. This elision of religion and gender matters, I argue, because so much of the vocabulary of passivity and limitless responsibility for another that literary scholars derive from Levinas rings with echoes of western norms of feminine self-giving care, which are themselves rooted in certain biblical traditions. As Erin Biviano (2007) and others argue, to borrow from Levinas without the accompanying critique risks relegating the vulnerable to a position of greater vulnerability. Further, as I argue throughout this essay, to theorize a universal paradigm of reading carries with it risks of generalizing the experience of those already in power.

At the same time, my own sense is that we need an ethics of reading—a description and prescription of *how one ought to read*—now more than ever, in a world even more technologically mediated than Zygmunt Bauman (1993) imagined 25 years ago in *Postmodern Ethics*, when he asserted that the “moral self-awareness is the most evident and most prominent among technology’s victims” (198). As J. Hillis Miller (1987) warned in *The Ethics of Reading*, “the attractions of inattention are immense” (3), and as so-called “attention merchants” seek to monetize individuals’ attention and digital social media platforms engineer society,<sup>8</sup> my students increasingly describe an existence in which reading a full-length book is a difficult exercise, not to mention having a face-to-face conversation. Maryanne Wolf (2018) supports my students’ anecdotes with larger-scale research in *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, which confirms the sense that students’ (and scholars’) attention is increasingly divided by the way our lives are infused with smaller and smaller bits of textuality, disrupting our capacity to engage in sustained reading and reflection (72–73). And the consequences are not only textual; media studies professor Douglas Rushkoff (2019) describes university students with such difficulty coming face-to-face with a human other that he explicitly tells them to practice making *eye contact*.

In other words, we have plenty of reason for investigating what it means to do justice to a literary text and how such texts might invite us into practices of attention that can help us resist the blend of hyperattention and attention deficit that grows out of the current digital economy. While J. Hillis Miller (2015) himself has recently (and rather cynically) denied much reason for teaching literature now apart from pleasure and perhaps the capacity to spot fake news, I would argue that an ethics of literary attention explores the relationship between reader and text in part to suss out the possibilities of reading as an exercise that develops our capacity to attend in general.

Such an approach returns us not just to Emmanuel Levinas but also to Simone Weil, who famously argues in *Waiting for God* (Weil 1973) that “school studies”, even geometry homework, can train students’ capacity to attend to both God in prayer and a suffering other. For Weil, attention is the ethical practice *par excellence*; it “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (111). This passive (and also inescapably gendered) openness to the other for the sake of the other’s being in the world sounds very much like Attridge’s Levinas-inspired description of readerly ethics. Yet while Levinas’ face-to-face encounter is rooted in phenomenology, a descriptive claim about how reality *works*, how the intersubjective encounter precedes being, Weil’s theory of attention is more explicitly normative. She argues that the practice of this kind of “empty, waiting” attention (112) in school exercises can form in students the capacity to help “someone in

<sup>7</sup> Also see Irigaray (1993) and Chanter (2001).

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent scholarly overview of the attention economy, see Citton (2017). Other recent book length projects on attention include Watson (2017) and Odell (2019).

affliction" (115), to "give one's attention to a sufferer", which "is a very rare and difficult thing" (114). For Weil, such attention, codified here in the Judeo-Christian vocabulary of "love for our neighbour", "simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'" (115). Weil acknowledges that attending to a suffering other is both simple and nearly impossible, but she nevertheless centers her entire ethical paradigm on this face-to-face engagement.

Weil's writing is no less implicitly gendered than Levinas' and certainly no less inflected with religion, though in Weil's case, Christian rather than Jewish,<sup>9</sup> and the embeddedness of her ethical theorizing within explicitly Christian allusions makes it perhaps harder for scholars to elide the religious root, though a surprisingly large number try. Both philosophers are notoriously hyperbolic, their style difficult, their metaphors stretching toward the literal. They share a sense of the radical importance of attentive interpersonal encounter and the biblical mandate of responsibility for an other inherent in the other's vulnerability, even to the point of self-sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Weil, though, brings the explicit vocabulary of *attention* that resonates so powerfully in the contemporary moment, leading to her work's rising popularity in literary theory, as in Yoon Sook Cha (2017) *Decreation and the Ethical Bind: Simone Weil and the Claim of the Other*.

Still, Weil's ethics of responsibility for the other carries with it just as much risk as Levinas' of inviting vulnerable subjects to sacrifice too much. For this reason, I maintain that in our literary ethics a structural, apparently universal, relationship between text and reader, abstracted to the level of theory, is *not enough*. On its own, it misses too much—not just the importance of gender, religion, race, and other forms of particularity, but also the question of *from whose experience we are theorizing*. Much of the literary critical conversation on ethics has focused on Dickens, Henry James, or J.M. Coetzee, with a significant exception for philosophers' love of Jane Austen and a veritable cottage industry on Toni Morrison. Some of the more influential recent books on literary ethics continue to show surprisingly limited attention to writers outside the traditional canon, with the result that the literature itself may not highlight the risks of elevating a self-giving, passive, endlessly responsible Reader (implicitly but never admittedly modeled after a self-sacrificing mother or messiah).

However, like so many contemporary texts written by women of color, *The Break* suggests both an ethics of readerly attention—an ethics of reading founded in the novel's own metafictional self-commentary, one that invites a conversation with Levinas and Weil—and an ethics of representation—a challenging of the abstracted Reader with a devastating reminder of the particularity and complexity of not the Reader but readers, not the Moral Subject but moral subjects—and that Western philosophy may not be the only or best source for thinking about ethics.

## 2. Attending

At the level of representation, *The Break* certainly highlights the complexity of things, not only through its multiply-focalized narrative structure but also through its representation of these multiple characters' psyches. Even in the face of the assault and the subsequent hospital stay and investigation, Emily's family members and friends negotiate their concern for her with their own memories of the past and worries in the present. The novel demonstrates how each character is complexly motivated and sees from a different angle, embedded in her own life. This complexity is in addition, of course, to the novel's striking verisimilitude on the urgent ethico-political topic of physical and sexual violence

<sup>9</sup> Levinas (1952) was famously critical of Weil for her deeply problematic relation to the Jewish tradition, as in his essay "Simone Weil Against the Bible". For a helpful reading of the relationship between the two philosophers' ideas, see Gillian Rose (1993) essay "Angry Angels: Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas".

<sup>10</sup> While not many creative writers were reading Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy in the mid-to-late twentieth century, many of them *were* reading Simone Weil, whose work was first translated into English in the 1950s. Turning to Levinas—who was familiar with Weil's work and famously disapproving of her—to parse out literary dynamics that likely derive from Weil's influence does not feel quite right. These scholarly dynamics warrant further thought.



against Indigenous women and girls, violence so dire that the final report of the [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#) (2019)<sup>11</sup> termed the phenomenon “genocide”.

Yet read in terms of the New Ethical Criticism, *The Break* also seems to suggest a metafictional ethics, an ethics of *paying attention* that is also an ethics of reading. Such an ethics is not a thing apart from the novel’s representational content but a concurrent lesson in how to attend to the painful reality. The novel suggests such an ethics, in part, through its insistent thematizing of looking, particularly looking at others’ faces, and the thematics of responsibility. In the interpersonal encounters of the characters, this thematics of looking and face-to-face encounters accrues a broader significance through repetition: the refusal of responsibility that could arise from face-to-face relating is overwhelmingly coded negative in the text, whereas attentive face-to-face encounters, which register the vulnerability of the other and provoke responsibility and active caretaking, are overwhelmingly positive. This explicit thematics parallels Levinas and Weil in notable ways, ways that make the novel particularly resonant as an intervention in a literary ethical discourse already in conversation with the philosophers.

The importance of sincere attention to others, and particularly the shared gaze of the face-to-face encounter, is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated in scenes of its absence. The narrative dramatizes two such scenes, both in characters’ memories, with devastating results. In one such memory, Stella recalls a high school party at which her friend Elsie was sexually assaulted, and the scene is rendered in repeated terms of failed attention: Stella “didn’t notice all the other guys following” Elsie and a boy upstairs; “none of the girls noticed” how long they were upstairs (202). When Stella and her cousin Lou finally bring Elsie downstairs, “no one looked up and everyone was partying again like nothing happened” (204). But something *did* happen, although following the familiar mechanisms of trauma the details remain in “big, blank spaces where all the answers should be” (205).<sup>12</sup> What Stella and Lou discover when they go upstairs to find their friend is chilling: “Elsie was the first thing they saw once they turned the corner. Elsie’s beautiful curly hair pressed to her face by a large hand. The scene became clearer with every step” (202). As Lou screams at the young men and tries to cover her friend’s body with a blanket, “Stella only watched Elsie’s face, still pressed into the pillow, her mouth open, her hair damp” (203).

If in [Levinas \[1957\] \(1993\)](#) terms, in the face of an other “one is confronted with the mandate, ‘You shall not kill,’” in contrast with the desire to possess, own, or use an other (109), it is not accidental that the rapist presses Elsie’s head down, avoiding the ethical challenge implicit in her face, which would “put [his] freedom into question” (115). Of course, one can reject the implicit ethical command in another’s face, but this scene dramatizes with horrifying concreteness the refusal of a face-to-face encounter that could be the foundation of an ethical relating. It is also painfully echoed in the eventual scene of the attack on Emily, which comes late in the novel, and which uses the repetitive vocabulary of her rapist’s “hand over her face” (308, 309).

It is also not accidental that in the grammar of the sentence describing what Stella and Lou witness when they turn the corner, Elsie is described as the “first thing” they see. This phrasing is both common grammatical usage and also an implication of the way, as [Weil \(1965\)](#) argues, force turns a human into a thing (6; also see [Levinas \[1957\] 1993](#), p. 97).<sup>13</sup> The novel further highlights this devastating result as it repeatedly depicts Elsie after she has been assaulted as emptied of agency and the capacity for human connection. She is “just limp, like she was passed out but her eyes were open” (203); she “just looked off at nothing. Her eyes looked dead” (204). Years later, when she sees Elsie on the street, Stella notes that her “face looked older than it should have”, but Stella intentionally walks by “real close, so their

<sup>11</sup> ([National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#) 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Consider [Sommer \(1994\)](#): “In some resistant texts, silence is the willed muteness of trauma, a defensive armor against humiliating or panic-provoking memories” (538). Against a sense of *willed* muteness, however, is Simone Weil ([Weil 1973](#)) insistence that those who are traumatized by *malheur*, or affliction, “have no words to express what is happening to them” (120), an idea taken up in much twentieth-century trauma theory.

<sup>13</sup> The “thingification” implicit in oppression also calls to mind Martin Buber’s *I-Thou* paradigm.

eyes could meet. Elsie saw her but there was no recognition, her eyes were as blank as they had been that night. Still dead" (207). Again, this blankness depicts a recognizable trauma response, but in the vocabulary of the novel, and of Levinas and Weil, it is significant that what Stella seeks is a face-to-face human encounter, and that Elsie's capacity for such an encounter seems to have been cut off. And while readers do not realize it at this midway point of the novel, by its end they will also recognize the heartbreaking after-effects of Elsie's trauma on the next generation, as the pieces come together to reveal that Elsie's daughter, conceived in that assault, is the perpetrator of the assault on Emily.

Similarly embedding the characters in a narrative of the after-effects of sexual violence against Indigenous women, Cheryl remembers the doctors' failure of responsibility toward her sister Rain, who was sent away from the hospital when she presented herself after being beaten up, also in terms of the doctors' failure of *looking*: "They didn't even treat her. Just put her right back out in the street. Didn't even look, just thought she was another drunk and didn't care" (180). This failure of looking, of *attending* to a suffering other, precipitates Rain's death that night, as she wanders with a head injury in the freezing temperatures. Such failure is emphasized even more strongly by the implicit contrast with what immediately follows, as Cheryl's daughter Lou hears this story again and almost in response attends to her niece in the hospital bed: "I go over to Emily and look at her for a long time. She smiles up at me, an apologetic smile that makes me want to cry all over again" (181). Lou's face-to-face encounter with Emily, her *attention* to Emily, manifests as a stark contrast to Rain's much earlier treatment in the familiar setting of the hospital.

Indeed, Lou is one of the characters who consistently practices sustained acts of looking at others, a practice that the novel signals as good, even restorative. Again and again, Lou (the only character whose section is narrated in first-person) describes others' faces: "Ziggy's little face all white bandages" (175), Sunny's "young face [that] seemed to have aged" (175), Jake's "face pale in its pain" (175), her "mother's face struck red, wet and folded into itself" (175). Lou looks at others as a way of reading them, assessing their wellbeing (not coincidentally, she is a child welfare social worker) in order to be able to better care for them. In the hospital, Lou not only looks at Emily "for a long time" but also at Cheryl: "I look at her long, my poor mom and all she's been through" (180). The phrasing here echoes Weil's paradigmatic ethical question, the miracle of looking at a suffering other and asking what they are going through. Lou *attends* to others in a way that opens up space for caring.

We see this caring, and the healing it can bring about, in the experience of Emily's best friend Zegwan, or Ziggy, as well. Sick with guilt that she did not keep her friend from being hurt, Ziggy finds herself squarely in her father's gaze: "He keeps looking at her" (212). When she finally admits how ashamed and guilty she feels how she "couldn't do anything", "didn't do anything", her father, again, "looks at her, right in the eye like he does" and asks, "What could you have done?" (213). The passage is repetitive, again stating, "He keeps looking at her" (213), but the repetition emphasizes the sustained interpersonal connection and the importance of the character's attention. When he empathizes with her feeling of shame but insists she has nothing to be ashamed of, that there "was nothing [she] could've done" (214), the words seem to genuinely free Ziggy from her shame and empower her to seek out Emily, whom she asks to visit in the hospital, and thereby expand the practice of paying attention to a suffering other rather than hiding in isolation. When the friends reunite in the hospital, "Ziggy looks up and looks at Emily closely" (307), and in a powerful display of mutuality "Emily looks at her friend", whose face was also beaten up on the night of the attack, and asks, "Does it hurt?" (306). This question is another variation on Weil's, an other-oriented expression of attention and care that highlights the degree to which Emily is not just a victim but a surviving subject.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, characters who do not share Lou or Ziggy's father's capacity to look at others, particularly suffering others, and pay attention to what they are going through are not all morally

<sup>14</sup> Flora, mostly known as Kookom in the novel (Cree for grandmother), and her daughter Cheryl also exemplify this capacity to look at others. When Stella goes to visit, her "Auntie Cher" "looks Stella up and down, examining her the way Kookoo does" (194); likewise, "Kookom's cloudy grey eyes look up at Stella, all seeing" (195).

suspect. Like Elsie, many of the characters struggle to make eye contact, or turn their faces away from others, from a place of pain. When Emily “turns away from all of them” earlier in the narrative and “begins to cry even though she tries to hide her broken face” (183), the novel certainly does not suggest this is an ethical failure but an understandable outgrowth of her trauma. In her sorrow over her daughter’s experience, Paul likewise struggles at points to make eye contact (185), though she does “stud[y] her girl”, whose “face seems so tiny, the wounds there bigger somehow”, which leads to Paul’s sense of feeling useless and exposed rather than a capacity for caring responsibility (182). In other words, in the novel’s insistent thematizing of faces, looking, and caring responsibility, difficulty looking is not always a moral flaw: sometimes it results directly from suffering, a point made even more inescapably in the gradual revelation that Phoenix—homeless, abuse survivor, daughter of Elsie, described repeatedly as one other characters do not attend to—is herself the one who sexually assaulted Emily.

To be clear, these scenes are not metaphors for reading: to render them as such would be a great injustice against their representation of a reality that is all too real. Instead, they are a robust and consistent interpersonal ethical paradigm within the novel. Yet *The Break* does invite metafictional theorizing about the attention we pay to a text in the character of Tommy, the young police detective who takes on Emily’s case with his reluctant partner Christie. Tommy is keen and earnest. While the novel opens with a scene of Tommy, Christie, and Stella silent around her kitchen table, “all looking down or away” (7), subsequent pages and chapters highlight Tommy’s desire to take Stella seriously, even though his older partner shrugs her off as a “crazy dame” (68). After they leave Stella’s house, even though Christie has said there is nothing to the case, Tommy calls multiple hospitals in search of a clue (78). Tommy cares about the crime Stella has witnessed, and eventually the assault Emily has experienced, in part because Indigenous women remind him of his mother (75). He is deeply invested in the case, even going to his mother for advice as it unfolds.

Tommy’s compassion for Emily and her family, his resistance to Christie’s apathy, and the fact that he is one of the novel’s focalizing characters, invite readers’ identification: he is a likeable guy, in part because of his persistence as a Métis police officer taking his partner’s racist microaggressions. And the opening for readers to identify with Tommy is not just a result of his characterization: it is also a structural element of the mystery genre, which, as Alan Goldman (2011) argues, generally functions by setting up readers to identify with the detective as their double in parsing out the narrative’s clues (268). Goldman asserts that this functions both cognitively, as readers both work with and compete with the character-detective in figuring out the details of a crime (265), and also emotionally, as readers empathize with the detective’s feelings and experience and also seek to understand the perpetrator’s motivations (267).

*The Break* takes this genre-driven invitation to associate detective with reader one step further by insistently associating Tommy with textuality. From the narrative’s first scene, Tommy is associated with writing, “The younger one goes over his scribbled notes, the paper of his little coiled book flips and crumples” (7). Interviewing Emily in the hospital, he “checks his little book” (185). Later we read that he “has painstakingly written and rewritten all his notes” (220). In a way, Tommy’s textual practices almost seem to suggest he is not just a double for readers, seeking to piece the narrative together, but for literary critics, perhaps most damningly when we read that he “takes notes, makes reports” (76) that too frequently “become just words on a screen” (77).

Yet the narrative also echoes an uncomfortably apt readerly experience in Tommy’s work to solve the mystery as it presents his more-than-altruistic interest in the case. Stella notes from their first encounter that while Officer Christie appears “bored”, “the younger one, he’s so young, is eager, maybe even excited” (8). Tommy intuitively feels the crime Stella reported may have been a rape, though Christie insists it is not, and back in the car he keeps “listening for a sex assault” on the radio, “wondering if one will be reported. He’s kind of hoping for it, just to prove the old guy wrong” (72). The idea of *hoping* to hear a sexual assault reported for any reason is troubling. The discomfort is increased in the scene when Tommy first questions Emily in the hospital, as she speaks, “he feels excited for



some reason" (124). He has to force himself to "speak slowly", and soon "He can't hold in his odd excitement. It all seems so real and he's going to fix it" (124). As details come out, "He has to swallow to keep from sounding too excited"; he "wants to shout but stays calm and collected" (126); after Emily provides another detail, he "smiles. Elated" (127). In the hall outside the room, he *keeps smiling*.

In an almost obscenely explicit way, Tommy's pleasure in discovery dramatizes the risk of gaining aesthetic pleasure from a text about another's suffering. Tommy's excitement, his delight in uncovering these clues, is in a certain sense understandable. It is also structurally fundamental in the mystery genre: readers' pleasure is rooted in reconstructing a scene of violence that they can retroactively witness. But even as its genre invites it, Vermette's novel will not let us forget how problematic such pleasure can be. In the terms of the New Ethical Criticism, Tommy reminds us of the dangers of seeking to master a narrative in a way that primarily enlarges the self.

Perhaps ironically, it is Officer Christie who takes the wind out of Tommy's sails. In the hall, Christie congratulates the smiling Tommy: "You're now the proud owner of one hell of a . . . rape case" (127). We read, "Tommy's face melts down, slowly" (127). As the case continues, so does Tommy's attentive persistence, but tempered now by the realization of what a serious and painful situation it is. Instead of pleasure in uncovering details, Tommy feels embodied empathy for Emily: "it hurt[s] to look at her" bandaged face (291). As he begins to realize who the perpetrator is, he resists the knowledge, again, perhaps aligned with readerly experience: "It has to be [guys]", he says and thinks. "It has to be" (295). It takes his mother's advice and stories to convince Tommy that it is possible for a young woman to violently sexually assault another, but even so he feels unsettled: "He wants everything to be different. He wants the simplicity of finality, but it's never like it is in the movies. It always lingers on" (302).

Tommy's experience begs to be read as metatextual commentary on the novel's own open-endedness. My students resonate powerfully with his discomfort at the idea Phoenix is guilty of the crime. What begins as pleasure in the clues falling into place is disrupted by the very shape of the narrative, and Tommy's experience dramatizes that development. Even at the moment of the resolution, the narrative unsettles us, and in so doing it offers a serious lesson in the dangers of, in Sommer (1994) words, reading any story to "feel aggrandized, enriched by the appropriation and confident that our cunning is equal to the textual tease" (528).

### 3. Witnessing

If Tommy doubles as the reader of the mystery in his role as detective, Stella doubles as reader in her role as witness to the crime. In Levinasian terms, once faced with the event she sees from an upper window in her house, Stella is rendered in some sense inescapably responsible. The narrative opens after the event of witnessing, after Stella has called the police and waited hours for them to arrive, and so readers are introduced to the story's events not by sharing her full view of the assault but through her reconstruction of it, her testimony to the police officers. Though they express repeated doubt that the assault was sexual, Stella is sure she saw a rape from the second-storey window when she went to calm her crying baby in the night. She is sure she saw a "really tiny woman" (9).

As the novel unfolds, it is clear that Stella feels the weight of her responsibility to the woman she saw being attacked. This responsibility coalesces around the fact that she did not go out to the woman but stayed inside, ostensibly out of the competing responsibility for her three children: she tells the police, "It looked bad, so I called 911. But I couldn't do anything, my baby was crying so hard. He's teething" (10). Starting at the beginning again, the officers ask whether she went outside or talked to the person, and after Stella shakes her head she feels "shame" (11). Later, after the officers have pieced together the crime Stella witnessed with a hospitalized girl, Stella feels she is "horrible" (162). She seems to be judging herself for not going out to help the girl, a sense confirmed by the scene that arrives in the novel's center, a retelling of the night's events, in which we read that Stella did not stay with her crying baby after all but, after calling 911, "ran downstairs but then stood, frozen in the kitchen" (172). Stella overcomes her frozenness to put on her husband's boots but then hears another

of her children cry; she opens the door but the alarm goes off and she cannot remember the code; her eldest child calls for her, but Stella issues a reassurance and continues to open the door, then “stopped again”: “The woman was sitting up, alone . . . But Stella just watched her” (172). Again, Stella tries to go out, and again stops: “She shook her head. Knowing she should do something, not knowing what to do. What could she do?” (173). Her children keep calling, and Stella keeps standing there, until finally she tells herself the police will help, and then runs back upstairs “to her screaming kids” (173).

In class discussion, I ask my students whether the novel suggests a judgment of Stella: faced with a vulnerable, suffering other, she wavers between helping and turning away. Faced with the radical needs of an other she does not know, an other out in public, she retreats to her private domestic sphere, choosing to attend to her children, crying but unwounded, rather than the other whose wounds demand her attention. Confronted with risk to her own person, as the assailants have fled the scene but could return, Stella retreats up the stairs to watch through her window.

Stella herself continues to be wracked with guilt over her inaction: she cannot seem to shake her sense of unfulfilled responsibility, not only in this scene but to the grandmother she has not visited for months and eventually returns to. “I feel so awful, Kookoo”, she tells her grandmother, “You don’t even know”; “I’m not a good person at all” (333). Despite her Kookom’s reassurances, other characters voice harsh judgment. When Emily’s grandma Cheryl tells her friend Rita that the witness had not gone out to help the girl, Rita cannot hide her “disgust”: “So she, like, saw it happening and did nothing? I can’t fucking believe that” (342). Cheryl reminds Rita that Stella called the police, but Rita asks again, “she couldn’t do anything? Nothing?” before repeating twice in conversation, “she should have” (343).

I ask my students: do you agree with Rita’s judgment? The room is divided.

Next, I ask, are we Stella? Students who chuckle uncomfortably when I ask if we are Tommy are silent now. There is a way in which the question is obvious: like Tommy, Stella is distinctively associated in the novel with stories and textuality, associations that issue a metafictional invitation. As her Kookom tells her late in the narrative, “You have always been a storyteller, a story keeper, a watcher” (335). This assessment rings true with what has preceded it in the narrative, for it is in Stella’s chapters, Stella’s memory, that the novel frames stories of a shared girlhood experience of sexual harassment (165–170) and of Elsie’s rape (202–205). It is in Stella’s memory that we read the fullest account of Rain—her mother—turned away from the hospital and sent out to die in the cold, and how Stella “learned all the facts” through newspaper articles, police reports, and repeated questions to her family, in order to piece together these details into a “story” (272).

The novel thus invites an association of Stella and reader-as-witness, rendered responsible when faced with the text. As [Attridge \(2015\)](#) writes, “we can draw on Levinas’ insistence that responsibility is not something we choose to take on, but something we find ourselves already seized by . . . . Thus I would argue that we are *constituted* as literary readers by the responsibility for the work that imposes itself upon us” (126). This responsibility is “for the other—ultimately, for the other’s survival” (126). In Attridge’s description, which he admits is not an “extrapolation” Levinas would have accepted (126), the reader is responsible for the wellbeing and survival of the text; in Stella’s case, the other for whose wellbeing and survival she is rendered responsible in her act of witnessing is most immediately a sexually assaulted young woman, a fact the novel will not let us forget even as it also invites a metafictional reading.

Stella, like Tommy, is a double for readers and perhaps even especially professional readers. Highlighting her role as a watcher, a keeper of stories, a *witness*, I ask my students again, is Stella *us*? Does the novel invite judgment of anyone confronted by an other in need who does nothing to help, who turns away from the responsibility implicit in the act of witnessing, in the very act of reading?

These questions imply a normative edge, a doubled ethics of the text that is both interpersonal and aesthetic. But it is almost impossible to render these questions into the fully abstracted sphere of reader and text. Attridge continues to insist that an ethical approach to literature is about “treating a work as an event”, rather than solely considering “anything to be learned or deduced from it” (124), but he also

admits that “a responsible reading of the words on the page can’t avoid attending to the strands that tie them to the world they arose from” (126). In *The Break*, the strands that tie these representations to the world invoke the urgency and painfulness of the all too real phenomenon of sexual violence, and violence against Indigenous women and girls in particular, a phenomenon embedded in gendered, raced, and colonial histories and systems of injustice.

Indeed, *particularity* disrupts our tendency to generalize: not categorical “otherness” or “alterity”, but the specific details and identity of both survivor and witness. The novel stages this negotiation of the general and the particular in Stella’s horrifying realization that the anonymous “tiny woman” she saw from a distance is actually her own cousin. Stella’s haunted sense of unfulfilled responsibility is profound even before she gains this knowledge, although she does try to calm herself by agreeing with her white husband that “it’s not like anything happened to us or anything”: “She tries to remind herself of this too. Nothing actually happened to her. She wasn’t hurt, her family wasn’t hurt, not at all” (160). The distance implied here, that one can care less about a stranger than a family member, does not align with responsibility as Levinas or Weil would construe it, and it also does not sit well with Stella’s own conscience. Nor does the text allow it, as only pages later she discovers from her Kookom the terrible irony that the assault victim in fact *is* family (171).

This revelation leads to the re-narrated scene at the center of the novel that tells more fully what happened that night, the one in which Stella attempts over and over again to go out to help the small woman but again and again stops. The new information about the young woman’s identity reframes the scene, by making more explicit Stella’s attempts to fulfill her perceived responsibility and also revising in her consciousness who the woman was, staging the transition from general to particular. “She pulled the door open and stopped again. The woman was sitting up, alone. Emily was sitting up alone in the snow, pulling on her pants. But Stella just watched her, watched Emily through the glass, fogged by the cold” (172). As the scene dramatizes Stella’s revised memory of the night, Stella’s horror at what she saw, and what she could not quite manage to do, intensifies: “She saw the woman, girl, Emily, saw her get up, so slow, and limp a step” (173). This real time memory revision—not just a woman but a *girl* (Emily is only 13 years old), not just a girl but *Emily*—renders the scene even more painful, not just because Emily is family but because Emily is *particular*.

This negotiation of general and particular manifests as well in the novel’s insistent thematizing of faces and face-to-face encounters. In Tommy’s consciousness, “all those women blend into one, their faces so similar. The young girl, poor Emily, tiny and broken in the hospital bed, her aunt with the haunting eyes, looking so carefully, and the witness lady, so relieved they didn’t think she was crazy anymore. They all look the same—same long dark hair, straight and shiny, same almond eyes, almost” (221). Tommy’s blending of the women into one derives in part from their family resemblance, a fact the novel repeats (for instance, 160, 194). Yet it also highlights the risk of stereotyping, lumping all these Indigenous women into a categorical victim, a risk visible as well in Tommy’s association of these women with his own mother and her experience of domestic violence.

The importance of particularity in the face-to-face encounter is rendered even more explicitly in Stella’s fully narrated act of witnessing, for as she insists in her second account to the police that she “couldn’t see any faces” (162), the revelation of Emily’s identity *also* revises her memory of whether she saw the rape survivor’s face. In the re-remembered scene of witnessing, it is not just that the woman’s face becomes Emily’s face, as her identity moves from categorical gender to Emily’s name. Instead, we read that Stella in fact *did* see the girl’s face in the original scene: “For a second, her face was aglow in the light, and the snow dancing around her, and Stella wanted to scream” (173).

This ultimate confrontation with the assault survivor’s face seems to be the last straw that freezes Stella in inaction and leads her to turn away. Coupled with the scene’s earlier description of how Stella after seeing the woman in the snow at first “paused there, remembering something she hadn’t thought of in a long time” (172), this tension between the general/anonymous and the particular face is a clue, a beckoning. In the classroom, we pause over this scene. We attend to its most minute details in the closest of readings, open to it, tentative, careful. When the pieces click into place and we feel that

thrill of satisfaction, we think guiltily of Tommy's pleasure. We talk about the impossibility of moral purity, the risk of engagement.

This is what we discern: the very details of Emily's rape, the winter snow, the "bottom naked", recall the details of Stella's mother's death, details we only learn later in the narrative (272). This "story" that Stella has pieced together and kept as a "story keeper" may be the "something" she remembers but has not thought of in a long time. That recollection would explain the subsequent internal battle Stella fights as she tries to go out to help the young woman. Likewise, the face Stella sees later takes on a different significance in light of the fact that Stella looks just like her own mother Rain (160) and that she also looks like all the other women descended from her Kookom (194, 220). In other words, the face Stella sees in the distance may make Stella want to scream and then freeze her in inaction not because it looks like Emily but because it looks like her own self, like all her relatives, like her lost mother. This indeterminacy points to both the overwhelming accrual of pain for these women in general and also the pointed particularity of a singular life.

A painstakingly careful reading of the scene, one that requires a rereading of the passage in light of later scenes and revelations, opens up the degree to which Stella is not a free subject, with full capacity to respond by taking responsibility, but a specifically *traumatized* witness. Stella's own particularity disallows an easy moral judgment of her inaction. The recognition of what her husband patronizingly calls her "past" (15), of her prior experiences of sexual harassment, her witnessing of Elsie's rape, her piecing together of her mother's story, not to mention the childhood *loss* of her mother, disrupts our capacity to generalize her experience as a witness without reference to the specific. Stella's experience, her centrality in the text, her haunted sense of limitless responsibility, invites questions about the ethics of witnessing. It even invites us to *practice* the kind of readerly attention that models careful, slow, open, and risky care for a textual other. But it unsettles us with the reminder that at its root, the face is not a category but a singular, individuelle. *fac* The reader is not a free, untraumatized moral actor but bears any number of burdens when facing a given work of literature.

#### 4. Relearning

A rigorous assessment of literary ethics in all its modes is more important now than ever as the structures of daily life in Western culture undermine our capacity to pay attention, as language and story are used to justify rendering others *things* rather than responding to the vulnerability implicit in their faces. How easily we stereotype, flattening a nuanced human being, attributing guilt, justifying our refusal of responsibility. With great difficulty do we look at an other and ask, with full openness, "What are you going through?"

Literary writing does something singular; it is a Saying that disrupts the Said (Levinas again), a "questing toward what otherwise may be" (Adrienne Rich's phrase), an event that asks us to partner in its own creation (this is Attridge and also Weil). It both prompts and challenges naïve conceptions of mimesis, but I am convinced that it is too late in the game for any of us to deny the importance of its ethical *content* in favour of its form alone. *The Break* represents something indisputably related to reality; faced with this novel, I am rendered responsible not just to partner in its creation as an aesthetic event by giving it my full and hospitable attention but to *do something in the world it represents*. The only way to claim that literary texts as a rule do not represent reality and invite responsibility is this is to theorize without being in conversation with any of the many, many texts that *do*. This is an essential challenge for literary scholars moving forward.

But not everyone who reads this novel is a literary scholar, nor can everyone who reads it respond in the same way. If Tommy teaches us a lesson about the risks of readerly mastery and aesthetic pleasure in a story of suffering, Stella reminds us that different readers read from different positions and that to generalize limitless responsibility may further marginalize the already marginalized. This diversity manifests powerfully in the space of the classroom as a reading community, where male students often express surprise at the ubiquity of sexual harassment in the novel while women nod with weary familiarity. Likewise, settler students often express dismay at the structural inequalities

that lead to so much of the novel's suffering, connecting the text's dynamics with statistics and histories they are learning in Indigenous studies, history, and sociology classes, often with shock at how little they knew of these realities before coming to university. Indigenous students, though, particularly in the first-year course, have been more likely to talk to me after class or in a writing assignment about the novel's familiarity, which paradoxically has both provoked pain and also a deep sense of relief at *for once* recognizing sisters and aunties, fathers and brothers in a literary text assigned on a university syllabus. And then there are the students who choose to excuse themselves from the reading and the discussion, aware enough of their own particular pain to own that facing this literary text would not bring good into their lives or the world. The anecdotes are instructive: the plurality of readers is a reality we would do well to bring more fully into our theorizing of literary ethics. And this plurality parallels the plurality of ethical systems at work in the world, another point our literary ethics may not yet have fully enough addressed.

As *The Break* begins with the land, it ends with the land, and specifically with ceremony on land south of the city, where "the bush closes in . . . like a quick greeting hug" (340). Kookom has died, passing on the matriarchal role to Cheryl, and she gathers with her family on this land outside the city to smudge with sage and sit and sing together in the steam of the sweat lodge (344–45). Emily is there with Zegwan, and Cheryl notes both the girls' "resilience" and also the way Ziggy's face is still wounded, the way Emily "still walks with a limp, and even here, with only her family around her, she sits with her body curled into itself like a turtle ready to retreat inward" (339). The resolution here is by no means happy, but it is strong and full of love. The novel's final pages narrate both the immensity of the group's ongoing pain—Cheryl notes, "They're already so broken, could they even break any more?" (344)—and also the renewal brought by the ceremony, by the gathering of community. The possibility of Emily's healing seems to inhere in these two related practices, ceremony and community, as does the healing of her family and friends, broken by witnessing her pain as well as their own individual burdens.

This ending is illuminating in its reminder that ethics is so often embedded in spiritual traditions: not just that Levinas' philosophy is best understood in conversation with his essays on Judaism or Weil's in terms of her quasi-Christianity, but that the characters in *The Break* live and act within the practices of their own spiritual and philosophical traditions. The caring attention they devote to one another throughout the text, the concerted looking, the open listening, the concrete acts of help and practice of presence, may not be most fully explained by Western philosophical models of face-to-face encounter and attention. A more consonant source may be Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), who in her work describes finding in other Indigenous stories "A way of living that was full of community. A way of living that was thoughtful and profoundly empathetic. A way of living that considered, in a deep profound way, relationality" (22). Simpson connects this way of being in the world to the land, to the land that has been dispossessed by settler colonialism and the land to which Indigenous people relate not through possession and conquest but "connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear *relationship*" (43). This description of relationship to the land also describes the relationships among Vermette's characters; in fact, it describes the very form of her novel. In other words, while I have been arguing that *The Break* has a great deal to teach scholars about the New Ethical Criticism, the New Ethical Criticism may not have quite so much to teach us about *The Break*.

As it turns out, Kookom is the one who can teach us about the Break, and *The Break*. Eventually we realize that it is her voice—Kookom's, Flora's—that narrates those sans-serif sections between chapters. Kookom's voice as the storytelling elder opens the novel, framing its setting and characters, victims, witnesses, and perpetrators alike, in a history of dispossession from the land, the reference to the Red River (3) an allusion to the Métis uprising, to the negotiations of settler colonialism, to the strength and also the losses. Kookom's voice as the storytelling elder notes that while others do not notice this strip of land through the city, she has "always loved" it, would walk through it noticing the way elderly folks would plant gardens in it, "all nice and clean", the way looking down at the



grass would let you forget you are in the city (5). You do not notice it if you are not paying attention, Kookom says. You do not notice the land if you are not looking.

I did not notice the land when I moved here seven years ago, to Canada, to Saskatchewan, to Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis, did not realize how indivisible it was from Indigenous ways of being in the world. I had never learned about how similarly indivisible the land was from assessments of structural injustice, from violence against Indigenous women and girls, from the questions of what justice and healing might actually look like going forward, questions of concrete responsibility. Nor did I notice the importance of the land in *The Break* when I first read it, my eyes skimming past those opening pages into the urban setting, plot, and drama. Only rereading and rereading did I begin to see. This seeing sent me to books like Simpson's and Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks* and Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass*, books that insist on the material, insist on the land. It sent me to sessions on my campus where I listen with every part of me I can muster to Cree and Métis elders and poets and scholars, floored at everything I never knew. It taught me all over again that my generalizing paradigms, of literary ethics, of postcolonial theory, of feminism, break, once again, under the weight of particularity.

To admit this, as a scholar, as a teacher, means returning to the humbling space of nonmastery, of a responsibility to keep learning. It means, as I have been saying here, challenging received theories, but also admitting that I have work to do if I am going to do justice to this text and so many others in the space of the classroom: decolonizing my theory and my teaching by decentering my own expertise. But as I face my students in all their minute and extraordinary particularity, confronted by the multiplicity of their differences from me and from each other, and as I ask them to face this text with me, I recognize the work as worthy. I have already been rendered responsible: but I endeavor, to the extent of my own capacity, to offer the kind of attention asked of me. This work is endless. It is also good.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

- Attridge, Derek. 1999. Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other. *PMLA* 114: 20–31. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Attridge, Derek. 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Attridge, Derek. 2015. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1993. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Biviano, Erin Lothes. 2007. *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice: The Loss of Self, The Gift of Self*. New York: Crossroads.
- Booth, Wayne C. 1988. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Buell, Lawrence. 1999. Introduction. In *Pursuit of Ethics*. *PMLA* 114: 7–16.
- Cha, Yoon Sook. 2017. *Decreation and the Ethical Bind: Simone Weil and the Claim of the Other*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Chanter, Tina, ed. 2001. *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Citton, Yves. 2017. *The Ecology of Attention*. Translated by Barnaby Norman. Cambridge: Polity.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eagleton, Robert. 1997. *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Eagleton, Robert. 2004. One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth. *Poetics Today* 25: 595–608. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Eskin, Michael. 2004. Introduction: The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature? *Poetics Today* 25: 557–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gibson, Andrew. 1999. *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. New York: Routledge.
- Gibson, Andrew. 2005. Ethics. In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. Edited by Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth and Imre Szeman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Goldman, Alan. 2011. The Appeal of Mystery. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69: 261–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Hakemulder, Jèmeljan. 2000. *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hale, Dorothy. 2009. Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century. *PMLA* 124: 896–905. [CrossRef]
- Hughes, Robert. 2010. *Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Beyond of Language*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Iacoboni, Marco. 2011. The Ontological Priority of Representations: The Case of Mirror Neurons and Language. *Language and Dialogue* 1: 7–20. [CrossRef]
- Irigaray, Luce. 1993. The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 'Phenomenology of Eros.'. In *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke, and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 185–217.
- Keen, Suzanne. 2007. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed.
- Koopman, Eva Maria. 2015. Empathic Reactions after Reading: The Role of Genre, Personal Factors, and Affective Responses. *Poetics* 50: 62–79. [CrossRef]
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1993. Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite. In *To the Other*. Edited by Adriaan Peperzak. Purdue: Purdue University Press, pp. 88–119. First published 1957.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1952. Simone Weil against the Bible. In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Translated by Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 133–41.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 1987. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. 2019. Available online: <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/> (accessed on 20 June 2019).
- Newton, Adam Zachary. 1995. *Narrative Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Newton, Adam Zachary. 2001. Versions of Ethics; Or, The SARL of Criticism: Sonority, Arrogation, and Letting-Be. *American Literary History* 13: 606–37. [CrossRef]
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oatley, Keith. 2016. Fiction: Simulation of Other Worlds. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 20: 618–28. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Odell, Jenny. 2019. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Robbins, Jill. 1999. *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rose, Gillian. 1993. Angry Angels: Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas. In *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rushkoff, Douglas. 2019. *Team Human*. New York: Norton.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sommer, Doris. 1994. Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers. *Poetics Today* 15: 523–51. [CrossRef]
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1992. French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics. In *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, pp. 54–85.
- Vermette, Katherena. 2016. *The Break*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Wallace, Cynthia R. 2016. *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Watson, Gay. 2017. *Attention: Beyond Mindfulness*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Wehrs, Donald R. 2013. *Levinas and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Weil, Simone. 1973. *Waiting for God*. Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: Harper and Row. First published 1951.
- Weil, Simone. 1965. The Iliad, or the Poem of Force. *Chicago Review* 18: 5–30.
- Wolf, Maryanne. 2018. *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York: Harper.

