INTRODUCTION

In this book I examine problems of political responsibility for certain kinds of human suffering in order to explain how we might come to acknowledge and experience its burdens, and how and why we flee from them. I identify acknowledging and experiencing responsibility as a disposition toward "responsiveness," and I ask how we can cultivate responsiveness, and what hinders its cultivation. The problem of responsiveness is rooted in complex relationships between politics, ontology, and narrative – that is, between questions about our responsibility for other people's suffering, our experiences of our ontological and political conditions, and the ways in which those experiences and our activities are invested with meaning through the stories we tell about them. Questions of political responsibility expose and illuminate the human conditions of plurality, freedom, and contingency. They illuminate the normative significance of the fact that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."[1] They highlight the freedom of those who occupy positions of relative privilege to organize – politically, economically, semantically – the world in which they live, often at the expense of those who occupy less privileged positions. And, finally, the question of freedom highlights the contingent character of our condition – the fact that it could be otherwise.

The meanings of these conditions and our experiences of them are not simply given to us by nature or necessity. Instead, they depend on the stories we tell ourselves and each other about them, and how we listen to those stories. We all tell stories, we all *want* and *need* stories,

[1] Arendt, 1998: 9.

to help us make sense of our world. Roland Barthes was right to say that "the narratives of the world are numberless," that "narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society," and that "it begins with the very history of mankind and nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative."[2] I use "narrative" and "story" interchangeably, to mean an account of some features of ourselves and our world – written or unwritten, spoken or unspoken, conscious or even unconscious – that helps connect them to or disconnect them from other features in order to make sense of our lives. This is admittedly a very general definition. It is necessarily so because, as we will see, stories come in many different forms.

In addition to making an argument *about* stories, in this book I also tell one: A story that starts from the problem of responsiveness, moves through a discussion of what obstructs responsiveness, and culminates in a suggestion of what a politics of responsiveness to suffering might look like. Cultivating responsiveness is not the same as being conscious of guilt, of having a "bad conscience,"[3] or of feeling guilty. Nor is it the same as assuming responsibility.[4] Responsiveness is prior to the assumption of responsibility for suffering. It is one of its necessary conditions. But responsiveness is a problem because it can often be frustrated by the ways in which we avow and disavow our relationships with other people and with ourselves. In this book I argue that the stories we tell ourselves and each other about others' suffering, and how we listen to them, can facilitate or hinder the cultivation of responsiveness.

My story, like all stories, answers some particular questions. First, to reiterate, how can we – especially we relatively privileged citizens of relatively privileged societies – cultivate responsiveness? In a sense this question is not a new one. Anti-sweatshop activists, proponents of fair trade and slow food, feminists, anti-poverty and anti-racism activists, religious and spiritual leaders, and others who struggle for social justice are all attuned to our implication in others' suffering and seek to help foster that attunement in others. Similarly, many scholars – including those with whom I am in critical conversation, such as Iris Young,

[2] Barthes, 1977: 79.
[3] Nietzsche, 1992.
[4] On the distinction between guilt and responsibility, see Arendt, 1968.

William Connolly, Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean-Paul Sartre have, in different ways and to different degrees, addressed the problem of responsiveness. However, these activists and scholars – and, in Young's case, activist-scholars – have not sufficiently appreciated the depth of the problem. For no matter how well-intentioned we are, how conscious of our privilege, how attentive to our implication in suffering, we are all still subject to powerful temptations to disavow those things. We have underestimated the resilience of several dispositions – thoughtlessness, bad faith, and misrecognition – that inhibit the cultivation of responsiveness. At some moments in this book I draw attention to my own temptations to disavow responsibility, not because my situation is unique, but precisely because I, too, am implicated in the problem of responsiveness. Because I argue that storytelling and listening are critical for the cultivation and frustration of responsiveness, my second question is: What roles do stories play in those processes, and how do they do so?

The problem of responsiveness is an urgent one today because, especially with the intensification of globalization, calls to assume responsibility for our implication in others' suffering resound with increasing urgency. If we are to have any hope of answering these calls effectively, we must not only come to some more or less shared understanding of what our responsibilities are and agree in principle to assume them; we must be able to acknowledge and experience the existential and practical burdens they entail. Storytelling is a crucial part of cultivating responsiveness because stories help us organize, represent, and try to respond to our world. Our theories about politics, for instance, are stories that deploy implicit and explicit assumptions, logics, and arguments to weave an account of how some aspect of political life unfolds. Their characters are often bloodless, lifeless, abstract; their settings relatively static; their plots only thinly contextualized. But others, such as literary stories and the stories we tell about our own lives and the lives of others, often deploy concrete characters that may be real or imagined, alien or familiar. They use shifting settings, moods, and themes to organize dynamic plots that connect (or disconnect) events across diverse times, spaces, and places. They are richly contextual. Both kinds of stories illuminate some features of our condition and obscure others. But they do not invite the same sorts of emotional investments and disinvestments, the same sort of receptivity

or repulsion; and they do not pose the same risks of frustration, disappointment, even betrayal, or of being emotionally swept away or left cold. In this book I tell stories in both "theoretical" and "literary" modes. As I said earlier, my argument is partly a story *about* stories, a theoretical account of how stories work to facilitate or frustrate the cultivation of responsiveness.

Given that stories feature prominently in this book, I want to begin with a confessional one of my own that emphasizes how difficult it can be to negotiate the burdens of political responsibility. When I was called for the interview that got me my job at Oberlin College, I knew I would wear the only suit I owned because that's what one does for such occasions – and what I had done several times before. But then, for the first time, I began to think about it: Why might my suit matter? One set of reasons is clearly aesthetic. Many of us have heard the saying that the clothes make the woman. Self-presentation matters, and academic job interviews come with a set of norms about how to dress for them. And then there's that voice in the back of our heads (usually that of a nagging adult): "You're not going out wearing *that*, are you?" I liked the way the suit looked and it didn't cost a fortune. That was the story I told myself about why I bought it. But because my talk was going to be about political responsibility, there were very different reasons to think about my suit, very different questions to ask, and a very different story to tell about it that had nothing to do with the conventions of my chosen profession: Where did it come from? Who made it? Under what conditions might they have worked? When I asked *these* questions, I started to think about my suit as a *political* problem, not just an aesthetic one. If the people involved in producing my suit were being exploited and brutalized, might that implicate me in their suffering? I didn't think much when I bought this suit. But when I got called for the interview, I started thinking and investigating. And here's the story that I can now tell you.

My suit was made by Nautica, whose website includes a stirring statement of "corporate responsibility." Given the association of "Nautica" (from "nautical") with matters aquatic, the statement unsurprisingly concerns water: access, cleanliness, sustainability, and so on. With so many examples of terrible corporate *ir*responsibility, this statement is at first reassuring. The story Nautica tells me is that by

purchasing this suit I contributed in some small way to saving the planet. I felt good – I was doing my part as a responsible global citizen. But then I dug deeper. It turns out that in 2010, Wikileaks – the organization responsible for leaking damaging information about the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq; and, more recently, classified information about the surveillance practices of the National Security Agency originally collected by Pvt. Chelsea Manning – released almost 2,000 U.S. government cables to a Haitian newspaper, *Haiti Liberté*. The cables revealed that in 2009, a number of factory owners in Haiti, with the vocal support of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the American embassy in Port-au-Prince, pressured the Haitian government to rescind a legislated minimum wage increase for factory workers. Until June 2009, the minimum wage had been $1.75 for an eight-hour workday. The factory owners were refusing to obey a law passed in June 2009 that raised the minimum wage to $5 per day, arguing that this was economically unsustainable for their industry. To put this in perspective, by some estimates in 2008, a Haitian family of three needed $12.50 per day to survive, and that was two years *before* the island was devastated by a massive earthquake. Nevertheless, David Lindwall, deputy chief of mission for the U.S. embassy, argued that the proposed $5 minimum wage "did not take economic reality into account" and was a populist measure intended to appeal to "the unemployed and underpaid masses."[5]

That is one way to tell the story about wages in Haiti. It is one version of the story of neoliberalism writ small – a story of relatively unregulated markets intended to facilitate the pursuit of profit and economic growth – whose singular focus on a particular picture of economic reality and a particular narrative of economic "progress" tends to obscure all other possible pictures, all other possible narratives. While the proposed increase may have been dissonant with the neoliberal version of reality, it did *not* ignore, but cast in stark relief, that of the workers, whose wages would *still* not be enough to live on even with the legislated increase. It seems to me, as to many other people, not just appealing but necessary as a matter of justice that human beings receive a living wage for labor and that they work under reasonable, nonviolent,

[5] http://theoldspeakjournal.wordpress.com/2011/06/20/wikileaks-cables-shows-u-s-opposed-minimum-wage-rise-despite-rampant-hunger-poverty-in-haiti.

and non-dominative conditions. This is another picture of economic reality, another story of what progress would look like and of what hinders it. In this story, progress toward more just societies, locally and globally, and the improvement of workers' lives, is hindered by the obsessive focus on market imperatives that characterizes neoliberalism. Such stories animate the arguments frequently offered by anti-sweatshop activists, and they provide another perspective from which to tell the story of the wage dispute. Ultimately, Haitian President René Preval negotiated for $5 per day in all industries *except* the garment industry, where wages would be $3.13 per day.

But wait, it gets better. One of the companies fighting for lower wages was Nautica, the one that produced my suit. Of course you won't find that on their website, but it took me roughly ten minutes to find it online. So now my suit is a very different object. It implicates me in the exploitation of Haitian workers – I bear some responsibility for their suffering. My suit suddenly felt very heavy. Maybe your clothes are feeling heavier now, too. On the other hand, I still chose to wear that suit to the interview. I am painfully aware of the hypocrisy in that choice, for which I must take full responsibility. How can I write about political responsibility while failing to act in the face of this knowledge? Indeed, I – and we – have a range of choices in the face of such burdens. We can feel the heaviness, experience the full weight of our clothes on our bodies and our consciences; or we can shrug it off, as it were, and go about our business. More likely, we might occupy some middle space, *struggling with* our clothes, neither escaping from nor "submitting meekly to [their] weight."[6] I try to live in and with the heaviness, even though I am always sorely tempted to flee from it.

This story illustrates in a very concrete way how through our everyday activities like buying clothes we may be sustaining the exploitation and brutalization of others. We might tell a very similar story about the horrific factory collapse in Bangladesh in May 2013, or the one that followed quickly on its heels in Cambodia. Market imperatives outweighed concerns about workers, and so shoddy and cheap construction led to disaster. That my story is a *confession* is significant too, for confessions – as we will see in detail in the final chapter – can reveal

[6] Arendt, 1965–6: 52.

not only our efforts to avow burdens of responsibility, but also the tensions between our desires to avow and our desires to flee: I *know* that my suit was probably made under inhumane conditions; I feel the burden that it imposes on me; and yet I chose to wear it because, as I said, that's what one does, and economically it is what I could do. It is not, however, what one *must* do. By submitting myself to norms of "professional necessity" and casting my "choice" in economic terms, it was and is easier for me to flee the burden of my responsibility for those workers who suffered in and through the production of my clothes.

Problems of responsiveness arise in other contexts as well. The fair trade movement addresses many of the same issues as the anti-sweatshop movement, but in the food industry and in agricultural production. Like sweatshop workers, food producers often work in unsafe conditions for far less than a living wage. Meanwhile, they produce goods that people in the rest of the world can consume relatively cheaply, and consumers of these goods thereby benefit from the domination, oppression, and exploitation of those who produce them. As in the case of sweatshop workers, activists argue that we bear responsibility for the suffering that agricultural producers endure because we purchase those goods and thereby sustain their fundamentally unjust working conditions, as well as the global economic order that legitimizes those conditions.[7] Or take the slow food movement: Founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986, the movement has a number of goals connected to culinary aesthetics and the health dangers of fast food, but another important aim is the promotion of ethical buying and ethical eating. The movement urges us to avoid consuming food produced quickly and cheaply through the exploitation of human labor, as well as food produced in ways that involve animal cruelty. On this account of the relationship between buying, eating, and the system of global food production, we bear responsibility for the suffering of humans *and* animals when we make purchasing decisions that sustain a global fast (and unjust) food culture.[8]

These examples illustrate how the imperative to cultivate responsiveness – to experience and acknowledge responsibility – arises. They also highlight what makes it so *difficult* to cultivate responsiveness: We

[7] See, e.g., Lyon and Moberg, 2010; Bovard, 1992.
[8] See, e.g., Petrini, 2007.

may fail to acknowledge and experience our implication in suffering precisely because it comes about through such ordinary activities that we don't think much about it. Or, as I said, we can flee these experiences: We can deny or disavow our responsibility. Or, as Deputy Chief Lindwall's comments suggest, we can fail to really notice others' suffering to begin with by seeing things in one way rather than another – by seeing some*thing* rather than another. In this book I address a wide range of political problems and experiences, from the situation of workers in different industries to the shattering horrors of genocide and terror. These very different problems share a common feature: They can highlight our implication in suffering, and they illustrate, in different ways, why and how we can fail to cultivate responsiveness in the face of it.

We ignore such failures at our peril, because in recent years problems of responsibility have haunted the scene of politics with new intensity. In the face of genocidal violence in Rwanda, Kosovo, and Darfur; the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the U.S. government's anemic response to Hurricane Katrina; and the global economic and financial crisis – to name some of the most spectacular cases – ordinary citizens, politicians, activists, and scholars have been asking pointed questions about who or what is responsible for these forms of suffering and how that responsibility ought to be discharged, whether by holding others liable retrospectively or by taking action for and in the future. What are the responsibilities of the international community in the face of humanitarian catastrophes, and who should be held responsible when they are not met? Should responsibility for the September 11 attacks be laid at the feet of the hijackers? Of Osama bin Laden? Is it a consequence of the radicalization of an "antimodern" Islam by religious leaders who stir their followers into anti-American frenzies? Is it a consequence of an arrogant American imperialism? Does responsibility for the suffering engendered by Hurricane Katrina lie with incompetent government agencies? Does it reflect a broader and more insidious racism in American society? Was the global economy plunged into crisis because of irresponsible elites? Greedy lenders? Irresponsible consumers? How might we hold them responsible? Was it a consequence of neoliberalism badly managed, or an inevitable consequence of an unsustainable ideological constellation? How should we move forward?

Questions of responsibility arise in the face of less spectacular and less public suffering as well – the oft-hidden suffering of the sweatshop worker or the coffee farmer, for instance. Do they suffer because they do not work hard enough to better their station? Do they suffer because their bosses run their factories in arbitrary and cruel ways? Or do they suffer because global neoliberal capitalism requires that they do? Or, indeed, do they not suffer at all, but merely contribute to the inexorable march of profit, progress, and freedom that characterizes neoliberal capitalism? These questions are at the root of the Occupy movements, and of the struggle between the 99 percent and the 1 percent: What are the roots of suffering, and who (or what) is responsible for it?

Political theorists are also asking such questions, as evidenced by a rapidly growing literature on questions of responsibility in politics.[9] Because increasing technological sophistication and globalization have diversified and intensified the capacities of (especially) privileged citizens of Western, late-capitalist societies to contribute to the suffering of those who are less privileged while insulating themselves from globalization's pernicious consequences; and because we are living in a moment of intersecting economic, social, political, and cultural crises that are global in their scope and effects, the persistence with which people are asking questions about political responsibility is vital if we want the burdens of living together to be distributed more evenly, and hopefully to be lightened as well. In that sense, this questioning is certainly for the better.

On the other hand, it is during just such moments of urgency that it is wise to take a step back and, as Hannah Arendt counseled, to "think what we are doing"[10] – in this case, to consider the questions that we are *not* asking. For instance, it is hard to escape the sense that while we are asking important questions about responsibility, we frequently ask them of *others* and less often of ourselves. We ask "what have *you* done?" or "what have *they* done?" Less frequently do we ask "what does this have to do with *me*, or with *us*?" What might I have done, or we have done, that implicates me or us in others' suffering? These are not just matters

[9] See, e.g., Lavin, 2008; Matravers, 2007; Young, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2011, Borowiak, 2011.
[10] Arendt, 1998: 7.

of intellectual curiosity. They are connected to more fundamental questions about how we experience the burdens of sharing the world with others. And again, no matter how attuned we are to our implication in others' suffering, no matter how committed we are to struggling to alleviate it, we are all subject to a powerful urge to disavow our implication in suffering and to retreat into thoughtlessness, bad faith, and misrecognition, three dispositions that inhibit responsiveness in different ways that I explore in detail in Chapters 3–5. When we are thoughtless our conscience fails us, or we abandon ourselves to the seductions of ideology, or we are simply overwhelmed by how much there is to think *about*. When we are in bad faith, we take ourselves to be passive objects rather than active subjects, helpless in a world for which we deny any responsibility. When we are subject to misrecognition, we take our socially constituted, historical, contingent world to be a natural one, and so do not see how to transform it; or, indeed, that transformation is even possible.

Our capacity and willingness to cultivate responsiveness, as well as our incapacity and unwillingness to do so, have been one of the defining problems of the post–World War II era. Many politically significant stories of different kinds – told in different ways, in different settings, to different audiences, and for different purposes – have featured prominently in this period. One kind emerged in such prototypical contexts as the Nuremberg war crimes trials and the trial of Adolph Eichmann, two major milestones in the development of international criminal law. The practice of such trials was institutionalized in international politics and law with the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2002. The stories elicited, contested, and judged during these and subsequent trials are stories of individual liability for criminal wrongdoing, of wrongful actions by some that led to harmful outcomes for others, and of defendants who were "just following orders," or were coerced, or didn't understand the implications of what they were doing, and so on. These stories are told with a view to punishing wrongdoing and engaging in symbolic political theater, or to declaring innocence, all in the name of international criminal justice.

A different kind of story, told in a different setting to a different audience, and for a different purpose, unfolds in truth and reconciliation commissions, first established in South Africa and imitated since by many other countries in Latin America and elsewhere to confront