BURDENS OF POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

How can human beings acknowledge and experience the burdens of political responsibility? Why are we tempted to flee those burdens, and how might we come to avow them? Jade Larissa Schiff calls this experience of responsibility “the cultivation of responsiveness.” In Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness, she identifies three dispositions that inhibit responsiveness – thoughtlessness, bad faith, and misrecognition – and turns to storytelling in its manifold forms as a practice that might facilitate and frustrate it. Through critical engagements with an unusual cast of characters (from Pierre Bourdieu to Jean-Paul Sartre) hailing from a variety of disciplines (political theory, phenomenology, sociology, and literary criticism), she argues that how we represent our world and ourselves in the stories we share, and how we receive those stories, can facilitate and frustrate the cultivation of responsiveness.

Jade Larissa Schiff is Assistant Professor of Politics at Oberlin College. Her specialty is in twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental political theory, and she works at the intersections of political theory, phenomenology, and literary criticism. Her current research explores experiences of suffering and the ways in which we narrate and respond to those experiences.
Burdens of Political Responsibility

NARRATIVE AND THE CULTIVATION OF RESPONSIVENESS

Jade Larissa Schiff

Oberlin College
“Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it.”

“I did what we all do, once we are grown up, when confronted with sufferings and injustices: I did not want to see them.”
– Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*
## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .............................................................. page ix  
Note on the Cover ........................................................... xv  
Introduction ................................................................. 1  
1 The Problem of Responsiveness ......................................... 27  
2 Thoughtlessness ............................................................ 50  
3 Bad Faith ................................................................. 85  
4 Misrecognition ........................................................... 117  
5 Creative Reflections: Mimesis and Responsiveness ............... 141  
6 Ambivalent Confessions ............................................... 164  
Conclusion: Toward a Politics of Responsiveness .............. 185  
Bibliography ................................................................. 197  
Index ................................................................. 207
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a daunting task to write the acknowledgments for a book that is, in large part, about acknowledgment. Not just because it is not always clear what “proper” acknowledgment entails, but because that uncertainty feeds all sorts of anxieties about failing to “get it right.” Those anxieties dissipate a bit, however, as soon as one realizes that – as I argue throughout this book – acknowledgment is never a settled accomplishment, but always a fragile and variable response to interdependence, freedom, and contingency. I have incurred many intellectual and emotional debts to many, many people while writing this book. I have no doubt that the full measure of what I owe to them – and to others as yet unrecognized – may only crystallize later, perhaps much later. In that spirit of acknowledged imperfection, then, here is a first attempt at acknowledging all those individuals and institutions whose intellectual and emotional support and nourishment have helped me carry this book through to its completion.

This book began as a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. I doubt very much that I would have ended up there were it not for Alexander Wendt, whose early support and mentorship convinced me to come to Chicago, and whose guidance helped me chart my initial course of study. While I eventually ended up on a very different path, I will be eternally grateful to him for his role in enabling me to pursue that path at all.

I wrote my dissertation under the extraordinarily generous, patient, challenging, and thoughtful supervision of Patchen Markell, Robert Gooding-Williams, and John McCormick. Patchen was unfailingly encouraging, demanding, and rigorous in his responses to my work. He
also encouraged wide-ranging explorations that released me from anxieties and always led somewhere productive. Sometimes the significance of our conversations did not hit me until months later, but it often hit with great force. Even if what I found did not make it into the dissertation or the book, the exploration itself was always extremely rewarding and continues to bestow its gifts today.

John was an unflagging source of support and constructive feedback, seeing me through many wildly different potential dissertation topics early on, and providing helpful guidance during the writing phase while leaving me free to roam. I also owe John a great deal for guiding me through an article on Leo Strauss that has become the germ of another project that is on the horizon. I cannot count the number of hours we spent in person and over e-mail working through the architecture and details of that article. His generosity was and is remarkable.

Bob’s support and encouragement have been invaluable. He graciously agreed to join my committee following the sad, untimely death of Iris Marion Young. One of my fondest memories from graduate school is of sitting in Bob’s office for nearly four hours, puzzling together through Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of bad faith, which is the subject of Chapter 3 of this book. The chapter and I are immeasurably better for it, and I am certain I will never forget it. Thanks are also due to all three for a very helpful conversation at my defense, which shaped the process of moving from dissertation to book in important ways.

Finally, although Iris was not on my committee, her work and her voice shaped both the dissertation and the book in countless and profound ways that I did not expect, and she continues to shape my thought today. I have no doubt that she would disagree with a good deal of what follows, but I could not have said any of it without her. In addition to my committee members, this book was shaped by very fruitful conversations with Sankar Muthu and Lisa Wedeen at the University of Chicago. It also benefited from two other sources of feedback there. One was Chicago’s invaluable workshop system. In particular, I learned a great deal from presentations to the Program in International Politics, Economics and Security and to the Political Theory Workshop.

In addition to having fantastic mentors and guides, I found support, both intellectual and emotional, among my fellow graduate students.
John Schuessler was the first graduate student that I met in Chicago. I stayed with him when I came down for Prospectives’ week, and that experience was a wonderful introduction to life in the department. I felt supported by so many of my graduate student colleagues – particularly Zachary Callen, Andrew Dilts, Mara Marin, Emily Nacol, David Newstone (a fellow Canuck!), and many, many more besides. I owe a very special debt to J. J. McFadden, with whom I spent – and have continued to spend – countless hours talking about my work, his work, political theory, and life in general. J. J. was and is a tremendous and ongoing source of intellectual and emotional sustenance. He has tried mightily over the years to convince me of Hegel’s significance for my argument, and although Hegel did not make it into the book, J. J. has taught me that I will have to reckon with him eventually. I will do my best.

I also received useful feedback from scholars at other institutions, including Simone Chambers, Bill Connolly, Jim Glass, Joe Heath, Nancy Luxon, Eric MacGilvray, Keith Oatley, Lars Toender, Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, Melissa Williams, and many more; as well as from audiences at the University of Maryland-College Park, The University of Minnesota, Wesleyan College, The College of William and Mary, The University of Waterloo, The University of Toronto, and Oberlin College. The book benefited tremendously from feedback I received in formal presentations and informal conversations at meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association, the Midwest Political Science Association, the American Political Science Association, and the Western Political Science Association. Thanks are due to wonderful co-panelists, discussants, and our lively and engaged audiences, and to many friends and colleagues at these meetings.

A lot of the work of turning the dissertation into a book took place at the Political Science Department and the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto. Many thanks to David Cameron, then-chair of the department, and to Joe Heath at the Centre, for granting me not only Visiting Scholar status but also library access and office space that enabled me to work steadily. Thanks are also due to Simone Chambers for helping me to secure that space. I received terrific comments on a first draft of the book manuscript from Janice Bially Mattern. Those comments prompted a major restructuring of the manuscript that both focused and sharpened the argument. Her intellectual support and
friendship mean a great deal to me. Davide Panagia and Michaele Ferguson also read later versions of the entire manuscript and their feedback was extremely helpful. The book was completed at Oberlin College, where I have the unbelievably good fortune to work and teach. Finally, I have benefited greatly from feedback from two anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press; from my editor, Robert Dreesen; and from the invaluable assistance of Elizabeth Janetschek. My thanks to Alissa McGowan of PETT Fox, Inc., for meticulous copyediting and to Gnanadevi Rajasundaram of Integra for capable supervision of the entire production process.

And finally, there are those debts that are difficult even to put into words. My first exposure to political theory came in a high school political science course taught by Allan Kirkwood-Zahara. We read tiny snippets of Hobbes and Aristotle, and I was forever hooked. Rennie Regehr, a mentor and a friend, encouraged me many years ago to “love the question,” and I have carried that advice with me throughout my professional and personal life. More recently, I am so very grateful to Melissa Williams, whose friendship and support, intellectual and emotional, have been a source of great comfort, sustenance, and growth over the past several years. Kai Brooks has supported me more than he probably knows. And then there is the OISE gang, which has helped me grow. I also owe a very special debt to Dr. James Drake who in February of 2003 did something for me, as Aristotle says of virtuous action, “to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive and in the right way” (Nichomachean Ethics II, 9). With great generosity of spirit, steadiness of hand, and exemplary judgment, he changed my life.

I cannot even begin to describe my gratitude to and love for my parents, Bernard and Gissa Schiff, and my sister Vanessa Coplan, for nurturing me as a relatively sickly child, and for their constant love and support throughout my life, without which I could not be who and where I am. They have been there to provide love and support even when I could not receive it and did not always reciprocate. I owe a great deal to our community, too, an uncommonly close and loving bunch. They are an extended family of mine, and they helped instill in me a love of knowledge and a sense of social and political responsibility, the spirit of which animates this book.
And lastly, there is Anna, and our daughter Lia. Anna has been with me through thick and thin, through good times and bad (and there have been plenty of both!), and sometimes, it seems, as much in spite of me as because of me. I could not have done this, would not be where I am, without her. My dear Lia . . . Lia has, in her first few years of life, transformed me. She reminds me what is important and offers an innocent and uncomplicated love that cannot be described – though she is far from an uncomplicated little person. It is to these two strong, wonderful women that I dedicate this book.

NOTE ON THE COVER

The image on the cover is of “Orange,” by Wassily Kandinsky, painted in 1923. Kandinsky is widely supposed to have had a form of synaesthesia that enabled him to see sounds and to hear colors. Toward the end of the book, a constellation of musical concepts and practices – transposition, polyphony, improvisation – emerges as a way of describing how narratives work and the roles they play in our lives. My decision to use a piece by Kandinsky is inspired by that constellation.