This volume represents an array of philosophical essays that I have written over the a period of twenty years (1993–2012), registering some shifts in my views over that period of time. If I am asked to say what, if anything, rationalizes this collection, I could only answer in a faltering way. If there is a sense to be discerned from that faltering, it would probably be this: when we speak about subject formation, we invariably presume a threshold of susceptibility or impressionability that may be said to precede the formation of a conscious and deliberate "I." That means only that this creature that I am is affected by something outside of itself, understood as prior, that activates and informs the subject that I am. When I make use of that first-person pronoun in this context, I am not exactly telling you about myself. Of course, what I have to say has personal implications, but it operates at a relatively impersonal level. So I do not always encumber the first-person pronoun with scare quotes, but I am letting you know that when I say "I," I mean you, too, and all those who come to use the pronoun
or to speak in a language that reflects the first person in a different way.

My point is to suggest that I am already affected before I can say "I" and that I have to be affected to say "I" at all. Those straightforward propositions fail, though, to describe the threshold of susceptibility that precedes any sense of individuation or linguistic capacity for self-reference. One could say that I am suggesting simply that the senses are primary and that we feel things, undergo impressions, prior to forming any thoughts, including any thoughts we might have about ourselves. That characterization would be true of what I have to say, but it would not fully enough explain what I hope to show.

First, I am not sure whether there are certain kinds of "thoughts" that operate in the course of sensing something. But second, I want to underscore the methodological problem that emerges for any such claim about the primacy of the senses: if I say that I am already affected before I can say "I," I am speaking much later than the process I seek to describe. In fact, my retrospective position casts doubt on whether or not I can describe this situation at all, since strictly speaking, I was not present for the process, and I myself seem to be one of its various effects. Further, it may be that retroactively, I reconstruct that origin according to whatever phantasm grips me, and so you will receive an account only of my phantasm, not of my origin. Given how vexed they are, one might think we should all remain silent on such matters, avoiding the first person altogether, since the indexical function fails precisely at the moment in which we want to marshal its forces to help us describe something difficult. My suggestion, rather, is that we accept this belatedness and proceed in a narrative fashion that marks the paradoxical condition of trying to relate something about my formation that is prior to my own narrative capacity and that, in fact, brings that narrative capacity about.

Let us follow Nietzsche's well-known remark that the bell that has "boomed . . . the twelve beats of noon" startles the self-reflective person who only afterward rubs his ears and, "surprised and disconcerted," asks, "what really was that which we have just experienced?" It may be that this kind of belatedness, what Freud called "Nachträglichkeit," is an inevitable feature of inquiries such as these, reflecting the narrative with the historical perspective of the present. Still, is it possible to try to give a narrative sequence for the process of being affected, a threshold of susceptibility and transfer and I that might reflect upon and relay, a life that did not yet exist and that, in part, accounts for the emergence of that I?

Certain literary fictions rely on these kinds of impossible situations. Consider the rather fantastic beginning of David Copperfield, in which the narrator speaks with extraordinary perspicacity about the details of ordinary life preceding and including his own birth. He mentions parenthetically that he has been told the story of his birth and that he believes what he has been told, but as the narration proceeds, he ceases to relay the story as if it were authored by someone other than himself; he has inserted himself as a knowing narrator at the very outset of his life, a way perhaps to get around the difficulty of once having been an infant unable to speak, reflect, or think as an adult author does. A certain denial of infancy seeps into his ever more authoritative account of when he cried and what others thought and did on that occasion.

Indeed, the opening chapter is fantastically entitled "I Am Born," and the very first line throws down the gauntlet: Will this narrator be authored, or will he author himself? The novel opens: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." There is, of course, a double irony, given that the narrator is a fictional construct of Charles Dickens and so already and continuously authored, even as he poses this question, suggesting that he might be able to leap out of the text that supports his fictional existence. Even within the terms of the novel, it is obvious that he could not have offered a report on his own birth.
with any kind of first-hand authority, and yet he proceeds with this impossible and seductive undertaking precisely as if he were there, looking on, as it were, as he enters the world.

Narrative authority does not require being at the scene. It requires only that one is able to reconstruct the scene from a position of non-presence in a believable way or that one's unbelievable narration is compelling for its own reasons. The story means something as it relates it, since we are being introduced into his rather remarkable self-understanding. What he relates may or may not be true, but it hardly matters, once we understand that the story he relates for says something about his authorial ambitions and desires, clearly meant to counter and displace the infant's passivity and the lack of motor control, a resistance perhaps to needing to be in the hands of those he never chose, who turned out to care for him more or less well.

My point is not to say that what happens in literary works such as these has a parallel in the theory of subject formation. Rather, I want to suggest that narrative gestures such as these find their place in nearly any theory of subject formation. Could it be that the narrative dimension of the theory of subject formation is impossible, yet necessary, inevitably belated, especially when the task is to discern how the subject is initially animated by what affects it and how these transitive processes are reiterated in the animated life that follows? If we want to talk about these matters, we have to agree to occupy an impossible position, one that, perhaps, repeats the impossibility of the condition we seek to describe.

To say that it is impossible does not mean that it cannot be done, but only that we cannot quite find a way out of the constraints of adult life except by asking how those incipient passages remain with us, recurring still and again. To say that I am affected prior to ever becoming an "I" is to deliver the news by using the very pronoun that was not yet put into play, confounding this temporality with that one. I, personally, cannot go back to that place, nor can I do so in an impersonal way. And yet there seems to be much we can still say. For instance, let us think about the language in which we come to describe the emergence or formation of the subject.

In a theoretical vein, we can, following a general Foucaultian line, simply state that the subject is produced through norms or by discourse more generally. If we slow down and ask what is meant by "produced" and to what view of production does such a passive verb formation belong, we find that there is much work to be done. Is "being produced" the same as "being formed," and does it matter which location we use? It is always possible to refer to a norm as a singular kind of thing, but let us remember that norms tend to arrive in clusters, interconnected, and that they have both spatial and temporal dimensions inseparable from what they are, how they act, and how they form what they act upon.

A norm may be said to precede us, to circulate in the world before it touches upon us. When it does make its landing, it acts in several different ways: norms impress themselves upon us, and that impression opens up an affective register. Norms form us, but only because there is already some proximate and involuntary relation to their impress; they require and intensify our impressionability. Norms act on us from all sides, that is, in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways; they act upon a sensibility at the same time that they form it; they lead us to feel in certain ways, and those feelings can enter into our thinking even, as we might well end up thinking about them. They condition and form us, and yet they are hardly finished with that work once we start to emerge as thinking and speaking beings. Rather, they continue to act according to an iterative logic that ends for any of us only when life ends, though the life of norms, of discourse more generally, continues on with a tenacity that is quite indifferent to our finitude. Foucault clearly knew this when he remarked that discourse is not life: its time is not ours.²

We tend to make a mistake when, in trying to explain subject formation, we imagine a single norm acting as a kind of "cause" and then imagine the "subject" as something formed in the wake of that norm's
action. Perhaps what we are trying to describe is not exactly a causal series. I do not arrive in the world separate from a set of norms that are lying in wait for me, already orchestrating my gender, race, and status, working on me, even as a pure potential, prior to my first wail. So norms, conventions, institutional forms of power, are already acting prior to any action I may undertake, prior to there being an "I" who thinks of itself from time to time as the seat or source of its own action. My point is not to make a mockery of such moments in which we understand ourselves to be the source of our own actions. We have to do that if we are to understand ourselves as agent at all. The task is to think of being acted on and acting as simultaneous, and not only as a sequence. Perhaps it is a repeated predicament: to be given over to a world in which one is formed even as one acts or seeks to bring something new into being. Acting does not liberate any of us from our formations, despite the protestations of gleeful existentialism. Our formation does not suddenly fall away after certain breaks or ruptures; they become important to the story we tell about ourselves or to other modes of self-understanding. There remains that history from which I broke, and that breakage installs me here and now. And so I am not really thinkable without that formation. At the same time, nothing determines me in advance—I am not formed once and definitively, but continuously or repeatedly, I am still being formed as I form myself in the here and now. And my own self-formative activity—what some would call "self-fashioning"—becomes part of that ongoing formative process. I am never simply formed, nor am I ever fully self-forming. This may be another way of saying that we live in historical time or that it lives in us as the historicity of whatever form we take as human creatures.

Finally, my argument would not be complete if I did not say that the contours of an ethical relationship emerge from this ongoing paradox of subject formation. I am affected not just by this one other or a set of others, but by a world in which humans, institutions, and organic and inorganic processes all impress themselves upon this me who

is, at the outset, susceptible in ways that are radically involuntary. The condition of the possibility of my exploitation presupposes that I am a being in need of support, dependent, given over to an infrastructural world in order to act, requiring an emotional infrastructure to survive. I am not only already in the hands of someone else before I start to work with my own hands, but I am also, as it were, in the "hands" of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human. In this sense, "I" am nowhere and nothing without the nonhuman.

The unwilled character of this dependency is not itself exploitation, but it is a domain of dependency that is open to exploitation, as we know. Further, susceptibility is not the same as subjugation, though it can clearly lead there precisely when susceptibility is exploited (as often happens when we consider the exploitation of children, which depends on an exploitation of their dependency and the relatively uncritical dimensions of their trust). Susceptibility alone does not explain passionate attachment or falling in love, a sense of betrayal or abandonment. Yet all those ways of feeling can follow, depending on what happens in relation to those who move and affect us and who are susceptible to us (even susceptible to our susceptibility, a circle that accounts for certain forms of affective and sexual intensity). In each of these cases, it is less a causal series than a form of transitivity at work in delineating a set of relations; we do not always know, or cannot always say, who touched whom first, or what was the moment of being touched and what was the moment of touching. This is the consequential insight of Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining" from *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is also related to his more general account of how it is we come to sense anything at all, when he considers, in Malebranche, that being touched first animates the sentient subject.

Is something relayed or transferred in transitive relations such as these? Jean Laplanche would claim that there are enigmatic messages that are relayed at the early stages of infancy and that they become
installed as primary signifiers that launch the life of desire. The drives are awakened by these strange early interpellations, and that enigmatic quality persists throughout the trajectory of sexual desire: “What is it that I want?” “What is this in me that wants in the way it does?” For Merleau-Ponty and, indeed, with Malebranche, it is only by being acted on that any of us come to act at all. And when we do act, we do not precisely overcome the condition of being acted upon. Being touched or handled or addressed as an infant awakens the senses, paving the way for a sentient apprehension of the world. And so, prior to sensing anything at all, I am already in relation not only to one particular other, but to many, to a field of alterity that is not restrictively human. Those relations form a matrix for subject formation, which means that someone must first sense me before I can sense anything at all. Acted upon, quite without any consent, and surely through no will of my own, I become the kind of being with the capacity to sense something and to act. Even as I come to speak within a discourse that firmly lodges the “I” at the source of its distinct action, I see that this “I” remains in thrall to a prior transitivity, acted upon as it acts. I cannot see this at all unless my ability to sense things has already been animated by a set of others and conditions that are emphatically not me. This is just another way of saying that no one transcends the matrix of relations that gives rise to the subject; no one acts without first being formed as one with the capacity to act.

Of course, many people do act as if they were not formed, and that is an interesting posture to behold. To posit that capacity to act as a fully independent feature of one’s individuality (with no account of individuation) is to engage in a form of disavowal that seeks to wish away primary and enduring modes of dependency and interdependency, including those disturbed conditions of abandonment or loss registered at early ages that are not precisely overcome or transcended in the life that follows, but repeat through more or less unconscious enactments of various kinds. Certain versions of the sovereign “I” are supported by that denial, which means, of course, that they are thoroughly brittle, often displaying that brittle insistence in symptomatic ways. Story lines ensue: When will that figure break of its own accord, or what will it have to destroy to support its image of self-sovereignty?

So perhaps it might be said that throughout these essays, a struggle with that form of sovereign individualism is underway. To claim that a subject acts only when it is first formed as a subject with the capacity to act, that is, as one who is already and still acted upon, might seem like a relatively conservative claim. Is it not possible to overcome our formation, to break with that matrix that formed any of us as a subject?

Of course, it is possible to break with certain norms as they exercise the power to craft us, but that can happen only by the intervention of countervailing norms. And if the latter can and does happen, it means simply that the “matrix of relations” that forms the subject is not an integrated and harmonious network, but a field of potential disharmony, antagonism, and contest. It also means that at moments of significant shift or rupture, we may not know precisely who we are or what is meant by “you” when we say it. If the “I” is separated from the “you” or indeed the “they,” that is, from those without whom the “I” has become unthinkable, then there is doubtless a rather severe disorientation that follows. Who is this “I” in the aftermath of such a break with those constituting relations, and what, if anything, can it still become?

And it might be that the constituting relations have a certain pattern of breakage in them, that they actually constitute and break us at the same time. This makes for a tentative or more definitive form of madness, to be sure. What does it mean to require what breaks you? If the dependency on those others was once a matter of survival and now continues to function psychically as a condition of survival (recalling and reinstituting that primary condition), then certain kinds of breaks will raise the question of whether the “I” can survive.

Matters become more complex if one makes the break precisely in order to survive (breaking with what breaks you). In such situations,
the "I" may undergo radically conflicting responses: as a consequence of its rupture with those formative relations, it will not survive; only with such a rupture does it now stand a chance to survive. The ambiguity attests to the fact that the "I" is not easily separated from those relations that made the "I" possible, but also to the reiteration of those relations and the possibility of a break that becomes part of its history, one that actually opens up a livable future. Frantz Fanon interrogates this problem of breaking with the terms of interpellation that institute one's "nonbeing" in order to break into the category of the human, even break it open by rejecting its racialized criteria. Similarly, Fanon underscores the conditions under which racialization establishes a kind of being who is destroyed prior to the very possibility of living and who must, in order to live, draw upon and develop another understanding of embodied freedom. For Fanon, as for Spinoza, the question also emerges: What destroys a person when that person appears to be destroying himself or herself? Do we find the social within the psychic at such moments, and if so, how? Strictly speaking, Spinoza believes that a person cannot take his or her own life, but that something external is working on the person at such moments. This raises the question of how what is "external" becomes not only "internal," but the driving force of psychic life.

To make this argument well, I would need to include a chapter on psychoanalysis, but that will not be found in this particular volume. The essay on Spinoza, however, does allow for a conjectured exchange between Spinoza and Freud. And yet many issues raised by psychoanalysis are interrogated in the texts considered here, including the condition of embodiment, the strategies of denial, primary dependency, the aims of desire, violence, and the primary importance of relationality and the persistently vexed character of social bonds and the unconscious.

The essays included here not only span nearly twenty years, but they represent less known—and less popular—dimensions of my philosophical work. The links to feminism and gender studies can be found in the essay on Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray, and some of my political commitments can surely be discerned in the essay on Sartre and Fanon, and also on Spinoza and the formulation of an ethics under pressure. But in the work on Malebranche in relation to Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard, Descartes, and Hegel, I am perhaps concerned more with the relational dimensions of embodiment: passion, desire, touch. I am less concerned with understanding the activities of the thinking "I" than with the sensuous conditions of being sensed and sensing, a transitive and ongoing paradoxical condition that continues even in the most self-sufficient postures of thought.

Again, the point is not to undermine any conceit we may have that we act or desire independently and to show that we are but the effects or prior and more powerful forces. Rather, the task is to see that what we call "independence" is always established through a set of formative relations that do not simply fall away as action takes place, even though those formative relations sometimes are banished from consciousness, even arguably must be banished to some extent. If I can come to touch and feel and sense the world, it is only because this "I," before it could be called an "I," was handled and sensed, addressed, and enlightened. The "I" never quite overcomes that primary impressionability, even though it might be said to be its occasional undoing. Oddly, but importantly, if the thesis is right, then the "I" comes into sentient being, even thinking and acting, precisely by being acted on in ways that, from the start, presume that nonvoluntary, though volatile field of impressionability. Already undone, or undone from the start, we are formed, and as formed, we come to be always partially undone by what we come to sense and know.

What follows is that form of relationality that we might call "ethical": a certain demand or obligation impinges upon me, and the response relies on my capacity to affirm this having been acted on, formed into one who can respond to this or that call. Aesthetic relationality also follows: something impresses itself upon me, and I develop impressions that cannot be fully separated from what acts on me. I am
only moved or unmoved by something outside that impinges upon me in a more or less involuntary way.

This uneasy and promising relation cannot be easily denied, and if denial does prove possible, it comes at the cost of destroying a social and relational world. I would say that we must affirm the way we are already and still acted on in order to affirm ourselves, but self-affirmation means affirming the world without which the self would not be, and that means affirming what I could never choose, that is, what happens to me without my willing that precipitates my sensing and knowing the world as I do.

The ethical does not primarily describe conduct or disposition, but characterizes a way of understanding the relational framework within which sense, action, and speech become possible. The ethical describes a structure of address in which we are called upon to act or to respond in a specific way. Even at the preverbal level, the structure of address is still operative, which means that ethical relationality calls upon this domain or prior susceptibility. A person is called a name or addressed as “you” prior to any sense of individuation, and that calling, especially as it is repeated and rehearsed in different ways, starts to form a subject who calls itself by those same terms, learning how to shift the “you” to an “I” or to a gendered third person, a “he” or a “she.”

There is always disturbance in that shift, which is why self-reference, enabled by the scene of address, can and does take on meanings that exceed the aims of those who introduced the terms of discourse through address. So addressing someone as “you” may well solicit a recognition that it is “I” who is meant by that second person, but that “I” may well resist or shift or reject the various semantics that are associated with that “you.” In other words, “Yes, it is me, but I am not the one you think I am.”

This misrecognition at the heart of the scene of address becomes more stark when it is a matter of gender. If I do not recognize myself as “she,” does that mean that I fail to recognize that someone seeks to interpellate me within that pronoun? I could act as if I am not being addressed, or I can turn around and offer the clarification of the pronoun I prefer, but whatever I do, I understand that that particular misrecognition was intended for me. In other words, even when the interpellation is wrong, it still is directed toward me. And sometimes when the interpellation is meant for someone else, and I think it is meant for me, it may be that the specific scene of address is misunderstood only because a more general scene of address is understood.

Perhaps the catcall on the street was meant for one woman, and another understood that it was meant for her. The fact is that it probably could have been meant for the second woman, even as she was mistaken in this particular instance. Such interpellations are roving and overinclusive; they take any number of objects, even as they seem to be directed toward one. The relatively impersonal character of the interpellation means that misrecognition is always possible. Further, it is not just the catcall or the insult or the slur that constitutes an interpellation within the scene of address; every pronoun has an interpellative force and carries with it the possibility of misrecognition. “You, you are the person I said I love?” or “I, I am the person you claim to love?”

How does this discussion of interpellation relate to the issues of primary impressionability and subject formation? In the first instance, the scene of address and even its linguistic structure precede any act of vocalization. Address can take place through other kinds of signifying actions, through touch, movement, holding, by turning one way or another, achieving and losing visual or tactile connection. The question of whether someone else is present can raise the question of whether I am present, as if absence or presence were transitive spaces, intermediary zones between differentiated individuals. A vast potential for vacillation emerges in response to the question of whether there is an “I” that can be at once differentiated and dependent or is in the process of differentiating within dependency. The “I” may feel that it is nothing without the “you,” and that may well index a very real condition of primary dependency (an early autobiographical condition relived...
psychically). Differentiation seems to thrive on the constitutive possibility of misrecognition that exists within any interpellation. Although a preverbal infant does not say, "Is it me you are calling when you say that name?" there is nevertheless something enigmatic at work in being called any name or assigned a gender through pronominal reference or repeated treatment and practice. Both the proper name and gender must surely arrive as enigmatic noise that requires an interpretive response, which includes a series of errors and misrecognitions. Perhaps some sense of that enigma survives into the world of adult interpellations: "Is that me to whom you refer when you claim that I am this or that?" Sometimes the possibility of misrecognition emerges in the midst of the most intimate relations: "I cannot believe you are my mother!" or "Is this my child?"  

Although the "subject" usually refers to a linguistic creature already differentiated within language, even capable of linguistic self-reference, it presupposes subject formation, including an account of coming into language. The fact that language precedes the subject does not obviate the need to account for how language emerges and how to account for the relation between embodiment and language in subject formation. After all, if the scene of address is not necessarily verbal, and if it is not restrictively linguistic, then it designates a more primary operation of the discursive field at the level of the body. That said, we cannot really differentiate between different "levels" as if they had an ontological status that exceeds their heuristic utility. The body is always supported (or not supported) by technologies, structures, institutions, an array of others both personally and impersonally related, organic and life processes, to mention just a few of the conditions of emergence. Those supports are not simply passive structures. A support must support, and so must both be and act. A support cannot support without supporting something, so it is defined as both relational and agentic. So the transitive relay of agency has to be understood as happening somewhere in this zone where supports are already acting on a body with various degrees of success and failure, acting on a localized field of impressionability for which the distinction between passivity and activity is not quite stable and cannot be. Acted on, animated, and acting; addressed, animated, and addressing; touched, animated, and now sensing. These triads are partially sequential and partially chiasmic. And the same can be said about the relation between the body and language. After all, the throat and the hands signify want or frustration or pleasure prior to when any linguistic form of speech gives expressions to those dispositions. It is hardly controversial to claim that in infancy, a great deal of bodily signifying happens prior to verbalization and speech. The emergence of speech does not constitute a substitution and displacement of the body. Bodily significations do not become successfully converted or sublimated into speech; the bodily dimension of signification does not fall away as talking begins (nor does it haunt speech as a metaphysics of presence). Although bodies can be signifying one way and speech another, the two modalities remain related to one another, even if in symptomatic ways. (Hysteria is a prime instance.) At a more mundane level, a public speaker must find a way to animate the throat, or the person using sign language must figure out the right ways to move those hands. So though we might say that bodily signifying precedes speech, we would be mistaken to think that it vanishes with the speech act or, indeed, with the written text. In its absence, the body still signifies. Descartes tried not to know this, but, according to Nancy, his own language worked against that disavowal.  

Just as philosophy founders time and again on the question of the body, it tends to separate what is called thinking from what is called sensing, from desire, passion, sexuality, and relations of dependency. It is one of the great contributions of feminist philosophy to call those dichotomies into question and so to ask as well whether in sensing something called thinking is already at work, whether in acting, we are also acted upon, and whether in coming into the zone of the thinking and speaking I, we are at once radically formed and also bringing something about. The primary impressions we receive establish a
relationship of animated necessity with the world. We speak as if impressions are received or impressions are formed, but if they are formed as they are received, then primary impressionability gives us a way to rethink both activity and passivity, that dualism so problematically associated with gender difference. Even if we cannot return to primary impressionability as an originary condition except through fantastic narrative turns, that is no reason to dispute its importance. It just affirms that we require forms of fiction to arrive at self-understanding and that verification cannot operate in the usual way in this domain. If one seeks to give an account of a condition in which series and sequenced were themselves a rather stark problem, as was the distinction between active and passive, then one has to find other means or allow for narrative to bespeak its own impossibility. Either way, it seems that we can understand neither what sense the subject might have nor how the subject comes to sense its world if we do not seek to describe the chiasmic conditions of its formation.

This is not a matter of discovering and exposing an origin or tracking a causal series, but of describing what acts when I act, without precisely taking responsibility for the whole show. Where the ethical does enter, it seems, is precisely in that encounter that confronts me with a world I never chose, occasioning that affirmation of involuntary exposure to otherness as the condition of relationality, human and nonhuman. Acted on, I act still, but it is hardly this “I” that acts alone, and even though, or precisely because, it never quite gets done with being undone.

“I How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?”

I remember a sleepless night last year when I came into my living room and turned on the television set to discover that C-Span was offering a special session on feminist topics and that the historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was making clear why she thought Women’s Studies had continuing relevance and why she opposed certain radical strains in feminist thinking. Of those positions she most disliked, she included the feminist view that no stable distinction between the sexes could be drawn or known, a view that suggests that the difference between the sexes is itself culturally variable, or, worse, discursively fabricated, as if it is all a matter of language. Of course, this did not help my project of falling asleep, and I became aware of being, as it were, a sleepless body in the world accused, at least obliquely, with having made the body less, rather than more relevant. Indeed, I was not altogether sure that the bad dream from which I had awoken some hours earlier was not in some sense being further played out on the screen. Was I waking, or was I dreaming? After all, it was no doubt the persecutory