

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

I'm (Not) Listening: Rhetoric and Political Rationalities of Self and Other

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/46f6484f>

Author

Hunt, Richard L.

Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

I'm (Not) Listening: Rhetoric and Political Rationalities
of Self and Other

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Richard Lewis Hunt

August 2016

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Vorris L. Nunley, Chairperson

Dr. Steven Gould Axelrod

Prof. Nalo Hopkinson

Copyright by
Richard Lewis Hunt
2016

The Dissertation of Richard Lewis Hunt is approved:

Committee Chairperson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express appreciation to the entire graduate community in UCR's Department of English, including graduate students, administrators, and faculty alike, all of whom helped make the department feel like home; I am truly grateful to have been a member of such an incredibly professional, collegial, and engaged academic community. The same must be said of my time working at the Graduate Writing Center and with GradSuccess.

My deepest thanks to all of my committee members, past and present. Your contributions have made this dissertation what it is (with the exceptions, of course, of any foibles, mistakes, or inaccuracies, which are entirely my own).

Finally, none of this would have been possible without my incredible, supportive family and my loving and wildly patient partner Pam. An entirely separate and equally long manuscript would need to be written to begin to catalogue the many ways I have been and continue to be enriched by having each of you in my life. Without a doubt, this dissertation is yours, too.

For Doran Ray Hunt,

who always, I believe, saw me with a PhD

and who never let me forget it

For Peter John Eiden,

the landmark/rock who helped keep me

from drifting too far up the coast

in the heavy south swell of doctoral study

and

For Lorraine Kay Jolley,

simply my hero

without whom, not.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

I'm (Not) Listening: Rhetoric and Political Rationalities
of Self and Other

by

Richard Lewis Hunt

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, August 2016
Dr. Vorris L. Nunley, Chairperson

In “I'm (Not) Listening: Rhetoric and Political Rationalities of Self and Other,” my primary aim is to explore and theorize the collective, social nature of listening, with a particular emphasis on the role that power plays in shaping listening processes and practices. While a robust body of scholarship is currently being developed around numerous aspects of listening, few of these studies seek to understand the social, political, and ontological forces shaping the processes of public, collective, democratic listening. Over four chapters, I attempt to make legible these forces and their effects through analyzing various representations and instances of listening in a wide variety of subject matter, including (in this order) poetry, science fiction novels, African-American rhetoric, and public discourse surrounding race. Centrally, I investigate the possibilities of communication across perceived differences, such as those of race, gender, and culture, emphasizing how our very understandings of the nature of human being govern which

persons and groups are commonly given a listening and whose voices are effectively rendered inaudible in the public sphere and everyday life.

A central aim of my dissertation is to analyze key political rationalities in public discourse that govern what it means to listen and what is sayable, as well as who is authorized to speak and under what terms. In this vein, I argue that listening must be understood as not merely a physiological effect, but as thoroughly ontological, always-already historically situated, and invariably inflected by power. And if indeed listening must be understood as ontological, as bound up with particular understandings of being and the human, then any given conception of listening plays a role in constituting a particular kind of subjectivity and buttressing that subject's borders against the ontologies of the other. In one important sense, then, to listen is to necessarily expose the self to some measure of risk and to expose one's ontology to the possibility of transformation. This project overall, therefore, works to outline the fundamentals of a grammar of listening and to analyze the complex interrelationships among language, listening, subjectivity, and human sociality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	VI
INTRODUCTION: I'M (NOT) AFFECTED: REASON, THE SUBJECT, AND THE DANGERS OF LISTENING.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: 'NEWSPAPER HEADLINE RADIO BRAIN': GINSBERG, LOWELL, AND THE MEDIATED SUBJECT	26
CHAPTER TWO: SCIENCE FICTION, COMMUNICATION, AND THE REPRESENTATION AND NEGOTIATION OF DIFFERENCE	87
CHAPTER THREE: MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY: AFRICAN-AMERICAN RHETORIC, ONTOLOGY, AND THE RHETORIC OF BECOMING	164
CHAPTER FOUR: MECHANISMS OF NOT-LISTENING: THE BLACK TROPE AS RHETORICAL VIRUS IN THE KILLING OF TRAYVON MARTIN.....	238
CONCLUSION: MAKING WORLDS TOGETHER: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR THE POLITICS OF LISTENING	290
WORKS CITED	319
APPENDIX.....	334

INTRODUCTION: I'm (Not) Affected: Reason, the Subject, and the Dangers of Listening

“We are the instruments of our instruments. And we are necessarily susceptible to the particular ills that result from our prowess in the ways of symbolicity. Yet, too, we are equipped in principle to join in the enjoying of all such quandaries, until the last time”

(Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* viii).

“That which is to be grasped by the eye makes itself normative in knowing” (Heidegger, “Science and Reflection” 166).

Listening offers a conceptual wealth of semantic and analytic possibilities. The term evokes, on one hand, a space of pleasure, of possibility, of connection, of immersion in a perceptual openness, an affective receptivity that registers not only aurally, but as broader somatic resonances affecting our emotions, our consciousness, our very sense of being in/with/against-the-world. On another hand, listening implies a chore, a deliberate effort, a kind of being-present that often entails discomfort, and perhaps even an ethical commitment, a vow, and an investment in a particular ontology, a particular presence of Being.¹ Broadly speaking, these are the preoccupations that drive this project. To what are we given to listen, and why? To whom, and when? How? To what effects, for cultural production, for human relationships and communities, and for our very understanding of

¹ For my discussions of ontology as it relates to rhetoric and listening, I have in mind specifically Heidegger, for whom human being (Dasein) is always an interpretation, and the interpretation of being human is fundamental to that Being (25-7). This is, in a certain sense, a fundamentally rhetorical insight. Heidegger thus resonates deeply with (literally) ancient lines of rhetorical thought, as represented by Protagoras’ famous dictum, “Man is the measure of all things,” for example.

Being and “the human?” If, as Kenneth Burke has argued, literature is equipment for living, what might it mean to think of literature and rhetorical theory as equipment for *listening*, and as tropological terrain for Being?

This dissertation begins with intersections between rhetoric, ontology, ideology, subjectivity, and various tropes and theories of listening. I then deploy some of the insights generated at these intersections to a range of texts from Allen Ginsberg’s poetry through discourses on race and violence that circulated around the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. In this introduction, I will: provide an overview of my theoretical framework; outline key concepts, methods, and aims; suggest a series of integral research questions guiding the project; and finally sketch out a trajectory for this dissertation across four interrelated chapters.

Theoretical Framework

Broadly speaking, this project posits the concept of listening as a receptive, affective, physiological, and ideological practice. Fundamentally, I seek to engage listening as both methodology and subject of inquiry. According to Adrienne Janus, Jean-Luc Nancy’s focus in his brief but penetrating book *Listening* “is to suggest the conditions of possibility for an ontology, an epistemology, a philosophical style of thinking and writing based in listening as a mode of attending to the resonances that penetrate, reverberate between, compose and decompose, self and world, the psychic and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual” (n 4, 185). Janus’ insights create a terrain of possibility for my project, and his “listening as a mode of attending to resonances” inspires and informs much of what follows. And as will shortly be made clear, although

Nancy's meditations take perceptual listening as one point of focus, his aim is hardly a simple inversion of what Martin Jay calls ocularcentrism, in favor of an also reductive otocentrism. Rather, what I find more compelling and useful here is Nancy's effort to propose a model of listening that provides productive alternatives to the ways that visuality, reason, and the subject inevitably perpetuate problematic Cartesian subject/object dualities. Nevertheless, while his model of listening is productive, I believe it can be enriched through an anchoring in rhetorical theory.

This dissertation is not concerned only, or primarily, with an aesthetic of listening, but also more broadly with a grammar of listening, in the vein of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (in which a grammar comprises sets of foundational principles—in his case, as it pertains to the fundamental grounds of human action). Thus, this dissertation seeks to develop a grammar of listening as a generalizable—a soft, lower case universal—set of foundational principles for understanding and analyzing the various processes and activities evoked by the term “listening.” I take as a central postulate that “listening” is not simply a *natural* but rather a *naturalized/naturalizing* process. Like a Gramscian common sense, any given historical conception of listening is arrived at and struggled over through affective, social, cultural, and political processes. My intention, therefore, is not to argue for the primacy of popular music over symphonic, or free verse over metered, or to privilege certain voices over others in public discourse, but rather to sound out the terrains, ideologies, and political rationalities upon which such determinations and decisions are made and upon which “listening” is practiced.

In short, this project argues that listening is (almost) always rhetorically conditioned, or constructed through motivated, ideological processes. Furthermore, this project argues that the development of a grammar of listening in literary and cultural studies, in tandem with an analysis of public discourse, can contribute to efforts to understand and rework the terrain upon which literary aesthetics, the politics and poetics of listening, and conceptions of the subject and reason are articulated—a racialized terrain which has problematically buttressed the imaginary of the nation-state, historically lending itself to the perpetuation of fantasies of Whiteness and the “White” nation state as the proper subjects of history, humanity’s apotheosis.

Prior to offering some principles that should be considered foundational for a grammar of listening, I want to briefly articulate an understanding of rhetoric that will facilitate sounding out the aforementioned terrains. In *Rhetorical Power*, rhetorical and literary theorist Steven Mailloux defines rhetoric as “the political effectivity of trope and argument in culture” (xii). Crucially, this definition resists the not uncommon understandings of rhetoric as mere “eloquence,” as florid, deceptive language, or as “persuasive discourse,” instead foregrounding rhetoric as a methodology or lens for identifying the roles of historical and socio-political power relations in shaping how and why certain tropes, arguments, and language use prove effective in the first place. Taking this notion further, Richard L. Wright, in his germinal article “The Word at Work: Ideological and Epistemological Dynamics in African American Rhetoric,” argues that “Rhetoric is the dynamic constructive force that frames and structures social reality” (97). This definition is deeply influenced by the African American rhetorical concept of

nommo, in which the word “propels itself outward into and onto the world of being and doing” (85). For Wright, in other words, “the word does work in the world” (85). This generative, dynamic aspect of African American rhetoric is central to this project, especially for understanding the capacities of rhetoric for manifesting effects. So, whereas Mailloux’s definition helps us diagnose the power relations always present in circulation of discourse, Wright’s definition supplements this by foregrounding the constructive role of rhetoric in actively shaping social realities. Thus, whereas I take listening to be (again, in Janus’ words) “a mode of attending to resonances,” we might similarly take rhetoric to be a central methodology for understanding the political investments and material effects of these resonances (not all sounds equally resound),² as well as the forces involved in naturalizing a given historical conception of listening.

As a way to supplement my discussion of the circulation and effects of rhetoric, as well as highlight the intersections between listening and subjectivity, I want to propose the concept of the “rhetorical virus.” Essentially, this concept gestures toward the Platonic fear of the vulnerability of the subject via the ear. For example, Plato consistently evinced fears around very specific kinds of listening; certain instruments were to be preferred (the lyre over the flute) for their presumed effects on the self, and certain modes of communication were to be strictly prohibited (the rhetorician, whom he describes as concerned with “the pleasant” over “the good,” is despised and castigated). In other words, Plato tacitly acknowledges that listening plays a role in constituting the

² Resonance, per Veit Erlmann, “entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived” (10).

subject, and the constituted subject is therefore vulnerable through listening. In Plato's sense, many of the listening practices of the demos threaten to corrupt or infect the idealized, stable, rational thinking self. To wit, rhetoric can "infect" otherwise "good people" with "bad ideas." Alternately, as Derrida's commentary on the pharmakon demonstrates, a given substance can be either poison or remedy. A virus may sicken or inoculate. Therefore, the rhetorical virus can work to a rhetorician's benefit or detriment, for as Carole Blair points out, one of rhetoric's definitive characteristics is its "capacity for consequence" (20), and of course consequences are never entirely within one's control.³

The rhetorical virus might be taken to be, to reprise my epigraph, one of the "particular ills" to which we are susceptible as a result of "our prowess in the ways of symbolicity" (*Language as Symbolic Action* viii). Plato's fears that haunt the *Phaedrus*, then, as we see the esteemed philosopher diligently severing rhetoric from philosophy, seem specifically attributable to the fragile nature of the idealized rational human agent. His fear then (and subsequent long traditions of fears that require "rhetoric" to function as foil for philosophy, certainty, and truth) can be read as a sort of panic around mortality, since rhetoric in this formulation reveals our vulnerability to our own instruments as well as our capacity to be affected, thus also revealing the untenable nature of the stable, rational, thinking self as the sole idealized basis for the human, the citizen, etc.

³ I am indebted to Vorris Nunley for this insightful and succinct way of thinking through this concept, through Blair and Derrida.

Sound and Sense

In order to sound through a grammar of listening, I situate this project around several deeply interrelated areas of investigation, including: listening as sense (in terms of both sensory perception and “making sense”); the role of listening in processes of subject formation, including the circulation of discourses of race and ethnicity; representations and explorations of listening in literary texts; listening as literary methodology; the role of ideology in shaping processes of listening; critiques of “reason” as refusal of receptivity; and the possibilities for community and democracy afforded by various conceptualizations of listening. I will argue that a robust grammar of listening must reconcile its core principles alongside the intersections and tensions between these areas. However, since these areas of investigation interpenetrate each other, it is difficult to attempt to define each area separately, here. Instead, I will briefly provide several articulations to begin sounding out these shared spaces.

Fundamentally, any rigorous grammar of listening should make some account of sound. To this end, I borrow from sound studies scholar Steve Goodman’s work crafting “an ontology of vibrational force,” in which the “linguistic imperialism that subordinates the sonic to semiotic registers is rejected for forcing sonic media to merely communicate meaning, losing sight of the more fundamental expressions of their material potential as vibrational surfaces, or oscillators” (82). Put differently, while it’s evident that certain sounds are heavily loaded with ideological significance—meaning potentials—we must nonetheless avoid the tendency to privilege the semiotic registers of sound to the exclusion of sound’s material potentials. In that sense, some account must be taken of

sound as *actant*,⁴ as having presence and possible effects/ affects outside of semantic registers.

This notion links us to two primary intonations that attend listening-as-sense, for the course of this dissertation:⁵ sense as perception (i.e. one of the five senses), and sense as a hermeneutic, or process of making meaning (as in “common sense” or “making sense”). To address the first of these intonations, I return to Jean-Luc Nancy, who holds that listening as sense perception offers a possible alternative to a Western intellectual history that is driven by visibility and various profoundly limiting relationships between vision-as-sense, reason, and the self. Contrary to Platonic and Cartesian selves, Nancy argues:

A self is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a self is made of a relationship to self, or of a presence to self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity (not just the individual in the current sense of the word, but in him the singular occurrences of a state, a tension, or, precisely, a ‘sense’)—this referral itself would have to be infinite, and the point or occurrence of a subject in the substantial sense would never have taken place except in the referral . . . (8-9)

In other words, if the self is a function of referral, then it is not a fixed, essential subjectivity, and one always re-locates one’s self in the process of sensing. Perhaps, then, Descartes’ famous formulation, with modification of emphasis, reveals unintended insights and possible effects. Rather than taking the act of thinking as indubitable proof

⁴ Attributing the term to Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett notes: “an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (viii).

⁵ While this model is indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening*, my interests also diverge from his, so the model I propose differs to that extent.

of one's existence, we might take the act of sensing and the effects of referral to in fact constitute the illusion of an apriori self preexisting said act: "I sense, therefore, I constitute and endlessly reconstitute a self."

Similarly, Viet Erlmann's *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* riffs on Foucault to suggest the notion of the "listener function." This listener is "not simply the recipient of an indefinite number of significations that fill his or her hearing, nor does he or she come after the work. Rather, the listener is a function that fixes these meanings with the goal of circumscribing and prescribing the auditory ways in which individuals acknowledge themselves as subjects" (Erlmann 24). So, it is productive to apply some pressure to Nancy's easy equations of listening-as-sense with the constitution of a more (willingly) vulnerable and interconnected sense of subjectivity. Both scholars posit the self as (at least partially) an effect of listening, but whereas in Nancy, listeners seem to contend in an ongoing way with a timeless process of referral, Erlmann's listener function includes the acknowledgement that the nature of the function produces and is produced by different forms across time and space.

The second of this project's two primary intonations of listening-as-sense refers to the process of "making sense" of that to which one listens; this is the historical terrain of hermeneutics, literary theory, and communication theory, for example. I take it for granted that meaning making is a process of construction, not a neutral effort to discover discrete messages embedded in or aesthetic truths about a text. To quote Kenneth Burke, "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion'" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 172). In other words, meaning is rarely if ever self-

evident—it is most always an effect of persuasion, influenced by persuasion. To this end, this project will privilege a Nietzschean model that places interpretation prior to representation, as vs. thinking of language and representation as mimesis (Thomas 30). Mailloux also provides an excellent model in his development of a rhetorical hermeneutics, which problematizes both realist and idealist conceptions of meaning, locating meaning neither solely in the text nor the reader, but in the interactions between them (13-16). He also argues that a thorough rhetorical hermeneutics must acknowledge the discursive effects of two rhetorical situations: production and reception of texts (17).

Thus, given the rhetorical nature of the construction and reception of literary texts, and given the notion that a given historical conception of listening helps govern processes of “making sense,” I attempt to construct here (through modifying one of Burke’s most well-known axioms) a mode of literary engagement that engages literature as equipment for *listening*. I mean by this to say both that literary texts can train readers in various kinds of listening (from “common sensical” to “avant-garde”), and that texts themselves are, to some extent at least, products of various practices of listening. (In the first case, it is readers attending to resonances, and in the second case, writers). As such, literary texts can also dismantle and then reconstruct existing grounds of textual reception, forcing readers to confront their own preconceptions and expectations, thus requiring readers to re-listen, to listen again. Moreover, we might fairly consider listening as a master trope of literary engagement. In fact, might we not consider all forms of literary theory to be organized practices of listening grounded each in their own set of relatively defined investments? Wright argues, for example, “In effect, all knowledge and

truth are embedded within the pragmatic, political, and linguistic/discourse processes that motivate their construction . . . In this sense, there can be no such thing as a natural, neutral, or rhetoric-free language/discourse that merely reports the world as it is” (90). While few contemporary critics might endorse the notion that their literary methods are “natural” or “neutral,” few may also be willing to take rhetoric seriously as a rigorous, epistemological mode of literary engagement. However, Terry Eagleton makes precisely such an assertion, arguing in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, that rhetoric can function as a kind of meta-theory, as a mode of listening (he doesn’t use auditory terminology per se, but I believe the comparison apropos) with an extensive capacity for self-reflexivity. Thus, while there is no outside of ideology, and while all sense-making is rhetorically conditioned, a rhetorical understanding of listening offers a model through which readers can sensitively attune to the sources, investments, and effects of texts-as-resonances.

The Marxist dialectic is another invaluable mode of attunement for listening (one might also say “ear-training”) in literary and cultural studies. Herbert Marcuse describes the dialectic as “the power of negative thinking” (444), arguing, in short, that contemporary global capitalism increasingly manages to co-opt alternative modes of thinking and being, replacing all thought with its own ideology (445). However, as all knowledge and structures contain within themselves the seeds of their own contradictions, readers can resist said co-optation by identifying the central contradictions in an object of analysis, and exploiting those contradictions to effect qualitative change.⁶

⁶ Rob Latham, in his insightful, encyclopedic work *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, & the Culture of Consumption*, models rigorous, incisive dialectical thinking in an almost relentlessly productive manner throughout the text. Latham argues

Thus, “negation is a positive act,” and “confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude” becomes the project of dialectic thinking (447). Confronting given facts with their exclusions becomes a way of critiquing dominant epistemologies, modes of listening, and common sense on their own terms. To be clear, I mean to suggest dialectical listening as a kind of “ear training,” and as a sort of inoculation against the rhetorical viruses of untrammelled capitalism, racism and racialization, the (baited) pleasures of neoliberal subjectivity, etc. Thus, a dialectical mode of listening provides an indispensable critical strategy to guide readers’ sense-making processes, and to attempt to resist the compulsive draw of normative, naturalized modes of listening.

Therefore, literature understood as equipment for listening, coupled with the idea of listening-as-sense (in terms of making sense), necessarily prompts the understanding (as Wright, Burke, and Marcuse would no doubt attest) that once an object of one’s listening is taken to “mean,” to have semiotic significance, we are situated squarely within knowledge production, the processes and domains of rhetoric and ideology. In other words, the process of how a listener comes to “make sense” must be understood as motivated by specific epistemological and institutional investments that are always-already occupying the nexus of effects and persuasion, investments which furthermore are imbricated into our very understandings of ourselves as subjects, as constituted through the motivated language/discourse we use to make sense. For, as V. N. Volosinov

convincingly, for example, that “the dialectical paradox at the heart of Fordist consumer culture” is “its capacity to unleash the most powerful, exhilarating desires, and its inability finally to satisfy the epochal hungers it has evoked” (Latham 41). Indeed, I consider this a fundamental insight into the nature of contemporary capitalist culture.

notes, “Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse” (13). In this sense, not only is language a source of ideology and a container and vehicle for its transmission, but it actively shapes consciousness itself as “ideological through and through” (22). Thus, while we may hold, along with Nancy, that the subject is constituted through listening, a subject’s consciousness takes shape through language and the ideological processes of making sense. As such, ideological frameworks can even mediate our sensory perception, connecting sense making to politics and subjectivity, as China Mieville’s *The City & The City* convincingly illustrates. Indeed, the novel’s plot and setting are driven by the intriguing notion that the eponymous cities’ topologies, as well as markers of citizenship and patriotism, are constituted precisely through a particular politics of seeing.

But in that vein, little has been said thus far about the relationships between listening and socio-political power. Central to this inquiry is the concept of the political rationality, which Wendy Brown defines as “a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship. A political rationality governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains” (693). As it pertains more specifically to listening, I would add that political rationalities, in addition to governing the sayable and the intelligible, govern who gets to speak and be heard, and under what conditions. Similarly, political rationalities structure who can effectively be forced (via real or implied force) into receptivity, and who can refuse it. Put differently, who can claim the socio-political “privilege” to penetrate, and who is accounted as penetrable? Who or what is sovereign? Where? As political rationalities are

normative, we can similarly take any given dominant conception of listening to be normative, to produce effects, and to function as a political rationality, organizing the penetrability and sovereignty of listeners and speakers, for example. A grammar of listening within democratic societies must therefore be understood as constitutively entailing a dimension with ethical/political implications, one which necessarily prompts the question, “what kinds of listening are required if we are to take seriously the practice of liberal democracy?”

So, while I take seriously Theodor Adorno’s contention that ideology and commodification mediate mass listening and the possibilities of democracy, I also believe it important to foreground Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of hegemonic articulations as a way to approach the power dynamics inherent in democratic listening and receptivity. In contradistinction to Adorno’s excessively bleak vision of reification and ruling class domination, Laclau and Mouffe’s inflections of hegemony afford a vision of democracy in which numerous articulations are possible, desirable, and in fact necessary, amongst diverse social groups (113, 136, 178). Alexander Livingston’s work in crafting a “critical theory of the public sphere” nicely supplements this discussion with a more specific emphasis on listening. Ideally, a truly democratic listening would be capable of revealing one’s own vision of the good and the true as simply one version amongst many. In practice, however, this is unrealistic. Instead, Livingston argues, “Trying to reach some understanding across these differences, in a situation in which the interdependence of identities and interests is not something abstracted from deliberation but the very substance of it, is the hard work of an agonistic democratic politics” (286).

The goal here needn't be agreement, per se, but the process must entail some receptivity and should strive for at least a measure of productive incommensurability. And crucially, we must recognize this very process of exchange not as dangerous, nor as a sign of receptivity-as-weakness, but rather as the fundamental ground, the condition of possibility, of American democracy. If listening fundamentally entails a measure of receptivity, and as I believe, some willingness to be transformed by what one hears, then we need a model of subjectivity and a theory of reason that are capable of receptivity.

Within the historical trajectory of Marxist critical theory, numerous critiques have been leveled at the totalizing impulses and effects of reason (c.f. Lukacs and numerous works by authors associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory). Nikolas Kompridis' excellent *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* takes up this tradition in order to renew its possibilities by reframing what Kompridis sees as persistent problems that have kept the tradition mired within some of the very terms it has sought to critique. Kompridis thus articulates a critique of reason alongside theories of listening and receptivity, persuasively arguing that a renewal of critical theory as discipline and activity is predicated upon effectively enlarging the meaning of "reason," specifically such that it can include Heidegger's concept of world disclosure as reason (86). This necessarily entails a kind of receptive reason that remains open to possibility, to the unforeseeable, and to new beginnings, as vs. a reason that is overly rule-governed, driven unrelentingly towards certainty and reproducibility, or seemingly paranoid about the "dangers" of irrationality (235). Likewise required, therefore, is a reformulation of the meaning of agency and subjectivity. Whereas the idea of agency is

generally bound up with “making it happen,” Kompridis advocates a kind of agency in which “one lets oneself be claimed, lets oneself be enlarged in ways one could not have foreseen . . . One doesn’t make it happen, one either allows it to happen, or one does not allow it” (207). This is an important distinction, as it describes a kind of passive agency that entails a willing but unforeseeable self-decentering. One effect of embracing a passive agency of this sort is the increasing possibility of a turn from valuing predominantly an individualistic, heroic subjectivity (of which the Ayn Randian hero is the most extreme example), to placing more value upon cooperative intersubjectivity. What’s at stake here is an undermining of one of the pillars of Enlightenment Reason, one which continues to stop its ears against the voices of the people and communities whom it can only figure as externalities, collateral damages, property costs.

For Kompridis, then, a new model of reason—which of course allows for a distinctive model for listening—affords a new model of subjectivity (and vice versa), and interestingly, one of the ways he develops these lines of thought is through an argument about listening, specifically, through reliance on Heidegger’s notion of the “call of conscience” (57). This sets up a call and response model based on active receptivity, which carries important implications for the possibilities of community as well.

To juxtapose listening and receptivity with what I referred to briefly above as the process of stopping up one’s ears, I want to propose the concept of “not-listening.” This concept finds a physiological analogue in Erlmann’s contention that “Hearing is repression” (257). In this claim, Erlmann is referring to the function of the ear that necessarily filters out disturbance that would otherwise register as noise (223-6).

Similarly, L. Murray Schafer notes that “The ear’s only protection is an elaborate psychological mechanism for filtering out undesirable sound in order to concentrate on what is desirable” (11). This is something between a physiological and psychological process of not-listening, inasmuch as the ear filters out “undesirable sound.” In the broader course of this project, this refers to a type of negative listening necessary for the constitution and coherence of the rational subject and the perpetuation of ideologies.

One way to articulate this idea in fuller detail is through contrasting the ideas of “noise” vs. “meaningful sound.” Jon Cruz, in *Culture on the Margins*, argues that during the mid-nineteenth century, Black music went from being heard “by captors and overseers primarily as noise” to becoming heard “increasingly as a font of black meanings” (43). This development of what Cruz calls “pathos-oriented hearing” became the basis for overseers, captors, and slave owners to begin finding meaning in Black music, which helped lead to the recognition of slaves’ humanity (43). Cruz thus links the “noise vs. meaningful sound” distinction with subjectivity—some subjectivities register as noise, and it is the mode of listening that underwrites this designation. By refusing (or proving incapable of) the move to pathos-oriented hearing, existing boundaries get policed around sounds, meaning, and subjectivity, and this distinction is organized by dominant political rationalities. Put differently, the practice of not-listening is rooted in a tacit acknowledgment of what we may have to actively block out from our awareness, perception, and knowledge in order to maintain our belief systems and our relationships to the world. This is in part why listening can be understood as dangerous, because it may jeopardize our very ontologies and epistemological commitments to reality.

Before moving on to the chapter sketches, I want to briefly reiterate some of the ways literary study contributes here to a grammar of listening. Fundamentally, I return to my earlier stated intention to take listening as both methodology and subject of inquiry, attending to the resonances of literature in rich and complex ways.⁷ To be clear, I don't mean by this merely a wringing out of literary texts to produce meaning. Rather, while meaning is a part of listening to literature, so is listening for affect (somatic and intellectual), pleasure/displeasure, consonance/dissonance, etc. As Janus' and Mailloux's work suggests, attending to resonances in literature must also entail receptivity to two rhetorical contexts: production and reception. But "resonance" is not simply a different way to say "context." While decidedly similar, "resonance" more effectively makes legible the fact that context echoes across contexts. Each historical moment contains a multitude of resonances, some of which resound through a given text and some of which do not (again, not all sounds equally resound). While this seems on one hand an obvious truism, its value lies in highlighting, via rhetoric, the discourses and power dynamics that help shape the political effectivities of certain tropes in terms of their affective force and other persuasive resonance. In addition, thinking through notions of context through the language of audition (versus ocularcentrism) provides opportunities for new insights into existing conversations.

⁷ Though not elaborated in these words, the rich possibilities afforded by "attending to resonances" of literature are modeled for me nowhere more thoroughly than in the extensive oeuvre of Steven Gould Axelrod, whose ethos of listening is simultaneously critical and generous, attentive and forgiving, incisive and holistic, demonstrating a level of listening sensitivity and scope that are, while very difficult to reproduce, nonetheless deeply inspiring.

Secondly, I will take ocularcentrism as a central presumption, positing that Western thought has been largely characterized by a visual bias, and therefore some effects of this bias will register within literary texts. On a related note, I hold that poetry, as an art form, takes sound as one of its primary formal features (rhyme, alliteration, even poetic meter), yet tends to privilege visuality over the auditory in terms of subject matter and content. For example, no sustained effort in literary criticism investigates an auditory equivalent of “the image,” which is often considered to be the driving force behind a great majority of the Western poetic tradition. Indeed there are scant few vocabulary options for undertaking such an investigation—perhaps “tone” points us in the right direction? But even then, tone has also become heavily associated with visuality in terms of color and hue. Perhaps Schafer’s notion of the “soundscape” can stand in for “the image?” This approach to literature may entail investigating the following important question/supposition: is a general paucity of sound studies of literature due to a general lack of words to describe sound in an ocularcentric culture, or is sound simply a more difficult phenomenon to describe than the effects of light? We have imagism, but what is its sound equivalent? Not quite “sound poetry.” Conversely, I do not want to enforce an artificial distinction between formal features and subject matter/content. Perhaps it is wiser to attune our hearing to the ways that rhyme and alliteration contribute to and modify/clarify/affect a given image.

Another general method will involve considering ways that my chosen literary texts (see the chapter sketches below for proposed works) take up some of the themes addressed in the above theoretical framework. How are different political rationalities of

not-listening represented, for example? How do various authors attempt to disarticulate Enlightenment rationality from subjectivity? How do depictions of the rational subject inform which characters' speech gets heard or, conversely, marginalized? What are the relationships between representation in texts and theories of "the subject?"

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one, entitled "'newspaper headline radio brain': Ginsberg, Lowell, and the Mediated Subject," will focus on Allen Ginsberg's *The Fall of America* (and other poems written during the same period) which he composed with the help of a tape recorder on long cross country road trips, during which the car radio played almost constantly. The back cover blurb describes the poems within as "the flux of car bus airplane dream consciousness Person during Automated Electronic War years, newspaper headline radio brain auto poesy & silent desk musings, headlights flashing on road through these States of consciousness." Thus for Ginsberg—whose relationship with media and pop culture ranged from resistant to complicit—the literal interpenetrations of our bodies by all-pervasive radio waves stand in for the similar interpenetration of our subjectivities by the content of these media transmissions. For context and comparison, I consider Ginsberg's work alongside that of Robert Lowell, arguing that the two poets' work represents contrasting attempts to use the medium of poetry to both intervene in American rhetoric (as civic discourse) and to reconcile poetry and democracy with the rapidly changing media landscape in 50s and 60s America. For Lowell, a "visual poet," media informed, or rather haunted, his work, representing a skepticism as to its role in American lives and selves. For Ginsberg, an "auditory poet," documenting these effects

was simply part of his job description, even such that some of his poems (e.g. “New York to San Fran”) came to simulate the fragmented, shifting experience of media consumption, which he mirrored through portraying a mediated poetic subject. In the end, both poets were harbingers of cultural change, though Ginsberg’s work wrestled in more complex and thorough ways specifically with the effects of media on the listening self. Thus, overall I argue that Ginsberg invites us to listen to media discourse as it resonates through him, blaring rhetorics of capitalism and consumerism, but he also sounds a pointed countercultural strain that affords possibilities for resisting commodification and forging a creative and critical space amidst the media onslaught.

Chapter two is entitled “Science Fiction, Communication, and the Representation and Negotiation of Difference.” As I will argue, since science fiction (hereafter sf) has a rich history of exploring the boundaries separating “humanity” from “the other,” and contains a deep archive of fictional and theoretical encounters between “the self” and “the radically alien other,” sf carries significant possibilities for understanding relationships between hegemony and people on its margins, as well as the processes and limits of communication and listening. In this chapter, I focus on contemporary sf literature in order to consider the genre itself as a mode of listening, as carrying generic affordances that can help attune us to listen to difference; I also track themes and representations of listening and difference in order to understand the ways that listening as a trope is treated within sf. In order to examine how the genre may help us understand the possibilities and limits of listening, I work through three primary threads: relationships between communication and worldview/cognition; relationships between

processes/conceptions of listening and the stable, rational self; and the politics inherent in any given conception of listening—for example, treating communication as a technical problem to be solved, vs. as a social or ethical matter. Over the course of this chapter, I argue that sf literature persuasively demonstrates that coming into contact with the other reveals our cultures, our knowledges, our selves, to be always already contingent, to be merely one way amongst many of being and knowing. Moreover, listening reveals a dependency on the other for the constitution of the self. In this sense, the Enlightenment, rational, stable self is revealed to be both dialectical (dependent upon the other for its very constitution, yet denying the legitimate being of the other) and rhetorical (constructed largely through processes of language and listening).

My third chapter is entitled “Making a Way Out of No Way: African-American Rhetoric, Ontology, and the Rhetoric of Becoming.” As I briefly discuss in the first chapter, rhetoric has long been understood as the art of democratic deliberation or the very process of civic discourse. However, even in the face of a powerful rhetorical tradition in the United States, numerous groups have for centuries all too commonly found their contributions to civic discourse regularly, even systematically, dismissed or ignored. The tradition of African-American rhetoric, while consistently finding its rhetors confined to the margins, has repeatedly and over the long-term proven quite effective at creating the conditions of possibility under which African-American scholars, speakers, and writers might get a listening in the broader public sphere. In the process, African-American rhetors and rhetoric have implicitly and explicitly theorized relationships between race and ontology and have developed rhetorical strategies to intervene in and

reshape these relationships. African-American scholars and rhetors, in part resulting from the conditions and experiences of systematic oppression based on race, have long understood race to be an ontological matter—one bound up with the very meaning of human being—rather than simply a set of discrete but interrelated social, political, and economic problems. Even as early as Maria W. Stewart, rhetors have realized that striving for political rights and social inclusion could never alone suffice in a system that categorically excludes Black people from the category of humanity. This tradition extends directly through numerous scholars and rhetors, including (to name just a few) W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis.

While it would be neither accurate nor appropriate to suggest that the rhetors discussed here have made specific reference to the Western philosophical concept of ontology, it is certainly clear that each rhetor was grounded in an orientation towards ontology/being that does not locate or fix race only within the body but rather frames race more broadly as deeply bound up with *ways of being* and knowing. Put differently, African-American rhetoricians have long recognized Blackness not as fixed substance or having some static essential being but rather Blackness as becoming, as process. Moreover, while it would not be accurate to suggest that African American rhetoric has defined itself in relation to hegemonic American Whiteness, given that Whiteness-as-American-ontology provided one unavoidable context of emergence for African-American rhetoric, the rhetors studied here implicitly or explicitly recognized this context and sought to intervene in it to reshape a more inclusive American ontology. Thus, through core strategies such as dismantling systems of racial hierarchy, broadening and

deepening the reach of the American founding principles, painstakingly constructing common grounds of shared humanity, insisting on Blackness being recognized and respected as singularity, and unraveling the myth of Whiteness as culmination of history, African-American rhetors have developed and made available numerous singular contributions to rhetorical theory and practice in a contemporary globalized world.

Chapter four, “Mechanisms of Not-Listening: The Black Trope as Rhetorical Virus in the Killing of Trayvon Martin,” builds on and extends some of the key frameworks from the previous chapter, applying them to contemporary subject matter. Historically, tropes have been defined as figures of speech, and to date, little if any work in rhetorical theory explicitly proposes and grounds a definition of trope that can accommodate a more widely productive use of the concept to understand the role of rhetoric in shaping the meanings and effects of race. Thus, my analysis begins with a distinctive definition of the concept of the trope, both drawing on and departing from the rhetorical tradition, proposing trope to be a kind of resonance between figures of speech, commonplaces, and *doxa*. Then, building upon and extending these insights, I will argue that language, culture, meaning, and bodies are tropic in their genesis and in their effects. This expansion effectively allows for shifting the term out of the “merely” linguistic into the material—a shift from affect to effect in the world that effectively resituates trope into the realm of rhetoric as a practical art. This shift from the linguistic to the material, along with its attendant move to include the body within the purview of rhetoric, provides a rigorous rhetorical grounding for a version of Blackness that Vorris Nunley has referred to as the Black trope. In these terms, I argue that the Black trope as rhetorical virus has

historically functioned as a means of obscuring Black humanity, and I then apply the insights generated herein to an analysis of the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Finally, by reworking the question of intentionality through foregrounding the role of the Black trope in shaping Zimmerman's actions, I contend, alongside Nunley, that Zimmerman's shooting of Martin amounted essentially to an attempt to debilitate, obliterate, or make moribund any transference of productive affect, effect, and meaning in the network of significations linked with Blackness. Zimmerman's actions were, in short, an attempt to murder a trope. In these contexts, the Black trope is made legible as a key mechanism of not-listening to the knowledges, histories, and experiences of African Americans, leading ultimately to ongoing, systematic violence, analyzed here through the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent exoneration of his killer.

In closing, it is my hope that these four treatments of very different material should serve to illuminate some of the important differences and commonalities in the processes, politics, and ontologies of listening. Each chapter may, on the surface, have little in common with the subject matter analyzed in the other chapters. However, through exploring in significant depth these individual aspects of listening, the overall effect should be a kind of "cubist" theorizing in which looking at a single subject—listening—from four distinctly different perspectives should reveal more about the subject in question than might otherwise have been possible.

CHAPTER ONE: ‘newspaper headline radio brain’: Ginsberg, Lowell, and the Mediated Subject

By the mid-1960s, Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg had both earned reputations as poetic innovators and political progressives who envisioned a role for poetry and poets in shaping the life of the nation. Both poets found themselves in positions of relative privilege as public figures with public voices and platforms, and they both treated these positions as responsibilities and opportunities to shape public discourse for the better. One way Ginsberg and Lowell each sought to do so was through decoding media messages to reveal the capitalist, imperialist, militaristic ideologies underlying them, ideologies that both poets saw as ultimately harmful to the nation and even the world; both poets modeled this decoding process in their poetry, effectively offering what we might call reading or listening lessons. In this vein, this chapter investigates the representation and problematization of ideologically conditioned and mass mediated modes of listening in selections of both poets’ works written between 1965 and 1970. For Lowell, media informed, or rather haunted, his work, representing a skepticism as to its role in American lives and selves. For Ginsberg, representing the effects of media was simply part of his job description, even such that some of his poems came to simulate—in both form and content—the fragmented, shifting experience of media consumption. In the end, both poets were harbingers of cultural change, though Ginsberg’s work wrestled in more complex and thorough ways with the effects of media on the listening self, modeling complex modes of mediated subjectivity and providing models for enjoying

some of the pleasures of the mass media without getting completely caught in its capitalist and nationalist ideological snares.

In analyzing the work of mid-twentieth-century American poets, James Breslin has argued that many such writers sought to capture a “temporal immediacy” within their work, a sense of contemporaneity unique to the period (*From Modern to Contemporary* xv). This temporal immediacy required—as Lowell described it—a “breakthrough back into life” (qtd. in Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary* xiv). This drive to break “back into life” entailed a direct rejection of the modernist poetics of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics that had “domesticated modernism” and subsumed poets within “the myth of the value-free technician” (13, 17). Rather than treating poems as discrete, self-enclosed, ahistorical aesthetic objects, many of the major poetic movements of the 1950s and 60s sought to create poetry “of the present” (xv). And while a great deal of research places Lowell’s and Ginsberg’s work within these historical contexts, very little work yet attempts to situate their work in relation to the media contexts of the time. Steven Gould Axelrod’s excellent “Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg” is a notable exception. In analyzing the poets’ relationships to various media discourses, Axelrod argues that their poetry and the mass media were often “resonating each other, at times becoming virtually indistinguishable from each other” (“Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 14). One overall effect of these resonances was to make “the circumambient media discourse audible and visible to critical analysis . . .” (19). This process of laying bare media discourses helped transform American poetry through its embrace of the unavoidably political nature of poetry and by

prompting innovations at the levels of poetic form and language. Both changes were incredibly timely, especially given the tremendous rise of mass media forms through the middle of the twentieth century and the increasingly significant roles that mass media were coming to play in the everyday lives of Americans.

Building on Breslin's and Axelrod's insights—emphasizing the “media” within this drive for temporal *immediacy*—I explore the roles media played in Lowell's and Ginsberg's efforts to document and make sense of their specific historical moments. Drawing from Lowell's *Near the Ocean* and *Notebook 1967-68* and Ginsberg's *The Fall of America* and “New York to San Fran” (written during the same period but published separately), I argue in this chapter that the two poets' work represents contrasting attempts to reconcile poetry and democracy as well as media and subjectivity within the rapidly changing media landscapes of 1950s and 60s America. More specifically, I argue that Lowell and Ginsberg sought to shape public discourse in the U.S. by modeling in their poetry critical modes of listening (vis-a-vis popular media discourses) and forms of subjectivity capable of inhabiting these rapidly changing media landscapes without being co-opted by their ideological aims.

The poets' contrasting approaches to media influenced the language and content of their poetry and subsequently determined the kinds of listening they could train readers to do and the kinds of mediated subjectivity the speakers in their poems could model. As I suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, any given historical conception of listening is arrived at and struggled over through affective, social, cultural, and political processes. It follows that different kinds of subjectivity will accompany different

historical conceptions of listening (a concept upon which I will shortly expand through Veit Erlmann's notion of the listener function). Thus, by "mediated subjectivity," I refer to the ways that the poets conceptualize and represent the ways that media forms affect subjectivity. In Lowell's case, while he certainly resonated media discourse to great effect, his approach to mediated subjectivity, while innovative and compelling, was relatively limited in scope. His attitude toward mass media was signaled by a general absence of references to pop culture, a silence that he occasionally punctuated with compelling parodies that effectively dismantled the ideologies at the heart of popular media discourses. For sources of media discourse and language, Lowell tended to rely most heavily on popular print media. This strategy limited his approach to mediated subjectivity in at least two ways. For one, print media lend themselves to a linear mode of engagement that is not particularly applicable to other modes of media consumption such as listening to the radio or watching television, which would be more commonly characterized by switching channels. Secondly, Lowell would have had a narrower selection of references from which to draw when simulating the experiences of mediated subjectivity — he demonstrated little familiarity with pop cultural figures and texts that would have been common in the everyday media experiences of many Americans. Nonetheless, his highly trenchant parodies of media discourses, regardless of the sources that informed them, quite effectively modeled critical listening and a form of mediated subjectivity that could at least position itself apart from and resistant to the hegemonic discourses of American empire.

Where Lowell dabbled but did not revel in the mediated self, Ginsberg engaged in what we might term a “you gotta get in to get out” approach to pop culture that is virtually pervasive in his work of the period. He often immersed himself completely within media and pop cultural discourses, even becoming at times complicit with their shared underlying consumerist ethos. This occasional complicity, while on one level contradictory to Ginsberg’s broader aims, was arguably unavoidable if he was to engage deeply enough with mass media consumption to fully understand, decode, and deconstruct its many pleasures and pitfalls. Indeed, it was precisely this depth of immersion and its concomitant occasional complicity that allowed Ginsberg to form an unusually complex and powerful perspective on the role of media in American culture and lives. He combined a Whitman-esque metonymic understanding of self and landscape (e.g., “I am America”) with a Marshall McLuhan influenced conception of self, media, and technology. Within Ginsberg’s poetry of the period, Whitman’s soaring landscapes now incorporated both the massive achievements and potentially debilitating externalities of modernity, coming to resemble McLuhan’s new mediated environment in which technologies were extensions of the human senses (“Culture and Technology” 493). The mediated subject that emerged within this conjunction should in theory have had little to fear from the media and technology that simply extended her senses and capacities. However, this is where Ginsberg effectively one ups McLuhan. The latter, in his insistence that the medium was effectively the only message that mattered, proved unable to account for the ideological effects that stemmed from the aggressively capitalist nature of mass media in the postwar United States. Thus, to this blend of Whitman and

McLuhan, Ginsberg added a Marxist orientation through which he decoded the content and nature of mass media. In sum, *The Fall of America* and “New York to San Fran” often simulate (at the level of form and content) the sensory experience of the McLuhanesque mediated environment, critiquing the ideological elements of this experience while alternately doubting and yearning for Whitman’s democratic vistas. His readers might be thus “trained” in critical modes of listening by repeatedly witnessing the speakers in his poems negotiate these mediated sensory experiences while maintaining a commitment to a robust, democratic ethos.

It is primarily this alternating doubt and yearning that grounds the modes of critical listening afforded through Ginsberg’s complex perspective on mediated subjectivity. On one hand, like Lowell, Ginsberg sought to shape public consciousness by relentlessly documenting the ways that hegemonic consumerist, imperialist, militaristic discourses ravaged already marginalized people and even the Earth itself. On another hand, Ginsberg differed from Lowell in his belief that the tools of mass media could be turned back against their capitalist masters; he frequently pointed his audiences towards musicians and public figures who provided counter-hegemonic perspectives—Bob Dylan was of course a perennial favorite—and he consistently used the media in savvy ways to spread his own alternative messages as well. Overall, Ginsberg’s work suggests a model of mass-mediated listening in which we’re all complicit, but we needn’t be uncritically so. His poetry invites us to listen to media discourse as it resonates through each poem’s narrator, blaring rhetorics of capitalism and consumerism but also sounding a pointed

countercultural strain that affords possibilities for resisting commodification and forging a creative and critical space amidst the media onslaught.

To recap, Lowell and Ginsberg each drew from and sought to intervene in American public discourse, and both saw poetry as a way to participate in and shape this discourse towards greater embodiment of American founding principles. In that sense, Lowell and Ginsberg are best understood as “rhetorical poets,” as writers who saw themselves and their work as having a responsibility to help advance and sustain an increasingly egalitarian practice of democracy in the U.S. Both poets worked to critically counter hegemonic media messages, to lay bare the ideological underpinnings of media language, and to reinvigorate public discourse with other inflections. Both poets modeled productive listening strategies, but Ginsberg also consistently explored and represented forms of mediated subjectivity capable of living in—rather than simply attempting to retreat from—the McLuhan-esque new mediated environment of 1960s America. Therefore, given Ginsberg’s more complex treatment of media, I devote the bulk of my analysis to his work over the course of this chapter.

This line of argument stands to contribute to the scholarship on both Lowell and Ginsberg, and it has implications for developing various approaches to listening as a literary hermeneutic. To the first point, placing Ginsberg and Lowell alongside each other and highlighting similarities as well as differences enriches the scholarship on both poets, revealing more in common than being “simply opposite ends of William Carlos Williams,” as Lowell once quipped (qtd. in Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 100). In terms of the scholarship on Ginsberg specifically, this chapter offers a potentially major

contribution by bringing into the conversation a heretofore missing element of Ginsberg's work: mass media play highly significant roles in his work, roles which to date remain all but ignored in the scholarship. In particular, the notions of training readers in critical listening and modeling mediated subjectivity could prove useful in this regard. Moreover, this chapter develops a theory of Ginsberg's sophisticated media theorizations, demonstrating that he was ahead of his time in understanding the role of media in culture and further sedimenting his reputation as a profoundly innovative thinker and writer.

To the second point—developing various approaches to listening as a literary hermeneutic—this chapter explores to some small extent the modified axiom of Kenneth Burke that I briefly laid out in the introduction. To restate, if literature can be understood as equipment for living, what might it mean to think of poetry as equipment for *listening*? In this chapter, I consider a twofold application of this insight: both that literary texts can train readers in various kinds of listening and that texts themselves are, to some extent at least, products of specific listening practices. My exploration of the idea of training readers and listening will be self-evident, as it forms a major thread of the chapter; the listening practices of the writer will be touched upon through my treatment of Lowell as a “visual poet” and Ginsberg as an “auditory poet.” However, with the notion of training readers in mind, a pressing objection should be briefly addressed here. Far from diminishing the power and aesthetic beauty of Lowell's and Ginsberg's poetry—reducing poems to mere didactic cudgels, for instance—this line of argument should serve rather to heighten appreciation of their work. To remain committed to both an innovative poetic sensibility and a democratic responsibility as a public figure is no small feat, and the fact

that both Lowell and Ginsberg managed to do so with reasonable grace is a testament to their uncommon talents and the rich merits of their writing.

From this chapter introduction, I move first to provide slightly expanded background regarding the media contexts of 1950s and 60s America and the theoretical frameworks of both rhetoric and listening that inform the concept of mediated subjectivity and other core elements of this chapter's analyses. From there, I position Lowell as a primarily a visual poet and then apply this insight to analyses of a selection of his poems. I then provide comparative readings of two poems on the death of Che Guevara as a way to clarify the contrast between the two poets' approaches to media. These readings form a transition into an extended section on Ginsberg's work, in which I unpack his sophisticated understandings of media. This section culminates in an in-depth reading of the poem "New York to San Fran," a poem that showcases Ginsberg at his media simulating best.

Background

In the post-World War II U.S., mass media were generally regarded with both hope and suspicion, both popularly and within intellectual circles. On one hand, for example, radio and television were seen as potential means of widespread education and instantaneous communication amongst people who were otherwise separated by vast distances; on the other hand, these two media seemed to carry tremendous power that could be dangerous in the wrong hands (Peters 27). Intellectuals in particular saw radio and television as "threats to democracy and the informed critical participation of the masses and cultural and social life" (Lister et al. 75). By the 1950s, mass media were

commonly characterized as playing an essential role in homogenizing American culture around a set of stultifying norms that primarily promoted consumerism and conformity (Kellner and Durham 8). At the same time, many intellectuals were keenly aware that these same media forms were commonly deployed in communist and totalitarian regimes to induce passivity and reproduce ruling party ideologies (8). Indeed, as Peters argues,

hypnotism became a chief metaphor for describing the spell that dictators and admen cast on their audiences via radio, film, and television. Mesmerism's afterlife helped shape the understanding of mass media in the twentieth century as agents of mass control and persuasion that somehow, via their repetition, ubiquity, or subliminally iniquitous techniques, bypassed the vigilant conscience of citizens and directly accessed the archaic phobias (or ignorance and sloth) of the beast within. (Peters 93-4)

From the 1930s through the 1960s (and continuing, certainly, through today), critics of media worked in a number of different ways to explain this unnameable power cast by “dictators and admen” to mold the malleable public to suit their own nefarious needs.

Most commonly, arguments of this sort—those decrying mass media as essentially dystopic—are associated with theorists of the Frankfurt school, such as Theodor Adorno. While these arguments are well-rehearsed elsewhere, their relevance to this chapter bears brief mention. In his foundational article “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” Adorno decried the rise of what he referred to as the culture industry, a primary aim of which was to convert aesthetic subjects into consumers, or music listeners into purchasers of music (273). Adorno further argues that through this and other mechanisms, “The liquidation of the individual [was] the real signature of the new musical situation” (276). In this view, the threat to democracy lied in the creation of mass subjects who were primarily consumers rather than engaged

democratic citizens. Dwight Macdonald, a leftist cultural critic and long time magazine writer and editor, expressed a slightly different set of concerns. Rather than identifying a threat to the possibility of the individual, he worried that the mass media were effecting a dumbing down of collective intellectual life in the U.S., which in turn diminished the possibility of democracy. Macdonald coined the term “Masscult” (note the resonances between “cult” and Peters’ discussion of the hypnotism metaphor above) to signal some of these concerns. In Macdonald’s view, Masscult is “not just unsuccessful art. it is non-art. It is even anti-art” (4). And unfortunately, “the enormous output of such new media as the radio, television, and the movies is almost entirely Masscult” (3). Like Adorno, Macdonald drew a clear distinction between “high culture,” which carried tremendously positive affordances, and Masscult, which could not, by definition, even count as art. Macdonald continued, “So let the masses have their Masscult, let the few who care about good writing, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, etc., have their High Culture, and don’t fuzz up the distinction with Midcult” (73). Notably, there’s an absolute distinction here between “good” writing, music, etc., and Masscult, a commodity solely produced to simulate (not *stimulate*) pleasure in “the masses” (27, 70, 71), a category that includes the “great majority of people at any given time (including most of the ruling class for that matter)” who simply “have never cared enough about such things to make them an important part of their lives” (73). These fears of mass media and the denigration and dismissal of the majority of the public—people who were most commonly theorized as objects of media intervention unable or unwilling to resist its hypnotic pleasures—were

the dominant discourses confronting Ginsburg and Lowell as they each began to rework the relationships between poetry and mass media.

Despite the intense gravitic power exerted by these dystopic media discourses, other, more optimistic perspectives did find purchase in some intellectual and creative circles. Peters argues, for example, that the postwar period gave rise to two favorable discourses about communication: one technical and one therapeutic. Adherents of the former posited that “the imperfections of human interchange can be redressed by improved technology or techniques,” while proponents of the latter privileged “a therapeutic ethos of self-realization” (28-9). In any case, both visions “claim that the obstacles and troubles in human contact can be solved, whether by better technologies or better techniques of relating . . .” (28-9). For many people, these positive discussions of the possibilities of mass communication offered an important antidote to the otherwise dystopian views of the period. And in the early 1960s, proponents of this technical discourse on communication gained an unflinching advocate—Marshall McLuhan—whose views on mass communication technologies can fairly be described as utopian. While acknowledging that rapidly developing technologies signaled profound change for human lives and cultures, he saw this change as a hopeful possibility rather than a threat. McLuhan argued, “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (McLuhan and Fiore 8). Moreover, the effects he described are simply part and parcel of what it means to be a human being; media are nothing more than “extensions of some human

faculty—psychic or physical” (McLuhan and Fiore 8). In other words, the rise of mass media was not something to be feared. Rather, it entailed the possibility of positive change and an accompanying new set of responsibilities. If we were collectively up to the task of responding productively to these changes, the possible outcomes were nothing short of utopian. In McLuhan’s view, “A full understanding of the sensory typology of cultures on one hand, and the sensory order and impact of art and technology on the other hand, affords the possibility of a human environment sensorially programmed for the maximal use of the human powers of learning” (McLuhan, “Culture and Technology” 495). In other words, media and technology as extensions of human faculties could be marshaled to direct human learning on scales and to degrees that were previously unprecedented. Thus, to briefly recap, by the time Lowell and Ginsberg were writing the poetry analyzed in this chapter, the poets were situated within dichotomous discourses that largely characterized mass media in either dystopian or utopian terms. Peters brilliantly characterizes the stakes of this dichotomy, suggesting that the decision as to which theory of mass communication one endorses “may turn on whether we are more afraid of being suckered by power [e.g. Adorno] or deprived of hope [e.g. McLuhan]” (Peters 224).

Within these media contexts, Ginsberg and Lowell sought to create work that could highlight the effects of mass media forms and content in mid-twentieth century lives and possibly even shape these effects and outcomes for the better. This is what I mean in claiming that Ginsberg and Lowell were “rhetorical poets” invested in reconciling poetry and democracy with the rapidly changing media landscape. With this

in mind, I now turn to providing brief grounding for the notion of rhetorical poets, aiming to first establish the frames through which I analyze Lowell's and Ginsberg's poetry, eventually leading to my claim that Ginsberg in particular modeled a kind of critical/rhetorical listening in his poetry that could embrace popular media without collapsing into dominant capitalist-imperialist imperatives.

As the introduction to this dissertation indicated, rhetoric has been and continues to be widely theorized in any number of complex, often contradictory ways. For our purposes in this chapter, I begin with the tradition of rhetoric as civic discourse (as inaugurated by Aristotle), which I then expand via more contemporary scholars such as Kenneth Burke, Thomas Farrell, and Steven Mailloux. In Aristotle's formulation, one primary purpose of rhetoric was to effect persuasion in public discourse.⁸ The bulk of his text *On Rhetoric*, which is largely regarded as the foundational text for the study and practice of rhetoric, is devoted to strategies for composing and delivering public speeches, primarily those designed to influence deliberative bodies, courts, or the public at large (Kennedy, "Introduction to Book 1" 25; Aristotle 47-48). And regardless of whether the purview of rhetoric is limited only to public speaking, the art of public speaking certainly has no greater elaboration than within the tradition of rhetoric. Moreover, within the Aristotelian tradition, the ideal role of rhetoric within the state is to establish and enact courses of action that best serve the public good. It is within this context that Thomas Farrell argues, "Rhetoric is the only art which . . . presents a public

⁸ For an excellent summary of scholars' various framings of Aristotle's treatment of rhetoric, see Kennedy, "Introduction" 12-13.

audience with the possibility of becoming, for a time, an accountable moral agent” (10). This notion of rhetoric as public discourse combined with the ideal moral outcomes Farrell mentions form the core definition of what I mean by rhetorical poets: Ginsberg and Lowell participate in public discourse first as listeners and then as rhetoricians offering their readers “the possibility of becoming . . . accountable moral agent[s]” through adopting skeptical, resistant (and in Ginsberg’s case, receptive) attitudes and behaviors towards mass media.

In a similar vein, the rhetorical hermeneutics of Steven Mailloux provide a means for analyzing both the production and reception of the two poets’ work. As a brief reminder, Mailloux defines rhetoric as “the political effectivity of trope and argument and culture” (xiii). Within the context of a rhetorical hermeneutics, this definition has relevance for both poets and their audiences. Ginsberg and Lowell were first on the reception side of rhetoric, registering the political effects of various tropes and arguments in American media (as I will shortly discuss, Lowell was devoted primarily to print media, whereas Ginsberg was nearly obsessed with auditory media). These differing forms of engagement with rhetoric and media fundamentally shaped both men’s production of poetry, resulting in both commonalities and differences. For example, while their perspectives on media forms differed significantly, the two poets shared a preoccupation with repackaging these media discourses as critical interventions in the public sphere. To reiterate then, this point further supplements my characterization of Lowell and Ginsberg as “rhetorical poets,” as poets who saw poetry as rhetorical; they both drew from and sought to intervene in the American rhetorical tradition, and both saw

poetry as a way to participate in and shape civic discourse towards greater embodiment of American founding principles.

Finally, thinking of poetry within and through rhetorical means, it will be productive to think of both poets' work as deeply driven towards Burke's fundamental rhetorical aims of *identification* and *consubstantiality*, interrelated aims and processes that move individuals and groups to identify and strengthen shared interests, highlighting and fostering their sameness rather than dwelling on differences (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 20-21). These aims of fostering togetherness and strengthening relationships through commonalities were at the heart of both poets' social and political activism, and they are indispensable threads in the poetry analyzed in this chapter.

Finally, the concept of listening also bears brief treatment here, specifically as it helps link rhetoric to Ginsberg's and Lowell's contrasting forms of media engagement and to their production of poetry and their processes of constituting the mediated poetic subject. In the introduction, I discussed Viet Erlmann's notion of the "listener function." To repeat, Erlmann suggests that the listener is "not simply the recipient of an indefinite number of significations that fill his or her hearing, nor does he or she come after the work. Rather, the listener is a function that fixes these meanings with the goal of circumscribing and prescribing the auditory ways in which individuals acknowledge themselves as subjects" (24). In other words, the listener is always already a filter with specific investments in maintaining a certain kind of subject. In this vein, my analyses will work to unpack the listener functions (and their attendant subjectivities) being performed and constructed in any given poem. Additionally, recall Adrienne Janus'

definition of listening “as a mode of attending to the resonances that penetrate, reverberate between, compose and decompose, self and world, the psychic and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual” (185, note 4). This definition quite effectively links listening to rhetoric, cultural context, and subjectivity along these lines: listening is a process of attending to the political effectivity of rhetorical resonances and tropes that penetrate, compose, shape, and inflect relationships between self and culture, poet and audience, and media contexts and mediated subjectivity. It is within this specific framework that I turn now to discussing Lowell and Ginsberg themselves.

Ginsberg and Lowell in the 1960s

Lowell and Ginsberg, despite the many dissimilarities between them, also had much in common. For one, both poets mounted substantive challenges to the state of American poetry they had inherited early in their careers (Breslin, *Modern to Contemporary* xiv). They worked to subvert the “literary hegemony” that had been established and codified through the work of T. S. Elliott and the New Criticism (Breslin, “Poetry” 1080), a hegemony that posited for poetry “a realm separate from and transcendent of history” (“Poetry” 1081). Nonetheless, stemming in part from this sense of disillusionment with the state of American poetry, both poets ambitiously sought, and to varying extents achieved, both critical and popular success. For instance, after the publication of *Near the Ocean*, Lowell came to play the “role of celebrity conscience and official poet of the opposition” (Axelrod, “Robert Lowell and the Cold War” 358), and was often followed by paparazzi when walking his dog (Flanzbaum 46). Of Lowell’s success, Flanzbaum also notes, “*Near the Ocean* . . . however fleetingly . . . represents a

rare phenomenon in recent literary history: an academically credentialed, canonical poet exerting wide cultural influence and political leadership” (56).

By contrast, Ginsberg’s poetry was received more coolly by the literary establishment, being perhaps too readily misunderstood as mere bohemian sensationalism. Indeed, Breslin suggests that whereas Lowell “started out with the active support of . . . fastidious literary authorities,” these were in his view precisely the poetic authorities “that the antics of the beats were most designed to antagonize” (*Modern to Contemporary* 110). In spite of his initial cool reception by the establishment, Ginsberg eventually got the critical praise he desired, winning a national book award in 1973 for *The Fall of America*. Additionally, by the mid-1960s, Ginsberg had become a countercultural phenomenon, influencing and working with numerous countercultural figures such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith (Gilmore). In the end, his shadow grew so long as to lead Mikal Gilmore, in a *Rolling Stone* obituary following Ginsberg’s death in 1997, to suggest (somewhat preposterously): “Perhaps only Martin Luther King Jr.’s brave and costly quest had a more genuinely liberating impact upon the realities of modern history, upon the freeing up of people and voices that much of established society wanted kept in the margins.” And while this seems to me a clear instance of overstating the case, Ginsberg’s eventual popular success and status as countercultural icon cannot be denied.

Arguably, Lowell’s and Ginsberg’s drives to attain critical and popular success ran parallel to their efforts to efface the lines often drawn between poet and public figure. Lowell, for instance, “succeeded better than any of his contemporaries in turning his

personal experience . . . into an expression of general public-historic concern” (Ruland and Bradbury 409). By the time of his death, Lowell was widely appreciated as a “public man of letters” who had “insisted on facing simultaneously both his own and his nation’s pain” (410). Similarly, “Ginsberg is *best understood as a public figure*, a gentle guru moving from cause to cause, from campus to campus, speaking always for antinomian freedom from state and corporate invasion of the self, whether through draft laws or violation of the natural environment” (396, emphasis mine). As public figures, both poets sought to make productive interventions into the dominant public and political discourses and ideologies of their day, especially as they encountered these discourses through popular media. Indeed, to return briefly to Axelrod’s insightful analysis of works produced by Lowell, Ginsberg, and Elizabeth Bishop during the Vietnam War, such works became poetry “*about* the media” as much or more so than poetry about the war (“Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 14, original emphasis). He notes, “In these poems, war as topos yields to a consideration of the way the informational apparatus produces, commodifies, and consumes the war topos” (14). Put differently, to some extent, media constructed the war as it was consumed by the public, and these poems laid bare those constructions. It bears repeating here that each of these poets “made the circumambient media discourse audible and visible to critical analysis, presenting it as constructed and contradictory, powerful but fissured” (19). This latter claim provides two central points of departure for my own readings of the two poets’ work to follow: Lowell and Ginsberg had in common this effect of laying media discourse bare to critical

analysis; however, their means of doing so differed, with Lowell drawing primarily from visual media and Ginsberg drawing primarily from auditory media.

I elaborate on the significance of this distinction when analyzing each poet's work individually, but for now, suffice it to say that Lowell might be best described as a visual poet, whereas Ginsberg is best understood as an auditory poet. In addition to privileging the visual in his poetry and media consumption, Lowell limited himself largely to print media in his allusions, and he seems to have leaned toward a dystopian view of mass media, sharing with Adorno and Macdonald a healthy dose of skepticism toward popular culture. Ginsberg, by contrast, privileged the auditory, incorporated a wide range of media forms into his poetry, and adopted a sophisticated approach to theories of mass media that balanced elements of utopian and dystopian discourses in eminently practical ways. Thus, while the two poets had a great deal in common as public and political figures engaged in revealing the constructed nature of media discourses, their visual/auditory preferences significantly shaped each poet's relationship to media, guided choices about the media forms with which each worked, and helped determine the poetic subjects, or the listener functions, that emerged in each poet's work. In this sense, while Ginsberg's work is deeply indebted to listening as a sensory experience, listening is more of a metaphorical framework in Lowell's case, one linked to sense making as I outlined it in this dissertation's introduction. In the sections that follow, I analyze the work of each poet in these terms, seeking to understand the models of mediated subjectivity and the affordances for critical listening that each poet provides.

Robert Lowell

While I have already characterized both Lowell and Ginsberg as rhetorical poets, a few more details bear mentioning regarding what more specifically that meant for Lowell. In this vein, Lowell has remarked, “all my poems are written for catharsis” (“After Enjoying Six or Seven Essays On Me” 291). And given the importance Lowell placed on facing both his own and his nation’s pain (Ruland and Bradbury 409), it is reasonable to suggest that his work sought to produce that catharsis on both private and public levels. In other words, some of his poems might be fairly described as rhetorical works written in part to effect public catharsis. Axelrod makes a similar point about the rhetorical nature of Lowell’s work, suggesting that his poems often constituted “ethical interventions in the discourse of the *polis* by poetry” (“Robert Lowell and the Cold War” 340).

Approaching this public/private poetic with an eye for cohesion across Lowell’s oeuvre, Christopher Ricks identifies three fundamental contexts that inform and pervade Lowell’s work: first, personal experience, an individual “I” in the “here and now”; second, “the way we live now, a social and political we in which ‘the Republic summons Ike . . .’”; and third, broad, “outer” contexts including the “historical, literary, and religious, dealing with the old, unhappy things which are not far off . . .” (116). The first and third of these areas have particular relevance here. The first point, Lowell’s connection to “a social and political we”—particularly in the sense Ricks evokes by use of the phrase “the Republic summons Ike”—seems to me another way to say Lowell was a rhetorical poet who felt called by his nation, like it or not. To the third point, I would

add media to Ricks' list of "things which are not far off" (especially considering the many ways that media and pop culture were rapidly becoming irreversibly interwoven with American life). To be certain, however, Lowell's references to mass media forms and texts were generally sparse, or at least nowhere near Ginsberg's level of almost manic engagement with pop culture. Mass media informed, or perhaps more precisely haunted his work, indicating a skepticism as to its role in American lives and selves.

In short, Lowell's relationship with media was largely built around a rejection of (or at least a deliberate silence regarding) mass media and pop culture. Generally, when Lowell incorporated public rhetorics into his poems, his references were almost exclusively to print based media. Steve Axelrod notes that even when referring to pop media Lowell's references are almost always to popular books, magazines, and other print media.⁹ In that sense, while Lowell and Ginsberg each worked to craft poetry that could both intervene in American rhetoric and productively address the rapidly changing media landscape in 50s and 60s America, Lowell's efforts toward these ends differed markedly from those of Ginsberg. As I previously suggested, Lowell's understanding of himself as a visual poet accounted in part for these differences. For instance, in a 1961 interview for *Paris Review*, Lowell drew a comparison between himself and Theodore Roethke, claiming that Roethke had a great ear for poetry but not a very good eye, whereas Lowell himself had a very good eye but a poor ear ("Robert Lowell, The Art of Poetry No. 3"). Later in the interview, Lowell linked poetry very closely to painting, then going on to place visuality at the heart of his process of composition. He noted, "Often

⁹ From a personal conversation on May 4, 2016.

images and often the sense of the beginning and end of a poem are all you have—some journey to be gone through between those things; you know that, but you don't know the details. And that's marvelous; then you feel the poem will come out" ("Robert Lowell, The Art of Poetry No. 3"). In this approach, the process of writing poetry largely involves reconciling an image with an intuition. The significance of this formulation will become clearer in comparison to the ways that Ginsberg's commitment to listening shaped his method of composition and the kinds of poetic subjectivities that might show up in his work—the comparative readings of each poet's treatment of Che Guevara should prove especially illuminative in this regard. For now, it should suffice to say that Lowell's print/visual media preference versus Ginsberg's radio/auditory inclination was quite significant in the ways that the two poets integrated media and constructed mediated subjects in their work.

In Lowell's case, references to popular culture are not entirely rare, but it is relatively infrequent that he dwells on any of these references in significant depth.¹⁰ The most notable exceptions occur in *Near the Ocean*, his 1967 series of anti-Vietnam War

¹⁰ In addition to the quite substantive evocations of media discourses that I will analyze shortly, examples of Lowell's brief pop culture references include: a sonnet for Harpo Marx (*Notebook* 124); mention of a massive neon Coppertone sign to critique the imperialist effects of global capitalism (26); a sonnet entitled "We Are Here to Preserve Disorder" that mentions "scenes on the green screen" and clearly evokes the imagery and deadly bland language of a TV newscast (138); and numerous similar instances scattered across his late 1960s work. I am grateful to Steve Axelrod for mentioning the following additional examples (amongst others): "Lowell cites the song 'Careless Love,' so important in country, jazz, and popular music, in 'Skunk Hour' (1959); he refers to Rogers Peet's store in 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' and to L. L. Bean in 'Skunk Hour'; he quotes Muhammed Ali's 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,' with admiration I believe, in *The Dolphin* (1973)" (Personal email).

poems. Indeed, one of the great strengths in these poems is his ability to so trenchantly appropriate media discourses to undermine the dominant narratives of American colonialism and exceptionalism. In “Robert Lowell and the Cold War,” Axelrod provides a compelling reading of “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” tracing Lowell’s appropriations of tropes such as “small wars” and “world policing” to editorials and opinion pieces by the likes of Walter Lippmann and Irving Howe (356-7). More broadly, Axelrod suggests that the poem “culminates Lowell’s poetic project of assembling quotations and allusions to directly challenge the dominant political narratives of his nation” (358). I would suggest that the second poem in this series, “Fourth of July in Maine,” similarly advances his project. The poem begins with a description of an Independence Day parade and then narrates the speaker’s experiences and musings spanning the remainder of the day. Lowell’s challenges to dominant national narratives begin in the first stanza, with the narrator implicating children’s costumes in the circulation of ideology:

Another summer! Our Independence
 Day Parade, all innocence
 of children’s costumes, helps resist
 the communist and socialist.
 Five nations: Dutch, French, Englishmen,
 Indians, and we, who held Castine,
 rise from their graves in combat gear —
 world-losers elsewhere, conquerors here! (*Near the Ocean* 27)

The costumes represent the process of swaddling children early on in national media narratives which everywhere constructed communism and socialism as hollow signifiers that could denote nothing other than a threat to our very way of life. The narrator also implies that the “combat gear” costumes of the Dutch, the French, the Englishmen, and

the Indians connote being “world-losers,” as opposed to the conquerors who “held Castine” (a town in Maine) and are therefore a model of American patriotism and independence. These lines also evoke an unmistakable paradox in celebrating the role of Native Americans in securing American Independence, when many tribes would soon after be pushed to the brink (and in some cases over the edge) of genocide.

The latter half of the poem also contains two otherwise rare references to playing recorded music. The first refers to playing classical or western art music on the Magnavox, a contemporary brand name record player (Lowell, *Near the Ocean* 31), whereas the second reference is to “repeating and repeating, one / Joan Baez on the gramophone” (33). Flanzbaum places this line in the context of Lowell’s ambitions towards popular success, reading the mention of Baez as an intentional identification with youth culture (52). In contradistinction, Axelrod has suggested that this Magnavox/gramophone distinction implies a “fusty speaker” through whom the poet “manifested a degree of discomfort with popular culture” (“Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 16-17). I would add that this distinction connotes a kind of generational gap, with on one side the sophisticated and mature listener and technophile, and on the other side, the impetuous youngster who, rather than relying on a rich selection of composers and conductors, merely plays the same popular record over and over again. This dichotomy takes on further significance in terms of the contrasting tone in each stanza. In the first case, very old music (“Bach’s precursors”) is being played on contemporary technology (Magnavox), which throughout the stanza is associated with summer warmth, self-discipline, and order (even as these are simultaneously implied to

be something of a veneer) (Lowell, *Near the Ocean* 31). In contrast, the contemporary music (Baez) is played on outdated technology (the gramophone), and is associated throughout its stanza with a frosted north wind, disorder and decline, and a dinner that has been “lost sight of,” left waiting in an unheated oven whilst Baez’s music repeats and repeats (33). This technological/temporal/tonal disjunction suggests that “great art” will stand the test of time, while pop culture moves almost immediately into the past after only a very brief period of addictive repetition.

Beyond this single mention of Baez, Lowell’s direct references to popular culture are virtually non-existent. His primary use of media discourses consists of trenchant parodies of public rhetorics, but beyond this, he seems uncomfortable with media discourse. Lowell “absorbs and reproduces” antiwar vocabulary in left journalism (Axelrod, “Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 16), but that is largely the extent of it. One explanation for this limited engagement with mass media is that Lowell saw pop culture as more threat than promise. Given his extensive reliance on print media, Lowell would almost certainly have been familiar with arguments such as those proffered in Macdonald’s “Masscult & Midcult,” which first appeared in *Partisan Review* in Spring 1960.¹¹ Indeed, Macdonald’s unfavorable perspectives on mass media resonate closely with those presented in Lowell’s poetry. Hilene Flanzbaum provides a persuasive reading of “For the Union Dead” along these basic lines. In short, she reads the narrator’s juxtaposition of Shaw’s statue against the public aquarium and commercial photography

¹¹ In any case, Lowell appears to have known Macdonald personally, as the poet dedicates one section of the poem “October and November,” in *Notebook 1967-68*, to Macdonald.

as indicating a crisis of art in which technology and mass media threaten the viability of “high art” (49-50). This high art/low art distinction, with an absolute preference for the former, is fully consonant with arguments like Macdonald’s and may help explain the general absence of references to popular culture in Lowell’s work.

While Lowell is commonly read as a poet deeply invested in his national culture, one point of contention I would raise here is that it is not always clear what “culture” includes when discussing his work. For example, Jay Martin notes, “His work, in short, has been a mirror to his culture, supplying society with elements for advance. He has criticized the poets of his generation whose ‘writings seem divorced from culture.’ Culture, he came to see, provides the necessary background for art: neither, without the other, can endure” (46). Martin’s argument is compelling here, particularly the idea that Lowell’s work mirrors his culture and provides means for societal advancements. However, the general absence of references to pop culture within Lowell’s work—and a similar lacuna within Martin’s essay, for that matter—effects a *de facto* exclusion of pop culture from culture more broadly. Given the rising influence and prominence of mass media and pop culture during the 1950s and 60s, this exclusion suggests that his work mirrored only a particular kind of culture, arguably not the kinds most relevant to the daily lives of a majority of Americans.

But these points should not be taken as excessively denigrating of Lowell’s approach to mass media. Most likely, this clear preference for print media is an expression of his own media consumption practices. Nonetheless, the preference has clear implications for Lowell’s process of creating and representing mediated subjectivity

within his work. We might characterize the mediated subject that emerges through his poetry in two primary ways. Certainly this mediated subject, the listener function Lowell performed/modeled for his readers, was one capable of identifying and resisting discourses of empire in their many guises. On another hand, the exclusion of mass media forms from his work greatly limited the extent to which Lowell could allude to models of mediated subjectivity capable of negotiating the increasingly aggressive mediated environments coming to characterize many Americans' daily lives.

In short, the poetic subject presented in Lowell's work is one grounded in print media and mildly dystopian attitudes towards mass media and pop culture. Lowell is rarely explicit about the media forms he invokes, and he integrates them into his narrators' voices in generally subtle ways. By contrast, Ginsberg tends to be very overt with pop culture/media references, often in fact saturating his poems with mass media voices, quotations, and references. Moreover, in Lowell, gestures toward media often have an interior reference point for the narrator, or such subtle gestures lead the narrator into his or her own interior world, whereas Ginsberg's narrators often sound like broadcasters themselves, their voices resonating loudly through the external world. In making these distinctions, I do not mean to privilege one mode of poetic subjectivity over another in absolute terms; my point is simply that Lowell's treatment of pop culture could not possibly provide coping strategies for dealing with media forms that he simply did not deal with himself. To develop these points, I turn here to brief analyses of poems each poet composed in response to the death of Che Guevara.

Lowell's poem "October and November," published in *Notebook 1967-68*, comprises six modified sonnets, each numbered and with a title of its own. The first is titled simply "Che Guevara." The first three lines read something like an editorial, with Guevara ". . . gangstered down / for gold, for justice . . ." (26). In the fourth and fifth lines, the narrator provides a brief description of the photograph of Guevara's corpse that circulated through news media worldwide: "the corpse of the last armed prophet / laid out on a sink in a shed, displayed by flashlight—" (26). These five lines are the extent of direct references to Guevara within the poem, and while the language used ("the last armed prophet") does reveal leftist sympathies for Guevara, the overall tone of the poem is much more muted than that of Ginsberg's, and the photograph that inspired the poem plays a relatively minimal role in the poem as a whole. Beginning in the sixth line, the narrator makes a non sequitur to a scene presumably observed through his own window, describing the burning colors of a fall sunset, a heavily trimmed oak tree, and shadows that buildings in the Manhattan cityscape cast over the poor. These images certainly connote Guevara and the causes for which he fought. For instance, the sunset images reinforce the characterization of Guevara as "the *last* armed prophet," and the ensuing shadows cast over Manhattan's poor signify the (at least temporary) victory of the powers of capitalism over those of a revolution for the working poor. At the same time, in the midst of this depiction of the potential global ramifications of Guevara's death, the narrator is moving through a heavily subjective, interior world, locating himself and a companion in "Manhattan, where our clasped, illicit hands / pulse . . ." (26). Use of the first-person plural possessive pronoun in the phrase "our clasped, illicit hands," combined

with the images seemingly glimpsed through an apartment window, generate the overall impression of an intimate scene into which news of Guevara's death passes, affording a personal moment of reflection and perhaps even shared grief between the narrator and the unnamed person with whom he clasps hands. This juxtaposition of the intimate and the public are somewhat characteristic of Lowell's work in general. As one example, Axelrod observes of "Fall 1961" that "The poem is careful to imbricate public rhetoric with the language of private life—the exposed discourse of the *polis* (the city-state) with the sheltered discourse of the *oikia* (the household)" ("Robert Lowell and the Cold War" 351).

Lowell's strong sense of interiority and his nature imagery contrast sharply with Ginsberg's treatment of the same subject matter. Ginsberg's "Elegy Ché Guévara," published in *The Fall of America*, opens by naming a specific newspaper and then describing in some detail two photographs of Guevara: the first shows Guevara as young and beardless, and the second is the widely circulated image of Guevara's corpse. Unlike the somewhat muted praise in Lowell's poem, Ginsberg's narrator portrays the eponymous hero (somewhat uncritically, in fact) as unqualifiedly heroic, finding him "radiant," "angelic," "perceptive," "sexy," and "intelligent" (70). Moreover, Guevara in this poem is depicted as both a martyr and a model of listening critically and responding productively to the morass of capitalist media. The poem's narrator declaims,

Incredible! one boy turned aside from operating room
or healing Pampas yellow eye
To face the stock rooms of ALCOA, Myriad Murderous
Board Directors of United Fruit
Smog-Manufacturing Trustees of Chicago U
. . . .

the metal deployments of
Pentagon
derring-do Admen and dumbled intellectuals
from *Time* to the CIA
One boy against the Stock Market all Wall Street ascream . . . (71)

The poem's narrator recalls the young Guevara's plan to become a doctor—a plan consonant with numerous mainstream ideals in 1960s America—only to highlight Guevara's rejection of those conventional ideals in favor of an ethic of anti-capitalist revolt. Our intrepid hero instead opts to square off against, among others: corrupt corporations manipulating South American politics, university governance excessively indebted to economic interests, the U.S. war machine, manipulative advertisers, intellectuals who have been ideologically co-opted by capitalist hetero-patriarchy, and even the inimitable “Stock Market” itself. The repeated references to Guevara as a “boy” both make him a more accessible model of action—one characterized more by youthful ideals than testosterone-soaked physicality—and align him with the biblical David facing down any number of seemingly invincible Goliaths.

As the poem closes, the narrator forcefully implies that a relatively singular foe takes shape within numerous interconnected elements of modernity, including: corporations, technology, capitalist economic principles, for-profit science, education, family, and television. Ginsberg writes,

Against the Tin Company, against Wire Services,
against infra-red sensor Telepath Capitalism's
money-crazed scientists
against College boy millions watching Wichita Family
Den T.V.

One radiant face driven mad with a rifle
Confronting the electric networks. (71)

Notably, the need to face off against specific manufacturing interests, industries, and the seemingly mystical capabilities of technology marshaled by capitalist forces is matched by the need to confront the passive media consumption behaviors of the educated, white-collar, family values crowd. And so where the Guevara in Lowell's poem is the last of his kind, a prophet whose passing signals the end of an era and presents both public and private occasions for grieving, the Guevara in Ginsberg's poem is an uncompromising, self-sacrificing revolutionary who understands the massive, complex nature of his multifaceted foe and whose example reveals the possibilities of what determined, self-aware, media savvy individuals might accomplish (even, one assumes, if that accomplishment entails martyrdom). Put simply, in Ginsberg's poem, idealized external action on the part of the reader is implied; those persons truly committed to democracy and freedom should take up the challenge to square off against the electric networks and derring-do advertisers.

To recap, the mediated subjectivity presented through Lowell's media-sparse poetics models a kind of critical listening that resists discourses of Empire but remains largely silent regarding ways of responding productively to the increasingly mass-mediated nature of Americans' lives. Ginsberg's work proffers a much more direct, activist model of mediated subjectivity that often borders on brash idealism. To be clear, I'm not proposing that Ginsberg or Lowell saw their poems as blueprints for a particular subjectivity or as some sort of "how-to manual" for living in the 1960s U.S. My claim is much more modest, simply an extension of Burke's compelling argument that literature does not only provide an aesthetic, imaginative experience, but can also function as

“equipment for living” (“Literature as Equipment for Living” 596), as a meaningful archive from which readers might draw in order to make sense of the world and their place within it. To place this notion specifically in terms of this chapter, Lowell’s and Ginsberg’s work provides varying models of how people might respond to and interact with media and incorporate it into their lives. In these terms, reading poetry therefore becomes a way of “listening,” of making sense of the world and the new mediated environments of modernity. From here, I turn next to an in-depth discussion of these issues within a broader selection of Ginsberg’s work.

Allen Ginsberg

While critical and rhetorical impulses similar to those of Lowell informed Ginsberg’s work, he recognized much more clearly than Lowell that something significant was at stake in attempting to reckon with and understand the roles and possibilities media might play in reworking the nature of American poetry, of America itself, and of American and even global subjects. Given this awareness of heightened stakes, Ginsberg created through his work a much more well-developed framework for representing, even embodying, the mediated subject. Thus, while both poets saw poetry as possibly helping shape and intervene in civic discourse, Ginsberg, as an auditory poet/listening poet, modeled strategies for a rhetorical mode of listening (political effectivity of trope, attending to resonances) and for productive modes of being a mediated subject within the noise and clamor of capitalist imperatives. Three primary factors led to Ginsberg developing this productive mode of modeling subjectivity via his poems: his drive to be a

rhetorical poet, his commitment to an auditory mode of composition, and his relationship to media (which resonated well with Marshall McLuhan's work).

To supplement my earlier framing of Ginsberg as a rhetorical poet, two more details bear mentioning here. Arguably, his most famous poem, "Howl," was a conscious attempt at what might be described as a rhetorical intervention into U.S. culture, an attempt to influence the national consciousness away from militarism and repression of the other and towards a greater egalitarian realization of democracy. He remarked, "In publishing 'Howl,' I was curious to leave behind after my generation an emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in U.S. consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalist complex solidified into a repressive police bureaucracy" (*Howl: Original Draft Facsimile* xii). And in *The Fall of America*, Ginsberg begins evoking these connections between poetry, democracy, and the aims of identification and consubstantiality prior even to the first poem, as he dedicates the book to Whitman and quotes extensively from his "Democratic Vistas." Additionally, apart from his poetry, Ginsberg made other significant efforts to influence American public consciousness towards a greater sense of commonality and shared interests, or in Burke's terms, identification and consubstantiality. As one example, the charter for Ginsberg's Committee on Poetry—essentially a non-profit corporation he formed to receive and process the vast majority of his income—included the statement that these funds would be used, among other things, to "participate in projects for altering the consciousness of the Nation toward a more humane spirit of Adhesiveness prophesied by Whitman" (Kramer 100). This deliberate shaping of national consciousness towards

“Adhesiveness”—or consubstantiality—is an unambiguously rhetorical project rooted in Ginsberg’s vision of the history of American poetry.

Ginsberg’s commitment to an auditory mode of composition was the second factor leading to his model of mediated subjectivity. As I will argue, listening entailed at least three primary inflections for Ginsberg: a deep and sustained personal practice of listening (to all manner of sources), listening for others (training readers in critical listening), and incorporating the auditory into his work. Numerous sources document the importance of sound and listening to Ginsberg’s poetics in general. For instance: in interviews, he has described the poetic line as a unit of sound and thought (*Spontaneous Mind* 127); he has repeatedly expressed admiration for Williams’ innovations, writing poetry by “hearing with raw ears” (*Spontaneous Mind* 267); and he has cited as a foundational influence Williams’ advice that he should “Proceed intuitively by ear” (Kramer 111). Moreover, recall that Ginsberg’s absolutely formative hallucination of William Blake was an auditory hallucination. In addition to his theorizing poetics in terms of sound and listening, Ginsberg’s everyday practice of composing poetry was deeply indebted to audition. Kramer noted, “At home on East Tenth Street, Ginsberg is accustomed to writing to the combined noises of daytime television (Maretta likes soap operas), two stereo speakers (Orlovsky likes raga music), the Uher (his friends like the tapes that Ginsberg makes of his various encounters with policemen), a bombastic telephone, and the steady conversation of scores of habitués” (64). In other words, as Ginsberg composed, he was attending to resonances and dwelling in an auditory media cacophony in very literal ways. Taken together, this method of composition and

commitment to sound shaped the kinds of poetic subjectivities that showed up in Ginsberg's work, a contention I will unpack in some detail in a reading of "New York to San Fran," with which I culminate this chapter.

Thus far, I have made much of the productive nature of Ginsberg's relationship to mass media. Before moving on to discuss these productive possibilities in more detail, it must be acknowledged that Ginsberg was often quite complicit with the capitalist media apparatus. For example, prior to leaving the "square" world for a life as a poet and countercultural icon, Ginsberg worked for years in marketing departments, which led him to claim to have "a good background in the underbelly of mass communications" (Kramer 139). He also wrote quite commonly for heavily corporate publications such as *The Village Voice*, and his corporate media complicity was significant enough in this case that Steve Axelrod has argued of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" that the poem "was in a sense authored by the corporate forces that facilitated its publication" ("Between Modernism and Postmodernism" 18). And while Ginsberg's mutual admiration for and collaborations with Bob Dylan are widely acknowledged, less well-known is the public dimension of this friendship that was "as carefully constructed and consciously manufactured as any marketing or publicity strategy in today's corporate entertainment industry" (Hishmeh 395). Finally, as an example of one of his more unapologetically naked complicities, Ginsberg appeared in an ad for Gap khakis in 1997 (403), a transgression that may well have been unforgivable had it been committed three decades earlier. Nonetheless, this complicity also lent a unique power to Ginsberg's constructions of mediated subjectivity. While I would certainly not suggest that his complicity was always predominantly a form

of heroism and self-sacrifice (Hishmeh notes his strong desire for fame and celebrity, for example (400)), Ginsberg definitely saw his involvement with media as providing necessary sources of possibility for the many minds ensnared within mass media webs of manipulation and fleeting pleasures.

In that sense, in contrast to media critics who flatly repudiated and rejected mass media, Ginsberg's voyage into the belly of the beast was part of a larger effort to turn these technologies to his own poetic and rhetorical ends. Overall, Ginsberg saw media and popular culture not only as justifiable targets of critique, but as sources for enriching American poetry and for generating metaphor and making sense of life in consumer capitalist culture. "You gotta get in to get out," as Peter Gabriel sang on *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. Regarding media as a source for enriching poetry, Ginsberg suggested that he and his fellow beats "learnt the lesson" of representing American speech, as pioneered by Pound and Williams. He went on: "We were the first generation after them to learn the lesson and begin applying to our own conditions, our own provincial speeches, mouths of Denver and New Jersey, our own personal physiologies and personal breathing rhythms, and to our own police state science fiction postwar Buck Rogers Newspeak universal conditions of local ecstasy of god-realization" (*Spontaneous Mind* 118). Contrast this reference to Buck Rogers with Lowell's much more subtle allusions to Lippmann and Howe. Interestingly—and as some critics might suggest, paradoxically—Ginsberg saw the possible enrichment of American poetry, a continuation of the tradition of Pound and Williams, in the dissolution (not rigid maintenance) of the high culture/low culture distinction and in making use of all of the sources of discourse

(including mass media) surrounding him. This latter approach, making use of media, would lead Ginsberg to produce work characterized by what Axelrod describes as “media driven poetics” that effectively merge media discourses and poetry (“Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 17).

In addition to treating media as a source of enrichment for poetry, Ginsberg believed that media could be used as a force for positive social change. In this sense, Ginsberg’s approach to media had more in common with the theories of Marshall McLuhan than those of the Frankfurt school and Dwight Macdonald. But in contrast to McLuhan’s utopian visions of technology, the poet evinced an acute awareness of the power of mass communication to perpetuate ideologies of empire, promote conformity, quell dissent, and more. A passage from a 1966 letter Ginsberg wrote to then Defense Secretary Robert McNamara will help clarify the poet’s complex understandings of the possibilities and dangers of mass media. He writes:

Now given your material prominence and TV centrality and known and unknown governmental power-centralization, you must realize that it is your Will, your Fantasy, that dominates the mind-screen images of vast—not all—regions of the populace. But there are large regions of age and youth whose consciousness operates independently of the sense of fear you manifest . . . you must by now have read basic Buddhist or Bob Dylan heard, texts & advices how to escape from the trap. (Kramer 88)

Numerous points are of interest here. For one, Ginsberg suggests that McNamara’s television appearances have a powerful effect in disseminating his viewpoints—described here as “Will” and “Fantasy”—even such that these views come to dominate the thinking of much of the U.S. populace. Ginsberg also implicates television in people’s very consciousnesses, suggesting that TV and mind merge to produce internal “mind-screen

images” that govern how people understand the world. Fortunately, however, media also provide possible antidotes to dangerous imperialist fantasies like McNamara’s. In this case, Bob Dylan’s music is a kind of prescription from Ginsberg to McNamara to heal the fantasies of military dominance and spiritual separation plaguing the U.S.

These distinctions remain consistent throughout Ginsberg’s work, with much of his media optimism centered on the power of music, especially jazz and rock ’n roll. For example, he suggested in one interview that: “flower children” take rock seriously as an invocation of the divine (*Spontaneous Mind* 69); rock and jazz have a powerful spiritual nature, and Black music may in fact save America (70); and rock n’roll has the potential to alleviate the “white middle-class horror” of stultifying conformity (70-71). Setting aside the unfortunate romanticization of African-American lives and culture (a troubling tendency of the Beats that scholars have noted elsewhere, but which I do not have space to go into here), it is clear that Ginsberg saw some expressions of media as containing some inherently liberatory power.

This multifaceted perspective on the dangers and promises of mass media was uncommon at the time, and it was certainly unique among major poets. Most left-leaning artists and intellectuals of the period tended to either flatly reject mass media or to revel in and quote from it with ironic detachment, as in the case of Andy Warhol and other pop art enthusiasts. McLuhan’s work in particular helps account for Ginsberg’s complex perspective in several important ways, influencing both his general viewpoints on media and the form and content of his poetry. For instance, in a March 1967 interview for *Freelance*, Ginsberg referred directly to McLuhan when explaining that visuality had

come to dominate all sensory experience (*Spontaneous Mind* 73), a predicament that promoted separation between humans rather than the goals of identification and consubstantiality that characterized Ginsberg's work. This skepticism towards the visual may explain in part Ginsberg's common denigration of television. More importantly for our purposes, it amplifies the importance of the auditory in Ginsberg's poetry and suggests he believed that sound and audition might somehow innately foster a sense of togetherness and shared human experience, as if he too sensed the resonances Janus described as interpenetrating and (de-)composing self and world.

Additionally, several of McLuhan's other major theses influenced the form and content of Ginsberg's poetry, especially work he composed during the mid- to late 1960s. McLuhan's notion that media are extensions of human faculties appears to have been particularly influential. McLuhan argues, "The electronic age is distinct from any other age in having extended the human nervous system itself in a group of external technologies . . ." that include "telegraph and telephone and radio and television . . ." ("Culture and Technology" 493). Furthermore, "The extensions of our nerves and senses as they constitute a new man-made environment also require a wholly new kind of understanding of the sensory materials of this new environment and of the learning processes to which they are so deeply related" ("Culture and Technology" 493). Here, in positing mass media as extensions of human nerves and senses, McLuhan suggests that new relationships between human beings and sensory materials must be developed if we are to make sense of this new electronically mediated environment. Therefore, in addition to Ginsberg's at times almost explicit evocations of these nerve and sensory "extensions"

(as we will shortly see), the poet also seems to have taken up the project of pioneering and representing the new sensory understandings and concomitant subjectivities called for within this new environment. In a winter 1967 conversation with Basil Bunting, Ginsberg described his poetry as follows: “Like I’m beginning to see my poetry as a kind of record of the times—my impressions of what’s going on, like what’s going on in terms of how my being responds to it. I don’t know. It may not last, but I think it’s maybe useful in that it helps clarify the present” (Kramer 144). Ginsberg’s notion of his poetry as a “record of the times” puts a productive spin on Pound’s description of poetry as “news that stays news,” blurring the lines between high and low cultures. More importantly, his emphasis on recording “what’s going on in terms of how [his] being responds to it” in order to “[help] clarify the present” suggests that Ginsberg was exploring precisely the new understandings McLuhan called for within his new environment. These connections are particularly evident in the ways that Ginsberg represented both the mediated self and the mediated landscape/environment in his poetry throughout the period. With these points in mind, I will move through a relatively broad sample of poems from *The Fall of America*, with the aim of demonstrating some of the varied roles that media forms played in his broader poetic project of the period.

Ginsberg’s reworking of subjectivity via media is stated most explicitly in his summary notes that conclude *The Fall of America*. Entitled “After Words,” the text describes the book’s content as “chronicle taperecorded scribed by hand or sung condensed, the flux of car bus airplane dream consciousness Person during Automated Electronic War years, newspaper headline radio brain auto poesy and silent desk musings,

headlights flashing on road through these States of consciousness” (189). Many of the poems in the book were composed with the help of a tape recorder on long cross country road trips, during which the car radio was a central companion. Thus, for subjects with a “newspaper headline radio brain”—a phrase that suggests that media affects the very nature of consciousness—the literal interpenetrations of our bodies by all-pervasive radio waves stand in for the similar interpenetration of our subjectivities by these media transmissions. Accordingly, many of the poems’ in the book alternate between the voice of a narrator and seemingly directly transcribed radio voices, such that the voice of the radio becomes a speaker often indistinguishable from that of the narrator. In this sense, as the voices of speaker and radio merge, interpenetrating each other, form mirrors content as the speaker becomes the mediated subject.

This mediated subject is evoked particularly strongly, for example, in “These States, Into L.A.” and “Hiway Poesy L.A. to Wichita,” both of which feature major integration of radio/media voices into the poetic voice of the narrator. Ginsberg develops various inflections of mediated subjectivity throughout the book. For example, “Independence Day” features a “Self tangled in TV wires” (*The Fall of America* 125), and in “Have You Seen This Movie,” Americans are “Television Citizens” (167). In “An Open Window on Chicago,” the poem’s speaker evinces the newspaper headline radio brain that is characteristic of subjectivity inflected by media transmissions. To some extent, his very agency is an expression of media imperatives. The speaker notes, “Eat Eat said the sign, so I went in the Spanish Diner” (61). His response to this advertising message—eating when told to eat—signifies acquiescence to the imperatives of both

literal and figurative consumption consistently demanded by capitalist media. Moreover, the speaker suggests that media similarly determine his internal, emotional state. When asked about the source of his anger, the narrator responds that it comes from:

Outside! Radio messages, images on Television,
Electric Networks spread
fear of murder on the streets —
“Communications Media”
inflict the Vietnam War & its anxiety on every private skin
in hotel room or bus — (62)

Not only do these lines imply that electronic media spread an arguably unwarranted level of fear, they also suggest that “Communications Media” are effectively extensions of imperialist aggression at home. Notably, the scare quotes around “communications media” imply that such media are used for anything but communication, a concept that in the larger context of Ginsberg’s thought must entail both giving and receiving, rather than simply serving as a tool to justify imperialist actions abroad (inflicting war on “every private skin”).

And unfortunately, these transmissions are pervasive, all but impossible to avoid. Even when attempting to meditate on profoundly spiritual matters, media transmissions intrude: “Sitting, meditating quietly on Great Space outside — / Bleep Bleep dit dat dit radio on, Television / murmuring, / bombshells crash on flesh / his flesh my flesh all the same —” (*The Fall of America* 62). Whereas the earlier lines model critical listening — demonstrating the ideological uses of media for conditioning public opinion — these latter lines model a mode of subjectivity driven towards consubstantiality. One productive response to the television murmuring about bombshells crashing is to refuse the implication that nationalism is the basis for solidarity. Rather, if “his flesh” and “my

flesh” are “all the same,” our responsibilities lie towards humanity more broadly, rather than simply advancing American interests. And as the poem draws to a close, the narrator continues weaving his sense of individual mediated subjectivity into a broader metonymic self. In short, the speaker becomes the city and its diverse cross-section of humanity.

Steam from my head
wafting into the smog
Elevators running up & down my leg
Couples copulating in hotel room beds in my belly
 & bearing children in my heart,
Eyes shining like warning-tower Lights,
Hair hanging down like a black cloud — (63)

This metonymic self that is the poet and the city and its population combines McLuhan’s notion of the new man-made environment with a Whitman-esque metonymic subject/landscape, a conjunction I refer to as the mediated landscape.

Indeed, through combining McLuhan with Whitman’s metonymic links between America, landscape, and self, the poems in this volume portray America as itself a kind of mediated subject. In that vein, another central motif of the book is the mediated landscape and its interrelationships with human experience and subjectivity. For example, in the first two stanzas of “Have You Seen This Movie,” the narrator describes first an image of a tree without leaves, and immediately following it an image of “woodlegged wiretowers” (*The Fall of America* 165), seamlessly merging the media infrastructure into the experience of the American landscape. Similarly, in “Bayonne Entering NYC,” the Edison towers (power plant smokestacks, presumably) are located on “East River’s rib” (37)—the metaphor evokes the Adam and Eve myth from Genesis, with the city itself

here figured as a kind of natural companion to the river. Throughout the book, the grand vista's of Whitman's American landscapes are consistently juxtaposed against trappings of contemporary technology. The roars of jet planes are casually chronicled alongside birdsong (125), and "asphalt factory cloverleafs spread over meadows" (50). And consider the following juxtapositions of landscape and modernity, from "Beginning of a Poem of These States": "At Dry Falls 40 Niagaras stand silent and invisible, / tiny horses graze on the rusty canyon's mesquite floor. / At Mesa, on the car radio passing a new corn silo, / Walking Boogie teenager's tender throats, 'I wish they / could all be California girls'—as black highway curls out- / ward" (1). The grandiosity of forty Niagaras paired with tiny horses grazing on a canyon floor evokes a vast landscape immediately set against a Beach Boys soundtrack and a highway drawing the narrator further into and across the American landscape and self. Media is mapped even more directly onto the landscape later in the same poem: "Up hills following trailer dust clouds, green shotgun / shells & beer-bottles on road, mashed jackrabbits—through / a crack in the Granite Range, an alkali sea—Chinese armies / massed at the borders of India" (4). As the narrator travels, encountering the detritus of modernity, the radio voice culminates this series of images with a flashing glimpse of a potential conflict between India and China. The mediated subject narrating this poem casts one gaze through the car windows and a second, more far-reaching gaze through the radio and across distances that human eyes could never span without the extension of our senses. The radio, in other words, functions here as McLuhan's "live model of the central nervous system itself" (*Understanding*

Media 53), as the globe-spanning eyes and ears of the collective mediated American self integrated directly into the speaker's experience of the landscape.

Yet, elsewhere in *The Fall of America* Ginsberg reveals the shortcomings of McLuhan's utopian technological visions, portraying the detrimental effects of a specifically capitalist media on both the environment and mediated subjects. For example, in "Friday the Thirteenth," the poem's speaker evokes some of the effects of technology on the metonymic American self: "Earth pollution identical with Mind pollution, conscious- / ness Pollution identical with filthy sky Mother's milk poisoned as fathers' thoughts, all greed- / stained over the automobile-body designing table" (Ginsberg, *The Fall of America* 142). Throughout this rather dark poem, Ginsberg refuses to evacuate pollution from the sensory experiences of the new technological environment, as McLuhan's work does by failing to account for capitalism. The poet here appropriates media discourse to challenge dominant national narratives and to decry the capitalist obsession with profit; accordingly, the mediated subject presented here—greed-stained and suffering from mind pollution—is not the American hero of WWII flag tank European cobblestone parade, but rather more like one of the tragic figures from "Howl." This is not even America as Moloch, but as junky, a metaphor that extends throughout the poem, with Americans characterized as "Slaves of Plastic," "haircut junkies," "Striped tie addicts," "Star-striped scoundrelesque flag-dopers," "Growth rate trippers hallucinating Everglade real estate," "Steak swallows zonked on television," and "Old ladies on stockmarket habits" (144). Tropes of addiction and drug use run through this poem, linking technology, capitalism, and ideology with an unquenchable drive to consume

always more. The poem thus exemplifies an implicit critique of McLuhan's visions, which now appear more myopic than utopian. Ginsberg's Marxist orientation to capitalism and modernity thus calls into question how such an otherwise brilliant and timely media theorist as McLuhan could manage to overlook the potentially devastating ideological and environmental ramifications of his new mediated environment.

Despite the book's insistent critique of the destructive impulses of capitalist media and technologies, Ginsberg does not flatly reject media unqualifiedly. The media continue to provide opportunities for interventions, not merely forces to resist. Overall, the book suggests that many of the most destructive aspects of media are in fact extensions of the same problems that confront the subject of modernity more broadly: White supremacy; government and corporate collusion, corruption, and greed; imperialism and colonialism; and more. For example, in "Independence Day," the same self "tangled in TV wires" is also tangled in "white judges and laws" (*The Fall of America* 125). Part of Ginsberg's poetic project in *The Fall of America* is therefore to suggest that media language becomes a necessary and unavoidable part of the inner landscape of modernity. Just as "woodlegged wiretowers" are now features of the landscape, so are media forms and discourses part of the process of subject formation. As such, these forms and discourses can be turned to more productive ends. Ginsberg has suggested: "A long time ago I figured out that the interview and the media was a way of teaching. If you talk to people as if they were future Buddhas, or present Buddhas, that any bad karma coming out of it will be their problem rather than yours, so you say anything you want, and you talk on about the highest level possible" (*Spontaneous Mind* v). Ginsberg is able to mount such

effective and extended critique precisely because he is receptive to the media, which is not the same thing as uncritical acceptance. As we will shortly see, he explores and in turn models a subjectivity that can incorporate all of this without collapsing under or into it all. It is perhaps in this sense that Axelrod has described Ginsberg as “a subject enmeshed and participatory in [the media] apparatus” (“Between Modernism and Postmodernism” 18).

This enmeshed, participatory mediated subject—that is, both Ginsberg himself and frequently the speakers in his poems—can be productively read as a response to McLuhan’s call for “a wholly new kind of understanding of the sensory materials of this new environment . . .” (McLuhan, “Culture and Technology” 493). Here again, however, Ginsberg surpasses McLuhan as a theorist of media, even as he draws from his insights. Most significantly, Ginsberg refused the form/content distinction that characterized McLuhan’s work, both exploring the ways that media *forms* shape human being and also relentlessly examining and unmasking media *content* as capitalist ideology. This perspective combines McLuhan’s insights with the kind of work Ginsberg and Lowell undertook (as discussed earlier, via Axelrod) in revealing the constructed, motivated nature of media discourses. In arguing that “the medium is the message,” McLuhan largely dismissed the content of media as irrelevant (Lister et al. 84). More important, in his view, is the impact of media and technology in reshaping human societies, selves, perceptions, etc. In this formulation, technology plays a deterministic role that effectively trumps any concerns about ideology, media owners’ intentions, etc.

In my view, however, and seemingly in Ginsberg's as well, there is no reason why the question of form and content should be an either/or proposition. Ginsberg seems on one hand to take up McLuhan's insights into the very real effects of media developments on human societies and selves. In particular, poetic constructs mentioned earlier—such as the newspaper headline radio brain, the self tangled in TV wires, and the far seeing gaze of radio—directly echo McLuhan's notion that electronic media are extensions of the human nervous system (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 53). Other passages cited earlier—the notion of television citizens, that we are citizens of media more so even than citizens of a nation—echo McLuhan's arguments that society is significantly shaped by media forms (McLuhan and Fiore 8). On another hand, Ginsberg is quite clear that content matters, that media content plays a role in propagating capitalist and imperialist ideologies that work to the collective detriment of humanity; recall the earlier equation of air pollution and mind pollution, for example. In Ginsberg's view, the rise of mass communication in capitalist hands must be understood in precisely those terms, as advancing specifically capitalist ends. As such, it is incumbent upon us to be quite savvy about how we participate with these media, in terms of both form and content.

The poem "New York to San Fran" is a particularly salient example of all of the themes and frameworks I have been discussing in this chapter; it features Ginsberg at his media savvy best, modeling a kind of critical listening and mediated subjectivity that can help readers negotiate the media onslaught in productive ways. The poem begins as the speaker taxis in a commercial plane preparing for takeoff from JFK Airport. The first mention of a media source comes in the second stanza as the narrator notes, "And I — /

‘*Om Om Om*’ etc — / repeat my prayers / after devouring the *NY Post* / in tears — ” (*Wait Till I’m Dead* 52). The mention of prayer coupled with tears after reading the *Post* sounds a clear opening tone for the poem, one implying a desire for unity frustrated by the realities of separation, which are commonly reflected in the standard news fare of conflict and crime. Just as the repeated Om is practiced to invoke a sense of oneness with all beings, so do the tears that follow suggest that such oneness may be impossible to realize. As the engines roar and the plane takes off, the narrator recites another chant, then remarks, “And the vibration of Shiva / in my belly merges / with the groan of machine / flying into milky sky — ” (53). This merging of vibration with vibration, of spiritual essence with the sound (groan) of machine, foreshadows an interrelationship between the poet’s body and the airplane, poetic subject and media apparatus, individual self with collective American being, and human senses with their technological extensions. This merging is reiterated four stanzas later, as the narrator “plug[s] in the Jetarama Theater / sterilized Earphones — ” (53). While this action is a mundane task with which most media consumers would be familiar, in this context it is not clear whether the narrator is “plugging in” the earphones to the airplane, to himself, or both. In either case, the poet hardwires himself into the machine and its media apparatus, arguably even becoming part and parcel with them.

Now that we have jacked into the airplane along with the narrator, the very next line declares, “IT’S WAGNER! / THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES!” (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I’m Dead* 54). This scream (all caps) simulates the massive sound of the orchestra, which sounds “gigantic” in the narrator’s ears (54), providing a soundtrack as we tear

through the skies like valkyries. The narrator then begins mapping his rapidly shifting mediated experiences onto the landscape below, other passengers and crew, the collective American self, and more. Setting another central theme for the poem, the narrator comments, “We’re above the clouds! The / Sunlight flashes on a giant / bay! / Earth is below! . . . I spread my giant green map / on the air-table — ” (54). At this point, the narrator is surrounded by and plugged into a number of signifiers that connote the supposedly “highest and best” of Western culture—which of course posits itself as the “highest and best” of cultures. For instance, the airplane, the headphones, and sound recording itself are common sources of pride as technical achievements, while the tradition of Western art music was for centuries argued to represent a sonic-aesthetic achievement absolutely unrivaled by any other culture. These sentiments of technical and aesthetic superiority are amplified by the narrator’s godlike perspective on the world, not only from his position physically above the clouds but also in his ability to cast his gaze, via the map, simultaneously at the entire mass of continent stretching below. However, as the poem unfolds, the narrator remains skeptical of these sentiments of superiority, consistently linking these sources of pride with the externalities and collateral damage that their devotees must constantly eschew and/or rationalize away in order to retain their sense of privilege. Nonetheless, just as we saw earlier in this chapter with Ginsberg’s complicated complicity with mass media, despite the imbrication of these technologies into colonialist and imperialist structures, our narrator at times cannot seem to help himself but enjoy the power and beauty that this privileged, godlike subject position conveys. Put simply, in terms of my central argument in this chapter, the mediated subject

emerging in this poem is one that can enjoy the pleasures of media and technology without becoming completely coopted by their capitalist imperatives.

With the central themes established, the narrator now begins—“Click!” (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I’m Dead* 54)—frequently switching from one airline media channel to another, vacillating between high and low culture, music and film, recollections of further newspaper headlines, and more. He narrates his way through various bits of media madness, interspersing musings on the landscape below with details about his experiences in the physical space of the airplane, such as the arrival of a drink and a trip to the lavatory to smoke hashish (57-8). Following his trip to the lavatory, the narrator begins to feel a sense of guilt and dread, and the pastoral landscapes vanish in lieu of “land I see stripped / & ruled below my / magic carpeted-cabin” (58). He initially associates this dread and his darker visions with having smoked the hashish, but soon links the feeling instead with broader, collective actions and their consequences (e.g., the stripped and ruled land). His guilt and dread arise not because of his own actions,

but because this dreamy muzaked
liquored luxurious air-ride’s
Euphoria’s no heaven
If it costs blood-flaps on the smooth
hairless skin of high cheeked
Vietnamese teenagers.
Everybody forgets who’s body
suffers the physical pain of Orders
undreamt in these High Air
Conditioned modern Powers. (59)

In juxtaposing the narrator’s own liquored, passing euphoria with pain and injury inflicted on the other, this airline luxury and all its affordances take on a sickly sweet quality, evoking for instance a fly mired in honey. The sublime (yet packaged for

commercial consumption) orchestral music, the vantage point far above the Earth, and even the air conditioning foster a sense of comfort, entitlement, and isolation, making it easy disregard the humanity of the other. The narrator mirrors this sense of isolated privilege with the rationalization that a soldier is “just following orders,” a claim often used in war to justify actions that would otherwise have no reasonable justification outside the context of war. Put simply, the airline passengers in this poem are physically and metaphorically above the suffering of others, while traveling enmeshed in an entire apparatus orchestrated to perpetuate that privilege.

Shortly, the narrator changes channels again, when “Bam! Brahms brasses bang bright bombs / down over Ohio’s highways” (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I’m Dead* 59). Here, as the music merges with the narrator’s vantage point and experience of the landscape flashing by below, the tradition of Western art music is implicated directly with imperialism and war. And for a moment at least, as the bombs fall via the music onto the highways (another signal engineering achievement of 1950s America), the narrator seems haunted by the possibility that the consequences of imperialism might come home to roost. Meanwhile, the airplane-media-apparatus keeps “pushing” various media products—one of which is a “Bedtime Story”—leading the narrator to smugly state “They’ll even begin the movie / *The Satan Bug* after / I finish my cheesecake — / Anything to keep me from looking down / on that innocent vastitude” (59-60). In this passage, the entire airplane-media-apparatus becomes itself an elaborate bedtime story lulling passengers into the sickly sweet metaphoric sleep of personal comfort and blissful ignorance. After all, personal convenience is the cue that will start the film, and the

reward for finishing one's dessert is an opportunity for further media consumption. This metaphoric sleep is effected through media consumption and the ideologies surrounding it, which place Western culture and the Western subject each at the center of the world: "Man has overtaken his universe, / says the music, and pictures / of Mars are expected when / I set my sneakers on Land —" (60). Not only do Western technological achievements equate to mastery over the physical world, but the promised release of pictures from Mars is scheduled at the speaker's convenience, timed with his landing, a soothing reassurance that he will be able to participate in this landmark media consumption event.

As the poem continues, so does the narrator's media consumption feast, and the increasingly rapid changes in the direction of his voice and consciousness are frequently linked with channel changes and glimpses of the world through the narrow airplane window. Stanzas frequently begin with some comment on media (usually music), giving the sense that media texts are tangible objects off which the narrator's consciousness ricochets. In this sense, the poem models the process by which media directs the consciousness of the poetic subject and American consciousness more broadly. The surface level implication is that media respond to us—the frequent channel changes and the timing of the film and the Mars pictures, for instance—but the form of the poem reveals that it is we who respond to media.

The post-cheesecake movie begins. Entitled *The Satan Bug*, it is a science fiction film with a doomsday premise that affords the poet another opportunity to reflect on collective American paranoia. As his earlier low mood returns, he considers possible

causes, one of which may be “America itself / that made the mind movie airplane / national Paranoia” (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I’m Dead* 68). Two points bear mentioning here. The three nouns strung together at the end of the middle line read on one hand as a single grammatical object of the sentence; in this reading, America made the “mind movie airplane,” effectively a conjunction of media, technology, and human consciousness (a construct that is quite consistent with McLuhan’s contention that all media are extensions of some human faculty (McLuhan and Fiore 26)). On another hand, the three nouns may be read as a modifying phrase, along with “national,” specifying a particular kind of paranoia. Rather than an individual paranoia, the mind movie airplane national paranoia equates to a return of the repressed, a hint of pained lucidity within the sickly sweet dream of brass bombs loosed from air-conditioned cocoons above and beyond the fray.

The poem’s speaker continues to intersperse fragments of media with memory and landscape, continually suggesting the mediated nature of his experience and the blurred lines between media and the world. At one point, as the narrator returns his attention to the film, the protagonists are “in a green Ford riding through desert Utah — / As we pass the sunny Wasatch / glittering blue south — ” (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I’m Dead* 70). This remarkable synchronicity—the characters in the film drive through Utah right as the passengers in the plane fly over the state—strongly suggests a shared world in which media and life run on a shared reel as might the audio and visual tracks of a film print. And as the film begins climaxing with police searching desperately for the doomsday device threatening to blow up Los Angeles, the poem’s speaker poses the question, in a stanza all its own, “Is civilization going to / Blow up? (71). Ostensibly

From here, the poem moves through several stanzas chronicling a sublimely beautiful experience afforded by the narrator's mediated subjectivity. Heavenly vistas, divine music (Brahms' "Messiah"), and sound technology combine to produce a near ecstasy for the narrator, who cries rhapsodically:

Many elements of this passage demonstrate the unique power of Ginsberg's treatment of the mediated subject. Rather than simply denouncing media and their effects as ideological disasters, the poem's speaker revels in the pleasures of mediated, technological subjectivity: a combined overwhelming feeling of sadness and happiness at once; a scream that seems to include a hint of terror within its sublime delight; a sense of inexplicable triumph at the heart rending beauty seen via this soaring relationship to the natural environment; and all of this unfolding to the soundtrack of ascending violins. Indeed, the speaker must fasten his seatbelt to prevent his ecstasy from completely carrying him away.

As the poem moves toward its final lines, the speaker continues wrestling with the paradoxes and conundrums of Western culture: the possibilities of technological unity weighed against the likelihood of self-destruction; the transcendent promises of Beethoven and Wagner against the mundane realities of suburban conformity; and the inevitability of aging and death. The narrator again chants as the flight and the poem come to their ends:

OM, Down to the
ground roar tremble
along the white line
Jetbrakes roaring,
Brahms screaming
Symphony concluding
as we taxi slowly
down the runway
to the metal voiced
Terminal,
United. (Ginsberg, *Wait Till I'm Dead* 77-8)

The poem concludes in a rush of sound, a roaring, trembling, screaming symphony that refers not only to Brahms but to the narrator's own listening process. The flight has itself been a symphony of media consumption, one characterized by flashes of horror and aching beauty, for which the poem is a score. And in the end, regardless of whether the collective American media technology mind ever manages to live up to its own promises and possibilities, the speaker assures us unequivocally that we will all find unity one way or another: Terminal (fatal), and United (as one).

To link this extended reading explicitly to my claim that Ginsberg's poetry simulates and models the mediated subject at the level of form, I return briefly to McLuhan's notion that "extensions of our nerves and senses as they constitute a new

man-made environment also require a wholly new kind of understanding of the sensory materials of this new environment” (“Culture and Technology” 493). Elaborating on the significance of this notion, which they refer to as McLuhan’s extension thesis, Lister et al. provide the following example: “The difference between the view we have of the world when slowly walking, open on all sides to a multisensory environment, or when glimpsed as rapid and continuous change through the hermetically sealed and framing window of a high-speed train, is a change in sensory experience which did and continues to have cultural significance” (Lister et al. 83). Connecting this example specifically to McLuhan’s thesis, the authors note, “In short, he is claiming that such technological extensions of our bodies affect both our minds and our societies” (83). This example and explanation both are deeply relevant to Ginsberg’s work, as his poems frequently explore the differing sensory experiences afforded by rapid auto and airplane travel through the mediated landscape. As I suggested of “New York to San Fran,” for instance, the view through the window is mapped onto the rapidly changing media landscapes the speaker experiences from within the moving airplane; the fact of popular media, of mass culture, is effectively equated with the fact of the physical landscape. Placed explicitly within the terms of my overall argument, I contend that a poem like this had to arise as equipment for living, as a way of making sense of this new mediated environment, of reconciling the media and landscape as they blur past at the new speed of life. Similarly, the mediated subject in the poem is empowered to observe the mediated landscapes as they flash past without necessarily feeling compelled to master any of it. In other words, the poem models the new modes of sensory experience called for by McLuhan, embodied by a

mediated subject empowered to enjoy some of the pleasures of media without being coopted by them.

Still, none of this should be taken to imply that Ginsberg unambiguously succeeded with this teaching and modeling, managing to create some kind of replicable robot self that we can widely adopt and or mimic. Ginsberg often admitted, even in his poetry, to his own complicity in the machine, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that his motives and ambitions were selfless. And of course, receptivity entails risk—being open to media does not place him outside of its influence. He was not always able to maintain the posture of the teacher; sometimes it becomes evident that his mediated self was haunted by eschatological images, as in the aptly named “Friday the Thirteenth.” But despite all of this—the relentless critique of capitalism, his acknowledged complicity within it, his moments of succumbing to these influences he worked so hard to defuse in others—there remains, in general, a sense of possibility and hope in his work, perhaps as a vestige of his debt to Whitman’s romanticism. In that sense, *The Fall of America* constitutes a clear sense of continuity with “America” as a trope and as a place—Whitman’s landscapes are our own, though there are radio towers in them.

Conclusion: Poetry as Equipment for Listening

Over the course of this chapter, I have argued that Lowell and Ginsberg were each rhetorical poets in their own right who sought to positively influence public discourse in the U.S. toward more egalitarian ends. Both poets modeled critical listening in their work through drawing common media language into their poetry and revealing the capitalist, imperialist, and militaristic ideologies underlying much of the discourse of popular

media. Both poets alluded to experiences of mediated subjectivity, though Ginsberg in particular did so more thoroughly, exploring forms of subjectivity that could dwell productively within the mass-mediated environment of 1960s America. Together, the two poets' work suggests the tenability of the rhetorical poet as both artist and public figure, and certainly their work demonstrates the possibility of reshaping culture. Regardless of whether or not their poetry demonstrably trained any readers in critical modes of listening such that any particular effect registered in the public sphere, both men's presence as writers, activists, and cultural critics undoubtedly played some shaping role, however minor, in twentieth century American culture. At a minimum, both played a definitive role in reconfiguring the grounds of literary reception, heightening both the personal and political stakes of American poetry and creating different points of entry for wider audiences than they inherited at the beginnings of their careers.

This latter point returns us to the idea of poetry as equipment for listening. As I suggested earlier, borrowing from Kenneth Burke, literature can provide aesthetic, imaginative experiences and can also function as "equipment for living" ("Literature as Equipment for Living" 596), as an archive that might help audiences make sense of the world and their place within it. Certainly this claim has found ample evidence over the course of this chapter, particularly through my arguments and examples concerning the ways that both Lowell and Ginsberg provide deeply felt alternative responses to imperialist and capitalist discourses attempting to ensure our compliance with U.S. hegemony. And given Burke's dual claims for literature, it bears repeating that any drive toward a specifically rhetorical poetry does not necessarily entail that such poetry should

lack aesthetic merit. I cannot state this point strongly enough, as it is arguably a signal achievement of both Lowell's and Ginsberg's work in the late 1960s. To be specific, their work reveals that we needn't assume any arbitrary or absolute distinctions between politics and art, between interiority and individuality, between subjectivity and collectivity. Therefore, despite my emphases on training readers and modeling subjectivity in the poetry treated throughout this chapter, it should be clear that these poems are not merely didactic cudgels. Rather, they are aesthetic achievements—often characterized by stunning auditory and visual beauty—which reveal that “teaching” and the craft of poetry are not necessarily inherently at odds with each other. At their best, the poems treated herein succeed both aesthetically and rhetorically, provoking our sense of beauty and of justice. In these ways and others, it is evident that the lives and works of Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg enriched American poetry and culture in indispensable ways.

CHAPTER TWO: Science Fiction, Communication, and the Representation and Negotiation of Difference

Science fiction (hereafter sf) has a rich history of exploring the boundaries separating “humanity” from “the other” and contains a deep archive of fictional and theoretical encounters between “the self” and “the radically alien other.” As such, sf carries significant possibilities for understanding relationships between the White, heteropatriarchal subject and marginalized others, and for exploring the implications of these relationships within the processes and limits of communication and listening. In this chapter, I focus on contemporary sf literature in order to consider the genre itself as a mode of listening, as carrying generic affordances that can help attune us to listen to difference; I also track themes and representations of listening and difference in order to understand the ways that listening as a trope is treated within sf. Central questions for this chapter include: Across what kinds of difference and dissonance is it possible to listen? How might we theorize the relationships amongst language, cognition, perception, and subjectivity? How do we understand the process of listening to shore up or jeopardize the rational, stable, listening self? I begin by setting up a substantive framework for approaching these questions, moving then into discussing a selection of six sf novels: Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962); Stanislaw Lem’s *His Master’s Voice* (1968); James Gunn’s *The Listeners* (1972); Ian Watson’s *The Embedding* (1973); Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984); and China Miéville’s *Embassytown* (2011).

These novels treat listening and communication in various complex ways, effectively helping to illuminate the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and

otherness, especially as it is constituted through language. In order to examine how the genre may help us understand the possibilities and limits of listening, I work through three primary threads: relationships between communication and worldview/cognition; relationships between processes/conceptions of listening and the stable, rational self; and the politics inherent in any given conception of listening—for example, treating communication as a technical problem to be solved, vs. as a social or ethical matter. Over the course of this chapter, I argue that sf literature persuasively demonstrates that coming into contact with the other reveals our cultures, our knowledges, our selves, to be always already contingent, to be merely one way amongst many of being and knowing. This implies that to truly listen to the other is to hear the groundlessness of our own being—that is why the other is often silenced, repressed, destroyed. I will argue through this chapter that listening serves alternately to advance a certain stability of the self and to reveal that self as in some ways radically contingent, dependent as it is upon fixing the stability of the other in specific “othered” ways. Thus, listening reveals a dependency on the other for the constitution of the self. In this sense, the idealized rational, stable self of modernity is revealed to be both dialectical (dependent upon the other for its very constitution, yet denying the legitimate being of the other) and rhetorical (constructed largely through processes of language and listening). But in the face of this confrontation with groundlessness, are communication and fellowship with the other possible? These novels, by and large, suggest that the answer is yes.

Darko Suvin’s long-standing definition of sf is that it is the literature of cognitive estrangement (*Metamorphoses* 4), a genre that does productive work by generating

radical defamiliarization with present realities through the creation of (fictional) alternative realities. Cognitive estrangement might be said to be a kind of learning to listen for possible futures, for alternate modes of social arrangements and human relations. This basic framework, thinking of sf as futurity, arguably makes sf the genre of world disclosure (as the term is articulated by Nikolas Kompridis), revealing not only possible futures, but allowing us to understand contemporary social realities in a more robust way. In this sense, cognitive estrangement might be said to be a kind of learning to listen to our contemporary realities through a significant recognition of the contingent nature of any given historical moment.

In contradistinction to the notion of sf as futurity, scholars have argued that reality has increasingly come to resemble sf through, for example, rapid technological change and an ongoing, decentering experience of the new (see Aldiss, Bould & Vint, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.). Thus, sf both enables a kind of receptivity to possible futures and allows subjects to “recontain the radical newness” of a present moment that looks increasingly like the future (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 7). This latter point is developed through Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.’s notion of “science-fictionality,” which posits sf as “a way of organizing the mind to include the contemporary world” (x), and as “a kind of awareness” and “a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction” (2). So, if sf is a mode of thinking, may it not also be a mode of listening? If so, what does sf as a genre, and science-fictionality as a mode of awareness, help us to hear? One possible response to these questions may be summed up in author Suzette Haden Elgin’s suggestion that “Women need to realize that SF is the

only genre of literature in which it's possible for a writer to explore the question of what this world would be like if you could get rid of [X], where [X] is filled in with any of the multitude of real world facts that constrain and oppress women" (Haden Elgin, "An Interview"). I will return to this point later in significant detail in my discussion of *Native Tongue*, but for now, I contend that the kinds of explorations indicated here exemplify the possibilities of sf as world disclosure.

Central to this chapter's treatment of sf will be elements of a critical debate around Suvin's definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement. Suvin argues: "SF is, then a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" ("Poetics" 375). In other words, Suvin contends that the genre's work of generating radical defamiliarization functions specifically through a rigorously scientific-cognitive lens. Furthermore, this defamiliarization can have numerous affordances. In addition to functioning as mirror and crucible for humankind (374), sf has "moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives" (378). These are certainly functions that the best sf performs. However, this definition has undergone—and is still undergoing—significant scrutiny, especially for the rigid hierarchies that Suvin establishes between science fiction and other "literatures of estrangement," such as fantasy fiction, in particular. While I don't wish to recap this

debate extensively, I will briefly discuss a particularly relevant and persuasive deconstruction of Suvin's premises by contemporary author and critic China Miéville.

In the afterword to his co-edited collection *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, Miéville attempts to take the Suvinian line of sf criticism to its own implied furthest extensions. Central to the Suvinian critical perspective is a scientifically oriented understanding of the "cognition" in cognitive estrangement, the presumption that sf authors rigorously and accurately build upon the best scientific knowledge available at the time to create their fictional devices, technologies, and worlds. This basic line of argument has long been debated in sf, in terms of whether or not to privilege science fictional devices based on their *feasibility*. Miéville argues, though, that feasibility cannot be the grounds for Suvinian cognition. Rather, through a rigorous extrapolation of the very terms of the Suvinian mode of sf theory, Miéville argues that even Carl Freedman's "cognition effect," which is "the attitude of the text towards the kinds of estrangements being performed" (234), can only ultimately reveal sf as "something done with language by someone to someone" (235). In my view, such a move places us squarely within the bounds of rhetorical theory. Miéville arrives at this point—though he doesn't do so using the term "rhetoric"—through noting that sf "relies above all not on the language of science, nor on the command of that language, but on the *appearance* of that command" (238, original emphasis). Thus, "The cognition effect is a *persuasion*" (238, original emphasis), and the aim of this persuasion is to generate a kind of authorial ethos that can

induce the reader to go along for a ride.¹² Needless to say, the contention that “cognition” in sf is above all a performance and a persuasion at least partially removes the shine from the “science” in science fiction, but in my reading (and Miéville’s), this serves first and foremost to more clearly illustrate the ideological elements of the genre and the critical hierarchies built around it; the estranging elements of the genre, in which its most significant powers lie, remain undiminished.¹³

For Miéville, then, sf’s cognitive logic is *about* cognition and logic, not *a function of* cognition and logic; science becomes a *subject* of sf, not its operating logic. Still, this performance/appearance of mastery of the language of science generates an ideologically based suspension of disbelief based largely on the charisma of the author and the text (*Red Planets* 240). Therefore—and this is a clincher—sf’s cognitive logic is in fact “intensely ideological” (239), and sf as a genre is ideological “at the level of form” (242). Sf relies, in this analysis, largely on the ideological weight of science itself, understood as the dominant mode of legitimating that which gets to count as knowledge about reality. So, we have this complex relationship in which sf is ideological at the level of form, yet

¹² This move on Miéville’s part moves us even more squarely into the domain of rhetoric. Burke reminds us, “Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric” (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 172).

¹³ Indeed, this is more or less Miéville’s point—rather than sf as a literature of cognitive estrangement, he proposes that the genre is centrally distinguished by an “unreality function” (244). Of course, one might suggest that all fiction is characterized by an unreality function, and that perhaps the difference is a matter of degrees of unreality and the centrality of these unrealities (what Darko Suvin and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. have each discussed in terms of “the novum”) to a given work of fiction. However, as this argument is not crucial to my purposes here, I will simply reiterate the contention that sf generates powerful effects through estrangement, and not of a variety necessarily indebted to a scientific mode of cognition.

many of its authors and critics effectively attempt to dissimulate sf as ideology through insisting on its capacity for a specifically *cognitive* (read: outside of ideology) estrangement, an insistence which nonetheless *is* the very core of the sf form as ideological. While it is certainly true that numerous sf authors and critics have long recognized and critiqued an uncritical embrace of a purely instrumental reason, I will nonetheless argue below that the ideological orientation that Miéville describes often shapes and directs the representations of reason, subjectivity, and language in sf. Furthermore, given that the genre is ideologically organized around a scientific mode of cognition, many of the novels that feature language and communication prominently attempt to do so through scientific approaches to language. While such an approach has long proven fruitful in inspiring sf novels about communication, I will argue below that rhetorical methods are necessary for robust understandings of the significance of these themes. To build upon this point about rhetoric, then, I want to explore the implications of Miéville's argument for sf novels that implicitly take up questions that fall within the areas of inquiry long associated with rhetoric, such as the ways that power circulates through and is implicitly or explicitly buttressed or contested through language. To begin to work through this question, I will ask what it would mean to leave behind a social-scientific mode of analyzing language within sf (usually associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) in favor of a more deliberately ideological orientation and some of the frameworks of rhetorical theory.

Within sf, there is a significant sub-genre devoted to the exploration of language and communication. These linguistically oriented sf novels frequently explore notions of

communication across radical difference, amongst beings not only of different species and planetary origins, but with widely divergent physiologies, perceptual apparatus, and relationships to reality. Some of these novels explore the politics of communication and listening in detail, including the possibilities and effects of alien communication on human societies, cultures, and selves. Rooting their science in the social science of linguistics, novels in this sub-genre often extrapolate from linguistic hypotheses in order to explore alternate human social, cultural, and political formations. However, while the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis inspired and informs a significant number of these novels, I argue here that due largely to the methodological limits of a social-scientific framework for the study of language, many of the questions driving these novels can be more productively interpreted through rhetorical means. In general, my argument will be organized around a central dialectic that consists of, on one hand, treatment of language as a neutral, value-free medium for the rational exchange of information, and on another hand, explorations of the rhetorical, ideological, and political implications of all language use. For example, according to Walter E. Meyers, in *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*, “The central question of linguistic relativity is this: does our perception of reality constrain our language, or does our language constrain our perception of reality?” (160). It is notable that this question is often presented as a kind of either/or dichotomy, as if the two propositions are mutually exclusive. It is much more productive to treat these relationships dialectically, rather than as another version of the chicken or egg question. On the one hand, what would it mean to have a language completely unconstrained by our perceptions? Such a notion certainly implies a neutral,

value-free relationship between language and the world. On another hand, the idea of language constraining our perception of reality implies a kind of determinism that is largely indefensible. In order to work through this dialectic, I'm proposing three different modes of analyzing the representations of language use within my chosen novels: linguistic relativity (the broader discipline associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), which largely inspires this sub-genre; Volosinov's Marxian theory of language, which can supplement and deepen the first mode; and rhetoric-as-epistemology, which I will argue is a mode of analysis well-suited to address many of the most substantive ideas raised by and within the novels.

The history of linguistic relativity itself seems to straddle the above dialectic, having often been advanced or contested in deeply polarized terms. The seeds of linguistic relativity arose with Romantic thinkers of the mid to late nineteenth century and gained significant prominence in the first half of the twentieth century, largely through the work of Edward Sapir (an anthropologist and student of Franz Boas) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (a linguist and student of Sapir himself) (Swoyer, "How Does Language Affect Thought" 26-27). Sapir and Whorf were most interested in the second part of this dialectic—the constraints of language on perception and cognition—and many of their arguments asserted unequivocally that language does constrain our perceptions of and relationships with reality. As the study of linguistics became increasingly influenced by scientific paradigms (vs. those of anthropology, for example), linguistic relativity began losing its prominence, dismissed as overly deterministic or fruitlessly irrelevant, tinged even with traces of cultural racism. Thus, over the course of

its development, linguistic relativity came to be framed as a kind of polarity. Commonly, linguists identify two general versions of the Whorfian hypothesis: a strong version and a weak version. In Swoyer's analysis, these versions respectively result in claims that are either dramatic or banal ("How Does Language Affect Thought" 23). For opponents of linguistic relativism, the strong version is often associated with linguistic determinism and thus dismissed out of hand, whereas the weak version is caricatured as underwhelming and banal.¹⁴

As a result of these sorts of dismissals, linguistic relativity fell from favor in linguistic studies in the last decades of the twentieth century, and it is only recently that it has been regaining steam as a legitimate subject of inquiry in linguistics (Swoyer, "How Does Language Affect Thought" 30; Wolff and Homes 253). However, dominant methods in the renewed field by and large reject the previous model characterized by dichotomy, a strong/weak distinction, and ethnographic investigation, privileging instead a complex series of interrelated proposals investigated empirically. For example, in an advanced review article of studies in linguistic relativity, Phillip Wolff and Kevin J. Holmes argue: "Linguistic relativity can now be said to comprise a 'family' of related proposals that do not necessarily fall along a single strong-to-weak continuum" (253). Within this "family," linguistic determinism remains unsupportable, given the research, as does the direct

¹⁴ Swoyer gives the following example: "usually the question is whether there is a space for an interesting and plausible version of relativism between claims that are banal (the Babylonians did not have a counterpart of the word telephone so they did not think about telephones) and those that are dramatic but almost certainly false (those who speak different languages see the world in totally different ways)" ("How Does Language Affect Thought" 23).

equation of language with thought, or as the authors term it, language as language-of-thought (253-4). Still, Wolff and Holmes argue that five proposals within this family offer legitimate insights into the relationships between language, cognition, and perception.¹⁵ Wolff and Holmes describe these five forms as: “those in which thinking occurs before language use (thinking for speaking), those in which linguistic and nonlinguistic codes compete with each other (language as meddler) or in which linguistic codes extend nonlinguistic thinking (language as augments), and those in which thinking is directed toward properties highlighted by language (language as spotlight) or in which language engages a schematic mode of processing (language as inducer)” (261). Through these forms, the authors note that language can work to *shape* thought in some ways, and to *direct our attention* to certain features of experience and the world, but language does not *determine* thought. For example, we may find ourselves given to “attentional biases acquired through the frequent, habitual use of language” (259). The authors discuss this concept through studies that demonstrate that gender categories within languages (e.g., masculine and feminine nouns in Romance languages) reliably exert pressures on speakers’ cognition, such as in judging similarity between images (259). In this sense, the research seems to support Kenneth Burke’s definition of “man” as symbol-using animals who are therefore susceptible to the ills of symbolicity (*Language as Symbolic Action*,

¹⁵ While I do want to avoid using a specifically social scientific approach to rigidly frame (or “legitimate”) my overall discussion of relationships between language and cognition/thought/ideology, it is useful to outline these five productive threads, at least in brief, especially considering the common treatment of linguistics as a science in science fiction. In that sense, Wolff and Holmes’ article is quite helpful in terms of its reasoned, balanced, thorough approach to a great deal of empirical work in the field.

60, viii). We are not simply users of language; language also affects our relationships to the world.

In general, these studies are useful in understanding and empirically verifying some of the ways that language and thought affect each other, yet they also retain traces of structuralist thinking, perhaps as a result of a debt to Chomsky's theories of universal transformational grammar. The question of universals remains present within these debates, but may be rapidly becoming a moot point. Swoyer suggests, "it is important to stress that substantive linguistic and cognitive universals are entirely compatible with substantive linguistic and cognitive differences between languages and cultures (and subcultures and other groups)" ("How Does Language Affect Thought" 40). Thus, with that debate at least temporarily bracketed, Swoyer suggests that the following questions should continue to shape investigations in linguistic relativity: "1 Which aspects of language influence which aspects of thought in a systematic way? 2 What form does this influence take? 3 How strong is the influence?" (25). His essay ends by calling for a rigorous kind of interdisciplinary study that would be required to shed light on these hypotheses, suggesting that "testing a specific version of the hypothesis requires a combination of skills, including those of a good ethnographer, linguist, and experimental psychologist. Progress will be slow, often painful, sometimes hard to discern. But that's the thing about science" (41). It is largely this idea of the slow, painful progress of science that renders it an extremely limited set of methods for analyzing language. By

contrast, rhetoric, and its companion *phronesis*,¹⁶ are precisely geared to generate knowledge and understanding on the fly, in the moment. Gerald Bruns describes the merits of a rhetorical consciousness, as vs. one rooted in the necessity of the slow, painful progress of science: “Rhetoric is a way of improvising moments of order in the absence of a standing order of things. It differs from philosophy and science in the sense that it belongs to a world of complex systems where there isn't time to determine definitive truths. It presupposes a world of randomness and contingency where events come rushing at you and survival requires immediate action” (50). This is certainly where social-scientific treatment of linguistic relativity falls short not only as a method for understanding language use, but as a literary hermeneutic for sf itself.

Indeed, one thing that really strikes me about science driven linguistic relativity studies is that few if any of them can wrestle at all effectively with questions of ideology or power. They are driven by a need to sanitize the relationships between language and thought, seeking to make the world a stable, knowable place. Given that many of these experiments are conducted under rigidly controlled laboratory conditions, they effectively aim to eliminate power, ideology, and other everyday use factors as inputs in the experiments. Thus, we should not be surprised that the experiments can tell us little to

¹⁶ Gerald Bruns defines *phronesis* as “a condition of moral knowledge at the level of particular situation--call it a mode of responsiveness to what is singular and irreducible and therefore refractory to rules, categories, models, advanced pictures of the good life, and the whole idea of totality or order of things as such. Beneath knowing what something is or what something is for or how to make something, there is knowing what a situation calls for in the way of right action, even when the situation is so complex and unprecedented that one experiences the shortfall of one's principles, beliefs, or patterns of conduct, or even one's sense of how things should go if they are to go right” (48).

nothing about the ways that power affects language. Since power is always-already present in and circulating through language use, it is unclear that these experiments can prove particularly revealing about the ways that language works at the broader levels of human politics and sociality. In other words, empiricism dictates a mode of analyzing language that seeks abstraction over actually existing language use. Also notably missing from these formulations is any kind of substantive theorization about what language is, where it comes from, or what drives linguistic change over time. Even if we take as given Chomsky's notion of universal grammars as innate human capacities, that says little about the daily processes of language interactions amongst human beings in social and political worlds. Furthermore, linguistic relativity is driven by investigations across different languages, and thus needn't take too seriously the politics of language within any given language, amongst dialects, for example. Indeed, some of these limitations are beginning to be recognized even within empirically driven linguistic frameworks. For example, in his article on linguistic relativity in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Chris Swoyer asserts that "questions about the extent and kind of impact that language has on thought are empirical questions that can only be settled by empirical investigation" ("The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis"). However, nearly a decade later, in his chapter for *Language and Bilingual Cognition*, he winnowed this rigid assertion down to a much more focused set of claims about which kinds of linguistic variables can be productively examined through empirical research ("How Does Language Affect Thought," 37-40). This is why it is valuable to move from science driven frameworks towards ideological critique and rhetorical theory. Swoyer suggests, "we have at best a

tentative handle on many of the central linguistic and cognitive variables that seem likely to be relevant to linguistic relativity hypotheses” (“How Does Language Affect Thought,” 35). Part of the problem, Swoyer argues, is that some of these variables will not necessarily be testable within empirical frameworks. For example, “language is a vital part of a culture, and many aspects of a person’s culture are likely to covary with aspects of their language in ways that are difficult to tease apart” (“How Does Language Affect Thought,” 36). Furthermore, “When we turn to other aspects of language, the situation is far worse. For example, it seems reasonable to suppose that if a language does affect the way its users think, the meanings of its words and phrases are a strong candidate for having such an impact” (34). In other words, language use is very, very messy. Since a “tentative handle” on variables (such as culture and semantics) within a scientific framework makes for, at best, new rounds of “slow, painful progress,” investigations into linguistic relativity necessarily require other modes of engagement. Thus we are returned virtually full circle from social scientific modes of linguistic relativity to a substantive engagement with the anthropological. Even in places where empirical research demonstrates clear causal or affective relationships between language, perception, and cognition, there remain significant doubts about the broad applicability of these methods for sorting through the tangled processes of everyday language use. As my analysis of the novels will show, a social-scientific approach to language often effectively manages an erasure of the politics of everyday language use. In that sense, we require alternate methods for approaching the second half of this dialectic. For that, we turn first to Marxist language theorist V.N. Volosinov.

Written in 1929, Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* remains the most compelling formulation of a Marxist theory of language, and it provides significant insights into the ways that power and ideology circulate through language. The main impetus of the text is to resist then-dominant theories of language that sought to abstract language from communities of language users in order to attempt to isolate it as a system subject to scientific analysis. For example, Volosinov resists the "abstract objectivism" of Saussure, noting that an abstracted notion of "structure" is useful only for certain intellectual purposes—it cannot describe the social elements of language effectively (58-9). In this sense, Volosinov seeks to place language use *within the world*, as opposed to rooted in an abstract structure that gives it shape and meaning. Furthermore, noting that Marx and Engels never provided a comprehensive account of the workings of ideology (xiii, n 2), Volosinov seeks to do precisely that, in the process denuding us of a false belief in the neutrality of language. In this classic Marxist formulation, language is a site of class struggle; it is a primary medium through which power and ideology circulate, proliferate, take hold, face resistance. And while my interests here are not limited to the justifiably critiqued arguments about class struggle as the central driving force of history, the basic model of language as a site of ideological contestation is a highly significant modification to the "laboratory" models of social-scientific linguistics. In this light, whereas Swoyer's above mention of semantics seems a begrudging admittance about how meaning might shape consciousness, in Volosinov's analysis, "The word is the ideological phenomenon *par excellence*" (13). In other words, meaning becomes not simply an "independent variable" in one's investigations, but is in

fact a fundamental site of political struggle. To be clear, I don't mean to uncritically celebrate Volosinov's text at the expense of the insights provided by a social-scientific mode of engagement. The point, rather, is to illustrate the opposing poles of the dialectic I'm sketching out. In that sense, my aim here is not to "solve" these philosophical problems around language use so much as to set up a hermeneutic that can help unpack the ways that sf represents and explores language.

Volosinov's deep insistence on the social nature of language moves us away from the valuable but limited framework of an individual's relationship to the empirical world and into the realm of the always already socio-culturally situated relationships amongst people and social groups. He notes, "The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside—in the social milieu surrounding the individual being" (93). This claim would seem to directly oppose the notions advanced in ideas of universal, innate, biological, cognitive structures of language. However, we should keep in mind Swyer's admittance that universal grammars are not incompatible with many versions of linguistic relativity. Thus, it is perfectly possible that we have innate grammars, and yet the organizing center of utterances remains social. Volosinov goes on to say: "Utterance as such is wholly a product of social interaction, both of the immediate sort as determined by the circumstances of the discourse, and of the more general kind, as determined by the whole aggregate of conditions under which any given community of speakers operates" (93). So, even if we have universal grammars, they will be common to all speakers, thus the differences that shape language use in a given community cannot be innate, but must be products of social interaction. In my reading, this idea both gets us

closer to Sapir and Whorf's initial contentions (as vs. the ways that their ideas were subjected to social-scientific methodologies that essentially reframed the terms of the investigation away from cultural and onto cognitive factors), and renders moot any objections to linguistic relativity that are rooted in Chomskyan innate grammars theories. Thus, what I'm primarily rejecting here is the implication that social-scientific methodologies are the *only way* (as Swoyer argued in 2010) to understand the ways that language shapes our apprehension of the world. Still, Volosinov's approach clearly falls prey to determinism, as the above quote illustrates. Therefore, while the basic orientation is valuable—language as primarily social, and utterances as products of that sociality—we must also recognize the limits of the model. The driving force here is a dialectic within which language shapes and directs but does not determine cognition.

Though empirical research is valuable in documenting influences of language on cognition and vice versa, I also reject the notion that epistemology and cognition are coterminal; the ways that we know the world are not contained entirely in our empirical perception of it, as strict social-scientific methods seem to imply. This leads me back to the empirical study of linguistic relativity, to Wolff and Holmes' claim about "attentional biases acquired through the frequent, habitual use of language" (259). I contend that in this revised model I've proposed, these rigorous studies have merely managed to generate a minor "proof" of a much larger social/linguistic reality, as exemplified in what Krista Ratcliffe has called the "tropological function of language" (9). In other words, all words function as tropes, at least at a minor level, and thus words carry, as baggage, certain kinds of attentional biases; tropes shape and direct our attention (a point that clearly

echoes Volosinov's notions of the word as ideological phenomenon). These effects can converge, as Wolff and Holmes' article implies. They say of the findings of a number of studies under review: "These findings are consistent with the possibility that the regular use of language can lead people to prefer one construal of the world over others" (259). Thus, the authors describe not only empirical studies that seem to demonstrate the tropological nature of language, but on a broader level, the ideological nature of language as well, as in preferring particular construals of the world.

Though Wolff and Holmes may be reticent to grant these larger implications, their findings undeniably have a great deal in common with Volosinov's arguments. For example, he contends that "consciousness is ideological through and through," or in other words, it is a "social-ideological fact" (12). Subjectivity is in fact constituted through language. Writes Volosinov, "Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse" (13). Thus, this tendency to "prefer one construal of the world over another" is not simply an accidental byproduct of language use, but is directly related to the social nature of language. In terms of our dialectic, this claim effectively mirrors Meyers' framing of the role of language in shaping cognition. We can see thus far that some social-scientific linguists have sought (unsuccessfully) to dismiss any shaping effects of language on cognition; by contrast, Volosinov argues that language use and consciousness are always already ideological, and thus form the basis for our relationships with the world. I turn now to a discussion of rhetoric, my third method for exploring relationships between language and reality, which provides significant analytical tools for understanding the

ways that power and knowledge circulate and are contested within everyday language use.

In many ways, the dialectic that I'm laying out here is one that is quite familiar in studies of rhetoric. In that sense, this chapter is an intervention in an ongoing debate dating back to Plato, in which rhetoric has been constructed as opposite to and other of the philosophical tradition that imagines itself as not historically contingent but as grounded in—and the only mode of knowledge production capable of—certainty. For my purposes here, I think it evident that linguistics as a social science positions itself within this Platonic tradition, as capable of generating knowledge-as-certainty. While linguistic relativity is capable of illuminating certain elements of language use (as highlighted above, for example), its tools are quickly exhausted when we come to the areas of knowledge that constitute the vast majority of human interactions. Quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gerald Bruns says that rhetoric “from oldest tradition has been the only advocate of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the *eikos*, and that which is convincing to reason, against the claim of science to accept as true only what can be demonstrated and tested” (49). So, while some strains of social-scientific linguistics and Volosinov's work on the social and ideological nature of language help describe the poles of this dialectic, rhetorical theory provides fruitful methods illuminating the vast terrain between them: the terrain of the probable, that which need not rely on certainty. Outside of the either/or dichotomy of language constraining perception or perception constraining language, how can we understand these poles to work dynamically, dialectically? Our

interests here lie in defense of the probable, the contingent, specifically through understanding the epistemological nature of language use.

To understand rhetoric as epistemological, Susan Jarratt's *Rereading the Sophists* provides a useful starting point. Jarratt understands the early Greek Sophists to be, contrary to Platonic notions of truth and knowledge, engaged in sophisticated philosophical projects that seek to understand the relationships between language and knowledge (xx). For them, truth is arrived at via social processes, through rhetorical processes specific to any given time and space. While Plato valued transcendent truth, the Sophists valued *nomos*, beliefs that are "held to be true" (42). Thus, rhetoric is the framework that grounds the Sophistic understanding of truth as negotiated in varying ways throughout various times and geographies, such that languages represent the needs, beliefs, knowledges of each culture (60).

Richard L. Wright makes a similar point in redefining rhetoric from the narrow confines of "persuasion" to encompass the workings of discourse more broadly: "Whereas many rhetorical approaches limit their perspective on power and discourse dynamics to the power of discourse to accomplish certain intended effects or to the personal power of particular rhetors in given situation, the present argument supports the much broader approach that views all discourse as a constructive dynamic inseparable from the ideological and the epistemic" (91). Therefore, where discourse is inseparable from the epistemic, language use is always organized around and through historically contingent bodies of knowledge, and as such, is always grounded in a particular worldview. Wright goes on to say, in short, that to be different is to experience the world

differently, which leads one to know differently, to think/feel differently, and ultimately, to talk differently (86). This is a fundamental premise of many of the novels I analyze below.

Moreover, rhetoric, through Burke's formulation, reveals our capacity to be affected, our vulnerability to our own instruments (language), and thus the untenable nature of the stable, rational, thinking self. "Man's . . . powers of symbolicity give rise to kinds of symbolic action that, by the same token, make him susceptible to corresponding kinds of servitude" (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 61). This point is a profoundly important one for reading these novels. Whereas science and reason often function to shore up the subject's position at the center of its world, Burke's claims begin to indicate that something in language itself eludes our control, decenters the agency of the subject, makes us vulnerable to each other and to language itself. In some ways (and Whorf would no doubt endorse this sentiment), we are at the mercy of our symbol systems. As I will argue, this is where listening and receptivity reveal important, often overlooked elements of the processes of communication and human sociality.

I must make a final important note, before moving on to the analyses of the novels. As I have noted, within sf literature there is a substantial body of work that portrays "communication" in various ways. And given the fact that the estrangement in sf commonly includes contact with the radically alien other, defamiliarizing and reconceptualizing processes of communication is a regularly occurring (and generally optimistically treated) trope within the genre. Indeed, Walter Meyers quotes John R. Kreuger as arguing that approximately one-third of sf texts are concerned with some kind

of language problem (Meyers 12). Meyers lists numerous kinds of linguistic concerns taken up in sf, from communication with animals and machines to postulating the importance of “alien words” on the reader (7-9). However, there is an important distinction to be made between treating communication more broadly as subject of investigation as vs. a focus on listening more specifically. These are obviously deeply interrelated, though communication seems to connote more of a focus on the speaker and the process of broadcasting than it does on the listener/receiver. Let me briefly illustrate why these differences are significant for this study.

John Durham Peters argues that the concept of communication arises in the early twentieth century, largely as a result of the proliferation of communications technologies (5). In Peters’ view, communication thus comes to be idealized as a sort of technical problem to be solved. Rather than centering on the difficult process of negotiating the boundaries of self and other, communication comes to signify a straightforward exchange of data or information between multiple parties—a process grounded in and requiring mimesis—and any failure in this exchange is understood to be a problem of medium or coding. Thus, communication problems come to be commonly understood as solvable through improvement in the technical practices and technologies of communication. These are severely limited and limiting views, however, and Durham argues, in contrast, “Communication . . . is more basically a political and ethical problem than a semantic or psychological one” (269). Much of his central argument is summed up in the idea of refiguring the problem of communication away from the idea of “fidelity to an original” and instead towards “responsibility to the audience” (266). This notion of “responsibility”

is indeed a profoundly ethical question, and one that, in my view, begins to bring listening to the forefront of the problem of communication. While Peters does not explicitly take up the concept of listening in much detail, and while much of his persuasive text remains centered on communication as an active process performed largely by a speaking (or writing) subject, his shift away from speakers to an ethical relationship with audiences seems to imply the importance of receptivity, of a theory of listening. Similarly, Peters argues, “the fundamental problem of communication is not adjusting semantics so we mean the same things with words, but figuring out ways to come into fellowship with otherness” (252). To idealize mimesis (the adjustment of semantics), whether in terms of matching language to some objective reality, or through aligning one’s communicative gesture with one’s “authentic” self, is always already to set out an impossible standard for one’s speaking and for one’s listeners—it is to take a philosophical stance driven by the possibility of certainty, rather than a rhetorical position on the contingency of human knowledge. We must then understand communication as a political problem, not primarily one of semantics. This coming into fellowship with otherness implies a more flexible self, one not threatened by the more receptive practices demanded in the process of listening. In other words, “communication” as a concept seems largely unable to take seriously the role of listener and processes of listening. It may in fact be that listening is the more central process in communication, if we are indeed to legitimately attempt to “come into fellowship with otherness,” an aim that is frequently at the heart of the sf novels to which I now turn.

My analyses of these novels will first include relatively brief readings of five of the novels, in order to gloss the variety of language-oriented scenarios that sf addresses. This chapter will then culminate in a much more thoroughly developed reading of *Native Tongue*, which I see as a paradigm case for approaching the numerous questions I have laid out thus far. I begin with Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of A Spacewoman*, which presents a hopeful and somewhat complex treatment of many of the concerns that are central to this chapter. In general, the novel is endearing and has a great deal to say about the possibilities of listening across radical difference and about the effects of listening on the self. However, in developing its ostensibly utopian vision of the future of communication as a science, the novel manages to severely obviate the political dimensions of communication and listening. In that sense, the dominant approach of the novel is to treat language as a neutral, value-free medium for the rational exchange of information. I will treat three primary elements in a brief analysis: first, the book treats communication as a technical problem to be solved, as vs. a political and ethical matter; secondly, the book persuasively illustrates relationships between perception, cognition, communication, and worldview; and thirdly, the book presupposes and interrogates the connections between communication/listening and the stable, rational self.

In some ways, Mitchison's novel epitomizes the problematic premise that communication is simply a technical problem to be solved, a premise that Peters identifies as a common and long-held misunderstanding and one which essentially reduces theories about communication to solely technical discourse (28-9). For example, throughout the novel, there are few if any genuine irreconcilable differences amongst any

of the diverse peoples and species. Most parties manage to iron out their disputes simply through good communication. Even laboratory animals, now that humans can communicate effectively with them, manage to be “ecstatic” about taking part in certain experiments (157). There is a vaguely referenced “communication theory” that helps protagonist Mary solve certain “communication problems” incredibly rapidly, often seemingly over the course of only a few days (108). She quickly diagnoses and solves communication problems, and reaches understandings with various beings with a minimum of effort and strife. Thus, attributable largely to good communication and the idea of a reason governed society, Earth in the novel seems to have entered a kind of “post-violence” society, with the occasional regrettable exception (175). Peters suggests, by contrast, “The conceit that communication necessarily improves relations or clarifies the underlying reasons of things is insufficiently acquainted with the night” (133). Such a conceit ignores and/or erases the politics of listening. However, Walter Meyers suggests that this problem is not uncommon in sf, linking the idealization of communication to common science fictional elements such as: instantaneous language learning via technical devices (akin to a downloading software) or subliminal/subconscious programming (chapter seven); wondrous, inexplicable technology such as the “universal translator” (chapter eight); or when all that fails, good old fashioned telepathy (chapter nine). In Mitchison’s novel, and in sf more broadly, communication experts most commonly predicate their actions on the assumption that surely all alien species are interested in the exchange of knowledge. Communication is posited as a vehicle for the exchange of pure scientific knowledge. The work of communication is posited as always deeply rational;

little else, apart from reason and data, is worthy of exchange. Still, despite this apparent mastery of communication as a straightforward process of technical discourse, these modes and gadgets of communication do little to reconcile incommensurable differences and incompatible world views, especially if we theorize communication as a mere medium for the transmission of information occurring in the absence of politics.

David Michael Levin's *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics* is another deeply relevant text for challenging problematic assumptions about the relationships between reason, communication, and the self. Levin argues that the Cartesian subject (still our governing model) is characterized by profound egotism, narcissism, and "collective fantasies of planetary omnipotence and omniscience" (12). While Cartesianism has been valuable in many ways, allowing humanity to break away from certain kinds of dogma for example (12), we must now recognize it as a sort of Wittgensteinian ladder, a mode of thinking and being that has proven highly productive within specific arenas, but one which is increasingly revealing its limitations and destructive effects. Thus, a grammar of listening must be premised upon an understanding of "reason" as a particular social agreement about what counts as legitimate thought, techniques of knowledge production. Any concept of universal reason proves therefore unable to negotiate difference, especially those differences "it cannot subsume without violence" (13). Levin's project, then, is to lay out a productive (if occasionally romanticized) model of listening that affords new relationships between people and new possibilities for democracy as listening community. And this is precisely the problem with Mitchison's treatment of communication as simply a technical problem

to be solved. For example, Mitchison overlooks the politics of listening, though she creates numerous communication scenarios in which politics are central. For instance, throughout the novel, mobility via technology is a profoundly liberating kind of power as it relates to listening, since her erstwhile explorers can always opt to leave an alien planet if they don't like the way "communication" is going. This functions as a metaphor for the political rationalities that underlie wealth and mobility, in terms of who can simply opt out of listening when the impulse arises.

The novel does productively portray the effects of perception and cognition on worldview on language, with a very apparent debt to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This is dealt with most effectively in the first chapter, in which Mary is tasked with establishing communication with a species of "radiates," whom are described as "something like a five-armed starfish, itself developing out of a spiral" (Mitchison 11). She must first attempt to overcome significant differences in communication that emerge from physiology, as "the radial pattern which had developed out of the budding spiral had remained throughout evolution and completely dominated all mental and psychical processes" (11). As a result, "when it came to attempted communication," this significant difference in physiology "increased my difficulties far more than I ever thought it would" (11). Still, true to form as master of scientific communication, it took her a (mere) "period of weeks" to establish communication, during which time she became increasingly "out of tune" with her "own normal concepts" (17-18). Thus, as Mary learns to communicate with the radiates, she comes to realize the contingency of her own knowledge base and worldview—this is precisely the core insight of rhetoric as

epistemology, that knowledge and language are interrelated, interdependent, always already contingent and historically and culturally situated. In the novel, given the effects of their radial physiologies, “[the radiates] never thought in terms of either-or” (18). Subsequently, she notes, “It began to seem to me very peculiar that I should do so myself, and that so many of my judgments were paired: good and evil, black or white, to be or not to be” (18). Indeed, this is an example of the power of science fictional estrangement at its best: the postulation of a radically different physiology becomes a basis upon which to critique the very limited and limiting (but nonetheless highly sedimented) notion that morality and the driving questions of life can be reduced to dichotomy. Over time, Mary begins to lose herself, her very subjectivity, as she becomes alienated from this foundational dichotomous construction of reality. When her fellow explorers discover the extent to which her worldview has shifted through communicating with the radiates, she is instructed to begin to snap out of it through making “a quick two-way choice” (22). To be certain, George W. Bush and the Sith would be proud of such a method.

The points covered thus far comprise a central tension in the novel: how do we balance the necessity and possibility of good communication with the inevitability that one may risk oneself in the process of listening to the other? There are numerous places throughout the text that imply that the future ideal human is the scientist, the explorer, the rational, dispassionate being (see especially pg. 120). Early in the novel, Mary discusses the relationship between listening and the self: “I suppose one of the things which one finds it hardest to take is that one must develop a stable personality and yet that inevitably it will be altered by the other forms of life with which one will be in communications,

and that these bio-psychical alterations must be accepted” (Mitchison 9). Mary’s job, at this point in the novel, is to establish communication with the radiates mentioned above. She has little choice then but to risk the stability of her self in order to fulfill her task as the scientist of communication. This thread appears in various places throughout the novel, most notably perhaps as we near the novel’s final chapters. Mary has agreed to be the subject of an experiment in which she receives a “graft,” the attachment of an alien symbiote directly to her body. During the second instance of such a graft, Mary describes herself as becoming rapidly “anti-scientific” (163). At one point, she questions, “In what sense was I me?” (161). She then, under the emotional, anti-rational influence of the graft, ceases to be a “civilised scientist” (168). This seems to be her great transgression in the novel and is a point about which she is quite disturbed. Her stable personality is disrupted through this graft, which suggests that the self ordinarily begins and ends at the boundary of the skin and is jeopardized when this barrier is compromised. The outcome of the penetration and transgression of the boundary of skin-as-self is her ceasing to be “scientific” and “civilized” in favor of unreasoning, emotional states. She then links back to the episode with the radiates, bringing the novel full circle, when she states:

Yes, I had been somebody else. Somebody, from a scientific point of view, delinquent. It had affected me more deeply this time than I had been affected earlier on in my contact with the radiates, the reason doubtless being that I had been involved not merely through my own curiosity and sympathy, but through an active and dangerous emotion generated from outside, even though I had been willing to accept it. But we are not yet able to prepare ourselves completely against such attacks, especially not if we are also communications experts, needing to keep all channels open. (175-6)

Thus, outside emotion jeopardizes the scientific subject, and it is her drive to communicate that makes her vulnerable. This is one very productive aspect of this book: on one hand, she's clearly extolling the rational, stable self, and she sees a need to protect it—she sees it as the ideal self. On the other hand, she also implies that this self must be willing to be vulnerable if it is desirous of learning, since some information must needs come in unexpected ways, and must necessarily change us (but hopefully not completely ousting the stable, scientific self). So, in the first case, we are deeply within the genealogy of Plato's fears about the dangers of listening to the rational, stable self; but in the second case, we recognize a necessary openness (precisely the process of *listening*, the receptive end of communication) that is the condition of possibility for learning and communication.

In the end, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* represents quite powerfully the drive to constitute diverse communities in which difference does not exist hierarchically, and while Mitchison problematically constructs these communities through the possibilities of “scientific reason,” she also indicates the necessity of risking that scientific self if we are to take listening seriously. However, Mitchison's idealizations of communication seem to want to erase the idea of the other entirely. “The Other” thus becomes a historical event of sorts, a collective trauma like the Holocaust that serves to guide our interactions (such as in the rule of non-interference with alien subjects' ways of being, for example). As a historical event, the other no longer troubles human society and the relationships of sentient beings everywhere. In this sense, the book proffers very hopeful propositions (utopia, difference without hierarchies); however, attempting to do so through erasing the

concept of the other inevitably erases the legibility of the other (much like contemporary ideologies of colorblindness and post-feminism), thus performing a kind of disappearing act on the ongoing, actually existing significance of otherness as a political rationality and organizing logic of human societies.

James Gunn's *The Listeners* sets out to be a compassionate, searching novel characterized by a serious degree of literariness and sophistication. These aims are admirable, and they succeed well in places, but some of these aims often amount to little more than missteps and missed opportunities. Fundamentally, this is a novel inspired by the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) initiatives that began gaining steam in the 1960s. The basic premise is that in 1978 a group of scientists gain permission to access the "Little Ear," a series of high sensitivity satellite dishes built by the U.S. in a remote valley in Puerto Rico. Their primary endeavor is to listen for extraterrestrial communication. We join the narrative in 2025, at which time the project is headed by Robert McDonald, a linguist and engineer. The central engine of the plot is that in 2027 a message is received from an extraterrestrial civilization on the distant planet of Capella. It comes in the form of a rebroadcast of old 1930s radio transmissions (primarily American pop culture). The rebroadcast includes music, radio programs, dramas, etc, but it is punctuated with organized series of crackles and pops, of alternating static and silence which the listeners in Puerto Rico eventually decode into a kind of visual matrix (a precursor of the fax), an image of dots and blank spaces which they must visually interpret. In this sense, the initial problem of communicating is conceived primarily as a technical problem and a mathematical one. This point connects to Miéville's arguments

about the ideological nature of sf as form, inasmuch as the novel suggests that through such a precise medium as mathematics, there seems to be little danger of disagreement, since all reasonable people, if communicating effectively, will most certainly be able to resolve their difficulties. Therefore, the emphasis on communication as a technical problem, common in sf, has the ideological effect (intended or otherwise) of erasing the politics of listening.

Despite this scientific ideological framework, the book seems to evoke Sapir-Whorf as well, through the implication that we cannot get outside of our own cognitive and linguistic modes of perception and knowledge (17, 142). Radically different interpretations of the extraterrestrial message arise as the inevitable result of reading it through significantly different world views. Jeremiah Jones (the religious leader of the Solitarian faith, which holds that there is no other life in the universe—God created Man and Man alone) interprets the series of dots and blanks as a winged angel with distinctly human features (118). By contrast, the scientists on the project interpret it as a bird like, vaguely humanoid creature wearing a space suit and helmet, protective items that other elements of the message suggest are necessary in order for the extraterrestrials to protect themselves from a rapidly advancing heat wave caused by an increasingly hot sun (134). While it is quite easy to denigrate the limited vision of the Solitarians, I suggest here that Jones and his ilk stand in for any more general worldview that doesn't privilege science as the only viable episteme for legitimating knowledge; in our terms, science becomes privileged as the only legitimate mode of listening. The novel gestures towards a kind of plurality, in which we might be sympathetic to various interpretations, but the

compromise that it attempts effectively collapses the differences, in highly revealing ways, between empiricism and faith. For example, at one point, MacDonald tells Jones that science may be a kind of listening and a kind of faith, but it is one that has as its goal the need to be reproducible by all listeners across time and space (95, 184). The certainty of precise, effective communication amongst scientists and aliens alike is guaranteed by logic and grounded in unmediated access to empirical truths about the natural universe (137, 95).¹⁷ This suggests, then, that Jones is outside of reason, is not engaging in legitimate communication due to his rejection of the scientific rubric/worldview. In this sense, science seems clearly to owe a debt to theology, perhaps through the religious roots of the scientific revolution, inasmuch as science is taken to be a boundless, ultimate source of meaning in the universe. So, although the novel suggests that worldview always governs our processes of making meaning and our relationships with language and communication, in the end, the novel's tone privileges the scientists' version of the message.

In this initial analysis, the novel epitomizes Burke's concept of terministic screens: the terms that organize each group's lives direct their attention and thus govern the possibilities of interpretation of the interstellar message.¹⁸ One might suggest that this

¹⁷ For a contrast, see Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," in which humans and extraterrestrials may indeed have access to the same empirical realities, but their conceptualizations of these realities vary widely, due to perceptual apparatus and the accompanying cognition and worldview. Similarly (as I will discuss in more detail shortly), Lem's *His Master's Voice* treats this topic in more satisfying depth, and with greater ambivalence.

¹⁸ Burke argues, "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function

point is on one level simply an echo of Stuart Hall's arguments about the processes of decoding.¹⁹ However, where my argument differs here is in the contention that while decoding (or listening) is certainly shaped by a listener's background, listening also functions defensively, proactively, and/or reactively to shore up listeners' subjectivities. Our meaning-making practices are intricately bound up with our very understandings of our selves. For these reasons, I contend that listening is the more agile hermeneutic here (as vs. decoding or communication more broadly). This relationship between listening and subjectivity is clearly indicated through the disparate readings of the initial alien communication, the paranoia that arises in anticipation of public responses to it, and in incidents of public (mostly the Solitarians) panics that emerge from the urge to protect one's worldview, which has been threatened by the very existence of extraterrestrial communication. Epitomizing these fears, President Andrew White, in laying out objections to sending a reply, asks McDonald, "What if it changes us?" (137). Thus, we see there is a primary threat here is again the possibility that listening will endanger our individual and collective identities and enact our transformation.

This transformation does occur in the novel, though in a favorable way. Despite some initial public panics, the message in fact makes possible a much more cohesive "humanity" through what seems to me a kind of alien peace. I find this term suggestive in several ways as it relates to the effects of the message exchange with the Capellans.

also as a *deflection* of reality" (Language as Symbolic Action, 45). Furthermore, these terminologies effectively direct our attention (50).

¹⁹ In "Encoding/ Decoding," Hall argues that any given act of decoding is always filtered through the listener's background, knowledge frameworks, etc.

Given the great distance between the two planets, radio waves must travel 45 Earth years in each direction; thus, there is a ninety year waiting period for a response from any message to Capella. During this time, a profound peace settles over Earth. McDonald's son Robert, near the novel's closing, describes humanity as having "slowed down" since first receiving the message (166). The sense underlying this slowing down is described by Andrew White as a "curious mixed sense of liberation and serenity, as if by contact with alien creatures who are truly alien we have discovered what it means to be truly human" (186). This peace is an alien peace because deep, lasting peace is arguably alien to human nature, and because it is effected through means extrinsic to human action and motives. The novel suggests that through being confronted with the truly alien, humanity can reconstitute/redefine itself with a greater sense of commonality, given the existence of these aliens against whom to articulate "the human." However, this is another way in which the novel's politics seem uninformed or naive; there is already a long-standing tradition, usually based on race, in which "the human" is articulated against "the other." Thus, it is unclear why we should take seriously the idea that extraterrestrial life should automatically be exempted from these well-established human politics and hierarchies. Systems of oppression virtually vanish over a couple of decades, and all members of the species *homo sapiens* come to count unqualifiedly as fully human simply because we have knowledge of the existence of sentient extraterrestrial birdlike creatures? A dubious premise. However, the idea remains intriguing, inasmuch as it highlights the dialectical role of the other in constituting the self.

In the end, despite the great promise of communication through science and mathematics, across great distances in time and space, and between alien consciousnesses, the overall effect of the novel is to offer a somewhat bleak, or at least deeply wistful, account of the possibilities of communication. For example, Earth's message to Capella, and their first message and eventual reply, are all essentially dead letters. It turns out that Capellan civilization was destroyed by the transformation of its own sun, perhaps millennia before even having sent their initial message. Their message and response were from preprogrammed technologies designed to identify possible sites of sentience and to then communicate the details of their demise to anyone willing and able to listen and respond (210-11). In addition to these "dead letters," the novel is haunted by poor interpersonal communication amongst families, unopened/unread letters from father to son, and the implication that meaning and genuine contact are always deferred, just beyond our reach. This latter point is consistently implied through the repeated descriptions of characters' experiences listening to the information captured and processed by the technicians and scientists at the Little Ear. This information is not "sound" in the strict sense of the word—rather, the sounds the characters hear are auditory representations of the various media that advanced civilizations might use for communication, such as radio signals, gamma-rays, or hydrogen emissions (16). These inputs are processed by computers into audio output, to enable literal listening through headphones or speakers. Throughout the novel, this output is characterized as the sound of "a babble of distant voices, some shouting, some screaming, some conversing calmly, some whispering—all of them trying beyond desperation to communicate, and everything

just below the level of intelligibility” (13). There is always the haunting implication that we can hear, in the static and noise of the universe played through speakers and headphones, the unintelligible voices of angels or the too-softly-whispered secrets of the universe.

In a passage that sums up much of the novel’s attitude towards listening and communication, Robert Jr. says, “God! If I could only help. If I could only answer that cry. If I could only close that broken circuit, tear down that impassable wall of distance, bring intelligence together with intelligence” (179). This sentiment is reflected in Peters’ argument that communication, throughout much of modernity, developed alongside a deep fear of solipsism, of the impossibility of human beings ever being in complete contact (16). On one hand, then, it seems that the universe—life itself—gets cast as a communication problem through which, once solved by the appropriate applications of technologies and techniques, all of life’s mysteries will be revealed and all of its problems solved. These solutions, however, are always frustrated and deferred by the inherent frailties of the human species. On another hand, these Voices (often capitalized in the novel), as the background noise of the universe, reveal primarily the human drive to force our own meanings, rooted in our own sense of importance, on otherwise meaningless natural phenomena. The voices evoke both the inherent frustrations of interpersonal communication and the ultimate groundlessness upon which humanity might place concrete knowledge about the meaning of human life, relationships, and endeavors. Whereas the first case signifies the inability of human beings to crack the technical code of being, the second case constitutes a clear refusal of the idea of cosmic

meaning in favor of emphasizing the importance of mutually constructing meaning with each other, amongst sentient beings. In this sense, the novel is deeply wistful about the possibilities of communication, or at a minimum, perhaps the novel's commitment to scientific rubrics of communication as a technical problem inevitably entail a drive to want to collapse the complexities of interpersonal communication into the simple rubrics of data exchange, the straightforward act of fixing a broken circuit. In any case, despite a few missteps and some missed opportunities, the novel remains a generally satisfying meditation on numerous aspects of the possibilities of listening and communication.

Stanislaw Lem's *His Master's Voice*, like Gunn's *The Listeners*, is largely inspired by SETI projects. Unlike Gunn's novel, however, it mounts a much more thorough critique of claims of the universality of scientific knowledge and communication. While *His Master's Voice* is at times dry, dense, and given to philosophical and scientific speculation, these speculations are also amongst the novel's great strengths, reading often like brilliant, incisive sociological accounts of science. Not only does Peter Hogarth (the narrator, whose posthumously published journal forms the body of this novel) suggest that science is capable of knowledge and certainty only within the limits of a given culture's knowledge frameworks and conceptual apparatus, he also describes science as always shaped by the motivations and limits of the human species, suggesting that ultimately the human drive for knowledge is always grounded in or corrupted by the human/animal drive for conquest and power. This set up forms the background against which the novel explores the possibilities of communication.

The central premise of the novel is that a message from space has been received in the form of a repeating cycle of neutrino emissions, basic particles of interstellar radiation. The U.S. government forms the project “His Master’s Voice” in order to attempt to decode this message, one that these select representatives of humanity may hope—as the capitalization of “His” implies—is effectively a message from some wise, all-knowing intelligence whose very existence might give meaning and structure to our own.²⁰ A team of 2500 prominent thinkers is formed, including scientists, linguists, philosophers, and of course Hogarth, a globally respected mathematician. The first dilemma the project must confront is the intractable problem of decoding a message that is transmitted in a language that has no possible point of entry for the decoders. Since languages are closed systems, this effort proves largely impossible, even for massive teams of the best minds available. In the end, some information is gleaned from the message, in the form of a mysterious, radioactive substance known alternately as Frog Eggs and Lord of the Flies. Similarly, Donald Prothero and Hogarth stumble across the possible blueprints of an uber nuclear weapon that they dub TX (tele-explosion), a device that could instantly “send” a nuclear blast from any location to any location on the globe. Much to Hogarth’s and Prothero’s relief, however, TX never reaches a feasible measure of applicability.

So, the initial problem of translation remains intractable, and the headway the project has made can only be attributable to some shared grounding between the two communicating civilizations regarding physical principles of the natural world. This

²⁰ I am indebted to Nalo Hopkinson for suggesting this subtle and accurate implication.

commonality is explained through Hogarth's explication of two different kinds of language: acultural and cultural. The former is basically coding such as DNA, which not only communicates the nature of organisms, but has the ability to bring that organism into existence through natural processes. The latter includes all human language systems and forms of expression. However, this distinction cannot stand in absolute terms (144). Any time an acultural language is coded into any symbol system, it will necessarily take on some elements of the culture of that symbol system (142-3). In that sense, and this is reiterated in numerous places throughout the novel, humanity is always already enclosed within our own limited perspective on the universe. So, all the project has managed to do ultimately is to eke out some minor connection between the message's symbolicity—those parts of the message, presumably, that are least inflected with the extraterrestrial civilization's cultural specificities—and humanity's limited understandings of the universe. In fact, Hogarth suggests at one point that these discoveries may be attributable to nothing more than dumb luck grounded in misunderstanding (145).

This is where Lem and Gunn share a common theme: the implication that science and its relationship to the natural world offer the possibility of a firm grounding for communication, a kind of assurance that there *really are* messages that can be flawlessly encoded and received. The two authors' treatments of this theme diverge, however. For Gunn, human frailty makes it likely if not inevitable that we will fail to achieve the scientific promises of flawless communication. For Lem, scientific communication functions something like the speed of light: the promise of a universal constant that we can approach only asymptotically, always drawing nearer but never reaching it. For Lem,

this state is not necessarily something to bemoan; it is simply the condition of things as they are. Therefore, rather than collapsing into the common trope in sf of communication as a technical problem to be readily solved (as in Mitchison), and rather than idealizing science in a kind of theological vein that portrays humans as not worthy of its incorruptibility and perfection (as in Gunn), *His Master's Voice* effectively critiques these sf tropes, attempting to treat the problem of communication in a more robust way.

The novel suggests that the rhetorical gist of sf emerges precisely from an urgency to identify and fix the possibility of knowledge-as-certainty. Thus sf (and I would argue, by extension, science itself), as a rhetorical act, as discourse of mastery over the physical world, is on one level simply the performance of comfort, an adult bedtime story. When confronted with the effects of vast space (infinity) upon the insignificant human ego, we immediately attempt to conquer it, or at a minimum, to see ourselves reflected in it. The novel mounts this critique quite explicitly at one point. In discussing science fiction, Hogarth says, "The authors of these pseudo-scientific fairy tales supply the public with what it wants: truisms, clichés, stereotypes, all sufficiently costumed and made 'wonderful' so that the reader may sink into a safe state of surprise and at the same time not be jostled out of his philosophy of life" (106). It seems evident, therefore, that Lem would side with Miéville in his arguments about the ideological nature of sf. And perhaps Lem takes this point one step further. Whereas Miéville argues that sf itself is ideological, Lem more broadly challenges the notion of science itself as a neutral, value-free medium—he resists the dissimulation of scientific cognition (not only in its fictional iterations) as contingent. Therefore, if indeed the novel poses the familiar sf dilemma of

communication as a technical problem to be solved, the novel ultimately suggests that such a problem cannot be solved. As we see with the distinction between cultural and acultural languages, our very selves, knowledges, worldviews, and capacities to listen are all bound up together in a Gordian knot. As Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" suggests, language is foundational to the human condition; it is both our possibility of "advancement" and the certainty that we will create only an anthropocentric world. We will come only to create the world in our own image and marvel at our ability to do so. Like Narcissus, we see ourselves reflected in the world and we are entranced by it, but it is only an illusion we have used to seduce ourselves. We fall in and through it, willing ourselves to forget, through dissimulation and self-delusion, that human symbol systems are our only means of representing and communicating knowledge of the "objective" world. Therefore, we must understand that the minute we're outside of the notion that language is a value free medium, outside of the paradigm of scientific certainty as the ultimate goal and idealized mode of legitimation for communication, at that moment we're within the purview of Volosinov's arguments about language and consciousness as ideological, as always already inflected with power.²¹

So, with no basis upon which to ground the certainty that communication can succeed in precise terms, does this mean communication must inevitably lapse into

²¹ In the novel, there is not much explicit discussion of language as ideological in the classical Marxist sense, but it is evident that the thinkers employed on the project are to be producing knowledge about language and the interstellar message (as a specific act of communication). Their labor, in the form of the knowledge it produces, will then be immediately appropriated and placed into the service of the political quest for global domination.

solipsism? Perhaps. Indeed, the novel suggests solipsism may be the fundamental human condition; the question of whether or not humans are alone in the universe reads as a metaphor for the impossibility of bridging distance between human beings. In a statement that reads like a microcosm of the entire novel, Hogarth says in the closing pages of his journal, “I was never able to conquer the distance between persons. An animal is fixed to its here-and-now by the senses, but man manages to detach himself, to remember, to sympathize with others, to visualize their states of mind and feelings; this, fortunately, is not true. In such attempts at pseudo merging and transferal we are only able, imperfectly, darkly, to visualize ourselves” (199). Therefore, the novel, much like Gunn’s, treats a SETI scenario as a way to explore the more immediate (lack of) possibilities of communication amongst human beings. In short, what we are capable of hearing and knowing is inextricably bound up with our world views and always ringed in by our understandings of ourselves, our individual and collective subjectivities. The self is ultimately groundless, and may be nothing more than the process and effect/affect of grasping after solid ground, after some form of certainty and concrete knowledge of the world in which we might root the self. This is, however, a shared condition, and therefore communication failures should not be taken as a source of despondency— we must instead realize that failures in communication in fact help us realize that it is all the more important for us to commit to the difficult work, as Peters suggests of making worlds together (30-31). Similarly to Lem’s sentiments in the novel, Peters also suggests, “At best, ‘communication’ is the name for those practices that compensate for the fact that we can never be each other” (268). For both Lem and Peters, the distance between subjective

consciousnesses is ultimately uncrossable. *His Master's Voice* portrays solipsism as a fundamental truth of human selves and societies; it suggests that this state is permanent, but it is not one to bemoan. It is important to note, for both Lem and Peters, that communication is not completely trumped by this solipsism. Something in communication still works. We can never *be each other*, but we certainly must take seriously the responsibilities of making worlds together. Despite the pitfalls and limitations, communication as it is has to be enough.

I suggested earlier in this chapter that linguistic relativity as a theoretical enterprise has returned virtually full circle from Sapir and Whorf's early investigations, through a decades long turn to more explicitly social scientific modes of linguistic relativity, back to a substantive engagement with the anthropological. Indeed, many of the sf novels that explore elements of language are frequently informed by scientific approaches to language and also feature anthropological settings, plot lines, and themes. Often, in fact, these novels are written (wholly or in various chapters) in the form of field notes; this is certainly the case with Ian Watson's *The Embedding*, which is arguably a novel about anthropology and language. Three primary threads within the novel form the basis of an extensive exploration of both scientific and anthropological approaches to language: linguist and anthropologist Pierre Darriand is in the Amazon doing field work with the isolated Xemahoa tribe; Chris Sole is a member of a team of British researchers at the Haddon Project, which has captured southeast Asian refugee children and crafted separate controlled environments for them in order to use the children for linguistic and cognitive research to investigate what's "underneath" human culture and language; and

finally, extraterrestrial visitors the Sp'thra are essentially anthropologist traders, seeking to gain knowledge of human languages in exchange for technological baubles. The impulse behind each of these threads is an exploration of the extreme implications of linguistic relativity in terms of the relationships between language, cognition, and perception. In this brief analysis, I consider the novel's portrayals of relationships between language and reality, as well as those between reason and the self.

The Embedding persuasively borrows from and parodies linguistic relativity. In order to begin to make this case, I return to Walter E. Meyers, who argues that Benjamin Whorf "sought a reality behind the veil of language" (169). This search for a veiled reality is precisely the aim of each of the anthropologists and researchers in this novel, and is reflected, for example, in the larger aims of the Haddon Project's experiments, through which Sole and his colleagues attempt to teach the captured children "defective languages" in order to "find out what the raw, fresh mind of a child will accept as natural—or 'real'" (36). This project presumes that there is a profound relationship between the nature of the mind, reason, and the structures of language. Sole's project is if anything more ambitious: "If we could . . . work out the rules of universal grammar . . . we'd have a map of the whole possible territory of human thought—everything we can ever hope to express, as a species" (40). In this line of thinking, the novel suggests that sentient minds essentially adapt themselves to a given set of empirical parameters within the natural world. As such, this set of parameters results in the establishment of cognitive structures in the mind, which subsequently gives rise to linguistic structures. Thus, the implication is that if the world imprints itself in language, a la a Chomskyan universal

grammar, then there is some profound truth about human being embedded in the very structure of language.

The novel's portrayals of the aims of the Sp'thra are similarly grounded firmly in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Meyers suggests that a "central tenet of Whorf's ideas" is "the notion that systems of thought produced by other languages are valuable for the different insights into reality they provide" (Meyers 162). This is the very animating impulse of the Sp'thra. Their quest is to travel the universe acquiring specimens of living brains from as many species as possible in order to collectively compile the underlying structures and attendant world views of a vast number of language systems, which will then be used to map out a vision of reality that allows them to know "This-Reality" in its entirety, and thus transcend it. Sp'thra representative Ph'theri suggests, "the mind's concepts of reality based on the environment it has evolved in are all slightly different" (117). This presumption leads them to conclude, "The rules of reality can only be understood by superimposing the widest range of languages from different worlds upon one another. *There* is the one and only key to This-Reality—and the way out" (120). The Sp'thra are looking for the bigger picture of reality, perhaps an objective perspective on the nature of reality that they believe only a vast collectivity of language-worldviews can provide, imbued as they are with the evolutionary traits specific to each being's perceptions of reality. Through the estranging elements of extraterrestrial linguistic anthropologists, Watson thus explores the extreme ramifications of linguistic relativity; if indeed a given perspective on the empirical world shapes a given language, then arguably that language will be predisposed towards the expression of that given perspective on

reality. The novel conveys this notion quite persuasively. At the same time, given the ultimate absurdity of the Sp'thra quest, there is a clear parody of work like Whorf's, which seeks a greater understanding of reality through a kind of collection of languages and worldviews. The suggestion is that such an attempt is ultimately futile; while studying a few languages may help slightly broaden our perspectives, we will still inevitably attain only a minuscule version of the virtually infinite possible subjective perspectives on reality. This shares a dark vision in kind with Lem's novel—a vision of ultimate solipsism. However, whereas Lem's novel suggests that solipsism can be an impetus towards communication, *The Embedding* finds any attempts at communication to be ultimately futile, as they will invariably be stymied by the human drive for power. I shall return to this point briefly in my closing summation of this novel.

Regarding the relationships between reason and the subject, the novel suggests that unreason is a threat to the subject. Indeed, the boundaries of the subject and its very coherence are blurred as reason becomes tenuous. Near the novel's end, Chris Sole is wracked with guilt over the capture and experimentation on the children. He determines that he will free them, eventually leaving the research facility carrying Vidya, his favorite of the children. However, Vidya's consciousness has become unpredictable, dangerous, and somehow contagious. As he arrives at his home with the child, he begins sharing in Vidya's thoughts and emotions, becoming unable to distinguish between himself and Vidya. As the experience begins growing in intensity, the narrator suggests, "Reason—rationality—is a concentration camp, where the sets of concepts for surviving in a chaotic universe form vast, though finite, rows of huts, separated into blocks by electric fences,

which the searchlights of Attention rove over, picking out now one group of huts, now another” (213). In Vidya’s case, the experiments with language had degraded his reason, impaired reason’s role in containing and constituting the subject through forming concepts into “rows of huts.” And indeed, “this was unfortunate—for the concentration camp is the survival strategy of the species” (213). Reason constitutes the subject *not* as any kind of universal faculty, but as a limited and limiting container driven primarily by and towards the policing and maintenance of its own boundaries. At the peak of his unreasoning experience, as the boundaries of the concentration camp bulge and begin to burst, Sole briefly understands himself as a kind of hybrid, inter-subject, called Sole-Vidya. It is specifically the erosion of a particular conceptual framework that makes this threatening intersubjectivity possible. In this reading, the policing of what counts as reason functions to stabilize certain kinds of subjectivities. As the rest of the novel implies, “reason” cannot be fairly understood as some universal faculty common to any sentient life—after all, there is very little truly “reasonable” behavior exhibited by humans over the course of the novel. Rather, reason should be understood as having ideological elements that affect the nature of subjectivity, ideological elements that reason-as-contingent must protect in order to ensure the contingent subject’s coherence.

In closing, I contend that Watson’s *The Embedding* offers one of the most rigorous explorations of linguistic relativity in any novel. In fact, Meyers suggests “for a clear exposition, worked out in a story, of some important principles of transformational grammar, *The Embedding* has no equal” (191). Still, the novel stumbles into some familiar problems. For one, language is certainly treated as primarily a technical problem

to be solved. Upon their arrival, the Sp'thra use "language machines" to "learn perfect English in three days from recorded TV and a hastily cobbled together teaching programme" (110). Also, as is often the case with scientific approaches to language, we're left with a treatment of language that largely strips it of politics, of the circulation of power within and between language users and language communities. Therefore, while the novel ultimately suggests that communication is a straightforward technical process that can be easily mastered through the right techniques and technical devices, the profound frailties of the human species make it most likely that communication will always be secondary to the use of the cudgel. In the end, humanity is shown to be characteristically savage—the Haddon project continues to glut itself on the captivity of and ruthless experimentation with orphaned refugee children in the name of science and the advancement of knowledge, along with the ever present administrative drive (in the person of Sam Bax) to glorify one's self through the advancement of one's administrative purview and project. Similar to *The Listeners*, Watson's novel idealizes science as necessary and valuable for human advancement, but ultimately implies that humans aren't worthy of this promise. The nuclear destruction of the Sp'thra (as a way for the allied Earth governments and militaries to gain access to their technologies) also indicates that force is inevitably the recourse to negotiations that do not produce desired outcomes (the acquisition of Sp'thra interstellar travel technologies). Thus, the thin veneer of civilization is pulled back, revealing civilization to be simply a facade over the "savage" tendencies of humans. In that sense, the small-minded politicians (those concerned mostly with shoring up their own power and their own limited view of reality) win in the

end, at the expense of the difficult process of “coming into fellowship with the other,” as Peters puts it. In this reading, communication is offered as an idealized and valuable mode of communing with other beings, but this promise is always deferred by an irresistible drive for power and an all-too-ready recourse to the cudgel.

China Miéville’s 2011 novel *Embassytown* demonstrates that the tradition of sf language fiction remains alive and well. Written in Miéville’s characteristic genre-bending style, the novel is part sf, part fantasy, part “weird fiction,” as Miéville describes his own writing. At the center of the novel is Avice Benner Cho, a charismatic heroine and poet with a knack for picking up languages.²² Her home town, the titular Embassytown, is situated at the end of the known universe, making this something of a frontier novel as well as a fictionalized anthropological language study. After a number of years of travel throughout far flung solar systems, Avice becomes a kind of local hero when she returns to Embassytown, in large part because few people who leave the town ever return. Embassytown itself is set in the midst of a larger, unnamed city populated by the native Ariekene, a race of beings whose language is purely referential; the central linguistic tension in the novel is thus driven by a distinction between simile and metaphor, between referential and figurative language. The Ariekene are capable only of simile, and everything spoken in native Ariekene, called simply “Language” (always capitalized), is “a truth claim” (64). By contrast, metaphor is understood to be a species

²² As a poet, language expert, and charismatic heroine, Cho evokes protagonist Rydra Wong of Samuel Delany’s *Babel-17*, another notable sf language novel. Other details of *Embassytown* also evoke *Babel-17*, such as the commonly described body modifications, known here as “augmens.”

of lie, of untruth (395). Through this central distinction, the novel explores the ideological and political nature of language in some detail and makes several contributions to understanding how *sf* carries generic affordances that can help attune us to listen across cultural difference.

Given the referential nature of the Ariekeene language, in order for something to be uttered, speakers must have a concrete reference for it in the “real world.” Where no reference exists for a potential thought or concept, one must be created. This need occasions Avice’s first significant engagement with the Hosts (a respectful term that Embassytown locals use to refer to the Ariekeene); at a young age, Avice is selected to perform a simile, becoming thereby “enlanguaged.” The Hosts direct her through a series of actions that make her a simile, after which she becomes known as “the girl who was harmed in the dark and ate what was given to her” (28). Other similes and parts of speech are similarly created via other humans, enabling the Hosts to generate new linguistic constructs and communicate a wider set of concepts. As humans get “enlanguaged,” become actually part of Language and circulate/function as parts of speech, each may be often fawned over by individual Ariekeene who find a given simile to be a particularly useful communicative device (145).

These aspects of the novel present compelling dramatizations of relationships amongst language, knowledge, and worldview. For one, the Ariekeene worldview strictly indexes possible expansions of knowledge to specific developments within language (the process of “enlanguaging”). Of course, in this scenario in which language is purely referential, there is too concrete a relationship between words and things, between

language and the world—the notion that everything in “Language” is a truth claim evokes (only later to reject) the common sf trope of language as a value-free medium for the neutral exchange of information. As we will see, however, the Ariekeene worldview will be transformed by discovering a different relationship to language, one in which they understand and can deploy metaphor as a “lie that truths,” or a “truthing lie” (395). This transformation of worldview via language change serves as a metaphor driven by the sf impulse of estrangement. As the novel drives towards the transformation of Language into language—an embrace of metaphor over simile as the foundational premise of language—Miéville presents us with a sophisticated portrayal in which the abstract functions of language are inseparable from its political uses and effects. While the estranging sf metaphor I’m alluding to here plays out primarily through humans being integrated into the Ariekeene language and worldview, in the end, it is the Ariekeene who will be drawn into the overarching language models and worldviews of Bremen, the vast colonizing force that established the “frontier town” of Embassytown and which sees itself as a civilizing force to which all intelligent species should rightly desire to belong. John Rieder refers to this myth as the missionary fantasy, one of four central myths that have historically linked sf to colonialism. He notes, “Although we know that our arrival here disrupts and destroys the traditional way of life here, we believe that it fulfills the deep needs and desires of all right-thinking natives” (31). In these terms, the novel links the politics of language and listening to the histories of colonialism and its effects.

Following this line of argument, I want to suggest that “enlanguaging” within the novel metaphorically presents a significant rhetorical insight: that human beings are

already circulating throughout culture in a manner similar to the functioning of language. Several theoretical frameworks can help illuminate this terrain. For example, we might draw from Roland Barthes' notion of myth as a metalanguage, or a second order of signification (114-15), as a way to understand how bodies accrue meaning in culture. Stuart Hall makes a related point through his theorization of race as a floating signifier, in which race is understood to accrue social meanings over time, as opposed to being rooted in some inherent biological truth. Race, in other words, functions as a trope rather than a biological fact of being (I will return to these points in greater depth in chapter four). Given the rhetorical orientation of this dissertation, I want to develop this argument in more detail by returning to Ratcliffe's arguments about the tropological function of language. Her basic argument is that all words function "not as transparent descriptors of thought that stipulate only dictionary definitions but rather as tropes (i.e., as rhetorical figures) that suggest multiple meanings" (9). She goes on to argue, "What grounds the tropological function of language is the symbolic systems within which words 'play'; within such systems, words (such as *gender* and *race*) function as cultural categories through which people see, organize, analyze, and value the world" (9). The key connection here is between the novel's literal turning of people into parts of speech, coupled with the rhetorical insight that all parts of speech function as tropes and therefore as cultural categories through which people organize their worlds. Therefore, just as the Ariekene require people to perform, embody, and create similes in order to speak certain things and thus make possible certain kinds of knowledge, so can we understand culture, in a broad sense, as requiring certain people to function as tropes in order to stabilize

certain kinds of cultural meaning; where such people-as-tropes do not exist, they must be manufactured. In terms of the novel's implied critique of colonialism, as Bremen's initial patient interest in the Ariekene turns gradually to impatience, we can see that the colonizing force has only ever been able to figure the Ariekene through the trope of the stubbornly underdeveloped other whose intransigence hinders the forward march of collective progress. In this sense, the novel again evokes the historical ties between science fiction and colonialism, in this case conjuring what Rieder refers to as "the protonarrative of progress" (30). However, contrary to a great deal of sf literature that has tacitly endorsed this protonarrative, Miéville's novel points to its shortcomings.

Thus, in addition to illuminating the troping functions of the colonial project, the novel puts significant pressure on these generic tropes that have long informed the sf frontier novel. For instance, as various parts of speech are "enlanguaged" via specific humans, the Hosts are able to generate broader linguistic constructs and communicate knowledge that did not exist prior to contact between the human and Ariekene civilizations. Therefore, in one very important sense, the frontier and anthropological aspects of this novel make it a story of "The Fall," of the inevitable change of a culture that has historically accompanied contact by "the civilized West" (represented here by the colonial socio-political structure of Bremen). Over the course of the novel, it becomes evident that Bremen is seeking ever increasing centralized control over Embassytown and the Ariekene. The central figure in this plot line is Ambassador EzRa,²³ whose strange

²³ A thorough explanation of the function and nature of these Ambassadors would necessarily be quite complex, and given that it is outside the central gist of my analysis, here, I will say only the following. In short, the Ariekene have two mouths, which speak

variation of speaking Language sets off the events that culminate in “The Fall” of the Ariekene from simile into metaphor. EzRa’s speech has unintended consequences, though, and after a long series of (at times slightly preposterous) events, the Ariekene develop the capability for metaphor, for lying, essentially. Similarly, they find themselves now capable of developing and understanding a system of writing, which previously eluded them given the nature of their Language. Thus, this transition is a fall from innocence, from making only truth claims to developing the capacity for lies; it is simultaneously a fall from a kind of prelapsarian oral culture into a written culture. And contrary to the often uncritical sf trope of the human explorer as benefactor of and hero to the “uncivilized other” of alien worlds, Miéville’s novel presents the phenomenon in more complex, highly ambivalent terms that afford a more receptive mode of listening to the experiences of the colonized other.

This shift from an oral to a writing-based culture has both troubling and hopeful implications, representing not only a fall but also a kind of “breakthrough,” an entrance into a more capacious mode of language use and a broader community of language users. In that sense, Miéville reworks the missionary fantasy and the protonarrative of progress in a way that more fully represents the perspective of colonized subjects. More specifically, through his construction of the Ariekene as speaking simultaneously through two mouths Miéville suggests a complex relationship—previously quite uncommon in mainstream sf—of the colonized to their own colonization. Near the end of the novel, and

simultaneously in order to form Ariekene words and phrases. Therefore, in order to be able to speak Language at all, a pair of humans (in this case, Ez and Ra) must be trained from birth to speak simultaneously the two individual parts of Language.

following his significant role effecting the transition from Language to language, the Host known as Spanish Dancer says (simultaneously with both mouths) “i regret nothing/ i regret” (403). Miéville, as a good dialectician, thus effectively reflects a deep ambivalence toward colonialism. Spanish Dancer speaks as the colonial subject, suggesting both a sense of loss that accompanies a realization that there is no going back, and the sentiment that change in and of itself is not to be feared, is not wholly negative. Thus, whereas the dominant trend in sf has long been to portray colonized subjects as happily accepting colonization as a boon, *Embassytown* presents a complex, sobering, sensitive yet not romanticizing look at the entrance into colonialism on the part of the colonized.²⁴

In closing, Mieville’s novel quite productively explores the nature of language and thus makes several contributions to understanding the genre of sf as a mode of listening. First, the novel rejects the all too common sf premise that treats language as a value-free medium for transmitting information and communication as a technical problem to be solved. The notion of Language as purely referential constitutes a satisfying postulation of what a language outside of ideology might look like; it is, in short, impossible. The novel implies that if everything in “Language” is a truth claim, then “Language” also stands in for an idealized anti-rhetoric (if we understand rhetoric as the province of the probable, as vs. that of the certain, the transcendently true). In that

²⁴ It should be noted here that the novel does not portray a scenario involving colonization by violence and military conquest, as was most commonly the case in European colonization. This is worth mentioning here to distinguish this more voluntary scenario from one in which the dominant characteristics would be loss, grief, and trauma, rather than ambivalence.

sense, the fall of Language represents a fall into rhetoric from some idealized linguistic position outside of the problems of power and representation. In these ways, *Embassytown* clearly implies that languages and their concomitant worldviews are never simply neutral, never outside of ideology. Miéville would seemingly side with Volosinov, then, in the implication that language use and consciousness are always already ideological and form the basis of our relationships with the world.

Secondly, the novel's evocation of the troped other (through "enlanguageing") illuminates productively reconfigures some of the historical relationships between sf and colonialism. The Ariekeene, from the moment of first contact with Bremen, were already enlanguageed in Bremen's systems of rhetorical meanings of the other, troped as the underdeveloped other, a people living in the past, objects of conquest, or similar (see Rieder 30-32). Their transformation from Language to language instantiates a similar shift in how their being signifies/connotes; tropically speaking, the Ariekeene become "willing subjects" in the intergalactic "forward march of progress," though troped peoples of this category are assumed to require patient guidance and patronage to complete the transition. At a minimum, Miéville reconfigures this SF trope through demonstrating the one-sided nature of these historical portrayals and revealing that the colonizer requires the colonized to function within a narrow range of tropes that help stabilize the colonizers' extremely ethnocentric and limited mode of apprehending the world.

Thirdly, the novel further defaces the one-sided nature of SF colonization tropes by exploring the process of colonization from a perspective of a colonized people, thus

portraying the entry into colonialism as extremely fraught. Spanish Dancer's seemingly contradictory expression—"i regret/ i regret nothing"—best reflects this fraught experience. On one hand, the critique of the colonial effects of language seem clear: the introduction of the language of Bremen precipitates a change in worldview—or more explicitly, a transformation of consciousness itself in this novel—which fundamentally alters the nature and structures of Ariekene life. The two mouths and their contradictory statements may also reflect a transition into dual consciousness, similar to that described so poignantly by Du Bois. On the other hand, the Ariekene are not simply portrayed as objects of conquest, willing or otherwise. They have, for better or worse, expressed agency in effecting this language change. But it is clear that the change does not come without cost, even without a sense of irrevocable loss or regret that may ever linger. In this sense, *Embassytown* presents a complex metaphor for understanding the processes and effects of colonization and of the trooping of human beings within hegemonic systems of meaning. And through what might be best understood as synesthesia,²⁵ the powerful affect implicit in "i regret/ i regret nothing" invites us to map these apparently contradictory feelings and modes of perception onto each other, such that we might possibly touch even a fleeting moment of understanding of one perspective on the experience of being colonized. And while we might arguably never fully understand another's perspective that we have not ourselves lived, even the invitation to attempt to

²⁵ I am indebted to Nalo Hopkinson for this insight. Commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter, Prof. Hopkinson suggested the value of synesthesia in furthering my discussion of Miéville's novel, suggesting, that "metaphor and synaesthesia are arguably sf's most powerful stock-in-trade."

do so—especially given the all too common one-sided portrayals characteristic of science fiction—certainly contributes to the possibility that mainstream sf audiences might learn to better listen to the experiences of “the other.”

Suzette Haden Elgin’s 1984 novel *Native Tongue* persuasively and extensively explores the politics and power relations of listening. The novel sketches out the limits of listening as it relates to cognition, ideology, epistemology, and morality; theorizes the relationships between power, language and communication; and postulates the role of women’s listening in constituting the masculine subject. In numerous ways throughout the novel, Elgin sketches out the limits of listening in no uncertain terms, and suggests that outside the limits of listening lies the death of the self or the other. The novel reads at times very much like a feminist parable, and one in which linguistics is a science capable of putting its methods and theories in service of feminist aims. In this sense, Haden Elgin—who held a doctorate in linguistics—goes significantly beyond a straightforward scientific treatment of linguistic relativity, exploring the ways that power and ideology are embedded in language.

Set in the twenty-second and twenty-third centuries, the novel centers on the Chornyak Household, the most prominent of thirteen family lines of linguists that are central to the increasingly rapid political and economic expansion of the nations of Earth into, as *Star Trek* so effectively puts it, the final frontier. The novel’s “lines” of linguists collectively provide virtually all translation services for Earth’s various governments and financial interests, linking them to the continually expanding lists of alien civilizations upon whom Earth’s prosperity increasingly relies. Another key premise is that the

Nineteenth Amendment has been repealed, stripping women of all citizenship rights and relegating them to the same legal status as children. Despite the fact that women are legally defined as men's intellectual inferiors, women still play a significant role in providing translations services and educating the lines' children, whose labor is also pressed into the service of their patriarchs.

Indeed, the children are brought into the family enterprise from early infancy. The linguists have developed a highly efficient method for acquiring alien languages: they place their babies in a sophisticated "Interface" with Aliens-in-Residence, and virtually from birth, these babies spend hours a day "interfacing" with their assigned Alien-in-Residence across a membranous barrier that allows linguistic and visual interaction but maintains the separate physical environments necessary to support different life forms. But there are limits to this method. Apparently, as a bit of exposition informs us, "humanoid" aliens have generally similar hardware and thus perceptions to humans, so humanoid languages can generally be easily acquired by infants in Interfaces over the course of about a year, during which time the infant establishes itself as a native speaker of the alien language. However, the linguists have refused to attempt to acquire any languages of non-humanoid species, as they hold that the perceptions of non-humanoids, due to radically different sensory apparati, for one, must necessarily be incompatible with humanoid perceptions; as such, any language that can express these perceptions will never be comprehensible to any humanoid consciousness. Head of "the lines," Thomas Blair Chornyak, claims that "no human mind can view the universe as it is perceived by a non-humanoid extraterrestrial and not self-destruct. It is as simple as that" (66). Thus,

Haden Elgin explicitly links cognition, perception, and language, and in one subplot, the novel is quite ruthless in its exploration of these themes.

A shady organization known as “Government Work” is attempting to acquire the language of a non-humanoid alien referred to as Beta-2, a being so radically other than human that the narrator proves generally incapable of even describing it. It appears to have no corporeal existence, being described by the nefarious members of the Government Work team as a flickering (perhaps this alien references the mysterious balls of light in Asimov’s *The Martian Chronicles*). The Government Work team has built an Interface along the linguists’ specifications, but each of the babies they place in it dies a horrible death; one in particular “had literally turned itself inside out by the violence of its convulsions” that resulted from being placed in proximity to the alien and exposed to its perceptions and presumed (though imperceptible to the team) attempts to communicate (49). In this sense, the communications of the non-humanoid alien are literally fatal for the infant to hear. The Government Work team attempts to understand what is happening to the children through outlining four key principles. First, “there’s no such thing as reality,” apart from what we make up through perceiving stimuli, making up statements about it, and coming to some general agreement through these statements. Second, people get used to these manufactured realities, and this habituation conditions perceptions—if a non-conforming reality arises, “either the culture has to go through a kind of fit until it adjusts . . . or [people] just blank it out.” Third, “human beings are hardwired to expect certain kinds of perceptions.” In other words, our physiological “hardware” enables and limits the types of perceptions we can have. Finally, if radically

alien perceptions somehow do begin to breach these perceptory, linguistic, cultural, and physiological envelopes, the perceiving subject will be completely unable to process it (140-41). Overall, these principles read like a hybrid of a scientific model of linguistic relativity that's been heavily modified through a reading of Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," and they characterize much of the novel's treatments of language: truth/reality is primarily a set of social agreements constructed through language, but language is grounded in perception, which is determined by physiology. In any case, the babies' physiology and consciousness, being completely unable to process the Beta-2 alien's perceptions, or perhaps the mode of communication through which the alien attempts to communicate these perceptions in the process of Interfacing with the baby, inevitably results in the babies turning themselves "inside out," trying either to process or escape the alien perceptions/communications. Showard notes, "There's something about the way the non-humanoid Aliens perceive things, something about the 'reality' they make out of stimuli, so impossible that it freaks out the babies and destroys their central nervous systems permanently" (141).

Beau proposes a solution: treat babies with hallucinogens from the moment of birth, in order to "uncondition" their hardwired tendencies towards exclusively humanoid perceptions, leading to a being whose consciousness was oriented around the possibility that "hell, *anything at all* might very well come along" (142, original emphasis). Therefore, the team presumes that altering the babies' consciousness with hallucinogens will increase the child's receptivity to non-conforming realities and alien perceptions, presumably because the child will not have become habituated to certain perceptions,

which shape its reality. Indeed, “it ought to get broadminded enough to be ready for anything whatsoever to come its way” (142). The “hardware” question seems inadequately addressed with this theory, which is perhaps why the plan doesn’t end up working. Still, this is an interesting choice of words, in that the fundamental problem with the inability to communicate, such that it results in the death of the self, is that one is not “broadminded” enough. Thus, in one very important sense, as we push out towards its limits, listening always entails the “death” of the self in one sense or another, inasmuch as listening always requires receptivity, which may at any moment change what we’ve come to think of as the self—one must either fundamentally alter one’s consciousness or die, in this example. If we listen, and become more “broadminded,” it could well mean leaving behind the mind we thought was our own, in favor of something “broader.”

In addition to the relationships between language, perception, and physiology, the novel explores the notion that the politics of listening/speaking play a role in the constitution of the gendered subject. Micheala Landry is an idealized wife who excelled during her time at the wifely duty training academy. Indeed, she is described by the narrator as “a thoroughbred, and superbly trained” (36). Her husband, Ned Landry, highly valued one aspect of her training in particular: “What really mattered to him, the one service that he could not have simply purchased, was Michaela’s role as listener. Listener! That was beyond price, and had come as a surprise to him” (36). Furthermore, the narrator informs us: “That *listening function* of Michaela’s meant a tremendous amount to Ned Landry, because he loved to talk and he loved to tell stories” (37, emphasis mine). She has a “listening function,” so she is part breed stock/thoroughbred

and part man-serving robot. But Ned is a tremendous bore, by all accounts, and of course it's everyone else's fault that they're unwilling to listen to his fantastic yarns. But with Michaela, it's different. No matter how tedious his blather, she "always looked interested" (37). And Ned "didn't have any desire for conversation, he just wanted to be listened to, *attended to*" (37, original emphasis). Yes, "She hung on his words. As he *wanted* them hung on—not slavishly, but tastefully. That was the difference. He could have paid some female to listen slavishly, at so many credits the hours, sure. But you'd know. You'd know she was only listening because of the money, like some kind of a meter running. It wouldn't be the same" (38). The main difference here for Ned is that he believes that he's generally wowing Michaela—he thinks that she generally finds him interesting. However, her skill as a listener, that which makes him feel like a man, is merely a surface appearance. She doesn't find him interesting at all. She too finds him a bore. But her willingness to pretend otherwise helps constitute him as a masculine subject. There is a profound sense of self-satisfaction that accompanies being well-listened-to. Michaela's listening "fed" Ned (38). "When he got through talking to Michaela . . . He was in a state of satisfaction that wiped away the rebuffs he got from others as if they'd never happened" (38). Ned later meets a well-deserved end at Michaela's hands, and she becomes a kind of avenging angel, turning her performance of listening to her advantage against unsuspecting patriarchs.

Later in the novel, another male speaker, Mr. Verdi, describes Michaela (she's been hired on as his nurse) as "the best listener that I *ever* knew! . . . Does a man good to have somebody like you that can pay attention when he talks" (81). It becomes

increasingly clear that patriarchs need women to pay attention to them when they talk. The Head of the Lines, Thomas Blair Chornyak, who's also hired Michaela on as a nurse, later establishes a similar speaking relationship to Michaela. He says, "She was the most remarkable listener Thomas had ever encountered. Never bored, never uneasy and anxious to leave him and get on with something else, never wanting to put her own two cents in. She made him feel that every word he said was a pleasure to her ears . . . Which could not be true, of course, but was a delightful illusion and a credit to her womanhood. If only Rachel [his wife] could have been like that!" (222). Notice how a remarkable listener never wants to "put her own two cents in." Thus, the masculine subject is ideally a speaking subject, not a listening subject, and a good woman recognizes and respects this as a "fact." Shortly after this listening episode, the narrator tells us that Thomas and Michaela have begun an affair. Michaela seems to be equally adept at receptivity and the facade of "listening" as a lover. The conflation of these two acts, listening and Michaela's quite properly feminine, receptive sexuality (as Thomas describes it, never lustful, but nonetheless rapt with ecstasy at his touch) seems to imply that Michaela's listening is a kind of faked orgasm for the benefit of constituting the masculine subject without his own knowledge of it. He says, "despite her modesty he could always perceive that his touch carried her to the heights . . ." (223). Michaela is increasingly coming to stand in for the ultimate performance of femininity, the "giving him what he wants" that constitutes the masculine subject, while also treating him as a sort of dupe, via a kind of tricksterism and double consciousness that he's unable to perceive. There's a certain kind of generosity in this kind of listening, one that gets taken for granted, treated as one's

due. In this sense, we can recognize gendered subjectivity as dialectical, as constituted only in dialectical relation with the “other” gender(s).

This (partially forced) generosity functions not only at the level of individuals, but more broadly, it plays a social role in the construction of gender. Indeed, the most direct treatment of the politics of language in the novel comes through Haden Elgin’s treatment of the gendered dynamics of language within patriarchy. While it’s true that a particular language reflects a particular worldview, it is also important to note that in patriarchies, the masculinist worldview and relationship to language will be the hegemon. Given the repeal of the nineteenth amendment, men’s hegemonic role is unquestioned in the world of the novel. This element of the plot dramatizes the concept I’m calling not-listening. Kenneth Burke’s notion of terministic screens will help clarify this point: “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must also be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45). Burke might suggest that not-listening is the implicit deflection that must inevitably follow from a given choice of terms. Put differently, the internalization of a given political rationality separating noise from meaningful sound has as its necessary correlate the effect that “noise” will continue to register as “noise” so long as one’s terminological reflections of reality remain constant. Thus, in the world of the novel, not-listening is not simply men ignoring what women say, or ignoring that they are speaking; more specifically, it should be understood as an active process of patriarchal males constructing anything that women have to say as

always already unworthy of being listened to; or if one wishes to be more generous, not-listening may simply be an effect of constructing the other as collateral damage.

The novel begins with an act of legislation that essentially enacts a policy of not-listening—it constructs women as property, and therefore, by definition, nothing they might say could possibly be of any interest to men. In fact, women are designated as dangerous to the interests of the nation state. In the language of the legislation: “The natural limitations of women being a clear and present danger to the national welfare when not constrained by the careful and constant supervision of a responsible male citizen, all citizens of the United States of the female gender shall be deemed legally minors, regardless of the chronological age; except that they shall be tried as adults in courts of law if they are eighteen years of age or older” (7). This is on one level a heavy handed parable. However, the point this drives home is that the legislation of women’s inferiority in the novel implies that these tenets are present in patriarchy, whether they’re made explicit through legislation or not. The point of the legislation is simply to make more enforceable certain gender ideologies that already circulate in culture. Once this specific dismissal of women’s intelligence and contributions is accomplished, due to “natural limitations” which are “inherent” to the gender, there is established a legal framework for dismissing the concerns, communications, and contributions of women. For our purposes, we should understand this legislation as a metaphor for not-listening, for the inevitability of the value systems of patriarchy to make women’s voices inaudible, irrelevant, noise. As I have suggested above, not-listening is rooted in a tacit acknowledgment of what we may have to actively block out from our awareness,

perception, and knowledge in order to maintain our belief systems and our relationships to the world. This might be actively malicious, as in the legislation Haden Elgin describes, or it might be simply a kind of “collateral damage.”

In the novel, the basic question/assumption is repeated in many places that women are primarily taken up with things not worthy of discussion—trivial, nonsensical matters that no one of any good sense could possibly care about. “Why on Earth would anyone want to talk of such foolish things?” (264). If women’s concerns are foolish, outside of the reasonable, doesn’t this, in a sense, imply that not-listening serves to shore up the rational subject? Women become a foil against which “rationality” and “the reasonable” get constructed. Indeed, woman must be fundamentally understood as “a rather sophisticated child suffering from delusions of grandeur” (110), according to Thomas. They also have a “shy, animal cleverness that served them well” (102). The women often use this misunderstanding, this male not-listening, to their advantage, as a kind of tricksterism—it enables spaces of resistance, spaces in which women’s subjectivities and communities can develop in ways that exist under the purview of the male gaze but manage to elude its penetrating gaze, its entitlement and total governance. This is analogous to Vorris Nunley’s concept of African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric, which refers to Black spatialities and modes of communication in which Black knowledges and subjectivities circulate freely, independent of the normative, disciplinary gaze of Whiteness.

Still, despite the moments and spaces of freedom provided by this kind of tricksterism, this process of constituting the male subject certainly has negative effects on

women. After a humiliation at the hands of a flirtatious male colleague, Nazareth is berated by her father and husband, who laughed at her as if she was a ridiculous child. The narrator says of the incident, “It was nothing at all [to the men]. If she had had the skill and the leisure to write it all down, and to somehow bring it to pass that men would read it, it would only bore them. What a fuss a woman makes over nothing at all; that is what they would say, and they would forget it at once. And there were no words, not in any language, that she could use to *explain* to them what it was that had been done to her, that would make them stop and say that it was an awful thing that had been done to her” (202). In other words, it’s not possible for them to hear her, no matter how she might try to communicate to them. They’re indeed not-listening, and the masculine subject has constructed the feminine subject as outside of reason, as making always fuss “over nothing at all,” and therefore her concerns and experiences will always be impossible for men to hear. Thus, given the novel’s framework of patriarchy, the politics of listening always get hegemonically constructed to, as Judith Butler says of ontology, maximize precarity for some, and minimize it for others (2-3). The cost for the novel’s women is constant exposure to social death, one effect of which is to constitute the masculine subject, which is in its very constitution unable to perceive these costs or constitution. Thus, to return to my earlier metaphor, if we don’t listen, the other may die (social death), but if we do listen, it could be our death (transformation of worldview and self) that results.

In the face of this patriarchal oppression, and to counter these effects of social death, women have begun working on the Encoding Project, which is the creation of

Láadan, a language specifically for women. This project is camouflaged by a public face, Langlish, which is an overwrought, impossibly clumsy language. Langlish is the distraction the women present to men, feeding men's arrogance to stoke their ignorance. Láadan, however, focuses on expressing concepts that no one has ever thought useful to express before; the idea is that this will have powerful liberating effects on women's subjectivities and political status. In other words, language is always already political, which is Volosinov's point. It is implied that a room of one's own (which they have in the Barren Houses, once their reproductive capabilities diminish) will not suffice to end gender discrimination (206, 251). By contrast, a language of one's own will effect changes in reality (250), helping to liberate women from oppression. The women are understandably terrified to begin using Láadan, since they have kept it a closely guarded secret for generations; they fear men's reactions and the subsequent consequences. Thus, this dilemma stages a kind of "coming out" debate in the novel, which functions as a meta-feminist critique of the politics of listening and the tricksterism that enables it. It suggests a choice between a social death that deprives women of social equity but still entails some degree of private selves and spaces—through tricksterism and the exploitation of men's ignorance—versus the possibility of real death and further coercion and oppression, which they fear would be the result if men discovered the truth about Langlish and Láadan. Of course, only the latter choice has the chance to change the status quo, if the women are willing to risk it.

Thus, a central moment in the novel is the moment at which the women must confront whether or not to begin using Láadan, or to continue developing it. This is the

problem and scenario: when at last Nazareth joins the Chornyak family Barren House, she is shown the Encoding Project in its real form (the secret of Láadan is usually not revealed until women move into the Barren Houses), and she's outraged that they women haven't yet begun using it themselves and teaching it to every girl child they have.

Caroline says, "But the men know the power of a new language just as well as we do—and they *would* stop it, Nazareth. The day we begin to use Láadan, the way we let it out of the basement, that day we put its very existence at risk" (251). Thus, the women have forestalled Láadan's widespread use, because, as Caroline points out to Nazareth, once they begin using it, they know that it will result in fundamental changes to their reality; it entails the certainty of change, but profound uncertainty about what form that change may take. Initially, they can only conceive of these changes through destructive visions; patriarchal responses to the threat of Láadan, the destruction of the Barren Houses, and the erasure of the language. This would obviously be devastating and not worth the risk.

During the debate about whether to use Láadan or not, Caroline says, "Suppose we begin to use it, as you say we should do. And then, as more and more little girls acquire Láadan and begin to speak a language that expresses the perceptions of women rather than those of men, reality will begin to change. Isn't that true?" Nazareth responds, "As true as water . . . As true as light" (250). And this is what's ultimately terrifying to the women. In Aquina's vision, the men will find out, and the women will be confined, drugged, punished, put away, and Láadan killed, because it's too dangerous to Patriarchy.

And the novel essentially stages a scenario in which use of the language does alter reality. Shortly after the above discussion, Nazareth wins the argument, and Láadan is

promptly put into use and is taught to all girl children, secretly. Over several years, as the women use the language, they begin to change significantly. They no longer feel obligated, it would seem, to adopt the polar opposite subject position that masculinity requires—they no longer feel compelled to deliberately resist men and masculinity within the terms of Patriarchy itself. Dano Mbal describes the women's changes: "'The problem,' he said, 'is not difficult to summarize. It can in fact be done in three words, thus: WOMEN ARE EXTINCT'" (288). In other words, women, as they have been constructed by Patriarchy to shore up Patriarchy and the masculine subject, no longer exist. The predicament for men is thus as follows:

Can a man point a finger at a woman and say to her, "I accuse you of never frowning, or never complaining, of never weeping, of never nagging, of never so much as pouting?" Can a man demand of a woman that she nag? Can he demand that she sulk and bitch and argue—in short, that she behave as women used to behave? In the name of sweet reason, gentlemen, I ask you—can one accuse a woman, name her guilty, for ceasing to do every last thing he has demanded that she not do all his life long? (289)

Thus, instead of playing the part of the foil against which the masculine subject constructs itself, the women, through Láadan, have found ways to be that are not in diacritical opposition to masculinity. After some five years or so, even female babies have begun speaking the language in secret, and it indeed changes the women's realities. As the novel reaches its conclusion, women have apparently found the language so fulfilling that they drastically alter their own performances of feminine gender—much to the men's dismay. It's not that the women become unmanageable, as in the paranoid stereotype of the "femi-Nazi." By contrast, the women simply cease meeting force with force. They no longer nag, complain, chastise men, or otherwise engage in these behaviors that have so

long frustrated the men, but which have simultaneously provided ground against which the men could argue for their own superiority within the confines of rationality, a facade of emotional control, and the image of the benevolent protector. But it may be most devastating to the men that the women no longer seem to listen to them, especially given the implication that the masculine subject is predicated upon the willing listening female subject. The effect, then, is to remove the ground upon which men's identities have been formed in the hyper-patriarchal world of the novel, not through direct resistance to men's control, but by creating a new reality through a language that can accommodate, embody, and communicate women's knowledge in ways that no other language has yet been able to do.

There are of course numerous possible critiques of the limits of this line of thinking for application to real world political struggles, and in terms of the execution of these theories throughout the novel. Regarding the latter case, for example, the novel contains a paradoxical treatment of the differences between communication as "technique," as a technical problem to be solved, vs. communication as a negotiation of subjectivities and worldview. On the one hand, the infants that learn the alien languages don't seem to profoundly alter their own realities as a result, nor do they find themselves unable to relate to other linguists that speak a different array of alien languages. On the other hand, widespread use of Láadan creates nearly immediate change in reality, and significant change within five years of widespread use. Still, despite both of the possible threads of critique mentioned above, my aims here are not to simply treat this novel as either a straightforward exposition of linguistic theory, nor as an unambiguous manifesto

of feminist language goals. Rather, I have sought to consider the novel on its own terms, as Haden Elgin has suggested, as a piece “of literature in which it’s possible for a writer to explore the question of what this world would be like if you could get rid of [X], where [X] is filled in with any of the multitude of real world facts that constrain and oppress women” (Haden Elgin, “An Interview”). The novel is, in other words, not a manifesto, but an exploration in the vein she lays out above. The significance of the work is not to proffer conclusive solutions to the social oppression of women in patriarchy, but to extrapolate from language theory possible creative responses to this oppression. To put this same basic sentiment in terms of rhetorical theory, we might return to Richard L. Wright:

Whereas many rhetorical approaches limit their perspective on power and discourse dynamics to the power of discourse to accomplish certain intended effects or to the personal power of particular rhetors in given situation, the present argument supports the much broader approach that views all discourse as a constructive dynamic inseparable from the ideological and the epistemic. Indeed, one might ask what all of this means for individuals and groups who seek to empower themselves through the use of new or alternative ideological/discursive formation, thereby claiming to alter the conditions for the generation and functioning of knowledge. (Wright 91)

I am arguing, here, more or less for a viewpoint akin to Kenneth Burke’s contention that literature is equipment for living, that it provides collective ways to name and come to terms with common social and cultural situations (“Literature as Equipment for Living,” 300). This means that we can’t assess the novel primarily in terms of its success or failure as linguistic theory, nor can we dismiss it as simple science fictional escapism (not an uncommon charge against the genre). It is also not merely a parable, but is wrought through science fictionality as a mode of thinking. For example, Haden Elgin did actually

create the language she posits in the novel (Láadan), and the title page of the novel notes that a dictionary of Láadan became available in 1984. This suggests that she took these explorations and extrapolations seriously enough to move them off the fictional page and into the real world of patriarchal politics. While the language never took hold broadly amongst the public (thus joining numerous other failed constructed language projects, such as C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards' Basic English), the very fact of its creation suggests the significant value of science fictionality as a mode of understanding the politics and processes of listening.

Overall, Meyers notes that science fiction tends to be optimistic about the possibilities for communication (100; 102). However, optimism in and of itself is not of course an inherent good. While it does seem generally true that sf, broadly construed, is optimistic about communication, we must also acknowledge some significant drawbacks to this optimism. As I've argued above, the notion of communication as a straightforward technical problem to be solved often ignores the politics of listening and performs an erasure of certain kinds of subjectivities and epistemologies. Furthermore, this optimism is often naive about the promises of science. The novels I've discussed here provide a range of responses to these threads, sometimes echoing this naïveté, other times countering it with dark visions about the fundamentally flawed nature of human beings. Despite the problems of both uncritical optimism and unflagging pessimism, I side with Meyers in arguing for the importance of remaining optimistic about the possibilities of communication. To that end, I contend that the novels analyzed here powerfully explore many facets of the politics and processes of listening, and in general, even despite their

shortcomings, they suggest the possibility of enacting constructive change in human societies through an increased attention to the processes of communication. Like Meyers, I see sf as having significant potential for enhancing our understandings of the relationships between the functionings of language and our daily engagements with the world (209). Significantly, we must foreground the fact that communication is not a neutral process; it is always already ideological. A greater emphasis on receptivity and listening can illuminate these ideologies. Still, even perfectly attentive listening is not guaranteed to bridge differences amongst varying world views; solipsism may well be a fundamental condition of human existence. Either way, we're stuck needing to make worlds together.

CHAPTER THREE: Making a Way Out of No Way: African-American Rhetoric, Ontology, and the Rhetoric of Becoming

Dating back to Aristotle, rhetoric has been understood as the art of democratic deliberation or the very process of civic discourse. However, even in the face of a powerful rhetorical tradition in the United States, numerous groups have for centuries all too commonly found their contributions to civic discourse regularly, even systematically, dismissed or ignored. Nevertheless, the tradition of African-American rhetoric, while consistently finding its rhetors confined to the margins, has repeatedly and over the long-term proven quite effective at creating the conditions of possibility under which African-American scholars, speakers, and writers might get a listening in the broader public sphere. Or to echo the poignant African American maxim, Black rhetors excel at making a way out of no way. As a fundamental strategy in this process of getting a listening, African-American rhetors have worked consistently to recast both hegemonic meanings of Blackness and the very terms through which race itself is understood. For instance, discourses of modernity have largely constructed the concept of race through (pseudo-) scientific and biological frameworks, effectively sedimenting its effects in rigid, hierarchical ways. In contrast, African-American scholars and rhetors, in part resulting from the conditions and experiences of systematic oppression, have long understood race to be an ontological matter—one bound up with the very meaning of human being—rather than simply a set of discrete but interrelated social, political, and economic problems. Even as early as Maria W. Stewart, rhetors have realized that striving for political rights and social inclusion could never alone suffice in a system that

categorically excludes Black people from the category of humanity. Thus, over centuries of collective endeavor, African-American rhetors have re-theorized relationships between race and ontology and have developed rhetorical strategies to intervene in and reshape these relationships, in the process having a tremendous, indispensable impact on the American project.

While tremendous amounts of research have been devoted to the study of race, rhetoric, and ontology as independent areas of inquiry, only a very small number of scholarly works have examined the interrelated nature of all three fields taken together. To understand the contributions that African American rhetoric stands to make towards enriching our understandings of the significance of these interrelations, I begin here with a brief overview of some of the primary positions and stakes within each of the three fields. Under Plato's nearly unavoidable shadow, the Western philosophical tradition has tended to draw an absolute distinction between rhetoric (described in the *Gorgias* as mere empty flattery at best) and ontology (the fundamental inquiry into the nature of what objectively exists). In recent decades, however, numerous scholars have eschewed this distinction in productive ways. Bernard Miller, for instance, posits a model of ontology that is inseparable from language and rhetoric. Central to this model is the concept of *doxa*, which has otherwise been generally dismissed as referring to mere public opinion. Miller, by contrast, argues that *doxa* instead denotes the fundamental role of language and knowledge in structuring our experiences and understandings of reality, of Being. As contrasted with the ideal of object of truth, *doxa* refers to dominant knowledge that is accepted as and acted upon as if true. In that sense, *doxa* plays a role in sedimenting how

we understand what it means to be a human being (Miller 229). Thus, within the context of this chapter, *doxa* is not mere opinion, but plays a role in constituting human being in the broadest terms. Similarly, but in more localized terms, *doxa* is singularly significant in “determining who we are as Americans” (133).

Vorris Nunley, in *Keepin’ It Hushed: The Barbershop and African-American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*, makes a similar argument regarding African American rhetoric more specifically, noting, “the very terrain of meaning, experiences, and what it means to be a human being gains traction through a network of rhetorics and rationalities,” and therefore, “to theorize and discuss [African American rhetoric] is to theorize and discuss Black knowledge, Black life, Black lives, and Black ontology” (11). Historically in the West, race has most commonly been understood through a difference-from-center model that posits racial characteristics as “something added” to Whiteness, something non-essential to the objectively true nature of human being. By contrast, in addition to demonstrating the connections between rhetoric and ontology, Nunley’s work reveals that a robust understanding of human being must similarly theorize race in terms of rhetoric and ontology. This contention frames a key term/concept for the arguments that unfold in this chapter: singularity. If race is a matter of ontology and epistemology, rather than merely surface level expressions of difference, then singularity denotes a kind of internal center of gravity of meaning and distinctiveness for any given race or ethnicity. Put differently, singularity provides a warrant for and the means by which we must understand races and ethnicities each on their own terms, apart from any reference to ontological or epistemological norms (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 93).

Given these refigured relationships between race, rhetoric, and ontology, traditional understandings of rhetoric as civic discourse must similarly be reconceived. In an updated Aristotelian vein, Kenneth Burke has argued that *identification* is a primary purpose of rhetoric, or more broadly, of human communication in general. By identification, he refers to the process through which parties come to recognize themselves as having shared interests (whether genuine or otherwise) significant enough to warrant acting in cooperation. The goal of identification is to establish *consubstantiality*, or a sense of substantively shared “sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes . . . (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 20-21), which helps ground any given way of life (or in our terms, ontology). However, Burke also acknowledges that *division*—the ways that individuals or groups perceive themselves to be at odds with others (22)—is “implied in [identification] at every turn” (23). Unfortunately, too few rhetorical theorists have thoroughly explored the implications of division within rhetoric as civic discourse. Jane Sutton and Mari Lee Mifsud offer one important corrective to this aporia. In their view, despite rhetoric being positioned as the art of democratic deliberation, the history and aims of rhetoric itself have been complicit in this process of sedimenting social and political hegemonies over time. Some of the key tenets of rhetoric itself drive deliberative processes not towards democratic discourse predicated on the inclusion of diverse voices, but rather towards “turning down the other” in order to bring the *demos* “to rest” (Sutton 38). In other words, rhetoric has historically privileged a surface level public agreement—secured, in no uncertain terms, through force, or at a minimum, through the threat of implied force—at the expense of genuine democratic inclusivity that might

unsettle the majority. This idea is powerfully and repeatedly exemplified, for example, by the common responses of Southern Whites to the arrival of SCLC activists during the 1950s and 60s; White leadership commonly complained that, to paraphrase, “Our town had no race problem until King and the northern agitators arrived.”

Each of these preceding points—interrelations between race, rhetoric, ontology, and the possibility of civic cooperation—provides the fundamental context for what I am referring to as the rhetoric of becoming. In short, the rhetoric of becoming refers to African-American rhetorical practices that emerge through distinctively Black and American ontologies and epistemologies, aiming to refigure numerous elements of American *doxa* and ontology and to counteract the hegemonic process of “turning down the other” in public and political discourses in the US. In a similar vein, Keith Gilyard suggests, “Black discourses... have been the major means by which people of African descent in the American colonies and subsequent republic have asserted their collective humanity in the face of an enduring White supremacy and tried to persuade, cajole, and gain acceptance for ideas relative to Black survival and Black liberation” (Gilyard 1). Seen through Gilyard’s lens, the rhetoric of becoming denotes a discursive mode of this chapter’s titular epistemology, making a way out of no way. In light of these concerns, this chapter asks the following central research questions: What can African-American rhetoric teach us about securing the conditions of possibility under which we might get a listening, both in everyday discourses and over the longer time frames necessary to create and sustain systematic socio-political change? Additionally, how can theorizing ontology alongside the rich resources of African-American rhetoric help produce incisive critical

frameworks through which we can analyze the central, stabilizing role that tropes of Blackness have played in shaping the very meaning of being in the U.S.?

Over the course of this chapter, I develop focused responses to these questions primarily through analysis of African-American rhetorical texts, specifically a selection of speeches and writings by Maria W. Stewart and Malcolm X. To be clear, it would be neither accurate nor appropriate to suggest that the rhetors discussed here have made specific reference to the Western philosophical concept of ontology. Nonetheless, I will argue that each of these two rhetors was grounded in an orientation towards ontology/being that does not locate or fix race only within the body but rather frames race more broadly as deeply bound up with *ways of being* and knowing. Moreover, both rhetors argued strongly for understanding and embodying Blackness on its own terms, which I frame here in terms of singularity. In that sense, while Whiteness-as-American-ontology provided one unavoidable context for the emergence of African-American rhetoric, the tradition has certainly not defined itself in relation to hegemonic American Whiteness.

Thus, regarding the rhetoric of becoming, the primary trajectory of my argument throughout this chapter unfolds across two distinct threads. In short, I argue that Stewart and Malcolm X effectively worked to remake American *doxa* in two parallel directions, both of which were intended to reshape a more inclusive American ontology. First and foremost, Stewart and Malcolm X sought to encourage African Americans to embrace an understanding Blackness as singularity, a move that would have significant effects for Black self-determination, political agency, internal decolonization, and more. Secondly,

both rhetors worked powerfully to undermine mythologies that Whiteness has constructed of itself as the proper subject of history, the apotheosis of human being, in order to dismantle systems of racial hierarchy and to broaden and deepen the reach of American founding principles. In both cases, working to remake American *doxa* presented tremendous challenges. Indeed, Gilyard suggests that one of the most difficult tasks for the effective rhetor “is to fulfill the requirement that rhetoric be consistent with or overcome an audience’s mythology” (11). Although Gilyard uses the term mythology here, the term *doxa* substitutes in just as well. In the terms presented here, overcoming these mythologies is not a simple matter of persuasion, but equates more closely to restructuring an audience’s fundamental understandings of reality. Thus, as I will argue, the primary challenge confronting Maria Stewart and Malcolm X was the need to remake American ontology itself, a process that would have to be accomplished, at least in part, through re-figuring *doxa*, through re-shaping the conditions within which rhetoric is practiced (what Aristotle described as the available means of persuasion). In short, through making a way out of no way.

This argument has implications for both the study of rhetoric and ontology as well as our understandings of “America,” broadly speaking. The rhetoric of becoming suggests an ontology not in philosophical terms but rather rhetorical ones, an ontology that is contingent and malleable (though not at all easily so, given that it is so heavily grounded in *doxa* central to the entire American national imaginary and sense of self). In this sense, African-American rhetoric, in its longstanding drive to create social change, simultaneously effects a reworking of American rhetorics towards more robust

democratic deliberation and more inclusive democratic ends. In other words, and put more plainly, this is one way in which African American rhetoric has made undeniable contributions to the American project and has developed and made available numerous singular contributions to rhetorical theory and practice in a contemporary globalized world. This insight may be of particular significance, given the traditional treatment of African-American rhetoric as largely peripheral to the formation of the American project. In contrast, Gilyard argues in his closing paragraph that “an understanding of continued Black articulations for a better society form a central question to be confronted by all if we are to bring a better society into existence” (17). In other words, the study of African American rhetoric, ontology, and epistemology, far from being relevant only for Black folks or only regarding matters of race and identity, should in fact be treated as fundamentally relevant for all Americans committed to democracy and core American ideals. And it may mean that we might at last collectively begin to cease turning down the other, and that we might, to paraphrase Nunley, finally refuse the problematic historical tendency of banishing African American rhetoric and epistemology to the “caves of difference” or the “cellar of identity politics” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 7).

In the argument that follows, I begin with a rigorous, extensive theoretical framework section that details the fundamental terms and concepts necessary to ground my analysis of the primary rhetorical texts. This section provides an overview of relevant literature on African-American rhetoric, ontology writ large, theories of Black being/becoming, and the role of rhetoric in creating or foreclosing space for marginalized groups within robust democratic deliberation. From there, I analyze in detail a selection

of works by Maria W. Stewart, focusing on her efforts to promote Black self-determination and to expand the reach of American founding principles. An in-depth analysis of selected works by Malcolm X follows, in which I argue that he first and foremost sought to promote an understanding of Blackness as singularity; only secondarily did he concern himself to undermine aspects of American *doxa* that had long buttressed mythologies of White supremacy and American exceptionalism. Finally, in a brief conclusion, I draw together the various threads that span the chapter and explore a few final implications that relate specifically to this chapter's primary research questions, as written above.

Theoretical Framework

African-American rhetoric is a rich, highly generative field comprising multiple, overlapping communicative and artistic practices, bodies of knowledge, and ways of being that are grounded in the histories and experiences of African-Americans and their antecedents. And while African American rhetoric has certainly retained elements of many of the originary cultures of Africans forced into slavery and brought to the U.S., it is also a quintessentially American art, both shaping and being shaped by the American experience. While germinal scholars such as Geneva Smitherman and Richard L. Wright have identified a number of elements that are broadly characteristic of African-American rhetoric in general, the field has also historically privileged adaptability both in the rhetorical moment and across longer stretches of time in accordance with the changing nature of African-Americans' lives. This adaptability is thus itself characteristic of African-American rhetoric, helping shape what I will refer to as the rhetoric of becoming.

Also central to my argument is the body of work demonstrating that African American rhetoric is an ontological and epistemological project that both nourishes and sustains Black being both on its own terms and within the hegemonic context of Whiteness-as-American-ontology. From these points of departure, I analyze how distinctively African American ways of knowing and being have shaped the strategies and practices that Black rhetors have used to reliably and effectively secure a listening in the public sphere, make Blackness-as-singularity much more socio-culturally manifest, and reshape American *doxa* in fundamental ways.

This chapter's theoretical framework begins with a "founding mother," Geneva Smitherman, who has been quite arguably the most influential scholar of African American rhetoric to date. Drawing from a panoply of African American intellectual and cultural discourses, and supplemented with extensive mainstream academic credentials, Smitherman created a compelling body of work that made explicit the intellectual and philosophical content of numerous key tenets of Black knowledge and being and made the case for the acceptance of these tenets into more mainstream academic and intellectual circles. In particular, her analyses of the interrelated natures of language, knowledge, and being have become central to the study of African American rhetoric. For Smitherman, worldview is embedded in language, and therefore, Black language is epistemic, or bound up with the construction of knowledge. Moreover, throughout her work, she argues uncompromisingly for seeing "black linguistic-cultural differences as legitimate African survivals whose retention is to be preserved and sustained" (206). To deny the legitimacy of a language is to deny the value of its culture. Thus, for

Smitherman, language is effectively a mode of existence that helps ward off social death and has allowed African Americans to create a “culture of survival” in the face of centuries-long conditions of racism and oppression (2). Additionally, arguing for the legitimacy of African American English carries potentially significant political and social ramifications for White America. Building on Smitherman’s work, philosopher George Yancy states: “to refer to AAL as a language, to buttress this claim with solid historical and linguistic-cultural research, legal and institutional support, is a danger to white America; for to use the term ‘language’ is to suggest an entire cultural identity, a co-equal language . . . and a legitimate mode of reality construction” (“Social Ontology” 294). In other words, African-American language and rhetoric simultaneously nourish a notion of Blackness as epistemology and singularity, to borrow again from Nunley (*Keepin’ It Hushed*, 36, 93), and call into question the mythology of Whiteness as culmination of history.

Numerous scholars have followed Smitherman to argue for understanding African American language and rhetoric as epistemological. For instance, in his article “The Word at Work: Ideological and Epistemological Dynamics in African American Rhetoric,” Richard L. Wright productively links epistemology with rhetoric and the experience of difference, noting, “To be different is to experience the world differently, to think and feel differently, and ultimately, to talk differently” (86). Others have emphasized the ontological nature of African American rhetoric. In discussing African-American language in terms of a social ontology, Yancy sees himself as inheriting and continuing Smitherman’s project, which he characterizes as engaging in the

“depathologization, celebration, and reclamation of African American humanity and identity” (“Social Ontology” 281). Importantly, Yancy recognizes that the ultimate stakes in this conversation concern humanity and identity, both of which hegemonic Whiteness has historically sought to deny to Blacks. Yancy’s work is thus resonant with that of Nunley’s *Keepin’ It Hushed*, as described earlier, which presents an extremely well-realized vision linking African American rhetoric, epistemology, and ontology. The unifying frame here is the insight that African American rhetoric is fundamentally bound up with Black ways of being-in-the-world and constructing and communicating knowledge about the world.

One significant implication of these arguments is that ontology itself must be understood as rhetorical, and conversely rhetoric is implicated in what might be described as the manufacture of ontology. Such an insight runs contrary to a “philosophical” understanding of ontology that privileges fixity, certainty, and knowability regarding that which can be said to exist. In contradistinction, a rhetorical approach to ontology suggests that our experiences of Being are always already interpretations of Being, interpretations that are always shaping and shaped by and through rhetoric and dominant forms of knowledge. It is in this vein that Nunley argues, “ontology, being writ large, and racial ontology, Black being, in particular as they relate to the body, are inherently rhetorical and spatial in the American context” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 17). Whereas Enlightenment humanism has posited a kind of universal subject position that is supposedly outside of race and constitutes the objective essence of human being, a rhetorical ontology, as Nunley’s work demonstrates, can recognize race as fundamental to

the nature and experience of Being. Put differently, race is not “something extra,” something epiphenomenal to human being; ontology is instead always already inflected by and experienced through race (even if these inflections, as is often the case with Whiteness and ideologies of colorblindness, are experienced as a supposed absence of race, as some kind of “default” mode of human Being). Thus, contrary to the premises of a philosophical ontology that privileges certainty and fixity, there is very little we might ultimately claim to know about the “universal nature” of Being except to say that it is the nature of human being to have many possible natures, as Hubert Dreyfus has eloquently stated in his exegesis of Heidegger.²⁶ In other words, there are no neutral, value-free positions from which to objectively establish the nature of being—the *nature* and *meaning* of being are so fully imbricated as to be effectively indistinguishable from each other. Rather than universal, objective knowledge of Being, we have only *doxa*. Bernard Miller, linking language, rhetoric, and being, puts it thusly:

[I]t could be that the most significant lesson to be drawn from this ontological perspective on language, that all things are in some sense made of words, is that all things, that reality as such, are subject to all the contradictions and ambiguities of language, the result of some strange but glorious mix, a cosmos suffuse with chaos, at times presumptively chaos itself. In this perspective there is no greater sense of Being beyond the here

²⁶ Dreyfus has made available a series of audio recordings of his lectures from his famed course on Heidegger that he has offered at UC Berkeley for decades. In the second lecture of the series, advancing the proposition “Existence is our essence,” Dreyfus quotes Pascal’s aphorism that “Custom is our nature.” Dreyfus goes on to explain: “whatever culture socializes us into, and which we take to be our nature, that’s what we think we are. Our nature, our essence, is simply to be the kind of being that through their activity gives themselves a nature. To say that custom is our nature is to say that we have no nature, which is to say that existence is our essence . . . Once you see that, you see that there isn’t any right answer as to what our nature is, just that we’re capable of having lots of understandings of our ‘nature,’ and uh, that’s it” (my transcription). See Dreyfus, “Course Lectures.”

and now to which we can be delivered, or even come to know. (Miller 235)

If there is no “sense of Being beyond the here and now,” then the experience and nature of human being is always contingent, always produced within specific spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts. Or, to borrow again from Miller, “the essence of human being is a result of its involvement in the world” (154).

It follows from these two propositions—that race is ontological and Being is never neutral but always an interpretation and always context specific—that a rhetorical ontology is therefore political. As Judith Butler argues in *Frames of War*, “To refer to ‘ontology’ in this regard is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organization . . . The ‘being’ of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others” (2-3). This notion of ontology as political *qua* rhetorical is significant for a number of reasons. Most notably, it reveals as rhetorical and political the otherwise presumably biological category of “the human.” Although virtually all political, social, moral, ethical, and juridical boundaries are drawn in relation to who counts as fully human, the concept is anything but self-evident; indeed, the struggle over these boundaries has been a central thread running through centuries of African American rhetorical practices. And while few African American rhetors (indeed, few rhetors of any tradition) have explicitly linked the western philosophical concept of ontology with everyday rhetorical practices and lived experiences, the basic stakes of rhetorical, political ontology have long informed Black

folks' knowledge and communication practices, fundamentally shaping African American ontologies and subjectivities. In this sense, Nunley argues that hush harbor sites and rhetorics should be understood "not just as geographies of difference and/or resistance, but as biopolitical sites of the manufacture of African-American ontologies and knowledges," where the biopolitical (Nunley quotes Hardt and Negri here) refers to "the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity" (Nunley, *Keepin' It Hushed* 12). Quite significantly, this quote returns us to the notion of Blackness as singularity, not simply difference. While the biopolitics of AAHHR produce alternative subjectivities, these subjectivities entail but are not reducible to resistance to Whiteness as hegemony; to suggest otherwise would be to imply that Blackness can be understood as a kind of derivation from or primarily a response to White hegemony. Such a "difference from center" model is precisely the kind of problematic hierarchy that Smitherman and those following in her footsteps have persuasively reconfigured. In the revised terms proposed here, we can see that if rhetoric is ontological and vice versa, then rhetoric is a potential mode of intervening in ontology and coming to conceptualize and value racial differences on their own terms outside of any hierarchical frames.

However, it bears brief mention that some prominent scholars of African American culture and history argue strongly against understanding Blackness in terms of distinctive African American ontologies and subjectivities. Frank B. Wilderson, III has coined the term Afropessimism to refer to a loosely cohering body of work premised on the notion of Blackness as absence, rather than as distinctive ontology. In short, Afropessimism entails the notion that slavery has never really ended and that it continues

to form the fundamental social, political, economic, and juridical frameworks that govern the everyday experiences of Black folks and sediment the privileges of Whites under modernity (Wilderson, “Narcissistic Slave” 6; “Afro-Pessimism”). In contrast to a rhetorical ontology that posits Blackness as a productive force that has for centuries shaped the meaning and experience of Being in African Americans’ lives, Wilderson argues that Blackness must be understood as a condition of absence and ontological death (“Afro-Pessimism”). In this view, Black folks can never be subjects, only objects, since Blackness’ primary function is to play a structural role within the broader system of modernity, stabilizing numerous meanings, political and social structures, economic motives and processes, and more. In truth, there does seem to be a clear intellectual and political warrant for this line of argument, and many thinkers that Wilderson has associated with Afropessimism (such as Saidiya Hartman and Jared Sexton) have produced trenchant social, political, and historical analysis following from these initial premises. In that sense, Afropessimist thought has proven productive as well as problematic. For example, on the one hand, Wilderson’s work evinces an uncompromising explanatory power that refuses to let the U.S. off the hook for slavery and its ongoing effects and meanings. In discussing Hartman’s excellent book *Scenes of Subjection*, the two scholars described the book’s arguments as allegory, as a “history of the present” (Hartman and Wilderson 190). This insight is indispensable for understanding the lingering social, political, and economic effects of slavery in the contemporary U.S., as well as the ways that historically persistent tropes of Blackness continue to play a role in producing very real consequences in Black lives.

On another hand, despite the explanatory power of Afropessimism, Wilderson's work gives rise to a separate set of objectifying problematics that reify Whiteness and neoliberal capitalist power at the expense of Black human bodies. There are two related issues that I find untenable, here. First, to suggest that Blackness should be understood as ontological death is to misapprehend the nature of ontology. Given that ontology is always an interpretation, it would be non-sensible to suggest that Blackness is a null interpretation, a non-interpretation. If the matter is instead one of asking for whom and by whom Blackness is interpreted, Butler's work around precarity is much more productive than the Afropessimist argument that holds Blackness to be primarily a stabilizing function of Whiteness constituted, in the first instance, by violence (Wilderson, "Narcissistic Slave" 17). In addition to this misapprehension of ontology, Afropessimism effectively—albeit perhaps inadvertently—places Whiteness at the center of Black lives. To theorize Blackness as Absence, as a condition of ontological death, arguably in fact reifies Whiteness through accepting the very terms upon which it fantasizes its own unchallenged hegemony. For instance, Wilderson envisions a "black revolution" that includes a "structural prohibition" against (as vs. simply a preference against) non-Black allies (Hartman and Wilderson 189-90), which bolsters the untenable notion that race is the only fundamentally non-transgressable basis of solidarity. Moreover, while Afropessimism is productive in analyzing the structural role played by Blackness within the rhetorical, economic, libidinal, social, and political systems of contemporary global capitalism, can we in good conscience fairly equate the daily lives of millions of African Americans with the horrors of slavery? Does this not minimize the actual suffering of

slaves? To say that slavery is the history of the present is not necessarily the same as saying that slavery is the “ongoing paradigm of Black (non) existence . . . ” (Wilderson, “Narcissistic Slave” 16). The latter is premised upon a philosophical, dichotomous mode of thinking that says that either slavery and its effects ended (colorblindness) or they didn’t (Afro-pessimism). In contrast, a rhetorical ontology allows us to acknowledge and recognize slavery as the history of the present without effectively fixing Blackness either in the past or somehow structurally outside of time and space. As I will argue, the rhetoric of becoming is grounded but not mired in history; it is premised upon an ontology of Blackness as becoming, as dynamic process that, to borrow again from Nunley, “does not merely resist (which depends too much on the power and subjectivities it opposes) but, more importantly, produces distinctive subjectivities” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 9).

This dynamic, productive model of Blackness is reflected in and extended by João H. Costa Vargas’ notion of Black radical becoming, which postulates Blackness not as being, but as becoming. This shift provides a highly productive model for thinking about ontology and racial politics (especially as vs. the static, intractable Blackness of Afropessimism). Whereas contemporary moral frameworks emphasize permanence, argues Vargas (478), Black radical becoming emphasizes process and change, especially in ways that do not and cannot yet anticipate the outcomes and goals of this becoming.

Argues Vargas:

Blackness is thus itself a process; it is always in the making, defined by its intrinsic dynamism as it is inflected by and simultaneously affects the contexts we live in. Let us focus on blackness as a result of our own agency. We are black insofar as, having more or less survived the constant assaults on our humanity, we recognize and draw on a collective reservoir of resistance, pride, and hopes. Thus, because blackness is a process

marked by time, space, and power, and because this collective reservoir is not only constantly changing but can be accessed through countless routes (organizing, art, and spirituality, for example) we are always becoming black. (476-7)

Although Vargas is not concerned with making an argument about ontology in the abstract, his dynamic formulation of Black becoming effectively amounts to a rhetorical ontology that accounts for race without relying too heavily on the troubling histories that have constituted race as a political rationality that shores up systemic inequality. And while it is necessary to understand how race functions and to draw from this understanding for explanatory power, Vargas argues that relying too heavily on race as a biological or visual category—or even as a fixed basis for political solidarity—only plays into the discrete, categorizing logics of global, patriarchal hegemony.

To place this point in terms of my larger argument, Blackness as becoming suggests an ontology not in universalized, philosophical terms but rather in rhetorical terms, an ontology that is contingent and malleable over time. And in Vargas' view, this embrace of malleability can function as an indispensable strategy for enacting political change. Attempting to fixate on too specific and static a future would seem to privilege being over becoming, thus also falling prey to patriarchal logics (such as those of individual volition, masculine will, singular accomplishment, etc.). On the uncertain nature of the destination, Vargas says: "The confusion of meanings, the transformation of being, the embracing of the 'abyss' and the coming to utopian nonsite, a 'no-place' where everything is possible are the corollaries of the refusal to utilize the master's tools and inhabit the master's house" (485). Nikolas Kompridis, throughout his brilliant *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*, has made a similar argument

about the innate incapacity of a fixed vision to escape the sedimented logics of hetero-patriarchal capitalism. Put differently, fixity and concrete goal driven thinking and action are amongst “the master’s tools,” and as such, they cannot get us outside the logics of “the master’s house.” My point here is not to make the argument that African-American rhetors have historically eschewed destination—certainly Maria W. Stewart had a clear destination in mind, as did (until their final years at least) both Malcolm X and Dr. King. Rather, I mean to argue that Blackness as becoming, and the broader corollary that ontology is rhetorical, has characterized African-American rhetoric arguably since its inception. This point has potentially significant implications for rhetorical theory in general, particularly in terms of what African-American rhetoric can teach us about getting a listening through remaking *doxa*.

Some of the key dynamics of rhetoric itself, as it pertains to “othering” already marginalized groups and epistemologies, are powerfully outlined by Jane Sutton and Mari Lee Mifsud in their excellent edited collection *A Revolution in Tropes*. As I briefly discussed in this chapter’s introduction, Sutton and Mifsud maintain that rhetoric, despite its historical claims for propagating robust democratic deliberation, in fact commonly functions to “turn down the other” in order to avoid unsettling the majority group (Sutton 38). They contend that rhetoric, rather than enabling democratic change, more commonly works to collapse the other into the selfsame, or to enact a kind of domestication of the other (Sutton and Mifsud, “Figuring Out/In Rhetoric” 5-8). But on the other hand, Sutton and Mifsud’s argument should not be taken as dismissive of the importance of arriving at consensus via public discourse. The authors grant this importance but follow it with a

trenchant question: “While we certainly see the value and significance of the majority in the conceptual context of rhetorical theory, we also see something else. We see how contact is configured in [dominant Aristotelian traditions of] rhetoric also creates a way of turning down the other in an effort to achieve a single resting place settled upon by ‘all, or the majority, or the wise’ among us. We wonder where the rhetorical theory is for unsettling this resting place when it turns out to be a place of oppression for others?” (“Introduction” xii-xiii).

In working to answer this crucial question, Sutton and Mifsud contend that this turning down is grounded within the Aristotelian worldview largely in two different conceptions of contingency and a core ideal regarding nature. Most significantly, in the chapter she authored for the collection, Sutton unpacks Aristotle’s distinction between natural and unnatural motion, in which “nature” is understood to be essentially eternally unchanging, or always returning to a state of equilibrium. Thus, “natural” motion functions according to a particular telos, the end result of which is always to return things to their natural resting state (Sutton 30). This connection between telos and natural motion underwrites the only kind of contingency Aristotle sees as appropriate to rhetoric: contingency grounded in the probable, or that which usually happens (31). In that light, that which is possible (even if only by chance) but not probable is understood as unusual and by extension counts as unnatural motion without telos that cannot lead to the ideal resting state inherent in nature. In these terms, and in contrast to a vast body of rhetorical theory which holds that rhetoric deals with the probable rather than the certain, Sutton and Mifsud argue, “The axiom of rhetoric being an art of navigating contingency in

public life *prefigures the expulsion of the other*, of radical contingency. That part of the contingent that falls outside of the *doxa* gets expunged, discarded, rendered invisible and without authority” (“Introduction” xviii, emphasis mine). What this means is that there is something of a paradox built into rhetorical theory and practice as we know it. On one hand, rhetoric represents the fundamental possibility of democracy through rigorous deliberation in the public sphere. On the other hand, this possibility is always already bounded, prefiguring within its very terms the expulsion of ideas and discourses that are not already to some extent included as the probable, or that which usually happens.

To begin linking these concerns with ontology, it is important to reiterate that the key distinction between the probable and the not probable (but still possible) is predicated on social, contextual knowledge, or *doxa*. Sutton suggests: “To enter the realm of rhetoric vis-à-vis contingency is to enter a place where key moves in (the threads of) argument are accomplished by attending to what happens for the most part. Contingency linked to the probable is characterized in terms of social knowledge held together by a boundary formed by opinion (*doxa*)” (Sutton 32). This attending to what happens “for the most part” is bounded by *doxa* and circles back to reify *doxa* on its own terms. This circular move essentially generates tremendous inertia around what kinds of change are possible, are considered natural or unnatural. Put in terms of ontology, this inertia, this not probable kind of contingency, is linked with certain kinds of un/natural bodies, speakers, and ideas. “In the city, some have bodies of the earth (at rest) and they are tasked with speaking in the realm of contingency (qua probable). Some embody what is unnatural with respect to contingency” (Sutton 32). A rhetoric that might unsettle the resting place

of the majority, thereby creating the conditions of possibility under which ontology might shift, must therefore work to make natural that which *doxa* holds to be unnatural—the speech of the “merely possible other” must be transmuted at a minimum into the speech of the probable other. To return to the example of the SCLC above, the “northern agitators” needed to find rhetorical means that would condition/enable the *doxa* to enfold them as concerned Americans, or patriots, or Christians doing “the Lord’s work,” or similar. Thus, the process of re-figuring ontology can and must be accomplished, at least in part, through re-figuring *doxa*, a process that has been quite effectively engaged by the rhetors to whom I now turn.

Maria W. Stewart

The rhetorical genealogy I sketch here begins with a “founding mother,” the nineteenth century educator, rhetor, and activist Maria W. Stewart. Stewart’s groundbreaking influence and effort, while not widely known, are indispensable in the American rhetorical landscape. Stewart’s list of accomplishments includes becoming: the first Black woman to publish a political manifesto in the U.S.; the first woman—White or Black—to address a “promiscuous audience” of both men and women, Whites and Blacks; and the first Black American to speak publicly on women’s rights (Richardson xiii). Moreover, Stewart, a friend, confidant, and mentee of firebrand David Walker, was also “a clear forerunner to generations of the best known and most influential champions of Black activism, both male and female, including Frederick Douglass . . . Sojourner Truth . . . and Frances Harper . . .” (Richardson 5, xiv). More generally speaking, Maria W. Stewart was an outspoken activist whose writings and lectures were uncompromising in their

commitment to challenge race-based and gender-based injustice and inequality. Feeling called by God to share her vision for a better future, Stewart unflinchingly pointed out American hypocrisy, challenging Whites to give up their dangerous and myopic attitudes and behaviors towards Blacks. Her uncompromising candor gained her a great deal of respect amongst select communities and persons—William Lloyd Garrison was an admirer of hers, publishing and promoting a number of her works over the years (Richardson 11)—but the broader public response to her work was largely unfavorable, an unfortunate fact that effectively limited her public career to a brief, three-year period running from 1831-33. Unfazed, Stewart remained an inveterate firebrand in the vein of her mentor David Walker. She drew heavily from biblical sources to denounce American slavery and racial hypocrisy, commonly pronouncing, within the tradition of the American Jeremiad, the inevitable doom that would befall the U.S. if the nation failed to change its ways. In her view, the fall would come in the form of divine retribution, though she did not shy away from the occasional implication that slavery and racial injustice could precipitate armed revolt.²⁷ In addition to her Jeremiadic approach to race, Stewart's very presence on the speaker's platform unapologetically trampled gender norms that held that a proper woman must confine herself to the domain of domesticity. She explicitly decried the state of affairs for Black women both in terms of the extremely limited opportunities available for employment and education within the White

²⁷ Stewart saw herself as being in a "line of militant spiritual descent" that included "Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and her contemporaries David Walker and Nat Turner" (Richardson 25), which translated for her into a "willingness to embrace armed struggle" (25).

mainstream and in terms of being pressed into second-class roles in Black families and communities. Finally, her frank speech challenged African-American audiences as well, pressing them to accept personal responsibility for individual self-improvement and the collective improvement of the race. She unremittingly critiqued the African-American community for what she saw as too much passivity and reliance on the advocacy of White abolitionists to promote racial justice, as well as too little concern for mitigating the effects of gender-based inequality on Black women and girls.

Despite this broader unfavorable response, Stewart remains widely regarded as an indispensable figure in the histories of African-American rhetoric and social justice. Over the course of her life, she not only served as a precursor for notable rhetors to come, she also worked tirelessly to empower Black communities, build schools and other social organizations, and generally advance the situations of African-Americans everywhere she went (Richardson 27, 84-85). Additionally, Patricia Hill Collins sees Stewart as essentially a “founding mother” of Black feminism. Collins notes:

Efforts to reclaim the Black feminist intellectual tradition are revealing Black women’s long-standing attention to a series of core themes first recorded by Maria W. Stewart. Stewart’s treatment of the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, her call for replacing denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, her belief in Black women’s activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and her sensitivity to sexual politics are all core themes advanced by a variety of Black feminist intellectuals. (23)

In this sense and others, Stewart’s significance in the rhizome of African-American intellectual discourses is too vast to catalog here. For the purposes of this chapter, then, I will argue that Stewart’s work demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of Blackness as becoming and ontology as rhetorical. Focusing on two of Stewart’s texts—her first

published work, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which We Must Build” (1831), and “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall” (1833)—I will center my analysis on her use and development of key rhetorical strategies that would come to be quite common within African-American rhetoric. Such strategies will include: calls for Black self-definition and self-reliance, pleas for moral impeccability; asserting and modeling Black humanity; and drawing on Christian doctrines and American founding documents to reconfigure American *doxa* surrounding race, religion, and rights. And while I use the terms self-definition and self-reliance commonly here—in keeping with Stewart’s own terminologies and those of the literature on her work—both terms should be understood as early iterations of the drive towards Blackness as singularity.²⁸

In her calls for Black self-definition and self-reliance, along with her pleas for moral impeccability, Stewart anticipates some of the key strategies of African-American rhetoric that would continue through the civil rights era and even into contemporary discourses of racial justice and equality. Indeed, elements of these intellectual and ontological threads, such as her understanding of the dynamic, malleable nature of Blackness, arguably foreshadow Vargas’ discussions of Black radical becoming. In her terms, this dynamic ontology was often reflected through the notion of “improvement” of

²⁸ I am hesitant to argue too directly that Stewart sought Blackness as singularity, given that her vision of Blackness is occasionally subsumed within an ontology that centers some aspects of Whiteness as an ideal mode of Being. Her program for Black self-improvement through moral perfection, for example, requires a kind of redemption from some past sin for which Blacks have been cursed by God. Such a notion is heavily indebted to the Christian doctrine that Blacks are the descendants of Noah’s son Ham, who was cursed for looking upon his father’s naked body.

the collective knowledge bases and socio-cultural standings of African American people and communities. For instance, Stewart notes:

I am of a strong opinion that the day on which we unite, heart and soul, and turn our attention to knowledge and improvement, that day the hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth against us will cease. And even those who now point at us with the finger of scorn, will aid and befriend us. It is of no use for us to sit with our hands folded, hanging our heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition; but let us make a mighty effort, and arise; and if no one will promote or respect us let us promote and respect ourselves. ("Religion and the Pure Principles" 37)

A few related concerns are notable in this quote. For one, it demonstrates an awareness that the *meaning* of Black being, as it circulates in the international community, can be re-inflected through a constructive epistemological and ontological project undertaken collectively by African-Americans. Moreover, her rejection of "hanging our heads" seems to entail a rhetorical imperative as well as a call to action. While there is no doubt that the historical treatment of Blacks in the U.S. has always provided more than sufficient cause for lament, the passivity of hanging one's head could only serve to reinforce racist ideologies of Blackness that worked to justify slavery and oppression in the first place. This is not to suggest that Stewart's concerns were limited to intervening in the way Blackness was being read; the point, by contrast, is to emphasize Stewart's brilliance in her twofold project of working to alter the ways that Blackness signified while also insisting on practical self-definition and self-reliance. This project, in other words, is precisely the remaking of American *doxa* within Black communities and throughout the U.S. at large. And in a move that anticipates Malcolm X, although her dominant priority was to firmly cultivate Black self-reliance, she would occasionally imply that should Whites prove unreceptive to Black improvement, armed resistance

(while undesirable for all parties concerned) could become a necessary means of creating necessary change. For instance, note her evocation of the specter of Black violence (which commonly haunted the White imaginary) couched in the guise of dismissing the impetus to armed revolt: “Far be it from me to recommend to you either to kill, burn, or destroy. But I would strongly recommend to you to *improve your talents*; let not one lie buried in the earth. Show forth your *powers of mind*” (“Religion and the Pure Principles,” 29, emphasis mine). Her recommendation is self-improvement and intellectual development, but recourse to violence (especially within the context of her Jeremiad inflected rhetorical project) might well happen quite naturally or by the hand of God.

Stewart’s emphasis on self-definition had clear implications for gender as well. Collins suggests, “To Stewart, the power of self-definition was essential, for black women’s survival was at stake” (Collins 4). In Stewart’s view, the process of self-definition—in particular, a personal, individual commitment to individual and collective moral improvement—would in the long run produce capable Black leadership and an eventual end to slavery. And women, given their role as the moral compasses of society and family, would be best suited to the role of instigating and sustaining the necessary push. Lamenting the status of Black women yet celebrating their potentials, Stewart says:

Did the daughters of our land possess a delicacy of manners, combined with gentleness and dignity; did their pure minds hold vice in abhorrence and contempt, did they frown when their ears were polluted with its vile accents, would not their influence become powerful? Would not our brethren fall in love with their virtues? Their souls would become fired with a holy zeal for freedom’s cause. They would become ambitious to distinguish themselves. They would become proud to display their talents. Able advocates would arise in our defense. Knowledge would begin to flow and the chains of slavery and ignorance would melt like wax before the flames O woman, woman, would thou only strive to excel in

merit and virtue; would thou only store thy mind with useful knowledge,
great would be thine influence. (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 31-32)

In other words, the end of slavery and the realization of American promise is first and foremost “women’s work”—this is a largely unprecedented vision of women’s power and agency, even if it is admittedly contained within gendered notions of women’s “purity,” etc.

Moreover, her insistent and uncompromising calls for self-definition and self-reliance—including economic sovereignty—presumed the possibility of women’s agency as part and parcel of the collective process. Rather than limit themselves exclusively to the domestic sphere, Black women could generate income and contribute it to the construction of schools and other capital projects intended to ensure the collective good:

The good women of Wethersfield, Connecticut, toiled in the blazing sun, year after year, weeding onions, then sold the seed and procured enough money to erect them a house of worship; and shall we not imitate their examples as far as they are worthy of imitation? Why cannot we do something to distinguish ourselves, and contribute some of our hard earnings that would reflect honor upon our memories, and cause our children to arise and call us blessed? Show it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force? By no means. Let every female heart become united, and let us raise a fund ourselves; and at the end of one year and a half, we might be able to lay the cornerstone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us . . . (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 37)

Her plan calls for long term, incremental improvement specifically through women’s agency and education, specifically in terms of a Protestant ethic that indexes economic power to correct, virtuous ethical principles.

Unfortunately, Stewart’s outspokenness, coupled with the many complex dynamics intersecting both race and gender, may have helped make her own essentially

radical subjectivity (grounded in a notion of Blackness as becoming that was far ahead of its time) a bit unpalatable for many types of audiences. She drew on internal conviction and religious faith to find nourishment and courage in the face of isolation and a lukewarm, even unfavorable mainstream reception. At the very core of Stewart's work was a profound conviction that she had been called by God to spread a prophetic message of reconciliation or doom. The significance of this conviction cannot be understated in regard to her own sense of identity and purpose as well as her public reception. I quote from Richardson at length on this topic:

Convinced of a calling she could not refuse, Stewart was thrust into the public role not only of teacher — an acceptable position for woman — but of prophet. Her claim that God communicated with her directly could only be regarded with uneasy suspicion by the organized black church. In order to obey God, she had to act in contradiction to the secular identity to which she had once aspired, that of a traditionally refined and accomplished woman, by her own definition 'a chaste keeper at home, . . . possessing a meek and quiet spirit.' Orphan, widow, solitary visionary, a woman who could claim to have 'traveled a good bit in my day,' she was both an independent and an isolated figure in the world. Her calling was not merely reformist, it was subversive, and she herself was the first to encounter its transformative character by its challenge to her own identity. (26)

This subversive challenge to her own identity provided her a vantage point from which to recognize the somewhat malleable nature of both race and gender. It also meant that in some senses she had to *create and become* the specific kind of raced and gendered subject she knew to be possible, which is arguably a kind of becoming characteristic of Black women in particular. Collins suggests that the process of "feeling one's way" has become "an unavoidable epistemological stance for Black women intellectuals" (18). She goes on to quote Alice Walker, who says that the Black female intellectual "must be her

own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself” (qtd. in Collins 17-18). This framework is consistent with Richardson’s above characterizations of Stewart’s identity. Certainly Stewart herself had to “feel her way,” especially in her role as first orphan and then widow, followed even more significantly by her need to fulfill what she perceived as a calling towards activism despite the fact that virtually no women—let alone Black women—were granted any agency whatsoever in the public sphere in her day. Thus, Stewart’s own process of identity construction, along with the epistemological stance it entailed, is quite suggestive of the notion of Black radical becoming, especially as viewed through Walker and Collins.

In this sense, Stewart’s own experience with malleable subjectivity bolstered her understandings of ontology as rhetorical, as grounded in *doxa*. This perspective was further strengthened by her study of history and the Bible; she drew from both sources to identify and publicize the lives of key figures whose very being revealed as false the premises upon which notions of Black and female inferiority were based. With this knowledge, her task then became one of reconfiguring American *doxa* into greater, more inclusive resonance with the human rights and liberties gestured towards by American founding principles. One of the ways she worked towards these ends was to publicly perform her embodiment of these insights. Put differently, she was no doubt aware that her very public work itself had a crucial rhetorical role to play—modeling Black humanity would prove more effective than simply arguing for it. In this vein, Logan suggests, “The general response of white audiences to the very presence of intelligent,

articulate Black women was often much stronger than their response to anything the women had to say. The speakers were the embodiment of their message—whether the message was the abolishment of slavery, support for Black women, or recognition of racial autonomy. They authenticated their arguments; the messenger was the message” (22). Her efforts to counter the repressive aspects of American *doxa*, in other words, were certainly furthered by her very presence in doing the work. Her speeches and writings were therefore rhetorical in the conventional sense (as public persuasion) as well as rhetorical in an ontological sense, in the ways her embodied Blackness-as-becoming enabled her quite consciously to remake definitions of Blackness within American *doxa*.

This embodied rhetorical ontology was almost certainly a response to specific tautological strains of thought within American *doxa*. For instance, enslavement and oppression were ideologically buttressed by widely accepted definitions of Blackness that emerged from supposedly scientific principles that in fact merely constituted an already racist means for arriving at a predetermined conclusion (e.g. White supremacy). More specifically, American *doxa* held that intelligence and reasoned argument were first and foremost the province of Whites alone. Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* was a prominent source of such brazen intellectual falsehoods, propagating “an elaborate pseudo-scientific discussion of the physical, mental, and moral inferiority of blacks” (Richardson 126, note 66). Such pseudo-scientific discussions were much more difficult to maintain in the presence of people such as Stewart herself embodying evidence directly contrary to their premises. And certainly she presumed that her own embodied rhetorics could prove effective across larger scales. As previously discussed, Stewart

urged African Americans to engage in large-scale, collective, publicly evident “improvement of our talents”; such an effort would not only produce concrete internal gains for African American communities, but it would move her embodied work broadly through the public sphere to help remake American *doxa* on the everyday level. In this vein, she exhorted her fellow African Americans to take up the burden of representation to counter the most virulent tropes of Blackness: “Prove to the world that you are neither ourang-outangs, or a species of mere animals, but that you possess the same powers of intellect as the proud-boasting American” (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 40). This exhortation was likely a direct rebuttal of Jefferson’s arguments, and it signals overtly a recognition of the importance of intervening in the rhetorical dimensions of ontology in order to reconfigure American *doxa* and the ways it prefigured and circumscribed African-American ontology.²⁹

One of the most significant and effective of Stewart’s rhetorical strategies for reconfiguring American *doxa* was to confront racist Whites with essentially impossible choices designed to deconstruct the otherwise naturalized connections between Christian doctrines and the idea of America. She was often quite masterful at putting her audience in a dilemma that effectively forced them to recognize the many ways in which Christian and American doctrines were irreconcilable in their current instantiations. The core of her strategy was to place to deeply held values systems into direct friction with each other so that she might overcome the “common sense” that made the American mythos possible

²⁹ Richardson notes that Jefferson’s fourth chapter, “Laws,” drew a comparison between blacks and primates (126 note 66).

despite the otherwise obvious disjunctions between Christian principles, American discourses of human rights, and the categorical obfuscations of Black humanity. For example, in her first published essay, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,” in a brief section entitled “Prayer,” Stewart highlights these disjunctions by illustrating the ultimate irrelevance of the color line in heaven if nowhere else. She prays: “And now, Lord, be pleased to grant that . . . all nations and kindreds and tongues and people might be brought to the knowledge of the truth, as it is in Jesus, and we at last meet around thy throne, and join in celebrating thy praises” (34). Stewart saw the promises of religion as residing without fail in uniting all humanity under God’s reign in the afterlife. But more immediately, she knew that Christian principles could prove invaluable in holding people’s feet to the fire, applying the internal pressure of their own moral and religious commitments as a way to prompt devoted White Christians to accept a definition of humanity that included Blacks.

Logan similarly points out how Stewart—amongst other nineteenth century Black women rhetors—sought to disarticulate Whiteness and Christianity within the American mythos by arguing through the Bible that Christianity and White superiority were in many ways antithetical to each other. Borrowing from John D. Barbour’s notion of “deconversion stories,” Logan notes, “Promoting this deconversion from the belief that Christianity and White superiority were synonymous, black speakers argued that the practice of slavery and oppression prevented White America from assuming its rightful place as a chosen nation” (Logan 31). For Stewart, a fundamental first step in this process of disarticulation was to dislodge “America” from its “chosen nation” position into that

of the Christian sinner. Lamenting the state of White Christianity, Stewart cries, “O, could I but see the church built up in the most holy faith; could I but see men spiritually minded, walking in the fear of God, not given to filthy lucre, not holding religion in one hand and the world in the other, but diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord . . .” (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 33). Most notable here is the suggestion that the economic imperatives that perpetuate slavery have by definition trumped any true commitment to Christian principles on the part of White Americans. Given to the accumulation of “filthy lucre,” America cannot truly “serve the Lord.” From this first principle, Stewart would extensively incorporate elements of the Book of Revelation to jar racist Whites from their essentially anti-Christian positions.

Indeed, the Book of Revelation and the tradition of the Jeremiad provided two indispensable sources for Stewart’s work recasting Whiteness and Christianity within the American *doxa*. These strategies span all of Stewart’s works, beginning with “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality.” Focusing often on Revelation’s prophecies of God’s forthcoming “cataclysmic destruction of the forces of evil,” argues Richardson, Stewart “found justification for what secular authorities might well have considered inciting to riot. The forces of rebellion and destruction, she argued, would act as the instruments of God’s punishment of a slave-holding society” (Richardson 17-18). In many cases, Stewart would imply that the cataclysmic destruction of the U.S. would come not because White Americans were merely sinners, but because America itself had taken on a Satanic role intent on murder and corruption of the innocent and a refusal to take any repentant actions.

Oh, America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee. Thou art almost become drunken with the blood of her slain; thou hast enriched thyself through her toils and labors; and now thou refuseth to make even a small return. And thou hast caused the daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms and fornications; but upon thee be their curse. (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 38-39)

Numerous biblical villains are evoked here, including Cain (blood crying out to heaven) and Satan himself (the corruptor, driving daughters into prostitution and fornication). The “dark cloud” hanging over America suggests God’s pending judgement, making the U.S. not a shining city on a hill (as the nation has long been portrayed) but rather a doomed civilization akin to Sodom and Gomorrah.³⁰ The affective power alone of these allusions might likely have caused even intractable racists to reconsider slavery in the U.S. Moreover, casting America as the villain worked powerfully against notions such as manifest destiny, thereby helping unravel the myth of Whiteness as proper subject of history.

What’s more, Stewart’s characterization of America as Biblical villain also constituted a war within the press, yet another way in which she sought to control representations of African-Americans and thereby rewrite ontologies of Blackness within American *doxa*.

[Y]ou may publish, as far as the East is from the West, that you have two millions of negroes, who aspire no higher than to bow at your feet, and to court your smiles. You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of the “shining city on a hill” trope, see Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*.

able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt. (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 39-40)

Here, she first acknowledges the use of the presses to disseminate the misleading manufactured trope of the “happy slave.” She then mounts an ideological skirmish of her own, inverting hegemonic White tropes of hero and villain. In this vision, Whites are murderers and tyrants, whereas Blacks embody the fearless, undaunted character so central to the American mythos. And of course, she deploys the central African American trope linking Whites to the Biblical pharaoh and African Americans to the Israelites whom God delivered from bondage in Egypt.

This inversion continues throughout the passage. Suggesting that Blacks will willingly forgo their rights to self-defense, Stewart then characterizes Whiteness as a thief and rapist, and again links African-Americans more closely to American founding principles:

We will not come out against you with swords and staves, as against a thief; but we will tell you that our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired. We will tell you that too much of your blood flows in our veins, too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits. We will tell you that it is our gold that clothes you in fine linen and purple, and causes you to fare sumptuously every day; and it is the blood of our fathers, and the tears of our brethren that have enriched your soils. AND WE CLAIM OUR RIGHTS. (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 39-40, original emphasis)

The notion that African-Americans’ souls are fired with the love of liberty works counter to dominant *doxa* linking Blackness with a crude, animalistic nature. She then juxtaposes the aspiring Black soul against the White rape, invasion, and colonization of the Black body and a dominant White American love of gold, fine clothing, and a sumptuous material life. Thus, in her vision—and contrary to dominant ontologies—it is African-

Americans who are fired by lofty American spiritual ideals and Whites who are mired in the muck of a violent, Earth-bound animalistic nature. And her rousing claim that culminates the passage refuses the question of whether or not Blacks *have rights* within the Christian American paradigm. Rather, she flatly *lays claim to the rights* that have already been guaranteed by God to all men, as reflected within the founding documents of the United States.

Stewart continues this effective inversion of trope, race, and political position throughout her body of work. In another particularly powerful example, she restages the conditions leading to the American Revolution—without a doubt one of the most powerful commonplaces in the entirety of American rhetoric—but inverts the roles of Whites and Blacks in complex ways. “Did every gentleman in America realize, as one, that they had got to become bondmen, and their wives, their sons, and their daughters, servants forever, to Great Britain, their very joints would become loosened, and tremblingly would smite one against another; their countenance would be filled with horror, every nerve and muscle would be forced into action, their souls would recoil at the very thought, their hearts would die within them, and death would be far more preferable” (“Religion and the Pure Principles” 38-39). Here, Stewart re-invokes the passion and fire that fueled the American revolution, returning “American gentlemen” to the subordinate positions they occupied as subjects of the British Crown. The reference to “bondmen” directly invokes slavery, which effectively invites these same gentlemen to recognize the horror that stems from a lack of freedom. To invite Whites to recognize these horrors is to attempt to move her audience towards what Jon Cruz describes as

pathos-oriented hearing (61-2), an openness, however minimal, to hear slaves' suffering as the suffering of human beings. The effect of the passage is therefore to position Blacks as American revolutionaries and Whites as the British oppressors. In so doing, Stewart works to reposition the entire abolitionist movement not as a fringe movement driven by a small minority of misguided radicals and bleeding hearts, but as an extension of the very ordinary impulse of America itself.

Stewart also amplifies the power of her messages by convincingly placing herself within powerful tropical roles from within both the Bible and the American mythos. In terms of the former, she casts herself and all abolitionists as martyrs, as persecuted Christians who receive eternal glory for their willingness to die for their faith. However, in this case it is racist White Christian Americans doing the persecuting. "Many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs; for I am firmly persuaded, that the God in whom I trust is able to protect me from the rage and malice of mine enemies, and from them that will rise up against me . . . " ("Religion and the Pure Principles" 30). What's most powerful here is not simply her occupying the position of the martyr, but the way in which her adoption of that position places any detractors as adversaries of God himself. In short, to assail Stewart herself with "rage and malice" is to oppose God by moving against one who is under his protection.

To occupy a singularly powerful place within the American mythos, she conjures and associates herself with Patrick Henry's inveterate preference for liberty over death. In the powerful closing paragraph of her "Address at the African Masonic Hall," Stewart

addresses the preposterous plan put forth by the euphemistically named Colonization Society to again dispossess Blacks of their homeland and rights by relocating African-Americans to Liberia. “[A]nd now that we have enriched their soil, and filled their coffers, they say that we are not capable of becoming like white men, and that we can never rise to respectability in this country. They would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through” (“Address at the African Masonic Hall” 64). In terms of presence alone (as discussed via Logan above), the effect of this statement must have been nearly staggering. To hear such a courageous statement in public from a Black woman—who would have been laboring under negative stereotypes of cowardice, weakness, docility, and more—would certainly have gone a long way to further the urgency of her message and to challenge ontologies of Blackness and gender within the American *doxa*.

For all of the ways in which Stewart’s work sought to reshape dominant White attitudes and behaviors, I would be remiss in closing this section without at least brief discussion of the urgent power of her direct communications to Black audiences. Given the importance Stewart placed on self-definition and self-reliance, it should be no surprise that she frequently sought to advance and fortify the principles upon which Black self-definition and self-reliance might be based. A significant portion of the White ideological agenda surrounding slavery aimed to not only undermine a sense of Black humanity to White Americans, but to generate a profound sense of racial inferiority within African-American communities. Stewart worked directly to counter these messages by both undermining mythologies of Whiteness and placing Blacks at the core

of American collective progress. “Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name, like the names of the great men that are in the earth, while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support. We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them” (“Address at the African Masonic Hall” 59). Rather than reciting the well-worn heroics of White Americans such as the “Founding Fathers,” Stewart highlights the utterly exploitative nature of White American political and economic power. Put simply, she argues here, as in other places, that Whites have claimed all the credit for “America,” though Blacks have done the difficult, fundamental labor of building the nation. Collins has suggested, “Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups” (xii). Stewart, however, commonly refused to reframe her ideas along these lines. The sentiment she expresses above—which was certainly far from novel in Black communities—would likely have been physically dangerous for most Blacks to express in the presence of Whites. In that sense, Stewart was one of very few rhetors of her era to publicly express African-American Hush Harbor knowledge. So not only was the message itself quite valuable to reiterate to African-American audiences, the very act of speaking such knowledge in public must have seemed alternately exhilarating, dangerous, and empowering to many of her Black listeners. However, more than any

other factor, this frank speech, this public airing of Black knowledge that decenters White comfort, arguably accounts for the bulk of her unfavorable reception from a White public and the unfortunately brief nature of her period of public engagement. As Nunley argues, Stewart “was run out of Boston in part because she dared assert African American episteme (knowledge), subjectivities, and experience into the public sphere” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 15). And since Stewart was one of the first rhetors to publicly assert Hush Harbor knowledge and subjectivity, and to be run out of town as a result, she stands at the forefront of a long line of African-American rhetors who would risk—and in some cases give—their lives in service of improving the lives of African Americans and dauntlessly remaking the American project. It is with this contention in mind that I turn now to an analysis of arguably the greatest rhetor in this tradition, Malcolm X.

Malcolm X

“Sometimes, I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice—which disturbed the white man’s smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency—that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe.”— Malcolm X (*Autobiography*, 377).

Malcolm X (1925-1965), easily one of the greatest American rhetors and social critics, remains also one of the most controversial. His all too brief life and public career underwent numerous transformations, with Malcolm ranging from a teenage Lindy hop prodigy to a cynical, self-interested street hustler, a prison intellectual, a devoted Muslim minister, an outspoken Black separatist, and finally an international public figure willing to work with any organization trying to improve the lives of the many oppressed peoples

under modernity's boot heel. To date, in many popular representations and conceptions of his life and work, Malcolm X remains either widely misunderstood or confined within the rhetorics of the Nation of Islam phase of his teaching and speaking, which attempts to dismiss and defuse the power of his critiques by fixing him as a separatist, a racist, and/or a demagogue seeking to incite violence. In contrast to these views (derived no doubt from a position that privileges White comfort), theologian James Cone, in assessing Malcolm X's impact, argues: "No one had a greater impact on the cultural consciousness of African-Americans during the second half of the 20th century than Malcolm X. More than anyone else he revolutionized the black mind, transforming docile Negroes and self-effacing colored people into proud blacks and self-confident African-Americans" ("Malcolm X" 1189). With this contention in mind, this chapter positions Malcolm X first and foremost as an African-American Hush Harbor rhetorician driven primarily to prompt African Americans to embrace an understanding of Blackness as singularity. In so doing, I draw primarily from four of his works: "Message to the Grassroots" (November 1963), "The Ballot Or the Bullet" (April 1964), "Debate at Oxford Union" (December 1964), and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965).

Taken together, these texts demonstrate that Malcolm X's life, when viewed as a whole, was highly consistent with Vargas' notions of Black radical becoming. More specifically, the concepts of Blackness as process, as "defined by . . . intrinsic dynamism as it is inflected by and simultaneously affects the contexts" in which Black folks live (Vargas 476-7), are powerfully reflected in the numerous transformations that characterized Malcolm X's life and the contexts in which he lived it. With this in mind, I

argue throughout this section that Malcolm X, similarly to Maria W. Stewart, developed complex understandings of the relationships between race, rhetoric, and ontology. Moreover, he consistently developed and deployed powerful rhetorical strategies to intervene in and reshape these relationships. Over the course of a public career lasting just over a decade, his work served to remake American ontology and *doxa*, both through his uncompromising insistence that Blackness be recognized and respected as singularity, and through very effectively working to undermine myths of Whiteness and America that had long functioned to exclude Blacks from the category of humanity and relegate African Americans to the status of second-class citizens.

Central to Malcolm X's rhetorical project was an unflagging drive to promote Black self-determination and to help African-Americans develop a sense of Blackness as singularity. James H. Cone describes Malcolm X's work similarly, saying, "In place of integration, nonviolence, and love of enemy, Malcolm—via public rallies, radio, television, and newspapers—advocated separation, self-defense, and self-love. He was determined to develop an independent, uncompromising approach to black freedom" (*Martin & Malcolm* 263). This drive was initially grounded in Nation of Islam (NoI) teachings designed to cultivate an independent, collective Black identity upon which a foundation could be laid for all subsequent social progress. In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm suggests, "My black brothers and sisters — no one will know who we are... until we know who we are! We never will be able to go anywhere until we know where we are! The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is giving us a true identity, and a true position—the first time they've ever been known to the American black man!" (252,

original emphasis). In this analysis, Malcolm contends that African-Americans have never known a shared constructive identity. Drawing from the NOI creation myth that posits Blacks as the original race of humans (166), Malcolm refuses a reduction of Blackness to mere difference, implying instead that Blackness as ontology is whole unto itself and needs no recourse to other ontologies in order to gain coherence (singularity, in other words). In fact, Whiteness was treated as a secondary derivative of Blackness in these formulations. But regardless of whether Malcolm X's audiences accepted this inversion of racial hierarchies, the very public nature of his arguments and the palpable strength of his convictions, especially when viewed in the context of centuries of demonstrated inhumanity in Whites' treatment of Blacks, would have certainly undermined elements of American *doxa* that linked racist oppression to supposedly scientific Black racial inferiority.

James Baldwin, during an interview on the spring 1963 television program "The Negro and the American Promise," noted that this public legibility, this public airing of Hush Harbor epistemologies, accounted for Malcolm X's extraordinary power in reaching working class Black audiences: "When Malcolm talks or one of the Muslims talks, they articulate for all the Negro people who hear them, who listen to them. They articulate their suffering, the suffering which has been in this country so long denied. That's Malcolm's great authority over any of his audiences. He corroborates their reality; he tells them that they really exist." Baldwin saw Malcolm's early NOI-based arguments as necessary but also flawed. He goes on, "What Malcolm tells them, in effect, is that they should be proud of being black, and God knows that they should be. That is a very

important thing to hear in a country which assures you that you should be ashamed of it. Of course, in order to do this, what he does is destroy a truth and invent a history. What he does is say, 'you're better because you're black.' Well, of course that isn't true. That's the trouble" (*American Promise*). In Baldwin's view then, this inversion of racial supremacy, while powerful and effective, was essentially doomed to fail in a long-term American program of bringing about racial understanding. Ultimately, however, convincing Blacks of White inferiority (as devils) was much less significant for Malcolm X than was helping African Americans develop, to state it in the key terms of this chapter, a strong awareness of Blackness as singularity. In an April 1961 debate with Baldwin, he argues for the importance of this ontological shift: "Mr. Muhammad's teaching . . . doesn't teach the black man to wait for the white man to change his mind, Mr. Muhammad's teaching is changing the black man's appraisal of himself. And as soon as the black man undergoes a reappraisal of himself . . . he says to himself . . . he doesn't need any President, he doesn't need any Congress, he doesn't need any Supreme Court, he doesn't need anybody but himself to bring about that which is his if he is a man" ("Debate"). This notion of Black reappraisal is the very seed of possibility for embracing Blackness as singularity, a step that was, in Malcolm X's view, a necessary precursor for greater social justice and independence for African-Americans.

Later in his career, after his split with the NOI, Malcolm X famously softened his rigidly essentialist views on race, though he continued to argue strongly for Blackness as singularity, for Black self-determination. Nonetheless, despite his changed perspectives

on race and ontology and his painful departure from the Nation of Islam, he reflects positively in his *Autobiography* on the effects of these counter-hegemonic messages:

I had helped Mr. Muhammad and his other ministers to revolutionize the American black man's thinking, opening his eyes until he would never again look in the same fearful, worshipful way at the white man. I had participated in spreading the truths that had done so much to help the American black man rid himself of the mirage that the white race was made up of 'superior' beings. I had been a part of the tapping of something in the black secret soul. (289)

The verb choices here are quite revealing of the effects Malcolm X helped bring about for many African-Americans: revolutionizing Black thought, opening people's eyes, spreading truths, and dispelling mirages. Each of these actions and outcomes points to the notion of Blackness as singularity. And this process is precisely what Cone referred to as revolutionizing the Black mind ("Malcolm X" 1189). In the long run then, Malcolm X had not only helped African-Americans develop a sense of racial pride—a "true identity," in terms of singularity, a "tapping of something in the black secret soul"—but he had also worked to undermine mythologies of White supremacy to remake American *doxa*.

As Baldwin noted above, Malcolm X's unflinching commitment to *parrhesia*, his willingness to speak Hush Harbor truths in public spaces, was one of his greatest strengths and accounted for a great deal of his power and appeal. Even when ostensibly addressing a White or mixed race audience, virtually the entirety of his content was squarely addressed to Black audiences and expressed Hush Harbor epistemologies; the White public were accounted as eavesdroppers, at best. In "The Ballot or the Bullet," for example, he none too subtly couches an ultimatum to Whites within an articulation of Black epistemologies. In explaining the context for his title, he notes:

Negroes have listened to the trickery and the lies and the false promises of the white man now for too long, and they're fed up. They've become disenchanted. They've become disillusioned. They've become dissatisfied. And all of this has built up frustrations in the black community that makes the black community throughout America today more explosive than all of the atomic bombs the Russians can ever invent. Whenever you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap, you're in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting in your lap. When a racial powder keg goes off, it doesn't care who it knocks out the way. Understand this, it's dangerous. ("Ballot")

It is difficult to say which points disturbed Whites more: his characterizations of Whites as deceitful (contrary to the American mythos of meritocracy) or the image of a pending racial explosion that could dwarf anything the Soviets might bring to bear. In any case, this Hush Harbor knowledge registered as threat for Whites, and Malcolm X was commonly read as the source of the threat, rather than simply a social critic pointing out the dangers that already existed.

To his credit, Malcolm X not only remained undaunted by White public perceptions that he was a threat, it further convinced him that he was on the right track. In his epilogue to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley quotes Malcolm X as saying, "the more the white man yelps, the more I know I have struck a nerve" (415). Moreover, being read as a threat by the White public would have enhanced his Hush Harbor ethos with Black audiences. In fact, to this day, his willingness and ability to so uncompromisingly embody Hush Harbor subjectivity from such a far-reaching platform seems difficult to fathom and remains completely unparalleled. But as Malcolm X saw it, frank speech of this type was simply part of his job description. In his *Autobiography*, he notes, "telling the arrogant white devil the truth about himself is a full-time job" (233). Such a job did not come without risks, of course. Nunley suggests that in the case of

African-American public figures, “their very lives often depend on not transgressing or disrupting the biopower of White comfort constructed through political and social rationalities anchored in mainstream, commonsense understandings of society and race” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 16). Given these risks, Malcolm X’s public airing of AAHH epistemologies would have further corroborated Black realities, to borrow from Baldwin, thus promoting an embrace of Black ontologies as singularity and demonstrating that Whiteness was not the unassailable monolith it purported itself to be. So in addition to frankly disseminating Hush Harbor content, Malcolm X publicly modeled the uncompromising Hush Harbor subjectivity he thought would be necessary for African-Americans to emulate in order to effect significant change. In that sense, perhaps more powerful than the content of Malcolm’s Hush Harbor messages was his courageous public modeling of Hush Harbor subjectivity, the very acts of his relentless frank speech.

In addition to the ontological reorientation—via messages and modeling—entailed in giving rise to Blackness as singularity, Malcolm X argued for numerous specific changes to Black folks’ political and economic behaviors as a way to transform the material conditions of life within Black communities. One of his primary strategies to this effect was to pose Black nationalism as a way to make Blackness as singularity a governing principle in the daily lives of African Americans, in terms of developing greater self-determination, self-governance (politics), and the economic power so necessary in a capitalist country. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” he issues a very straightforward call to these ends:

So this government has failed us. The government itself has failed us. And the white liberals who have been posing as our friends have failed us. And

once we see that all of these other sources to which we've turned have failed, we stop turning to them and turn to ourselves. We need a self-help program, a do-it-yourself philosophy, a do-it-right-now philosophy, a it's-already-too-late philosophy. This is what you and I need to get with. And the only time – the only way we're going to solve our problem is with a self-help program. Before we can get a self-help program started, we have to have a self-help philosophy. Black nationalism is a self-help philosophy. (“Ballot”)

His insistence on a “self-help program” is reminiscent of Maria Stewart’s vision of rebuilding the Black community from within, rather than relying primarily on outside sources of support—and in fact, Malcolm X increasingly critiqued the mainstream civil rights movement for consistently turning to the government or White allies rather than focusing first and foremost on nourishing and protecting Black communities from within. Malcolm X was not concerned so much with broad social acceptance for African-Americans; rather, he was more concerned with Black self-acceptance, with Blackness as singularity, and with Blackness as becoming, as coming into its own.

His arguments for separatism and Black nationalism eventually morphed into a politically mature program of well-informed, self-aware, collective Black political agency designed to set direction for Black communities. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X suggests, “the political philosophy of black nationalism only means that we will have to carry on a program, a political program, of reeducation — to open our people’s eyes, make us become more politically conscious, politically mature. And then, we will — whenever we are ready to cast our ballot, that ballot will be cast for a man of the community, who has the good of the community at heart” (“Ballot”). Whereas much of his earlier his political thought had relied heavily on tropes of the White man as villain and antagonist, his urgings here are almost entirely internally focused, effecting a call for

political Black agency within the democratic process. In this sense, Black nationalism functioned as a trope to effect singularity. In truth, it is not clear that Black nationalism was particularly tenable as an actual set of geopolitical aims—consider, for example, that Malcolm X never provided a detailed vision for how Black separatism and Black nationalism could realistically be enacted. Would it have required massive expatriation, an attempt at Black secession, or something else entirely? As a trope however, Black separatism worked to effect a kind of separatism of the mind, a declaration of ontological independence. And through Black nationalism—the trope of the Black nation—Malcolm X sought to re-colonize the Black mind. In other words, this is ontology and *doxa* refigured through rhetoric. Black nationalism had become a rhetorical tool for Malcolm X to argue for singularity, and later a way to posit his agenda as the most sensible agenda/goal for the entire civil rights movement.

In the second sense—making his agenda central to the entire civil rights movement—Black nationalism provided a strong foundation for Malcolm X to construct common ground amongst African Americans across all religious and political persuasions. To that end, he was consistently working in many of his speeches to frame Black nationalism on his own terms (as versus the “hatemongering” mythos that mainstream discourses had constructed around it) and to make the term and concept more palatable for Black audiences who may have preferred Dr. King’s more moderate politics. Consider the definition in the passage just above, wherein Black nationalism “*only* means . . . a political program, of reeducation — to open our people’s eyes” (“Ballot,” emphasis mine). Contrary to an embrace of radicalism, then, skeptical Black

audiences needed *only* to value opening African Americans' eyes, resulting in increased political consciousness. And in addition to reframing and defusing Black nationalism, Malcolm X proposed it as a way to bridge religious and philosophical differences, promote racial solidarity, and work towards a common goal. He argues,

What's so good about it — you can stay right in the church where you are and still take black nationalism as your philosophy. You can stay in any kind of civic organization that you belong to and still take black nationalism as your philosophy. You can be an atheist and still take black nationalism as your philosophy. This is a philosophy that eliminates the necessity for division and argument, 'cause if you're black, you should be thinking black. And if you're black and you not thinking black at this late date, well, I'm sorry for you. ("Ballot")

This idea of “thinking black” across religious, philosophical, and even international lines became increasingly characteristic of Malcolm X's work, eventually affording him a unique position within the national civil rights discourse. Whereas he had spent years criticizing organizations such as the NAACP and the SCLC, he increasingly encouraged audiences to join “any kind of organization — civic, religious, fraternal, political or otherwise that's based on lifting the black man up and making him master of his own community” (“Ballot”). This brilliant strategy helped him parlay his somewhat peripheral role in the civil rights movement into a position of further enhanced ethos with Black audiences. In offering a solution to unite all African Americans under a common philosophy, he sidestepped the internecine struggles of the civil rights movement (which was something of a paradox, given his consistently withering critiques of the NAACP and the SCLC). As such, he marshaled public frustration with the often all-too-public power struggles between various civil rights organizations, positioning himself as one of very few public figures who put Black collective well-being over the struggle for power

and influence within the movement. He also effectively planted his own terminology and agenda—Black nationalism, self-determination, and Black control of Black communities—at the heart of what the civil rights struggle should aspire to do.

For all of this current discussion of Malcolm X's consistent efforts to promote a sense of racial pride and singularity amongst Blacks, and for all of his well-known critiques of normative Whiteness, it must also be plainly stated that his efforts towards Black singularity did not entail sparing Black folks from his incisive, nearly surgically precise commentary, either.³¹ In particular, he persistently critiqued African-Americans for what he perceived as passivity or complicity in the ongoing conditions of oppression. One such repeated critique came via the tropes of the "house Negro" and the "field Negro." And most notoriously perhaps, these tropes were frequently leveled at more mainstream civil rights leaders, including widely beloved figures such as the Reverend Dr. King himself. But contrary to how King and others must have felt about these charges of being "house Negroes" and "Uncle Toms" ("Grassroots"), the matter was ultimately not personal for Malcolm X. In a much more genuine way, he was deeply concerned that despite their best intentions, mainstream civil rights leaders could not possibly bring about Black singularity and self-determination. In particular, as Cone suggests, "For Malcolm, nonviolence was a coward's philosophy, and no black could ever achieve

³¹ Malcolm X would commonly interject statements such as the following into his speeches: "I know you don't like what I'm saying, but I'm going to tell you anyway" ("Grassroots"), or "I hate to say this about us, but it's true" ("Ballot"). Whereas in other rhetorical situations, direct critique of one's audience can easily prove detrimental to one's case, Malcolm X's Hush Harbor ethos coupled with the general African-American rhetorical privileging of frank speech only further enhanced his effectiveness.

dignity following it” (*Martin & Malcolm* 261). Moreover, Malcolm X likely believed that King and others were “not capable of responding to the urgencies of commonplace, working-class African Americans” (Woodyard 142), whose lives and fates Malcolm X was first and foremost concerned to improve. Nonetheless, following his split with NOI, Malcolm X increasingly toned down these denunciations, becoming increasingly willing to build common cause with King and other Black leaders he had previously dismissed.

Unfortunately, Malcolm X knew his Black nationalist and separatist arguments had gotten him marked as too militant to allow any ready alliances with more moderate organizations. For instance, in mid-1963, King expressed concerns that “the extensive news coverage of the Muslims and their rhetoric would dissuade sympathetic whites from supporting civil rights” (Garrow 275). Of course, Malcolm X had long tried to make it painfully clear that he advocated violence only as a means of self-defense of Black lives and Black communities. The real problem with his public reception, more accurately, was that his vision of singularity and self-determination was fundamentally at odds with the ways Whites had constructed their own comfortable ontologies of race at the expense of Black being. The notion that he was a hater was more perception than fact, a strategy intended to “turn him down,” in Sutton and Mifsud’s terminology. In Malcolm X’s own analysis, the mainstream refusal to hear his arguments was largely because he had been constructed as a hater in the media. “One of the tricks of the west is to use or create images, they create images of a person who doesn’t go along with their views and then they make certain that this image is distasteful, and then anything that that person has to say from thereon, from thereon in, is rejected” (“Oxford”). Unfortunately,

the specifics of how misrepresentation and sensationalization via newspaper headlines turned Malcolm X into a distasteful trope cannot be taken up here. The more relevant point for our purposes is that Malcolm was aware of how he circulated publicly as a trope, and being the extremely savvy rhetor that he was, he increasingly and quite deliberately began putting himself forward to the mainstream public as an alternative to the peaceful resistance of King and the SCLC. Cone argues, for instance, that “Malcolm made Martin and other civil rights leaders acceptable to white America by presenting himself as the ‘bogeyman’ alternative” (*Martin & Malcolm* 264). In fact, Malcolm X said as much directly to Coretta Scott King during a trip to Selma.³² And by way of example, the ultimatum implied in his title “The Ballot or the Bullet” should alone suffice to demonstrate Malcolm’s strategic positioning of the SCLC’s voting rights agenda against the public’s (inaccurate) perception of his disposition towards violence. But perhaps more importantly than posing himself as an alternative to King et al, Malcolm X saw his messages as important correctives to overworn yet all too familiar and ongoing Black ontologies of subservience and passivity that were implied within or could be constructed through the widespread use of nonviolent strategies; his role, by contrast, was working to broadly promote the notion that African-Americans had a right to self-defense (and thus

³² About three weeks prior to his death, Malcolm X made a trip to Selma, where he was scheduled to speak. Haley notes the following exchange in his epilogue to the *Autobiography*: “At the church where he would speak, Malcolm X was seated on the platform next to Mrs. Martin Luther King, to whom he leaned and whispered that he was ‘trying to help,’ she told *Jet*. ‘He said he wanted to present an alternative; that it might be easier for whites to accept Martin’s proposals after hearing him (Malcolm X). I didn’t understand him at first,’ said Mrs. King. ‘He seemed rather anxious to let Martin know he was not causing trouble or making it difficult, but that he was trying to make it easier... Later, in the hallway, he reiterated this. He seemed sincere...’” (427).

singularity and self-determination). Such a notion required that he both conjure and refigure the troubling ways that the possibility of Black violence was circumscribed by White fear within American *doxa*.

In that sense, while Malcolm X certainly did advocate unqualifiedly for Black self-defense in the face of White terror (pun intended), his frequent reliance on the tropes of revolution and armed resistance also served two significant rhetorical purposes: furthering Black self-determination and modeling a less desirable civil rights alternative to White audiences. In terms of the first purpose, self-determination, Malcolm X was well-versed with both the proverbial carrot and stick. In one clear example, he sought to incite a shared sense of racial pride through invoking Cassius Clay as metaphor for the collective Black freedom struggle. “You can’t sing up on freedom. But you can swing up on some freedom. Cassius Clay can sing. But singing didn’t help him to become the heavyweight champion of the world. Swinging helped him” (“Ballot”). Using this strategy, Malcolm X tapped the collective pride many African-Americans felt both at Clay’s championship and his frequently outspoken expressions of African-American Hush Harbor rhetoric and epistemology. Clay thus served as a kind of ideal model for Malcolm X’s vision of a reappraised Black collective sense of self. This was one strategy of many that Malcolm X relied on to help Black folks embrace their legitimate right to defend themselves should the need arise to do so.

On another hand, Malcolm X did not hesitate to use the proverbial stick to prompt Black audiences to see violence in the name of self-defense as an occasionally necessary option. Given the “distasteful image” of him that had been constructed in the media, he

was aware that some Black audiences might have inaccurate preconceptions of his principled stand on violence that could unfortunately make them unwilling to hear him. To that end, Malcolm X sought to jar reticent, integrationist leaning audiences out of what he saw as a position of excessive passivity and domestication. In one painful but no doubt effective strategy, he pointed out the contradiction between African-Americans being willing to fight abroad for America while remaining reticent to resort to violence back here at home to protect Black communities and Black children.

You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it's true. How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your churches are being bombed, and your little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you're going to be violent with Hitler, and Tojo, and somebody else that you don't even know? ("Grassroots")

Much of the power of this passage emerges through a conflicting blend of patriotism, pride, grief, shame, outrage, and a drive towards justice. As such, these exhortations are not so much about advocating violence as about refiguring Black ontology on its own terms rather than those of White ontology and dominant American *doxa*.

In addition to these carrot and stick strategies for furthering Black self-determination, Malcolm X also relied on tropes of revolution and armed resistance to deploy what might be termed "trickster rhetorics," which provided central strategies in his approach to affecting White audiences. First, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that Malcolm X was disingenuous in his advocacy of the use of violence for Black self-defense; rather, I am claiming that his awareness of how these statements would be read by White audiences afforded him an invaluable rhetorical tool for opening up space in

which American *doxa* might be refigured along more racially egalitarian lines. Angela Davis states the case similarly, arguing that Malcolm X's "rhetorical brandishing of guns served a very specific purpose with respect to the 1960s mass movement for black liberation. Not one to resort to circumvention and euphemism, Malcolm certainly meant what he said" (284). More specifically, Davis notes, he would "oratorically invoke the bullet" primarily "to emphasize the black community's determined quest for political power" (284). In this sense, "the bullet" is more of a rhetorical lever for creating movement than it is an implement of destruction, and Malcolm X's "rhetorical brandishing" certainly entailed an element of public performance. In other words, his oratorical invocations of "the bullet" indicate an awareness that *tropes* of Black violence could be leveraged through the media to achieve wider reaching effects than could *actual* Black violence (in the sense of armed insurrection), especially when alongside other civil rights discourses. The trickster element here lies in Malcolm X's use of the threat of violence as a means to avoid actual violence, as well as the use of rhetoric and intellect to outsmart and overcome an opponent who was physically more powerful (even several million highly determined Black revolutionaries would have had little hope of defeating the entire U.S. armed forces in open combat).

While the trickster figure is complex, often contradictory, and not without its potential problems in this context, the primary trickster characteristic of "living by one's wits" is both relevant and productive here. Indeed, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is rife with trickster inflicted tales of this sort, and there is evidence to suggest that Malcolm X saw this characteristic as linked by divine providence to his mission of Black

liberation. For instance, just weeks prior to his March 1964 split with NOI, Malcolm X departed New York to rejoin Clay's training camp in Florida, noting, "I flew back to Miami feeling that it was Allah's intent for me to help Cassius prove Islam's superiority before the world—*through proving that mind can win over brawn*. I don't have to remind you how people everywhere scoffed at Cassius Clay's chances of beating Liston" (306, emphasis added). And this spiritually ordained trickster characteristic—overcoming seemingly impossible physical odds through superior mental prowess—was consistent throughout many of Malcolm X's own experiences. In the *Autobiography*, he narrates numerous events in which he overcame greater force and even undermined various oppressive systems through trickster rhetorics. During his tenure as a railroad porter, for example, he avoided getting drawn into a fight with a very large, very drunk, uniformed White soldier. Through eschewing physical force in favor of his intelligence, Malcolm X left the soldier standing in the train naked from the waist up before his fellow soldiers were able to sit him back down peacefully. The tale closes thusly: "I would never forget that—that I couldn't have whipped that white man as badly with a club as I had with my mind" (77). Perhaps even more relevant for the argument at hand is Malcolm X's retelling of the means by which he avoided being drafted during World War II. In short, he began deploying trickster strategies as early as ten days prior to his visit to the army induction center, planting seeds in the ears of neighborhood informants to suggest he had anti-American intentions (104-5). On the day of his visit, he carefully crafted himself into a hyperbolic image of the stereotypical Harlem hustler, performing extremely over-the-top versions of the language and mannerisms of the street hustler (105). Upon being

ushered in to meet with the Army psychiatrist for his intake assessment, Malcolm X ramped up these performances further still, eventually confessing the following: “Daddy-o, now you and me, we’re from up North here, so don’t you tell nobody. . . . I want to get sent down south. Organize them Negro soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!” (106). The recruitment officer apparently bought this trickster charade, and needless to say, Malcolm X was never chosen to serve in the armed forces.

My contention here is that Malcolm X was well-versed in marshaling White fears and expectations and turning them to his own ends, and these trickster experiences significantly informed his approaches to rewriting American *doxa* in the minds of White audiences. For instance, given the much smaller size of the African American population as vs. Whites,³³ he would have recognized the potential value of trickster strategies through which superior mental prowess might outmatch superior numbers. A compelling moment in Alex Haley’s epilogue to the *Autobiography* might make this contention clear. Haley recalls a moment when Malcolm X divulged a detail that he seemingly felt compelled to admit but which he did not wish to have included in the book manuscript. He discusses his past recklessness in putting an apparently loaded gun to his head and pulling the trigger in order to secure leadership over his former burglary gang. However, he then confesses, “I palmed the bullet” (Haley 416). Haley offered to add this detail to the manuscript, but Malcolm X declined, saying, “No, leave it that way. Too many people would be so quick to say that’s what I’m doing today, bluffing” (416). This incident is

³³ Malcolm X commented somewhat regularly on this population disparity, including noting during his debate at the Oxford Union, “I live in America where there are only 20 million blacks against probably 160 million whites.”

revealing in at least two ways. For one, palming the bullet signifies a trickster move to stack the odds in his favor. Secondly, his decision to leave this detail out of the main body of the manuscript further demonstrates that Malcolm X was an inveterate rhetorician, always seeking particular effects in all of his rhetorical activities. In this case, he opted to maintain an illusion in order to keep his uncompromising ethos intact. He would not even allow for the possibility that he might be read as anything less than dead serious in his advocacy of Black self-defense, as it was largely this ethos in particular that ensured he had the listening ears of the mainstream media.

And yet, while Malcolm X was dead serious about the imperative of Black self-defense, it is extremely unlikely that he ever took particularly seriously the idea of mounting a successful armed overthrow of White hegemony. Ultimately, by contrast, he believed that if African Americans had a strong sense of singularity and were mentally and physically prepared to defend Black lives and Black communities by force, violent overthrow would never become necessary. In fact, he stated precisely this point during his masterful performance in the Oxford Union debate:

I live in America where there are only 20 million blacks against probably 160 million whites. One of the reasons that I am in no way reluctant or hesitant to do whatever is necessary to see that black people do something to protect themselves, I honestly believe that the day that they do, many whites will have more respect for them, and there'll be more whites on their side than there are now on their side with these little wishy-washy 'love thy enemy' that they have been using up until now. ("Oxford")

In other words, the sentiments expressed here perfectly illustrate Malcolm X's complex blend of trickster rhetorics and uncompromising commitment to do what was necessary to improve Black lives. He believed that a willingness to use force, or at most an

occasional show of force in self-defense, would suffice to give African Americans a firmer place from which to demand equal rights. In light of Blacks being significantly outnumbered (in the event of armed conflict), an emphasis on mental prowess over physical strength was indispensable, and his militant ethos lent strength to the effects of his trickster work in these terms. Put differently, Malcolm X believed that a legitimate embrace of Blackness as singularity, along with the willingness to act accordingly in defense of Black lives, would make irrelevant the question of whether or not African-Americans would ever need to turn to armed revolt to effect genuine change. Perhaps he hoped that this visible embrace of self-defense and singularity could begin rewriting some of the core notions of Black inferiority within American *doxa*, such as tropes of Black passivity and subservience, so that the majority of Whites could come to accept African-Americans as full human beings.

In addition to Malcolm X's savvy in leveraging the mere possibility of Black armed resistance, and his willingness to bear the public perception that his primary aim was to "kill up crackers," he also drew from mythologies of the American Revolution, in the vein of Maria W. Stewart, to generate rhetorical effect. He worked very effectively to evoke these powerful commonplaces in the American imaginary to invert racial hierarchies, undermine mythologies of Whiteness, and make the idea of armed resistance more palatable to a majority of African Americans. To the last point, "The Ballot or the Bullet," delivered before an African American audience in Detroit, provides perhaps the best iteration: "It'll be . . . the ballot or it'll be the bullet. It'll be liberty, or it'll be death. And if you're not ready to pay that price, don't use the word freedom in your vocabulary"

("Ballot"). As did Maria Stewart, Malcolm X evokes Patrick Henry in order to situate the African-American freedom struggle at the heart of the American project, rather than at its periphery. This re-centering move casts African Americans as the true inheritors of the original American revolutionaries, relegating Whites to the oppressive role originally played by the redcoats. He also maps this binary logic—essentially a thinly veiled ultimatum—onto the two primary poles of civil rights discourse: King's nonviolent drive for voting rights versus Malcolm X's own advocacy of armed resistance. And in the last line of this passage, the direct second person address challenged his African-American audience to marshal their deep sense of patriotism and national pride—and the requisite unwavering courage and resolve—to further the American project by embodying the American revolutionary ethos.

A great deal of this speech was built around a principle of inversion and a clear rejection of the double standard that commonly justified White violence, no matter how vile and unwarranted, while vilifying the slightest possibility of Black armed resistance.

[The white man] made the mistake of teaching me that Patrick Henry was a patriot, and George Washington... wasn't nothing non-violent about ol' Pat, or George Washington. 'Liberty or death' is what brought about the freedom of whites in this country from the English . . . these thirteen little scrawny states, tired of taxation without representation, tired of being exploited and oppressed and degraded, told that big British Empire, liberty or death. And here you have 22 million Afro-Americans, black people today, catching more hell than Patrick Henry ever saw. ("Ballot")

In this passage, Malcolm X evokes Henry and Washington to both situate Black revolution within the American tradition and to build an affective bridge by which ambivalent Whites, rooting again for the "thirteen little scrawny states," could better recognize and listen to the legitimacy of Black civil unrest. Which do you value, his

inversions implicitly demanded of Whites, your deeply held American ideals or your frozen, static, hypocritical Whiteness? Similar to the rhetorical brilliance Stewart evinced with these same key strategies, Malcolm X virtually demanded that Whites either relinquish their claims to American founding principles or open themselves to re-figured ontologies of race. The nation could not possibly have both—a choice must be made.

Perhaps his most eloquent, moving, and broadly accessible expression of these ideas and strategies took place a mere two and a half months before his death during his renowned debate at the Oxford Union. The debate centered on the proposition “Is extremism in defense of human liberty a vice?” (“Oxford”). Arguing that extremism was no vice in such cases, Malcolm X contended that American Whites were essentially making a Black revolution necessary and inevitable in order to fulfill the American promise. He noted, “the racist never understands a peaceful language, the racist never understands the nonviolent language,” and “the only way we can bring about a change is to speak the language that they understand.” He then went on to convincingly suggest that African Americans had become the true inheritors of the American tradition and, as such, were justified in turning to the same violent means that gave rise to the United States in the first place. I quote at length:

We have been the victim of [the White man’s] brutality, we are the ones who face his dogs, who tear the flesh from our limbs, only because we want to enforce the Supreme Court decision. We are the ones who have our skulls crushed, not by the ku klux klan, but by policeman, all because we want to enforce what they call the Supreme Court decision. We are the ones upon whom water hoses are turned on, practically so hard that it rips the clothes from our back, not men, but the clothes from the backs of women and children; you’ve seen it yourself. All because we want to enforce what they call the law. Well any time you live in a society supposedly and it doesn’t enforce its own laws, because the color of a

man's skin happens to be wrong, then I say those people are justified to resort to any means necessary to bring about justice where the government can't give them justice. ("Oxford")

Being the extremely media savvy rhetor that he was (Banks 199), Malcolm X poignantly evokes here the shameful, horrific television images that he knew had carried tremendous power abroad, juxtaposing a vulnerable Black humanity against the brute, animal aggression of American segregation. As a result, not only does he make a compelling case for Black armed resistance, he also undermines mythologies of American Whiteness as the proper subject of history. One overall effect is to turn "the Negro problem" effectively into "the White problem," making racial discord in the U.S. not a result of Black racial inferiority (as had been argued throughout American history) but rather an effect of White hypocrisy and deeply flawed American cultural, political, social, and economic systems.

And while Malcolm X was unflinching throughout the Oxford debate in his withering critique of White American hegemony, he closed the speech in something of an uncharacteristic move that powerfully reflected his newly revised views on race and his uncommonly sophisticated understandings of race and ontology. In his closing line, he says, "And I, for one, will join in with anyone—don't care what color you are—as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth" ("Oxford"). Such an invitation, rather than signaling some tepid embrace of an integrationist agenda, in fact indicates a profound insight into the nature of race and ontology. As is well known, during his first pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X adjusted his views on Whiteness. But importantly, this shift did not entail a "love your enemy" philosophy or anything similar; he remained quite clear on who the enemy was (the White man), and he remained

determined to meet violence with violence, should the need arise. Instead, Malcolm X fundamentally reappraised what it meant to be “White,” or who counted as White. Rather than thinking of Whiteness in terms of skin color, he had come to theorize the “White man” as primarily “attitudes and actions” towards Blacks and other nonwhites. In other words, he had disarticulated Whiteness from biology. In discussing his experiences and interactions with people of all races and complexions during his famed first pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm says,

That morning was when I first began to reappraise the ‘white man.’ It was when I first began to perceive that ‘white man,’ as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, ‘white man’ meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been. That morning was the start of a radical alteration in my whole outlook about ‘white’ men.”
(*Autobiography* 333-4)

In short, Malcolm X had come to experience race as ontology. In his famed letter home from Mecca, he says the following: “We were *truly* all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the ‘white’ from their *minds*, the ‘white’ from their *behavior*, and the ‘white’ from their *attitude*” (340). In a similar vein, after having returned home from Mecca, Malcolm describes an exchange at a traffic light with a White man in a car next to him. “‘*Malcolm X!*’ he called out—and when I looked, he stuck his hand out of his car, across at me, grinning. ‘Do you mind shaking hands with a white man?’ Imagine that! Just as the traffic light turned green, I told him ‘I don’t mind shaking hands with human beings. Are you one?’” (363). There are three related interesting points here. One is the notion that being a human being is not reducible to a

self-evident biological state; it is, as Malcolm previously noted, attitudes and actions. In that sense, one cannot say of others whether they are human beings or not—rather, it is an internal question that one must first answer for oneself and then embody in the world. Secondly, Malcolm's response assumes and enacts a reversal of the human/nonhuman dichotomy that was commonly imposed on differences between Whites and Blacks. In asking whether or not this man was a human being, he puts the onus on Whites to demonstrate their worthiness to be included within the category of humanity, a burden that has for far too long characterized the work of African-American rhetors and activists. And finally, the inclusion of this anecdote within the *Autobiography* enacts a public rewriting of American *doxa* through denaturalizing hierarchies of race and the otherwise always already presumed equation of Whiteness with humanity.

Similarly, just as Malcolm X had begun to express willingness to work alongside people he had formerly known as White, so had he perhaps begun to reconcile with America itself. When *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published about six months after his death, it was far from the hate-filled screed that most White Americans had been led to expect. Certainly the book reported on the Nation of Islam teachings that Malcolm X had espoused for much of his career, and there was an unremitting indictment of America's history and its current state of race relations. But at the same time, as the narrative progresses, we see a man increasingly interested in the possibility of finding a common ground amongst all Americans, as is indicated in the passage quoted above. By the end, it is evident that Malcolm X had come to believe that at least some White Americans might be reasoned with, might be willing and able to listen. To these

audiences, and to conservative African-Americans who might have found his ideas too extreme to be palatable, he offers an invitation late in the book to try to understand America from his perspective. “I think that an objective reader may see how in the society to which I was exposed as a black youth here in America, for me to wind up in a prison was really just about inevitable. It happens to so many thousands of black youth. I think that an objective reader may see how when I heard ‘The white man is the devil,’ when I played back what had been my own experiences, it was inevitable that I would respond positively . . .” (*Autobiography* 378). Contrary to the voice of the firebrand that had largely dominated his public performances, this passage evinces a kind of tenderness, a muted appeal, a desire to be heard by all Americans of goodwill, and perhaps even a subtle note of explanation for why he had made some of the choices he had made. This is not to say that Malcolm X ever sought or ever would have sought the approval of White Americans; he remained a Hush Harbor rhetorician until the end. But just as Dr. King moved closer to some of Malcolm X’s militant views later in his career,³⁴ so too does the above passage suggest that Malcolm X had come to believe that racial reconciliation might just be possible, so long as “objective readers” were willing to try to understand the malleable, rhetorical nature of race and to re-shape American *doxa* collaboratively and on more egalitarian terms.

It is for these reasons and many more that James Cone has argued, “All Americans owe Malcolm a great debt. He was not a racist, as many misguided observers

³⁴ For instance, Keith Gilyard argues that “the influence of Black power proponents upon [King] is . . . evident in his last speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) on August 16, 1967 . . .” (10).

have claimed. He was an uncompromising truth-teller whose love for his people empowered him to respect all human beings. ‘I am for truth,’ he said, ‘no matter who tells it. I’m for justice no matter who is for or against it. I am a human being first and foremost, and as such I am for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole’” (“Malcolm X” 1195). On the surface at least, some of Malcolm X’s later views quoted here contradict many of his earlier perspectives on race, justice, the possibility of solidarity, and the nature of humanity. A lesser rhetorician and leader, or an intellectual with a less capacious mind, or an activist less devoted to the collective well-being of African-Americans, might have been troubled by some of these apparent paradoxes in the trajectory of his thought. Indeed, in our contemporary era in which changing one’s mind is often read as a sign of weakness, a career such as Malcolm X’s—marked by numerous transformations—would be difficult to envision. But considering the number and extent of his shape shifting self-recreations, and given his ontological tendencies towards becoming over being and creating change by any means necessary, the closing months of his life might well have proven to be his most radical transformation yet.³⁵ What further, perhaps more fundamental social change that transformation might have signaled for America, tragically, we will never know.

Conclusion: A Rhetoric of Becoming

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Maria W. Stewart and Malcolm X exemplify key ways that African-American rhetoric has long theorized relationships

³⁵ Angela Davis, in her thoughtful and open-ended “Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X,” suggests that he was killed at “an apparently critical juncture in the evolution of his political philosophy and practice” (282).

between race and ontology in complex and productive ways, working also to refigure these relationships and thereby shape the trajectory of the American project in indispensable ways. Stewart, as a founding mother of African-American rhetoric, women's rights discourses, and Black feminism, helped shift the landscape of possibilities surrounding who could speak and who could be heard in the public sphere. She both drew from and contributed to abolitionist discourses, deploying particularly powerful inversions of racial hierarchies and opening up possibilities for being heard through masterfully juxtaposing tensions and promises inherent to the American mythos. Moreover, balancing a critique of American power and an insistence on Black self-determination, Stewart foreshadowed many of the strategies that would inform centuries of African-American rhetorical practices. Similarly, Malcolm X drew from and contributed to the rich, rhizomatic resources of African-American rhetoric to uncompromisingly and relentlessly cultivate a sense of Blackness as singularity. And perhaps more effectively than any other rhetor to date, he worked to unravel myths of Whiteness and dismantle their accompanying systems of racial hierarchy to make plain the ways that Whites' drive to obscure Black humanity was keeping America on a collision course with itself. Taken together, the parallel efforts of these two indispensable American rhetors illuminate a rhetoric of becoming that has served to substantively remake Black ontologies and American *doxa* at large.

This point returns us to one last central question this chapter has sought to raise: how can theorizing ontology alongside the rich resources of African-American rhetoric help produce incisive critical frameworks through which we can analyze the central,

stabilizing role that tropes of Blackness have played in shaping the very meaning of being in the U.S. The inimitable James Baldwin provides the basis for one such framework. During an interview for Kenneth Clark's 1963 television special entitled *The Negro and the American Promise*, Baldwin was asked what the current state of race relations might mean for the future of the nation. He gave, in part, the following reply: "What white people have to do . . . is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it." Consistent with other works analyzed in this chapter, Baldwin's contention inverts established racial hierarchies. However, Baldwin goes further. Not only does he refuse the very notion of "the Negro problem," he suggests that "the nigger" was always already a construction of Whiteness explicitly manufactured to shore up some central, innate deficiency in ontologies of Whiteness itself, in the very meaning of White being.³⁶ In Baldwin's framework, there is an uncrossable ontological divide between "the nigger" and "a man" that has nothing to do with biology or even hierarchies of culture. "The nigger" cannot succeed to or ascend to the state of being a "man" because the two categories are mutually exclusive by definition. "The nigger" cannot become a "man," but must be exposed as a fabrication and demolished, its genealogy (in a Foucaultian sense) laid bare, the human beings beneath its crushing

³⁶ As a white scholar, it is quite uncomfortable and arguably inappropriate to use the word "nigger" in any context, as it is impossible to remove or even significantly muffle the tremendous violence the term still carries. Nonetheless, given that only this term accurately connotes the sociopolitical and tropical formulation to which Baldwin refers, I have opted to use the term here (albeit always in scare quotes), rather than attempting to whitewash the matter through substituting phrases such as the still troubling but less offensive term "the Negro" or the nearly euphemistic phrase "the 'N' word."

weight released from the impossible task of shoring up a failing Whiteness that relies for its very existence on the continuous creation and destruction of “the nigger.”³⁷ As such, if the U.S. were to have any possibility of a promising future, Whites would need to shift the national conversation away from the supposed shortcomings of Blackness, seeking instead to refigure the very meaning of White being towards singularity rather than hierarchy and difference-from-center (with Whiteness, of course, as the presumed center).

To be clear, Baldwin was not suggesting that the possibility of increased racial equality was dependent upon the willingness of Whites to engage in this heretofore unprecedented ontological refiguring. And it is certainly not my point to conclude a chapter on African-American rhetoric by positing White agency as a cure-all for racial discord. However, I do think it both relevant and important to highlight and undermine the traditional “division of labor” by which Americans collectively attempt to solve “the problem of race.” Historically, African-Americans have been largely tasked with the burden of understanding and refiguring the workings of race within the American context, being alternately called upon as experts on race yet dismissed as “biased” should this expertise too heavily decenter White comfort. Krista Ratcliffe described this dynamic as “a gendered and racialized silence that haunts U.S. public discourses” (79). Baldwin’s

³⁷ It bears brief mention that Baldwin’s comments here do not equate to an early form of Afropessimism. While both lines of thinking recognize the structural role Blackness plays in stabilizing Whiteness, Baldwin is far from theorizing Blackness as a condition of ontological death. For Baldwin, “the nigger” has ultimately more to do with Whiteness than with Blackness. The term does not suggest Blackness as absence, but is instead more accurately a rhetorical device for managing and distributing precarity, to use Butler’s term.

framework, by contrast, tasks Whites too with generating expertise on the meaning of race and its role in American ontology and American *doxa*. To do anything less is to capitulate to yet another way of exploiting Black (intellectual) labor on behalf of the American project.

As an alternative to this still ongoing mode of exploitation, and in the interests of countering the historical tendency to jettison African-American rhetoric and epistemology to the “caves of difference” or the “cellar of identity politics” (Nunley, *Keepin’ It Hushed* 7), any person interested in advancing the cause of social justice might seek to employ core strategies and epistemologies of the rhetoric of becoming. In this vein, one significant insight that has emerged over the course of this chapter bears reiterating. Namely, the work of Maria W. Stewart and Malcolm X demonstrate that securing the conditions of possibility under which one might get a listening may fundamentally require intervening within the culturally dominant *doxa* and the ontologies it makes possible. This insight is particularly salient when rhetorical conditions prevail that Sutton and Mifsud have discussed as “turning down the other.” A brief example from Plato should help clarify this point. Given his unwavering conviction that arriving at timeless, transcendent truth is not only possible but necessary, Plato famously denigrated rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. Contrary to philosophy’s drive to identify and disseminate universal truths, rhetoric was merely a mode of deceit, a way to make a lesser case seem the stronger. However, such a claim presumes that the lesser or stronger cases are self-evident as such, as if the premises of any argument exist in an absence of politics. In such cases, what recourse could be left to democratic citizens whose very ontologies are taken

unquestionably to be a “lesser case?” As American history illustrates, few options are left beyond repeating cycles of and strategies for turning down the other. As it pertains specifically to African-American rhetoric and social change, centuries of American *doxa* would have held virtually any argument for racial equality to be, in Plato’s language, the weaker case. Therefore, as the works of Maria Stewart and Malcolm X make clear, this necessary inversion, this making a lesser case seem the stronger, is utterly necessary (Plato’s hyperbolic misgivings notwithstanding). Put differently, the rhetoric of becoming has proven invaluable for creating the conditions of possibility under which ontology might shift, might make natural that which *doxa* holds to be unnatural. Unsettling the resting place of the majority in productive ways, contrary to the historical uses and momentum of rhetoric, must be recognized as a fundamental necessity if rhetoric is to have any legitimate chance of doing its work in a robust democracy.

CHAPTER FOUR: Mechanisms of Not-Listening: The Black Trope as Rhetorical

Virus in the Killing of Trayvon Martin

Despite the contemporary proliferation of colorblind rhetoric and increasingly commonplace presumptions about the U.S. having entered a post-racial moment, race remains a powerful and deeply inequitable social logic and political rationality. The history of theorizing race in the western intellectual tradition has lead, over the last several centuries, from biological/scientific groundings through cultural hierarchies and into the superficially appealing notion that race is simply a social construction that should therefore no longer matter. This chapter attempts a corrective to the aporia in these theories by arguing for an understanding of the nature, functions, and effects of race grounded explicitly in rhetorical theory. In this sense, I'm not interested in staging a scientific-philosophical inquiry into what race *is*, but rather asking rhetorical-philosophical questions about what race *does* and how particular meanings, affects, and discourses of race and racialization become terrains of both normativity and generative possibility. Through the concept of the rhetorical virus, I analyze the meanings, circulation, effects, and affects of Blackness in the public sphere, as a vibrant *actant* of movement always already tropological. Blackness must be understood here not as a fixed or static essence, but as *becoming*, as modalities of Black people becoming Black, both through agency and within hegemonic, restrictive epistemologies. Blackness is thus always in motion, both/alternately as a space of agency for the being and becoming of Black subjects, and as a rhetorical virus and political rationality for stabilizing the meanings and privileges of Whiteness. In these latter terms, this essay investigates what

racism does as the non-apprehension of and not-listening to Blackness, to Black subjectivity on its own terms, analyzing how the affects, effects, and functions of racialization as rhetorical power move within and beyond the mere linguistic to produce substantial rhetorical and material consequences, such as repression and physical violence. More specifically, I argue that the Black trope as rhetorical virus has historically functioned as a means of obscuring Black humanity, and I then apply the insights generated herein to an analysis of the shooting death of Trayvon Martin.

Throughout much of the history of rhetoric, *trope* has denoted a reservoir of strategies from which to draw in order to enhance arguments, to convey meaning in effective and affective ways, and to persuade audiences. The dominant rhetorical meaning of trope is rooted in Greek *tropein*, “to turn” (Corbett 461). The implication is that tropes alter the meanings of words, expand them, redirect them, turn their meaning from the literal to the figurative. The concept of the trope, in this framework, has historically referred to categories of figures of speech, rather than denoting common instantiations of metaphors (such as the frontier in westerns or the trope of invisibility in African American literature), as I will argue. As such, conventional definitions of trope provide only indirect support for understanding the ways that bodies can be said to take on semantic significance. Building upon and extending these conventional definitions, we might understand language, culture, meaning, and bodies as always already tropic in their manufacture and in their effects.

Working in this direction, a number of scholars working at intersections between language, power, and race have provided groundwork for understanding the ways that

bodies signify. Stuart Hall, for example, argues that race is a discursive formation, one that maps hierarchical meanings onto otherwise insignificant physical differences such as skin color and hair type (*Race: The Floating Signifier*). Similarly, Hortense Spillers, argues that the Black body is commonly inscribed with heavily loaded markers of race that can constrain the range of meanings of Black humanity within a narrow range of categories (or tropes). Taken together, the various forces that shape the meanings of bodies can effectively bury (in Spillers' terms) human agents beneath these significations. This burying is precisely the kind of work effected by the Black trope, which Norris Nunley describes as "swallow[ing] up the distinctive individual personhood of any particular Black person" ("Cicero's Tongue"). Placing this notion within a broader context suggested by Lakoff and Johnson, it seems evident that particularly resonant tropes, far from being mere figures of speech, function as cultural logics, as ways of thinking and being (236). The balance of this chapter will rely on these expanded definitions of trope to understand systems of racial meaning and their effects in the contemporary U.S.

In these terms, race is not an identifiable set of physical attributes then so much as it is a set of affects and effects inscribed through and on bodies, manufacturing meanings that often produce and buttress stubborn and tenacious not-listening in the public sphere. Through these processes, once a racialized body "does" certain work troubling/disrupting certain logics we are situated squarely within knowledge production, the processes and domains of rhetoric and political rationality. In other words, the process of how a listener comes to "make sense" must be understood as motivated by specific epistemological and

institutional investments that are always-already occupying the nexus of effects and persuasion, investments which furthermore are imbricated into our very understandings of ourselves as subjects, as constituted through the motivated language/discourse we use to make sense. In this view, as Nunley has argued, rhetoric must be understood broadly as a shaping force helping to produce the very meaning of being, further revealing the meaning of being to be unavoidably political (*Keepin' It Hushed* 12-13).

In this analysis, the Black trope provides a framework through which to trouble facile arguments about whether or not Zimmerman “really is a racist” or not. This is not to say that such conversations have no merit, as calling out overt racism in the public sphere remains a deeply necessary task. However, arguments over this question of Zimmerman’s racism reduce the problem of racism to a binary in which there are good guys and bad guys functioning from and through individual conviction. This binary makes racism primarily a matter of individual action and individual volition, neglecting the profound shaping effects of the long history and current sweep of racist and racializing discourse in the U.S. Did Zimmerman intentionally pursue Martin as a result of conscious racism? Only Zimmerman himself could answer this question with authority. However, by reworking the question of intentionality through foregrounding the role of the Black trope in shaping Zimmerman’s actions, I contend, alongside Nunley, that Zimmerman’s shooting of Martin amounted essentially to an attempt to debilitate, obliterate, or make moribund any transference of productive affect, effect, and meaning in the network of significations linked with Blackness. Zimmerman’s actions were, in

short, an attempt to murder a trope. Tragically, a young man's life was lost in the process, yet another instance of collateral damage in the drive to protect Whiteness from the other.

This argument has clear significance for understanding the circulation and effects of systemic racism in ways that incorporate but are not solely predicated upon notions of individual volition. Moreover, I contend that tropic, rhetorically grounded understandings of race can trump colorblind ideologies, revealing their failings, codings, and reliance on "old-fashioned" modes of racism as strategies of dissimulation. Thus, understanding the cultural effects of the Black trope as rhetorical virus provides, as I will argue, a much more agile and productive framework for understanding the role that race continues to play in anti-Black violence and in shaping public sphere discourse about race, specifically in response to a common but facile arguments about intentionality and colorblindness that many commenters mounted in defense of Zimmerman's actions. If my argument holds, the trope of Blackness is then best understood as, in addition to a problem of representation, a kind of organizing principle for the American imaginary, American selves, and the nation-state itself.

Before providing an overview of the structure of this chapter, two brief definitions bear reiterating. Elsewhere in this dissertation, I have developed in depth the concepts of *not-listening* and the *rhetorical virus*. For our purposes here, the *rhetorical virus* may be understood first as a cluster of signs around which particularly potent cultural energies are cathected. Like their physiological counterparts, rhetorical viruses carry the capacity for consequence, but in altering subjectivity rather than physiology. Moreover, these consequences may be effected with or without the willing cooperation of the host subject,

which as we will shortly see, productively refigures the question of intentionality in racist acts. Secondly, *not-listening* should be understood not as a passive or distracted process, but as an active process of rendering meaningful sound into noise. Put in terms less indebted to intentionality, not-listening might be understood as the “deflection” effect in Kenneth Burke’s terministic screens.³⁸ Thus, the process may range from an active delegitimation of the speech of the other to a kind of collateral damage enacted through an inability or unwillingness to listen, especially when listening would potentially prompt the listening subject to reevaluate some substantive element of her worldview. Put differently, if listening is understood as, to borrow from Adrienne Janus, “a mode of attending to resonances” (185 note 4), then not-listening is effectively stopping one’s ears to resonances and the potential adjacencies, or sympathetic resonances, they entail.

With these introductory frameworks in mind, I move next to providing a distinctive definition of the concept of trope, integrating and building upon insights from within the rhetorical tradition. I then link this definition with theories of race and racialization, arguing for the significant utility of rhetoric and trope as modes of understanding race and its effects and material consequences. Following a brief discussion of some of the content that has been ascribed to the Black trope and inscribed on the Black body, I apply these collective insights to a reading of the events immediately leading up to Trayvon Martin’s death at the hands of George Zimmerman on the evening

³⁸ Burke defines terministic screens as follows: “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 45).

of February 26, 2012. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the ways that the Black trope was deployed in Zimmerman's trial as a means of vilifying the young Martin and securing his assailant's acquittal on the grounds of self-defense.

Trope as Cultural Resonance

Figures of speech denoted by trope typically include metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (Burke's four "master tropes"), amongst many others.³⁹ Yet the various types each have in common a generalized kind of semantic effect, a move from the literal to the figurative. Corbett suggests that tropes, "involve a *transference* of some kind," specifically, "a transference of meaning" (461). As vs. literal, denotative significations of words, "tropes involve a change of 'meaning,' since [they] result in effects that are different from the ordinary mode of expression" (461). Corbett expands on this notion through a brief discussion of Quintilian:

It was Quintilian who most explicitly related the figures to the logos, pathos, and ethos of argument. Quintilian looked upon the figures as another means of lending 'credibility to our arguments,' of 'exciting the emotions,' and of winning 'approval for our characters as pleaders' (Instit. Orat., IX, i). This view of the function of figures of speech is perhaps the most reliable attitude to adopt toward these devices of style. Because figures can render our thoughts vividly concrete, they help us to communicate with our audience clearly and effectively; because they stir emotional responses, they can carry truth, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'alive into the heart by passion'; and because they elicit admiration for the eloquence of the speaker or writer, they can exert a powerful ethical appeal. (459)

Here, Corbett is suggesting, via Quintilian, this attitude about tropes (as heightening the effects of ethos, pathos, logos) should be the dominant attitude, given the capacity of

³⁹ For Burke's four master tropes, see *A Grammar of Motives* (503-517).

tropes to produce greater persuasive effects in arguments. What is significant here in terms of a redefinition of trope is the emphasis on *effects*—especially on listeners—which allows for shifting the term out of the “merely” linguistic into the material, from affect to effect in the world. This emphasis resituates trope into the realm of rhetoric as a practical art.

Richard Lanham, in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, treats tropes similarly, though he resists trying to codify any singular definition. Of the body of work within rhetoric defining trope, Lanham suggests, “Theorists have differed in defining this term, and any single definition would be prescriptive. Such consensus as there is wants trope to mean a [f]igure that changes the meaning of a word or words . . .” (154-5). Within the body of rhetorical theory, then, the metaphor of “turning” typifies much of the work that has been done around trope throughout the history of rhetoric: tropes are generally understood as tools for conveying meaning and generating rhetorical effect, and as tools for persuasion.

Diverging from much of the work on tropes within both literary and rhetorical theory, this expanded sense of trope is particularly important for understanding the meaning of race and the work of racial signification in the contemporary U.S. To begin, I want to return to and continue to trouble notions that limit the tropological to “figurative language,” especially given the persuasive line of thinking that maintains that all language is essentially figurative. In Nietzsche’s view, for example, “all words are tropes in themselves” (“Lecture Notes” 107). He argues: “There is just as little distinction between actual words and tropes as there is between straightforward speech and rhetorical figures. What is usually called language is actually all figuration” (108).

Therefore, in Nietzsche's expanded sense of the word, tropes don't just *change the meanings of words*. Certainly they serve that purpose in the strict rhetorical sense, but there is also a level at which all language is tropological all the time. Ratcliffe makes a similar point in referring to the "tropological dimension of language" (9). Both scholars are making legible that the distinction between literal and figurative language is arbitrary, limited to soft categorical distinction. In actual language usage, a word's connotative significations are not epiphenomenal to the word itself. Denotation is not *a priori to*, but interacts with, shapes, and is shaped by, connotation.

A fully robust formulation of trope will also require deemphasizing the "speakerly" privilege that characterizes the history of rhetoric.⁴⁰ One way this privilege registers is in the implicit focus on intentionality in dominant rhetorical definitions of trope. For example, tropes are usually taught as strategies for enacting persuasion, for a deliberate "turning" of literal meaning. If we hold that to be true, can a metaphor count as a metaphor only when a speaker intends it as such? Can a reader legitimately interpret words as metaphorical even when a writer did not intend them as such? It seems evident that few if any rhetoricians would factor intentionality into their identifications of tropes, but how far should this openness be extended? What about deeply internalized turnings of meaning, as in such cases wherein tropes become naturalized and acted upon as if literal, as in the clichéd but nonetheless powerful Western cultural logic "time is money?" Deemphasizing this speakerly privilege will mean, at a minimum, foregrounding the

⁴⁰ Lisbeth Lipari suggests that a recognition of this speakerly privilege is becoming increasingly commonplace in rhetorical theory (227).

affective dimensions of language in which tropes function as *actants*. As another example, deeply resonant words like “America” must be understood as *tropes* because they come inevitably to stand in for other concepts so powerfully that one cannot utter the word without invoking the typical ways that these words “turn” meaning. Indeed, I would argue that the meaning of “America” is always already turned. As a single word, “America” does not fit any of the classical tropic forms as a figure of speech turning or transferring meaning from literal to figurative; however, for much of the twentieth century (and still lingering on in the national imaginary of U.S. “patriots”) the trope “America” functioned globally as *synechdoche par excellence* for “freedom,” “liberty,” and the possibility of individual social advancement, despite many very obvious counterexamples throughout the nation’s history.

In the canonical definitions of trope, little attention is paid to the fact that tropes also constrain meaning. In addition to the turning they effect from the presumed literal to connotative significations, tropes also function to focus the significations of the literal and metaphorical uses towards particular denotations, connotations, and partial characteristics. To state this point more strongly, tropes can have the effect of locking meaning down. This “locking” is of course impermanent, but it amounts nonetheless to significant semantic and historical pressure. For example, in clarifying the distinction between simile and metaphor as separate but related tropes, Corbett provides the following metaphor: “David was a lion in battle” (479). The suggested transference here is effected through similarity: “although the comparison is made between two things of unlike nature (*David* and *lion*), there is some respect in which they are similar (e.g., they

are courageous, or they fight ferociously, or they are unconquerable in a fight) . . . *David* is not literally a *lion*, but he is a lion in some ‘other sense’” (479, original emphasis). However, in this trope, our attention is already directed to certain aspects of “lion”—there are already denotative aspects of “lion” that form the preconditions for the connotative transference of meaning. For example, to say that “David is a lion” clearly does not mean that he fights with teeth and claws (except, perhaps, in another metaphorical sense). Nor are lions in any sense “unconquerable,” as this transference might convey; it seems much more likely that a majority of adult male lions, as head of a given pride, will indeed eventually succumb in a fight with a younger, stronger rival. Additionally, given that “battle” connotes primarily a human activity (fighting waged on a large scale, amongst numerous combatants), it would be dubious to suggest that lions engage in “battle” in any sense other than a metaphorical one. Similarly, to refer to David as a lion does not generally connote that he maintains a group of females of his species who hunt and kill his meals and whom he in turn dominates through intimidation and brute strength. To reiterate, then, this classical “turning” is not simply a clear cut and straightforward transference of meaning from a given word’s denotative meanings as refracted by the denotations of a different term; the conditions of the transference have already been at least partially shaped by other linguistic, historical, and cultural factors. The metaphorical affordances of lion are predominantly linked with (as Corbett details) courage, ferocity in a fight, even tremendous charisma. By contrast, lion does not commonly function as a metaphor for exploitative patriarchy enacted through violence and intimidation.

Tropes as Commonplaces

Given that the broader tropological nature of language conditions the possibilities for the turning of meaning enacted by tropes, we can similarly conclude that significant cultural energies cathect around especially powerful tropes. In these cases the possibilities for how these tropes might be received are also more heavily constrained. As previously noted, some scholars of literature and cultural analysis have embraced a broader sense of trope to indicate something like a cultural catalogue of common representations and literary and rhetorical devices characteristic to a given literature or body of cultural production. These connections between trope, meaning, and cultural cathexis suggest that the second sense of trope shares some characteristics with *commonplaces* in rhetorical theory. For example, if metaphor is a figure of speech and thus a trope, what do we make of metaphors that become quite common and thereby exert significant persuasive energies rooted in hegemonic cultural values and imperatives? It is at these cathexes that we can locate clear links between commonplace, trope, and literary and cultural critique.

Richard Lanham suggests that *commonplace* denotes a body of doctrines that is at times confusing and contradictory, though contemporary uses of the term usually indicate rich sources from which to draw in order to effect persuasion. “The commonplaces are always the places where we are ‘on familiar ground.’ Thus the complicated doctrine of the commonplaces veers off, in one direction, toward smaller-scale figures like Epitheton and Proverb, and in another direction, toward the larger-scale design of a full memory theater” (Lanham 170). Curiously, epitheton (“an adjective that frequently or habitually

accompanies a certain noun” (70)) is included within the commonplaces, but frequently or habitually used tropes are not. Similarly, while proverbs are often metaphorical (“a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is in no way intended as a literal comment on the value of birds), no mention is made of specific metaphors, or any trope for that matter, as commonplaces. Given these considerations, it seems reasonable to include common, habitual instantiations of particular tropes within the body of commonplaces; such an inclusion is neatly in line with the second sense of trope, as I am discussing it, and therefore, we have identified a precedent for this expanded usage within rhetorical theory itself.

Additionally, conceiving of the commonplace as a culturally specific memory theater in which we are on familiar ground implies that the commonplaces are storehouses of cultural knowledge, of cultural memory, functioning not only as sources from which to draw in service of persuasion, but in fact helping to organize and maintain meaning within language and within culture itself. Discussing commonplaces, Burke suggests:

The so-called ‘commonplaces’ or ‘topics’ in Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* . . . are a quick survey of ‘opinion’ in this sense. Aristotle reviews the purposes, acts, things, conditions, states of mind, personal characteristics, and the like, which people consider promising or formidable, good or evil, useful or dangerous, admirable or loathsome, and so on. All these opinions or assumptions . . . are catalogued as available means of persuasion. But the important thing, for our purposes, is to note that such types are derived from the principle of persuasion, in that they are but a survey of the things that people generally consider persuasive and of methods that have persuasive effects. (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 56)

Any given catalogue of a culture’s commonplaces, then, essentially comprises a storehouse of cultural knowledge regarding privileged states of mind, personal

characteristics, etc. It is important to highlight the fact that the commonplaces catalogued in these surveys of opinion are never simply neutral. As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, in order for a given means of persuasion to register as available, it must resonate significantly across multiple elements of culture, such that it enters into adjacency with other related means. It is through these discursive processes that tropes move from figures of speech into familiar, habitual elements of a cultural memory theater.

Furthermore, it is through this memory theater, this catalogue of persuasive things and methods, that meanings are also constrained. We might draw from it, for example, tropes like the “noble savage,” the “barbarian,” the “civilized man,” or the “witch.” Of course, these terms are commonly referred to as stereotypes, but I contend that trope is a more robust and appropriate mode of apprehension for them. For example, one mistaken colloquialism holds that there is a “kernel of truth” in all stereotypes. Tidy though this claim might be, it is both misleading and inaccurate, and it can offer no explanatory power for how this “kernel of truth” gets distorted into a stereotype, whose knowledge gets to count as the “truth” in question, etc. In the case of the barbarian, for example, there are certainly stereotypes about barbarians, but the barbarian is not only a stereotype. Part of the problem here is that in order to sort through what counts or not as a stereotype about barbarians is inextricably linked with power in the history of the usage of the term. Rather than claim that there is a kernel of truth in stereotypes about barbarians, it is more accurate to suggest that “barbarian” was at one point a contested term whose multiaccentuality, to borrow from Volosinov (23), was collapsed into a uni-accentuality—

the aims and outcomes of this struggle over language were to create a concept against which the western conceptualization of “civilization” could be defined. Barbarian, in other words, is a trope that functions as a foil to give western civilization an appearance of being “natural,” the good and the true. In short, I am suggesting that stereotype is to trope as caricature is to sketch; all are representations, but stereotype and caricature overemphasize particular characteristics for particular effects. One significant difference, however, is that caricatures are never mistaken for reality; they are understood to be exaggerated representations. Stereotypes, like other culturally resonant tropes, can function to constrain meaning in these exaggerated ways. They might be said to be an overworn and exaggerated species of trope, and perhaps one whose cultural energy cathexes are commonly more problematic and troubling than other tropes.

As the preceding discussion attempts to demonstrate, “trope” indicates a resonant adjacency between figures of speech, commonplaces, and *doxa*. I have been arguing for a two-fold definition of trope: tropes as various types of figures of speech, and tropes as specific, frequently used figures of speech that should be included within the commonplaces. Similarly, we may need a new sub-species of trope to signify the ways that language and meaning can be “turned” by something other than words—by images, actions, sounds, bodies, and other cultural actants. In this light, it seems that a strict focus on trope as turning the meanings of words is partially predicated upon a clear cut distinction between language and reality; such a focus implicitly embraces a conduit model of language, or one that suggests that language is reflective of knowledge rather than partially constitutive of it. This distinction is untenable; language is not “innocent,”

never merely neutral. Language and reality influence and shape each other. For example, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are not primarily linguistic, but are first and foremost conceptual modes of generating understanding about the world (272). They contend that metaphors, through providing conceptual frameworks for our experiences, create our realities (144). To be clear, there is nothing metaphysical about this claim; more accurately, it highlights the centrality of our conceptual frames for interpreting our experiences and providing bases for further action in and on the world. In their words, “Metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language” (153). In this sense, tropes can stand in for and function as cultural logics.

What I’m trying to get at with trope is a relationship between language and reality/sociality/materiality/bodies that is not deterministic or fixed, but is malleable and governed by history and power at the same time. In a similar vein, Ratcliffe argues, “What grounds the tropological function of language is the symbolic systems within which words ‘play’; within such systems, words (such as *gender* and *race*) function as cultural categories through which people see, organize, analyze, and value the world” (9).

To restate these connections, race as a word gets linked through given cultural symbolic systems to varying conceptual frameworks grounded in power and developed through historical processes; these frameworks then come to function as cultural categories, cultural logics, that help govern our further interpretations of the world and our actions within it. In these terms, we can see that tropes, as turnings of meanings, are far from simple tools for persuasion. Particularly resonant tropes must therefore be understood as

repositories of cultural energies, images, significations, and anything that tends to effect, consistently, specific kinds of turnings of meaning.

This expanded definition will help us account for non-linguistic “turnings” that are constructed through discourse, such as the ways that gendered and racialized bodies, for many Western subjects, consistently effect particular kinds of turnings. As Ratcliffe has argued, “bodies are troped, and tropes are embodied” (123). Describing this process in more detail, she argues:

Although tropes are terms within discourse, the socially constructed attitudes and actions associated with these terms become embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our cultural socialization . . . Once embodied, these tropes with their associated attitudes and actions may (un)-consciously inform our own attitude and actions. This chicken-and-egg cycle continues in perpetuity, with discourse socializing people and people accepting, resisting, and/or revising this socialization via discursive practices. (111)

Put differently, we inherit at birth a system of words and meanings, the most resonant of which we come to embody; these words and meanings also signify/connote bodies and epistemologies in coded ways that are inflected by power; these codings shape the very nature of our relationships with reality, our ontologies; finally, our ontologies become the existing systems into which subsequent generations of language users and cultural agents enter.

Rhetoric and the Meaning of the Black Body

Scholars of race have long understood race to be predominantly not about physiological difference, but about the meanings of any differences that a given set of ideologies might inscribe. In the opening lines of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois famously stated: “Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may

show the *strange meaning of being black* here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois 4, emphasis mine). Even as early as 1903, then, astute scholars of race understood that race is not merely a neutral category predicated upon physiological difference; rather, the more salient question is how the differences ascribed to physiology come to *mean*. However, it has not been until the last several decades that a body of theory has been developed to account for how differences come to mean, for the basic processes through which bodies come to signify. Stuart Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, juxtaposes his discursive model of race against two other perspectives: a realist conception of race, and a textual conception. In the realist view, race is accounted for by genetics: differences amongst races really *are* there, and along with these foundational assumptions about difference inevitably come essentialist hierarchies that mirror the broader social hegemony. In the textual view of race, there are no real differences between races—any perceived differences must be understood as entirely language based. This second view is more interesting than the realist conception, but any understanding of race that seeks to deny the very existence of difference would seem unable to grapple with the ongoing effects of perceived differences in structuring social inequalities. The position that Hall advocates, race as discursive, accepts that some differences exist between groups constructed as racially different, but what’s more important is to recognize the ways that those differences come to mean. Thus, for Hall, race is a “floating signifier,” a set of racialized physical attributes that take on different meanings across time and space, based on the imperatives of a

given social and political order (*Race: The Floating Signifier*). Hall further suggests: “Race is a discursive, not a biological category. That is to say, it is the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristic—skin color, hair texture, physical and bodily features, etc.—as symbolic markers in order to differentiate one group socially from another” (“The Question of Cultural Identity,” 617). And since the meaning of race changes over time, it is imperative to have a clear sense of the processes through which these meanings are constructed and transformed.

In her germinal article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers develops an analysis similar to Hall’s, but with a specific emphasis on some of the meanings of Black womanhood in the contemporary U.S. This article is quite helpful for understanding the relationships between language/discourse and Blackness, and for reading the interplay amongst Blackness read as sign, signifier, and signified (she makes reference to but does not limit herself specifically to these latter terms). In the following pages, I will link Spillers’ argument with a rhetorical grounding in the term *trope*, to facilitate a broader mode of rhetorical analysis that will be productive in analyzing relationships between race and public discourse and the effects of these relationships on bodies and subjects. But first, let us turn in some detail to Spillers.⁴¹

⁴¹ It is important to note that Spillers’ specific interests in this article lie in opening up a space of possibility for a potentially revolutionary black female subjectivity within U.S. culture, a mode of being that would inherently trouble the normative grounds of gender

The article begins with the provocative claim that she is a “marked woman”; she follows this claim with a series of tropes/stereotypes associated with Black womanhood, such as “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” and “Miss Ebony First” (65). Of these, she says: “I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (65). Identity, in this sense, is understood as never apolitical, but as signifying particular cultural meanings; note that she describes her locus of confounded identities as situated within the “national treasury of rhetorical wealth,” a term that resonates with Lanham’s discussion of commonplaces as a “full memory theater.” In the terms of our argument thus far, these terms are embodied cultural tropes. Furthermore, she argues that Black womanhood (as I will argue in the following chapter about Blackness more generally), serves particular rhetorical functions for the nation-state. These tropes and rhetorical functions constrain the range of meanings, in the public sphere at least, of Black bodies and Black subjectivities. Spillers continues:

The problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms enclosed in quotation marks in the preceding paragraph isolate overdetermined nominative properties. Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus. (65)

and race (80). It is my hope that I will not do a disservice to this article by borrowing from it a broader focus on race without emphasizing gender; however, I believe that this borrowing is merited and will prove productive, given that my aims align neatly with her stated intention in the article to trace a “symbolic order” that she refers to as an “American grammar” (68).

In this mode of analysis, these heavily loaded markers obscure the agents beneath them. Similarly, in his compelling analysis of the Zimmerman verdict, Vorris Nunley has advanced an argument that resonates with Spillers', emphasizing especially the effects of this burying. Of the Black trope, Nunley suggests, "It covers up, camouflages, and swallows up the distinctive individual personhood of any particular Black person. When Zimmerman and Whites like him believe themselves to be in jeopardy, the Black trope alters, heightens, increases and releases an unhinged, undomesticated, or criminalized Blackness that frightens" ("Cicero's Tongue"). In this reading, Zimmerman's reaction to Trayvon Martin was a reaction to a trope. A trope embodied by a young man that Zimmerman killed that night in the attempt to police, to eradicate, to do violence to, a trope. This attempt failed: the young man was killed, but the trope lives on. In Zimmerman's sight, Martin as a human being was buried and couldn't come clean of these attenuated meanings ascribed to Blackness by the historical order of White supremacy in the U.S. Thus, there is a sense in which Martin was both hypervisible (as the Black trope) and invisible (as a human being). George Yancy, in his afterward to *America and the Black Body*, discusses the interrelationship of invisibility and hypervisibility. Describing a scenario in which police stopped Cornel West on concocted cocaine charges while he was driving from New York to teach at Williams College, Yancy suggests that West was on one hand invisible, due to the police officer's unwillingness or inability to see West as anything other than the Black trope; West's identity as a professor of philosophy and religion was met by the officer not only with disbelief, but with disdain and racial epithets. Yancy then productively compares West's experiences to the titular

character of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose identity can never register in the American imaginary. On another hand, West "is rendered hypervisible as a drug dealer," as the Black trope obscures his humanity, his identity, beyond the reach of the policing agents of whiteness ("Microtomes" 271).

Spillers' argument takes a very similar tact to the foregoing, but with an emphasis on the hypervisibility of marked bodies and the effects of this hypervisibility:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

My sense is that in enclosing "murdered" within quotation marks, Spillers means to convey primarily the burying of the human subject beneath these "originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation." At the same time, given the nature of these metaphors, it seems an inevitable outcome that the human subject buried there is subject first to widespread, even ubiquitous symbolic "murder" in the racialized national imaginary, followed by the literal murders of human subjects, enacted almost ritualistically as a result of these originating metaphors and in service of refueling and perpetuating them by appearing to demonstrate their ongoing urgent salience to the national imaginary of White purity. This last point will be the subject of analysis in the next chapter. Meanwhile, it is necessary to discuss in more detail some of the history and workings of the Black trope, as Nunley has called it.

Several key questions must now be asked: if indeed Whites are not seeing human beings beneath the Black trope, who/what are they seeing and why? What are the histories of this seeing? While it is beyond the scope of this project to analyze in significant historical depth the emergence and codification of the Black trope, some introductory discussion will help provide context as to the nature of its masking functions, or its burying, as Spillers has put it, as well as the constitutive relationship the Black trope has come to play vis-à-vis White identity and the identity of “America” itself. Central to the argument in this section is the notion that, as the above arguments have implied, ontology is rhetorical and always already political. I do not mean by this to suggest that being as such, or reality, does not exist apart from rhetoric and politics. Rather, as Nunley argues, “the very terrain of meaning, experiences, and what it means to be a human being gains traction through a network of rhetorics and rationalities” (*Keepin’ It Hushed* 11). As Nunley’s work makes evident, the very meaning of being is unavoidably political and is always situated within, constituted by, and implicated in the perpetuation of various nodes and networks of rhetorics and rationalities. This insight helps us link rhetoric to the materiality of bodies and to the ways that this materiality signifies and circulates as meaning, organizing elements of the public sphere and the social imaginary. Following a brief discussion of some of the content that has been ascribed to the Black trope and inscribed on the Black body, I will move on to analyze how these ascriptions and inscriptions have also come to function as rationalities for the politics of identity formation in the U.S.

As numerous scholars have argued, Blackness has functioned throughout modernity, indeed Blackness was initially constituted, in dialectical relationship with Whiteness. Goldberg argues, for example, that race is a discursive formation only arises with the advent of modernity (93, 107). Similarly, Omi and Winant place the origins of race in the European “discovery” of the American continents. They note, “It was only when European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere, when the oceanic seal separating the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ worlds was breached, that the distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear” (61). This view is generally consistent with Nunley’s argument about the political nature of ontology, as Omi and Winant make it evident that the discourses of race that arose were hardly disinterested philosophical inquiries into the meaning of human being, noting, “The representation and interpretation of the meaning of the indigenous peoples’ existence became a crucial matter, one which would affect the outcome of the enterprise of conquest. For the ‘discovery’ raised disturbing questions as to whether *all* could be considered part of the same ‘family of man,’ and more practically, the extent to which native peoples could be exploited and enslaved” (61-2). This representation and interpretation of the meaning of indigenous existence is directly analogous to the process Spillers discusses, a process that produces the overdetermined nominative properties that come to stand in for and bury the identities of the other. And while the conditions of the conquest of the Americas and the advent of the African slave trade cannot of course be directly conflated, Omi and Winant argue that “the

overdetermined construction of world ‘civilization’ as a product of the rise of Europe and the subjugation of the rest of us, still defines the race concept” (62).

This problem of the meaning of the other’s being then becomes central to the formation of the United States, and while indigeneity remained at the core of that “problem,” so increasingly did Blackness, which came to stand in a very specific dialectical relationship to the formation of Whiteness. In paraphrasing Toni Morrison, Yancy suggests that via Blackness, “The white imaginary is able to ‘play in the dark,’ to use Morrison’s turn of phrase, creating a presumptive metaphysical binary that renders blackness sinister, criminal, evil, savage-like, and hypersexual, while whiteness is rendered supreme, innocent, good, and civilized. To imagine America through the lens of these racial tropes reveals the social ontological Manichean space within which black and white bodies move and have their being” (Yancy, “Microtomes” 267). As a necessary correlate of this binary, this dialectic of identity, Blackness becomes understood as a negation, the “not-me” in Morrison’s terminology, by which Whiteness comes to recognize and circumscribe itself. Yancy notes that via the construction of the not-me, the Black body is stripped of humanity through a series of negations. “Hence, the black body is *not* beautiful, *not* civilized, *not* moral, *not* intelligent--indeed, *not* white” (269). By contrast, “Dialectically, the white body . . . is constituted through a series of affirmations” (269). Therefore, Blackness as trope has for centuries evoked a kind of anti-America—Blackness was constructed as a kind of negation that could focus and define, work as a foil for, the “civilization” that is “America.” Morrison has suggested, through “the projection of the not-me,” that White identities and American culture are shaped only in

relation to the negation of the other. In these analyses, we can see that the Black trope has come to signify not only negation, but the negative terms against which Whiteness comes to idealize itself and the nation. Indeed, “What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” (Morrison 38). Given Morrison’s claim that this fabricated brew is uniquely American, it follows that an inquiry into the fabrication itself should prove revealing about individual and national identities. In that vein, Carol E. Henderson says of the Black body: “This body is a moving signifier, a canvas of convergent ideologies that says more about American than America is willing to say about itself . . . a body that lays bare the angst and anxiety of cultural identities built on the fragile multiplicities of a myriad of self-images” (22). Therefore, in addition to helping unbury and make legible the human subjects obscured by the Black trope, reading the Black body as signifier can also reveal significant naturalized, buried over presumptions constitutive of American culture and politics and their effects.

I have argued thus far, along with Spillers, Hall, Nunley, and numerous other scholars, that through a combination of discursive and material processes, skin comes to signify; meanings are inscribed on skin, on bodies. Subsequently, bodies get commonly read as metaphor (for example, “Blackness *is* criminality”) or metonymy (Blackness as the anti-America, as abstracted image of threat to the nation-state). We should add to these points that metaphor and metonymy in turn serve broader conceptual (again, not merely linguistic/signifying) functions. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “metaphor is

primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language” (153). In this view, metaphor (I would suggest trope, more broadly) is primarily a way of making sense of the world. Therefore, I suggest that the attempted equation of Blackness and criminality is not simply a stereotype, in terms of misrepresentation or false knowledge—rather, this metaphor should be understood as a kind of political rationality, a way of organizing the (White) world into categories of being and knowledge that provide an ontological grounding for equating Whiteness and “America,” for example. I will go into this last point in significant depth in the chapter that follows, but for now it may suffice to quote Toni Morrison again, who suggests that Africanism, or what I am discussing here in terms of the Black trope, serves numerous conceptual functions in the American imaginary. For example, “It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (7). The trope of Blackness is then, in addition to a problem of representation, a kind of organizing principle for the American imaginary, American selves, and the nation-state itself.

Given the contingency, one might even suggest dependency, of Whiteness vis-à-vis Blackness, it follows that this contingency must remain inconspicuous in order for the edifice to stand. On this note, one of the ways Spillers discusses the meaning of ethnicity is through reference to Roland Barthes’ classic essay “Myth Today.” Barthes argues, in short, that elements of culture come to take on a second order of signification, in which something like skin color, for example, can carry any number of significations, based on the role it is tasked to play within culture (110). It is this second order of signification that

Barthes terms “myth.” Most importantly for our purposes, myth is “depoliticized speech”—not only does myth accrue and stabilize a specific array of connotations, it is also the task of myth to make these significations appear “natural,” outside of culture, as elements of some transcendent truths (143). In this way, the significations of the captive body that Spillers describes, once depoliticized or naturalized in the ways Barthes contends, can be taken as further evidence for the “rightness” of the significations. There is a profoundly circular logic at work here. The histories of enslavement can thus be rationalized not as injustices perpetrated by the enslavers as a result of flawed Western cultural imperatives, for example, but paradoxically as the inevitable results of social, cultural, religious, and moral failings on the part of the enslaved. This point speaks to what Barthes means in suggesting that myth effects an emptying out of history, refilling signifiers with “nature” (142). For our purposes, I contend that rhetoric can help us understand the ways that these meanings of race are constituted and naturalized within and circulating through public discourse and normative epistemologies, producing very real effects. In this view, rhetoric must be understood broadly as a shaping force helping to produce the very meaning of being. Thus, rhetoric is not only a historical body of knowledge concerning effective persuasion, but functions additionally as “a terrain of intelligibility” (Nunley, *Keepin’ It Hushed* 17). It is upon these terms that I ground the analysis to follow.

At this point, I should briefly clarify that I am not arguing nor intending to imply that the Black body has no being outside of its significations for and within normative American culture—I do not view ethnicity as reducible only to difference from center. In

short, understanding Blackness through a lens of singularity. However, given the very real effects on human beings (Trayvon Martin, in the analysis to follow) resulting from the circulation of the Black trope, analyzing these normative significations contains deep political relevance, despite my lack of explicit theorization of Blackness as singularity in this case. Additionally, it is important to reiterate that the tropical elements discussed here must not be taken to have any kind of truth in and of themselves. As I have argued of tropes, they are outcomes of discursive processes; as such, tropes play a role in shaping the meaning of race, as Hall's work shows, as opposed to the weak contention that tropes (this is the argument that underlies a broad, even humorous acceptance of stereotypes) are the effects of some underlying truths about race itself, understood as a biological or perhaps cultural phenomenon. On another hand, neither does the claim that these racial meanings are outcomes of discursive processes line up with the lukewarm, idealistic contention that race is "just a social construction"—a point that Nunley has convincingly critiqued (*Keepin' It Hushed*, 48)—which may often entail as a consequence the untenable claim that the "problem" of race has been solved, revealed as a mirage. This is an important distinction, and one that otherwise plays into the problematics of colorblind racism. Indeed, thinking of race as merely some kind of collective fantasy, and one that might be banished simply by labeling it fantasy, proves largely unable to reckon with the ongoing effects of race as political rationality and normative logic.

One more brief note before moving into some application of these arguments to the killing of Trayvon Martin. While, as I have noted above, it is beyond the scope of this project to analyze in significant historical depth the emergence and codification of the

Black trope, I do wish to briefly suggest that an in-depth analysis of the cultural meanings of American identity would benefit from rigorous readings of the rhetorical genealogies of the Black trope(s). If the human body—in this analysis, the Black body in the U.S.—is a metonymic figure, then it should be a fairly straightforward process to trace the workings of this metonym back into U.S. history; doing so would provide counter-histories to those imagined histories that have come to be central to White identity and the American normative (White) subject. Additionally, these counter-histories would help dispel the apparent “naturalness” of the trope by revealing the racist and political nature of their construction in the first instance.⁴² A rhetorical genealogy project of this kind would require attention to detail on long trajectories of historical usages, dating at least back to anti-abolitionist rhetorics leading into the Civil War. In terms of methodology, we might borrow Ratcliffe’s suggestion that reading the histories of tropes should not aim to travel back *to* a particular point in time, but should rather “[travel] back *from* a particular moment of usage” (109). This is an excellent distinction, and while traveling back from a moment of usage would require significant scope, such a method would provide a deeply rigorous grounding for a rhetorical genealogy of the Black trope that demonstrates clearly the changing but persistent nature of racist representation, and its relationship to American identity(ies) throughout the entirety of U.S. history, including the ways these long-standing tropes continue to manifest in contemporary public rhetorics. In that vein,

⁴² For example, consider Newt Gingrich’s campaign rhetorics about the importance of weaning black people off of welfare by teaching them how to get jobs. This reasoning, while seemingly sensible and contemporary to Gingrich and many of his adherents, is largely a reinvocation of the trope of black idleness that proliferated during slavery and reconstruction.

just as Omi and Winant suggested that not enough scholarly attention has been paid to the role of racial dimensions of the 1970s “conservative counterrevolution” (116), I think not nearly enough attention has been paid to the ways in which these racial dimensions rely on specific rhetorical genealogies. These “available means” deployed by racists (colorblind and otherwise, intentionally or otherwise) do not just drop out of the sky, nor do they only originate in 1970s problems linked to/emerging from reaction to the “nanny state.” I believe that a rigorous rhetorical genealogy would reveal these racial dimensions, and especially their attendant rhetorics, to be rooted in many of the same ideologies (e.g. the “hierarchy of races”) that justified slavery in the first place and that circulated throughout slavery and reconstruction, staying largely intact until the present day. But let us return for now to reading trope in the contemporary moment.

The Killing of Trayvon Martin

From the earliest coverage of Trayvon Martin’s death at the hands of George Zimmerman, public and media responses to the verdict were deeply divided along racial and ideological lines. Across media and public discourse, the verdict was extolled and rebutted exhaustively, as were all elements of the process, including the deeply suspect rationale behind Zimmerman’s initial pursuit of Martin, the meaning and significance of Zimmerman’s delayed arrest, the relevance of Florida’s “stand your ground” law, the selection of an all-female and nearly all-White jury, and the appropriateness of the charges themselves. While I find completely unconvincing any suggestion that race had nothing to do with Zimmerman’s pursuit and shooting of Martin, as I trust the preceding arguments have implied, it is not my intention here to attempt to “get to the facts” about

whether or not Zimmerman is a consciously committed racist or whether or not his claims of self-defense were indeed legitimate. Unfortunately, only one account of Martin's killing exists: the account of the killer himself. While I find Zimmerman's account of the events and his claims of self-defense to be wholly implausible, it must be admitted that we cannot, in any "objective" or conclusive manner, get to the "facts" of the killing itself as they are buried in the "rhetorical wealth" of the American imaginary. It is possible, though highly unlikely in my analysis, that Zimmerman's account is accurate, and that the young Martin initiated physical aggression that made Zimmerman feel justified in shooting him. Given that an objective account is beyond our reach, my primary aims here will be to contextualize Zimmerman's shooting of Martin in terms of my preceding discussion of trope, thus refiguring the problem of racism away from individual, volitional acts and towards an internalized system of racial meanings that produce, to return again to Judith Butler, an unequal distribution of precariousness.

Summary of Events

The events leading up to Trayvon Martin's death at the hands of George Zimmerman, along with the process and outcome of Zimmerman's trial, are relatively well-known. However, I will briefly recount some of the factual elements (i.e. those that can be reliably substantiated through court documents, such as the transcript of Zimmerman's initial call to police) and the overall timeline to provide context for what follows and to add to the collective memory of this tragic loss of young life. While my initial recounting will be brief, I will return to significant details over the course of the analysis.

On the evening of February 26, 2012, seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin was returning from a trip to a convenience store to his father's girlfriend's home in the gated community of The Retreat at Twin Lakes, in Sanford Florida (Yancy and Jones 15). At approximately 7:09 p.m., twenty-eight year-old George Zimmerman, a resident of the gated community and volunteer captain of the neighborhood watch, called Sanford PD to report a guy who "looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something" ("Audio: Calls from Zimmerman").⁴³ As he's giving directions to the dispatcher on where a patrol car should meet him, Zimmerman notes that Martin has begun running. Zimmerman begins following Martin, but is told by the dispatcher, "Ok. We don't need you to do that," to which Zimmerman replies "OK" ("Audio: Calls from Zimmerman"). The remainder of this call consists of arrangements for the police to meet Zimmerman. The call ends, and according to the account Zimmerman would later provide, so had his pursuit of Martin. Within a few minutes, six different people called 911 to report an altercation. Within minutes of these calls, Zimmerman shot Martin in the chest at close range, killing him. The police arrived at 7:17 pm, canvassed the neighborhood, and took Zimmerman into "investigative detention" (Yancy and Jones 15). Zimmerman claimed that he had shot Martin in self-defense and was released that night. Incredibly, while Zimmerman was not tested for drugs or alcohol, Martin's body was. It would seem that the young man was already on trial for playing some role in his own killing.

⁴³ Unless otherwise indicated, I rely on an audio file and transcription of this call as posted online by *The Washington Post*. A transcript of this call is provided as an appendix at the end of this chapter. See "Audio: Calls from Zimmerman, Neighbor Capture Last Minutes of Martin's Life."

After Zimmerman's initial release, there was no indication from Sanford PD that any charges would be filed or that a substantive investigation would take place. More than two weeks after Zimmerman's killing of Martin, amidst increasing public outcry, Sanford Chief of Police Bill Lee explained that no charges had been filed because police had no evidence to disprove Zimmerman's claim of self-defense. The following day, March 13, 2012, Sanford PD's homicide detective Christopher Serino recommended that manslaughter charges be filed. The case was turned over to State Attorney Norm Wolfinger on the next day. Nearly one month after the incident, on March 22, Florida Governor Rick Scott appointed special prosecutor Angela Corey to investigate (CNN Library). Zimmerman turned himself in on April 11, in response to Corey's decision to file second-degree murder charges. Zimmerman was released on bail on April 20, only to have his bond revoked on June 1 due to a court finding that he had misrepresented his finances. He was released on a much larger bond on July 5, 2012. Nearly a year later, on June 20, 2013, both legal teams agreed to an all-woman jury; five of the six jurors were White (Wagstaff). Zimmerman's trial began on June 24, 2013. On July 13, after approximately sixteen hours of deliberation over two days, the jury found Zimmerman not guilty of second degree murder in the killing of Trayvon Martin (Tienabeso, Gutman, and Wash).

Zimmerman's February 26, 2012 Call to Sanford PD

In order to engage in a rhetorical analysis of some of the ways that race has already been discussed in discourse surrounding this call, and to begin to raise some of the central distinctions in many of the rhetorics surrounding Zimmerman's actions more

broadly, I provide here some brief discussion of the phone call Zimmerman placed to Sanford PD in the minutes shortly preceding his fatal shooting of Martin. Initially, I will problematize any easy dismissal of the centrality of race to the incident as a whole. Then, the analysis that follows provides an informed rendering of the events of the night of February 26 situated within discourse surrounding the incident and its outcomes, so as to later highlight and interrogate which elements of these events have been and can be commonly treated as factual in public discourse.

As noted briefly above, on the evening of February 26, 2012, Zimmerman spotted Martin returning from a trip to a convenience store and promptly called Sanford PD to “report” him. The dispatcher asked about Martin’s race, and Zimmerman responded, “He looks black” (“Audio: Calls from Zimmerman”). Many commenters have accurately noted that Zimmerman’s initial mention of Martin’s race came only in response to a query by the dispatcher; this comment has been typically raised in objection to what these commenters characterize as the media overplaying the role of race in this incident.⁴⁴ I will return to this strategy of media blame in due course, but meanwhile, two significant points must be added in response to this objection. First, it must be noted that identification of Martin’s race (not his height, weight, or clothing, for example) was the

⁴⁴ As I will argue, most charges of this nature arise from adherence to ideologies of colorblindness. However, note that NBC did play at least two different edited versions of the audio from the call, such that Zimmerman’s legal team filed suit against NBC for defamation. According to Michael Martinez, writing for CNN: “Allen’s broadcast removed a critical aspect of the dialogue between Zimmerman and the dispatcher, bringing the ‘up to no good’ and ‘he looks black’ statements even closer together, to further the false and defamatory implication that Zimmerman had said he believed Martin was ‘up to no good’ because ‘he looks black,’” the suit says. The lawsuit accuses NBC of falsely claiming that Zimmerman said “f—— coons” on the February 26 call.”

dispatcher's first task in asking Zimmerman about this "suspicious" person. One can almost imagine a kind of affective flowchart in the police imaginary in which the response to this first question immediately directs that a generalized police response proceed as if suspects pose varying (race specific) levels of threat.⁴⁵ Secondly, even with Martin's race already established, Zimmerman volunteers this information again, within 30-40 seconds of the first mention, saying, "Yeah, now he's coming toward me. He's got his hands in his waist band. And he's a black male" ("Audio: Calls from Zimmerman"). These three statements in sequence are very revealing and clearly trouble any easy dismissal of Zimmerman's awareness of Martin's race. It is unambiguous in these statements that Zimmerman registered, at least affectively if not deliberately, the rhetorical weight of the Black trope. 1) He's coming toward me. 2) He's got his hands in his waist band. 3) *And* he's a black male (in the audio recording of this call, Zimmerman does place emphasis on the conjunction). The conjunction is a telling addition, especially given that Zimmerman has already told the dispatcher that Martin is Black—this restatement, "And he's a black male," reads as a supplement, an additional particularly relevant detail to both of the previous sentences. Given that fact that all language is tropological, it would be reductive, an oversimplification, to suggest that these are merely descriptive statements. The first two statements clearly imply if not outright assert that Zimmerman feels threatened. The third statement must be read in the same light. Here are

⁴⁵ While this claim is arguably polemical and in no way attempts to argue that this particular police dispatcher is overtly racist, scholarship does suggest that law enforcement responses to suspects are shaped to some extent by the suspect's race (see Goff and Richardson 62-3, for example).

the subtexts: 1) This person is aggressive and appears to have hostile intent. 2) He has a gun or other weapon. 3) All of the foregoing is *heightened* by the notion that Blackness is itself dangerous, criminal, hyper-violent, etc—any number of connotations of the Black trope might be filled in here. In short, all three statements are reports of threat for Zimmerman, or are at least details that he feels justify his sense of imminent threat. It might be argued, then that in one important sense, any actions he might take are already “self-defense” from this perspective.

The threat implied in these preceding details did not result in any actual physical aggression and must have (temporarily) receded for Zimmerman, for he continued providing details for the dispatcher. About thirty seconds later, Zimmerman says, “These assholes. They always get away” (“Audio: Calls from Zimmerman”). Which “assholes” are “these,” one wonders? Such a naming reveals that Martin, a human being whom Zimmerman has never met, is within moments decisively transformed into an “asshole” and grouped in with others of this kind—as to the rules for inclusion into this category of “assholes,” Zimmerman does not elaborate. However, what must be noted is that Martin is now, in Zimmerman’s captain-of-the-neighborhood-watch imaginary, not a person, not a human being, but an “asshole,” defined primarily by having been thrust into a category called “assholes,” all of whom “get away.” The claim that “these assholes always get away” constructs and gives name to a violent fantasy and a kind of phantom that is by definition elusive, always hovering at the edge of the imagination, appearing only long enough to disturb, threaten, destroy, and disappear. It creates an abstract, unreasonable threat against which we must always be vigilant and which we must constantly attempt to

eradicate. In these terms, this labeling is most definitely an act of aggression, making Zimmerman the initial aggressor regardless of whether or not (as Zimmerman's defenders hold, despite any evidence to this effect) Martin would later strike Zimmerman first, with a blow to the face.

I would also suggest that the category into which Martin has been placed has racial overtones (though it need not be exclusively or explicitly racist) given the linked senses of threat described above. This would also explain why virtually the entire tone of Zimmerman's call is one of paranoia and fear, despite the fact that all he's seen so far is a young Black man in a hoodie walking around in the rain. Zimmerman's imagination does not turn, for example, to an assumption that the young man might be in need of assistance for one reason or another. Or, as Leonard Pitts, Jr. points out, "That might be the behavior of a boy who was turned around in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Or of a boy enjoying a cell phone conversation with a girl and not overly eager to return to where his sweet nothings might be overheard by his dad. That no such alternate possibilities seem to have occurred to Zimmerman for even an instant suggests the degree to which we as a people have grown comfortable with the belief that black is crime and crime is black" (Pitts). As he's giving directions to the dispatcher, Zimmerman notes that Martin has begun running ("Audio: Calls from Zimmerman"); he is now an "asshole" fulfilling Zimmerman's further expectations by attempting to "get away."

Therefore, to prevent Martin's successful flight from an unknown and in fact imaginary crime scene, Zimmerman begins following him. Within a few seconds, though, he is promptly told by the dispatcher, "Ok. We don't need you to do that," to which

Zimmerman replies “OK” (“Audio: Calls from Zimmerman”). Commenters seeking to defend Zimmerman have most commonly argued, in line with Zimmerman’s own account, that he ended his pursuit at this point. However, analysis of the audio, in addition to the account provided by Rachel Jeantel, the young woman with whom Martin was talking when Zimmerman began his pursuit, suggest otherwise. Zimmerman’s heavy breathing is obvious for several seconds after he’s agreed to stop following Martin. His initial pursuit, based on the audio, lasted approximately 20 seconds, from the moment he reported that Martin was running until the moment he agreed to stop the pursuit at the request of the dispatcher. Still, approximately 45 seconds after the pursuit supposedly stopped, Zimmerman’s speech patterns indicate that he is distracted, not fully engaged with the dispatcher, likely continuing to look for Martin. Zimmerman says, “Um, if they come in through the gate, tell them to go straight past the clubhouse and, uh, straight past the clubhouse and make a left . . .” (“Audio: Calls from Zimmerman”). Furthermore, when asked if Zimmerman would like to meet police at the clubhouse, he suggests instead, “Could you have them call me and I’ll tell them where I’m at?” (“Audio: Calls from Zimmerman”). This would seem to indicate that Zimmerman is continuing his pursuit of and search for Martin, against the instructions of the dispatcher—otherwise, why would he not proceed directly to the clubhouse? If he is not stationary and able to give his location at that moment, what else is he doing besides continuing to attempt to prevent the “attempted flight” of another “asshole?” Jeantel’s testimony supports these latter inferences as well, as she noted that she heard Martin ask “Why are you following me for?” (“I Know He Was Scared”). After Martin’s question, she reportedly heard a man

ask Martin “What are you doing around here?” (“I Know He Was Scared”). A scuffle reportedly ensued, at which point the line went dead (“I Know He Was Scared”). Most commonly, Jeantel’s testimony is either completely ignored by colorblind commenters, or worse, she is aggressively painted over with other elements of the Black trope, ridiculed, denigrated as ignorant and dishonest, and thereby disregarded.⁴⁶ In this sense, the Black trope makes available a wealth of strategies for not-listening. I turn now to an analysis of the ways that some of these strategies were deployed to great effect during Zimmerman’s trial.

Colorblindness as Jurisprudential Not-Listening

In this section, I discuss some of the ways that colorblind rhetorical strategies were deployed as rhetorical viruses to enable not-listening within the Zimmerman trial. Despite colorblind commenters’ insistence on the irrelevance of race, and despite the fact

⁴⁶ Jeantel’s testimony raises very complex issues that cannot be treated in depth here. While her time on the stand did unfortunately provide some fodder for those wishing to damage her credibility as a witness, it is also painfully evident that many commenters aiming to discredit her did so precisely within the terms of the black trope. She has been extensively denounced, even dehumanized, by people on both sides of the case, and I will not further do so here. Let me briefly pose, by contrast, a few considerations under which she might have received a more receptive listening. Three mitigating factors that bear further exploration include: the likely hesitation she felt when asked to deploy Hush Harbor rhetoric and knowledge (see Vorris Nunley’s *Keepin’ It Hushed*) in a venue that was not receptive to them and had no real frame of reference for hearing her. In addition, she may have been experiencing “stereotype threat,” which Goff and Richardson define as “the concern with confirming or being evaluated in terms of a negative stereotype about one’s group,” which creates conditions under which “the threat of being stereotyped can cause excessive self-regulatory demands that impair one’s performance” (63). Thirdly, defense counsel arguably knew that Jeantel’s self-presentation would not resonate positively with the court. To that end, defense counsel seems to have drawn out elements of Jeantel’s personality and self-presentation that would “speak for themselves,” as it were, further burying Jeantel beneath the masking of the black trope.

that Judge Debra Nelson “made it clear that statements about race would be sharply limited and the term ‘racial profiling’ not allowed” (Alvarez), the struggle over racial meaning nonetheless played a prominent, arguably central role in the trial. Interestingly, if unfathomably, all parties in the trial adopted colorblind positions. In addition to the judge’s ruling on the matter (the strict delimitations mentioned above) and the defense’s determination to portray Zimmerman as a colorblind good Samaritan, the prosecution adopted a colorblind position. Following the verdict, special prosecutor Angela Corey noted, “This case *has never been about race* or the right to bear arms . . . We believe this case all along was about boundaries, and George Zimmerman exceeded those boundaries” (qtd. in Lush et al, my emphasis). Even Martin’s family adopted a colorblind stance towards the trial: one of the family’s lawyers said on their behalf, “To this family, race is not a part of this process. And anybody who tries to inject race into it is wrong” (qtd. in Demby). It would seem that there is intense pressure to play the colorblind game in a colorblind system. And given all of the preceding, the jury’s colorblind orientation, as reflected in the following comment from juror B37, came as no surprise: “I think all of us thought *race did not play a role* . . . We never had that discussion” (qtd. in Ford, my emphasis). Certainly it is the prerogative of a jury to make whatever informed decisions they make in the context of a trial. However, this juror claims that a frank discussion about the role of race in Martin’s death *never even took place*. And still, just because they never had the discussion does not mean the Black trope did not help shape their interpretations of evidence and the content of their deliberations. As such, it is evident that this adoption of a colorblind strategy effectively managed only to render the

prosecution ineffectual, given that race inevitably continued to circulate as common sense, through deeply coded speech, rhetorical viruses, trope, and weighted connotation.

Faced with an ineffectual prosecution and immersed in presumptions of colorblindness on all sides, the defense consistently evoked the Black trope, deliberately attempting to map it onto Martin's person. For example, as *New York Times* op-ed columnist Charles M. Blow notes, "the defense held up a picture of a shirtless Martin and told the jurors that this was the person Zimmerman encountered the night he shot him. But in fact it was not the way Zimmerman had seen Martin. Consciously or subconsciously, the defense played on an old racial trope: asking the all-female jury — mostly white — to fear the image of the glistening black buck, as Zimmerman had" (Blow). Blow points clearly to the power of trope in this instance, and its deliberate and dishonest invocation. In another preposterous claim, the defense claimed that "Trayvon armed himself with concrete" (qtd. in Bogado). All Black men, under these terms, are apparently understood as always already "armed" with their very surroundings. Despite the fact that each of these two strategies is at best disingenuous and at worst dangerously manipulative, they were obviously effective, as they are deeply resonant with White fear of the Black trope. Tim Wise, in a lengthy and detailed blog posting on the trial, describes research substantiating these links between Blackness and criminality in the national imaginary: "According to academic research, whites are highly likely to view blacks as violent and dangerous (Peffley and Hurwitz, 1998: 90), and adherence to these stereotypes is highly correlated with a tendency to presume guilt, evidence notwithstanding, whenever the adherent is confronted with a crime that fits their mental

schema regarding black criminals (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997: 384)” (Wise, “Of Children and Inkblots”). Within the logics of colorblindness, as within all rhetorical viruses, resonance is a primary currency. Explicit racial reference is avoided, and connotation is exploited to do its work.

Lisa Bloom’s analysis in the *New York Times*, entitled “Zimmerman Prosecutors Duck the Race Issue,” was arguably the most incisive piece written about the coded workings of race in the trial. Bloom, a lawyer and legal analyst, astutely takes apart the problems in the trial of circling around race through connotation and colorblind logics. In short, she argues that the defense pulled no punches in manipulating the Black trope to great effect, while in contrast, when the prosecution did attempt to discuss race in a straightforward way, they fumbled. For example, Bloom notes that the defense called a witness, Olivia Bertalan, who “testified that she had cowered in her closet, baby in her arms, as two African-American males burglarized her home.” What could this testimony possibly have to do with Trayvon Martin? According to Bloom, “The prosecution never asked.” Indubitably, then, colorblindness was the dominant mode of racial discourse in the trial; Judge Nelson had allowed use of the term “profiling,” so long as it was not coupled with the word “racial,” also allowing emotional testimony relevant only in terms of fear of Blackness. And this latter move went unquestioned by the prosecution. Additionally, in an insightful critique of the defense’s deployment of visual rhetoric to further heighten fear of the Black trope, Bloom points out: “One of the final photos the defense showed to the jury was a 7-Eleven surveillance camera image of Trayvon Martin an hour before his death, the kind of blurry photo one sees on the local news when the

police are searching for a holdup suspect.” Martin is visually coded as the suspect in this strategy, associated with a kind of image, that of the surveillance camera, that most people see only in connection with a public search for suspected criminals. In contrast to the defense’s coded but forceful barrage of colorblind rhetorical moves, the prosecution constantly fumbled the role of race in shaping Zimmerman’s actions. In just one example (she names many), Bloom suggests, “the state appeared to want to tread lightly on the jurors’ presumed delicate sensibilities on the dicey subject of race and, leaving the race question aside, simply pointed out that Mr. Zimmerman must have made ‘assumptions.’” This is an example of jurisprudential colorblindness at its finest. Still, such is the ideological reach of colorblindness that, as Lizette Alvarez points out, “overtly bringing up race might not have helped the prosecution.” In the opinion of Ed Shohat, a Miami lawyer and member of the Miami-Dade County Community Relations Board: “There is no question that race is the 800-pound gorilla in this trial . . . But if you overplay that card either way, you lose with the jury. You have to let the jury come to its own conclusion” (qtd. in Alvarez). The implication of this claim is that colorblindness has been so broadly internalized as the contemporary American racial common sense that any given jury may prove unreceptive to any overt discussion of race, regardless of its relevance to the case. In this context, Blackness functioned as a rhetorical virus that worked both ways, doing its work whether it was directly addressed or only evoked via subtle and not so subtle codings.

Unfortunately, these purportedly “neutral” approaches to race and law, as implicit in colorblind logics, are quite common, and found approval in colorblind sources such as

Jonathan V. Last's "George Zimmerman and the Nature of Criminal Justice," published on *The Weekly Standard's* blog. Attempting to naturalize the verdict in the name of legal neutrality, Last says: "Achieving justice in a fallen world is, if not a fool's errand, then at the very least, a task of incomprehensible difficulty. As such, our criminal justice system is highly imperfect, even in the best of times." While some of these claims have merit—justice is frequently elusive and is rarely achieved in perfection—Last's argument is also deeply consonant with a long tradition of apologies and rationales, as Butler similarly argues in *Frames of War*, written to minimize the actualities of injustice and precariousness for hegemonic groups (3), year after year. Justice is always a "fool's errand" when it is the other who is demanding justice. Meanwhile, two wars and over 12 years later, I wonder if we have completed our errand of "justice" for the attacks of September 11, 2001, with countless lives of "others" lost, written off as collateral damage in this "fool's errand."

In contrast to argument's like Last's, Ekow N. Yankah, in "The Truth about Trayvon," published by the *New York Times*, pointed out the always already racialized nature of terms such as "reasonable doubt," which demonstrates the problems with pretending race doesn't matter in a trial when it is already coded into the entire process. He notes, "The anger felt by so many African-Americans speaks to the simplest of truths: that race and law cannot be cleanly separated. We are tired of hearing that race is a conversation for another day. We are tired of pretending that 'reasonable doubt' is not, in every sense of the word, colored This is about more than one case. Our reasons for presuming, profiling and acting are always deeply racialized, and the Zimmerman trial, in

ignoring that, left those reasons unexplored and unrefuted.” This demonstrates the challenge, for the legal system, of racism without racists. It is entirely possible, I would even suggest it is likely, that neither Zimmerman, nor the judge, the defense attorneys, or any of the jurors actively and consciously thought of themselves as racists deliberately seeking racist outcomes. But that was the effect. As I have argued above, *intentionality is not the point* in assessing colorblind racism. Yes, overt racism continues to exist and continues to exact a toll on the lives of human beings and the possibilities for robust American democracy, and it should be called out and challenged as often as possible. But in addition, in the face of the proliferation of colorblind racism, we are called to confront something much more insidious than intentionality: racism that cannot understand itself as racist, that masquerades as jurisprudential neutrality, and that cannot make sense of or admit to the role that race and racial meaning played in this process. The outcome of the colorblind courtroom in this case, where the victim of the crime was coded as the suspect, was that “perversely,” Martin was “found guilty of his own shooting death” (Thistlewaite).

Conclusion: Colorblind Racism and the Question of Intentionality

At this point, I want to suggest that understanding the cultural effects of the Black trope as rhetorical virus provides, as I hope the above analysis of Zimmerman’s call and eventual trial demonstrate, a much more agile and productive framework for understanding the role that race played in Zimmerman’s pursuit and killing of Martin and his subsequent exoneration, specifically in response to a common but facile arguments about intentionality and colorblindness that many commenters mounted in defense of

Zimmerman's actions. His adherents in the media brought forth character witnesses who firmly denied that Zimmerman might be racist, or that he might have deliberately shot and killed Martin as an explicit expression of racist beliefs. Zimmerman's father even publicly described Zimmerman as "colorblind."⁴⁷ Additionally, recall Judge Nelson's troubling but hardly surprising move to bar any discussion of racial profiling during the trial, which effectively dismissed any consideration of race as a significant element in Zimmerman's killing of Martin. While these tepid objections and Judge Nelson's dismissal of race is *de rigeur* in an age of colorblindness as dominant racial ideology, it remains particularly troubling in the framework advocated here, in which race was indeed an unavoidably central factor in the killing. As Tim Wise points out, "if the presumption of criminality that Zimmerman attached to Martin was so attached because the latter was black — and would not have been similarly attached to him had he been white — then the charge of racial bias and profiling is entirely appropriate" ("No Innocence Left to Kill"). The question I'm raising therefore is not whether Zimmerman's intentions in pursuing and killing Martin were unambiguously racist; rather, the more salient issue is to ask to what extent the question of intentionality is pivotal or even particularly necessary, given the workings of the Black trope within the frames of colorblind racism. The point to reiterate here is that the Black trope as rhetorical virus makes possible (if not inevitable) Zimmerman's pursuit and eventual killing of Martin, but it does so in ways that do not require Zimmerman's conscious intentions or awareness. This is not to claim

⁴⁷ In an interview with myFOXorlando, Robert Zimmerman said of his son that "he served as a mentor to two black boys and that his son is "colorblind." Quoted in "George Zimmerman's Father Claims Trayvon Martin Beat His Son, Threatened His Life."

that Zimmerman either is or is not consciously racist—in fact that is not the point, and I will not take up the question here. Rather, the Black trope, hovering about the edges of Zimmerman’s (always already racialized) sense of suspicion, commonly arouses suspicion for those interested in policing.⁴⁸ In this sense, racist intentions are not necessary. Zimmerman (indeed, most Americans) may even believe himself to be racially egalitarian, since the equation of Blackness and crime have long been naturalized in the American racial imaginary.⁴⁹

The question of intentionality provides an example of where old, established definitions of racism fail us, and where the new racism, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to it, relies on the failures of these old definitions as one of the sources of its effectivity. If racism is defined as necessarily entailing intentionality, then it becomes impossible to understand as racist any actions stemming from an internalized system of racial meanings that circulate as common sense. This internalized, rationalized racism as common sense forms the terrain of possibility for racism without racists, to borrow again from Bonilla-Silva. It is critical to underscore this point: we do not need to prove that a person or an act meets a classic definition of racism as individual intentional acts of prejudice and discrimination in order to understand that the Black trope does work in varied and specific ways, such as: equating Blackness, crime, and threat; rationalizing racist beliefs and responses to Black bodies as common sense and self-preservation; and providing seemingly unassailable *ex post facto* rationales for any steps taken to eradicate threat (or

⁴⁸ See: Goff and Richardson (62-63); Rome (4)

⁴⁹ See Rome (19-22)

more bizarrely, as Michael Dunn's November 2012 killing of Jordan Davis indicates, even the perception of threat).⁵⁰ Rhetorical viruses can do their work just as well in the absence of intention, and can also function to effect certain intentions where none might otherwise have existed.

Still, it should go without saying that the increasing dominance of colorblind racism does not mean that more direct, bald forms of racist beliefs and behaviors have ceased to exist—a few minutes of reading the comments sections on most any web posting related to the Martin killing would be sufficient to disabuse one of such an ill-begotten misconception. The important point to emphasize is that colorblindness differs from other, more longstanding forms of racism. In contrast to overt and unapologetic system of institutionalized oppression such as chattel slavery and Jim Crow, Bonilla-Silva characterizes colorblind racism as “the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system . . .” (3). As such, colorblindness has worked in numerous ways to add to the repertoire of racist strategies and actions, including making the plausible deniability of racism sufficient cause to deny its existence in fact or as motivation/intention. If we wish to be more generous, we might suggest that today's

⁵⁰ Following the conviction of Michael Dunn on three counts of attempted murder, and the hung jury on the charges of first degree murder for his killing of Jordan Davis, Dunn's lawyer, Cory Stolla, publicly argued that his client's belief that Davis had a weapon provided sufficient legal grounds for Dunn's actions and his pleas of self-defense. “Though a weapon was never found, Stolla maintains the youths could have had one and somehow ditched in and around the gas station [sic]. Regardless, the key point was that Dunn believed they were armed and that his life was in danger” (qtd in Botelho and Hostin). While this rationale did not sway the jury towards full acquittal in this case, it is quite telling that Stolla believed that such a defense was at all reasonable or juridically sound.

mainstream racists-who-aren't-racists are motivated by a utopianism that badly misfigures, even while attempting to espouse, the sentiments of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. If we simply refuse to see race, they maintain, it will cease to matter. Colorblindness is therefore not the eradication of the social significance of race, but merely the vehement denial thereof. As David Theo Goldberg argues, "racelessness is the war not on racism but on racial reference, not on the conditions for the reproduction of racially predicated exclusion and discrimination but on the characterization of their effects and implications in racial terms" (233). Goldberg's claims here point to the ideological foundations upon which any straightforward discussions of race were prohibited during Zimmerman's trial. Additionally, racelessness in these terms works to circumscribe the possibilities for robust democratic models of listening, specifically through the ongoing delegitimation of Black knowledge and speech and the continued jettisoning of Black knowledges and life experiences from the public sphere, processes of delegitimation that Nunley has so incisively critiqued in *Keepin' It Hushed*. This prompts the question: to which presumptions about Blackness must the colorblind adhere in order to so readily dismiss Black experiences of racism as simple misunderstanding or complaint? Bonilla-Silva describes this phenomenon as the "minimization of racism" (91), but worse yet, some colorblind commenters see these reports of racism as evidence of a self-fulfilling, self-produced fantasy stemming from an internalized psychology of victimhood, as Shelby Steele's arguments suggest ("The Exploitation of Trayvon Martin"; "The Decline of the Civil-Rights Establishment"). In either case, racelessness provides significant mechanisms of colorblindness and obviously (but never totally)

effective strategies of not-listening, which I analyze in significant depth in the pages to follow. But meanwhile, the points that I want these discussions to make are as follows: the Black trope masked Martin's humanity in Zimmerman's perception; from this point, an explicitly racist intention was not necessary for him to take actions that would have racist effects; Zimmerman's pursuit and killing of Martin were attempts to eradicate a sense of threat posed by the Black trope to the White imaginary.⁵¹ Zimmerman attempted to kill the Black trope, but he failed, instead taking a human life, the young life of Trayvon Martin. Given these points, I contend that tropic readings of race can trump colorblind ideologies, revealing their failings, codings, and reliance on "old-fashioned" modes of racism as strategies of dissimulation.

In this chapter, I have been proposing a rhetorical, tropical model for understanding the circulation of racial discourse and its effects on bodies, grounded in the ways that bodies come to signify and these significations come to function as "natural." I have been arguing, in short, that trope is the fulcrum upon which the politics of listening are leveraged in discourses of race, and that the Black trope as rhetorical virus functions as a primary political rationality in public discourse, helping shape, to borrow from Wendy Brown, governance of the sayable and the intelligible. This argument has applicability for a number of additional directions that I am not able to explore here, but

⁵¹ For those wishing to eradicate traces of racial bias from this case, much has been made of the fact that Zimmerman was "not white, but hispanic." Two points: 1) one needn't be racially white in order to operate according to the logics of the white imaginary; 2) the racist pretenses of this statement remain generally unexamined by those who make the claim—if Zimmerman has a white father and a latino mother, why is he "hispanic" and not "white?" Vestiges of "one-drop" remain.

which at least bear brief mention. First, the rhetorical frameworks for which I have been arguing could prove quite useful in unpacking the ways that the Black trope somehow made plausible the claim that a grown man pursuing and ultimately killing an unarmed minor was engaging in self-defense. In addition, these frameworks could inform a reading of media and news coverage surrounding this entire series of events, making legible the ways that colorblind racism circulates as “common sense” in the hegemonic rhetorics surrounding race and racial discourse in the contemporary U.S. Finally, placing these treatments of the Black trope in conversation with theories of race and state could help highlight the otherwise naturalized connections linking heteropatriarchal Whiteness metonymically to the United States, a long-standing historical conjunction that continues to buttress ideologies and structures of racism on national and even global scales.

CONCLUSION: Making Worlds Together: Implications and Applications for the Politics of Listening

“[O]ppression often resides in the habits of mind and being that constitute common sense.” —Vorris Nunley (*Keepin' It Hushed*, 149)

I want to conclude this dissertation by considering some of the implications of the foregoing analysis for the possibilities of a genuinely robust American democracy. To be clear, I am not guided in these readings by a naive belief that a perfect world is possible or that any particular rhetorical framework can function as a panacea against racism and the other ills of democracy in the U.S. However, if Americans are indeed unwaveringly committed to democracy and liberty in the manner suggested the long-held rhetorical tradition of the shining city on the hill, then it is incumbent upon us to be able to listen even to that which we may not want to hear. And this suggestion—that it is incumbent upon “us” to listen—is of course a fraught proposition, given all of the histories and the politics of listening this dissertation has outlined. I am unable to offer a solution to this troubling dilemma, though I do believe headway may continue to be made, through some of the means I will propose herein, toward more robust democracy.

Overall, this dissertation has attempted to balance a critical analysis of histories and structures of repression and oppression alongside a constructive analysis of strategies for and possibilities of realizing a more inclusive vision. Taking a page from Nikolas Kompridis, for example, I have attempted not to simply collapse—as attempts at critical theory have all too often done—into any totalizing narratives that would foreclose the possibility of an increasingly just economic and political system. To the extent possible, I

have sought to minimize retelling the fantasies that White normativity holds deep within its breast, opting to focus on White hegemony only in terms of setting historical and political context and revealing its fissures, insecurities, illusions, and contradictions (i.e., opportunities for reform in the name of more robust and inclusive democracy). And while I continue in this vein throughout this conclusion, I also find myself drawn towards dwelling in a bit more detail on White normative subjectivity here, with the explicit aim of applying the insights of this dissertation towards identifying and undermining those aspects of White normative subjectivity and ontology that are most inclined toward not-listening, to foreclosing the possibility of genuinely robust democratic discourse. I suggested in the introduction, and elsewhere in this dissertation, that Whiteness posits itself as humanity's apotheosis, as the culmination of history and therefore outside of history. Given this proposition, a key aim in this conclusion is to trouble White normative ontology and subjectivity in order to help it find its place *within history* (an increasingly urgent proposition, given Donald Trump's nomination as Republican candidate for president), rather than outside of or apart from history. And while I do not purport to provide any particularly satisfactory solutions here, the implicit question underlying this conclusion might best be stated as follows: What is the most direct and efficacious way—for all parties involved—to usher White normative subjectivity into history?

Keeping these tenets in mind, this conclusion proceeds along the following lines: I begin by briefly recapping primary arguments advanced in each chapter and over the course of this dissertation as a whole. I then explore further implications of these arguments and consider a few possible directions for future research along these lines.

Following that, I devote the bulk of this conclusion to applying some of these general frameworks and insights to analyze President Obama's comments (and reactions to them) following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. My aim in so doing is to unpack the investments that White normative subjectivity maintains in a specific perspective on race and history in the U.S., investments that can help make legible a few specific opportunities for rhetorical interventions in the name of genuinely robust democracy.

In chapter one, I argued that Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell were rhetorical poets whose work sought to intervene in the democratic life of the nation. I explored the role of listening on the part of both poet and audience, focusing especially on the role of media and technology in shaping listening processes in Cold War America. In chapter two, I examined common treatments of language and communication within science fiction, unpacking varying representations of power, ideology, politics, and perceived difference as they inflect possibilities for communication. My third chapter engaged with a particularly powerful strand of the African-American rhetorical tradition—namely the theorization and reconfiguration of American ontology and *doxa*—which has played, over time, an indispensable role in helping African American rhetors get a listening in the public sphere and reshape American democracy in more egalitarian ways. Finally, in my fourth chapter, I analyzed the role of the Black trope in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent exoneration of his killer. I attempted to deploy the concepts of the rhetorical virus and not-listening to unpack specific ways that historically conditioned meanings of Blackness function as political rationalities to sediment the precarity of Black lives and to render Black voices and epistemologies into noise. In light of these

brief recapitulations, and before moving into some of these applications of this dissertation's core insights, I want to consider some possible implications—both for research and teaching—of each chapter's arguments and of the dissertation as a whole.

Extending frameworks on media, listening, and subjectivity from chapter one could prove productive in exploring the interrelated dynamics of complicity and resistance within a specifically neoliberal media context. Also productive would be further development of the twofold focus on identifying productive pop cultural texts while dismantling hegemonic media messages, which I loosely referred to as the “gotta get in to get out” approach to pop culture. Doing so can inform research into poetry as well as helping us decide what and how to teach. For instance, it could be quite productive to revisit a wide array of canonical and non-canonical American poetry looking for shared cultural threads between the poet as listener and audience as listening body, as well as analyzing marginalized poets' representations of experiences of being unheard in the public sphere. As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, a rhetorical understanding of listening offers a model through which readers can sensitively attune to the sources, investments, and effects of texts-as-resonances. In that sense, there certainly is a great deal of work that could be done looking into listening practices of authors and how those show up and get modeled for readers. Such an approach could also tie in with the pedagogical work of training our students to read for critical/political awareness in literature: What visions of democracy are afforded in any given text, and how are these visions shaped by political and economic forces or mechanisms of not-listening such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, and more? In an overview of

American poetry, what characterizations of the politics of listening emerge? Quite significantly, I believe, will be the process of continuing Lowell's and Ginsberg's project of facing the nation's pain, dwelling in both our research and teaching on poets who do this work and making legible the mechanisms of not-listening within the work of poets who resist this important project.

Chapter two constitutes a potentially important contribution to the study of communication, listening, and language within science fiction, yet I have managed only to scratch the surface of this very rich area of investigation. Further studies might continue to explore different representations of listening across perceived difference whether it be cultural, biological, political, etc. Research questions could include: What models of egalitarian listening are presented/explored in any given text? Are characters able to listen and be heard across difference? How so? How do the sounds of language represented in the text—through dialect or characterizations of sonic-aesthetic “beauty,” for example—play a constructive or impedimentary role in whether and how characters are heard? Are the text's characters “making worlds together,” in J. D. Peters' sense? How so? These questions can inform scholarly research as well as teaching practices; students might, for instance, draw from various sf texts to posit frameworks for listening and responding to people whose worldviews differ significantly from their own. Moreover, working within the chapter's linguistics-oriented arguments might help students develop the understanding that language is not neutral, an insight that might heighten students' sensitivity to the power circulating in language, tropes, etc.

Implications for chapter three span at least three possible trajectories: exploring in more depth and breadth African-American rhetorical strategies for getting a listening in the public sphere; highlighting these and other contributions of African American rhetoric for rhetorical theory in general; and further theorizing relationships between *doxa*, race, and ontology, perhaps delving into the rhetoric of becoming for insights into more dynamic understandings and models of subjectivity. To the third point more specifically, further theorizing relationships between *doxa*, race, and ontology might involve juxtaposing Black radical becoming to a Platonic view of language (as conduit) and soul (as transcendent being). With Plato as relief, the rhetoric of becoming can make more legible the substantive ways that language sort of constitutes our being, through *doxa*, which in this context has almost a materiality to it, a nearly palpable quality like computer coding that might get infected with a virus and made corrupt. Ontologies, understood through *doxa*, are rather like permeable bodies circulating amongst each other amidst a sea of vulnerabilities; they bump into each other and rebound, sometimes with an explosion of heat and light, sometimes with mild friction, sometimes adapting and overlapping, sometimes absorbing each other or dividing like single-celled organisms. Quite importantly, their boundaries are malleable yet often masquerade as unyielding, impermeable membranes or even unbreachable walls. Arguably, then, *doxa* is not “mere belief” or “mere opinion” (which would be contrasted with some ideal of transcendental truth), but is rather a fundamental grounding out of which action arises. If so, *doxa* provides the foundation of and rationale for any given action and arguably makes certain

kinds of actions inevitable, a contention that resonates with key insights of my final chapter as well (around the question of intentionality, for instance).

My examinations in chapter four of embodied tropes, meanings of Blackness, and listening in the public sphere have numerous implications for improved understanding of embodiment within rhetorical studies, more robust democratic discourse on race, and formulating rhetorical interventions into some of the longstanding tropes that help perpetuate inordinate, unreasonable, and unconscionable police violence against African Americans. In research building on this study, I would like to develop a focused rubric for analyzing discourses of race in the public sphere, including a typology of rhetorical strategies that buttress various conflicting ontologies, epistemologies, and ideologies of race in the U.S. Further tropes could be examined in detail, with a specific eye towards identifying rhetorical interventions to be used in public sphere and academic discourse to undermine the effects of such tropes. Examples of particularly pernicious tropes include: the “Sharpton trope” (often used to denigrate African-Americans’ responses to racially charged events by characterizing ongoing civil rights discourses as mere attempts at securing personal power for Black community leaders); the trope of “Black complaint” (plays on the fatigue, frustration, guilt, and prejudices of mainstream audiences who prefer the blissful ignorance of pretending that race no longer matters);⁵² and the trope of “Black culpability” (holds people responsible for their own deaths at the hands of police

⁵² As numerous commentators have pointed out, those members of the public tired of *hearing* about racial inequality would be well-served to spend a moment attempting to empathize with the billions of people worldwide who continue to *experience* racial inequality.

and vigilantes, often through numerous other tropes such as “Black refusal of perfect compliance”). In all honesty, it feels like a bit of a disservice to so briefly mention such powerful mechanisms of not-listening and violence without giving them the rigorous discussion they deserve; it is, however, my intention and my hope to see these tropes taken up elsewhere, in both academic and public media. Finally, further projects emerging from my fourth chapter might also include an analysis of the ways that the Black trope, and the other tropes mentioned here, have been used to constitute and police the racialized nature of the U.S. nation-state.

In terms of implications emerging from overlaps between the chapters and from the dissertation as a whole, I want to briefly discuss interrelationships between rhetoric, ontology, and subjectivity, culminating with a few notes on applications for the classroom. Potential contributions of this dissertation to rhetorical theory include: further support for arguments for incorporating bodies and ontology into rhetorical theory (especially chapters two, three, and four); and heightened awareness of the rhetorical power of reshaping *doxa*, especially by using a given *doxa*’s internal contradictions against itself (especially chapters one, three, and four); and the powerful rhetorical strategies characteristic of a rhetoric of becoming for “making a way out of no way,” or building and advancing arguments that must establish, as they unfold in process, their own conditions of possibility for getting a listening. Moreover, one primary and significant contribution this article stands to make is in providing a framework for reconceptualizing the role of the listener in rhetoric. For instance, regarding the traditional understanding of rhetoric as civic discourse, this dissertation provides implicit

ethical and ontological grounds for claiming that We the People have an obligation to listen. Such a model would require rhetoric to be refigured away from the one-directional “good man speaking well” to also productively encompass the “good person, listening receptively.”

If my arguments have been effective, these contributions to rhetorical theory should also have demonstrated the importance of a new model of subjectivity that does not perceive vulnerability only as a threat to be avoided. This idea of vulnerable subjectivity—alluded to in the title of this dissertation and certainly hovering about every chapter—is part and parcel with a robust understanding of rhetorical ontology. As I argued in my introduction, for instance, the rhetorical virus is an attempt to formulate one example of the “particular ills” resulting from “our prowess in the ways of symbolicity” (*Language as Symbolic Action* viii), as Burke has described the phenomena. More specifically, the rhetorical virus offers a means to link rhetoric with ontology and subjectivity and to explore the Western philosophical roots that cathect these various formulations with fear of vulnerability. Opportunities for further work in this specific area could include specific analysis of how the vestiges of Platonic conceptions of language and soul construct language itself as a threat, one endangering the supposedly rational subject formerly presumed to be master of language but now revealed as its subject. The nature of the Platonic self is endangered by this experience, and being persuaded, in this worldview, can only be understood as weakness.

Finally, I want to consider some applications of the politics of listening in the teaching of composition. This could include a threefold strategy that aims to help

students: understand how power shapes both speaking and listening; explore more democratic practices of listening; and perhaps most importantly, develop strategies that increase the possibilities that historically marginalized voices can be heard. What would it mean, for instance, for a composition instructor to both ground rhetoric in the specificities of its Western histories and to simultaneously complement these discussions through teaching rhetorics not centered in the Western tradition? The aim here would be to foreground a democratic model of listening that brings diverse knowledges and communication practices to bear to enrich both the classroom and the rhetorical tradition. While there is a great deal still to be said on all of the aforementioned topics, the great majority of it will need to be said elsewhere. And keeping all of these points in mind, I turn now to the process of applying the core insights of this dissertation to contemporary public sphere discourses around race.

President Obama, Race, and the Problem of History

Currently, an unwritten interdiction largely prohibiting frank discussions about history and race in the public sphere forms a significant barrier to the possibility of legitimate and robust democracy. This point is demonstrated most plainly perhaps in the all too common tenet, consistently advanced by proponents of so-called “colorblindness,” that discussion of race constitutes racism. To bring this point home, I want to analyze how differing perspectives on history form fundamental, possibly intractable oppositions between frank, open, anti-racist discussions of race in the public sphere and problematic ideologies of colorblindness with their attendant colorblind and colorblinding rhetorical strategies. Indeed, these two perspectives are each largely predicated upon different

understandings of the relationship between race and history, such that, rhetorically speaking, the “problem” of race becomes largely a problem of history. Paradoxically, while colorblind rhetors commonly claim that anti-racists are stuck in a now irrelevant past, there is no doubt that White subjectivity and American identity rely heavily on weighted and very partial accounts of U.S. history. It is in fact the colorblind who are stuck endlessly selecting and defending a past that is largely indefensible in terms of “freedom,” “liberty,” and “choice,” ostensibly the values most central to White American identities. Thus, “American history” should be understood as a dominant political rationality of Whiteness, governing (amongst other things) what is sayable about race in the public sphere. This rationality privileges White comfort and sanctions only those identities and subjectivities that readily align with the official, neatly razored out scraps of the American historical narrative.

In the case of race, White supremacy and White comfort are the dominant rubrics legitimating hegemonic explanations about which scraps of this narrative remain relevant and which have been or should be consigned to the dustbin of history. And these contradictions and tensions are only heightened by the election of the nation’s first African American president. On one hand, yes, Obama represents a triumph for America itself, an apparent fulfillment of long trumpeted promises and possibilities that Whiteness attributes to itself. However, on the other hand, this triumph can be nothing other than also a triumph *over America itself*, over its histories of oppression and White supremacy. In the dominant narrative, there can be no external evildoers easily blamed for the conditions over which Obama’s election triumphs, conditions that are part and parcel

with, not epiphenomenal to, the nation's founding. This paradox further necessitates a temporalization of racism for colorblind/colorblinding rhetoricians, both producing and requiring an increasingly desperate insistence that anti-Black racism is in the past. And this is but one example of the ideological and rhetorical convolutions required to uncritically valorize American history as a foundation of White identity while obfuscating the still present heritages of institutionalized oppression. Additionally, given that America is treated as an inevitable outcome of Whiteness, Obama's election can be co-opted as, rather than an implicit critique of Whiteness on these terms, proof of the virtues of Whiteness and the egalitarian culture it has produced.

Given the foregoing concerns, it begins to make sense why colorblind/colorblinding rhetoricians frequently critique Obama for "dividing the nation" in the sheer act of openly talking about race: the very fact that his election is celebrated as proof of a post-racial culture serves also as an incontrovertible reminder of a history of racism and oppression. In that sense, the very fact that he is president can be understood as itself racially divisive, not only in the reactions of straightforward and colorblind racists, but also given that President Obama's election simultaneously occasions and makes deeply suspect the kind of uncritical celebration of "America" that has long nourished White (and especially masculine) subjectivity. This evocation of discomfiting history is commonly attributed to an "obsession with race" on the part of the Obama administration. This colorblind outcry became particularly shrill following the president's comments on Zimmerman's acquittal. I will consider the content of his comments shortly, but first, I will briefly demonstrate that the "racial division" attributed to Obama was

rooted in the fact of his having spoken about race at all. Contrary to the wild-eyed denouncements about the presidential administration's obsession with race, by many accounts—some of which are published in otherwise largely colorblind sources like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Fox News*—it is only infrequently that President Obama directly discusses race at all. According to Mary Frances Berry, former longtime member of the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights:

Race is a touchier topic for the president. Mr. Obama has rarely been eager to identify himself as a black candidate or president. On rare occasions, he has addressed the matter—notably during the controversy over his former minister Rev. Jeremiah Wright—but usually casts the issue in a broader context of American history. He wants to be careful so that people who are uncomfortable with the first African-American president don't believe he's only going to pay attention to African-Americans. (qtd. in Meckler and Campo-Flores).

Similarly, amidst a wash of outrage manufactured largely by colorblind commenters, Bill O'Reilly surprisingly defended President Obama's comments on the Zimmerman verdict, saying, "He was just expressing outrage in very personal terms; as the leader of the country the President is entitled to do that" (O'Reilly). And even despite the fact that several 2012 Republican presidential candidates, including Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum, "[echoed] his call for a full investigation into the case" (Parsons and Memoli; Thompson and Wilson), the colorblind "party line" required denunciation and even excoriation of Obama as divisive. Certainly this denouncement should be read as a racialized attempt to delegitimize President Obama through the contention that he was using his presidential authority to play identity politics and to pander to African Americans. However, in a long view of history, these kinds of denouncements read like

just another strategy of not-listening to the voices and experiences of African Americans more broadly.

Indeed, contrary to the colorblind charge that the president's remarks were *creating* racial division where none might otherwise exist, data from Pew Research and ABC News polls indicate that significant racial divisions certainly do exist already in the United States. And the president's comments and his detractors' responses accurately reflected these existing divisions. For example, "Just 9 percent of blacks approved of acquitting George Zimmerman of criminal charges in Martin's death, compared with 51 percent of whites who approved" (Levinson). In addition, "The *Post*/ABC News data also reported that 87 percent of blacks say the shooting was unjustified. Just 33 percent of whites agreed" (Levinson). Though these results may frustrate the post-racial idealizations of the colorblind, it is evident that the Zimmerman verdict itself was a source of racial division, rather than President Obama's comments about it. To return to Goldberg, the colorblind ideology of racelessness is thus not a war on racial inequality, but a war on referring to race at all (233). And despite the fact that President Obama's record on race issues is tepid at best, he deserves some credit for confronting (albeit obliquely) the differing majority perspectives of Whites and African Americans on this verdict. To some extent, he refused to capitulate to the war on racial reference, and it is this refusal that colorblind commenters were reacting to as racially divisive.

During a press conference on July 19, 2013, President Obama spoke for approximately seventeen minutes about the verdict, perhaps attempting, as Frank James

suggested in an article for *NPR*, to “[Explain] Black America to White America.” The president explained,

In the African-American community, at least, there’s a lot of pain around what happened here. I think it’s important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn’t go away . . . The African-American community is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws — everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws. And that ends up having an impact in terms of how people interpret the case. (qtd. in James)

Again, contrary to the colorblinding rhetorical tenet that discussion of race constitutes racism, these comments represent President Obama’s attempt to call attention to already existing racial division to attempt to help bridge it. In attempting to “explain black America to white America,” to use James’ terms, the president was arguably attempting to help “white America” learn to listen in a way that is necessary for robust democracy. David Brooks interprets the president’s comments in a similar way, noting, “And so he arrived at, I think, a pretty responsible position at the end of the day, at the same time giving voice to a whole range of conflicting feelings, conflicting thoughts, conflicting ideas, and I think giving all Americans a sense of what other people are feeling, why they’re reacting the way they are. I thought it was a deeply unifying statement” (Block, Dionne, and Brooks). President Obama’s comments can be “unifying” for Brooks because he understands that there are already existing, long-standing racial divisions in the U.S. and that these divisions need to be bridged and healed, not simply ignored, disavowed, or forced into the past. And listening may be the necessary first step. For Brooks, the comments were unifying because President Obama “gave people a sense of where each other was coming from.” But unfortunately, the many colorblind mechanisms

of not-listening largely just turned the president's speech to noise, making its content illegible beyond the mention of race itself. In colorblind ideologies, the president's comments cannot be understood as unifying since colorblindness obfuscates any pre-existing division, and given the imperative to protect White comfort, White privilege, and White entitlement, many colorblind subjects feel entitled to have their ill-informed beliefs count as reality.

This sense of entitlement extends to construction of the dominant narrative about American history. Indeed, underlying these facile denouncements of Obama as divisive is the more intractable problem that American history is itself necessarily divisive for the colorblind. As Obama pointed out in his comments (again obliquely), the history of institutionalized oppression experienced by African Americans "doesn't go away." And obfuscation of this fact is a significant *raison d'être* of colorblind ideologies. It is in this sense that history is itself divisive, and exhaustively dividing and cataloguing historical facts between those which Americans are either culturally obligated to forget or to remember becomes a core project of colorblind ideologies. Within this project, history gets replaced by ideology and trope, which are then taken as history itself, and any attempt to counteract these discourses is dubbed "revisionist." In fact, it often seems that colorblind commenters are more insistent that we cease discussing the histories of injustice than that we work steadily to end ongoing injustice. My contention here is that the reason these troubled histories are so unhearable for the colorblind is that they trouble not only the dominant narrative of American history but the nature and mythos of White American subjectivity. It can be a painful shock to have to reconcile one's proud racial-

national heritage with the reality that White privilege always already entails an inheritance of blood money. Therefore, if President Obama publicly references these histories that are supposed to have been severed from the present, the colorblind reaction must inevitably be denouncement. But for better or worse, this history of institutionalized oppression can never go away. It did happen. It is factual. Certainly, eventually, the resonances and residues of this history will more fully recede, but likely not while that history continues negatively impacting the lives of people it has long disadvantaged. As the war on terror has recently and so decisively demonstrated, the national tolerance is quite high for collateral damage to the lives of the other, and the historical problem of race is no exception.

The president's evocation of these troubling histories, coupled with the suggestion that they have continuing effects, further troubles normative White subjectivity by challenging hegemonic mechanisms of not-listening; the implicit "threat" in this sense is that the ongoing salience of these histories renders valid the knowledge about these matters possessed, in Obama's terms, by the African-American community. This kind of knowledge, rarely given a listening in the public sphere, is in Nunley's terms African-American hush harbor knowledge. Moreover, hush harbor knowledge and subjectivities present substantive threats to the political rationalities of White comfort and hegemonic narratives of American self and nation, potentially forcing a fundamental reconsideration of the histories of freedom and progress that constitute "America." For example, George Yancy suggests, "When the black body is made the center of the analysis of America's historical legacy, America undergoes a process of transmogrification, revealing a history

steeped in horror and terror” (“Microtomes” 269-70). Therefore, not-listening to the history of the Black body in the U.S. is indispensable in sustaining dominant American narratives and the White subjectivities they make possible. Obama’s body and comments are both “divisive” on these terms. To borrow again from Nunley’s arguments, there is an important distinction between hush harbor rhetoric and public podium/auction block rhetoric—the latter is a tamed, domesticated version of Blackness more easily digestible in the public sphere. Thus, Obama’s Blackness signifies the triumph of Whiteness when his speech is sufficiently domesticated—he is obligated to perform domesticity in public in order to minimize the threat that his Blackness poses to White history and the White subject (as Nunley has convincingly argued of public Blackness throughout *Keepin’ It Hushed*).

Many of the barriers to genuine, widespread conversation about race and its effects are therefore problems of historical memory. For example, the colorblind discourse insisting that African Americans need to “get over it,” may in fact more accurately understood as yet more dissimulation; in fact, the more pressing need is arguably that colorblind Whites and White culture find ways to reconcile these opposing histories, rather than trying to jettison, in the names of democracy and civility, that which troubles White normativity. The uncomfortable fact is that White people and White culture were responsible for the horrific race-based system of slavery that helped give rise to modernity; Whites and Whiteness created and enacted it, in the process kidnapping, dehumanizing, murdering, raping, mutilating, torturing, and terrorizing untold millions of human beings over the course of hundreds of years. It was Whites and

Whiteness who broke up families, killed and brutalized children, and worked people literally to death, largely in pursuit of the profit motive and the development of local and eventually national economic systems.

These incredibly ugly histories suggest at least two critical points with which the colorblind patriot must reconcile himself: 1) these horrific acts were done to other human beings by Whites and Whiteness, and this fact is indelibly a part of the earned racial inheritance of Whiteness; 2) these acts were fundamentally part and parcel with America, American culture and history, and the roots of U.S. economic dominance. It is a permanent, indelible smear not only on our history, but on the very nature of the political and economic system we are exhorted to love, even worship. These incidences were not epiphenomenal to this system; they were an effect of it. They were not an aberration; they are part of its nature. These points make irretrievable the imagined golden histories of founding fathers driven at all costs towards freedom and equality, driven by the ideal that “all men are created equal” (itself a claim contemporaneously blind to all people of color and to women’s humanity as well).

But while the national discourse struggles to unmake or explain away the ugliest things that America has done, we miss the opportunity to strive for a more genuine version of the ideals embedded in those words; while we grasp at the past, trying to remake its image, we reintroduce and sediment traces of it in the present. Trying to forget that America was born and grew up making people of color grist for its mills, we stop our ears to the ways it continues to do so. If we’re unwilling to hear about the past, how could we possibly open ourselves to its traces in the present? In sum, a forceful thrusting of

racism into the past (mirroring the violent past itself) is required to bolster the fantasy of Whiteness as the proper subject of history, but on some level, it can serve only to remind us of the past that Whiteness must deny to sustain its own delusions that Whiteness is what it purports itself to be. But if we are to take seriously a commitment to robust democracy, this not-listening to the experiences and knowledge of Black folks is debilitating and can be justified only through tacit supremacy and a profound sense of White entitlement to the silent complicity of the other, an entitlement dissimulated perpetually by defining “entitlement” as primarily an immoral characteristic of the other.

Indeed, one of the entailments of Whiteness is the privilege to remain unaware of and unaffected by the deeply entrenched racial divisions Obama referenced in his post-verdict comments. Thus, while I am sympathetic towards and hopeful about Brooks’ interpretation of the president’s comments, what Brooks’ analysis fails to address is the question of why “white America” might want to understand “what other people are feeling.” I do not mean this to sound crass or cynical, nor am I suggesting that “white America” is wholly solipsistic or apathetic. Rather, I am returning to my earlier arguments about the risks of listening, attempting thereby to open an inquiry into how we might productively shape value systems that could ground a willingness to listen even when doing so creates discomfort, troubles hegemonic worldviews, and poses, quite frankly, little if any immediate cost for the White subject who refuses to do so. Put differently, how do we pierce the shroud of privilege and entice into listening those normative, colorblind subjects who feel entitled to not know or care why other people feel and react as they do? So while I hope, as Brooks and James both believe, that

Obama's remarks might have made listening possible for a few people who were otherwise not-listening, I remain skeptical that the mechanisms of colorblind not-listening could be so easily hacked.

Nonetheless, piercing this shroud of privilege must be a central aim in rhetorical interventions in public sphere discourse about race. And while tragedies such as Trayvon Martin's death commonly occasion increased national attention to matters of race, a more sustained and intensive campaign will likely prove more efficacious over time. As Gene Demby has noted, "criminal cases — and the Zimmerman trial, in particular — are lousy proxies for fights over big, messy social issues" (Demby). The emotional charge surrounding the Zimmerman trial only caused colorblind commenters to entrench themselves more deeply, seeing the national outrage it generated as a manufactured power grab by the "true racists" on the left. In this view, it wasn't Zimmerman on trial so much as the state of the national conversation on race. Zimmerman's fate was inextricably bound up with adjudication of broader issues related to normative White identity, the meaning of "America," and a worldview steeped in White entitlement. This point helps explain the repugnant reaction of the frequently polemic Ann Coulter, who upon hearing the verdict, tweeted simply "Hallelujah!" ("Ann Coulter On George Zimmerman Verdict"). Apparently, the verdict worked to temporarily resolve for her not simply the question of Zimmerman's guilt or innocence, but the extent to which Whiteness more broadly is implicated in ongoing, systematic, anti-Black violence and oppression. In her view, Whiteness, too, was acquitted on that day. And while it is beyond the scope of this conclusion to formalize in depth a more sustained and strategic

rhetorical intervention into mainstream discourses of race, given the deeply charged nature of Coulter's reaction and those like it, it seems that such an intervention, or rather series of interventions, are quite necessary.

The most apt responses must be grounded first and foremost in a commitment to genuine and robust democracy, which entails what might be termed a "socialist redistribution" of precariousness. Butler suggests, "policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (Butler 28). Redistributing precariousness is precisely where Cruz's pathos-oriented listening must be incited and cultivated, with the intention of opening public discourse to conversation about race, and eventually, the unequal distribution of precarity. But how can we speak and listen through the impenetrable walls of colorblind ideologies? How do we begin to dispel the effects of the Black trope? Simply highlighting the indispensability of listening within a robust democracy, and explicitly formulating and advocating a kind of listening that lowers walls, are two very good places to start. Americans from across the ideological spectrum must then both engage in this variety of listening and insist on being heard in this way. And we have to find ways to ask the right questions, in the right places, and at the right times, inquiring very publicly, and insisting on *parrhesia*, about what we mean when we say democracy and what commitments we are prepared to make to its practices.

The fundamental first step, as I see it, is identifying possibilities for attunement so that we might coax the colorblind out of their defensive stances and recognize some of our own, so that we might minimize not-listening (both “ours” and “theirs”). It is my hope that laying bare the deeply naturalized and coded stakes in the politics of race and othering, in terms of both normative subjectivity and the politics of listening, will be a step in this direction. However, we have to theorize not *only* (and indeed not even *primarily*) the victories and hegemonies of colorblindness and colorblind/colorblinding rhetorics, as has become quite common in progressive critiques—we must also identify and exploit weaknesses, fissures, and possibilities for change. And while I have primarily discussed not-listening as profoundly disadvantageous, it must be noted that the sites of not-listening are also necessarily sites of possibility, potential spaces in which listening *might* occur, given the right circumstances and the appropriate impetus. The defensive posture itself of not-listening might lead us precisely to discovery of weaknesses in the ideological armor of White normative ontology. Put differently, the drive to not-listen and the stakes involved suggest vulnerability, and attuning to these vulnerabilities may prove quite generative in identifying and overcoming the primary objections to enacting widely inclusive democratic processes and practices.

More specifically, attuning in these ways could provide grounds for doing the difficult work of interrogating history and its connections with subjectivity, ongoing inequality, and our all-too-narrow model of democratic discourse. As I discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, an ideal model of democratic listening could help reveal any given epistemology and ontology to be simply one amongst many; this is, however, an

admittedly fraught ideal, one that gives rise to both obstacles and opportunities. While such an ideal remains currently unrealistic, following the defensive postures of not-listening towards their most heavily charged points of resistance could lead the way to formulating a model under which competing visions of “America” might at least coexist with a broader measure of openness. The work of African American rhetoricians in refiguring American *doxa*, as discussed in chapter three, provides an excellent model for this kind of work, as might continuing to deploy the longstanding American trope of the “shining city on a hill,” reinflecting it as a multicultural city whose growth has always been nourished through diversity. This would entail deploying very deliberate strategies crafted to enact a shift away from the historical tendency of Whiteness to essentially devour diversity into itself, taking credit for the accomplishments of diverse Americans while refusing to acknowledge the debt America owes to diversity itself. Rather, the new rhetorical aims would be celebrating our collective ability to marshal diversity as one of our greatest national resources, one that has enabled us to make worlds together in ways that would be otherwise impossible.

In order to get to a point where we’re listening in these ways, we have to loudly foreground the terms upon which a democratic listening subject might be founded—and this will necessarily entail risks to the nature of subjectivity. But it will also mean asking the pointed question about which identities are more important to “America”—*ex post facto* constructions of White normalcy, or those that value a genuine embrace of the egalitarian spirit alluded to at the core of America’s founding principles and documents. Unfortunately, it may be the case that democracy has never—or at least not for any

extended period—worked in any truly egalitarian sense in the U.S. It is more accurately the case that democracy *has worked very well* according to the intentions of the founders (e.g. whose voices get heard and whose get rendered into noise). A crucial question then involves asking how we resolve this distinction between the humanist “spirit” of the words and their actual failures to be inclusive of women and all people of color?

What’s ultimately called for—the endgame of a truly robust democratic politics of listening—is effecting a fundamental shift in how we understand history and “America.” Certainly there will always be people who remain impossible to reach, people who construe receptivity as weakness. But those of us who are oriented towards receptivity and listening must continue to play by our rules, not theirs. We must therefore—in pursuit of our own ontological commitments, not in capitulation to “their” intractability—attempt to listen to “them.” And while this is an admittedly fraught proposition—for instance, asking marginalized peoples to continue to try to listen to Whiteness (despite centuries of effectively being forced to do so) in order to best understand how to usher Whiteness into history—I can think of no viable options that do not entail at least a measure of doing so. On one hand, it is without a doubt unreasonable to place more burdens on Black folks, for example, asking African American rhetors to continue to embody dual consciousness and to perform public podium/auction block rhetoric to help secure the common democratic good while we “wait” patiently and work deliberately for Whiteness to see the writing on the wall. And I suspect it does little to balm this further injustice to emphasize the fact that the “we” who are listening to Whiteness in this way are today a more diverse, multicultural group than ever in U.S. history. On another hand, let me return briefly to my

earlier arguments that political rationalities are normative and that therefore we can similarly take any given dominant conception of listening to be normative, to produce effects, and to function as a political rationality, organizing the penetrability and sovereignty of listeners and speakers, for example. If this is the case, we must understand that the hegemonic listening practices of White normativity must themselves be transformed if we are to secure a listening for historically marginalized voices. I do not of course “like” or value the political implications of this dilemma as it stands, but I do believe this assessment to be unfortunately accurate. Effective rhetorical strategies to transform hegemonic listening practices might therefore seek to “make a way out of no way,” to create their own conditions of possibility, of legibility.

One possible place to start could be to attempt to resonate with the affective reactions that accompany many normative White subjects’ sense of threat that stems from most any situation in which one’s ontology appears undermined by other ontologies. Put differently, we might acknowledge that placing one’s ontology at risk may feel like chipping away at the very foundations of the world. As I have argued in numerous places throughout this dissertation, coming into contact with “the Other” reveals our cultures, our knowledges, our selves, to be always already contingent, to be merely one way of knowing amongst others, amongst many. This is in part why listening can be understood as dangerous, because it may jeopardize our very ontologies and epistemological commitments to reality. In this sense, contemporary “get back to a better America” rhetorics are in part attempts at dissimulation, at writing history as White normative ontology wants it to have been and needs it to be if its position outside of history is to be

sustained.⁵³ Seen this way, the entire fundamentalist approach to reality is predicated on not-listening, on forcing everything in its purview (including its gaze both backwards and forwards in time) to conform to its expectations—it means squeezing the entirety of being into the narrow, always already subjective and selective nature of a given *doxa*. By contrast, through an orientation grounded in receptivity and listening, we accept and recognize that phenomena are situated within *doxa*, and thus they are always at least partially masked by the histories that precede our encounters with them. Phenomena are thus always in need of disclosure, in the sense that Kompridis describes it; listening and “letting be” are the ways to allow phenomena to show up for us clearly in their situatedness, vs. showing up as “truth.” When we recognize a phenomenon as situated, we’re able to possibly make adjustments to how we understand and respond to it; when we do not see it as situated, we’ve already enacted an initial violence by forcing the phenomenon into our narrow, partial *doxa*. This is precisely not-listening—erasing over any possible relevance of the genealogy of a particular phenomenon, transfiguring all phenomena into ventriloquists’ dummies, mere mouthpieces for our own perspectives, making our own situatedness the universal value for all phenomena.

⁵³ I would like this point to go without saying, but given the very real stakes involved (for example the potential for violence embedded Donald Trump’s vile denigrations of undocumented Mexican immigrants), the point bears brief but explicit mention. I am in no way attempting to excuse away these “reclaim America” rhetorics as “just stuff that humans do.” This entire dissertation should provide evidence to the contrary. Rather, I mean here to emphasize my conviction that a willingness, no matter how begrudging, to listen to that which one does not want to hear is a fundamental tenet of a genuinely robust democratic politics of listening.

Our relationship to history therefore must necessarily be one of listening rather than speaking, one that does not pass sentence on our antecedents' lack of conformity to a contemporary progressive *doxa*, regardless of how much truer a version of freedom and liberty we know ours to be.⁵⁴ Beating up our forebears, as many of us on the "Left" are wont to do, for not having found themselves in an absence of history into which a democratic Eden might have been planted seems only moderately more productive at best than the bumbling, intractable, dunderheaded "right wing" conviction that Eden did in fact take root and flourish, only to be stymied 190 years later by proponents of multiculturalism and feminism. Both mythologies attempt to turn their own situatedness into a universal value. But this is not to say that both perspectives are of equal merit simply because neither is the universal value; recall, after all, that this dissertation privileges rhetoric over philosophy, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) over the impossible to attain transcendent knowledge. Listening to history is best practiced absent a universal value; this does not, however, oblige us to listen without a rubric. On this point, I have to side with the good Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s conviction that the arc of history is long but bends ever toward justice. In that light, we see that theirs is a crumbling edifice, these not-listening propounders and confounders of history, these "make America great again" rhetoricians with their ongoing defense of that which is indefensible. Theirs is a

⁵⁴ While it is generally wise to remain skeptical of oversimplistic dichotomous frameworks purporting to explain the difference between two contrasting viewpoints, the following comparison does merit consideration: in progressive *doxa*, our forebears are often castigated for their failure to live up to our high standards of egalitarianism and democracy, whereas in conservative *doxa*, it is usually contemporary Americans castigated for our failure to maintain and adequately service the initial vision and standards of our forebears.

fading world inexorably eroding with the changing tide. For those of us unconvinced by the attempt to stop one's ears and shout history into being, and for those of us persuaded by the hope that we might one day become that which we have long purported ourselves to be, the frameworks I have been advocating provide the chance at a robust democratic listening, the possibility of hearing ourselves in that which we abhor, in that which we fear, in that which we castigate in order to constitute our own being. Implied in all this is a relationship with history that makes possible a legitimately democratic future: we have to embrace what "America" has been in order to understand what (and how) it could be, what it might someday become, and what we might shape it into being, so that we can continue working towards a future we need but don't know how to build or even conceive.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." Trans. Maurice Goldbloom. 1978. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. 1982. New York: Continuum, 2002. 270–299. Print.
- Aldiss, Brian. *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. 1st American ed. New York: Atheneum, 1986. Print.
- Alvarez, Lizette. "Zimmerman Case Has Race as a Backdrop, but You Won't Hear It in Court." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, 7 July 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- "Ann Coulter On George Zimmerman Verdict: 'Hallelujah!'" *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. The Huffington Post, 13 July 2013. Web. 14 July, 2013.
- Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Ed. & trans. by George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.
- Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985. Print.
- "Audio: Calls from Zimmerman, Neighbor Capture Last Minutes of Martin's Life." *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 20 May 2014. Web. 2 Jan. 2014.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg." *Pacific Coast Philology* 42. 1 (2007): 1-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.
- . "Dissertation Chapter 1." Message to the author. 19 July 2016. Email.
- . "Robert Lowell and the Cold War." *New England Quarterly* 72.3 (1999): 339. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 13 May 2014.
- . *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978. Print.
- Baldwin, James. Interview by Kenneth Clarke. *The Negro and the American Promise*. 1963. *American Experience*. PBS. Web. Video and Transcript. 25 Sept. 2015.
- Baldwin, James and Malcolm X. "Debate between James Baldwin and Malcolm X." 25 Apr. 1961. *Democracy Now!* Web. 1 Mar. 2016.

- Banks, Adam J. "Looking Forward to Look Back: Technology Access and Transformation in African American Rhetoric." Richardson and Jackson 189–203.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. New York: Hill and Wang, 1979. Print.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Bartkowiak, Mathew J., ed. *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Ed. Michael William Jennings and Howard Eiland. Trans. Harry Zohn. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006. 389–400. Print.
- Blair, Carole, ed. "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality." *Rhetorical Bodies*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999. 16-57. Print.
- Block, Melissa, E.J. Dionne, and David Brooks. "Week In Politics: Obama on Race and Trayvon Martin." *All Things Considered*. *npr.org*. National Public Radio, 19 July 2013. Web. Transcript. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Bloom, Lisa. "Zimmerman Prosecutors Duck the Race Issue." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, 15 July 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Blow, Charles M. "The Whole System Failed Trayvon Martin." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, 15 July 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Bogado, Aura. "Zimmerman Defense: 'Trayvon Armed Himself with Concrete.'" *Colorlines*. Race Forward, 12 July 2013. Web. 2 Jan. 2014.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 4th ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Print.
- Botelho, Greg and Sunny Hostin. "Dunn Convicted of Attempted Murder; Hung Jury on Murder in 'Loud-Music' Trial." *CNN.com*. CNN, 15 Feb. 2014. 15 Feb. 2014.
- Bould, Mark, and China Mieville, eds. *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*. Wesleyan, 2009. Print.

- Bould, Mark, and Sherryl Vint. *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Breslin, James E. *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945 - 1965*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985. Print.
- . "Poetry." *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Emory Elliott, Martha Banta, Terence Martin, David Minter, Marjorie Perloff, and Daniel B. Shea, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization." *Political Theory* 34.6 (2006): 690-714. Web. 10 May 2011.
- . "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." *Theory & Event* 7.1 (2003): N. pag. Web. 29 Apr. 2012.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "The Hermeneutical Anarchist: Phronesis, Rhetoric, and the Experience of Art." *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, & Jens Kertscher. The MIT Press, 2002. 45-72. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. California ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969. Print.
- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. California ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969. Print.
- . *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Reprint. U of California P, 1968. Print.
- . "Literature as Equipment for Living." *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Second Edition. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1967. 293-304. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. Print.
- CNN Library. "Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts." *CNN.com*. CNN, 29 Aug. 2013. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print. Perspectives on Gender 2.
- Cone, James H. "Malcolm X: The Impact of a Cultural Revolutionary." *The Christian Century* 109.38 (1992): 1189-1195. Print.

- . *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991. Print.
- Corbett, Edward P. J. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Cruz, Jon. *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. Print.
- Csicsery-Ronay, Jr, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan, 2011. Print.
- Davis, Angela Y. "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X." *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. Ed. Joy James. Malden: Blackwell, 1998. 279–288. Print. Blackwell Readers.
- Demby, Gene. "One Trayvon Martin Case, but Two Very Different Trials." *Code Switch*. *npr.org*. National Public Radio, 9 July 2013. Web. 14 July 2013.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1977. Print.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being in Time, Division I*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995. Print.
- . Course Lectures: Philosophy 185 Heidegger. Rec. Fall 2007. *Internet Archive*. Web. 18 Nov. 2011.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2009. eBook.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.
- Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas Kellner, eds. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. 2nd ed. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984. Print.
- Erlmann, Veit. *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality*. New York: Zone, 2010. Print.

- Farrell, Thomas B. *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Print.
- Flanzbaum, Hilene. "Surviving the Marketplace: Robert Lowell and the Sixties." *New England Quarterly* 68.1 (1995): 44. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 14 May 2014.
- Ford, Dana. "Juror: 'No Doubt' That George Zimmerman Feared for His Life." *CNN.com*. CNN, 16 July 2013. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Vintage, 1980. Print.
- Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: W. Morrow, 1986. Print.
- "George Zimmerman's Father Claims Trayvon Martin Beat His Son, Threatened His Life." *FoxNews.com*. FOX News Network, 29 March 2012. Web. 27 Jan. 2014.
- Gilmore, Mikal. "Allen Ginsberg." *Rolling Stone* 29 May 1997: 34+. *EBSCOHost*. Web. 14 May 2014.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.
- Gilyard, Keith. "Introduction: Aspects of African American Rhetoric as a Field." Richardson and Jackson 1-18.
- Gilyard, Keith, and Norris Nunley. *Rhetoric and Ethnicity*. Portsmouth: Boynton/ Cook, 2004. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965-1971*. City Lights, 2001. Print.
- . *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Ed. Bill Morgan. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008. Print.
- . *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*. Ed. David Carter. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.
- . *Wait Till I'm Dead: Uncollected Poems*. Ed. Bill Morgan. New York: Grove Press, 2016. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen, Barry Miles, and Carl Solomon. *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous*

- Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts & Bibliography*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. Print.
- Goff, Phillip Abita, and L. Song Richardson. "No Bigots Required: What the Science of Racial Bias Reveals in the Wake of Trayvon Martin." *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. Ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013. 59–72. Print.
- Goldberg, David Theo. *The Racial State*. Malden: Blackwell, 2002. Print.
- Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. Print.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs. New York: Schocken Books, 1988. Print.
- Gunn, James E. *The Listeners*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972. Print.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Haden Elgin, Suzette. "An Interview with Suzette Haden Elgin." By Kim Wells. *Women Writers: A Zine*. 1999. Web. 16 Feb. 2013.
- . *Native Tongue*. New York: DAW Books, 1984. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- . "The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and Its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Anthony G. McGrew. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Race: The Floating Signifier*. Dir. Jhally, Sut. Media Education Foundation, 1997. YouTube. Web. 13 Mar 2013.
- . "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies." *Culture, Society, and the Media*. Ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. London: Methuen, 1982. 52-86. Print.
- Haley, Alex. "Epilogue." *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1966. New York: Grove Press, 1977. Print. Grove Press Paperbacks.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.

- Hartman, Saidiya V. and Frank B. Wilderson. "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183–201. *JSTOR*. Web.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Reprint. Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.
- Henderson, Carol E. "Introduction: Bordering on the Black Body: Text and Subtext in America's Literature and Culture." *America and the Black Body: Identity Politics in Print and Visual Culture*. Ed. Carol E. Henderson. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009. 13–24. Print.
- Hishmeh, Richard E. "Marketing Genius: The Friendship of Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan." *Journal of American Culture* 29.4 (2006): 395–405. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 15 May 2014.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992. Print.
- Hunt, Michael H. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Web.
- "I Know He Was Scared": Trayvon Martin's Girlfriend Recounts Phone Call Right Before Fatal Shooting." *Democracy Now*. 18 May 2012. Web. Transcript. 3 Feb. 2014.
- James, Frank. "Obama Explains Black America to White America." *It's All Politics*. *npr.org*. National Public Radio, 19 July 2013. Web. 7 Feb 2014.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.
- Janus, Adrienne. "Listening: Jean-Luc Nancy and the 'Anti-Ocular' Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory." *Comparative Literature* 63.2 (2011): 182–202. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 May 2012.
- Jarratt, Susan C. *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. Print.
- Jay, Martin. "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism." *Poetics Today* 9.2 (1988): 307–326. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 July 2012.
- Kennedy, George A. Editor's Notes. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. By Aristotle. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

- . Introduction. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. By Aristotle. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.
- Khan, Tabassum Ruhi. “‘Dam’ the Irony for Greater Common Good: A Critical Cultural Analysis of the Narmada Dam Debate.” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): n. pag. Web.
- Kompridis, Nikolas. *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006. Print.
- Kramer, Jane. *Allen Ginsberg in America*. 1968. First Fromm International Paperback. New York: Fromm International, 1997. Print.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. London: Verso, 2001.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.
- Lanham, Richard A. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.
- Last, Jonathan V. “George Zimmerman and the Nature of Criminal Justice.” *weeklystandard.com*. The Weekly Standard, 17 July 2013. Web. 29 Jan. 2014.
- Latham, Rob. *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. Print.
- Lem, Stanisław. *His Master’s Voice*. Trans. Michael Kandel. 1983. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999. Print.
- Levin, David Michael. *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Levinson, Alana. “Polls Show Wide Racial Gap On Trayvon Martin Case.” *It’s All Politics*. *npr.org*. National Public Radio, 22 July 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Lipari, Lisbeth. “Rhetoric’s Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45.3 (2012): 227–245. *Project MUSE*. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.
- Lister, Martin, et al., eds. *New Media: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.

- Logan, Shirley W. *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print.
- Lowell, Robert. "After Enjoying Six or Seven Essays On Me." *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*. Ed. Steven Gould Axelrod. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999. 288–291. Print.
- . *Near the Ocean*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967. Print.
- . *Notebook 1967-68*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. Print.
- . "Robert Lowell: The Art of Poetry No. 3." *Paris Review* Winter-Spring 1961: n. pag. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.
- Lush, Tamara, Kelli Kennedy, Suzette Laboy, and David Fischer. "George Zimmerman Cleared of All Charges in Shooting of Trayvon Martin, Released by Judge." *FoxNews.com*. FOX News Network. 14 July 2013. Web. 2 Jan. 2014.
- Macdonald, Dwight. "Masscult & Midcult." *Against the American Grain*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1962. Print.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetorical Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.
- Marcuse, Herbert. "A Note on Dialectic." *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Eds Eike Gepphardt and Andrew Arato. New York: Continuum, 1982. 444-451. Print.
- Marsalis, Wynton. *Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life*. New York: Random House, 2008.
- Martin, Jay. *Robert Lowell*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970. University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers No. 92. *ProQuest ebrary*. Web. 4 July 2016.
- Martinez, Michael. "George Zimmerman Sues NBC Universal over Edited 911 Call." *CNN.com*. CNN, 7 Dec. 2012. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "Culture and Technology." *The Sense of the Sixties*. Ed. Edward Quinn and Paul J Dolan. New York: The Free Press, 1968. 493–495. Print.

- . *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Second Edition. New York: Signet Books, 1964. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Massage*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967. Print.
- McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage, 2009. Print.
- Meckler, Laura and Arian Campo-Flores. "Obama Backs Probe of Florida Teen's Death." *wsj.com*. Wall Street Journal, 24 Mar. 2012. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Meyers, Walter E. *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980. Print.
- Mieville, China. *The City & The City*. New York: Del Rey-Ballantine, 2010. Print.
- . "Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory." Afterword. *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2009. Print.
- . *Embassytown*. London: Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Miller, Bernard. *Rhetoric's Earthly Realm: Heidegger, Sophistry, and the Gorgian Kairos*. Anderson, S.C: Parlor Press, 2011. Print. Lauer Series in Rhetoric and Composition.
- Mitchison, Naomi. *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*. 1962. Glasglow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2011. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham UP, 2007. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B Leitch et al. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
- . "Nietzsche's 'Lecture Notes on Rhetoric': A Translation." Ed. Carole Blair. *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16.2 (1983): 94–129. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Dec. 2013.

- Nunley, Vorris. "Cicero's Tongue: 'Hey! It's me, Trayvon!'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 19 July 2013. Web. 19 Dec. 2013.
- . *Keepin' It Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2011. Print.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- O'Reilly, Bill. "Trayvon Martin Case Takes an Intense Turn." *O'Reilly Factor*. *FoxNews.com*. FOX News Network, 26 Mar. 2012. Web. 28 Jan 2014.
- Parsons, Christi and Michael A. Memoli. "Obama Addresses Trayvon Martin Shooting Death in Personal Terms." *LATimes.com*. Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.
- Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999. Print.
- Pitts, Leonard Jr. "Trayvon 'Killed by a Stereotype.'" *Miami Herald*. Miami Herald Media Co., 5 May 2012. Web. 4 Feb. 2014.
- Plato. *Gorgias. The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Trans. H.N. Fowler. Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 1990. 61-112. Print.
- . *Phaedrus. The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Trans. H.N. Fowler. Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 1990. 113-143. Print.
- . *The Republic. The Portable Plato*. 1948. Ed. Scott Buchanon. New York: Penguin Books, 1979. 281-696. Print.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006. Print.
- Richardson, Elaine B., and Ronald L. Jackson, eds. *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Richardson, Marilyn, ed. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. Print. Blacks in the Diaspora.

- Ricks, Christopher. "The Three Lives of Robert Lowell." *New Statesman* 69 (1965): 496-97. Rpt. in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*. Ed. Steven Gould Axelrod. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. Print. Critical Responses in Arts and Letters.
- Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print. The Wesleyan Early Classics of Science Fiction Series.
- Rome, Dennis. *Black Demons: Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype*. Westport: Praeger, 2004. Print. Crime, Media, and Popular Culture.
- Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Viking, 1991. Print.
- Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Print.
- Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2011.
- Steele, Shelby. "The Decline of the Civil-Rights Establishment." *Wall Street Journal* 22 July 2013, Eastern ed.: A17. *ProQuest*. Web. 30 Jan. 2014.
- . "The Exploitation of Trayvon Martin." *Opinion. wsj.com*. Wall Street Journal, 6 Apr. 2012. Web. 22 Jan. 2014.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Stewart, Maria W. "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall." Richardson 56-64.
- . "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which We Must Build." Richardson 28-42.
- Sutton, Jane S. "The Earth Is Not at Rest and Neither Should Be Rhetoric." Sutton and Mifsud, *A Revolution in Tropes* 19-46.

- Sutton, Jane S., and Mari Lee Mifsud, eds. *A Revolution in Tropes: Alloioiostrophic Rhetoric*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. Print.
- . "Introduction: A Revolution in Tropes." Sutton and Mifsud, *A Revolution in Tropes* xi–xxvii.
- . "Figuring Out/In Rhetoric: From Antistrophe to Alloioiostrophe." Sutton and Mifsud, *A Revolution in Tropes* 1–18.
- Suvin, Darko. "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre." *College English* 34.3 (1972): 372–382. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Mar. 2013.
- . *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.
- Swoyer, Chris. "How Does Language Affect Thought?" *Language and Bilingual Cognition*. Ed. Vivian Cook & Benedetta Bassetti. New York: Psychology Press, 2011. 23–42. Print.
- . "The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis." Ed. Edward N. Zalta. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford U. Winter 2010. Web. 23 Feb. 2013.
- Thistlewaite, Susan Brooks. "For Trayvon Martin, Is There No Justice?" *OnFaith*. *faithstreet.com*. Faith Street, 14 July, 2013. Web. 7 Feb 2014.
- Thomas, Douglas. *Reading Nietzsche Rhetorically*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999. Print.
- Thompson, Krissah and Scott Wilson. "Obama on Trayvon Martin: 'If I Had a Son, He'd Look Like Trayvon.'" *WP Politics*. *washingtonpost.com*. Washington Post, 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.
- Tienabeso, Seni, Matt Gutman, and Stephanie Wash. "George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty and Goes Free." *ABCNews.com*. ABC News, 13 July 2012. Web.
- Timmerman, David M. "Isocrates' Competing Conceptualization of Philosophy." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 31.2 (1998): 145–159. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Aug. 2012.
- Vargas, João H. Costa. "Black Radical Becoming: The Politics of Identification in Permanent Transformation." *Critical Sociology* 32.2–3 (2006): 475–500. *crs.sagepub.com*. Web. 15 Aug. 2015.

- Volosinov, Valentin Nikolaevic. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislav Matejka & I.R. Titunik. 1973. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986. Print.
- Wagstaff, Keith. "The George Zimmerman Trial: A Day-by-Day Recap." *theweek.com*. The Week Magazine. 10 July 2013. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Watson, Ian. *The Embedding*. 1973. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1990. Print.
- Wilderson, III, Frank B. "Afro-Pessimism." *Afro-Pessimism*. *Incognegro.org*. Incognegro. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.
- . "The Narcissistic Slave." *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. *Afro-Pessimism*. *Incognegro.org*. Incognegro. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.
- Wise, Tim. "Of Children and Inkblots." *TimWise.org*. 21 May 2012. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.
- . "No Innocence Left to Kill." *TimWise.org*. 14 July 2013. Web. 14 July 2013.
- Woodyard, Jeffrey Lynn. "Africological Theory and Criticism: Reconceptualizing Communication Constructs." Richardson and Jackson 133–154.
- Wolff, Phillip, and Kevin J. Holmes. "Linguistic Relativity." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 2.3 (2011): 253–265. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.
- Wright, Richard L. "The Word at Work: Ideological and Epistemological Dynamics in African American Rhetoric." *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*. Ed. Ronald L. Jackson II and Elaine B. Richardson. New York: Routledge, 2003. 85-97. Print.
- X, Malcolm. "The Ballot or the Bullet." 12 Apr. 1964. *American RadioWorks*. American Public Media. Web. Transcript. Say It Plain Say It Loud: A Century of Great African American Speeches. 29 Feb. 2016.
- . "Debate at Oxford Union." 3 Dec. 1964. *Liberator Magazine*. Web. Audio and Transcript. 2 Mar. 2016.
- . "Education Radio: Malcolm X's 'The Ballot or The Bullet.'" 12 Apr. 1964. Education Radio. *Internet Archive*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- . "Message to the Grassroots." 10 Nov. 1963. *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*. Ashbrook Center at Ashland University. Web. Transcript. 29 Feb. 2016.
- . "Message to the Grassroots." 10 Nov. 1963. *YouTube*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

- . Interview by Kenneth Clarke. *The Negro and the American Promise*. 1963. *American Experience*. PBS. Web. Video and Transcript. 25 Sept. 2015.
- X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1966. New York: Grove Press, 1977. Print.
- Yancy, George. "Afterword: The Black Body: Under the Weight of White America's Microtomes." *America and the Black Body: Identity Politics in Print and Visual Culture*. Ed. Carol E. Henderson. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009. 266–278. Print.
- . "Geneva Smitherman: The Social Ontology of African-American Language, the Power of Nommo, and the Dynamics of Resistance and Identity Through Language." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18.4 (2004): 273–299. *Project MUSE*. Web. 15 Mar. 2010.
- Yancy, George, and Janine Jones. Introduction. *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. Eds. George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lanham: Lexington, 2013. 1-23. Print.
- Yankah, Ekow N. "The Truth About Trayvon." *The Opinion Pages*. *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, July 15, 2013. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.

APPENDIX

Full Transcript of Zimmerman's 2/26/12 call to Sanford PD

Dispatcher: Sanford Police Department. ...

Zimmerman: Hey we've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy, uh, [near] Retreat View Circle, um, the best address I can give you is 111 Retreat View Circle. This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about.

Dispatcher: OK, and this guy is he white, black, or Hispanic?

Zimmerman: He looks black.

Dispatcher: Did you see what he was wearing?

Zimmerman: Yeah. A dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie, and either jeans or sweatpants and white tennis shoes. He's [unintelligible], he was just staring...

Dispatcher: OK, he's just walking around the area... Zimmerman: ...looking at all the houses.

Dispatcher: OK...

Zimmerman: Now he's just staring at me.

Dispatcher: OK—you said it's 1111 Retreat View? Or 111? Zimmerman: That's the clubhouse...

Dispatcher: That's the clubhouse, do you know what the—he's near the clubhouse right now?

Zimmerman: Yeah, now he's coming towards me.

Dispatcher: OK.

Zimmerman: He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male. Dispatcher: How old would you say he looks?

Zimmerman: He's got button on his shirt, late teens.

Dispatcher: Late teens ok.

Zimmerman: Somethings wrong with him. Yup, he's coming to check me out, he's got something in his hands, I don't know what his deal is.

Dispatcher: Just let me know if he does anything ok Zimmerman: How long until you get an officer over here?

Dispatcher: Yeah we've got someone on the way, just let me know if this guy does anything else.

Zimmerman: Okay. These assholes they always get away. When you come to the clubhouse you come straight in and make a left. Actually you would go past the clubhouse.

Dispatcher: So it's on the lefthand side from the clubhouse?

Zimmerman: No you go in straight through the entrance and then you make a left...uh you go straight in, don't turn, and make a left. Shit he's running.

Dispatcher: He's running? Which way is he running?

Zimmerman: Down towards the other entrance to the neighborhood. Dispatcher: Which entrance is that that he's heading towards? Zimmerman: The back entrance...fucking

[unintelligible] Dispatcher: Are you following him?

Zimmerman: Yeah

Dispatcher: Ok, we don't need you to do that.

Zimmerman: Ok

Dispatcher: Alright sir what is your name?

Zimmerman: George...He ran.

Dispatcher: Alright George what's your last name?

Zimmerman: Zimmerman

Dispatcher: And George what's the phone number you're calling from?

Zimmerman: [redacted by Mother Jones]

Dispatcher: Alright George we do have them on the way, do you want to meet with the officer when they get out there?

Zimmerman: Alright, where you going to meet with them at?

Zimmerman: If they come in through the gate, tell them to go straight past the club house, and uh, straight past the club house and make a left, and then they go past the mailboxes, that's my truck...[unintelligible]

Dispatcher: What address are you parked in front of?

Zimmerman: I don't know, it's a cut through so I don't know the address.

Dispatcher: Okay do you live in the area?

Zimmerman: Yeah, I...[unintelligible]

Dispatcher: What's your apartment number?

Zimmerman: It's a home it's 1950, oh crap I don't want to give it all out, I don't know where this kid is.

Dispatcher: Okay do you want to just meet with them right near the mailboxes then?

Zimmerman: Yeah that's fine.

Dispatcher: Alright George, I'll let them know to meet you around there okay?

Zimmerman: Actually could you have them call me and I'll tell them where I'm at?

Dispatcher: Okay, yeah that's no problem.

Zimmerman: Should I give you my number or you got it?

Dispatcher: Yeah I got it [redacted by Mother Jones]

Zimmerman: Yeah you got it.

Dispatcher: Okay no problem, I'll let them know to call you when you're in the area.

Zimmerman: Thanks. Dispatcher: You're welcome.