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Making Conversation: Fiction, Philosophy and the Social Medium

By

Erin Elizabeth Greer

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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Committee in Charge:

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair
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Making Conversation:
Fiction, Philosophy, and the Social Medium
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Abstract

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Making Conversation: Fiction, Philosophy, and the Social Medium originates in the hazy self-awareness of the contemporary networked world, in which activities such as donating to political campaigns, posting on social media, and contributing to online scholarly reviews are frequently characterized as modes of participating in an ethereal and endless digital “conversation.” At the same time, works like Sherry Turkle’s recent *Reclaiming Conversation* express fears that the digital “conversation” is corroding our abilities to converse in person, thereby threatening our “capacity for empathy, friendship, and intimacy.” Moreover, recent political developments—the US’s 2016 election, the British “Brexit” referendum, and the increasing prominence of digitally organized hate groups—have stimulated fears that online “conversation” in its current form undermines democracy by precluding the development of a central public “conversation” based on agreed-upon facts, openness, and civility.

Contemporary concerns about conversation in the digital age in fact extend a long philosophical tradition in which “conversation” has been made to index lofty aspirations for both public and intimate life. Derived from the Latin figures for turning, *vertĕre*, and togetherness, *com*, to converse originally meant “to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass one’s life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with.” From John Milton’s claim that “a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage,” to Jürgen Habermas’s conception of a public sphere in which talk among private citizens critiques and legitimizes the modern state’s authority, this less-instrumental cousin of discussion (from the Latin *discutĕre*, “to dash or shake asunder”) has frequently represented a playful, open, and aesthetic practice constitutive of both intimate relations and democratic politics.

Making Conversation proposes the novel as a referent to ground and focus our talk of “conversation.” Adopting a method inspired by Ordinary Language Philosophy, I turn to novels that provide exemplary studies of conversation as a social medium. Each chapter moves through increasingly expansive contexts of conversation, beginning in the domestic realm with George Meredith’s *The Egoist*; moving next, via Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, into the realm of intimate community; then to that of national “public” life as critiqued in Salman Rushdie’s Thatcher-era novel, *The Satanic Verses*; and finally into the global “conversation” of the Internet and social media, as refracted by Ali Smith’s *There but for the: a novel*. Reading scenes of conversation in these works alongside theoretical invocations of this social medium, I elucidate the discursive, collaborative, and aesthetic processes by which intimate and political communities form and transform across a period stretching from the Victorian novel through contemporary digital media.

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Introduction: Rethinking Conversation

Since at least the writings of Plato, whenever new media for human communication develop, concerns about the fate of ordinary conversation are raised.¹ Digital new media have recently stimulated the latest round of eulogies of the art of conversation. In her 2015 work *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, media scholar Sherry Turkle warns that, as face-to-face conversation is replaced by digital surrogates, we risk losing our “capacity for empathy, friendship, and intimacy,” as well as self-esteem and social trust.² The stakes of conversation, it seems, include love, friendship, social relations broadly, and—in a more figurative sense—our political system of democratic liberalism. In *The Audacity of Hope*, then-Senator Barack Obama described his vision of “our democracy not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had” (92). These words signal the significance of his observation in late 2016 that the transposition of political discourse to social media has made it “very difficult to have a common conversation” (qtd. in Remnick). Both statements invoke the liberal ideal of deliberative democracy, in which a vibrant “public sphere” hosts a conversation among citizens that shapes the course of history.

But what *is* a conversation? What is entailed in having a “common conversation”? The practice is at once very ordinary and extremely ideologically laden, a concrete activity engaged in constantly, and also a hazy but stirring metaphor embedded in our daily lives, representative of elusive ideals in intimate relationships, culture and politics. An early enthusiast of conversation, John Milton, argued in the 17th century that a “meet and happy conversation” is the divine foundation and index of a true marriage (Milton 27). For Jürgen Habermas, conversations among merchants meeting in coffee shops in Early Modern England and Europe played a crucial role in the development of liberalism, laying the blueprint for the “public sphere” that, he argues, checks and influences the power of the government. Yet, is there more to conversation beyond platitudes about listening, patience, openness, thoughtful consideration, honesty, etc.?

This project is a literary-philosophical investigation of such (and other) questions. It will not decisively define “conversation,” but I hope that it will clarify the nature and possibilities of this essential social medium. The chapters that follow place works of literature into dialogue with works of philosophy, drawing from ordinary language philosophy, aesthetics, epistemology, and political theory. My investigation travels from the private to the public sphere, tracing a literary-philosophical account of the role of conversation in constituting social relations in both spheres, and culminating in a new formulation of the “conversational” aspects of public life in times of riots and social media. The novelists at the center of this project—George Meredith, Virginia Woolf, Salman Rushdie, and Ali Smith—test the material conditions as well as ethical and political possibilities of “conversation,” driving an appreciation of conversation that is at once more expansive and more concrete than is offered by the familiar tributes and lamentations.

Imaginative fiction drives this project of theorizing “conversation” for several reasons. Theories of language, subjectivity, intimacy, and community are folded into novelistic depictions of conversation. To attend to novels’ representations of conversation is simultaneously to use

¹ For a wide-ranging overview of this historical trend, see Peters.

² Turkle warns that face-to-face conversation is being replaced by digital surrogates, which do not offer the same psychological and sociable benefits of face-to-face interaction. Her work is a contemporary continuation of an ancient trend that is, for this project, quite notable: from Plato through Turkle and now Obama, when new media for human communication develop, several of the concerns they inspire relate to the threat they seemingly pose for conversation.

literary examples to think through the philosophical significance of this social medium, and to focus on an aspect of novelistic representation that undertakes significant philosophical work. Often, the suggestive constellations of literature anticipate theoretical investigations: Chapter 1 examines an instance of this occurrence in George Meredith's late Victorian dramatization of what would later come to be known in philosophical circles as "speech performativity." Chapter 3 elaborates Salman Rushdie's depiction of the formation of what Nancy Fraser terms a "counterpublic;" *The Satanic Verses* was published two years before Fraser's groundbreaking essay, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy."

Proposing the novel as a referent to ground and focus our talk of "conversation," my project may suggest affiliation with Mikhail Bakhtin's famous—and still influential—claim that the novel is an essentially "dialogic" form of literature, in which the author implicitly "converses" with his or her characters and "the totality of the conversation" carried on outside the novel in the transhistorical sphere of literature and culture (Bakhtin 274). Bakhtin's "novel" is a textual space in which disparate voices meet and enter into a relation he calls "interanimation," an interaction in which languages and their corresponding worldviews are enlivened and altered through contact with each other.³ A work is "novelistic" if no single voice—such as that of a character, narrator, or author—subsumes the others, if the work's "languages" circulate in an endlessly shifting "argument between languages, [...] dialogue between points of view" (76). This structured "heteroglossia" is "the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre," and it is also, Bakhtin observes repeatedly, the distinguishing feature of the modern world connected by global trade and imperial exchanges (300). Bakhtin writes, "it is as if [the voices in a novel] actually hold a conversation with each other," and in this conversation, the last word is never reached (324). Bakhtin does not draw clear distinctions between conversation and modes of interchange like argument, dialogue, heteroglossia and interanimation. His aim is to theorize the interrelation of language and ideas in culture and literature, and in pursuit of this aim he presupposes a loose understanding of conversation, heteroglossia, and the rest, invoking them to describe endless interactions between worldviews that are played out in language. *Making Conversation*, by contrast, seeks to clarify the distinguishing elements of "conversation," while simultaneously examining the aspirations couched in invocations of the metaphor of conversation to characterize different sorts of social relations.

As this project does not take for granted Bakhtin's notion that the novel is a constitutively "conversational" genre, readers might be surprised that this study of conversation does not consider inarguably "conversational" literary works: those intended for the theater. A project structured around such texts would perhaps explore the relationship between theatrical and sociological representations of turn-taking, idiom and character or personal identity. But again, my interest goes beyond the formal features of (real or fictional) conversation, and the works selected for this study help me to distill the three subjects of inquiry that allusions to conversation typically blend: conversation as it structures intimate relationships, as it takes shape through aesthetic collaboration, and as it undergirds public life. Consideration of the different manners in which plays and novels conceptualize conversation would nonetheless be a valuable continuation of the present study, as would a broad consideration of the relation between literary and conversational genres (how might the study of narrative conventions across literary genres illuminate the different conventions of conversations arising in different contexts, between

³ See, in particular, the essays "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" and "Discourse in the Novel."

different sorts of social actors, on different subjects, etc?).⁴ Such questions are, however, beyond the scope of *Making Conversation*.

This project likewise shares an interest, but not ambition, with several recent literary studies of 18th and early 19th-century English conversation culture (salons, periodicals, coffee-shop gatherings, etc.). Jon Mee's *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* focuses on the period named in the title, which he identifies as the era in which the "understanding of culture as a form of conversation"—an "interactive and participatory idea of culture"—developed alongside a culture of conversation, in which clubs, bookshop sociability, and conversationally-toned periodicals were central (32, 21). In tracing the development of the British conception of "conversable" society in *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680–1820*, Robin Valenza argues that the early novel plays a crucial cultural role, as it "not only affects a conversable style, but also attempts to model conversability" (46). Numerous works have described the networks of "sociability" in England in the 18th and early 19th centuries.⁵ The ambition of such works tends to be literary-historical, establishing the mutual determinations of literary, cultural, and intellectual history. My project takes a more flexible approach by staging dialogues that cross not only disciplinary but also historical boundaries.

Making Conversation is methodologically aligned with a growing body of literary scholarship influenced by Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP), which draws philosophy into the realm of the everyday—and relevance for ordinary people—by discerning philosophical inquiry in literature's representations of everyday language use. OLP is dedicated to examining everyday language use in order to identify and demystify what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the pictures that have "held us captive" (*Philosophical Investigations* §115, p 48e). Contributors to a recent issue of *New Literary History* dedicated to the tools that OLP offers for feminism offer a clear explication of the OLP project:

We seek to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI* § 116). The phrase "everyday use" is not to be taken univocally. Wittgenstein did not mean that each word has one everyday use, or a finite range of everyday uses. To the contrary: in [*Philosophical*] *Investigations* he explores the ways in which human beings, in their everyday activities—including their theorizing—naturally project words into new contexts and thereby, to the extent that these new uses are comprehensible and engaging, change what can be done with these words. (Bauer et al. vi).

The above citation hints at one of the reasons that the present project makes no attempt to offer a comprehensive definition of conversation. The meaning of the word is undoubtedly different when put to different uses: Milton does not mean "conversation" in the same way that Habermas

⁴ In a more broadly sweeping set of comparisons than I have in mind here, Deborah Tannen has argued that "ordinary conversation achieves coherence through linguistic features generally regarded as quintessentially literary: use of, and repetition and variation of, rhythm; phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse structures; ellipsis ('indirectness' in conversation); imagery and detail; constructed dialogue; and figures of speech and tropes" (15).

⁵ A seminal example of such work is Peter Clark's *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World*. More recently, the collection *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840* provides a wide survey of the interrelation between socializing and sharing literature. Elizabeth Eger's *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* spotlights the role of women in "establishing the bluestockings as a group who cultivated intellectual conversation about literature, history, and politics" in England during a period stretching from 1750-1812 (60).

does, and this project does not mean to suggest otherwise. Ordinary Language Philosophers caution against flattening such differences, and moreover urge all understanding to be built from the ground up, from use into meaning, rather than through imposing an abstract definition onto a precise use. With the authors of this special issue of *New Literary History*, I “share a commitment to the particular, understood not as the opposite of theory or philosophy, but as the place where philosophy can take place” (vi). I make a complementary move toward particular examples of conversation in works of literature in order to counteract a tendency to celebrate “conversation” in abstract and ambiguous ways.

Making Conversation aims to draw the particular literary examples of conversation into constellation with each other and with works of philosophy: not compressing them into a single definition of conversation, but discovering how they together illuminate conditions and possibilities of community. If I have a loose working definition of conversation, it is this: conversation is a social medium situated in history, which means that its constituent elements and possibilities are conditioned by, and conditioning of, social reality. Conversation is “made” not only through the exchange of words, but also through collective attentiveness to a shared subject.

The word’s etymology emphasizes the non-linguistic elements of conversation. A compound of *com* (with) and *vertĕre* (to turn), to *converse* originally meant “to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass one’s life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with” (“converse”).⁶ The earliest uses of conversation to denote verbal communication, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, occur in the late 16th century (roughly half a century before Milton’s description of a “meet and happy conversation” as the “chiefest and the noblest” purpose of marriage) (“conversation,” Milton 27).⁷ Conversation is at its (etymological) roots a mode of being with others, a gesture or process of “turning together.” This original sense of conversation emphasizes motion and companionship. Understood in this way, conversation is not directed toward achieving a final state of “intimacy” conceived as reciprocal knowledge of private selves, nor is it intended to change a person’s opinion about a given topic: such talk would be “discussion,” from the Latin *discutĕre*, “to dash to pieces, to shake violently,” or at the further end of the spectrum, debate and argument (“discuss”). The historical valences of the word suggest a practice that maintains distinctions, separateness and privacy, a relation produced and sustained by turning through—and indeed, toward—the world with others. Extrapolating from this etymology and the implications of most invocations of conversation, I suggest that conversation is at its most basic level a mode of “turning together” with others, toward subjects of shared interest.

Methodology in context

Making Conversation stages a conversation between works of literature and philosophy in order to develop an account of conversation that is imaginative and exploratory, while also remaining tied to particular examples. Most academic studies of conversation engage sociological or linguistic methods, or adopt the rational telos of philosophical pragmatics. In different ways, each of these approaches privileges values of efficiency and logic. As I will summarize briefly below, many important observations and theoretical frameworks have

⁶ See also the *OED* etymology for “convert.”

⁷ See definition 7a of “conversation, n.”

emerged from these modes of studying language-in-use. The normative tendency in these fields, however—their valorization of communicative efficiency and rationality—suppresses the aesthetic and playful elements of conversation, the non-teleological potential so suggestively inscribed in the word's roots. The literary-philosophical approach of *Making Conversation* remains attentive to the sociological concerns outlined below, but it also attends to the multiple directions in which language-in-use reverberates when considered through literary and philosophical texts that link conversation to broader ethical and political questions about domestic partnership, community, and politics.

The sociologist Erving Goffman offers this definition of conversation in a footnote to the essay “Replies and Responses” in *Forms of Talk*:

[T]he special sense in which the term [conversation] tends to be used in daily life [...] might be identified as the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks; a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule; everyone is accorded the status of someone whose overall evaluation of the subject matter at hand—whose editorial comments, as it were—is to be encouraged and treated with respect; and no final agreement or synthesis is demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as unprejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants. (14, n8).

The idealized conception Goffman presents of conversation as “an end in itself,” which occurs in the privileged margins of otherwise instrumental interactions, is simultaneously shared and contradicted in all direct studies of conversation: in language philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and—as I explore in the chapters of *Making Conversation* and briefly preview at the end of this Introduction—formulations of interpersonal ethics and political theories of a conversational “public sphere.” Often the conditions for such egalitarian and noninstrumental talk are absent, as in situations of social hierarchy, prejudice, cultural difference, etc. The idealized conception of conversation as an “end in itself” evokes the “purposiveness without purpose” of aesthetic activity (Kant §15, 62). Indeed, Immanuel Kant called conversation one of the “pleasant arts”—aesthetic, but “directed merely to enjoyment” rather than to the higher ends sought in “beautiful” art, the “mode of representation which is purposive for itself, and which, although devoid of [definite] purpose, yet furthers the culture of the mental powers in reference to social communication” (§44, 148). “Social communication” is an end for Kant because we exercise and cultivate our full human rationality and freedom only in communicating with others, but, in his view, we do not thus communicate in ordinary conversation. I complicate this stark distinction between “communication” and light, everyday conversation most directly in Chapter 2’s reading of the aesthetics of conversation in Virginia Woolf’s fiction. For Woolf, ordinary conversation does not necessarily rise to the level Kant would call “social communication,” but neither is such an achievement altogether out of reach for ordinary conversation.

Goffman’s idealistic description of conversation is informatively at odds with the most prevalent academic approaches to studying conversation in ordinary life, including Goffman’s own. Sociological and pragmatic philosophical accounts of conversation share the conception of conversation as noninstrumental verbal exchange, while also indicating that conversation is a tool in the negotiation of social relations, personal identity (what Goffman calls “face”), or transparent and rational communication. In pragmatic philosophy, for example, conversation is classically explained according to Henry Grice’s “Cooperative Principle,” which in effect states

that participants in a conversation share an assumption that their co-conversationalists are rational and that conversation is a cooperative project following rational standards:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation). But at each stage, SOME possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable. We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE. (“Logic and Conversation” 45)⁸

With his numerous qualifications (“to some degree at least,” “to some extent,” etc.), Grice seemingly leaves space for genres of conversation that do not strictly share these assumptions of cooperation and rationality, but the Cooperative Principle is the normative guideline for what is generally “suitable” or “unsuitable” in a conversation. Four additional maxims follow from the general Cooperative Principle: Quantity (provide the quantity of information required for the purposes of communication: no more and no less), Quality (try to make your statements both truthful expressions of your belief/understanding, and substantially supportable by evidence), Relation (“be relevant”), and Manner (be clear, brief, orderly, and comprehensive) (45-46). For people engaged in conversation, these maxims are heuristics: when in doubt about what Grice terms the “implicatures” of your fellow conversationalist’s words, you are to infer whatever meaning best supports the view that your co-conversationalist is upholding these maxims (49-50).

Pragmatists following Grice have varied in the extent to which they conceive of meaning as inferred from context, and also in the principles they propose as primary guides to inference.⁹ Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson, leading proponents of an adaptation of Gricean principles called “Relevance Theory,” suggest that the traditional Gricean explanation of conversation does not take account of human psychology and is overly normative and rationalistic (*Meaning and Relevance* 4). “Relevance Theory” replaces the maxims associated with the Cooperative

⁸ Grice’s ambition in this text, which was originally offered as a William James lecture at Harvard, is to introduce a unifying linguistic theory, which would show that the meaning of verbal exchanges derives from both formal features of language and contextual features of speech-in-use that he calls “conversational implicatures.”

Participants in a conversation do not “decode” each others’ meaning according to a perfect correspondence between utterance and fact, Grice argues, but rather “infer” meaning, weighing words against their objective, systematically defined meanings and the contexts in which they are offered. For further overview of the interventions made by Grice and various schools of “neo-Griceans,” see Sperber and Wilson’s introduction to *Meaning and Relevance*.

⁹ Grice and John Searle notably fall in the camp of those who imagine most of the work of listening to be decoding, with listeners *inferring* in order to assign referents to certain terms (Sperber and Wilson *Meaning and Relevance* 2-5). More recently, the field has been dominated by those who imagine a greater quantity of meaning is achieved through contextual inference, which can be influenced by elements such as knowledge of your co-conversationalist’s views, sympathies, educational background, mood, etc. See, for instance, McCann and Higgins.

Principle with the single maxim of relevance: “For relevance theorists, the very act of communicating raises precise and predictable expectations of relevance, which are enough on their own to guide the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning” (6). They define “relevance” broadly as the quality that connects a given conversational contribution to the context of the conversation.¹⁰ They elaborate slightly by indicating that “relevant” inputs require less cognitive effort to connect to the conversational context, thus anchoring their theory of meaning in a basic principle of cognitive efficiency. Relevance becomes the primary heuristic of conversational interpretation; a conversationalist ought to “follow a path of least effort, and stop at the first overall interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance” (*Meaning and Relevance* 7).

Sperber and Wilson argue that the Relevance principle evades key objections that literature and art—and aesthetically-inspired modes of speaking—pose for the normativity of a Gricean model of communication. As Sperber and Wilson point out, the Gricean model inadequately accounts for conversational behaviors like exaggeration, the use of metaphor, sarcasm, irony, etc. It suggests that such conversational behaviors occlude the rational and communicative content of an utterance, but can be decoded into straightforward meaning. Sperber and Wilson suggest that the “relevance” heuristic replaces the Gricean “norm of literalness” with a looser, more encompassing norm of “relevance” that can readily absorb figures of speech, particularly those that do not add to the cognitive effort of interpretation (*Meaning and Relevance* 19). Their explanation for irony and figures of speech appears to be a negative one: irony and figures of speech are such common features of our conversational culture, they do not slow down apprehension, and the relevance heuristic functions just as efficiently with such turns of speech as it does with more direct assertions. But this approach similarly fails to tell us *why* it would be valuable in conversation to dress one’s content up in such ways, nor does it account for instances in which the “meaning” of an utterance cannot be reduced to propositional content. When the meaning of an utterance cuts across informative, performative, and aesthetic dimensions, normative heuristics such as the Cooperative Principle and the principle of Relevance equally flatten interpretation.

Sociological studies of conversation, including the branch called Conversation Analysis, have a similar tendency to flatten conversation into a single dimension, which we can loosely call social negotiation. In Erving Goffman’s account, conversation is conceptually subordinated to “face,” “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes,” which a social actor “claims for himself [...] during a particular contact” (*Interaction Ritual* 5). “Face” is “claimed,” but also contingent on (culturally-specific) social norms and the particular dynamics of a given social arrangement: we may claim different “face” in the company of certain friends, work colleagues, chatty strangers on public transit, etc. In any case, “face” is a collaborative social product, “not lodged in or on [a person’s] body, but rather [...] diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter” (7). Goffman asserts that “face” is “a sacred thing,” and the person as a whole “a ritually delicate object” (19, 31). Conversational contributions become “moves” demanded by the occasion in order to preserve the sacred social self. The stakes are

¹⁰ “Context” is also a fairly broad concept, of course, and one could imagine that context determines the scale and scope of conversational pivots that can still be deemed “relevant.” An interlocutor’s tone of voice or facial expression is a contextual cue that might justify a shift in topic, or an unpremeditated personalization of the topic at hand. Sperber and Wilson note that there are situational contexts that alter expectations of relevance: classrooms guided by a pedagogy of freedom and nonjudgment, for instance, or social hierarchies that permit certain participants greater relevance latitude (bosses and “masters” need not offer discernibly “relevant” remarks to their subordinates) (*Relevance: Communication and Cognition* 160-161).

high: every overture of conversation “places everyone present in jeopardy”: if, for instance, a person’s attempt at trivial pleasantries is coldly rebuffed, “he will find himself committed to the necessity of taking face-saving action;” or, on the other hand, if his overture is out of place or tone, the others “will find themselves obliged to take action against him in defense of the ritual code” (38).

Since its founding by Goffman’s colleague Henry Sacks in the 1960s, the field of Conversation Analysis has been devoted to elaborating the key structures and components of conversation. Studying social encounters in both “ordinary” and “institutional” settings, Conversation Analysis focuses particularly on turn-taking, overlap of and transitions between speakers, conversational grammars, conversational “repair” when something goes awry or when speakers feel that they have made a social mistake, and other behaviors that Conversation Analysts characterize as systematic elements of conversational form.¹¹ Whereas Goffman often uses the resources of imagination, sketching fictional scenarios or calling upon his audience’s common sense and imagination in order to explore theories of social order, Conversation Analysis is rooted in empirical observation.¹² In fact to some critics, it suffers from too little theory, often overlooking issues like social power, prejudice, and the identities of conversationalists.¹³ Its methods, such critics say, are suited only to a utopia of social equality; not only do they render social difference invisible, they also universalize modes of interaction that unfold in particular contexts and between particularly positioned social actors.¹⁴

A final approach to studying and theorizing conversation worth mentioning is the semiotically-inspired work of linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein. Silverstein is harsh on both neo-Griceans and the Sociologists, who, he argues, reduce socio-political implications of interaction to questions of conversational form, “fetishize” the “moment-of-interaction frozen in vitro by transcriptional techniques,” and rely on universalizing assumptions about social norms (“Commentary” 626). Silverstein’s approach suggests conversation is a literary activity, a collaborative production of “coherent semiotic texts,” which “come into being in the context of mediating social events through which people adjust one to another” (“How Knowledge Begets” 31). He maintains the sociological interest in the way talk influences social relations, but he argues that the power of conversation derives less from its explicit content than from social indexicality nested in details like idiom, gesture, register, and so on: matters of style. Conversationalists tend to miss this aspect of what they are doing, most likely feeling as though they are “co-constructing [...] a *denotational text* that comes into existence between or among them” (ibid. 34). But the primary product of conversation, Silverstein argues, is the set of

¹¹ See Sacks et al., “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation” and “A preference for Self-Correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation.”

¹² See Maynard for a discussion of Goffman’s work in relation to Conversation Analysis.

¹³ For an overview and contribution to this line of critique, see Billig.

¹⁴ There are advocates for bridging CA techniques with the analysis of power-in-interaction. For classic early feminist uses of Conversation Analysis, see Fishman, West and Zimmerman. In the 1980s, Fishman studied conversations between heterosexual partners and found marked differences in the types of positions men and women assume vis à vis asking questions, providing explanations, etc. West and Zimmerman’s study found that men interrupt women more than vice versa. The framings of this early research on the differing conversational patterns of men and women tend to propound an essentialist view of gender, but defenders of the feminist potential of CA reframe the analysis so that the tools of CA can help to detail the cultural construction of behavioral differences. For more recent discussions of feminist applications of CA, see Kitzinger and Wooffitt (who provides a partisan overview). For a study raising doubts about the clarity of the distinction between the speech patterns of men and women, see James and Clarke.

“mutual social adjustments” that regulate social and cultural groups through subtle “indices” of group membership, like “register,” idiom, etc. (34, 58). Silverstein’s aim and method of studying conversation, while quite different from mine, share my sense that there is no solid boundary between literary and sociological realms in everyday language use.

The literary-philosophical approach of *Making Conversation* illuminates aspects and potentials of conversation beyond sociological expediency or index, rational cooperation, and transparent relevance. As mentioned earlier, my methods are closest to those of Ordinary Language Philosophy, a mode of inquiry less interested in the sociological achievements of language use than in the concepts (murky or clear) and logics (which may be rational, social, aesthetic, political, and/or otherwise in tendency) discernible in language-in-use. For the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and numerous philosophers and critics working in the tradition he established, (most of the time) “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (§43).¹⁵ Rather than maintaining that meaning is anchored in formal and determinant language or “cognitive” rules, this approach to language holds that meaning emerges in and through use, deriving from a “form of life” shared by language speakers that cannot be reduced to the logical and “objective” content of utterances. For an Ordinary Language Philosopher, it is unsurprising that there would be cases of language use that cannot be fully explained according to a principle of Relevance (or Quality, Quantity, or Manner).

Charges that formalistic theories of language tend to overlook the operation of power in social relations suggest a political and ethical significance to Wittgensteinian warnings against affixing solid and objective meanings to utterances. The normative impulse of pragmatic, “relevance,” and sociological approaches can amount to siding with those whose social positions give them power to “mean what they say,” to allude to the title of the book by Stanley Cavell that inspires the title of my first chapter. Like meaning itself, the principles of interpretation emerge in the context of the utterance, which in our world of various forms of social inequality is shot through with differences of power, vocabulary, information, affect, style, etc. Even Sperber and Wilson note that different social positions, like that of “master” and “servant,” make people in a hierarchical relation engage with language according to different expectations. Given the numerous modes of social stratification in our world, it is intellectually and politically dubious to presuppose a priori rules applying equally to collaborators in conversation.

In another vein, heuristics more particular and less normative than Relevance or Cooperative Rationality might better account for the playful, imaginative and allusive uses of language that attend certain “forms of life.” My own experience with academics and artists who delight in allusive conversations suggests that “positive cognitive effects” accompany various forms of ambiguity for some conversationalists. Moreover, works of fiction, from early novels to contemporary TV sitcoms, give witness to the pleasures of conversational “sport,” humor, and metaphors that are appealing precisely because of the effort they require in order for us to discern their full relevance, and by extension, their reconfiguration of the “relevant” features of the subject at hand. My point is not to revive New Critical conceptions of “the literary” as distinguished from ordinary language situations, but rather, to put pressure on the assumption

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Wittgenstein modestly qualifies this assertion: “For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (his emphasis). In other words, he is explaining the use of the word meaning, and also performing his understanding that meaning is (mostly) use in the language. In another section of *Philosophical Investigations*, he repeats the general formula while invoking “function” rather than meaning: “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that.” (§340, his emphasis).

within pragmatic philosophy and sociology, as well as strands of literary criticism, that these are distinct and normatively bounded realms. Rather than working backward from concepts about how language use expresses cognitive or social inclinations, or privileged aesthetic values, *Making Conversation* insists that the understanding of language use proceed from the use. And by looking to literature as the source of language use, this project affirms the value and possibilities offered by imaginative poesis over and in addition to sociological and pragmatic ambitions of describing and theorizing existing social relations.

Structure

Making Conversation progresses chapter by chapter through increasingly expansive contexts of conversation, beginning in the domestic realm, then moving into the realm of intimate community, then to that of national “public” life, and finally into the global “conversation” of the Internet and social media. While I selected the central literary works due to their complex analyses of the features and possibilities of “conversation,” each may also be seen as a touchstone of both literary and social history. This aspect of my project is worth highlighting: each novel studied is historically and philosophically positioned to interrogate the ideals and aspirations of the “conversations” it represents, and each work’s critical examination of “conversation” reflects formal and thematic features associated with broader literary movements. The conversations in George Meredith’s *The Egoist*, for instance, underscore the shifting relations between men and women of the late Victorian era, and they link this disruption of gender relations and romantic ideals with a proto-modernist form of language play. Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* both demonstrate, in their representations of conversation, the high modernist interest in aesthetics and the conviction (or hope) that art might provide value and social cohesion at a moment of deep skepticism regarding traditional sources of meaning in western cultures. Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* contests both literary and social norms, critiquing the regulation of British public “conversation” while imbuing the novel with the linguistic and formal flourishes associated with Rushdie’s variety of postcolonial “hybridity.” Ali Smith’s *There but for the: a novel* brings my analysis to the Internet age and the memetic exchanges that have largely supplanted conventional dynamics of conversation on digital social media. If it is premature to assert that Smith’s work provides a formal touchstone in literary history, I nonetheless find that her narrative aesthetics foreground the conflict between modes of expression and exchange associated with literary fiction and new media. The span of 150 years of British and Anglophone literature thus allows *Making Conversation* to draw from literary works whose critical insights are both historically conceived and relevant to social life today, precisely *because* of the decisive historical crises of their moments of conception.

The project’s opening in the domestic scene of marriage reflects the historically preeminent position of marriage in the philosophical exploration of conversation. John Milton’s claim that a “meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage,” which I alluded to earlier, is the first significant ethical and political invocation of conversation. He bases this claim on the observation that conversation—unlike the other supposed “end” of marriage, procreation—is itself *without* “ends” other than companionship:

“It is not good,” saith [God], “that man should be alone, I will make him a help meet for him.” From which words, so plain, less cannot be concluded, [...] than that in God’s intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage: for we find here no expression so necessarily implying

carnal knowledge, as this prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man.
(26-27)

Clarifying his meaning for future generations with different grammatical norms, he continues: “the solace and satisfaction of the mind is regarded and provided for before the sensitive pleasing of the body” (27).

Milton’s elevation of good conversation as the index and essence of worthwhile marriages is a relatively radical move. Although women are still cast as secondary and contingent to their relations with men, Milton indicates that their most fundamental features are intellectual and spiritual, rather than biological. Eve was a companion first and foremost, an equal in dialogue, whose conversation would provide aid and solace to her partner’s mind and spirit. Detaching the legitimization of intimacy from procreation, Milton “queers” marriage, and his ideal of partnership emerges in the queerly negative gesture of his advocacy for legal means of dissolving partnerships that are “no marriage.”¹⁶

Stanley Cavell elaborates upon the implications of Milton’s “happy conversation” in his two books about mid-century Hollywood film, *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, which are complementary studies of cinematic efforts to represent the challenges of marriage raised by women’s assertions of equality.¹⁷ Cavell focuses on conversations in the films that allow him to elucidate the ethical relationship he calls “acknowledgment.” As I will explore more fully in Chapter 1, acknowledgment is a mode of being with others that hinges on the recognition that interpersonal intimacy is necessarily limited, that people will never achieve full mutual understanding with others. To acknowledge others is to be in their presence while accepting this incompleteness of intimacy, resisting the allure of melodramatic efforts to overcome the distance between self and other, on the one hand, and the temptation of absolute skepticism and surrender of all interpersonal ethical claims, on the other. *Pursuits of Happiness* develops these ideas in relation to “comedies of remarriage,” in which the conversations of the central film pair lead them toward acknowledgement and a reunion after a divorce or other separation. The couples thereby affirm marriage not as the inevitable outcome of romance, but as a choice previously declined or negated; this remarriage plot thereby connects conversation to a freedom difficult to find in a normative culture in which “marriage is the name of our only present alternative to the desert-sea of skepticism” (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 64-65). *Contesting Tears* explores the dark inverse of the utopian strivings for loving acknowledgment traced in *Pursuits of Happiness*: marriages in which inequality, suspicion, and misogyny lead to refusals of acknowledgment and the “desert-sea of skepticism” from which cruelty and manipulation issue. Typically, the refusal of acknowledgement manifests as a form of silencing or deliberate mishearing, an unhappy warping of domestic conversation. For Cavell, conversation is a crucial feature in representations of marriage from Milton through late Romantic and Victorian novelists like Jane Austen and George Eliot, to 20th-century film, because the challenges of

¹⁶ This pro-equality “queering” of marriage recalls a suggestive etymological detail: the Indo-European root “wer” is hypothesized to be the common ancestor to both the Latinate *vertere* to the Germanic *wyrd*, as though the non-teleological mode of being indexed by conversation is a queer/weird deviation from normative social relations (“wer-²⁵”).

¹⁷ Both Milton’s and Cavell’s texts aim to establish a justification for marriage as an institution, indicating that neither God nor procreation provides this justification adequately; in doing so, they may be said to “queer” marriage, denaturalizing the institution, detaching the legitimization of intimacy from procreation, and calling marriage to account.

acknowledgement are intensified in the negotiation of intimacy our culture normatively aligns with marriage.

Another version of *Making Conversation* might have begun with a study of courtship conversation in the novels of Jane Austen. Austen's works not only enact the first significant novelistic concentration on the domestic sphere, but they also make the field of conversation central to the representation of domestic and small-town life—a move consistent with Milton's sense of the ethical coincidence of domesticity and conversation, which continues through much of the realist fiction of the Victorian period. As Jon Mee observes, "Jane Austen is often regarded as the doyenne of conversation in the English novel," a reputation he attributes to her technical skills: her "command of dialogue, the distinctive speech patterns of her characters, and the way that distinctiveness so brilliantly plays into the labile economy of free indirect speech" (201). Of more interest to my project is the way that Austen's works anticipate many of the significant philosophical traits Cavell finds in the Hollywood comedies of remarriage: the suitability and equality of couples who will eventually marry is established through their conversations, which often provide education (particularly in humility, generosity and desire); the couples are typically privileged enough to possess the education and leisure to guarantee the richness of their conversations, but concerned about financial stability and the threat of downward social mobility; and the marriages that conclude the novels are often reunions (*Sense & Sensibility*, *Pride & Prejudice*, *Persuasion*), or rediscoveries of long-known friends as lovers (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*). Austen's novels share Milton's project of demystifying and secularizing the marriage institution, making it apparent that marriage is a condition entered into by humans, sanctified not exclusively by God, but by its own qualities of enrichment and companionship (as well as by its financial imperative, particularly for many women). The emphasis in Austen's novels on a verbal reciprocity between lovers challenges Cavell's suggestion that the Hollywood genre of remarriage comedies follows and inherits the fruits of the previous generation of feminists' struggles for suffrage. A century before the victories of suffrage movements, Austen is already querying and thematizing "the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man," particularly through her scenes of conversation (*Pursuits* 17).

Austen's world of course lacks many options for women. As Cavell observes, in her novels, "a refusal to marry is apt to mean economic and social destitution and the acceptance of a bad marriage will mean the suffocation of the expression of rationality and playfulness" (*Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* 125). The best chance a woman has for the rational and playful conversation that enriches life is a good marriage, but these restricted conditions make what Cavell calls the "wager of marriage" significantly more coercive and fraught than that of the 20th-century's comedies of "remarriage" (ibid. 125). The formula of romantic comedy familiar to English audiences since at least Shakespeare and on robust display in Austen's novels—in which an initial attraction is followed by misunderstandings, then playful antagonism or pining, before a fortuitous final reunion and the (typically off-page) wedding—manages to provide a Miltonian affirmation of marriage within societal strictures that prevent fully free choice of both union and separation.¹⁸ There is much more to say of the representations of

¹⁸ A great deal of valuable scholarship has been devoted to revealing and tracking the critiques of marriage and the institution's hegemony embedded in Austen's novels. In particular, see Walker for an insightful, and historically contextualizing, identification of "indifference" to the marriage institution at the core of the novels' essentially coerced rehearsal of a marriage plot. Walker argues, "Refusing as imponderable the question whether marriage is good or bad, writing that invokes the muse of indifference may be overbrimmed with marriages – Austen's fiction,

conversation and courtship in Austen's novels: more, even, than has yet been observed in the plentiful existing critical literature on the subjects.¹⁹ But the conceptualization of companionship the novels present through vibrant, mutually enriching conversation has—along with plots of romantic reunion after inauspicious beginnings—become so familiar to contemporary audiences that this project begins instead with a text that directs sharp critical attention to the material foundations of that familiar formula for romance.

Published in the waning decades of Victorian ideals, George Meredith's 1879 *The Egoist* proposes a different convergence of conversation, marriage, and domestic life, and it does so precisely by reversing the traditional courtship plot. Remaining within the domestic sphere, *The Egoist* begins with a betrothal and then follows a woman's efforts to avoid the promised marriage. In **Chapter 1, "Must We Do What We Say?: The Plight of Marriage in *The Egoist*,"** I read Meredith's novel in dialogue with Milton and Cavell, as well as theorists for whom marriage is emblematically related to speech in a different, much more instrumental, sense: the speech performativity epitomized by the wedding vow, and, with lesser force, by promises like betrothals. *The Egoist* complicates the convergence of romantic aspirations and conversation by pointing to the historically varying power for language to enact changes in interpersonal relations. Anticipating J.L. Austin's philosophy of speech acts in its dramatization of the consequences of a woman's regrettable promise, the novel points to the historically specific challenges that speech performativity poses for intimate conversation in a socially unequal world in which the force of an utterance depends upon the position of its speaker. It thereby urges a historical-materialist revision of the conversational ideal of marriage developed by Milton and revived in Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, raising doubts about the feasibility of ideal conversation—and the romance it indexes—in conditions of stark social inequality.

From Meredith's critique of the historical contingencies of language use in domestic settings, I turn to Virginia Woolf's representations of conversation, which adopt a characteristically modernist focus on aesthetics, as well as a more communal analytic framework. In **Chapter 2, "A Many-Sided Substance': Virginia Woolf's Aesthetics of Conversation and Conversational Aesthetics,"** I demonstrate that the stakes involved in Woolf's representations of conversation derive from both epistemological and aesthetic philosophical traditions. Many scholars have noted the influence of Cambridge epistemology and Kantian aesthetics on the Bloomsbury group; indeed, these subjects were often pursued in the famous conversations of the "Thursday evenings" in Bloomsbury that drew Virginia and her siblings Vanessa, Thoby (while alive) and Adrian into dialogue with members of the Cambridge *Conversazione* Society (otherwise known as the Cambridge Apostles) such as Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Desmond McCarthy, EM Forster and Roger Fry, as well as non-members like

to take a famous case – but constitute on the whole a pervasively ironic contest with conjugality, a relationship between representational form and social practice of a different order from that of the idioms of endorsement or attack" (7).

¹⁹ Struever, for example, argues that "For Austen, domestic discourse improves on Hume's general conversation as the best provider of ruled liberty; conversation is not simply an idle, leisurely preoccupation but the purposeful construction of life and attitude and value, a project with socially redemptive values" (245). See also Tandon, who argues that "conversation is in Austen less a technique than a constitutive atmosphere of her work" (3). Like Jon Mee and many others, Tandon mines the plethora of eighteenth-century essays and books on conversation to establish the historical construction of the moral and political values that her contemporaries associated with the "atmosphere" of conversation.

Clive Bell.²⁰ Particularly in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, however, Woolf subtly reworks ideas developed by Immanuel Kant and Bertrand Russell, adapting and interweaving them into a theory by which conversation can produce something like a *sensus communis* pitched to relieve epistemological doubt about the “commonness” of the world revealed to each of us through our separate senses.

Over the course of his philosophical career, Bertrand Russell repeatedly revisited concerns about the likely discrepancies between different persons’ perceptions of the material world. “We want the same object for different people,” he writes in *The Problems of Philosophy*, and yet, each person has his or her own private “sense data” (17). To elaborate upon this problem, he offers an imaginary scene that returns in slightly altered form in Woolf’s novels:

When ten people are sitting round a dinner-table, it seems preposterous to maintain that they are not seeing the same tablecloth, the same knives and forks and spoons and glasses. But the sense-data are private to each separate person; what is immediately present to the sight of one is not immediately present to the sight of another: they all see things from slightly different points of view, and therefore see them slightly differently. (*Problems* 17)

Woolf sketches similar scenes of people “sitting round a dinner-table,” her details echoing many aspects of the epistemological conundrum Russell raises. In this respect, my reading supports Ann Banfield’s *The Phantom Table*, which argues that Woolf’s work rests upon a solid philosophical foundation shared with Russell and his Cambridge colleagues.

However, I argue that from this foundation, Woolf’s work develops a unique philosophy of its own, in which the conversations her characters make “sitting round” dinner-tables offer an aesthetic solution to Russell’s concerns. That this solution draws heavily from Kantian aesthetic philosophy is unsurprising, as core Bloomsburian aesthetic concepts—in particular, the emphasis on the freedom and disinterestedness of artistic experience—give modernist inflection to classic Kantian aesthetics.²¹ As Christine Froula attests, “Kant’s influence on Fry, Woolf, and Bloomsbury aesthetics can hardly be overestimated” (14). Whereas Froula and other scholars have primarily focused on Woolf’s feminist reworking of the Kantian ideal of impersonality, I show that the scenes of conversation in Woolf’s fiction rework the crucial Kantian concept of the *sensus communis*, which, to briefly summarize, is a sense of being in community with others that Kant argues attends one’s response to a beautiful object. As I will elaborate in Chapter 2, Kant maintains that to perceive an object as beautiful is to perceive in oneself a response that feels as though it *must* be universally shared: everyone who encounters this object, Kant’s sensitive aesthete intuitively, must similarly be moved by its beauty.

Drawing Kant into dialogue with Bertrand Russell, Woolf’s scenes of dinner-table conversation suggest that a particular mode of conversation can generate a *sensus communis*, which relieves philosophical skepticism about the possibility of commonly sensing a shared world. In these scenes, a “many-sided substance” emerges through dinner-table conversations: perceptible by all, this “substance” is the product of conversation conceived as both verbal exchange and attunement, an aesthetic act of “turning together.” Far from merely reflecting Woolf’s familiarity with Russell’s epistemology and Kant’s aesthetics, *To the Lighthouse* and

²⁰ This history is traced in numerous studies, but I particularly recommend the introduction to Ann Banfield’s *The Phantom Table*, especially pp. 30-36, which considers the role that the conversations of “Thursday Evenings” in Bloomsbury played in Woolf’s philosophical development.

²¹ See Desmond MacCarthy, “Kant and Post-Impressionism” and Clive Bell, “The English Group.” For scholarly discussion of Bloomsbury aesthetics, see Rosenbaum, particularly the first chapter, “Literary Post-Impressionism.”

The Waves reframe both philosophical inquiries in terms of conversation, developing a nuanced and powerful model of conversation as a framework for artistic perception and the formation of community, a process through which characters fleetingly create, as Rhoda calls it in *The Waves*, a “dwelling-place.”

From the conversational *sensus communis* that sustains intimate community in Woolf’s work, my project moves with Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* to a critical representation of the discursive construction of *political* community. **Chapter 3, “Another Court, Silent and Black’: *The Satanic Verses* and the Conversational Public Sphere,”** uncovers the novel’s critique of central assumptions underlying the dominant theoretical conception of the “public sphere,” the space of allegedly non-coercive conversation among citizens posited as the heart of liberal democracy. In Nancy Fraser’s words, the public sphere is conceived as the place in which “political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (57). Rushdie’s novel depicts the formation of what I call, following Fraser, a black “counterpublic” in Margaret Thatcher’s England. Reading *The Satanic Verses* in dialogue with accounts of public life that similarly challenge the classic account of the public sphere, I develop an alternative to the somewhat blinkered formulation offered by liberal political theory.

The standard liberal account of the public sphere has been developed most comprehensively in Jürgen Habermas’s seminal 1962 work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas locates the origins of the contemporary ideal of the public sphere in early modern England and Europe, when “categories of Greek origin”—the *polis* (public) and the *oikos* (home)—were revived in new forms suited to the birth of the modern liberal state (3). The seed of the fully developed public sphere of the 18th- and 19th-centuries originated in 17th-century coffee houses at which merchants met and discussed news that might affect business in the distant markets with which they were now trading (Habermas 30-43). Journals bearing trade news and political coverage provided material to structure these discussions. Over the course of the 17th- and 18th-centuries, Habermas writes, the scope of the “public sphere” expanded, and discussions in coffee shops and other “public” spaces increasingly critiqued institutions like the Church and State, denaturalizing their power. The further liberalization of Western societies posed problems for the “public sphere,” however, as an increasingly literate and vocal working class demanded political rights and brought views and concerns into public discourse that did not easily coalesce into consensus. Furthermore, their insistence upon politically addressing material concerns seemed to conflict with the abstract Enlightenment ideal of rational and disinterested discussion. Habermas argues that the public sphere was indeed damaged by workers’ successes, insofar as the postwar welfare state elided the boundaries between civic life, private or material life, and government authority. A further blow to the public sphere was the development of a culture in which consumption, rather than conversation, became the preferred pastime of middle-class westerners.

Habermas notes that the ideal of the public sphere historically treated the discussions among property-owning white men as representative of general public interests. This presumption depended upon a conflation between property-owning “bourgeois” and general “man.”²² In light of this central, often invisible, assumption, Habermas asserts that “ideology exists at all only from this period on,” suggesting that “ideology” as such, at least in the West, is at heart a confusion between property-owning (white, Christian) men and an abstract, universal

²² As we will see, the fact that Habermas does not comment upon the additional erasure of the gender, race, and religion of this figurative “man” provokes the harshest, and most crucial, criticisms of his account of public life.

human subject (88). This conflation depends upon a naïve faith in the market as an equalizing mediator of men, but it was initially supported by the fact that the interests of the bourgeoisie were closer to the “general” interest than those of either the Church or State. Furthermore, according to the dogma of market liberalism, anyone is able to earn the money necessary to pay for the credentials required to participate in the public sphere: education and leisure. In spite of his criticisms of such ideological underpinnings of the notion of the public sphere, Habermas admires certain functions that this realm of society ideally performs, namely the critical discussion that he later develops into the concept of “communicative rationality.”²³ In the ideal public sphere, as in Habermas’s later political thought, rational deliberation among disinterested individuals tests the “validity” of political propositions and drives public life to a more rational, progressive standard. And while he locates the origins of the public sphere in the sociable conversations of merchants gathering in coffee shops, Habermas stipulates that, in the fully formed public sphere, “reason [...] turns conversation into criticism and *bons mots* into arguments” (31). His model of public discourse is premised upon the rational and teleological talk of discussion, rather than the open, unpredictable, and more aesthetic exchanges of “conversation.”

A conspicuous problem with the classic account of the public sphere is that it obscures the influence exerted by prejudice, socio-economic inequality, and outright discrimination upon both discussion and access to public space. A fantasy imperative to the public sphere described by Habermas is that differences in social or economic status—which are frequently tied to race and gender—cease to matter in the spaces set aside for public life; any (white male) person who could afford a cup of coffee was theoretically welcome to discuss politics in the coffee shops of 18th-century England. The historical record and literary works of the time tell a different story, in which working-class struggles for inclusion in public life often unfolded in the streets, through protests and riots. The exclusions, prejudices, and implicitly shared values that produce the “sphere” in which public life occurs moreover influence the intercourse of those citizens who gain entry.

The Satanic Verses depicts post-colonial contestation of the “public sphere” in Margaret Thatcher’s England, dramatizing—and forging crucial connections between—noteworthy alternative theorizations of public life. As I show in Chapter Three, the text implicitly shares elements of analyses that have been offered by political theorists including Hannah Arendt, Nancy Fraser, Linda Zerilli, and Lauren Berlant, who each in different ways contests the norm of rationality and the pretenses of universality that fuel the liberal ideal of the public sphere. In the novel, tensions caused by racist regulation of public space—including the extrajudicial killing of a Black activist by police—erupt finally into a devastating riot. This penultimate scene suggests an alignment of the insights of these alternative theorists of public life that models public transformation on “conversation” instead of the more restricted “discussion” privileged by Habermas. Here again, a conception of conversation as a simultaneously verbal and aesthetic process—a constitutive attunement of perception in talkatively “turning together”—prompts the theoretical intervention that I derive from Rushdie’s novel and the political theorists skeptical of liberalism’s confidence.

²³ It is worth noting here that “communicative” is a qualifier of rationality, just as rationality is the object of the “communicative” act. In other words, Habermas’s late philosophy situates rationality *in* conversation—a teleological conversation to be sure, but, crucially, in this conceptualization, reason or rationality is not a transcendental quality that the individual mind aspires to manifest, but rather an emergent property of interaction between social subjects.

Making Conversation concludes by considering today's digitally networked world, reading the practices of "sharing" and exchange that constitute what has been called the "digital public sphere." **Chapter 4, "World-Wide Conversation': Digital Social Media, Democratic Fantasy, and the Novel,"** theorizes the "conversational" qualities of Web 2.0 in light of my previous chapters' literary-philosophical conversation, and also through a reading of Ali Smith's *There but for the: a novel*. I argue that Smith's 2011 novel transposes the logic of digital social media into physical space, developing an aesthetic I call "augmented realism" in response to formal challenges to fiction posed by Augmented Reality technologies, including social media. The novel's "augmented realism" refracts its critique of digital social media through an investigation of the forms and functions of fiction in the contemporary, digitally-networked age. Inverting the methodological premises of the traditional Digital Humanities, this concluding chapter indicates one mode by which the Humanities can clarify the conditions of the "digital age" and the fractious "post-truth" politics that have prompted today's most strident elegies of the art of conversation.

As I am writing this introduction, anxieties about the fate of conversation are at an especially high pitch. These anxieties are evident in President Obama's lamentation of our inability to "have a common conversation," as well as in the proliferation of "conversation guides" following the 2016 US election, which offered tips for navigating post-election Thanksgiving dinners. The tacit link between democracy and conversation has become overt in the expression of fears regarding the future of both. In this project's Postscript, I reflect on the ways that the literary-philosophical explorations of *Making Conversation* might help us move beyond vague appeals to conversation and into more concrete and useful efforts.

Chapter One: Must We Do, When We Say? The Plight of Marriage and Conversation in *The Egoist*

“And what his chief end was of creating woman to be joined with man, his own instituting words declare, and are infallible to inform us what is marriage, and what is no marriage, unless we can think them set there to no purpose: "It is not good," saith he, "that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmeet for him." From which words so plain, less cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned interpreter, than that in God's intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage, for we find here no expression so necessarily implying carnal knowledge, as this prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man.”

John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Restored to the Good of Both Sexes*

“When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.”

JL Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*

“She submitted to stand engaged; and that was no light whispering of a word. She was implored to enter the state of captivity by the pronunciation of vows—a private but a binding ceremonial.”

George Meredith, *The Egoist*

Opening this project with a consideration of the conjunction of marriage and conversation, I am rooting my literary-philosophical inquiry into conversation in the role that everyday discourse plays in a Cavellian project of acknowledgment. But this chapter explores the ideal of acknowledgment in tandem with another emblematic connection between marriage and speech: the performativity of speech, the *action* accomplished in the process of speaking. Ever since J.L. Austin's pioneering identification and study of speech performativity in *How to Do Things With Words*, the marriage vow has served as a classic example of speech performance—the utterance of “I do,” in the proper context and by the proper subject, creates the condition in which it is true, the condition of taking another person to be a lawfully wedded partner. Performativity is an element of language productively at odds with the non-teleological values of conversation. It is for this reason that I think it is especially suggestive that the practice and trope of marriage focalizes elements of language that seem divergent, in the process revealing the difficulty of the intimate telos of turning together.

The marriage scene is (post-Milton) a private scene: a bourgeois nest apart from prying eyes, where daily devotional acknowledgment occurs and reoccurs in conversation that might seem meaningless to an outsider—the “little language such as lovers use,” to cite Bernard in *The Waves* (142). On the other hand, marriage is a legal state established through a particularly blatant, government-underwritten exercise of power in language. Moreover, as poststructuralists like Derrida and Judith Butler have argued, the performative power of the “I do” does not make that utterance qualitatively different from language in general; indeed, explicit performative

utterances clarify the performativity inherent to all language, as well as the sociological-conventional source of this power. The convergence of linguistic, ethical, and social norms in the very small-scale social contract of the speech act illuminates a similar convergence in all speech that structures the everyday intimacies and contingencies of people. This twofold linkage between marriage and verbal utterance invites us to connect the social and ethical themes aligned with acknowledgment to more abstract philosophical questions about the nature of language and the source of its power to shape human relationships. This linkage also provides an occasion to think through some of the normative assumptions governing both language use and societally condoned forms of partnership.

Such a twofold linkage between marriage and talk is at the heart of the novel that I will consider in this chapter, George Meredith's *The Egoist*. Like Jane Austen's novels, *The Egoist* enquires into the possibility of affirming marriage and intimacy within a patriarchal culture that presents limited opportunities for women outside of marriage, and even more strictly limited options of divorce.²⁴ Whereas Austen's plots invoke the trope of a would-be-lovers' quarrel to stage the separation before final (re)marriage, *The Egoist* situates its heroine in an unhappy engagement. The novel reverses the familiar marriage plot: Clara Middleton promises to marry Willoughby Patterne and then spends the majority of the novel striving to disengage herself. The novel's action occurs in the temporal gap between what J.L. Austin would call a commissive performative utterance, Clara's engagement, and the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of this promise. It is confined to the estate of its principle egoist, Patterne Hall, and, even more claustrophobically, the plot unfolds primarily in the conversations the various actors have in this restricted setting. These conversations raise the ethical stakes of marriage, indicating "infelicities" (to borrow one of Austin's terms) in the marriage convention that are intrinsically both linguistic and historical, while also hinting that a "meet and happy conversation" might indeed be, as Milton wrote, the "chiefest and noblest end of marriage" (27). But *The Egoist* is principally about performativity, inquiring into the possibility for free and affirmative communication between individuals, given speech's tendency to *act*.

In the first part of the chapter that follows, I will recover some of the themes introduced in the Introduction to show how the conversations of Meredith's characters manifest what Cavell

²⁴ Divorce was still an exceptionally rare occurrence at the time of the publication of *The Egoist*, although the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 had relatively recently made it possible for a broader population to divorce. This act importantly established a common law Divorce Court that was not overseen by the Church, making it possible for people to achieve "absolute divorce" without a Parliamentary bill (amazingly, wealthy couples occasionally achieved divorce by having public parliamentary hearings in which they would air their grievances, among other things). In addition to making it possible for more ordinary people to legally divorce, the Act "enshrined the double standard of morality in law by allowing relief to a husband for his wife's adultery alone, while requiring a wife to prove adultery plus a compounding offense such as cruelty, desertion, incest, or bigamy" (Hammerton 271). Making adultery the primary legal justification for divorce, the law seems not to align divorce with the vision of companionate marriage that Milton sketched, but as Mary Lyndon Shanley has pointed out, debates over the additional grounds necessary in cases in which women were seeking divorce not only led to the "enshrining" of the double standard that tolerates promiscuity in males but punishes it in females, but also, "contained the seeds of the idea that marriage could not properly be understood solely as an institution for sexual or reproductive bonding, but as a locus for companionship and mutual support. Thus by rejecting the ecclesiastical doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and by debating aggravating grounds for divorcing an adulterous husband, parliament had opened the door to further debate about the purpose and nature of marriage itself" (Shanley 369). This legal-political background, along with recollections of John Stuart Mill's vision of marriage as "society between equals," and his wife's assertion that marriage must involve "that genuine friendship, which only exists between equals in privileges as in faculties," helps contextualize the scrutiny that *The Egoist* makes of marriage.

calls “struggles for acknowledgment.” Out of these struggles, the primary subject of my inquiry begins to emerge: speech performativity. The novel’s inquiry into this feature of speech anticipates both the formal philosophical theorization offered by J.L. Austin in the middle of the 20th century, and later post-structural and queer turns applied to Austin’s work that interrogate the mutual reinforcement of linguistic and social convention as well as the concept of personal agency in the context of performative language. By anchoring its study of speech performativity in a plot that reverses the conjugal trajectory of so many 19th-century novels, while retaining shadowy hopes about human intimacy outside of the cultural imperative to marry, *The Egoist* combines its precocious theory of speech performativity with an inquiry into the possibility of true intimacy in a world produced and governed by such speech. Meredith may be, as Jamie Bartlett has summarized, “a canonical writer generally agreed to be bad at writing,” but *The Egoist* is critically prescient, offering a new perspective upon the conjugal entanglement of language and intimacy (547).²⁵

Meeting, Happily

Beginning with marriage and a nod to Milton, this project begins with an affirming negation, a sort of utopian gesture toward love and ideal partnership in the advocacy of divorce. As we will see, a similar gesture is the essential move of Meredith’s novel, as well.

In Stanley Cavell’s reading, “Milton means something more by conversation than just talk, [...] he means a mode of association, a form of life [...]. Contrariwise, Milton does also mean talk [...] —or at least he means articulate responsiveness, expressiveness” (*Pursuits* 87). Studying a set of Hollywood films he dubs comedies of remarriage, Cavell proposes that marriage (and society) is indeed legitimized by conversation. As in Milton’s *Doctrine*, Cavell finds that the practice of conversation in the films comes to index a “mode of association, a form of life,” which is about “consent and reciprocity,” “intellectual adventure, improvisation, [and] devotedness” (*Pursuits* 182, *Contesting* 165). The conversations that Cavell affirms are performative aesthetic works. As performances, they are fleeting, but leave lasting effects upon the sensibilities; as aesthetic works, they possess what Kant calls “merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without end” (*Critique* §15, 111). They are not undertaken to meet ends outside themselves and the “form of life” they sustain.

Most crucially for Cavell—and most pertinently for *The Egoist*—the conversation of lovers at times manifests “struggles for acknowledgment” (*Contesting* 30). Many of the conversations between Willoughby and Clara enact such struggles, as Willoughby’s histrionics prefigure several of the principle means Cavell identifies by which individuals evade “acknowledging” others. As mentioned in the Introduction, “acknowledgment” is a central theme throughout Cavell’s philosophical writings; it represents a response to human finitude and the limits we encounter in our quests for intimate understanding that does not devolve into skepticism or romantic denials of limitation. In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell suggests that we ought to meet “the problem of the existence of other minds” in a way similar to the manner in which most of us meet the more worldly skepticism posed by Descartes, Hume, Kant, etc: “What skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to

²⁵ Bartlett offers both a summary of the critical disdain for Meredith and an exemplary reading that takes Meredith more seriously. Like the present chapter, Bartlett’s reading is founded on resonances between his work and “the philosophy of language,” focusing specifically on the philosophy implicit in the “granular descriptions” that, as she finds, tend to take the place of plot development.

us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged” (324). We accept the world’s presence on the basis of something like faith: faith in our senses and their fidelity to the world as it is, and faith in our minds for translating sense perception into coherent pictures of reality that are likewise faithful to “reality,” at least to an acceptable extent. The concept of acknowledgment suggests that we take the “presentness” of others on something like faith, too: faith in other minds being somewhat like ours, or at least somewhat like the stories we can tell to account for them: at any rate, of their being here, in some capacity, which we can only accept.

Cavell argues that one of the principal ways a person might resist acknowledging another is through attempting to bridge the gap between the two, to merge with the other in the style recommended, for instance, in strands of romantic ideology. A version of this ideology is behind many of Willoughby’s most histrionic demands for Clara to commit herself in speech acts. In their engagement, he makes her swear that she is “wholly” his, his “utterly,” and that their “engagement is written above” (Meredith 73). Shortly after their engagement, he demands that she promise to be faithful to him even after he dies:

"Clara! to dedicate your life to our love! Never one touch; not one whisper! not a thought, not a dream! Could you—it agonizes me to imagine . . . be inviolate? mine above?—mine before all men, though I am gone:—true to my dust? Tell me. Give me that assurance. [...] Clara! my Clara! as I live in yours, whether here or away; whether you are a wife or widow, there is no distinction for love—I am your husband—say it—eternally. I must have peace; I cannot endure the pain. Depressed, yes; I have cause to be. But it has haunted me ever since we joined hands. To have you—to lose you!"

"Is it not possible that I may be the first to die?" said Miss Middleton.

"And lose you, with the thought that you, lovely as you are, and the dogs of the world barking round you, might . . . Is it any wonder that I have my feeling for the world? This hand!—the thought is horrible. You would be surrounded; men are brutes; the scent of unfaithfulness excites them, overjoys them. And I helpless! The thought is maddening. I see a ring of monkeys grinning. There is your beauty, and man's delight in desecrating. You would be worried night and day to quit my name, to . . . I feel the blow now. You would have no rest for them, nothing to cling to without your oath."

"An oath!" said Miss Middleton.

"It is no delusion, my love, when I tell you that with this thought upon me I see a ring of monkey faces grinning at me; they haunt me. But you do swear it! Once, and I will never trouble you on the subject again. My weakness! if you like. You will learn that it is love, a man's love, stronger than death."

"An oath?" she said, and moved her lips to recall what she might have said and forgotten. "To what? what oath?"

"That you will be true to me dead as well as living! Whisper it."

"Willoughby, I shall be true to my vows at the altar."

"To me! me!"

"It will be to you."

"To my soul. No heaven can be for me—I see none, only torture, unless I have your word, Clara. I trust it. I will trust it implicitly. My confidence in you is absolute."

"Then you need not be troubled." (85-86)

Willoughby seeks an oath to make their romantic bond immortal: she will be "his" for eternity, if she swears by it verbally. I'll return to the explicit issue of these characters' relations to speech acts later in the chapter; for now, it is enough to observe that Willoughby's private melodrama makes him insensible to the woman speaking before him. The two are completely out of tune with each other, aligned in neither tone nor sentiment, to borrow a musical metaphor that Meredith himself frequently invokes.

The disconnect between Willoughby's exaggerated tone and Clara's levelheaded responses makes it clear that the two are not in each other's presence. Not only does Willoughby repress the meaning of Clara's words: he represses the fact of her presence before him as an autonomous other. In Cavell's words, he has "convert[ed]" Clara "into a character and ma[d]e the world a stage for [her]" (*Must We?* 333). While willful insensibility manifests a (bad) form of acknowledgment, providing "as conclusive an acknowledgment that [others] are present as murdering them would be," the denial of acknowledgment "does violence to others, it separates their bodies from their souls, makes monsters of them" (*Must We?* 332, *Pursuits* 109). "Acknowledgment" is not necessarily morally laudable, but its refusal is intrinsically brutal.

Fully entering into the presence of the other—acknowledging the other—means not only accepting the other's presence, but "put[ting] ourselves in the other's presence, reveal[ing] ourselves to them" (*Must We?* 332-333). This self-disclosure entails revealing oneself to be separate: "what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them *other*, and face them" (338). One must accept his or her own finitude in order to fully "face" the other, in Cavell's account. This limitation includes acknowledgment that the other has his or her own ideas about oneself, which a person cannot control. This alarming condition of unbridgeable difference, which reminds us of our own mortality and limits, is also what Cavell calls the "reasonable condition for a ceremony of union":

[W]hat is wanting – if marriage is to be reconceived, or let's say human attraction – is for the other to see our separate existence, to acknowledge its separateness, a reasonable condition for a ceremony of union. Then the opening knowledge of the human is conceived as the experience of being unknown. To reach that absence is not the work of a moment. (*Contesting* 22)

The kind of knowledge entailed in the "union" of acknowledgment is always incomplete. According to Cavell, it requires "reaching" an "absence," which I take to mean a state in which we not only perceive ineluctable difference and mystery, but also accept these features of intimacy. Cavell suggests that we might even appreciate difference and mystery as the basis for a "ceremony of union" – a marriage, perhaps, but also possibly a conversation, seriously undertaken. Willoughby does not want to accept "being unknown." As though his words could achieve what they assert—as though they could be performative—he tells Clara, "We are one another's [...] So entirely one, that there never can be question of external influences. [...] You have me, you have me like an open book, you, and only you!" (98-99). Denying his own limits, as well as Clara's, Willoughby's theatrical assertions that their love draws them into "oneness" deny the chance of actual "union," in the sense possible under the conditions of acknowledgment.

On the other hand, Willoughby's insistence upon the performative power of language offers his own weak form of acknowledgment. His constant demands that Clara undertake additional oaths demonstrate that he at least dimly perceives his own limits. He appeals to

language to forge the bond he cannot otherwise guarantee. But this implicit acknowledgment betrays a misperception of what conversation can actually do. In the sort of conversation that follows acknowledgment, we speak from within, and on the premise of, the “absence” described above. In *Contesting Tears*, the study of the Hollywood “melodramas,” Cavell explicitly equates “the logic of human intimacy” with “separateness,” and calls this logic “the field of serious and playful conversation or exchange” (221). Willoughby’s demands for words to bind Clara demonstrate an urge to overcome this separateness through a particularly charged kind of conversation or exchange.

Ceremonies of Union: the commissive speech act

It is surprising, given the averred importance of J.L. Austin’s work in Cavell’s intellectual development, that Cavell did not draw speech acts into his constellation of marriage, ethics, and conversation. Drawing performativity into the constellation not only illuminates ways that performativity can be invoked in an attempt to evade acknowledgment, as in the discussion above; it further reveals the limits of any theory of intimacy that depends upon speakers having full control over their self-expression in language. *The Egoist* helps to make clear that a conception of the illocutionary force of speech underwrites the significance of talk in intimate relationships, throwing into relief the performativity shadowing even the most playfully purposeless conversations. It is precisely because speech *acts*—with both illocutionary and perlocutionary force—that words exchanged have the power to constitute a “form of life,” and a “ceremony of union.”²⁶

As mentioned above, the marriage vow is paradigmatic in speech act theory.²⁷ But *The Egoist* structures its plot and nascent philosophy of performative utterances around promising, an example of a form of performative utterance that J.L. Austin terms “commissive,” which is less immediately and absolutely active than utterances like the marriage vow. Language, but not yet

²⁶ Austin terms the more psychological effects of utterances their “perlocutionary” consequences, as opposed to the performative consequences achieved by linguistic convention; like all of Austin’s categories, however, this distinction between perlocutionary and illocutionary is blurry (101).

²⁷ As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out with characteristic wit, “The marriage ceremony is, indeed, so central to the origins of ‘performativity’ (given the strange, disavowed but unattenuated persistence of *the exemplary* in this work) that a more accurate name for *How to Do Things with Words* might have been *How to say (or write) ‘I do,’ about twenty million times without winding up any more married than you started out.* (Short title: *I Do-Not!*)” (3). What Sedgwick is directing attention to is the (queer) way in which Austin’s own work “performatively” voids performative utterances of their illocutionary force. Austin writes a great deal about the necessity of particular circumstances in order to grant performative utterances effective force, and the various ways in which such utterances can be “infelicitous.” For instance, reciting the marriage vow to your partner outside of the presence of an official of the state or church will not effect your marriage; nor will reciting “I do” accomplish a union if, like Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, one happens to have a wife already, locked in his attic; nor will it accomplish a marriage if the words are exchanged between two men, or two women, in a dwindling number of US states. But performative utterances are also “infelicitous” when offered in philosophy, just as in literature: when “it is as examples they are offered in the first place - hence as, performatively, voided in advance” (3). In consequence, Sedgwick proposes a view of *How to Do Things With Words* that attends to its queerness: “*How to Do Things with Words* thus performs at least a triple gesture with respect to marriage: installing monogamous heterosexual dyadic church- and state-sanctioned marriage at the definitional center of an entire philosophical edifice, it yet posits as the first heuristic device of that philosophy the *class of things* (for instance, personal characteristics or object choices) that can preclude or vitiate marriage; and it constructs the philosopher himself, the modern Socrates, as a man - presented as highly comic - whose relation to the marriage vow will be one of compulsive, apparently apotropaic repetition and yet of ultimate exemption” (3).

law, has entangled Clara with a man whose refusal to “acknowledge” her is evident in nearly every scene of interaction, and *The Egoist* suggests an engagement is nearly as difficult for a woman to escape as a marriage. The device through which this predicament is established—the illocutionary force of Clara’s promise to marry Willoughby—completes a theoretical constellation of marriage, ethics, and speech that is both intuitive and illuminating.

Austin’s discussion of commissives appears halfway through the lectures collected into *How to Do Things With Words*, as he begins to dissolve “the dichotomy of performatives and constatives [...] in favour of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts” (149). As many readers have noted, Austin’s lectures begin by announcing the existence of a class of utterance hitherto unstudied in philosophy, the performative, but by their end, Austin has demonstrated that all speech has a performative dimension; he has moved from identifying “the performative” as a class of utterance, to demonstrating that performativity is an aspect of speech.²⁸ Commissives have less performative force than “verdictives” (the utterances of a jury, for instance) and “exercitives” (utterances that do what they say because of the relevant power of the speaker, such as issuing a formal warning, appointing someone to a position, etc). “Typified by promising or otherwise undertaking,” Austin explains, commissives “commit you to doing something, but include also declarations or announcements of intention, which are not promises, and also rather vague things which we may call espousals, as for example, siding with” (150-151). A commissive performs something immediately—in saying “I promise,” one is doing the act of promising—but its performativity also relates in a more ambiguous way to the future act it anticipates.

There is a lapse of time between the speech act of promising and the execution of the promised act, of course. Judith Butler has thus invoked the figure of chiasmus to represent the relation between a commissive (in her example, a threat) and its associated act:

The act of threat and the threatened act are, of course, distinct, but they are related as a chiasmus. Although not identical, they are both bodily acts: the first act, the threat, only makes sense in terms of the act that it prefigures. The threat begins a temporal horizon within which the organizing aim is the act that is threatened; the threat begins the action by which the fulfillment of the threatened act might be achieved. And yet, a threat can be derailed, defused, can fail to furnish the act that it threatens. The threat states the impending certitude of another, forthcoming act, but the statement itself cannot produce that forthcoming act as one of its necessary effects. This failure to deliver on the threat does not call into question the status of the speech act as a threat - it merely questions its efficacy. (*Excitable Speech* 11)

Both a commissive and the event it promises are acts, and each requires the other in order to make full sense. If Clara and Willoughby did not have faith in the power of her “word” to guarantee the future event of their wedding, her promise to marry Willoughby could not compel the plot as it does. This faith situates her utterance and the promised wedding in the interweaving loop of chiasmus. But as Butler says of the threat, a promise can be unfulfilled, and it is precisely this possibility of “derailment” that interests Meredith in *The Egoist*.

It is worth observing that the temporal extension of the traditional, pre-modernist novel makes it the literary form best suited to revealing the narrative drama at the heart of everyday

²⁸ See Culler for a thoughtful synopsis of Austin’s initial theorization of performativity, and a thorough review of the ways that performativity has since been picked up by theorists.

speech acts. By unfolding its primary plot in the space between a promise and its fulfillment or non-fulfillment, *The Egoist* illuminates the narrative aspect of speech acts and blurs the distinction between the literary, sociological, and material elements of language when spoken. Speech acts like promises depend upon “plots” to realize their full meaning, their final status as what Austin will call “felicitous” or “infelicitous.”

Clara’s initial promise to marry Willoughby is not directly represented in the novel. The narrative perspective is entirely limited to Willoughby’s estate and surrounding neighborhood, and readers first learn about her existence through gossip, allusions to “hints [...] dropping about the neighborhood” of a woman and a courtship unfolding elsewhere (65). These hints are made explicit in Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson’s gossip mash of sentimental cliché and material concern:

He met her at Cherriton. Both were struck at the same moment. Her father is, I hear, some sort of learned man; money; no land. No house either, I believe. People who spend half their time on the Continent. They are now for a year at Upton Park. The very girl to settle down and entertain when she does think of settling. Eighteen, perfect manners; you need not ask if a beauty. Sir Willoughby will have his dues. We must teach her to make amends to him. (65)

Mrs. Mountstuart’s information is evidently second-hand, if not from a further remove: she “hears” details about Clara’s father and their material situation, and weaves these reports into an empty and unsubstantiated assertion that “both were struck at the same moment,” culminating with an indication of the community’s assumed role in the romance of others. The neighborhood must teach Clara to “make amends” for Willoughby’s previous bad experience of being “jilted” (by a woman ironically and iconically named Constantia).

The presiding county gossip’s report is followed in the next chapter by a fuller narrative description of the couples’ courtship. Presented at this retrospective remove, and in a hasty summary, this description also assumes the air of gossip. Readers do not directly witness “the great meeting” between Clara and Willoughby, nor their subsequent courtship and engagement, but rather follow the narrator’s synopsis. Willoughby has successfully asserted himself over other suitors, “while yet he knew no more of her than that he was competing for a prize,” and he consequently feels that he has proven to “the world” that he is “the best man” (71-72). In this summary, readers also learn that Clara commits herself verbally to Willoughby only after much hedging and delay:

She begged for time; Willoughby could barely wait. She unhesitatingly owned that she liked no one better, and he consented. A calm examination of his position told him that it was unfair so long as he stood engaged, and she did not. She pleaded a desire to see a little of the world before she plighted herself. She alarmed him; he assumed the amazing god of love under the subtlest guise of the divinity. Willingly would he obey her behests, resignedly languish, were it not for his mother's desire to see the future lady of Patterne established there before she died. Love shone cunningly through the mask of filial duty, but the plea of urgency was reasonable. Dr. Middleton thought it reasonable, supposing his daughter to have an inclination. She had no disinclination, though she had a maidenly desire to see a little of the world—grace for one year, she said. Willoughby reduced the year to six months, and granted that term, for which, in gratitude, she submitted to stand engaged; and that was no light whispering of a word. She was implored to enter the state of captivity by the pronunciation of

vows—a private but a binding ceremonial. She had health and beauty, and money to gild these gifts; not that he stipulated for money with his bride, but it adds a lustre to dazzle the world; and, moreover, the pack of rival pursuers hung close behind, yelping and raising their dolorous throats to the moon. Captive she must be. (72-73)

Hardly “struck at the same moment,” Willoughby and Clara evidently become engaged as a consequence of his pressuring and confusing her into “submission.” Readers moreover learn that even after becoming formally engaged, Clara “enter[s]” an even further “state of captivity” by pronouncing additional vows. Willoughby strives to make her “captive” with her words, a verbal “ceremony of union” each considers binding.

Most crucially for the novel’s inquiry into speech performativity, this scene spotlights the centrality of speech to Willoughby’s strategy of subjugation, his extraction of verbal promises that enchain their utterers. He turns such speech acts into exaggerated performances: “He made her engagement no light whispering matter. It was a solemn plighting of a troth. Why not?” (73) As the account of this solemn plighting continues, readers learn that Willoughby has extracted from Clara more than the average recitation:

Having said, I am yours, she could say, I am wholly yours, I am yours forever, I swear it, I will never swerve from it, I am your wife in heart, yours utterly; our engagement is written above. To this she considerably appended, ‘as far as I am concerned’; a piece of somewhat chilling generosity, and he forced her to pass him through love’s catechism in turn, and came out with fervent answers that bound him to her too indissolubly to let her doubt of her being loved. (73)

Clara’s addendum ‘as far as I am concerned’ implies that an engagement does not necessarily index possession that is entire, unchanging, and “written above” (God is appropriately figured as a writer exercising ultimate illocutionary efficacy). In granting Willoughby license to preserve his own liberty, swerve from the engagement or see it as purely human and contractual, Clara makes plain that she does not believe an engagement to be divine, transcendental, and permanently and wholly binding. She seeks to loosen the grip of her words as soon as she utters them by suggesting they are binding according to convention and will. His “fervent answers,” moreover, demonstrate a confused belief that love vows assure lovers because of their performative, rather than expressive, power: love is to be deduced from the bonds a person has willingly spoken himself into, not from the content of any expressions of love. The indissolubility of their bond comes not from love, nor from the words “above” in which God has “written” of their bond, but from *Willoughby’s* words.

Willoughby recognizes that Clara is balking at the presumed performative force of her words. He insists to her that her words are binding: “*affianced* is, in honour, *wedded*,” he tells her. “You cannot be released. We are united. Recognize it; united. There is no possibility of releasing a wife!” (194). And yet Clara wavers, threatening to derail her promise. That her wavering is not a sufficient cause to break the engagement reinforces Willoughby’s affirmations of the binding power of words. *The Egoist* suggests that our words indeed are our bonds, even when we do not fully mean them. Linguistic convention can hijack a person, enlisting her beyond her will.

Not only does Willoughby emphatically insist upon the solidity of bonds established through language, but he also enlists language throughout the novel in his efforts to shape reality. He tells Clara, for instance, “To-day I am altogether yours” (307). Her inquisitive response, “Are you?” makes clear that he did not achieve a felicitous performative. Two additional noteworthy

instances occur in his conversations with Laetitia, a woman he has known since childhood, twice encouraged to believe he would marry, and who has been openly pining for him throughout her entire adult life. As Willoughby becomes increasingly nervous that Clara will cut the bonds of her words and “jilt” him, he constructs a scheme in which he would preemptively jilt Clara, pair her with the cousin he thinks is undesirable, and marry Laetitia as though he has secretly loved the childhood friend all along. He tries to guarantee Laetitia’s consent before releasing Clara to Vernon by attempting to make speech performative according to his own will, disregarding the circumstances typically necessary to make performative speech felicitous: “I am free. Thank heaven! I am free to choose my mate—the woman I have always loved! Freely and unreservedly, as I ask you to give your hand, I offer mine. You are the mistress of Patterne Hall; my wife” (474). His declaration “I am free” not only disingenuously implies that he has already broken his engagement with Clara, but it indicates and performs the actual freedom that he indeed has, unmatched by Clara. Moreover, it leads to the assertion that Laetitia is, or will become, his wife, which appears to be an effort at using what Austin calls an “exercitive” utterance (the utterance that names, appoints, and proclaims). Laetitia does not accept the nomination. Later, Willoughby attempts to secure her linguistically from the reverse direction, insisting that *her* words have performatively achieved something beyond her intention, which is irrelevant to the way such utterances work. She responds to a knock on the door, thinking it is Clara’s knock, with, “Come in, dear.” Willoughby enters and “seize[s] her hands,” exclaiming, “Dear! [...] You cannot withdraw that. You call me dear. I am, I must be dear to you. The word is out, by accident or not, but, by heaven, I have it and I give it up to no one” (593).

As these last two instances with Laetitia show, Willoughby occasionally treats casual and conversational speech as equally performative as the more appropriately “binding” speech acts of promising and taking oaths. In all of the situations described above, he insists upon the effective value of spoken language, in contradiction of the purposeless play of conversation central to Cavellian descriptions of acknowledgment. This seeking of illocutionary force in ordinary conversation makes the same point that Austin eventually reaches in his lectures: lurking in all oral speech, all conversation, is potential illocutionary force. “What we need,” Austin observes late in the lectures, is not “a list of ‘explicit performative verbs,’” but rather, “a list of *illocutionary forces* of an utterance” (148-9, his emphasis). Certain utterances may have different illocutionary forces depending upon the circumstances in which they are said, their speaker’s social position, their subjective context, and so on. In the instances described above, Willoughby wagers that illocutionary force might be managed by his intentions alone, irrespective of the intentions of his interlocutors. Willoughby’s wager in fact points to a quandary raised by the relation between private intentions and public illocutionary utterances—and it also points to the tension inherent to a theory of conversational acknowledgment that eschews instrumental uses of language (or people).

Doubtless Wrong, but No Misstatement

The performative force of language, *The Egoist* suggests, is problematic in a stratified world, in which speakers occupy such different positions within society that they relate to language differently. In Clara’s case, it is her social position as a woman that makes it impossible for her to fully mean what she says, due to her historically guaranteed inexperience and restricted agency. Early in the novel, Vernon reminds her that she is “in a position of [her] own choosing,”

referring of course to her acceptance of Willoughby's proposal. Clara recoils from this notion and makes an interesting qualification:

"Not my choosing; do not say choosing, Mr. Whitford. I did not choose. I was incapable of really choosing. I consented."

"It's the same in fact. But be sure of what you wish."

"Yes," she assented, taking it for her just punishment that she should be supposed not quite to know her wishes. (196)

Consenting is, along with promising, among Austin's list of commissive verbs. In distinguishing between a commissive and the decision it supposedly indexes, Clara indicates not only that she succumbed after badgering, but that her succumbing was a matter of language, not a matter of inner decision. Insisting that she *consented*, but did not *decide*, Clara shifts emphasis to the speech act she committed rather than the intentionality behind it, signaling that she was "incapable" of having what Austin would call the "appropriate" intention when she performatively committed herself to marrying Willoughby.

Austin himself struggles with the issue of speaker intentionality, as though he anticipates the implications post-structuralists would later draw from his philosophy. He states that "a person participating in and so invoking the procedure [of an illocutionary act] must in fact have those [implied] thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently" in order for the performative to be "felicitous," that is, in order for it to accomplish an intended change in the world (12). A moment before this passage, however, he preemptively undermines the force of those "musts" by acknowledging that a promise given without the intention to keep it "is not even *void*, though it is given in *bad faith* [...] doubtless wrong, it is not a misstatement" (11). The person who says "I promise" is indeed, in that utterance, performing the act of promising, even if she or he has no actual intention to prove this utterance "felicitous" in subsequent action. As Jonathan Culler has observed, "in principle [...] the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions" (507). Austin does not go as far as Derrida, for instance, in voiding utterances of intentionality, but his work already signals that speech operates somewhat independently of the intention of its speakers. There is no guarantee that "appropriate" intention underwrites the performative force of utterances. As Clara finds, linguistic convention can hijack a person, enlisting her in a future she could not have intended.

The plot of *The Egoist* dramatizes the problems of citationality that Derrida, and later Butler, make central to their retheorizations of performativity. An utterance achieves its institutional, performative effect only because it is recognizable as the appropriate utterance in a pre-scripted social formula. The utterance is a citation of other utterances, and the entire social history of speech underwrites its current meaning and efficacy. This citational element of speech constitutes what Derrida calls a "dehiscence" between the speaker's utterance and intentionality: "The intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. The iteration structuring it a priori introduces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [brisure] which are essential." (18). The iteration pre-exists the speaker, whose speech invokes this prehistory of speech and takes its life from a system separate from the speaker's intention.

The prehistory, as Clara's situation exemplifies, makes it too easy for a woman to act, in speaking, beyond her full intentions. The novel's deconstruction of language is very different from the deconstruction that would become popular nearly a century later, for Meredith's understanding of language is deeply connected to the historical and historically-variant uses into

which it is put. One could imagine that in Meredith's world, it would be possible to reform society in order to empower certain subjects to more consistently mean what they say: women could be more fully educated, given greater freedom and wider experience, and thus be ushered into the community of those who speak and act through language with full agency. Derrida, and those following in his legacy, would insist that the "brisure" hinted at by citationality does not disappear simply with the sociological empowerment of speakers to mean what they say. Language only means because its meanings have been sketched in advance of our use of it. This advance sketching of language, the very foundation by which utterances have meaning, indicates that the agency and intentionality of any speaker of language is restricted. It is not, in other words, a problem unique to the "subaltern" of a society.

The Egoist does not insist upon the same absolutist approach to language, and the novel's attitude seems much closer to that of Ordinary Language Philosophy" and specifically that of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose decoupling of language from the "metaphysical" realm returns agency to human speakers.²⁹ For Wittgenstein, it is language *use* that determines language *meaning*, and although speakers of language undoubtedly follow precedent when using language, speaking a language is more like playing a "game" that is "unregulated [...] not everywhere circumscribed by rules" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 68). The particular meaning of language never pre-exists its concrete utterance, and it is always possible for new formulations to present new meanings, and new perspectives on old meanings. This view corresponds to *The Egoist's* portrayal of Willoughby's insistence upon the "binding" *uses* of language. According to a Wittgensteinian reading, Willoughby's insistence upon binding ceremonials helps illuminate features of the *use of language* in relation to historical conditions. Meredith's critique suggests not that intimacy between men and women can never be founded upon talk, but that any hopes for a fuller, fairer intimacy between the sexes must attend to the ways in which we talk, and the uses we make of others' speech.

For Clara, the conditions of language use in her historical moment mean that "very few women are able to be straightforwardly sincere in their speech, however much they may desire to be" (205). Laetitia implicitly agrees, observing that women "are differently educated. Great misfortune brings it to them" (205). Strangely exempting herself from this "they" who are differently educated, Laetitia alludes to the education that urges women to prevaricate rather than cause offense or discomfort. One consequence of this different education is evident in Clara's father's classically offensive and dangerous opinion that, "Not to believe in a lady's No is the approved method of carrying that fortress built to yield" (527). But Clara's formulation suggests that the obstacle to female sincerity might lurk in speech, as well as desire.

Ignorance is also a primary obstacle to Clara's meaning what she says, and the ignorance stems both from social restriction and a habit of repression that helps preserve her restrictive conditions. As Clara begins to articulate in a private discourse with herself: "To ask [women] to sign themselves over by oath and ceremony, because of an ignorant promise, to the man they have been mistaken in, is [...] it is—" (142). She cuts herself off because she realizes that, a moment before, she has inadvertently slipped Vernon's name into a place indicating the metaphorical "Captain Oxford" who might, like Constantia's real Captain, help her escape from

²⁹ In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein characterizes his project as working to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (§ 116). As Toril Moi articulates, according to Wittgenstein, there can be no "general theory of the generality of language... use is always specific and concrete" (198).

Willoughby. This pre-Freudian slip links the repression of desire with a system of courtship that fosters “mistakes” like Clara’s ignorant estimation of Willoughby.³⁰

Women are nonetheless bound by the words they utter. As Clara puts it, they “have their honour to swear by equally with men” (173). Society must logically affirm as much, she continues, even of “girls” when it makes them “swear an oath at the altar” (173). The societal foreclosing of women’s capacity to mean what they say, while yet holding them by their words, represents a provocative intertwining of linguistic and patriarchal convention. Willoughby, indeed, appears to intuit that linguistic and social convention are both on his side, as a male of the ruling class:

I abhor a breach of faith. A broken pledge is hateful to me. I should regard it myself as a form of suicide. There are principles which civilized men must contend for. Our social fabric is based on them. As my word stands for me, I hold others to theirs. If that is not done, the world is more or less a carnival of counterfeits. (489)

This pseudo-Kantian case for behaving so as to make one’s promise “felicitous”—a shifting of the categorical imperative from the realm of constative utterances into the realm of the performative—is, significantly, offered by a self-proclaimed “civilized man” with serious interest in maintaining the present social fabric. Throughout the novel, Willoughby’s behavior demonstrates what we already know: a “civilized” man’s word is less binding when offered to a woman (or, presumably, to a servant, a colonized subject, etc.). But Willoughby’s metaphor of the “social fabric” woven of pledges, in which to break one’s pledge is to invite one’s own social death, reveals truth in its hyperbole. Through performative force, words do in fact institute, and hold together, the social fabric.

It is worth emphasizing again that Meredith’s critique of the way that language serves the interests of patriarchy and aristocracy is firmly historical and materialist, illuminating the historical conditions of language use rather than implying an underlying correspondence between the formal structure of language and essential qualities of sex or gender. Language and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing, not due to something like the “phallogocentrism” that post-structuralists ranging from Derrida to Lacan, Irigaray, and Cixous would perceive a century after Meredith, but due to another chiasmatic loop, in this case between social inequality and language use. Social inequality mediates a person’s use of language, conditioning her ability to mean what she says, and certain linguistic conventions commit her to what she says even if she cannot “mean” it. That society holds subjects accountable for the performative conventions of language they cannot “mean” is a historical injustice, and the consequences that play out in language bear further historical and material consequences through the performative dimension of language. This method of critiquing patriarchy insists upon recognizing the profound significance of language in constructing reality, suggesting that a critique of any sort of social inequality must encompass an understanding of how certain historically imbedded uses of language magnify the inequality, increasing the vulnerability of those whose social position renders them less fluent in the languages of convention.

³⁰ A psychoanalytic critic could write a version of this chapter titled, “*Can We Mean What We Say?*,” elaborating the implications of Freudian theories of the unconscious for a philosophy of language-in-use. But *The Egoist* does not offer a philosophy of the structures of consciousness; it merely suggests that social constraints might influence our honesty with ourselves. Resulting patterns of repression may be simultaneously adaptive (in evolutionary/psychological terms) and work in concert with political oppression.

Performative suspension

The Egoist's philosophy of linguistic efficacy unfolds a final crucial aspect in a climactic scene in which Willoughby attempts to drain language of all illocutionary force. The scene approaches questions about personal agency and the efficacy of language from the inverse direction of the performative utterance, a direction premised upon a view that speech "makes nothing happen" (to cite Auden on poetry) not because it is *merely* talk, but because of the particularly vague character of the talk employed, which effectively forestalls definitive action. Willoughby, in this scene and for reasons I'll explain in a moment, undertakes a virtuoso conversation in which his talk becomes pure form: a structure of well-timed interruptions and ellipses, indeterminate demonstratives, and ambiguous gestures into which listeners invest meaning according to their preconceptions. It is an understatement to observe that the scene contains no performative utterances; it depicts a conversation deliberately drained of illocutionary (and "perlocutionary") efficacy.

As we will see, Willoughby makes indeterminacy an instrumental value, perverting the playful aesthetic purposelessness of conversation as admired by Cavell and Milton. Indeterminacy, one might say, is essential to conversation in its pure form, distinguishing it from "discussion" and "debate." Willoughby's performance in the following scene shows that indeterminacy may also be instrumentally employed as a particular mode of denying acknowledgment. This clear instrumentalization of one of the central aspects of conversation produces a surrogate speech performance, which offers insight not only into Willoughby's pathological denial of acknowledgment to others, but also into the sociable aesthetic play of conversation in its "good" sense. The free play of language loses its ethical value when it becomes a game played alone, in the company of others reduced to bewildered spectators.³¹ Because Willoughby never directly lies, his behavior throughout the scene provides an exaggerated substantiation of Cavell's observation that, "We are [...] exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims [...]" Misnaming and misdescribing are not the only mistakes we can make in talking. Nor is lying its only immorality" (*Must We?* 11-12).

The scene occurs near the end of the novel, when Willoughby has grown increasingly panicked about the apparent likelihood of Clara "jilting" him. As I have mentioned above, he proposes to Laetitia – the night before the scene at hand – without having broken his engagement with Clara. Laetitia declines and leaves Willoughby's house for her father's cottage on the estate. Their exchange has been overheard by a boy living with Willoughby, Crossjay, who accidentally hints its content to another of Clara's would-be suitors, Colonel de Craye. The circulation of this story registers one way in which language, and narrative, assume an active and agentic role, trundling the plot toward its conclusion. De Craye first shares the news of Willoughby's proposal to Laetitia with Clara, who is astounded because Willoughby has that morning renewed his pressure upon her. She confronts Willoughby in the presence of her father, Dr. Middleton, working her way up to a direct question about his alleged proposal to Laetitia. He tells her he

³¹ In his reading of *King Lear*, Cavell elaborates upon the interrelation of theatricality and acknowledgment, describing a tendency to deny acknowledgment by "convert[ing] the other into a character and mak[ing] the world a stage for him" (*Must We?* 333). In this scene, the situation is reversed, and Willoughby converts the others into an audience. As we will see, the consequence is that he feels himself morphing into a "juggler" and finally "a machine."

was speaking on Vernon's behalf, which satisfies Dr. Middleton and stirs doubts in Clara. Meanwhile, the gossip Mrs. Mountstuart arrives, and de Craye intercepts her with news that Willoughby and Laetitia are now engaged. Her whispered congratulations inform Willoughby that a story is definitely abroad, and definitely inaccurate in its indication that Laetitia assented. A tense lunch is served, after which Willoughby, Vernon, Mrs. Mountstuart and Clara all depart the house, leaving Dr. Middleton alone with Willoughby's aunts. Another visitor arrives: Laetitia's father, Mr. Dale, who is distressed at what he has ascertained from his daughter's odd behavior and gathering gossip about her engagement with an already-engaged man. Confusion mounts as Dr. Middleton, believing that Mr. Dale has come after learning that his daughter declined *Vernon*, reassures Mr. Dale that Laetitia can yet be persuaded to marry "the gentleman" whom Dr. Middleton so highly esteems (593). He comically cautions that "the circumstances" should not yet be treated as "public," and therefore "it is incumbent on us [...] not to be nominally precise" (539).

The "public" then arrives, in the form of the dull-witted county gossips Ladies Busshe and Culmer. They, too, have heard that Laetitia and Willoughby are engaged. The scene becomes increasingly convoluted, with bits of dialogue representing the gradual piecing together of strands of gossip, until Lady Busshe screeches, "What whirl are we in?" She enjoins the gathering to "proceed upon system," the first step of which is to state everything known with explicit precision (545). "The Middletons are here," she reviews, "and Dr. Middleton himself communicates to Mr. Dale that Laetitia Dale has refused the hand of Sir Willoughby, who is ostensibly engaged to his own daughter!" (546). Dr. Middleton has momentarily departed and cannot revise her nominally precise interpretation, and no one listens to Willoughby's aunts, who attempt to insist upon the version of the story Willoughby has told Dr. Middleton, that Laetitia refused his plea on Vernon's behalf.

Mrs. Mountstuart now reenters the scene, and although she is aware of Willoughby's plan to marry Laetitia himself and couple Clara with Vernon (in order to disappoint de Craye, his imagined rival for the affection of both Clara and the county at large), she luxuriates in the suspension of clarity. The conversation continues, very slowly illuminating the Ladies representing "the world," and someone even suggests that their conversation itself is determining the state of affairs: whether or not Vernon has been rejected by Laetitia, the unnamed speaker says, "is in debate, and at this moment being decided" (549). When Lady Busshe finally articulates aloud Willoughby's plan, and observes that "Dr. Middleton is made to play blind man in the midst," she comments that the length of time and convolutions of plot, which have led toward this projected "amicable rupture, and [...] smooth new arrangement," have "improve[d] the story," firmly locating the affair in the realm of discourse (549). She moreover appears to credit "the county" with producing the story: "I defy any other county in the kingdom to produce one fresh and living to equal it," and as we will see, this attribution of power to the "county" of gossips is partially appropriate. Following this set of clarifications, the gossips who thus take credit for the county's story possess the same information as the novel's readers, a rare equivalence that further blurs the distinction between narrative and diegetic "reality."

At this moment, Willoughby and Dr. Middleton both enter, and the former immediately scents danger. Not certain what each person present knows, he nonetheless recognizes that he is suspended in a web of contradictory gossip about his engagement status. The upshot of this is that, while he is not definitively engaged to either Clara or Laetitia, neither is he quite disengaged from either, at least in the view of "the world" whose perspective he confuses with reality. He launches a conversation involving everyone present that seeks to preserve this state of

indeterminacy, evidently believing that both futures remain open to him as long as the uncertainty lasts, and the observing world is made to believe indistinctly in each. He feels like a “fearfully dexterous juggler,” keeping the various versions of truth in motion (563). Willoughby survives this scene because of what the narrator calls his “proleptic mind,” a characterization that suggests his mind itself functions like a rhetorical figure, representing events as accomplished when they are still unfolding (551).

Willoughby’s prolepsis combines ambiguous language, significant glances, and interruptions. He reassures Mr. Dale that Patterne is “[his] home,” for instance, which Mr. Dale presumably interprets in relation to his daughter’s proposed marriage to Willoughby, while Dr. Middleton interprets the words as an allusion to Laetitia’s marriage to Vernon, who also lives at Patterne (556). To the county Ladies, his vagueness is a mode of hedging that denies them confirmation of the story Mrs. Mountstuart has communicated. At one point, Willoughby glances significantly at Lady Busshe, throwing her what Erving Goffman calls a “back-channel’ cue,” but “Lady Busshe would not be satisfied with the compliment of the intimate looks and nods,” and she asks directly, “Which is the father of the fortunate creature?” (556).³² Willoughby’s reply that, “the house will be empty to-morrow,” blatantly evades her question. He then bounces away to interrupt a threatening conversation between Dr. Middleton and Mr. Dale, intervening with gestures and words about Mr. Dale’s health just when Dr. Middleton is about to specify by name the man whose “passionate advocate [he] proclaimed [himself]” (558).

While Willoughby’s evasion of the commitment that would follow linguistic precision seems to be a straightforward and ordinary, albeit self-serving and unethical, use of vagueness, the scene suggests deeper philosophical implications of this use of language.³³ Indeed, Meredith was writing at a moment of renewed philosophical inquiry into vagueness, a line of inquiry traceable at least as far back historically as Aristotle, which had fallen out of favor in philosophy until a revival in the 19th century.³⁴ According to one strand of this tradition, the vagueness of certain linguistic terms is an epistemic matter, vague language indexing incomplete knowledge of the world. Other philosophers saw linguistic vagueness as a problem arising from the intrinsic vagueness of the thing being represented. This second view, called the “supervaluationist approach,” means that “for some sentences there is no fact of the matter whether they are true,” and it can lead to two further philosophical positions: “on one view, once the semantics have been properly formulated, there is nothing more to be said; on another view, the semantic indeterminacy reflects some real indeterminacy in the non-linguistic world itself” (Sainsbury and Williamson 741).

³² Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 12.

³³ The Introduction to this project provides a somewhat fuller discussion of what Grice calls “conversational implicature.” See, also, “Replies and Responses” in Goffman’s *Forms of Talk*, Sperber and Wilson’s *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, and H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, especially *Logic and Conversation* and “Presupposition and conversational implicature.” In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Stanley Cavell puts the significance of conversational implicature in decidedly ethical terms: “We are, therefore, exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims [...] Misnaming and misdescribing are not the only mistakes we can make in talking. Nor is lying its only immorality” (11-12).

³⁴ For recent work on the ways novels have taken up the philosophical problem of vagueness, see Quigley and Wright. Quigley generally associates literary inquiry into vagueness with the “linguistic turn” evident in Modernism, whereas Wright argues that 19th-century literary realism was not strictly “realist” when it came to linguistic philosophy, and that numerous Victorian novelists were engaging in similar inquiry as their contemporary philosophers. My argument about Meredith’s own “linguistic turn” and its invocation of vagueness tends to support Wright’s historical claims.

The most interesting feature of Willoughby's semantic indeterminacy is that his oral vagueness is performative: not merely *reflecting* indeterminacy in the world, or indeterminate knowledge of the world, his language *achieves* worldly indeterminacy. If he were to speak truthfully and definitively, there would once more be a "realist" correspondence between language and world, but since he holds out for a world more advantageous to him than the one that increasingly looks most likely, he delays. Borrowing an anachronistic analogy from quantum physics, we might say that Willoughby's prolepsis turns the drawing room into a sociological version of Erwin Schrödinger's box, giving his engagement status something like quantum superpositionality. Quantum theory holds that atoms can be in two places, or two states, at the same time. When electrons pass through an experiment *unobserved*, they leave traces that indicate they behave like a wave, distributing their tiny mass across a spectrum of positions. However, when those same electrons are *observed*, they behave like particles, each following a singular path through the system. Schrödinger's famous parable of a cat whose life hinges on the state of a quantum particle illustrates the intellectual difficulty of this idea of "superpositionality" by translating it from the level of minute particles to the level of everyday material bodies with which we interact: "an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation"³⁵ (Schrödinger 328).

In Schrödinger's story, an unfortunate cat is placed in a steel box along with a glass tube of acid that, if released, will kill the cat. A hammer rests against the tube. Whether or not the hammer shifts and cracks the tube depends upon the state of a radioactive substance in a Geiger counter. According to quantum theory, the state of that substance would be represented by a wave function: it is equally probable that an atom of the substance decays and sets off the hammer, as it is probable that no atoms decay and the cat survives. In fact, experiments show that unobserved particles distribute their positions as a kind of "smear" across possible states, which Schrödinger suggests means that the atoms both decay and retain their integrity. But as soon as we peak into the box in which a cat's life depends upon an atom that can be in two positions at once, the atom has a position, and the cat proves to be either alive or dead. Before we peak into that box, the cat is—theoretically speaking—both alive and dead. The atom must be both in the state that would crack the glass of acid, and also in the state that would leave the hammer unmoved. Schrödinger offers this parable in order to show that a moderately acceptable hypothesis about the superpositionality of microparticles becomes absurd when extrapolated to the case of macroforms, like cats.

Similar to the superpositional cat, Willoughby is in some senses engaged to both Laetitia and Clara as long as both fathers think he is engaged to their daughters, the women themselves have no true independent agency, and the observing gossips remain bewildered by the incidents and talk unfolding before them. A word of precision could reveal his duplicity and effectively make him engaged to neither of the women, but until then, a marriage to either woman remains possible.

In other words, Meredith's novel depicts a world so thoroughly mediated by discourse that not only is social reality determined by certain performative utterances, but, conversely, the coordinates of social reality can be suspended by indeterminate discourse. The Schrödinger analogy clarifies the significance of the observing witnesses: it is the gossips who have the power to arrest discursive play and make one solid reality out of the manifold. As long as they

³⁵ Schrödinger first offered this story in 1935.

are uncertain, Willoughby is untethered. Talk itself becomes the quantum box—the space in which simultaneous oppositional states are “true”—a use of language that prefigures 20th century philosophy’s turn from positivist-rooted investigations of the correspondence between language and truth to explorations of the power language possesses to make its own truth conditions. To adapt the Schrödinger analogy, this drawing room scene suggests that observers achieve the life or death of the “cat” not in the moment of observation, but in the moment of performatively uttering the content of that observation to the wider world. The gossips do not, of course, have the biblical power to speak with complete creative force, but they do have the power to compel changes in the social world through their interpretation of the discursive world. The scene indicates that the ultimate source of language’s performative power is the public, and specifically, a public bent on interpreting, and thereby fixing, language’s relation to fact.

The “world” itself, as represented by Ladies Busshe and Culmer, is aligned with “fact” over rhetoric, and the presence of these women exerts the pull from rhetorical possibility toward factual determinacy. Linguistic efficacy can be suspended only as long as interlocutors will play in the box, as it were, and such rhetorical play is precisely what the Ladies Busshe and Culmer do not—indeed *cannot*—do. Following one “exceedingly lively conversation at his table,” Lady Culmer remarks to Willoughby, “what it all meant, and what was the drift of it, I couldn't tell to save my life,” and Lady Busshe, during the same “lively conversation,” is said to show “symptoms of a desire to leave a profitless table” (446, 445). Like a biased caricature of a scientific positivist, the Ladies seek “profit” from conversation, clear knowledge of fixed social determinations, which will serve them as currency in the social economy of their neighborhood. Willoughby understands this quality to be especially threatening, because such women ironically cannot be “hoodwinked” as easily as witty women, like Mrs. Mountstuart, who enjoy verbal play: “These representatives of the pig-sconces of the population judged by circumstances: airy shows and seems had no effect on them. Dexterity of fence was thrown away” (448). The verbal fencing he enjoys with Mrs. Mountstuart takes the place of facts and deeds, whereas the dull Ladies resist the distraction of verbal play they do not follow, and “steadily [keep] on their own scent of the fact,” striving to observe a fixed universe, rather than play in the indeterminate space of ambiguous language (447).

The indeterminacy of this scene may moreover be seen as an intensified demonstration of the temporal and narrative dynamics of performative utterances. Clara’s repeated delays of the promised marriage, during which she attempts to talk her way out of her promise rather than breaking it, are mirrored in Willoughby’s delay of communicative meaning. Like Clara, Willoughby stalls, attempting to delay the illocutionary force that Meredith suggests all conversation will eventually have. Willoughby’s suspension of illocution creates space for additional plot. One of the two women might change her mind, in which case his preferred meanings will settle retroactively on the indeterminate words. If neither woman agrees to marry him, he will at least have delayed being shamed in the eyes of “the world.”

The Ladies of “the world” function as much as communicative readers as they do scientific observers in this scene. When they leave Patterne Hall believing Willoughby to be engaged to Laetitia, Lady Busshe thanks him for “a lovely romance,” and is described to be “thoroughly imbued [...] with his fiction, or with the belief that she had a good story to circulate” (564). While Willoughby credits himself as the author of the fiction that the Ladies, having parsed, will circulate, the power seems to reside much more in the community of gossiping “readers,” who insist upon making social fact out of conversational play. Their interpretation moreover entails collating observed words and behaviors with the norms that

convey them into meaning, making these dull torch-carrying “pig-sconces” exert not only a pull toward facticity, but toward normativity. Relatedly, this scene indicates that the aesthetic qualities of conversation—its indeterminacy and purposeless play—are not, in themselves, “good.” The ethical value of conversation depends upon the circumstances in which it unfolds, and Meredith seriously challenges the possibility that a man and a woman of his era could have the kind of “meet and happy conversation” that legitimizes marriage in a Miltonian or Cavellian sense, because of the multivalent connections between language, gender and power.

By the end of the novel, Willoughby’s fixation on the observing “world” leaves him without independent agency. He once more presses Laetitia to marry him, laboring to align reality with the “story” Lady Busshe will begin to circulate. He realizes that he has lost his sense of independent selfhood: “his partial capacity for reading persons had fled. The mysteries of his own bosom were bare to him; but he could comprehend them only in their immediate relation to the world outside” (566). So molded by concern for the world’s perception, he attempts and fails to “read” himself in the same “partial” manner in which he was once able to read others, his inner qualities a “bare” text to parse through the prism of the world’s vision. Moreover, he finds himself to be a bad reader of a self that functions like “a machine,” calculating and performing whatever will salvage its image before the world (566). Recalling Cavell’s warning that, in refusing to acknowledge others, we “make monsters of them,” it appears here that the same refusal can make “monsters” of ourselves. Willoughby’s attempt to control a situation dependent upon others begins as an evasion of their authentic otherness, but it ends in making him fully “other” to himself. This version of alienation is the consequence of an extreme will to control his image and others’ perceptions. Denying the limits of his power, Willoughby has forfeited his self.

Willoughby’s fixation on “the world” dictates the acts that resolve the plot. He makes a final attempt for Clara’s hand, and in the process discovers that Clara, unrelenting in her refusal to marry him, might be willing to accept Vernon. She does not promise to marry Vernon—I’ll return to this detail in a moment—but rather, negatively dodges illocution with the utterance, “I could engage to marry no one else” (569). This negative almost-promise gives Willoughby confidence that he has achieved the second-best (to his mind) scenario, because his world-wary ego will at least experience the satisfaction of having prevented his rival Colonel de Craye from marrying Clara: “She must be given up: but not to one whose touch of her would be darts in the blood of the yielder, snakes in his bed: she must be given up to an extinguisher; to be the second wife of an old-fashioned semi-recluse, disgraced in his first” (464-465). The “gift” of Clara to Vernon will appear to the world to be an act of generosity and condescension, in which, as far as he knows, no one will be happier than himself: “Vernon taken by Clara would be Vernon simply tolerated. And Clara taken by Vernon would be Clara previously touched, smirched. Altogether he could enjoy his fall” (570). This assurance sets Willoughby’s resolution to once and for all achieve engagement with Laetitia, and realign reality with its representation in circulating gossip.

Noblest Ends? Speech without intimacy, intimacy without speech

The novel’s denouement suggests conjugal pairings in scenes with dramatically, and significantly, different attention to speech acts in conversation. In the conversation that secures Laetitia and Willoughby’s engagement, Laetitia acquiesces in an informal performative speech ceremony. She stipulates the presence of witnesses, Willoughby’s aunts, and addresses them

rather than Willoughby, making the semipublic record reflect that she marries for money, not love, and will be “irresponsive and cold”:

He asks me for a hand that cannot carry a heart, because mine is dead. I repeat it. I used to think the heart a woman's marriage portion for her husband. I see now that she may consent, and he accept her, without one. But it is right that you should know what I am when I consent. (595).

Laetitia's “consent” recalls Clara's, replacing the former instance of a woman reciting words without appropriate intention with a new instance of a woman reciting words with full disclosure that the “appropriate” intention is absent. In other words, Laetitia promises to marry Willoughby only when he, and witnesses, recognize that this promise and the marriage it anticipates will be strictly a formal consequence of words. Words are our bonds, she reaffirms, and she wishes all to know that she is binding herself in words that derive binding power from convention rather than sensibility: “Ladies. You are witnesses that there is no concealment, there has been no reserve, on my part. May Heaven grant me kinder eyes than I have now. I would not have you change your opinion of him; only that you should see how I read him. For the rest, I vow to do my duty by him” (597). Her coldness results from the flaws that she “reads” off of his acts and words, but she verbally contracts to abide the “duties” that marriage entails, which are clearly not, in her estimation, sentimental.

While Laetitia's premarital vow insists upon the detachability of speech acts and sensibility, the understanding that passes between Clara and Vernon is a speechless demonstration brimming with sensibility finally acknowledged. The acknowledgment of this sensibility is a comical relief to readers, to whom it has long been obvious that Clara and Vernon love each other. In fact, the reader's clearer knowledge of Clara's desires has been a running joke in the book, an occasion for self-conscious metacommentary drawing attention in yet a different way to the strange status of observers, in this case, the narrator and readers:

[A]ll the doors are not open in a young lady's consciousness, quick of nature though she may be: some are locked and keyless, some will not open to the key, some are defended by ghosts inside. She could not have said what the something witnessed to. If we by chance know more, we have still no right to make it more prominent than it was with her. (335)

The narrator refuses to name Clara's interest in Vernon, disclaiming the “right” to articulate what the character herself is not able to articulate. Of course, we do not know more than Clara “by chance”: we know it because of the narrative's careful hints and descriptions, and because the central female character is entangled in a structure of social, linguistic, and psychological forces that coordinate to restrict her freedom and self-knowledge.

The subplot of Clara's awakening to her own desire aligns *The Egoist* with Cavell's “remarriage” films in yet another sense, which becomes especially telling as we circle through speech acts back to the original connection between marriage, conversation, and love. Cavell writes that the “acquisition in time of self-knowledge” is a classic resolution to comic plots:

In classical romance this may be accomplished by learning the true story of your birth, where you come from, which amounts to learning the identity of your parents. In comedies of remarriage it requires learning, or accepting, your sexual identity, the acknowledgment of desire. Both forms of discovery are in service of the authorization or authentication of what is called a marriage. The women of our films listen to their lectures because they know they need to learn something

further about themselves, or rather to undergo some change, or creation, even if no one knows how the knowledge and change are to arrive. (*Pursuits* 56)

Like the heroines in Cavell's comedies of remarriage, Clara must learn and accept her sexual identity in order for the full resolution of *The Egoist* to be achieved. She does so through conversation—not with Vernon and not even on the subject of Vernon, but rather with observers like Laetitia and Mrs. Mountstuart, whose comments awaken her to the fact that others believe her to be attracted to Colonel de Craye, a “reading” of her behavior that alerts her to her true feelings. The novel suggests that she must acknowledge her desire for Vernon, in order to allow the plot to resolve fully.

The final pairing of Clara and Vernon would seem to represent the best-possible authentication of marriage in the world depicted by *The Egoist*. He finds her witty and charming as a conversational partner, and she finds him enlarging and erudite, as well as kind. But in the final sentences of the novel, which suggest a union of sorts between the two, the narrative prose conspicuously declines to make explicit claims: “Two lovers met between the Swiss and Tyrol Alps over the Lake of Constance. Sitting beside them the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly. But taking a glance at the others of her late company of actors, she compresses her lips” (602).

The scene through which Vernon and Clara affirm their mutual attraction is likewise full of ellipsis that, in this novel, represents a critical deferral of the performativity of intimate conversation. Their conversation mediates the question of their intimacy through Clara's father, by purportedly pertaining to whether or not Clara will join Vernon and her father on a journey the two men plan to make through the Alps:

"To the Italian Alps! And was it assumed that I should be of this expedition?"

"Your father speaks dubiously."

"You have spoken of me, then?"

"I ventured to speak of you. I am not over-bold, as you know."

Her lovely eyes troubled the lids to hide their softness.

"Papa should not think of my presence with him dubiously."

"He leaves it to you to decide."

"Yes, then: many times: all that can be uttered."

"Do you consider what you are saying?"

"Mr. Whitford, I shut my eyes and say Yes."

"Beware. I give you one warning. If you shut your eyes . . ." (586)

In this passage, Clara says yes to Vernon without him having proposed. Her yes contains “all that can be uttered,” a deeply ironic assertion that reinforces a sense that, in this world in which speech has a power divorced from its speaker's intentionality, utterance is itself at odds with the expression of deep and free feeling. This “all” is precisely what cannot be uttered: “it” may be indicated, but not contained, in elliptical language. Laetitia enters the scene a few lines later and witnesses “their union of hands,” an embodied expression of tenderness that suggests they have carved a space for intimacy surrounded by, but not enacted through, language. In this case, linguistic vagueness preserves intimacy precisely by refusing to perform, by shaping a space for indeterminate union.

The final page's image of the Comic Muse “compress[ing] her lips” represents the strength of Vernon and Clara's connection precisely by refusing to name it, to draw it into the conventions of marriage (whose characterization Clara has not amended from her earlier pronouncement that it is a “dungeon”) or language (201). This silence of the two lovers meeting is playfully allegorized: they are meeting in the setting they have earlier associated with

“comradeship,” above a lake named to reflect both the ironic name of Willoughby’s first fiancé and the ideal commonly associated with such romantic closures. The “lovers” are thus stranded in between narrative allegory and intimate privacy, and this raucous novel ends with an ambivalent gesture that signals, among other things, the incompatibility of a “meet and cheerful conversation” and marriage in its contemporary form.

It worth recalling Cavell’s observation that, “If marriage is the name of our only present alternative to the desert-sea of skepticism, then for this very reason this intimacy cannot be celebrated, or sanctified; there is no outside to it. You may describe it as lacking its poetry; as if intimacy itself, or the new pressure upon it, lacked expression” (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 64-65). For Cavell, marriage is a poor representative of the best intimacy achievable in the condition of human separation and the potentially disfiguring skepticism this condition might provoke. Intimacy modeled by default on one relationship “lack[s] its poetry,” as though celebration of the instituted inevitable is intrinsically empty. We can easily enumerate further problems with a situation in which marriage is the only “name” or symbolic relation through which a culture can imagine intimacy; such a culture is necessarily blind to, or repressive of, not only non-normative romantic relations, but also various other forms of social configurations outside, against, and beyond the conjugal pair. This is bad news, Cavell suggests, for anyone seeking rescue from skepticism through marriage, just as it is repressive or heedless of other rich possibilities for connection.

For Meredith, the intimacy of romantic love lacks its Muse. Just as marriage lacks poetry if it cannot be undertaken in full freedom, the novel suggests that love lacks its literary representative because language itself, in Meredith’s England, cannot be undertaken in freedom. The historically embedded performativity of speech, and its derivation of power from flawed social as well as linguistic conventions, means that finding a language for intimacy that is authentic and non-coercive, a poetics of intimacy outside the epithalamion, remains ultimately beyond the scope of *The Egoist*. What the novel offers instead is a quantum box, an intimate meeting space sketched and prepared by language but with sensibility preserved for an indeterminate, unuttered “all.” In a sense, the scene suggests a more positive ethic derived from the lesson of Willoughby’s anti-illocutionary antics in the drawing room. The vagueness of the conclusion is the greatest freedom that the novel and its readers, interpolated as gossipy observers, can afford the lovers. If Clara and Vernon are to undertake a conversation worthy of Milton’s accolades, it will need to articulate its own conventions of meaning, new utterances appropriate to a partnership not yet legible in Meredith’s England.

Chapter Two: 'A Many-Sided Substance': Virginia Woolf's Aesthetics of Conversation and Conversational Aesthetics

"They are making passes with their hands, to express what they cannot say; what excites them in those photographs is something so deeply sunk that they cannot put words to it. But we, like most English people, have been trained not to see but to talk. Yet it may be, they went on, that there is a zone of silence in the middle of every art. The artists themselves live in it."

"In course of time the talk turned, as talk has a way of turning, back on itself"

- Virginia Woolf, "Walter Sickert: A Conversation"

"English people have been trained not to see but to talk," the narrator observes in Virginia Woolf's fictional essay "Walter Sickert: A conversation." Visual art, she proceeds to suggest, arrests this English impulse to chattiness by drawing its perceivers into the "zone of silence in the middle of every art." Silence lies at the heart, presumably, even of verbal arts like Woolf's novels; the artist dwells in this zone, and yet is moved to speak, to give expression to the view from within this silent space.

In Woolf's work, silence is also "in the middle" of the most verbal, everyday, and "English" art of conversation. She represents this practice as something much more complex and aesthetic than the epigraph sketch of superficial "talk" suggests, developing it not only into a full-fledged art of its own, but also using conversation as a figure to model artistic exchange between human subjects and the world. Particularly in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Woolf collapses together the acts of seeing and talking—the epigraph's straw antipodes—in the figure of conversation, and in this figure she offers a vision of community premised upon artistic efforts linking the social features of talk with the silent attentiveness of looking. The resultant "conversational" model of intimacy is modest in its ambitions: it recognizes language as both the means and the limit of intimacy, and it strives for that elusive accomplishment Cavell names "acknowledgment." Woolf's representations of "conversation" intensify the reservations about cultivating intimacy through language that we saw in *The Egoist*, shifting from that novel's concerns with the historical contingencies of language use to a characteristically modernist skepticism about language as a whole, as the inevitable medium through which we strive to translate our thoughts and feelings into something shareable. In Woolf's work, conversation begins with a Cavellian acknowledgment of separateness. It is a particular mode of facing others by not quite facing them: by facing the world with them, and establishing a common ground upon which to stand as mutually mysterious beings.

From *The Voyage Out* through *Between the Acts*, Woolf's fiction demonstrates keen awareness of the limits of language as a means of connecting with others. Richard Dalloway's exclamation to Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* encapsulates this limitation of language, and of the capacities of verbal conversation to bring people together: "Here I sit; there you sit; both, I doubt not, chock-full of the most interesting experiences, ideas, emotions; yet how

communicate?” (63). At times in Woolf’s fiction, this limit offers relief, as in Clarissa’s appreciation in *Mrs. Dalloway* of the “solitude” she can enjoy in her marriage with Richard; as she sees it, “there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect” (120). Similarly, in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily thinks that Mrs. Ramsay is “glad [...] to rest in silence, uncommunicative; to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships” (171). She imagines that “Mrs. Ramsay may have asked [...] Aren’t we more expressive thus?” (171-172). For her own part, Lily finds that “words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. [...] For how could one express in words these emotions of the body?” (178). An abiding concern in *The Waves* is “how little known” one’s friends are and a view—to which I’ll return—that “speech is false” (276, 138).

The moments of greatest connection between Woolf’s characters are frequently moments when verbal conversation occurs alongside a different sort of “conversation,” the nature of which is indicated in the word’s Latin roots of *con* (with) and *vertēre* (to turn).³⁶ Originally, as we saw in the Introduction, “conversation” signified a process of “turning with” others toward and through shared experience. Speech presumably played a part in guiding the conversationalists’ “turns,” but the essence of conversation was the togetherness experienced, not the words by which it was achieved. Woolf’s depictions of conversation evoke this root meaning; frequently she contrasts wordless conversational attunement with the shallower and flawed efforts of characters to gain access to each other’s inner worlds through speech. Even in scenes of conversation, her narrative voice famously focuses more on the non-verbal attunement or divergence of thoughts than on the actual words exchanged. The opening of *To The Lighthouse* offers a sharp example, spacing a six-line conversation about going to the lighthouse over the course of fifteen pages, as the narration plunges into the minds of the characters listening to and participating in the conversation.³⁷

At times, Woolf’s characters “converse” without exchanging a single word, gaining a sense of togetherness wholly through the act of turning, or looking, together. Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, characters connect most powerfully when they are not seeking direct access to each other through language, but are instead turning together—toward sand dunes, a woman and child sitting in a window sill, the lighthouse, a bowl of fruit, etc. Recall the moment when Mrs. Ramsay finally feels linked to Augustus Carmichael, as they look in their different ways at the centerpiece bowl of fruit: “That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them” (*Lighthouse* 22). And Woolf’s next major novel, *The Waves*, formally develops this model of conversational attunement in its own style, the curious cycle of soliloquies that comprises the text. Described by Woolf in her diary as a “playpoem,” the text is a tissue of punctuated “speech” that is abstract, lyrical, and bearing only obscure relation to that of the other characters (*Diary* 203). A lifelong “conversation” nonetheless holds the works’ six main characters together, as they run against the limitations of speech, yet find their identities to be interwoven over the course of years of turning together toward a shared social world.

In what follows, I read pivotal scenes in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as explorations of “conversation” in the word’s archaic as well as contemporary senses by staging a dialogue between Woolf and two philosophers whose influences are subtly present throughout

³⁶ See this project’s Introduction for further discussion of this etymology.

³⁷ Briggs similarly traces the nonverbal communication that occurs between Woolf’s characters as they exchange superficial speech. However, Briggs focuses on Woolf’s treatment of “the culturally unspeakable,” taboo subjects including sexuality, trauma, war, same-sex love, and even friendships between women, directing attention to both Woolf’s thematic and stylistic subversion of conventions obscuring open discussion (170).

the texts: Immanuel Kant and Bertrand Russell. As I will show, these scenes—in which companions gather around a dinner table “making conversation” and also, in the process, making community—tap into and reconfigure philosophical debates and traditions current in the Bloomsbury circle: epistemology as elaborated in Bertrand Russell’s work, and aesthetics as developed by Immanuel Kant. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay’s social orchestrations carry her into an impersonal creative zone “through everything, out of everything,” in which she accesses something “eternal” (83). In *The Waves*, the linkage between the text’s style and the “conversational” intimacy it depicts is most apparent in a repeated scene in which the characters have gathered for a meal and gaze together at a flower in the center of the table: the classic emblem of beauty. As they turn toward it, speaking of what they see, feel, and think, “something is made,” a “many-sided substance” (145, 229). The text’s description of this “something”—this beautiful object seen from numerous perspectives—evokes both Kant’s aesthetic philosophy and Russell’s articulations of epistemological doubt. The twofold conversations of these dinner scenes integrate and rework the ideas of these philosophers, as though *The Waves* places Kant and Russell into a conversation of their own.

To the Lighthouse moreover develops something we might call a “conversational epistemology.” Conversation models an orientation toward the world in which an urge for positive, and possessive, knowledge about an objectified world is replaced by an urge for dialogical understanding. The classic epistemological project, represented in shorthand by Andrew Ramsay as an inquiry into “subject and object and the nature of reality,” transforms in Lily Briscoe’s encounter with “reality,” which she treats as a subject rather than object. It “lay[s] hands on her, emerge[s] stark at the back of appearances and command[s] her attention” (*Lighthouse* 158). In *The Waves* as well, “reality” does not passively lie in wait of the sovereign Enlightenment subject’s inquiry; rather, it is constructed in the collective conversational encounter. Subjects—those whose voices form the silent conversation of *The Waves*—create the world they share in the motion of turning toward it and transforming it into an aesthetic space. A new sort of understanding becomes possible in this world generated in turns, as though “reality,” or one instantiation of it, becomes accessible when intimacy between persons structures inquiry about the extrapersonal world.

In the first part of this chapter, I will elucidate the “conversational epistemology” that Woolf develops in *To the Lighthouse* and describe its relation to aesthetic practice. The second part of this chapter focuses on actual scenes of conversation, the dinner table conversations in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. My argument is not that Woolf intentionally crafts a philosophy of conversation from her interpretations of Kant and Russell, but that such a philosophy, in which conversation is itself the quotidian synecdoche of the broader aesthetic foundation of a shareable world, emerges when we reconstruct a conversation among three writers interested in art’s relation to “subject and object and the nature of reality” (*Lighthouse* 23). Reading *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* with attention to the figure and practice of conversation illuminates a philosophy at the heart of Woolf’s work that draws together aesthetics, epistemology and ethics. And whereas scholars typically locate political salience in Woolf’s feminism or subtle critiques of British Empire, tracing her representation of conversation reveals a more fundamental link between politics and her aesthetics. Conversation, *The Waves* in particular suggests, generates a particular form of *sensus communis*, the aesthetic affirmation of commonality that Woolf’s philosophical contemporaries believed our other senses could not ensure.

The philosophy of conversation that emerges in this reading does not diminish the sense of individual isolation that pervades *The Waves*, but the latter forms the backdrop against which

the fleeting moments of conversational communion “blaze” (229). Each character in *The Waves* repeatedly seeks relief from ordinary life: through romantic love (Neville), storytelling (Bernard), home-making (Susan), sexual affirmation (Jinny), business success (Louis), and imagination (Rhoda). None reaches fulfillment, and the repetition of their preoccupations as the cycle of soliloquies proceeds underscores the fragility of the moments when they grasp meaning, clarity, or beauty. The dinners during which they “behold what [they] have made” stand out as the singular instances in the text in which all voices tune into one “conversation,” and the characters collectively experience a moment of coherence. These passages are further striking because their lyric content synchronizes with the text’s conversational form. The characters quickly resume their rhythms of effort and regret, however, and Rhoda commits suicide. Bernard “sum[s] up” their lives at the end in an ambivalent monologue, the “conversation” having ceased. In other words, the *sensus communis* that I argue coalesces in conversation is not transformative. In a way, it prefigures the penultimate scene in Woolf’s unfinished final work, *Between the Acts*, in which the characters are “dispersed,” feeling themselves to be “orcs, scraps, and fragments,” and yet also ennobled by the possibility of producing and sharing in the experience of art (196). Such transient consolation is consolation nonetheless, a chance for meaning and community in what Bernard calls these “so animal, so spiritual and tumultuous lives” (*The Waves* 249).

Conversational Aesthetics

To the Lighthouse begins in the middle of a conversation, and although the novel famously blurs the distinction between spoken and unspoken words, it is deeply engaged with the concept of conversation, developing a philosophically suggestive conversational figure over the course of its pages. Its opening words—Mrs. Ramsay’s assurance to her son James that, “of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” they will go to the Lighthouse—compose one of the few clearly-marked lines of dialogue. As in other works by Woolf, a great deal of the communication between characters in *To the Lighthouse* appears to take place silently, to such an extent that the work seems almost to record variations of what the narrative twice calls “dumb colloquy.”³⁸ Each time this phrase appears, however, it refers not to the wordless dialogue so frequently occurring between characters, but rather to moments of apparently private experience. With this phrase and the related term “intercourse” as used to describe Lily Briscoe’s artistic perception and practice, the novel develops what I will call a “conversational epistemology,” which conjoins ethics and aesthetics through the altered version of epistemology that emerges when the relation between “subject and object and the nature of reality” is reimagined through the figure of conversation.³⁹

³⁸ Many scholars have been interested in Woolf’s representation of communication, and particularly her depiction of communication that occurs within silence. Much of this scholarship has read Woolf through the lenses of post-structuralism, recasting the silence of linguistic alienation in positive terms. See e.g. Nikolchina, Laurence, and Minow-Pinkney. Martha Nussbaum provides a problematically romantic reading of the Ramsay’s *apparent* nonverbal communication. The other primary way in which scholars have thought about “conversation” in relation to Woolf is through attending to the historical importance of conversation for the Bloomsbury group, as well as the trope in her work of conversations from which women are excluded. See Banfield, especially 16-17; Froula 19; and Zwerdling 26.

³⁹ This is of course Andrew Ramsay’s shorthand for the philosophical preoccupations of his father’s career. His elaboration, “Think of a kitchen table [...] when you’re not there,” places Mr. Ramsay’s work, and by a turn Woolf’s novel, into dialogue with the British empiricist tradition represented by Hume, Berkeley, and Locke. Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, was also interested in this tradition; Stephen’s *History of English Thought* (which

This conversational epistemology models a mode of epistemic inquiry and relation to the world that follows rhythms of self-exposure and vulnerable responsiveness, rather than objectifying scrutiny.

The first explicit invocation of a conversational figure to stand in for contemplation of the world appears early, in a description of William Bankes's manner of looking at sand dunes. To Bankes, in his preoccupation with understanding his relationship with Mr. Ramsay, his gaze upon the sand dunes becomes a "dumb colloquy" on the subject of that relationship:

Looking at the far sand hills, William Bankes thought of Ramsay: thought of a road in Westmorland, thought of Ramsay striding along a road by himself hung round with that solitude which seemed to be his natural air. But this was suddenly interrupted, William Bankes remembered (and this must refer to some actual incident), by a hen, straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks, upon which Ramsay, stopping, pointed his stick and said "Pretty — pretty," an odd illumination in to his heart, Bankes had thought it, which showed his simplicity, his sympathy with humble things; but it seemed to him as if their friendship had ceased, there, on that stretch of road. After that, Ramsay had married. After that, what with one thing and another, the pulp had gone out of their friendship. Whose fault it was he could not say, only, after a time, repetition had taken the place of newness. It was to repeat they met. But in this dumb colloquy with the sand dunes he maintained that his affection for Ramsay had in no way diminished; but there, like the body of a young man laid up in peat for a century, with the red fresh on his lips, was his friendship, in its acuteness and reality, laid up across the bay among the sandhills [...] That was it. He finished. He turned from the view. And, turning to walk back the other way, up the drive, Mr. Bankes was alive to things which would not have struck him had not those sandhills revealed to him the body of his friendship lying with the red on its lips laid up in peat. (20-21)

If the sand hills were to speak, they would probably not discourse on the subject of male homoerotic friendship that has been ruined by repetition. The only sense in which this moment resembles "colloquy" derives from Bankes's projection and re-encounter of his conflicted feelings about Ramsay. The conceit of "dumb colloquy" suggests that his reflective process is dialogical, but not in the sense of an authentic dialogue with another.

A psychological reading might account for Bankes's projection of his feelings into specious "colloquy" by noting the illicit flavor of his feelings about Ramsay. With the curiously sensual, red-lipped male corpse Bankes imagines as the symbol of their relationship, the text evokes a vision of homoerotic friendship suspended by one friend's straight marriage. Ironically, Ramsay's marriage—which brings "clucking domesticities" and robs him (in Bankes's view) of the "glories of isolation and austerity which crowned him in youth"—seems responsible for the transformation of the men's relationship into a sort of mimicry of marriage, "repetition ha[ving] taken the place of newness," as in classic accounts of wedded life (22).⁴⁰ In any case, this

Mr. Ramsay's single work of importance appears to resemble) poses the "problem of knowledge" as a problem of "reciprocal action" between subject and object, soul and matter, "or of one upon the other" (25-26).

⁴⁰ The association between marriage and repetition may be found in philosophical works on the subject by authors such as Kierkegaard and Hegel. Stanley Cavell also offers unusually laudatory words on the subject: "marriage [...] implies a devotion in repetition, to dailiness," a "willing repetition of days, [a] willingness for the everyday" (*Pursuits* 241, *In quest of the ordinary* 178).

metaphorical “colloquy” reveals much more about Bankes’s conception of marriage, masculine intimacy and endeavor, and knowledge, than it does about the sand hills or any insights they may bear regarding Ramsay.

The discordance of the designation of this moment as “dumb colloquy” hints at the novel’s further investigations of dialogical forms of understanding and intimacy. Bankes’s “colloquy” is an instance in which the private preoccupations of a human perceiver utterly subsume the object being perceived. This presents one version of the conviction that “reality” is only available to human cognition through mediating forces of perception, a keystone of modern philosophy that also, of course, inspires modernist aesthetics. And just as Bankes’s preoccupation causes his view of the sand hills to be overlaid with an image representative of his relationship with Ramsay, *To the Lighthouse* presents numerous occasions in which “colloquy” between persons, and their intimacy more generally, is guided less by an authentic, reciprocal and open exchange, than by each person’s private needs, desires, or idealizations. The scene’s lessons for both epistemology and intimacy are worth noting: for the former, a possibility is raised (negatively) that a human perceiver might *actually* engage in “colloquy” with the natural world—a possibility that will be more fully elaborated in the “exacting form of intercourse” Lily engages in while painting—and for the latter, the scene might provide an unflattering snapshot of egoistic tendencies that condition interpersonal knowledge and intimacy as well.

Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, characters have a propensity to invent the other with whom they interact according to their own needs or abilities. Lily, again, provides words for this process: “Half one’s notions of other people were [...] grotesque. They served private purposes of one’s own” (197). Curiously, Lily decides in the moment of this observation that, “if she wanted to be serious” about the person in question, Mr. Tansley—instead of making him into a grotesque “whipping boy” against whom to take out her frustrations—“she had to help herself to Mrs. Ramsay’s sayings, to look at him through her eyes” (197). Mrs. Ramsay’s appreciation of Tansley is to be Lily’s guide, rather than any direct relation between Lily and Tansley themselves. Imagining another’s point of view upon the person she is attempting to orient herself toward, Lily’s idea of correcting her notions of Tansley suggests mediating her knowledge through another person’s view, a notion that hints at aesthetic judgment; the relation between aesthetic work or judgment and intimacy is even more evident in Lily’s exclamation that “this making up scenes about them, is what we call ‘knowing’ people, ‘thinking’ of them, ‘being fond’ of them!” (173). Lily accepts the predicament in which her knowledge of others is mediated by “untrue” scenes, however, acknowledging that such scenes are “what she knew them by all the same” (173). Like it or not, for herself at least, Lily sees knowledge and affection to be products of an aesthetic, fiction-making process. I will revisit and develop slightly different observations about the mediation of intimacy by aesthetic work within *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* later in the chapter, when I turn from the theme of conversational epistemology to the aesthetics of conversation.

The second time the phrase “dumb colloquy” appears, it specifically indicates a relation between self and other in which egoistic needs are not dictating the terms of the exchange. The phrase appears toward the end of the novel, featuring in Lily’s perception of Mr. Ramsay in a rare moment of impersonality, when he ceases to demand her sympathy and marches toward the boat that will finally take him, James, and Cam to the Lighthouse: “it seemed as if he had shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise, had entered some other region, was drawn on, as if by curiosity, in dumb colloquy, whether with himself or another, at the head of that little procession out of one’s range” (156). The idea of colloquy once

again encompasses a mode of thought figured as dialogue, and this time, the feature of impersonality, the shedding of personal vanity, insecurity, hopes, and demands upon others, is crucial. In her admiration of Mr. Ramsay, Lily attributes to him qualities central to Woolf's idea of the "naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" mind of the artist, whose "resonant and porous" mind is impersonal to the point of losing sexual distinction, becoming "androgynous," unconscious of "worries and ambitions," personal hopes and cravings, and sexual and other markers of individual identity (*A Room of One's Own* 99). Mr. Ramsay's apparent entry into "some other region" in which his characteristic egoistic concerns do not distract him anticipates the text's descriptions of Lily's own painterly process, in which she "subdue[s] the impertinences and irrelevances that plucked her attention and made her remember how she was such and such a person, had such and such relations to people" (157). Lily's view of Mr. Ramsay thus crucially links his "dumb colloquy" with Woolf's famous descriptions of artistic impersonality, suggesting that impersonality or androgyny can be understood as preparatory to a kind of conversational engagement with the world. Turned the other way, the passage also suggests that genuine conversation requires a degree of ego relinquishment, artistic attentiveness that loses sight of the self.

The nature of a conversational engagement between person and world is most dramatically explored in the depiction of Lily's painting process, which the novel figures as an "exacting form of intercourse" that is to some extent akin to sexual violence. Immediately after observing Mr. Ramsay's apparent "dumb colloquy," Lily feels herself "drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people," and into "an exacting form of intercourse" with "this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention" (158). Lily indeed seems to court the "presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers" when she deliberately "subdue[s] the impertinences and irrelevances that plucked her attention and made her remember how she was such and such a person, had such and such relations to people" (157). She assumes her position at the easel with her brush raised, painting at first with trepidation, and then "losing consciousness of outer things [...] her name and her personality and her appearance" until she feels herself "moving her brush hither and thither, [...] as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw" (159). The synesthetic slippage from seeing the object to feeling its rhythm highlights the mobile responsiveness characterizing Lily's gaze, and the way in which her gaze treats its "object" as a "subject," mobile, assertive, and exceeding apprehension by the eye to such an extent that it enters her body. This is the "exacting form of intercourse" that she engages in with the "real" world beyond appearances.

As a manner of looking, colloquy and intercourse both resemble and significantly diverge from absorption, a state of rapt concentration generally considered to be fundamental to an encounter with a work of art. Lily's "intercourse" sounds a bit like art historian Michael Fried's account of absorption, the "condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed" until one attains an "almost somnambulistic character," a kind of "self-forgetting, an obliviousness to [one's] appearance and surroundings" (10, 11, 13). Moments of absorption, Fried writes, induce the absorbed person into "involuntary, automatic, or unconscious action" (20). Lily's surrender to the rhythm of what she sees is only possible because of her self-forgetting, and it transforms her painting into an "involuntary" action. But it is a caricatured acolyte of the Impressionist painter Mr. Pauncefort, not Lily, who is described as entering a state of absorption as he paints derivative seascapes "in Panama hat and yellow boots, seriously, softly, absorbedly, for all that he was watched by ten little boys, with an air of profound

contentment on his round red face gazing” (13). Other characters are occasionally “absorbed” in what they are thinking or saying, as when Paul Rayley, in love, is “all of a tremor, yet abstract, absorbed, silent” (101). Absorption, as we see especially in this latter instance, renders conversation impossible, as it entails surrendering oneself so completely into contemplation, appreciation, or concentration upon an idea or object that one becomes incapable of responsive action or interaction. The language of conversation, of “exacting [...] intercourse,” signals that for at least one form of perceptive and creative encounter, active response, rather than total self-surrender, is essential.

Lily’s “exacting form of intercourse” represents a strikingly different approach to “truth” than the other prominently depicted in the novel: Mr. Ramsay’s pursuit of knowledge. According to Mr. Ramsay’s conceptual terms, thought is “like the alphabet,” and the pursuit of metaphysical truth requires either “superhuman strength [...] plodding and persevering” methodically from A to Z in a heroic endeavor likened to undertaking a doomed polar expedition, or the genius vision that, “miraculously, lump[s] all the letters together in one flash” (33, 34). In either case, truth is fixed, and may be discovered by dogged perseverance or miraculous vision. Like Mr. Ramsay’s work as summarized by his son, Lily’s painting also inquires into “subject and object and the nature of reality,” but for Lily, there is no steady, ordered and arranged “reality;” there is instead *this* reality, *this* truth, which lays its hands on her rather than the reverse; she does not “pursue” truth, but rather opens herself up to “intercourse” with it. In fact, as the passage in which the term “intercourse” appears indicates, she seems to be almost forced into this antagonistic, desiring relationship:

It was an exacting form of intercourse anyhow. Other worshipful objects were content with worship; men, women, God, all let one kneel prostrate; but this form, were it only the shape of a white lamp-shade looming on a wicker table, roused one to perpetual combat, challenged one to a fight in which one was bound to be worsted. Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. Why then did she do it? (158).

She perceives “truth” as latent in material forms—in shapes, textures, and spatial relations between objects like lamp-shades and wicker tables—and feels her encounter with “truth” as a confrontation.

Mr. Ramsay and Lily both feel buffeted and battered in their pursuits: he imagines himself blasted by polar winds, and she imagines standing on “a windy pinnacle.” Both, moreover, link this struggle to an urge to “worship,” or do “homage to the beauty of the world,” but for Mr. Ramsay, this “homage” comes as a relief from the effort of understanding the world, rather than appearing as a path toward understanding (36). Mr. Ramsay pays “homage” to his wife, sitting in the window with their son, as a part of his desire for “sympathy, and whisky, and some one to tell the story of his suffering to,” and the solace this “homage” provides seems to follow from the intertwining of patriarchy and idealizations of (certain conceptions of) women (36). Lily’s worship, by contrast, is itself a part of the “intercourse” by which she encounters “reality.”

In the key passage likening Lily’s process to “intercourse,” the triple repetition of the demonstrative pronoun “this” accents the particularity of the “other” claiming Lily. She is not being commanded by a philosophical abstraction of “truth” or “reality,” but by *this* other thing,

this truth, *this* reality. And yet, Lily is not a straightforward proponent of nominalist philosophy, for how precise can the reality facing her be, when it is also distinct from appearances? A similar description of reality in *A Room of One's Own* might help disentangle this precise and concrete, yet not transparently material, reality:

What is meant by “reality”? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech... But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent... Now the writer, I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect and communicate it to the rest of us. (110)

“Reality,” when it overwhelms a walker or lays hands upon a painter, seems to possess a bodily force, and yet it also relies for its manifestation upon the observer. A writer or artist may “live more than other people in the presence of this reality,” which suggests that incandescence or porousness of mind induces one to be aware of the presence of a quality that can “stamp” a moment, rendering it permanent.

To “live [...] in the presence of this reality” is to live vulnerably, if Lily’s experience is a guide; it is to make oneself open to the “other thing” that surrounds the self, entering a frame of mind in which perception feels like submission, an entangled rhythm of “worship” and “combat.”⁴¹ This conversational epistemology inverts the metaphors typically representing post-Enlightenment relations between human inquiry and the natural world, which frequently posit masculine subjects discovering the secrets of a feminized, sensual and objectified natural world. As Carolyn Merchant and others have tracked, metaphors of (male) scientific inquiry following the Enlightenment develop from Francis Bacon’s advocacy of putting a witchlike nature on trial, torturing her into disclosure of secrets she has been unfairly withholding from humans since the Fall, to a 19th century conceptualization of the (male) scientist coaxing a now-willing feminine Nature to disrobe herself.⁴² Lily’s “exacting form of intercourse” seems to reverse the

⁴¹ Departing from a rational empiricist tradition represented by Mr. Ramsay, Lily’s epistemology in some senses anticipates Levinasian “metaphysics.” Like Woolf, Levinas invokes a figure of conversation in order to describe a desiring encounter between the self and the absolutely Other: “The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation” (Levinas 39). Conversation “maintains the distance between me and the Other,” and the truth of this encounter between self and other derives in large part from its provisional nature, from the fact that it does not result in a settled idea of the Other: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it” (Levinas 40, 51). By figuring Lily’s encounter with the world as intercourse, Woolf is similarly indicating an attitude in which the “nature of reality” cannot be comprehended by a subject encountering “reality” as an object.

⁴² See Merchant, *The Death of Nature* and “Secrets of Nature: the Bacon Debates Revisited.” Merchant argues that Bacon “developed the power of language as political instrument in reducing female nature to a resource for economic production. Female imagery became a tool in adapting scientific knowledge and method to a new form of human power over nature. The “controversy over women” and the inquisition of witches - both present in Bacon’s social milieu - permeated his description of nature’ and his metaphorical style and were instrumental in his transformation of the earth as a nurturing mother and womb of life into a source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance” (*The Death of Nature* 165). Defenders of Bacon have been particularly upset by her interpretation of his language; it should be noted that he did not advocate the torture of nature in so many words, but he does recommend the use of various “trials and vexations of art,” in order that nature may be “forced out of her natural state,” “betra[ying] her secrets more fully,” such that technology may “conquer and subdue her” (qtd in “Secrets of Nature” 162). See also Eamon and Hadot.

hierarchical sexual relation posited in both, postulating a passive mode of inquiry as a submission to penetration by one's "object." Whereas, in the former model, a masculine empirical subject penetrates nature—rather like the "beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male" with which Mr. Ramsay "smites" his wife when he demands sympathy, according to their son James—in the latter, a female subject is penetrated. Lily understands her resumption of painting in the opening pages of the last section of the novel as an effort to "[get] at the truth of things," but once she begins painting, "the truth of things" seems to get at her.

In Woolf's reversal of a familiar model of empirical inquiry, the inquirer has invited penetration. Lily willingly "exchang[es] the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting," and, following the text's metaphors, she is not "undressed" by "this other thing," but undresses herself, bringing about the "moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body." In response to her self-inquiry, "Why then did she do it?" she offers the rather unsatisfying answer that "reality" compels her thus: "For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs" (159). As a form of receptiveness toward that which "protrudes," her painting is represented in explicitly sexual terms: "as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither" (159). The "intercourse" is carried off when her faculties lubricate, as though the perceptive mode described above requires the perceiver to be stimulated, aroused. Consenting, even invited, as this sexualized relationship between the natural world and human inquiry is, it retains disquieting patterns of domination and submission.

The Aesthetics of Conversation

In its most elaborate scene of conversation as ordinarily conceived, *To the Lighthouse* presents a different model of conversational encounter with the world, exacting in more peaceful ways. A similar model develops even more fully in *The Waves*, motivating that text's very structure and rhythms. Rather than deprecating conversation as a merely "pleasant art" in the style of Kant, both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* suggest that making conversation can be an art requiring a strenuous "effort of merging and flowing and creating," at the end of which "something is made" (*Lighthouse* 83, *The Waves* 145; Kant 148, §44). *To the Lighthouse*'s primary dinner table scene unfolds the creation of a conversation as an aesthetic project shepherded by the singular artistic presence of Mrs. Ramsay, whereas the dinner table scenes in *The Waves* shift the production of "one thing"—the conversation and the intimacy entwined indistinguishably in it—to a collective effort, a "communion" achieved through "turning together." In both cases, the conversation and intimacy that result from aesthetic perception and efforts structures a perspective through which Woolf's characters learn to look together upon the world.

In the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay's "social manner" functions as the chief binding agent that gives aesthetic shape to the gathering. The power her manner exerts is likened to that of a foreign language adopted "at some meeting, [at the suggestion of] the chairman, to obtain unity" (*Lighthouse* 90). Through artifice, it "imposes some order, some uniformity" (90). Suggesting that Mrs. Ramsay's social manner is like a foreign language highlights the conventionality of her conversational discourse by pointing to the conventionality of language as such: a nonnative speaker is especially conscious of the formal features of an adopted language, its rules as well as the subtler qualities of tone, rhythm, and style that help

communicate speakers' feelings and intentions. The analogy also resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19, 8).⁴³ To speak the language of the dinner table is to share its form of life, its implicit social conventions and assumptions.

The contours of the "form of life" esteemed by Mrs. Ramsay, and dictating the conversation, are most apparent when the narrative takes the perspective of characters who do not naturally fit this form.⁴⁴ The presence of Charles Tansley, who has "worked his way up entirely himself," and consequently has "no knowledge of this language," underscores the class assumptions of this "form of life" (91, 90). He is defensive and disdainful of the "damned rot they talk," while craving recognition for having ascended from the working class into this circle (85). Lily Briscoe and William Bankes both feel uneasy and insincere as they conform to the "codes of behavior" that permit the conversation to flow, affirming the Victorian gender relations and "clucking domesticities" that prevail in the Ramsay household (91, 22). Lily notes that the conversation takes an "auspicious turn" when she bends to the comically specified "seventh article (it may be) [of the code, which] says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her own occupation might be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself" (91).⁴⁵ She goes to the help, in this case, of the floundering Tansley, playing "the usual trick" of inviting him to show off, a gendered gesture that also sacrifices sincerity (92). Confirming Tansley's and Lily's suspicions of the insincerity of dinner party conversation, Bankes warns himself that "he must make himself talk" in order to prevent Mrs. Ramsay from "find[ing] out this treachery of his; that he did not care a straw for her" (90). Although he elsewhere appears to care for Mrs. Ramsay, Bankes's reflection demonstrates his alienation from the scene's "clucking domesticities" and completes the passage's critique of the "language," or form of life, associated with dinner party conversation. The scene moreover shows that the dependence between conversation and its signifying "form of life" works both ways: a shared form of life must be at least temporarily inhabited in order for the conversation to gel, and the conversation must be sustained in turn, to preserve the form of life from the threat of conflicting "forms of life."⁴⁶

⁴³ In drawing this brief connection between Woolf and Wittgenstein, I am not suggesting that we should suspect she had more familiarity with Wittgenstein's work than she claimed; rather, I merely observe that her own inquiry occasionally parallels his. Banfield summarizes the Woolfs' minimal relation to Wittgenstein in her introduction, commenting that "the rise of Wittgenstein's influence [was] a kind of cut-off point for the philosophical background of Bloomsbury" (9).

⁴⁴ These characters are neither utterly excluded, nor fully incorporated. A reader, seeing things to which the characters themselves are blind, might reflect upon those who would be fully excluded due to the way this particular "form of life" presumes racial, ethnic, religious, and other social markers according to which this group of well educated English people is homogenous. The correspondence between conversation and art implies moreover what we all know in a post-Kantian age of immanence: aesthetic judgment also indicates a "form of life" that is often linked to, if not strictly conditioned by, material, social, and historical conditions. In *The Waves*, I will suggest, are hints toward a less rigidly exclusionary conversational aesthetic – but this implicit warning about the exclusiveness of "conversation" that *To the Lighthouse* provides is worth remembering.

⁴⁵ As in *A Room of One's Own*, Lily sees that she is in a "form of life" in which women serve "as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35).

⁴⁶ The claim that we must share a form of life in order to share a language anticipates the linkage I will later make to Kantian aesthetics and the idea of universal "common" sense; being moved by a work of art may be seen as socially heartening because, in evoking the "sensus communus," it indicates that we share a "form of life" with others

In addition to affirming a particular and narrow “form of life,” however, the conversation at the Ramsays’ table also gives meaningful form *to* life, as the scene’s continual reference to aesthetic elements emphasizes. The text’s insistence upon the aesthetic dimension of the dinner party chatter appears both in its depiction of Mrs. Ramsay’s creative role in bringing the party together, and in its description of the changes the party undergoes through her efforts. She attends to the words of her guests not for their informational content, but for the contribution or threat they make to the creation of a “community of feeling with other people,” as when she becomes alert to the “danger” posed by a turn of talk toward the permanence of literature, which she knows will incite her husband’s insecurities and possibly also his temper (113, 107). Mrs. Ramsay is described in terms that evoke familiar modernist descriptions of artistic impersonality, “dissociating herself from the moment” even while creating it: “She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy—there—and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it” (83).

Mrs. Ramsay moreover feels that her “effort of merging and flowing and creating” reveals something beneath the surface of everyday encounters that “part[akes] ... of eternity,” an intuition that anticipates Woolf’s description of what distinguishes a writer in *A Room of One’s Own* (*Lighthouse* 105). As cited above, Woolf claims that the writer, “has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality”—a specific “reality” (like Lily’s “*this* truth, *this* reality”) that Woolf does not quite define, but rather describes in action: “What is meant by ‘reality’? [...] whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge” (*Lighthouse* 158, my emphasis; *Room* 110). Moreover, the writer who lives in the presence of this permanence-making quality beneath the skin of the everyday, must “find [reality] and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us” (*Room* 110).

Mrs. Ramsay does not communicate “reality” in direct, material terms, by writing or painting, for example, but her “effort of merging and flowing and creating” nonetheless enables her to find, collect, and communicate a sense of permanence. She creates a social figure that makes her feel as though “there is a coherence in things, a stability,” something “immune from change” that “shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest” (105). The “reality” Mrs. Ramsay “communicates” is relational and also beyond human relations. This latter suggestion emerges through the echo between this moment of social merging and Mrs. Ramsay’s earlier experience while knitting in solitude of “freedom [...] peace [...] and], most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability” (62-63).

In the earlier scene of knitting, Mrs. Ramsay imagines that she has “shrunk” into her essential self, a “wedge-shaped core of darkness,” which is distinctly contrasted against the active and personal self that manifests as “apparitions” through “the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal,” which is demanded in company with others (62). It is only in this reprieve from her active and personal self that Mrs. Ramsay experiences the rest described above: “Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles) but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir” (63). In the dinner scene, her aesthetic sensitivity is a consequence, at

similarly moved: a link between language and art, or conversation and aesthetic judgment, that this reading finds at the heart of Woolf’s work.

least in part, of a similar feeling of detachment and impersonality. Filled with the “sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything,” she conceives of her creative project:

Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy — that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing — ladling out soup — she felt, more and more strongly, outside that eddy; or as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. (82-83)

At this moment, she is both engaged in the “expansive, glittering, [and] vocal” efforts of “being” and “doing,” and also “outside that eddy,” directing an eye toward a deeper “coherence” than the spectral, apparitional, social world. Returning to the account of the artist’s “business” offered in *A Room of One’s Own*, we might say that Mrs. Ramsay’s efforts “of merging and flowing and creating” have produced something that indeed “communicates” a deep order of reality, a wholeness aligned with permanence. Evidence of her at least partially successful “communication” of such a sense of “reality” comes in the final section of the novel, when Lily Briscoe, ten years later, remembers Mrs. Ramsay as having “ma[de] of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)” (161).

The dinner scene invites us to ask how Mrs. Ramsay’s “glittering and vocal” social manner converts spectral sociality into an essential “reality.” Mrs. Ramsay’s apparitional “being and doing” has become a particular mode of activity that we should, I think, call aesthetic, but both the earlier scene of solitude and this scene of “merging and flowing and creating” highlight the peculiar nature of aesthetic production. Simultaneously engaged and disengaged, aesthetic work effects a re-materialization of something—some element of self, in the earlier scene, or of “things” in the later—whose presence in materials is described as spectral, fleeting, apparitional:

Our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by” (62, my emphasis);

There is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, *the spectral*, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. (105, my emphasis)

The repetition of ghostly imagery in these separate scenes suggests a peculiar kind of relation between body and spirit, in which the aesthetic seems tasked with transforming materiality from a haunting remainder of “spirit” or essence—the ruby, the coherent—into an embodied coherence. The text leaves open the possibility that aesthetic work itself *produces* embodied coherence, rather than revealing or manifesting a coherence that exists independent of art.⁴⁷

Couched within the passage’s description of the “moment” Mrs. Ramsay shapes, in aestheticizing dinner table conversation, is not only a version of aesthetic theory, but a

⁴⁷ Banfield has suggested that “a ghostly virtual reality” exists in Woolf’s novels in the sense that conceptions of things, existing only in human minds, have a “phantasmic” quality (74).

philosophy *about* aesthetics.⁴⁸ The passage directs readers to view the party itself, and not just its primary “creator,” in terms of aesthetics:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (97)

Lit by candles, and framed by glass, the characters obtain a new consciousness of their physical relation, feeling solid and distinguished from a comparably fluid, formless outer world. The most striking aspect of this moment is the text’s adoption of a point of view from within the aesthetic realm. What might initially seem to be a familiar modernist critique of materialist “realism” and a naïve belief in artistic mimesis—the “panes of glass [...] far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely”—is in fact a much more complex claim about the relation between art and reality. The dinner guests see the “outside” world through the rippled panes of glass, as though they are themselves *inside* a framed work of art, looking outward through the glass at a “fleeting” and “spectral” world distinct from their own formal coherence.⁴⁹ Transporting the reader, with the dinner guests, into the field of representation—or, rather, reminding the reader of where she has always been—Woolf seems to propose that we (at least at times) look at the world through the glass of the aesthetic medium, and that doing so is simultaneously a mode of reflecting upon the formal coherence, or significance, of ourselves.

Later in the scene, the windows are referenced again, when the darkness outside has deepened to such an extent that the windows no longer reveal any of the “fluidity out there,” but rather solely reflect the lighted interior. Curiously, however, while looking at “the window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black,” Mrs. Ramsay still imagines that she is “looking at that outside,” conflating two senses of being “outside” the moment: both the exterior world of pre-artistic “fluidity” and the aesthetic reflection of the dinner party are detached from the party itself (110). The changes in the window glass suggest that the scene gradually solidifies into an aesthetic object, moving from a moment of aesthetic self-consciousness (the characters making a “hollow” of form within the formless world) to a more defined picture against the black window panels. The later moment doubles the initial aesthetic moment; the characters are self-conscious of their own aesthetic form, and are also presented with an aesthetic production distinct from the social scene it re-presents.

⁴⁸ Woolf’s aesthetic theory, especially the “feminist” aesthetics of *A Room of One’s Own*, have been amply elaborated, and my intention here is less to review Woolf’s aesthetic theory, than to show that Woolf introduces a specific theory about the role that aesthetics play in everyday life and everyday formations and negotiations of community. For an argument that Woolf adapts Kant’s aesthetics to feminist purposes, see Froula; for an argument that Woolf develops a feminist aesthetics of Deleuzian “care,” see Berman; for an argument historicizing Woolf in terms of aesthetic theories prevalent in her intellectual environment, see Goldman.

⁴⁹ The situation could be an analogy not only for art, but also for any ideological system that presents human experience as purposive, suggesting that such framing is itself an aestheticization of human experience that becomes the lens through which we understand “reality.”

Artificial and yet the best transmitter of “reality,” this doubling aesthetic lens seems not to vanquish the specter, but rather to vanquish hauntedness by upping the ante: transforming apparition into appearance, specter into spectacle, and therefore, somehow, a stronger communicant of the “reality” that otherwise haunts the material world. The upshot is a conviction that we form a “hollow,” an “island,” a “common cause against that fluidity out there;” the conviction, in other words, that our aesthetic projects project ourselves into a material purposiveness that is exceptional in a spectral world.

The shared conviction of forming a “common cause against the fluidity out there” is the consequence of an aesthetic self-judgment made possible—in this scene—by the aestheticizing work of conversation. The candles, the table, and the Boeuf en Daube are undoubtedly as instrumental in this achievement as are the words being exchanged. Making conversation, under Mrs. Ramsay’s guidance, the characters transform themselves from disparate individuals into “a party round a table,” but becoming conscious of this coherence is an intrinsic part of the coherence. Conversational art is accomplished, it seems, when its constituent creators pass from aesthetic effort into aesthetic judgment.

There is undoubtedly a significant difference between the aesthetic conversation that Mrs. Ramsay helps make, and actually material aesthetic objects, as the novel’s juxtaposition of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily persistently reminds us. Mrs. Ramsay imagines that the “moment” she has helped to create is not itself permanent, but rather “part[akes] of eternity,” and provides the material from which “the thing is made that endures” (105). According to Mrs. Ramsay’s perception, the scene she has made through sharing words and Boeuf en Daube begins to dissipate the moment she and her guests leave the table: “as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past” (111). The “sphere” in which Mrs. Ramsay “mak[es] of the moment something permanent” is perceptual, psychological. If the moment has any permanence, the sphere in which it persists is memory: a less permanent, and much more spectral, sphere than Lily’s still-modest sphere of neglected paintings hung in attics. Yet, as Mr. Ramsay reminds himself, simultaneously tormenting and soothing his fragile ego, “the very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare” (35). The differences between conversation and canonical aesthetic objects may perhaps be traceable in terms of degree, rather than kind. Nothing endures without end; conversations might “communicate” a sense of the “reality” that can stamp the everyday with enduring significance, and the framing of the dinner party between panes of reflective glass further indicates the aesthetic potential of everyday experience. Under aesthetic stewardship, fleeting conversation may reveal—or perhaps generate—an order created by sociality, an elemental social coherence. This latter possibility, the generative aesthetic potential of conversation, is explored more fully in the very texture of Woolf’s next novel, *The Waves*.

The Waves and Silent Conversation

The convergence of aesthetics, conversation, and judgment sketched in *To the Lighthouse* is elaborated in *The Waves*, and it serves, I will argue, as that novel’s technical as well as thematic core. In making this claim, I am invoking the etymology of the word “conversation,” the gestural image of “turning together” that supplements, and supersedes, ordinary verbal conversation. As we have seen in *To the Lighthouse*, verbal conversation can serve aesthetic rather than communicative purposes. People are “only superficially represented” by words they

exchange with others, according to Bernard in *The Waves*. Such a view corresponds with Mrs. Ramsay's sense that our "apparitions" scarcely communicate the nature of our "unfathomably deep" selves, indicating that both of these novels share a deep scepticism about the possibility of knowing others (*Lighthouse* 62). Yet, in spite of this apparent scepticism about human relations, *The Waves* portrays a poesis of community in conversation.

Readers repeatedly encounter in Bernard's final soliloquy a sense of wonder at the delicate intimacy one feels with "friends – how distant, how mute, how seldom visited and little known" (*Waves* 275). He considers himself to be "a phantom, sometimes seen, often not" (275). And yet, a page later, a passage that begins by echoing this earlier declaration ends in an assertion that his individual life is so fully inflected with the lives of others that it cannot be distinguished from theirs:

Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known – it is true; and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call 'my life,' it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs. (276)

The intimacy that comes to be established in the face of the "muteness" of their essential selves, and the discrepancy between speech and the "wedge-shaped core," results, I will show, from a practice of "conversation" in its etymological as well as contemporary senses. The text of *The Waves* itself models the original sense of "conversation," serving as a record of a kind of colloquy of mute wedge-shaped cores of darkness, "turning together." The curious style by which the text invokes, and subverts, expectations of conversation—its formula of soliloquies that a person could hardly be imagined to utter aloud, attributed to characters with the phrase, "So-and-so said"—seems to call for readers to consider what kind of "conversation" *The Waves* records. A recurrent image serves as a synecdoche of the combination of both verbal and figurative senses of conversation that I find in *The Waves*: speaking to each other over a dinner table while also turning together toward a flower at its center, the characters "make one thing [...] seen by many eyes simultaneously" (127). This twofold "conversation" is a snapshot of the lifelong intimacy of the characters, the way that they "make one thing"—*The Waves* itself—over the course of decades of turning together through a world contoured by this turning.

The Waves is not generally read as a "conversation," in spite of its mimicry of certain conventions of representing conversation. In her diary, Woolf described the text as a "playpoem," but is it unlikely that anyone would actually say aloud the words designated as speech, and moreover, the characters scarcely seem to respond to each other. (*Diary* 203).⁵⁰ They pick up threads from each others' soliloquies, but only in very rare instances do they appear to directly address each other, and even in those instances, textual markers like parentheses combine with the consistently lyrical and impersonal language to suggest that these direct addresses are not being uttered *aloud*.

A similar interpretive model treats *The Waves* as a musical, rather than conversational, text, and there are numerous similarities between the interpretive possibilities opened up by this approach and my own. In a well-known letter, Woolf declared that she felt she was "writing to a rhythm and not to a plot" (*Letters* 204). Bernard, in his last soliloquy's efforts to "sum up" his life and account for the way in which his experience feels blended with the experiences of others, invokes the metaphor of "a symphony, with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and

⁵⁰ Entry for November 7, 1928.

its complicated bass beneath” (256). It may be the case that music—even a specific piece of music, such as a late string quartet by Beethoven that includes a fugue in 6 voices, which Elicia Clements has argued inspired the form of *The Waves*—heavily influenced Woolf’s stylization of the novel: the text’s overlapping, recurrent themes, the strong rhythms of the language, the way in which the voices intermingle and borrow from each other, without directly responding to each other, and the musical motifs all support such a reading (Clements 161). Studies like Clements’, and Melba Cuddy-Keane’s related reflections upon the “chorus” of natural sounds invoked occasionally by characters in their soliloquies, are illuminating descriptions of the text (Cuddy-Keane 88-90). But in describing Woolf’s work, such approaches stop short of traveling with her. If community is rewritten as chorus (Cuddy-Keane’s argument), or as a singing conversation (to link my analysis to Clements’), how do actual people move—to borrow phrasing Woolf gives to Rhoda—from “the semblance of the thing” to the thing itself? In other words, how do people—we readers, perhaps—sing community into being? Reading *The Waves* in terms of conversation helps clarify the way that the text models not only *what* community can be, but also *how* subjects can make it so. The characters “make” a conversational, intimate community by turning together, a project that proves to be responsive, mobile and artistic.

In the first instance in which the two senses of conversation coincide, the characters have gathered for a farewell dinner sending their friend Percival off to India. Bernard conflates their “communion” with sense perception, connecting the work of conversation to epistemological inquiry:

‘But here and now we are together,’ said Bernard. ‘We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, “love”? Shall we say “love of Percival” because Percival is going to India?’

‘No, that is too small, too particular a name. We cannot attach the width and spread of our feelings to so small a mark. We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan’s farm, from Louis’ house of business) to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves – a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.’ (127)

Bernard suggests that they are drawn together by a feeling more expansive than fondness for a departing friend. Such an explanation of their feelings would be “too particular;” a creative urge “to make one thing [...] seen by many eyes simultaneously” is by implication more general, more “common,” than the personal emotions of any individual. Their urge to be together is an urge to create, and the object they make is fundamentally collaborative, gaining “contributions” from each eye that gazes upon it.

In this strange account of creation, not only does looking become making, but Bernard curiously remarks that the “one thing” they make is “seen by many eyes simultaneously.” This would seem to be an unnecessary specification; *of course* the dinner guests can simultaneously see the same objects in their surroundings. Bernard’s words are sensitive to a particular expression of epistemological doubt, according to which an observer’s mind and perspective give him or her a unique picture of the world, which neither corresponds perfectly to the material reality of the world, nor matches the picture of the world formed by any other observer. His words in fact seem like a defensive response to an assertion in Bertrand Russell’s 1914 work,

Our Knowledge of the External World: “there is absolutely nothing which is seen by two minds simultaneously” (87). As Ann Banfield and others have shown, Woolf’s work consistently engages with the British epistemological tradition. This tradition—a central subject of Woolf’s father’s seminal work, *A History of British Thought*, and appearing in *To the Lighthouse* through Mr. Ramsay’s preoccupations—calls into question the correspondence between the sense perception of an inquiring subject and the “reality” of the object-as-perceived. When the relation between a knowing subject and “reality” is thus brought under scrutiny, so, too, is the possibility of sharing a world with others whose perceptions are likewise of undetermined fidelity to “reality.”

According to Banfield, Woolf ultimately endorses Russell’s description of “reality” as a mathematical, logical structure given to us in circumscribed doses according to our subject positions.⁵¹ Russell describes the world not in terms of what is “seen” by a particular subject, but what is “seeable” by perspectives both occupied and unoccupied – potential views upon the world’s objects by potential, non-particular subjects.

The Waves evokes Russell’s philosophy in a number of ways, but the text does not so much endorse Russell’s epistemology as it reconfigures it in relation to aesthetics. The entire text seems to dramatize what Russell called, in *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927), “a question of very great importance”: “What difference is there between the propositions ‘there is a triangle’ and ‘I see a triangle’?” (225). *The Waves*’ opening implicitly poses the same question, moving from the italicized, third-person description that begins, “*The sun had not yet risen,*” to the first soliloquies:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.” (9)

Like Russell’s “question of very great importance,” the opening juxtaposition of a third-person declaration with a first-person sensual report marks a distinction between subjective perception and the objective features of the world. The first-person voices in which the majority of the novel is written are emphatically subjective, and they frequently articulate a concern about the shareability of experience and the consequences for individuals whose efforts to connect with others run against the limits of language. In its formal presentation as primarily a cycle of first-person utterances, *The Waves* makes two inquiries simultaneously: what kind of whole can be made out of disparate subjective experience, and what is the relation between these experiences, this whole, and the world as it would appear to a transcendental observer? The voice of the third-person interludes does not offer such a transcendental perspective, however. It is idiosyncratic, prone to historically-charged metaphors like the waves’ echo of “turbaned warriors” drumming, which suggests that objective knowledge is beyond the novel’s representational reach. This absence of an “outside” perspective only underscores the epistemological uncertainty that contextualizes the “conversations” of the six characters.

For Russell, this uncertainty is socially significant, because “we want the same object for different people” (*Problems* 17). As this passage from *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) continues, he situates this desire in a scene strikingly similar to the scene of communion in *The Waves*:

⁵¹ See also Zhang.

When ten people are sitting round a dinner-table, it seems preposterous to maintain that they are not seeing the same tablecloth, the same knives and forks and spoons and glasses. But the sense-data are private to each separate person; what is immediately present to the sight of one is not immediately present to the sight of another: they all see things from slightly different points of view, and therefore see them slightly differently. (17)

Russell further claims that the ordinary conviction that these ten people do in fact see the same tablecloth, cutlery, and so on depends upon the existence of “something over and above the private and particular sense-data which appear to various people” (17). There must be a common world, in other words, populated with what Russell calls “public neutral objects” (17). His eventual account of the relation between human observers and such “public neutral objects” characterizes observation as a “purely structural position, one already there before an observer arrives” (Banfield 72). There are infinitely different “perspectives” through which different people may look upon public neutral objects, and each of these perspectives discloses its own “world.” “If two men are sitting in a room,” Russell writes, “two somewhat similar worlds are perceived by them; if a third man enters and sits between them, a third world, intermediate between the two previous worlds, begins to be perceived” (*Our Knowledge* 87-88). And although a “world” is conjured and contoured according to the position from which it may be observed, a particular observer is not necessary to that world’s “existence”: “The three-dimensional world seen by one mind [...] exists entire exactly as it is perceived, and might be exactly as it is even if it were not perceived” (87). A “world” exists whether perceived by an actual mind or not, just as a slightly different “world” exists as it would be perceived by a mind situated slightly to the side of the hypothetical body perceiving the world in the first instance.

Suggesting that the act of looking together *generates* a singular and shared “seven-sided” flower, Bernard evokes Russell’s claim that the perspectives individuals occupy define “worlds”—each “side” of the flower is the “contribution” of a differently-positioned perceiver—but he suggests that these various perspectives collapse and collate productively into *one* world. It is as though he socializes the empirical compromises made by Russell and other Cambridge New Realists. In contrast to Russell’s conclusion that nothing can be “seen by two minds simultaneously,” the “seven-sided flower” indicates that looking together can in some way *make* the “thing...seen by many eyes simultaneously.”

Tying the characters’ establishment of a shared world to their perception of a flower, *The Waves* hints at an aesthetic, rather than structural, “solution” to Russell’s concerns. The flower, of course, is a paradigmatic symbol of beauty—Kant’s exemplary “free natural beauty,” which, as he describes in *The Critique of Judgment*, elicits aesthetic pleasure irrespective of its instrumental purpose (§16, 65-66). Indeed, Bernard’s odd assertion that the characters “make” a flower by looking at it, begins to make sense by the light of Kant’s concept of the *sensus communis*. Enlisting Kant in the next section’s analysis of *The Waves*, I will argue that it is actually this sense—not the flower with which Bernard confuses it—that the characters make as they turn together in conversation. They generate the sense of sharing a common world, not by invoking the existence of “public neutral objects,” but rather by turning together in a particular manner that transforms the world of objects into what Rhoda calls a “dwelling-place.” In *The Waves*, “conversation” is not merely the *product* of aesthetic work, as it appeared in *To the Lighthouse*; it illuminates a social potential within aesthetic work more generally, and offers a revised account of the sense underlying aesthetic perception.

The Conversational *Sensus Communis*

Additional aesthetic qualities of the characters' communion become prominent in the novel's second dinner-table sequence. Once more, the characters turn toward a flower at the table's center, which has "become a six-sided flower; made of six lives," following Percival's death (229). Here, Bernard further emphasizes that the flower serves as an emblem of the common life that their communion reveals: "Marriage, death, travel, friendship [...] town and country; children and all that; a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out" (229).⁵² The oddly transformative, poetic power of the gaze has expanded: first an object, and then a collective "life," is generated through the conversational concentration of attention.

The "many-sided substance" Bernard describes seems to hover on the border between self and other, its characteristics established in individual perceptions that are then projected outward and manifest in a form that can be shared. Bernard cannot be reasonably taken at his word that the flower's physical dimensions correspond in a literal way to the dimensions from which it is seen; but his formulation does, less radically, propose that the important fact about the flower, lending its defining ontological character, is that it is seen from many sides all at once. The flower then transforms qualitatively from an object of perception into "one life," having perhaps served as a transitional object through which Bernard conceptualizes communion. Communion, here, is a secular transubstantiation, many lives becoming one. The unstable and shifting set of metaphors the characters invoke for this transformation indicates that it is a mysterious process with a mystifying outcome, as miraculous perhaps as its religious analogue.

Just before seeing the "one life" they have built together, the characters fall into what Rhoda calls a "disembodied mood," when "the sharp tooth of egotism" is blunted, and—sampling from several characters' soliloquies—they feel "impartial," "dissolved," "extinct, lost in the abysses of time" (225). Their disinterestedness is momentary, and the "many-sided substance" vanishes as soon as they cease looking together, turning attention once more toward themselves and each other, with judgment that is no longer disinterested. As the characters recover a sense of time and desire, they observe what they have "made": an "illumination," Louis calls it; a figure "built up with much pain, many strokes," says Jinny.

The coalescence into "one life" ends as soon as the characters' attentions dissipate and personalize. Jinny and Neville speak of love and look theatrically (or so it seems in Louis's appraisal) at water lilies. Susan murmurs self-pityingly to Bernard, whom she has always loved, again according to Louis. He and Rhoda observe the others from a distance, resisting the claims of their own identities, but ultimately suffering a "shrinkage" and a "shriveling," as they become themselves once more under the gaze of their friends: "Illusion returns as they approach down the avenue," Louis says. "Rippling and questioning begin. What do I think of you – what do you think of me? Who are you? Who am I? – that quivers again its uneasy air over us, and the pulse quickens and the eye brightens and all the insanity of personal existence without which life would fall flat and die, begins again" (232). This return of the "insanity of personal existence"

⁵² Again, these words could represent the book as a whole: a many-sided substance made by the characters, filled with their experiences, but minimizing biographical events and blurring the lines of "character" to such an extent that it becomes possible to think of *The Waves* as the narrative autobiography of "one life" in six voices.

ends the moment of aesthetic judgment, which is entwined with aesthetic production, as the characters emerge from a disinterested and impartial frame of mind into their personal selves.

Disinterestedness of this sort is common to descriptions of aesthetic experience, and in some accounts, it forms the crucial link between art and community. As Christine Froula paraphrases in her survey of the influence of Kant's aesthetic philosophy on the Bloomsbury group, the "escape from personality" that a person experiences (according to Kant) in artistic contemplation is a form of "freedom that mediates sociability and community [...] by transposing its beholders beyond egotism into (possible) disinterested pleasure" (13-14). The concept of disinterestedness is the most obvious similarity between Kantian and Bloomsbury formulations of aesthetic production and contemplation. For Froula, this "disinterestedness" enables a "noncoercive dialogue about the *sensus communis*, or common values" (14). But as the first dinner scene suggests, the characters in *The Waves* are not precisely in "dialogue about the *sensus communis*:" they are *building* it in dialogue, as though this sense of commonness is itself a product of the aesthetic work of conversation.

According to Kant, intuition of the *sensus communis* is a defining feature of aesthetic experience. To judge something aesthetically is to believe in the universality of one's judgment. When we call a flower beautiful, for instance, "we believe that we speak with a universal voice, and we claim the assent of every one" (§8, 50). More specifically, we "*imput[e]* this agreement to everyone" (§8, 51, his emphasis). Beauty is not a defined concept; we would not attempt to logically persuade others of a flower's beauty. Rather, according to Kant, we believe that anyone who perceives the flower will immediately, pre-conceptually, feel that it is beautiful. This belief rests upon the implicit assumption that we share with others a *sensus communis*, a "subjective principle which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but yet with universal validity" (§21, 75). Faith in the universality of one's aesthetic judgment is constitutive of the experience of aesthetic judgment. In a moment of aesthetic appreciation, one does not identify as part of a concrete community that appreciates the work, but rather believes that there must be others who do, or would, feel as one feels upon encountering the work. The instinctive, pre-conceptual appreciation for beauty seems evidence of this actual or possible community. Recalling Mrs. Ramsay's words, aesthetic judgment implicitly affirms that there exists a "community of feeling with other people."

One of the essential features of a work of art or other object that stimulates aesthetic judgment, a Kantian might say, is that it can be seen from many "sides" and yet be judged with a singular verdict. The characters do not "make" the actual flower that stands between them; rather, conversing in the twofold sense of talking and turning together, they make the particular kind of communion that attends aesthetic experience. Bernard's conflation of the feeling of communion with the flower suggests that their feeling of closeness is qualitatively similar to the feeling of abstract, "disembodied" communion implicit in instinctive aesthetic pleasure. Rather than conflating the flower with the *source* of their aesthetic solidarity, however, Bernard suggests that they *make* the flower. The flower does not provide a causal account for their feeling (as it would in a more traditionally Kantian schema), but rather it comes into being as though to explain their feeling, standing for the *sensus communis* that develops as the characters "converse" in a disembodied mood.

The characters' further reflections in this moment of communion evoke additional tropes commonly associated with aesthetic work. Aware that individual life "stream[s] away, down the unlighted avenues, past the strip of time, unidentified," Bernard wonders, "And we ourselves, walking six abreast, what do we oppose, with this random flicker of light in us that we call brain

and feeling, how can we do battle against this flood; what has permanence?" (227). He recalls a poem Neville once shared with him, which reminds him of Shakespeare and "a sudden conviction of immortality" that he used to feel in response to poetry, which now "has gone." Somewhat like Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Bernard's "what has permanence" raises doubt about the supposed immortality conferred by art. Moreover, this doubt immediately prefaces the characters' reconsideration of the "thing" they make coming together, highlighting the fact that this "thing" appears to be an aesthetic work *without* permanence, that "blazes against the yew trees" for an instant, and then has "gone out." Contrasted with the massive, gnarled trees famous for living thousands of years, this "life" intensifies but does not extend the "random flicker" of light in individuals: communion makes a more brilliant and immense blaze out of small flickers, a "mysterious illumination" against a dark and aged inhuman backdrop. The thing that they "oppose" to the "unlighted avenues," the darkness, is both like and unlike a work of art or poetry. Mortal like humans, it is yet a "purposive" product of work, built up over time and through collaboration. Crucial, again, is the connection between this transformation of individual into community and the emblem of the flower: some coalescence of *vision*, or attention—upon an aesthetic object—serves, or is made to explain, the coalescence of community.

Rhoda's understanding of this moment of communion subtly refines its relation to an aesthetic *sensus communis*. She begins by reflecting that they have entered into "the still mood, the disembodied mood," in which they feel "the walls of the mind become transparent" (228). She immediately associates this "mood" with an earlier experience of art and community, her attendance of a music recital on the afternoon that she learned of Percival's death in India. Walking with the other characters past Wren's palace following dinner, Rhoda envisions the same curious image of a square standing upon an oblong that came to her while listening to the music: "Wren's palace, like the quartet played to the dry and stranded people in the stalls, makes an oblong. A square is stood upon the oblong and we say, 'This is our dwelling-place. The structure is now visible. Very little is left outside'" (228). In the earlier scene, this curious image of a square and oblong "dwelling-place" serves for Rhoda as an alternative to describing the music conceptually, through language. She has attempted and rejected a series of similes for the singer's voice. First, she analogizes it to an arrow piercing the musical note/apple, then to an axe "split[ting] a tree to the core," and finally to a woman's call to a lover, "leaning from her window in Venice" (162). The violins make a "ripple and laughter like the dance of olive trees and their myriad-tongued grey leaves when a seafarer, biting a twig between his lips where the many-backed steep hills come down, leaps on shore" (162). She becomes frustrated with these attempts to translate her pleasure into metaphors: "'Like' and 'like' and 'like,' but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?" (163). Like Kant, she seems to believe that some part of the aesthetic experience cannot be linguistically—conceptually—expressed. The aesthetic, Kant claims, communicates its pleasures "without the mediation of a concept," and any attempt to convey aesthetic pleasure conceptually will inevitably distort the experience (§40, 138; §20, 75).⁵³

Rhoda abandons this effort to provide a narrative, metaphorical account of her pleasure, offering instead the abstract image of a "perfect dwelling-place":

⁵³ Stanley Cavell has similarly claimed, following Kant and Wittgenstein, that aesthetic criticism must itself be a form of aesthetic creation: "What I see is that (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it too. Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it." *Must We Mean What We Say?* 193. See also pp 85-86.

Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering branch has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (163).

“The thing” Rhoda sees in this moment of revelation is not the noumenal truth of the music, which she would not be able to conceptualize or express anyway, but rather a “perfect dwelling-place,” the curious figure of the square and oblong she later recalls in communion with her friends. Her discovery is doubly Kantian: the “dwelling-place” with others who are “not so various or so mean” suggests that she intuits something like a *sensus communis*, and describing *this*, rather than the music itself, relieves a frustration consonant with Kant’s insistence that aesthetic judgment cannot be accounted for via concepts. Rather than use language, which is by nature conceptual, to describe a non-conceptual aesthetic experience, Rhoda uses language to attest to the experience’s affirmation that she “dwells” with others. Reviving the image of the “dwelling-place” in the moment when other characters seek to describe the “thing” they have made in conversation at the dinner table, Rhoda once again describes the social implications of her experience of the “object,” rather than the object itself. In doing so, she comes closer than the others to describing what is “made” in conversation: not a flower or other “many-sided substance,” but a communion like that which is affirmed by music and other works of beauty.

The significance of a conversational *sensus communis* is underscored by the fact that it is Rhoda, the tortured and suicidal character who “wish[es] above all things to have lodgment,” who finds a “dwelling-place” in aesthetic communion with her friends (131). Rhoda’s characteristic fragility and alienation from others registers frequently in *The Waves* as a desire to flee her embodied and material circumstances. She daydreams of wild seas, marble columns, and cold landscapes she shares only with a swallow. These private fantasies help her recover from the social trauma of being “broken into separate pieces” (106) when forced into company with others. They also manifest what Rei Terada has called “phenomenophilia,” an impulse of “looking away” from the given world that she argues emerged in response particularly to the epistemological skepticism of Kant’s *First Critique* (4). In works of literature and philosophy following Kant, Terada traces this trope of “looking away” from a reality that is neither chosen nor guaranteed to correspond to the concepts our minds construct from sense data. A “phenomenophile” withdraws from this “nonoptional” and uncertain reality into private, idiosyncratic fantasy, which means she withdraws from the possibility of community (Terada 75). Terada argues that Kant’s *Third Critique* offers aesthetic judgment as an alternative to the phenomenophile’s response to the *First Critique*. Aesthetic judgment affirms community in a way that sense perception alone cannot, and the pleasures of aesthetic work provide relief from “nonoptional reality” without extracting one from community: “In developing a universalist aesthetics, Kant trades irregular enjoyment for what he hopes is something better: a glimpse of a basis for spontaneous community” (99).

Rhoda’s discovery of a dwelling-place is similar to the return to community that Terada finds in Kant’s *Third Critique*.⁵⁴ Seeing a dwelling-place in the music hall—and again in the

⁵⁴ In a passing reference, Terada calls Woolf one of the twentieth century’s most “spectacular and complicated example[s]” of female phenomenophiles (28). Rhoda’s discovery of a “dwelling place” precisely in the shared

moment of creating and affirming an aesthetic communion in conversation—Rhoda finds temporary “lodgment” in her actual surroundings, rather than in the fantasies through which she escapes them. One of the tragedies of *The Waves*—and an indication that the commonality constructed in conversation may be as temporary as conversation itself—is that Rhoda does not “dwell” in this place long enough. Her sense of alienation ultimately defeats its alleviation by music and the similarly aesthetic “conversation” with her friends.

Using the language of “conversation,” we might say that aesthetic experience elicits a feeling of “looking” or “turning” with others, which implies that we share a common world. There is a crucial distinction between the “conversational aesthetic” that emerges in *The Waves* and Kant’s aesthetics: Woolf’s *sensus communis* is produced collectively, rather than simply evoked by the beautiful object. The characters in *The Waves* do not share a judgment of the flower. Only Bernard invokes the flower to account for their feeling of communion, whereas others attach their *sensus* to the perception of an “illumination,” an object “built up with many strokes,” the “dwelling-place,” etc. The passages indicate that the *sensus communis* is the product of aesthetic effort, rather than an *a priori* sense that matches one’s judgments of aesthetic works with those of other viewers. As such, Woolf’s conversational *sensus communis* does not share Kant’s normative presupposition of shared (Western and aristocratic) taste. Others need not affirm the beauty of a particular object in order to experience communion; the conversational *sensus communis* is generated when disinterested attunement toward an experience combines with an awareness of different, but simultaneous, perceptions of this experience by others. Such attunement entails an imaginative awareness of others made possible, at least in *The Waves*, by the “disembodied mood” that art particularly cultivates. The endless, lifelong process of “making conversation” reflected in *The Waves* suggests that the collective construction of aesthetic commonality is a fragile effort that succeeds only as long as it is renewed.

The tacit model of conversational communion that emerges in *The Waves* makes an illuminating contrast to the characters’ conversation in the ordinary sense of the word. Like *To the Lighthouse*, the novel is critical of dinner table chatter. It shows conventional (verbal) conversation to fall too easily into alternating self-assertions, “attempts to say, ‘I am this, I am that,’ which we make,” according to Louis, “coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul” (*Waves* 137). Feelings of “vanity,” “fear,” and “a desire to be separate” lead the characters, in Louis’s view, to obscure their essential connection, “a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle beneath” (137). Susan “speaks” next, describing not a chain but a “furious coal-black stream that makes us dizzy if we look down into it,” waters of “hate” and “love” (137). Jinny, too, thinks of this shared undercurrent as hate and love, and Neville completes the communal analysis of their interrelation by concluding that “these roaring waters [...] upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise; when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, ‘I am this; I am that!’ Speech is false” (138). The imagery suggests that a collective, unconscious current of affect is more primary than individual articulations of identity, and the allegedly sovereign function of reason is itself “crazy” in its suppression of this elemental truth. Conversation as ordinarily understood is an inevitably vexed attempt to connect with others

aesthetic experience suggests that, if Woolf is indeed a “phenomenophile,” she also considers and queries the possibility of a more sociable attitude toward beauty.

through repressing connectedness, insofar as speech falsely affirms individual identity, differentiating the personal self from the “coal-black stream.”

The striking violence of the imagery representing prelinguistic connectedness in this series of soliloquies complicates its apparent disavowal of “crazy” speech and individuality. *The Waves* is, after all, a cycle of individual articulations, and neither Louis’s image of a chain yoking people together, nor Susan and Neville’s notions of waters that threaten to overwhelm and drown individuals struggling to speak as such, are appealing ways to conceive of human community. A dubious but real value attends individual articulation in this work, yet the dampened distinction between voices and the claim that first-person articulation is “false” suggest that the conceit of individuality is itself at question. When Bernard, in the final section of the book, tries to tell the story of his life, he finds it difficult to do so without implying an autonomy from his friends that he simultaneously disavows. On the other hand, the “false” speech of the individual contains the truth of difference, multiplicity, and diverse perspective. This is a truth that Lily Briscoe alludes to in *To the Lighthouse* when she thinks that “one wanted fifty pairs of eyes” in order to adequately see Mrs. Ramsay (*Lighthouse* 198), and that likewise fuels Woolf’s argument in *A Room of One’s Own* that the world has been impoverished by the suppression of women’s perspectives. There are more sides to a person or flower than any single pair of eyes can see. Difference—the “supreme mystery” of other minds as Clarissa Dalloway puts it (*Mrs. Dalloway* 127)—can neither be accurately represented through speech, nor overcome. By shifting attention from the speaking subject to the “thing [...] seen by many eyes simultaneously,” “conversation” constitutes togetherness premised upon this complex truth of multiplicity. The inherent coal-black connection the characters perceive with such ambivalence transforms through “conversational” attunement into a *sensus communis*, which counters both the isolation of epistemological doubt and the egoistic impulse to distinguish oneself from others, without reverting to engulfing sameness.

The World, Displayed

Immediately following Bernard’s first description of the “seven-sided flower,” Neville suggests that the community indexed by the flower entails a certain kind of worldly awareness, which in turn enables the companions to converse in the ordinary verbal sense: “‘After the capricious fires, the abysmal dullness of youth,’ said Neville, ‘the light falls upon real objects now. Here are knives and forks. The world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk’” (127). “The world,” here, is a distinctly communal world: not the given space of knives and forks (and tablecloths, as per Russell), but that same space transformed into a “world” by shared attention. The characters follow the party from *To the Lighthouse* into consciousness of the aesthetic nature of their community, seeing themselves “displayed” in a similarly revealed world of “real objects,” and this foundation enables them to talk.

A striking resemblance between this world displayed through “conversation” and the description of “worldly reality” Hannah Arendt offers in *The Human Condition* helps distinguish the implications of Woolf’s conversational *sensus communis*. Arendt, like Woolf, proposes a definition of reality in which looking takes on a productive force:

The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself [...]. This is the meaning of public life [...] the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators. Only where things can be

seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (*Human Condition* 57)

Arendt's work pivots around a concern that the "common world" has been lost in modernity. This loss undermines the very possibility of the "meaningfulness" humans can achieve in their public lives through action and speech. Like Russell, Arendt attributes this loss of a common world firstly to epistemic uncertainty, nominating Galileo as the founder of the radical modern doubt that finally questions not only the evidence of the senses, but also all thoughts and experiences, filtered as they are through sense and reason. The famous Cartesian recourse is emblematic for Arendt of the general modern response: a turn inward, toward the ideas one can be certain one has, without knowing their correspondence to any external reality. In this skeptical modernity, "What men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody" (*Human Condition* 283). At the same time that epistemological doubt has weakened the reality of the "common world," "mass society" threatens the condition of plurality that is equally necessary for the unfolding of speech and action. An "unnatural conformity" characterizes "mass society," in which people learn to "behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor" (58). "Worldly reality" is doubly lost, as it relies upon both the existence of a "variety of perspectives" and "everybody [being] concerned with the same object" (57-8).

The model foundation for politics that Arendt finds in the ancient Greek *polis* is a kind of talkative spectatorship, a process by which individuals come to understand through conversation that they look, from many sides, upon the same world. She notes: "In this incessant talk the Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view.... [They learned] to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects" ("Concept of History" 51). Woolf's representation of a process of "making" the common "thing seen by many eyes simultaneously" suggests a similar model of talkative spectatorship, and it links this "conversational" generation of worldly reality with aesthetics. The unwritten final section of Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* was projected to elucidate the faculty of "Judging," developing her notion of the political import of the Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment.⁵⁵ Anticipating both Arendt's theory of talkative spectatorship that conversationally constitutes public life in her philosophy and the turn toward aesthetic judgment of her later political thought, Woolf's "many-sided substance" intimates the link between such pre-political "conversation" and aesthetics that Arendt herself would begin to develop, but not complete, while Arendt's earlier work articulates political implications Woolf leaves unnamed.

⁵⁵ Recent scholarship reconstructs an Arendtian account of political judgment by drawing from her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, notes toward a seminar on the subject, and passages from *The Life of the Mind*. See, for instance, Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, and *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, which place improvisation and freedom at the heart of Arendt's link between political and aesthetic judgment. See also Norval.

Chapter Three: ‘Another Court, Silent and Black’: *The Satanic Verses* and the Conversational Public Sphere

The camera sees broken windows. It sees something burning in the middle distance: a car, a shop. It cannot understand, or demonstrate, what any of this achieves. These people are burning their own streets.

– *The Satanic Verses*

How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?

– Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

The vision of human community formed through the conversational work of “turning together” with which my previous chapter’s reading of *The Waves* ended is troubled by that text’s uneasy awareness that the “dwelling-place” generated by its six protagonists excludes many subjects. Bernard, Neville, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan are privileged white English people; Louis, the Australian who grows up to be a businessman, is wracked with an outsider’s self-consciousness among this elite community. But the true “outside” is located, as Neville articulates, in the expanse of Empire: “We sit here, surrounded, lit up, many coloured; all things—hands, curtains, knives and forks, other people dining—run into each other. We are walled in here. But India lies outside” (135). India—along with England’s other colonies—lies outside the scope of the play-poem’s illumination. Percival’s silent manliness and unheroic death in India reinforce *The Waves*’ uneasy consciousness of the vast and troubling Empire that sustains the “dwelling place” its characters are able to make.

Drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s theorization of the public realm at the end of the chapter, I suggested that the implicitly political quality of a conversationally construed *sensus communis* follows from its illumination that one is looking, or turning, with others. This awareness links a singular perspective upon the world to an experience of human community founded upon plurality, rather than conformity. *The Waves* represents differences such as class, sex, sexuality, national origin, and social priorities, but racial difference remains in its haunting periphery.

Moving from Woolf’s reflection of the interwar years in Britain to the Thatcher years as represented by Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, this chapter theorizes the connection between “conversation” and the public realm more explicitly. Set in England during the riotous 1980s, *The Satanic Verses* offers a parodic critique of British public life after the postcolonial diaspora had carried traces of India and other former colonies definitively, and uneasily, *inside* mainland Britain. The novel queries the possibility that an actually-liberal public sphere might develop in England following the end of the British empire. As the work reflects, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed dramatic racial tension in England, as marginalized communities increasingly resisted their exploited societal position. The burning of “Brickhall” depicted in *The Satanic Verses* references riots in the 1970s and 1980s in Brixton and Southall, London boroughs whose

residents were primarily of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian descent. The mainstream media covered these events using unambiguously xenophobic language; *The Financial Times*, for instance, likened the spread of racial unrest to that of an “alien disease” (“Outbreak”).⁵⁶ Another article from that journal—which was primarily reporting on an international economic summit in Canada—linked international disagreement over interest rates to the “rioting” and observed, “the eight days of street fighting in London, Liverpool and Manchester, have shown that consensus, whether on the international stage or at home, is becoming in dangerously short supply” (“Searching for Consensus”).

Eulogizing “consensus,” such discourse frames alarm about social unrest in terms that evoke a liberal conception of the “public sphere,” a space of rational, measured discussion tending toward consensus. The public’s civil discussion, according to this tradition in political theory, both guides and holds in check political representatives. Such an idealized conception of rational public discourse lurks behind many conservative critiques of social movements. Moreover, as observers like Paul Gilroy and Lee Bridges pointed out at the time of the riots in London, the media’s narrative of racial unrest failed to mention the neighborhood organizing and appeals to the state for justice that preceded the “riots,” focusing only on exaggerated images of destruction.⁵⁷ As elaborated at greater length in this project’s Introduction, the public’s civil discussion, according to this theoretical tradition (elucidated most fully in Jürgen Habermas’s seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), places ideas into competition with each other, and the best ideas eventually rise into broad acceptance by the population and their political representatives. The people flooding the streets of English cities during the Thatcher years were typically excluded from this ideal space of political appearance and intellectual exchange. The foremost issue for such political subjects was, as it remains for many today, the policing of the supposed “consensus.”

The Satanic Verses offers an illuminating study of those forms of public life that deviate from the forms validated by liberal political theory. Riots, after all, are expressive, even if they do not manifest the rational, progressive, and measured qualities favored in liberal political philosophy. Other scholars have noted that *The Satanic Verses* critiques the British tradition of liberalism—while also noting that, ironically, the *fatwā* and street protests against its author have largely overshadowed what Timothy Brennan calls the book’s “neglected political center,” which encompasses a sharply critical satire of British public life during Margaret Thatcher’s time in power (80).⁵⁸ Janice Ho, for instance, analyzes what she calls the “trope of tropicalization”

⁵⁶ *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* and *Policing the Crisis* are two noteworthy examples of contemporary analyses of the media construction of xenophobic panic about racial unrest.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Bridges and Gilroy.

⁵⁸ The present chapter complements this work by Timothy Brennan, as well as recent work by Janice Ho and Peter Kalliney, who each redirect attention toward the novel’s political critique. As Brennan observes, “the neglected political center of the novel is a solidly social democratic demolition of Thatcherite Britain, its fatuous advertisements for a new middle class, its adventurist war in the Falklands, and its increasing police brutality and immigrant exclusionism” (80). As Janice Ho has noted, the novel’s infamous depiction of the Prophet is more complex than the protests and fatwa suggest. Ho argues, “We cannot read the sociopolitical structures of Islam in *The Satanic Verses* as mere mimetic representations of a historical referent. Instead, Rushdie has grafted these structures onto contemporary versions of social marginality, effecting a bifurcation that asks us to draw historical parallels between the persecution of the prophet Muhammad and his followers and the present-day exclusions of immigrant communities in white Britain” (213). “Mahound” is a fundamentalist and a hypocrite, to be sure, but he is also an outsider whose ascent to power challenges an oppressive government that rather resembles the discriminatory Thatcherite State in 1980s Britain. Moreover, Mahound’s fundamentalism is itself represented ambivalently, as both passionate dedication capable of changing the world, and as bloody, unyielding extremism.

deployed through the characterization and actions of Farishta, which “enacts a critique of a long-standing English tradition of ‘temperate’ liberalism” (212). Likening this critique to Carl Schmitt’s “concept of the political” as an arena of radical antagonism rather than temperate discussion, Ho argues that the novel’s “tropicalization” of Brickhall “signals the emergence of an alternative and heated political presence, a radical black consciousness among the nation’s ethnically marginalized denizens” (212). Reading the riot in relation to the novel’s depiction of the “undercity” in which this radical political consciousness develops, rather than in relation to Farishta’s “tropicalization” of Brickhall (which could be interpreted as confirmation that an “alien disease” is indeed sweeping England), I uncover an additional strand of political critique within the novel. *The Satanic Verses* provides something like a *bildung* of a brown-and-black “counterpublic,” to use the term Nancy Fraser would introduce to political theory in a seminal essay published one year after *The Satanic Verses*.

The novel’s *bildung* of a “brown-and-black” counterpublic provides resources for revisiting the liberal ideal of the “public sphere” and conceptualizing public life in a way that views non-rational public demonstrations, from protests and marches to riots, as part of the discourse that comprises public life.⁵⁹ In what follows, I establish a conversation between Rushdie’s novel and political philosophers, not primarily in order to alter the literary-historical understanding of Rushdie’s relation to Black British politics, but rather in order to explore ideals about public life that are central to both the novel and political theorists whose work is not generally put into this sort of conversation with each other, or with fiction. Centering my analysis on the way the counterpublic of the “undercity” forms and interacts with the dominant British “public,” I find that *The Satanic Verses* does not only contrast a liberal, consensus theory of politics to an illiberal, antagonistic theory of politics. Drawing upon a range of philosophers—Nancy Fraser, Hannah Arendt, Lauren Berlant, Stanley Cavell, and Judith Butler—I argue that *The Satanic Verses* hints at a third model, in which public discourse is conceived neither in terms of rational discussion nor partisan antagonism, but rather in terms that I call “conversational.”

I read *The Satanic Verses* alongside theories of public life that deviate from Habermas’s account—theories developed by Nancy Fraser, Hannah Arendt, and Lauren Berlant, among others—in order to develop a new framework for understanding the discursive processes that form and transform the public sphere. I trace the novel’s critical depiction of the dominant British “public sphere” and elucidate the process by which the black “counterpublic” arises in what the novel calls the “undercity” of Brickhall. Tracking this process, I reveal a new strand of postcolonial critique within the text, which directly challenges traditional conceptions of the public sphere. In contrast to the liberal fantasy of rational discussion, the framework I develop with Rushdie, Arendt, Fraser, Berlant and others privileges the discursive practice of “conversation.” The resulting theoretical lens has the potential to enhance our understanding of

⁵⁹ The novel alternates between referring to the Indian characters as “brown” and “black” in a manner that reflects an alternation prevalent at the time in both public discourse and the self-description of people of South Asian descent. In Stuart Hall’s words, “[There was a] moment when the term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities” (“New ethnicities” 442). As I will show, the novel also hints subtly at problems generated in this “organizing category.” Nonetheless, I refer to the counterpublic that arises as “black,” both because that is the word the novel uses in its descriptions of Brickhall, and because the oppositional force it represents in the novel is *ontologically* disruptive to the dominant public sphere in a manner similar to the force that scholars in Black Studies often identify with “blackness” in Western discourse. This, too, is a point I will return to later in the chapter.

the conflicts and possibilities that arise when those in an “undercity” demand inclusion in public life.

According to Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* celebrates diasporic “hybridity;” it affirms “intermingling” and disavows rigidly “pure” identities, whether religious or national: “mélange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*” (*In Good Faith* 4). If the novel affirms these things, it does so negatively, by satirizing English “purity” and showing it to be mobilized by the police and media against “intermingling,” with devastating consequences. The conversational theory of public life that I develop through this reading of *The Satanic Verses* clarifies the process by which “intermingling” in the novel leads to a riot, providing an interpretive framework useful for any “public” in which consensus seems short in supply.

The English Public of *The Satanic Verses*

The Satanic Verses tells the story of two Indian men, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha (born Salahuddin Chamchawalla), who transform into an angel and a devil while falling to English soil from the exploded remains of a hijacked airplane. Once in England, the men meet very different fates. Farishta, having gained a halo in the fall, is warmly embraced by English society, while Chamcha is rejected in his new hairy and horned state. Both men suffer, however. Farishta slips frequently into psychotic fantasies in which he is the Angel Gibreel, visiting the Prophet at the conquest of Mecca and a mystic leading an Indian village on pilgrimage to Mecca. Chamcha is brutally arrested and sent to an immigrant detention center, and later finds himself welcome only among the “undercity” of racial outcasts and activists. There is undoubtedly a great deal to be said about the novel’s presentation of two diverging immigrant stories: in Chamcha’s story, the immigrant grows less and less legible to the British ruling class, and, against his will, begins to identify with the dark-skinned underclass. In Farishta’s, the immigrant is more warmly embraced but suffers from paranoid schizophrenia and a loss of stable identity. Farishta’s delusions begin prior to the hijacking, so we ought not to derive a tidy parable about assimilation from his story. In any case, the novel’s center is Chamcha’s story, and my analysis will focus on passages set in his new community, the undercity. Farishta’s story serves as a fascinating ancillary narrative that provides (critical) commentary on Islam, the film industry, and destructive envy, but I will save further analysis of the significance of their parallel narratives for elsewhere.

With horns, hooves, and sulphurous breath, Chamcha seems to have become the allegorical embodiment of xenophobic fears of the immigrant Other. Before his transformation, he had been a successfully assimilated Indian Englishman, married to a white woman, obsessed with aristocratic British tastes, and enjoying a media career that has earned him the nickname “Brown Uncle Tom” (267). Following the airplane hijacking, Chamcha is presumed dead and his wife Pamela takes up with another Indian man named “Jumpy” Joshi. When Chamcha appears in his new, beastly form, Pamela refuses to allow him into their home, and he is exiled to the diasporic “undercity” of London’s Brickhall. He hides out in a boarding house above the Shaandaar Café, the convivial heart of the undercity, and develops an uneasy relationship with its proprietors, Muhammad and Hind Sufyan, and their teenage daughters, Mishal and Anahita.

In the novel’s portrait of Thatcher’s Britain, Englishness is a fiction. Anglophilic Chamcha has adopted all the markers of “Englishness” prior to his transformation, conflating Englishness with the “the good,” and both with the upper classes (256). His self-made English incarnation is dedicated to “assiduity, fastidiousness, moderation, restraint, self-reliance, probity,

family life,” a “moral code” he equates with his adopted country (257). He is a British citizen by law and obsessive assimilation. He admires the characteristic reserve that Farishta views as evidence of “hearts of bloody ice” (131). Before the fateful hijacking and magical metamorphosis, he has assimilated fairly successfully, having worked hard since arriving in England to attend boarding school at age 13 to become “a good and proper Englishman” (43). Among “classmates [who] giggled at his voice and excluded him from their secrets,” he began to hone the skills of mimicry that would later constitute his career: “that was when he began to act, to find masks that these fellows would recognize, paleface masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was *okay*, he was *people-like-us*” (43). As an adult, he is a successful professional actor and is married to posh-sounding Pamela, who is fleeing her own upper-class past into their “marriage of crossed purposes, each of them rushing towards the very thing from which the other was in flight” (180).

Chamcha’s fantasies about both Englishness and his own assimilation are dashed when he falls from the sky to England following the hijacking. He is immediately arrested by immigration authorities, while Farishta is warmly welcomed by those he scorns as uptight and cold. Chamcha dissociates the “moderate and common-sensical land” of his fantasy England from the police van in which he is abused by lower class officers who disregard his insistence that he is a British citizen and prove oddly unfazed by his horns (158).

Chamcha’s mistreatment—and the officers’ unquestioning acceptance of his status as half-man, half-animal—is in fact unsurprising, when viewed by the light of his supposed “success” in English society. His career is founded upon a set of skills honed in response to his exclusion from English society, and his success has been limited by the same prejudice that inspired its boarding-school origins. There are fewer opportunities for a man “of the tinted persuasion,” as Chamcha is told by TV producer and advertising executive Hal Valance (267). In Chamcha’s first meeting with Valance, the ad-man presents Chamcha with “some facts”:

Within the last three months, we re-shot a peanut-butter poster because it researched better without the black kid in the background. We re-recorded a building society jingle because the Chairman thought the singer sounded black, even though he was white as a sodding sheet, and even though, the year before, we'd used a black boy who, luckily for him, didn't suffer from an excess of soul. We were told by a major airline that we couldn't use any blacks in their ads, even though they were actually employees of the airline. A black actor came to audition for me and he was wearing a Racial Equality button badge, a black hand shaking a white one. I said this: don't think you're getting special treatment from me, chum. You follow me? You follow what I'm telling you? (267)

In light of these “facts,” Chamcha pursues voice acting parts; he and an overweight Jewish American woman named Mimi Mamoulian become so ubiquitous as the voices of characters in radio dramas and animated TV commercials that Chamcha thinks of them as “legends of a sort, but crippled legends, dark stars. The gravitational field of their abilities drew work towards them, but they remained invisible, shedding bodies to put on voices” (60-61). As his Indian lover Zeeny taunts him, “They pay you to imitate them, as long as they don't have to look at you. Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face. Got any ideas why?” (60).

The novel plays up the irony of Chamcha’s and Mimi’s invisible presence throughout British media, asserting that they “ruled the airwaves of Britain” (60). The cheeky inversion of the jingoistic poem and song “Rule, Britannia!” seems to suggest that imperialist chauvinism has backfired. We are accustomed to the idea that immigrants dominate unskilled segments of the

labor economy in their new countries. But here, the presumed superiority of Englishness and strict norms of femininity have pushed two immigrants with nonconforming bodies to develop skills that make them dominate the airwaves, a synecdoche for British public culture. Englishness itself may be approximated by adopting a vocal “mask;” it is a performance, but one whose visible stage is barred for those “of the tinted persuasion.”

Through Valance, the novel links its parodic representation of British media with the government of Margaret Thatcher. Valance is a personal friend of Thatcher, “ma[king] much of his ‘intimate’ association with the Prime Minister he referred to affectionately as ‘Mrs. Torture,’” until his television show flops and he loses her favor (266). Valance is described as “one of the glories of the age,” “the personification of philistine triumphalism” and a caricature of the liberal fantasy of self-making taken to an empty extreme: “a monster: pure, self-created image” (266). (His name, of course, bears the Dickensian signification of superfluous furnishings). Both he and Chamcha are products of assiduous cultivation, a parallel that lodges another ironic jab at conservative inconsistency, for who is a better icon of liberalism than the immigrant who makes his way in an unwelcoming new country? According to Valance, Thatcher’s neoliberalism revives classic liberalism, positing the unfettered market as the answer to the novel’s recurrent question, *how does newness enter the world?* “What [Thatcher] wants,” he tells Chamcha, “what she actually thinks she can fucking *achieve* – is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country” (270). He tells Chamcha that Thatcher’s project is to replace “the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really *want*, and who know that with her, they can bloody well get” (270). Thatcher is a “radical,” he says, and her policies amount to “a bloody revolution. Newness coming into this country that’s stuffed full of fucking old *corpses*” (270).

Construing Thatcher as the “radical” enemy of entrenched privilege, Valance posits the market as the source of “newness” broadly conceived.⁶⁰ Social change, in this view, follows from economic rather than political processes, and the political realm is called upon not to change society, but rather to keep out of the way of the realm that can do so: the market. The limitations of this understanding are couched in Valance’s reporting of “the facts” about racial bias and its effect on media representation; when a political issue like race relations is left to the market, a circle of self-perpetuating prejudice solidifies. Prejudice determines the public’s entertainment demands, and, meeting these demands, the media refuels the prejudice. Gesturing toward this closed circuit of imaginative life through the parodic Hal Valance, *The Satanic Verses* gives subtle political substance to Mimi Mamoulian’s bored recitation of “postmodernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a ‘flattened’ world” (261).⁶¹ As we will see, the political consequences of the biased media become sharply

⁶⁰ The historical record shows that Thatcher was more dedicated to destroying organized labor than “fucking old *corpses*” like the monarchy and the House of Lords, which suggests that her allegiance lay less with free competition than with unimpeded capital accumulation. See Ellen Meiksins Wood for a cogent articulation of the Thatcher record and its contradiction of its “self-evaluation as a ‘modernizing’ project against the grain of Britain’s persistent backwardness” (166).

⁶¹ Frederic Jameson, one of the most prominent theorists of this “flattened” world, famously argued near the time of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* that such “flatness” suppresses individuals’ ability to recognize themselves as historical subjects, interfering with the sort of “cognitive mapping” that fosters political subjectivity. This Marxist concern about the postmodern condition can be phrased in terms of the novel’s inquiry into “newness”: in a flattened world, capable only of pastiche, newness simply does not enter the world. In other words, *The Satanic Verses* parodies the commodity culture targeted by critical theorists of late capitalism, while indicating the tangible

evident in the passages leading up to and depicting the “riot.”

The novel’s sketch of British culture is particularly damning when viewed against theoretical articulations of the function of the public sphere in liberal society. As outlined in this project’s introduction, the “public sphere” is a key formulation in liberal political theory. It forms through the discussions of citizens gathering in public to deliberate matters of common concern; this discursive public space is allegedly free from the coercion of the government and the likewise coercive appeals of necessity attended to in the “private” sphere. The discussions among citizens ostensibly exert a check on the power of the government, and—in the optimism of Enlightenment liberals—a kind of free-market competition among the ideas circulating in discussion leads to the best ideas prevailing. Numerous critics have faulted Habermas for supposing, for theory’s sake at least, that we “bracket” the social inequalities—often tied to race, class, and gender—that dictate exclusions from the “public sphere.” In any case, the Britannia “ruled” by posh-mimicking immigrants and a market cast as “revolutionary” is a far cry from Habermas’s ideal of modern states governed by disinterested, rational discussion.

The Undercity

The Shaandaar Café and Boarding House, Chamcha’s refuge after his return to an inhospitable Britain, resembles the precursor to the public sphere that Habermas describes, the early-modern coffee houses at which tradesmen met to discuss issues focalized through circulating journals. In this way, is tempting to read the Shaandaar as the sort of space of alternative belonging and expression that Nancy Fraser has called a “subaltern counterpublic” (67). Such counterpublics, Fraser argues, “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics,” as marginalized populations “elaborat[e] alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (67, 61). Counterpublics are “discursive arenas” parallel to the bourgeois liberal public sphere, “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (67). In Fraser’s telling, counterpublics are not necessarily democratic or egalitarian, but the “counterdiscourses” generated by subordinated groups “permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and need”—a process fundamental to democracy as a whole (67). Nor are all counterpublics equally dedicated to intervening in public discourse; as I will demonstrate, *The Satanic Verses* provides a *bildung* in which the “undercity” develops from a space of refuge from political violence, to a space of organizing against political violence.

Chamcha makes his way to the Shaandaar after escaping from a detention facility, where he and the other detained immigrants have been subjected to ambiguous medical treatment—or possibly, it is hinted, experimentation. A fellow inmate suggests that the British authorities exercise a sort of biopolitical power of performative utterance: “They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (168). Here, the novel invites one of its many possible allegorical interpretations: the immigrants become monstrous and beastly as a consequence of their racist “descriptions” by their hosts. (Like the many other allegorical interpretations the novel bids the reader to consider, this interpretation does not adequately

consequences of these features of culture in post-imperial race relations. Racial inequality drives the “demand” for racially biased representations in entertainment and advertising media, and in a flattened world of pure exchange rather than original production, the generation of genuinely post-colonial conceptions of race is not possible. Jameson’s influential essay, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” first appeared a few years before *The Satanic Verses*, in 1984.

account of its excessive plot—a point I will return to later.) Chamcha and several other inmates manage to escape, but his wife, his embodiment of Englishness, rejects him when he appears with hooves and horns in their entryway. Her new lover, who happens to be Chamcha's college friend Jumpy Joshi, takes Chamcha to the Shaandaar, the center of "that otherworld [...] that undercity whose existence [Chamcha] had so long denied" (412).⁶²

Residents of the undercity gather at the Shaandaar for coffee, food, and conversation, particularly with its male proprietor, Muhammad Sufyan. A schoolteacher in India, Sufyan and his family moved to England after his involvement with the Communist Party posed problems for them in India. He now serves as "mentor to the variegated, transient and particoloured inhabitants of both [café and boarding house]" (243). Joshi is one of Muhammad's mentees, retreating to the café to write poetry that strives to "reclaim" racist metaphors like the "rivers of blood" trope and seeking solace there during rough patches with Pamela. Another regular, Hanif Johnson, comes less for mentorship than for a chance to ogle the Sufyans' seventeen-year-old daughter, Mishal. Johnson is a lawyer with connections in the Labor Party; he purports to maintain an office at the Shaandaar in order "to keep in touch with the grass roots" (271).

The Shaandaar provides refuge to many besides Chamcha. In fact, the Sufyans profit heavily by "claiming 'temporary accommodation' allowances from the central government" for lodging people who cannot be placed in public housing (264). The rooms are overcrowded by families without other options: "Behind six doors that opened a crack every time Chamcha went to make a phone call or use the toilet, [were] maybe thirty temporary human beings, with little hope of being declared permanent" (264). Idealistic Muhammad is unaware that his wife and daughters are "ra[king] in the cash" by this arrangement, or, as Hanif Johnson later accuses, "mak[ing] fortunes off the misery of your own race" (290). Hind Sufyan, however, assesses the Shaandaar's success without romanticism: "O, yes, of course the customers liked [Muhammad's] personality, he always had an appealing character, but when you're running an eatery it isn't the conversation they pay for on the bill. Jalebis, barfi, Special of the Day. How life had turned out! She was the mistress now" (248).

Joshi brings Chamcha to the Shaandaar the night he returns, and the Sufyan family holds "an impromptu crisis summit" to determine what to do with the devilish goat-man (251). With a "gallery of nightgowned residents" watching, the family conference evokes a session of Parliament, with its own shadow public. The scene manifests, in "tinted" parody, the Habermasian idea of deliberations among citizens in the public sphere, which inform, and inspire the form of, the deliberations by which their representatives govern the nation under the watchful collective eye. The nightgowned residents murmur with assent and dissent as their representatives discuss Chamcha, invoking western science and pseudo-science (Mr. Sufyan advocates for a Lamarckian explanation of Chamcha's appearance, insisting that Darwin himself would concur), Hollywoodized religion (Mishal wonders if Chamcha needs an exorcism), conservative morality (Mrs. Sufyan exclaims about the risk to the "honour, safety of young girls"), and literature (Mr. Sufyan references *Steppenwolf*). The discussion takes a decisive turn,

⁶² The Shaandaar hosts the "convivial" culture Paul Gilroy has recently associated with multicultural communities in Britain. Arguing against the apparently still-prevailing opinion that diversity and community cannot easily coexist, Gilroy uses the term "conviviality" to designate "a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity, but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication. In these conditions, a degree of differentiation can be combined with a large measure of overlapping" ("Multiculture in Times of War" 40). See also Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

however, when Joshi intervenes, enjoining the gathering to take an “ideological view” of Chamcha’s condition.

Here, in the comically disorganized form of Joshi’s speech, the novel parodies its own most obvious allegorical reading. Chamcha, Joshi argues, represents the general experience of immigrants in Britain:

‘The central requirement,’ he announced, ‘is to take an ideological view of the situation.’

That silenced everyone.

‘Objectively,’ he said, with a small self-deprecating smile, ‘what has happened here? A: Wrongful arrest, intimidation, violence. Two: Illegal detention, unknown medical experimentation in hospital,’ murmurs of assent here, as memories of intra-vaginal inspections, Depo-Provera scandals, unauthorized post-partum sterilizations, and, further back, the knowledge of Third World drug-dumping arose in every person present to give substance to the speaker’s insinuations, – because what you believe depends on what you’ve seen, – not only what is visible, but what you are prepared to look in the face, – and anyhow, something had to explain horns and hoofs; in those policed medical wards, anything could happen – ‘And thirdly,’ Jumpy continued, ‘psychological breakdown, loss of sense of self, inability to cope. We’ve seen it all before.’

Nobody argued, not even Hind; there were some truths from which it was impossible to dissent. (252-3)

Chamcha has been disfigured by the racist state, Joshi suggests, and his monstrous form is only an extreme manifestation of conditions the gathered residents have experienced first- or second-hand.

Building his case from shared embodied experiences of the most private sort, Joshi’s rhetoric inverts bedrock convictions of public sphere theory, dispensing with the impersonality and abstract rationality considered crucial in most theories of the public sphere and political speech. In accounts from Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel through John Stuart Mill, Jürgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt, politically meaningful speech is supposed to be undertaken in a state of disinterested rationality. This requirement for abstract, disembodied discourse has been invoked historically to deny political speech to subjects construed by those in power as excessively particular: people of color and women, whose bodies and “natural” tendencies, it is implied, draw them irremediably out of the category of the “universal” human. The particulars of the white, heterosexual and able-bodied male are masked beneath the caption of “universal,” and it has been suggested time and again in various ways that divergence from this norm makes a person incapable of the disinterested and rational speech that constitutes public life. Directing attention toward Chamcha’s bodily particularities, and building solidarity on the basis of shared, embodied, and personal experiences, Joshi defies this logic. He insists that the nightgowned parliament should judge based on their own first-hand exposures to biopolitical abuses and degradations. These experiences, the narrator comically suggests, make them “prepared to look in the face” at a truth that is impossible to dispute. Although the syntax suggests that some quality of truths determines whether they may be disputed, the claim is blatantly parodic: Truth in this passage derives its compelling force not because of its abstract immutability, but because of its affective power upon the subjective perceiver. In any case, Joshi’s speech attempts to make Chamcha the (unwilling) referent for the sociological category of English immigrants precisely *because* of the latter’s particular, embodied experiences, which spotlight dispersed experiences

currently lacking representation within mainstream British political discourse. That is, Joshi's address to the nightgowned parliament seeks to establish the prepolitical conditions of representability for the class of person Chamcha is made to represent.

Joshi also overdoes the allegorical interpretation, and through this parody of the sort of reading the book might itself provoke, *The Satanic Verses* offers a subtle—and as far as I can discover, unintended—response to Frederic Jameson's notorious claim, first advanced in a talk in 1986, that, "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" ("Third-World Literature" 69, his emphasis). In Joshi's "reading," Chamcha's individual destiny is an allegory of the public *diasporic*, rather than third-world, culture and experience. By staging this ideological over-reading, the novel anticipates and diverts a reader's fixation on easy allegorical parallels between Chamcha's experience and the experience of Third World immigrants. The scene subtly critiques ideological uses of literature, as the reading Joshi advances is particularly crude. His argument advocates subsuming Chamcha's individuality beneath a more general historical "type," in a manner that occludes the peculiarities of Chamcha's experience. The element of magic is the most striking detail that exceeds and destabilizes the "objective" yet "ideological" views Joshi promotes. Another noteworthy absence from Joshi's reading is Chamcha's most pointed personal grievance: his wife's abandonment of him for his friend. Both Joshi's motives and methods are questionable.

The scene also sketches a critique of a particular mode of representation. There is something subtly liberal about Joshi's move—subtly in line with the impulse to universalize that is necessary to liberalism: he turns Chamcha into an abstraction even while pointing to his particularities.⁶³ The "gallery" is told that it has "seen it all before," that their prior experiences account for the miraculous goat-man—that he is an exaggerated instance of their own typical experience: this proposition, of course, absurdly overlooks the horns and hooves. The scene thus elicits a paradox of representation in both realist fiction and liberal political systems: an individual is proposed as the representative of a "type"—he is proposed as this representative because of how particular his experiences are, and there is an uncertain relationship between his experience and identity and the identities and experiences of his "public." The scene suggests that this movement, this allegorical reading that blends the individual and the class, is performed in order to solidify political identifications among the undercity. But in simplifying his "reading" of Chamcha, Joshi fails to recognize a genuine instance of "newness."

At the time of the Shaandaar summit, readers have recently learned that Hind Sufyan experiences her own version of an unsettling translation from an individual person into an impersonal exemplar of a historical category of person. She strongly dislikes life in England,

⁶³ Parodying the strong-armed attempt to rationally and ideologically explain Chamcha's inexplicable state, *The Satanic Verses* offers the germs of a critique of abstraction and classification rather similar to those offered in critical theory. For instance, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer – loose affiliates of Habermas in the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory – argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that, "the rule of enlightenment," abstraction strives to make all objects and experiences comprehensible to reason. Abstract classification requires neglecting, or erasing, details that do not easily fit the categories, and according to Adorno and Horkheimer, particulars always deviate from the abstractions of human conceptualization. According to the strong-armed reasoning of the Enlightenment, "whatever might be different is made the same," they write, and the forced identification of a concrete particular with an abstract universal means that nothing is permitted to be "identical to itself" (8).

where her husband cannot practice his previous dignified career as a schoolteacher, and where racism and violence are part of daily life. But the crowning degradation of her life in London is the flattening of her individual personhood, its dissolution under the force of history:

They had come into a demon city in which anything could happen, your windows shattered in the middle of the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands, in the shops you heard such abuse you felt like your ears would drop off but when you turned in the direction of the words you saw only empty air and smiling faces, and every day you heard about this boy, that girl, beaten up by ghosts. -- Yes, a land of phantom imps, how to explain; best thing was to stay home, not go out for so much as to post a letter, stay in, lock the door, say your prayers, and the goblins would (maybe) stay away [...] – and worst of all, the poison of this devil-island had infected her baby girls, who were growing up refusing to speak their mothertongue, even though they understood every word, they did it just to hurt; and why else had Mishal cut off all her hair and put rainbows into it; and every day it was fight, quarrel, disobey, – and worst of all, there was not one new thing about her complaints, this is how it was for women like her, so now she was no longer just one, just herself, just Hind wife of teacher Sufyan; she had sunk into the anonymity, the characterless plurality, of being merely one-of-the- women-like-her. This was history's lesson: nothing for women-like-her to do but suffer, remember, and die. (250)

It is commonplace to observe that immigrants frequently suppress aspects of their personal identities in order to blend into their adoptive cultures. But Hind's list of complaints spotlights a different force of anonymization: the historical forces she encounters as an Indian woman in England feel so powerful that nothing individual remains to her. Her identity becomes a cliché, and her awareness of this flattening does nothing to mitigate the effect. Moreover, her experiences separate her from the public spaces of London: "best thing was to stay home," indoors, out of the streets where "phantom imps" render life unbearable.

Perceiving her predicament in terms of characterization—or rather, lack thereof, as she blends into a characterless anonymity—Hind's experience of diasporic life in England suggests that living in England is like living in a narrative in which only white subjects can be fully developed characters. Her particular qualities are subsumed to those of the social category she fits, "women-like-her," who seem to be totally absorbed into a historical narrative beyond their control. Her experience suggests two things: she is a secondary character in the "narrative" constituting English public life, and this narrative reduction of a marginal political subject overflows the bounds of public discourse, making a woman-like-Hind lose her sense of her own individual particularity.

Hind gives voice to the inverse of the political allegorization Chamcha resists: whereas political discourse might treat an individual's destiny as an allegory of collective experience, politically- or historically-determined experience leads this woman to lose track of the aspects of her self that do not accommodate her life to similar abstraction. Here is an ironic culmination to the list of ways in which Chamcha's experience reflects the immigrant experience more generally: his bodily difference makes him an exile from polite British society; he has been abused by the state in an immigrant detention center (in spite of being a British citizen); and the very frustration of becoming the unwilling representation of a historical category of person is itself an aspect of the immigrant experience. Alienated from the abstract "universal" of human, the immigrant is abstracted into another class of people, one which does not gain political power

in exchange for the loss of individuality. The politically marginal are simultaneously too particular, allegedly diverging from the normative “universal” human type, and too abstract, their individual particularities erased by the powerful sameness of fate faced by those denied political subjecthood.

It is worth distinguishing these warnings about the erasure of individual subjects in the fields of history or political discourse from the rather trite view of “postmodernity” parroted by Mimi Mamoulian, that the world has been “flattened” and history reduced to post-structural textuality. *The Satanic Verses* does not reduce history to textual narrative, but rather, it illuminates two distinct, but interrelated, confluences between history and narrative: as Hind’s experience shows, a particular kind of historical disempowerment registers as identification with one’s narrative construction in the minds of others, an alienated perception of oneself as a part of a “characterless plurality” shaped by history; as Chamcha’s experience shows, this discursive translation can be a precursor to political response. If Hind’s experience is typical, Joshi’s “ideological” reframing of Chamcha’s predicament shows how the typical can be inserted into a different narrative, one aimed at stimulating action rather than surrendering to historical fate. This transposition from one narrative frame into another is the work of a certain form of political speech, the novel suggests.

Joshi’s ham-fisted reading of Chamcha indicates a route toward symbolically sculpting the undercity into a politically-oriented counterpublic. He is seeking, as Nancy Fraser puts it, to “invent and circulate counterdiscourses.” The plot following this moment, however, disappoints the political hopes a reader like Joshi might develop for the awakening consciousness of the undercity, and in this way it anticipates and dramatizes one of Lauren Berlant’s key objections to Fraser’s theorization of subaltern counterpublics. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant argues that Fraser attributes too much political significance to the discursive communities that form in the margins, regardless of their capacity or even intention to alter the political arena. Berlant writes that the “counterpublic model tends to over-enmesh a mess of different things,” generally contributing to a false view of communities formed by marginal groups as inherently political (7-8). Berlant develops her alternative idea of the “intimate public” in *The Female Complaint*’s analysis of imaginary communities of middle class (mostly white) American women unified by consumption of sentimental media and objects. These consumption practices express shared fantasies: “Intimate publics elaborate themselves through a commodity culture; have an osmotic relation to many modes of life; and are organized by fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacles that shape their historical conditions” (8). The *bildung* of the counterpublic in *The Satanic Verses* can in fact be seen as a representation of the transformation of an “intimate public” into a critical, and political, counterpublic.

During his residence in the attic of the Shaandaar, Chamcha inexplicably begins “to appear to the locals in their dreams” (285). To the white locals, he is a “sulphurous enemy crushing their perfectly restored residences beneath his smoking heel,” whereas “nocturnal browns-and-blacks found themselves cheering, in their sleep, this what-else-after-all-but-black-man, maybe a little twisted up by fate class race history, all that, but getting off his behind, bad and mad, to kick a little ass” (286). In a clear case of dream wish-fulfillment, which helps to clarify the nature of unexpressed wishes, the “nocturnal browns-and-blacks” view Chamcha as their representative, kicking ass after deformation by “fate class race history, all that.” A subconscious public solidarity is revealed through the shared embrace of Chamcha’s dream incarnation.

Instead of galvanizing the undercity into collective action or other forms of political solidarity, however, the “power of the dream” is harnessed by “Asian retailers and manufacturers of button-badges sweatshirts posters [...], and then all of a sudden he was everywhere, on the chests of young girls and in the windows protected against bricks by metal grilles, he was a defiance and a warning” (286). In short, the revolutionary energy tapped by Chamcha’s image is commodified, absorbed by the market and domesticated into consumption practices. At this point, a dispersed semipublic resembling Berlant’s conception of an “intimate public” has begun to form in the “undercity.”

Berlant argues that the women whose fantasy and consumption practices link them in such “intimate public” life conceive the more traditional “public” realm as “a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization [rather] than a condition of possibility” (11). In Rushdie’s novel, the residents of the undercity certainly associate the public realm with trauma and degradation, as many of them have been detained repeatedly by the police and subjected to humiliating treatment by immigration authorities. Indeed, it is upon this shared sense of threat that Joshi builds his case for accommodating Chamcha at the Shaandaar. In light of Berlant’s analysis of “intimate publics,” we might suppose that the undercity finds “public” expression first in the realm of consumption because of the relative safety and accessibility of this realm. But just as the “intimate publics” Berlant describes express desires beyond pure consumption in their engagement with sentimental commodities, the dispersal of Chamcha’s image through “button-badges sweatshirts posters” lifts shared feelings into visibility and a kind of prepolitical publicity.

It is the arrest of outspoken activist Uhuru Simba that catalyzes the transformation of this “intimate public” into a politically active “counterpublic,” a force of organized resistance to state authority.⁶⁴ Simba is arrested for a series of murders of elderly white women, and he is also made the “fall guy” for the so-called “new occultism among the city’s blacks”—the official interpretation of the circulation of Chamcha’s devilish likeness (288). There is no evidence supporting the police’s charge, but Simba is nonetheless “tried and convicted” in the mainstream media, which seems to equate his radical anti-western politics with evidence of murder: the press “was full of Simba’s support for Qazhafi, Khomeini, Louis Farrakhan” (450). Meanwhile, “in another court, silent and black, he had received an entirely more favourable judgment” (450). As we will see, it is this conflict between the judgment of the undercity and the judgment of the dominant British public that fuels the conflict leading ultimately to a riot that destroys much of Brickhall. In other words, the undercity’s coalescence into a fully political counterpublic occurs as a consequence of “conversation,” the collective viewing of—turning together toward—a concrete wrong. And conversely, the street disputes that flame into the riot may also be understood as a conversational conflict, a fundamental disagreement over the nature of the common world.

⁶⁴ Recent movements for racial justice in the US – and before them, for economic justice against the irresponsibility of Wall Street – follow this same pattern: a dispersed feeling of injury is perceptible in the atmosphere of commodities, music, television shows, etc., but it focuses into action and political speech when an event triggers a collective turning-toward, and with: when we know that black men are killed extrajudicially at a higher rate now than in Jim Crow days, and that the killers are often agents of the state who face no reprisal, we have a common cause, a common object of perception, a common ability to map ourselves historically. The phrase Black Lives Matter asserts much more than would, for instance, Cops Must Stop Killing Black People, and the BLM movement expands from that central focus to a broader critique of systemic devaluing of black lives in education, drug enforcement, nonlethal policing, finance, and every other institutional realm of American life. The focal grievance grounds the wider appeal.

Inventions of Counterdiscourses

With Simba's arrest, collective consumption is replaced by collective action, beginning with a deliberative community meeting. Members of the Brickhall community gather to discuss how to respond to the baseless arrest. Chamcha, who has regained his human form and returned to a house he now shares with Joshi and Pamela, attends the meeting in hopes of seeing the attractive Mishal Sufyan. Mishal is a central organizer in the undercity and the new lover of Hanif Johnson, Simba's lawyer. Through Chamcha's cynical perspective, the novel raises and dissolves stereotypes about such community organizing:

He had expected the meeting to be small, envisaging a back room somewhere full of suspicious types looking and talking like clones of Malcolm X [...] with maybe a few angry-looking women as well; he had pictured much fist-clenching and righteousness. What he found was a large hall, the Brickhall Friends Meeting House, packed wall-to-wall with every conceivable sort of person -- old, wide women and uniformed schoolchildren, Rastas and restaurant workers, the staff of the small Chinese supermarket in Plassey Street, soberly dressed gents as well as wild boys, whites as well as blacks; the mood of the crowd was far from the kind of evangelical hysteria he'd imagined; it was quiet, worried, wanting to know what could be done. (413)

Chamcha arrives with the prejudices of an outsider whose knowledge of the "undercity" has, until recently, been obtained only through the mainstream media. What he finds instead of the "evangelical hysteria" he expects is a diverse and inclusive, reasonable and calm "counterpublic" calmly gathering its bearings for political action.

Once more, the novel portrays a community's abstraction of an individual man, this time Uhuru Simba, into a galvanizing symbol. Chamcha immediately notes a weakness in this rhetorical organization of the undercity: Simba is not a good man. He has a reputation for violence, particularly against women. As Joshi acknowledges, "in his personal life, [...] the guy's frankly a piece of shit" (412). But, Joshi continues, this "doesn't mean he disembowels senior citizens; you don't have to be an angel to be innocent. Unless, of course, you're black" (412). True as this may be, Joshi loses Chamcha when he concludes, "Simba's bull craziness is, you could say, a trouble in the family. What we have here is trouble with the Man" (415). To Chamcha, such speech unhelpfully elides relevant details about the particular man: "a man's record of violence," Chamcha reflects, "could not be set aside so easily when he was accused of murder" (415). But more problematic is the historical transposition at work in Joshi's utterance:

[Chamcha] didn't like the use of such American terms as 'the Man' in the very different British situation, where there was no history of slavery; it sounded like an attempt to borrow the glamour of other, more dangerous struggles, a thing he also felt about the organizers' decision to punctuate the speeches with such meaning-loaded songs as *We Shall Overcome*, and even, for Pete's sake, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*. As if all causes were the same, all histories interchangeable. (415)

Histories are not being interchanged in the meeting, but the referents attached to them are: perhaps, as Chamcha reflects, in order to "borrow the glamour of other, more dangerous struggles," or perhaps to sketch a broader global solidarity of people of color. As in Joshi's "ideological view" of Chamcha's metamorphosis and Hind's absorption into "characterless

plurality,” the novel identifies a problem of political reference, in which a particular situation is subsumed under a broader category. Under Chamcha’s gaze, the effort, whatever its motives, appears to equate importantly different racial grievances, a move akin to the “post-modern” logic of “flatness.” The flattening of racial struggles seems to prevent (once again) collective perception of a genuinely new, historically specific occurrence. The perceptual object that organizes the new counterpublic is oscillating between the specific incident of Simba’s arrest and the local injustice it indexes, and a more abstract conception of racial injustice.

Simba himself embraces the mantle of representing an abstract revolutionary blackness. At the community meeting, his mother repeats a speech he allegedly delivered in court during his committal proceedings: “I stand here, my son declared, 'because I have chosen to occupy the old and honourable role of the uppity nigger. I am here because I have not been willing to seem reasonable. I am here for my ingratitude’” (414). More specifically, he seeks to occupy the familiar symbolic role of the black revolutionary who will transform a stultified and oppressive western culture⁶⁵:

'Make no mistake,' he said in that court, 'we are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed; African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children. We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top. We shall be the hewers of the dead wood and the gardeners of the new. It is our turn now.' (414)

Most in the community affirm Simba’s self-nomination as a symbol of resistance to the state’s oppression of black people, rallying at the suggestion that an awakened counterpublic might remake England. But Chamcha’s concerns revive the novel’s earlier ambivalence about representation, suggesting that this counterpublic’s efforts to “remake [its] society” are tainted from the outset by a conflation of historical and political aims that obscures the features of the particular society to be remade.

Along similar lines, it is worth noting the denotative slippage throughout the novel between “brown” and “black,” a slippage that reflects both public and “counter-public” discourse in England in the 1980s, but which the novel subtly signals to be problematic. Chamcha is “what-else-after-all-but-black” when he is most distorted by the force of the state, and when he represents a force of direct opposition to “civil” society. The very collapsing of “browns-and-blacks” into a category is itself a move that has been critiqued in recent years by Black Studies scholars. Anti-blackness, scholars in this tradition argue, is foundational to modernity in a way that colonial dehumanization is not. Colonialism helped build the power sustaining Western “Enlightenment,” but the structural non-personhood of colonial subjects has proven to be historical and mutable in a way that the non-personhood of black subjects has not been. Critics like Frank B Wilderson and Jared Sexton point to temporary alliances between Blacks and others struggling for social justice, maintaining that such alliances typically cease once the demands of the nonblack cohort are acknowledged; while the struggles of nonblack people of color are “political conflicts,” the struggles of Black subjects are “antagonisms” that cannot be resolved

⁶⁵ Exemplary of this prevalent view of black revolutionary energy is Hazel Carby’s claim that “black youth recognise liberal dreamers and the police for what they are and act. They determine the terrain on which the next struggle will be fought: the street, the day” (208).

without transforming the structure of civil society.⁶⁶ With these critiques in mind, there are several ways to think about the novel's use of the term "black"—and by extension, the novel's reflection of the predominant terminology at the time in the discourse of communities of color as well as people in power. At times, "black" indexes all that is not white, as the term frequently did in the postwar decades in England. At other times, "black" indexes a specifically African line of descent, and the word gestures toward a global diaspora initiated by slavery. Again, it is when Chamcha is most dramatically figured as a direct threat to "civil" society that he is deemed "what-else-after-all-but-black." Simba is of Black African hereditary descent, and it is his death in police custody that sparks the events which culminate in the riot, as though the novel anticipates later Black Studies arguments that black bodies are positioned as foundational sacrifices to Western "civil" society. In *The Satanic Verses*, the brown man is made monstrous by state violence, whereas the black man is killed; the state, it might be argued, is sustained by the exploitation and manipulation of "browns," and the extermination of "blacks."

Of course, this is a novel that rebuffs all monologic readings. If anything, the slippage between "browns-and-blacks" and distinct categories of Brown and Black persons indicates the instability of solidarity formed in the margins of public culture. Just as the British public sphere circulates fictions of Englishness, the black counterpublic circulates its own fictions of identity. Perhaps this is inevitable, as narrative binds and shapes communities. But the novel signals that this form of discursive community formation runs risks: of repressing relevant particular details, in favor of general coherence; of occluding particular histories, in favor of broader solidarity. To be clear, the novel does not make a case for strictly local politics. What it does offer is an ambivalent reflection of one means by which a counterpublic might "invent and circulate counterdiscourses" designed to galvanize political activity, borrowing and recasting from liberal discourse the movement from the particular to the abstract and representative. The specific counterdiscourse developed in the novel's undercity obscures the particularities of the struggle of Brickhall's "browns" and "blacks." Recalling Arendt's account of public "reality rising out of the sum total of aspects," we might anticipate that such distortion of the nature of "reality" threatens the possibility of collectively "remaking" it. In familiar terms, the undercity's theory may be unequal to its ambition of praxis, because its members do not adequately apprehend their common world.

The riot as conversational meta-discourse

The organizing of the counterpublic ends up leading, through a series of repressive encounters with the State, to a massive riot. I will elaborate shortly, but to quickly summarize: first, Simba dies while in police custody. The official explanation offered to the Brickhall community and the media-viewing public is that he fell off his bunk bed in his jail cell. The community demands justice, delivering speeches outside the police station. Meanwhile, the crimes that Simba was arrested for—the killings of elderly women—continue, proving to the Brickhall community that an innocent man has been killed by the State. Skirmishes start breaking out between the community members and teenage skin-heads who arrive to pick a fight with any person of color. There are attacks on Brickhall families. Things escalate quickly, and eventually, a full-scale riot has broken out and Brickhall is engulfed in flames.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Wilderson's "Gramsci's Black Marx" and *Red, White, and Black*, and Sexton's "People-of-Color-Blindness."

The riot claims the lives of several prominent characters: Hind and Muhammad Sufyan, Jumpy Joshi, and Pamela Chamcha. In its wake, the narrative perspective leaves England altogether, returning with Chamcha to India and his Indian lover, Zeeny. The conclusion of the novel suggests that the riot prompts cynical resignation and a retrenchment in ideals of national rootedness and the heterosexual, homo-racial couple. But the riot sequence also enables a specific critique of State power and in the process a new framework for understanding the conversational undertaking of public demonstrations, from marches and rallies to disorderly riots.

Riots clearly fall outside the bounds of rational discourse that Habermas and others allege constitutes the public sphere. They are expressive, and yet they register the inadequacy of the normative conception of the discourse that ostensibly generates the public sphere. Responses to riots in the mainstream media and by politicians tend to cast them as threatening to the very values of rational disinterestedness and “civility” that allegedly make the public sphere viable. In the 1980s, as riots were erupting in England and particularly in communities of color, media and politicians’ responses registered this unrest as a threat to British public life, coded in racial terms. The Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies noted at the time that the British press was full of assertions like those quoted earlier from *The Financial Times*, which cast social unrest as “alien” and linked it to a “threatening black presence” within England, “always codified as ‘immigration’” (Solomos et al. 27). The CCCS authors cite Alfred Sherman, a writer and advisor to Margaret Thatcher, who declared that the riots threatened “all that is English and wholesome” (qtd. in Solomos et al. 25). Former York Chief Constable Harold Salisbury said that “the foundations of our society” were being threatened by “subversive” individuals, a category in which he included not only rioters, but “anyone who shows affinity towards communism, [...] the IRA, the PLO and I would say anyone who's decrying marriage, family life, trying to break it up, pushing drugs, homosexuality, indiscipline in schools, [and] weak penalties for anti-social crimes” (qtd. in Gilroy and Simm 18).

According to the CCCS authors, the rhetoric originating in the Conservative Party and spreading throughout the media made race a scapegoat for economic problems resulting from the country’s failure to adjust to the realities of its post-imperial place in the global capitalist economy. Critical race scholars in Britain have moreover argued that the press and politicians misapprehended, or misrepresented, the nature of black community actions. Many of the “riots” followed more “civil” and organized forms of resistance to the state (marches, petitions, etc.), but such details were omitted from press coverage, and the people in the streets were overwhelmingly represented as anti-social criminals.⁶⁷

The development of the counterpublic depicted in *The Satanic Verses* follows a similar pattern, in which a black community organizes itself for political action, then is distorted and deformed—but also galvanized—by media prejudice and the police’s crackdown. The novel’s events particularly resemble the events that stimulated riots in Brixton in 1981 and 1985; as in Brixton, the Brickhall community has experienced increased policing, including frequent stops and searches of pedestrians; a black person dies in police custody (or is alleged to have died, in the case of Brixton), and word spreads by mouth through the community; violent confrontations

⁶⁷ In an article published in *Marxism Today* in 1982, Paul Gilroy and Lee Bridges argue that the movements for racial justice in Britain had been “drawing on traditions of anti-colonial struggle,” but that the media and Left- as well as Right-wing commentators overlooked the context and critical content of the actions (Gilroy and Bridges 34-35).

occur in the streets; buildings are looted and burned.⁶⁸

A riot might be viewed simply as what happens when a counterpublic that is excluded from public life—from representation in public sphere—demands inclusion, and is violently refused. But the critique offered by *The Satanic Verses* is more nuanced. Because of the ambivalent depiction of the counterpublic, and the critique of representation, the novel guards against concluding that the Brickhall community simply deserves its day in the court of public opinion.

Here it is worth revisiting, and more thoroughly examining, Hannah Arendt's account of public life, because there is an inviting echo between the novel and Hannah Arendt's account of public life, which diverges in crucial ways from the liberal theory traced by Habermas. Here is the novel's summary of the events leading up to the riot:

As Simba had in effect already been tried and convicted in what he had once called the "rainbow press -- red as rags, yellow as streaks, blue as movies, green as slime", his end struck many white people as rough justice, a murderous monster's retributive fall. But in another court, silent and black, he had received an entirely more favourable judgment, and these differing estimations of the deceased moved, in the aftermath of his death, on to the city streets, and fermented in the unending tropical heat. (450).

The novel is emphasizing the clash of judgment—differing *estimations*—one judgment formed by the press, the mainstream public sphere, and another formed among Simba's community. Throughout the depiction of the riot that develops out of the fermenting clash of estimations, the narrative perspective oscillates between these two perspectives: of the media and of the streets.

As we have seen, for Hannah Arendt, it is precisely *differing estimations* that comprise the world we share. Public space is *itself* a collaborative construction that comes into being whenever people with differing estimations gather in public, "rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators" (*The Human Condition* 57). Arendt links the "incessant talk" among citizens gathering in public to the other sense embedded in the etymology of conversation: looking together at a common world. For Arendt, unlike Habermas and the liberal theorists whose thought he traces, the value of the talk that unfolds in public derives not from its testing and legitimizing of political processes and rationale, but from its cultivation of an understanding among talkers that plurality is their political condition. The public realm is not an arena in which ideas are placed into discursive competition; rather, "it arises out of [people] acting and speaking together," and it simply appears "between people living together for this purpose" (*HC* 198).⁶⁹

Critics have taken issue with the affinity between Arendt's theory of public life and aesthetics; Habermas himself faulted Arendt for evidently forsaking the ambition to close the "yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion" with rational argumentation (Habermas and

⁶⁸ For a fuller description of the Brixton riots of 1981 and 1985, see John and Parry et al.

⁶⁹ Arendt's vision of public life requires numerous conditions that modern society fails to meet: equality, a sense that the government exists for the people as a political body, rather than principally for the protection of private property, and a generally shared sense of the reality of the world in which one dwells with others. The Greeks, of course, achieved these conditions by severely restricting citizenship, and the *polis* was made possible by the exploited labor of women and slaves toiling in "private." It is also worth noting that the ostensibly disembodied discourse of the public sphere in Greece was in many instances supplemented by sexual relations between the men freely meeting; the boundaries between public life and sexual or private life are axiomatically blurred, we might say; intimacies of various sort have historically proliferated and sustained the "disinterested" common life established through talk.

McCarthy 23). As mentioned in the conclusion of the previous chapter, toward the end of her life Arendt began to develop a theory of the relation between political and aesthetic judgment.⁷⁰ Drawing from Kant's *Third Critique*, Arendt proposes that our political judgments occur to us in a manner similar to aesthetic judgments: we experience them as impulsive responses to particular objects or cases, while simultaneously feeling that they evoke universal values. If we judge a thing to be beautiful or just, we universalize this judgment. The conviction that others who encounter the same world and its (beautiful or political) objects *must* judge as we do is inherent to both Kantian aesthetics and political conviction. The goal of rational persuasion implicit in the Habermasian public sphere is, in Arendt's view, both unrealistic (political judgment, like aesthetic judgment, does not submit to logical persuasion) and founded upon a misconception about the type of truth indexed in political judgment. Arendt argues that the traditional liberal view presumes that we can *compel* others to share our own views through offering logical arguments, as though political "truth" is an inevitable and transcendent end-point that can be reached procedurally, an account that obscures the freedom and contingency of political judgments.

According to Arendt's alternative, aesthetic-political model of judgment, the impasse of partisan disputation follows less from rational obtuseness than from more deeply rooted, *preconceptual* disagreement over foundational facts and their value. Those who disagree over political issues—for instance, opponents debating issues related to immigration—effectively perceive different objects. Discussion alone can never yield agreement, because each participant holds to a view of a fundamentally different object.⁷¹

To a critic like Habermas, this model of public life resigns us to an aesthetical politics of "taste" and baseless intuition, in which the aspiration to universal, rationally-attested validity is surrendered. To this alleged threat of political nihilism, Linda Zerilli has countered:

The real threat of nihilism is not the loss of standards as such but the refusal to accept the consequences of that loss. The idea that by holding fast to universal criteria we shall avoid a crisis of critical judging neglects the very real possibility that such rules can function as a mental crutch that inhibits our capacity to judge critically. ("Feminist" 309)

As present political conditions in much of the world seem to confirm, we reach a political *cul de sac* when we trace and retrace a terrain of rational argumentation: nihilism and paralysis are the potential consequence of the refusal to recognize the limits of rational persuasion. Moreover, Arendt warns that to only pursue logical reasoning "means to level the capacity for thought, which for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man, to its lowest common denominator, where no differences in actual existence count any longer" (ibid 318). Instead of thus "leveling the capacity for thought," Arendt recommends that one "tra[n] the imagination to go visiting," imaginatively projecting oneself into different positions from which to view the world and practicing an impartiality akin to the impersonal pleasure experienced

⁷⁰ These ideas are latent in the picture of public life she offers in *The Human Condition*. Her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* laid a foundation for developing this argument, but they stop short of fully articulating an aesthetic theory of political judgment. She intended to develop it fully in the final section of *Life of the Mind*, which she did not complete by the time of her death.

⁷¹ As mentioned, Arendt died before she was able to complete this philosophical account, but Linda Zerilli's recent book, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, develops Arendt's nascent aesthetic-political theory into a philosophy of the "world-building" process of judgment.

when perceiving an aesthetic object (*Lectures* 43). Recalling my previous chapter, we ought to practice entering “the still mood, the disembodied mood” sketched in *The Waves*.

In *The Satanic Verses*, the counterpublic’s discursive framing of the world seems to endanger a political project founded upon “conversation” because it distorts the objective characteristics of the world, thus diminishing the prospects of “turning with” others toward the real, historical grievances of the undercity. While this warning implicitly offered by the novel is important, the riot that follows is more directly the consequence of a different distortion of conversation: the refusal, or repression, by the police and mainstream press of the undercity’s public outcry against police abuse.

I should note that I read Arendt against her own grain, and particularly against her insistence upon the distinction between “private,” “social,” and “public” realms: in her schema, the private realm is the realm of necessity, the body, and reproductive labor; the “social” is the “hybrid” realm in which we associate with others as we choose, applying domestic and typically conformist norms in our lives outside the household; the “public” realm is the space of freedom, plurality, political speech and assembly. This set of distinctions infamously led her to argue against school desegregation, and to oppose the “politicization” of economics by all forms of class politics.⁷² Her argument that the “public” world we share is collaboratively constructed nonetheless offers resources for less restrictive conceptions of political activity. By describing that space as *itself* a collaborative construction that comes into being whenever people gather in public, Arendt hints at a way of understanding precisely those political efforts she discounted as nonpolitical: movements that are considered nonpolitical until they are successful, until they have successfully broadened the scope of the political to include their perspective. A primary function of such forms of speech is to affect the perceptibility of the public world, insisting upon the presence of aspects excluded according to existent norms of discourse and political representation. The estimation of Simba as an innocent man, a man killed extrajudicially by the State, forces itself into what Arendt calls the space of appearance, the space of public life.

In *The Satanic Verses*, the conflict of “differing estimations” in the streets could stimulate Arendtian conversation, a public sphere constituted through the “sum” of a broader and more diverse set of “aspects.” But this potential broadening of the public “conversation” becomes an exchange of physical force rather than words. The violence begins as small skirmishes between individuals whose estimations of Simba have been shaped by their different sources of information. To the dominant public shaped by the mainstream press, Simba’s death is “a murderous monster’s retributive fall” (450). Information about Simba and the actions of the police travels through the “other court, silent and black” by word of mouth, rather than through the channels of the mainstream media—by now it is of course clear that this “other court” is only “silent” according to the fantasies and discursive procedures of the dominant British public. If the novel inadvertently evokes Arendt’s view of the public realm in its depiction of “city streets” on which “differing estimations” meet, the ensuing events indicate that the encounter between these different estimations is a violent refusal of “turning with” others toward newly visible aspects of the world.

⁷² Arendt criticized compulsory school desegregation on the grounds that discrimination in education was, in her view, related to the “private” and “social” rights of families to determine their children’s activities and social interactions. See “Reflections on Little Rock,” 55. Her stark distinction between realms moreover implies that a person suffering an injustice because of his or her body is not free, and therefore is incapable of participating in public life. Her views of the US civil rights movement have been powerfully criticized. For a recent example, see Gines.

Tensions mount as the “Granny Ripper” strikes again, proving to those in the undercity that Simba was innocent of the killings of elderly women. The police, however, declare that a “copycat killer” must have “somehow discovered the trademark [arrangement of victims’ entrails] which had been so carefully concealed for so long” (450-451). The greatest provocation to the undercity—described by Hanif Johnson in foreshadowing figurative language as “incendiary”—comes as the police “quadruple” their presence in Brickhall (451). The undercity begins circulating “stories of police brutality, of black youths hauled swiftly into unmarked cars and vans belonging to the special patrol groups and flung out, equally discreetly, covered in cuts and bruises” (451). Interpersonal violence increases, mainly perpetrated by white people against black people: “attacks on black families on council estates, harassment of black schoolchildren on their way home, brawls in pubs” (451). The last straw comes when one of several “self-defense patrols of young Sikh, Bengali, and Afro-Caribbean males,” which form to protect black residents from the police, catches the real serial killer as he is about to claim a new victim (451).

In the undercity, “news of the mass murderer’s capture” spreads quickly, “accompanied by a slew of rumours: the police had been reluctant to charge the maniac, the patrol members had been detained for questioning, a coverup was being planned” (453). Small-scale fights begin as pub-goers meet in the streets, but it is the police’s response that catalyzes the riot:

There was some damage to property: three cars had their windows smashed, a video store was looted, a few bricks were thrown. It was at this point, at half--past eleven on a Saturday night, with the clubs and dance-halls beginning to yield up their excited, highly charged populations, that the divisional superintendent of police, in consultation with higher authority, declared that riot conditions now existed in central Brickhall, and unleashed the full might of the Metropolitan Police against the "rioters." (453)

The riot follows, rather than precedes, its enunciation by the police, as though the police have issued a self-justifying performative utterance, coupling the riot declaration with unleashing their “full might.”

The novel depicts the ensuing events from the frenetic perspective of the streets and also from the perspective offered to a national television audience, emphasizing the contrast between these perspectives. The media outlets ally themselves with the police, apparently because their own material interests align with the preservation of the existing order: “a thing easily broken or purloined,” the news camera “requires law, order, the thin blue line. Seeking to preserve itself, it remains behind the shielding wall, observing the shadow-lands from afar, and of course, from above: that is, it chooses sides” (454-455). Through its material interests, the media is aligned with capital and consequently, the novel indicates, with the State. Having chosen sides, the camera “cannot understand, or demonstrate, what any of this achieves. These people are burning their own streets” (455).

In the eyes of the camera, police community relations officer Inspector Kinch is “a good man in an impossible job” (455). The media endorses his insistence that the police need better protection from the rioters, while the street-level perspective indicates the opposite. Kinch alludes to “organized crime, political agitators, bomb-factories, drugs,” none of which, aside from political agitation, are encompassed in the novel’s representation of life in the undercity. Kinch says that he “understand[s] some of these kids may feel they have grievances,” implicitly denying the existence of material causes for such “feelings,” and he complains that the police have been made “the whipping boys of society” (455). This perspective—reminiscent of statements made by Margaret Thatcher herself in the wake of the 1981 riots in Brixton—is at

odds with the novel's indication that the unrest escalates into "riot" conditions only *after* the "full might of the Metropolitan Police" has been unleashed to suppress popular rage against the police's mishandling of the Granny Ripper case.⁷³ Kinch next invokes xenophobic self-righteousness:

These kids don't know how lucky they are, he suggests. They should consult their kith and kin. Africa, Asia, the Caribbean: now those are places with real problems. Those are places where people might have grievances worth respecting [...] People should value what they've got before they lose it. Ours always was a peaceful land, he says. Our industrious island race. (455)

Here is a window upon the construction of a certain sort of English "consensus": the media, together with a representative of the State, distinguishes between an ungrateful dark-skinned "they," and "our race," who are (by nature, it seems) industrious and peaceful. Having sided with Inspector Kinch, the camera cuts to a studio discussion, where "a serious head bathed in light" discusses historical outlaws and revolutionaries, people "who stood *for* as well as *against*," people—he stresses—unlike the contemporary rioters: "looting video stores is not what the head has been talking about" (456).

Much of what the camera sees is directly contrasted with the more accurate knowledge of the novel. For instance, here is the televised perspective on Hot Wax, a nightclub popular in the undercity:

From the air, the camera watches the entrance to Club Hot Wax. Now the police have finished with wax effigies and are bringing out real human beings. The camera homes in on the arrested persons: a tall albino man; a man in an Armani suit, looking like a dark mirror-image of de Niro; a young girl of – what? – fourteen, fifteen? – a sullen young man of twenty or thereabouts. No names are titled; the camera does not know these faces. Gradually, however, the *facts* emerge. The club DJ, Sewsunker Ram, known as "Pinkwalla," and its proprietor, Mr. John Maslama, are to be charged with running a large-scale narcotics operation – crack, brown sugar, hashish, cocaine. The man arrested with them, an employee at Maslama's nearby "Fair Winds" music store, is the registered owner of a van in which an unspecified quantity of "hard drugs" has been discovered; also numbers of "hot" video recorders [...] An illuminated journalist will offer the nation these titbits many hours after the event. (456-457)

Here is how the same news is conveyed in the streets: "Pinkwalla! – And the *Wax*: they smashed the place up -- *totalled* it! – Now it's *war*." (457). Readers are pointedly told that, "this happens, however – as does a great deal else – in places which the camera cannot see." In the end, readers learn that charges are dropped against the club and the people arrested "for lack of evidence" (516). The novel does not indicate that this information is conveyed to "the nation."

⁷³ In an interview following the 1981 riots in Brixton, Thatcher commented, "I think there is probably deep disaffection among the problems. Whatever the problems, nothing, but nothing, justifies what happened on Saturday and Sunday nights. It is totally and utterly wrong as all the ways of protest and demonstration and democratic methods we have that anyone should attempt to take it out on the police or the citizens of the area like turning over cars and looting properties, setting it alight, throwing bombs and missiles at the police—nothing justifies that. And I cannot condemn it too strongly." In the same interview, in response to a suggestion that police had behaved "like an army of occupation," Thatcher dismissed the claim as "absolute nonsense" and an "appalling remark" whose utterer she "condemned;" she insisted that the rioters were "criminal," and "the police's job is to protect the citizens against criminal activity" (Thatcher).

For any Britons whose information is curated by the mainstream media and its cameras, the people of Brickhall are irrational and wild, “burning their own streets.” The uprising of the undercity is reduced to criminal looting. For the “undercity,” however, the eruption of violence is a direct consequence of a State crackdown that reinforces the fact that the streets are hardly “their own.” Even before Simba’s arrest, residents in the undercity have been fearful of the police, suspecting them of occult behavior, a superstition expressive of the dramatic gulf between the police and the community. The increased presence of police following Simba’s death underscores the community’s tenuous position. The police’s unleashed “might” not only suppresses public outcry, but it transforms that outcry from terms that might have been legible even in the liberally-construed “public sphere” into chaos and destruction.

The riot moreover follows the mutual shunning of conversation between the police and the undercity following Simba’s death. Inspector Kinch, the putative mouthpiece of the state, is “kept permanently in the dark” as he callously propounds the improbable official explanation for Simba’s death:

The death of Dr. Uhuru Simba, formerly Sylvester Roberts, while in custody awaiting trial, was described by the Brickhall constabulary’s community liaison officer, a certain Inspector Stephen Kinch, as “a million-to-one shot”. It appeared that Dr. Simba had been experiencing a nightmare so terrifying that it had caused him to scream piercingly in his sleep, attracting the immediate attention of the two duty officers. These gentlemen, rushing to his cell, arrived in time to see the still-sleeping form of the gigantic man literally lift off its bunk under the malign influence of the dream and plunge to the floor. A loud, snap was heard by both officers; it was the sound of Dr. Uhuru Simba’s neck breaking. Death had been instantaneous. (449)

Simba’s mother calls attention to the implications of the Inspector’s figurative language: “these people are gambling with our lives. They are laying odds on our chances of survival” (449). Hanif Johnson stokes the skepticism that greets this story: not only is it highly unlikely that someone could kill himself by falling out of bed, but moreover, “in an age of extreme overcrowding in the country’s lock-ups it was unusual, to say the least, that the other bunk should have been unoccupied, ensuring that there were no witnesses to the death except for prison officers” (450). The extreme insensitivity of Kinch’s remark underscores that it is not addressed to Simba’s community, and the fact that the police spokesperson is deliberately kept ignorant indicates that the police—and the state it represents—refuses even to enter fully into the presence of the undercity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, refusing to enter into another’s presence and thereby making them into a “character” is one powerful and common way to deny “acknowledgment,” according to Stanley Cavell. The state’s refusal to appear directly before the black community manifests its refusal to even pretend to listen to its complaints. The words of Mrs. Roberts and Hanif Johnson are accordingly addressed to their own community, not the police. The state refuses to respond to, or even demonstrate having heard, the complaints of the black population, and the outspoken members of the black community in turn direct their remarks only to their own community.

The riot offers more than a dramatization of a counterpublic’s “insistence that black Britons [...] be recognized to occupy spaces within the island’s towns and cities *and* a legitimate place within the geography of citizenship” (Baucom 213). Such a straightforward reading overlooks what Ian Baucom has called the “hermeneutic indeterminacy” of the riot within the novel. As Baucom explains, the indeterminacy of the riot’s meaning is emphasized through the

novel's alternation between the perspective of those caught in the middle of the riot, the perspective shaped by the media for the national audience, and the perspective hinted in the novel's repeated provocation, "*how does newness enter the world?*" (Baucom 213-214). In one reading, the riot and its fires represent the "hew[ing] of the dead wood" Simba has promised, which might clear the ground for a remade society. But *The Satanic Verses* does not only depict a counterpublic's bid for recognition by the dominant public; it suggests a different "geography" of public life altogether, in which "hermeneutic indeterminacy" itself comprises the public sphere. This is the account of public life that I have named "conversational."

Adopting the lens of conversation not only clarifies the closure of the public sphere to the Brickhall residents, but it illuminates the kind of work achieved by public unrest, even if this work is not yet fully visible to the "camera." The improvisation, movement, lawlessness and uncertainty of demonstrations give them the rhythms of conversation rather than the progressive, rational march of discussion. A primary function of such forms of speech is to affect the visibility of the public world, insisting upon the presence of aspects invisible according to existent norms of discourse and political representation. Recognizing their capacity to reveal new aspects of the world allows us to attend to the expressive range of such acts, not necessarily *agreeing* with the content of the claims made, but nonetheless recognizing that the claims reveal the world to be different than we had thought.⁷⁴ In a political community in which the conventionally-construed "public sphere" is hostile, exclusive, or dangerous for certain would-be participants, social unrest performs the work of interrupting public life in a manner that highlights the assumptions governing the delineation of so-called rational, disinterested discourse.

A "conversational" account of public life attends to the twofold expressive power of protests, riots, and street demonstrations: they are usually meant to express concrete concerns or demands, and they also provoke a new view of the world. The space of public life alters, even if the people in power cannot make out the expressive content of the speech, or dispute its rational legitimacy. This twofold expressiveness of demonstrations is simultaneously a source of power and risk. The risk of misunderstanding or mishearing stems from the very conditions making it necessary to take to the streets: the speech of such subjects, and/or the matters on which they speak, are not adequately addressed in the existing structure of public life. Demonstrations call attention to the structure itself.

The nature of this conversational disruption may become clearer by drawing upon Lauren Berlant's claim, in the introduction to a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to "intimacy," that the public realm is always an intimate, if also impersonal, space. Here, Berlant traces a different interrelation between intimacy and publicity than that which she will develop in the later work *The Female Complaint*, arguing that even the more politically-oriented bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas is, paradoxically, a "collective intimacy," a cultural

⁷⁴ This point seems especially significant to me today, as protests on college campuses over racially charged incidents are drawing passionate critique and support: many commentators critical of student activists are saying that students today are uniquely intolerant – due to "coddling" – and are closed to the possibility of rational and thoughtful discussion. The students' reactions indeed fail to "hear" this claim, but likewise reveal that the world these preachers-of-tolerance see is not the same world these students see: when the college campus seems like a "world" in which one is not welcome, the request to be "civil" and measured as you justify your existence must feel painful, and the outbreaks of passionate protest express not only certain views (that an observer may disagree with, for instance, about the necessity of prohibiting certain forms of speech from campus spaces) but also reveal a new view of the campus space as prohibiting, in subtle ways, certain forms of bodies.

interior carved by discourse (“Intimacy” 283). This collective intimacy grounds a public’s understanding of what subjects count as matters of public concern and what modes of discourse count as rational; such shared “common sense” makes it possible for “the public” to exercise its critical function of representing its interests to the State. Reframing the public sphere as collective intimacy leads Berlant to an alternative analysis of the “structural transformation” that Habermas bemoaned. The two primary forces that transformed the public sphere, she writes, were mass entertainment and “the expansion of minoritized publics” (284). Habermas alludes to both forces as well, and Berlant’s explanation of the former is consistent with Habermas’s own description of the shift toward a culture of commodity, rather than discursive, exchange: “institutions that produced collective experience, like cinema and other entertainment forms, came to mix the critical demands of democratic culture with the desire for entertainment taken for pleasure,” which “creates problems for the notional rationality with which collective consciousness is supposed to proceed” (284). The second issue Berlant raises, diversification, is deemed detrimental to the public sphere in Habermas’s account because “minoritized publics” draw into the public realm concerns that a classic bourgeois liberal view deems private or personal. For Berlant, the true challenge this liberalization of the “public” poses derives from the assumptions that constitute intimate (public) relations. She writes that these two “developments” together have “much complicated the possibility of (and even the ethics of the desire for) a general masscritical public sphere deemed to be culturally and politically intimate with itself” (284).

Berlant’s point is not to identify diversity with discord, as a xenophobic reactionary might wish. Rather than rehearsing the alleged difficulty of combining solidarity with diversity, she draws upon the disruption of public “consensus” by diversity to illuminate forms of collectivity historically excluded from the realm of “public” life. Such typically excluded, more “mobile processes of attachment,” establish collective identifications that cannot be universalized, semipublic bonds based on particular desires, experiences, and tastes: “workers at work, writers and readers, memorizers of songs, people who walk dogs or swim at the same times of day,” and the list continues (284). Her primary point is that many kinds of attachments constitute public life, if not the critical-rational public sphere. Relatedly, it should not be necessary for an experience to be universal and impersonal for it to be admitted to the realm of public life. There is an affinity between her urge to conceptualize public space as constituted through “mobile processes of attachment” and the novel’s numerous critiques of the abstract erasure of individual particularity: in Joshi’s “reading” of Chamcha and the use of Simba as a symbol, and Chamcha’s critique of the undercity’s invocations of American racial struggle. Both the novel and Berlant call, implicitly or explicitly, for a conception of collectivity that does not elide particulars – of attachment, injustice, or messy humanity – in order to be recognized in the broader public sphere.

Berlant is less interested in describing a political alternative to the critical-rational public sphere than she is in rethinking assumptions that go unmarked in conventional theories of public life—assumptions that resemble, she maintains, assumptions common in intimate relationships. She argues that intimacy rests upon the fantasy of tacit accord, a “common sense” allegedly anchored in universally shared values and norms. When discord is articulated, rather than *intimated*, the intimate relation itself appears to be at risk:

Thus when friends or lovers want to talk about "the relationship"; when citizens feel that the nation's consented-to qualities are shifting away; [...] intimacy reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit

obligations to remain unproblematic. We notice it when something about it takes on a charge, so that the intimacy becomes something else, an "issue"- something that requires analytic eloquence. ("Intimacy" 287)

Berlant suggests that the same logic of intimacy prevails in the public sphere, as well. Here we can discern a possible meaning of her earlier parenthetical assertion that the expansion of the public sphere raises doubts about the "ethics of the desire for" a "culturally and politically intimate" public sphere. If intimacy relies upon the unspeakability of certain feelings or desires, it cannot grow and adapt. In the public sphere, this would mean that one must conform to values and norms, many of which exclude or even threaten particular groups.

When excluded groups insist upon receiving recognition in public, whether as participants or as suddenly-spotlighted exiles from the arena of public discourse, they occasion "metadiscursive" awareness comparable, Berlant suggests, to the moments in interpersonal intimacies when one person expresses concerns about aspects of the relationship that have been previously taken for granted. Such moments of "metadiscourse (relationship talk)" interrupt and interfere with intimacy's conventional reliance "on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence" (286). The strident elegies for British "consensus" proliferating in the later decades of the 20th-century manifest not only an effort to retain fantasies about British life and politics, but also an attachment to the very concept of "tacitness" that Berlant argues is central to intimacy. Framing protests and riots by subordinated groups as the destruction of British consensus, these commentators' invocations of fantasies of collective intimacy suggest an effort to bypass "relationship talk."⁷⁵ But such "relationship talk" spurs precisely the collective awareness that promotes the sort of deliberation that ushers "newness" into the world, in contrast to discourse founded on tacit norms and privileges.

The bodily speech of political demonstrations is "metadiscursive." It reminds us that power negotiations have already occurred prior to the deliberations liberal theorists, including Hannah Arendt, equate with politics. Public demonstrations contest the delineation of subject matter suited for political consideration, as well as the determination of which forms of expression, and by whom, constitute the "public sphere" in the first place. Forms of protest function "metadiscursively" in the sense that they highlight the exclusions or injustices that determine which subjects are "recognizable" in public. They critique what Berlant calls a community's "normative relays" and its allotment of "sites of pleasure and profit" targeting the *structures* governing public life, not simply the material content brought into public discourse ("Intimacy" 287). Those in power accurately intuit that "metadiscursive" political actions "fra[y] and expos[e]" the norms and privileges structuring public life, threatening not only the balance of power but also "their definition of the real" (Berlant 287).

In the light of this analysis, the emotional charge of conservative responses to progressive politics appears to stem less from material selfishness than from existential anxiety. Metadiscursive interruptions create opportunities for an expanded public to redefine "the real," but movements for political change are typically experienced by the ruling class "as an irruption of the most sacred and rational forms of intimate intelligibility, a cancelling out of individual and collective destinies, an impediment to narrativity and the future itself": the kind of threat, in other words, fatal to an intimate relationship ("Intimacy" 287).

⁷⁵ A similar effort is underway, I think, in dismissals of today's campus demonstrations on the basis of the stridence, irrationality, and "intolerance" demonstrated by an allegedly coddled generation that seeks to curtail the "freedom" of others' speech.

Such an existential risk is inherent to open democracies. As Judith Butler has observed, “The point of a democratic politics is not simply to extend recognition equally to all of the people, but, rather, to grasp that only by changing the relation between the recognizable and unrecognizable can (a) equality be understood and pursued and (b) ‘the people’ become open to a further elaboration” (*Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* 5). Butler’s “performative theory of assembly” is close, but not identical, to what I’m sketching with Rushdie’s help. Butler argues that large assemblies of people in public space—people assembling in order to do things other than rationally discuss current affairs—effectively *alter* the space of public appearance and therefore the sense of what can transpire in public: “When bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands: they are demanding to be recognized, to be valued, they are exercising a right to appear, to exercise freedom, and they are demanding a livable life” (ibid. 26).

Moments of metadiscursive “irruption” occur when historically “silent” subjects demand public acknowledgment. In trading the term “acknowledgment” for Butler’s “recognition,” I am proposing Cavell’s concept of “acknowledgment” as a model for how the “further elaboration” of democracy can be undertaken. Acknowledgment, as we have seen, is Cavell’s word for the mode of encounter—epitomized in his work by “conversation”—between people who recognize that their knowledge of each other is always limited, always modest and open to revision or further elaboration. For Cavell, acknowledgment means not only recognizing the presence of the other, but “put[ting] ourselves in the other’s presence, reveal[ing] ourselves to them,” which in turn means revealing ourselves to be “separate” from them, finite, and ultimately “unknown” by them (just as the self-understanding and political identifications of the “other” to be acknowledged are themselves open to elaboration) (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 332-333; *Contesting Tears* 22).⁷⁶

Acknowledgment also means *doing something* based on the awareness of the other: “Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge)” (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 257). Acknowledgment, then, is a good term for what the narrator alludes to in Jumpy Joshi’s argument that Chamcha ought to receive refuge at the Shaandaar: “what you believe depends on what you’ve seen, – not only what is visible, but what you are prepared to look in the face.” Acknowledgment goes beyond what is visible or perceptible, in requiring something of us, just as looking someone or something in the face implies recognizing a responsibility, an ethical relationship.⁷⁷

When historically “silent” subjects demand public acknowledgment, they are not strictly appealing to the state for particular rights, or even recognition as political subjects who might have rights—although these are crucial parts of the appeal. But the appeal is also for the nominal “public” to *acknowledge* that their perspective also helps constitute the common world—an appeal for inclusion in the world-building conversation of public life. Acknowledgment of this

⁷⁶ Like Berlant, Cavell senses a likeness between intimate and public discourse. Particularly in *Pursuits of Happiness*, he finds the conversations between idealized heterosexual couples to model a society’s ideal democratic public life: “if the covenant of marriage is a miniature of the covenant of the commonwealth, then one may be said to owe the commonwealth participation that takes the form of a meet and cheerful conversation” (*Pursuits* 151).

⁷⁷ The “face” is central to the ethical account developed by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, which also figures “conversation” as the “primordial” relation between self and Other (Levinas 39). Cavell has contrasted his philosophy to Levinas’s in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, specifically pp. 143-154.

sort is the implicit aim of strands of democratic theory that remind us of the strange temporality of democracy: there is some sort of foundation (in liberal modernity, the foundation is often a constitution and possibly a revolution that produced the constitution), but democracy is never finished—as the passages from Butler’s *Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* affirm, it must be open to revising its scope, the boundaries that demarcate “the people”—whereas a discussion reaches a conclusion, a conversation is endless and contingent, not only *subject to* revision but reliant upon—and constituted by—its own revision.

Adopting the lens of conversation not only clarifies the closure of the public sphere to the Brickhall residents in *The Satanic Verses*; it also illuminates the kind of work achieved by public unrest, even if this work is not yet fully visible to the “camera.” Public “conversation” includes the “metadiscursive” interruptions of its own norms; measured public debate and performative assemblies—from principled demonstration to frenetic, spontaneous riots—reframe the common world and broaden the “conversation.”⁷⁸ Moreover, reframing theories of public life around the figure of conversation rather than discussion permits a public to reconfigure itself through demonstrations and non-rational discourse, laying the theoretical foundation for a living, open democracy.

The lens of conversation that I have developed through reading Rushdie together with Arendt, Butler, and Cavell transfers the concept of acknowledgment from the sphere of interpersonal ethics to the sphere of politics. “Acknowledgment” in the political realm must take a unique form, just as, according to Cavell, we “acknowledge” others according to different terms depending on the context in which we encounter them. The “conversational” lens draws into focus the central provocation of public life: How do we “look in the face” of a world whose numerous aspects are revealed and produced in the living encounters that unfold in public space?

Among other things, *The Satanic Verses* depicts the way that those in power in England—in the media and in politics—have resisted the demands of acknowledgment posed by marginalized persons demanding inclusion in the category of “the people.” It moreover proposes that this resistance itself intensified the destruction of Brickhall. To “acknowledge” the undercity, the British public would need to reveal itself, to acknowledge its own contingency: “Race class history fate, all that”—these, plus gender and sexuality, are some of the names we might give to the contingencies that have defined British public life historically.

The Novel and the Public Sphere

In 19th-century narratives of protests, strikes, and riots—such as in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* and George Eliot’s *Felix Holt*—the narrative tends to side ultimately with a normative view in which the public sphere will become available to the restive populace once the latter accepts the terms, and learns the norms, of measured discussion. *The Satanic Verses* does not exactly deflate this ideal of rational public life, but it devotes attention to the obstacles that stand in the way of realizing such an ideal by invoking a view of public life as conversational, in which some “acknowledgment” of others and of a shared world must precede the political discussion. “Consensus [...] is in dangerously short supply,” the novel suggests, not because unhappy browns-and-blacks refuse to behave as reasonable citizens, but because unhappy

⁷⁸ Aletta Norval has similarly argued for combining Cavell, Zerilli, and Arendt to derive a “democratic politics of acknowledgment,” but her argument does not focus on the expansion of public “acknowledgment” spurred by interruptions of previously accepted norms. See “A Democratic Politics of Acknowledgement: Political Judgment, Imagination, and Exemplarity.”

browns-and-blacks are exposing prior “consensus” to be dependent upon their exclusion from the various forms of talk that lead to “consensus.” The unrest of postcolonial England can be understood as resistance to the forced exclusion of the *sensus*—feelings, thoughts, and judgments—of new British subjects from the scope of national “consensus.”

The Satanic Verses does not indicate a way forward for “multicultural” England. The riot does not lead to a remade England, and Chamcha himself leaves, albeit with a trace of hope that a younger generation of “browns-and-blacks” might achieve a better life in England. The final narrative turn could even be interpreted as an unlikely ally to policies of “humane repatriation” favored by some conservatives in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s (Solomos et al. 27-30). Returning to India, Chamcha makes peace with his father and his old, repressed selves, and completes his repatriation with a sexual and romantic union with an Indian woman. “My place,” says Zeeny on the last page, drawing Chamcha after her and away from his childhood home, where Farishta has just committed suicide in front of his eyes (547). With Farishta’s death, Chamcha’s nightmare of England is, nightmarishly, concluded. The prodigal migrant has come home to roost, in the most normative terms of national citizenship and heterosexual, homoracial, bourgeois domesticity. The conclusion of *The Satanic Verses* appears to embrace a return to “roots” located in the nation-state, retracting the plurality and energetic global eclecticism of the preceding hundreds of pages and seeming to abandon several of its characters’ hopes for remaking the British public sphere.

The Satanic Verses, it seems, lacks conviction that the acknowledgment necessary for conversational public life could come any time soon in England. We might call the novel’s abandonment of England a postcolonial anticipation of “Afro-pessimism.” The Afro-pessimist attitude toward the public sphere, and civil society broadly, holds that it cannot be rehabilitated from its anti-black roots. Efforts to transform this aspect of civil society using the tools of civil society are misguided because the edifice structurally—*ontologically*—requires a denial of black personhood.⁷⁹ *The Satanic Verses* does not make such claims directly; it does not present an argument against the abstract premise of public life, and in fact, it seems plausible that the events of the novel could have unfolded very differently, if the State were only to acknowledge the claims of the undercity. That the state does not acknowledge the undercity—that it instead “unleashe[s] the full might of the Metropolitan Police”—seems to be a historical rather than “ontological” fact about British state power. Afro-pessimism would urge a question whose answer lies outside the scope of *The Satanic Verses*: would the state’s acknowledgment of the claims of the undercity require the state to qualitatively transform? Is the ontology of British power reliant upon the structural silence of certain groups, and if so, which groups? Perhaps not “browns-and-blacks” in equal measure.

A theory of democratic acknowledgment, developed in connection with Arendt’s philosophy, suggests less absolute reasons that things do not work out well for the undercity in *The Satanic Verses*. Its “estimation” of Simba is, as we have seen, a bit tenuous—or to be more precise, the estimation that the undercity *brings out in public* is edited, abridged for “the Man” and leaving out Simba’s personal flaws while emphasizing its own correspondence with an abstract, globalized conception of racial oppression. The “estimation” of the mainstream public

⁷⁹ Much of this scholarship focuses on the U.S. context, with its particular history of slavery, but it also points out that modern capitalism and the civil societies of the “West” rest upon the destruction of Black bodies. See, for instance, Wilderson’s “Gramsci’s Black Marx” and “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (silent) scandal,” which opens with the claim that “There is something organic to black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society” (18).

is the product of a national press that collaborates with the police. The undercity undermines the possibility of “acknowledgment” by distorting its own appearance, failing to reveal itself and its actual perspective. The mainstream public undermines the possibility of acknowledgment by refusing to “look in the face” at the injustice: the facts are there, a man is dead in a prison cell, and the crimes he was accused of have continued in spite of his arrest. But the dominant perspective of the press will not adjust in the face of this knowledge.

Some have argued that Rushdie’s depiction of the devastating riot amounts to a tepid endorsement of political liberalism. Janice Ho, for instance, argues that *The Satanic Verses*’s magical realist “tropicalization” moves between realist and magical registers in such a way that dodges the central question posed by a contrast between temperate liberalism and radical movements for social change: whether violence is necessary to radical political transformation. Thus, Ho argues, *The Satanic Verses* “rewrites a liberal Englishness in order to repoliticize it, but also dreams of a radical politics that can retain its radicalism without recourse to violence” (226). But another possibility is that Rushdie doesn’t side with liberalism over a more radical politics: he sides with novels and leaves behind the question of political change.

In an essay Rushdie wrote reflecting on the controversy stimulated by *The Satanic Verses*, he claimed that “hybridity” is “how newness enters the world” (“In Good Faith” 394). In “Is Nothing Sacred?,” a lecture delivered via proxy during his underground phase, Rushdie suggests that novels mirror the “way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel” (7). Unlike the media portrayed in his book, a novel does not take sides, it “does not seek to establish a privileged language, but it insists upon the freedom to portray and analyze the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges” (7). The novel, in this view, is a kind of virtual public sphere, its Bakhtinian heteroglossia a synecdoche of modern plurality. Perhaps, following Arendt, the magical realist style suggests that our political “reality” includes “estimations” typically excluded from the space of politics not only because of conservative resistance, but also because of the assumption that superstitious and supernatural beliefs remain outside the space of politics. In other words, perhaps the novel suggests that the discourse constituting our political “reality” is in truth similar to that of a magical realist novel like *The Satanic Verses*.

If *The Satanic Verses* indicates any definitive feature of the “public sphere,” it is that this space is not neutral: it is a managed space, a space shaped by forces with an interest in maintaining the status quo. To enter this space from the excluded outside, two options are presented: to become a “Brown Uncle Tom” or to be a martyr, whose voice is engulfed in flames that destroy a neighborhood and many bodies. Perhaps Rushdie wants to suggest fiction can accomplish the combination of inclusion and rationality not yet possible in the public sphere: a conversational medium, the novel prompts readers to make one world out of a sum of aspects, and the act of reading becomes an act of making coherence, order, and direction out of multiplicity. The cynical reading of Rushdie’s advocacy for the “hybridity” of his own novel is that Rushdie may be suggesting the proper place for hybridity and superstition is the magical realist postcolonial novel, rather than England in the 1980s. For Rushdie, literature can afford representing the depth and complexity of people and communities—the roundness of characters and counterpublics—which, at least in the novel, are ironed out of political discourse. It is as though Rushdie suggests that fiction can accomplish a combination of conversation and discussion -- of inclusivity, openness, spontaneity, attentiveness and unpredictability on the one hand, and rational order, coherence, directionality and apparent “progress” on the other. The undercity flattens Chamcha and Simba in making them into the loci around which political

identity forms; the novel maintains roundness, and it prompts readers to make one world out of its sum of aspects. The act of reading becomes an act of making coherence, order, and direction out of the multiplicity of novelistic conversation.

Such “conversation” does not lead to “consensus” construed as “monotonic” convergence; the quarrel does not end. Rather, for a self-consciously heteroglossic novel like *The Satanic Verses*, the point is for the reader to perceive the conflict of voices, and by extension, to perceive that the shared, common world is a paradoxical composite of diverse and occasionally conflicting perspectives: “It was so, it was not,” as another motif in *The Satanic Verses* puts it. Re-presenting the chaos of voices in the English public sphere—and resisting a singular, simple reading along the lines of fantasy, straight realism, or political protest—*The Satanic Verses* challenges readers to strive to make something out of a reality generated by profuse, divergent, unmanageable voices.

The book’s tumultuous history—the offense and pain it caused in its depictions of a religious Prophet modeled on Muhammad—deflates some of this utopianism and also raises questions about just how inclusive and non-judgmental an author/text ever actually is.⁸⁰ Free Indirect Discourse, the preferred narrative mode of *The Satanic Verses*, makes fiction a kind of speech act that can refuse straightforward notions of accountability. Also, of course, the novel as a literary form has a historical affiliation with colonial modernity. Hybridity and heteroglossia can become alibis: *It was so, it was not*. As responses to the novel indicate, insistence that a novel “does not seek to establish a privileged language” risks reproducing the ideological erasure of the values dictating which “languages” are admitted to the public sphere, and in which configuration.

At best and worst, novels like *The Satanic Verses* do something that Hannah Arendt argues is necessary for politics: they “tra[n]sform one’s imagination to go visiting” (*LKPP* 43). That is, they give us exercise in the mode of thinking and judging that she thinks we should take into public space. It is this mode of thinking and judging that prepares us to acknowledge that the perspectives of others collaborate with our own in producing the world we share. Of course, we can recognize that literature does historical, moral, and political “work,” without naively imagining that circulating novels will make liberal, empathetic and multicultural citizens of us and solve social problems.⁸¹ *The Satanic Verses*—its reception history as well as the “conversational” view of life it inspires—provides something of a blueprint for thinking about this “work” performed by literature *in tandem with* other processes of collective action, political transformation, and cultural change. But the perspectives novels take us to are never sufficient on their own, and this training is the preface to, not the fulfillment of, politics. The book and its history suggest that public “conversation” arises from multiple modes by which communities encounter each other: imaginatively, discursively, and also in the streets.

⁸⁰ See Timothy Brennan’s *Wars of Position*, particularly pp 76-80, for a detailed account of the reception history of *The Satanic Verses*. Among other contributions, Brennan’s account tracks the parallels between the “illiberal” response to the novel among those offended by its portrayal of the Prophet and the anti-Islamic uses that “Western” states made of the “Rushdie affair.”

⁸¹ The literary critics, philosophers, and now cognitive scientists commonly elaborate claims about the contribution of literary reading to the development of empathetic, liberal citizens. They do not, however, suggest that reading accomplishes this transformation alone. See for instance Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and “Redemption from Egotism”; Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge, Cultivating Humanity, and Poetic Justice*; and Oatley. For a review of reasons to be skeptical of associations between literature and empathy, see Jurecic.

Chapter Four: ‘World-Wide Conversation’: Digital Social Media, Democratic Fantasy, and the Novel

“The Web is yours. It is a public resource on which you, your business, your community and your government depend. The Web is also vital to democracy, a communications channel that makes possible a continuous world-wide conversation. The Web is now more critical to free speech than any other medium.”

Tim Berners-Lee, “Long Live the Web”

“An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers’ payroll. And the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate and make it very difficult to have a common conversation.”

President Obama, *New Yorker* profile, 2016.

“The mere blowing along a road of a piece of litter, is enough to dispel the so-called truth of every single thing online. But we’re forgetting how to know what’s real. That’s the real problem.”

Ali Smith, *There but for the: a novel*

Early proponents of the Internet hailed it a potential solution to the flaws of the “public sphere” that motivate, for instance, the development of the black counterpublic in *The Satanic Verses*. If the “virtual equality” of the Habermasian public sphere fails to manifest in practice, such web enthusiasts speculated, perhaps the truly “virtual” space of the Internet might host conversations untainted by the prejudice and unequal privilege that accompany discourse in the more physical “public sphere.” Bypassing “gatekeepers” such as media institutions would facilitate direct conversation between citizens, their political representatives, and their wider communities.

Today, the imagined relation between the Internet and democratic “conversation” is more fraught. The current architecture of the Internet appears to favor the development of echo chambers rather than well-informed, rational-critical discussion. The political influence of fear-mongering bogus “news” stories, untethered from facts and promoted through social media, has been so widely discussed in relation to the 2016 US Election and British EU Referendum, that the Oxford English Dictionary made “post-truth” 2016’s “word of the year,” defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Word of the Year 2016 is...”). Usage of the word increased by 2,000% in 2016 over 2015, according to the Dictionary.

Hope for a Habermasian liberal public sphere evidently persists, however, fueling the intensifying concerns about the fate of democratic “conversation” in a landscape polarized not only according to ideological values, but also according to basic perspectives about the facts of the world. As President Obama told a *New Yorker* writer in the wake of Donald Trump’s election, “the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the

opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate and make it very difficult to have a common conversation” (Remnick np). My previous chapter’s model of “conversational” public life suggests, among other things, that politics has always been challenged by discrepant perspectives—that an early task of political life is the poetic, worldmaking task of “turning with” others and affirming common ground. Alarm (among liberals) over the influence of digital social media stems precisely from a growing consensus that the logic and architecture of social media inhibits the pluralism of “turning with” diverse fellow citizens. At the same time, my previous chapter signals the weakness, or incompleteness, of an assessment of contemporary public discourse that is nostalgic for the political landscape before the ascendancy of Web 2.0. The “public sphere” has always been biased to favor the interests of capital, the state, and whiteness. If social media is implicated in Trump and Brexit, it also enabled new possibilities for “counter-public” movements for justice like Black Lives Matter. Among other moves, I aim to clarify some of these ambivalent features of Web 2.0 by directing attention to the underlying economics that create the conditions of digital “conversation.”

As web-based “conversations” have transformed the so-called “public sphere,” the increasing digital mediation of everyday life also raises new challenges for the representational aims of literature. In what follows, I offer an analysis of digital “conversation” that concludes with an examination of the relationship between digital social media and an older medium deemed constitutively “conversational,” the novel.⁸² I will explore potential challenges for literary realism posed by the digital mediation of everyday reality, filtering my reflections through Scottish author Ali Smith’s 2011 novel, *There but for the*. In Smith’s novel, a dinner party guest named Miles Garth locks himself indefinitely in his hosts’ spare bedroom. He then develops a kind of celebrity specific to the new media age: he becomes a meme, his celebrity promoted via YouTube and conventional media. An encampment forms outside the bourgeois house in Greenwich he has occupied. I argue that, in this central plot development, the novel transposes his digital-age celebrity into the real world: his “followers” arrive in person. Smith’s 21st-century Bartleby withdraws from the ethically compromised economic and social conditions of contemporary England. The novel’s portrait of this refusal to participate in contemporary society and its transmutation into a meme spurs a critique of digitally-mediated “conversation” that is simultaneously an investigation of the currency of the novel form.

Conversations and Platforms

“Conversation” is the dominant metaphor used to describe online discourse, particularly that of Web 2.0 and digital social media. Emails from media outlets, political organizations, and nonprofits frequently enjoin readers to “join the conversation” or “help change the conversation” through commenting, financially contributing, and/or signing petitions. New media scholars refer to the “broader conversation” that Twitter users affect by tweeting and retweeting about

⁸² I cannot here cover all of the forms that “conversation” takes on digital platforms, and this chapter will focus on the “conversations” of Web 2.0-based social media, particularly where they are imagined to constitute today’s public sphere. This means that I will be omitting, for the present, numerous other possible avenues of study, such as interpersonal chat through G-mail, Facebook messenger, Snapchat, etc.; wikis where individuals share knowledge and resources; professional discussion boards; special interest forums; and chatbots that facilitate “conversation as an interface” between consumers and companies (Hammond).

hashtagged issues (boyd et al. 10).⁸³ In 2011, the *New York Times*' Research and Development team released a tool called the *Cascades Project*, a visualization of online news "sharing" activity that, in the words of the video introducing the project, "illustrates the connections between readers and publishers, helps identify influential contributors to a conversation, and cleanly displays the life-cycle of a new sharing conversation in an intuitive way" ("Cascade"). The tool is supposed to help "*The Times* use this information to expand its impact in the conversation."

In *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Ryan Milner argues that online memes are particularly "significant as individual strands in vast tapestries of public conversation" (3). Because of new media's expansion of opportunities for previously-excluded voices to express themselves publicly, Milner writes, "our public conversations are bigger and louder than they've ever been" (2). Milner's definition of "conversation" is tautologically predetermined to affirm his premise: "public conversations—the worlds that are created through participatory media—are memetically made" (4). A similar presumption underwrites much of the pre-2016 discourse characterizing new media as "conversation," taking for granted that the more people engaging with each other through digital social media, the "bigger and louder" the "public conversation."

Two distinct claims are blurred in associations between social media and conversation. People frequently suggest that online interchanges are "conversational," and also that these interchanges fuel and affect a broader public "conversation." Both claims reflect muddled understandings of "conversation."

Aside from the moderate reciprocity involved in "replying" to others' utterances, interchanges on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms do not exhibit any of the basic characteristics of conversation as it is understood by sociologists, linguists, philosophers of language use, and ordinary experience.⁸⁴ For instance, social media "conversations" tend to dispense with the Gricean pragmatic-philosophical "Cooperative Principle," which dictates that participants in a conversation make contributions appropriate to the "stage" of a conversation and the "accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" (Grice, 1989:26). The exchanges made on digital social media seldom demonstrate the "Principle of Relevance" articulated by Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson, which holds that the essential characteristic of utterances in conversational exchange is "relevance" to the subject matter and flow of talk (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Nor do most social media interactions exhibit the features Erving Goffman invokes in describing conversation as "a ratified, joint, current, and running claim upon attention, a claim which lodges [participants] together in some sort of intersubjective, mental world" (*Forms of Talk* 70-71). It is not necessary for the participants in an online exchange to be jointly engaged and temporally in sync, and the "ritual brackets" of standard greetings and partings that, according to Goffman, frame conversation in ordinary life are often absent from digital engagements. Social media "conversations" frequently begin with utterances made without an intended recipient; such utterances may be linked to a larger unfolding discursive engagement with a hashtag, or followers might respond with text, emoticon, image, links, etc. Social media platforms host a constant cycle of utterances, any of which might be retweeted, replied to, "shared," etc., but most "conversations" begin unpredictably when previously unspecified followers choose to "ratify" others' utterances as claims upon attention, however transient.

⁸³ See also André Brock and Meredith Clark.

⁸⁴ I elaborate these theorizations of conversation in much greater detail in this project's Introduction.

Some of the qualities of social media practices do resonate, however, with the conversational labors described by Goffman and others studying conversation, who see everyday talk as a process in which personal identity and social relations are endlessly negotiated and renegotiated. As was discussed in Chapter 1, cultural norms, power relations, and personality are enforced and contested in the sometimes subtle, sometimes unsubtle, work of talk, gesture, body language, etc. As more of social life, including “conversation,” moves to digital realms, many of the normative and performative functions of conversation are likewise shifting to this realm. Goffman’s account of the process by which “face” is collaboratively constructed and defended through social interaction easily maps onto online management of “face.” As was outlined in this project’s introduction, Goffman’s term “face” refers to “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (“On Face-Work” 5). Each individual “claims” face in every social interaction, and then must engage in “*face-work*,” actions “to make whatever he [sic] is doing consistent with face” (12). As a projected image of self, this “face” is “not lodged in or on [the person’s] body, but [is] rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them” (7). The social identity or “image of self” is fluid, interactive, and discursive. It is *read* retrospectively from a flow of events.

An online avatar is also, of course, an image of self that is collaboratively and discursively constructed. Unlike physical-world face-work, digital “face-work” is semi-public, performed in front of a larger audience that may or may not be tuning in. The “face” that emerges in social media emerges in part through interaction, but also through deliberate curation, and the “image of self” is more explicitly crafted for the sake of an audience. When “interactions” occur over social media, there is no guarantee that participants will abide by the same social rules, nor that they will understand the “ritual” in equivalent terms. Nor is there any guarantee that the interaction will remain confined to the initial participants.

Online practices are constantly evolving, and different platforms and self-selected communities abide by different social norms. Comment threads on news sites and beneath YouTube videos often exhibit bullying, ridiculing, and “calling out.” 4chan is notoriously prone to instigating misogynistic behaviors; Reddit users have a reputation for marginalizing poses of impersonal rationality, and Tumblr is associated with more affective and image-driven discourse about issues of public concern.⁸⁵ Goffman observes that “societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters,” explaining that we do this through rituals that teach people “to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise” (“On Face-Work” 44). The discrepancies between this vision of true “societies” and online conversational norms is often stark. Rather than favoring real or feigned sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others, the circulation of discourse online often rewards snark, competitive wit, and sensationalism. Cyber-bullying and “trolling” fill out the spectrum.

The abstraction and impersonality of digital social media “conversation” is perhaps encapsulated in the emergence of the “follower” as a new type of addressee. On Facebook, there are two primary social identities—the “friend” and the “follower”—and on Twitter, “following” is the primary social relation. Users “follow” friends, family members, coworkers, celebrities, brands, media outlets, politicians, and occasionally “bots.” We “share” thoughts and media with

⁸⁵ Milner elaborates these distinct social media subcultures at length in Chapter 4 of *World Made Meme*.

an impersonal audience comprised of a similar mix of intimate and anonymous followers. Occasionally, “followers” are “bots” algorithmically programmed to “follow” and “share” or “retweet” particular sorts of messages: in the lead-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, the two most active Twitter accounts “debating” the issue on that forum were bots, @ivoteLeave and @ivotestay, both of which “mechanically retweet[ed] messages from their side of the debate” (Howard and Kollanyi 2). In the lead up to the 2016 US Presidential election, one third of pro-Trump tweets and one fifth of pro-Clinton tweets were generated by bots (Guilbeault and Woolley).⁸⁶ Such figures clearly complicate expectations that social media “democratizes” public discourse, a subject to which I will return.

If online practices of exchange and sharing map loosely but imperfectly onto sociological understandings of conversation, they also suggestively evoke the more gestural concept of “conversation” that I have been developing in this project. The “sharing” and self-display that drives much of the content circulation on digital social media can indeed be understood as a collaborative aesthetic project by which persons “turn together” and generate a world through making certain features commonly visible. New media scholar Robert Payne has argued that the most “bland and depoliticized notions of ‘conversation’” are invoked in descriptions of online behaviors (554). But “sharing” is hardly “bland and depoliticized,” when such behavior has the capacity to determine the content and boundaries of the “common world.”

A New Athens?

Most invocations of online “conversation” are implicitly or explicitly politicized, conceptualizing the digital world as a modern “public sphere” that poses unprecedented opportunities—and threats—to liberal democracy. Early promoters of the Internet suggested that it would develop into a radically democratizing discursive world, in which ordinary citizens could directly interact with each other and with policy-makers. In an address at the first World Telecommunications Development Conference, in Buenos Aires in March of 1994, then-vice-president Al Gore proclaimed that the Internet would “promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian democracy forged in the fora the GII [Global Information Infrastructure] will create.” Gore then gives his image of a digital Athenian *fora* gets the stamp of conversation: “Our goal is a kind of global conversation in which everyone who wants can have his or her say.” Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, has argued that the Web is “vital to democracy, a communications channel that makes possible a continuous world-wide conversation”—seeming to hint, like Gore, at an ideal democratic world government premised upon web-enabled conversation. A number of technology developers, politicians, and scholars shared this enthusiasm, effectively “interpret[ing] the advent of online media as a second structural transformation of the public sphere” (Schäfer 2). This second structural transformation of the public sphere would presumably redeem democracies from the first, which, in Habermas’s telling, occurred through the commodification and depoliticization of public discourse.

The “cyber-optimists” (also called “digital utopians,” “net-enthusiasts,” and other similar labels) point to three main characteristics of the Internet. The Internet has led to a vast expansion

⁸⁶ For additional analyses of political bot activity undertaken by a collective of researchers, see the website *Political Bots: Project on Algorithms, Computational Propaganda, and Digital Politics*.

of readily available information, which can support rational and informed discussion; it expands the number and demographics of potential participants in informed discussions; and it enables entirely new modes of discursive engagement, like Wikis, which manifest discursive collaboration in a more tangible sense than ever before, dismantling old informational hierarchies.

Crucial to the aspirations for a “new Athenian democracy” in cyber-space is a narrative of “passing.” In an early MCI commercial, for instance, a cast of persons Wendy Chun describes as “variously raced, gendered, aged, and physically challenged” proclaim the virtues of the bodiless virtual sphere, saying (in turn and together), “People can communicate mind-to-mind. There is no race. There are no genders. There is no age, no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds, only minds. Utopia? No. No. The Internet” (Chun 131).⁸⁷ In his 1995 book about the “PC revolution,” *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates celebrates the fact that, because the Internet is essentially “race-blind,” “virtual equity can be achieved much more easily than real-world equity” (294). As Chun has argued, such early promotion of the Internet “cash[ed] in on mainstream desires for a quick and painless fix to the color line,” as though the Internet “dissolv[ed] the ‘race problem’” (129). Rather than changing the racist, sexist, etc., foundations of society, the Internet’s “promoters and visionaries” promise a parallel virtual space that does not attach words and gestures to raced (and sexed, aged, etc.) bodies. Chun notes that this way of framing the Internet does not seek to end discrimination, but rather places the responsibility for dodging discrimination on those who might be discriminated against. Crucially, such individuals are “empowered” to take their freedom into their own hands *as consumers*: “telecommunications companies claim to create utopia/amnesia by privatizing civil rights” (Chun 144).⁸⁸

The disproportionate “trolling” of women and people of color who decline to attempt to “pass” as white males indicates the limits of this (flawed) digital-utopian dream. Online harassment and abuse is generally understood to result from a misogynistic or racist impulse to silence the subjects whose voices net-utopians promised would enjoy new outlet and influence. In 2016, a member of the British Parliament, Yvette Cooper, launched an initiative to combat online abuse, which is explicitly premised upon the understanding that the Internet is the new public sphere: “Today the internet is our streets and public spaces. [...] Yet for some people online harassment, bullying, misogyny, racism or homophobia can end up poisoning the internet and stopping them from speaking out. We have responsibilities as online citizens to make sure the internet is a safe space” (qtd. in Laville). Cooper suggests that governmental and nongovernmental organizations need to work together to establish “safety” in order for the “public space” of the Internet to enable true freedom of expression.⁸⁹ In order to affirm the

⁸⁷ The advertisement she quotes, “Anthem,” is available on YouTube as “MCI TV Ad 1997.”

⁸⁸ Such messaging is in line with neoliberal cynicism about social change. If racism, sexism, agism, and discrimination against those with disabilities persist in the real world, the logic goes, individual consumers afflicted by such discrimination can simply move to a place where they will be engaged strictly in terms of their “minds.” This disembodied equality implies passing as the sort of “unmarked” subject—white, male, youthful, and physically strong—who takes free communication for granted in the physical world. The utopia of “Anthem” is not post-racial at all, but rather a space demurely to the side of an order of white supremacy that thereby retains its power.

⁸⁹ Legal scholar Danielle Keats Citron has traced the transformation of public attitudes toward cyber harassment. In the mid-2000s, most discussions of cyber harassment framed strict crackdowns as potential violations of freedom of expression. Today, she argues, the tables have turned, and there is a more widespread belief that cyber harassment silences targets, predominantly women and people of color, thereby threatening *their* “freedom of speech” (Citron 406). Amanda Hess’s *Pacific Standard* essay “Women Aren’t Welcome Here,” which won a spot in the 2015 edition of *The Best American Magazine Writing*, was pivotal in shifting this view. Private companies have begun to alter

liberal value of freedom of expression while seeking to stem online bullying, some advocate that media firms like Twitter and Facebook enact policies prohibiting trolling behaviors rather than speech. Ban-worthy offenses would include editing others' tweets to make it seem as though they have said things they have not said, and disseminating others' personal contact information without permission.⁹⁰

The development of “Web 2.0” is frequently seen as a major advancement in the democratizing power of the Internet.⁹¹ While the Enlightenment ethos emancipated individual persons as capable of ascertaining truth for themselves—overturning the unquestioned authority of Church, State, and Feudal Lord—“truth” was still mediated, prior to the digital age, by journalism. Partisan media outlets offered differing accounts of public events, and the average individual was positioned on the side of receiving—perhaps critically, perhaps passively—rather than producing a set of views of the public world. Web 2.0 is commonly held to have “disrupted” this pattern. In the paper that offers a widely-cited definition of Web 2.0, computer scientists Cormode and Krishnamurthy describe what they call its “democratic nature”:

The essential difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is that content creators were few in Web 1.0 with the vast majority of users simply acting as consumers of content, while any participant can be a content creator in Web 2.0 and numerous technological aids have been created to maximize the potential for content creation. (Cormode and Krishnamurthy)

Even the algorithmic underpinnings of the Web are characterized as “democratic,” as the math allegedly taps into and materializes the desires of Web users. The link infrastructure that Google’s PageRank search algorithm taps into, for instance, has been described as a sort of “voting” process that privileges pages according to the quantity and quality of other pages linking to them.⁹² As new media scholar Christian Sandvig rather grandly paraphrases a common view: “In the old media systems of movies, news, music, and television, despotic media executives used mysterious processes to make decisions on your behalf. New media were the Allied tanks rolling through Paris; they were the fall of fascism” (Sandvig 2015 1). With social media, we have the more direct “voting” of “likes,” “up-votes,” publicly visible emoticons and favorites (Sandvig 1).

A rather impoverished view of democracy underwrites this discourse and much of so-called “digital utopianism.” Behaviors are treated as expressions, and choices as “votes,” notwithstanding the fact that both are influenced by advertising, site design, and the circular

their approach in step with the shifting public opinion. In order to “ensure that voices are not silenced because people are afraid to speak up,” Twitter amended its terms-of-service agreement in 2015 to prohibit threats, harassment, and nude photos (Doshi).

⁹⁰ These are the recommendations offered by Leigh Alexander in the wake of Twitter’s banning of alt-right user Milo Yiannopoulos, following his incitement of a harassment campaign against black Ghostbusters actress Leslie Jones. Her point is that Twitter needs to adopt policies prohibiting certain behaviors, and she warns that without doing so, banned harassers like Yiannopoulos can become “a martyr for ‘free speech’” (Alexander).

⁹¹ There is some dispute about the term “Web 2.0.” Some see it as an empty piece of marketing, while others use it to signify the Web since it became dominated by participatory platforms and user-generated content. A third view claims that the open and participatory ethos associated with Web 2.0 has vanished as proprietary platforms that carefully control content, like Facebook and Twitter, have become dominant. In any case, the general opinion is that the rise of participatory platforms represents both a stage in the development of the Internet and, for many, a step forward in the Web’s march toward democracy. See Allen for a discussion of the rhetorical contests of Web 2.0 v 3.0.

⁹² See Thelwall and Vaughan; and Page et al.

reinforcement of algorithms that reward popularity. This discourse posits “democracy” as the rule of mass instincts and inclinations, rather than as a deliberative project with careful guards against prejudice and manipulation. Without deducing a causal relation, it is interesting to note that this vision of democracy complements a political trend that has historically coincided with the spread of the Internet: the emergence, since the Cold War, of illiberal democracies in places like Turkey, Russia, Israel, and India, and the rise of xenophobic populism throughout Europe, the UK, and US.

The “digital divide” distinguishing those with access to the global Internet and those without is shrinking, in part through international initiatives to broaden Internet access. In the summer of 2016, the United Nations passed a resolution calling upon member states to facilitate universal and open access to the Internet and condemning any interference with access. The resolution calls Internet access a “right,” noting that in today’s world, such access is essential to the “freedom of expression, freedom of association and privacy” protected in the Human Rights Charter (UN General Assembly 2). The resolution affirms the UN’s commitment to “continue its consideration [...] of how the Internet can be an important tool for fostering citizen and civil society participation” (4).

The public-private (or simply private-private) partnerships frequently adopted to meet this liberal mandate recall familiar patterns in global “development.” A prime example of the uneasy power brokerage through which Internet access expands is Facebook’s “free basics” program, whereby the technology company offers free “internet” in the form of its own website plus a selected handful of others to smartphone users in developing countries. While the program has been embraced in some places, it failed in India when net-neutrality activists effectively spotlighted its imperialist undertones (Bhatia). Tapping into resistance to anything resembling the old narrative of what James Vernon aptly summarizes as a “trickle-down process of modernization from the West to the Rest,” activists galvanized the wider public to persuade the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India to embrace principles of net neutrality that blocked Facebook’s plan (5). The company has nonetheless persisted in its vision of providing Facebook-gated Internet to the developing world, emphasizing the democratic-capitalist opportunities for the self-advancement enabled by the Internet. Their R&D division is currently developing “Aquila,” a solar-powered drone that will “beam internet to places that have never been connected,” and the company hopes to eventually develop partnerships “with telecom operators and governments around the world to connect people on the outskirts of cities, rural areas and disaster zones where you can’t get traditional connectivity today” (Facebook “Second Quarter 2016” 3).

Facebook’s vexed strategy of philanthropic capitalist expansion spotlights a crucial feature of this “second structural transformation of the public sphere.” Today’s Internet is dominated by Web 2.0 platforms, particularly by a few giant corporations, and their designs are dictated by profit motive rather than a commitment to nourishing civic discourse. Habermas’s ideal public sphere was also in essence a public-private enterprise, a network of coffeehouses, trade journals, and partisan newspapers. Today’s “public sphere” is rather like a network of Starbucks-like coffee shop franchises, surveilled and plastered in the messages of private companies, in which half the coffee shops and their favored journals are simply invisible to patrons of the other half. Online “conversation” occurs on platforms that collect and sell user-data to corporations, potentially ceding this information to governments (the term “surveillance capitalism” has been coined to describe this profit model) (Zuboff). Most individuals with Internet access use the Internet for entertainment and consumption purposes, or apolitical social

negotiations, rather than for civic engagement purposes. Those who *do* participate in online political discussions tend to access information through “filter bubbles” hidden within search algorithms, which invisibly reinforce their preexisting concerns and views; users therefore tend to segregate into online “echo chambers,” micro-publics that never reintegrate into a wider public reflecting the actual diversity of society.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg boasted on a conference call with investors just before the 2016 US Election that his site has become “the new town hall [...] enabling dialogue and increasing civic engagement” (Facebook “Third Quarter 2016” 2). But the real focus of the same call was the site’s profitability, and the company has not yet worked out how to provide the public service it pretends to cherish and also keep users engaging with content in a way that pleases advertisers and investors. The “town hall” metaphor seems pitched to release Facebook from certain responsibilities it often denies, namely those associated with media corporations. The metaphor repressed contemporaneous controversies over News Feed curation and the company’s tolerance for lucrative “fake news” (later in 2016, Facebook adopted a public relations pitch and software development strategy devoted to curtailing the circulation of “fake news”). The company brands itself as the eliminator of “gatekeepers” governing individuals’ engagements with politics and each other, while it is itself the largest gatekeeper in history. Its “gates” are the constantly changing and often invisible work of programmers, and they exist in order to increase the corporation’s profit.

In the words of a *Wired* magazine article about the current infrastructure of the web, Facebook has become a “parallel world to the Web” (Wolff and Anderson). The dominant social network seals off the rest of the Web in order to form what Michael Wolf calls an “empire: one in which the developers who built applications on top of the platform that [Zuckerberg’s] company owned and controlled would always be subservient to the platform itself. [...] The Web of countless entrepreneurs was being overshadowed by the single entrepreneur-mogul-visionary model, a ruthless paragon of everything the Web was not: rigid standards, high design, centralized control” (ibid). Facebook’s strategy is a process of enclosure, whereby the “commons” come under private control and their resources are harnessed to profit their proprietors. Unlike the enclosures of common land in the early stages of capitalism, contemporary informational enclosures work not by expelling “users” from spaces that have been privately claimed, but by building often-unseen walls around spaces that are experienced as “free,” enforcing norms of behavior, controlling the visibility of information and fostering certain forms of discourse while disincentivizing, or even suppressing, others. Facebook’s aim is to be the central and sole “gathering” space of the Internet, the place where users socialize, shop, access news, engage in debate, amuse themselves, etc., and it has been fairly successful in moving toward this goal. This represents a dramatic centralization of authority in establishing the form and content of the shared “world.”

Memetic Media, Hashtag Counterpublics, and the Threat/Promise of Democracy

The most compelling evidence for the democratic capacity of the Internet is also the strongest signal of its threat to liberal democracy. In a sense, the Internet has helped dissolve any lingering fantasy of a unified “public sphere,” fostering a proliferation of “micro” and “counter-publics” that undoubtedly reveal the world to be available to numerous and “frequently opposed

aspects.”⁹³ But unlike the “public” of Arendt’s idealization, or the conversation of counterpublics that Nancy Fraser imagines, social media counterpublics seldom engage each other. A 2014 Pew report, for instance, finds that “conversations on Twitter” concerning political topics are dramatically polarized and independent of one another, “ignoring one another while pointing to different web resources and using different hashtags” (Smith et al.; See figure 1). Eli Pariser originally coined the phrase “filter bubble” to describe the way in which the Google algorithm functioned to reaffirm existing biases and preoccupations, through factoring in a user’s search history, location, and other user demographic data when returning search results. The concept of the “filter bubble” is all the more relevant to today’s social media landscape, in which over half of US adults access news through their social media networks.⁹⁴

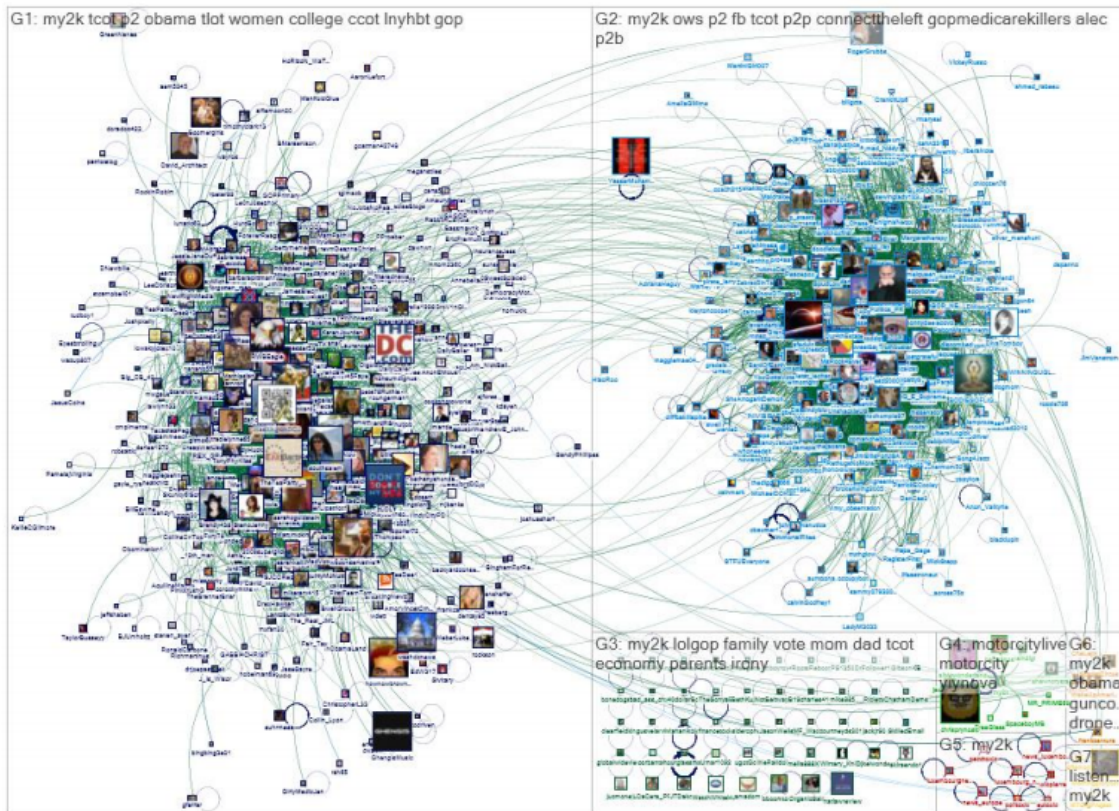


Fig. 1. Pew Research Center’s “Social Network Map for #My2k,” a hashtag proposed by President Obama’s White House in 2012 “to represent the “2K” or the estimated \$2,000 in increased tax costs that the average U.S. household was facing unless Congress acted to head off an automatic tax increase” (13-14).

At the center of online counterpublic “conversation” is the “meme.” The concept of the meme comes from Richard Dawkins’ definition of a “unit of cultural transmission,” a cultural “replicator” akin to the gene: “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping

⁹³ It might be more accurate to call discursive communities that complement rather than challenge the normative social and economic order “micropublics,” rather than counterpublics.

⁹⁴ A 2016 Pew study finds that 62% of US adults get news from social media, and 44% of US adults get news from Facebook in particular. These users might of course access news from a variety of sites, but current trends are in line with Facebook’s ambitions of becoming the primary gatekeeper of the Internet. See Gottfried and Shearer.

from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins 192). Ryan Milner has tracked the memetic movement of the term “meme” from Dawkins’ 1970s work to contemporary popular media, showing that a 1994 article in *Wired* connected the term to participatory new media, and it has since been popularized through various new media channels, including 4chan, Reddit, Tumblr, and others (Milner 17). Internet memes are “unique for their multimodality (their expression in multiple modes of communication), their reappropriation (their ‘poaching’ of existing texts), their resonance (their connections to individual participants), their collectivism (their social creation and transformation), and their spread (their circulation through mass networks)” (Milner 5). Images, hashtags, phrases, videos, news stories, and multimedia objects all function as memes, when widely circulated through digital social media. Numerous scholars have argued that memes are, in Milner’s words, a “vernacular mode of public conversation” (164). According to many observers, memes capitalize on the democratic freedoms of the Internet, particularly in situations of illiberal censorship of public expression:

Memes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion. With rich visual language and a culture of creative remix and communal participation, meme culture has provided an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building. (Mina 362).

Clarifying his own use of the metaphor of conversation to describe the circulation of memes, Milner describes the “logics, grammar, and vernacular” of memetic culture, acknowledging that the norms of memetic circulation “facilitate both exclusion and empowerment during public conversations” (6). As shown in my first chapter, “conversation” has a socially and historically prescribed logic, grammar, vernacular, and also a performative force. Memetic media possess these attributes as well.

Online counterpublics redraw the world, prompting collective “turning” through hashtags and “sharing” that reorganizes and illuminates new aspects of the shared world. In some cases—Black Twitter is a prime example—online counterpublics have effected change in the wider “conversation” of the mainstream media and policy makers: activism online has helped organize, link, and explicate activism offline. The counterpublic community of “Black Twitter,” which would become crucial to the power of #BlackLivesMatter, was generating critical “conversation” of this sort before the genesis of #BLM through the use of provocative hashtags like #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. The Twitter user who launched this hashtag, @Karnythia, describes her intention in terms of public discussion: “I thought it would spark discussion between people impacted by the latest bout of problematic behavior from mainstream White feminists” (qtd. in Clark 213). She suggests that social media can prompt “discussion” when a noteworthy number of users begin to organize their public commentary and exchange through attention-grabbing and convention-unsettling hashtags. “Black Twitter” formed gradually, punctuated and sharpened by specific moments when hashtags sifted Twitter users, helped illuminate solidarity and became a focus around which identities were negotiated and political messages sharpened.

Right-leaning online “counterpublics” also exist, of course, and their political power has recently been demonstrated by the successful campaigns of Brexit and Donald Trump. Feedback

loops linking forums, blogs, and right-leaning media connect Web users who deny the existence of human-driven climate change, or who fear and denigrate feminists, immigrants, black folks, Muslims, Latinx, GLBTQ+ folks, etc. Donald Trump's presidential campaign was largely promoted by the "alt-right," an online discursive community devoted to "white nationalist" politics—in the words of Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "alt-right" is "a fancy, almost antiseptic term for white supremacy in the digital world" (qtd. in Rappaport).

Both the alt-right and the progressive enclaves of the Internet enjoy access to communication platforms unmediated by the "gatekeepers" of institutional media. Many scholarly, bloggerly, and journalistic observers struggle to describe the political role of digital new media, precisely because it activates the ambivalent qualities of populist democracy. New media has simultaneously "provided an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building" and "ma[de] it very difficult to have a common conversation" (Mina 362; Obama, qtd. in Remnick). An analogy drawn from the discourse of community and labor organizing may help clarify the political power of memetic new media and Web 2.0 broadly. Labor organizer Jane McAlevey argues that many activists conflate two distinct political functions: organizing and mobilizing. Whereas "organizing" involves building a collective through one-on-one conversations and persuasion, "mobilizing" means activating those who are already sympathetic to one's cause.

Memetic media and Web 2.0 "conversations" connect and mobilize self-selecting groups of users. Memetic culture can affect public "conversation" through mobilizing: through intensifying the voices of those who have been excluded from mainstream civil discourse and agitating them into collective action on- or off-line. But without major software redesign, public education, and organizing efforts, the circulation of images and text on digital social media will remain a "conversation" among comrades, families, and sects. This insular "conversation" can influence public life; the alt-right has affected the future of the US and the world through its elevation of a fringe candidate into the White House, and racial justice activists have mobilized a national movement for criminal justice reform through their uses of social media. In both cases, memetic social media have altered mainstream politics, but they have not done so through stimulating a general "public conversation." Rather, in both cases, activists have gotten the attention of the mainstream media and politicians; their positions have been picked up by representatives already in positions of power, but the "public conversation" has not been enriched. The liberal ideal of a centralized "conversation" is a fantasy, and one made increasingly unrealistic by polarizing trends in media, education, and economics, which are themselves the consequence of other liberal (and neoliberal) fantasies.

Anticipating the features of Web 2.0 and digital social media, Hannah Arendt's account of the "social" realm—a "curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance"—offers one explanation of the illiberal telos of liberalism. In *The Human Condition*, she describes the social as the "family" writ large. A kind of monstrous amalgamation of the public and private, the social is the public appearance of patriarchal authority, conformity, and tribalism. This realm, she argues, inevitably grows out of modern liberalism's conflation of privacy with private property, which degrades politics from the exercise of freedom, action, and the exchange of individual views into the public protection of private property. She argues that the epistemological individualism of the Enlightenment not only means autonomy from authoritarian definitions of truth (handed down by the Church and feudal State); it also is the first stage in the erosion of faith in truth altogether. The turn to the inner world encapsulated in

Descartes' *Cogito* undermines conviction in a shared external world. Fundamental political concepts like public interest and the common realm vanish in liberal modernity. Yet, since we are communal animals by instinct and necessity, post-Enlightenment Europeans replaced the common realm with the "social," a space of being-with-others through conformity, "multiplying and prolonging the perspective of [one's] neighbor" (*The Human Condition* 58). If the "public," for Arendt, is a composite reality constructed out of diverse views upon the objective world—"reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators"—the "social" generates "reality" through proliferating the same view, reproducing singular perspectives throughout a population (57).

The Web dominated by digital social media indeed seems to exhibit and exacerbate many of the qualities Arendt assigns to modernity's social realm. It occupies a liminal position between public and private spheres, as well as spheres of work and commerce (divisions that have not historically existed for many women, domestic workers, enslaved laborers, etc). When social media is made the vehicle of political utterances, echo chambers of personal networks, compounded by algorithmic filter bubbles, make this space of ostensible exchange into a curiously externalized interiority.

Arendt's view of the modern social realm helps make sense of a seeming paradox in the design of social media. On one hand, social media appears to elevate the individual: individuals become celebrities, users circulate pieces of information or entertainment media, tailor their News Feeds, and interact with corporations and politicians without the "gatekeepers" of prior eras. On the other hand, social media's individualized experience compounds conformity within echo chambers. Arendt studied a "social" realm in which the "culture industry" handed down mass media products for consumption; today's user-produced social media even more concretely bears out her warning that branded individualization can lead, counter-intuitively, to conformity.

Conversational Media: Novels v. Web 2.0

Arendt argues that the novel is the "first entirely social art form," a medium formally suited to modernity's turn inward. Novels, she suggests, support the modern view that individuals have in common not the objective world, but rather the structure of their minds (*The Human Condition* 283). As my earlier elucidation of Arendtian "conversation" in *The Waves* and *The Satanic Verses* indicates, I think her analysis of novels is a too-hasty dismissal that overlooks the efforts of certain novels to recover—and in Rushdie's case, remap—common ground in modernity. Her passing reference to the "entirely social art form" of the novel is also provocatively at odds with the representational conflict at the heart of a recent novel, whose critique of Web 2.0 "conversations" unfolds through its staged refusal to give novelistic representation to the experience of digital social media.

Ali Smith's *There but for the: a novel* presents a skeptical view of the promises of social media and the broader Web to connect us. The novel dramatizes some of the same concerns Sherry Turkle elaborates in her 2015 call to arms, *Reclaiming Conversation*, which argues that digital "conversation" is corroding our capacity to have face-to-face conversation, with alarming consequences for "trust and self-esteem, and the capacity for empathy, friendship, and intimacy" (Turkel 128).⁹⁵ She argues that we are becoming different sorts of subjects, less fit for

⁹⁵ Turkle refers to a psychological studies review allegedly showing that college students are less empathetic than they used to be, hypothesizing (like the authors of such studies) that replacing face-to-face conversation with

conversation: we crave stimulation and are intolerant of the sorts of pauses that challenging talk sparks and requires; we are never bored or fully alone, and thus never develop the bedrock selfhood that, she argues, we then cultivate through talking with others. She uses the pronoun “we” throughout the work, interpolating her reader and also signaling that she is no Luddite who despises technology, but rather, another person involved in a “complicated” relationship with technology.⁹⁶

There but for the similarly suggests that digital social media threaten our capacity for face-to-face conversation and its attendant benefits, subtly linking this concern to a critique of social media’s relation to democratic political exchange. *There but for the* filters both warnings about digitally connected life through an inquiry into the aims and means of fictional, novelistic representation in the contemporary digitally-networked world. In other words, a self-conscious novel—Bakhtin’s quintessentially “conversational” medium—takes to task today’s dominant medium of so-called “conversation,” Web 2.0. Ali Smith’s novel makes a case for fiction in the digital age, reinforcing many of this chapter’s analyses, but its emphasis falls on the qualities of social and public life that exceed and resist this memetic culture.

The man at the center of *There but for the*, Miles Garth, is a Bartleby of the post-9/11, post-new-media age. Like Melville’s clerk, he withdraws from the world, evidently preferring not to work, nor communicate, pay rent, engage in the bourgeois banter of dinner parties, etc. *There but for the* does not focus on his motivation, although it suggests many reasons a man might prefer not to participate in the life of the contemporary British middle class. Smith depicts a world of borders, surveillance, and wealth inequality, in which the language of human rights surfaces in advertising slogans, but not in the bureaucratic agency that grants asylum to immigrants (in the ad in question, rights are asserted to be contradicted, given pedestrians a “liberal” lesson with an anti-liberal subtext: “It’s My Right To Eat Tin Cans,” says a cartoon trash bin, as the audience is instructed, “Deny Your Bin Its Rights” [A. Smith 9]). CCTVs are the uncomprehending witnesses to the loneliness of solitary urban wanderers. Surveillance drones are classed as toys, and someone wonders aloud at a dinner party whether or not it matters if tigers go extinct, now that we have such lush digital reproductions of them. Additional elements of the contemporary world highlighted by the novel include drone warfare, Internet porn, child abuse, homophobia, loneliness facilitated by the disconnected connections of new media, corporate “ethic cleansing” to suit consumerist identity politics, casual racism and sexism offered as a challenge to the humorless censorship of political correctness, jokes about child labor manufacturing the clothes we wear, commodity fetishism, the neglect and erasure of elderly people, and an implicitly white supremacist media and culture.

After Miles withdraws from this world, people begin to gather outside the house he has occupied. One of his earliest “followers” calls him “a wise man not found anywhere on the world wide web” (46). The localized and physical web that develops around him appears to signal an urge toward presence and meaning not met by the networks of the digital web. Presence is a

technologically mediated interactions is one of the principal causes of this decline. The cited studies include Konrath et al.; Nass et al.; and Lauren Sherman et al. The latter finds that in person convo leads to strongest emotional connection. See also Nass, “Is Facebook stunting your child’s growth?”

⁹⁶ A recent study, which compliments Turkle’s concerns, suggests that political “conversations” occurring online might dissuade people from having conversations offline: “social media generally have a negative impact on the willingness of people to join a political conversation in face-to-face contexts. And, in some situations, there is a spiral of silence, where willingness to discuss political issues is indirectly hindered as a result of higher levels of perceived disagreement with social ties” (Hampton et al. 1091).

theme throughout *There but for the*, with characters repeatedly reflecting upon the way that cell phones and constant connectivity interfere with presence in the physical world.

When the novel directly refers to the Internet, the picture is bleak. Mark, one of the four characters whose perspective the narration adopts, believes the Internet offers “a semblance of plenitude” but is in fact “a new level of Dante’s inferno, a zombie-filled cemetery of spurious clues, beauty, pathos, pain, the faces of puppies, women and men from all over the world tied up and wanked over in site after site, a great sea of hidden shallows” (105-6). May, the third section’s narrative filter, is an elderly woman who thinks people are saying the word “intimate” instead of “internet”: “That was them these days, spending all their time looking up things on the intimate. The great-grandchildren, even, and them hardly past babies, spent their time on the intimate. It was all the intimate, and answer-phones and things you had to speak at rather than to. Nobody there” (143). She offers this further (admittedly secondhand) assessment of the ironically named “intimate”:

It was all supposed to be about how fast things were; they were always on about how fast you could get a message or how fast you could get to speak to someone or get the news or do this or that or get whatever it was they all got on it. And at the same time it was like they were all on drugs, cumbersome like cattle, heads down, not seeing where they were going.

The girl thumbed and fingered away at her own world in her hand like it didn’t matter that she was in May’s hospital room, or in anyone’s hospital room, on earth, in heaven, wherever. It didn’t matter where in or out of the world she was. (148)

One of the novel’s academic characters alleges that, “The mere blowing along a road of a piece of litter, is enough to dispel the so-called truth of every single thing online. But we’re forgetting how to know what’s real. That’s the real problem” (106). The only explicit champion of the Internet is a passing character depicted as racist and ignorant, who says the Internet is where she turns whenever she “need[s] to know anything;” this alleged availability of knowledge is “what’s so great about being alive now” (90). In the mouth of someone whose ignorance the novel demonstrates almost in excess, these words seem like a warning that indeed the Internet represents nothing but the “semblance” of plenitude and truth, a newly vast “sea of hidden shallows.”

When Miles withdraws from society, the physical network that forms around his central absence exhibits many of the same features as the digital web. Miles becomes a Meme. His “followers” camp out because they fear missing any developments; as one explains, “I was a day tripper for three [weeks,] [...] then I thought, well, this is interesting, isn’t it? I wanted to see what was going to happen. I was worried every time I went home that I’d miss something. What if something happened and I wasn’t here to see it?” (126). Compelled to vigilance lest he miss a crucial status update, this man has of course absented himself from other spaces in which something might happen, like the “home” he references as though it were as “privative” as Hannah Arendt’s Greeks would hold.

Very little happens under the obsessive monitoring of the crowd referred to as the Milo Masses, and these producers of this new semipublic space have very little agency. Here is how the encampment is described at its height, when hundreds of people have joined (the character filtering this description is ten-year-old Brooke Bayoude):

The fact is, today the crowd outside Mr. Garth’s room was so big that it was the kind you can get carried along with in a direction you don’t really want to go in.

[...] The people sitting and standing and playing the guitars and eating their lunches on the big plastic mats that stop the grass becoming mud are back. The foodstalls are back. The Milo Merchandise stall that Mrs. Lee organized is back, with the T-shirts and badges and flags saying MILO-HIGH CLUB and SMILE-O FOR MILO ;-), and the Milo Little Ponies for if people bring children. There have been flashing cameras at night for the last few nights, but the crowd has been being good because the police always move in if the crowd is too rowdy. There were TV cameras there this morning because there are two more women who are claiming to be Mr. Garth's wives, though there are always people pretending to be Mr. Garth's wives [...]. There are TV cameras most days now. There are cameras from America, and there were some French TV people who came for the debate they had before the last time the police moved everybody on, when France was saying that France had a person who had shut himself in first, before Mr. Garth did, so Mr. Garth wasn't the original. Also the Psychic who wears the hat and gives people the Milo Messages is back. The people who light the candles and tie ribbons and teddy bears and other things to the fences at the bottom of the gardens under Mr. Garth's windows are back. The people with the banners that say Milo for Palestine and Milo for Israel's Endangered Children and Milo for Peace and Not in Milo's Name and Milo for Troops Out of Afghanistan are back, and probably the man dressed as Batman will be back too [...]. The lady will probably definitely be back who goes round asking everybody how much of Jesus do you need to see to believe in him. (211-212)

In this account of the Milo Masses, we see spectacle, appropriation, commodification, a debate about copyright and political and religious proselytizing. We see the threat to individuality, the possibility of getting “carried along... in a direction you don't really want to go in.” We also see people hanging out and having fun—playing guitars, sharing meals. Presumably they have suspended their participation in the ordinary economy, having become full-time participants in a social phenomenon rather than remaining workers in offices, schools, shops, etc.

This combination of utopian promise and ideological and economic co-optation of course resembles the mixed nature of the Web, its manifestation of an Arendtian “social” realm. The majority of the so-called “Milo Masses” have no actual knowledge of Miles, a fact underscored by their insistence upon calling him Milo, since his real name is too mundane, “wet,” “a bit middle class” (127). The masses are evidently not interested in disputing the objective reality and meaning of Miles's gesture of refusal: they need not establish that his self-sequestration has any objective reality toward which others near them “turn.” It is unlikely that either the Palestinian rights group or the pro-Israeli group seriously believes that Miles's seclusion has anything to do with their cause. That is not the point. As a meme in the era of “post-truth politics,” Miles's act of refusal need not have any definitive “truth;” it merely needs to have viral appeal. Miles and his refusal have coalesced into a sign whose circulation can be used to energize and embolden any echo chamber. In this regard, too, the Milo Masses function as an allegory of social media and its failure to live up to promises to enable democracy.

The novel's depiction of in-person conversation often resembles this snapshot of the Masses. The extended scene depicting the dinner party from which Miles so fatefully excuses himself is full of excruciating snippets of miscommunication, prejudice, anxiety, jealousy, and scorn. Deep political differences surface, dividing the guests. One guest, who works for a company that manufactures surveillance drones, advocates for tighter border security,

defensively lauds “civilization” against elite intellectuals, and seems spurred by the presence of an openly gay man into making frequent homophobic remarks. He clashes with the two academics, who draw attention to the conflict between his assertion of the necessity of border “fortifications” and his advocacy of drone surveillance technology. His wife cannot absorb the fact that the academics are black, and her awkwardness provokes their daughter Brooke to ask her, “Have you not met any or very many black people before or are you just living in a different universe?” (90). A closeted gay, or at any rate queer, man and his unloved wife are transparently at odds with each other.

Miles is distinguished in this scene by his consistent kindness and curiosity, as though he is the figure whose conversation exhibits the rather impossible aspirations so often attached to it. He listens, and he responds to others with thoughtfulness and empathy. The other admirable characters in the scene form allegiances with each other, recognizing each other as unbigoted, politically principled, and sensitive to art, and signaling this allegiance with meaningful looks, side remarks, and occasionally simply by repeating the insensitive words of the other guests. There is no indication that the development of such “filter bubbles” at the dinner party is the consequence of digital culture. The parallel is nonetheless suggestively there. Miles, however, reaches across the proverbial aisle, or through the filter bubble, demonstrating generosity even toward the racist and ignorant, yet also demonstrably mistreated, wife of the “microdrone” salesman. When he locks himself into the spare bedroom, he is shutting out the “sound and fury” of others’ inattentive pretenses of “conversation” (107).

Toward augmented realism?

An emergent school of critical geography that seeks to account for the intermediation of digital and physical geographies has begun using the term “Augmented Reality” to describe contemporary conditions like those depicted in *There but for the*. The term “Augmented Reality” originated in computation circles, where it refers to the integration of 3-dimensional virtual objects into real-world environments, typically with the aid of wearable computers like Google Glass [see “Virtuality Continuum,” figure 2].⁹⁷ Increasingly, new media scholars are extending the term to refer to the experience of the physical world as mediated by engagements with Web 2.0 media like Yelp, Four Square, Google Maps, Facebook, Wikipedia etc. Critical geographers focusing on this version of Augmented Reality apply (for instance) a Foucauldian lens to the digital mediation of physical spaces in order to theorize new circulations of power and visibility through “user-generated” annotations of physical space.⁹⁸ Scholars in this vein are interested in the consequences of the skewed demographics of the users who augment reality via these media; in Western countries, reality is still mainly mapped by young, white, middle- and upper-class people, who are mostly male.

⁹⁷ For a quick introduction to the standard uses of the term, and examples of current AR technologies, see Van Krevelen and Poelman.

⁹⁸ See Graham et al., “Augmented reality in urban places: Contested content and the duplicity of code” and “Crowd-Sourced Augmented Realities;” also Jurgenson.



Fig. 2. “Virtuality Continuum,” Milgram P, Kishino AF “Taxonomy of mixed reality visual displays” IEICE Transactions on Information Systems E77-D.12, 1994: 1321–1329.

For an increasing proportion of the global population, experience of the physical world is mediated by such new media to the extent that we each live in slightly personalized augmented realities. As discussed earlier, “filter bubbles” created by social networks and algorithms present Internet users with unique representations of the world. This does not only mean that we each interpret the world according to different ideological lenses; in more concrete terms, research shows that certain features of the physical world, like particular restaurants and bars, can be effectively “invisible” to smartphone users whose navigation of space is mediated by Yelp, Google Maps, FourSquare, and the like (Graham et. al., “Augmented Reality,” 470). Sherry Turkle’s research similarly shows that attention to digital “conversations” displaces attention from physically-embodied conversations. She suggests that digital and embodied conversations intermediate each other, and that the consequence of this particular “augmentation” of reality is that “real” conversations adopt the rhythms and priorities of digital “conversations,” losing their social and “humanizing” powers.

Digital mediation poses unique challenges to fiction, another medium frequently attributed with great “humanizing” and empathy-nourishing powers. Classic literary realism is understood to “pu[t] man wholly into his physical setting” (Tate 224). In Ian Watt’s words, realistic fiction focuses on the “truth of individual experience” (13). If individual experience of reality is changing in significant ways as digital and material worlds increasingly intermediate each other, it follows that the formal techniques of realism might change to represent the new texture of reality. In the early 20th-century, acknowledgment that access to “truth” is always mediated spurred the formal experimentation of modernism, which largely shifts the aims of “realistic” representation from disclosing the “objective” world to representing the subjective and phenomenological realms. In the early 21st-century, the “truth” of everyday experience is not only mediated by subjectivity, ideology, discursive norms, etc.; it is intermediated with a digital realm that is collaboratively produced and in constant flux. The aims, premises, and formal tools of novelistic representation might need to change once again in order to re-present this digital-material intermediation.

Many contemporary realist novels that acknowledge the existence of digital media do so in a manner that suggests that the digital runs parallel to physical reality, rather than intersecting with and fundamentally altering it. Zadie Smith’s 2012 novel *NW*, for instance, includes a “chat” between characters that emphasizes the inferiority of this mode of conversing: the characters are distracted and not engaging with each other reciprocally. The novel also contains two plot threads depending upon the Internet: one character arranges sexual encounters through a secret email account and “the website,” and another tries his hand at online stock trading, believing that the race-blind Internet trading market will afford him opportunities he’s missed as a black immigrant living in London. The former plot thread proposes the Internet as a vehicle of

depressive bourgeois escapism, and the latter seems to critique—or at least raise a skeptical eyebrow toward—net-enthusiasts’ eulogies of the post-racial public sphere of the Web. A final sequence that stands out among the book’s references to digital media is a pair of short chapters, back to back, which contrast Internet map directions and the embodied pedestrian experience, endorsing the “pedestrian rhetoric” described by Michel de Certeau over its algorithmic counterpart (de Certeau 107). Critical geographers engaging with new media would likely object to *NW*’s suggestion that the two modes of navigation may be compared, rather than understood as inextricably intermediating for most contemporary Londoners.

On the surface, *There but for the* appears to similarly treat the Internet as a medium running parallel to embodied experience, rather than a medium through which embodied experience is itself filtered. Characters have somewhat banal arguments over the value of the Internet, its alleged threats to introspection, deep knowledge, intentional presence in the world, real human connection, etc. They send and receive emails, which contain suggestive typos, and they warn that the “facts” on the Internet are often bogus. Nothing overtly marks the book as concerned with what I have referred to as Augmented Reality.

There but for the moreover exhibits a distinctly modernist emphasis on the sense-making efforts of ordinary individual subjectivities. The novel is narrated in Free Indirect Discourse, filtered through four characters. Each section of the novel depicts a period of less than 12 hours; in the first three sections, on the day depicted, the character filtering the section’s narration eventually joins the encampment of the Milo Masses; the final section filters ten-year-old Brooke Bayoude’s perspective on the day after Miles has, unbeknownst to the Masses, left the house. Virginia Woolf’s “beautiful caves” metaphor is an apt description of Smith’s technique, as she interweaves past and present as her characters move through contemporary urban space. But this modernist version of “realism” is combined with a series of unlikely events in the overarching “plot.” Far from departing from realism in the comparatively straightforward manner of surrealism or post-modern fiction, this unlikely plot represents the behaviors, drives, and qualities of digital social media as though they were occurring in physical space. For this reason, I suggest that the novel offers a glimpse, and a refusal, of an aesthetic we might call “augmented realism.”

“The fact is, imagine.”

In the final section of the novel, narrated through Brooke’s perspective, we learn that “all those people outside the house and watching YouTube and reading the papers or looking on the net don’t know what the real fact about Mr. Garth really is” (A. Smith 209). The real fact, at this point, is that Miles has left the room. It is uncertain whether or not Miles’ actual presence in the room matters, however. He has been nothing but an organizing idea for most of the crowd’s constituents, a meme whose power resides in the fact of its circulation, not in its concrete content. The individuals in the crowd have given up their ordinary and individual lives in order to participate in, and thereby generate, the Milo phenomenon. The crowd has not existed because of Miles Garth, it has existed because of the idea of “Milo,” and it has tautologically provided its own justification. This is the logic of celebrity in the digital age, the age of screens mediating and displacing everyday experience: any ordinary person can become a phenomenon; spectacle accrues interest exponentially in memetic “conversation;” and the significance of memes derives from their circulation in a network, not from a naively conceived correspondence between sign and referent.

If this sounds like the familiar postmodern logic of late capitalism rendered more explicit and material, it is worth considering why the novel restricts this logic to the representational realm of plot, maintaining a technique of representing subjectivity that is distinctly modernist. Containing the “augmented” part of its realism to the realm of plot, the novel represents the semipresence of digital sociality, while also making a case for the kind of presence that fiction can render. Rather than surrendering to the surface play of signification most commonly associated with postmodern aesthetics, *There but for the* makes emotional and intellectual appeals, while suggesting that redemptive presence can be retained or regained in spite of the “sea of hidden shallows” threatening to engulf us—precisely through storytelling and empathy.

There are two major absences at the center of the novel: Miles’s absence—he never narrates, and he is literally inaccessible to everyone else—and also the absence of the view of the Crowd. The narrative voice only follows characters who stand out from the Masses, and then only when they are not yet part of the Masses. Each narrative-filter has direct personal ties to Miles, and demonstrates empathy for him, rather than contact-enthusiasm. Anna, the first narrative filter, initiates a food-delivery scheme so that Miles, a vegetarian, can stick to his ethics when the family whose house he is occupying sends him only deli meat under the locked door (“Beggars can’t be choosers” [16]). Mark, the second filter, brings Miles news clippings to share how the world is responding to his gesture. May, the third, is an elderly woman not lucid enough to fully understand what is happening, but her section’s flashbacks emphasize an empathetic bond she shares with Miles, who has visited her every year on the anniversary of the death of her daughter, his school friend who died when she and Miles were teenagers. The fourth narrative filter, ten-year-old Brooke, delivers Miles notes with facts handwritten on them, having imagined he might get bored in the room alone. These are the characters who best achieve moral presence amidst the noise of the crowd. The four are thereby distinguished in the context of Augmented Reality by their empathy and commitment to being fully—that is, imaginatively as well as perceptively—in the presence of others.

It is crucial that the novel never represents the encampment from within. The Masses, metaphoric representatives of social media, remain peripheral to the representative work the novel primarily undertakes: depicting the texture of life for those who strive to reclaim, or retain, human presence in a world that increasingly mimics the abstract conformity and missed communication of online social networks. Transposing the dynamics of digital social media into real space, the novel hints at the intermediation scholars of Augmented Reality describe. The boundary between the digital and the real is not clearly cut. The boundary that *is* clearly cut in Smith’s novel distinguishes those who are accessible to novelistic narration from those who are not. The narration ends every time the narrator-filter arrives at the crowd. The novel does not, finally, “augment” realism; rather, it signals a new representational challenge for fiction, while repeatedly staging its own refusal, its own preference not to go there.

In some sense, the novel signals allegiance with Virginia Woolf’s facetious marker of December 1910 as the moment when “human character” changed. If sometime on or around December 2010 (the novel’s historical setting), human character has again changed, this change is one that the novel enlists novelistic resources to resist. *There but for the* suggests that social networking is antithetical to the subjectivity that novels represent, and, rather like Sherry Turkle, it suggests that the rhythms and logics privileged in social networking are dangerous to human character.

Brooke’s father theorizes that the Masses have assembled “because TV and the internet were full of nothing but humiliation,” and “they feel so disenfranchised” (209). But the most

“disenfranchised” character in the novel seems to be Miles himself. He is silent while he remains in the room, and he is structurally silent as well: the absent center of the narrative told through the perspective of other characters. He is passively dependent upon the food and access to the outside world that the more empathetic of his “followers” provide. Moreover, he seems to have lost a sense of his own agency, and only regains this through reading a short story that Brooke writes for him. This loss of agency is the ethical thrust of some observers’ concerns about meme culture, as the individual persons at the center of memes are often inadvertent celebrities, whose sudden prominence follows a logic and scope outside their choice or control. In many cases, memetic celebrity is fueled by mockery or ridicule, sometimes with dire consequences for the wellbeing of the featured person (Ali Smith’s earlier novel, *The Accidental*, includes a subplot in which a teenage girl commits suicide following the micro-memetic circulation among her schoolmates’ email accounts of an image of her face spliced onto a naked woman’s body).⁹⁹ A new career has emerged: that of agents representing online meme celebrities, from persons to “grumpy cat[s]” (Milner 202).

It is Brooke’s short story that enables Miles to imagine his way out of the predicament he has seemingly created for himself. She writes the story following a turning point in Miles’ sequestration, when she finds the door to the spare bedroom to be unlocked (as it has been for months, we learn). Brooke and Miles have a long conversation, during which Brooke expresses her uncertainty regarding the point of fiction:

The thing is, I can see the point of a joke, and I can see the point of a fact, but what is the point of a book, I mean the kinds that tell stories? If a story isn’t a fact, but it is a made-up version of what happened [...] I mean, what is the *point* of it? Mr. Garth leaned his head on the handlebars. Think how quiet a book is on a shelf, he said, just sitting there, unopened. Then think what happens when you open it. Yes, but what *exactly* happens? Brooke said. I have an idea, he said, I’ll tell you the very beginning of a story that’s not been written yet, and then you write the story for me, and we can see what happens in the process. (229)

Brooke agrees to Miles’ proposal, provided that Miles will write a story for her in return. In the process, Brooke finds story-writing to be an exercise of uniting imagination and truth: “[I] want the story to be true and factual as well as a made-up thing” (233). Her mom’s more academic gloss of this aspiration expresses a familiar appreciation of the value of fiction: “She wants a work of the imagination that’s simultaneously rigorously true” (233). It is not an accident that this summation comes from a character who critiques the Internet for its own “so-called truth.” The story Miles writes for Brooke, which opens Smith’s novel, begins with lines that encapsulate this seemingly-paradoxical ethos of fiction: “the fact is, imagine” (xi).

This unification of imagination and “truth” makes something further “happen.” The novel suggests that a combination of the conversation with Brooke, the story Brooke writes for Miles, and the story he writes in return for Brooke, inspires Miles to leave the room. In Brooke’s story, a man modeled after Miles sits on an exercise bike in a guest bedroom. The story splits into two threads: in one version, the exercise bike transforms into a magical bicycle on which the man travels through hundreds of years of local history, and in the other, the bike transforms into an ordinary bicycle, and the man simply carries it down the stairs, out of the house’s front door, and

⁹⁹ See Pasternack and Phillips for studies of memetic celebrities who suffered for their fame. Pasternack offers an account of the fate of “Star Wars Kid” and Phillips describes the harassment faced by a preteen YouTube celebrity and then her father, who released a video pleading for the attention to stop.

onto the street on which he cycles away. In the story Miles writes, the ten-year-old version of himself visits the adult version in the spare bedroom. There are objects blocking the man's eyes and mouth, which the child removes, allowing the man to see and speak again. Then the child instructs the man in folding paper into an aeroplane. The man's plane "follows its flightpath exactly." "Simple, the boy says. See?" (xiii). With this metaphoric representation of Brooke and Miles's interactions, Miles signals to Brooke that, through conversation and her story about a man's simple exit from the confinement he has built for himself, she has helped him see the way to once again live—as an anonymous man with agency, rather than a meme.

It thus seems that if the novel has any lesson for the digital age, it is a lesson at least as old as modern literary departments: sharing stories—particularly stories that draw readers narratively into the psychological perspectives of their protagonists—is the best way to exercise and cultivate those same skills Sherry Turkle associates with conversation. The fragmentary title of the book gestures toward a longer sentence about imagination and empathy: "There but for the grace of God go I." *There but for the* indicates the limits of the "conversations" occurring through "turning with" others on digital social media toward/via an unspeaking meme: the meme can be appropriated for any cause, and is certainly no guarantee of "common ground" (Pepe the frog comes to mind, which moved from a goofy MySpace zine to 4chan, the alt-right, the Trump campaign, and in January 2017, the Twitter account associated with the Russian embassy in the UK). The novel's critique of this separation between "truth" and spectacle moreover suggests that storytelling, and novelistic discourse in particular, serves truth, and is therefore poorly suited to representing such vehemently myopic "conversation." To invoke Bakhtin once more, a novel discursively modeled after memetic social media would not host a "system" of "interanimating languages;" rather, it would present an incoherent simultaneity of languages that cannot interanimate, because they are premised upon the falseness and inadmissibility of each other. *There but for the* travels up to the limit, and then declines to cross the threshold at which the languages become paradoxical.

Miles' departure from the room may be the strongest, though indirect, signal the novel offers about social media. In leaving behind a memetic existence, which has quite literally depended upon his static passivity, Miles reclaims true participation in life. That he is inspired to do so by a story is Smith's unsubtle plea for the significance of literature in the age of digital "conversation."

Postscript: Invitations Serious and Playful

A proliferation of “Thanksgiving conversation guides” followed the presidential election of Donald Trump in the US, proposing, to various ends, conversation as a response to the acute political division, anger, and anxiety of the moment. Mainstream news organizations offered tips for “keeping the peace” at ideologically diverse dinner tables, including suggestions for how to redirect a tense conversation or preempt political discussion altogether. Many progressive organizations, on the other hand, developed and circulated “guides” to equip individual progressives for a decentralized campaign of dinner-table persuasion. As one anonymously (and probably collectively) authored guide circulating on Facebook put it, “*democracy happens every day* [...] if you can help someone move from vocally racist to silently racist, or silently racist to silently not so sure, or silently not so sure to vocally not so sure, and so on, don’t you want to?” (“How to Talk to your Loved Ones about a Donald Trump Presidency”).

Conservative media produced their own primers, such as Kimberly Ross’s “How to Survive the Thanksgiving Survival Guides” on *RedState*. These “guides” produced by conservative sites mock the “trembling liberals who can’t fathom that anyone might hold differing views” (Ross). They poke fun at the proliferation of topics that might trigger delicate and wounded progressives. Such guides miss the point of the progressive guides, which imagine Thanksgiving conversations as opportunities to “help someone move” politically to the left, rather than as a risk to liberals’ trembling self-esteem.

The surge in “conversation guides” is noteworthy, but their explicit association between political campaigns and private conversation is not a new phenomenon in contemporary politics. Some progressive groups regularly produce conversation guides, and a consistent message of Black Lives Matter activists for white “accomplices” has been for us to make use of our unique access to intimate spaces with white folks who haven’t yet acknowledged persisting racial inequalities. In the words of the introduction to a guide produced by Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), “tough conversations with other white folks [...] are necessary if we want to break silence about race in this country” (“Thanksgiving”). In a somewhat different but related vein, the Obama Whitehouse launched a Thanksgiving conversation campaign during the rollout of “Obamacare,” in which people were encouraged to #GetTalking about health insurance with their loved ones during holiday gatherings.

These appeals for individuals to foreground politics in ordinary conversation evince faith in—or hope for—the Habermasian rational deliberation and political process rooted in the “public sphere” of civic-minded talk that *Making Conversation* has tested and challenged. The calls to conversation, moreover, express awareness that the “public sphere” is not in working order. As discussed in my final chapter, social media have raised sharp concerns for those who, like President Obama, would aspire for us “to have a common conversation.” The conversation guides propose a model for rebuilding the “common conversation” through the conversations of private persons meeting around dinner tables in domestic, “private” space: this is not the Habermasian model of private persons meeting in public, nor the “world-wide conversation” of new media enthusiasts’ fantasies. The shift to domestic space correlates with the disappearance of noncommercial public space and the blurring of boundaries between public and private that have coevolved with neoliberalism and the development of technologies that bring digital representations of the world—from the workplace and intimate relationships to politics and popular culture—persistently into peoples’ “private” environments. The narrow scope of the

conversational campaigns might represent another symptom of the contemporary absence of democratic institutions.

This project has attempted to provide a literary-philosophical exploration of the roots of this widespread, if unevenly developed, nostalgic hope for “conversation.” It begins with Victorian-era ambivalence about the possibility for “meet and happy conversation” between spouses living in a patriarchy, and it ends with digital-age ambivalence about the possibility for any conversation at the level of political community. Language cannot be separated from its use, as Wittgenstein pointed out, and its use cannot be separated from the social conditions in which persons use it. The performative force of conversation can usurp the agency of speakers, as in *The Egoist*, but it can also shape a reassuring “dwelling-place,” as in *The Waves*. An ideal of rational conversation as performatively constructing public life can, as Chapter 3 argues, forcibly exclude certain subjects from public life. The riot in *The Satanic Verses* is a rupture in the ideological “consensus” of British politics, which, I argue, can be comprehended as a moment of productively disruptive “relationship talk,” an indication that the norms governing public discourse are untenable. *There but for the: a novel* portrays a contemporary world in which it is difficult to imagine productive disruptions of public conversation; rather, we live in distinct micro-worlds made of memes, and many people are indifferent to the “truth” of the meanings ascribed to these memes. The solution to this suspension of the conditions for any sort of public “conversation” is unclear in the novel, but Smith suggests that we would benefit from returning to sharing stories, rather than shallow and abstract memes. A story helps her central character reclaim agency and purpose as an individual person, but there is no indication that this recovered independence revives “conversation.”

Jacques Rancière has written loftily of the political power of story-telling. “Literature,” he writes,

is a certain way of intervening in the sharing of the perceptible that defines the world we live in: the way in which the world is visible for us, and in which what is visible can be put into words, and the capacities and incapacities that reveal themselves accordingly. It is on this basis that it is possible to theorize about the politics of literature ‘as such’, its mode of intervention in the carving up of objects that form a common world, the subjects that people that world, and the powers they have to see it, name it, and act upon it. (7).

For Rancière, in literature, words are presented not in order to persuade others, nor to will a particular change in the world. Literature instead offers an interpretation of the world. It engages in the aesthetic world-building that sketches the landscape for an Arendtian politics of speech and action.

The political force or efficaciousness of art and literature in this understanding is minimal, but crucial: unlikely to radically transform subjectivity or anything of that sort, art and literature can nonetheless provide us with a sense of living in the same world. This is the starting place for politics. Unlike propaganda, which has a specific telos of conversion, art conceived in this “conversational” way seeks only to unite attention and shed light on the objects of the world. It seeks to help us turn together. Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of solidarity with Augustus Carmichael when looking at the dinner table’s centerpiece of fruit in *To the Lighthouse* encapsulates this minimal and crucial power of conversational art: “That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them” (*Lighthouse* 22). The characters’ ways of looking remain distinct, and yet they are loosely aligned by an awareness that they are looking at the same objects.

According to Arendt—and this project—politics can begin when we recognize that we share the world with others whose ways of looking may be quite different from our own. Politics can begin when we are able to acknowledge this difference, and yet retain a sense that we are looking together, and at the same thing. Politics can begin when we agree that we are looking at the same thing, differently, and then begin to talk about what we see. Our current political landscape is notably lacking in this conversational foundation. Reading imaginative literature can give us practice in this sort of consciousness: it can be a means by which one fulfills Arendt's recommendation to "tra[n] one's imagination to go visiting" (*LKPP* 43). This observation perhaps offers only limited encouragement after several decades of "austerity" that have particularly constricted the Humanities, and amidst Whitehouse proposals to eliminate the United States' National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. If the arts and humanities can help reestablish the common ground on which political practice can proceed, they are themselves in need of political help.

This project's method might be characterized as a "conversational hermeneutic." Its conversational methodology bears some resemblance to the practices Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best have gathered under the rubric of "surface reading." As with "surface reading," a conversational hermeneutic takes texts as meaning what they say, and the critic's task becomes more carefully, thoroughly, and creatively attending to precisely what the texts are saying, and how. Marcus and Best describe surface reading as an "*affective and ethical stance*. [...] an embrace [that] involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects, and refuses the depth model of truth, which dismisses surfaces as inessential and deceptive" (10). A conversational hermeneutic likewise does not seek to unearth hidden, repressed or unconscious truths of a text in the manner of symptomatic reading practices, nor does it necessarily share the self-care aims of Eve Sedgwick's "reparative" practice. It is not primarily sociological, as much "history of the book" and "distant," digitally enabled approaches to texts are. It can be combined with these and other critical approaches, but the key distinguishing feature is that the final object of a conversational reading is not actually the text itself.

The text and critic are mutually interested in certain aspects of the world. Turning with texts, conversational criticism attends to them in ways that good conversationalists attend to each other and carves a shared space in which the text and critic mutually illuminate a vision—of politics perhaps, of race, gender, or faith, of how to live a moral life, of trauma or joy or hope, or any other extra-textual interest. This mode of reading is similar to the Ordinary Language criticism advocated by Toril Moi (among others), who observes, "An analysis—a description—of the particular case can only ever be an invitation to look and see," which can be rephrased as an invitation for the reader to turn with the critic (Moi 98). One of the models for the conversational method I've adopted is Stanley Cavell's work, especially his readings of Shakespeare, Beckett, Austen, Eliot, and Hollywood films. He undertakes philosophy as a practice of reading. To use my terms, he turns with his texts, thinking with them as they explore provocative questions about love, language, intimacy, critique, ethics, etc. In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, he urges "letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it," and his readings of works of art indeed seem to be conversational engagements with the "voices" of these works (10).

Scholarship in this view becomes a kind of record of the conversations that happen when scholars and texts turn together toward issues of mutual interest. The words of text and scholar interact to elaborate that shared interest—not dissecting it or each other, as might happen in a “discussion”—but expanding and expounding upon it. Many different methods of literary analysis have come in and out of favor over the decades, and to the extent that these methods can be squared with conversation—as ways of attending to the text’s “voices”—I am in favor of them: at times, for instance, it is helpful to incorporate New Historicism’s concerns about context. Occasionally, computer-assisted analysis may fruitfully identify networks within or between texts. Certain turns in a textual-critical conversation may call for a New Critical attentiveness to formal features and their elaboration of thematic concerns. But I’ll repeat: the object of this sort of conversational analysis is not, finally, the text itself. Perhaps texts have seldom truly been the objects of study in literary analysis. In any case, what distinguishes a conversational hermeneutic from other approaches is the overt claim that the object of analysis is the world—the *world viewed*, to invoke a title of another of Stanley Cavell’s works—in this case, viewed through the lenses that our cultural products provide us, collectively.¹⁰⁰

A conversational scholar “acknowledges” her text by bearing the knowledge that the text will always be more complex than she can know, that there will always be other readings of the text, as empirically, historically and logically sound as her own. Her aim, again, is not to reach the definitive truth of the text so much as it is to reach, with the text, a new perspective upon the world. In a conversational frame of mind, a scholar knows that the world looks different to someone else. Neither of our perspectives is necessarily closer to the “reality” of the thing (although one may indeed be closer, through attending more carefully to its details), but together, they constitute the “world” that we share. Recall that in *Contesting Tears*, Cavell explicitly equates “the logic of human intimacy” with “separateness,” and calls this logic “the field of serious and playful conversation or exchange” (221). Conversation preserves separateness, substituting the desire for absolute knowledge and certainty with a desire for such serious and playful exchange.

In Chapter 3, I argued that using the lens of conversation when theorizing public life enables us to widen the criteria for publically relevant topics and modes of engagement, and this lens further suggests the shared world is created as much through aesthetic attunement as through rational critique. As scholars “making conversation,” we foster new modes of being in the world, not by describing and celebrating or criticizing programs hinted at in our favorite texts, but by drawing others—and new texts—into a conversation with us about the possible modes of being on which our favorite texts also weigh in. The texts we choose matter (whether or not we care to affirm this responsibility), as they sketch the positions toward which we train our imaginations to “go visiting.” Recall Hind Sufyan’s sense in *The Satanic Verses* that she has been flattened by culture and history into the abstraction of “women-like-her”; to follow Rushdie’s lead and comprehend public life according to narrative theory, she is denied the opportunity to be a “round” character in public discourse, and she is also, incidentally, given only slightly “rounder” characterization in Rushdie’s novel. It is thus difficult to conceive of others sending their imaginations “visiting” her flattened subjective position, and if they attempt such a visit, their efforts would be limited as long as Hind remains a part of an undifferentiated class. Of course,

¹⁰⁰ In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cavell argues (among other things) that the study of film is a study of filmic mediation of the world and also a study of ourselves, of the ways that we view films and the ways that our viewing of films changes our experience of the world.

some degree of "visiting" the positions of abstractly-conceived others is inevitable in political imagination. This truth seems to point not toward rationalizing patterns of simplistic "othering," however, but instead toward the necessity for greater efforts of imagination, and more resources to support and deepen these efforts.

To conceptualize scholarly work as "making conversation" is to understand that we "turn with" our students, other readers, and texts, toward a world seen together and *generated in the process* of this self-conscious collective envisioning. A conversational hermeneutic commits us to emphasizing, taking responsibility for, and indeed celebrating, this potential for building new kinds of solidarity through aesthetics.

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