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Word Hoard Issue 4 Complete

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Word Hoard Issue 4 Complete

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Andy Verboom, Meghan O'Hara, Emily Kring, Maryam Golafshani, Diana Samu-Visser, William Samson, and Nahmi Lee

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Word of Mouth
# The Word Hoard

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**Issue 4, 2015**
In “Your Ear”—from Günter Grass’s 1974 collection Liebe Geprüft (‘Love Tested’)—one partner eulogizes the fantasy of mutual understanding. Fired off into the air, phrases swirl among the updrafts for a moment, then fall to the ground like wreckage. Even strung onto the kitestring of the other partner’s ear, words “split” under the effort to communicate. Meanwhile “your ear flutters,” hearing nothing but “itself.”

Compare this kite-ear with the elphantine pinnae of Roald Dahl’s BFG (Big Friendly Giant): such ears are capable of detecting ant speech, a “heart beating across the road,” and the flight of a dream on the evening breeze, but they are powerless against the homophonic. Beings and beans, Wales and whales, Jersey and jerseys, even thin air and thick ear. Offended by the attempts of his pint-sized guest to correct his conflations, the BFG reproaches her “gobblefunking.” He can hear, you might say, everything but himself.

While we have called the theme of this fourth issue of Word Hoard “Word of Mouth,” Grass and Dahl prompt us to consider those parts of dialogue beyond speech: not merely speaking to but receiving from, not merely exchanging with others but corresponding with ourselves. We have called it “Word of Mouth,” granting significant privilege to that one organ. We should equally consider it to be “word of ear” and—as the contributors to this issue remind us—“word of hand,” “word of mind,” “words of mouths.”

* *

This issue is another high water mark in Word Hoard’s aspirations toward generic
breadth. Alongside research from a half-dozen academic points of view, we offer reflective and creative works by an interviewer, a poet, a performance artist, and a visual artist.

Rather, two visual artists: reprising his role as cover illustrator, Hinson Calabrese summons at once the intimacy of a cinematic close-up and the architectural coolness of an establishing shot, confronting us with a mouth looming over an unpeopled street.

Discussing his cover with us, Calabrese stressed its allusion to the San Gennaro festival scene in *The Godfather Part II*: flying this toothy street banner over Little Italy, NYC, “a place entirely preoccupied by the illusion of tradition and ritual,” manifests the crucial relation between “word of mouth” and “folk history.” But the street’s vacancy proposes that, like “ritual and ceremony,” the spoken word is no longer attended: “word of mouth (and what it means) is a strangely persistent leftover from a world of communication that has moved on.”

Welcome, then, to the aftermath of the party. It’s just you and a mouth. Rather, a banner from which a mouth seems to emerge, which stretches not only over a street but across a shadowy skyline. This second perspective transmutes it into something like a surgical mask. The implication is deeply ironic, of course—a prophylactic meant to sequester the mouth, a mask, is also the condition of its uncanny spectacularity, a banner. But the implication is also horrifically kitschy—for if this is a surgical mask, it is of the novelty kind, a lurid zombie mouth screenprinted across it. The overwhelming question: What do we do, now, when we purport to turn our attentions on the mouth? Are we merely being disingenuous, or are we being necromantic?

Let’s back up. Extracted from the wholeness of a face, this mouth cannot be definitively assigned an expression. Perhaps its lips are unsealed, prepared for conversation. Perhaps it emerges—from some non-Euclidean space behind or beneath the paper-thin banner—with solicitude and vulnerability. But such emergence is a deft illusion, trompe l’oeil tantalizing us with a liveness forever just out of earshot. In this way, Calabrese’s illustration—much like a transcription of spoken words, much like the essays and creative pieces in this issue—asks you to listen with your eyes.

* 

The writing in this issue of *Word Hoard* resonates with that of our first three issues. Like our first issue, “Community and Dissent,” these works stalk questions of isolation, dialogue, and community, of authority, resistance, and complicity. Our second theme, “The Unrecyclable,” resurfaces here in contemplations of authenticity, adaptation, and performance, of subjectivity, ego, and embodiment. And a few new kernels of “Pop/corn” explode as our writers stir problems of ethics, aesthetics, and economics, of parody, sincerity, and responsibility. “Word of Mouth” lies at the intersection of such matters, adding crucial interrogations of speech, text, and sign, of fail-
ure, error, and noise, and of the myriad ways in which chinwagging might make us more able or less willing to listen.

Miranda Niittynen starts us off, proposing an ethics of “feminist ethnography” in response to the mutual interference of those two uneasily yoked terms. While the former picks its way carefully among the rocks of appropriation, power relations, and subject formation, the latter trots after the carrot of the Other’s ‘authentic voice’—a notion shaped by the ubiquity of the voice recording technology designed to capture it. Niittynen finds a productive strategy for ethnographic collaboration through Judith Butler’s theorization of the self as unfixed, incohesive, and inarticulable and in her call to suspend the desire to comprehend the Other.

If Niittynen hears mostly static in the voice recording, E Martin Nolan tunes his ear the music of “error.” From a reflection on the process of interviewing authors, Nolan turns to Anne Carson’s meditation on mistake, omission, fragmentation, and imperfection as individual notes comprising the chords of poetic meaning. Poetic liberty from any obligation to unmediated ‘authenticity,’ Nolan argues, allows artists like Janet Cardiff to grip, contort, and even compound the mediations of voice recording technology in their attempts to mimic the “real” fragmentation of the self.

Brendan C. Gillott sustains this inquiry into poetry, subject, and voice, reconsidering Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* as a sort of performance script and demonstrating how its energetic, caustic “noise” eats away at the traditional poetic ego, as epitomized in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. Gillott proposes that Olson’s paratactic “mouthings” echo the parataxis of embodiment and suggest the possibility of an egoless poetic voice—a “poet-mouth.”

Christine Leclerc’s poem “Empty it out” responds to both Gillott and Olson by adopting its form from a poem central to Gillott’s essay, Olson’s “Golden Venetian Light [...].” Breathing new life into the overdetermined image of the mouth, Leclerc not only resurrects it to sensuous, gustatory delight but also reanimates it to Frankensteini-an, monstrous isolation. Her “mouth within a mouth without a mouth” suspends between the differential senses of “a word” and the alienating sensations of body horror.

Lois Klassen similarly worries the delicate fabrics of communication and community in a transcription of her visual work *We Spoke*, itself a transcription of several “intimate exchanges” occurring over two weeks in April, 2011. Her concern with “dialogical aesthetics” and the fictionalizing effects of mediation return us to the creative potentialities of auto-ethnography implied by Nolan. But, harmonizing with Niittynen, Klassen reflects on a (not-quite monologic) performance piece by Casey Wei to find both discursive hegemony and subversive opportunity in the inter-textual and “inter-subjective location of dialogue.”

Casey Wei offers her own reflection on the same performance piece, *Answers: A Monologue*. Through the decontextualization and re-voicing of celebrity sound bites, Wei suggests, *Answers* draws attention to how mass culture produces and circulates spoken words as commodities. Regarding the
deliberate subversiveness of parody with skepticism, however, Wei (much like Janet Cardiff) values instead the “the snippets of ‘Realness’” one catches when listening for, and with, sincerity.

It is shouting distance from celebrity to Victoria Barnett-Woods’s analysis of “word of mouth’s” most common denotation—“gossip”—in E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India and Bapsi Sidhwa’s Cracking India. Through Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of “mimicry,” Barnett-Woods figures gossip as a dissident discursive mode which resists the linguistic and political hegemony of nationalist narratives. She further urges us to consider gossip and rumour within productive circuits of intra-, inter-, and extra-textual dialogue laid by the novel form.

Jason Sunder implies a troubled relation between the literary and the political, unpacking the complicated socio-historical contexts in which Forster and Sidhwa write in order to question Barnett-Woods’s conceptions of power and resistance. “[T]he infinitely complex formations in which class, caste, gender, and race … are intertwined in history,” Sunder argues, render gossip ambivalent and its concrete effects uncertain. Postulating “the circulation of gossip as a sort of trade in illicit speech,” Sunder scouts the challenges of a political economic theory of gossip.

With our issue drawing to a close, we move from viva voce (“living voice”) to, as Mary McLevey nimbly turns the phrase, “the theory of viva non-voce.” Jamie Rooney intercedes in the linguistic philosophy surrounding “homesign”—the gestures utilized by deaf children who have not acquired conventional signed languages—by challenging Endre Begby’s recent assertions about homesign’s “spontaneous” semantic content. Dramatizing the interlocutory challenges presented by this non-conventional and ostensibly “non-shared” language, Rooney emphasizes the dependence of successful dialogue on mutually, situationally established linguistic norms.

Mary McLevey concretizes this concern with interlocutors’ mutual responsibility by considering the architectural space required for, and the productive spatiality offered by, signed languages. Calling for “the renovation of [our theories of] language to include three-dimensional space,” McLevey highlights the social and political stakes of “audism” and “Deaf Gain” and champions the unique critical and pedagogical benefits of sign languages’ iconicity.

As our theme deals with the exchange and circulation of language—speech, text, and sign—it seems particularly appropriate that this issue of Word Hoard be the first in which we feature a book review. Finally, then, we are indebted to Julia Novak for offering her study Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance as the subject of our inaugural review, authored by Andy Verboom. Acknowledging Novak’s study as an important intervention in literary critical methodology, Verboom challenges the study’s twinned fidelities—first, to the promise of the archival and, second, to the promise of critical objectivity—and asks, “Does live poetry require written criticism to flourish?”
It’s time we editors quit our chin-wagging, ear fluttering, and gobblefunking. Swivel your ears with us and listen to what follows. Of course, these contributions aren’t the final words—and we’re glad that’s not how creation and criticism work. We look forward to revisiting many of these questions, contemplations, and problems in future issues of *Word Hoard*. After all—as T. S. Eliot writes in his final of *The Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding”—“last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.”

Andy Verboom
and Meghan O’Hara
with Emily Kring
Works Cited


Ethnographic studies that draw upon feminism are simultaneously subversive to and subverted by traditional anthropology, and this contradictory relationship manifests itself within the larger field of feminist ethnographic studies. Ethnography involves the gathering of verbal accounts by an ethnographer who textually represents the words, stories, and testimonies of research participants during fieldwork. Feminist ethnographers specifically seek to ‘give voice’ to marginalized groups. In doing so, they represent the complexity of oppression within cultural groups, and attempt to politically interpolate dominant discourses found in traditional anthropological studies. The groups studied need not be defined by national borders; rather, they are often (though not always) separated from the ethnographer’s socio-economic background. This is an undeniable shortcoming in feminist ethnographic studies given that, from the outset, educated feminist ethnographers often possess enormous social privilege vis-à-vis the communities they study. For this reason, the definition of feminist ethnography remains a contentious issue, and this practice often redoubles the theoretical problem of representing research participants that was originally manifest in more traditional approaches to ethnographic studies. In seeking to represent women’s verbal accounts and implementing them into ethnographic writing, feminist ethnographers often seek to derive legitimacy from the methods that they are essentially seeking to disrupt.

Given this shift in methodology, despite their altruistic attempts to represent participants differently, feminist ethnographers are always already implicated in ethical issues inherent to the unequal power relations that subjugate subaltern subjects (Alcoff; Hedge; Mohanty; Oyewumi; Spivak, “Can”; Spivak, “Echo”; Trinh, “Not”). From this position, I am intrigued by and have structured my research around the question posed by Judith Stacey and Lila Abu-Lughod: “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” For Abu-Lughod, possibility lies in feminist ethnography due to the very fact that this relationship entails women researching women, and it is in this practice that such methods are different from previous ethnographic studies (25). Contrary to this argument is Stacey’s contention that feminist ethnography’s only possibility is a partial one, since in every
way the ethnographer is betraying a feminist principle to remain ethical to her or his research participants (117). The contingent relationship formed between researcher and participant that Stacey notes follows that this feminist or experiential approach—though more conscious of its limitations—could result in a greater degree of betrayal for the participant than that often attending to more conventional ethnographic approaches.

Following Stacey, and incorporating feminist ethnographies over the past three decades, I argue for a closer analysis of this ethnographic relationship and a particular focus on the ethnographer as a ‘self.’ My response to this conversation takes up the subject formation of research participants, as it is unethical to expect participants to fit into a category so strictly defined by the dominant culture’s standards of what it means to be a ‘self.’ I argue that an ethnographic ethic would not mean simply common respect for the experience and feelings of participants, but also a realization of the ethnographer’s own transient position within this relationship. If the dominant norms of the ‘self’ are produced by normative linear narrative conventions, as argued by Judith Butler in “Giving an Account of Oneself,” then feminist ethnographers, too, remain guilty of replicating these conventions when formulating a ‘whole’ subject from speech of their participants. To this end, I incorporate Butler’s discussion on accountability of the self in order to implicate it within these qualitative ethnographic projects. In so doing, I propose that Butler’s theory has quite a lot to offer when discussing the paradoxical relationship between a feminist ethnographer and her or his participants. By complicating this notion of the self, I hope to offer new ways of thinking about feminist ethnographies that are critically accountable for the problem of subject formation at the outset of the project. In short, treating the ethnographer as a research subject, I seek to turn the ethnographic gaze inward.

Whereas feminist experiential ethnographers have sought to represent participants in a more ‘ethical’ and ‘whole’ manner, critical feminist ethnographers have sought to critique ethnographic practices that assume the ethnographer can reach authenticity and truth through research. As the result of influences from poststructuralist theories, critical feminist ethnographers have outlined the inconsistencies and interruptions that are faced within fieldwork, and have at times assumed their own failure at the outset of their projects (Lather; Stacey; St. Pierre; Visweswaran). In Fictions of Feminist Ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran argues that feminist approaches to ethnography demonstrate that ethnography is always a failure. Visweswaran claims that feminists take up ethnographic failures and recast them as ‘successes’ in order to set guidelines for future methodologies (98). In so doing, they suggest that the ‘better’ their methods, the more authentic the research product (Visweswaran 98). A sharp and rigid dichotomy exists between success and failure with respect to feminist ethnographies, as the ‘end goal’ of a study is often framed as a successful or unfettered textual representation of a participant; however, this kind of thinking is what critical feminist ethnographers are trying to avoid. For Visweswaran, failures
expose the overall problem of epistemology (99). Failures to ethically and successfully represent research participants expose more definitively the difficulties of understanding others and how deeply communicating subjects are marked by their cultures.

These perpetual failures, however, should not signify the end of discussion. Instead, they mark a transition whereby the limitations that are inherent in the traditional approach to ethnography are no longer resisted, but rather utilized in order to disrupt the desire to ‘better’ engage with participants (Visweswaran 100). For Patricia Lather, “[f]ailure is not just a sign of epistemological crisis but also an epistemological construct that signals the need for new ground versus repetition on the same terms” (38). Hence, the current system that sets up research methods as either successes or failures needs to be dismantled for future access to alternative methods.

Inherent in the experiential approach (and following Linda Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking for Others”) is an avoidance of representing the voices of research participants: feminist ethnographers resist practices that speak for participants in favour of practices that allow them to speak with participants. Such a theoretical foundation has led those who practice feminist ethnography to seek, as far as possible, to inject an authentic voice of the participant into the final textual product. This has encouraged such researchers to utilize technologies that, on the surface, appear to represent voices in ethnographic projects. As the use of tape recorders help to define and shape what is included in the interview process, the polished ethnographic text exposes more definitively the position of the ethnographer than the accounts of the participant. While the text appears to reveal a culture (and its individuals) in its entirety—in its most honest form—it is the ethnographer and the readers of that ethnography who shape what will be interpreted and heard from the transcripts, recordings, and phonetic tones of participants. Not only is the accountability of a subject opaque to the researcher in its (in)ability to capture the words and coherency of that subject, but the tape recorder also causes real interruptions in the interview process.

Feminist ethnographers often have not fully separated their experiential ethnographies from those of more traditional methods, but only try different approaches to reach similar ends. These approaches are related through a desire to create ethnographies that represent ‘success’ based on conventional ‘wholeness’ through the words of the participant. In examples of traditional ethnographic practices, such as David Fetterman’s Ethnography: Step by Step, the tape recorder is promoted for its ability to “effectively capture long verbatim quotations, essential to good fieldwork, while the ethnographer maintains a natural conversational flow” (70, emphasis added). Implicit in his title is the idea that a successful ethnography can be accomplished through following a regimented system of steps, while his arguments suggest that the act of recording voices verbatim is something to which all ethnographers need aspire. This attitude towards the efficacy and desirability of recording devices in the wider context of ethnographic studies may, at first review, seem favourable.
Indeed, the problem of speaking for research subjects appears circumnavigated by means of technological assistance, but this should not lead one to the conclusion that the act of recording is not, in and of itself, a means of representation that risks appropriation and distortion.

The tape recorder is strategically used to record the ‘authentic voice,’ as opposed to more basic interview practices wherein an interpretational reading of the participant’s voice is transformed by the notes of the ethnographer. The notion of an ‘authentic voice’ already assumes that recording words will further represent subjects in a more ‘honest’ way than through the interpretive notes of the ethnographer. Authenticity is, of course, problematic in many ways. Although upon a first listening, the voice on the tape recorder seems the ‘true’ voice or a ‘real’ account of the subject, such listening does not take into account that such recordings do not simply stand alone in ethnographic representations. Rather, the very nature of ethnographic accounts necessitates their first being heard by a specific self—with its own interpretative frameworks and influences—and then analysed and written by the ethnographer in her or his own primary languages. Just as the ethnographer cannot escape her or his positionality and write from ‘nowhere,’ personal accounts similarly do not drop out of mid-air.

In Fictions, Visweswaran recalls her own obsession with the ‘authenticity’ that the tape recorder provided. Though ethnographers utilize tape recorders for their potential to directly and transparently represent participant’s voices, what is heard while transcribing interviews is ultimately affected by the ethnographer’s own interpretation of participants’ accounts. The final ethnographic text becomes the interpretational voice of the ethnographer, and rather than avoiding the problems of representation, the text essentially redoubles such misrepresentations. For Visweswaran, the use of the tape recorder became a means to satisfy her yearning to ‘capture’ women’s words only because of the perception that the device could replicate voice free from lenses of manipulation and representation (97). Visweswaran writes that it is the ethnographer’s task to break down participant resistance in order to create a clear subject-hood. She states:

Normative ethnographic description itself is rife with the language of conquest: we extort tales and confessions from reluctant informants; we overcome the resistance of recalcitrant subjects when we ‘master’ their language or ‘subdue’ their insistent questioning. The ethnographer finally arrives when she renders a people or person ‘subject.’ (60)

Desiring to be a self and to make research participants ‘subjects’ is exemplary of the normative drive to create linear narratives or ‘whole’ stories of one’s self or others. Refusing to be a subject, in the linear sense, is akin to refusing to be easily accessed; specifically, it is an agential way to avoid research that risks the danger of researchers “steal[ing] knowledge from others, particularly those who have little else, and us[ing] it for the interests of power” (Lather 96). As feminist ethnographers have shown, however, the agency to refuse re-
search is allotted only to groups with resources to do so (Hedge; Lundstrom; Visweswaran).

While ethnographic practices have traditionally sought to gain knowledge of other groups through observations that objectify the ‘other,’ feminist ethnographic practices seek to make individuals agential by producing them as ‘whole’ and ‘speaking’ subjects. Western notions of subjectivity, however, are already bounded by normative constructions of what it means to be a self. For Rey Chow this “subject-constitution” is heavily rooted in an Anglo-American liberal humanism that tries “to make the native more like us by giving her a ‘voice’” (“Violence” 35). The other is then represented as individual, monolithic, and static and is given a subjectivity imposed upon as the result of conventional western norms. Research participants are allotted few options, Chow argues: there are “two types of freedom the subaltern has been allowed—object formation and subject constitution—which would result either in the subaltern’s protection (as object) from her own kind or her achievement as a voice as-similable to the project of imperialism” (Writing 35). Similarly, Gayatri Spivak writes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “Echo” that this relationship results in a doubling effect as the only words heard by ethnographers are mirrors to what they already know as Western subjects, and this ensures that the subaltern is only understood insofar as her or his responses contain relative value to Western culture, societal values, or ways of knowing. In concert with Spivak, Chow argues that researchers are driven to gain knowledge of other cultures in order to “enrich” themselves with the “surplus value of the oppressed” (Writing 30). From this position, one might argue that participants express strategic agency by refusing to give their words under such restrictive conditions.

Ofelia Schutte argues in “Cultural Alterity” that she who is from the dominant culture sets the terms of the interview process, and seldom the other way around (62). The researcher not the researched—often decides the ultimate intention, whereas participant silence, or refusal to be interviewed, is considered an ethnographic failure. For Trinh T. Minh-ha, “silence can only be subversive when it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories” (“Not” 373). Reinterpreting silence as subversive, feminist ethnographers can begin to think against traditional forms of ethnographic representation. For instance, Visweswaran argues that lies, secrets, and silences are resistance strategies that outline ethical issues and demonstrate the positioning of the ethnographer. Discussing examples of research participants who have refused to be interviewed, Visweswaran and Jayati Lal conclude that participants embody agential freedom from subjugation when they refuse to be represented in any form outside of that they desire. For Lal, such occasions work against negative stereotypes of ‘Third World’ women as “unliberated” (204).

The construction of narrative accounts makes the concept of unfettered testimony by a participant problematic in its own right. Even if personal accounts seem the most true to the speaking subject, this does not mean that such accounts will be read or understood by others—or that they are not
affected by social norms. To provide an example, Schutte unpacks her Latina identity and how it is cast as a “recognizable category” (58). The word ‘Latina’ provokes a series of preconceived stereotypes, and she argues that “[Latina] is a signifier that both masks and evokes a range of associations—hot blooded, temperamental, submissive, defiant, illegal or illicit, sexually repressed or sexually overactive, oppressed, exploited, and so on” (58). Such negative associations tied to words—and threaded together—are “producers[s] of culture” (Schutte 58-59). In a similar vein, Gelya Frank argues that negative constructions of “disability” often skew the reality of the perceptual viewer. In *Venus on Wheels*, Frank addresses how preconceived linguistic norms regarding disability came to signify the material body of her research participant, Diane. She argues that clinical accounts by doctors, when describing Diane’s body, did not wholly reflect what was observed. Linguistic conceptions of what it means to ‘have legs’ or to be a ‘whole body,’ when placed under the veil of negative stereotypes, substitute embodied reality and ignore a “source of countless ambiguities that spill over or resist filling the outlines of narrative strategies” (123). In both Schutte’s and Frank’s work, words that stand for race, ethnicity, gender, and disability come to signify a number of preconceived norms that seek to “capture” identity and yet fail to account for the complexity of the subject’s fundamental reality.

Just as real experiences are lost to language, so too do bodies slip outside of narrative constructions despite the fact that they are tangentially part of this process. Butler makes this clear in *Senses of the Subject* when she writes that “[a]lthough the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture” (20-21). Butler argues that communicating subjects cannot put into words the “body in its knowability” (21); however, all scenes of address involve the body. Whether it is the animation of the throat in speech, the hands in sign language, or the body that produces the written text (Butler, *Senses* 15), the only tools offered to access bodies and beings are always already pre-established by a signifying system. For feminist ethnography, dependency on tape recorders reduces the speaking body to spectrality. If perceptions are skewed by preconceived linguistic understandings (and technological reduction), then one cannot give an account of oneself that is ungoverned by such norms.

Discussing the concept of accountability of the self, Butler argues that subjectivity is an on-going process, one that is informed and governed by clusters of norms that police how subjects come to know themselves in the everyday. Calling into question the authority of self-representation, Butler has argued that when a self narrates its story, it is no more reliable than the accounts of others. Though it is usually argued that we can only truly know ourselves and never—or not without great difficulty—fully know others, Butler wants to problematize the belief that we even know ourselves. In “Giving an Account of One’self,” Butler argues that the self’s account is not individual, unique, or representative of something truthful since our self-re recognisability is the effect of language conventions that produce social norms (23). When wanting to know other subjects, we anticipate a life...
narration by and of that subject. A life narration understood in its linearity is emblematic of a larger conception of temporality and subject-hood described throughout Western history. It is along these lines of thought that Gelya Frank recounts “how our interviews began, an entanglement of intentions resolved by the most conventional narrative device of Western autobiography: ‘I was born...’” (124). In the case of past ethnographies, descriptions of participants are often represented in linear fashion with little regard to whether or not the individuals represented understand their own experiences in a linear or chronological way. This is to say that accounts of the subject have more to do with audience accessibility than an organic representation of participants.

Through this linear telling of subjectivity, Butler argues that a narration always arrives late to the norms that are already formed and, therefore, the self reconstructs and reproduces itself differently in each act of telling (27). Narration is assumed to be coherent and sequential. In the act of narration, however, the story of the self is always under revision. Calling into question this authority Butler states:

We can surely still tell our stories—and there will be many reasons to do precisely that—but we will not be able to be very authoritative when we try to give an account with a narrative structure. The ‘I’ cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one’s own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know. (26)

Our accounts of ourselves, nevertheless, are never fully our own, nor can there be self-accounts that are not already conforming to linguistic norms that govern the corporeality of the subject (Butler, “Giving” 26). Likewise, the tape recorder only sustains the illusion of unfettered representation of a ‘true,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘fixed’ self since the self is perpetually in flux. Therefore, any telling from a subject, researcher, or participant cannot give an accountable response affirming who they, as subjects, are. Thus, authenticity through tape recording devices does no more to show the ethnographer the truth of the subject’s account than her or his own account of the subject’s words. “No reality can be ‘captured’ without transforming” (Framer 115), writes Trinh, and ethnographic interviews are deeply transformative because they involve a set time limit to ask pre-established questions relevant to the ethnographer. In this regard, capturing spoken words creates little more than a temporal fiction, as participants’ responses do not remain identical over time. It is, however, our inability to give authentic or authoritative accounts of ourselves or of others that will allow us to reframe our motivation for ethnographic practices. Such a reframing may allow for more ethical ethnographic fieldwork and text-work to be produced—work that recognizes its own limitations from the outset.

What is most important for feminist ethnographers is finding ethical ways of conceptualizing the research participant, or the means to question their own positions in hearing an other’s response. In “Giving an Account of Oneself,” Butler begins to (re)formulate the recognition project that understands the self in opposition to an other and, as a
result, contains this relationship as static. Discursively, the self comes to understand itself through what it is not. Since one is endowed with a specific exteriority, Butler argues, the self’s perceptions of the material world are fundamentally shaped by these factors. Butler begins to break down the ways in which the self conceptualizes its own recognition in the world for its livelihood. She states that self-formulation does not begin prior to recognition of the other. It would be wrong to argue that there are individual selves who reproduce this relationship. There is no original knowledge or self that starts this relationship, but rather it is the external norms through language that frame the ways in which both self and other are situated: “‘[a]s Hegel would have it, recognition cannot be unilaterally given’—or, in other words, the self does not come into being without the other and vice versa” (Butler 22). Since there is no original self in this relationship, it is important to recognize that this relationship is a reciprocal and mutually dependent system. To call this relationship into question is to critique how we situate the dominant culture and reflection of the other. Since it can be argued that the Western self understands its own subjectivity only insofar as it is not the other, so too is the other structured to understand her or his subjectivity in contrast with the western notion of what it means to be a ‘self.’

This (ethnographic) project of recognition is on-going and does not stop formulating the other’s position in opposition to the self for the dominant culture’s own definition. Yet it is this belief that we can gain self-knowledge through the opposition of an other subject that makes ethnographic practices inherently colonial. To the contrary, Butler argues that the self can never be truly realized because self-understanding is composed mainly by norms that place selves in opposition to others. Butler states that coming to terms with the fact that we cannot fully know (our)selves should form the basis of future critical discussion. For Butler, these normative frames are part of language construction, and it is these “norms embedded in language” that police “what will and will not constitute recognisability” (23-24).

Arguing that we must begin to realize how our selves are formulated in order to revamp our approaches of studying others, Butler states that exploitative relations can only be disrupted through shifting our attention to the linguistic norms that position our subjects in the world (27). Recognizing the subject’s limit of knowledge about the self, researchers can begin to reframe their projects away from the power relationships that are supportive of self-definition through research participants. Advocating for more patience and humility, Butler suggests acknowledging the fact that full knowledge of the self or other is unattainable in theory as well as in practice. Only through this framework, it would seem, could a feminist ethnographer knowingly treat other subjects as collaborative research participants with a clear feminist conscience. Such a praxis may be the only way these pathological (and culturally specific) linguistic norms may be located, as engaging with our limitations may create new discursive spaces in which we can openly discuss our own ethnographic ‘failures’ and ‘successes.’ In suspending the drives for
self-knowledge, the ethnographer can avoid furthering ethical violence upon participants. Indeed, halting the drive for self-knowledge is difficult—if not impossible—Butler argues, since it would be an on-going process of resisting self-identification and the identification of others (27). We also cannot assume, she explains, that through our inability to know ourselves we will gain a form of transparency; rather, this will lower our expectations of our own capacity for self-knowledge and ability to account for ourselves or others (28). This is precisely where the question of ethics emerges in this critical conversation.

I shall reiterate the question: “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” Certainly, the many shapes and forms of existing ethnographies that seek to follow feminist principles suggest the answer is clear; however, as a consequence of the arguments and theories discussed above, I believe that the more appropriate lines of inquiry necessarily become the following: Are feminist ethnographies ethical ethnographies? Can feminist ethnography be ethical? And what does an ethical representation of a participant’s voice (or silence) look like?

Ultimately, I argue that feminist ethnography poses both the problem and the solution to ethical relationships between subjects. A feminist ethnography would presumably be an ethical project wherein knowledge gain comes with the utmost respect for research participants. Yet this is no easy task. Knowledge gain itself epitomizes the issues of structuring the ethnographic method, and has led to further violence of representation regarding those who are researched. As Trinh states, “[t]o lay emphasis on expression and on message is to forget that even if art is said to be a ‘window on the world,’ it is only ‘a sketched window[...].’ And, just as sketched windows have their own realities, writing as a system by itself has its own rules and structuring process” (Woman 21). Thus, ethnographic representations always follow through the interpretative ears of the ethnographer, whereas ethnographic writing follows from the linguistic and structural norms through the process of rhetoric.

The mechanism by which ethnography might become a solution for these ethical problems is its allowance of researchers to further disrupt their place within power relations. More conscious of the myriad ways in which ethnographic studies might affect the lives of others, this approach would immediately call into question a feminist’s ability to give an account of others or the self and fully recognize that “language is always older than [us]” (Trinh, Woman 36). Thus, it is a magnified reading of language that allows ethnographers to interrogate their positions and to realize that reflexive accounts, though important for research process, can only be partial.

What I argue here is that ethnography becomes the solution once it steps away from its traditional dialectic. This is put best by Butler in “Giving an Account of Oneself”:

There is lots of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows as well. In this sense, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the
scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be perhaps an ethics based on our shared, and invariable, partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as what one thinks that one is, might imply, in turn, a certain patience for others that suspends the demand that they be selfsame at every moment. (27)

Ethnography essentially becomes a paradoxical metaphor for the Hegelian scene of recognition, and it is not until we disrupt our position within this dialectic that we will realize that the ethics of knowing will come from the comfortability of our non-knowing. Following Butler, ethnography can symbolize a window—a window that allows us to see its frame (even if it is only a sketch) as well as the area both inside and outside. This window will at times let us recognize our irrecognizability and break the desire to understand other subjects as static others, which stems from a desire to be a static self.
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What to Do with All This Imperfection?

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**From Voice to Paper**

Flux is a problem. We instinctively assume the solidity of things we have found to be porous, and we cannot adjust our instincts to accord for that realization. This problem, as Miranda Niittynen reminds us via Judith Butler, runs to our very sense of self. Not only can we “never—or not without great difficulty—fully know others,” but “the belief that we [can] even know ourselves” is problematic (14). The ‘true,’ ‘authentic’ self is not, in a definitive sense, knowable by the self or communicable to the Other because, as Niittynen puts it, the self is “perpetually in flux” (15).

Navigating such non-linguistic flux requires the use of linguistic tools—Niittynen’s “language conventions” and “social norms” (14)—that bring with them their own complications. Ethnographers have advised that a more ‘authentic voice’ might be captured through the use of increasingly ubiquitous voice recording technology. Surely the unedited speech of a subject is closer to the subject’s ‘true’ point of view than the interviewer’s notes of the subject’s speech. The voice is being produced, after all, by the subject’s body as opposed to the interviewer’s pen. But the whole scenario—the very existence of the recorder in the room with the speaker, the expectation that the recording will be listened to—renders the communication mediated, controlled, and thus not ‘authentic.’ Then there are the transcription and editing processes that follow the recording. As Niittynen argues, voice recording is just another—though perhaps more convenient—linguistic tool that “only sustains the illusion of unfeathered representation” (15) on which interview methods depend for legitimacy.

I would counter Niittynen’s assertion and argue that the voice recorder does allow some advantage over other recording tools, but I also concede to Niittynen’s claims that that advantage is one of degree and not of kind. This position is based on my own work with voice recording: in addition to writing poetry and essays, I work as a literary critic, and I will take this opportunity to reflect on the interviews I have conducted using a voice recorder. I will follow those reflections with a consideration of how an ethnographer’s relationship to authenticity and uncertainty of meaning compares to that of a poet’s.

Word of Mouth
Transcribing voices as captured in a recording can be a fascinating, and exhausting, challenge. People speak far differently than they write, even if they are accomplished writers: they speak in partial sentences, they trail off, they take off on elaborate digressions based on associations collected in the back and forth of oral conversation, etc. By my own measures, I have achieved some success in typographically capturing the unique oral delivery of many interviewees. I measure that idiomatically, I must admit, by listening back to the recordings and reading along with my transcriptions. But I can also say that the final written forms of the oral interviews I conduct read much more quickly, and more naturally, than any essay I have authored or any Q&A I have conducted by written correspondence. Using a voice recorder has allowed me not only to document the thoughts and opinions of my interviewees, but also to engage with the loosened rhythms, syntaxes, and grammatical formations used in their oral expression.

To this point, however, I have not considered what Niittynen, paraphrasing Butler, claims regarding communicability: “normative frames are part of language construction, and it is these ‘norms embedded in language’ that police ‘what will and will not constitute recognizability’” (16). I pause at “recognizability” because that is exactly one of the constraints placed on me by the literary goals of my interviews. I consider literary interviews as a site of learning, primarily, and if I intend for the reader to learn from the interview, I must prioritize readers’ ability to recognize—that is, to engage with—what is being said. If I want a reader to read through my (admittedly long) interviews, then I must make certain judgements as to what might engage a reader’s attention.

So, while my process of interviewing, transcribing, and editing may be superficially similar to that of an ethnographer, my end goal effects a crucial difference. That is, I have an obligation to favour entertainment value. If my interviewee happens to go off on an errant or unclear tangent, it is my obligation to hide from the world that such a waste of breath ever occurred. This benefits everyone involved: the reader is kept from boredom and confusion, the interviewee appreciates my discretion, and I am saved from some tedious work. In the process, authenticity has been sacrificed. In a sense, I am attempting to do just what Niittynen advocates, to “recognize our irrecognizability” (18). I am not, however, openly acknowledging that irrecognizability; I am instead covering it up and presenting readers with a recognizable exchange, one derived from a recording that is, inevitably, partially irrecognizable (or at least partially boring and confusing).

While there are differences between the responsibility, ethics, and rigour required of the critic-interviewer and those required of the ethnographer, both desire to effect an understanding in the reader—and both must make some kind of compromise to achieve this, knowing s/he can only count on a reader’s partial understanding, blocked as we all are both by our “partial blindness about ourselves” (Butler 27) and by language’s inability to facilitate the communication of even that partial blindness to another. But what if effecting understanding—getting one’s points
across—is not the goal? What if the goal is, instead, to emphasize the failure of getting one’s point across? And what if one’s point is the failure to get one’s point across?

**Leaving the Question Mark There**

In her essay-poem “Essay On What I Think About Most,” Anne Carson claims error causes a “condition of fear” and “a state of folly and defeat”—that is, it prompts “shame and remorse” brought on by “realizing you’ve made an error” (30). Carson questions this usual association, extrapolating from Aristotle’s belief that error “is an interesting and valuable mental event” to posit instead the particular significance of error in the form of metaphor. In her thinking, “metaphor causes the mind to experience itself// in the act of making a mistake.” She continues: “such mistak-eness is valuable” for teaching “that things are other than they seem,” and for exposing “the juxtaposition of what is and what is not the case” (30).

While “there is much to be seen and felt” from the mistakes of metaphor (30), Carson lets that cryptic assertion stand, moving on to another form of error: omission. Turning to a 7th century Greek poem, Alkman’s “fragment 20,” Carson emphasizes the errors of arithmetic, grammar, and metrical form on which Alkman’s poem is built; as with metaphor, Carson cryptically describes these errors as valuable, for “out of [them] may arise/ unexpectedness” (35). A larger error, however, regards the subject of the poem itself: it is absent, and a bracketed question mark stands in its place. Philologists claim the missing subject indicates that the poem “is surely a fragment” and ought to be read as such. Carson ignores that advice, however, instead choosing to “leave the question mark there” (34). If we regard this choice through the ethnographers’ eyes, then it becomes a serious ethical lapse. Carson disregards the (quite reasonable) belief that the original subject of the poem has been lost to an “accident of history,” such as decay, and dismisses the philologists’ reticence as a reduction of “all textual delight/ to an accident of history.” Rather, she insists, the poet left the subject out on purpose, allowing the reader to “admire Alkman’s courage” in confronting an unknown subject (34).

Herein lies the key to Carson’s essay-poem: mistakenness itself, “the willful creation of error” (35), is the value of poetry. Poetry has only a tangential responsibility to uphold any level of authenticity. This is an argument for poetry as disrupter.

Although poetic practice and ethnographic practice take epistemological uncertainty in different directions—poets indulging it, ethnographers attempting to reign it in—an important connection remains. Butler claims that “if the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that fall outside the terms of identity, then any effort made ‘to give an account of oneself’ will have to fail in order to approach being true” (28). Failure is for Butler what error is for Carson: unavoidable. As Carson puts it, “the fact of the matter for humans is imperfection” (35). One cannot, you might say, measure imperfection—or uncertainty—using tools meant to gather certain, definitive, or ‘authentic’

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measurements. Instead, one must accept error and failure, and the resulting imperfection should be imperfectly represented.1

‘Poetic licence’ is generally understood as the freedom to distort facts for the sake of art. Carson is certainly arguing for that, but she is also suggesting a twist on the concept: that a poet might retain a distortion that a philologist or ethnographer would be keen to resolve. As such, she finds herself halfway down the path Niittynen and Butler prescribe. Paraphrasing Butler, Niittynen suggests that “our inability to know ourselves…will lower our expectation of our own capacity for self-knowledge and ability to account for ourselves or others ” (17). Carson, like Niittynen, acknowledges “our inability to know,” but while the ethnographer uses this inability as a check against overconfidence in her claims—that is, to avoid creating “subjects as [knowable] static others” (Niittynen 18)—Carson aims to hang confidently suspended in an acknowledged unknowing. And that confidence is not just for the poet: Carson-as-critic is equally confident in embracing error, for she is “uneasy with any claim to know exactly/ what a poet means to say (34).” She is more comfortable not knowing.

The poet’s interest is in errors, imperfections, and mistakes themselves, while the ethnographer aims to find what truth is available despite those distortions. Both acknowledge limitation: for the ethnographer this is an obstacle that must be accounted for and corrected, but for the poet this may be the final destination, or a springboard for further explorations.

Recording as Imitation

A recorded voice, played back, is not the voice that was recorded. It is, instead, an imitation or copy of that voice. The transcription of the recorded voice is a further copy, resulting in a manuscript that is two steps removed from the original utterances of the speaking subject. At each step, there is the possibility for error to emerge. That error might be intentional—as in an attempt to make an interview more recognizable—or it could be unavoidable—as in the event of indecipherable or missing language. In either case, the likely presence of error leads the interviewer/ethnographer to interpret with caution, so as to not misrepresent the speaking subject.

Unless one is a poet. In that case, the distance between an original utterance and its final representation might become a lush playground. The physical voice was once the only vehicle for poetry, and it remains important despite the form’s major migration to the page. In fact, the tension between voice-bound poetry (which has certainly not gone away) and page-bound poetry invigorates some of the form’s most vociferous debates and fascinating artifacts. Take, for a recent illustrative example of the latter, Jordan Scott’s Blert, in which he attempts to capture his persistent stutter on the page, and to make an engaging music from that repeated verbal ‘error.’2

Given the interest in vocal imperfection, it should be expected that poets have pounced on, and will continue to pounce on, the artistic possibilities presented by the voice recorder. Performance artist Janet Cardiff does so in a manner that is perhaps relevant to the question of ethnography: by manipulating,
and creating, recorded “error.” Her several audio “walks,” which she describes as “similar to… an audio guide,” are records of her own peripatetic journeys that in turn direct listeners along the same routes (“Introduction to the Audio Walks”). These tracks are supplemented with sound effects recorded from the environs of the walks. “The virtual recorded soundscape,” Cardiff insists of one such walk, “has to mimic the real physical one in order to create a new world as a seamless combination of the two” (“The Missing Voice”). Nonetheless, a tension remains between the virtual and physical, with Cardiff’s recorded—indeed, curated—audio environment substituting itself for the real audio environment her listeners would otherwise perceive. What the listener is hearing is a deliberate inauthenticity, or “error,” but one which Cardiff hopes will act as a foundation for a third, “new” environment—one enriched by the walking directions and the “thoughts and narrative elements” she provides (“Introduction to the Audio Walks”).

In her creation of such immersive fictions, Cardiff seems to deliberately discard concepts of authenticity. But in her introduction to “The Missing Voice: Case Study B,” Cardiff explains that her “walks” were motivated by a desire “to dramatize [her] life, make it real by making it cinematic.” She began the process by “walk[ing] and tak[ing] notes on a mini voice recorder” (“The Missing Voice”). As she listened to her recordings, however, she notes that “this voice became another woman,” which, in speaking apart from and back to Cardiff, insisted on the “multiple personalities and voices” (“The Missing Voice) of the self. This is reminiscent of Niittynen’s claim that the self is “perpetually in flux” (14). Cardiff would later add a third-person voiceover and the additional sound effects to the recordings, thereby further distancing the piece from her original—but no more authentic—audio notes. For Cardiff, the distance between her “life” and the woman in the recording was established upon her first listen back. In Niittynen’s terms, Cardiff recognized her own “irrecognizability” in the face of audio mediation—but then added to that mediation in an attempt to make her work seem “real.”

The difference between Cardiff’s “real” and Niittynen’s “authentic” establishes a crucial distinction between poetic practice and ethnographic practice. In both cases, recording is understood as imitation, part of a larger series of mediations from self, to voice, to recorder, to ear, to transcription and editing, and finally to interpretation. Along the way, the “authentic” will be muddled with mistakes, errors, unknowing, and misinterpretation. The question is whether to cope, or come to terms, with the eventuality of meditative error—in order to recover some authenticity—or to build on it. Like Carson, Cardiff is less concerned with the verifiably “authentic” than with the judicious creation of inauthenticity: in the process of adding artful error to her original recordings, she attempts not to accurately capture the irrecognizable aspect of the “authentic” but to create what the audience might recognize as resembling something “real.” Instead of identifying the layers of mediation to get at some level of truth that might lie within or below them, Cardiff adds to those layers in an attempt to imitate the real. Imitating what an audience might experience as ‘real’ is, of course, an unpredictable endeavour, and it re-
veals the level of risk a poet or artist is allowed to take. If Cardiff fails to convince an audience of the realness of her work, this is not an ethical lapse on her part because both parties know that Cardiff is attempting to mimic reality, and not to capture it directly.

Such trickery—Carson’s “willful creation of error”—is unavailable to the ethnographer due to her ethical obligation to provide the most “authentic” account possible. Yet she must still confront error and failure. Niittynen argues that if ethnographers “interrogate their positions” amid this context of error, failure, and imitation, they must “realize that reflexive accounts, though important for the research process, can only be partial” (17). Thus, the source of the poet’s opportunity to exploit error for all its rich artistic possibilities is the ethnographer’s challenge to “partially” reach some level of authentic knowledge despite the inevitable failure of an important ethnographic tool—the voice recorder—to capture the inherently imperfect process of reflexivity. In both cases, however, the identification and acceptance of error/failure makes it possible to salvage some value from the aftermath of imperfection.

1 Even the form of Carson’s “Essay On What I Think About Most” takes part in this performed uncertainty: is it an essay, or is it a poem? Like much of her work, it contains the trappings of both, but cannot be said to be either, entirely. The title, too, is difficult to pin down and could suggest at least two subjects: what things the speaker most often thinks about, or what she thinks about most things. After reading the essay-poem, we can only assume that Carson means for the titular uncertainty—its linguistic error or mistake—to remain unresolved.

2 Scott performs part of his book in a video available at https://vimeo.com/7384677

The Word Hoard

What to Do with All This Imperfection?

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Slips of the Mouth: The Paratactactic Voice of Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*

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Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* are typically read as part of the American ‘long poem’ tradition, following on from William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, the latter forming the primary poetical model on which Olson based his own long work. What is called the ‘long poem’ grew to prominence as a modernist response to epic, and is often characterised as explicitly fusing lyric and epic ‘voices,’ combining epic mythopoesis with lyric intensity, “a breadth of subject and discursive scope [developed to] insure poetry’s social relevance” (Keller 534). This fusion brings with it anxieties concerning the work’s coherence, as the long poem is characteristically an uneasy synthesis between a variety of anterior forms, combining both public and personal utterance. The poet must thus find a method which holds these otherwise uncomfortable bedfellows in some functional union. *The Cantos’* influential solution to this difficulty is found in what Pound termed the “vortex,” a “radiant node or cluster” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92), which pulls otherwise unconnected voices and ideas together; at its root the vortex is a structural form of parataxis, which places rather than subordinates phrases and images. There can be little doubt that Olson’s poetry had its genesis in Pound’s paratactical tendency, but it is also indispensable, in reading Olson, to recognise the younger poet’s deployment of parataxis as not only moving on from but explicitly opposing itself to Pound’s. In thinking through Pound’s parataxis, Olson came to conceptualise and practice poetic speech in a way which differed markedly from ‘the Master’s’ own.

Writing to Robert Creeley in 1951, Olson was coming to the view that Pound’s voice in *The Cantos* is, though compelling, in an important sense suboptimal; Olson suggested that *The Cantos’* success is funded by its poet’s “EGO POSITION,” an overbearing and authoritarian personalization of history which ultimately means that Pound and his associates “never speak … basically, for anyone but themselves” (“Mayan Letters” 93). In making this judgement, Olson aligns ‘Ez’s epic’ with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which, in his foundational essay “Projective Verse,” he damns as an example of
Keats’s ‘Egotistical Sublime,’ or, in his own terms, “the non-Projective” (39). The epic, for Olson, is made fatally dysfunctional in and for modernity by the ‘egoism’ of its great practitioners. (Wordsworth and William Carlos Williams are made to share the blame here.) The project of the newly-begun *Maximus*, then, is in part one of redeeming epic through a smashing of the poetic ego, and a return to a pre-modern, Homeric model of epic speech and experience. Olson’s prime tool in this task is a fragmenting parataxis, one distinctively allied to the bodily operation of speech.

Early Olson criticism, whilst more than cognizant of the symptomatically fragmentary and paratactic nature of the writing, tended to emphasize its attempted coherence. Thomas Merrill, in 1982, wrote that what he called Olson’s “grammar of illiteracy,” his tactical derangement of syntax, “is really the grammar of life—life in all its ongoing continuity and unremitting process” (62). In another influential study, of 1978, Robert von Hallberg read Olson as essentially a didactic poet, leading to the conclusion that Olson’s best work was done in the first volume of *Maximus*, and that the more mythological, allusive, and heuristic-hermetic work of the second and third installations was therefore a falling off and an aberration from his vital poetic (3; 41). In both of these views Olson’s primary genius is essentially a continuous one, and his paratactical poetic is read as only “apparent disorder” (von Hallberg 62) working in service of an overarching or prospective logi-
cality. More recent criticism has, if anything, exacerbated this tendency. Carla Billitteri’s 2009 study *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson* argues that Olson’s opposition to *logos* as syntax forms part of a broader American search for a Cratylic poetic utterance which makes language natural and ideal (118-19). Olson’s failure to achieve such a language does not stop Billitteri from adjudging his poetry as fundamentally geared toward coherence, however. Similarly, Heriberto Yépez’s 2013 *The Empire of Neomemory* characterizes Olson’s making of the “text into a living body that breathes” as tantamount to creating “a *Frankenstein* or *spiritual cyborg*” (15), one imagined as a perfectly functioning machine which never breaks down. The thread which unites these positions is that they take Olson’s work too much as theory rather than as praxis, and imagine that a ‘grammar of life,’ a ‘Cratylic language,’ will effect an uninterrupted, didactic synthesis between poem and world. This piece will argue, on the contrary, that Olson’s parataxis is one based in physical, *spoken* performance rather than written discourse or an elevated epic ‘voice’ of ‘high style’ and elaborate formulaic figure; if it is a machine, then it is a machine whose articulations are composed in no small part of noise, whose ‘coherence’ is paradoxically instantiated in entropic leakage.

Olson’s ‘noisiness’ is already present in the complexity of the voice masquerading as ‘Maximus’ in the early poems, some interference pattern of poet and/or teacher, and of
its audience, neither Homer’s massed polis nor Milton’s “fit audience … though few” (391), which is, perhaps, also Pound’s. Speaking in 1962, Olson outlined what function he understood ‘Maximus’ to have in his work:

The general proposition is … this creature, Maximus, addresses himself to a city, which in the instance is Gloucester, which then by turn happensto be in Massachusetts. I’m not at all impressed that there’s necessarily any more Gloucester, Massachusetts in any meaningful sense than the creature is either me or whom he originally was intended as, which was Maximus of Tyre, a second-century dialectician. At least on the record what he wrote was dialethi, which we have I guess in the word ‘dialectic,’ meaning intellectual essays, or essays on intellectual subjects. And he mostly wandered around the Mediterranean world, from the center, the old capital of Tyre, talking about one thing—Homer’s Odyssey. I don’t have much more impression of him than that. I’ve tried to read his Dialethi and found them not as interesting as I expected. But he represents to me some sort of figure that centers much more than the second century A.D.—in fact, as far as I feel it, like, he’s the navel of the world. (Butterick 6-7)

Both the city which the poems address and the persona which addresses it are not ‘impressed’ into the work in Olson’s mind in that they are not stable poles of communication: ‘Gloucester’ is no more literally or only the city than ‘Maximus’ is literally or only a characterization of a second-century philosopher. Rather, Olson cryptically states that he understands Maximus as “the navel of the world” (Butterick 7). Here, Maximus is associated with another object of Olson’s enthusiasm, demonstrated in his famous early poem “The Kingfishers”: the omphalos or navel, which sits at the gnomic centre of that work.

Laid in Delphi, the omphalos stone is held in myth to be the centre or ‘navel’ of the world. In “Kingfishers” Olson associates it with the revolutionary potential of Mao, and is particularly interested in the untranslatable sigil carved on its side:

But the E
cut so rudely on that oldest stone
sounded otherwise,
was differently heard.
(Collected Poems 88)

The omphalos is emblematic of the beginning, and of the centre or root of cosmogenesis; but it also bears on it the mark of how that beginning and centre have been lost. The now meaningless sigil (it looks like, but probably is not, an epsilon) must, Olson reasons, have been of great power and deep significance once. Maximus of Tyre, as a scholar of Homer, has some connection to this lost world through the Odyssey, and so has access to the rule of poetry Olson believed, via the classicist Eric Havelock’s account in his Preface to Plato, to have preceded the disastrous intervention of
Plato, with his logic of subordinated experience, cause-and-effect, and the written word. In his 1963 study Eric Havelock wrote that “just as poetry itself [for Plato], as long as it reigned supreme, constituted the chief obstacle to the achievement of effective prose, so there was a state of mind which we shall conveniently label the ‘poetic’ or ‘Homerian’ or ‘oral’ state of mind, which constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect” (46-47). If Plato represents the rule of logical and syntactical abstraction in the shape of the written word, then Homer represents, and legislated for, a prior, alogical and essentially paratactic oral-poetical regime which Olson understood to have enshrined a more direct, even proprioceptive, relationship to phenomenological objects—and to the world itself. Maximus of Tyre is imagined as a final outrider of this consciousness. The ‘Maximus’ of the poems, then, is not a ‘persona’ or a ‘character’ so much as he is a vortex in the Poundian sense: a gathering of luminous connections and details from across time and culture. Indeed, more so than this, he is an omphalos in his own right, an anchoring point and beginning that is nonetheless inscrutable and of uncertain genesis. From here we can begin to understand the unstable form of address Olson creates through ‘Maximus,’ already a point of contestation at the beginning of the poem, and becoming increasingly complex and even compromised as the sequence progresses.

At the beginning of Maximus, then, ‘Maximus’ can be understood as a type of paratactic construct, one whose inner dynamics are suggested rather than demonstrated. He is also the nexus of a range of referents—to the Classics, to epic, to Olson’s own great height, and so on. In first entering the poem he pulls these references together. Speaking to Gloucester, he speaks from the east, the sea, and Tyre. This oceanic character is reinforced through invoking a whaling “lance,” described as “metal hot from boiling water” (5); here Olson returns to older hunting grounds, reflecting his period as a Melville scholar, by evoking the pivotal moment in which Ahab “baptises” his harpoon in blood (Melville 435). Olson, perhaps wary of unhappy precedent, reverts this chrism to water, but it is telling that compacted references to two long works which the poet deeply admired (both The Odyssey and Moby Dick could be described, in different senses, as ‘epic’) begin Maximus’ enormous undertaking. At this stage of the work Olson’s handling of parataxis for the purposes of pulling together disparate material owes an obvious debt to Pound. However, the development of Olson’s poetics soon took his understanding of parataxis in a markedly different direction, a direction indicated in the very earliest sections of Olson’s great work.

The clue is already there in “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” on the second page of Maximus: “By ear, he sd” (6). Plato socially and imaginatively ostracised the poet when he ushered in writing and logic,
pushing the rhapsode to redundancy. Similarly, the oral aspect of the Chinese ideogram had been conveniently ignored by sinologist Ernest Fenollosa, who privileged its supposed immediacy as a pictorial sign; Pound (broadly) followed him. Olson was going to put the spoken word and aural reception back at the forefront of long form poetics. *Maximus* is conceived of not as *written* but as *said*. It will be composed with attention to the sound it makes — in fact, “be played by, said he, coldly, the / ear!” (6). To ‘play by ear’ suggests a more reactive and spontaneous approach to composition than can be found in the *Cantos*; a mode of composition happy to backtrack, concede and correct error, and contradict itself. Scholarship has thought of this as primarily a processual dynamism and has associated it with the sonic and the oral. Such will become the major trajectory of Olson’s handling of ‘voice’ as *The Maximus Poems* progresses. This reaches a pitch in the third volume (published posthumously, in 1975), but the seeds are present in the early 1950s as volume one (published 1960) was in production. So, for example, in “The Songs of Maximus,” which constitutes the fourth ‘letter’ of the sequence:

**SONG 5**

I have seen faces of want,  
and have not wanted the FAO: Appleseed  
‘s gone back to  
what any of us  
New England. (20)

This is the whole song, the second shortest of six brief songs which compose this section. Again here, a series of historical, mythological, and personal references are juxtaposed: Jonny Appleseed (a fellow Massachusite) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (a suppressed reference to its one-time founder FDR, Olson’s political hero and one-time boss). Olson/Maximus is the *omphalos* or centre cohering these otherwise disparate parts, and might seem to fall here exactly into the trap he saw Pound caught in: the *omphalos* as ‘EGO-POSITION.’ What is significant for our argument is that the song is short; in fact, it is cut off. “Appleseed / s gone back to / what any of us / New England” (20) is obviously not a speech including logical sense; in fact, it sounds like a speaker ‘winging it,’ or ‘mouthing off,’ and then running out of ideas or inspiration into the fourth line. Thus “what any of us” (20) is a vague push toward a conclusive or universal point which cannot find the link to where it is going (New England), and is more a case of playing for time than it is of artful and suggestive paratactic construction. The voice is, then, explicitly constructed as a *voice* here, a speaker who can say the wrong or the stupid thing, or go out of his zone of competence. The *umms* and *aahs* of a person speaking naturally, rather than as a ‘public speaker,’ are reinserted into the voice in Olson’s poetic; this spontaneity makes his poetry a parataxis of sonic event as much as it is a site of a more Poundian vortex-parataxis.
The poetic ego is weakened because it knows itself to be part of a compromised world of happenstance.

Olson develops this self-cancelling gesture as an antidote to the Poundian ego. Combined with his habit of revising earlier stages of *The Maximus Poems* in later passages, as direct and explicit corrections or as additions, the tendency of the voice to speak over, confute, or interrupt itself at a local level demonstrates an increasingly idiosyncratic style orientated towards process and the kinetic rather than the completed, hypotactic, or monumental. This is in part a product of Olson’s thinking the poem as necessarily corporeal, as comparable to activities such as walking or dancing. Such activities are always a series of trade-offs between intention, artistry, physical capacity, and chance encounter. So, in ‘Letter # 41 [broken off]’, which begins the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*:

With a leap (she said it was an arabesque I made, off the porch, the night of the St Valentine Day’s storm, into the snow. Nor did she fail of course to make the point what a sight I was the size I am all over the storm trying to be graceful Or was it? She hadn’t seen me in 19 years (Maximus 171)

This is not parataxis in the manner used by Pound. There is a great deal more ‘personal mythology’ in Olson by this point than is ever immediate in Pound; though ‘Letter 41’ goes on to make the ‘leap’ between this evening of Olson’s youth and the movements and settlements of migrating populations (“The Jews / are unique because they settled astride / the East African rift” [171]), and further back into deep geological time and the breaking (‘leaping’?) apart of the continents, it is the poet’s body, flailing or felicitous, which is the sight-out-of-proportion sitting at the centre and made ridiculous. The relationships between clauses are pointedly indistinct. The key blur enabled here is between two possible states of the body in flight—leap and arabesque. The latter is decorative or poised; the former suggests some degree of desperation. The unclosed bracket between what Olson-as/or-Maximus calls the leap and what ‘she’ calls arabesque is a characteristic Olson gesture. Here, it is particularly instructive because it decouples the statement from the competence of the speaker (the ‘EGO-POSITION’), and at the very beginning of the letter—the whole page of text shimmers under the sign of this uncertainty. That the action under discussion, which is itself the lynch or *omphalos* of the poem, is so fuzzily delineated suggests precisely the great break Olson makes with Pound. It is not so much a matter of self-knowledge as of self-doubt: “what a sight I was the size I am all over the storm / trying to be graceful Or was it?” (171) The mutual unknowing of 19 years is nowhere near as radical, here, as the self-ignorance which cuts in with “Or was it?” (171), an ejaculation with which the
poet-mouth destabilises itself and frustrates its own associations. The body is not just in movement—it is in movement against itself, taking two contradictory poses simultaneously: leap and arabesque, memory and oblivion, elocution and interruption. Olson’s kinetics is one shaped by entropy; it is unlike the “radiant node” (Gaudier-Brzeska 92) characteristic of Pound.

The crucial difference is that Olson’s verse is radically unclosed, explicitly orientated towards its own process (it is not distinct in being processual as such, but in the degree to which it embraces the processual). Its parataxis points not only to polysemic or undetermined relations but also toward the way in which the paratactic structures of Maximus itself are compromising and deranging to the writing, highlighting irregularities and lacunae. In this context, Theodor Adorno’s writings on Friedrich Hölderlin’s parataxis are illuminating:

The paratactical revolt against synthesis attains its limit in the synthetic function of language as such. What is envisioned is a synthesis of a different kind, language’s self-reflection, while language retains synthesis. To destroy the unity of language would constitute an act of violence equivalent to the one the unity perpetuates: but Hölderlin so transmutes the form of unity that not only is multiplicity reflected in it—that is possible within traditional synthetic language as well—but in addition the unity indicates that it knows itself to be inconclusive. (136)

There are some clear distinctions between the characteristics Adorno finds in Hölderlin and those of the poetry Olson was writing as Adorno produced in his essay. Primarily, English is usually considered an analytic language, and has a small number of synthetic components relative to Hölderlin’s German. This relatively analytic nature of English was a central cause of Ernest Fenollosa’s view, formative for Olson, that the language avoids the more abstracting tendencies of most European languages, and so has a better chance of recovering the immediacy of the ideogram (15). Adorno is more sanguine: synthetic features of language are inevitable and constitute the ‘limit’ to the possibilities inherent in parataxis. Olson’s work is as subject to this limit as anyone’s. The innovation, which Adorno also sees in Hölderlin, is in the infusion of ‘unity’ with the ‘inconclusive,’ and vice versa. This is crucial, because Olson’s project aims both to break up the monolithic and abstract ‘ego’ he finds in the Miltonic epic and its fractious American-long-poem progeny (Pound, Williams etc.), and to pull together experience and language in such a fashion that it overcomes the alienating effect of abstracting and hypotactic thought. This latter, well-documented aspiration is exemplified in what Olson calls ‘the will to cohere,’ to overcome the divide between body and mind, human and environment, form and content, subject
and object which he feels is our major deleterious inheritance from Plato. This might be understood as a desire to have the world as a realm or site of being rather than of mere contemplation, where the active stance implied by ‘being’ presages the role of the ‘inconclusive’ in ‘unity.’ Adorno suggests that these two seemingly contradictory sub-projects are achievable through parataxis. The question of how Olson achieves this, how the pairing of the inconclusive with coherence becomes manifest in his work—especially considering the stark differences between Hölderlin as a lyric poet and Olson’s more extended scope—can be answered in considering one of Olson’s latest and most accomplished poems, “Golden Venetian Light From Back of Agamenticus Height Falling / Like Zeus’ Dust All Over the River & marsh as / Night Falling Saturday June 28th 1969 on // Gloucester / Ripping Red River.”

“Golden Venetian Light …” is not alone amongst Olson’s later work in possessing a long and involved title (the section following is called “Short Possible Poem To Follow / Long Excessive ‘Venetian Job’ Written Earlier / At Toward Sunset on Squam River Tonight Also”), but it does furnish a number of useful details for understanding what the pages that follow are trying to achieve. The mythic references reinforce the epic tropes already at play in Maximus. “Zeus’ Dust” is the shower of golden particles as which the god appeared to Danâe and conceived the hero Perseus. In contrast, the referent of “Agamenticus Height” is closer to home, although more obscure: Mount Agamenticus in southern Maine. The mountain is not excessively large but can be easily seen from Cape Ann, and commands famously impressive views itself; it might be read as Gloucester’s answer to Milton’s “AonianMount,” Helicon, the home of the muses (Milton 59). “Golden Venetian Light” is about four-and-a-half pages long, not an “Excessive” length by the standards of an Olson poem (if we include the non-Maximus work, it is probably about average), but it has a sort of exuberance and plenitude which could usefully marry “Excessive” to Adorno’s ‘inconclusive’ as a description of the section’s progress. It begins:

I believe in what the Arabs by muezzin — that at least once a day (& for me it almost has to be sunset to face the sun directly as often as it is out & let its rays or whatever (the fact of its existence, & that without itself as the hydrogen furnace there’d be no us on earth.

(Maximus 613)

Here the paratactic gestures, though more frequent, are essentially recognisable to the reader of “Letter # 41”: unclosed brackets, the juxtaposition of ‘&’ clauses, a lack of subordinating or causative structures, and the way in which the voice seems to interrupt itself either by speaking over itself (the long dash that both ties and separates the “muezzin” and “that at
least” [613] suggests a type of agglutination which is stickier, messier and more confused than the linguistic sense of the word often implies—a gumming together of two distinct instances of speech) or by confuting/dismissing what it says (“its rays or whatever” [613]). These techniques are more widespread in Olson’s later work but retain an essential similarity with the writing of the first two volumes. They are primarily located in writing which is ‘about’ thought in the form of memory or study, therein demonstrating their genesis in autodidactic Poundian poetics.

The majority of the first page of “Golden Venetian Light” is in this vein. The poem is nominally split into two sections, this first page and a second section marked ‘II,’ which runs down two thirds of the next page. However, the full force of Adorno’s ‘inconclusive’; and its relevance, can be felt in the way that the poem refuses to finish at the point that it ostensibly ‘finishes.’ The section marked ‘II’ begins with Olson reporting his view of some birds on the marsh; he is then distracted by the houses behind them, which remind him of the model village given to him by his Aunt Vandla (a recurring memory in The Maximus Poems), which in turn brings up the “model toy steam shovel” (614) Olson bought his son for his birthday. Olson finishes on an angry denunciation of ‘models’ in general, a point which is in itself a significant gesture in his poetics. The most remarkable thing about ‘II,’ however, is that it is fractured by an asterisk, which interrupts the flow of the verse paragraph, and continues the poem after this invective as if in the manner of an explanatory footnote. The shift of attention from the birds to the houses is the point of this break; Olson continues underneath as if in a footnote, ostensibly discussing the architecture of the houses but continues to struggle to finish. Repeated attempts to cut the text off as if it were a letter (“Love // O” [615] and “Signed off / & going home. Me” [616]) are to no avail. The poem’s attention is systematically redirected by its author’s surroundings (“No wow the gulls // are suddenly back & // chomping” [Maximum 615]). Consequently, the environment becomes the active process in the poem, driving the poet to observation; it is not the literary convention of the letter but the natural event of nightfall which ultimately brings the poem to its close. Rather than merely reflective, the poem becomes reactive, interacting with the world which surrounds it.

As has been suggested above, the asterisk poses a problem for the reader: where does it come in the poem? What order is the material supposed to be put into? “Golden Venetian Light” has at least two endings, with several other candidates not quite making it. This can be read as of a piece with a paratactical poetics dedicated to breaking down subordinating logical structures, but it still entertains a series of problems around performance and so (for Olson) around corporeality. The crux of this difficulty can be found on the fourth page of the poem, as Olson again tries and fails to end:

Word of Mouth
Trout in them–no pickerel–no what, herring
in those
waters

today. signed off
& going home. Me.

Love life until it is
your own. Missive, & PS
like also for
Jack & Mary’s
lifetime.

(Maximus 616)

The “PS” (616) here is not, really, a postscript, because such a thing implies a controlled addition to a controlled end, where in fact the poem goes on for another page under the aegis of the column of text which sits mockingly next to Olson’s claim to have “signed off” (616). The writing here poses questions about chronology and simultaneity, as even ‘before’ the ‘postscript’ new and distinct lines appear in parallel, though exactly what ‘before’ means here is hard to judge. Like much of the poem the lines on the right seem to be a response to some immediate happening, in this instance the hanging of some laundry. The pages under discussion are primarily driven by this notational-observational style, which begins by situating itself and allowing things to go ahead round. The result is that only a limited degree of guidance is given to it by its writer (whose activity is primarily one
of noticing, and giving notice), and there is relatively little in the way of a logic or argument. The poetic voice does not so much speak over itself as allow itself to be repeatedly occupied by its landscape; the voice conceived of as declamatory and authoritative has no choice but to stumble here. A text which becomes so alogical that it breaks down all possibility of a ‘complete’ or ‘final’ performance by the poet might seem to be too much the fulfilment of Olson’s campaign against the poetical ego. The poem cannot even speak for itself. It might, however, be more true to Maximus to read it as a total derangement of the written text, which builds a series of undecidable decisions into any reading. Two texts sit juxtaposed as if a great ‘&’ sat between them, neither able to finally subordinate the other. The frustration of the reading voice is thus its triumph in that it places emphasis on the kinetic and entropic character of the mouth’s action rather than the nominally stable and monumental character of the written word posed as a stylised ‘voice.’ The text lets the world in in all its superfluity and simultaneity, which of necessity it can neither contain nor fully comprehend.

The effect of this can be usefully compared with Adorno’s comment on the relationship between ‘form’ and ‘content’ in Hölderlin: “His poetry expresses, better than any maxims could and to an extent that Hegel would not have approved, that life is not an idea, that the quintessence of existing entities is not essence” (123). There is no ‘form’ that can radically control reality; nor is reality amenable to containment in a ‘form.’ Any poetical encounter with reality, any coherence between verse and world, is going to be a process of deforming speech in which what are labelled ‘form’ and ‘content’ engage in a mutual creative destruction. This is of course true of all poetries; what is notable about Olson’s is that it explicitly demonstrates it. This goes some way to explaining Olson’s distaste for models, which pretend to contain a likeness of a thing in a changed form. For the poet who wrote that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (“Projective Verse” 40), such an effort is ludicrous since all things have a proper, and more to the point, a necessary form.

For Olson, the necessary form of human experience is the body. This is the insight at the centre of “Projective Verse,” where the ‘stance toward reality’ is understood as shaped by the physicality of the stander (47). By extension, the stander’s physicality is shaped by his or her environment; as in “Golden Venetian Light,” all experience is in some degree compelled by landscape. Much of the ‘noise’ or ‘interference’ in Olson’s later poetry can be understood as the landscape’s phatic utterance, expressing its presence in and through and to the speaker.

Here, then, is the answer to the problem of the long poem’s (in)coherence which Olson formulates: to use ‘place,’ the city, not just as topos but as a condition of possibility, to allow it to speak in and through and over
the poem through a physiognomy that is like a knot, held in place by the way it pulls against itself. If it is to be in a place it must perforce be in a body, and embodiment makes ego impossible because the body is a complex process rather than a given value or meaning lifted from history as stable; it is already unstable, needs no further destabilising. Olson takes modernist parataxis well beyond traditional ‘subjective’ or even ‘speaker’-centric models of poetic ‘voice,’ finding coherence not in these theoretical-rhetorical models but in physicality. The instability of paratactic structures is not only an analogue of this fact but provides a platform which is naturally bodily and oral-aural. In attempting to re-embody the long poem Olson’s parataxis of voice finds paradoxical coherence in the incoherent, entropic body itself rather than in some present or prospective discourse; language’s frustrated synthesis manifests itself as a huge and ‘excessive’ release of energy which forms Maximus’ impetus. Two decades after “Projective Verse,” Olson’s poetry could perhaps be better described as ‘fissive verse,’ fragmenting, fractious, and of enormously energetic mouthing.
Works Cited


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Word of Mouth
Empty it out

Christine Leclerc
Winner of the 2014 bpNichol Chapbook Award

Mouth within a mouth without a mouth—a mouthless mind.
Shadow-killing darkness of valves
sustain
the civilizing gesture of rhetorical Bay leaf.
A bay in the shape of a leaf.
Leaflets in the shapes of bays.

*

A shadow is a shortcut
to light, fuses—
to run with Peregrines.
Nightly vermouth of crawling across roots, barks, herbs and bitters.
Blueberry pie bush
and silence-deepening light.

*

A mouth comes from two places. A word comes from more.
The blanks represent missing data.
The blanks assume coherence.
Gutterance of bacterial elements—
Think with a ring of lip.

Word of Mouth
Lois Klassen
Queen’s University

For fifteen days in 2011, I furtively performed a materialization of speech.¹ The highly varied and mostly memorable content of conversations was for me an ideal and eminently available source for an art project about dialogical aesthetics. But conversational content captured with a recording device was not what I was after. I am a visual artist, after all. I wanted to accumulate and eventually see the conversations that I had experienced and recalled. So, the project involved putting recalled conversational content through layers of cognitive and visual manipulation—filters, you might say. I am referring here to the techniques of retrieval, handwriting, and display. The conversations, which quickly became unwieldy and endlessly mutating inside of my head (at least that’s how I imagined them), had to be metaphorically yanked out of my head and transferred, through a hand-and-pencil process, onto paper. The mental sorting and ordering that was involved resulted in what might be called fictionalization—a filtration that was dispersed during both retrieval and documentation. I had to work quickly with all of this, to prevent my unstable memory from another process: overwriting.

Let me emphasize this: my aim of research was aesthetic.

I wanted to see what my side of the story looked like.²

Preparations for We Spoke included two beautifully wordless afternoons spent in the letterpress studio where these words were centered and imprinted in stately italic font onto about forty pieces of heavy paper:

We spoke

Once the project was rolling, I made sure that wherever I went I was equipped with a few of the printed cards and a pencil. After nearly every conversation I had during the course of the project, I would privately pencil my memories of what was said onto the cards. As soon as I could, I then deposited these reports into a shiny mailbox, which was affixed to a gallery wall in the exhibition called A Furtive Conundrum. The results have been further fictionalized and transcribed for publication here.³

Word of Mouth
April 1

*We spoke*

About your very large, very well-stocked textile studio.
About how you might fabricate for her a graduation dress.
About the meaning of *valediction*.
About community art projects and about our experiences with ethics board supervision; about community projects that go badly, and the vulnerability of artists.
About how you were once a Mennonite, and how you know where to get Mennonite sausage.

This is the second conversation in one evening about Mennonites. Earlier, I had heard myself blurting out that three or four of the artists in “Beaver” had Mennonite names.
(That conversation happened in the hours before I started this project, so I will leave it alone.)

April 2

*We spoke*

About the exhibition openings last night.
About “Beaver.” We speculated in a gossipy kind of way about the sexualized curatorial premise and how the participating artists were mostly young women,
(and how the curator is dating one of the artists).
About making art as older women.
About a local documentary filmmaker-in-residence.
About the challenges of applying research models to visual art practices.

We uttered this word far too many times:

K’moon-it-ee
Ku-MOO-nit-ee
K’mūnitty
Kah-myūn-ĭt-ĕ
*Kamunity
*K’moonity

I am desperately sick of that word, which seems to be meaninglessly accumulating inside of my head.
April 3

We spoke

About media art and the old *Storyum.*
About the art work called *Vancouver [de] Tour Guide 2010,* and unsettled land claims.
About Canada.
I told you that I thought our project was “coming along,” when you asked.

I should have said, “coming along nicely. Thank you for your good work,” or “We have a long way to go but I am confident it will be a very strong piece,” or “It’s going to be GREAT!”

I feel (and see) conversational regret.

April 3

We spoke

About change.
You said you would not ever be able to change professions.
You wondered what led to him to change from being specialized in one area to a new one.

The conversation made me question for the first time how my appraisal of his reasons was framed by my own needs: I told you that he chose a safer, more secure, more lucrative profession (for his family).

No actually I didn’t—I was just thinking it through, while we were talking.

About voting in Australia, and how it is a cause for joining friends later for a BBQ, *will that happen here?*, you asked—and—*what is voter turnout in Canada?*
*I don’t know,* I told you.

April 3

We spoke

About immigration & the upcoming election: how can immigrant communities consider voting for a government that has so recently curtailed the unification of immigrant families, we asked—not so much questions as assertions.

Word of Mouth
About racial tensions in Europe.
About an article I am writing for Public.
You thanked me for taking up Olympics / fascism liaisons.

We fought April 4
over hospitality.

We spoke
You apologized with a text message, sorry.
So did I.

April 4

We spoke
—We talked & talked—
All I remember is telling
you that if you ever dream
up a “social engagement”
project that requires someone
to “monitor” content for “appropriateness”
the project is likely all wrong.
.
.
.

I also hinted to you about this project.

I am beginning to truncate my conversations because I
don’t want to let it slip that everything said
is getting written down and deposited into a letter box in an obscure gallery.
I don’t want to compromise the pleasures of talking
for this episode of creative practice.
.
.
.

I notice that in the usual course of conversations
I talk a lot about talking with others. I talk as if what gets said in one conversation needs to be added to another. I feel the need to fill conversations (and this artwork) with content taken from somewhere else.

April 4

*We spoke*

At the meal he made when we met his fiancée.
I remember at dinner that all of us kept talking about how to convert imperial length into metric… how tall is everyone in imperial and how tall is everyone in metric.

*(How is this interesting in anyway, I asked myself!)*
Was this a lame way of negotiating our enormous age, language & ethnic differences—a way to laugh, about measurements & food?

April 5

*We spoke*

About your day at school.
You found the chemistry in-class assignment easy.
The new assignment for video production is going to be your favourite assignment, you said.

April 6

*We spoke*

Today I had 2 more conversations about conversation:

CG told me of a conversation they had with a friend. It revealed a new way of talking … they talked about their sexuality in a way they had never done before. Now CG wants to take on the subject of intimate conversations between friends in a new film project.
FC told me about a conversation with people he had never met before. He felt a sense of appreciation

Word of Mouth
for them as outsiders—people whose experiences were similar to his, but vastly different at the same time.

In both of these situations, the conversation revealed a longing—something missing that became revealed through the presence of another. When I heard this I tried to imagine the feelings that might accompany awareness and revelation.

April 10

*We spoke*

I am furtively observing foreign speech acts at the Saskatoon Airport.

“This is really weird.”

A young stewardess is talking on her cell phone with an older man who has just walked off a flight. He is on one side of the glass barricade & she is on the other. While looking into his face, close enough to touch but blocked by the floor to ceiling barricade, she narrates the entire day into her phone.

I think he is her father & he wants to know where she has been.

Later, sitting on the toilet in the airport, I can hear laughing & loud talking. I recognize the voices of the conference moderator & a panelist from this morning’s event. They seem to be on the same page now, and on the same flight back to Toronto. I guess their fundamental differences of opinion from the panel have been resolved or at least tabled.

Do they like each other now?

(Maybe they always did—I hadn’t considered that earlier today.)

The conference was a lot of talking about talking. The featured artist at the conference said that she was wary of the word “dialogue” because it has been over-used.

*...It’s absurd...it has become meaningless.*

She said that dialogue is something that doesn’t really exist in artworks. She tries to be very accurate about what form it takes in her work. She did not give a lecture.

Instead, she had one of the curators interview her.
We spoke later—
I told her about how I was very nervous about showing my final video piece to the participants whose speech acts formed the content of the piece… about how, like her, I was planning to project images of them speaking into a public space.
She told me that in her way of working she never offered her participants withdrawal rights.

Our conversation got hijacked by a famous young artist-guy.
She gave me a knowing look and invited me to email her later.

April 13

We spoke

On my cell phone
About your trip to Vancouver.
I was conscious of the cost of the call.
So I agreed with everything you said.
(“Can’t wait to see you!”)

April 14

We spoke

About parenting.
Later, I spoke to him
about homework & finding a job.
He said nothing.

April 14

We spoke

About your depression.
I tried to deflect the intensity of the conversation by talking about the sorry state of mental health services. I asked about how you had conquered depression in the past.
I invited you for dinner.

You didn’t come.

Word of Mouth
April 16

We spoke

for a long time about a number of conversations that I’d had with another person.

The more I re-played those interactions in my head, the more upset I became.

I couldn’t sleep that night.

I was completely worked up over the condition of powerlessness.

I should have spoken up back then, but I didn’t know how.

April 16

We spoke

Your conversation style is forceful, direct, critical.

There are large gaps in the topics you cover.

One strong opinion chasing down another.

Something like batting practice—or a driving range.

Some months after We Spoke was finished and the exhibition closed, I prepared a more formal textual response to a performance artwork by Casey Wei called Answers: A Monologue. I was struck by how specifically Wei’s performance made use of found speech as aesthetic content. Whereas I had furtively collected and produced words and ideas from intimate exchanges, her art was made when her body reenacted portions of highly public speech acts. Neither of us intended to provide a ready analysis or easy rationale for our work to our audiences. As with other contemporary art and creative writing, our work was meant to provoke further dialogue and imaginative detours amongst its own audiences. At the conclusion of the symposium in which Wei performed, I was invited to produce a response to her work. I chose to offer a rudimentary literary analysis, using well-known theoretical texts on dialogical aesthetics that had inspired me during the development of We Spoke—such as, The topic of a speaking person has enormous importance in everyday life…. We can go so far as to say that in real life people talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people’s words, opinions, assertions, information…. (Bakhtin 77)

By the time it was my turn to speak on the afternoon of the second day at the Liminal Positions Symposium, I was thoroughly enjoying the unexpected intersections of meanings that were laying tracks in and around my imagination. We were talking about a kind of border zone between people—an intersubjective location for dialogue. Thoroughly liminal, dialogue relies on the participants’ endless supply of past influences and tangential thoughts that work their way into its zone. If we could picture it, this liminal zone might look like the seemingly indiscriminate
but evocatively considered arrangements of pictures on attractive black velvet panels that form Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which Lisa Robertson impressively summarized in her keynote lecture.7

As I was listening to Casey Wei’s performance of found and fragmented speech acts, Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical aesthetics seemed to be an obvious way to frame the myriad of influences that enter the conversational zone. Wei’s performance, *Answers: A Monologue*, is not at all monologic in the Bakhtinian sense. It is composed of dialogue, or more accurately, isolated pieces of publicized dialogue from movies and television broadcasts. From the inter-textual clues, I guessed that she had assembled answers from artists and celebrities during interviews that were somehow circulated through mass media. According to Bakhtin, all utterances, not just the answers, are Janus-faced: “[Each] word is a two sided act…. Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’” (58). We form and speak words that anticipate a receiver. By giving the listener of her performance only fragments of dialogic exchanges, Wei was demonstrating how, in mass media, an audience stands in for the dialogic other. The isolated answers were performed as invitations for the audience to engage actively by completing the picture and banishing the unknown. Unknowing is so familiar and so objectionable at the same time. By actively repressing it, we hardly notice our own unknowing. In my *We Spoke* project I became conscious of my tendency to cover up unknowing. I also became aware of how intimate were the conversations that revealed the speaker’s awareness of unknowing (see “April 6”). Wei’s performance, in contrast, positioned unknowing (and nearly knowing) foremost in the action and meaning of the artwork. In the usual circumstances of mass-circulated dialogue, we may know a whole lot less than we think. Mass media, celebrity culture, and the world of art stars were all referenced in Wei’s *Answers*. All of these sites work within centralized language systems—one could say there exists a “unitary language” or “monologism” of mass-circulated culture and capital, to borrow Bakhtin’s terminology. He describes a centripetal force within language that works to build ideological centralization and unification through the words we circulate. Authoritative words require specific responses. This is a requirement and not really a choice; an authoritative utterance already has power attached to it—we do not choose to give it power. To reinforce hegemonic power, we are called on to learn and repeat the words of authoritative discourse and to make them our own.

Mikhail Bakhtin worked out ideas of authoritarian discourse amidst intellectual repression in Stalinist Russia. Despite formidable setbacks in publishing and distribution, the survival of his work is evidence of the other, more optimistic feature of authoritative discourse that Bakhtin articulated. In the midst of people talking, there is always an opposing centrifugal force that continually stratifies and fragments the meanings produced by the authority. In this way, there is always the tendency for authoritative language to be profaned, parodied and possibly liberated. In *Answers: A Monologue*, the out-of-context words of aging moviemakers and art stars, spoken in
fractured pieces through the voice of a young woman on stage, seemed puzzling and funny. For that moment, the authority of mass culture was disempowered.

As if speaking to you now,
I am trying to tell you that what I saw and heard in Casey Wei’s *Answers: A Monologue* was a disruption of the monologue in the context of an intersecting and splintering dialogue.

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1 The resulting artwork, *We Spoke: Modes of Discourse* was included in the exhibition, *A Furtive Conundrum: Practicing the Furtive*, at 1612 Gallery, Vancouver. Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte and Ryan Mathieson curated this group exhibition which also included works by the following Vancouver-based graduate student artists: Dylan Cree, Kevin Day, Angela Ferreira, Natalie Schneck, Sara French, Jany Lastoria, Vitor Munhoz, Jacquelyn Ross, Karen Spencer, Yi Xin Tong, Casey Wei, Anthony Schrag.

2 I am typographically emphasizing this distinction not just to clarify my artistic inquiry for readers unfamiliar with artistic methodologies, but more importantly to distinguish this project from participant research methodologies in which participants are expected to provide responses that are “analyzed to answer a research question,” as described in the guidelines governing research ethics review in Canada (TCPS2 - http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-epct2/chapter2-chapitre2/). Though the results of this creative project are being circulated in an academic publication, the project emerged from a creative practice inquiry. This report draws on the project’s initial “publication” in an art exhibition and includes further fictionalizing, based on my interests in materializing dialogue aesthetics. In these ways, it remains distinct from academic research involving research participants. That is why an academic research ethics review board has not reviewed this project and why there were no consent agreements or debriefing events built into the methodology. Instead, the ethical consideration of the risks and benefits of its “furtive” methodology for the public were evaluated internally by the exhibition’s curators and artists. As an artwork, its ethics continue to be evaluated by viewers and readers who encounter it as a lingering artifact and text.

3 While a number of people have read these entries and provided feedback, I want to acknowledge the very helpful and inspiring responses provided by poet Sarah Klassen in 2014.

4 *Storyeum* was an ambitious, albeit short-lived, tourist attraction that operated in Vancouver’s Gastown district from 2004-2006. Premised on storytelling, the facility was made up of a series of large-scale theatrical settings in which actors performed narratives from the province’s history.

5 This community mapping project was initiated in the months leading up to the Vancouver Olympic Games by artists Rob Brownie, Althea Thauberger, Kristina Lee Podesva, and Annabel Vaughan. See - http://vancouvertourguide2010.org/

6 *Liminal Positions Student Symposium*, Emily Carr University, 2011.

7 Robertson’s presentation described her work as writer in residence at the Warburg Institute Library in London. A new publication from her Warburg research has recently become available. See, Lisa Robertson, *Thinking Space*. Brooklyn: Organization of Poetic Research, 2014.
Works Cited


Casey Wei
Visual artist/filmmaker/musician
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*Answers: A Monologue* was a performance piece I did in 2011, during the second year of my MFA. It resulted from a presentation everyone in the program had to do when introducing our work at the beginning of the fall semester, and I was sick of repeating myself: “Hi, I’m Casey, a visual artist working in film, video, text, collage.” Who cares? I had these cultural figures I admired, and quotations from them that I found insightful, informative, relatable. Bob Dylan, Lauren Bacall, Felix Gonzalez-Torres are the ones I remember. A musician, an actress, a visual artist.

I can’t find the text document of the piece, or else I would have included it with this response. It was a 15-minute-ish performance, maybe 4 pages of quotations that lead from one to another, not unlike Andrea Fraser’s performances *Inaugural Speech* and *Official Welcome*, which parody the rhetoric of art openings by sourcing quotations from important speakers. Whereas Fraser works within the canon of institutional critique, my approach was more ambiguous in its criticality. Dylan, Bacall, and Gonzalez-Torres are icons, and what they say has weight when their words have been recorded, transcribed, printed, sold, collected, and digitized: kept alive and made sacred over the years, but at the same time, *not*. I say ‘*not*’ not as a critique of celebrity fetishism but because I simply lost the file.

Celebrities are not sacred people but are sacred images. Their aura makes whatever they might say quotable, flushes it with genius and immediate context, thereby packaging the statement into an image itself. These aren’t real conversations. They are edited, approved, re-edited, re-approved. The responses are rehearsed in front of a mirror, practiced over thousands of hours, filmed in front of a crew and a studio audience. They’re affirmations of the parts of myself I want to project into the world that I can see in their words. When I want to express myself, and my artistic intent, it’s basically a selection, a curation of ideas that already have existed for a long time. Remembering the quotations was easy because I could have said them.

I chose Bob Dylan because I thought (and still do) that he was just so cool, Lauren Bacall because her voice sounded so good, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres because he was so romantic. I think *Answers* drew on a few more
celebrities, but I don’t remember. I remember enjoying doing the Bob Dylan voice and taking a moment to apply red lipstick before changing my register to the huskier, sultrier tone of Lauren Bacall. For Felix Gonzalez-Torres, I spoke precisely and evenly, like an academic. I was nervous and found authority in the fact that the monologue I was delivering contained only powerful words spoken by revered people. I remember wearing red acid wash jeans and a grey blazer. I was 25.

Afterwards, at the closing reception, I was introduced to an older male artist who taught at the university where the symposium was held, and his first words to me were: “I thought your performance was annoying … but that was the point, right?”

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In “We Spoke Again: Dialogue in Display,” Lois Klassen writes that my performance was “puzzling and funny,” the “out-of-context words… spoken in fractured pieces through the voice of a young woman on stage…. For that moment, the authority of mass culture was disempowered” (54).

It wasn’t my intention to disempower the authority of mass culture with this performance because I do not think that is possible; I give into it and look for the parts of it I can feel as real. Maybe that is why I never saved the file of the quotations. I want to remember the performance as a feeling rather than recall it in a text. For me, the Real is a feeling, and that is the pleasure of art: the ability to move in parallax to inequalities and injustices of capitalism, always looking for glimpses of that Realness. I can sincerely love such images because I see myself in Bob Dylan’s gait, Lauren Bacall’s pout, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s candies.

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We Spoke

about transgression, and I said I didn’t believe in it.
He asked me, “Then, why do you like rock music?”
I said, “Because it sounds good.”
Works Cited

Passing through the Cracks: Gossip and Subversion in Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*

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Modes and methods of resistance in colonial and postcolonial literature, in their many manifestations, provide markers for scholarly interpretation and in-depth readings of a given work and its literary tradition. As an example, Anglo-Indian colonial novels at the turn of the twentieth century and even earlier tend to mark racial and ethnic resistance between colonized and colonizing subjects. In novels that come after formal decolonization—for the purposes of this essay, 1947 India—resistance in literature can appear in multiple forms and have multiple voices, not simply an exclusively Western-educated male voice of the time before partition. Since Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism* (1979), literary theorists have meditated upon these markers of resistance and their signification within a work, implying its relationship to larger notions of nation, national identity, cultural consciousness, representations of gender, and many more. Homi K. Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture* (1994), considers colonial mimicry and the anxiety that it produces as an act of resistance. In *Politics of Translation* (1998), Gayatri Spivak remarks that translation both into and out of English can be seen as a mode of political resistance. Christopher Stroud, a linguist who specializes in polylingual code-switching in oppressed, developing, and post-colonized countries argues that meaning-construction through code-switching may be a “strategic means whereby speakers position themselves as agents of [either] resistance or compliance” (149). Stroud argues that code-switching can be seen as a subversive act; as a means for oppressed peoples to utilize the language of the oppressor, in addition to their own indigenous languages, in order to undermine colonial and neocolonial authority (164). Resistance is crucial to all of these scholars’ arguments—dense nodes of colonial and postcolonial linguistic and literary ambivalence are examined and argued about within the public spaces of intellectual inquiry.

For the purposes of this essay, a much closer examination of Bhabha’s theoretical apparatus for understanding modes of discursive resistance is essential to understanding my own position, particularly as I focus on the role that rumour plays in a colonial space. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha prolifically discusses the ambivalent nature of the relationships between the colonial and colonized subject and the colonial discourse that is produced based upon these
relationships. His definition of discourse, found in the essay “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” is “a recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of space for a ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised” (100). In his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Bhabha argues that during the time of British occupied India, there were instances of cultural appropriation or mimicry that were supposedly desired by both colonizer and colonized (e.g. Macaulay’s Minutes). Colonized Indian subjects would mimic the behaviour, dress, and speech of the English as a method of acquiring status and economic stability during the occupation. While the colonizers appeared to have “desired” the colonized subjects to mirror their European customs and internalize the Western ideologies surrounding religion, politics, and the aesthetic, the “mimic man” presented a “double articulation” and a possible subversive threat to the imposed British authority. “Mimicry is thus … a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also a sign of the inappropriate … [a] recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power … and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (122). The undermining nature of the “mimic” destabilizes the imperialists’ set of values and epistemic systems of cultural identity, and is a moment of candid reflection of the arbitrary nature of elevating one system of knowledge over another.

Bhabha formulates a different understanding of the political and cultural exchanges between the colonial British and the colonized Indian; he argues that colonial discourse is fluid and decentered, entering between cycles of imperialist impositions and resistance. He also posits that there is a multiplicity of speech acts that are being communicated from either side of the dividing cultural/racial lines of asymmetrical power. While there is still an obvious political and cultural imbalance of dominance, the relationships between these two disparate cultures (British and Indian) are not clearly defined. When considering Bhabha’s connection between mimicry and hybridity of cultural value systems, lines of difference between the colonial and colonized subjects are blurred, and political resistance to colonial oppression becomes viable. Bhabha’s scholarship can be augmented by examining the ways in which gossip and rumour can be constructed as alternative and even dissident discourses to the Anglo-centric and hegemonic narratives of “imperialism” and “nation.” I too consider vernacular forms of dissidence, but in this case, with a more vernacular terminological framework. In using A Passage to India and Cracking India to augment the current circulating discussion, this essay both closely reads sites of anti-colonial and pluriversalizing gossip within these two novels, and attempts to articulate an argument about the need for considering gossip as a narrative strategy and politically subversive mode of discourse in Anglo-Indian and post-colonial literature. The examination of these two disparate but connected works will be used to address the following questions: what is the representative role of gossip in colonial
and postcolonial literature? Or, does reading gossip in highly politicized novels offer an alternative understanding of how the novels could be understood? This essay will argue that gossip in the canonical works of Forster and Sidhwa serves as a direct alternative discourse to both colonial and, in post-partition India, hegemonic nationalist rhetoric, complicating the hierarchical and stratified boundaries of dominance and submission. This discursive mode of resistance can be intertextually engaged, allowing for a new thematic thread to bind these two texts over the long history of British occupation in India, in addition to the broad literary legacy of South Asian writing that Sidhwa and Forster actively participate in.

Forster’s *A Passage to India* intricately engages with not only the narratives of nationhood, race, and imperialism, but also microscopically constructs individual stories of friendship that tend to counteract the macroscopic narrative teleologies of British imperialism. Amongst the countless dialogues and numerous interlocutors within the novel, gossip marks moments of both intimacy and revulsion between characters, and indirectly reflects the socio-cultural and political issues that Forster himself was grappling with during his own time abroad. One such sequence occurs toward the beginning of the novel, as the reader is attempting to understand how characters view themselves and their relationships with each other in the seemingly tense and uncertain surrounding environment of Chandrapore. In preparing to meet with Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested at the city’s college, Cyril Fielding realizes that he has “stamped on [his] last collar stud” implying its ruin (67). Dr. Aziz, in an immediate moment of generosity offers his own, hiding the fact that it is the only one in his possession. Both characters internalize their reactions to the incident and its instant happy repair. The narrative’s perspective then pivots to Fielding’s interior thinking: “Fielding was not surprised at the rapidity of their intimacy. With so emotional a people it was apt to come at once or never, and he and Aziz, having *heard only good of each other*, could afford to dispense with the preliminaries” (68, my emphasis). This moment of intimacy is entirely predicated upon hearsay—what one character has heard about the other previous to this initial physical encounter. The intimacy is also predicated on the fact that both Aziz and Fielding ascribe to a cultural value system that credits the importance of informal reports and rumour. Each man immediately trusts the other, independent of “barbaric” constructions of South Asian men and the “vileness” of English-Indian fraternization articulated by the patriarchal narrative of the British imperial enterprise. The hearsay that has circulated around these men individually has shaped how one would perceive the other upon their first meeting. In her book *Gossip*, Patricia Spacks claims that “[g]ossip as a phenomenon raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, [and] the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture’s dominant values” (12). The sparked friendship between the two men, ignited by their communally-constructed identities by the larger social environment, directly challenges the naturalized English cultural hierarchical system within occupied India. The characters’ identities were built upon, almost exclusively, by the Indian community and the
communal network of unregulated, ungovernable, and undetermined, but also powerful, mode of discourse.

The on-going friendship between Aziz and Fielding questions the inherent authority of the British, in addition to the inherent inferiority of the North Indian, triggering here what Bhabha would articulate as a moment of “colonial ambivalence.” Mr. Aziz is a “mimic man,” as indicated by his Western style of dress, education, and lexicon (“jolly good,” etc.). By associating with not only Aziz, but other South Asian characters in the novel as he does, Fielding’s own position respecting the British Empire is on equally unstable ground (much to the disapproval of the British colonial administration). Fielding still casts essentialist assumptions of Indians as a collective ethno-cultural group (“so emotional a people”), but in trusting the hearsay of others, he is also dismissing the English cultural values of empiricism and manifest evidence. He simply adheres to what has been said about Aziz by others within the specifically Indian community with whom Fielding associates. Indeed, the very fact that Fielding is more welcome amongst the ostensibly “inferior” social and racial group of the colonized subjects affirms his trust in their judgment of Aziz. Arguably, given his and Aziz’s immediate sense of fraternity, the foundational hearsay, and the characters’ compliance with it, there is a weakening of British-imposed social boundaries, and a debilitated authority of what David Spurr would call the imperializing rhetoric of “debasement.” Both men are ambiguous characters and articulate that ambiguity with not only their dress and manner, but also with what they regard as truth or deception. The discourse and exchanges that circulate around and between Fielding and Aziz, in opposition to the imperially sanctioned understanding of their relationship, informs their attitudes toward each other at their first meeting: attitudes that endure throughout the course of the novel.

The imperially sanctioned understanding of the relationship between Indian and British colonial subjects is, however, constituted in the character of Ronny Heaslop, the literary foil of Fielding and the representative figure of the young, ambitious, and misguided colonial administrator. Throughout the novel, Heaslop’s construction of colonized subjects is one-dimensional and essentializing—a creation in the larger mode of colonial myth-making in the empire’s global “civilizing mission.” As Spacks has previously noted, just as there is a form of gossip that questions authority and pressures its boundaries, other forms of rumour and falsely-constructed ontologies (in this large-scale form of imperial myth making) may also form a discourse that reflects the values of the hegemonic community “interpreting [it] to itself” (231). In this interpretation of the self, there is almost always constructed a diametrically opposed subject that is discursively designed to only reinforce the “self” in a world of oppositional “others.”

Despite Spack’s argument about the innocuous nature of myth making, when contextualized within an environment of racialized prejudice, imperial myth making can easily escalate into unforgiving and dangerous stereotyping. As an example, in the same sequence in which Fielding and Aziz cement their friendship (marking a moment of
anti-colonial resistance), Heaslop affirms his own stereotypical views of Indian subjects. Having finished the tour of the Fielding’s college, the touring party (including Aziz), is in the middle of bidding their goodbyes when Heaslop underhandedly says, “Aziz was eloquently dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race” (87). With this utterance, Ronny Heaslop is sustaining the imperialist perspective of colonial England, as he simultaneously reveals his own colonial anxiety. With the phrase, “the Indian all over,” Ronny is essentializing an entire population of people, indiscriminately denigrating their subjectivity by emphasizing their seemingly inherent incapability. This model of stereotyping was ubiquitous within English-occupied India, as Bhabha and Spurr argue, to maintain difference between the two groups and to further justify the British occupation. In Bhabha’s essay, “The Other Question…,” there is an in-depth discussion of “colonial discourse” which configures the colonized subject as fixed and degenerate only as a means to justify colonial hegemony. Bhabha argues that “processes of subjectification [are] made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (95), and that the colonizer relies on the stereotype of his colonized subjects as “a secure point of identification” (99), revealing the ambivalence and colonial anxiety that underpins this discursive strategy. Colonial discourse and its strategic function as “the creation of a space for a ‘subject peoples’… in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administrates and instruction” (101), is a way to unpack the hegemonic narratives of Eurocentric teleology that are found in Ronny Heaslop’s imperial utterances. David Spurr, in a chapter entitled “Debasement: Filth and Defilement,” agrees with Bhabha when he notes that qualities are assigned to the colonized peoples—“dishonesty, suspicion, superstition, lack of self-discipline” reflecting “a projection of anxiety onto the racial and cultural Other” (76-77). There is more revealed about Heaslop in this comment than any actual truth about Indians as a race of people. Furthermore, it is earlier revealed that Aziz was only missing his collar-stud because he had given it to Fielding, emphasizing how Heaslop’s comments mark the ignorance on the part of the colonial authority, and the racist perceptions that underpin his colonial worldview.

Though the previous two examples stress the importance of how information between characters is shared and the potential help it may be in determining relationships between interlocutors within the novel, there are other examples in A Passage to India in which the sway of rumour may mean life or death. The climax of this novel deals with an alleged attack made upon Amelia Quested and the rumours that fly around not only the event, but also the signification of this event, particularly as the memory of the 1857 Mutiny rests on the minds of both Indians and Britons. Dr. Aziz is accused of the attack made upon Quested in the Marabar Caves, and should he be convicted of that crime, his punishment would be no less than a life sentence, or perhaps even death. In a particularly fraught scene during Aziz’s trial in the courthouse, a
group of English colonial subjects accompany
Quested onto the witness platform, collectively symbolizing not only their unity, but also
assumption of colonial superiority. The lawyer defending Aziz asks that the group step
off of the platform, as they have no legal right to be up there with the witness. The presiding
judge hesitantly agrees (perhaps knowing his job may be at stake) and the imperial group
sits down with the others in the court hall. Forster, in painting this scene, constructs the
sequence in a series of wild whispers: “[t]he news of their humiliation spread quickly, and
people jeered outside. Their special chairs followed them … People began to talk all over
the room, about chairs, ordinary and special, strips of carpet, platforms one foot high” (245-
46). The embarrassed silence of the haughty British is enveloped in the energetic whispers
and rumours of the Indian courtroom hall. Above all other passages within A Passage
to India, this sequence symbolically refers to the narratives of the colonial enterprise
being supplanted by the alternative narrative or discourse of the colonized subjects. The
English remain mute throughout the remainder of the trial, their signifying silence marking a
discursive defeat.

The energetic buzz of the courtroom following the humiliated and demeaned “author-
ity,” would be described by Homi Bhabha as a moment of colonial “panic” in his essay,
“By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence in the Mid-nineteenth Century.” Using the 1857
Mutiny as a point of entry, Bhabha considers the role of rumour and its agency during
heightened times of political tumult. He argues that “[t]he indeterminate circulation of
meaning as rumour or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic, constitutes the
intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance” (287). In other words, the inability to deter-
mine a central epistemological location for an identity, idea, or ideology, creates a break
in the Westernized formation of structure; a structure whose maintenance is urgently
needed within the colonial peripheries of British India. Particularly in times of contention
between colonizing and colonized subjects, rumour acts as an alternative discourse that
destabilizes the definitive authority of the former over the latter. With the evolution of fear
and “panic,” rumour implies a slip in colonial power, and with that slip, a widening gap
for alternative discourses to usurp the colonial one. Rumour has not only the ability to unify a
subjugated people (as is indicated by the ubiquity of the gossip in the courtroom scene), but
also allows for that unified body to be a voice of rebel agency. Bhabha continues, however,
to mention the trickiness that can accompany gossip and rumour. For Bhabha, “the trans-
mission of anxiety…in a form of circulation in-between the colonized and the colonizer”
ends up being a moment of ambivalence and liminality (294). He argues definitively that
rumour leads to conspiracy, and with that comes action, usually against the hegemonic
powers that have imposed legislative and imperial modes of silencing those oppressively
subjugated. The Bhabhian “moment of panic” imbues this courtroom scene; the whispers of
injustice inside the courtroom heightened into a louder vocal wave of jeers outside of it. The
overwhelming presence of gossip and rumour reflects not only the impotency of the English
court system in India as a system of civil order, but also indicates that rumour (its origins being from the subaltern’s inability to speak) as a form of colonial resistance can produce the silence of a racialized imperial apparatus.

The historical event of the “riot” at Chauri Chaura, chronicled by Amin’s Event, Metaphor, Memory, speaks to the relevance of rumour not only in literature, but in the larger social and cultural implications rumour and gossip have in the reality of colonialism in occupied India. In his examination of the event, Amin critically assesses how rumour, as methodology, can interrogate the colonial narrative strategies that build an imperialist epistemology. In recovering events like those of Chauri Chaura, marginalized voices once muted by the British colonists are also recovered. Amin historically anchors what Forster articulates in the literary world—access to rumour is at least partial access to a subaltern history and worldview. The ‘riot’ of 1922 took place approximately ten years after the publication A Passage to India, but the racialized prejudices against the Indian communities is resonant at both sites (on the page and in reality). Tension between those who are occupied and those who are occupying builds in the early 1900s, and rises to a crescendo just prior to official decolonization and partition.

At the turn of the twentieth century, British authors expressed doubt about the legitimacy of their country’s occupation of India and reflected this heightened sense of colonial uncertainty in their literature. This is true of not only Forster’s A Passage to India but also Rudyard Kipling’s Kim and George Orwell’s Burmese Days. Yet, within these three novels, the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that channel into the landscape of British-Indian tensions are patriarchal and masculine in their nature. In A Passage to India, in addition to the other works previously mentioned, women of colour are nearly invisible, shadowed by the “purdah,” or consistently on the periphery of the novel’s main narrative thread. There is an air of indifference toward the lives of these women, or the potential agency they try to enact. As an example, on the day of Aziz’s trial, “a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting” (237). The male Anglo-Indian characters are not concerned with the condition of women of colour, inclusivity of gendered discourses, and the subaltern condition. Nor do these concerns surface as thematically important for the canon of Anglo-Indian novels produced during the colonial era. As with Forster’s Passage, there seems to be a common thread in works written during this time of imperial occupation: issues of race, which appear to be naturalized as male, consistently trump issues of gender.

Not until well into the twentieth century is a reader able to consider issues of both raced and gendered forms of discourse within a colonial context, at which time postcolonial authors revisit their historical and literary genealogies in novels. Bapsi Sidhwa’s Cracking India can be argued as an intertextual engagement with works like A Passage to India, intentionally reflecting upon the memories of a historical past to incorporate voices
that were patriarchally considered mute and easily dismissed. Sidhwa’s novel deals directly with the violence of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan as it foregrounds a narrative of a young girl living and growing up in Lahore, temporally set only thirty years after the young Aziz was put on trial. Though *Cracking India* was published in 1991, nearly fifty years after the partition, it is the first novel written by a woman to address not only the violence committed against women during the 1947 independence and partition of the Indian sub-continent, but also constructs a narrative found in the voices of frequently marginalized and in the female subjects who were impacted by the violent split between India and Pakistan. Sidhwa’s novel is a counter-narrative of sorts; telling the history of the partition from below, the novel focuses on the disabled Lenny, her Ayah, and later Hamida, in lieu of the patriarchal and hegemonic colonial narratives and counter-colonial narratives iterated by the male authors who write of the 1947 partition. Chronologically, the novel, as a historical fiction, recounts the gripped tensions of the time just prior to the partition (including Britain’s presence), and the violent aftermath of the partition during which millions of Muslims and Hindus are displaced or heinously murdered. While women are subjects of violence within the novel, there are moments of female subaltern resistance that de-center familiar masculine notions of political power. Rumour and gossip in *Cracking India* function as a definitively feminist counter-narrative to the patriarchal hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that have previously constituted the colonial and post-colonial South Asian canon. Considered intertextually with *A Passage to India*, which deals with racial divides and rumour, it is crucial to examine the gendered ways in which gossip can supply a window to alternative and subversive counter-narratives for subaltern subjects.

Lenny, the youthful protagonist, is raised in a Parsi family. In yet-partitioned Northeast India her family is considered politically and socially “neutral,” given the fact that Parsis compose only a small percentage of the entire population and are therefore not a politically threatening demographic group (Singh 29). This neutral position for Lenny and her family allows for her parents to host dinners, inviting those of disparate political backgrounds, religions, and ideologies. Early in the novel, one such dinner portrays the Parsi home as the neutral “contact zone” being compromised by the political polarity of its guests, making the site more a political battlefield than a place of welcome neutrality and civil conversation. Mr. Rogers, an English inspector, and Mr. Singh, a Punjabi Sikh engage in a heated argument during what seems to be the last dinner held before Indian national independence and partition.

‘You won’t be able to blame everything on us for long, old chap,’ says Inspector General Rogers. ‘That old bugger, Gandhi, is up to his old bag of tricks...That wily Banya [referring to Gandhi] is an expert on fasting unto death without dying’ ‘And what if he dies?’ questions Mr. Singh righteously. ‘You mark my word. One day he will die! Then what you will do?’ ‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll celebrate!’ says the Inspector General, losing his patience. (70-71)
The escalating verbal altercation results in a violent close call; Mr. Singh, after being continuously insulted by Rogers, picks up a fork and attempts to attack the Inspector General, aiming for his eyes. Lenny’s father and the wives of the two men are able to stop Singh from doing any harm to Rogers, but the dinner conversation about politics comes to an abrupt end after this incident. Lenny, eager to be a part of the political conversation, hides under the dinner table, eavesdropping on the entire unfolding of the conversation that leads to the attack. The knowledge she gains from the conversation is both literally and figuratively acquired from below. This sequence speaks to two important literary representations of the historical events preceding the partition. Firstly, the cultural assumptions about the Parsi family leads to larger discussions about the multitudinous racial groups that were affected by the partition, thereby pressuring not only the racialized assumptions Rogers makes about Indians (echoing Ronny Heaslop’s stereotyping), but also speaks to the second historical issue of Gandhi’s religious and ideological role within the Independence movement. It is in this argument, riddled with direct insults and ad homonym attacks, that the history of the tense dialogue of pre-independent India is relayed.

The Sethi dinner table, as a site for this altercation, provides a “third space,” negotiating between public movements and private opinions allowing for oppositional discourses and marginalized ideologies to be discussed. Specifically, the conversation reflects the failure of the male-driven hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses of empire and nation in this novel. Both forms of discourse stereotype, racially condemn, and inevitably result in violence, but also unconsciously exclude the voices of marginalized subjects, represented here by the silenced wives and Parsi father. Given the exclusion of marginalized subjects in both imperial and national narratives, it is important to dwell on the critique that Sidhwa is articulating in this sequence. What Sidhwa gestures toward is the actual impotency of these patriarchal narrative structures in the story of South Asian nation-building. Both men are unable to come to terms with the other’s personal and political views of how India could or should be formed. As Rogers symbolizes the Eurocentric telos of modernity, Singh echoes the sentiments of the majority groups oppressed by the colonial regime. However, despite this diametrically opposed disagreement, Sidhwa’s use of the politically silent third party (found in the Sethi family, and the wives) critically points to the multiple demographies that would be equally impacted by the partition, but are inextricably silenced in the ideological formation of the nation(s). The very fact that violence concludes the charged discussion, with an attack on one of the interlocutor’s eyes, symbolically suggests that in this instance, these political conversations are blind to not only the other groups affected by the partition decision, but also the fact that these groups, including women and non-majority religious groups, will need to break through their complicit silence or remain victims of it. The conversation between Rogers and Singh, so early in the novel, registers the inability for the narrative of nation to be constructed from the top down. As a brief counterpoint, however, these silent figures, also embodied in the silent Lenny underneath
the table, may also be acting out a refusal to engage with the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives of the two representative men. The refusal to engage in the conversation could be argued as a moment of nuanced resistance, acknowledging the fact that neither of the narratives spoken by Rogers and Singh is the appropriate story to tell. Whether the silence of the majority of the subjects at (or under) the dinner table speaks to the refusal to engage in this discourse or to their symbolic exclusion from collaborating with these men in the narrative of the nation, there is a direct indication that subaltern subjects must find alternative avenues or modes of discourse should they wish to have any form of representation within the larger national community.

Lenny, triply marked by her gender, disability, and ethno-cultural and religious background, is also distinguished by her ability to absorb multiple kinds of knowledge as she navigates through the partition and the events portrayed in the novel. Not only is she privy to the discourse espoused by “authoritarian” figures like Singh and Rogers, but more importantly, she is witness to conversations and gossip vocalized by those who experience political tension on a concrete and daily basis: the gossip and hearsay “on the ground,” so to speak. In describing her experience with Ayah in Queen Victoria’s Park, she “learns fast… of human needs, frailties, cruelties, and joys” (29). Silently absorbing the information around her, Lenny listens in to a conversation between Ayah and her newest love interest, the Pathan Sharbat Khan:

Sharbat Khan cautions Ayah: ‘These are bad times—Allah knows what’s in store…

The Congresswallahs are after Jinnah’s blood’
‘What’s it to us if Jinnah, Nehru and Patel fight? They are not fighting our fight,’ says Ayah lightly.
‘That may be true,’ says Sharbat Khan thoughtfully, ‘but they are stirring up trouble for us all.’ (84)

This sequence illustrates a utilization of information, transmuting political conversations into gossip and reconstructing major political figures like Gandhi and Nehru to familiar terms. With this transmutation comes the simultaneous reduction of these authoritative figures (both as characters and as real men) to a level of casual acquaintance. Gossip, as understood and mediated by Lenny and relayed to the reader, is a narrative discourse that is slippery, easily mutable and ever shifting; the power of silence is reined in by Lenny equally as the quiet observer either under a dinner table, or at the side of her Ayah in a park. The heavily hegemonized narratives of both the colonial and counter-colonial speakers at the dinner table carry the same significance as a conversation between an ostracized Pathan and a poor Ayah. In fact, the repetition of Lenny’s “learning” from her outings in the park (in addition to her rapt silence during these moments of political gossip, as found between Ayah and Sharbat) speaks to her dependence upon the knowledge gained while with her Ayah. Singular “authoritative” discourse is therefore destabilized in these moments, and redistributed to entirely new venues and recontextualized to include multiple spaces in which “authority” for Lenny can be located. Spacks elucidates the power of ver-
bal relay and the potential consequences that it may incur. She argues that “one can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, and how and by whom it is understood … it often violates the ‘claims of civility,’ but it incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in public power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere” (6-7). The transmission of discourse from the mouths of those with ostensible patriarchal and public authority (Singh and Rogers) to a social space constructed as public but unauthoritative (a park) corroborates Spacks’ argument, while augmenting it to consider the gendered nature of public and private spheres and who maintains authority within these respective spaces.

Unlike *A Passage to India*, where narrative agency remains between male Muslim and British speakers with Indian women located “behind the purdah,” in *Cracking India* the reader recognizes a shift in the characters of Lenny and Ayah in pre-partition Lahore. Sidhwa’s novel follows what Harveen Sachdeva Mann calls a “female script,” listing the characters that the novel centers on and the roles that they play, within a larger critique about the violence and denigration towards women that occurred during the 1947 partition. Specifically, Mann acknowledges Sidhwa’s clever use of de-centering the importance of Nehru and Gandhi (in particular), as a means to strip the men of arbitrarily allocated entitlement, particularly as Gandhi’s representation is ambiguously flawed respecting his views toward women (95-96). Within the historical narrative of South Asian nation-building, both men have been figured as iconic representatives of a nationalist movement. Yet, the grand narrative of the nation as determined by the broad strokes of nationalist discourse is directly countered with the ground-level discussions by the marginalized, subaltern, and disabled of Sidhwa’s work. Mann asserts that Sidhwa produces “an alternative version of Indian history as it is remembered and rehearsed by ordinary citizens, not politicians or historians, on the other side of the subcontinental divide” (73). This alternative history is not only mediated by men from varying social and racial delineations as was found in *Passage to India*, but by both men and women, arguably with women having more power over this alternative history as *Cracking India* progresses.

The construction of an alternative history of the partition, mediated by gossip as it is in this novel, gives insight into how a woman’s agency can be established in politically marginalized conditions and spaces. More importantly, the access to knowledge attained through gossip may also mean the difference between freedom and life, or servitude and death. Throughout *Cracking India* there are several accounts of sexual violence committed against women: unforgivable crimes echoing the fact that the casualties of civil war are very often those who do not engage with the political ideologies that catalyze the war from its start. Violence and political ideologies are not considered at the national level in this novel, but are rather understood by the emotions, reactions, and sensibilities of specific characters to the events that occur to either themselves or their families. Lenny feels the seemingly arbitrary selection of these casualties sacrificed to ideologies of
nationalism (who are often women) when Ayah is abducted from the Sethi home. Lenny obsesses over the loss, consistently pleading with her mother and godmother to search for her companion. Ayah’s location and the conditions surrounding her abduction and ensuing captivity are only known to Lenny through her godmother and the network of people that she uses to gain otherwise unattainable information. Sidhwa makes a point to describe the power Godmother has when locked into these unofficial channels: “[n]o baby—not even a kitten—is delivered within the sphere of her influence without her becoming instantly aware of its existence. And this is the source of her immense power, this reservoir of random knowledge…You cannot be near her without feeling her uncanny strength” (222-23). The alternative to patriarchal and exclusive hegemonic political discourse is embodied in Godmother; gossip and rumour are what give her uncanny power, knowledge, and agency.

Through the medium of hearsay, Ayah is rescued from her sexual prison and returned to Lenny. During the encounter between Godmother and Ayah’s captor at his house in the red district of Hira Mandi (literally Diamond Market), Godmother uses her unique strength to exercise her contempt for the man’s irredeemable actions. In an expanded sequence, Godmother denounces him as a “low-born, two-bit evil little mouse,” “the son of pigs and pimps,” and “whining haramzada,” amongst other deserved insults. In a final moment of reflection, Lenny realizes, “[t]he confrontation between Ice-candy-man [Ayah’s abductor and captor] and Godmother opened up my eyes to the wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion” (260-61, 264).

The injustices committed against the subaltern subject of Ayah, are vocalized through the other arguably subaltern subject of the godmother, with gossip providing the framework in which knowledge is gained and wielded as a weapon of resistance against a male-dominated framework of gendered politics. Rumour suggesting the location where Ayah was hidden, and the gossip about her sexualized imprisonment by the Ice-candy-man are what leads Godmother directly to her and facilitates the rescue. Female empowerment is found in the fact that all of the agents that participated in Ayah’s rescue are women. Though men are the perpetrators of her capture and denigration as a sex slave in the Hira Mandi, the women of this novel, through their interconnected network of “sources,” directly counter patriarchal and masculinized discursive power structures (Sidhwa 252-55).

Considered intertextually, *A Passage to India* and *Cracking India* point to alternative methods of knowledge production, meaning construction, and alternative forms of discourse that build the concept of a nation. In Forster, writing in colonial Anglo-India, numerous anxieties about racial discrimination and marginalization of racialized figures are brought to the foreground as two men from different ethno-cultural communities attempt a friendship in a politically contrarian environment. Sidhwa’s novel engages with the voices of those absent from Forster’s work, insinuating the agency of subaltern female subjects into the building of a national consciousness. Both authors write either of or from a moment of national anxiety in northern India or Pakistan, and in their respective historical moments, use gossip as a means to dismantle
the colonial or hegemonic narratives of how a nation is to be represented.

The role that each author plays in creating a dialogic novel is important to consider. Both novels incorporate dialogue between characters, but also construct a negotiation between Western values of patriarchy and colonialism, and portray subaltern characters that directly question the legitimacy of Westernized notions of authoritative discourse. According to Spacks, gossip in literature questions even the authority of the written word—"the double context of literary language, no longer entirely the narrator's property, never entirely the reader's, generates much of that language's power" (21). Dialogue between the author or narrator and the reader is consistently contextualized by a personal history informed by race, gender, ethnicity, and myriad other characteristics. Much like gossip, information given, received, and understood establishes a relationship between author and reader, bound by either mutual intelligibility or a rhetorical exchange of ideas. Exchanges are not solely occurring between interlocutors within the two novels discussed, but also between the authors composing the dialogues and the reader who is "listening" to them. Given that the political nature of both of these texts is informed by their geographical and historical importance, it is crucial to consider the exchanges that occur between characters as well as between the narrator and a reader. Such consideration may help enrich a further understanding about the political implications of discourse, narrative, and the power of orality within colonial and postcolonial literature.

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1 “Pluriversal” is a term derived from Walter Mignolo’s work on decoloniality. Derived from Carl Schmitt’s model of the pluriversal, Mignolo argues that the political formation of multiple states and multiple forms of governance on a global scale is the most egalitarian mode of decolonial living. The role of the West “should be global but not universal” (72). I use the term pluriversal here to mark the idea that multiple discursive frameworks can occupy a historical narrative, or a narrative within a piece of literature, and that all frames for understanding oneself through discourse, narrative, and communication, could be considered on equal planes, and considered equally valuable in the mythos of nation-building.

2 Mimicry, continued from this discussion above is a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (126, his emphasis). Yet, imbricated on top of that definition is Bhabha’s argument of the “double articulation” of the mimic. This double articulation is described as the colonized subject appropriating a more “Western” identity in order to be more recognizable within colonial discourse, and by extension the colonial mindset. However, the “other” serves as a threat to the colonizer, as it introduces a deviance from the attempt to normalize colonial discourse as a sweeping, “universalization” of Western ideology over Eastern cultural systems. It is this idea that “almost the same, but not quite/white” creates a sense of ambivalence over the role of the mimic man.

3 David Spurr writes that in the historical moments that the West needed to justify its colonization of the “East,” including South Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there would be a rhetorical gesture toward the “obsessive debasement of the Other.” He argues that this “discourse arises not simply from fear and the recognition of difference, but also, on another level, from a desire for and identification with the Other which must be resisted” (80). It is within this moment between Fielding
and Aziz that identification with the Other is not being resisted.

I am referring to Pratt’s essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in which she defines a contact zone as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” and in the essay, she further exemplifies the social and transcultural implications of the contact zone—particularly assessing the colonial subject’s attempt to keep the imbalance of power (34).
Works Cited


Word of Mouth
I Bet You’re Wonderin’ How I Knew:  
The Politics of Gossip in E.M. Forster and Bapsi Sidhwa

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Gossip

Patricia Meyer Spacks’ study on gossip in literature emphasizes the “hidden life of language,” the role of gossip as “a phenomenon that raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture’s dominant values” (12). In “inhabit[ing] a space of intimacies,” writes Spacks, gossip “builds on and implicitly articulates shared values of intimates” (15). What makes Spacks’ subsequent argument so compelling is the way in which she reads the range of gossip’s affective register—from “malice” to “intimacy”—as a measure of social positions that jostle against each other in literary works from those of Spenser to Agatha Christie. Victoria Barnett-Woods, whose paper I respond to here, seeks to extend this formulation of gossip to E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*. In so doing, Barnett-Woods broaches questions of how gossip figures into “colonial” and “post-colonial” novels about India, and, from this, how gossip in “highly politicized” texts might “offer an alternative understanding of how [these two] novels could be understood” (Barnett-Woods 63). Barnett-Woods’ provocative and insightful position invites us to reimagine gossip as a means of counter-discourse in Forster and Sidhwa. Before we may do so, however, I argue that we need to first attend carefully to how jingoism and racial violence characterized the Raj’s paternalist agenda at the turn of the century. This history is entangled in power politics that, prior to explicit British intervention in the early 17th century, involved myriad kingdoms, tribes, ethnic groups, castes, rural populations, and religious groups. These struggles continued amidst the British Empire’s commercial and political ventures. British commerce as such dovetailed into political consolidation through military force, first in the form of the East India Company (following the 1757 Battle of Plassey) and, following the 1857 Rebellion, the British Crown (1858-1947). By investigating how both Forster and Sidhwa attend to these genealogies, I seek here to build on and complicate the theoretical groundwork that Barnett-Woods’ formulation of gossip lays out for us.

Barnett-Woods begins with the apt observation that gossip in *A Passage to India* “marks moments of both intimacy and revulsion between characters, and indirectly marks the socio-cultural and political issues that
Forster” raises (63). Indeed, countless instances of gossip populate the text: Aziz, Ali, and Hamidullah constantly chatter about the English, just as the British officers while away their hours at the whites-only club in idle talk about each other and the Indians. Barnett-Woods is also correct to draw attention to the fact that gossip is but one element in a novel that trades in many different modes of discourse. The text overflows with snatch-es of casual conversation, misunderstandings, shared intimacies, insights both trivial and profound, jokes, rumours, administrative and legal jargon, the indistinct clamour of crowds, songs, snatches of poetry—the list goes on. This hodgepodge of speech contributes to the novel’s prolonged meditation on politics, race, friendship, sex, and religion in the colonial context of 1910s Chandrapore, all filtered through E.M. Forster’s modernist and Western-humanistic aesthetic.

I would argue, however, that gossip is not exactly a counter-discourse here, but one discursive register amongst many others. The warp and woof of these registers collide at the level of Chandrapore’s racially-charged atmosphere more generally. When Barnett-Woods draws on the oft-cited scene of Aziz and Fielding’s first encounter, she zeroes in on the narrator’s remark that the two had “heard only good of each other, [and] could afford to dispense with the preliminaries” (Forster qtd. in Barnett-Woods 63). What remains yet to be considered here is how the circulation of these precursory, well-disposing third-hand accounts “directly challenges the English cultural and social hierarchical systems within occupied India” (Barnett-Woods 63). Given the heightened climate of racism and mutual suspicion between Anglos and Indians after 1857, Fielding does breach some unspoken rules of racial etiquette when he befriends Aziz, but what does this say about the immediate racial tensions embedded in the scene? I would suggest that the way Aziz must cross the room’s partitions and spatial boundaries allegorizes the racial and social boundaries that will always separate him from Fielding—and so Forster’s point here is less about “subversion” than about how Indians (a specific set of economically privileged, Muslim, male Indians at that) and colonizers negotiate social intimacy in Chandrapore’s politically and racially charged atmosphere. Fielding might come across as affable, but Aziz never lets us forget the shape and direction of the power discrepancy that mediates this relationship.

Indeed, this very asymmetry informs the bulk of the Forster criticism that takes Aziz and Fielding as metonyms for the Indian professional establishment’s tense relationship with the British in 1910, a moment in which the push for national independence was still somewhat embryonic and splintered between competing interest groups. We still talk about Forster nearly a century after A Passage to India’s publication precisely because the text refuses to resolve these tensions. The novel’s closing scene deliberately plays on nationalist antagonisms when Aziz declares to Fielding,

“We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty five-hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then”—he rose against him furiously—“and then,” he concluded,
Aziz’s “half-kiss” suggests that he will not—indeed cannot—give his whole self to Fielding, not while India itself remains split between the Anglos and the natives. Forster forecloses any possibility of resolution, playing instead in the fissures of circumstance that complicate desire in the abstract, invested as it may be in politics, power, friendship, sex, or death. The novel thrives on the messy ambiguity of human relationships, the fact that people can love and hate one another with the same degree of intensity at the same time, a quandary made messier still when politics, race, and gender contribute to the equation. With that said, I assent to Barnett-Woods’ suggestion that gossip functions as a means of establishing and maintaining a given set of social boundaries, both between the novel’s Anglo-Indians and the natives, as well as within the little cliques that constitute both groups in the world that Forster creates. But the problem of social intimacy and gossip, while not exactly different in kind from politics, is nevertheless several steps away from the latter. A rigorous theory of gossip in the text, then, must explicitly bridge the intimacy and social codes constitutive of Aziz and Fielding’s friendship with the macrostructural problem of politics that haunts these intimacies.

The interplay between intimacy and politics can also complicate the centrality of rumour in the courtroom episode. Here, Barnett-Woods imagines an ideological rupture formative to the “humiliated and demeaned ‘authority’” (66) of Miss Quested’s friends when Das, the Hindu judge overseeing the trial, orders them to return to the gallery. But I think that Das’ request does not necessarily signal the “discursive defeat” of the “haughty” British—as Barnett-Woods puts it—so much as it invokes a rather absurd moment of misguided solidarity amongst a group of pampered, upper-class Anglo-Indians accustomed to getting their way (66). If anything, we could say that it is Miss Quested’s friends who, in attempting to abuse their racial and social power, are disciplined by the juridical authority vested in the body of a Hindu who acts here as judge. Authority as such remains the purview of the imperial sovereign, but it imposes itself here upon the whites. Ironically, that sovereign authority expresses itself through the brown body of Das-as-judge. This opens up the fraught—and, historically, very real—problem of the Crown’s profound discomfort with granting judicial powers to Indian subjects in court cases involving white parties on either side.

**Gender**

Barnett-Woods’ attention to the power discrepancies formative to rumour and imperial racism invites us to think carefully about how power circulates in the context of Miss Quested’s accusation and subsequent retraction. This problem raises a number of further important questions, particularly about women in turn-of-the-century India. In addition to its racial discrepancy, does the Anglo-Indian judicial system allow a space for white women to assert themselves as victims, or does Ronny Heaslop’s status as the “recipient of all the evil intended” against the whites, as the figure who is left “bearing the sahib’s...
cross” (Forster 182), efface the very real problem of violence against (at this point, exclusively white) women in general? Does Miss Quested’s initial accusation, as Brenda Silver argues, slot Aziz into the subject position of “‘woman’ according to a patriarchal biopolitics of ‘periphrasis’” (Silver 91) that reduces all social subjects to sexually-constituted determinants under the imperative of imperial patriarchy? Most important, perhaps, is the question of how we are to acknowledge Muslim women as agents in a discursive grid that continually strives to either speak for or over them.

Forster makes a brief—but profoundly unsettling—gesture toward this final problem with the narrative’s acknowledgement of the “Mohammedan ladies [who] had sworn to take no food until [Aziz] was acquitted” in spite of the fact that “their death would make little difference, [as] indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting” (209). This brief aside interrupts a narrative otherwise preoccupied almost exclusively with the tensions between white men, brown men, and white women. Does the narrator’s lament about the general indifference to whether brown women live or die pre-emptively foreclose their status as human beings? If so, is their hunger strike to be interpreted within a social imaginary predicated on their allegiance to Aziz as a sort of figurehead for a heterosexist community of Muslim mimic men? Or, on the other hand, does their “disquieting” (209) invisibility gesture toward their necessarily unstable and problematic social positioning within that imaginary from the start?

The “disquieting” presence of the “Mohammedan ladies” (209) indirectly anticipates Chandra Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism in her seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.” Mohanty argues that Western feminist critiques of the global south have historically championed the white, liberated, Western woman as the radical ideal toward which all women should aspire. The major problem with this approach, continues Mohanty, is that an analysis that fails to take into account the heterogeneity of oppression in different contexts across the world—and at different moments in history—reinscribes the formal conditions of the very patriarchal structure that feminism purports to contest. As a consequence, a critical approach that effaces the heterogeneity of third-world women imposes in those women’s manifold subject positions a universalizing totality, a “composite, singular ‘third-world’ woman” (Mohanty 197).

Mohanty reminds us here that feminist theory, without a strong account of the material, social, and historical contingencies that define a given colonial context, risks lapsing into a naïve abstraction of power inequity based on the simple binary of man and woman in which ‘man’ = ‘oppressor’ and ‘woman’ = ‘oppressed.’ (Never mind, for the moment, that the lack of racial qualifiers leaves us to assume the man and the woman are white). This gets still more fraught in the context of colonial power because internal conflicts specific to a given colony at a given historical moment beget further splinterings, gendered and otherwise, amongst subjects or groups of subjects.
While Forster’s too-brief acknowledgement of women in the turn of the century India indirectly anticipated these later theoretical insights, the role of politically active women such as the Rani of Jhansi (1835-58) or Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri (the political activist to whose 1926 suicide Gayatri Spivak attends in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) exceed the scope of the novel’s imaginary. It makes sense, then, that Barnett-Woods would turn to Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* as a text that immediately engages with the political contradictions inherent to questions of women’s agency and sexual violence during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. Barnett-Woods’ analysis of Sidhwa proceeds from the premise that gossip embodies the “utilization of [unofficial] information, transmuting political conversations into gossip and reconstructing major political figures like Gandhi and Nehru to familiar terms” (70). This “reconstruction,” in turn, carries political and sexual valences which find their expression as such through gossip. Additionally, Ayah, Lenny, and Godmother, according to Barnett-Woods, follow a “female script” that offers a “larger critique about the violence and denigration towards women that occurred during the 1947 partition” (71). Ayah’s sexual promiscuity and power over her would-be suitors over the first two-thirds of the novel, for example, chafes against the socially conservative rhetoric of the Indian Congress’s sexually vexed brand of nationalism—a point that Barnett-Woods importantly takes into consideration. To Barnett-Woods’ remarks I would add that the eventual dissolution of Ayah’s centripetal force for the group of men who surround her speaks more generally to Lenny’s observation that, with the impending division of the nation, “[p]eople shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer my all-encompassing Ayah—she is also a token. A Hindu” (101). What, then, are we to make of the Partition as a real historical moment in which power and identity divide friends and neighbours according to a biopolitically determined set of juridico-legal criteria? Moreover, how might we interpret this problem against Ayah’s shift from a self-assured and sensually secure human being to an object of sexual violence in the events leading up to her marriage to Ice-candy-man?

Barnett-Woods astutely interprets the novel as a counterweight to “the historical narrative of South-Asian nation-building” forwarded by major figures like Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah (Barnett-Woods 71)—but to build on this, I would suggest that Sidhwa provokes us to think through how women in the novel confront sexual violence as something that emerges from the enforced subdivision and reconstitution of subjects in relation to the conservative-nationalist discourse that characterized the Indian Congress Party. This is an explicitly political issue. Although Barnett-Woods does well to address gossip’s potential as a discursive circuit that speaks to gender, she does come dangerously close to depoliticizing the problem of sex and gender when she contends that “[v]iolence and political ideologies are not considered at the national level in this novel, but are rather understood by the emotions, reactions, and sensibilities of specific characters to the events that occur to either...
themselves or their families” (71). This claim implicitly separates Lahore’s domestic and public spheres into mutually exclusive zones predicated on a fixed sexual division of labour. The symbolic order of politics and the law remains the purview of men such as Gandhi, Jinnah, and Nehru, while women are scripted as “emotional” subjects located in the domestic structure of the family, thereby enforcing the very patriarchal structure that Barnett-Woods otherwise credits the novel with contesting.

Although the text confronts the inherently violent sexual politics that condition India and Pakistan’s gendered divisions of labour, I would argue that it does not make any claims toward resolving them. Late in the novel, for instance, Lenny’s mother returns from one of her many rescue missions for Lahore’s abducted women, only to walk in on Imam Din as he pins a stray cat to the screen door:

Imam Din, one leg on the ground and one on the kitchen steps, has a huge black and battle-scarred cat trapped in the screen door and is pressing his whole weight on the frame to hold the slippery intruder. The cat, caught below its ribs, is suspended a foot off the floor. Frantically twisting, its teeth bared, the panicked creature is spitting wildly. (237)

While the neighbours and servants encourage Imam Din to beat and torture the cat, Lenny’s mother screams at Imam Din to “Let her go at once!” (237). Lenny remarks that her mother “cannot see the cat’s gender—it is secreted behind the door—but the rest of us seem to know it’s a him” (237, emphasis in original). The scene escalates as Lenny’s mother hits Imam Din so hard that she draws blood. When Lenny’s father enters the kitchen, Lenny’s mother lets up, but she nevertheless admonishes Imam Din for “snivelling” before “Sahib,” and adds that “[i]f he whines like a woman he must wear bangles” (239).

Lenny’s mother is embroiled here in a contradiction that she cannot entirely resolve. While her gendering of the cat as a “her” and her subsequent attack on Imam Din signal a brief, if explosive, moment of clarity about how deeply embedded gender violence really is in India/Pakistan’s national consciousness, the father’s arrival immediately reinstates the hetero-patriarchal order from which that very code of violence originates. (For his own part, Imam Din’s Muslimhood and professional role as a servant to a Parsi family complicates this still more, as does the symbolic charge of a flyswatter as Lenny’s mother’s weapon of choice. The economy of labour and subsequent social hierarchy amongst the servants and their Parsi employers is a topic for another paper, however.) Imam Din’s feminization by Lenny’s mother compounds his racial and professional subalternity according to the logic of a biopolitical economy under which Lenny’s father occupies the role of patriarchal figure-head. Somewhat paradoxically, Imam Din’s sexual subordination as such comes about from a moment in which this very economy is momentarily shattered by Lenny’s mother’s anguish, only to be re-established through her sexist insult—Imam Din should wear “bangles” if he is going to keep “snivelling” (239)—that coincides with the father’s arrival. In other words, Lenny’s mother, through the insult, re-adopts the very patriarchal discourse
she initially challenges, the economic value of which she appears reminded by the arrival of her patriarch.

The conditions around the insult resonate with an earlier episode in which Lenny hints at the performative aspects of her father’s masculine authority:

Mother and Father are standing at the opposite ends of their joined beds. “Janoo! Don’t tease me like this … I know you’ve got it: I saw it!”

Mother’s voice teeters between amusement and a wheedling whine. She is a virtuoso at juggling the range of her voice and achieving the exact balance with which to handle Father. Father has the knack of extracting the most talented of performances from us all—and from all those who work for him. (76)

Here, Lenny’s mother—a “virtuoso” who “juggles” her voice (76)—performs her role as sexual plaything for her husband, himself a sort of phallic ringmaster who draws out the self-subordinating speech acts of those who perform their respective social roles under his authority. Just as Lenny’s mother berates Imam Din for his “womanliness,” she enunciates here the imperative that maintains the sexually-ordered, hypermasculine symbolic order of Lenny’s household.

I do not mean to suggest that the world of the novel circulates within the heterosexist authority of Lenny’s home. What I am concerned with, rather, is the way in which sexual violence, the symbolic order of patriarchal authority, male and female bodies, ethnicity, class, race, and women’s agency qua biopolitical subjecthood struggle with and against each other as discursive forces across the field of India’s conservative-nationalist project in the immediate moment of Indian/Pakistani independence.

Mimicry

I will return to gossip and nationalist politics momentarily, but I would like first to return to Forster clear up some issues concerning Barnett-Woods’ engagement with Homi Bhaba’s concepts of mimicry and ambivalence. Barnett-Woods understands these concepts as lynchpins for Aziz and Fielding’s friendship that, like gossip, undermine Anglo-Indian authority. Observing that Fielding is something of an outlier because of his friendship with Aziz, Barnett-Woods states that the friendship questions the inherent authority of the British, in addition to the inherent inferiority of the North Indian, triggering here what Bhabha would articulate as a moment of “colonial ambivalence.” Mr. Aziz is a “mimic man,” as indicated by his Western style of dress, education, and lexicon (“jolly good,” etc.). By associating with not only Aziz, but other South Asian characters in the novel as he does, Fielding’s own position respecting the British Empire is on equally unstable ground (much to the disapproval of the British colonial administration). (64)

I would contend, however, that there is nothing exceptional about Fielding’s instability qua subject before the Crown on its own
terms. Yes, Fielding is something of a social outlier and this stigmatizes him, *but he knows his limits and he never exceeds them*; hence the social membrane that distances him from Aziz throughout the narrative as a whole, regardless of how much Fielding expresses his desire for Aziz’s intimacy. Furthermore, Barnett-Woods’ interpretation of Bhabhian ambivalence suggests that ambivalence as such negates power, but power does not work this way: rather, subjects are always and already unstable before the discursive power networks they embody. From this common position of instability, the text invites us to think through how its characters negotiate abstract power through its concretized expression of the social roles and political structures that mediate and set limits upon the relationships between those characters.\(^3\)

Barnett-Woods demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of both mimicry and ambivalence as abstract theoretical constructions, but she sometimes overlooks the historical processes that determine these terms when she applies them to Forster and extrapolates outward. Concerning the way that mimicry “poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (Bhabha qtd. in Barnett-Woods 62), Barnett-Woods claims that

\[\text{[t]he undermining nature of the “mimic” destabilizes the imperialists’ set of values and epistemic systems of cultural identity, and is a moment of candid reflection of the arbitrary nature of elevating one system of knowledge over another. Bhabha formulates a different understanding of the political and cultural exchanges between the colonial British and the colonized Indian. (62)}\]

When Bhabha speaks of mimicry, he implicitly refers to a specific class of Indian men—most commonly in Bengal and the northern provinces—who enjoyed access to certain British cultural institutions like education and the arts. However, Bhabha’s tendency toward abstraction obfuscates how mimic men are supposed to register politically, or, for that matter, in any realm beyond some imagined Oedipal economy of subconscious white male anxiety specific to Bhabha’s personal interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis. Because of this, mimicry does not easily “destabilize the imperialists’ set of values and epistemic systems of cultural identity” in any specific, concrete, material sense. I similarly doubt that we can talk about any period of India’s colonial history according to the deterministic and historically bereft binary of colonizer and colonized that Bhabhian-style criticism sometimes invites.

Mimicry and menace, at least conceptually, signal a rupture within the tautological imperative of colonialism as an ideological project that ultimately funneled into the state-oriented economy of industrial capitalism more generally. The mimic man, “almost the same but not quite,” in this context repeats but does not represent his colonial master. Menace swirls into existence at this moment of imperfect mimesis. Before his colonial overlord, the deviation formative to the mimic man renders explicit a caricature: the racially marked body of the non-white male who strives to reproduce his white, patriarchal, and racist master’s white, patriarchal, and racist system. Since the
mimic man’s body constitutes a sort of living carnival mirror for the colonizer’s body, the mimic man always and already harbours the implicit terms. Yes, Fielding is something of a social outlier and this stigmatizes him, but he knows his limits and he never exceeds them; hence the social membrane that distances him from Aziz throughout the narrative as a whole, regardless of how much Fielding expresses his desire for Aziz’s intimacy. Furthermore, Barnett-Woods’ interpretation of Bhabhian ambivalence suggests that ambivalence as such negates power, but power does not work this way: rather, subjects are always and already unstable before the discursive power networks they embody. From this common position of instability, the text invites us to think through how its characters negotiate abstract power through its concretized expression of the social roles and political structures that mediate and set limits upon the relationships between those characters.3

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of the non-white male who strives to reproduce his white, patriarchal, and racist master’s white, patriarchal, and racist system. Since the mimic man’s body constitutes a sort of living carnivale mirror for the colonizer’s body, the mimic man always and already harbours the implicit threat of ideological subversion. This embodied representation (or “menace” qua “irreverence,” in Bhabha-speak) of the imperialist master’s ideals vis-à-vis ideology, the argument goes, renders explicit the spuriousness of ideological false-consciousness, underneath which some authentic superstructure of reality supposedly lurks. This clears a space for further Bhabhian moves like ambivalence and third-space. But this analysis begs all sorts of questions, and Bhabha’s habitual appeal to jargon only further clouds his reasoning. How is the mimic man, as the body that instantiates his master’s absurd ideological cloak, supposed to threaten the everyday workings of capitalism in any practical sense? In the language of poststructuralism, we could argue that the mimic man exposes the simulacral veneer of ideology, but this sort of a claim does not get us very far when we analyze the manifold tensions and contradictions formative to any question about the history of Indian nationalist struggle.  

With that said, Barnett-Woods does acknowledge “the multitudinous racial groups that were affected by the [1947] partition” of India and Pakistan (69). As I explain below, the very terms upon which nationalism and popular resistance are mobilized render any discussions about them unstable from the start. This throws mimicry as a subversive phenomenon into question. To demonstrate what I mean by the real complexities that fuel the ongoing debates about resistance and assimilation in colonial India, I would like to turn for a moment to the problem of nationalism and reform in the context of 19th century Bengal. In her discussion of Shakespeare’s tremendous popularity amongst Bengal’s literary elite in the 19th century, Jyotsana Singh points out that many Bengali bourgeois—those subjects of the “civilizing mission” that constituted potential “conduits for Western ideas”—embraced Shakespeare as a representative of cultural identity to put them on equal footing with the British (123). Indeed, the Anglo-Indian project of constructing English-educated babus “offered a program of building a new man who would feel himself a citizen of the world while the very face of the world was being constructed in the mirror of the dominant culture of the West” (Loomba qtd. in Singh 131). A Bhabhain aporia if ever there were one. However, the establishment of Western cultural institutions in the early 19th century also struggled with considerable pushback from the local bourgeoisie. Partha Chatterjee, who theorizes the gendered separation of India’s material and spiritual spheres as formative to struggles for nationhood in the Bengali context, describes the way “[a]n entire institutional network of [Bengali] printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and literary societies” established itself “outside the purview of the state and European missionaries” (The Nation and its Fragments 7). Bengali theatre and novels, for example, borrowed from both ancient traditions and from contemporary European forms. However, such apparent counter-discourses also operated under exclusionary or oppressive auspices that
“conspicuously” adhered to “caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family” (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 235). Hence, those very plays that borrowed irreverently from Western and traditional forms also forwarded a distinctly conservative social agenda in which the domestic sphere secured restrictions of caste, class, and gender. The theatrical trope of the Bengali woman absurdly imitating the memsahib, for instance, was calculated to evoke laughter as an interpellative tool that warned its audiences against the dangers of subscribing to any liberal Western ideals about women that the Bengali establishment perceived as a threat to certain longstanding norms. Hence, while Western-educated Bengali men strove for liberal reform at the level of public institutions, they also strove for limited and controlled emancipation for women, a social outlook in lock-step with older forms of power that sidestepped European liberalism and at the same time restricted women to the domestic sphere. What I want to emphasize here is that mimicry alone cannot account for the myriad cultural and political formations that culminated in Bengali sovereignty struggles, or, for that matter, populist movements invested in issues of caste and gender that far exceeded the demands set out by the Indian National Congress.

In thinking through the overall question of Indian struggles for sovereignty that had begun to foment by the latter 19th century, then, the problem does not lie so much in “our inability to think out new forms of the modern community,” but rather in the limits of a “theoretical language” that, if left unchecked, does not provide us with the space to think through the contradictions embedded in the confrontations inherent to the dialectic of “community and state” (Chatterjee, Nation 11). My point—as Foucault most famously formulated—is that power and resistance are not stable categories. Rather, both power and resistance proliferate through struggles within and across overdetermined discursive networks that often collide and conflict with one another, even when they ostensibly operate under the same ideological umbrella. It is true that mimic men implicitly force the administrative superstructure to correct for its own inconsistencies in the very production of those mimic men, and it is also true that the mass surges for independence mobilized by Congress in the spirit of Gandhi and Nehru came about from Western education and extensive expertise about the European judiciary. However, in the Indian context, class, gender, and caste constitute unique institutional variables that, in all sorts of ways, determine issues like who gets to learn and who does not. The revolutionary timbre that characterizes both mimic men and our mainstream histories about interwar mass movements (such as non-cooperation and Quit India) does not account for the further power discrepancies amongst the Indian people themselves, particularly the intense oppression imposed upon women and the rural and urban poor by native elites.5

Finally, a Bhabhian critique of power must also contend with the fact that the concepts it celebrates—fluidity, ambivalence, and, perhaps most notoriously, hybridity—constitute the very means through which global capital, in all its ahistoricity, duplicates itself.6 On one hand, as Hardt and Negri remind us, “[t]he affirmation of hybridities and the
free play of differences across boundaries is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions” (142)—a totalitarian and totalizing ideological bogeyman who pulls the strings of capitalism, so to speak. On the other hand, if neoliberalism and the global market exploit and produce the very aporias, ambiguities, and in-between states that postmodernists and theorists of hybridity of the (old) New Left deploy to reveal our ideological false-consciousness, how are we to interpret Bhabha’s celebration of these concepts as politically subversive, counter-discursive, contestatory, or any other quasi-intellectual nom de rigueur we throw about? Given the political vacuum that has followed the collapse of the welfare state and subsequent dissolution of the public sphere into the private, the corporate into the philanthropic, and—most frightening of all—the ecological into the economic, it is little wonder that, in the midst of our collective social and moral vertigo, we lack any real means with which to coherently talk about ideology, politics, or, for that matter, popular revolt.

All of this is to say that we cannot address Indian resistance or Anglo-Indian hegemony without first taking into account the infinitely complex formations in which class, caste, gender, and race—amongst the British and the Indians but also amongst the myriad Indian peoples, especially those groups who endured for centuries under Moghul and Hindu rule—are intertwined in history. Grand claims about history’s “fluidity” or “decenteredness” depoliticize and de-historicize these issues from the start. This is not an attack on Bhabha per se, and it is certainly not an attack on theory or continental philosophy; rather, my reservations here come about from the too-quick deployment of controversial theorists (of which Bhabha is amongst the most notorious examples) without a clear account of why theory does or has mattered over the last thirty or so years.

An economy of gossip?

In closing, I would like to shift away from Bhabha and return to the potential intersection between gossip and nationalist politics. I am very interested in Barnett-Woods’ claim that “gossip and rumour can be constructed as alternative and even dissident discourses to the Anglo-centric and hegemonic narratives of ‘imperialism’ and ‘nation’” (62). But I think this is not so much a question of “The Anglo-centric” or “The Hegemonic” so much as it is a question of analyzing how the East India Company and the Crown controlled and suppressed certain types of language that they saw, for one reason or other, as threatening to their interests. If we think about the circulation of gossip as a sort of trade in illicit speech, how might such illicit speech be reconstituted before a disciplinary body? What could a sustained engagement with gossip ruled as seditious activity tell us about John Adams’ 1823 ruling in which printers were required to have a license, the Vernacular Press Act imposed by Lord Lytton in 1878, or, perhaps most notoriously, the Press Act of 1910? I do not have the space to get into specific histories or case studies here, but I would, by way of conclusion, like to offer a few preliminary remarks about how we might start to theorize
gossip and rumour when they encounter the disciplining gaze of the Raj’s interests. This raises several questions. Does gossip constitute a fixed signifier that necessarily destabilizes a given discursive formation, or does it circulate in different sorts of ways, and to different ends, depending on who whispers to whom? Does idle chatter escalate to the status of gossip when it encounters a certain social threshold? Do rumours or gossip circulate in the same way and for the same ends amongst different discursive groups separated by class, gender, race, and caste strata—or do we need to clear a space for multiple economies of gossip contingent on where and how they circulate? Can we talk about a social division of labour particular to gossip? How might we measure gossip in terms of its value and circulation? To be clear, I am not speaking of particular instances of gossip or rumour here, but rather of how the circulation of gossip in general can prise open fissures or inconsistencies within a power relation that appears inviolable. This is certainly not to say that gossip’s political deployment is simply anti-hegemonic in the crude sense; nor do I mean to suggest that the structural fissures out of which gossip arises are necessarily visible or exposed from the start. What I wish to do, rather, is to provisionally theorize a means by which to think through the real historical outcomes that can follow a rumour’s circulation, with particular attention to the social relations from which that rumour materializes.

I want to briefly turn to the economist J.C. Kumarappa, who, in 1945’s *Economy of Permanence*, made a rather remarkable observation about Marx’s formulation of value and context. To understand the abstract qualities that determine a given object’s exchange value, Kumarappa posits, we have to first engage the social division of labour in which that object circulates to determine the qualities relevant to exchange value in that context. For instance, an historian of Egypt will figure age as a property in his or her overall equation of an artefact’s value in the commodities market for Egyptian artefacts. That is, time expressed as age becomes a factor in the artefact’s alienated figuration of exchange value for the historian in a way that time expressed as age would not influence, say, a farmer’s figuration of a crop’s value at harvest time. So we have a given use-value, be it Egyptian artefact or corn, but its entry into the commodities market is determined by figurations of value that are deemed relevant by a select group of people who participate in the local division of labour. However, these heterogeneous figurations funnel into a calculation of exchange value that puts all of its objects on a shared, homogenous plane of alienated value in the commodities market. Put another way, use-value—as it always has been—is embedded in exchange-value, but the abstract qualities upon which use-value finds its alienated expression as exchange value differ incommensurably between objects, determined as such by the localized social division of labour, while nevertheless contributing to the same generalized, abstract circuit of commodity exchange.

Taking the analogy slightly further, Kumarappa describes how the tension between use-value and exchange-value differs from context to context. A rupee represents food to a peasant living on the margins of society, but that same rupee represents a
commodity to be invested for more rupees to a stockbroker; in other words, the same exchange-object assumes two different valences for two different people. Yet the logic of capital accepts both of these figurations in the context of the commodities market, and both of these figurations likewise contribute to the commodity’s value as such. The contradiction that Kumarappa draws out is essentially materialist: value is predicated on social relations, but the sum total of social relations that determine value as such is, itself, simultaneously overdetermined and underdetermined.

How might this quandary apply to something like gossip or rumour as a form of exchange that, in the context of colonial power, is labelled (or “valorized,” to keep with the Marxian analogy) as a threat, as seditious speech, as filth? Does rumour circulate across and within multiple social strata according to the same peculiar logic as the commodities market? Does a piece of gossip’s value shift according to the power formations through which it circulates? In posing these questions, I speak here, I suppose, of a political economy of rumour, but in making this suggestion I do not mean to imply that rumour as such is reducible to culture as an alienated expression of use-value in an Adornian sense. What I am interested in, rather, is the way that rumours or gossip, in their concretization according to a given set of static qualities—along the lines of say, seditious hearsay, unsanctioned whisperings, an inassimilable symbolic excess, dirt as “matter out of place,” or whatever else—end up both destabilizing and reconstituting the social circuits through which they flow. What, then, is gossip’s power?

1 Forster’s choice to pursue the problem of intimacy and Indian nationalism through a narrative about an English educator’s rocky friendship with a Muslim man has not been lost on commentators. Frances B. Singh argues that Aziz’s political outlook “restructures” itself according to “Gandhian lines at the end of the novel” (268). Aziz’s passion for Persian verse remains, however, and this suggests to Singh a distinction between aesthetics and politics in which “a Muslim can develop and retain an identity—the great concern of the Young Partymen,” an Islamic separatist group—“without resorting to political separatism, the division of India along religious lines.” (268). Nirad Chaudhuri offers a less charitable assessment of Aziz and his friends as “inverted toadies” who “belong to the servile section” (22). The Hindu Godbole, a “clown” (21), likewise does not fare much better under Chaudhuri’s assessment. Chaudhuri’s complaint rests in what he sees as a “humanitarian prepossession” that “leads Forster to waste his politico-ethical emotion on persons who do not deserve it” (20).

2 In speaking here of gender and performance under the rubric of speech acts, I have in mind Elizabeth Grosz’s formulation of a heteropatriarchal economy in which the figure of the woman, castrated though she is, “accepts her castrated position as fait accompli” in this signifying system (Grosz 132). As Judith Butler points out, if the feminine figure must accede to her castration, then she is always and already in violation of the Law; she has transgressed before she has even been marked as a “she.” This is so because some prior body has “failed to perform its castration in accord with the symbolic law” (Butler 104). The violation is necessarily implied, even if the logic behind the violation appears to beg the question vis-à-vis corporeality and language, or launch an infinite regress of violating bodies that are always and already prior to the subject. In response to her compromised position as such, the woman develops into a seduc-
tress so that she may become the phallus for the masculine other who strives to have it. That is to say, she assumes the position of the phallus precisely because the phallus is what she is not (Grosz 132-133).

3 Of course, “power” itself is heterogeneous, disparate, and contingent; I use it in the singular here as a matter of convenience.

4 We could, alternatively, follow Slavoj Žižek’s suggestion that false-consciousness is moot, given that we knowingly buy into ideology’s exploitative logic from the start (The Sublime Object of Ideology 24-30).

5 Indeed, such contingencies brought together a diverse array of scholars—including Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Partha Chatterjee—under the auspices of the Subaltern studies group in the early 1980s. The Subalternists sought to unearth the “residuum of a dismembered past” (Guha 37), and in so doing, contest the homogenous and homogenizing impulses of elitist historiographies that erected elite Indians such as Gandhi and Nehru as heroes in the annals of history whilst effacing “the small voice of history,” the everyday experiences of women, children, rural peasants, the urban proletariat, low-born castes, and other marginalized figures who worked, lived, and participated in the oceanic mass of India’s nationalist struggle from 1857 onward.

6 Žižek’s charge that Deleuze is an “ideologist of late capitalism” (Organs without Bodies 184) might well apply to Bhabha in this instance.
Works Cited


“There’s glory for you!”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,”
Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously.
“Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I
meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down ar-
gument for you!’”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-
down argument’,” Alice objected.
“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty
said, in rather a scornful tone, “it
means just what I choose it to mean—
neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether
you can make words mean so many
different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty,
“which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking-Glass 57

"Writing," writes Jacques Derrida,
“designate[s] not only the physical ges-
tures of literal pictographic or ideographic
inscription, but also the totality of what makes
it possible . . . we say ‘writing’ for all that gives
rise to an inscription in general” (9). Echoing
Derrida’s logic, we ask, how does “speech”
designate not only the physiological transub-
stantiation of oration, but also the deictic, icon-
ic, and marker gestures (homesign) which can
give rise to full-blown natural languages—the
viva voce of the “voiceless”?1 Approximately
10% of deaf children are born to deaf par-
ents; without access to the spoken linguistic
input surrounding them, they are exposed to
and naturally acquire a conventional sign lan-
guage.2 Deaf children3 who are born to hear-
ing parents and not exposed to a conven-
tional sign language still communicate through a
gesture system: “homesign” (Goldin-Meadow
and Zheng). Extensive study of the complex-
ity of homesign did not occur until the 1970s,
driven by the work of Susan Goldin-Meadow
and associates. According to Goldin-Meadow,
homesign and natural language share many
properties, such as morphological structures
(Goldin-Meadow et al., “Children”; Gold-
in-Meadow et al., “Silence”), syntactic structures (Goldin-Meadow, “Resilience”; Goldin-Meadow and Zheng), recursion (Goldin-Meadow, “Resilience”), noun-verb distinctions (Goldin-Meadow et al., “Silence”), and foundational predicate frames (Goldin-Meadow, Hearing). Due to these properties, homesign greatly differs from the expressive gestures used in spoken conversation by both developing children and adults. In the philosophical literature, there is significantly less work which addresses the pragmatic and semantic processes of homesign communication. Bermudez’s Thinking without Words (2003) argues that trained bonobos demonstrate the same cognitive and communicative advancements as homesigners. In stark contrast, Begby’s “Language from the Ground Up” (2014) contends that homesign gestures carry semantic content (similar to the signs of any established natural language), notwithstanding their deictic and iconic forms. Given the radical divergence in the work of Bermudez and Begby, this paper focuses on the role of the Gricean Maxims in establishing the norms of homesign and, thus, how homesign gestures carry semantic content. Begby argues that homesign gestures are a “child’s own spontaneous creations, devised in the process of attempting, though often failing, to communicate” (“Language” 7-8). By emphasizing a very specific notion of public conventions and the spontaneous nature of homesign gestures, Begby underestimates how the semantic meaning of homesign is modulated through norms. When a homesigner gestures to an interlocutor, they are constrained by what the interlocutor can understand. Thus, as the gestures of homesign become increasingly arbitrary, norms (established through the Gricean Maxims) become correspondingly more important for successful pragmatic communication. Homesign gestures are not governed by public conventions; yet, without norms, it would be impossible to communicate through the arbitrary gestures of homesign. To illustrate this point, suppose the lexicon of English (a conventional public language) underwent a “quarter shift”; more precisely, every signifier was randomly assigned to a new signified and referential element. This new mapping would be every bit as arbitrary as English; yet, it would not be conventional (as English is, of course, conventional). In order to communicate with this new linguistic mapping, two people would need the “key” to the quarter shift, allowing mutual understanding. Without norms in this context, there would be no correct answer to the question of which signifier is assigned to which signified and referential element. Because homesign gestures are significantly arbitrary, norms are needed in order to understand how gestures are “tagged” to their correct meanings. For example, Goldin-Meadow et al. note that homesigners use a standard grasping gesture to denote holding objects, including umbrellas or rolled newspapers (“Silence” 36-40). On the first level, this gesture seems entirely iconic, me-
mediated by a similarity with the object it represents. In the same study, Goldin-Meadow defines *iconic* gestures, in part, as stylized pantomimes whose form varies with the intended meaning of each gesture (38). The standard “clenched fist” grasping gesture, however, demonstrates a significant arbitrariness as it is used to represent a broad spectrum of signified and referential elements which do not involve the clenching position, thereby negating any mediation of similarity between sign and object. In the latter context, while negating any mediation of similarity with the object it represents, the standard “clenched fist” grasping gesture is certainly not governed by *public conventions*; yet, norms must be in place for successful communication. The less iconic the homesign gesture, and the more significantly arbitrary, the more Gricean Maxims must be in place to facilitate mutual understanding.

There is an immediately relevant question when one considers the production of a homesign gesture: *What does the interlocutor need from me for successful communication?* In addressing this question, the norms of homesign are established according to the terms of the Gricean Maxims. Suppose you are asked to communicate “hammer” (noun) without the use of a conventional public language. In Grice’s category of *Quantity*, which relates to the quantity of information to be provided, there are two maxims: (1) “Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)”; and (2) “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required” (“Logic and Conversation” 167-68). Conveniently, as you and your interlocutor are standing in a garage, you point to a hammer. According to Grice’s maxims *Quantity*, you have made your contribution as informative as is required and you have not made your contribution more informative than is required. Following Goldin-Meadow’s et al.’s 1996 classification of children’s homesign gestures, you have produced a *deictic* gesture which maintains a constant kinesic form: deictics are “predominantly [used] to single out objects, people, places, and the like in the surroundings” (“Silence” 38). Next, you are asked to communicate “hammer” (noun) without the use of a conventional public language or a deictic gesture. Still in the garage, you walk over to the tool and place your arm parallel to the hammer’s handle with your clenched fist directly beside the hammer’s head. Again, according to Grice’s maxims of *Quantity*, you have provided the apposite amount of information. Following Goldin-Meadow et al.’s categories in the same 1996 study, you have created a characterizing or *iconic* gesture: a stylized pantomime (“Silence” 38). Following the Gricean Maxims, Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs’s “principle of least collaborative effort” (133) dictates that both you and your interlocutor must *mutually accept* that your interlocutor has understood your gesture before any conversation can continue. Thus, along with your communication of “hammer,” you must produce head or hand gestures (e.g., nods and headshakes) to convey...
affirmation, negation, or doubt; these are categorized by Goldin-Meadow et al. as marker or modulator gestures ("Silence" 38). The norms of these homesign gestures—pointing (deictic gestures), producing pantomimes (iconic gestures), and making head or hand signs (marker gestures)—are established through the Gricean Maxims, according to the amount of information needed by the interlocutor. Yet, in merely pointing and pantomiming, can these gestures express propositions similar to those expressed in conventional public languages? To address this question, it is necessary to interrogate how the norms of homesign are involved in the processes of single and double displacement; more precisely, I argue that these pragmatic norms must be established for homesign gestures to carry full semantic content.

As previously argued, the less (simply) iconic or deictic a homesign gesture, the more Gricean Maxims must be in place to facilitate mutual understanding. In order to address single displacement and the norms involved in this processes, suppose you and your interlocutor are still standing in the garage, but the hammer is not present. You are now asked to communicate "hammer" (noun) without the use of a conventional public language. Following the logic of Begby’s 2014 discussion on pointing gestures, you may think that using deictics to refer to a non-present hammer would be either incomprehensible or a violation of communication principles; for, perhaps deictic gestures are constrained to perceptually present objects, people, and places. Yet, you point to the hook on which the hammer was previously hanging. Thus, by pointing to an object (the hook) in your immediate environment (the garage), you have successfully referred to a non-present object (the hammer). According to the principle of least collaborative effort, both you and your interlocutor are responsible for mutually accepting that a perceptually present object refers not merely to its own signified or referential elements, but to another object. As you have provided the apposite amount of information (your interlocutor did not think that your pointing meant to draw attention to your finger or the hook), the conversation can successfully continue with the Gricean Maxims in place. Displaced references, such as this "hammer" gesture, are used robustly in homesign, corresponding to the establishment of norms for communication.

In the processes of double displacement, homesigners’ pragmatic use of complex deictic and iconic gestures relies increasingly on the norms established through Gricean Maxims. As the final scenario, you and your interlocutor are now standing in a kitchen and there is neither a hammer nor a hook present. You are now asked to communicate “hammer” (noun) without the use of a conventional public language. Again, following the logic of Begby’s 2014 discussion on pantomime gestures, you may think that, in the absence of the actual space (the garage) and the present object (the hook), referring to the non-present object (the hammer) would be impossible through only deixis and iconicity. Yet, you develop a plan: first, you will provide the apposite information about the actual space (the garage) as an iconic...
projected space; then, within that framework, you will point to the projected location of the present object (the hook) in order to refer to the non-present object (the hammer). If the pragmatic norms of homesign are not adequately established, your interlocutor may think that you mean to draw attention to your finger, the garage, the hook, or another irrelevant reference. Yet, because your gestures were as informative as was required and not more informative than was required, your interlocutor successfully understood your sophisticated gesture—hammer—notwithstanding the lack of mutually salient objects for pointing to or indexing. While single displacement involves reference to an absent object through a pointing gesture in the actual space of a present object, double displacement involves reference to an absent object through synchronized pantomime and pointing in a projected space. In the move from deixis to iconicity to single displacement to double displacement, there is increasingly more and more complex information being transferred from the producer to the receiver of homesign gestures. According to Clark’s principle of least collaborative effort (“Referring” 133), the producer and receiver of homesign mutually minimize the quantity of their gesturing by maximizing their reliance on a common ground for the subsequent level of communication. In each stage of the pragmatic use of homesign, the producer must return to the question, what does the interlocutor need from me for successful communication? Thus, given the sophistication of the references being communicated, there is a growing need for norms to be mutually established by the producer and receiver, especially regarding the apposite amount of information that must be provided.10 Given the increasing importance on common ground and norms in the progressing stages of communication, Begby’s notion of public convention and comments on the spontaneous nature of homesign seem increasingly misleading.

The producer and receiver of homesign are responsible for mutually accepting that both parties have understood the current gestures before any conversation can continue; thus, the interlocutor’s efficiency in accepting, rejecting, or postponing the presented gestures greatly impacts the success of the communication. Given the opportunity to establish norms, the producer will gauge the efficiency of his/her interlocutor, thereby calibrating the type and amount of semantic elements which must be included in his/her contributions. According to Talmy, language users “treat certain elements and their interrelations as the central identifying core of a particular event or event type (at least for the purposes of communication).” Furthermore, in Talmy’s study, “other elements, which could in principle share an equally intimate involvement in the event, appear in most languages peripheral or incidental.”11 Zheng and Goldin-Meadow relate this distinction (central versus peripheral elements) to the non-conventional communication of deaf children, concluding that they “convey each of the elements considered core to motion events involving crossing space” (38) and omit those elements which are con-
I argue that the aforementioned distinction is another example of how Grice’s maxims of *Quantity* drive the semantic content of homesign. In order for the homesigner to make his or her contribution as informative as is required, he or she must include the “elements considered core to motion events”; in order for the homesigner to not make his or her contribution more informative than is required, he or she must omit those elements considered “peripheral or incidental.” For example, as a deaf child requested that his experimenter move a toy bag to a particular spot on the floor, he included the following semantic elements: *figure, endpoint, motion, path, manner, place,* and *origin.* The only semantic element he omitted was a reference to the *agent* (even though he was capable of producing gestures for this component); as the deaf child became more familiar with his experimenter and their mutual understanding of the *agent* was established, this omission became a common pattern (Zheng and Goldin-Meadow 39). Thus, in regard to Grice’s maxims of *Quantity,* the inclusion of the reference to the agent began as a requirement for informative contributions; eventually, the omission of the reference to the agent became a requirement for informative contributions.

Following these arguments, the deaf child of Zheng and Goldin-Meadow’s 2002 study distinguished between caused and spontaneous motions, adjusting his use of semantic elements according to the respective requirements of informative communication. In caused motions, the object is moved along the path; for example, “I slid the puck across the ice.” In describing caused motions, the deaf child predictably omitted the path (as the puck is set on a determined path), and included lexical items for the figure and the endpoint (as the latter element is dependent, for example, on the velocity of the puck). He thus drew attention to the initial and final parts of the motion event. In spontaneous motions, the object moves itself along the path; for example, “I slid across the ice.” In describing spontaneous motions, the homesigner included a lexical item for the path (which is comparatively indeterminate) and incorporated the other components directly into the path gesture itself. He thus drew attention to the medial part of the motion event (49). As noted, the puck is on a determined path in caused motion while the hockey player is on an indeterminate path in spontaneous motion; thus, it is a requirement for informative contributions to omit or include the semantic element of path, respectively. In their gestures, homesigners include the “central identifying core of a particular event” and omit the elements that are “peripheral or incidental”; through their attention to the quantity of information to be provided through semantic elements, deaf children establish the norms of homesign communication.

Notwithstanding the communicative responsibilities shared by the producer and receiver of homesign, the producer is greatly constrained by the receiver’s inability to re-
ciprocate in kind through homesign gestures. Regarding the possible arbitrariness of gestures in proportion to the receiver’s comparative incapacities, Goldin-Meadow asserts, “the deaf children must keep their gestures grounded in the here-and-now and relatively transparent, or no one will understand them” (*The Resilience of Language* 226). While the relationship between producer and receiver is usually formulated as between a deaf child and his or her caregiver, I argue that, in emphasizing the caregiver’s inabilities, Goldin-Meadow underestimates both the morphological and pragmatic insights which a deaf child may gain from his or her caregiver. First, Goldin-Meadow et al. insist that children’s homesign morphemes cannot be traced to their hearing mothers’ gestures (“Children” 87). Yet, as their study develops, Goldin-Meadow et al. concede that the children were “occasionally producing single words [orally] but never combining those words into sentences” (“Children” 90). Zheng and Goldin-Meadow exactly duplicate this concession in their study (29). To clarify the distinction, morphology concerns the form and formation of words, while syntax concerns the arrangement of words into higher units such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Thus, depending on the single words produced by the child, he or she may have been accessing significant morphological input from his or her caregiver. For example, suppose one of the words produced by the child is the free morpheme “help”; the child could easily be exposed to the processes of derivational inflection, for example, adding the suffix “-er” and thereby changing the grammatical category of the word from a verb (“help”) to a noun (“helper”). As the children could produce single words (probably both free and bound morphemes), Goldin-Meadow et al. considerably underestimate the morphological input that the homesigners may access from their caregivers.

Homesign is defined, in part, by being a “non-shared” form of communication, unlike conventional language systems. Yet, corresponding to my previous argument regarding morphology, I also contend that Goldin-Meadow underestimates the significant insights on communicative pragmatics which a deaf child may gain from his or her caregiver. Goldin-Meadow neglects analysing the items which caregivers make salient for their deaf children and how the proportions of their communication—the quantitative requirements—provide an example or clue to expressive pragmatics. When homesigners communicate with gestures, they often receive speech in return from the hearing individuals within their homes; such speech is typically designed to provide an “oral education” for children. The gestures which co-occur with this speech are, according to Flaherty and Goldin-Meadow, not free to adopt the properties of homesign. Because hearing parents proffer responses in speech which do not include homesign properties, deaf children must interpret complex “cospeech” gestures (Goldin-Meadow and Alibali 272). In response to
the global and unsegmented gestures of their caregivers, homesigners use gestures which are characterized by segmentation and combination. While the hearing caregivers (through the gestures that they produce while they speak) do not provide a mode for the linguistic structures of homesign, they do provide profound insights on the pragmatic necessities of communication. For example, interpreting the rich tapestry of homesign, cospeech, and speech between child and caregiver involves a complex form of Clark’s “mutual acceptance” process, necessitating continuous accepting, rejecting, or postponing of the presented visual (or auditory) input. A child may need to use double displacement in order to respond to a gesture that co-occurs with speech and therefore forms an integrated system with the speech that the deaf child cannot access. Thus, unlike a spoken conversation using a conventional public language, the dialogue between a homesigner and a hearing interlocutor necessarily includes radically heterogeneous forms of communication which cannot be mutually adopted. More precisely, the hearing caregiver addresses the child with an integrated system of gestures and speech, which cannot be appropriated by the child. In the other direction, the child addresses the caregiver with a complex system of homesigns that the caregiver is not free to implement. Thus, the part of Clark’s “common ground” that is established by mutual adoption of language is de facto unavailable to a homesigner and a hearing interlocutor. Overcoming this partial absence of common ground, homesigners must interpersonally cultivate their other responsibilities in the “collaborative process” of communication; the caregivers of deaf children provide a forum, and a possible example, for mastering these communicative pragmatics.

The inability of interlocutors to respond in kind and mutually adopt linguistic properties is developed by Begby as non-bidirectionality: “homesign remains to a large extent a non-bidirectional” (“Language” 23). Returning to the request to communicate “hammer” (noun) while “standing in the kitchen,” I argue that bidirectionality has a profound impact on the arbitrariness of homesign, especially double displacement. The basis of bidirectionality is the ability to understand and adopt an interlocutor’s words, and vice versa; upon hearing a new word, one would be able both to comprehend and use it in one’s own linguistic productions. If there were a high degree of bidirectionality among homesigners, interlocutors would have a much better understanding of each other’s needs, therefore taking significantly less time to establish the norms of pragmatic communication. Considering both Goldin-Meadow’s assertion that deaf children must keep their gestures “grounded in the here-and-now” (The Resilience of Language 226), and my previous arguments on the partial absence of common ground between homesigner and interlocutor, I emphasize that the arbitrariness of homesign gestures is always constrained.
by the interlocutor’s (in)ability to understand. When this limitation on comprehension is lifted, the arbitrariness of homesign can substantially increase; this is the case in both the study of Goldin-Meadow, Mylander, and Franklin regarding Chinese and American homesigners and the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language (ISN). In the former study, the authors note “the differences between the children’s systems were no bigger across cultures than within cultures” (87). Thus, given at least a partial lifting of the comprehension constraint, both cultures were similarly efficient in establishing the norms of communication, with neither lagging behind in developing linguistic structures out of their respective input.

In regard to the latter development, suppose you produced your doubly displaced sign for “hammer” in a group of fellow homesigners; diachronically, each new cohort of this group would move further from the deictic and iconic significance of the gesture—eventually, it would become entirely symbolic. The development of homesign’s arbitrariness occurs over multiple cohorts, establishing the norms of communication one generation at a time. After the first cohort cultivates a pidgin, the younger generation regularizes their received grammatical input. As both the Gricean Maxims and norms of communication are already “in place” for the younger cohort, the pidgin can be elevated to a creole and, eventually, with the full regularization of maxims, norms, and the structures of language, the creole can be elevated to a natural language. Through such systematization and conventionalization of arbitrary gestures, Nicaraguan Sign Language became a full-blown natural language in about 10-15 years. When interlocutors can understand and adopt each other’s innovations, their ability to recognize each other’s needs—therefore taking significantly less time to establish the norms of pragmatic communication—is greatly increased; by lifting the limitation on comprehension, the arbitrariness of homesign can dramatically develop.

While there are a substantial number of studies on the properties which homesign shares with natural language—including morphological structures, syntactic structures, recursion, and noun-verb distinctions—there is significantly less work which addresses the pragmatic and semantic processes of homesign communication. I argue that important insights on the gesture system are gained by analysing the role of the Gricean Maxims in establishing the norms of homesign and, thus, how homesign gestures carry semantic content. Homesign gestures are not governed by public conventions; yet, without norms, it would be impossible to communicate through the arbitrary gestures of homesign. According to Clark’s principle of least collaborative effort (“Referring” 133), the producer and receiver of homesign mutually minimize the quantity of their gesturing by maximizing their reliance on a common ground for the subsequent level(s) of communication. In their gestures, homesigners include the “cen-
tral identifying core of a particular event” and omit the elements that are “peripheral or incidental.” Notwithstanding the communicative responsibilities shared by the producer and receiver of homesign, the producer is greatly constrained by the receiver’s inability to reciprocate in kind through homesign gestures. I contend that, in emphasizing the caregiver’s abilities, Goldin-Meadow underestimates both the morphological and pragmatic insights a deaf child may gain from his or her caregiver. Bidirectionality has a profound impact on the arbitrariness of homesign, especially double displacement. When interlocutors can understand and adopt each other’s innovations, their ability to understand each other’s needs is greatly increased; by lifting the limitation on comprehension, the arbitrariness of homesign can “take flight.”

1 Contra the mistaken notion of deaf children (without a conventional sign language) as “voiceless,” alongside the rich tapestry of homesign, they “occasionally produce single words [orally]” (Goldin-Meadow and Zheng, 29); thus, I later argue that these deaf children may gain significant morphological and pragmatic insights from their caregivers. Furthermore, because homesign is defined, in part, by being a “non-shared” form of communication, the dialogue between a homesigner and a hearing interlocutor necessarily includes radically heterogeneous forms of communication which cannot be mutually adopted (“non-bidirectionality”).

2 Such conventional sign languages include American Sign Language (ASL).

3 The children in many of Goldin-Meadow’s studies are severely (70-90 dB bilateral hearing loss) to profoundly (>90 dB bilateral hearing loss) deaf. For a more detailed account, see page 736 of Hunsicker and Goldin-Meadow’s “Hierarchical Structure.”

4 Also, due to these properties, homesigners greatly differ from the “feral children” who have not participated in any linguistic exchanges in their youth.


7 See pages 115 & 133 of Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs’ “Referring as a Collaborative Process.”

8 According to Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, a presentation, expansion, or replacement can be judged acceptable or unacceptable by three methods: acceptance, rejection, or postponement (9).

9 See page 22 of Begby, “Language from the Ground Up.”

10 See pages 167-168 of Grice’s 1975 essay “Logic and Conversation.”


13 “ISN” for “Idioma de Signos Nicaragüense.”


Works Cited


Reflections on Reframing Language Through Signed Signs and Deaf Gain

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Jamie Rooney’s “‘You Can Make Words Mean So Many Different Things’: A Study of Homesign” strings together, among other things, research from Goldin-Meadows, a direct response to work on homesign by Endre Begby, and maxims from Anglo-American philosophy of language, all with an eye to radically heterogeneous forms of communication and a designation of gesture in “speech.” The complexity of his arguments and his attention to both the details of existing homesign research and larger questions on the nature of communication is both compelling and thought provoking. But his article raises a couple of questions for me: If Grice’s English-spoken philosophy of language provides the tools for a study of homesign, what do insights from signed languages contribute to theorizing beyond tacit assumptions about the nature of language? What of conceptions of communication that are distinctly non-voiced, that is, what of the theory of viva non-voce? There is no shortage of such thinking, and in what follows I take up a particular (and by no means exhaustive) set of it, namely, Deaf Studies’ attention to the question of language via reflections on American Sign Language (hereafter ASL). First, I consider responses from Deaf Studies to Derrida’s grammatological project and its efforts to take up what Derrida leaves out. Second, I consider the concept of “Deaf Gain” and the reframing of “deaf” beyond the parameters of individual bodies and signing communities. I will thereby emphasize the social and political implications of the privileging of speech in hearing-dominant societies, as well as highlight some of the alternative concepts and questions that signed signs bring to communication.

Audism and Embodied Signs

To begin, it is essential to explain the term “audism” and its relationship to Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism. In his article “Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression,” H-Dirksen Bauman gives a brief history and explication of the “maturing concept” (240) of audism, a term gaining use in Deaf Studies classrooms and that will hopefully
become more recognized in other disciplines and inquiries into the nature of language. Generally, audism refers to discrimination against deaf people, but more specifically the concept names instances of oppression in the lives of deaf and hard of hearing people, as well as wider structural oppressions found throughout hearing dominant society. Critiques of individual audism emphasize the way that deaf and hard of hearing people are subject to prejudices and micro-aggressions from hearing people who assume that hearingness is better than and preferred to deafness and deaf ways of life. Critiques of institutional audism link individual experiences of oppression with wider matrices of power—such as those connected to education or medicine—that encourage and reward hearingness and hearing ways of life. Metaphysical audism, a term coined by Bauman himself, traces the way that the above levels of oppression are underpinned by longstanding metaphysical assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity—particularly “the orientation that links human identity and being with language defined as speech” (242). Meditating on the connections between the philosophical privileging of speaking subjects and the realities of individual and institutional audism, Bauman points out that Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism is of invaluable import to Deaf-centered projects that aim to end phonocentric violence and to re-frame “language” as a matter of more than words and mouths. While, importantly, Derrida never explicitly takes up Deaf History, critiques of audism on all levels lock gears with Derrida’s critique in a way that makes clear the “historical, institutional site of his project” (Bauman, “Listening to Phonocentrism,” n.p). Each of these dimensions of audism provide insight into the way that the supposedly exclusive relationship between speech and language is enforced within hearing-dominant societies. The arbitrary authority of “speech” is, in these contexts, undone through the centering of non-voiced and strictly gestural languages.

Deaf perspectives open up to scrutiny several new dimensions of the relationship between language, subjectivity, and everyday life. An emphasis on the spatial aspect of gesture, for example, raises a set of practical questions about communication. DeafSpace is an approach to design and planning that aims to make spaces better suited for signing languages and deaf ways of being. DeafSpace considers factors of interpersonal visibility (such as the amount of lighting in an area and the number and height of walls in a room) as essential conditions for communication. For example, Gallaudet University outlines six components of DeafSpace on its Campus Design and Planning webpage: sensory reach, mobility, proximity, light, color, and acoustics (“What is DeafSpace?”). As these priorities imply, the question “what does another person need from me in order to communicate?” can be usefully re-situated and re-contextualized to account for physical space and location. Robert Sirvage’s work on Deaf Walkers expounds on this connection between space and lan-
language, analyzing the norms and responsibilities between signers when they are engaged in both conversation and walking. As ASL requires direct eye contact with another, signers keep a peripheral eye out for obstacles in the way of their conversation partners, alerting them to possible obstacles and shifting positions as needed (Bauman and Murray xxv-xxvi).

In this context, Begby’s notion of “non-bidirectionality” and Rooney’s notion of “bidirectionality” (as well as the latter’s emphasis on communicative responsibility) take on alternative meanings: direction is immediately relevant in the sense of orientation and movement and responsibility involves both participating in social norms and active involvement in the safety of another person (Rooney 100). If these categories of linguistic analyses are stretched through such an analogy, then a stretch is part of the point, for signed perspectives open up the meaning of words to the breadth of their contexts. While Rooney emphasizes the normative relationship between guardian and child as well as the minimum conditions necessary for pragmatic communication, an analysis of communicative relationships need also consider street signs, passersby, and physical bumps on the path of communication. Even in the less motion-oriented example of DeafSpace, relationships like those of elbow room and light fixture position become essential points of consideration for the question of what we might make words mean.

The physicality of ASL, the renovation of language to include three-dimensional space, influences one’s orientation in communicative social life as well as one’s orientation in the more critical and imaginative realm of one’s reading life. Accordingly, theory and philosophy, too, are opened up by signed perspectives. In his essay “Listening to Phonocentrism with Deaf Eyes: Derrida’s Mute Philosophy of (Sign) Language,” Bauman recounts an interaction he had, in his role as a Gallaudet ASL and Deaf Studies professor, with a student struggling to read Foucault:

He [the student] first signed that it was difficult to read, with his left hand representing the book, open and facing him, and his right hand was in a V shape, the two finger tips representing his practice of reading, re-reading, and then finally, his fingers got closer to the book, and finally, made contact; at this point, the eyes of the V shape then became a digging apparatus, digging deeper into the text. He then reached in between the lines of the page, now signified by the open fingers of the left hand, and began to pull ideas and new meanings from underneath the text. The notion of reading between the lines gained flesh, as the hands literally grasped for buried meanings. The result of reading Foucault, he said, changed his thinking forever, inspiring him to invent a name-sign for Foucault. The sign he invented began with the signed letter “F” at the side of the forehead, and
then twisting outward, showing the brain undergoing a radical reorientation. In a concise image, the philosophy of Foucault is given an iconic shape that is not one of mere mime—for it would be unintelligible to a non-signing audience—but imbued with the metaphorical iconic performance of the ramifications of studying Foucault.

While some nuances of some of the signs described may be lost to a reader not familiar to ASL, two details here are worth hovering over. First is Bauman’s characterization of iconicity as the site of expressive possibility and depth. Second, and less obvious, are the implications of iconicity for embodied relationships to texts, intimating a proliferation of relations and concepts that all follow from the modality of signing as gestural and visual as opposed to spoken or written. The qualitative difference between words and signs (in this example, the difference in their respective iconic potentiality) suggests not only that Deaf perspectives in theory are essential—the core implication of this very response—but also that signing offers a dimension of experiment and expression that spoken or written modalities of language do not. Elsewhere, Bauman and Murray similarly wonder about the gain to be had from using ASL or other signed languages to explain concepts such as Foucault’s more spatial notion of the “microphysics of power” or the process of cellular mitosis. They conclude that the three-dimensionality of signed languages is of invaluable pedagogical import (“Deaf Studies” 9). Attention to the complexity of iconicity in signed languages renders patently false the too-familiar assumption that iconicity is indicative of lesser cognitive functioning. Further, to name a more concrete social gain, this complexity makes an argument for the importance of publications such as the Deaf Studies Digital Journal and the circulation of video articles in ASL.

**Deaf Gain**

In an effort to tie together some of the above thoughts, we might say that perhaps what the social and political dimensions of audism make most clear for theory about speech and gesture is the need to make unfamiliar those relations between words and meaning that seem most obvious. Indeed, the privilege of words, their obvious meaningfulness, strikes one as ‘obvious’ precisely in the context of speech-oriented theory in hearing-dominant societies. My gesture here is in part one of defamiliarization for the sake of decentering speech, but it is also one that takes seriously questions about communication raised in the context of signed languages. What follows are new concepts essential for inquiry not only into language’s social and political dimensions but also into its sensory dimensions. An appreciation for the particular sensory nature of signed languages leads us to a framework upon which this essay has depended and whose name I have stepped around until now: Deaf Gain.
As Bauman and Murray, the editors of the collection *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes of Human Diversity* (2014), phrase it: “Deaf Gain is defined as the reframing of ‘deaf’ as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity that has the potential to contribute to the greater good of humanity” (“Reframing” 3). Or, simply, it is the re-framing of “deafness” as a marker of gain and benefit as opposed to loss or lack. But, importantly, Bauman and Murray’s emphasis on “sensory and cognitive diversity” (“Reframing” 3) aligns Deaf Gain with movements such as those advocating for neurodiversity and biodiversity, distinguishing the term from notions of “deaf” as merely a cultural or linguistic marker. If “deaf” as marker begs questions such as “What is deaf?” then “Deaf Gain” emphasizes the value of difference across cultural, creative, and cognitive lines (Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Studies in the 21st Century” 6-12). English glosses for the signed concept of “Deaf Gain” provide further semantic nuance here: DEAF INCREASE, DEAF BENEFIT, and DEAF CONTRIBUTE. These signs emphasize the introduction or emergence of something new, something that was not there before, an alternative way of being in the world that is qualifiedly distinct from ways of being that are oriented toward hearing and speech. This alternative way of being is obviously significant on the level of deaf and signing communities, but it also has implications for other language users.

One of the more immediate themes in Deaf Gain scholarship is its appeal to “humanity,” and more specifically its assertion that deaf people might make “contributions to humanity” (Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Gain” xxxix). While such terminology might suggest that Deaf Gain is simply another liberal humanism of sorts, it is important to note that Deaf Gain is firmly rooted in critiques of normalcy. More clearly, its critical heritage marks its distinction from what might be more specifically identified as “nostalgic longings for the humanist past” (Braidotti 45). Indeed, Deaf Gain’s alignment with disabilities studies—particularly the latter’s emphasis on the body as a site of possibility rather than a site of essential limits—oppose it to familiar humanist assumptions. If Deaf Gain were reconcilable with liberal humanism, its “gain” might simply mean an individual’s “getting ahead” in a current system—that is, capitalizing on difference within audist hearing worlds. The radical re-framing that Deaf Gain attempts, however, challenges traditional audist connections between subjectivity and language and opens up new ways of theorizing subjectivity. In fact, I am inclined to read Deaf Gain along the lines of Walter Mignolo’s “epistemological disobedience:” Deaf Gain, that is, as a decolonial gesture that resists narratives of self-presence and coming-to-be through speech, a radical “changing [of] the terms” (Mignolo 4) of language and communication. While maxims from an Anglo-American philosophy of language indicate the rules of a speech-based game, Deaf Gain and concepts
drawn from signing contexts initiate in part a shift in the terms of theorizing communication.

**Conclusion**

Neuroscientist Laura-Ann Pettito’s work provides a specific example of the way that Deaf Gain is characterized by concretely social and political priorities. Pettito is part of a group of scientists who ask questions about the nature and benefits of sign languages to human neural development. In “Three Revolutions: Language, Culture, and Biology,” she outlines her efforts to scientifically disprove audist assumptions that underlie the privileging of speech. Pettito’s findings indicate “[i]n early life the human brain will not discriminate between speech and sign but processes them identically, with biological equivalence,” and so she concludes that “speech and language have now been biologically decoupled. Speech is not language” (73). This research highlights Deaf Gain’s priorities in two ways: first, as Pettito goes on to make clear, it has implications for deaf education, public policies affecting deaf people, and the importance of deaf children’s access to signed languages in early years. Second, it notes that signed languages contribute to the neural development and literary and reading skills in both deaf and hearing children; therefore, there is value in any child—whether deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing—learning sign (71-72). The above priorities reiterate the points about language and theory that the concepts of audism, DeafSpace, and Deaf Gain make abundantly clear: namely, that linguistic analyses need to engage discourses of power and oppression, that they need space for physical and historical contexts, and that they need to take sensory and other dimensions of difference into account.

While Rooney’s methodological choices do not highlight the social priorities of a Deaf Gain framework, I do not say that his work is disconnected from an essential effort to question assumptions about the nature of language and meaning-making. His reflections on the complexity of homesigning relationships and his convincing concept of homesign-as-arbitrary are not only highly original contributions to the little examined question of semantic meaning in homesign, they also challenge familiar habits of thought regarding the relationship between gesture and speech. In response, I have used his emphasis on the heterogeneity of communicative forms as a starting point to consider ways that Deaf Studies and ASL perspectives generate new concepts and terms in relation to language. My aim here has been to present histories and concepts that situate Rooney’s engaging work amongst other theoretical inquiries into “speech” by way of signs-as-signed. My iterations of words that have been said about how signs are important—they are a mouthful. My point is a singular one: thinking alongside language that is not of words or mouths is instrumental to the effort of thinking about communication and social relationships in alternative ways.
1 Bauman points out the way that the concept of “audism” takes as its model analyses of oppression via the concepts of individual racism and systemic racism (“Audism” 240-241).

2 Sirvage’s work is available on video the journal Deaf Studies Digital Journal, in the peer reviewed article “Navigational Proxemics of Walking Signers: A Paradigm Shift in Methodology.” His article is in ASL and does not have an English translation; my reflections here are based on Bauman and Murray’s summary of Sirvage’s work in their introduction to Deaf Gain.

3 Sarah Taub’s book Language From the Body (2001) is an oft-cited and invaluable analysis of iconicity in American Sign Language.

4 Here I borrow Harlan Lane’s explanation: “English glosses for American Sign Language (ASL) are conventionally written in capital letters. Hyphens connect glosses that are one word in ASL. They are not translations” (5). Glosses, rather, are more often defined as transcriptions. Similar to the occurrences of an italicized non-English word in English texts or a collection of hyphenated words in a translated text, glosses here index a situation where the original language presents a concept for which there is no word in the second language context.
Works Cited


There have been numerous positive reviews of Julia Novak’s Live Poetry, a handful of which are cited on the book’s companion website, www.livepoetry.net. Reviewers applaud Live Poetry as a “fresh,” “important,” or “unprecedented” intervention in current poetry criticism, a corrective to critics’ pernicious textual partisanship or puritanism. Novak observes these critics granting precedence, for example, to the published poem as the definitive version or to the written poem as the originary script for a reading or a performance. Suitably, then, reviewers commend Novak’s defence of, in her terms, “oral performance as a basic realisation mode of the art of poetry, which is parallel to, rather than a mere derivative ‘version’ of, the written mode” (12).

Live Poetry reaches for comprehensiveness, drawing analytic tools from para-linguistics, musicology, kinesics, as well as theatre, performance, and folklore studies in order to address the numerous imbricated aspects of performed poetry. The study is devised for quick reference, with analytic approaches and tools dispersed into isolated sections and subsections. Novak’s terminal “Checklist for the Analysis of Live Poetry Performances” acts as a field guide, asserting live poetry as a cohesive, if interdisciplinary, object of critical research.

In all of these respects, Novak’s study is timely (or a bit overdue), competently written, and eminently accessible as a beginner’s guide to live poetry. While Novak focuses exclusively on live poetry in the United Kingdom, her methodology is ostensibly applicable to live poetry as a general art form across geopolitical contexts. I urge you to read some of the aforementioned positive reviews for more detail on what’s good (indeed, what’s great) about Live Poetry. Below, I’ll focus on two related problems with the study’s conception: first, an archivally inflected presumption that criticism benefits its object; and second, a focus on methodological objectivity that displaces what’s actually at stake in live poetry and its study.

An archival problem

Novak opens her introduction by refuting the cliché of poetry as a genre in crisis, citing its “renaissance through the spoken word,” apparent in a profusion of performance
events ranging from traditionally conceived “readings” and open mics to festivals and poetry slams (11). Yet the language of literary criticism is often that of crisis-and-intervention—positive criticism saves art from ignorance and negative criticism saves particular standards of taste from ignorance—and, accordingly, Novak describes her own project as an intervention into the derogation of live poetry (i.e., an art form) by academic and aesthetic conservatives (i.e., those who are ignorant of its artistic ways and means).

Although some critics depend on a nearly sacred conception of textuality to declaim live poetry as derivative of or lower brow than “page poetry,” it’s hardly fair for Novak to generalize this opinion as the mainstream of poetry criticism. Anyone still treating the poem as the isolated transcription of genius isn’t attending to the most interesting aspects of contemporary written poems either, which cannot be aptly read in the garret of their textuality because they are free-ranging and quasi-textual in their borrowed contexts and emphatic linguistic unoriginality. (Kenneth Goldsmith’s Uncreative Writing, for all its absurd prescriptivism, is useful for its description of this late twentieth- and twenty-first-century trend in American poetry.) But were this straw “page poetry critic” a reality, would its threat to live poetry communities be any greater than that of a dwindling rear guard in someone else’s skirmish? It seems not, for if live poetry communities in the UK are distinguished from the long tradition of poetry “readings” by their “willingness to concede to live poetry an aesthetic value independent of print” (11), as Novak claims, then live poetry communities, by definition, validate their art to themselves. Live poetry self-perpetuates, crusty critics be damned.

So, simply, this crisis of live poetry’s derogation is a crisis of and for criticism: the fact that “poetry performances are hardly ever reviewed” results in “the lack of historical documentation and of a critical language” for live poetry (11-12). If Novak’s formulation doesn’t merely beg the question (suggesting, as it does, that live poetry is not adequately celebrated in written reviews because it has not been adequately celebrated in written reviews), it at least acknowledges that written critical discourse runs on a different circuit from that of its putative object. This we know. The necessary question for Live Poetry is whether those circuits intersect in a meaningful or beneficial way. Does live poetry require written criticism to flourish? Evidently not. So, do live poetry communities have sufficient (non-academic or non-written) resources to produce, circulate, and comment on their own aesthetic traditions—that is, to maintain their own histories of taste? Do these communities require conventionally understood “standards of taste” or “histories” in order to produce live poetry? Or, to tweak the terms slightly, how is live poetry perpetuated (or not) through its own forms and in its own terms? How does this perpetuation differ from that of page poetry, and how are the particular stakes of live poetry audible in this difference?

Were Live Poetry a study of live poetry per se or of the communities through which live poetry does flourish, it would necessarily pose such interesting questions. Instead, it is a critique of criticism, and so it repeatedly turns toward methods of record writing (e.g., using musical notation as a critical tool) and away
from the very liveness of the object it constitutes for study. In other terms, Novak seeks to facilitate the archivization of live poetry via written criticism, to produce a discourse ("critical language") and a history ("historical documentation") around live poetry, and in so doing save an art form not only from contemporary ignorance but also from the historical amnesia that—in the archivist’s terms—always threatens the lively spoken word.

Despite Novak’s appraisal of textual partisanship in poetry criticism, she doesn’t consider the textual bias in her own foray into the comprehensive critical categorization and recording of live poetry. Further, she occasionally transmutes criticism’s crisis of forgetfulness into a crisis of live poetry per se: “scholarly engagement with live poetry touches upon an important question concerning poetry in general: that of the future development, and survival, of the genre in contemporary media cultures” (238). What happened to live poetry’s flourishing in spite of critical inattention? Julian Jordan’s review of Live Poetry, available on www.WriteOutLoud.net, suggests both the ease and the influence of such rhetorical slippage: “Anyone interested in the future of live poetry should read this book” (n.p).

That this line of Jordan’s review should be cited on www.livepoetry.com betrays Novak’s investment in the old archival promise that a comprehensive historical record guarantees futurity—or, conversely and more specifically, that those who don’t study the history of live poetry are doomed to stymie the form. I’m not convinced on this matter, however, for if “progress” (i.e., changes and developments) in live poetry were somehow impeded by the lack of written histories of taste, then there would have yet occurred no “history” to record: the dark times before Novak’s intervention would be what archives construct as chaotic prehistory. I have much more faith in Novak’s earlier suggestion that live words, and the communities constructed through them, are doing just fine on their own. Here’s my counterproposal: those interested in the past, present, or future of live poetry should get involved in live poetry communities. Reading Live Poetry (and then, presumably, getting involved in a community of critics) might not hurt live poetry as an art form, but these are two different enterprises.

A discursive problem

Even if we set aside the ugly historio-critical assumption that academic research is inherently beneficial to its objects, we can find a related problem in Novak’s attempts to delineate a more-or-less objective methodology for critiquing live poetry. The live poems she selects for sample analysis demonstrate a strong tendency toward anti-hegemonic politics and ethics. Indeed, much self-consciously “live” or “performed” poetry is activist, and we might say that all live poetry—Novak defines it as staging a “direct encounter of the poet with a live audience” (12)—proposes an ethos of intersubjectivity against the logic of objectivity that structures systematic knowledge. Yet Novak evades any declaration of hermeneutic politics or ethics, presumably in order to posit her “toolkit” as just such an objective and systematic (i.e., rigorous) methodology. Thus, the academic strength of Novak’s methodology—drawing into discursive legibility and articulability

Word of Mouth
so many intuitively understood aspects of face-to-face communication (e.g., tone and emphasis, accent, bodily gestures, performative environs)—is also the condition of its political and ethical self-blinding. That is, Novak’s “critical language” is developed not out of the stakes of live poetry but in spite of them, not out of the counter-cultural (perhaps even subaltern) intersubjectivity of live poetic encounters but within the abstractions of academic interdisciplinarity. This approach resembles the development of certain “branches” of postcolonial criticism within the disciplines of comparative literature or Marxism—as opposed to those “branches” of postcolonial criticism developed out of the cultural and material stakes of local colonial situations, such as subaltern studies or Indigenous theory. We might attempt to rescue postcolonial comp-lit and postcolonial Marxism from their Eurocentric pedigrees by recalibrating them toward local specificities, but such rescue efforts tend to lose the plot, being labour done in service of critical discourse (e.g., saving the art of Marxism from ignorance) rather than in service of that discourse’s putative object (e.g., communities economically disenfranchised through colonial practices). Novak’s methodology, similarly centred on a correction of critical discourse, seems as likely to do justice to the specific and varied concerns of live poets as to stumble upon those concerns ineptly or, indeed, to miss them entirely.

This is all to say that Novak approaches live poetry as a critic, for criticism, while dressed as a champion of live poetry. As a consequence, her study demonstrates little reflection on the political and ethical stakes of live poetry criticism, on the importance of studying live poetry. (I should say, here, that David Kennedy’s review, “How To Write About Readings,” raises a related point.) Rather, Novak sticks to the terms set out by the pseudo-apolitical, pseudo-anethical “aesthetic” debates surrounding live poetry’s legitimacy as art: citing such dead-end debates, she finds in favour of those who defend live poetry on the aesthetic level. This hobbles her conclusions such that most sections and subsections of Live Poetry are capped by the same refrain: that live poetry is modally different from page poetry. These differences certainly matter to those already studying live poetry—those likely already convinced of the substance of these differences—but by abstracting such differences from their political and ethical stakes, Novak isn’t winning over any politically and ethically committed scholars to a new interdisciplinary field.

Novak’s methodological objectivity is, perhaps, simply an artefact of Live Poetry’s composition as her Ph.D. dissertation. This seems to be confirmed by her study’s polemical potshots at literary criticism, demonstrating a sort of deference to the academic ideal of the field-founding, combative first book. Novak consistently finds literary critical techniques wholly inadaptable to live poetry while investing much of the study productively modifying techniques of analysis and notation drawn from other disciplines. Yet all this overzealousness is undercut by a (too brief, too late) qualification appended to her “Checklist for the Analysis of Live Poetry Performances”: “the checklist … does not cover those aspects
of poetry that traditionally have been dealt with in literary studies, such as theme, imagery, or rhetorical tropes. These may, of course, be of interest to the researcher …” (233). Novak’s penultimate chapter, dedicated to a “sample analysis” of a live poetry performance, is similarly unconvincing regarding the limitation of “traditional” literary criticism: it occasionally cites a published version of the poem rather than the declared live version; it offers little interpretation unavailable to “traditional” approaches; and it offers some unpersuasive interpretation that might have benefited from closer attention to image and trope.

Live Poetry would be a far more generous and generative book if Novak took a political or ethical position, enabling her to assert why live poetry matters, and thus why its differences from page poetry matter, and thus why competent criticism of live poetry matters. Would such stakes demand a critical approach that shelves “traditional” literary interpretation in favour of the techniques Novak proposes? Would they demand a core competency with “traditional” literary interpretation, to which Novak’s techniques would provide ad hoc supplementation? Would they suggest that critical discourse is a violence and intuition a more ethical manner of interpretation? I suspect the stakes of live poetry vary enough to demand or suggest all three interpretive approaches, so Novak’s emphatic, preemptory shelving of literary critical methods seems both an over-correction for textual partisanship and a meta-critical distraction from the political and ethical interests of live poets and live poetry communities.

One last good thing

Several of Live Poetry’s extant reviews are written by live poetry practitioners, and none of them suggests that Novak is writing for the wrong crowd. I mean this in two senses. First, as I suggested above, her study doesn’t do the cultural critical work necessary to win new academics to the study of live poetry. In this sense, Novak is preaching to the choir, to those already invested in live poetry communities. Suffice it to say that interdisciplinarity isn’t particularly useful unless it fosters coalition-building. Second, where Live Poetry shines is in its thorough parsing of the tangle of media that is poetry performance. If we take this thoroughness as productive rather than exhaustive—that is, if we divorce it from the archival anxiety underwriting Live Poetry—it offers an excellent resource for the practice of live poetry rather than its critique. I mention above Goldsmith’s Uncreative Writing which, while written as prescription for page poets, is much more valuable for its provision of a critical discourse and history surrounding digital textual dissemination and (un)creative copying. I think of Live Poetry in the inverse, written as critical description but much more valuable as a reminder, to page poets and live poets alike, of the complexities of their media. In this second sense—at the risk of contradicting my scepticism regarding this study’s importance to “the future of live poetry”—the readers who may benefit most from Live Poetry are poets.

Andy Verboom
Western University

Word of Mouth
Diana Samu-Visser
Outgoing Editor-in-Chief

For my part, the opportunity to take over the management of a new academic journal was less the result of words through a grapevine than it was the persistent encouragement of two of the journal’s founders, Leif Schenstead-Harris and Kevin Godbout. Aside from my general skill with administrative cat-herding and a love of introducing folks with similar interests to one another, I was not especially qualified or prepared for such a venture. However, when those of us at Word Hoard state that dialogue is at the core of the journal’s vision, trust that we put our money where our mouths are.

In cafés, marketplaces, restaurants, pubs, and offices all over London, my initial conversations with Leif and Kevin showed me what the spirit of the journal could look like in practice well before we began the work of our second issue. In the months that followed, the word got out that Word Hoard was here to stay. Our readership and interest in the potential of the journal grew, and our editorial teams and dialogic network expanded to include scholars, artists, and critical minds from a wide variety disciplinary backgrounds.

Word Hoard’s name is derived from a stanza of Seamus Heaney’s poem “North,” a stanza in which a counselling voice, conjured by the speaker’s view of a “longship’s swimming tongue … buoyant with hindsight,” ruminates on a stretch of beach. That particular stanza has long since become a familiar friend to me, but I had forgotten how apt the lines that follow and close the poem are at visualizing what it is to encounter the overwhelming and terrifying richness of dialogue:

It said, ‘Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.’

At the risk of repeating my sentiments from earlier issues, it has been a singular privilege to have spent late nights, early mornings, lazy Sundays, and casual afternoons in dialogue with the people who have made and
who continue to make *Word Hoard* possible. It is an even greater pleasure to know that the journal’s future is in such capable hands, and that we will continue to see the gleam of insight and creativity that each issue will offer in the years to come. To our editors and our contributors: thank you for trusting us with your words. To our mentors: thank you for helping to shape our dialogues. And finally, to our readers: thank you for joining us once more as we delve into and discuss the abundance of the word-hoard.

**Will Samson**  
Outgoing Copy-Editor-in-Chief

I heard it through the grapevine. My time at *Word Hoard* came to be through word of mouth (and wine—thanks, grapevine), so it’s only appropriate that my time with *Word Hoard* should end with this issue. It’s quite surprising that *Word Hoard* didn’t take up the issue sooner, since its success is largely attributable to word of mouth. From the original idea, which was spread deipnosophically, to the spread of the call for papers, to the search for respondents, to the propagation of the finished product (and all of these steps repeated for each subsequent issue), *Word Hoard* has always depended on word of mouth. The format of the journal, in which each submission is met with a solicited response, entwines *Word Hoard* with word of mouth all the more tightly.

So we come to the close of this issue, after having discussed ethnography, gossip, sign language, poetry, hearsay, gender, imperfection, meaning-making, miscommunication, mass culture, and non-verbal communication, amongst other topics—and we find ourselves, like Montaigne to La Boétie, trying to overcome an insurmountable distance with only the power of our words. Mawkish sentimentality aside, *Word Hoard*’s commitment to a thoroughly dialogical approach shows the power of those words (and also their shortfalls, when communication breaks down—though it’s equally important to have a record of that, however fallible) and makes the distance seem less unbridgeable.

Ultimately, the strength of *Word Hoard* rests on its commitment to opening lines of communication amongst grad students and between individuals who share interests, but who might never have otherwise been put in contact with each other. I am humbled that in the last three years with *Word Hoard*, I have been able to read, edit, and provide feedback on articles by colleagues, friends, students, and professors; I’ve been exposed to new lines of thought and exposed others to the same. As academics and artists, our words are all we have, and are all the more important for that reason. If there’s one hope that I have for *Word Hoard* as it continues, it’s that people continue to spread the word.
P.S.: You can stay with me anytime, I have a room.*

_for Dana._

Be well, my sweet: come back this summer;
I’m sorry for my late letter.
If it feels good, it does good,
and since we share more than blood, I have been cheered.
Sincerely true story: a park ballet at the Lyric and our bookish chatter at the Forks!
I waited in line to get my copy signed, for you—
I gave your name as mine
In the days before you died.
I had 22 days dark, shit, shit, shit.
Try, like me, to allow more hope than fear.
Did it work for you?
It gave me night sweats.
This darling disease does not allow for ‘appropriate.’
You are a gift to me.
Are you coming to the Peg?

* The above text—minus the dedication and 8th line—has been taken from various letters, conversations, cards, and text-messages between myself and my recently departed cousin and dear friend, Dana. In the days following her death I turned to the talk we shared, my words and hers. In memoriam, I share them here, too.
Works Cited