

STRANGE INTIMACIES:
THE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVEL

BY
JENNIFER DYAN SCHNEPF
B.SC., UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, 2002
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, 2005

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND
MAY 2014

© Copyright 2014 by Jennifer D. Schnepf

This dissertation by Jennifer D. Schnepf is accepted in its present form
by the Department of English as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

Date_____

Daniel Kim, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date_____

Jacques Khalip, Reader

Date_____

Deak Nabers, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date_____

Peter M. Weber, Dean of the Graduate School

CURRICULUM VITAE

Jennifer Dyan Schnepf was born to Gordon and Sharon Schnepf on February 19, 1979, in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada. After graduating from Yale Secondary School in Abbotsford, British Columbia, she attended the University of British Columbia, where she received a B.Sc. in Chemistry in 2002, and a M.A. in English in 2005. Since the fall of 2006, she has been a graduate student in the Department of English at Brown University. In 2012, she was appointed Visiting Instructor of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Literature at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut. She has been the recipient of a 2013-2014 Huntington Library Research Fellowship, a 2013-2014 Christopher Isherwood Foundation Research Fellowship, and a 2009-2010 Miss Abbott's School Dissertation Fellowship at Brown University. She will be teaching in the History and Literature Department at Harvard University beginning in the fall of 2014.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the past eight years, there have been many people who have helped this dissertation take shape. Countless lessons, conversations, arguments, suggestions, questions, and answers inform every page that follows. At Brown University I have learned to think critically and I am grateful for the example set here by so many. To begin, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. First and foremost, I thank my advisor, Daniel Kim, who called me on February 20, 2006 and invited me to come to Brown University to pursue a Ph.D. In the eight years since he has always encouraged my tendency to read idiosyncratically while steering me in the right direction. I thank him for his patience and his encouragement. Jacques Khalip has encouraged me to look at aesthetics, traces, and remainders. I am grateful to have had his instruction to, as he once put it, attend to the sheen of language. Finally, I began as a Ph.D. student the same year that Deak Nabers became a faculty member in the English department. From his first seminar, Deak taught the pleasure of polemical thinking. I am grateful for his lively and critical engagement with drafts, and his steadfast belief in the work of young scholars.

In addition to this committee of readers, I am indebted to past and present members of the English department including Stuart Burrows, Tim Bewes, William Keach, Nancy Armstrong, Ravit Reichman, Jeanne Feerick, Rolland Murray, Lawrence Stanley, Melinda Rabb, Jim Egan, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Each has influenced the way that I think about reading, writing, and the work of the academic in important ways. I must also thank Debbie Weinstein in the Pembroke Center for her mentorship and

unwavering support. To the people who make the English department run, particularly Marianne Costa, Lorraine Mazza, Marilyn Netter, Suzie Nacar, Ellen Viola, and Henry: thank you providing such a warm environment to work in over the years.

The inspiring intelligence and disarming kindness of the group of scholars that made up my cohort, the incoming class of 2006 is unmatched. Thanks especially to Jeff Covington, Adriene Genette, Khristina Gonzalez, Austin Gorman, Sarah Osment, Julia Shaw, Amelia Worsley, and David Liao. In addition, I also wish to thank those who have read unfinished portions of the dissertation, offered suggestions, or given encouragement at various dissertation writing workshops and Mellon workshops. I am particularly appreciative of the professional support, advice, and friendship of Derek Ettensohn, Wendy Lee, Corey McEleney, Sachelle Ford, Angela Allan, Katy Miller, John Mulligan and Niki Clements, Tyson Stolte, Maggie Hennefeld, Peter Kim, Nathan Conroy, and David Hollingshead.

Beyond the intellectual community at Brown, I have been fortunate to have the feedback and support of academics at other universities. I'd like to thank Allan Hepburn, Ned Schantz, and members of the English department at McGill University, as well as my outstanding colleagues at Connecticut College and Clark University. I thank them for believing in my work and my pedagogy.

I'd also like to look back a bit further and thank the members of the University of British Columbia's English department who first sparked my interest in literature when I was still a chemistry student taking literature courses as electives. Marlene Briggs, Eva-Marie Kröller, Michael Zeitlin, Sandra Tomc, and especially Barbara Dancygier

generously wrote reference letters early on and I want to acknowledge the crucial role they played in allowing me to pursue this work.

Finally I'd like to thank my family, especially my brother Adam and my parents, Gordon and Sharon Schnepf. Their support makes everything possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CURRICULUM VITAE	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION: Strange Intimacies	1
CHAPTER 1. Approximate Modernism: Gallup, Fitzgerald, Stein, and the Noise of the Public	12
CHAPTER 2. Graham Greene's Little Games: <i>The Quiet American</i> and the Imperial-Colonial Novel at Midcentury	41
CHAPTER 3. Reconsidering Mass Political Identity: The Bewilderment of Richard Wright	75
CHAPTER 4. Humming Queerly to Oneself: The Intimacy of Communicating Otherwise in Christopher Isherwood's <i>A Single Man</i>	109
CODA	136
WORKS CITED	140

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the dinner party that night she was still thinking, trying to accept the fact that a part of Killian and a part of herself would always be strangers. She wondered if that were especially her fate, or if it were everyone's fate.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Intimate Strangers" (1935)

This dissertation examines a series of strange or otherwise unaccountable intimacies in twentieth-century literature by focusing on works by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Richard Wright, Graham Greene, and Christopher Isherwood. These sorts of relations arrive on the American scene with artful subtlety in "The Intimate Strangers" (1935), an obscure short story by Fitzgerald in which the predicament facing the heroine revolves around the question of what, exactly, constitutes intimacy.¹

First impressed with the notion that an intimate connection with her husband, Killian, depends on an alignment of knowledge, Sara, the protagonist, is left utterly perplexed by Killian's verbal withholdings. At first Killian's "fumbling with words" merely irritates her (618), but this feeling of broken connection intensifies when he avoids her physical advances as well: "This is a very strange thing," he tells her after the fact, "I might have been more — well, more demonstrative" (615). Not surprisingly, the exact nature of Killian's "very strange thing" becomes the subject of a good deal of readerly suspicion within the story. Queer speculation is no doubt fueled when Sara

¹ This story first appeared in the June 1935 issue of *McCall's Magazine*. It failed to make much of an impression and was quickly forgotten by Fitzgerald publishers, fans, and scholars. It was not published again until 1979 in a volume of previously uncollected stories entitled, *The Price Was High*, where the editors tell us that "the story was first turned down by the *Post*, but bought by *McCall's* for a desperately needed \$3000" (608). This collection is now out of print as well.

explains away his bouts of all-night debauchery by declaring that, “he seems to get yearnings for the society of friendly policemen”(623). And although Killian will later admit that it is his love for his dead wife that keeps them apart, the nature of this ghostly secret is nonetheless a closeted one: “if you begin locking things up in a cupboard,” he muses, “you get so you never say half what’s in your mind” (625). Rather than take the interpretive path that leads to fretting over Killian’s sexual identity, I’m more concerned with what happens when we resist the impulse to approach the “very strange thing” as an interpretive problem and regard it as an unpliable presence, inertly lodged in the narrative instead. In its capacity to mean nothing, the “very strange thing” comes to bear a striking resemblance to something else in the story, namely, the “jibberish” Fitzgerald describes when Sara and Killian sing together. What’s “very strange” about jibberish, as it were, is that it too resists interpretation—what gets across isn’t meaning but rather the *tone* of the words, which, as it turns out, comes to matter a great deal.

Tone becomes the basis for an altogether different kind of intimacy between Sara and Killian. When they sing together we are told, “The Russian jibberish song came first—not knowing a word of the language they had yet caught the tone and ring of it, until it was not burlesque but something uncanny [...]” as they continue, “the conviction grew in Sara that they were communicating, that they were saying things to each other in every note, every bar of harmony. They were talking to each other as surely as if with words—closer than any two people in the room” (627). The “strange thing” that signifies their broken communication turns out to be the very thing that mediates Sara and Killian’s closeness. Insofar as the reader must also contend with broken communication, Fitzgerald’s story aligns Sara’s experience of strange intimacy with the reader’s. In this

respect, Fitzgerald's short story, and the other tales of strange intimacy in this dissertation, block the reader from the pertinent information that they come to anticipate as part of what it means to participate in the experience of reading: instead of setting about deciphering meaning, this literature gives us nothing but tone.

This attitude toward the reader is one shared by Gertrude Stein, whose own account of writerly relations in *The Making of Americans* (1925) also anticipates an alienated audience: "I am writing for myself and strangers," she says, "This is the only way I can do it" (289). In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai reflects on Stein's potentially estranging remark, and counterintuitively insists that the statement ought to be taken as "an inclusive rather than exclusive formulation of audience if we understand Stein's writing as an active process of 'strangering' its reader" (292). The very prevalence of literature similarly invested in drawing its readers into such "strangering" relations drives my inquiry in the chapters that follows. Such relations, as common as they might be, have generated virtually no traction in American literary criticism's fascination with social bodies. As a survey of this critical history will show, this fascination is reserved for the more easily identifiable communities of nationalism and its others.

Indeed, from its inception, the practice of identifying readily recognizable forms of communal belonging has been the central concern for American literary criticism. The focus of this practice has shifted from concentrating on shoring up the porous perimeter of the nation state to communities that extend beyond the nation's borders. Beginning with the institutionalization of American literary studies after the Second World War, critics have widely claimed that American literature assumes the cultural function of

consolidating a unified national community.² Under these auspices, the novel primarily serves to overcome cultural antagonisms and divisions within the national body by naturalizing a coherent nationalist narrative. Even in this early phase of American literary criticism though, we ought to note that maintaining the appearance of a unified national identity is more fraught than it might first appear: critics in the 1950s and 1960s note that, unlike the robust literary traditions and historical narrative available to its British counterpart, the American novel inherits relatively impoverished social forms from its national culture and must labor to embellish such forms through prose.³ The American novel is thus tasked with the challenge of providing the aesthetic form for an American nationalist essentialism.

By now such insular accounts of American literature's communal investments have run their course. Those relatively restrictive nationalist narratives of U.S. literature have given way to a host of more flexible, transnationalist models of belonging. Beginning perhaps with new historicism's injunction to "subver[t] the very notion of a unified narrative of national expression" (Elliott 621), criticism adopted the project of incorporating marginalized histories in accounting for salient communal forms in the novel.⁴ In turning to America's history of imperial expansion, for instance, critics reframed the formation of national identity as a constitutively international project, one

² See, for instance, Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (1938); R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (1955); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960); and Sacvan Bervikovich, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975).

³ See Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950); Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957); and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).

that incorporates rather than sidelines the violence of empire.⁵ In this manner, the transnational turn has shown us how informal affiliations that extend beyond the nation's borders become powerful linkages producing national bodies that don't align neatly with the terrains of state sovereignty.⁶ Beginning in the 1990s, for instance, the transnational communities that crop up around the transatlantic imaginary have reframed a great deal of scholarship in African American literary studies as necessarily transnational in scope.⁷

As these examples suggest, American literary criticism has trafficked in a wide array of communal forms ranging from those that conform to America's territorial sovereignty, to those that extend their analysis to consider the global implications of American actions and reactions in the world. Yet the fact that even geographically expansive forms retain the same commitment to communal essentialism that underwrote nationalist forms of belonging points to something profoundly limiting in our efforts to study the messier, less neatly accounted for social relations that arise in American literature.

What motivates this dissertation is a desire to account for the presence of such intimacies. I ask why such a diverse set of writers from the 1930s through to the 1960s construct narratives that feature multiple social visions within a single novel. While it is often the case that these novels depict familiar forms of national and transnational

⁵ See Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002), and *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), edited by Pease and Kaplan.

⁶ For a compelling articulation of these communal realignments and their impact on American literary studies, see Wai Chee Dimock's introduction to *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007).

⁷ See Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1994), and Brent Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003). A more robust discussion of this criticism can be found in Chapter 3, where I assess the identitarian commitments of the criticism of black diaspora.

community, I suggest that the aesthetic problem animating these novels is how to present forms of relation that don't depend on a commitment to communal identity. Largely through the strategies deployed by the genres of late-imperial romance, African-American postcolonial travel writing, and queer migrant fiction, the figures of alternative social forms become central to the novels of the midcentury. The revised literary history I set forth here reveals a more complicated legacy of literary social forms: while some authors, like Isherwood, imagine that ethical forms of relation could be realized through everyday practices, others, such as Greene, view the notion of intimacies that don't rely on entities such as the nation-state, as idyllic yet politically facile and ultimately untenable.

The archives that inform this dissertation's approach to the ephemeral presence of the relations that I'm calling strange intimacies are theoretical writings that question the basis of community, and a loosely-related set of social scientific and linguistic tracts. The first of these archives is a theoretical conversation that emerged in French philosophical discourse in the early 1980s in the wake of significant political upheavals in Europe.⁸ This critical conversation offers a reassessment of community, beginning with Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (*La communauté désœuvrée*, 1983), then Maurice Blanchot's response to Nancy, *The Unavowable Community*, (*La communauté inavouable*, 1983),⁹ and concluding with Giorgio Agamben's final intervention, *The*

⁸ This is of course after May 1968, but we might also consider the more immediate conditions in Italy at the time: both the Italian Workers' movement, "Potere Operaio" (Worker's Power), and the Italian Autonomy Movement, had gained political momentum and sparked philosophical consideration by the late 1970s. See for instance, Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, "The Return of Politics," in *Italy: Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (1980) for a historically-situated assessment of these conditions. See also Paulo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004) for an account of the Italian Worker's movement and its influence on communal philosopher's such as Antonio Negri.

⁹ These two works were translated into English several years later as *The Inoperative Community* (Theory and History of Literature). Trans. Peter Connor et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991

Coming Community (1990).¹⁰ What this dialogue offers is a sustained criticism of many of the philosophical assumptions that underwrite popular notions of community that tend to draw from the Enlightenment commitments of humanism and rationalism. We might think of the pervasiveness of these commitments in the way we commonly think about community by considering the intellectual legacy of Adam Smith's "fellow feeling" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith's theory of empathy across great distances still echoes in Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* (1983), which has assumed the status of the standard narrative for thinking about nationalism. A nation "is an imagined political community," Anderson reminds us, "[...] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Communion becomes the quality of the social that Anderson aims to theorize, and yet we ought to recognize his little-remarked-upon insistence that the experience of estrangement and anonymity (members "will never know," never "meet," and never "hear" of one another) must be routinely surmounted for communion to take place. In contrast to communion, Agamben puts forth the concept of "an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (18). This formulation presents an enticing alternative framework for reading communal forms in literature, one that seems to invert criticism's tendency to read *for* collective essentialism.

(first translated into English 1986); and *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988, respectively.

¹⁰ Originally published as *La comunità che viene*. 1990. Published in English as Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

To consider Agamben's model of the social in a bit more depth, we should note how he presents us with the grounds for posing alternatives to communal essentialism in political terms, by thinking of them as alternatives to social organization by the state. In *The Coming Community*, for instance, Agamben suggests that singularities,¹¹

[...] cannot form a *societas* because they do not possess any identity to vindicate nor any bond of belonging for which to seek recognition. In the final instance the State can recognize any claim for identity—even that of a State identity within a State [...]. What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition). (86)

Part of the argument that follows is that midcentury literature, across an array of genres (genres that have traditionally aligned quite readily with identity), repeatedly tests the possibility of social forms that are, as Agamben puts it, “radically devoid of any representable identity”(86). As difficult as it is to imagine a full-scale rejection of identity, part of my reason for introducing this theoretical conversation is to suggest that, in different ways, the literature this dissertation probes finds remarkably inventive ways of critiquing essentialist communities like state nationalism or diaspora along very similar lines. It seems worth stating here however that my readings are informed but never determined by these theoretical approaches to the question of community.

In fact, rather than rely on these conversations and their objects of analysis to guide my thinking, my readings carefully track the peculiar aesthetics that the novels embrace in their exploration of co-belonging. I have chosen literary works that emphasize the problem of representing social forms across disciplines ranging from the social

¹¹ Of Agamben's term “singularities” it should be noted that this nomenclature offers a way of allowing the individual to avoid capture by structural identity. Agamben suggests that language is what “transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property (the condition of belonging ϵ)” (10).

sciences to the computer sciences. The result is that my dissertation turns to an admittedly idiosyncratic archive of representational technologies that share the common quality of revealing, with varying degrees of self-reflection, the representational difficulties encountered when making sense of human collectives.

These technologies vary from chapter to chapter. In the first chapter, for instance, I examine how George Gallup's account of scientific opinion polling conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion in the 1930s suggests that sampling methods provide accurate predictors of public belief. In the process, noise emerges as an unlikely yet significant mediator of public desire. Fitzgerald seems particularly attuned to noise's political capacities in this historical moment, and attempts to incorporate acoustic discord, as well as its potential to yield encounters with inchoate collectives, in his novel, *Tender is the Night* (1936).¹²

While the noise of desire offers one medium through which the strange intimacies present in these chapters travel, I've found that a whole host of similarly non-linguistic media generate the particular conditions by which the protagonists across these novels discover themselves to be, as Nancy would say, "irreducibly plural" (*Being Singular Plural* 12). It is under these conditions, which I'd argue all the novels in this dissertation furnish, that the ethical implications of what could happen once we pull away from claims of identity come into relief. Through iterations of these conditions—in the form of tone, noise, silence, broken signals, affective bewilderment, and phatic contact—this turn

¹² This isn't to suggest that noisy publics are particular to the 1930s: Lauren Berlant has written cogently on this phenomenon in the second Bush presidency by riffing on the President's remarkable 2003 claim that, "Somehow you just got to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people." See Berlant, Lauren. "Affect, Noise, Silence, Protest: Ambient Citizenship," ICA 2009 Mini-Plenary, *Public Narratives & Symbolic Power, Social Solidarity*. Web.

from language ushers in a turn from the psychoanalytic depth model of the subject as well. Ethical relations thus proceed in step with the social potential available from the surfaces of others instead. What this looks like in my concluding chapter, on Isherwood's novel, *A Single Man* (1964), is a sustained examination of silence. What silence makes available are relations that can't be properly characterized as homosexual or, for that matter, sexual at all—despite the fact that readers so often want to interpret the novel on those terms. Silence becomes the condition for assuming interest in the other *and* for not having that interest met with epistemological certainty about the individual one seeks to know. Thus silence functions very much like tone did in my earlier analysis of Fitzgerald's "The Intimate Strangers." Isherwood will posit that it is the very act of seeking knowledge, rather than the confirmation of sexual identity, that establishes the basis of an intimate relation. There is, moreover, a sense of intimacy without a shared sense of belonging in instances where Isherwood asks silence's relational capacities to surmount the uncanny threshold between the living and dead. What seems like a condition of terrible isolation for the survivor is revealed to be identical to a togetherness fantasized as an act of sitting together in self-absorbed silence.

To make sense of the communicative capacities of silence, along with other unconventional mediums of communication, I've turned to disciplines that focus on communication without words. In the work of Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, Roman Jakobson, and others in the fields of linguistics, information theory, communication theory, and cryptography, we find useful terminology and a new methodology to apply to literary hermeneutics, one that accounts for non-linguistic elements in a literary text. This methodology marks a departure from conventional critical reading practices centered on

language's semantic capacity. For instance, Jakobson's concept of phatic communication provides Graham Greene with the conditions to imagine a plausible ground for overcoming the antagonisms dividing the Vietnamese, the British, and the Americans in 1950s Indochina. While the concept will require further unpacking in the second chapter, the phatic—the condition of “contact” needed for any act of communication to occur—allows meaningless chatter, or similarly gaps in conversation, to assume the basis for ethical relation. To test the plausibility of such intimacies is not the same as endorsing them however, and Greene's novel is perhaps the most cynical that such social relations can provide a durable alternative to entrenched national communities.

Insofar as the literature here foregrounds the materiality of language, it lessens our sureness of the novel's commitment *to* inform. These novels tell us less about subjective interiority than we might expect, and less about larger human collectives as well. As I hope the following chapters make clear, this is an uncomfortable but effective way for the twentieth-century novel to imagine a new reader capable of reading without understanding, and to point toward an ethics in which identity might fail to function as the basis of community.

CHAPTER 1

Approximate Modernism: Gallup, Fitzgerald, Stein, and the Noise of the Public

Many voices are heard as we face a great decision. Comfort says, 'Tarry a while.' Opportunism says, 'This is a good spot.' Timidity asks, 'How difficult is the road ahead?' [...] But out of the confusion of many voices rises an understanding of dominant public need. Then political leadership can voice common ideals, and aid in their realization.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1937

The semantic problems are concerned with the identity, or satisfactorily close approximation, in the interpretation of meaning by the receiver, as compared with the intended meaning of the sender. This is a very deep and involved situation, even when one deals only with the relatively simpler problems of communication through speech.

—Warren Weaver, "Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication" (1949)

Readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1934 novel *Tender is the Night* might be forgiven for failing to address what Dick Diver describes as "one of most extraordinary telephone conversations" he has "ever held" (98).¹³ To be sure, part of the difficulty in recollecting this particular telephone conversation stems from the fact that it contains a crowd of voices, each clamoring to be heard:

Dick had talked not only to Abe but to a dozen others. On the phone these supernumeraries had been typically introduced as: "—man wants to talk to you is in the teput dome, well he says he was in it—what is it?"

"Hey, somebody, shut-up—anyhow, he was in some shandel-scandal and he kaa possibly go home. My own personal is that—my personal is he's had a—" Gulps sounded and thereafter what the party had, rested with the unknown. (98 italics in original)

¹³ After all, even *Beautiful Circuits* (2010), Mark Goble's comprehensive study of mediation in American modernist literature, considers numerous scenes that center on the telephone in *Tender* but bypasses this particular moment altogether.

The telephone receiver is passed from one unnamed caller to the next in a dizzying parade of anonymous voices. It eventually reaches Abe North who confesses he has launched a “race riot” in Montmartre but his narrative is interrupted as well— as “once again...the receiver was a chorus of innumerable melodies” (98).

In this episode, the phone mediates the chaos of individuals clamoring to communicate at the same time. Dick hears only an undifferentiated mass of speakers, a monstrous, many-mouthed entity that makes words but not sense. Aside from Abe’s presence, there is no clear indication where one individual stops speaking and the next one begins—an unknown “somebody” is mentioned twice and an equally vague “anybody” is mentioned once. Instead of pronouns, the scene relies heavily on dashes and ellipses as Fitzgerald does away with grammar, abandons sentences midway through, and introduces onomatopoeic gulps and scufflings. This extraordinary telephone conversation, we might say, exemplifies the very sin for which Malcolm Cowley criticized the whole of the novel: Fitzgerald can give us the “complexity of life” he said, but it comes at the cost of “defects in execution.”¹⁴

For Fitzgerald, the telephone is anything but a straightforward medium for connecting individuals. In fact, this telephone conversation displays a disquieting degree of communicational malfunction at work. And while we might speculate that a good deal of this failure is due to Abe’s state of unrest and inebriation, the problem persists due to the number of voices on one end of the line speaking simultaneously. The melodic

¹⁴ In 1951, literary critic and author Malcolm Cowley famously went so far as to “correct” what he perceived as the novel’s “defects in execution,” reversing the position of the novel’s second and third books in order to present the sequence of events in their chronological order. In his preface to the revised edition of *Tender is the Night*, Cowley remarks: “a novel has to be judged for what it gives us, not for its defects in execution, and *Tender* gives us an honesty of feeling, a complexity of life, that we miss in many books admired for being nearly perfect in form” (xvi).

“chorus” bears no message, and the cacophony of voices speaking over one another results in no clear voice getting across. As the wrenching repetition of the voice uttering ‘my own personal is that—my personal is he’s had a—’ suggests, personal expression of beliefs, desires, or opinions are extinguished under such conditions.

Viewed from another perspective however, what does get across in the telephone call is noise. To get at the totality of the cultural logic expressed by Fitzgerald’s fascination with telephonic noise I will situate his novel in relation to two roughly contemporaneous developments: First, the relationship of noise to signal in communication theory, as first recognized by Claude Shannon at Bell Telephone Laboratories, and second, the notion of sampling created by George Gallup for opinion polling. In this chapter, I track a strain of modernism that sought new ways to represent collective desire, while paying particular attention to the technologies that shaped the form that desire could take. While there have been interesting critical studies of American modernism’s response to the advent of technologies such as the phonograph and the cinema,¹⁵ my focus is on the emergence of the scientific opinion poll, a technology that depends on the secret of the public’s desire being found in the noise that it makes.

From *The Great Gatsby* through to *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald remained keenly interested in conveying collective desire. We might expect Fitzgerald—as the author of *The Great Gatsby*, one of the most influential literary articulations of the American Dream, to have a similar account of the novel—to believe that the novel could transmit America’s collective desires through the expressive potential of prose. As I will show, however, while Gallup was resolute that the poll was a tool to make the mind of

¹⁵ See for instance, Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (2010).

the public transparent, Fitzgerald, by the time he wrote *Tender is the Night*, was far more skeptical that the technology of the novel ought to perform the task of divulging desires.¹⁶ As *Tender*'s 'innumerable chorus' of voices aptly demonstrates, the transmission of noise will offer, paradoxically, a kind of ideal solution to the problem of representing the motley desires of the public while, at the same time, keeping them a secret. Stripped of their semantic content, Fitzgerald allows the materiality of words, or noise, to function as provocatively meaningless and unassimilable forms of desire in the novel. My brief engagement with Stein's work on pronouns will elaborate on the pervasiveness of such unknowable social bodies in American modernism more broadly.

To develop a more nuanced account of noise, I turn now to Shannon's theory of communication, which tells us that all communication systems are designed to send a message from an information source to a destination, but the process by which this happens is by no means straightforward.¹⁷ In an exposition intended to introduce Shannon's model to a broader audience, Warren Weaver elaborates on the process of communication in some detail. To illustrate how communication works, Weaver first explains how it often doesn't:

In the process of being transmitted, it is unfortunately characteristic that certain things are added to the signal which were not intended by the information source. These unwanted additions may be distortions of sound (in telephony, for example) or static (in radio), or distortions in shape or shading of picture (television), or errors in transmission (telegraphy or facsimile), etc. All of these changes in the transmitted signal are called *noise*. (7-8)

¹⁶ Fitzgerald's cacophony of voices, in the telephone scene that began this chapter, demonstrates how many voices fail to articulate a clear political message. It is no surprise that the group speaking in that scene is somehow associated with a race riot—a disorganized political convergence.

¹⁷ This theory was first presented to the general public in Shannon's "The Mathematical Theory of Communication" in 1948.

We might apply this observation to the problem facing novelists with a large cast of characters. If we can imagine the novel as a communication system, then the multi-person telephone conversation reveals how the voices of characters added to the voices of other characters produce the distortions that we call noise. In contrast, Fitzgerald's deployment of Nick Carraway as the singular voice of *Gatsby's* Jazz Age will seem like a more efficient way of voicing collective desire.

Fitzgerald seems to be thinking back to this novelistic technique of isolating a voice by the time he writes *Tender is the Night*. In fact, in one scene from *Tender*, Fitzgerald pulls back the curtain to reveal how the novelist manufactures a scene that features a single voice within a noisy social world. Here, Americans Nicole Warren and Dick Diver encounter one another in the crowded room of an alpine lodge: "Miss Warren and Mormora were at a corner table—Nicole was diagonally across from them and forty yards away" (151). The geometry of the room underscores its expansiveness and yet, "as Dick arrived he heard [Nicole's] voice,"

"Can you hear me? I'm speaking naturally."

"Perfectly."

"Hello, Doctor Diver."

"What's this?"

"You realize the people in the centre of the floor can't hear what I say, but you can?"

"A waiter told us about it," said Miss Warren. "Corner to corner—it's like wireless." (151)

What makes the perfection of the communication especially startling is that it transpires across a room peopled with "a small gallery of Englishwomen [...]" (151), and yet Nicole's message seems to reach Dick without interference—that is to say, without the scrambling influence of other voices. In this early scene of courtship, this perfect correspondence through crowds without the need for disambiguation does initially seem

to constitute an exceptional case of communication in the novel, especially given that, moments later, Dick and Miss Warren will struggle to communicate when speaking face to face (“I don’t know whether you understand,” Miss Warren will say to Dick, who will nod and note that only “with some concentration he had been able to follow her” (152)). The architecture of the hotel salon—“a room of fabled acoustics”—is precisely a medium that encircles the speaker, allowing voices to leap across distances instantly and without wires or amplification. But more than this, in its quirky capacity to reproduce sound from one corner to the next, the room blurs out certain voices (those located in the room’s center) and amplifies others (those located at its corners), thus the mediated transmission of Nicole’s voice is actually what produces the effect of its intimacy. And, insofar as the very environment surrounding these characters performs the work of a transmitter, bringing certain voices to the fore and leaving others in the background as it were, we ought to consider that the room represents the space of the novel itself.¹⁸ At the same time that Fitzgerald was contending with the novelistic problem of transmitting a clear expression from crowds, Gallup was addressing a very similar problem in the political realm. In what follows, I introduce Gallup’s technique of public opinion polling, as well as his extensive writings on the subject, in order to understand the pressures that gave rise to the turn from empiricism and toward aesthetic and statistical abstraction in the late 1930s.

“Nothing Must Ever Be Thrown Out”

¹⁸ “The transmitter,” as cultural historian James Gleick notes, “operates on the message in some way—that is, encodes the message” to produce the signal. Often “more complex messages may be sampled, compressed, quantized, and interleaved” (223).

“The troubles of representative government,” Walter Lippman wrote in 1922, “go back to a common source: to the failure of self-governing people to translate their experience and their prejudice by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge” (*Public Opinion* 142). For George Gallup, writing fifteen years later, scientific polls supplied just such a machinery, capable of producing social knowledge that would “constitute a kind of public-intelligence service in the field of social groups and opinion, and [would] indicate in a measurable way tendencies which would otherwise be the subject of speculation and guesswork” (142-3). Time and again, Gallup describes the technique of ‘opinion measurement’ as precisely the sort of new-fangled technology Lippman desired, an instrument through which the desires of the American public could finally be known.

It wasn’t until the nineteen-thirties, and the crisis of the 1936 presidential election in particular, that the derivation of public desire was subjected to rigorous mathematical consideration by the social sciences. The election, between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Alfred Landon, provided the occasion for a face-off of old and new polling techniques that would forever shift the method of public opinion polling in America. Up until 1936, the straw vote polling method was the preferred polling method since it had correctly predicted the outcomes of the five previous presidential elections. This empirical technique depended on a tremendous number of ballot returns; the more ballots collected and counted, the more accurately the poll could predict the voting habits of the nation at large. Such thinking received widespread support from the general public and many professional political observers (Gallup 41). Straw vote polling was routinely conducted by *The Literary Digest*, a popular magazine founded in 1890. Democratic Chairman

James Farley voiced his endorsement of the straw vote methodology used in the *Digest* poll, claiming that,

Any sane person cannot escape the implication of such a gigantic sampling of the popular opinion as is embraced in *The Literary Digest* straw vote. I consider this conclusive evidence as to the desire of the people for a change in the national government. It is a poll fairly and honestly conducted (Gallup 41).

The *Digest* returned to the method that had proved so accurate in the past to forecast the results of the 1936 presidential election. It aimed to collect an unprecedented number of responses, claiming to ask the voting intentions of one fourth of the nation's voters by using its "tel-auto" lists which compiled the names of telephone subscribers and automobile owners, and sending out ten million ballots beginning in August and continuing into late October. With 2,376,523 ballots returned, the *Digest* sample size was indeed enormous; in the final tally of these ballots, the *Digest* predicted a convincing Landon victory, snaring no less than a total of 370 electoral votes (43).

Of course, it wasn't Landon but Roosevelt who was voted into office that year; and not narrowly but by a convincing majority, winning 523 out of the possible 531 electoral votes. The American Institute of Public Opinion, founded in 1935, (The Institute would later become the Gallup Organization, in 1958), anticipated that the *Digest* poll would incorrectly predict the outcome of the vote before it happened. Error lay in the *Digest's* sampling methods, which inadvertently selected only automobile and telephone users, that is, largely upper- and middle-income groups. Such qualifications, Gallup rightly observed, "excluded large sections of the population" and these excluded sections—in this case, the lower-income portions of the population—tended overwhelmingly to vote for Roosevelt (64).

Where the scientific polling method used by the Institute differed from the *Digest's* straw vote method was in its use of sampling rather than counting—abstraction rather than empiricism. Instead of aiming to collect astronomical numbers of ballots, it relied on an entirely different set of sampling procedures that could be endorsed and explained by its team of statisticians. In *The Pulse of Democracy*, Gallup's 1940 book about the public opinion poll, a book that aimed to “describe and defend this new instrument”(vi), Gallup takes pains to explain that sampling is by no means just an esoteric practice. Not only is it a common activity people inadvertently practice everyday (he uses the example of a tasting a spoonful of soup to test the flavor of a bowl), but it is also a necessary method of navigating the quantity and complexity of data encountered in daily life:

[Sampling] is a procedure made necessary by the very conditions of our complex life. Human beings could not perform a fraction of their usual tasks if they were not able to judge the world about them by abstracting from total experience, by selecting parts to ‘represent’ the whole. (56)

In such a world, no one could “afford to obtain all the data possible before they can formulate generalizations or make decisions” (57).

The case of sampling from a homogenous whole is fairly straightforward since a sample can be taken at random; however, statisticians quickly realized that the procedure is far more challenging when the whole in question is heterogeneous. For a community “as large and diversified as the United States,” Gallup claimed that sample-taking could not be random and still be accurate; instead it had to happen via “stratified” or ‘controlled’ sampling methods (60). In the case of the voting public, where the whole “is not composed of identical dissociated units, but of human beings who form themselves into distinct groups in certain observable, measurable ways”(60), it becomes necessary to

select the character of the cross-section so that “the groups are selected to represent the public as a whole” (64). This representative sample “conforms to information about the total population obtained from sources such as the Bureau of the Census, other divisions of the Department of Commerce, and information from the Federal Security Administration [...] Other governmental agencies provide supplementary information concerning such matters as income and relief status” (64). As W.L. Crum stated:

[...] there are within the population several fairly distinct groups which presumably have different voting intentions. Any such group may be fairly homogenous within itself, and the ordinary method of random sampling can be used in making selections from that group. So far as selection from the entire population is concerned, however, *some attention is needed to ensure that each important group is reached to the proper extent, particularly in case the complete sample is not large.* (64 emphasis in original)

Gallup called this practice of creating the sample that has the same cross-section as whole population, “building a miniature electorate” (56).¹⁹ While many factors such as voter participation and continuous polling contribute to the accuracy of the polls, “the prime determinant of accuracy in any sample survey of opinion,” he explains, “lies in the character of the cross section—in the way the groups are selected to represent the public as a whole” (64). Gallup reasoned that it is the quality of the sample rather than the quantity of people reached that determined the accuracy of a poll, but this left the question of what exactly was being measured. As Gallup emphasized, this shift in emphasis away from voting habits of individuals and toward the political leanings of groups is the main difference between the straw vote method and the new, statistically-sound method developed by his company. Whereas the straw vote method of polling was

¹⁹ Besides matching the representative sample to the census data, the institute’s statisticians were also careful to base their samples not on the total population of the nation, but on the total population of voters—those members of the public that actually go to the polls and cast votes. See Gallup, 66-68.

based on the democratic idea that the vote of each individual counts, it nonetheless also showed itself to have little predictive value when compared to the controlled sampling method. Thus, though people would continue to cast their ballots on an individual basis, scientific polling maintained that the abstraction of individual voters into clusters was a surer method of discovering what the public wanted. As Gallup reinforced, “both experience and statistical theory point to the conclusion that *no major poll in the history of this country ever went wrong because too few persons were reached*” (68, italics in original). The fact that the millions of ballots collected by *The Literary Digest* were not insurance against its failure to predict the outcome of the 1936 election reinforced the shocking truth that well-chosen parts could represent wholes best: successful polling depended on discovering the voting habits of groups, not on the voting habits of individuals. If the public could not come to hear its collective voice by adding up the voices of individuals—and if the logic of abstraction remained locked within the realm of statistics—then perhaps there was a sense in which individuals could come to understand their interrelations simply through the impersonal voice distilled from the pollster’s masses of facts and figures, the disembodied voice of pure information that spoke on no one’s behalf yet in speaking articulately, presented the public to the politicians and to itself.

Like the room of “fabled acoustics” in *Tender* we saw earlier, the poll works as a transmitter that performs compression, noise reduction, and signal amplification to create the effect of a clear, singular voice of the public. Gallup would say that, “without *a device* like the poll of public opinion, the real attitude of the people might have remained hidden much longer [...]” (186 emphasis added). In referring to the scientific poll as a

device for channeling the voice of the public, Gallup points out how its method of representing the people differs from the straw vote method. Scientific polls don't record the opinions of voters and directly reproduce them on the basis of a one-to-one correspondence. He emphasizes how instead the poll performs work on the data it amasses, compressing it to produce a clear signal.

While statistical analysis was charged with the task of deriving a signal, it was the task of figurative language to explain the significance of this statistical output, showing how a signal could clean up the noise of the public's millions of opinions and turn them into a known quantity. Sometimes Gallup relied on visual analogies, likening a good poll to a good picture, when he said, "contradictory manifestations of sentiment through the press and organized lobby groups gave anything but a clear and satisfying picture"(202). Or when he stated that, "frequently the polls paint a graphic picture of the inconsistencies and contradictions in the public mind"(235). The 1995 film *The American President* relies on the same trope of visual clarity when Lewis, the president's advisor of domestic affairs, insists that polling "brings a murky problem into specific relief."²⁰

Most often though, Gallup chose a vocabulary that was auditory rather than visual, likening insights into the public mind to the utterance of a single human voice. As the chapter's epigraph from Roosevelt's 1936 inaugural address attests, "voice" serves as a widely recognized political metaphor, so much so that in popular parlance, "the voice" of

²⁰ In fact, the film anthropomorphizes the opinion poll so as to have it function as an affectively-charged yet perpetually "off camera" character:

Leon Kodak: You see, the country has mood swings.

Lewis Rothschild: Mood swings? Nineteen post-graduate degrees in mathematics, and your best explanation for going from a 63 to a 46 percent approval rating in five weeks is mood swings?

Leon Kodak: Well, I could explain it better, but I'd need charts, and graphs, and an easel.

Emphatically communicating how the public perceives and responds to the personal life of the American president (Michael Douglas), the poll's "feelings" will frustrate and comfort the president by turns, essentially involving him in a tumultuous yet ultimately rewarding relationship with a statistic.

the voter signals a citizen's agency, and democratic participation in national politics. One of the challenges Gallup faced was to convince those hesitant to recognize the logic of the scientific poll and its sampling methods that it knew the desires of the people and could communicate it better than their own voices could. One way to do this was to suggest that the poll wasn't just a tabulator of statistics but more importantly, an instrument of communication in its own right, superior to the human voice and uniquely capable of rendering collective desire articulable.

To allay these concerns, Gallup often suggested that scientific polling would ensure that the muted voice of the regular citizen was heard. For instance, Gallup used the fact that sampling requires door-to-door canvassing, conflating oral communication with statistical outcomes, to assure his reader that "people who have seldom had a chance to express their views are given the opportunity of making their voices heard" (231). The trope of the barely audible voice comes up again when Gallup states that, "in a crisis like war, when not merely the citizen's welfare but his very life maybe at stake, the need to *hear his voice* is imperative" (200). In some senses then, the rhetoric of scientific polling was itself misleading as it connected the expression of public opinion to individual expression in much the same way the straw-vote method did. This gave the impression that the work of the polls was simply to amplify the voice of the individual citizen, and allowed Gallup to make statements suggesting as much: "the weathercock of articulate opinion whirled in the winds of contrary propagandas, and the still small voice of John Smith and Mary Brown remained inaudible" (Gallup 190).

Indeed, the tenacity with which the human voice stands as the best index of personal opinion is strong. Not surprisingly then, despite sampling's success some

politicians and political spectators resisted the idea that any technological intermediary was necessary to know what was on the nation's mind. In fact, many saw 'the sample' as a dubious invention that bore little relation to reality. Seen as an intermediary between citizens and their politicians, the carefully selected sample struck many as a barrier to immediacy with the people rather than a tool with which to hear them clearly. For instance, President Woodrow Wilson insisted that he required no special equipment to cull public sentiment, claiming he "would rather hear what men are talking about on trains and in shops and by the firesides than hear anything else because I want guidance and I know I could get it there" (202). Wilson's desire to speak "directly" to the people echoed the attitude of William Allen White, who challenged the efficiency of pollsters by scoffing that "[they] spend a lot of time and a lot of money getting a national sample of public opinion. All I have to do is to get into my car and drive out to Clay Township and talk to the folks" (Gallup 228). Wilson and White construct a fantasy in which speaking to individuals *in person* bypasses mediation and affords a privileged form of intimacy with "the folk."

Without the logic of sampling, such conversations provide idiosyncratic opinions rather than data that can be extrapolated from to account for larger populations. Moreover, as the number of face-to-face interactions multiplies, what quickly becomes apparent is that the summing of voices does not create a stronger account of public desire but actually has the inverse effect of creating more noise. George Gallup makes this point in his introduction to *The Pulse of Democracy*:

As the old equality of participation gradually disappeared, the voice of the common man grew faint in the din and clatter of other voices speaking in his name. Basically that is why Walter Lippman in his search for 'public opinion' found only a 'phantom public.' [...] Unless the ordinary citizen

can find channels of self-expression, the common man may become the forgotten man. When such a situation develops, when the public opinion cannot get itself expressed, democracy lays itself open to its hostile critics. For public opinion can be a satisfactory guide only if we can hear it and, what is equally important, if it can hear itself. (14)

Gallup was adamant that the failure of translating collective experience into social knowledge was a matter of failing to find the appropriate ‘channels of expression.’

Giving voice to the people’s views also means a turn away from the voice as the best index of public opinion. Yet, at the same time, the idiom of the human voice would prove crucial to illustrate how scientific polling conveys public desire. The metaphoric valence of the human voice lends a working vocabulary to the condensing and clarifying work of sampling and statistics. Even in the Gallup quote above, we can see the shift between voice’s literal and figurative registers. Gallup initially relies on the presupposition that the political will of the “common man” and his “voice” are one in the same. The “din and clatter of other voices speaking in his name” quickly complicates this model however; while an individual can have a voice, the addition of others quickly renders those individual voices inaudible. Gallup’s language changes subtly but significantly in the following sentence, suggesting that what the ordinary citizen needs instead is a “channel of self-expression,” which he aligns with the public opinion that must also struggle to “get itself expressed”(14). For Gallup “expression” is a term capacious enough to encompass both voice and the statistical data derived from sampling. In the final sentence, Gallup remarks that public opinion must be “heard,” returning us to the auditory realm through metaphor rather than through fact.

Endless Variety

Gallup's method of scientific polling revolutionized the extraction and transmission of social information by condensing large quantities of meaningless data into a single strong signal. What remained compelling yet perplexing about scientific polling and its commitment to sampling was the fact that cross-sections could not be said to offer a straightforward representation of any real-life referent at all. In what follows next, I'll suggest that Stein experiments with social abstraction in her writing, a representational strategy far different than the one attributed to American literary modernism by critics such as Walter Benn Michaels.

"Although there are many different accounts of literary modernism," what they have in common, according to Michaels, is that "probably all of them acknowledge its interest in the ontology of the sign—which is to say, in the materiality of the signifier, in the relation of the signifier to the signified, in the relation of the sign to the referent" (2). Michaels begins *Our America*, his study of the nativist tendencies of American modernism, by citing the sermon about the eucharistic identity of sign and referent in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Spoken by Reverend Shegog, the sermon invokes the "Eucharistic miracle that turns the sign of Christ's blood into the blood itself" (Michaels 2). Michaels begins with the sermon to point out how Faulkner's novel invests in a specific fantasy about language—namely, that "the word can be made flesh" (1). For Michaels, this fantasy amounts to a "repudiation of arbitrary relation," of the sort that exists between the word and the thing in a system of syntactic and semantic conventions. To achieve an identity of sign and referent, the word is etherealized: "once the sign becomes the thing it need no longer function as a sign"—and words become unnecessary (5). In other words, as Michaels sees it, the sermon advocates a sustained disavowal of

“those conventions that, acknowledging the gap between sign and referent, are ordinarily understood to make meaning possible” (5). In the novels that share this anxiety about the nonidentity of word and thing (exemplified for Michaels in the writings of Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, in addition to Faulkner), there is simultaneously an insistence that the word should become the thing, and a lament that the word fails to achieve this identity.

The case of the proper name as a signifier is a provocative one for Michaels, who draws attention its use in Faulkner. His interest in the proper name derives from its tendency to symbolize a person in his or her absence. Michaels notes that, in *The Sound and the Fury* for instance, “proper names are imagined [...] as at least ideally linked to their referents”(3): “names are [...] imagined not only as uniquely designating a single person but as inseparable from that person” (3). In *The Sound*, hearing the word “caddie” spoken aloud appears “less as the use than as the misuse of [Caddy’s] name [...] it marks not the fact that she’s ‘here’ but the fact that she’s not here”(3). Michaels explains that this is the reason why “hearing the word [caddie] that he understands only as a name, and hearing the name as a reference to the absence rather than the presence of the person named, Benjy starts bellowing” (3). In other words, in the strict representational economy Michaels sees in Faulkner’s novel, the name works as a symbol we expect to make the person present.

Benjy’s response to his sister’s name aptly illustrates Michaels’ point that American literature dramatizes the desire for a perfect identity between word and referent. In the case of proper names, this desire operates between persons and the words we use to designate them. But this anxiety over the sorts of the words available to refer to people is

by no means confined to Faulkner's writing alone. Although Michaels doesn't consider her writings, other critics have noted how Gertrude Stein's fiction also betrays an uncertain relation to the proper name. For instance, as Jennifer Ashton has noted, "in [Stein's] lecture 'Poetry and Grammar' (1934) she extols the virtues of verbs, pronouns, and articles," while she simultaneously "repudiates nouns, insisting that the former are 'varied and lively,' able to 'make mistakes' and 'be mistaken,' while the latter, being merely 'the name of anything' do 'not go on doing anything...and so why write in nouns'" (582). In reflecting on Stein's "lively" language, Ashton situates what she calls Stein's "linguistic indeterminacy" in the context of deconstructive accounts of language. Ashton looks specifically at individual names, noting that "the proper name, with its long philosophical standing as the one category of sign that, as Stein puts it, 'never can make mistakes can never be mistaken' has been understood as the sign whose structure of meaning is the very paradigm of determinacy" (582).

In Beautiful Circuits, Mark Goble offers a more recent reading of Gertrude Stein's naming practices; indeed, he seems to approach her promiscuous use of proper names with Ashton's determinacy in mind. Citing Stein's attention to her guests in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Goble fixates on her tendency to always name names, labeling such instances "cameo appearances" to denote: "'a screen role of short but memorable duration often by an actor who is usually a major film star or entertainment figure'" (90). Cameos matter for Goble because of their characteristic brevity; he yokes this minimal presence to a representational logic he describes as follows:

a disorienting democracy of attention is all but forced on us, a vortex of characters in constant motion; some of whom are clearly trivial, yet all of whom occupy the stage for the identical fleeting moment. Thus a strict representational economy is emphasized, an implacable distribution of

mimetic resources that accords equal time to both the terminally obscure and the historically famous [...]. (103)

Goble reads Stein's sea of proper names as a hyperbolic effort to see the public in two dimensions; to make individuals so ubiquitous as to render any one of them meaningless: "the exhaustive accumulation of all these names...does not depend on a logic of linguistic reference" he claims, since "what comes to matter about all these names is not their singularity as references to people but their accretion within space and time" (102). Although Goble recognizes that, for Stein, names are not primarily referential, his concern with the amassing of names bypasses what I take to be Stein's real fascination with figuring the lives of others—a fascination that lays in her clever compressions of social knowledge. Goble acknowledges in passing that "countless individuals [are] abstracted within cryptic references to 'everybody' and 'others'" (101), before turning his attention back to "the names [that] continue to drop from the pages of *The Autobiography* at nearly the same relentless pace" (101). Here, Goble inadvertently introduces a formal alternative to the rigid representational work of the proper name by briefly mentioning the mechanism of abstraction; thus his claim that her depictions of the public depend on a 'strict representational economy' that affords equal time to 'the socially significant and trivial alike,' is technically misleading. Stein actually seems more interested in finding new ways to register the social *without* performing the inexhaustible work of personalizing each individual in the process. So while Goble foregoes discussion of "everybody" and "others" in Stein's work, focusing instead on the proper names that make up the "elaborate social registr[ies]" in novels such as *The Autobiography*, it is in her moments of linguistic sparseness, particularly the use of capacious pronouns when speaking of the social, that Stein breaks new ground by moving language past its

representational claims, and to the strange territory of approximation—an aesthetic which foregoes empiricism in favor of something like vagueness.²¹ We might think of Stein’s “everybody” and “others” as testing ways to absorb individuals into groups by condensing the unwieldy data of individuals into the manageable scale of demographics.

Goble classifies Stein’s turns of phrase such as “everybody brought somebody,” as “technically meaningless and oddly affecting” wordplay on Stein’s part—phrasings that can be “readily explained by reference to [her] fondness for both indeterminate pronouns and aggrandizing generalizations”(103). But of course, as I have been arguing, such referential inexactitude on Stein’s part doesn’t inform us about anything particular and yet these statements are certainly not “technically meaningless.” Stein’s economy with language (“everybody brought somebody”) quietly introduces unknowable social bodies into literature, folding perhaps countless thousands into the space of a modest three-word phrase. Kenneth Burke has called Stein’s writing “art by subtraction,” and, as Robert Weiss puts it, Burke “faults [Stein] for subtracting the content inherent in the literary medium [...],” a content that he calls literature’s “definiteness” (43). Indeed, we may think of how ‘everybody’ can make an appearance in Stein’s text, but this comes at the cost of subtracting the definiteness of fine grain details—what we might call *personal* details—in order to see a vague picture of the social in its totality. Ashton called this quality of Stein’s writing its indeterminacy, but I’d go further and suggest that Stein’s writing is an exercise in data compression by exploiting language’s inherent capacity to perform such feats of approximation.

Information and Approximation

²¹ For more on linguistic indeterminacy, and “vagueness” in particular. see W.V. Quine, *Word and Object: Studies in Communication*. 1960.

Stein's interest in approximation puts her ahead of her time. As Claude Shannon's famous characterization of the problem of communication, first stated in an esoteric and scantily-circulated article, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication"(1948) reminds us, messages may be approximate or exact: "The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or *approximately* a message selected at another point" (1, emphasis added). Taking a cue from Shannon, we can ask how an informational perspective helps to make sense of the difficult relationship literary representation maintains to approximation. "Informational dynamics are increasingly gaining priority over the formation of meanings," claims cultural theorist Tiziana Terranova in "Communication Beyond Meaning: On the Cultural Politics of Information" (2004), an article that expertly lays out the value of the concept of information for cultural analysis (52). Terranova helpfully situates information in relation to semantic meaning by reminding us that postmodern theory anticipated the "primacy of information networks of meaning [...]" when it described the culture of late capitalism as a culture of 'floating signifiers'"—that is to say, as a universe where "signs that have lost their anchorage in networks of signification" (52). For a time, information was understood as a "basic level of signification [that] provid[ed] a kind of minimum condition for the emergence of social meaning":

Information [...] was meaning at its degree zero, that is, a kind of minimal condition for the ideological work of signification. If a cultural politics was possible at all, such an approach proposed, it was because communication is more than the mere transmission of information, but also involves social and cultural networks of shared meanings that mobilize a whole cultural system of references in the service of shifting hegemonic politics. (52)

This early approach to information is fascinating for the fact that it imagines information as meaning in its most pared down form, as something like pure content divorced from its formal expression. However, this model is limiting because it suggests that information only operates in the same semantic universe as semiotics, offering up a meager amount of content that only comes to acquire meaning through its intelligibility in networks of signification.

But, as Terranova explains, Shannon's theory of communication offers an account of meaning formation that extends beyond the linguistic content of what is transmitted. The informational dimension considers "not simply the individual statement and its intertextual connections but also the overall dynamics of a *crowded* and uneven communication milieu [...]" (54 emphasis added). Terranova describes a cluttered informational landscape overrun with data; in such a context, information acquires meaning through its ability to persist in an environment hostile to communication. Indeed, Shannon would locate the meaning carried by information entirely within this dynamic. The force of this insight lies in its insistence that the semantic meaning of a message is displaced by the integrity of that message from sender to receiver.

Given this revised relationship between the linguistic content of a message and its meaning, how do we understand the relationship between information and what it represents? Terranova helpfully explains "information is not simply a representation but a technique of data compression that makes it easier for us to relate to the overwhelming complexity and indeterminacy of material processes" (62). If such a statement sounds similar to the logic of the scientific opinion polls discussed earlier in the chapter, it is with good reason. As Terranova points out:

[...] information makes the sheer magnitude and uncertainty of the world manageable, it also makes us a lot more aware of the approximate nature of all knowledge. Whether it is about contradictory and ever-changing opinion polls or proliferating databases, information technologies have helped make the complexity of the socius manageable by compressing variations in tastes, timetables, and orientations, bypassing altogether the self-evident, humanistic subject, going from masses to populations of subindividualized units of information. (65)

Put in this context, the scientific opinion poll performs “the scientific reduction of a mass of data to a relatively small number of quantities which must correctly represent this mass, in other words, must contain the largest possible part of the totality of relevant information contained in the original data” (Terranova 63).

Terranova’s description of the mechanics of compressing data into relevant information takes me some ways toward laying out how the aesthetic of approximation we witness in Stein and in Fitzgerald operates. The scandal of approximation as a form of representation is that it relieves representation from any obligation to empiricism. In other words, when understood as information, representation might be understood to occur when a part stands in for a totality. Given this insight, we can approach some of Stein and Fitzgerald’s more fanciful depictions of the social as cases in which such an aesthetic of approximation—one in which “representations, identities, and meanings are large nets cast onto a turbulent play of singularities”(Terranova 66)—are put to work.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, for instance, Stein figures the question of social knowledge unmistakably in terms of approximation. Toklas, the narrator of the novel’s chapter “1907-1914,” observes of the milieu within 27 rue de Fleurus walls: “It was endless variety, and everybody came and no one made any difference” (116). As I pointed out earlier, there is not a proper name to be found and yet the topic of the sentence is clearly ‘people.’ Stein calls attention to the inexactitude at work in this

sentence: telling us that “no one made any difference” insists that the particularity of precisely *who* was present at Alice and Gertrude’s home is irrelevant. But the representative logic at work in Stein’s indifference to individuals should also call to mind the method of representing “everybody” used by the scientific polls where, similarly “no one” makes any difference because opinion is measured by the metric of the cross-section. In Stein and Toklas’s Parisian salon, descriptions run along the same sort of lines: “There were friends who sat around the stove and talked and there were the endless strangers who came and went” (116).

Came and went. Stein’s phrase evokes a constant shifting of people. For critics such as Goble, Stein’s figuring of the social is indicative of the relentless pace of modern life. But we might approach her words in another way. We could explain Stein’s use of the phrase as an effort to bypass the referential work of proper names altogether, offering an imprecise population rather than a representation of each individual contained therein. Stein is not alone in taking interest in this expression. With uncanny frequency, the phrase also crops up in Fitzgerald’s prose, as seen in the iconic sentence that has come to typify a Gatsby party: “In his blue gardens men and girls *came and went* like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (39, emphasis added). In fact, nearly every time Fitzgerald describes a crowd, he returns to this phrase in particular, as if to call our attention to the imprecision of his descriptions: “Sometimes they *came and went* without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket to admission” (41, emphasis added). What matters about the social milieu of Gatsby’s parties isn’t the reference to the particular individuals that comprise

them. What this phrase and the following passage communicate most effectively is uncertainty:

The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp joyous moment the center of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light. (40)

One could argue that such colorful evocations of West Egg nights in *The Great Gatsby* have made Fitzgerald's fiction known for its exuberant elaborations of a good party, and *Tender is the Night* is no exception.²² Of an evening with the Divers in Paris we are told:

The party that night moved with the speed of a slapstick comedy. They were twelve, they were sixteen, they were quartets in separate motors bound on a quick Odyssey over Paris. Everything had been foreseen. People joined them as if by magic, accompanied them as specialists, almost guides, through a phase of the evening, dropped out and were succeeded by other people, so that it appeared as if the freshness of each one had been husbanded for them all day. (77)

What I mean to suggest by offering this assortment of party scenes is simply this:

Fitzgerald's social poetics, his method of representing a group of people, is not adequately explained by the rigid correspondence of signifier and referent. What's happening here is something different, a commitment to approximate knowledge rather than strict representation in the way that Michaels suggested. Words don't represent particular things—indeed, we might note that in the party descriptions offered above, “people” appear (as do “groups,” “wanderers,” “girls,” “faces,” and “voices”) but distinctions at the level of the individual are notably absent. From an informational

²² Another example of the Fitzgerald party occurs in the short story, “Bernice Bobs her Hair” (1920), which opens with the same social poetics I have been describing: “After dark on Saturday night one could stand on the first tee of the golf-course and see the country-club windows as a yellow expanse over a very black and wavy ocean. The waves of this ocean, so to speak, were the heads of many curious caddies, a few of the more ingenious chauffeurs, the gold professional's deaf sister—and there were usually several stray, diffident waves who might have rolled inside had they so desired. This was the gallery” (25).

perspective, we might say these parties operate as “macrostates” that depend on communicating vagueness in order to retain a multiplicity of possible social configurations. As Terranova explains,

Information theory acknowledges that a macrostate [...] (such as an average temperature, or an organism, or an identity) does not have a linear or deterministic relation to the multiplicity of the microscopic states that define it (the singular particles and their speed, the microscopic relations that make up an organism, all the mutations and divergences and singularities subsumed under an identity). (64)

What words like *came and went* do convey is their functionality as transmitters—acutely managing and transmitting an otherwise unwieldy magnitude of social data. But more than this, Fitzgerald proposes that language may work as a kind of statistical practice, culling, organizing, and averaging more information than it ultimately shares. Like the babble of the public that contains the voices of the many, an aesthetics of approximation works by blotting out the specificity of the instance, the example, and the particular. There is coming and going but no stillness; noise, but no meaning that rises out of the din.

“Then she looked among the strangers...”

I end this chapter with a noisy encounter similar to the one with which we began. In the first instance over the phone, Fitzgerald depicted the noise of the crowd in order to demonstrate the difficulty of communicating collective desire. In this final instance, Fitzgerald hones in on the difficulty of communicating individual desire as well, by likening the queer desires of the minor character, Luis Campion, to a noise in the night. In the following scenario, Fitzgerald maintains the impenetrability of Campion’s unrequited love in a conversation with Rosemary. In this provocative encounter with language’s propensity for meaninglessness, though, there is a fleeting moment of

intimacy between the two, marked by Rosemary's *lack* of invasive curiosity about
Campion's private life:

‘What is it?’ Her eyes were level and kind and not slanted into him
with hard curiosity. ‘Can I help you?’
‘Nobody can help me. I knew it. I have only myself to blame. It’s
always the same.’
‘What is it—do you want to tell me?’
He looked at her to see.
‘No,’ he decided. ‘When you’re older you’ll know what people
who love suffer. The agony. It’s better to be cold and young than to love.’
(34)

We might say the point of their exchange is that Campion tells nothing since, between his
stutters and circuitous narration (which intensifies as their conversation moves to other
topics), the meaning of his words fails get across. Without significance, the words he
emits are not all that distinct from pure *noise*—a fact perfectly underscored when “a
shutter opened suddenly in a room two stories above and an English voice spat distinctly:
“*Will you kaindlay stup tucking!*” in response to the sound of Campion’s voice (51).

Conveying desire’s refusal to mean is a balancing act Fitzgerald performs
throughout the novel as if to prove the novel’s capacity to do more than simply divulge
the tawdry details of human wants. In another instance, one of the novel’s love triangles
momentarily resolves into an exchange between Nicole and Dick that functions as
nothing but noise to Rosemary, the third-party overhearer: ““I want you terribly—let’s go
to the hotel now,” [Dick says.] Nicole gave a little gasping sigh. For a moment the words
conveyed nothing at all to Rosemary—but the tone did. The vast secretiveness of it
vibrated to herself” (64). What the words communicate to Rosemary isn’t their semantic
content because, as Fitzgerald alerts us, *for a moment the words conveyed nothing at all*.
What is transmitted, as if through the medium of tonality, is the unspeakable secret of

desire itself. Upon the novel's conclusion, then, it's not surprising that the tonality of desire once again assumes the sound of failed telephony. Tommy, Dick, and Nicole will try to work out their differences at a small café along the Riviera, but Tommy's desire for Nicole, and Dick's desire for her cannot be clearly communicated in light of her own uncertain emotions for them both: "There can be little communication between men in that position," Fitzgerald informs us, "[...] their emotions pass through her divided self as through a bad telephone connection" (268).

In the next chapter, we move from the static of the bad telephone connection to the "crackle" of walkie-talkies that transmit instructions at one moment then fail to work the next in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (52). What I am pursuing in the next chapter is the insularity that results when the usual channels of communication fail to connect us. The broken walkie-talkie is emblematic of the prevalence of failed communication in Greene's Indochina novel, which I argue indexes the problem with American liberalism. As Amanda Anderson has said, liberalism maintains a belief in the principals of rational deliberation, and yet, as I will show in *The Quiet American*, liberalism looks time and again like nothing so much as talking for the sake of talking, yet another iteration of empty words. With respect to the arc of the dissertation, we should note that while Fitzgerald insists that the desires of America are unrepresentable through recourse to language, Greene will put the point slightly differently by suggesting that America's problem is that, while it may in fact attempt to communicate using the standard channel of language, no one is listening. American literary critics have missed this point and thus, have read Greene's novel as America's successful atonement for the Vietnam War. I will show how this sort of reading simply participates in the tradition of

identifying and affirming national community that I pointed out in the introduction. As it turns out, Greene's conclusion will force us to consider the status of an apology that has no receiver.

CHAPTER 2

Graham Greene's Little Games: *The Quiet American* and the Imperial-Colonial Novel at Midcentury

“La vie sportive”—that is how a French commandant described to me his life on a small landing craft in the delta south of Saigon, hunting for Viet Minh guerrillas in the narrow channels, within easy mortar range from either bank.
—Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (1980)

On July 12, 1952, *Paris-Match* published an article by British essayist and novelist Graham Greene, reporting from the “Indo-Chinese front” in the midst of what would later be known as the first Indochina war. The article provides a gentle lesson to his European reader: it instructs her that war appears simple to those who have the luxury of viewing it from a comfortable distance while also introducing her to the French “enemies” and “often doubtful allies” involved in the conflict. Thus Tran Van Huu, Emperor Bao Dai, and Ho Chi Minh make obligatory appearances in the article, as do the Caodaists, the Hoa Haos, and the Binh-Xuyen. Intermittently though, Greene’s commentary veers away from this objective to ponder the uncertain future of France’s involvement in Vietnam instead.²³ At such moments, Greene’s sympathy for the French

²³ France’s colonization of Vietnam extends back to the nineteenth-century, when the French Empire seized Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and named the region French Indochina. France’s colonial rule briefly ceded to Japan for a five-year period, beginning in 1940. The Japanese occupation hastened the removal of colonial policies established under the French but this administrative reshuffling also allowed indigenous organizations seeking Vietnamese independence to accelerate gorilla activities and establish a military presence in the country (244). Although several small organizations vied for dominance, the principle domestic actor in these activities was the Viet Minh—the frontal organization of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Lead by Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh rallied around popular distrust of French colonialism and the country’s desire to install a nationalist group into power (Futrell 244). The Viet Minh

Empire reveals itself as a warning to the allied members of the Western coalition: “[...] France itself is at war and firmly determined not to let its allies down as long as humanly possible [...] As for the future, England and America ought to remember that every human possibility has its limits” (229 emphasis in original). Greene expects that France’s hold over Vietnam will reach these limitations soon, and he predicts that the country will inevitably experience the same fate recently suffered by Britain: “It is a stern and sad outlook and, when everything is considered, it represents for France the end of an empire” (230). He concludes the article by comparing the impression left by the French in Vietnam with the imperial legacies of Great Britain and other empires of the past. Even in its dying hours then, the British Empire and its waning fortunes continue to set the standard by which Greene would assess imperialism’s afterlife.

This nostalgia is also apparent in *The Quiet American*, which was published in Britain in 1955 and America in 1956 and has been touted as Greene’s Cold War masterpiece due to its examination of midcentury American imperialism in Vietnam from the embattled perspective of journalist Thomas Fowler—a British subject witness to the decline of his country’s once vast empire. Greene’s disenchantment with imperialism is well documented. Greene, according to modernist critic Jed Esty, was a central figure in the coterie of “next generation” writers—which also included Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, W.H. Auden, and Phillip Larkin—who represented English literature at midcentury and, as a general rule, took “imperial decline to imply national decline” (166). As Esty points out, this generation did not dismiss the project of imperialism outright despite their general acknowledgment of its tragic effects: “[Their] minor-chord lament

successfully launched military operations against the Japanese, seizing control over much of northern Vietnam by 1945. America, Britain, and France occupied the region until the Vietnam War.

stems in part from not having come of age artistically during the days of imperial centrality; they inherited the cultural detritus and political guilt of empire without the corresponding advantages of metropolitan perception” (8). Yet, more often than not, the narratives presented by these writers were deeply critical of empire, reprising “variations on the theme of an individual soul (especially the cosmopolitan traveler) caught in a tragic world or in an English nation increasingly bereft of any hope for moral, political, or artistic renewal” (166).

In addition to his status as a British subject living in an era of imperial decline, Greene also dealt with his position as a midcentury British novelist inheriting the formal and generic traditions of the imperial-colonial novel from his literary predecessors. Rudyard Kipling is perhaps the most well-known of the British novelists writing in the halcyon days of the British Empire. At the turn of the twentieth century, Kipling famously romanticized the colonial expression of the “Great Game” in his Orientalist novel *Kim* (1901), where he uses the phrase as a short-hand for the competition over Asian territories, played out between Russian intelligence agents and the Anglo-Indian boy, Kim, who works on behalf of the British Secret Service. Kipling plucked the facetious expression from the papers of British officer Captain Arthur Connolly, stationed in the Indian and Afghan regions from 1823 to 1842, who wrote home of his desire for imperial competition to be carried out as a kind of high-stakes sport between Britain and its colonial rivals. Orwell, a member of Greene’s generation of writers, was an unequivocal apologist when it came to the matter of Kipling’s antiquated political views: he points out that Kipling was “the only English writer of our time who had added phrases to the language,” but ruefully notes that ‘the great game’ numbers among those

“phrases and neologisms which we take over and use without remembering their origins do not always come from writers we admire.”

Like Orwell, Greene was certainly a skeptic when it came to his literary forbearers’ defense and even celebration of imperialism. Given the geopolitical upheavals and imperial competition that Greene wrote about at mid-century, it is not surprising that *The Quiet American* should be widely regarded as one of the earliest literary critiques of twentieth-century American imperialism in Indochina.²⁴ In fact, the novel continues to maintain a privileged status in the canon of works regarded as critical of US imperialism. This is due in large part to the long shadow cast by the Vietnam War. Despite its original 1950s publication dates, critics routinely foreground how the novel documents America’s

²⁴ The history of America’s intervention in Vietnam dates back to the first Indochina war. In the early 1940s, President Roosevelt and American policy makers seemed to favor an end to French hegemony in Indochina (Futrell, Condit 268), but Western fears about the growing strength of the Soviet Union intensified international involvement in the region. After the war, the British, who wished to resuscitate France as a European power in order to match the growing power of the Soviet Union, supported France’s control of the region. The United States buttressed Britain’s efforts to establish a united western front as the confrontation of postwar superpowers escalated into the Cold War. The Viet Minh received aid and assistance from the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, while France and the newly created Vietnamese National Army received military assistance from Britain and the United States. According to historian Doris Condit, America’s primary interest in Vietnam was a strategic one: “The United States viewed Indochina as the ‘most strategically important area’ of Southeast Asia and ‘subject to the most immediate danger.’ [...] Indochina constituted an indispensable part of the line of containment against communism in the Pacific [...]. It was the strategic key to Southeast Asia, where Thailand Malaya, Burma, and Indonesia would be ripe targets for Communist expansion if the Viet Minh triumphed” (268). The political theory that “Indochina’s fall [to the Communists] would undoubtedly lead to the fall of neighboring countries”(269) was known as “The Domino Theory” and this logic governed U.S. Cold War foreign policy. So it was not surprising when the 1950 National Security Council report “on the position of the United States with respect to Indochina” emphasized the threat to U.S. security posed by the potential “expansion of communist aggression” and the “anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia”(262-3). The U.S. met the perceived threat by implementing a containment strategy that entailed sending funds and ammunitions to the French. This arrangement prompted Ho Chi Minh to charge the U.S. with interventionism by proxy. By 1951, the U.S. sought “a greater voice in the employment of its military assistance in Indochina [and] became steadily more involved in Vietnam.[...] The trend toward greater U.S. involvement was such that John Ohly, the State Department’s deputy director of military assistance [at the time], wrote [...] that the United States seemed to be supplanting the French in Indochina such that failures were being attributed to the Americans. Not only might the United States be ‘on the road to being a scapegoat,’ but he felt it was dangerously close to direct intervention” (272). Historians of American imperialism would later recognize Ohly’s statement about U.S. involvement as a “perceptive warning” (Acheson 674).

early assistance to allied forces in the Indochina War, casting the novel as filling in a vivid backstory to America's full-scale intervention in Vietnam in the decades that followed. Literary critic Peter McInerney voices this position by stating that many readers "have understood that the novel is a history of the early fate of Americans in Vietnam"(187). Going on to note its uncannily prophetic quality, he highlights how "the novel is a visionary or proleptic history of what would happen to Americans in Vietnam"(187). As Karen Steigman observes, "*The Quiet American* has been read as a particularly prescient and trenchant anti-American allegory of US security policy in East Asia [...]" (5). Indeed, the sense that the novel is a sort of blueprint for the American foreign policy that would follow is echoed by John Clark Pratt who notes that "[w]ith America fully involved in the Vietnam War, [...] some critics began to see in this novel a paradigm for all that was apparently going wrong with the American cause [...]" (xiii).²⁵

This perspective helps to explain how, more than twenty years later, novelist Michael Herr causally observed that Greene's fictional work seemed like an omen portending America's fate in Vietnam. In *Dispatches* (1977), his novel written from his perspective as an embedded reporter in Vietnam, Herr alludes to Greene's Indochina, surmising that by the time "Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge in Dakao, his lungs all full of mud, maybe it was already over for us in Indochina" (49). Summing up these accounts, American imperialism in Indochina follows a narrative arc that begins with the historical period depicted in Greene's novel and moves to a predetermined end point: American intervention—just discernable in its nascent state in the novel—comes to

²⁵ Brian Thomas plays out the strange logic of this retrospective tendency: "If *The Quiet American* is to be read simply as a prophetic thesis about the dangers of American involvement in Indochina, then it could be said, perhaps, that Greene has been retrospectively vindicated by the subsequent drama of historical events" (421).

its fullest expression and ultimate conclusion with the Vietnam War. In his study of narrative closure, D.A. Miller neatly summarizes the narrative logic implicit here: “Once the ending is enshrined as an all-embracing cause in which the elements of a narrative find their ultimate justification, it is difficult for analysis to assert anything short of total coherence” (xiii). Enfolded as it has been by critics in this larger historical narrative, the complexity of the novel’s account of this history—and more specifically, the relationship to that history in which it seeks to embed its readers—has been strangely flattened.

One persistent feature of these accounts is how sharply they redirect the conversation away from Greene’s longstanding interest in British imperialism, or even imperialism in general, and toward the tribulations of American imperialism in particular. This should seem curious for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Fowler, the character ostensibly issuing the narrative of regret for America’s sins of Empire, is a British subject. How could we imagine Fowler speaking on behalf of America? And on what authority would (or could) a British subject make amends for the project of American imperialism, whose devastation would be amplified only years later with the Vietnam War? And yet, if we instead look to the novel’s titular American to speak on behalf of his nation’s offenses, Alden Pyle’s unremitting silence damningly situates him somewhere between blithe ignorance and defiant unrepentance on the subject. The absence of a clear national spokesperson here destabilizes the coherence of accounts that suggest the novel furnishes an apology for American intervention in Vietnam.

Apart from the odd misalignment between speaker and nation, there is also the issue of whom the indictment of America’s history is intended to reach. Critical consensus would imply the novel issues a kind of an imperialist apology; if so, its

recipient should be the countless millions of unnamed Vietnamese that have suffered in the past, and that will continue to languish under a state of foreign administration and attack in the decades to come. This position might imagine that the novel's denunciation of foreign intervention applies not only to America's future dealings in Vietnam, and Asia more broadly—but to the long, drawn out history of British imperialism in Asia from centuries past. But again, such a reading fails to make sense of the peculiar fact that the recipients of Fowler's narrative don't seem as numerous, or even as temporally dispersed as this. While at times the narrative explicitly links imperialist violence to the suffering of the Vietnamese, it's striking that the novel's conclusion—which in fact contains the novel's closest approximation to an apology—seems directed, not to a nation, much less to a people, but to Alden Pyle—an individual (and an *American* subject, no less) whose singular, particular death seems to weigh most heavily on Fowler's conscience in the end.

The discrepancies between the straightforward (one might say, 'coherent') imperial guilt narrative in the criticism, and the deeply ambiguous identities of speaker and recipient offered by the novel, could hardly be more pronounced. The rhetorical position that the novel ultimately takes—if not quite an admission of imperial guilt, then possibly an atonement for imperial injustices—centers on the concluding sentence of the novel where Fowler seems to utter one final, incontestable lament. For most readers, the ending neatly reconciles Fowler's status as an imperial apologist, atoning to a rapt and patient listener for his unnamed sins.²⁶ The text of this concluding sentence reads as

²⁶ Pryce-Jones (1981) argues that Fowler speaks to God; Georg Gaston (1984) demures, "it is perhaps possible that the 'someone' of Fowler's last words is God" (387), while A.A. DeVitis (1986) is less equivocating: "[Fowler] leaves Pyle's death not to chance, or to Fate, but to God when, at the novel's end, he wishes there were someone to who he could say that he was sorry" (400). Following a different strand of

follows: “Everything had gone right with me since he had died, but how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry” (189).

It must be stated that this sentence presents a far more ambiguous assertion than a simple apology. There is something slightly askew about its intentions, which bears, I think, a stranger relation to the atonement it speaks of than previous readers have granted it. Taking a closer look at its phrasing, we should note that Fowler wishes to say he is sorry but the conditions (for some untold reason) are not available for him to do this. The sentence does not tell us what the content or sentiment of the apology might have been, or to whom it should be directed. With no one apologized to, and with no apology actually spoken, Fowler’s “sorry” remains hypothetical (the modal verb ‘could’ casts it in the conditional mood), lodged firmly in the subjunctive (“I wished there existed someone to whom I could say I was sorry”). This is, in other words, an apology that is spoken of and gestured toward but never exactly offered. Stepping away from traditional approaches to Greene’s novel presents an opportunity to reevaluate the ambiguity of the novel’s rhetorical stance. In what follows, it will be necessary to detour from our discussion of the entrenched critical reception to Greene’s imperial writing in order to outline an approach to the analysis of the novel that takes its cue from linguistics. A social feature of language-use explicated in midcentury linguistics, phatic communication

thought, Douglas Kerr (2006) argues that, “[s]ince [Fowler] cannot unburden himself to priest or police, the only person who can fulfill this perlocutionary task for him is the reader of his narrative” (102). Karen Steigman (2012) poses her guess as to the identity of this listener the form of a question: “Is he addressing the reader when he says ‘how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry’?” (189). There is equal certainty on the part of other Greene critics that the lament encodes the identity of Pyle. “As we see [Fowler] last,” Miriam Allot (1963) notes, “Pyle is still on his mind. [...] Pyle may not always stay on his mind, one feels, but what has mattered in Fowler’s story is that he is capable of feeling this pity and sorrow for the lost young man [...]”(467). For John Cassidy (1957), the last sentence reveals Fowler’s conflicted relationship to Pyle’s memory even though Fowler’s life, “is to be uncomplicated by [Pyle’s] presence” moving forward (477).

will provide a remarkably rich vocabulary for explaining how the language of literary texts could appear both solipsistic *and* communal. To understand how the novel might seem to issue an apology for US imperialism on behalf of a British subject—to comprehend what that might even mean—and to determine whom that apology may or may not be addressed to, we need to attend to the narrator’s obsessive use of phatic communication. To do so we should look at a surprisingly parallel and coincident meditation on the kind of seemingly non-communicative communication that pervades Greene’s novel that emerged in the field of linguistics.

The Phatic Function

In 1956, the same year *The Quiet American* was first published in America, Russian linguist Roman Jakobson proposed a concise taxonomy of the factors deemed necessary for “any act of verbal communication” in his presidential address to the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.²⁷ Jakobson’s “factors”—ADDRESSER, ADDRESSEE, MESSAGE, CONTEXT, CODE, and CONTACT—became the lasting legacy of this address. (Figure 1) While several of these factors (ADDRESSER, ADDRESSEE, and MESSAGE) were considered a part of the “traditional model of language”(“Closing Statement” 355), Jakobson claimed three new “constitutive factors of verbal

²⁷ Jakobson was greatly influenced by the “communication turn.” According to Hans Götzsche, “Jakobson shifted his focus even further from structures and systems to the theory of language use. One kind of impulse was the development, during World War II, of the field of communication technology. Jakobson even substituted some of his theoretical linguistic terms with words used in this field; for example, ‘langue’ became ‘code’ and ‘parole’ became ‘message’”(143).

communication and three corresponding functions of language”(355). First among these

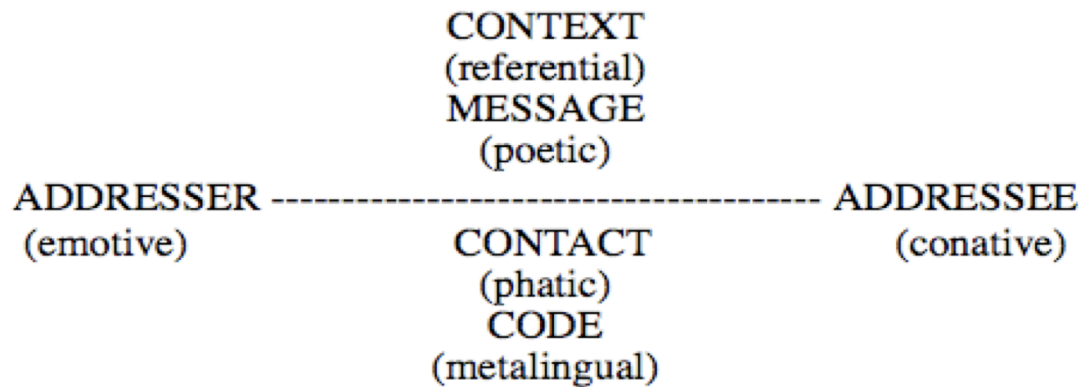


Figure 1. Diagram from Roman Jakobson. "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

new factors, was CONTACT, defined as “a physical channel and psychological connection between the ADDRESSER and the ADDRESSEE, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication”(353). He elaborates on CONTACT by emphasizing its social function:

There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works (‘Hello, do you hear me?’), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention (‘Are you listening?’ or in Shakespearean diction, ‘Lend me your ears!’—and on the other end of the wire ‘Um-hum!’). This set for CONTACT, or in Malinowski’s terms PHATIC function, may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication...It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative communication. (355-56)²⁸

Despite its proclaimed “newness,” Jakobson’s factor of CONTACT still draws on a relatively familiar account of communication. Concepts like “message,” “channel,” “exchange,” “send[ing],” and “receiv[ing]” feature prominently in his description. The

²⁸ Social scientist Erving Goffman cites the first sentence of this passage in his chapter on focused interaction in *Behavior in Public Places* without calling such messages phatic by name. For Goffman, the sentence illustrates how face-to-face “encounters are organized by means of a special set of acts and gestures comprising communication about communicating” (99). Goffman’s observation emphasizes that the self-referencing, or solipsistic quality of phatic language performs a social function.

primary difference between Jakobson's new taxonomy and earlier communication models is that Jakobson allows the message to remain empty of information, evacuated of semantic content altogether. With regard to the phatic function of language, then, the informational content of a correspondence is irrelevant, even beside the point. What matters is establishing that a "connection" exists between the two communicating parties.

Jakobson borrowed the basic idea of the phatic function from cultural anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski who coined the term "phatic" in 1923. Perhaps because he studied cultural variation among human populations, Malinowski used the expression phatic *communion* rather than phatic communication. In his writings on the subject, Malinowski maintains an emphatic insistence on the "human embeddedness of phatic communion"(Coupland et al. 210):

Are words in phatic communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought.

(Malinowski, "Meaning in Primitive Language" 249)

Although Malinowski insisted on language's social dimensions, he was not a proponent of this form of language use. In fact, embedded throughout Malinowski's account of the phatic is the notion that it offers a particularly impoverished form of communication. For Malinowski, gossip, (which he saw as the phatic's most infamous manifestation) reduces the function of speech to "*mere* socialibilities," phatic communication often takes the form of "a *mere* phrase of politeness," the "ties of union" it enables "are created by a *mere* exchange of words," and phatic communication establishes bonds "of personal union between people brought together by the *mere* need

of companionship” (151 emphasis added).²⁹ Moreover, Malinowski describes phatic language as “purposeless expressions” that “[do] not serve any purpose of communicating ideas”(150). Finally, he points out the inconsequential nature of the information that it trades in, noting that “the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant,” and that those who practice this form of verbal exchange swap only “accounts of irrelevant happenings” (150). Malinowski is not alone in designating phatic talk a minimalist communicative practice: it has been variously described as “phoney,” “dull,” “idle,” “trivial,” and “trifling.”³⁰ As sociolinguist Gunter Senft notes, “[i]t is generally claimed that phatic communion is characterized by not conveying meaning, by not importing information,” and indeed, this tendency—to note what the phatic *doesn’t* do—tends to be the rule in sociolinguistic literature.³¹ Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson concisely summarize the general opinion that phatic communication is a deficient or degraded type of communication when they recognize “the negative valuation that predominates, particularly when talk is analyzed to be referentially deficient and communicatively insignificant” (209). They also point out that such accounts often cast blame on the speaker for neglecting the rich semantic potential of language, debasing it to a useless medium for “chit-chat” (Hudson 109). It is perhaps not surprising that, between Malinowski and Jakobson, the most prolific users of phatic language are “primitives”

²⁹ See Coupland et al, 210 for the relationship between gossip and gender.

³⁰ See Abercrombie (1956), Leech (1974), Wolfson (1981), Cheepen (1988), and Mills (1989), respectively. See also, Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 208-209.

³¹ Senft, Gunter. “Phatic Communion.” *Culture and Language Use*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2009. 226-233.

(Malinowski's term for inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands), gossipy women, infants, and birds.³²

This negative consensus has diverted attention away from what is most interesting about the phatic: specifically, how it has managed to insinuate itself into Jakobson's dominant midcentury model of verbal communication all without *saying* anything. Instead of pointing out its failings, we might note that phatic communication seems particularly adept at evading the expectation that communication should transmit a message. Participants in phatic communication are indifferent to the possibility of transmission, and to the parochial notion that language-use is restricted to "send[ing] and receiv[ing] informative communication."

As I will explain momentarily, *The Quiet American* is a text that is replete with conversations that are dominated by the phatic. Not surprisingly, characters who engage in phatic communication seem to lack something like humanistic compassion for, or interest in, one another. For instance, the Economic Attaché from America seems to exhibit arrogant indifference when he "went on exultantly, paying no attention to words he didn't like" (33). At other times, it seems like the effect of a distracted mind: "For a quiet man Pyle that night was in a talking mood. I didn't hear all that he said, for my mind was elsewhere" (178). But we should recall that Jakobson's term for the social aspect of phatic language is not one that is associated with depth, but with superficial "contact." The phatic posits a world in which people speak to one another outside of the

³² In his first effort to describe the phatic function, Jakobson offers the following trans-species comparison: "the endeavor to start and sustain communication [...] is typical of talking birds; thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings" (356). As Mark Seltzer has noted, for Jakobson, evidence that a channel is present sounds like is a kind of 'chirp' ("Gezwitscher") (135). Implicit in Jakobson's choice of twittering birds is that the phatic function is singularly amenable to talk divorced from thought, thus achievable by anyone or anything capable of making sound.

expectation that talk involves an exchange of the rich, emotional information associated with interiority. As communication theorist Michel Serres points out, we need to revise our notion that the act of communication has humanist aims. Establishing “mere” contact is the minimal condition of any act of communication.

Interruptions, Delays, and Other Little Gaps

Serres has productively elaborated on Jakobson’s communication model by arguing that phatic communication isn’t a quirky anomaly but a fundamental feature of all communication. As media theorist Bernard Siegert puts it,

[...] Serres inverts the hierarchy of the six sign functions in Jakobson’s famous model. It is not the poetic or the referential function that (according to the type of speech) dominates all the others but the phatic function, the reference to the channel. In all communication, each expression, appeal, and type of referencing is preceded by a reference to interruption, difference, deviation. ‘With this recognition the phatic function becomes the constitutive occasion for all communication, which can thus no longer be conceptualized in the absence of difference and delay, resistance, static, and noise.’ (33, emphasis in original)

Serres relocates the ‘constitutive occasion’ for all communication: it is not the sender-receiver relationship that is fundamental to communication’s success but the very presence of the channel. This presence is indexed by the alternation of ‘expression, appeal, and type of referencing’ with ‘interruption, difference, deviation.’ Serres’ explanation is a useful one because it informs a methodological approach to literature that encourages us to pay attention to the gaps or delays in conversation as inextricable features of communication.

Turning to Greene’s novel, we can now assess the consequences of this method of reading. I begin with the opening pages of *The Quiet American* because they seem

particularly concerned with the communicative uncertainty of whether a channel works.

The novel begins as follows:

After dinner I sat and waited for Pyle in my room over the rue Catinat; he had said, "I'll be with you at latest by ten," and when midnight struck I couldn't stay quiet any longer and went down into the street. A lot of old women in black trousers squatted on the landing: it was February and I suppose too hot for them in bed. One trishaw driver pedaled slowly by toward the river-front and I could see lamps burning where they had disembarked the new American planes. There was no sign of Pyle anywhere in the long street.

Of course, I told myself, he might have been detained for some reason at the American Legation, but surely in that case he would have telephoned to the restaurant—he was very meticulous about small courtesies. (11)

The beginning of the novel unfolds *in medias res*, its drama hidden by the slow, silent nature of the scene. In fact, it is only much later in the narrative that we learn all the waiting has meaning: Fowler invites Pyle to dinner at the Vieux Moulin restaurant earlier this same evening at the request of Mr. Heng, who wants to intercept Pyle to "talk undisturbed" (174). The novel is never more explicit about the details of Heng's plan than this, although the implication is that Pyle will be ambushed on his way to meet Fowler. Indeed, Pyle never shows up for dinner at the arranged time, Fowler returns home, and the wait begins. In this allegorically-charged opening sequence then, waiting functions as the open, empty channel of phatic communication between Fowler and Pyle—and the "sign of Pyle anywhere in the long street" anthropomorphizes the awaited signal.³³

³³ The set up that produces this communicative circumstance explicitly calls for embodying an action rather reporting it: "Don't mind being late," [Fowler] said. "If you do get caught, look in here later. I'll come back at ten, if you can't make dinner, and wait for you."

"I'll let you know..." [Pyle replies].

"Don't bother. Just come to the Vieux Moulin—or meet me here" (180).

Unexpectedly, this parable of the channel and signal draws from the discourse of linguistic expression—not being quiet, telling, telephoning—at the same time it refuses to make recourse to the semantic function of language. Looking again at the passage, a comment such as “I couldn’t stay quiet any longer and went down on the street” indicates personal restlessness, while “I told myself,” and “he would have telephoned,” are the familiar phrases of silent reassurance we give ourselves in times of doubt. Even drawing attention to Pyle’s tendency to be “meticulous about small courtesies,” in order to account for his telephone habits, shifts emphasis away from the semantic content that motivates the hypothetical telephone call by attending instead to the stylistic minutiae of Pyle’s social niceties—as D.A. Miller has said, “the nothing to say” of style lays claim to the vanishing point of meaning.

Moreover, the numerous accounts of delay the passage—“I sat and waited for Pyle,” “I’ll be with you at the latest by ten,” “I couldn’t stay quiet any longer,” “he might have been detained”—locate us in that interruptive gap that occurs before the familiar reference work of language. Recalling Siegert’s explanation that “in all communication, each expression, appeal, and type of referencing is preceded by a reference to an interruption, difference, deviation,” we come to see that all this waiting *is* the point. It is precisely in this silent gap then—in the wait before words—that meaning passes in the novel’s first utterance that transpires between Fowler and Phuong: “I knew *before she had time to tell me* that she was waiting for Pyle too. ‘He isn’t here’ [said Phuong]” (11, emphasis added). The gap constitutes the communication, leaving Phuong’s verbal expression to count as the supplement, a near repetition of the message her noiseless waiting has already delivered. The police adopt the very same system of searching for

meaning by similarly ignoring linguistic reference and looking instead to the spaces *between* the words testified. In one particularly cunning instance of reading empty space, Vigot, the police detective, questions Fowler as to his whereabouts in the hours before Pyle's death but seems more interested in the time lapses that crop up in Fowler's alibi. Finding "ten minutes out here and five there [...] gives a little space," Vigot explains, "a little gap in time" (170).

Returning to the novel's concluding sentence, we can now see that Fowler's use of language is remarkably phatic in nature: noncommittal and without a message, his words seem to skirt around content. To return then to the issues I addressed in the opening to this chapter, Fowler's words suggest that the novel as a whole might skirt around the kind of clear commitment to a political position that would align him squarely against America's rising imperial profile. This observation is true of the ending and of the novel as a whole. Fowler's narrative repeatedly diverts discussion away from substantive political discourse and toward the curiously empty, solipsistic talk I will refer to as phatic political discourse. This discourse consists of talking about talking, of saying what *could* be said. In the novel, characters frequently speak in circles, speak to no one, speak of speaking, or speak of nothing. It is certainly the case that the novel privileges this phatic form of talk. Moreover, as readers, we are ensnared in this play with words. Unable to move outside of it, the novel implicates us in it. As the example of the concluding sentence suggests, we experience epistemological uncertainty at every turn through the novel's intensive experimentation with phatic political discourse. We are stuck, as it were, in a perpetual state of not getting the message.

Little Games

Taking seriously the novel's investment in phatic discourse entails seeing its relationship to imperialism in a much different way than most of its anticolonialist readers have. We can begin to get a sense of this difference by examining how the novel engages with one of British imperialism's canonical tropes: the great game. As noted earlier, Kipling routinely described the imperial project using the metaphor of the great game.³⁴ *The Quiet American* engages this imperial discourse through its focus on the trope of the little game, but not necessarily in terms that suggest an emphatic critique of it. In her 2004 retrospective review of *The Quiet American* (marking the author's centenary), British novelist and essayist Zadie Smith declared that Greene's "brilliantly constructed novel...reminds one of the game of jack straws, in which the aim is to take each stick in turn without disturbing the others."³⁵ Smith's analogy comparing the novel to this game in particular points out what is most striking about the sort of games that proliferate

³⁴ Playing small games is precisely what hides the great game from view in Kipling's *Kim*. Edward Said seems to suggest as much in his analysis: "[...] for Kim, the Great Game cannot be perceived in all its complex patterns, although it can be fully enjoyed as a sort of extended prank. The scenes where Kim banters, bargains, repartees with his elders, friendly and hostile alike, are indications of Kipling's seemingly inexhaustible fund of boyish enjoyment in the sheer momentary pleasure of playing a game, *any sort of game*." (137 emphasis added)

³⁵ Smith's evocation of children's games calls up a robust discourse linking imperialism to play. Historians of British Imperialism have provided compelling accounts of the pleasures of childhood play and its relationship to British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, much like Kipling's novels, historians routinely focus on games and do not seem cynical about their relation to colonial warfare. Many note that play often served a pedagogical function in teaching authoritarian techniques to British youth and acculturating colonial subjects. Said relates that Lord Baden-Powell's conception of the Boy Scouts fed Kipling's images of a play-intensive boyhood leading into "a grand scheme of imperial authority," with the Boy Scouts ultimately "fortifying the wall of empire" (137-138). In an article entitled, "They Taught the World to Play," Sir Charles Tennyson proposes that the dissemination of English ball games across the Empire established English traditions abroad, while J.A. Mangan's *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* suggests that foreign service members disseminated an "Imperial Games Ethos" (Berwick 250)—they exported the metropole's "traditions" and "morality" throughout the Empire thanks to the emphasis on sport in their nineteenth-century British Public School educations. Many who worked in the foreign services "paid tribute at the role played by games in forming their character and enabling them to withstand the rigours of their working life."

inside this novel: the little game models a technique of minimal engagement and a concomitant turning away from the realities of a world saturated by imperial war. Like the game of jack straws, playing depends on a determination not to disturb others. Within the novel, such forms of play appear at moments when characters toggle away from the real world to a hermetically sealed, private one. In one scene from the novel that exemplifies this phenomenon of simulated retreat, Fowler follows a battalion of soldiers as they make their way through Vietminh territory outside Phat Diem. The day is without action and Fowler points out that such bouts of boredom are not out of the ordinary for the group of men. To illustrate the sort of activities the soldiers engage in to pass the time, Fowler observes, “one man doodl[ing] with a twig in the dirt of the farmyard” as he rests (53).³⁶ This decidedly useless activity precipitates the stunning observation that follows: “After a while it was *as if* we had been forgotten by war” (53 emphasis added).

This simile imagines a world in which the soldiers might exist in one another’s company but away from the war. Here then, the novel stages an alternative community of men that centers around a little game, which figures as a diminution of imperialism’s great game. This correspondence raises the question: to what degree does the novel

³⁶ In a section of his 1963 study *Behavior in Public Places* titled “Away,”³⁶ Erving Goffman looks at several cases of self-involvement that bear striking resemblances to the circumscribed field of attention that Fowler describes when he links doodling to the feeling of being “forgotten,” or that Smith alludes to with ‘the game of jack straws’—a game one plays ‘without disturbing others’:

When an individual finds himself in a gathering from whose activities he wishes to insulate himself, he may give up his attention to an activity that is of a fanciful, fantasy, kind (and in this sense similar to the imagined world of reverie), and yet use materials for the construction of this alienated world that are visible to others. A component of disinterested intellectual pursuit will be present. This type of activity is illustrated by the individual who constructs elaborate doodles, or piles matches on the top of a bottle, or works jigsaw puzzles, and by the child who walks in such a way as to avoid the cracks in the pavement, or hops for a distance on one foot, or holds a stick against a fence post as he passes by, or kicks a can along his route. (73)

This list of auto-insulating behaviors is strikingly juvenile, (indeed, it mines the final series of examples from a child enjoying her walk) so it is not surprising to learn that Goffman will evoke the discourse of games, when he names these behaviors “toy-involvements”(74).

suggest that a phatic community presents a real alternative to those structured by imperial power? Do the soldiers here, alone on the battlefield, find a durable form of being together that stands apart from the imperial community, according to Greene? Is this an ethical community in which members act individually while also experiencing a sense of communion? Or, more cynically, is Greene's doodling soldier a symbol of the limited political potential of this form of inoperative community (to anticipate Jean-Luc Nancy)?³⁷

This chapter proposes the latter alternative is in fact the case. As the rest of this analysis will show, Greene certainly is interested in describing forms of ethical community but he is skeptical when it comes to the potential of these forms to unsettle already established political communities. The anti-imperialism that the ethical community seems to promise is simplistic and ultimately politically useless. We will see how the moments of phatic communion that do crop up in the novel are always illusory; they quickly dissipate in the face of national political discourse. Moreover, the collective bodies that the novel's inoperative communities offer—even with their utopic balance of individualism and communion—seem, for the most part, riddled with banality, as the little game metaphor suggests. Through the figuration of little games, Greene models how the ethical community, imagined as a perfect respite from the world at war, is ultimately unsustainable in the face of imperialism. In a scene that illustrates this, Vigot and Fowler

³⁷ Nancy's long-standing project of rethinking the basis of conventional communal forms (defined according to a single organizing purpose such as the idea of a leader, a homeland, etc.) proposes alternate forms of being-with-one-another that depend on exposure to the other and mutual abandonment. I mention Nancy's conception of the inoperative community (*La communauté désœuvrée*) to underscore how the questions raised by this philosophical inquiry appeared in Greene's literature decades earlier. This chapter's concern is not with the ethical community as proposed by Nancy, but with Greene's idiosyncratic literary experiments with an ethics that exists in relation to the historically-specific, hegemonic communal forms enabled by American imperialism.

play a game of dice to decide who pays for a drink, and the game functions as a Proustian madeleine of sorts. In later years, the mere glimpse of two men leisurely playing dice outside a bar will evoke for Fowler memories of a Western observer and a dead Vietnamese child enveloped by the sights and sounds of war:

[...] I took out my dice for the ritual game of Quatre Cent Vingt-et-un. How those figures and the sight of dice bring back to mind the war-years in Indo-China. Anywhere in the world when I see two men dicing I am back in the streets of Hanoi or Saigon or among the blasted buildings of Phat Diem, I see the parachutists, protected like caterpillars by their strange markings, patrolling by the canals, I hear the sound of the mortars closing in, and perhaps I see a dead child. (137)³⁸

Looking back to the band of soldiers, men Fowler imagines to exist temporarily outside the social and political constraints of imperialism, we should note how Greene's narrative exposes this community as similarly engaged in little more than a banal set of interchangeable, private, and apolitical acts—"The man who had doodled was relieving himself, and the man who had relieved himself was doodling" (54)—that quite literally piss away any potential political agency their stateless society might yield.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will turn to three examples from the novel to illustrate how the structuring effect of phatic discourse plays havoc with attempts to arrive at a productive ethical relationship to the question of empire. The first example examines a conversation between Fowler and Pyle that transpires in the watch tower. This conversation seems to figure the question of Western imperialism in Vietnam through the straightforward articulation of political positions—but the apolitical effect of phatic communication corrodes the novel's effort at substantive discourse from within the

³⁸ A very similar scenario "plays out" right before Fowler discusses Pyle with Mr. Heng: "The cat and the dog moved from floor to cardboard box to suitcase, like a couple of chess knights who cannot get to grips. [...] and the two old men were still playing mah jongg" (172).

language this discourse relies on. I then turn to the novel's interest in the postcard. While much has been made of the fact that the novel occasionally draws from the epistolary tradition, I will argue that taking seriously the way the novel's postcards shy away from direct address models how the novel similarly balks at the demand to "send" a clearly anti-imperialist message.³⁹ After considering the way that Greene's use of the postcard trope anticipates Derrida's analysis of language I turn, finally, to a scene in which Greene mediates on the political consequences of the postcard that never reaches its destination by framing a discussion through an imaginary mail slot. In this scenario Greene invites the ethical community to express itself in opposition to imperialism but will show it to be mute and yielding to the imperialist project in the end.

The Circle of Conversation

The watch tower episode is often considered to be the novel's set piece insofar as it places the political commitments of Greene's characters in sharpest relief. It relies almost exclusively on a sustained dialogue between Pyle and Fowler in which each side articulates the tenets of his political position. Many take Fowler's statements as straightforward condemnations of America's misguided liberal agenda at the same time they confirm Britain's desire to wash its hands of the situation in Indochina altogether. For example, Philip Stratford argues that the scene dramatizes "Fowler's inert non-commitment" and "Pyle's high-principled meddling"(403). It is certainly true that Fowler is keen to reject "mental concepts" and strives to root his politics in action: "Anyway the French are dying every day—" he tells Pyle, "that's not a mental concept" (96)—but it is

³⁹ Karen Steigman argues that the closing as well as the opening of the novel are epistolary: "[We can't] get around the text's frame, framed as it is by what might be read as two letters, in which the text's signatory concern about its reading is, literally, signed" (12).

also clear from their dialogue that Fowler is not interested in directly opposing imperialism so much as talking about the ambiguous nature of his involvement in it.

Commentators often point out that Fowler articulates the slipperiness of assuming clear political alternatives. This uncertainty manifests most directly when he notes that the collapse of political poles coincides with the liberalization of the Western imperialist agenda:

We haven't a liberal party any more—liberalism's infected all the other parties. We are all either liberal conservatives or liberal socialists: we all have a good conscience. I'd rather be an exploiter who fights for what he exploits, and dies with it. Look at the history of Burma. We go and invade the country: the local tribes support us: we are victorious: but like you Americans we weren't colonialists in those days. Oh no, we made peace with the king and we handed him back his province and left our allies to be crucified and sawn in two. They were innocent. They thought we'd stay. But we were liberals and we didn't want a bad conscience [...] We shall do the same thing here. (96)

Fowler issues a sustained polemic that lays out the parallel trajectories of Britain's past in Burma and America's future in Vietnam. And yet, while Fowler's position bespeaks a pessimism about the liberal project, it's significant that Greene stages Fowler's critique of liberalism through the very form of disengaged theoretical debate particular *to* this tradition. As the recent turn to the representation of liberal thought in literary studies proposes, liberal philosophy's "dedication to argument, debate and deliberative processes of legitimation and justification" provides the conceptual underpinnings for a liberal aesthetic. In fact, the "dialectic of hope and skepticism" that Amanda Anderson identifies as the shaping tension of liberal ideology is clearly reflected in the positions enunciated by Fowler's bleak resignation on the one hand, and Pyle's naïve optimism on the other. It is not the case, however, that Greene engages this form in order to educate his reader on the fine balancing act practiced by good liberals. In fact, Greene critiques liberalism here

by striking precisely at the insularity generated by its dependence on linguistic form; that is, it's heavy reliance *on* talk to develop its politics.

As I've noted, the scene is often treated as a substantive political discussion, but Greene suggestively hints at the recursivity of the talk between Pyle and Fowler by referring to it at one point as a "circle of conversation." The precise nature of the circular communication here warrants further consideration. First, the 'conversation circle' repeatedly excludes the two Vietnamese men although, physically, they complete the circle of men sitting in the round. And indeed, at one point Fowler expresses concern that he "bring them into the circle" of conversation (95). When Pyle claims, "You have to fight for liberty," Fowler responds by pointing out the rhetorical grounding of Pyle's ideological commitments: "I haven't seen any Americans fighting around here. And as for liberty, I don't know what it means. Ask them." Fowler "call[s] across the floor in French to them [the two Vietnamese soldiers] '*La liberté—qu'est-ce que c'est la liberté?*' They sucked in the rice and stared back and said nothing" (97). Here Fowler prompts the two Vietnamese soldiers to enter the conversation in a language they speak, but they would rather save themselves through sustenance than talk about saving the abstract figure of the liberal individual. With quiet precision, their silent response makes the scene one in which Western liberalism, quite literally, talks to itself. By staging the debate in the presence of two Vietnamese guards, Greene emphasizes how this deliberative mode comes to look remarkably solipsistic—like another little game, this time played with words. Fowler notes as much when he dwells on the effects of conversation despite the tense circumstances he's in:

It is odd how reassuring conversation is, especially on abstract subjects: it seemed to normalize the strange surroundings. I was no longer scared: it

was as though I had left a room and would be returning there to pick up the argument—the watch tower was the rue Catinat, the bar, of the Majestic, or even a room off of Gordon Square. (98)

Of course, the hypothetical transportative fantasy Fowler contemplates here should recall the fantasy of being forgotten by war that Greene figured as the doodling soldier on the battlefield. Here, doodling finds its parallel in the babble of language and, for once, the message is clear: talking politics is a distraction from, not an engagement with, politics itself.

Over the course of the dialogue, what becomes apparent is that each man accesses phatic political discourse in order to speak but say nothing. This observation gives new resonance to Pyle's allegation, "You don't mean half [of] what you are saying," and Fowler's response, "Probably three quarters"(97). Pyle mindlessly parrots the liberal tenets he's learned from York Harding, an intellectual whose books advocate an abstract liberalism that comes to look dangerously close to wordplay. Fowler points out the irony of engaging in mimicry while defending the principle of individualism when he warns Pyle: "Don't go on in the East with that parrot cry about a threat to the individual soul"(97). Fowler for his part will confess: "I don't know what I'm talking politics for. They don't interest me and I'm a reporter. [...] For the sake of an argument—to pass this bloody night, that's all." (96 emphasis in original).⁴⁰ Pyle pounces on Fowler's penchant for talk that propagates more talk when he puts this point in more accusatory terms, telling Fowler: "You're arguing for the sake of arguing" (97). It's worth noting that this is

⁴⁰ While commentators haven't commented on the oddly phatic character of Fowler's political polemics they often point out that Fowler's politics do relegate him to a certain solipsism. As A.A. DeVitis notes, "[Fowler] professes to remain uninvolved in the politics of real and ideological warfare"(394), while Pathak, Sengupta, and Purkayastha refer to it in ironic scare quotes as Fowler's "political 'involvement'," a point they underscore by noting his final position is one of physical and mental detachment: "it is tragic that the figure he presents at the end is one of exile, confined to his room, smoking endless pipes of opium" (416).

another way of recursively turning to language and skirting around what's *not* being said: namely, Fowler's abandonment of any effort to argue for the sake of establishing a more ethical relationship to Vietnam.

The Postcard

In addition to the little game of argumentative debate that Alden and Fowler indulge in, the watch tower scene explores other significant forms of phatic communication. What should also draw our attention is the brief, albeit remarkable reference to a postcard. As Fowler speaks with the first guard about his national affiliations, Greene sets up a second channel of communication in the scene—this one harboring an emphatically phatic communication heard by Fowler and the other guard:

Only one man had spoken. The other sat with his head turned sideways, watching the slit in the wall. He could have seen nothing but a postcard of sky: he seemed to be listening and I began listening too. The silence became full of sound: noises you couldn't put a name to—a crack, a creak, a rustle, something like a cough, and a whisper. (92-93)

Greene transfigures the postcard “sent” from the world outside the watch tower from the conventional materials of paper and ink to the media of sky and sound. The channel heralded by the vision of a postcard made of night sky is further established by the slit in the wall—open, like the flap of a mail slot—and awaiting a delivery. Just as swiftly as the channel appears it begins to teem with the sonic ciphers of ‘noises you couldn't put a name to’—a communication outside of language that even defies language's ability to describe it. In other words, the postcard arrives carrying noise and thus fails to deliver a coherent message. In fact the nonlinguistic delivery reminds us that a political message is missing from the vision of communion on offer here. This communion consists of Fowler who, prompted by the guard that listens to silence, assumes the same posture as the man,

and begins to listen right alongside him. The scene of the two men listening “with” one another figures the ethical community as a balance between the shared communal experience and the distinction of separate identities. However utopic this auditory experience might appear at first, Greene underscores that it is temporary in nature: the intimate scene is interrupted violently when a “bazooka shell [from the Viets] burst on the tower” (108). The guard that Fowler momentarily shares the noise with dies instantly in this attack. The point here is that wordless sounds lose whatever communal potential they might have garnered: as Fowler lies on the ground, stunned and suffering from injury, sound without meaning returns again as an unintelligible, disembodied voice, that now ceases to function as the medium for ethical communion. As the watch tower episode concludes, noise works as a sonorous harbinger of Fowler’s isolation: “A voice called something I didn’t understand. I almost felt I could sleep in this darkness and loneliness and absence of pain”(109).

The second time the postcard appears in the novel, it signals an unused channel of communication. This second postcard sits out in the open so that anyone may come across it. Fowler notes that it is left blank: the “unwritten picture-postcard of the Eiffel Tower” is placed “for some reason” on a littered desk in a small office (144). In this case, the postcard is out of place, half-hidden amidst the debris on the desk where it remains unwritten and unsent. In this scene, the communication promised by the form of the postcard meets with the failure of correspondence, suggested by the fact it remains ‘unwritten.’ The blank postcard raises the question: is there an intended message indexed by the postcard that lies fallow? It is precisely the problem of not receiving a clear message that frames Fowler’s next encounter with a machine, depicted here as an

eminently readable object, whose purpose can't be determined. Fowler finds the machine tucked away behind a secret door at the back of the office but nevertheless open to uninvited contact:

I was in a small shed about the size of the garage. It contained one piece of machinery that at first sight seemed like a cage of rods and wires furnished with innumerable perches to hold some wingless adult bird—it gave the impression of being tied up with old rags, but the rags had probably been used for cleaning when Mr. Muoi and his assistants had been called away. I found the name of a manufacturer—somebody in Lyons and a patent number—patenting what? I switched on the current and the old machine came alive: the rods had a purpose—the contraption was like an old man gathering his last vital force, pounding down his fist, pounding down... [...], the press was still employable.

I examined the press more closely; there were traces of white powder. Diolacton, I thought, something in common with milk. There was no sign of a drum or a mould. (144-5)

In what might be the novel's most lingering portrayal of reading, Fowler assesses the machine in several ways: he records his assessment of it "at first sight," and notes the "impression" it gives him, then he interacts with it to modify his hypothesis and thoughtfully speculate further. Finally, he examines the machine "more closely" in order to ascertain its "purpose"—"patenting what?" The machine keeps the answer to this question stubbornly hidden.⁴¹ The uncertainty that Fowler is left with after his moment of "machine reading" models the epistemological consequences of phatic political discourse that refuses a clear message. The novel offers no straightforward articulation explaining that the purpose of the machine is to make bombs. Given the novel's engagement with

⁴¹ The sequence recalls Rousseau reading the machine in *The Confessions*: "I looked at the metals rolls, my eyes were attracted by their polish. I was tempted to touch them with my fingers and I moved them with pleasure over the polished surface of the cylinder..." (1036). De Man's gloss of this passage is striking for a number of reasons but I'm primarily interested in his use of the term "contact" to describe the superficial relation furnished by the machine encountering the man. Recall here that "contact" is the same term Jakobson uses to describe the phatic function: "[...] Rousseau lingers complacently over the description of the machine that seduces him into dangerously close *contact*" (298 my emphasis).

imperialism though the trope of the little games, it is fitting that Fowler will later guess that Diolacton is a plastic used to make toys. It is this ambiguity, or skirting around purpose, that in the end prevents the novel from carrying an anti-imperialist agenda. We should link Fowler's proximity to the undiscoverable purpose of the machine back to the position we find ourselves in while reading *The Quiet American's* closing line: we don't know to whom the quasi-apology is intended or, to borrow from the scene of machine-reading, its "purpose."

As the above examples attest, Greene's used the postcard in his prose as an emblem for communication that fails to deliver a message twenty-five years before Jacques Derrida theorized language along these lines. In his famous analysis, Derrida notes that, with its open format, the postcard follows an uncertain path of circulation that makes it as likely to convey erasures as to convey messages. The postcard's immediate accessibility presents an apt allegory for the comingling of the public and private we accept whenever we converse with language: while the message may be intimate, it arrives in a vehicle available to be read by anyone. Derrida makes a crucial distinction between *reading* a message and *understanding* one when he claims that the postcard's "lack or excess of address prepares it to fall into all hands: a post card, [is] an open letter in which the secret appears, but indecipherably." This description of a communication in which the secret calls attention to its secrecy, should remind us of the machine that is read but that doesn't reveal its purpose, or again, the conclusion of *The Quiet American*, with its gesture toward an atonement that remains frustratingly opaque. As readers, we now realize that the novel's phatic discourse works much like a postcard—as a discourse that does not communicate *to* us, but that we maintain a strange proximity to nonetheless.

Emphasizing the primacy of the channel, Serres once remarked that conversation is not a matter of the content that passes between the two people exchanging words. Rather, “to hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him.” As readers, we now realize that structurally, we’ve held the place of the ‘third man’ all along.⁴²

Derrida explains that what makes this remove from direct communication so frustrating is that it produces the subjective experience of reading without knowing —of encountering text that is indecipherable: “This is a disagreeable feeling that I beg every reader, male and female to forgive me. To tell the truth, it is not only disagreeable, it places you in relation, without discretion, to tragedy. It forbids that you regulate distances, keeping them or losing them”(5). What Derrida’s plea for forgiveness betrays is the way that ciphers come to dominate their readers, forcefully pressing the reader up against the unknown. It is a state of domination we might extend over the reader of machines and the reader of this novel. Is it not Greene’s contention that reading is a matter of being disagreeably dominated by language rather than understanding it? We might recall Pyle “in his Legation room fretting at a telegram to decode [...]”(183) as a figure for the anxious reader who demands that language reveals its meaning, and expects a feeling of satisfaction upon completing the interpretative task. In contrast to reading that deciphers, reading that refuses to decipher is more than unsatisfying or discomforting, it “*places you in relation*” indiscriminately: instead of having your way with language, language has its way with you. It manipulates distances, it provokes a sense of unease, it maintains otherness and unintelligibility. In its denial of mastery over language, phatic discourse seems to hold us in a state of “certain” unintelligibility. We might recall that Fowler first

⁴² Coincidentally, a 1949 screenplay written by Greene is entitled, “The Third Man.” Greene later published it as a novella of the same name.

hints at the ethical consequences of this when he asks: “Wouldn’t we all do better not trying to understand, accepting the fact that no human being will ever understand another, not a wife a husband, a lover a mistress, nor a parent a child?” (60). Of course, this proposal presents an ethical relation that resists epistemological closure. But as the final example will attest, the novel ultimately denies the promise of ethical community that it seems to generate.

The Open Letter Box

My final example is an extension of the previous section insofar as it is haunted by an *absent* postcard that serves to illustrate the lack of mastery to be had through phatic discourse. In fact, the scene that follows explicitly structures the ethical community in the context of an awaited postal delivery. As Pyle takes leave of Fowler’s apartment after discussing his plan to marry Phuong, Fowler explains that, “some half-formulated fear made me follow him out to the head of the stairs and call after him”(156-7). Fowler remains here, at the top of the stairs, while Pyle walks down the stairs to the first floor and then “stare[s] up at [Fowler] from the first landing” (159). Our expectations about aesthetic form implied by the physical arrangement of the two men’s bodies in the space might lead us to assume that the subject is the one located above, with the unimpeded point of view, and the object is located below and visually available for examination. These expectations are upended however, by Fowler’s jarring account of the unnerving glance exchanged between the two: “It was as if [Pyle] had been staring at me through a letter-box to see who was there and now, letting the flap fall, had shut out the unwelcome intruder. His eyes were out of sight. ‘I don’t know what you mean, Thomas’” (157). The simile inverts the point of view of the watcher and the watched to show the subject’s lack

of epistemological mastery over the object. Pyle, located on the stairs below, is the one who “see[s] who [is] there,” who “let[s] the flap fall,” and who “shut[s] out” Fowler—who suddenly assumes the identity of the “the unwelcome intruder” in this scenario(157). From Pyle’s imagined view through the letter-box, Fowler becomes the trespasser while Pyle remains, not only hidden behind the door, but also in control of each man’s exposure.⁴³ It is no surprise that the scene should be organized around a communication that is phatic: “I don’t know what you mean,” Pyle says to Fowler—all while looking through the open mail slot.

The ethical community formed between Pyle and Fowler in this scene quickly dissipates as the discussion swings back to Western imperialism with a vengeance. Fowler tells Pyle he can’t trust men like Thé because “they aren’t going to save the East from Communism. We know their kind”(157). “We?” asks Pyle. Who is this ‘we’? The potential force of Fowler’s response here deserves our attention since it will pithily answer the vital question proposed by the novel: what comprises the collective of which Fowler is a part—the ethical community, or the more firmly entrenched, imperial one? We should recall of course that Pyle asks the question as he and Fowler are locked in a phatic communion that would offer up their ethical collective body as a possible referent to the plural pronoun: is the “we” here Pyle and Fowler who find themselves locked into a relation not structured by imperialism? The novel’s response is firmly and finally negative. Fowler quickly clarifies: by ‘we’ he refers to himself as one of “the old colonialists.” In the end then, Fowler resurrects the world’s languishing empires, of which he is reluctantly, but intractably a member.

⁴³ Although Fowler feels *as if* Pyle has usurped his flat, we should remember that the conversation transpires in the first place because Fowler finds Pyle already inside his Rue Catinat apartment. How did he get in? As Pyle tells it, “I met Domingues. *He was bringing in your mail*” (154 my emphasis).

The finality of this conclusion sits in tension with the ethical community that haunts the entirety of the novel: the communion shared between Fowler and Pyle as they remain bound to one another across the divide of life and death. Indeed, the quietude that tends to structure their communion reveals that the relation between Fowler and Pyle in death is ultimately identical to their relation to one another in life insofar as both seem entirely reliant on phatic discourse. In this chapter I argued that the novel was interested in exploring the ethical implications of phatic language but that the alternative communal forms it offers were ultimately unsustainable. While I will pursue the relations between the living and the dead in greater depth in the dissertation's final chapter (in which another British expatriate finds himself haunted by the dead), in the next chapter I turn to yet another text that stations the protagonist in a non-Western locale to contemplate the failures of received communal forms. What links this chapter and the next are their shared attempt to grapple with critical charges that the protagonists—Thomas Fowler here, and Richard Wright in the next chapter—are regrettably solipsistic. This claim seems directed toward a sense that these men are self-absorbed, disinterested Western elites. I hope that my reading of *The Quiet American* has taken us some way toward recasting Fowler's solipsism as an instance of strange intimacy. Fowler's final moments, alone with his opium, might be more productively read as a scene shared with Pyle, despite their separation.

In the case of Wright, the charge of solipsism stems from critics who accuse him of not caring to understand the inhabitants of the Gold Coast. This criticism places Wright's failure to find black diasporic identity on his trip squarely in his own hands. In the following chapter, I will return to some of the phatic thinking I did in this chapter to

argue that *not understanding* is in fact a more ethical form of relation than the diasporic alternative.

CHAPTER 3

Reconsidering Mass Political Identity: The Bewilderment of Richard Wright

But I never forgot the look of astonishment and bewilderment on the young woman's face when I had finished reading and glanced at her. Her inability to grasp what I had done or was trying to do somehow gratified me.

—Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945)

I blinked in bewilderment. The women were howling with laughter now.

—Richard Wright, *Black Power* (1954)

The unadmitted relief, then, of which I spoke has to do with a certain drop in the intensity of our bewilderment, for the baffling creator no longer stands between us and his works.

—James Baldwin, “Alas, Poor Richard” (1961)

The enterprise of identifying black diasporic culture in twentieth-century African American literature has motivated a great deal of transnational literary criticism over the past two decades. Inaugurated by Paul Gilroy's influential study, *The Black Atlantic* (1995), this strain of criticism tends to locate the consolidation of black diasporic identity at the center of its identity politics. Gilroy, for instance, posits a black diasporic community that transcends nationality and ethnicity in the making of a shared black Atlantic culture. Despite the merits of this critique, later readers point out that Gilroy risks reading black nationalism without a nation as nonetheless static and essentialist.⁴⁴ It seems that in his efforts to recover the alliances that bind the transatlantic diaspora

⁴⁴ See Yogita Goyal's *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (2010) on Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, especially pages 225-234.

together, Gilroy obfuscates internal fissures and contestations generated by differences in nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—differences that could challenge his characterization of a sustainable, hybridized black nationalism.⁴⁵

Set in the Gold Coast in the months before its independence, Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1956) presents a productive foil to these prevailing critical approaches, and invites us to reassess our current strategies for interpreting the genre of the African American travelogue in terms of political identity. Indeed, *Black Power*'s identity politics suggest that the current critical focus on recovering identitarian cross-sections within diaspora might well give way to an alternative reading tactic that has not been sufficiently addressed. The travelogue seems to resist overarching explanatory frameworks that would align the black multitudes with operable black political communities.⁴⁶ Rather than bemoan Wright's abandonment of diasporic nationalism as a troubling sign of the African American intellectual's waning engagement with diaspora, I show that *Black Power*'s experimentation with ethnographic description forwards an aesthetic of the pre-political multitudes. In place of the certainty afforded by the conventional practice of reading to affirm political communities, Wright's work forwards an ethical relation marked by the shared experience of epistemological uncertainty, an experience he describes in *Black Power* (and earlier writings) as one of bewilderment. What Wright's bewilderment offers

⁴⁵ See for example Elizabeth DeLoughrey (1998) and Michelle Stephens (2005) on gendering the middle passage, as well as Samantha Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (2013) on the gendered dimensions of diaspora. See *Black Queer Diaspora*, a special issue of *GLQ* (Vol. 18, Issue 2-3, 2012), for an elaboration on Black Atlantic scholarship that reconsiders the place of queer shipboard experience in present accounts of migration and travel. See Goyal (2010) for the place of the African continent in the Black Atlantic Imaginary.

⁴⁶ My use of the term *multitude* here and throughout this chapter is not in keeping with Hardt and Negri's vision of the proletariat primarily because they imagine that the multitude have already embraced a mode of political organization marked by the "collaborative relationships" forged through the networks of Empire. My use of the term *multitude* means to connote a group without a consolidated political identity.

transnational literary criticism now is a viable alternative to the current reading habit of shoring up social knowledge through conventional mass political forms. We might describe this ethical relation as one that both posits and resists identificatory resolutions: constituted of stereotypes that have conventionally come to figure as politically discernable black bodies, this prepolitical form assumes the mechanized body particular to a laboring black underclass, and the dancing body identified with a thriving black nationalism.

Wright's depictions of the black multitudes are conventionally read as some of twentieth-century African American literature's most iconic renderings of U.S. black cultural nationalism. From *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*, to *Black Boy*—Wright's literary output in the first decade of his career depicts the folk of the South and the urban migrants of the North in an explicitly national context. After his relocation to Paris in 1946, however, Wright's generic interests largely migrate to the foreign terrain of non-fiction travel writing.⁴⁷ Keenly attuned to the plight of Asian and African populations caught in the uncertain political climate heralded by decolonization, these later travel writings were routinely criticized by scholars for evoking an ethnographic imperative.⁴⁸

Ethnography names the process of narrating anthropological fieldwork.⁴⁹

Axiomatic to conventional ethnographic imperatives is a commitment to gathering empirical evidence while maintaining objective distance—a distance enforced by a

⁴⁷ See Wright's 1951 essay, "I Choose Exile," for an elaboration of this relocation.

⁴⁸ Among the travelogues he worked on in the 1950s were *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), *White Man, Listen!* (1957), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and an unfinished piece entitled, "French West Africa" (Blair, see footnote 70).

⁴⁹ As Clifford Geertz has said, what social anthropologists do is ethnography.

structuring binarism between the Western ethnographer and the marginalized, non-Western subject.⁵⁰ Tasked with the interpretation of evidence, the ethnographer's narrative reveals information not yet empirically visible about a culture. Ideally, then, ethnography clears away the opacity of alterity, revealing the previously impervious subject of inquiry in all its transparency. Apparently familiar with these general principles, literary critic Kwame Appiah recognizes that "the stilted diction [of the preface] signals a work of 'scientific' ethnography, a transparent conduit answering only the facts" (191), while critic Sarah Blair has argued that *Black Power* is limited by its unstated commitment to "some version of documentary epistemology."⁵¹ Wright, for his part, alludes to the conventional tropes of frame, distance, and objectivity that are the hallmarks of ethnographic discourse when introducing the text's objectives: "I felt that it was time for someone to subject a slice of African life to close scrutiny," he declares in his preface, "in terms of concepts that one would use in observing life anywhere"(13).

Given Wright's statement of intent, it is all the more surprising that once he embarks on the project, the narrative fails to deliver the cultural transparency it promises. This failure has not gone unnoticed by critics. Appiah remarks that "the melodramatic language" of the travelogue's opening chapter is "oddly in conflict with the high purpose announced in Wright's preface and the scientific language of the informational discourse that he has promised" (192). The travelogue's easy adoption of an ethnographic stance in

⁵⁰ See George E. Marcus and Michael M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (1986). The reflexive turn would subject the ethnographic binary to radical revision by the 1980s, Reflexive ethnography required autobiographical critical reflection on the part of the ethnographer in order to recognize one's own situatedness in the observational process. To my knowledge, no scholarship considers Wright's ethnography to be working along these lines, although the solipsistic dimension of the text has been remarked upon rather consistently.

⁵¹ See Blair's *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (2007).

principle and the struggle to achieve it in practice proved difficult to explain. Wright's close friend Chester Himes opined that the book was a mistake and that Wright should never have written it, while others attributed the book's failure to, among other things, Wright's "Western ethnographic gaze" (Gaines 80-81).⁵² More recently, Cornel West subjects Wright's encounter with Africa to a similar critique: "[Wright's] frank distance," West laments, "yields moments of Western condescension and modern revulsion at African bodies and religion. These problematic moments do not dehumanize Africans but they do blind him to the rich complexity of premodern Ghanaian culture and society" (x). Historian Kevin Gaines summarizes the travelogue's overwhelmingly negative reception by stating that, "Wright's text has widely been judged as problematic, even a failure" (80-1).

In part, what underwrites the unfavorable reception *Black Power* received is the widely held belief that Wright had squandered an important opportunity to understand Africa and produce an inclusionary narrative linking African Americans to the continent. In the United States, ethnography was recruited to strengthen an already robust pan-Africanist ideology, one Wright alludes to with *Black Power*'s epigraph, which poses Countee Cullen's pan-Africanist provocation—"What is Africa to me?"—as the travelogue's framing question. Beyond this, in the years following World War II, ethnography was touted as a discipline poised to facilitate America's engagement with the rest of the world. Ruth Benedict was one of a number of anthropologists who insisted on the public utility of the discipline in the postwar moment: "There has never been a time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-

⁵² According to Gaines, critics also cite Wright's "misguided application of modernization theory to Africa," "his dubious generalizations about African 'distrust' and the distortions of African personality bred by colonialism."

conscious,” she said, “who can see objectively the socially conditioned behaviour of other peoples without fear and recrimination” (Benedict cited in Hegeman 10-11).⁵³ According to Tim Watson, anthropology shifted its focus from “American home anthropology” outward to other countries (277). Information mining furnished the empirical grounds on which the U.S. could forge transnational communities, and the insights it revealed about other cultures could facilitate empathic connections between the American public and people around the world.

Certain critical accounts of *Black Power*’s failure to generate cross-cultural empathy have proven more illuminating for the way they address the narrative’s deviations from ethnography. For Michael G. Cooke, Wright’s observations have an obvious social object, but at the level of practical data, his text offers only “‘ever-winding avenues of searching’ that forbid ‘any immediate satisfaction’” (87). But, as Kevin Gaines proposes, if Wright’s work seems somehow insufficiently ethnographic, this is all the more reason to read it as an occasion for rethinking Wright’s political commitments: “As for Wright’s ill-advised forays into cultural interpretation, in his defense, Wright qualified many of his statements with a speculative tone, often accompanied by ellipses that marked either the provisional nature of his claims, [or] his capitulation to the limits of knowledge [...]” (81).⁵⁴ Although Gaines doesn’t follow through on the implications of his observations, it’s worth thinking through how Wright’s reflections on the formation of social knowledge raise important questions about the way in which *Black*

⁵³ See Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946).

⁵⁴ Blair has also suggested a breakdown in ethnography’s efficacy but locates this slide with the subject, claiming that Wright’s “African subjects and informants... resist their inevitable representation as [...] ethnographic specimens, or documentary objects” (100), a “resistance” that for Blair takes the form of children running, women scattering, or villagers parading, instead of posing.

Power diverges from, and is dubious of, ethnography and the imperative that it work to bridge cultural difference.⁵⁵

Wright's epistemological provisions and capitulations invite us to examine how *Black Power* unsettles ethnography's tacit link between social observation and social knowledge. As this chapter's epigraphs suggest, Wright frequently subjected states of epistemological frustration that seized the body's senses to a taxonomic rigor by classifying them, with remarkable regularity, as conditions of bafflement or bewilderment.⁵⁶ As it turns out, the preponderance of these sensory disorientations across his prose is striking, as is the pride of place they assume in Wright's inaugural account of himself as an author. In a stirring anecdote from his autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945), Wright relates that upon completing his first story he acknowledges to himself that it had "no plot, no action" driving it: "[...] I read it over and saw that there was a yawning void in it" (120). Nonetheless, Wright decides the meaningless story must be shared with the next-door neighbor so he swears her into a pact of secrecy, and proceeds: "When I had finished," he relates, "she smiled at me oddly, her eyes baffled and astonished" (121). He goes on to recount the reaction I mention in the chapter's first epigraph,

[...] I never forgot the look of astonishment and bewilderment on the young woman's face when I had finished reading and glanced at her. Her inability to grasp what I had done or was trying to do somehow gratified me. Afterwards whenever I thought of her reaction I smiled happily for some unaccountable reason. (121)

⁵⁵ Gaines also points out that Wright regarded anthropology as an imperialist practice: "Wright identified the anthropological project of interpreting Akan culture so thoroughly with British imperialism that to him, any consideration of an autonomous realm of culture unmediated by colonialism was anathema" (84-85).

⁵⁶ Examples of bafflement in *Black Boy* and *Black Power* are many. For example, see "My reactions were so baffled ..." (*Black Power* 153); "I was baffled..." (*Black Power* 224); "...I was baffled." (*Black Power* 493); "I was baffled." (*Black Power* 579); "He looked at me with baffled eyes." (*Black Boy*); "I was baffled." (*Black Boy* 188).

Of course, as he's revealed already, Wright doesn't grasp exactly what he's done either. But Wright's moment of identification as a storyteller depends on sharing this ungraspable story with someone who will fail to grasp its meaning in turn. Far from a solitary experience of confusion then, bewildered reading signals the emergence of an ethical relation where Wright and the reader share in the aesthetic experience of the 'yawning void' together.

With the exception of James Baldwin's eulogistic commemoration of Wright's penchant for baffling his reader, (transcribed in the chapter's third epigraph), such shared experiences have gone unremarked by Wright's readers. In the context of the travel writings in particular, the possibility of an ethical encounter produced through bewilderment offers a reading of the text's commitments that runs counter to the dominant critical tradition of African American scholarship in the wake of the transnational turn.⁵⁷ By assessing *Black Power*'s merits on its failure to establish a convincing diasporic black nationalism, critics have failed to note the ethical propositions the text does put forward. Such propositions might be best understood as a continuation of Wright's career-long effort to find, as he put it in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), a more "intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication." I will elaborate on this form of communication in what follows, but the key to it, for Wright, is to use literature to do something *other than* transmit cultural information. Following Agamben, we might call this an experience of language, "not as

⁵⁷ Gaines concedes that "Wright's rather numerous and frank expressions of culture shock have fueled speculation about his identity confusion, if not his racial self-hatred" (81). I'm suggesting that we maintain this "shock" in all its physiological implication.

this or that signifying proposition, but as the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists” (*Infancy and History* 4-5).

Whispered Words, Confidential Wisdom

Acknowledging Wright’s ambivalent uses of ethnographic practices in *Black Power* requires further consideration of Wright’s enduring engagement with ethnography. Even before the favorable public response to his 1941 documentary text, *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright recognized a necessary link between ethnography’s propensity to generate information about the black masses, and harnessing that information in the service of racial emancipation. Wright’s first job-seeking excursion to the University of Chicago’s famed Department of Sociology sometime around 1933 placed him in conversation with the “Chicago School” of sociologists, a group that included Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth among others.⁵⁸ Wright’s informal affiliation with the Chicago School would influence his theoretical and aesthetic approach to *Twelve Million Black Voices*.⁵⁹

At the same time, however, Wright remained deeply skeptical of a discipline that claimed to deliver an empirical account of black life, especially one so deeply entrenched in America’s academic and government institutions. So while he took pains to educate himself in the field’s disciplinary protocols, he nonetheless remained wary of its potential to deindividuate and objectify America’s black masses.⁶⁰ As Wirth’s research assistant, Horace Cayton, recalls, Wright “never forgot the enormous collection of facts and figures

⁵⁸ See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 68.

⁵⁹ As Wright acknowledges in the preface of *Twelve Million Black Voices*, he came to rely “most heavily” on sociological literature in assembling the text, citing Wirth’s “Urbanism as a Way of Life”(1938), and Cayton and Mitchell’s *Black Workers and the New Unions* in particular (xxi).

⁶⁰ While Wright sought out the documentary materials for this project, he requested “a list of readings in the social sciences” from Wirth. Wright “absorbed the list at a remarkable speed and visited his mentor several times to discuss what he was reading” (Bone 454).

we had assembled or the methodical manner in which we had organized, classified, and catalogued them” (Cayton, qtd in Bone 453). Indeed, the stupendous bulk of the information held by the school, which William J. Maxwell similarly described as “mountains of empirical material” (160), came to physically resemble the monolithic physical proportions of the masses it meant to understand. Wright’s references to the “immense files of materials on urban life among Negroes [...]” (xxi) in the preface of *Black Voices* and elsewhere, points to one unsettling aspect of the Chicago School’s research project, namely how its encyclopedic acquisition of data laid claim to authority about black life.

The impulse to see and know the lives of African Americans through meticulous and expansive cataloguing was not limited to the nation’s leading department of urban sociology. Documents tracking the plight of Chicago’s urban black population were piling up within the offices of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) in the late 1930s as well. When the Illinois arm of the FWP began in 1935, literary historian Rosemary Hathaway notes that the organization initially focused “on amassing materials for a state guidebook, as well as collecting folklore and slave narratives” (92). “However,” she continues, “documents from the early years of the project also suggest that researchers and writers were amassing information simply to be amassing information [...]” (92). Wright joined the FWP in Chicago as a staff writer in 1935: from January to July of the following year he briefly transferred to the Federal Theater Project before returning to the Writers’ Project where he remained until May 1937 (Hathaway 92). While he was active in Chicago, he wrote pieces for the FWP that were heavily influenced by ethnography’s disciplinary protocols. Commenting on one of Wright’s many essays for the FWP entitled,

“A Survey of Amusement Facilities,” Hathaway remarks that it successfully “displays Wright’s skill at ethnographic writing” noting it as a “fascinating example of how heavily Wright was influenced by his informal association with the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago”(94).⁶¹

Hathaway’s observations seem to trouble easy distinctions between Wright’s ethnographic writing for the FWP and his creative writing endeavors, but it’s important to recognize that, even if he borrowed from ethnography’s protocols, Wright always insisted that the difference between ethnographic writing and creative writing was an important one.⁶² To examine how Wright parses the distinction between the two modes of writing we can turn to his 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” First published in *New Challenge*, the same year that Wright concluded work for the Illinois Writer’s Project, the essay betrays an anxious awareness of disciplinary divisions: though it doesn’t name the fields of anthropology or sociology in particular, the essay’s instructive tone alerts black writers to heed the disciplinary standards that separate writers of “imaginative writing” from writing “professionals,” those charged with performing specific social functions with their work. In a section of the essay entitled, “Autonomy of Craft,” Wright states:

Negro writers should seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals. But if their writing is demanded to perform the social office of other professions,

⁶¹ Other pieces Wright wrote for the FWP include one entitled, “Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago’s Black Belt,” dated September 29, 1936, and another, “(Additional) On the Ethnography of the Negro,” dated January 13, 1936. On a document attributed to several authors entitled, “The Negro in Chicago,” Wright is mentioned as a “fieldworker.”

⁶² The question of how Wright made use of social-science discourse is pertinent throughout his literary career. For instance, in the case of *Black Voices* (which I noted, relies on material from the Chicago School and the FSA), literary critic Jeff Allred suggests that Wright rescues ethnography from its own didactic tendencies by harnessing it in service to a transformative political agenda: “The partiality of Wright’s narrative voice thus reframes scientific description not as disinterested, university-based knowledge production in the service of social management but as the articulator of an ethnic history functioning as part of a political program that seeks to transform, rather than manage or describe, the status quo” (569).

then the autonomy of craft is lost and writing detrimentally fused with other interests. [...] Writing has its professional autonomy; it should complement other professions, but it should not supplant them or be swamped by them. (“Blueprint” 105)

Insisting on the autonomy of creative writing, Wright implores writers to resist subscribing to the conventions of other professions because, “[i]f the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material,” he writes, “the artistic sense is submerged”(105). Overly burdened with instructive information, Wright worries that to veer into the territory of didacticism risks hampering the creative writer’s ability to produce black expressive art.

But what does expressive art ideally look like for Wright? One particularly evocative answer to this question comes in an earlier section of “Blueprint” entitled, “A Whole Culture.” Here, Wright claims that the “folklore of the Negro people” is what constitutes “the most indigenous and complete expression” of black life. In marked contrast to the informative discourse that characterizes didactic writing, what folklore’s unlettered cultural expression conveys is racial *wisdom* (99):

It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular, work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (99)

Wright goes on to suggest that, “one would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people” (99). What should draw our

notice about Wright's parade of intimate communications is how these examples at once perform and assert a coy refusal to disclose information: with the alliterative exception of "songs sung under blazing suns," each channel of communication—"whispered words," "confidential wisdom," and "deepest vernacular"—is markedly hushed, plunging the information passed between speaker and listener into the space of shared secrecy. Performatively, these communications pulse with the intimate physicality of which they speak, thus the 'swapping of sex experience' transpires on 'street corners' from one boy to the next, while 'the ways of men' are passed 'from mouth to mouth.' Through this anecdotal list of folklore's affective capacities, Wright realizes what seemed like a paradoxical desire for a 'more intimate' yet 'profoundly social system' of communication—one comprised of bodies coming together in homes and streets alike, conducting shared 'racial knowledge' from the medium of one body to the next through physically embodied sensations.

"Lives and Thoughts Unknown to Us"

While Wright would aspire to this ideal of an intimate yet social form of knowledge throughout his career, by the time he wrote the prose for the photo-documentary text *Twelve Million Black Voices* in 1941, he had already begun to anticipate how his desire to convey shared affective experience would introduce significant tensions into literary forms that abide by the social-scientific convention to convey cultural information. Wright challenges his reader's desire for cultural information in the collaborative work *Black Voices*, which featured Wright's prose alongside arresting photos selected by Edwin Rosskam, the photo-director of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), who culled images and narratives for the book from the

FSA's archive of 65,000 photographs.⁶³ While the narrative of *Black Voices* tells the history of black Americans from slavery through to the Great Migration, critics have also noted how Wright's prose doesn't simply serve to instruct and inform the reader about the lives of black folk—it also questions the group divisions that identify the folk as a discrete social entity in the first place. As the critic Jeff Allred astutely puts it, “Wright urges us to simultaneously constitute our friable and overdetermined collective identities and subject them to critical analysis” (553). What hasn't received comment is how Wright questions the effacement of internal differences within the masses by evoking the experience of bewilderment. Such moments of bewilderment reveal startling gaps in the text's otherwise masterful claim to knowledge of the folk. In one instance of this aporetic absence, Wright remarks of the streams of black migrants newly arrived to the “tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone” of the North (93): “There are so many people. For the first time in our lives, we feel human bodies, strangers whose lives and thoughts are unknown to us, pressing always close about us. We cannot see or know a man because of the thousands and thousands of men” (100 emphasis in original).⁶⁴ For Wright, the experience of urban relocation entails finding oneself as part of a mass migration that prevents the men and women living within it from knowing or being known. Echoing his earlier account of blues, spirituals and folk tales, this description of the black folk underscores the affective experience of intimate sociality produced through the eroticized anonymity of physical contact in urban space: the feel of strangers' bodies ‘pressing

⁶³ According to historian David Bradley, the pictures amounted to “a pictorial history of people who, lacking literacy and the leisure time necessary to the keeping of records, in a real sense lived outside the realm of traditional history. These were people who, from the point of view of most of America, had neither faces nor voices. The FSA gave them faces,” while Wright, in his estimation, gave them a voice (xiv).

⁶⁴ As Jeff Allred has noted, Wright's “we” throughout *Black Voices* is “notoriously hard to pin down” (552).

always close,’ suggests a sensuous knowledge of others that belies the semantically restrictive medium of language. What is new in this instance is the attending experience of *failed* fellow feeling—specifically, the mutual failure Wright expresses of not being able to “see or know” another migrant, despite this common experience.⁶⁵ As Wright puts it a little later, “We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance words cannot bridge” (100). Once caught up in the crush of the crowd, Wright points to language’s inadequacy, its inability to traverse the psychic distance produced by the social conditions of the encompassing system.

The text does not stop with the baffling scenarios that transpire within the mass but extends bafflement’s scope to encompass the reader as well. Although critics have argued that *Black Voices*, “at once estranges its readers from the subject and offers a way back through captioning”(Allred 553), there are in fact numerous instances when Wright’s ‘captions’ offer no such comfort, and actually intensify the estranging effects of the urban experience. In many cases, Wright’s prose doesn’t offer a psychic bridge to the black subject featured in the accompanying photograph, but leaves the reader left without any access to interiority whatsoever. This exteriorizing effect distinguishes Wright’s project from conventional ethnography that emphasizes the transparency and immediacy of the subject. At the same time, this frustrated epistemological encounter with ‘strangers whose lives and thoughts are unknown to us’ places the reader’s experience into neat parallel with the subjective experience of the alienated black migrant. In this sense,

⁶⁵ Allred says that *Black Voices* “has value to us for its experimental stance that seeks out new ways of seeing and saying we” (551). Allred contention is that, “[...] *Black Voices* posits a set of antagonistic subject positions: a (white) *you* whose routine misrecognitions mistake the outer ‘garb’ for the inner self of the other and a (black) *we* who speaks to readers from the far side of a racial, social, and narrative divide” (552 emphasis in original). While Allred locates the misrecognition of outward appearance for inner self along racial lines, he makes no mention of the misrecognitions that transpire *between* black subjects. Wright’s evocations of bafflement within Chicago’s urban black masses in this work offers up a domestic iteration of the bafflement within the black diaspora that I will explore in more detail in *Black Power*.

Wright formally achieves the co-presence he seeks: an intimacy forged, not through informational exchange, but through the establishment of an affective parity between the “we” of the text, and reader.

Having considered Wright’s deviation from ethnographic protocols in these earlier pieces, we might now make better sense of the narrative and figurative tensions found in *Black Power*, tensions that have perplexed and even disappointed the travelogue’s readers. Wright’s baffled response toward the African multitudes he encounters will operate as an extension of his earlier critique of ethnographic writing’s didactic impulse to affirm identity categories, and his aesthetic experiments with intimate forms of sociality wrought through affective means. In what follows, I turn to two scenes in *Black Power* in which Wright both animates and undercuts the critical expectation that his travelogue should confirm coherent mass political identities that coalesce around the familiar designations of class and race, respectively. As my readings demonstrate, Wright produces an aesthetic of the prepolitical moment before collectivization: rather than consolidate group identity, *Black Power* unsettles identity through an ethnographic allegiance to description that, in its emphatic turn away from the big picture, is perhaps a little *too* detailed. In his attention to the minutiae of life in the Gold Coast, Wright destabilizes structural identities through a narrative strategy that segments the expected “whole” into countless parts distributed across space and time. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by examining Wright’s bewilderment as a critique of cultural interpretation before the practice’s limitations were formally expanded upon by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz nearly two decades later.

Essential Repetitions

Black Power invites us to pursue the question that preoccupied Wright in his composition of the travelogue: How could one best represent the African multitudes without claiming to know them? As we shall see, Wright approaches this problem in a surprising way—by organizing the anatomy of each episode in the travelogue through repetitive forms. While formal repetition seems like a stylistic deviation from the disciplinary and generic demands of ethnographic writing, I will show how, under Wright's charge, minor deviations from the form at hand will reveal the uncertainty that nests within scenes that seem otherwise predictable. This uncertainty will assume embodiment in the human figures of the multitudes themselves. First though, we can observe how Wright atomizes his view of the whole into social fragments to map out the visual correlative of what it means to have no overarching, sense-making scheme. Such fragmentation structures Wright's account of the shipping docks of Accra, where countless dockworkers known as stevedores swarm across the ocean waves, bringing freight to shore by meager canoe. The freight—everything from automobiles to potatoes—arrives on European freighters anchored a significant distance from the Accra harbor. As Wright explains, European importers hire African workers to transport merchandise over rough waters for a lower price than what it costs to dock the ships in Takoradi, 170 miles away, and bring the freight to Accra by rail. We are given a stark glimpse of the labor pool exploited by this operation early on: the “crowd of half-nude men huddled before a wooden stairway leading up to an office” seeking employment (154), offers a grim *mise en abyme* of the degraded community that exists on this shore as the living dross of global capital. And so it is with difficulty that we mark Wright's

account of the laborers' "physical exertion[s]" as reminiscent of the amassed power of an "army of men" (153, 152), without also expecting Wright to affirm the potential political power of the proletariat. To be sure, Wright rehearses the desire to deliver a Marxist anti-colonial critique of the degradation before him yet he resists resorting to such an organizing principle to explain the multitudes. This is even more surprising given that, in the travelogue's introduction, Wright assures us he will draw on the tenets of Marxism to provide explanation when necessary.⁶⁶ So why, we might ask, does Wright not turn to "Marxist instrumentalities" to interpret this scene as one of latent class solidarity and imminent historical change?

First, we should examine the interpretive strategies that Wright does deploy to read the scene. Rather than resort to an all-encompassing political philosophy to explain the group of laborers, Wright begins by dividing up the mass, numbering the men and their activities:

[...] as many as four men had to put their heads under [pieces of freight] to carry them forward. Beyond these rushing men, far out on the open sea, were scores of canoes, each holding twelve men who paddled like furies against the turbulent surf. [...] Each of the twelve men in each canoe held a short, splayed oar with three prongs; each man had to dip and pull this

⁶⁶ Wright states his position in the following terms: "In presenting this picture of a part of Africa, I openly use, to a limited degree, Marxist analysis of historic events to explain what has happened in this world for the past five hundred years or more. If anyone should object to my employment of Marxist methods to make meaningful the ebb and flow of commodities, human and otherwise, in the modern state, to make comprehensible the alignment of social classes in modern society, I have but to say that I'll willingly accept any other method of interpreting facts; but I insist that any other method *must not exclude the facts!* But my utilization of Marxist instrumentalities of thought does not necessarily commit me to programs or policies popularly associated with Marxist philosophy" (12 emphasis in original). Wright's mediation on the deployment and effect of theoretical frameworks to explain social relations extends back to "Blueprint for Negro Writing," where he stated that "Marxism is but the starting point" for the black writer (102). Wright reserves a section of that essay, entitled "Social Consciousness and Responsibility" to elaborate his position: "No theory of life can take the place of life. After Marxism had laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live. He may, with disgust and revulsion, say no and depict the horrors of capitalism encroaching upon the human being. Or he may, with hope and passion, say yes and depict the faint stirrings of a new and emerging life. But in whatever social voice he chooses to speak, whether positive or negative, there should always be heard, or over-heard his faith, his necessity, his judgment." (102-3).

oar through the water sixty times a minute if the canoe was to keep afloat and move through the raging current, and each stroke of each man had to plunge into the water at the same time. (153-54)

Wright's precise enumerations attempt to make sense of the entire scene by dividing it into smaller, more manageable bits—noting that it takes four men to lift freight, twelve to paddle each canoe, sixty strokes to keep a canoe afloat—breaks up the sheer enormity of the enterprise into smaller components. And yet, despite all of this precision, it is decidedly not the case that the laborious attention to detail clarifies: if anything, a comprehensive account of the multitude is obstructed by this slow accretion of quantifiable data. This effect is reminiscent of the mountains of sociological data back in Illinois, which threatened to signify the enormity of the information-gathering project rather than the information itself. But one could also note how neatly Wright's detail-oriented prose of optimal paddling rates and canoe occupancies mirrors a Taylorist logic of production in its rehearsal of the atomization of the worker and the standardization of his movements. Describing the men variously as “wet and glistening robots,” “machines,” and “spokes in a wheel,” before declaring, “I'd seen men tending machines in frantic haste, but I'd never seen men working like machines...”(155 ellipsis in original), Wright speculates that the activity around him might exist on an endlessly repeating loop, where distinctions between one worker and the next no longer register.⁶⁷ Wright's worry recalls the emotions provoked by infinitely repeated motion, according to Leo Bersani: “It is terrifying,” he claims, “because any repeated motion—from a particular compulsive ritual

⁶⁷ Foucault's famous biopolitical description of the totalizing effects of power over life that “center[s] on the body as a machine,” works like Wright's description insofar as both textually perform the segmenting effects they describe: “[the body's] disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* 139).

to the ‘productive spinning’ of the universe itself—can, by its very nature, never be penetrated by consciousness. Pure, undifferentiated repetition is always (even when it lasts only a short time) intrinsically infinite, eternal and nonhuman.”⁶⁸

Bersani’s analysis concludes with the caveat that, “We can imagine the end (the temporal finitude) of a series only when we can perceive differences among units of the series.” And upon closer inspection, it seems the case that Wright rehearses a Taylorist framing of the scene in order to critique it, by introducing small moments of deviation that thwart the scheme of perfectly reproducible actions. Discursively, these deviations manifest in the narrative as an inordinate amount of attention paid to the minor idiosyncrasies that crop up between one iteration of a standardized task and the next. The result, then, is not a narrative propelled by efficiency but rather an extended, exhausting, and slogging seriality, comprised by the stitching together of instances of *near* repetition. A remarkable illustration of this concerns the activity of the laboring stevedores as they “beach their canoes filled with merchandise and, without pausing, heave out the freight and hoist it upon their heads; then at breakneck speed, rush out of the sea, stamping through soft, wet sand, and run; finally they would disappear over a dune of sand toward a warehouse” (153). The isolated action of raising freight to head is narrated on five separate occasions in all: “swarms of half-naked men were carting huge loads upon their heads”(152); “coming toward me was an army of men...their heads holding pieces of freight”(152-3); “black robots would beach their canoes filled with merchandise and, without pausing, heave out the freight and hoist it upon their heads”(153); “another canoe came toward the beach...again they lifted the boxes or crates or sacks or machine parts to

⁶⁸ Bersani’s lucid analysis of literary repetition can be found in the chapter, “Lawrentian Stillness,” from *A Future for Astyanax* (1976).

their heads and came rushing toward me” (153); “There were some children working too, but not in the canoes; they waited at the water’s edge and helped their fathers or friends or brothers to lift the heavy loads to their heads” (154). What these numerous repetitions-with-a-difference illustrate is how the system’s totalizing impression starts to decompose as the narrative isolates some of the laborers as “fathers or friends or brothers” of small children—children whose unpaid help, we should note, is quietly exploited to sustain the capitalist fantasy of the laborers’ efficient, inexhaustible bodies. Though the series of tasks are consistent in kind, Wright emphasizes how each gesture varies by degree, so that even plodding through trivial recalibrations of the central action (variously connoted by carting, holding, hoisting, lifting) not only prevents the massification of these movements, it effectively presents an aesthetic challenge to, say, the editorial impulse to condense and summarize nearly identical acts in the name of narrative efficiency.

As it turns out, Wright’s editors at Harper and Brothers demanded that he edit the extraordinary number of repeated events in *Black Power* by either “condens[ing] individual incidents” or “choo[sing] among them, perhaps keeping only one of the many descriptions of funerals, dances, and markets” (Fabre 403). Indeed, the travelogue’s remarkably recursive narrative structure—what Michel Fabre describes as “numerous experiences relating to a few recurring themes, among them funeral rights, the talent and love for dancing and the scorn of the British” (401)—caused Harper and Brothers to complain that the manuscript’s plot verged on the dull and formulaic.⁶⁹ They urged

⁶⁹ Appiah has disparaged Wright’s repetitious style as well: After noting that the publisher asked Wright to excise “repeated references to his incredulity at aspects of religious practice” (195, Reilly quoted in Appiah), Appiah states, “But the references that remain are multitudinous enough; and they have the effect of establishing a massive distance between Wright (and his readers in the West) and the people of the Gold Coast” (195).

Wright to revise in an effort to pare down the unwieldy manuscript, which reached an exhaustive 600 pages.⁷⁰ While Wright did comply to some extent, he also insisted that monotony was necessary to his project, even claiming that, “the repetitions... were essential”(403). Explaining his stubborn affinity for the recursive, Wright wrote to his editor:

By going from spot to spot, talking to this person and that one, I had to gather this reality as it seeped into me from the personalities of others. There might be some merit in that kind of getting and giving a reality, but it might bore the reader. [...]. It involves going back to some extent over ground already covered but each going back reveals more and more of the things described. (quoted in Fabre 403)

Once again, Wright reverts to an embodied model of communication that relies on channeling the ‘reality’ of a situation through ‘this person and that’—not through language, but the seepage that Wright imagines when strange bodies come together and communicate. A narrative attuned to understanding people in terms of masses would skip over ‘each going back,’ in its haste, but Wright’s minor deviations frustrate the fantasy of efficiency. The nearly-repeating narrative, in other words, is a narrative that threatens to ‘bore the reader’ as it circles maddeningly around the mass it won’t describe.

“My Reactions Were So Baffled”

I’m arguing that such dizzying diversions from the mass—through fragmentation not consolidation, and minor differentiations within repetition—effectively perform a downward spiral into meaningless sociality. Such incoherent circlings through the social

⁷⁰ According to Fabre’s meticulous report of the travelogue’s drafting process: “The first version, 600 pages long, was finished by the New Year, and by January 21, 1954, Wright had reread and reduced it by 40 pages” (401). Fabre’s account of *Black Power*’s composition also relates Wright’s effort to make the draft more objective, recounting that, in the second stage of writing, Wright “added statistics and long quotations from the documents at his disposal, in order to substantiate the sociological, economic and historical premises of the book, which, despite everything, remained a travelogue, since its progression depended upon the experiences of exploration” (401).

world of the stevedores utterly defeat the teleological resolution that class identification would offer, and Wright affirms the readerly experience of foiled class expectations by explicitly framing the entire episode through his own uncertain eyes. Wright's initial effort to make sense of this massive mobilization of bodies renders him paralyzed with incomprehension: "The nearer I got to the men," he says from the outset, "the more amazed I became. I paused, gazing" (153). Wright's interpretive capacities are overcome by the vision yet the sense of bafflement continues to resurface throughout the episode: "My reactions were so baffled," Wright states later, "that I couldn't tell what I felt" (153).

⁷¹ He reasserts this blunted feeling, noting "I felt no protest; I was simply stunned [...]" (153). At this affective juncture, we should recall how Wright's feelings get similarly routed when the idea of travelling to Africa is first proposed: "[...] My emotions seemed to be touching a dark and dank wall" (18). We might expect such an abject and uncertain account of feeling to block Wright's quest for diasporic identification. And yet, in the opening, this uncertainty reopens the possibility of identification, as touching the wall compels him to ask, "...But, am I African?" As Wright's locution suggests, bafflement offers a different path to diasporic identity than the well-trodden one of cultural understanding through informative discourse.

Wright frames the end of the stevedore encounter by narrating his failure to generate knowledge, and privileging something akin to experience instead:

⁷¹ Wright quite literally "couldn't tell what he felt," and this seems significant insofar as the very medium of verbal expression seems an inappropriate one since the act of speaking is compromised by the physical demands of the work it means to describe. Wright mentions how "[...] a strange silence reigned over everything. I had the impression that the tense effort of physical exertion would not permit a man to spare enough breath to utter a word..." (153 ellipsis in original). At other moments, he recounts how talking becomes impossible because the workers' "lips [hang] open from sheer physical strain" (155).

I walked toward the exit, then paused and stared again at the fantastic scene, seeing it but not believing it. I felt no hate for the shipowners who had contrived that this should be; there was something here amiss deeper than cheating or profit....My reactions were elementary [...] And for this particular barbarity I had no answer, no scheme; I would not have gone on strike if I had worked there; I simply would not have worked there in the first place, no matter what.... (155 ellipsis in original)

That the scene ends with ellipsis warrants pause as well, for if Wright adhered to prevailing standards of cultural or class difference, no lingering uncertainty ('I had no answer, no scheme') of what he witnessed would remain.⁷²

As much as the condition of bewilderment threatens to overwhelm us with our own failures to understand, I'm also arguing that embracing our bewilderment as a counterintuitive reading tactic can generate new readings of the social forms available in the text. In this episode, such a disoriented reading allows us to discern an aesthetic of the pre-political in the movements of the African multitudes. From his safe vantage on the shore, Wright notices that, "On the horizon of the sea, about two miles away, were anchored the European freighters and between the shore and those ships were scores of black dots—canoes filled with rowing men—bobbing and dancing on the heaving water" (153). Suggestively located in the space between the European ships of the imperial past, and the shores of the postcolonial future, the scores of abstract black dots 'bobbing and dancing' on the waves present a discordant image of cultural expression within a rigid system of capital exchange.⁷³ This is not to say that the signifying power of dance

⁷² We should also recall the definition of the ellipsis (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*): "The omission of one or more words in a sentence, which would be needed to complete the grammatical construction or fully to express the sense." The ellipsis, in other words, heightens the effect of incompleteness generated by the string of negations in this sentence.

⁷³ Dance is often understood as a form of transatlantic black expressive culture. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy locates dance within what he terms a politics of transfiguration: "This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by

overwhelms the workers' relation to capital in this passage, but Wright's brief vision of a balance attained by the dots figures an abstract image of political possibility still to come. With a naturalist sensibility, the scene dramatizes the condition of the Gold Coast's population figuratively 'at sea'—caught in a state of prepolitical limbo without an actualized political identity in their country's not-quite-postcolonial order. The dancing dots depict a physically moving mass that nonetheless still doesn't represent a political mass movement.

“They would know me for a stranger”: Diasporic Failings

One powerful way the travelogue depicts the absence of black nationalism on a global scale might be Wright's slow dismantling of dance's capacity to consolidate black culture when confronted with the sight of funeral dancers. As I've mentioned, the travelogue boasts numerous episodes of such dancing, but my analysis of dance's capacity for communal undoing focuses on one particular episode that transpires in the darkened alleyways of James Town—a location that, secluded from the influences of global capital and Western culture, seems to present a promising venue for cultural wholeness. Before getting there though, we should consider how dance is introduced in the travelogue: Wright explicitly interprets the dancing multitudes as indicative of a monolithic nationalism that successfully dissolves (or as Wright puts it, “melts”) internal tribal differences into a shared Gold Coast culture. In one particularly vivid instance of

the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claim to truth” (37). For Gilroy, the business of conceiving utopias “move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual, and discursive”(37): nonlinguistic forms of communication such as dance, become powerful transmitters of messages and feelings that recognize the historical reality of slavery in their production of transnational, historically-informed, cultural formations. Successfully bridging difference in these new formations signifies a utopian move beyond ethnic particularity and the establishment of a new basis for community. Dance, in this paradigm, seems well positioned to assume the task of unifying hybrid diasporic identities.

this, dancers emerging from their homes to greet Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah lead Wright to surmise that:

[...] they'd galvanized into a whole that was 4,000,000 strong, demanding an end to their centuries-old thralldom. Though still mainly tribal, though 90 per cent illiterate, they wanted to be free of an alien flag, wanted to sovereignty of their own will in their own land. And they had melted their tribal differences into an instrument to form a bridge between tribalism and twentieth-century forms of political mass organization. (76)

This vision of the moving crowd offers the aesthetic of a unified Gold Coast, galvanized through the desire for self-sovereignty, and the singular leadership of the Prime Minister. The boisterous image of a cohesive mass ready to enter into 'twentieth-century forms of political mass organization' invokes an eager image of nationalistic belonging.

In what follows, Wright transports this dancing mass, replete with its nationalist resonances, to an unassuming back alley in order to play out the viability of a nationalism organized around the black diaspora. "As I strayed on I heard the sound of drums,"

Wright relates:

Yes; I'd find them....Guided by the throbbing vibrations, I went forward until I came to a vast concrete enclosure. The drums were beating behind that high wall....Could I get in? I went around the wall until I came to a narrow opening. Discreetly, I peered through and saw, far back in the compound, a group of people dancing to drums; kerosene lanterns lit up the tableau. Ought I go in? They were black and so was I. But my clothes were different from theirs; they would know me for a stranger. (158)

The scene seems to function as a set piece depicting the differences that hold the possibility of the black diaspora in suspension: Wright's spatial separation from the dancers indexes his cultural distance from the unified mass within. The distinction between Africans and outsiders is spatially maintained in two ways: first, Wright

“stray[s]” from the hotel for “foreigners” into the native streets of James Town,⁷⁴ and second, the high wall of the enclosure architecturally reinforces the distinction between inside and outside. Sartorially, Wright is further distanced through his discordant Western clothing. And yet, Wright occupies a liminal position in this densely partitioned space. Even as the narrow opening of the compounds walls suggests a porous membrane that invites Wright to see the dancers, the opening also encourages their framing as objects to be observed surreptitiously, and at a distance. That Wright finds himself ‘guided by the throbbing vibrations’ of the drums suggests a physical pull into a diasporic identification that transcends cultural difference. Through this deep-seated inner compulsion propelling the body to pursue a union with the dancers, Wright slyly stages the conditions for a neatly wrought allegory of black nationalism mobilized by an embodied experience akin to racial feeling.

However, as the situation unfolds, what seems like the imminent success of the black nationalistic microcosm here in the darkened streets never comes to fruition. In fact, even reading the compound as a locus of African community, and the dance as an expression of that communal culture, quickly becomes impossible. We might consider, for instance, Wright’s initial concern that his clothes will impede his path to acceptance: far from posing a barrier to entry, establishing that he’s a stranger actually prompts his invitation into the compound. Moreover, the interior of the compound, which initially seemed to grant entrants a sort of insider status doesn’t offer up the solidarity that it seemed to promise from without. Indeed, an unobstructed vision of the mass never fully materializes once Wright steps inside: Wright recounts, “noticing as I passed a row of

⁷⁴ Wright identifies hotels as distinctively foreign sites within Africa, and not because they’re occupied by foreign travelers: “all of them were owned by foreigners,” Wright claims, since “pride would have kept any African, if he had had the capital, from operating a hotel” (107).

dim-lit rooms that in some rooms only men were seated and in others only women...”
(159 ellipses in original).

Communal potential is troubled further by the eruption of a virtual proscenium arch across the inner sanctum that divides the dancers from the spectators: “An old man came to me and shook my hand, then offered me a chair. I sat and stared,” Wright says of his sudden relegation to the position of audience member. Wright assumed the dancing would strike him as earlier dances had, as a set of bodily movements rich in communal expression. However, the dancing he witnesses within the compound subverts this expectation. He describes the dancers in the following terms:

There was no sadness or joy on their faces; they struck me as being people who had to go through with something and they were doing their job. Indeed, most of the faces seemed absentminded. Now and then some man or woman would leave the ring and dance alone in the center. They danced not with their legs or arms, but with their entire bodies, moving slowly, undulating their abdomens, their eyes holding a faraway look. (159)

To be sure, this tableau’s stilted version of the encounter between viewer and performer recapitulates ethnography’s objective examination of a passive, readily-available culture. So it is significant that, in place of the meaningful plenitude that Wright expects from the mass of moving bodies, he encounters a jarring absence of nationalistic expression. In fact, as a dance for the dead, the performance, which includes the splintering off of individuals dancing ‘alone,’ threatens to be read as a celebration of communal decay and disintegration instead. Yet Wright’s impression that he’s witnessing men and women carrying on with their dance as if it were a form of labor links the striking absence of national feeling in this scene to those confused figures of the “dancing and bobbing” stevedores in the previous episode. Here the blank expression held on the faces of the

animate bodies delegitimizes the potential for a political reading of the assembly of dancers.

And, as in the stevedore episode, bewilderment structures this episode's narrative form as well: the repeated failure of the dance performance to mean anything to Wright catalyzes a cascade of descriptions plagued by their failure to establish epistemological certainty. Upon witnessing the dance, Wright immediately asks a bystander for its purpose—a query that is met with the curt response, “A girl has just died.” As the scene continues, the looping effect of Wright's search for meaning intensifies: “‘Why are they dancing?’ I asked again, recalling that I'd asked the same question before, but feeling that I hadn't had an answer,”

I still didn't know why they were dancing and I wanted to ask him a third time. [...] The lanterns cast black shadows on the wet ground as the men and women moved slowly to the beat of the drum, their hands outstretched, their fingers trembling. *Why are they dancing...*? It was like watching something transpire in a dream. Still another young man came and joined the two who now flanked my chair. They mumbled something together and then the young man who had brought me in stooped and whispered: ‘You'd better go now, sar.’ [...] I had been looking backward as I walked and then the young man pulled the wooden gate shut and it was gone forever....I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me. (160-161 emphasis in original).

Instead of dissolving opacity, the text's vision of the dimly lit dancers shrouds their forms in the darkened shadows thrown by lanterns. Reading with bewilderment preserves the opacity of the subject that ethnography aims to render transparent. The scene reprises Wright's ‘yawning void,’ concluding with the refusal to consolidate black nationalism, as Wright's persistent questioning performs the text's refusal to provide answers.

This reading ought to recall Appiah's critique of *Black Power*; namely, that the travelogue's narrative tends to string together observations without explanation. In

keeping with ethnographic literature's projected public utility, he claims such a scene constitutes a "failure of sympathy"(194), and points, furthermore, to "missed opportunities for understanding; the points at which a route for the Westerner into the traditional world is barred by Wright's desire not to understand" (196). As the readings I have offered suggest, the narrative performs the failure to understand many times over, but not due to any abiding commitment to Western elitism on Wright's part. Rather, Wright forwards scramblings of the human sensorium as a means of indexing a copresence with what is unknown. This tactic supplies an ethical alternative to what Appiah had early called 'informational discourse,' a discourse which tends to trade in the codified differences produced through mass political identities. Appiah's suggestion that Wright's entry into the secret "traditional world" of Africa only happens through sympathetic narratives that claim cultural understanding provokes me to conclude this chapter by considering how Wright's text might allow us, finally, to reconsider the ethical relation between the reader and the African subjects of Wright's travelogue as something other than a recapitulation of the imperialist fantasy of cultural penetration.

"We do not understand people": Social Experience Without Social Knowledge

In closing, I will outline some of the theoretical work done by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in order to elucidate how *Black Power's* project draws out a more expansive vision of ethnography's ethical capacities. As I stated in the introduction of this chapter, ethnography conventionally posits a subject that may be rendered transparent through the interpretation of social data collected through direct observation. In thinking through the alternatives to interpretation, Wright critiques the ethnography's (and by extension the African American travelogue's), participation in the

reproduction and circulation of mass political forms. That Wright structured his 1954 travelogue around these interests is all the more remarkable given that sustained critical attention to the nature of the hermeneutic activity embedded in the ethnographic process doesn't turn up in anthropological literature until the 1970s. In a seminal essay on ethnographic methodology entitled, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," (1973), anthropologist Clifford Geertz corrects a common methodological misconception, namely, the "view of anthropological research as rather more of an observational and rather less of an interpretive activity than it really is" (4). Geertz was a proponent of symbolic anthropology, a framework through which culture is understood as a product of systems of meaning. A semiotic approach to culture thus relies heavily on the interpretative work of the anthropologist: "What we call our [ethnographic] data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to." Interpretation, as Geertz says, is everything:

[...] anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a 'native' makes first order ones: it's his culture). They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of *factio*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments.

In pointing out how observation is mediated through cultural meaning, Geertz disavows the objective status of anthropological knowledge as social reality.⁷⁵ Anthropology is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication [it is] after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" (2). While Geertz turns to interpretation to press passed enigmatic surfaces, enigmas nonetheless continue to crop up throughout "Thick Description," as figures of

⁷⁵ Geertz puts this point rather poetically: "man is an animal suspended in webs of signification he himself has spun" (2).

the irretrievable or impenetrable limitations posed by language. In one instance of this, Geertz draws on a passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) to reaffirm the enigmatic quality of others:

We... say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation, that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand people (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them." (6-7).

In the face of the seemingly intractable problem of enigmatic others, Geertz will end up redoubling his claim that a rigorous fidelity to context enhances the density of the interpretive framework and overcomes the perpetual opacity that structures social encounters. The penetrative powers of ethnography thus emerge with renewed vigor. Now routed through semiotic interpretation rather than direct observation, ethnography "bring[s] us in touch with the lives of strangers" (8) Geertz claims, and "renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity" (7).

While Wright shares Geertz's skepticism toward the referential capacities of language, he diverges from Geertz when it comes to the question of interpretation. While for Geertz, the ethnographic objective is to interpret culture (and thereby dissolve opacity), for Wright, culture is something to be repeated, observed, experienced—but never interpreted, or otherwise 'accessed.' Not interpreting culture will come to look like sustaining an encounter with enigmatic alterity rather than seeking its dissolution. One way to put this difference is that Wright ultimately seeks intimacy, not knowledge. Bewilderment serves this function rather effectively because it dependably fails to find meaning. Thus, the idiom of bewilderment provides a productive counterpoint to

informational discourse that would readily offer social knowledge about other cultures. Through its disorientation of the mind and the senses, bewilderment functions to deconstruct the subject-object binary that conventionally organizes the ethnographic process. So far as it disrupts culturally-produced modes of knowing, bewilderment also momentarily uncouples perception from the semiotic categories that uphold social taxonomies.

One way to frame the ethical model that Wright delivers in *Black Power*, then, is to recognize the revelatory social possibilities contained in bewilderment's insistent location in the body. By turning to bewilderment to structure conviviality in his travelogue, Wright reaches for a social experience outside the limits of language's referential capacities.⁷⁶ Moreover, we should recognize how the epigraphs of this chapter invoke the deeply affective nature of experiential intimacies across multiple moments of reading and writing: bewilderment heightens the intensity with which we read. It also highlights the pleasure and gratification to be had in recognizing that one does not know everything. These outcomes take us some distance from the ethnographic protocols of transparency and immediacy with which we started, and against which *Black Power* has been unfavorably measured. But critics that respond to black transnational writing expecting to get inside information on far away people and places might heed Wright's injunction to stop and question what expectations about mass political identities they bring to the text in the first place. Surrendering to bafflement requires critics of Wright's travel writing to consider the ethical utility of less invasive modes of textual engagement.

⁷⁶ For an intriguing contemporary call for ethnographer's to consider the ethical need to narrate embodied co-presence (or what he calls, "coevalness,") see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (2002).

Rather than dig deep, they might skim the surface of unaccountable social forms—and experience the pleasure of finding themselves bewildered in the process.

Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* will offer an apt endpoint to learning to live with bafflement. If the last two chapters have revealed odd moments of intimacy between strangers only to suggest that such fleeting forms of relation cannot endure under the more imposing communities organized around structural identity, then the final chapter offers the most sustained account yet of what strange intimacies might look like as a way of life. Of course, there might seem to be something nihilistic about suggesting that George's method of living with his partner's death should serve as a template for living strangely, but then I'm also suggesting that this method of living is what generates the optimism George feels in young Kenny's presence as well. I'll also press more firmly on something about our experience as readers that I've been alluding to throughout the dissertation: reading these novels is learning to live closely with others while remaining a stranger.

CHAPTER 4

Humming Queerly to Oneself: The Intimacy of Communicating Otherwise in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*

[...] we are originally seduced into a relation by messages we can't read,
enigmatic messages that are perhaps inevitably interpreted as secrets.
— Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality" (2000)

There is not one but many silences [...].
— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (1976)

In 2009, long-time fashion designer and first-time director Tom Ford adapted Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel, *A Single Man*, to film. Reviews for Ford's "wrenching and ravishing" debut were generally positive (Mondello): most found Ford's handling of sixties Los Angeles appropriately nostalgic, his aesthetic precision stylish if a tad distracting, and his treatment of George Falconer's (Colin Firth) mourning exemplary in its tender representation of romance between men. As viewers routinely noted, what swells to the surface of nearly every frame of the film is the "almost sensuous grief" George experiences in response to the untimely death of his lover, Jim (Matthew Goode). As *The New York Times* put it, "[...] Firth plays with a magnificent depth of feeling, has had his heart broken, and the pieces are still falling.

The film's foregrounding of George's lost love recuperates a sentimental vision of queer community, one that celebrates the normative character of George's sexual relationship with Jim. In this sense, the film entrances with the romance of queer community. While such a reading is certainly available in the novel as well, what

becomes more salient in the novel than the film is that, despite his love of Jim, George stands at odds with the broader community around him. Isherwood will figure George's neighborhood, for instance, as a rapidly expanding spawning ground for newly married couples:

[...] the World War Two vets came swarming out of the East with their just-married wives, in search of new and better breeding grounds in the sunny Southland, which had been their last nostalgic glimpse of home before they shipped off to the Pacific. And what better breeding ground than a hillside neighborhood like this one, only five minutes' walk from the beach and with no through traffic to decimate future tots? (18)

As this passage indicates, a notion of national community belies a tacit heterosexuality organized, not just around the heterosexual couple but, by extension of its reproductive potential, the family. As Berlant and Warner have explained,

Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction. A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. (554)

Yet the bellicose language of swarming, breeding, occupying ground, and threatening decimation suggests that the war Isherwood alludes to here is not only the one fought across the Pacific: there is an unmistakable hostility present in this narrative of domestication. It reflects a national ideology that romanticizes heterosexual sex in order to silently establish and defend itself as a norm. While heterosexuality gets cast as necessary to the survival of the body politic and its reproductive futurity, homosexuality figures as threats to the nation's health and well-being. This internal antagonism was identified by Leo Bersani who's asked, "Should a homosexual be a good citizen?" in

order to consider what might be gained from embracing the threat to society that queers are imagined to embody.⁷⁷

On the one hand then, Isherwood's story can be read as one of the queer community performing the appropriately sentimental gestures required for national membership. The quietly exquisite portrayal of George's romance in Ford's film is exemplary of this position. On the other, the novel's introduction of the specter of the 'decimated' child might be read as a queer embrace of the socially disruptive force of anticomunitarianism.⁷⁸ This chapter will align with neither of these approaches. Instead, I assume a position like the one proposed by the late José Muñoz in his polemic, *Cruising Utopia* (2009). As he puts it:

Although the antirelational approach assisted in dismantling an anticritical understanding of queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity. The version of queer social relations that [*Cruising Utopia*] attempts to envision is critical of the communitarian as an absolute value and of its negation as an alternative all-encompassing value (10).

Muñoz work productively lines up with the point of this chapter, which turns away from hetero- and homosexuality alike as the basis for community. *A Single Man*, I argue, does away with structural identity by resisting language yet seeks out other means of communication. This is put succinctly by George as he explains the problems of society toward the end of the novel:

We're in quite enough of a mess, semantically and every other way—without getting ourselves entangled in these dreary categories. I mean, what is this life of ours supposed to be for? Are we to spend in identifying each other with catalogues, like tourists in an art gallery? Or are we to try

⁷⁷ Also see Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" which inaugurates the antisocial turn in queer theory.

⁷⁸ See Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

to exchange some kind of signal, however garbled, before it's too late?
(174)

Conventionally thought, George's reference to a garbled signal evokes the idea of a communicative failure that is incomprehensible, imparting no semantic content.⁷⁹ It is precisely this quality, however, that will allow us to think about it in the way that Tom Roach, following Brian Massumi, has suggestively thought about affect: "Affect [...] is unrepresentable: In the remainder not captured in social life lies the potential for articulating, gesticulating, and communicating in ways incomprehensible to extant semiotic systems" (109). Moreover, because it is outside of language, Roach recognizes in affect an "unruly, communal nature" that is potentially "radically social" (11). Framed in this manner, we might approach the garbled signals in the novel as the basis for such a radical sociality. To refine what I mean by this we might consider the ordinary scene from which the title of the chapter is drawn: As George crosses a parking lot, "He hums queerly to himself, with a sounds like bees around a hive" (93). This apian drone offers up no information from George's private thoughts, and yet it is relational insofar as it communicates a subjective nondisclosure to the reader. Through the hum, we are held in a strange relation with George and come away knowing that we know precisely nothing about him.

In what follows, I first examine how critics repeatedly make recourse to sexual identity in their efforts to make sense of sociality in Isherwood's fiction. Such readings,

⁷⁹ We should note though that information theorists have convincingly nuanced the strict binarism of the convention I'm referring to here. As Tiziana Terranova has pointed out, "To a human ear, the information contained in encrypted bits might appear literally as hisses and noise (as in the emblematic sound of a modem connecting to the Internet). And yet, when communicated through a channel, this piece of noise also is information; that is, it displays a pattern of redundancy and frequency that can be encoded into a signal and further encoded in what will eventually appear to us as a Web page or simply a piece of random junk mail. In this sense, as information theory explicitly states, information does not involve meaning but only statistical patterns of redundancy and frequency—a modulation of signal to noise. (56)

organized around making the book and the character speak of a sexuality they seem unable to tell, are unanimously invested in penetrating the surface of the text, conflating the location of the novel's meaning with the mining of its secrets. I then engage in a series of close readings that challenge this approach to the text. In contrast to the posture of 'tourists in an art gallery' that George derides above, I show that the novel favors relations constituted through the disintegration of aesthetic form. In concluding, the chapter considers how Isherwood's mediation on George's singular sexuality locates his fiction in a broader philosophical debate that theorizes what Butler has called, "sexual practices [...] that do not appear immediately as coherent within the available lexicon of legitimation" (20).

Reading as Classification

"George smiles good-sportingly and says, "you left out Mr. Pordage and Mr. Propter—what do they do?" (67). George poses this question to a roomful of college students who have just read Aldous Huxley's novel, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939).⁸⁰ Alexander Mong explains Pordage with ease, but when it comes to Propter his response grows vague and confused: "'And Propter—' Alexander grins and scratches his head, clowning it up a bit—I'm sorry, sir. You'll just have to excuse me. I mean, I didn't hit the sack till like half past two this morning, trying to figure that cat out. Wow! I don't dig that jazz.'" Alexander trails off, Propter is never "figured out," and the class begins to

⁸⁰Elizabeth Hardwick's contemporaneous review, "Sex and the Single Man," punned on the Helen Gurley Brown sex advice manual for women in her title (which appeared in the *The New York Review of Books* on August 20, 1964). Remarkable by today's standards, she suggests that this scene of pedagogy masks George's "natural" propensity for indiscretion, noting that "when he gives his brittle, hysterical lecture on Huxley's *After Many a Summer [Dies the Swan]*, we see that George is not a real teacher, but one of those American artists or writers, hanging by his fingernails to his academic and sexual freedom, making a diversive (sp) display to *hide* a natural leaning toward indiscretions" (1).

dissect the novel from a different angle. But like an itch that must be scratched, the class discussion compulsively returns to Propter in what amounts to an inordinate readerly interest in an *absence*. The class inquest finds that, “Mr. Propter has no sex life. This makes him unconvincing as a character” (68).⁸¹

Reading in search of an absence or presence takes a more literal form elsewhere in the novel, when an IBM punched card machine performs the reading. George examines, “an oblong card slotted and slitted and ciphered by an IBM machine, expressing some poor bastard of a student’s academic identity,” because in the world of the university’s bureaucratic record-keeping “this card *is* his identity” (45 emphasis in original).⁸² For one brief, exhilarating moment, George is seized by the impulsive desire to “tear it up” or at least punch another slit in the card with his secretary’s nail file. Here George’s fantasy goes beyond merely disrupting the “old robot” that will eventually attempt to ‘read’ the card—if the neatly spaced holes on the punched card’s surface render human identity discrete and automatically legible, then the threat of George’s

⁸¹ Mr. Propter’s philosophical monologue in the Huxley novel insists, among other things, that “the most intimate contact is only of surfaces” an ethics that this chapter traces through *A Single Man*:

From solitude in the womb, we emerge into solitude among our fellows, and return again to solitude within the grave. We pass our lives in the attempt to mitigate that solitude. But propinquity is never fusion. The most populous city is but an agglomeration of wildernesses. We exchange words, but exchange them from prison to prison, and without hope that they will signify to others what they mean to ourselves.

We marry, and there are two solitudes in the house instead of one; we beget children, and there are many solitudes. We reiterate the act of love; but again propinquity is never fusion. The most intimate contact is only of surfaces and we couple, as I have seen the condemned prisoners at Newgate coupling with their trulls, between the bars of our cages.

Pleasure cannot be shared; like pain, it can only be experienced or inflicted, and when we give pleasure to our lovers or bestow charity upon the needy, we do so, not to gratify the object of our benevolence, but only ourselves. For the truth is that we are kind for the same reason as we are cruel, in order that we may enhance the sense of our own power; and this we are for ever trying to do, despite the fact that by doing it we cause ourselves to feel more solitary than ever. (Huxley 174-5)

⁸² The punched card is a bygone relic of computing systems, later replaced by magnetic tape, and used by big businesses to sort data and maintain records efficiently. “Facts,” as Burton Dean Friedman’s *Punched Card Primer* from 1955 tells us, “are recorded in the form of holes punched in paper cards.”

errant puncture disrupts the practice of finding identity absent or present. Punched card machines can be directed to translate punched holes, according to one manual, “this translation is termed ‘interpreting’”(6). By juxtaposing this reading of absences on cards with the reading of Mr Propter’s sexuality in George’s class, I mean to emphasize how Isherwood draws our attention to the hermeneutic tendency to read absence as identity.

Through these scenes of human and machine reading respectively, the novel anticipates its critical reception. With startling frequency, reviewers repeatedly isolate and positively identify George’s sexuality in their invariably vigilant responses to the absence of sex in *A Single Man*. For instance, in the September 1964 issue of the American political journal, *The New Republic*, Stanley Kauffmann’s review, slyly entitled “Death in Venice, California,”⁸³ recounts the minor events that occur over the course of novel yet perceives an oversight in Isherwood’s otherwise meticulously-crafted account of George’s day: “The only obvious *omission*,” Kauffmann knowingly reports, “is a sexual act” (23 emphasis added). Kauffmann explains that the absence of sex is strategic, passed over precisely because the wise reader dutifully expects to find it: “we feel that this has been left out to keep the cross-section [of the day] from being too complete” (23).

Jonathan Fryer’s 1976 critique tracks sexuality in Isherwood’s novels over the course of his career, endeavoring to rescue Isherwood as “one of the great Gay Liberators of the bourgeoisie” by insisting that the very absence of sex in his novels bespeaks its repressed and thus all the more insistent presence. Though he remarks of Isherwood’s first novel (*All the Conspirators* (1928)) that “sex is presented only obliquely, hinted at as

⁸³ Of course, the title of the review evokes Thomas Mann’s novella, *Death in Venice* (1912).

a motivating force behind personal relationships” Fryer boldly brings to the fore what he insists Isherwood left lurking in the shadows:

In a century whose fiction is remarkable for its growing sexual candor, Isherwood has been no trailblazer. The treatment of formerly taboo subjects in his work comes years after that by more adventurous writers such as D.H. Lawrence or, later, Gore Vidal. Even now, none of his novels has contained any noticeably ‘hot’ scenes (if one discounts George’s session with a handkerchief in *A Single Man*), mainly because he seems to feel them unnecessary. There is, however, a traceable development in the approach of his novels to sex, as if each time he has felt justified in going one little step further, swimming with the current of enlightened public opinion rather than leading it. To my mind, therefore, his significance in this field comes from the way he had helped to make respectable topics previously unmentionable in polite society” (344).⁸⁴

More recent criticism shifts from forgiving Isherwood for his modest approach to the failure of reviewers to read for sex. And so, despite reviews keen to overturn Isherwood’s repressive inclinations, David Garnes (2000) notes with some disappointment that, “There is no positive mention of the front-and-center depiction of George’s sexuality in any mainstream review [...]” Garnes goes on to say that, “Aside from using the adjective ‘homosexual’ to describe George, reviewers tended to ignore this groundbreaking aspect of the book.” “Respected for his earlier novels where gay themes are somewhat veiled or of peripheral importance,” Garnes suggests that, “Isherwood in *A Single Man* may have ventured into territory too uncomfortable for most critics to explore.” Reviewers deal with their discomfort, he argues, by recasting George as “a virtual Everyman,” speculating that, “perhaps it was prudent in 1964 for reviewers

⁸⁴ In his review of Peter Parker’s *Isherwood: A Life Revealed*, Thomas Mallon similarly lauds Isherwood for his increasingly “assertive” treatment of homosexual themes in his later fiction: “[Isherwood] earned his place in [the political pantheon of the homosexual movement] by producing assertively gay books well before *Christopher and His Kind*, during the 1950s and 1960s” (6).

to take that express route as a way of praising the book, conveniently bypassing the particular details of George's sexual life along the way" (201).

As the criticism illustrates, readings of Isherwood (much like the novel's account of reading Huxley) enact the repressive hypothesis.⁸⁵ With an uncanny likeness to George's students, seasoned readers of Isherwood's fiction also, "come forward like star detectives with the solution to [the novelist's] crime"(67).⁸⁶ These responses venture to speak what they take to be the open secret that Isherwood and his contemporary reviewers are thought to demurely keep. Locating what Kauffmann names the "obvious omission," readers attribute the absence that isn't, to either modesty on the part of Isherwood or discomfort on the part of his contemporary critics. Kauffmann, Fryer, Garnes, Mallon and Hardwick seek to repair the omission of homosexuality by enthusiastically recovering it from the manifest text of the novel in their responses to it—following suite, Isherwood in turn is made to earn his title as a writer of 'assertively gay books' paradoxically *and* precisely due homosexuality's bashful absence in them.

We have been versed in the epistemology of the closet for over twenty years now: how its structure cements certain forms of knowledge as truth, and how locating truth in forms of private exposure makes compulsory certain confessional speech acts.⁸⁷ That is to say, the legibility of queer identity requires that one get outside the closet, and that

⁸⁵ Speaking of sexual identity, Bersani notes in *Homos* that: "the elaborating of certain erotic preferences into a 'character'—into a kind of erotically determined essence—can never be a disinterested scientific enterprise. The attempted stabilizing of identity is inherently a disciplinary project. Panoptic vision depends on a successful immobilizing of the human objects it surveys, and, in an argument made famous by Michel Foucault, sexuality now provides the principal categories for a strategic transformation of behavior into manipulable characterological types. Once 'the homosexual' and 'the heterosexual' were seen as primary examples of such types, it was perhaps inevitable that any effort to enclose human subjects within clearly delimited and coherent identities would become suspect" (*Homos* 3). See also Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Volume I*.

⁸⁷ See Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

moving from inside to out requires an enunciation—an enunciation which, through its very articulation, performs the queer identification it claims to reveal. Perhaps no one has elucidated this structure for us more than Eve Sedgwick. While she begins with the epistemology of the closet, an epistemology that invites the sort of inferences about sexual identity I’ve been pointing out, Sedgwick will come to revisit the role it has played in engendering certain reading practices. In her essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or you’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you” (1997, 2004), Sedgwick diagnoses the “methodological centrality of suspicion” that has come to dominate critical theory via the hermeneutics of suspicion she attributes to Paul Ricoeur’s earlier work on Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. But what is interesting for our purposes is her claim that “queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative” (126). Sedgwick locates these intimate beginnings with Freud’s yoking of paranoia to “the repression of specifically same-sex desire”(126), then tracks it to Guy Hocquenghem’s assertion in the 1970s that paranoia is particularly adept at illuminating the phobic dynamics of homosexuality. But paranoid methodologies, Sedgwick points out, are but “one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones”(128). “Paranoid strategies,” she insists, “represent *a* way, among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge”(130 emphasis in original).⁸⁸ These

⁸⁸ Sedgwick states the case against “paranoid consensus” clearly here: “If there is an obvious danger in the triumphalism of a paranoid hermeneutics, it is that the broad consensual sweep of such methodological assumptions, the current near professionwide agreement about what constitutes narrative or explanation or adequate historicization may, if it persists unquestioned, unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills. The trouble with a shallow gene pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g., political) change” (144).

observations invite us to consider the epistemological practices to be gleaned *from* queer fictions, rather than merely practiced on them.⁸⁹

“A Kind of Intimacy”

Isherwood’s literary experimentation with alternative models of sociality resists the notion that relations ought to align with the categorical identities offered by language. In one striking manifestation of what a sociality without language might look like, Isherwood begins the novel with an encounter between lovers: one living and one remembered by the body but not thought of in the mind after death. It seems significant that, although George is living in the wake of Jim’s untimely death, Isherwood doesn’t exactly characterize the loneliness that George experiences as a direct result of the loss of his partner. The origin of George’s feeling of loneliness seems more a condition of existence rather than an affect catalyzed by loss. The feeling of loneliness is described in terms of an instantaneity that leaves George dispossessed—“the sensation of suddenly finding himself on an abrupt, brutally broken off, jagged edge” (13). And yet, there is something familiar in the suddenness, as though the “sick newness” of the sensation has itself become domesticated and routinized by the clockwork predictability with which it erupts at the same time and place: “And it is here, nearly every morning, that George, having reached the bottom of the stairs” seems to collide physically with Jim’s absence. The feeling of shock, by virtue of its repetition, has been modulated—familiarized. Yet, to speak of shock as familiar, or even as the felt, embodied experience of grief, is not the same as having knowledge of the sensation: “[George] stands quite still, silent. Or at most

⁸⁹ “[...] the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (151).

uttering a brief animal grunt, as he waits for the spasm to pass. Then he walks into the kitchen. These morning spasms are too painful to be treated sentimentally. After them, he feels relief, merely. It is like getting over a bad attack of cramp” (13). The affective nature of George’s response to Jim’s absence resists language as the sensation is based in the body and only manifests vocally in the grunt of animality. Through a gentle pun, Isherwood’s evokes the sentimentality of mourning only to dismiss it as the anticipated response. In another context, Bersani has explained that, “the ‘unfeeling’ reaction”—how we might characterize George’s response at this moment of spasm—reveals the subject’s distance from death to be illusory: “to think that we can look at [death] the way it appears to look at us, as a spectacle distinct from the looking” gives way here to an uncanny togetherness rendered as a deadening of experience for the one still alive (*Forms* 160). And indeed, through this physiological account of his response, George experiences a blank consciousness. Moreover, the connection proposed by George’s embodied mourning of Jim offers a challenging limit case that comes to look like a paradigmatic instance of the novel’s unspeakable model of intersubjectivity that avoids the snares of linguistic communication.

While speaking of the relation that surmounts the distinction between the living and the dead as a form of sociality might seem extreme in its gothic undertones, I mean to identify a model of relation in the novel that depends on one’s aloneness. What the relationship between George and his student Kenny Potter seems to depend upon is, in a similar sense, the reaffirmation of one’s singularity in the effort to enter sociality. For Isherwood, this form of relation will look like the trading of subject and object positions. Kenny follows George from campus until the two are engaged in conversation, the

student's muteness beckons George to engage in a series of fraught attempts at reading: "Silence. George glances quickly up at Kenny and sees that he's looking, though without any apparent interest, at the hirsute girl. Perhaps he hasn't even been listening. It's impossible to tell" (80). What transpires between George, Kenny, and Kenny's friend Lois who sits at a distance undoes traditional accounts of aesthetic form in which the aesthetic subject contemplates from a safe distance the safely cordoned-off object that stands before her. Here George assumes the role of the covert observer, looking quickly at Kenny as though to catch something meaningful in his look. We might surmise from the context that George looks to Kenny in this way in the hopes that he might obtain information. That Kenny's reticence is taken as a provocative sign of his hidden cognition is underscored by the series of questions George asks to himself: "Kenny is silent. Is he thinking this over? Is he going to ask George something right now? George's pulse quickens with anticipation" (80). We might speculate that the interpretive difficulty is what fuels George's anticipation, although the quickening pulse ambiguously ties this anticipation to the confirmation of a sexual attraction. But George's attempts to relate to Kenny by solving the riddle of his look's meaning recursively encounters an uncanny version of itself for Kenny is engages in the very same act of silent-looking as George. Like George, Kenny is looking at somebody. But it remains even less clear in Kenny's case what his observation of Lois means to achieve. Is Kenny seeking to extract information with his glance? The text is resolutely undecided on this point. Though Kenny shows no "apparent interest" in Lois this is not quite the same thing as disinterestedness. And again, the valence of sexual curiosity hangs thick around the term, "interest." Is Kenny's interest in Lois a sexual one? Or is his interest merely a desire to

know or learn something less charged, and more benign about her? We find George's inquisitive posture echoed in Kenny's position, the formal correspondence draws the two men into a bond of resemblance that pulls them out of the binary opposition of subject and object and places them in an ambiguous relation that results from the disintegration of that form. Kenny's look doesn't mirror George's look so much as it extends George's glance beyond them both. Moreover, if the act of interested looking begins with George and repeats itself with Kenny, then Kenny seems to extend the act outward to Lois who, like a cipher, neither confirms or denies the interest it might carry. Kenny's repetition of George's glance is also a further refusal to close the circuit that would lock the two men in an epistemologically-driven dyad. Again, nothing can be confirmed for George with certainty and his desire for knowledge is not satiated.

And yet, after all this deferral, the fact that Kenny's gaze is possibly a disinterested one draws George back into a formal relation with the student, imaginatively substituting himself for Lois as the object under Kenny's subjective consideration: "perhaps," George thinks to himself, "he hasn't even been listening" *to me*. But in readily renouncing his subjective status, and assuming the place of Kenny's object, George comes no closer to obtaining certain knowledge of Kenny's desire than his furtive glance had achieved. To perform this substitution requires George to consider other sensory registers and, as his speculation moves from the ocular to the auditory, George can fantasize that perhaps his voice becomes the object of Kenny's appraisal. Here again though, ambiguity is heightened as any confirmation of interest remains stubbornly out of reach. What comes to the fore at this moment is the persistent opacity of *any* listener's attention. Isherwood highlights how moments of perceived communication are always

threatened by the possibility of an absent-presence of attention on the part of the one who seems to be listening. The act of listening is always an inference.

The continual deferral of confirmation in this moment of contact dramatizes the displacement of epistemological certainties George's questions would seem to provoke. Yet even as George feels the anxious possibility of knowing Kenny's desires slip out of his acquisitive grasp, the scene will, at the same time, insist on the similarities between the two men through formal correspondence with a mounting intensity. If this moment eschews a relation between the two men that depends on the success with which can George claim knowledge of Kenny's inner desires, the conclusion that a relation between them must be impossible is nevertheless forestalled. Offered in its place is a less active mode of relation, one forged through the ease of their replication, as well as the breakdown of subject and object that such a correspondence would entail. George's sensory observations are frustrated in their efforts to ascertain Kenny's interest which seem locked within a resolutely impenetrable subjectivity. But more than this, they also demonstrate how the very effort on George's part to cordon off Kenny so as to make an objective study of him gives way under the weight of its own futility. The false sense of absolute division between the man who looks and the one who is looked at is surmounted.

Before George and Kenny part ways in the campus bookstore there is a moment that considers what is born out of mutual silence and welcome unintelligibility: "They remain silent, grinning almost intimately. George feels that, even if all this doubletalk hasn't brought them any closer to understanding each other, the not understanding, the readiness to remain at cross-purposes, is in itself a kind of intimacy" (82).⁹⁰ The term

⁹⁰ George understands the distance between George and Kenny in this scene to depend on a refusal to read for depth—imagining instead an intimacy generated out of the unsatisfying knowledge that there are limits

intimacy is perhaps surprising in this context. For Isherwood there is “a kind of intimacy” that depends on not understanding. The silence that structures George’s feeling of intimacy does not depend on a communicative mode that would require one to speak and the other to listen and understand. Along these lines, Jean-Luc Nancy has insisted that “[...] communication is not a bond.” He proposes “the metaphor of the ‘social bond’ unhappily superimposes upon ‘subjects’ (that is to say, objects) a hypothetical reality (that of the ‘bond’) upon which some have attempted to confer a dubious ‘intersubjective’ nature that would have the virtue of attaching these objects to one another.” Instead, Nancy locates the communicative work we commonly ally with speech outside of language. In doing so he draws speech into alignment with silence for their shared propensity to reveal the limit to understanding another’s subjectivity. Nancy will suggest that “speech—including silence—is not a means of communication but communication itself, an exposure [...]. The speaking mouth does not transmit, does not inform, does not effect any bond; it is—perhaps, though taken at its limit, as with the kiss—the beating of a singular site against other singular sites [...]” (*Listening* 30-1). Nancy’s language of communication is one of surfaces, reinforcing the turn away from a need for a psychological depth model of the subject to determine what we mean by communication. The silence that surrounds George and Kenny “communicates” the lack of understanding that structures the relation between the two men. Indeed, this is what Bersani might call the “communication of forms” (in Silverman 411), a communication, he suggests, that occurs without subjective intention whatsoever.

to what one can know of the other. Compare this with Kauffmann’s review that the novel keeps a certain “distance”: “[...] Isherwood never loses sight of life but it seems sometimes out of reach. [...] [This book] holds us because it runs parallel with the truth of our lives, but like any parallel it keeps a certain distance” (24).

Throughout, *A Single Man* presses psychologically-impenetrable subjects into collective arrangements that question the assumptions of intersubjectivity. Having returned home from their drunken swim in the ocean, George poses Kenny a question—“I suppose you’ve decided I’m a dirty old man?”—which becomes the occasion for George to speak in monologue about the nature of communication rather than solicit of an answer from his young friend.⁹¹ “This new phase of communication” is one George recognizes as

very much person-to-person. [And] Yet, paradoxically, Kenny seems farther away, not closer; he has receded far beyond the limits of an electric field. Indeed, it is only now and then that George can see him clearly, for the room has become dazzlingly bright, and Kenny’s face keeps fading into the brightness. Also, there is a loud buzzing in George’s ears, so loud that he can’t be certain if Kenny answered his question or not. (174)

We might begin an analysis of this scene by pointing out how it anticipates a scenario considered in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in which Foucault intimates that the particularity of the encounter “between two men of noticeably different ages” improvises a nocturnal togetherness “outside of institutional relations, family, profession and

⁹¹ I am perhaps alone in my insistence in calling this a piece of monologue rather than dialogue. Richard Preston’s account of *A Single Man* for *The Telegraph* contains the following sentence of observation: “He [George] still lusts but it is as much a symbolic meeting of minds that draws him to his student, Kenny, in the closing scenes: Youth and Age meeting in a drunken Platonic dialogue beside the ocean.” Given how I’ve framed the difficulty of knowing others, the phrase “meeting of minds” is one that demands further consideration. What interests me here in Preston’s comment and in other pieces of Isherwood criticism, is the readiness with which the interpersonal model of the Platonic dialogue is unproblematically relied on to serve as the template for Isherwood’s sociality. Instead, I argue that the encounters between Kenny and George serve to critique assumptions about subjectivity and the form of dialogue. In *On Sexuality and Power*, Alan Sinfield cites Isherwood’s invocation of the Platonic dialogues as a structuring paradigm that organizes the relations between men of noticeably different ages so as to make this organization evidence of a latent homosexual context: “George experiences with Kenny something like a Platonic dialogue, a ‘symbolic encounter’; Kenny appears ‘beautiful. Radiant with rapport’” (122). Moreover, “the Platonic dialogues which George invokes are a characteristic focus for the official and sexual roles of the mentor. Socrates’ strategy is to tease the boy with talk of love, while maintaining the idea that the teacher is on a higher plane, above physical expression. Even if the boy is keen, as Alcibiades is in the *Symposium*, it may be beneath the Socratic teacher’s dignity to respond. Plato has been a conduit for same-sex passion and, simultaneously, a way of disavowing any such concern” (122-3).

obligatory camaraderie” (136). What arises as an unlikely concern provoked by this encounter is a crisis of communication, as Foucault will ask, “what code would allow [these men] to communicate?” (136). The very possibility of communication seems foreclosed by a dearth of available signs: “They face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship [...]” (136). For Foucault, the solution is to turn back to the alphabet, and thus, to language. If his reading is helpful for alerting us to the uncertainties (“with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement”) that must imperfectly mediate the formless encounter, it is Isherwood’s novel that shows how to dwell ‘without terms or convenient words.’

I return to the passage from the novel, and Kenny’s fading face in particular, by way of Bersani and Dutoit, to suggest a kind of unmotivated reading that proceeds without inference. In their analysis of Godard’s *Contempt*, Bersani and Dutoit have noted that a body with “the power to dazzle” the gaze of others “can count on not being observed” (*Forms* 42). Kenny certainly does enjoy the paradoxical luxury of “being the nearly exclusive object of [George’s] look and of not being seen” as his disembodied face fades into light. To dazzle then, is to create a condition where vision is inverted, it produces blindness at the same instant that it invites visual attention. The transfixed look, in other words, loses its ability to see. Isherwood captures this in George’s ongoing impression of Kenny: “For a moment, Kenny’s face is quite distinct. It grins, *dazzlingly*. Then his grin breaks up, is refracted, or whatever you call it, into rainbows of light. The rainbows blaze. George is blinded by them. He shuts his eyes” (177 emphasis added).

Seeing like listening seems to work in ways opposite to their expected functions.

Although George and Kenny sit facing one another, George acquires no information but seems almost overwhelmed by an overstimulation that renders the senses useless precisely at the moment that they seem to work most emphatically—not silence, but too much noise, not dimness but too much light, blocks George from observing Kenny with anything like acquisitive intent.

We have seen how listening's invisibility presents the problem of establishing its activity with certainty: listening is always a *perhaps*. In this particular moment back at George's home, a potential resolution to this uncertainty is evoked and just as quickly dismissed: the definitive sign of listening might be the listener's response. Yet George, his voice rambling out into the darkness, "can't be certain if Kenny answered his question or not" (174). Remarkably, even confirmation of the listening eludes the listener. The listener, who we might assume has full access to her interiority, can only say, '*perhaps* I have listened.' George becomes illegible to himself, cannot be sure that he has in fact listened and this uncertainty manifests itself through spoken words that welcome silence: "You needn't say anything," George tells Kenny (thus dealing with either possibility)" (174). This blockage of epistemological certainty gets reworked as its inverse, as a successful transmission of *not-knowing*: "[...] are we to exchange *some* kind of signal, however garbled, before it's too late?" George asks. George follows the question of signal exchange directed at Kenny with an imperative cry, "*You answer me that!*" Just as we might expect, Kenny remains silent, a communication, we might say, of the uncertainty of whether or not George's plea for an answer has even reached him. Kenny's virtual absence within the intimate encounter might also describe the presentation of

George through the narrator's partial omniscience. While George's inner life readily yields to the narrator's penetrative observation, it nonetheless remains psychologically mystifying. In other words, to get "inside" George's is the same as not-knowing George. What seems important to distinguish here is that George's final statement—"I don't know what I'm about"—is not a denial of introspection but an epistemological claim (176).

Evoking an earlier moment in which George and Kenny swim, drunk and naked, in the ocean's dark waters, there is a striking passage curiously devoid of people that returns us to the ocean at the end of the novel. The resemblance between that earlier scene in which the two men frolic in the waves and this later one, in which humans are absent from the natural environment, nonetheless encourages us to consider the similarities between the two. The two scenes might be thought of as distinct presentations of identical content. "But *is* all of George altogether present here?" the second scene begins (183): the question will transition us from "George's body, asleep on this bed and snoring quite loud" to an extended contemplation of tidal pools. Here, this question will motivate the deconstruction of the binary between conscious and unconscious, sentient and insentient matter as it were. The same concern—the degree to which George is "altogether present"—is posed somewhat differently in the first ocean scene as well: "Giving himself to [the stunning baptism of the surf] utterly, [George] washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less" (163). The next sentence explores living unconsciously in social terms: "He is perfectly happy by himself; it's enough to know that Kenny and he are the sole sharers of the element" (163). What the two scenes have in

common is an interest in relations of insentient life. By routing the meditation on the natural world through such relations in the extended passage that follows, Isherwood introduces a veritable architecture of an interpersonal unconscious:

Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names, such as George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs. Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though, of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness—so to speak—are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets, ominous protean organisms motioning mysteriously, perhaps warningly, toward the surface light. How can such a variety of creatures coexist at all? Because they have to. The rocks of the pool hold their world together. And, throughout the day of the ebb tide, they know no other.

But the long day ends at last; yields to the nighttime of the flood. And, just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean—that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars. We may surely suppose that, in the darkness of the full flood, some of these creatures are lifted from their pools to drift far out over the deep waters. But do they ever bring back, when the daytime of the ebb returns, any kind of catch with them? Can they tell us, in any manner, about their journey? Is there, indeed, anything for them to tell—except that the waters of the ocean are not really other than the waters of the pool? (184)

This remarkable passage concludes with a series of perplexing questions that are left unanswered. Indeed, the nature of the questions seem unanswerable through recourse to language. In questioning if there is indeed ‘anything for them to tell,’ there is the suggestion that language would be redundant in the face of that which appears self-evident. The questions do gesture toward the possibility of their answer even as the novel ultimately remains silent on this point, not offering up an answer, just as Kenny’s silence met George’s inquiries in the earlier scene. The loss of boundaries is imagined through the tidal pools, pools that initially do the work of containment but that eventually fail and

overflow. The water imagery underscores the liquefaction of discrete identities that the practice of naming—as “George” for instance—falsely promises. Part of the point *A Single Man* makes here by reverting to imagery of the natural world is to point out that difference is an effect of language: the novel doesn’t offer a critique of the hierarchal nature of sexual inequality in the U.S. so much as question the predominance of identity as foundational to the possibility of community.

Not Altogether Present

This point is similarly made if the title of the novel is considered to offer two connotations: one might read a single man as a figure of social identity or as a figure of asocial nonrelationality itself. By one account, ‘a single man’ conjures the image of a man romantically-unattached but still susceptible to coupling. The single man is the available bachelor who has so far avoided the life of commitment. For such a specimen, we might look no further than the famous opening line of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) which inaugurates the phrase’s storied literary genealogy and cements its undeniable power to suggest the inevitable coupling of male (hetero)sexuality that is evoked in its absence: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (1).⁹² As firmly entrenched as such thinking is, whether one prefers Austen or Isherwood, part of my intention in this chapter has been to think seriously about how critics come to find sexual identity in postwar literature by colonizing language otherwise devoid of sexuality.

⁹² Whether the latent sexuality one supposes is hetero- in the case of Austen, or homo- in the case of Isherwood is of course a point of difference between the two but my main point is that the phrase is usually synonymous with a latent sexuality and thus invested in sexual identity.

The phrase might just as easily describe one, single solitary man isolated and apart from the great plurality found in the world—a single man as opposed to say, many men, or even just two.⁹³ Is it surprising that a phrase synonymous with the individual is read so often in terms of a latent sexuality—an ever-ready relationality—it makes no claims to suggest? This chapter purports that both of these connotations matter in the novel, and that they overlap to such a degree that they often appear to be indistinguishable from one another. George's loss of Jim makes this merger visible—the vacated place of the lover and simultaneously the experience of one's loneliness, not as consequent but as simultaneous. Viewed from this perspective, the phrase 'a single man' produces a space to perform the negotiation of latent sexuality and asociality. A brief moment in the locker room of the local gym elaborates the dynamics of this interpenetration of the erotic and the solitary: "Looking grimly in the mirror, with distaste and humor, George says to himself, You old ass, who are you trying to seduce? And he puts on his tee shirt" (106). The meticulous cataloguing and self-critique of his aging body before this question is posed allows us to suppose an answer with relative confidence: George is trying to seduce himself. Yet the fact that this scene ends in the interrogative—"who are you trying to seduce?"—offers a verbal recapitulation of the vertiginous flurry of curious glances cast between George, Kenny, and Lois, in which the object of Kenny's sexual desire stubbornly frustrates epistemological certainty. Here too,

⁹³ For critical work on this formulation see, for example, Michael Cobb's "Lonely," where he maps his interest in the category of "single" as sexless (and the resistance this concept generated at a conference on queer identity): "I came away frustrated because the questions I wanted to ask were not wrapped up in the imperative to think sex rather than think single. So I've begun to leave sex, whatever sex may be, out of it. I've left sex behind. Now, instead of simply thinking 'single,' I've been thinking 'lonely' because I want a notion of sexlessness to be attached to singleness" (446-7).

in this scene of locker room solipsism, George is both subject and object of his perception and yet the psychosexual never speaks.

I would like to return us to a sentence that I didn't initially draw attention to in Fryer's 1976 essay on *A Single Man* when I first quoted it near the beginning of the chapter: "Even now, none of his novels has contained any noticeably 'hot' scenes (if one discounts George's session with a handkerchief in *A Single Man*), mainly because he seems to feel them unnecessary." We should recall that Fryer is vigilantly on the lookout for sex ("hot' scenes") in Isherwood's fiction and is left unsatisfied by and ultimately dismissive of George's meager moment of onanistic ecstasy. I didn't focus on this remark in the introduction because the complications it introduces into his reading weren't enough to discourage Fryer from moving ahead with his broader thesis that claimed an interest in homosexuality on behalf of novels that seemed strangely silent on the matter. Yet curiously—we might even say, *tellingly*—Fryer's demure whisper of the "session with a handkerchief" in this sentence is barely breathed before it is quickly dismissed as *not really sex*, a point confirmed by the careful grammatical and visual cordoning-off (or is it caging-in?) of George and his solitary session by punctuating parentheses, so that his behavior doesn't disturb the larger point of the analysis. Yet even so, Fryer's reading remains unsure of what to do with the masturbating George.⁹⁴ Masturbation has no allegiance to hetero- or homosexuality but works across both identities and neither, so while Fryer can't assimilate the autoerotic straightforwardly into sexual classifications, he can't entirely dismiss it either—thus George sits, isolated but in plain sight, in an odd, bracketed-off purgatory.

⁹⁴ As Gayle Rubin has said of modern Western society's valuation and appraisal of sex acts: "Solitary sex floats ambiguously" (11).

Fryer's phrasing is by no means conclusive; in fact, the conditional tense of the offending observation further underscores the undecided status of masturbation in the critic's account of George's sexuality. But what happens to our reading of the novel if we choose not to discount George's "session"? Accounting for the session in identitarian terms presents a striking instance in which sexual behavior resists a neat transformation into characterological type. George's scene of masturbation represents a sexuality that cannot be contained through appeal to the delimiting function of homosexual identity. As such, masturbation locates a sexuality that is not straightforwardly social. Žižek's reading of Lacan's infamous insistence on the "impossibility of the sexual relationship" draws out the antisocial element of sex, arguing that the difference between masturbation and 'actual' sex—what we might call antisocial versus social sex—is no difference at all, insofar as "man's partner is never a woman in the real kernel of her being" (44).⁹⁵ While Žižek's example is a heterosexual one, it nonetheless implies that what distinguishes 'actual' sex from masturbation depends on certain assumptions about selfhood; specifically, the assumption that the presence of a partner depends on her possession of a "real kernel of being"—what Bersani would call an 'erotic essence.' If there is anything radical about masturbation, it is in the way that Isherwood uses it both to reanimate, and further complicate, the question of whether or not sexual behaviors must translate into sexual identities. While masturbation doesn't undermine the sexual categories of the

⁹⁵ "We usually consider masturbation as an 'imaginary sexual act,' i.e., an act where the bodily contact with a partner is only imagined; is it not possible to reverse the terms and to conceive the 'proper' sexual act, the act with an 'actual' partner, as a kind of 'masturbation with a real (instead of only imagined) partner'? The whole point of Lacan's insistence on the 'impossibility of the sexual relationship' is that this, precisely, is what the 'actual' sex act is; man's partner is never a woman in the real kernel of her being, but woman qua a, reduced to the fantasy-object (let us just recall Lacan's definition of the phallic enjoyment as essentially masturbatory)" (Žižek 44).

heterosexual and the homosexual, it points to a sexual remainder not neatly conducted by typological thinking.

Bersani's critical project has been invested in questioning the need to classify the sexual content of art. Tim Dean has said of Bersani's *Homos* (1995) that, despite its antisocial positioning, it promotes a reconsideration of community that does not depend on an investment in sexual identity:

[...] here I want to emphasize Bersani's inference—one that notably undermines his claims on behalf of gay specificity—that certain forms of aesthetic experience replicate homo-ness, and not least because it can induce self-shattering. The potential for aesthetic experience to dissolve the boundaries of selfhood and initiate 'new relational modes' turns out to have little to do with individual artists' or writers' erotic preferences, and even less to do with the sexual content of their works.⁹⁶ (390)

Dean's point via Bersani is a valuable one. It relieves critics from the burden of showing how the manifest text somehow stands as a testament of latent or repressed sexuality that would be unspeakable except through elaborate feats of decoding. Bersani's project in *Homos* offers one way by which reviewers and critics of *A Single Man*—such as those I mention at the beginning of this chapter—could instead conceive of 'new relational modes' that have nothing to do with "discovering" the sexual content of the work.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Dean concludes this observation with the following footnote which seems especially pertinent to my earlier point regarding how critics exorcize homosexual identity through their enthusiastic reversals of the repressive hypothesis: "The irrelevance of the author's sexuality to the aesthetic dissolution of selfhood remains unobvious in *Homos*, because Bersani makes his case by way of figures such as Proust, Gide, and Genet. It becomes more evident elsewhere—for example, in *Arts of Impoverishment* when he discusses an unequivocally heterosexual writer, Samuel Beckett, whose work manifests the shattered and thus nonappropriative consciousness that he finds also in recognizably gay literature (Bersani and Dutoit 11-91). Bersani clarifies this question in 'Is There a Gay Art?', a recent essay in which he traces an ontological kinship between desire for someone of the same sex and the formal similitudes that organize aesthetic space" (392).

⁹⁷ Sedgwick has hinted at this possibility in "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading": "[...] from Freud onward, including, for example, the later writings of Melanie Klein—the history of psychoanalytic thought offers richly divergent, heterogeneous tools for thinking about aspects of personhood, consciousness, affect, filiation, social dynamics, and sexuality that, though relevant to the experience of gender and queerness, are often not centrally organized around 'sexual difference' at all. Not that they are necessarily prior to 'sexual

Halberstam once explained that the antisocial thesis could relieve us of the burden of conforming to a discourse of “intimacy, romance and sexual contact” when thinking about human connection (140). But as I hope I’ve shown, part of this chapter’s claim about Isherwood’s fiction has been that connection without the familiar comforts of community is an unintelligible affair. What enters the domain of intelligibility is merely a shadowy outline tracing the dimensions and spaces that inhabit our lack of knowledge, which is to say, the non-sense of those around us. As I claimed earlier, this form of relation assumes paradigmatic status in George’s relation to Jim’s absent presence and I’d like to conclude here with a scene of readerly isolation that uncannily calls to mind the novel’s reader, who has in fact sustained a such a relation with the George, a protagonist we know by now is not ‘altogether present here.’ It is a form of isolation (absorption in a book), dependent on and nested within a scene of contentment with the other (“completely aware of each other’s presence”), dependent on and nested within a scene that acknowledges the absence of the other (“what is left out of the picture”), that underscores the paradoxical possibility of achieving strange intimacy in the solitude of reading: “What is left out of the picture is Jim, lying opposite him at the other end of the couch, also reading; the two of them absorbed in their books yet so completely aware of each other’s presence” (115).

difference’: they may simply be conceptualized as somewhere to the side of it, tangentially or contingently related or even rather unrelated to it” (132).

CODA

In 1949, Lionel Trilling wrote a short preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, a study that addresses liberalism at its aspirational best, and at its programmatic and dogmatic worst. For all its brevity, the preface nonetheless puts forth a comprehensive account of liberalism's peculiar tendencies—among them, its tendency to simplify, to “organize the elements of life in a rational way” when left to its own devices (xx). While Trilling cautions that it's worth taking a moment to examine the necessity of championing the drive to organize in the first place, he also wonders about the “present particular manifestations” of the liberal imagination in American life (xxi):

But at the same time we must understand that organization means delegation, and agencies, and bureaus, and technicians, and that the ideas that can survive delegation, that can be passed onto agencies and bureaus and technicians, incline to be ideas of a certain kind and of a certain simplicity: they give up something of their largeness and modulation and complexity in order to survive. The lively sense of contingency and possibility, and of those exceptions to the rule which may be the beginning of the end of the rule—this sense does not suit well with the impulse to organize. (xx-xxi)

In this dissertation, we have witnessed how several novelists of the twentieth-century grapple with this growing impulse to do away with contingency and liveliness and ‘organize the elements of life in a rational way.’ By way of illustration, we might think back to Fitzgerald's short story, “The Intimate Strangers,” and consider Sara's observation there that the news media too readily simplifies the complexity of human intimacies: “Remembering many public scandals and misalliances, she wondered that

each one had seemed so clear-cut in a sentence of gossip or a newspaper headline. Doubtless, behind every case, there were trapped and muddled people, weighing, buying a ticket to nowhere at an unknown price” (621). Gallup polls, ethnographic practices, punched cards, and even, as it turns out, literary criticism, make up an array of technologies similarly tapped to perform the basic function of organizing the elements of life in order to improve the conditions of living: Gallup polls tell us what millions of Americans want, ethnography tells us what foreign cultures believe, punched cards tell us who countless numbers of people are, and criticism tells us how America atones for imperial violence. But in performing this service, we should keep in mind what gets lost in translation. As Trilling suggests in the passage above, the ideas about life that do survive the tyranny of organization tend to give up a bit of their complexity or “largeness” in the process. Punched cards can transmit the age and gender of a person with the ease of punching holes through paper but, as *A Single Man* intimates, the efficiency of binary coding encounters insurmountable difficulty when tasked with transmitting the experience of sitting next to someone in comfortable silence, for example.

It’s probably not surprising that, when it comes to the social sciences or the bureaucratic machinery that facilitate them, the transmission of such forms of relation often take a back seat to the neater, tidier structural categories of identity. It should give us pause, however, when literary criticism falls similarly in line, passing over the strange, unspoken social relations that do emerge in literature, in favor of familiar structural identities, what we might call, to follow Trilling, ‘ideas of a certain kind and of a certain simplicity.’ How much simpler to know that the novel we’re reading is expressive of a

certain kind of already familiar identity? How much more difficult if things aren't quite that simple?

Trilling concludes the preface by stating that literature, "is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" (xxi), and asks that it be read with an eye to such features. This dissertation has tried to undertake such an enterprise by maintaining the irreducible complexity, 'variousness,' and strangeness of human relations afforded by literature.

Given that this dissertation has considered novels that incorporate other media, we might finally consider Friedrich Kittler's pronouncement, in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) that, "Under the conditions of high technology, literature has nothing more to say. It ends in cryptograms that defy interpretation and only permit interception." From one perspective, Kittler's assertion that literature has 'nothing more to say,' seems to sound a death knell for literature and its viability in the face in a cultural milieu increasingly saturated by new forms of technology. But from the perspective that this dissertation has adopted, literature seems keenly aware of all this, toying with the semantic limitations of its medium, and savvy to the possibilities opened up by reading *without* understanding. De Man takes us some way toward recognizing Kittler's intercepted cryptograms as densely meaningful in their own way. Of reading the unknowable in Rousseau, De Man has described the relation between the strange machine and its reader as a "seduc[tion] into dangerously close contact" with the unknown (298). In fact, hinted at throughout the literary works in this dissertation is a new kind of reader, one tasked with the challenge of balancing the older critical desire for intimacy through interpretation against the less invasive, less sure experience of reading

literature as a fleeting contact with alterity. We might stop and glimpse this new reader when Dick Diver intercepts impersonal blips of noise on the telephone, or when George encounters Kenny's disinterested gaze and learns nothing of his desires. We might also see this reader when Richard Wright comes across the laboring multitudes and finding himself blankly bewildered, or when Thomas Fowler spies a strange machine hidden in the back of a garage, trying and yet failing to ascertain its purpose. These novels stage scenes of reading in which interpretation is defied, and the quest for the meaningful plentitude offered by community is abandoned. The reader, for her part, encounters language's propensity to stop meaning and, caught in the experience of strange intimacy, keeps reading.

WORKS CITED

- Abramowitz, Rachel. "Tom Ford had to give life to 'A Single Man'." *Los Angeles Times*. December 6, 2009.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- . *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. New York: Verso, 1993.
- Allred, Jeff. "From Eye to We: Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, Documentary, and Pedagogy." *American Literature*. Volume 78, Number 3, September 2006.
- Anderson, Amanda. "The Liberal Aesthetic." *Theory after Theory*. Ed. Derek Attredge and Jane Elliott. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast." *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995.
- Ashton, Jennifer. "Rose is a Rose: Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy" *Modernism/Modernity*. Volume 9, Number 4. November 2002, 581-604.
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Rutland: Everyman. 1993.
- Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1946.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Affect, Noise, Silence, Protest: Ambient Citizenship," ICA 2009 Mini-Plenary, *Public Narratives & Symbolic Power, Social Solidarity*. Web.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Publics and Counterpublics*. Brooklyn: Zone, 2002.
- Berkovitch, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. New Have, Yale UP, 2011.
- Bersani, Leo. *A Future for Astyanax*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1976.
- . "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October*. Vol. 43, Winter, 1987.

- . *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- . "Sociality and Sexuality." *Critical Inquiry*. 26 (2000).
- Bersani, Leo and Ulysse Dutoit. *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*. London: British Film Inst., 2004.
- Blair, Sara. *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown: Staton Hill Press, 1988.
- Bone, Richard. "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance." *Callaloo*, No. 28, Richard Wright: A Special Issue (Summer 1986). 446-468.
- Bradley, David. Introduction. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- Burke, Kenneth. "Engineering with Words." Rev. of *Geography and Plays*, by Gertrude Stein. *The Dial* 74 (1923): 408-12.
- Butler, Judith. "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *differences*. 13.1 2002. 14-44.
- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Chiwengo, Ngwarsungu. "Gazing Through the Screen: Richard Wright's Africa." *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Ed. Virginia Whately Smith. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 20-44.
- Cobb, Michael. "Lonely." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3, Summer 2007.
- Cooke, Michael G. *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*. Westford: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "Preface." *Tender is the Night: A Romance by F. Scott Fitzgerald. With the Author's Final Revisions. Preface by Malcolm Cowley*. New York: Scribner's, 1956.
- Coupland, Justine, Nikolas Coupland and Jeffrey D. Robinson. "'How are you?': Negotiating Phatic Communion." *Language in Society* 21. New York: Cambridge UP, 1992. 207-230.

- Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Dean, Tim. "Sex and the Aesthetics of Existence." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, Theories and Methodologies*. March 2010; 125(2). 387-392.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- DeVitis, A.A. "Religious Aspects in the Novels of Graham Greene," in *Shapeless God*, ed. Harry J. Mooney and T. F. Staley. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968, 55-56.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP. 2004.
- Edwards, Brent. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Elliott, Emory. "New Literary History: Past and Present." *American Literature*. 57(4) December 1985. 611-623.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Richard Wright's Blues." *The Antioch Review*. Vol. 57, no. 3, Jazz (Summer 1999). 263-276.
- Esty, Jed. *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture*. Princeton, Princeton UP, 2004.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.
- Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.
- . *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Trans. Isabel Barzun. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Stein and Day, 1982.

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Scribner, 1989. 25-47.
- . *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribners, 1953.
- . "The Intimate Strangers." *The Price was High*. New York: MJF Books. 1979. 608-627.
- . *Tender is the Night*. New York: Wordsworth, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. "Friendship as a Way of Life," Interview by R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux, trans. John Johnston, *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One - Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: The New Press, 1997. 135-140.
- . *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Friedman, Burton Dean. *Punched Card Primer*. New York: American Book-Stratford Press, 1955.
- Fryer, Jonathan H. "Sexuality in Isherwood." *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 22, No. 3 (Oct., 1976), 343-353.
- Gaines, Kevin Kelly. "Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora." *Social Text*, 67 (Volume 19, Number 2), Summer 2001, 75-101.
- Gallup, George and Saul Forbes. *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it Works*. Greenwood Press, 1968.
- Garnes, David. "A Single Man, Then and Now." *The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood*. Ed. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 2000. 196-202.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Perseus, 1973.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Gleick, James. *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood*. New York: Pantheon. 2011.
- Goble, Mark. *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*. New York: Columbia UP. 2010.

- Goffman, Erving. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. Toronto: Collier-Macmillan. 1968.
- Göttsche, Hans. "Roman Jakobson." *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*. Ed. Siobhan Chapman and Christopher Routledge. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. 139-147.
- Goyal, Yogita. *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Greene, Graham. "Indo-china: France's Crown of Thorns." *The Quiet American*. New York: Penguin (Critical Library Viking), 1996. 212-230.
- . *The Quiet American*. New York: Penguin (Critical Library Viking), 1996.
- . *Ways of Escape*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd.; 1st edition, 1980.
- Gussow, Adam. "'Fingering the Jagged Grain': Ellison's Wright and the Southern Blues Violences." *boundary 2*, Vol 30, number 2, Summer 2003. 137-155.
- Halberstam, Judith. "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*. Vol. 5 (2). 2008 140-156.
- Hardwick, Elizabeth. "Sex and the Single Man." *New York Review of Books* 2 (August 20, 1964).
- Hathaway, Rosemary. "Forgotten Manuscripts: Native Geography: Richard Wright's Work for the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago," *African American Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), 91-108.
- Hegeman, Susan. *Patterns for America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Hudson, R.A. *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- Huxley, Aldous. *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. New York: Harper & Row. 1965.
- Inda, Jonathan Xavier. "Introduction." *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*.
- Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2001.

- Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language: Conference on Style, Indiana University, 1958*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960. 350-377.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.
- Kauffmann, Stanley. "Death in Venice, Cal." *New Republic* 151 (September 5, 1964): 23-25.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. Mineola: Dover, 2005.
- Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- . "The Fiction of Graham Greene: Between the Horror and the Glory." *Kenyon Review* 19 (1957): 56-75.
- Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1922.
- Lotringer, Sylvere and Christian Marazzi. "The Return of Politics." *Italy: Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*. New York: Semiotext(e) Journal, 2007.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages." *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1948. 228-276.
- Mallon, Thomas. "Darling Me." *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan/Feb 2005, Vol. 295. Issue 1. 169-173.
- Mangan, J.A. *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal (Sport in the Global Society)*. 2nd Edn. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Maxwell, William J. *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.

- Mondello, Bob. In *'60s L.A., A Somber, Stylish Encounter With Grief*. NPR. 10 Dec 2009. Web.
- Moore, Jack B. "No Street Numbers in Accra." *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Ed. Virginia Whately Smith. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 45-60.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- . *Inoperative Community (Theory and History of Literature)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- . *Listening*. Trans. Catherine Mandell. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006.
- Pathak, Zakia, Saswati Sengupta, and Sharmila Purkayastha. From "The Prisonhouse of Orientalism." *The Quiet American*. New York: Penguin (Critical Library Viking), 1996. 407-418.
- Pinto, Samantha. *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
- Pratt, John Clark. "Introduction." *The Quiet American*. New York: Penguin (Critical Library Viking), 1996. xi-xvii.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge. 1992.
- Preston, Richard. "'A Single Man': on the writer Christopher Isherwood." *The Telegraph*. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/7167031/A-Single-Man-on-the-writer-Christopher-Isherwood.html>. > February 5, 2010. Accessed January 27, 2012.
- Quine, William Van Orne. *Words and Objects (Studies in Communication)*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960.
- Roach, Tom. *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*. Albany: SUNY, 2012.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996.
- Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. New York: Henry Holt and Co. 2001.

- Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David H. Halperin. Routledge, 1993. 3-44.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Selzter, Mark. "Die freie Natur," *Archiv für Mediengeschichte - Gefahrensinn*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009. 127-138.
- Senft, Gunter. "Phatic Communion." *Culture and Language Use*. Ed. Gunter Senft, Jan-Ola Östman and Jef Vershueren. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009. 226-233.
- Serres, Michel. *The Parasite*. Trans. Lawrence R Schehr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.
- Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Shankar, S. "Richard Wright's Black Power: Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative." *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Ed. Virginia Whately Smith. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 3-19.
- Shannon, Claude. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. University of Illinois. 1963.
- Shiffman, Dan. "Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* and World War II-era Civic Nationalism." *African American Review*. Vol. 41 (3), 2007. 443-458.
- Siebert, Bernhard. "Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies." Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. *Grey Room* 29, Cambridge: Grey Room Inc. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Winter 2008, 26-47.
- Sinfeld, Alan. *On Sexuality and Power*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. New York: Economic Classics, 2013.
- Smith, Zadie. "Shades of Greene." *The Guardian*. Friday 17 September, 2004.
- Steigman, Karen. "The Literal American: Rereading Graham Greene in an Age of Security." *College Literature* 39.1 [Winter 2012]. 1-27.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. New York: Random House, 1936.

- . *Everybody's Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1937.
- . *The Making of Americans*. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.
- Stephens, Michelle. *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Szalay, Michael. *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Tennyson, Charles. "They Taught the World to Play." *Victorian Studies*. Vol. 2(3), March 1959. 211-222.
- Terranova, Tiziana. "Communication Beyond Meaning: On the Cultural Politics of Information." *Social Text*. Issue 80. Vol. 22, No. 3, Fall 2004. 51-73.
- Thomas, Brian. *An Underground Fate: The Idiom of Romance in the Later Novels of Graham Greene*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1988. 25-51.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination*. New York: New York Review of Books, 1950.
- Weiss, Robert. *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Weaver, Warren. "Some Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication." *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. University of Illinois. 1963. 1-28.
- West, Cornel. "Introduction." *Black Power. Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* New York: HarperPerennial, 1954.
- Winters, Yvor. *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism*. Norfolk: New Directions, 1938.
- Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Perseus, 2008.
- . "Black Power," *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1954.
- . "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In *New Challenge 2* (Fall 1937): 53-65. Reprinted in *Richard Wright Reader*, edited by Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978.
- Virno, Paulo. *A Grammar of the Multitudes: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*.
Durham: Duke UP, 2003.