

Texts as Tactics: How People Practice Politics with Books

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## Abstract

My dissertation focuses on the uses of literature in public spaces by large groups of diverse people tied to particular political ends. I document and study these “tactical readings” in the process of arguing that in the United States, between the Great Depression and the Great Recession, literature has helped people transform their communities and their world. I document how Betty Smith’s A Tree Grows in Brooklyn intervenes in discussions of women’s rights among soldiers during World War II; how poems by William Shakespeare and Amiri Baraka, W.H. Auden and Lorna Dee Cervantes become a mass voice against racism and imperialism in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001; how John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath becomes a tool for discussing immigration reform and organizing communities against foreclosure during the “Great Recession” in 2009. In each of these chapters, I specify particular texts being used at particular times by particular actors and leading to particular ends.

In linking texts, their readers, and the political consequences of reading, my critical approach runs contrary to the specter of New Critical hermeneutics that still haunts literary criticism in rarefied close readings or Derridian deconstruction. My approach also runs contrary to previous literary-critical attempts to situate literature in the world, such as reader-response theory with its focus on solitary, elite, or imagined readers. To challenge these paradigms, my sociological approach draws on the intersubjective theories of language pioneered by Jürgen Habermas. With Habermas’s theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy, I produce a methodology for literary studies that allows for a focus on texts, their readers, and contexts of consumption—both particular (at the level of reader and text) and general (the way texts relate to particular cultural climates, for instance). Habermas offers a way to move between systemic analysis, institutional contexts, and the particularities of the way texts are used by everyday readers. I work to show literary studies what we might learn from such tactical readers in the hopes that working collaboratively with them, we can shape new tactical interventions.

**Table of Contents**

Prelude		
	Mattering	1
Chapter One		
	A Habermasian School of Literary Criticism, or How to Read Texts as Tactics	13
Chapter Two		
	Books, Democracy, Inclusion: Soldierly Reading in World War II	63
Chapter Three		
	Poetry, Recognition, and Redistribution: The September 11 Chronocanon	110
Chapter Four		
	Political Action: Tactical Readings of <u>The Grapes of Wrath</u> in 2009	145
Coda		
	Teaching Tactics	193
	Notes	204
	Works Cited	219

Prelude  
Mattering

Literature matters. Simply put, that is the argument of this dissertation.

As an opening statement, in itself, this is ambitious in an era where people—even those who love literature—have grown weary of its defense. The long tradition of defending poetry (and literature more generally) passed on from Boccaccio, Sidney, and Shelley has sagged from defense to plaintive query, as in Dana Gioia’s famous 1993 essay “Can Poetry Matter?” The title’s despondency is an answer in itself. And agreement appears general. As I have spoken publically about this project—both formally and informally, on panels at literary conferences and at parties with lawyers and scientists—many have simply assumed literature’s irrelevance as a foregone conclusion.

Convincing literature’s doubters by singing the praises of a poem or touting the power of a novel will not succeed. Put another way, defending literature based on its intrinsic qualities—as many have done—is not my project. In what follows, I study the use of literature by diverse groups of people, which, I believe, suggests its value far more clearly than my best efforts at close reading might. While literature matters to many people in many ways—as in the familiar call to its subjective value, “that book changed/saved my life”—I focus here on a specifically materialist, sociological way of mattering.<sup>i</sup> I look at public uses of literature and, indeed, public uses tied to particular political ends to argue that in the United

States, between the Great Depression and the Great Recession, literature has helped people transform their communities and their country.

The politics I argue for here exists not in the sphere of ideology, but is directly linked to action, particularly action “concerned with questions of power and status in a society,” which is to say, action concerned with empowering the disempowered, with equalizing status, with instituting practices that would redress historical discrimination (OED).<sup>ii</sup> Thus, I am interested in how a novel intervenes in discussions of women’s rights during World War II; how poems become a mass voice against racism and imperialism in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001; how a novel becomes a tool for discussing immigration reform and organizing communities against foreclosure during the “Great Recession” in 2009. In each of these chapters, I specify particular texts being used at particular times by particular actors and leading to particular ends.

I study, to put it another way, women and men as they make their own history under particular social and historical conditions. This idea—paraphrased from Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)—is one to which I will return across this dissertation. My application is quite literal: I trace historically, socially situated readers doing what they can with texts in the historical, social contexts in which they find themselves. More specifically, I trace a history of struggle best defined by Gramscian hegemony. I argue that the readers I discuss are attempting to shape new hegemonic forms—new ways, as Gramsci uses the word, of exercising power outside of the state.<sup>iii</sup> If, as Gramsci argues,

“Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship,” the reading practices I study are fundamentally co-educational:

[...] the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher. [...] This form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. (350)

As he does throughout “The Study of Philosophy,” Gramsci here insists on a reflexive conception of the process of making meaning, of shaping history, and—ultimately—of political transformation. I examine a similar trajectory: how readers read and how their reading impacts their work in reshaping civil society to make it more equitable—for women, for people of color, for people living in poverty.

In linking texts, their readers, and the political consequences of reading, my critical approach here certainly runs contrary to the specter of New Critical hermeneutics that still haunts literary criticism in rarefied close readings or Derridian deconstruction, where the “page become[s] the apparently self-sufficient site of a critical reading” (Said, World 203). My approach also runs contrary to previous literary-critical attempts to situate literature in the world, such as reader-response theory with its focus on solitary (or imagined) readers or the classroom-sized “communities” popularized by Stanley Fish.



In contrast, I describe large numbers of readers in various public spheres marked by diversity of race, gender, and class, as well as educational attainment—not to mention diversities of interest and approach that work against traditional scholarly periodizations or nationalizations of literary canons. I call the practices I discuss in this dissertation tactical readings. While Gramsci again inflects my vocabulary, I borrow this term in no small part from Michel de Certeau, who describes tactics as means of resistance in a highly stratified power structure, a “use” that runs contrary to presumptive—or programmatic—uses (30). I can think of no better example of this than the chronocanons I discover at each site I study. Readers produce these chronocanons—temporally and spatially demarcated assemblages of (often widely divergent) texts—by selecting, reading, discussing, and reproducing texts through “perceptual schemes of their own ethos,” not traditional literary cultural norms (Bourdieu 44). While I hardly ignore the regimes that regulate their relationships with literature—that is, canons, classrooms, cultural ideas about books—I am interested in the field within these determining structures, where readers perform readings that run contrary to the expectations of academic critics and the institutions that shape their reading practices.

This approach does not lead me to make universal claims about the meaning of the text, but to make very particular historical claims about the use of texts.<sup>iv</sup> As such, my project is fundamentally sociological. But I want to emphasize at the start that I do not work in the sociology of literature’s dominant tradition which traces the way social history is reflected in literature<sup>v</sup>; rather, I situate

myself between the two most prominent strands of the sociology of literature today: the study of reading practices and systems-inflected studies of the political economy of literature.<sup>vi</sup>

Attention to reading practices has exploded in literary studies in the past ten years. Jonathan Rose writing in 2001, notes that the question of how “to enter the minds of ordinary readers in history” had been considered “unanswerable” (1). While he is not quite right, his claim does speak to a scholarly climate in which attention to readers was hardly common.<sup>vii</sup> Rose’s colossal The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class (2001), might then be understood as the start of this flood of work—like Thomas Augst’s The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth Century America (2003); Margaret Willes’s Reading Matters: Five Centuries of Discovering Books (2008); the two-volume collection the Cultural History of Reading (2009). As a mode of criticism, this history of reading is concerned with an array of experiences and class positions and offers detailed scholarly attention to particular readers or small groups, linking their reading practices to more general social and historical developments.

This contrasts rather dramatically with the other prominent line in the sociology of literature today. Often captured under the heading of Franco Moretti’s term “distant reading,” this approach looks at the macroconstruction of literature (57). Exemplary versions include Jim Collins’s Bring on the Books for Everybody (2010), an assessment of the relation between big box bookstores, the rise of literary adaptation in Hollywood, and the popularity of Oprah’s Book Club, as well as Pascale Casanova’s examination of the way the global economy shapes

publication, reception, and readership in The World Republic of Letters (2006).<sup>viii</sup>

These approaches reveal that literature is hardly a field autonomous from political or economic concerns. We read, in John Frow's term, under "regimes of reading," the "semiotic institution[s]" that "determine[...] the historically specific mode of existence of texts" (Marxism 185). Such institutions construct not only how we read, but what we read, as in Casanova's example of the links between imperialism and the dominant global positioning of certain European authors.

On one hand, then, we have a microsociology, narrowly focused and interested less in politics (though sometimes attending to questions class and gender) than in moral life and intellectual discovery.<sup>ix</sup> On the other hand, we have a systemic macrosociology—attending to the determining structures of the literary world in which readers move, somewhat helplessly—with an abiding interest in political economy and its lived consequences. One would seem to have to choose: macro or micro; political or ethical; determinate structure or individual determination. This is the paradox at the heart of my project: to attend to women and men making history and the conditions under which they must labor. Rather than choose, I attempt a balancing act: attention to texts, attention to their readers, and attention to systems. I strive to be distant and close at the same time.<sup>x</sup>

I achieve this balance with the help of a methodological shift. Rather than return to the roots of sociology or the roots of literary study, I look to the intersubjective theories of language pioneered by Jürgen Habermas—influenced, I might note, by both linguistic philosophy and systems theory (as well as sociology). I adapt Habermas's notion of "communicative action" and the

scaffolding of democratic theory he has built on it as a methodological approach to literary studies which allows for a focus on texts, their readers, and the contexts of consumption—both particular (at the level of reader and text) and general (the way texts relate to particular cultural climates, for instance). Habermas offers a way to move between systemic analysis (like Casanova), more specific institutional contexts (like Frow), and the particularities of the way texts are used (like Augst)—and to examine the conflicts that occur between these three levels in practice.

An elaboration of this methodology makes up my first chapter. I read Habermas's theory of communicative action from its unveiling in 1981 to its most elaborate articulation in Between Facts and Norms (1992). I then argue that the opposition between Habermas and literature—which Habermas himself has courted by condemning the social value of literature and which literary critics have augmented by essentially ignoring Habermas—is a mistake. Habermas's theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy can provide a methodology for critical attention that links intersubjectivity, communication, and democratic practice. It shows us how to link up the practice of building hegemony in civil society (with attention to micro-encounters like solitary reading, conversations, and book clubs) to the transformation of legal rights and protections for all. His theory of communicative action, applied from a literary critical position, I argue, allows for a complex, politically inflected, sociological understanding of literary studies.

I refine this methodology through practice in the following three chapters, each of which describes and analyzes a very different set of tactical readings situated in particular sociopolitical, historical, systemic frames. In Chapter Two, “Books, Democracy, Inclusion: Soldierly Reading in World War II” I focus on the Council on Books in Wartime, a little known non-profit (funded entirely by the Army and Navy) that selected, reproduced, and distributed nearly 123 million Armed Services Editions to U.S. soldiers during the war. I read the Armed Services Editions program—looking simultaneously at the systemic, institutional selection practices and the reading practices of soldiers (literally) in the trenches. The military was, no doubt, involved in a project that aimed to shape American ideology. But I find this ideology to be surprisingly progressive—not only encouraging soldiers to share their opinions about books (thus building democratic discursive communities), but also offering books that encouraged the (mostly) white and male soldiers to engage with otherness. I analyze soldiers’ particularly emphatic (and empathetic) responses to Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943). I suggest that these reading practices showcase literature’s capacity to enable political discussions about difficult issues—in this case, the rights of women in the 1940s—in situations where to simply discuss them would be impossible.

In Chapter Three, I focus not on literature as a nexus of communication, but as a means of communicating. “Poetry (and Politics) Everywhere: The September 11 Chronocanon” examines how literature works as a collective voice for a “counterpublic” (a term I borrow from Nancy Fraser). I analyze how, in the two

months following September 11, 2001, (mostly) anonymous readers republished poems by authors ranging from William Shakespeare to Amiri Baraka and from Lorna Dee Cervantes to W.H. Auden everywhere from subway walls to internet message boards to The Newshour with Jim Lehrer and the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. As the Bush administration launched its “war on terror” and began to restrict civil liberties in the United States, readers selected and broadcast poems that responded to the intertwined spike in racial profiling and the rise of imperialist attitudes in the United States. The chronocanon responds to these changes by affirming the existences and experiences of diverse cultures and calling for a broad multicultural—and international—solidarity. By bringing together a collection of poetic responses that used diverse, aesthetically complex voices readers produced a chronocanon that was at once rhetorically forceful and remarkably difficult to censor. Thus the republication of poems allowed readers to emphatically voice their political beliefs to a broad public—and attempt to encourage others to join them in rejecting Bush-era imperialism.

The fourth chapter, “Political Action: Tactical Readings of The Grapes of Wrath in 2009,” mixes aspects of the previous chapters. It looks at institutions, but also “bottom up” usage of texts. I examine how at the start of the “Great Recession,” non-professional readers used The Grapes of Wrath (1939) to make material political changes in their communities. I conducted fieldwork with the ambition of finding books in the hands of real readers. In two sites, I learned as much as I could about the “one book, one community” reading practices shaped by the National Endowment for the Arts-sponsored program the Big Read. Here I examine both

how the Big Read imagines reading to be culturally—and politically—valuable and how readers go far beyond its expectations and use the cultural clout of Steinbeck's novel as a means to alleviate local poverty. Some readers announced connections between the text's Depression-era setting and present reality; others used the novel to create spaces where such poverty might be ameliorated. In Jackson, Michigan, a Grapes of Wrath-themed Services Fair became a space not just for literary discussion, but for the delivery of much needed public services—ranging from free meals to advice on escaping foreclosure. The Fair is a clear example of how average people can help each other survive based on models suggested by the novel; thus, these tactical readings show the power of literature not only to inspire broad philosophical change, but to enable readers to produce immediate material improvements for those in need.

Each chapter converges on readers utilizing texts as tactics to respond to, engage with, and ultimately transform the conditions of life for others, both near (the collection of canned food during Grapes of Wrath book clubs) and far away (the global arguments of the September 11 chronocanon); or for people nearby but very different (the consideration of the other at the heart of the Armed Services Editions). Despite these persistent themes, each chapter also displays a different approach to this intersubjective methodology. One might, as I do in "Books, Democracy, Inclusion," visit institutional archives and read correspondence to understand reading practices. One might derive such particular understanding through more anthropologically inflected practices, like those of my final chapter. But the less actor-oriented media ecology of "Poetry (and Politics) Everywhere,"

offers a third route—one more divorced from subjectivity (and one more possible without the grant support necessary for research trips). Each chapter, then, presents a different “approach” to studying the interactions between readers, texts, and political action. Whatever the modulation, my focus remains on intersubjective communication—between readers and texts and, most crucially, the way texts shape communication between readers and others in their community, readers and non-readers alike.

Throughout, I read literature as just another part of social practice and understand its meaning by reading how others read it.<sup>xi</sup> This formulation is not only fruitful for the study of literature, but for elaborating and enacting the politics of hope that underscores the theories of Marx, Gramsci, and Habermas—the three figures whose ideas have shaped this project more than any others. Even as they move away from Marx’s teleological expectations, each in turn commits to theorizing and enacting modes of transformative political engagement, the end result of which is “the free development of each” as “the condition for the free development of all” (Communist 27).

As Habermas, an exemplary public intellectual himself, writes—in a passage I will discuss extensively in the first chapter—the point is to bolster “counterinstitutions that develop from within the lifeworld in order to set limits to the inner dynamics of the economic and political-administrative action systems” (TCA 2.396-397).<sup>xii</sup> Indeed, we do need material, accessible counterinstitutions of our own construction defined in our own terms, shaped by and representative of diverse lifeworlds and working in consort to resist the imperatives of capital.



My argument here is that literature helps us build such resistant formations. And, that with a refined sociological methodology, critics might not only be better able to see how it does so—thus more successfully articulating literature with politics—but might also contribute to this work. In a way, my ambition has been to translate the potential inscribed in the theories of Marx, Gramsci, and Habermas into the argot of contemporary literary studies. But, in another more crucial way, my project has been to utilize the theories of Marx, Gramsci, and Habermas to shine a spotlight on a crowd of incredible tactical readers: the World War II letter writers, the (mostly) anonymous republishers of poems after September 11, the community activists in the midst of the Great Recession. My work is a celebration of their interventions and an acknowledgement of their successes. With the help of the thinkers I have described in this brief prelude, I work to show literary studies what we might learn from such tactical readers in the hopes that, working collaboratively, we can shape new interventions. In what follows, I aim to provide a theoretical and methodological grounding for such work—as essential now as perhaps ever before.

Chapter One  
A Habermasian School of Literary Criticism, or  
How to Read Texts as Tactics

It's easy enough to suggest that literature is political in that it addresses "public matters" (the Greek sense of "politics"). Yet skim the Oxford English Dictionary's many definitions of the word and a second crucial aspect becomes clear: "practice," "activities," "affairs," "actions" (2a, 2b, 2c, 4a). A book on a shelf might well be "political" in various ways, but no book is a perpetual motion machine. Its potential needs help: someone to read it and take action. In what follows, I will outline a methodology that considers books and politics through the lens of action. Action can show not only how literature speaks to readers, but more importantly, shows how readers use literature to (in another phrase definitionally associated with "politics") build power in their communities and, ultimately, to substantiate that power in juridical processes. This methodology shows how literature is political by showing how people use literature to do politics.

The interest in moving beyond more abstract "political" claims to more concrete juridical processes is hardly mine alone. Much recent scholarly work has spoken to links between literature and the law ("literary [...] forms [are] a vital supplement to the practices of law and legalism" [Ward 22]); literature and human rights ("the role of culture and of signifying practices as means to both support and threaten human rights" [McClennen 6]); literature and prisons (where books have "incendiary potential" for prisoners [Sweeney 667]). Like these authors, I am interested in the large-scale political consequences of literature. Unlike them,

however, I do not focus on a single institution. Rather, the methodology I propose here looks, like the early work of critical theory, at culture more generally. Yet it does not revisit the familiar Frankfurt pantheon. Nor does it value ideology critique.<sup>i</sup> Instead it centers on the notion of communicative intersubjectivity, thus aligning itself with a figure of ill repute in literary studies.

Literary scholars began to dislike Jürgen Habermas as early as Habermas's first signs of moving away from the Frankfurt School focus on culture after his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962). It only got worse in the 1980s when Habermas antagonized the philosophers—particularly Derrida and Foucault—whose ideas about discourse and language had become central to the academic study of English. No doubt Habermas's late-career turn as a hawk—advocating for United Nations military interventions in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s; publishing paeans to an exclusive kerneuropa in 2003—has not helped his standing. These positions, in particular, confirmed assumptions that his theory and its fetishization of reason could offer little more than bland Kantian idealism or a liberal defense of western democracy. Habermas, in this reading, had not only uprooted himself from the soil of critical theory, but had truly made himself yesterday's news. As Jean-Jacques LeCercle announced, in PMLA, in late 2010:

The year 1999 marked the apex of what I have called the 'Habermas conjecture' [...]. Twenty years, three imperialist wars, and a world recession later, that conjuncture is now behind us, and we have to wake up from the sweet dreams of a globalization of the rights of man thanks to the

exportation of representative democracy through humanitarian interference. (917)

A damning caricature, to be sure, but is Habermas really so forgettable? Why, then, have three English-language book-length explications of his theory (and one philosophical biography) been published since 2009?<sup>ii</sup> Why have political theorists—like William Scheuerman, Lasse Thomassen, Martin Beck Matušík, Deborah Cook, Alex Demirovic, Payrow Shabani, and Amy Allen—and literary critics, particularly Amanda Anderson and David Colclasure, continued to pay particular attention to Habermas?<sup>iii</sup> Contra LeCercle, I mean to suggest that whatever pejorative adjective one might want to apply to Habermas “irrelevant” probably isn’t it. I mean to argue that whatever quarrels one might have with Habermas—I have more than a few of my own—his mature project produces, as Seyla Benhabib argued more than 25 years ago, “irreversible gains” for the project of critical theory, particularly (I would add) in the context of literary studies.<sup>iv</sup>

In making this argument, I will not be replaying the familiar debates between Habermas and Foucault or Derrida. I will not explicitly defend Habermas’s defense of reason; or his reliance on unfashionable Anglo-American speech act theory; or his failure (and it truly is glaring) to ground his abstractions in the complexity of the actually existing democracy that it seeks to describe. To make this argument, I deal, first and foremost, with Habermas himself.

I begin, in this chapter’s first section, by elaborating the general structure of Habermas’s theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy. This is important because, as Amanda Anderson notes, Habermas is “more often

glancingly invoked than seriously discussed” in literary studies; “he [is] alleged to be simply on the side of reason and enlightenment, a promulgator of the deluded and dangerous belief that communication has the capacity to be ‘transparent’” (140). The breadth and depth of Habermas’s philosophy hardly merits such treatment. While I will glance back to the early work of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, I focus on Habermas’s mature philosophy of communicative action from basic intersubjective communication situated in a lifeworld, to the more elaborate process by which such conversations become public opinion, percolate through various spheres into civil society and ultimately impact the juridical sphere.

This framework established, I turn to Habermas’s discussion of aesthetics across the 1980s and 1990s. Habermas initially conceives of something he calls “aesthetic rationality”—the term is shaped by Erving Goffman and Max Weber—in his Theory of Communicative Action (1981). But during the 1980s—in both The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1985) and a handful of essays—Habermas explicitly excludes literature from the practice of communicative action and, hence, from any potential role in democratic political transformation.<sup>v</sup> Thus, I chart his description of “aesthetic rationality” in the context of his total exclusion of the literary from the practice of communicative action. As I describe these ideas, it becomes clear that Habermas’s notion of literature is severely at odds with broad swaths of contemporary literary criticism and—more crucially—that the distinctions he makes are hardly entailed by his larger philosophical argument.

Having shown the limits of Habermas's approach to literature through this immanent critique, I turn—in the third section—to the work of reconciling literature with the broader architecture of communicative action and deliberative democracy. I focus on the ways Habermas unnecessarily demarcates types of language and suggest that his ultimate interest in intersubjectivity overrides such distinctions. Thus I sketch how a Habermasian literary criticism offers a methodologically grounded way to think about the relation between politics and literature—a way of examining, in granular detail, how literature, put into action, shapes ideas and practices from the fundamental encounter between readers and books to the way a book—through its diverse readers and conditions of reading—can alter political practices from community organizing to federal legislation.

While none of this—I want to emphasize—amounts to an explicit theoretical defense of Habermas, I do attempt two theoretical reconciliations. First, I hope to show Habermas's theory in its best light by grounding it in descriptions of radical democratic practices. Thus I mean to suggest that however retrograde Habermas's commitment to the rationalist enlightenment project—however retrograde commitment itself might seem!—his conception of reason need not be as totalizing as it has been made to seem. If Habermas can be redeemed, my bet is that he can be redeemed by showing his theory in action—not by another return to the “theory wars” of the 1980s.

More broadly, in regrounding Habermas in democratic practice, I hope to resettle his work within the tradition of critical theory described by Max Horkheimer in 1931 as he was taking over leadership of the Institute for Social

Research: “the kind of theory which is an element in action leading to new social forms [...] not a cog in an already existent mechanism” (216, my emphasis). As this dissertation situates literature within the processes of communicative action, it also works to explicate this revised version of communicative action within the context of material political transformations. By putting Habermas’s theory to the test in dialogue with the practices of a diverse array of readers, I mean to show it “not [as] something self-sufficient and separable from the struggle,” but as effective in clarifying just how people struggle to produce a more equitable democracy—and how literature can be part of that struggle (Horkheimer 216). If the “Habermasian conjecture” has ended—in the context of literary criticism, ended before it ever really began—I hope to suggest it is to our great detriment.

### 1. Communicative Action and Deliberative Democracy

Habermas’s theory of communicative action, though it takes him two long volumes to describe in full, is stated fairly directly towards the end of the first volume, Reason and the Rationalization of Society. There Habermas writes

I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes. (1.285-86)

Communicative action, then, is not the arm-twisting of a salesperson, or the rhetorical deceptions of a politician, but a pair of agents working toward

agreement, which will benefit both. As Habermas puts it later, in communicative action “all participants harmonize their individual plans of action with one another and thus pursue their illocutionary aims without reservation” (TCA 1.294). What’s more, the discussion must maintain certain qualities, in particular, rationality: it should avoid rhetorical sleight-of-hand or outright arm-twisting.

Let me suggest an example: Two neighbors debating which presidential candidate to vote for in an election. The Habermasian ideal would seem to be embodied in such a discussion; particularly if the discussion focused on issues of general concern, say, one candidate has vowed to end an imperialist war, which both can agree would be good. Such conversational examples are easy enough to imagine. They’re the kind of negotiation that is a persistent fixture of the democratic imaginary.

But the space between actually existing democracy and the democratic imaginary is not so small. And Habermas is hardly so daft as to simply ignore the potential problems of logocentrism; the consequences of idealizing speech situations; the way social inequality—based on race or gender, class or sexual orientation—entwines itself in every conversation; the way we live in societies where norms of communication—to say nothing of the languages speakers use—diverge increasingly radically. Habermas has attempted, at various points, to address each of these objections—from the poststructuralist to the multiculturalist.<sup>vi</sup> Rather than dwell on his rebuttals, though, I want to argue that his theory, even at its most general level, actively engages these debates.



It does so in fundamental ways. Habermas never suggests that conversations simply happen or that language is transparent. With multiculturalists, he shares a serious interest in questions of inclusion, though approached as questions of the (re)distribution of the rights that grant equal access to well-being. He shares with poststructuralists questions about how language works and grave concerns about teleology—rejecting, for instance, the Marxist “philosophy of history on which earlier critical theory still relied, but which is no longer tenable” (TCA 2.397). In short, I want to suggest that while there are good reasons to trouble Habermas’s theory from both poststructuralist and multiculturalist perspectives, what he offers is not an idealism that would ignore such concerns, but a theory attentive to spaces of resistance that provides grounding for radical practice. Most fundamentally, he does this by attending to the most human of practices:

If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination has to be established through communication—and in certain central spheres through communication aimed at reaching agreement—then the reproduction of the species also requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality that is inherent in communicative action. (TCA 1.397)

The non-coercive coordination made possible by communicative action is the foundation for the continuity of the social and, as such, the foundation of resistance to current systemic domination. As difficult as communication may be—whether one comes to this conclusion through a poststructuralist analysis of language,

through debates about national languages or access to schooling, or (as Habermas does) through systems theory—Habermas suggests it as the place to begin a nuanced analysis of both destruction and resistance. As such, his approach seems, at minimum, capable of dialogue with various of his supposed antagonists—something even he and Derrida admitted at the dawn of the twenty-first century.<sup>vii</sup>

The work I will undertake in this dissertation will address many of the complaints routinely aimed at Habermas in the particularities of my readings. That is, I will address how texts help readers think through (and across) difference and consider the potentials and the limits of linguistic coordination. If I do not theoretically engage these debates, I hope, at least, to highlight some of the ways in which they find more practical resolution.

But I begin here with a brief summary of the terms essential for understanding Habermas's thinking. There are four crucial components to the practice of communicative action: the lifeworld, various public spheres, civil society, and the law. The lifeworld is the "more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions" that allow for communication to take place (TCA 1.70). This encompasses, as Habermas later writes, language and culture: both the grammatical conventions that make the conversation mutually intelligible and the cultural presumptions about how a discussion should be carried out (TCA 2.125). Such conventions are produced by "a network of communicative actions that branch out through social space and historical time" and they "live off sources of cultural traditions and legitimate orders no less than they depend on the identities of socialized individuals" (BFN 80). These statements

go some distance in specifying the lifeworld, but the vagary of this term has been a familiar theme in criticism of Habermas.<sup>viii</sup> As anyone living in a multicultural world can attest, the lack of “unproblematic background convictions” is a familiar experience.<sup>ix</sup>

In Habermas’s own terms, perhaps the clearest way to understand the lifeworld is through its opposite: the system. Here, borrowing from systems theory, Habermas focuses on power and money, which operate untethered from lifeworlds and their incumbent norms or practices. Thus Habermas writes, in one of the few clear historical passages in Theory of Communicative Action:

capitalist modernization follows a pattern such that cognitive instrumental rationality surges beyond the bounds of the economy and state into other, communicatively structured areas of life and achieves dominance there at the expense of moral-political and aesthetic-practical rationality. (2.304)

The consequences of this entry of systems into lifeworlds are “disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld,” which he calls “pathologies” (TCA 2.305, 2.148). The imperatives of wage labor cloud any discussion; it’s hard to talk to your neighbor when she works third shift and you work first; harder still when she is your neighbor because she is a refugee from a place where communicative norms are quite different, both at the level of speech pragmatics and of the language itself. That the commodious conditions of the lifeworld simply exist, in an era where floods and hurricanes of capital have displaced not only lifeworlds but millions of lives, hurling them around the globe at damaging speeds, explains, on one hand, the necessity of Habermas’s vague definition and, on the other hand, the

greater necessity of precisely naming these cultural spaces in which resistance to systems might be found.

Indeed it seems productive to think of the lifeworld as a basis for resistance—not a space presumed to exist with stable boundaries and a list of members, but something more fluid, something constantly created in the “networks” of communicative action in which everyone engages everyday whether they want to or not. The more successfully we find the language to link these lifeworlds, the more capacious (and more powerful) these networks become. As language, ideas, and practices move from the lifeworld to civil society—and they can only do this when these networks become powerful—the process of hegemonic (re)formation begins.<sup>x</sup>

Ideas, having found particularly successful articulation—the dual sense of the word, as speech and as connection, will be crucial to my arguments in chapter four—in the lifeworld begin to percolate into the public sphere. Early in his career, in the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas defined the public sphere particularly in terms of the salons and museums, the coffeehouse culture and critical media that appears in England and Germany in the eighteenth century. The public, he argued, was “held together through the medium of the press and its professional criticism. They formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters” (51). What’s more, it was, “in principle inclusive [...] it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated in a clique” (37). However exciting the idea of such a space, critics, most famously Nancy Fraser, were quick to note Habermas’s oversight: the public sphere was defined by its exclusions. In

the halcyon days of the eighteenth century, neither women nor people of color, for instance, were able to participate fully in the public sphere. As Fraser points out, “contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics” (61).

Habermas has rightly accepted this critique and in Between Facts and Norms, he defines the public sphere as constituted of competing counterpublics. Thus the public sphere—in Habermas’s mature theory—might be conceived roughly along these lines: “a network for communicating information and points of view” to many hearers so that “the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (BFN 360). It is, then, a spacetime constituted of episodic publics (“found in taverns and coffeehouses”), arranged publics (“such as party assemblies or church congresses”) and an “abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographical areas” (BFN 374). As Habermas powerfully notes:

The one text of “the” public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next. (374, my emphasis)

Thus we might conceive of the public sphere as the venue in which various counterpublics, having built their messages in communicative practice with more

limited communities, put forth their ideas in the hopes of finding more adherents—to adopt not only the ideas, but the languages and communicative practices that best express them. Fraser’s useful example is that of twentieth-century feminists who were eager to make public and curb domestic violence. These “feminists formed a subaltern counterpublic from which we disseminated a view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies. Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in making it a common concern” (71). Indeed, feminist activists not only wrought linguistic change—making the phrase “domestic violence” well known and deplored—but also moved these concerns beyond linguistic transformation of the public sphere into real legislative transformations with more stringent laws against domestic violence.<sup>xi</sup>

This process constitutes the final two layers of Habermasian communicative action in its political sense. As Habermas puts it in Between Facts and Norms:

The public sphere must [...] amplify the pressure of problems, that is, not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes. (359)

The public message must be shaped in such a way that it can spur not only changes at the level of thought, but at the level of law. The way to do this is through civil society: the “nongovernmental and non-economic connections and voluntary

associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society” (BFN 366). These can be both long-standing (say, the National Organization for Women) and more temporary (the Riot Grrl movement in the early 1990s), but they work “to transmit” the counterpublic’s ideas in an “amplified form,” both in the public sphere and in such a way that these concerns can be heard by those who can enact legislative changes (BFN 367). This has been called Habermas’s notion of a “two-track” democracy: The public sphere and civil society work to influence the legislative process and by enacting laws approved by these publics, legislators derive their legitimacy.

Taken together, lifeworld, public spheres, civil society, and the law are the crucial components for understanding Habermas’s mature theoretical assertions. Habermas has consistently claimed that this framework is not idealizing, but based on the practice of actually existing democracy: “a skeptical evaluation of current world conditions is the background for my reflections” (“Conversation” 242). The claim is important, for it reminds us that however abstract Habermas’s theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy appears, it is not normative in a Rawlsian sense; it does not define, for instance, an abstract notion of justice for us to follow.

Yet there are clearly moments where Habermas fails to assess “world conditions”—his notion of “world conditions,” for instance, seems to be mostly limited to western democracies. In other moments, too, Habermas’s theory strikes me as painfully idealist. One of those moments is its rejection of literature as a means of communicative action. Both because this is an area of Habermas’s theory

internally in need of clarification and because I do not mean to simply borrow Habermas's theory and "apply" it to literature, my next section will develop an immanent critique of Habermas's communications theory. I will show that the marginalization of literature is hardly necessary. The theory of communicative action, particularly as part of a model of deliberative democracy, benefits much from a clearer engagement with alternate modes of communication—including those that transpire between readers and texts, between readers and other readers, and between readers and those who have never read the novels or poems in question.

## 2. Literature in Habermasian Communications Theory

"It is hard to imagine anyone associated with the Frankfurt School," writes David Ingram, "whose work, in manner of form as well as content, is so far removed from the aesthetic as that of Jürgen Habermas" (67). Still, both Ingram and Martin Jay have worked over the terrain of Habermas's scattered writings on aesthetics. And in their attempts to extract a cogent position, both focus on a mid-1970s essay, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin." There Habermas expressed his growing disdain for Adorno's aesthetic theory (calling it "consciousness raising" in a phrase seemingly calculated to align Adorno with the counterculture movement he disliked) and preferring Benjamin's focus on more widely available aesthetic practices with socially redemptive properties—non-auratic popular media like movies, for instance. Particularly given Habermas's other jabs at Adorno, it's not surprising that both Ingram and Jay



situate Habermas's aesthetic theory as deeply indebted to Benjamin. Jay concludes by noting Habermas's "continued determination to redeem those semantic potentials that Benjamin had located in auratic art" by reversing

the unbalanced relationship between the subsystems of rationality that characterize the types of modernization, capitalist and bureaucratic socialist, that have so far taken place. In particular, the domination of the subsystem of cognitive-instrumental (or what he calls in his new book [Theory of Communicative Action], functional rationality) over both moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality must be undone. (7)

Art—and this is an argument shared, at this level of abstraction, among many Marxist thinkers—might offer a redemptive response to various modes of domination.

Both Jay and Ingram give detailed readings, but their conclusions—Jay's essay was published in 1984, Ingram's in 1991—look quite different in light of Habermas's subsequent work. As I noted above, one clear trajectory in Habermas's career is the disappearance of questions of the aesthetic. Not only that, but after the scattered meditations on the aesthetic in the Theory of Communicative Action, when art does appear in Habermas's discussions, he expresses stronger and stronger doubt about its socially transformative potential. Thus, in what follows I will attempt to describe in some detail, the implications of Habermas's mature thinking about aesthetics—focusing on the period since 1980, in which he articulates the general theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy. The work of reconciling his earlier (and more sympathetic) aesthetic

assessments with this later work would be a project in itself—one requiring attention to a complex of issues both discursive and historical. What is clear is that by the 1990s, Habermas consistently claimed that art was external to communicative action.

He puts forth three basic arguments for this position. The first situates art—and, given Habermas’s linguistic focus, by “art” he often means “literature”—as “dramaturgical action,” capable of communicating between the writer and the public, but not in the egalitarian way that communicative action would. The second, more historicized argument, suggests that art has become rationalized and autonomous. It is not only insincere expression, but is a means by which the lifeworld is subject to external control.

These first two claims are somewhat fragmentary, appearing in brief flashes in Theory of Communicative Action. Habermas’s third claim, however, is more cogently articulated in writing throughout the 1980s, often as part of his debate with Derrida.<sup>xiii</sup> Drawing on speech act theory, he argues that language, by virtue of being part of a literary work, loses its illocutionary power; a book, put simply, is less capable of leading to action than a real world conversation. Habermas explores this claim at some length and those who would draw on his communications theory in a literary context, particularly David Colclasure, have engaged with it most seriously. Before I turn to this central argument, though, let me first quickly sketch Habermas’s dramaturgical and historical arguments.

Towards the end of the first volume of Theory of Communicative Action—in particularly complex terminology—Habermas proposes a role for art as a kind of

rational (but not rationalized) action. This is “dramaturgical action,” a phrase he adapts from sociologist Erving Goffman. He situates art as a “Model of Transmitted Knowledge,” writing, “Value standards are dependent [...] on innovations in the domain of evaluative expressions. These are reflected in an exemplary manner in works of art” (1.334). A novel could be seen as a model—either positive or negative—for how life in a certain period is (or should be) lived. In this suggestion it seems Habermas’s argument slips into a familiar Marxist paradigm in which literature “reflects” life—it is, in Lukács’s phrase, the “sundial of the mind” marking particular social and historical conditions (Theory 41). Of course, for Lukács, “Art always says ‘And yet!’ to life,” but even in this early argument Habermas seems to suggest it would not always offer critique (Theory 72).<sup>xiii</sup>

Still whatever “value standards” the reader imbibes from the book, the exchange is not communicative—for in “dramaturgical” action, the writer is, in some crucial way, dissembling. Her self-presentation is not aimed at reaching understanding, but in moving the reader in some particular, pre-ordained way. This process carries a hint of coercion and exists not at the equitable level of intersubjective communication, but rather at the level of ideology. As Ingram puts it “According to Habermas, the bourgeois art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was able to have an impact in shaping the identity of citizens as free, integrated persons only positively, or ideologically” (73).

Habermas’s second argument situates this problematic historically—specifying how the historical milieu of a book’s production shapes the abstract value standards it conveys. Capitalist development—here Habermas follows

Weber's rationalization thesis—has disconnected various spheres of cultural action from one another; thus, capitalist development mitigates art's connection to the various practices that shape the lifeworld: as Habermas puts it, "art's becoming autonomous means that the inner logic of the aesthetic value sphere is set free"; art, thus, loses any possibility of saying "and yet" to life; it cannot offer a means for critical reflection or resistance (TCA 1.161). Literature is now conceivable only as a tool of the forces of capital that would rationalize it and use it to their ends. Hence, as Habermas observes (again, showing the influence of early Lukács) since the eighteenth century, "the features of a form of life in which the rational potential of action oriented to mutual understanding is set free" are visible in bourgeois "political theories and educational ideals, in their art and literature" (TCA 2.328). Art is taken over by a particular group—the European bourgeoisie—in their attempt to achieve cultural hegemony.

Literature, then, is only capable of communicating bourgeois values, which are—here Habermas links his application of Weber to Parsons's systems theory—shaped by "media-steered subsystems" that "develop irresistible inner dynamics that bring about both the colonization of the lifeworld and its segmentation from science, morality, and art" (TCA 2.331). Art is rationalized, taken from the culture in which it was once rooted, and turned into the tool of some external agency—in this case, the steering mechanisms of money and power. Art is not just taken away from the people; it is taken away and then forced back upon them as a means of control. Habermas might cite Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947) here, for, indeed, his argument tracks it closely.<sup>xiv</sup> Instead he deliberately cites Marx. For Habermas,

this phenomenon is more than just rationalization, it is a kind “internal colonization.” The phrase has been used to describe material “internal colonies”—e.g. southern African Americans after emancipation living under Jim Crow and working predominately as sharecroppers—but Habermas uses it to describe a process by which capitalist ideology enters the lifeworld and impoverishes it; as when, it seems, a worker’s lifeways—waking at a certain time, eating a certain type of food at a particular hour—adapt to the factory whistle.<sup>xv</sup>

Though the language in which Habermas presents these discussions is quite different from that of his Frankfurt School predecessors, in many ways his conclusions here—as in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere—would seem to harmonize with those earlier despondencies. As Habermas puts it, describing not just Horkheimer and Adorno, but Marcuse as well: their research ultimately “confirmed them in the belief that culture was losing its autonomy in postliberal societies and was being incorporated into the machinery of the economic-administrative system” (TCA 2.382). Yet in a sense Habermas’s pessimism is greater than that of Adorno and Marcuse—for both continued to believe in art’s emancipatory potential within certain limits.<sup>xvi</sup> For Habermas, even such limited hopes are misguided.

This pair of arguments—art as dramaturgical; art as rationalized and colonizing—shape each other in important ways. From the first, one might extract a hint of hope about literature’s transformative potential: the reader (and here there is an echo Sartre’s notion of “directed creation”) might be guided into revolutionary thinking and action by the writer’s words.<sup>xvii</sup> But, alas, when

combined with Habermas's second thesis, the potential of revolutionary practice is erased. Even if art were (in some vague way) capable of transmitting ideas and values, those values are controlled by forces outside of the lifeworld; thus art is a tool of systems engaged in internal colonization. In both cases, of course, it goes without saying that this would not be through practices of non-coercive, equitable communicative action.

Situated in the context of contemporary literary studies, Habermas's first two aesthetic arguments look awfully strange. As Rita Felski has pointedly put it: "Literary critics love to assign exceptional powers to the texts they read, to write as if [...] subversive currents of social agitation will flow, as if by fiat, from their favorite piece of performance art" (18). Habermas seems to suggest the opposite. He first revives the unfashionable notion of the author—countermanding not only Wimsatt and Beardsley, but also Barthes and Foucault—then he suggests that an author is little more than a tool of bourgeois ideology. Whatever "subversive currents of social agitation" a critic might discover are dominated by an ideology bent on the internal colonization of the lifeworld. Habermas's first two aesthetic theses, then, offer an awfully bleak vision of literature's political power.

Not only do they look strange from the viewpoint of literary studies, but they are internally problematic. First, the universal fashion in which Habermas pursues the claims of internal colonization is simply historically wrong. While one could, no doubt, cite many instances of clear correlation between bourgeois ideals and literature since the eighteenth century, at many historical moments the bourgeoisie were not the only producers of art and art was not simply working to

reinforce their hegemony. This is true both in Habermas's European field of reference (Brecht, for instance) and even more true in a global context where anticapitalist and anticolonial artistic production and consumption utilize neither bourgeois forms nor support bourgeois ideas—think of Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka, think of Patrick Chamoiseau or Louise Bennett.

Second, and perhaps more disconcertingly, the internal logic of these two arguments hinges on a crucial and unfounded presumption: reading is a one-way street with the text giving (in some vague way that Habermas does not define) a certain set of ideas to a reader—and the reader (again, for some vague reason that Habermas does not define) accepting them. Above I noted the correlation with Sartrean “directed creation,” but taken together these two theses constitute a mish-mash of ideas from various earlier theories of reading, Marxist and otherwise: the author as “engineer” of the collective soul (as the Stalinist pronouncement had it); as caster of “the spell” (in one of Adorno's preferred locutions).<sup>xviii</sup> These ideas, in subtle but important ways, link back to a line of thinking—Aristotle through Arnold—in which art is an exemplary tool for “improving” its audience.

I do not have space here to fully engage the implications of this genealogy, but I want to emphasize that one should be deeply dubious of its fundamental assumption: that how we read a text is always predicated by the author; that what we take away from a text is always what the author wants us to take away. Anyone who has ever taught an introductory literature course knows that readers make myriad meanings from a text. This is not to cede—pace Walter Benn Michaels—the

possibility that texts have particular meanings and that those meanings matter.<sup>xix</sup>

Rather, it is to note sociologically that while bourgeois ideals are clearly inscribed in many novels and no doubt some readers come away with these ideals based on their reading, “internal colonization” has clear limits. These messages may well miss (or be missed by) those who “misread” novels understanding them to be about other issues, those who focus on minor characters in their interpretation.

Habermas’s first two notions of the aesthetic, I mean to suggest, not only contradict the broad literary-critical interest in assigning political power to novels or poems, but (much more problematically) are neither well-grounded in literary history nor in the realities of reading practice. Most crucially, they are not intellectually coherent with Habermas’s broader theoretical ambitions. These arguments—asserting the prominence of the author over the reader; announcing total discursive control with no space for resistance—constitute a rather self-contradictory move, as they lead Habermas to focus on the subjective position of the writer, not the intersubjective sphere that is among his central contributions to critical theory.<sup>xx</sup>

It is not particularly surprising, then, that Habermas finds another way to frame his objections to art and literature as he develops his theory through the 1980s and 1990s. His third critique of literature focuses on the distinction—central to his earliest articulations of the theory of communicative action—between “illocution” and “perlocution.” This approach to removing literature from the purview of communicative action avoids the complications of the previous arguments—though without ever actively contradicting them. In particular, in all



three arguments Habermas remains committed (though still without ever justifying it) to the position that someone or something—the author, the text, or the critic—must control the reader’s comprehension of texts. In this argument, J.L. Austin proves a reliable ally.

In The Theory of Communicative Action’s long excursus on Austin, Habermas notes that communicative action constitutes only “those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue illocutionary aims, and only illocutionary aims, with their mediating acts of communication” (1.295). Habermas also endorses Austin’s tripartite definition of illocutions: they achieve a “certain effect,” which he summarizes as “securing the uptake”; they bring about “changes in the natural course of events”; and, finally, they “invite by convention a response or sequel” (Austin 116-117). Illocutions move their hearer towards agreement with the speaker (“uptake”) in a way that she might not necessarily have agreed to previously (a change in the “natural course of events”) and, to make these consequences known, the hearer responds.

How might a reader’s interaction with a literary text differ from this model? Texts often move readers towards certain ideas (“uptake”) and reading can change the natural course of events at the singular level, viz. the familiar phrase “that book changed my life.”<sup>xxi</sup> Perhaps, then, it is the third aspect of Austin’s definition that allows Habermas to conceive of books as non-illocutionary. A book, Habermas writes, “removes the burden of acting from the reader” and “does not invite the reader to take a position of the same kind that everyday communication invites

from those who are acting” (“Philosophy” 223). We don’t, in other words, speak back to a book.<sup>xxii</sup>

Habermas elaborates this position in “On the Distinction Between Poetic and Communicative Uses of Language” (1985). There, literary texts (captured under the heading of “poetic language”) are prima facie distinct from the illocution at the heart of communicative action. Reading Roman Jakobson and Richard Ohmann, Habermas is able to conclude that the “peculiar disempowerment of speech acts, which generates fictions, consists in the fact that speech acts are robbed of their illocutionary force, retaining illocutionary meanings only as refracted by indirect reporting or quotation” (390). In Habermas’s reading, this virtualizes the relations to the world in which the speech acts are involved thanks to their illocutionary force, and releases the participants in interaction from an obligation to reach understanding about something in the world on the basis of idealizing suppositions in such a way that they can coordinate their plans of action and thus enter into obligations relevant to the sequel of action. (390)

The argument here is fundamentally formal. Because the world in the poem is marked off as unreal, the illocutionary force, even if the text did call its reader to action, is limited. We are, as it were, swept away by the text, our real-world commitments made to vanish in its imaginative potential. Poetic texts are, Habermas puts it, “world-disclosing” rather than “problem-solving” (396).<sup>xxiii</sup>

This essay is part of Habermas’s protracted dispute with Derrida about the nature of philosophy and the central focus of its arguments against “poetic

language” is the Derridian mode of philosophizing. As such, one might want to dismiss it as less related to novels and poems than its reliance on the word “poetic” might suggest. But he makes the same point explicitly about literature in the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. There Habermas cites Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood (1966) as a tricky text: “a literary elaboration of a notorious and carefully researched incident.” In Capote, the poetic form takes “primacy” because of the text’s “exemplary elaboration that takes the case out of its context and makes it the occasion for an innovative, world-disclosive, and eye-opening representation” (203). Capote’s style separates the text from a real discussion of the particulars of the Clutter family’s murder.

In a later essay, “Philosophy and Science as Literature?” (1992), Habermas is even clearer. Offering a protracted reading of Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler... (1979), he notes that in aesthetic language: “The house of ‘being’ is itself sucked into the maelstrom of an undirected linguistic current” (210). Habermas here is pointedly mocking Heidegger and those influenced by his post-linguistic turn thinking, yet despite the philosophical subtexts, he makes his literary point quite clear:

In everyday communicative practice speech acts retain a force that they lose in literary texts. In the former setting they function in contexts of action in which participants cope with situations and—let’s say it—have to solve problems. In the latter setting they are tailored to a reception that removes the burden of acting from the reader; the situations that he encounters, the problems that he faces, are not immediately his own.

Literature does not invite the reader to take a position of the same kind that everyday communication invites from those who are acting. (223)

Here Habermas is damning in uncharacteristically sharp language. What literature does is vague, otherworldly, and marginal to real communicative action—its modes are “metaphorical,” “rhetoric[al],” and “fictional” (207). Even if its ambitions were activist—even if it wanted “to solve problems”—it would necessarily fail; the fictional text always wants “to draw the reader into the spell of an imagined occurrence step by step, until he follows the narrated events as if they were real” (211). In this, the literary text becomes “parasitic” on more practical uses of language (PDM 199).

Despite the fundamental differences between this, Habermas’s third argument, and the preceding two arguments, he does maintain a kind of textual intentionality. In the sentence I have just quoted he does not say that Calvino himself wants to “draw the reader into the spell,” yet control is still exercised over the reader. Instead of an author coercing the reader, we have a text operating with a unique agency. Is it the author or the text that controls the reader? Habermas seems uncertain, for later in the essay he returns to the language of authorial intention suggesting that because the author cannot imagine the “ontological preunderstanding”—that is, the lifeworld contexts—of any possible reader, the novel could never succeed as part of a communicative practice. Thus, he writes

But the ladies and gentlemen who Boccaccio has fleeing before the plague from Florence to a bucolic country seat in the year 1348 cannot represent a German reader from the year 1888 or a Japanese reader from the year

1988, especially not with respect to the authenticating ontological presunderstanding with which these readers approach the text.

(“Philosophy” 213-14)

Certainly true, as far as it goes, but what does that really mean for the nineteenth century German or the twentieth century Japanese reader? Habermas’s focus here is purely subjective. Instead of imagining how the Decameron might mediate different types of communicative exchanges he dips back into the philosophy of consciousness and is only able to imagine readers as unique subject positions vis-à-vis the author’s subject position. Thus, as much as Calvino “attempt[s] to blur the transition from the one world [the literary] into the other [the real]” his attempts are “vain,” in a fashion similar to Boccaccio (223).

We might want to characterize Habermas’s third argument as, in some fundamental way, formalist. Yet it carries over much from the previous arguments, especially the reliance on authorial intention that was key to dramaturgical action. So while this third argument is by far the most damning—and the clearest in its announcement of illocutionary force as the central criteria for walling literature off from communicative potential—it maintains, in particular, intentionality (though now it is blurred between author and the text itself).

Thus if one—having looked at all three arguments—were to synthesize a Habermasian position on the literary it would, I think, look something like this: Literature aims to convince the reader of something (through rhetorical force, through sleight of language), but it invariably fails, for it is always already, by virtue of its form, stripped of communicative potential. So even as much as authors

strain to “solve problems” with their literary texts, they cannot. Thus literature is excluded from the happy world of communicative action. Its potential as a democratic transformative agent is nil.

Yet Habermas—ever cautious of dwelling in the Grand Hotel Abyss—does offer one redemptive gesture. In the brief literary excursus in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, he suggests the possibility that literature matters—indeed, that it can become part of lifeworld practices—with the help of literary critics, who serve as “mediators between expert cultures and the everyday world.” Criticism serves a “bridging function” between world-disclosing texts and the lifeworld by translating “the experiential content of the work of art into normal language” (207-208).<sup>xxiv</sup>

This argument—which trades authorial/textual control of the reader for critical control—also squares oddly with other of Habermas’s pronouncements about the role of the critic. Even if we ignore the fact that this argument doesn’t appear in his other later analyses of art, one only needs to look back to the brutal pessimism of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere to see (from a Habermasian perspective) the argument’s problems. There Habermas concludes by noting the ways that capitalist development has destroyed critical potential. In the twentieth century, “The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” (160). What’s more, whatever minimal public space still existed after the rise of capitalism “lost its political character” (169). The dynamics that provoked Habermas’s pessimism in the early 1960s surely haven’t changed today in a way that should make us

suddenly convinced of the possibility that literary critics might intervene in political issues in massively transformative ways.<sup>xxv</sup> Evidence, alas, points heavily to the contrary.

Still, however much Habermas would assign the unlocking of literature's illocutionary potential to critical experts (self-contradictory as such claims are), however slight the political potential of such practices might be, this moment in the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity offers the single crack in Habermas's otherwise total pessimism about literature's communicative potential. In the next section, I will attempt to pry this crack further open.

I have, to this point, elaborated (and critiqued) Habermas's claims that literature has almost no function in communicative action and deliberative democracy; now I will suggest that he has theorized its potential more fully than he imagines. In doing so I will join in a long line of commentators who have taken Habermas to task for his abstractions and his obsessions with the language of analytic philosophy (a language, I might note, that is just as removed from most people's experience as that of poetry). Most centrally, though, I will argue that these tendencies lead to a more consequential problem in Habermas's theory: an overwhelming political quietism. If the only seed of political transformation is illocutionary speech grounded in a lifeworld context and if we use Austin's strict definition of "illocution," the potential for transformation is fairly limited. How often can issues—especially politically charged issues—be discussed in such a purely analytic register? So if Habermas's goal—as he states in the closing pages of the Theory of Communicative Action—is to bolster "counterinstitutions that

develop from within the lifeworld in order to set limits to the inner dynamics of the economic and political-administrative action systems," the verbal arsenal simply must contain more than measured, rational illocutions (2.396-397).

### 3. Communicative Action as Literary Theory

Above I imagined a moment of quintessentially Habermasian communicative action: two hypothetical neighbors discussing and agreeing to vote for an less-imperialist presidential candidate. As I described it, the neighbors agree that voting for the candidate who would end an imperialist war (as opposed to the one who has vowed to continue it) is a shared good. While that agreement might come out of various rational, illocutionary, problem-solving exchanges—agreements about the need to spend money on public higher education, not drone strikes; the ethical good of not forcing one nation's notion of freedom on another—those exchanges might well include other kinds of engagement, perhaps even the discussion of literary texts.

I return to this imagined encounter not as a kind of idealizing fantasy, but as a heuristic. This concluding section explains how literary practice is encrypted in the DNA of Habermasian communicative action by putting the abstract arguments of the previous section into conversation with practices of reading. While I begin with this hypothetical, I will shift to reality by reviewing a familiar incident from literary history—the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906)—as a way to sketch a methodology for a Habermasian literary criticism: one that, in its most



general terms, attends to the intersubjective networks produced by texts, readers, and actions as part of literature's work of shaping political transformation.

Let's imagine, then, that in mentioning the ethical compromises inherent in any imperial encounter, one neighbor evokes—rather offhandedly—J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians (1980). I know what you mean, Neighbor B might respond. I've read that too. Coetzee's text offers a clear critique of imperialism in the form of an allegory—about the cycles of imperial history, about the corrupting influences of power, about the links between imperial desire and sexual violence. Yet like many excellent anti-imperialist novels, it is hardly a plainspoken screed. Indeed these hypothetical neighbors might quite reasonably have extracted very different notions from the text: perhaps one thinks of Abu Ghraib and sees the novel dealing with the interrelation between sexual violence and empire; perhaps the other sees it as a clear allegory of the waning of American power. Coetzee, it shouldn't go without saying, hardly had either of these particular resonances in mind when he wrote the text in the late 1970s. In this context, his particular intention is hardly at the heart of the discussion—indeed, few readers have access to the research skills or libraries that a scholar might utilize to answer such question and few public conversations engage in the nuances made available by this type of “radial reading”—moving from text to criticism (of the particular book, of Coetzee's career), to other books on related subjects (Dutch colonies, theories of archeology or linguistics).<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the context of a discussion of an imperialist war, the novel's evocation provides, I am suggesting, an enrichment of the lifeworld and, if the reach of the

textual practice were to expand—because more people had read the novel, because these two readers talked about it with others who then got copies—it could be more broadly transformative of the lifeworld, of the public sphere, of civil society. This is true however one interprets the text, for it starkly illustrates the consequences of imperialism: for those whose land and culture are taken and destroyed, for the takers and destroyers, for those imperial civilizations whose collapse may invite historical analogies. Far from rhetorical deception or escapism, the text enriches the rational discussion between neighbors; opens up possibilities to think analogically, imaginatively, historically in the context of the lifeworld setting. Waiting for the Barbarians secures “uptake” even if it is not the precise uptake we might imagine it meant to encourage. It does so because it helps shape a context that increases the possibility of mutual understanding and ultimate agreement, which—and this is where the text becomes a tactic—solidifies the two neighbors’ shared desire to vote for the less-imperialist candidate. As David Colclasure puts it, “the communicative use of language in an aesthetic form is a peculiar use of language because it discloses novel ways of articulating, through language use, issues of generalizable concern” (91). Books can be a way of discussing what is otherwise difficult to discuss or of linking the general to the particular; a way for readers who might not have experienced imperial rule to reflect on the geopolitical consequences of their vote in the upcoming election.

Clearly this is not the path that Habermas has staked out with respect to reading. Most fundamentally, it substitutes claims of the author’s failure (approached through a philosophy of consciousness) to incorporate the reader in

the alternative world of the text, for attention to the way that texts (approached through a focus on intersubjectivity) do different things for different readers. The way we read Coetzee (or, to recall Habermas's example, Boccaccio) depends on where we find ourselves—in the world, in a particularly classed or raced or gendered body, in time. Context is crucial—something Habermas notes frequently throughout his work.<sup>xxvii</sup> But this is not to assign to Habermas the radical contextualism typically associated with poststructuralist positions; rather to suggest that Habermas would seem to agree with V.N. Volosinov that we must attend to language as “theme,” the meaning “belonging to any utterance as a whole” grasped as part of its temporal, spatial, and historical totality (99).

Thus language—even literary language—should be understood through the context of particular moments of use. I have taken Coetzee as an example of a text with potential to enrich the exchange between these two voters, but many texts would work: Michelle Cliff's No Telephone to Heaven (1987), W.B. Yeats's “Easter 1916” (1916), Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North (1966). Shared reading of any of these texts, it seems obvious to say, might enrich such a discussion of this particular issue—indeed, even texts less critical of imperialism, by, say, Conrad, Kipling, or Naipaul, would enrich such discussions. These texts, by making imperialism more readily conceivable, can help us move beyond a discussion grounded wholly in familiar, shared experience. They help link a vote for a U.S. presidential candidate to experiences of imperialism around the world; in doing this, such texts enrich the local lifeworld. The text here serves as intermediary—and does so in a way, I want to emphasize, that social stratification

in its myriad forms makes difficult. Most conversations in the global north, to put it mildly, don't benefit from a detailed understanding of the conditions of imperialism. Put in these global terms, Habermasian communicative action might seem not just to allow for literary reading, but depend on it.<sup>xxviii</sup> Particularly in a world where local experience (the shirt one puts on in the global north) is linked through an obfuscated chain of exploitation (children working twenty-hour days to stitch logos, women and men working round the clock to make the supply lines efficient) to the global south, texts that convey both the generalizable experience of such exploitation and the particular details of it can shape local lifeworlds by enriching conversations beyond known, experiential particularities.

So against Habermas's various anti-literary positions, I would suggest the truly Habermasian position assumes neither the clear definition of the text vis-à-vis authorial intention nor disciplinary convention. But this is not, again, to endorse a radical indeterminacy of meaning where every reader is "right" all of the time. Rather it is to focus on the intersubjective production of meaning, to admit that critics cannot establish by fiat what constitutes the "right" interpretation nor can readers or reviewers or authors. This is where Habermas's notion about the "bridging" function of criticism—if we ignore the question of how the critic finds a public to whom she can speak—is shown to be a kind of subjectivism, as well (PDM 208). As if critics were the only one who could rightly tell readers what to take away from books! Instead, the "right" interpretation might be understood as the product of intersubjective communication leading to agreement about the meaning of a text in a particular lifeworld context at a particular moment. Criticism, then, is

assuredly part of the process, but not necessarily the criticism of the trained and sanctified literary critic; rather, criticism as a kind of everyday conversation about books and how they relate to other issues.<sup>xxix</sup> It is precisely in this process that texts become illocutionary. In a discussion, even at the simple level of what a text means, we engage in “securing uptake, taking effect, and inviting a response” (Austin 118).

A weak version of this claim might consider the interaction between a reader and a text: they way she writes in it, or about it, or copies a few of its lines on her blog or Facebook page, even when—to take another familiar example—she finds herself so annoyed or bored that she simply puts it down. This “conversation” isn’t a perfect analog of other human conversations, but many solitary reading practices do fulfill at least the first two of Austin’s three main aspects of illocution. They produce “certain effects” (the text helps us think about its subject [or perhaps some other subject] in a new way) and induce a “response or sequel” (we write in the book, look up what else the author has written, make a note to tell a friend what we’ve read). And, as I will go on to describe in the rest of this dissertation, there are many reading practices which are hardly solitary.

A strong version of this claim—the one I am pursuing here—would look at how the illocutionary potential of books is unlocked in communication between humans. In my hypothetical example, the reading of Coetzee produced a “certain effect”: it invites “a response or a sequel” in that it opens the possibility for agreement between the neighbors and that conversation secures an anti-imperialist “uptake” that leads to “changes in the natural course of events” in the

form of the vote. The illocutionary success of the neighbors' conversation was grounded in the book. This is, in part, what Colclasure means by citing a book's "capacity to articulate ways of looking at the objective, social, and subjective worlds in light of shareable subjective experiences" (54). But here—and this is why I am stressing the illocutionary property—the book offers more than ways of seeing; it helps guarantee the subsequent action. It turns an unfamiliar experience into something "shareable."

Rather than thinking of the text as a mediator between a (deceptive) author and audience, a means of ideological control, or an autonomous, escapist world, we could see the text as the nexus of a network of communicative practices which unlock its illocutionary force. Not only does this allow us to step around Habermas's arguments against literature, but it does so while affirming Habermasian literary criticism in the kind of intersubjectivity that is Habermas's most crucial philosophical intervention.

But I want to engage more directly with Habermas's third argument—about literary language as "parasitic" on regular speech. To this point, I have been discussing literary texts at a fairly general level—focusing more on what they say than how they say it. But the way language works in literary texts is key to Habermas's rejection of their illocutionary power. Thus, even if Habermas were convinced by this general line of argument, he could point out the particularly world-disclosing aspects of Coetzee's rhetorical flourishes: the metaphor of the slips the Magistrate digs up from the desert, the freighted, lyrical descriptions of the seasons. These, Habermas might want to claim, are not part of the literary

communicative practice, but distractions from the communicative potential of the text. For while Habermas admits that “normal language is permeated with fictional, narrative, metaphorical—in general with rhetorical—elements,” he constantly segregates such functions from communicative action, citing “distinctions between serious and simulated, literal and metaphorical, everyday and fictional” as boundaries to be maintained (“Distinction” 391, 384).

In a sense, I agree with Habermas. Literary texts are different; they are what Raymond Williams calls “well-written books of an imaginative or creative kind” (186). They do not purport to be real and they express themselves ‘well’ by drawing on the creative linguistic resources. Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” with its forceful diction and regimented rhythm, thus, gives a very different perspective on the Easter Rising than a non-fiction prose account. Coetzee’s novel helps us think about imperialism in different ways than Yeats (though if we read it with “Easter 1916” we might well use Coetzee to reflect on England’s imperial project in Ireland), but also in a different way than non-fictional prose. These literary accounts not only thematize experiences of imperialism, but showcase ways that different subjects have felt about it, both at the level of “form” and “content.” So, yes, literary language is different, but that’s hardly to say it lacks illocutionary power. While it’s easy enough to make species-distinctions between Yeats, Coetzee, and prose accounts of the Easter Rising, in the context of everyday use, such lines can hardly be so precisely drawn. Readers often (though not always) know the difference between literal and metaphorical, real and fictional, but the practical effects of such distinctions are hardly categorical in terms of the outcome

the texts produce. To put it simply, literary texts don't just recount the millions slaughtered by imperialist regimes, they—through their formal construction—help us imagine what it means to live under such a regime, to resist one, or to lose a family member in such slaughters. This is not to make an evaluative judgment—fiction is more important than fact—but to suggest that we come to know and understand different experiences differently through different types of texts. All of which is to say that Habermas's hard and fast distinctions—however grounded in the credos of linguistic philosophy—are tougher to parse in terms of the real world applications and, in particular, their illocutionary power.

On this point, Iris Marion Young's precise and illuminating critique of Habermas is particularly useful. Young notes that excluding particular types of language from potential political effect is hardly benign; it is a choice that has real-world consequences. Democratic inclusion, Young writes, "requires an expanded conception of political communication, both in order to identify modes of internal inclusion and to provide an account of more inclusive possibilities of attending to one another in order to reach understanding" (Inclusion 56). Different people (and different peoples) communicate differently—these differences of race, class, ethnicity, gender, national origin—must be taken into account when theorizing communication in a democratic polity. She suggests attention must be paid to:

- (a) the emotional tone of the discourse, whether its content is uttered with fear, hope, anger, joy, and other expressions of passion that move through discourse. [...]
- (b) The use in discourse of figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, puns, synecdoche, etc., along with the styles or attitudes such



figures produce—that is, to be playful, humorous, ironic, deadpan, mocking, grave, or majestic. (c) Forms of making a point that do not only involve speech, such as visual media, signs and banners, street demonstration, guerrilla theater, and the use of symbols in all these contexts. (d) All these affective, embodied, and stylistic aspects of communication, finally, involve attention to the particular audience of one’s communication, and orienting one’s claims and arguments to the particular assumptions, history, and idioms of that audience. (Inclusion 65)

Young’s definition of “communicative democracy” is far more inclusive of diverse types of linguistic production than Habermas’s. But it is also profoundly literary; indeed, on each of these points Young cites a feature of language—emotion, figures of speech, symbolism, rhetorical attention to audience—often explicitly associated with literary work. This is rather striking as Young, a political philosopher, never shows much interest in literature per se. But more importantly, if we apply Austin’s three-part framework for illocutionary acts—“securing uptake, taking effect, and inviting a response”—these diverse types of language all certainly contain illocutionary possibility (118).

Young’s attention to communicative action’s potential in diverse rhetorical modes suggests a second level to my argument about the ways literary texts serve to enrich conversations. Would it convince Habermas that his concerns about the non-illocutionary power of such modes of communication are overstated? Young, attentive to such objections, reminds us that these different modes are not “substitutes for argument,” but part of arguments; narratives, in one of Young’s

examples, “sometimes are important parts of larger arguments, and sometimes enable understanding across difference in the absence of shared premises that arguments need in order to begin” (Inclusion 79). Young’s critique of Habermas’s short sightedness—which has been echoed in other terms by other theorists—endeavors to square Habermasian rationality with more diverse linguistic practices.<sup>xxx</sup>

I have now suggested a number of ways that literary texts can work to enrich communicative action: at a general, thematic level they can bring experiences and ideas far from immediate lifeworld concern to the fore; at a more formal level literary devices can include a greater array of speakers in a discussion or have other affective results that augment discussion. Thus, in a Habermasian literary criticism, one might attend to both theme and to linguistic nuance, while still maintaining a commitment to the fundamental aspects of Habermas’s theory: intersubjectivity, linguistic context, and a commitment to transformational deliberative democracy.

Let me sketch how this works in practice by turning to the publication—and political consequences—of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906). This familiar bit of literary history will serve as the stage for elaborating the specific ways in which communicative action refigures critical reading.

The story begins in February 1905, when Sinclair began to publish chapters from The Jungle serially in the socialist newspaper Appeal to Reason. The chapters—grounded in Sinclair’s real world investigation and interviews with workers in Chicago meatpacking plants—were a hit with the Appeal’s nearly

300,000 subscribers. But before the narrative had run its course, the paper cut it off (Arthur 59). Less than a year later, Scribner's published Sinclair's novel and it went on to sell vast quantities—over 100,000 copies were printed in 1906 alone—both in the United States and abroad (Arthur 69-71). Around the time of its publication, the novel was also serialized in the New York Evening Journal, a Hearst paper.

Just a few weeks after the book was published, President Roosevelt wrote to Sinclair suggesting the writer should speak with the president's commissioner of corporations about the book's charges. Sinclair responded and a series of exchanges began in which the president and the author discussed the novel, the political power of literature, and—of course—socialism, which Roosevelt naturally argued was flawed. Following the exchange, Roosevelt invited Sinclair to the White House. At the meeting were four men—the president, two of his advisors, and Sinclair—and two books, a copy of The Jungle “bristling with index cards, and a similarly marked copy of David Graham Phillips's The Treason of the Senate” (Arthur 73). They discussed the value of Phillips's book—which is credited with helping to pass the Seventeenth Amendment, allowing the direct election of senators—and the need for deeper investigation into the meatpacking industry. This is particularly noteworthy as Roosevelt had already conducted one investigation—one that damned Sinclair's novel as full of “willful and deliberate misrepresentations” (qtd. in Arthur 74). Sinclair, in letters and in person, argued for the need for a second more covert investigation and, after the meeting, Roosevelt granted this wish. Exchanges between the writer and the president

continued throughout the spring as investigators in Chicago turned up evidence corroborating Sinclair's story and Roosevelt publically attacked the meatpacking industry, while also famously coining the term "muckrakers" to describe Sinclair and other popular Progressive era writers. Despite the president's public mockery of Sinclair, The Jungle was unquestionably instrumental in the public outcry that finally enabled passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act in June 1906—a mere five months after the novel became a national hit.

How would a Habermasian literary criticism examine this scene? It might seek to address Roosevelt's communication with the book, evidenced by his notecards. Indeed, the book had clear illocutionary force. As Roosevelt wrote to Sinclair "the specific evils you point out shall, if their existence be proved, and if I have power, be eradicated" (qtd. in Sinclair 14). But one might also look at those letters as illocutionary—discussing across vast political differences the value of socialism and shaping the president's (heartily capitalist) policies—as well as involving Sinclair's specific arguments about meatpacking, and Roosevelt's invitation. Certainly the in-person conversations qualify as communicative action, leading, as they did, to further investigation and the ultimate passage of the bill. From this focus on Roosevelt and Sinclair one might determine an intersubjective set of interpretations of the text for this particular historical juncture, noting among other things the difference between the author's intention and the text's consequences—as Sinclair famously grumbled, "I aimed for the public's heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach" (Jungle xi). Habermasian literary criticism reads

these interactions through the lens of the novel and scales from the level of the text to its national political consequences.

Of course, one could look well beyond this nexus. Spinning off from the conversations I have just described were thousands of others: between Roosevelt and his staff, between Senators, Representatives, and their constituents, between the investigators Roosevelt appointed and Sinclair (who gave them advice and contacts in Chicago), between those investigators and Sinclair's contacts as well as other officials—and, of course, between all of those who were peripherally involved, the readers who wrote letters to Roosevelt during these months, for instance. Taken together, the entire episode spans about eighteen months and is constituted by, at minimum, a few conversations between powerful people; at maximum by thousands of interactions between very diverse constituencies: readers and politicians, readers of newspapers and novels, readers of socialist and mass-market news, readers in California and Connecticut. A critic might choose to focus on some or all of these communicative exchanges but could not get away from the central role of Sinclair's novel in all of them—nor from the ultimate illocutionary outcome: the passage of the bill.

The example of The Jungle and the Pure Food and Drugs Act suggests, then, an instance one might well study through the paradigm of Habermasian communicative action ranging from basic communicative exchange between singular actors to the structures of civil society and ultimately legislative politics—and with only minor revisions to the central pillars of Habermas's argument. Indeed, close analysis could show The Jungle to be a perfect example of a text that

shapes a lifeworld, the norms and practices of which impact civil society and, ultimately, transform the juridical sphere.

To draw such conclusions, this reading has made three key methodological moves—moves I will repeat, with greater elaboration, throughout the rest of this dissertation. First, and most essentially, I have read contextually: understanding textual meaning to be situated in a particular moment, in a particular set of practices and lifeworld contexts. To achieve this contextual understanding is to read—and this is the second point—a text in its communicative use: to read it through the reading practices of those situated within the lifeworld. The third point is to understand the text as illocution in the broader sense I have argued for: that is, to attend carefully to not only what people say about it, but the particular, material consequence of those discussions. It is, then, to read with an interest in what people, at particular moments, do with texts—and to treat these practices as creditable ways of using literature in the making of intersubjective meaning, of shaping lifeworlds, and ultimately as part of a transformative political process.

These prerequisites, I want to be clear, contrast in notable ways with various literary-critical approaches. On the first count—to read in the context of particular moment—broadens the field of inquiry from traditional formulations of authors, texts, and history. While my example of The Jungle, situating the text around its time of publication, is hardly very radical, a Habermasian approach allows the critic to examine, for instance, that novel's resurgence with the interest in clean food in the early 2000s. In fact, throughout this dissertation, I will be disarticulating texts from their literary historical contexts and studying, instead,

how they are read by a diverse array of people: writers and presidents, yes, but also soldiers in hospital beds and publishing honchos; community organizers, grant-writers, and people living in transitional housing; newspaper editors, bloggers, activists, and volunteers. This approach asserts that the uses of literature go far beyond the rarefied republic of letters; its users are myriad and engaged with others in their communities and beyond.

By following the practices of diverse readers, Habermasian literary criticism also breaks out of the restrictive categories of literary history. Readers often read beyond literary-critical and literary-historical paradigms of nation, period, and genre. In the chapters that follow, I will show how readers mix Marianne Moore, Amiri Baraka, and William Shakespeare; how Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath—notable for its racial myopia<sup>xxxix</sup>—is made to speak to racialized poverty and to contemporary debates about immigration; how Betty Smith's A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, a novel about growing up working class and female at the turn of the twentieth century, shaped the way men at mid-century thought about women's rights. To call this "interdisciplinary" would miss the point. Readers use literature as a fluid field of practice, not one restricted by the norms of professionalized disciplines. In this sense, Habermasian literary criticism aligns with other contemporary critical endeavors, perhaps most clearly transnational literary studies, in its ability to think about the complexities of reading texts across languages and political boundaries.

Most essentially, it insists on a politics of action. Above I approvingly quoted Rita Felski's rejection of critics who suggest "subversive currents of social

agitation will flow, as if by fiat, from their favorite piece of performance art” (18).

To read texts as tactics is to be always looking to link reading practices with political transformation. Critical attention shifts away from the ideological reader-text relationship. It shifts away from reader-response interest in the solitary (or elite) reader; it shifts away from a poststructuralist interest in the critic as the exemplary performative reader. In place of these micro-foci, this methodology opens a broader field of public, collective use—disagreement and contestation, yes, but also agreement and collective action aimed at particular shared ends.

Interpretation is certainly part of action, but—as with the example of The Jungle—reading texts as tactics pushes the critic to attend to the material consequences of these interpretations, whether they ramify in legislation or in more minute transformations, like putting food in a local food bank (which I describe in chapter four). While a Habermasian critic can seldom assign causality—given that this approach covers a broad field in which manifold causes are in play—she can examine suggestive correlations, as when readers enact practices that appear strikingly like those of characters in a novel they have just read (a practice evident in chapters two and four); as when a scattering of poems relating to a particular subject are suddenly republished by many anonymous readers (which I discuss in chapter three). Whether causation or correlation, attempts to situate a literary text closely in discussion with other texts necessarily limits which texts a critic might study, for if the text cannot be found in action, in public use, Habermasian attention will not lend much insight.



And, along with limiting the potential for reading certain texts, this focus on action also shifts critical attention away from the nuanced, detailed, layered close reading that is, for nearly all critical positions, the sine qua non of literary criticism. To perform one's own elaborate close reading in this context would be to ignore lifeworld readerly practice (unless the lifeworld one was studying was a seminar room in a literature department). It would be to remove the text from the hands of its practitioners. If, then, the critic is reading closely, she is reading not just the text, but the text in and through its uses. Thus I attend to how readers in Michigan and Tennessee drew heavily on particular chapters of The Grapes of Wrath in their work for social justice; I look closely at how op-eds and websites read Auden's "September 1, 1939" and Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" after September 11, 2001; I look closely at letters in which soldiers describe their responses to A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. As a critical mode, reading texts as tactics is inherently synthetic. It looks closely at various historically situated, non-professional interpretations of texts and reads what readers are saying in consort with the text. The critic's interpretive work is to link the text in question with the cultural practice—to understand that relationship dialectically.

Each of the following chapters offers more elaborate examples of how this methodology might be employed. But they also stand more powerfully than this initial chapter as arguments for—and corrections of—Habermas's theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy. As I note above, in the sprawl of Habermas's theoretical work across nearly fifty years—but particularly since the publication of the Theory of Communicative Action—examples of practice are,

to put it generously, minimal. If this dissertation makes one argument, it is that humanities scholarship interested in politics can and should signify that commitment by mixing the theoretical with the practical—by, in this case, discovering real world engagements and, in documenting and analyzing them, encouraging more action. I hope that the chapters in this dissertation will serve as blueprints for others who would use literature to political ends beyond the classroom.

It is in this spirit that I have, throughout this chapter, evoked Habermas's ambition, stated at the end of Theory of Communicative Action, to bolster "counterinstitutions that develop from within the lifeworld in order to set limits to the inner dynamics of the economic and political-administrative action systems" (2.396-397). While not an insurrectionary slogan destined to be spray painted on walls around the world, its hope—for counterinstitutions of our own construction defined in our own terms, shaped by and representative of diverse lifeworlds and working in consort to resist the imperatives of capital—is foundational to radical transformation today. The point, for Habermas as for Marx, is to change it. This Marxian ideal, I hope to have indicated, remains part of Habermas's mature philosophy and, as such, implies that communicative action merits more attention than it has been given of late in left-oriented intellectual and activist projects, literary and otherwise.

But Habermas's particular usefulness for literary critics has been my main argument here. His theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy provides literary critics concrete terms for thinking about how people do politics

with books, how literature plays a role in shaping conversations and building popular opinions, how it is part of making juridical change. Let me now turn to the remarkable and transformative work of a diverse array of readers who engage such projects. The proof of my claims here—both about the theory of communicative action’s fitness as a methodology and about literature’s political power—rests in their interventions.

Chapter Two  
Books, Democracy, Inclusion:  
Soldierly Reading in World War II

What do you get when you add 13 million soldiers and 123 million books? In the following chapter, I will offer one answer to this question by examining the production and consumption of the Armed Services Editions. Published by the Council on Books in Wartime (a non-profit wholly funded by the United States military) and distributed to soldiers fighting overseas in the Second World War, the Armed Services Editions offer a remarkable opportunity to examine the political work literature is capable of enabling under particularly adverse circumstances.

I begin by describing the formation of the Council on Books in Wartime and the genesis of the Armed Services Editions. The council's archives provide not only records of what they published, but access to institutional intentions and ambitions. The archive is rich in documents that clarify the program's philosophy of reading and the complexity of its editorial work. The program is not, as one might imagine, a propagandistic collection dedicated to American exceptionalism, but a remarkably diverse chronocanon, the temporally demarcated set of texts, set in a particular context and aimed at a particular audience. It crosses genres, periods, the borders of national literatures, and, perhaps most strikingly, includes a diverse array of taste cultures. Taken together, this diversity of selection is not only surprisingly inclusive by midcentury literary standards, but includes a

number of selections that highlight and critique the familiar limits of American democracy.

But I argue here that the Armed Services Editions are more remarkable for what they do than for what they are—while this diverse chronocanon is intriguing, the material outcomes of the encounters it made possible are incredible. These outcomes are made available by the inclusion in the council's archives of hundreds of soldiers' letters to authors, the council, and the military. Thus, I read (to borrow Edward Said's term) in "contrapuntal" fashion, looking both at the books published and how readers responded (Culture 32). These letters evidence not just solitary reading and response, but an array of conversations: in barracks and trenches, across oceans and lines of hierarchy. And these conversations suggest that the Armed Services Editions, in a way we are seldom accustomed to witnessing in the history of the twentieth century, showcase the participation in—indeed, the creation of—a public sphere mediated by literature.

I focus on two particular aspects of this sphere. First I examine the ways in which soldiers attempt to negotiate what books should be part of the program. In these messages, soldiers' interest in an inclusive, plural public sphere is clear. Second, I turn to the letters about Betty Smith's novel A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1943)—the text about which there are substantially more letters than any other in the archive. In these letters, soldiers express profound emotions—"I'm not ashamed but instead extremely proud of the tears that have rolled down my cheek," writes one—and describe their understandings of experiences distant from their own (Clifton). Taken together, these two strands of response indicate the

particular success of the Armed Services Editions in enabling its readers to consider the experiences of others.

In laying out the stakes and the terrain of this argument, I have thus far used the language of Habermasian deliberative democracy—that of communicative action and public spheres; of discussion, debate, and inclusion. In concluding, I use the example of the Armed Services Editions to refine the Habermasian democratic paradigm. I link the work of Iris Marion Young to Nancy Hartsock’s feminist standpoint theory to argue that such reading practices as I describe here are foundational to solving some of the great challenges for democracy in the postwar era: in particular, bridging the gap between deliberative democracy and its mass formations by creating solidarity based on membership rights, private autonomy, and political participation among diverse arrays of people.

### 1. Books for Soldiers: The Armed Services Editions

Between 1943 and 1947, the U.S. Army and Navy, with the help of the Council on Books in Wartime selected, reset, printed, and shipped overseas, over 1,300 titles, putting into print—over the course of four years—122,951,031 books (Cole 10). The project’s scale is remarkable, even at the level of a single title. For instance, when the council decided to distribute The Great Gatsby (1925) in the fall of 1945, they printed 155,000 copies—roughly six times the total number put into print by Scribner’s between the book’s publication and the start of the war (Brucolli 26). Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the Armed Services Editions have received

such epithets as “the biggest book giveaway in history” and the “greatest publishing endeavor ever attempted in this country” (Brucolli 26, Trautman “Letter to Richard Simon”).

In the spring of 1942 the Council on Books in Wartime did not have such great ambitions. The council was little more than a loose network of publishing industry insiders discussing what they could do to support the war effort.<sup>1</sup> They began by organizing a few panels in New York where literary luminaries discussed the relations between books and the war and, encouraged by public enthusiasm, the loose confederacy quickly became a more formal organization. They rented an office around the corner from the Empire State Building, ordered letterhead, and set out to make books indispensable to the war effort.

Their first press release (dated June 1942) announces “books have a major role to play in this war,” citing the power of books “in influencing the thinking of the American people,” in “the maintenance of morale,” and “in supplying information that will be of use to the individual in connection with his particular part in the war effort” (“Aims”). An ambitious agenda and one that sounds awfully utilitarian on its face. The council wants to influence thinking and improve understanding, as well as “supply information [...] of use.” Even in talking about the more affective “morale,” the press release emphasizes the functional with “maintenance.” Though not yet affiliated with the military, the council’s language is already regimented.

Initially, as this press release indicates, the council focused singularly on the home front: they aimed to explain the war to those within the United States. To

this end, they quickly launched the Imperative Campaign that selected important contemporary books and brought them “to the attention of the American people” (“Aims”). The first two “imperatives” were John Hersey’s Into the Valley (1942) and W.L. White’s They Were Expendable (1942), both non-fiction about the war in the Pacific by respected journalists. Both books were also part of the council’s second project, the Recommended Book Lists. In essence, these were ten- to twenty-book reading lists, focused on particular themes: “The American Spirit” and “Britain: Let Us Understand the British.” Both “imperatives” and “recommended” books were heavily publicized by the council, which designed and fabricated display materials for bookstores and public libraries, while also promoting the books in newspapers and on the radio. Both the selections and the council’s manner of publicizing them makes clear that the council focused on recommending books that would help civilians understand the world at war, the enemies and allies of the United States, and the military and policy goals that guided the battles.

After just six months, in January 1943, the council’s work changed substantially, both in scope and in focus. That January, Ray L. Trautman of the Army Library Service approached Malcolm Johnson, one of the council’s board members, with the idea of getting low cost books to soldiers at the front (Cole 13). How could the council—who imagined themselves exemplary citizens sharing in civic sacrifice—not follow the lead of the military? In the next few months, the council “turned a good idea from the U.S. Army into an efficient cooperative enterprise which involved the army, the navy, the War Production Board, over seventy publishing firms, and more than a dozen printing houses, composition



firms, and paper suppliers” (Cole 13). As the council began to develop the Armed Services Editions, its largest and most successful project, focus shifted away from the home front and away from instrumentally useful non-fiction. What’s more, the council not only broadened its audience and its generic interests, but also ventured beyond the world of publicizing books and into publishing. In this they make more explicit, tangible commitments not only to the war effort, but to the material production of a particular type of culture. It’s one thing to recommend books to people, it’s another thing to decide which books should be republished and put them in people’s hands for free.

With these changes, the council’s work became much more taxing. They had initially budgeted \$5,000 for their first year of work (“Report”). The cost of selecting, editing, resetting, and republishing books (with the severe limits of wartime paper quotas), to say nothing of overseas shipment, led to a strengthening of ties between the council and the military. These ties were so blatant that, as John Hench writes in his thorough study of the publishing industry during the war, “publishers also feared that the council’s alliances with the federal government [...] would add the taint of propaganda” to the book business (46).<sup>ii</sup> While the council faced few accusations of producing propaganda, its ultimate product was hardly independent of governmental intervention. Indeed, from early 1943 on, the U.S. military became the materially controlling factor in the council’s work. First and foremost, the government financed—to the tune of \$700,000,000; over \$8 billion in 2009 dollars—the entirety of the production of the Armed Services Editions.<sup>iii</sup> And the money came with one central provision: the Army and Navy could veto the

publication of any text without explanation. While I will return to how the council and the military negotiated this relationship, let me emphasize the obvious point: the relationship continued. Not only did the government conceive of the program, but it continued to pay to put the books in print and to distribute them to soldiers around the world. Indeed, it seems to me that beyond the economics of the situation, the distribution is a clear ideological endorsement. The military, with its regimented control over every aspect of soldiers' lives, simply would not have shipped out tens of thousands of books if they did not feel comfortable with them. To put it simply, in producing the Armed Services Editions, the council found itself no longer just supporting the war effort—they were explicitly a part of it.

The process for getting the books into soldiers' hands was announced by the council in its June 1943 bulletin to members:

These Armed Services Editions, as they will be called, will be distributed exclusively in overseas areas, military hospitals, and training areas in this country where no camp libraries are available. [...] An entirely new format has been devised for these Armed Services Editions. The books will have paper binding, bound along the short edge, two columns to the page, type designed for easy reading, and be of a size to fit the pocket of any uniform. [...] It is expected that a new list of titles will be issued every month. Each list will contain from twenty-five to fifty books, about evenly divided between fiction and non-fiction and, wherever possible, including a few time-honored classics and first-rate mystery and western stories.

("Bulletin")

By late summer, production of the first set of Armed Services Editions was well underway and they reached distribution points during the autumn of 1943 as Allied troops were pushing into southern Italy and the battle for the Solomon Islands was winding down.

Between that moment and mid-1947, the 1,332 titles published were not just a mishmash of books, but the product of a conscious, careful, complex process of inclusion and exclusion. These titles, I am suggesting, constitute the program's notion of a canon. And like all canons, this one was highly contested. The council's archives include not just intellectual quarrels about what books should be published, but disputes about payment (it was late, it didn't come at all), about staffing (could the military support one more reader to help with the selection process?), and about power (who could make decisions and on what terms). Such fights suggest the complex interrelation between the military—who held the power of the purse—and the Armed Services Editions whose ambition to bring “the world's fine books” to soldiers involved, it seems, more compromises than they had imagined (Sloane).

The official process of selection evolved through various stages, but always looked something like this: Members of the council—initially on a voluntary basis, but eventually in paid roles—took on the work of finding and selecting titles. They collaborated with publishers to preview forthcoming texts, scholars to select classics, and—as I will describe in detail below—they also solicited feedback from soldiers themselves through advertisements in the military newspaper Stars and Stripes. Once they had created a substantial list, Philip Van Doren Stern, who

managed the Armed Services Editions for most of its existence, would then send the suggested books to Isabel du Bois and Ray Trautman, at the Navy and Army respectively, and wait for approval. The military always exercised complete right of refusal. After one particularly fierce pushback from the Navy to the council's insistence on a particular title, Archibald Ogden—then chairman of the council—puts this clearly: “of course your decision is the final one under our set-up as it now exists” (Ogden).<sup>iv</sup>

This selection process constitutes an important hub for my inquiry. It is here that the ideology the program hopes to represent and to reproduce would be most obvious. But the program's public articulation of its criteria is hopelessly vague. The announced criteria are often generic: the program should “provide the representative important books in all subject fields”; “Avoid the mediocre, subversive, and trashy”; “Provide fiction of enduring value.” And, in any case, many of its stated ambitions—the importance of “masculine viewpoint”—are explicitly contradicted by its own practices (Trautman 61-62). Thus, while vagary can be a mask for power, these guidelines—read against the general heterogeneity of the chronocanon—suggest that this is not the case here. The criteria for inclusion in the Armed Services Editions certainly eliminated texts radical in both politics and in form as well as any book, no matter how old, that made positive references to an enemy.<sup>v</sup> But beyond these predictable exclusions, it is very difficult to see a cogent agenda. Where there are fights about inclusion—seen through Stern's letters to the military—they seldom bear the appearance of shadow wars about a particular ideology, but sincere confusion: why, for instance, would the military approve

Conrad's Lord Jim (1900), Victory (1915), The Mirror of the Sea (1906) but not Heart of Darkness (1899)? Stern occasionally tries to finesse such selections by repeatedly suggesting titles that Trautman and Du Bois have already rejected. But again, the books in question are too eclectic to allow us to discern a particular ideology behind Stern's attempts.<sup>vi</sup>

Indeed if there is an agenda, it is eclecticism. The Armed Services Editions represent a diversity of purpose—and one that undercuts most of Trautman's post hoc announcements. Diversity—as suggested by the council's bulletins at the start of the project—may be the Armed Services Editions' clearest guiding principle. Speaking to OWI radio, one of the council's later directors described the program's breadth this way: “Everything from Mark Twain to rear guard”—everything from Oliver Twist to A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” (Gould). Since the Army and Navy were made up of over thirteen million readers, the council books, as John Jamieson<sup>vii</sup> notes, were “supposed to contain a sufficient variety of reading matter to provide something calculated to appeal to nearly everyone who cared to read at all” (142-3).<sup>viii</sup>

The diversity of selection, then, is a deliberate effort to include all types of readers—both experienced and potential. This ambition is clear not just in the selections, but in private letters between council members and their friends and in public pronouncements. At the council's annual meeting in February 1944, the crowd was told:

Each set literally offers something for everybody. True, reading some of the titles may prove a rather new and bewildering experience to some soldiers,

but again that is all to the good, in my opinion. I could tell you many stories about how these men will wade through books that they probably never would have heard of back in their civilian days. (“Proceedings”)

So while each set has many options and is explicitly calibrated to reach all readers, the emphasis here focuses on soldiers finding books new to them: “bewildering” new texts that might be difficult to “wade through,” but which, as this speech and many other documents attest, would still be read.

While I have named a handful of titles already, let me describe—as a representative example—the initial set of council books. It included thirty titles and carries clear traces of the council’s early thinking about books in wartime.<sup>ix</sup> Soldiers received foreign policy and history titles like Joseph C. Grew’s Report from Tokyo (1942), The Making of Modern Britain (1943), Phillip Hitti’s scholarly treatise The Arabs (1943)—books with a certain instrumental value for those stationed in Devon or Morocco or those curious to understand the enemy. They also received a remarkable complement of literary fiction. While some of these choices—William Sayoran’s The Human Comedy (1943), set in California during the war’s early years, or Melville’s Typee (1846), set mostly in the South Seas—have ties to the war, other literary works that made the cut have no discernable connection: “classics” like Oliver Twist (1838) and Lord Jim (1900); contemporary literary offerings like Tortilla Flat (1935) and Graham Green’s The Ministry of Fear (1943). These texts shared space with a historical novel by Howard Fast, and essays by H.L. Menken and James Thurber. Perhaps “quality” and “masculine interest” would seem to describe this list, but any other conclusions become more

complex when we add the less literary texts: The Fireside Book of Dog Stories, Mr. Winkle Goes to War (both 1943), and the middlebrow bestseller The Education of Hyman Kaplan (1937).

Such eclecticism marks each set of Armed Services Editions. While some are less literary than the first—the second set includes Ethan Frome (1911) and a selection of Robert Frost poems; the third, novels by John Steinbeck, Conrad Richter, Mark Twain, and Voltaire's Candide (1759), as well as Stephen Vincent Benet's short stories—over the program's short life, there is no indication that the Armed Services Editions moved towards or away from the literary.<sup>x</sup> The program stays relatively consistent in its selections throughout the war. Edith Wharton was always rubbing elbows with Rosemary Taylor, whose humorous bestseller Chicken Every Sunday (1943) was popular with troops; Candide shared space with Pistols For Hire (1941).

The diversity of the chronocanon, while it might muddy any particular ideological commitments, does make a number of arguments. While the council suggested they would prefer to publish “quality” books of purely “masculine” interest, this is hardly the case. The Armed Services Editions published a wide array of texts that accounted for nearly every soldierly taste: not just high, but low and middlebrow, too; not just masculine, but feminine and many stages in between. The program's eclectic chronocanon seems, on its face, to reject binary logic. It even expresses a rather inclusive notion of literacy—trying to move readers through different types of reading, helping them “wade” from the shallows of familiar texts to the deeps of new reading. As such, I believe the diversity of

selection expresses a commitment to a kind of democratic inclusiveness—of allowing diverse types of readers to participate in the program. This is important not only for its difference from more elite pedagogical models of reading, but also because military readers were hardly typical readers in the capitalist marketplace. Rather, they were something of a captive audience, as many of their letters hankering for more books attest. The Armed Services Editions, as such, constitute the limit of the potential reading at the front: “for the bulk of troops overseas, Armed Services Editions were the only books that were widely and easily accessible”—a point backed up by postwar Army research suggesting that 90% of service members read at least one Armed Services Edition (Jamieson 142, “Reading Tastes”).

But this is only half of the story of the Armed Services Editions. I have, to this point, described the program and its projects—intellectual, aesthetic, ideological—in its own terms. I have done so to provide a sense of its practices and its ambitions, which are, by some counts (the refusal to publish anything even vaguely sympathetic to an enemy) not so surprising, by some counts deplorable (the refusal to include a single book written by an African American).<sup>xi</sup> Despite these shortcomings—unfortunately all too familiar for the era—in the context of any other conceivable mass reading practice, the Armed Services Editions are surprisingly inclusive.

I now want to turn to the other half of the story: what readers did with the books. They read them: in their bunks, at their posts, in hospitals, mess rooms, libraries, on planes, trucks, and boats; “If you could see boys out here stop a jeep, a



bulldozer, a water evaporator, a grader or whatever piece of equipment they are working on [...] and out of the hip pocket comes the tattered, torn, maybe wet, copy of one of your books. I've seen them read them by a dim flashlight under a shelter half, even after the air raid siren has already blown and they should be in a foxhole" (Bell). They read them alone, but also together: to groups by flashlight, produced as dramas, even ripped apart, page by page, so other soldiers could read too, when copies were scarce—which all too often they were (Proceedings). What's more, copies of a single book could be "passed on through dozens of hands," as one soldier puts it (Bedel).<sup>xii</sup>

These are remarkable reading practices. For an act that is often imagined as solitary, passive, and escapist, the idea of reading a novel ripped page-from-page and passed from hand-to-hand or reading a poem punctuated by blasts of heavy artillery requires some conceptual refiguring. I will return to the way that the military setting inflects how these readers read. For now, let me suggest the program's more abstract implications: Through the process of reading and discussing with others, soldiers created a foundation for what Jürgen Habermas has called a "lifeworld": that set of shared experiences and references—indeed, shared uses of language itself—that enable communicative coordination. By reading and discussing together, soldiers and their various interlocutors developed the ability to come to agreement and the ability to work together vis-à-vis what Habermas calls a shared "grammar of forms of life"—the rules by which we think and act and speak about the world (TCA 2.392). As they read and discussed, they made judgments both literary and ethical. What's more, these

interactions were not focused on limited, subjective experiences—or on the immediate, exclusivist experience of living and working in a sex- and race-segregated military. With the help of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, soldiers developed a remarkably inclusive “grammar” for their ways of living that impacted American culture far beyond the war itself. Let me now describe two of these complex reading practices.

## 2. Reading Practices: Including Others

The array of texts in the first boxes shipped out to soldiers in the fall of 1943 was, as I noted above, a constant in the program. Highbrow texts like The Education of Henry Adams (1918), a book referenced in more than one letter as inaccessible for a broad audience, mingled with Max Brand.<sup>xiii</sup> This diversity marks a democratic selection practice that privileges inclusion over exclusion. It emphatically recognizes not just the diversity of educational (and by extension, class) experiences in the military, but the complex interrelation of “taste” that is a byproduct of these realities. As I suggest above, this is a surprising testimony to the inclusive aspirations of the editors of the Armed Services Editions.

But the shaping of such an inclusive sphere was not their work alone. To look at the selection process from below—that is, through the eyes of soldiers—is to see not only affirmation of the Council on Books in Wartime’s inclusive ambition, but attempts to shape an even more inclusive chronocanon. Many letters to the council acknowledge not only the practical value of the diversity of selection, but its symbolic value as well. One letter from a rather intellectual private

announces his resignation that while in the hospital he would have to read comics (“which I have never been able to regard as humorous books”). “It was with unexpected pleasure,” Private Boris Bitther writes,

that I discovered the wide selection of good books afforded by the “Armed Services Editions.” You are especially to be congratulated on the number of minor masterpieces (Such as James Stephens’ “Etched in Moonlight” and Max Beerbohm’s “Seven Men”) which are included among the better known and more obvious titles. At the same time, my friends who enjoy mystery and western stories appear to be equally satisfied with your choices.

(Bitther)

Bitther—who seems to think it would be too obvious to praise the inclusion of Keats or Dickens—shows the council his literary chops by saluting “minor masterpieces.” Yet even while engaging in his own act of distinction, he does not discredit other readers, his “friends” who enjoy less literary undertakings.

Many other letters echo this praise. A sergeant who thinks himself “quite a discriminating reader” notes that he “never see[s] a group of Council books without finding something very new which captures my interest or a worthwhile classic which I have long wanted to read” (Sholund). Another lists the popularity of various books:

The “Who-done-it” books have well-worn covers. [...]. The late books are also well read. [...] You find the bound editions of the short stories and poems by the Old Well Known Authors of the school days in use also. Then there are the books I really enjoy reading. Those are the ones by our foreign

correspondents. Especially those giving an inside light on why we are at war. (Pease)

Again and again, soldiers celebrate the texts and thank the council and the military for making them available. They emphasize the popularity—“well-worn covers”; “in use”—but their praise, as in this case, explicitly notes the diversity of options as part of the program’s value. Not only were the creators of the Armed Services Editions consciously building in a diverse collection of texts for their broad audience, but that audience recognized the diversity and valued it—in part, as these letters suggest, as a reflection of its own diversity.

While nearly every letter to the Armed Services Editions—or at least nearly every letter that remains in their archive—offers emphatic praise, many letters also offer suggestions. In these suggestions we see a greater interest in a diversity that represents the diversity of the military, but something more, too. For the texts recommended by soldiers cross many borders—of genres, of national literatures, of political pieties—and debate issues that go well beyond the books ostensibly under discussion.

Private G.W. McAdam wrote to the council in the fall of 1944 and—like so many others—praised the selections because “There’s certainly something there to please every taste and every level of mentality.” Despite his praise, he also has a few suggestions. Noting the popularity of Shakespeare with GIs in the reading room at his base, he asks “How about a few volumes of modern plays?” McAdam’s suggestions continue:

I especially enjoyed your edition of “Come In” by Robert Frost and wonder if you couldn’t put out some more poetry. [...] Carl Sandburg, Stephen Vincent Benet, Vachel Lindsay, Sindey Lanier, George Santayana, and some others might be especially good for such a book. Of course the English classics are always a sure bet in this line. Might publish some of the less-known works from such men, as I think the Pocketbooks again cover such timeworn classics as Gray’s *Elegy*, the *Deserted Village*, and the *Rubaiyat*.  
(McAdam)

The suggestions were, of course, quite reasonable. By the time McAdam was writing, Stephen Vincent Benet’s *Book of Americans* (1933) and *Western Star* (1944) and a selection *Great Poems from Chaucer to Whitman* had already been published. Early in 1945, a selection of O’Neill’s “modern plays” would be in print; eight months after that, *The Daniel Jazz and Other Poems* by Vachel Lindsay would be shipped to soldiers.

McAdam’s letter is typical in many ways—its praise and its polite suggestions—and so is the response he receives from Stern. To many of the most trivial seeming letters, Stern and other council members offer responses. While the letters are usually short—sometimes simply a form letter, though one that is always personalized—the responses tell the soldiers they are being heard, but they often do more than acknowledge receipt. In one particularly noteworthy letter, Louis Untermeyer (one of the council’s readers) writes back to a soldier to explain how the council selected a particular version of Keats’s “*La Belle Dame Sans*

Merci”; in another, Stern apologizes to a reader whose copy of The Gaunt Woman (1943) was missing pages and sends a new copy.<sup>xiv</sup>

These responses from the council were not just polite formalities. Ensign Jerry Bick, writing in January 1945, recites a long list of suggestions: Homer, Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, Shaw, Dos Passos, and Upton Sinclair—all books he describes as “classic.” He goes on to note a dearth of “foreigners,” as well, suggesting Anna Karenina (1878), Fathers and Sons (1862), Dumas, Balzac, Huysmans, Mallarme, and Verlaine, before mentioning more Americans: Dewey and Thomas Wolfe. Bick ends his letter comically: “That’s not all but it ought to hold you for awhile...”

The letter is something of a tour de force, both intellectually (how many ensigns in today’s Navy—to say nothing of literature majors in today’s universities—could reel off such a reading list?) and as a literary performance, closing with its ironic wink at its own excess and a deliberately misspelled “Thanx for listening to a very poorly written letter.” And it had at minimum predictive value, if not an actual influence on the selection process. Of the names on Bick’s impressive list, every American (save for John Dewey) would show up in the Armed Services Editions. So would Tolstoy (his short stories), though Bick’s European requests fared less well with the council.

Even when their requests did not end up as council books, many soldiers felt, in their correspondence, a sense of agency. Not only had the council, as I note above, requested such feedback in Stars and Stripes; they were deeply engaged with what the soldiers suggested. Thus as another soldier who requested Thomas

Wolfe wrote, upon receiving a note from Stern alerting him that Look Homeward, Angel (1929) had just been published: “I might have felt a slight sense of sponsoring if I were not sure that you already had it planned before I wrote” (Meltzer). Many soldiers, it seems, not only felt this sense of sponsorship, but wrote multiple letters engaging in the process of chronocanon formation. Indeed, while the soldiers had no formal vote (neither, recall, did the council), their requests were not only solicited, but in many cases—as in the requests for Wolfe, for more plays, for more poems as well as for many other books—honored. The responsive letters from the council seem to cement the engagement. I take these conversations—both the ones memorialized in the soldiers’ letters and those alluded-to conversations between soldiers that stand invisible behind the letters—as part of a shaping not only of the chronocanon, but of an essentially Habermasian public sphere: a place of debate and contestation over the nature of what books should be published and, by extension, what issues and ideas should be discussed. In writing, soldiers assert their place in the republic of letters, but in the council’s responses—both epistolary and editorial—a kind of mutual respect is established among the participants. Regardless of their rank or educational pedigree, readers become the shapers of the chronocanon.<sup>xv</sup>

Though the discussions I have cited thus far tend towards the literary, participants viewed this public sphere as more than purely literary. Indeed, many soldiers acknowledge the general power of books: “In a way you are influencing as many people for the good as the war has influenced people for the bad” (Meltzer). Private Meltzer doesn’t say influencing their reading, thus implying that the Armed

Services Editions shape the whole of a person. If the war is damaging, the books are redemptive—and that redemption has implications that go far beyond the literary sphere.

Like many soldiers, Richard Wharton praises the program for its “fine selection of books”—specifically the inclusion of H.L. Mencken, finding its “refreshing touch of atheism invigorating after the slush given us by chaplains, uplift societies, and other well-meaning but mis-guided souls.” Here literature is figured as opposing the normative constraints of military life—the sacrosanct dedication to “god and country.” Literature not only critiques those norms, but actively opposes them, as Wharton continues, praising Maupassant who “horrified the victorian world with his absorbing tales” (the council would publish a translation of his short stories less than a year later) and offering some broad advice in signing off:

Gentlemen, pay no attention, absolutely no attention, to whatever organization tries to influence your selection of books. If the legion of decency approaches you, please leer at them in your most offensive manner and tell them to stuff it.

Yours in deepest belligerency towards all moral societies. (Wharton)

As in other letters, the textual performance—certainly of a Mencken-esque sensibility—is unmistakable, but where other writers use rhetorical flourish to assert a position in a literary discussion, here the flourish asserts a more broadly social, ideological intervention. Wharton uses literature to attack the moral societies and religious groups who utilized access to the Army to evangelize



troops.<sup>xvi</sup> What's more, his mission—equal parts humanist reclamation and épater le bourgeoisie—is aided and abetted (in his mind) by the council. While they are, no doubt, an “organization”—indeed, they published some spiritual texts of the sort this letter forcefully opposes—Wharton construes their publications as fundamentally oppositional. In the process, he imbues literature with a remarkable capacity for resistance.

Another letter to the council sees books in a similar light. This one, from Norman Miller, ends by proclaiming

You are wrong if you suppose that soldiers want nothing but escapist fiction (indeed, in view of your inclusion of serious books, I have no right to charge you with that assumption), but shake them a few times, rock the cradle—  
else what's a literature for? (Miller)

Literature is made not for escape, but for action. Miller's phrases evoke Mark Blitzstein's musical The Cradle Will Rock (1937) and, indeed, it is work of Blitzstein's ilk that he encourages the council to publish. Noting like others that the council seems to provide “books that appeal to every literary (or non-literary) taste,” he suggests Marquand and Mann, who do make it into the Armed Services Editions, as well as Turgenev, Balzac, Strindberg, and Kafka (who do not), all before listing “not only Howells and Edith Wharton, but the ‘social protest’ novels of the middle ‘30s, when anti-fascism was de rigueur but not taken too seriously” (Miller).<sup>xvii</sup> While his colleague Richard Wharton might simply attack the bourgeoisie, Miller would go farther and indict their system with the proletarian fiction of the 1930s. While the council published no Mike Gold or Meridel Le Sueur,

it did publish a surprising number of writers with ties to the proletarian literary movement including Kenneth Fearing, Howard Fast and—as I will elaborate below—Betty Smith.

All of the letters from which I have so far quoted show how reading empowered soldiers who, by writing about books critique, suggest, and conspire against perceived enemies with perceived friends. Their topic is ostensibly literary, but in letters like those of Miller and Wharton, there is something far more at stake. Simply put, literary discussion allows soldiers not only to talk about literature, but about the role of religion in American culture (Wharton dismisses moral societies; but other letters ask for more spiritual writing); about class (for Miller, who would rock the cradle with proletarian literature).<sup>xviii</sup> But it is not only in letters that explicitly take on such issues where such contestation takes place. Literature, in these letters, is a mediator for discussions of great public interest: numerous soldiers fixate on Forever Amber (1944), a book banned in fourteen states for its frank sexual depictions. Their letters ask why they should not be able to read it; the council consents, publishing it in the T series. Others—including those I've quoted above—ask implicit questions about the relations between nation and culture in their requests for more world literature.<sup>xix</sup>

In these epistolary discussions, soldiers were constructing a lifeworld not just among those in their regiments, but with the council. In reading and writing, they were discovering issues of common concern and developing ways of discussing them: both the language to do so and the communicative practices that would enable such discussion. Literature mediated these practices. It was not just

a cipher enabling discussion of issues without explicitly engaging them, for it was the books themselves—both those in circulation and those that soldiers had previously read—that helped develop novel (the double meaning is suggestive) ways of expressing such ideas.

And, what's more, this building of a lifeworld has an explicitly public aspect. These were conversations not just whispered between bunks or muttered at the far end of a table in the mess hall. Rather, they transpired among all strata of the military hierarchy: between ranks, between class positions, educational attainments, and taste cultures. Perhaps nothing captures the significance of this so much as that these letters memorialize discussions between rank-and-file soldiers and the great literary men (and a few women) of the mid-century New York publishing world. As public conversation, these letters mark the space where the subtle navigation of a lifeworld shifts into the public sphere. And precisely because Habermas (pre-empting many of his critics) has doubted the efficacy of the public sphere in the era of mass media, the active, contestatory publicity of these encounters is so remarkable. In the highly stratified military, in the highly stratified United States—during an era where various legal and extralegal discriminatory practices marginalized not only many social groups, but silenced discussion of the issue of exclusion—these readers produced a public sphere that became a place for discussing such issues. And while not everyone came to agreement—soldiers wanted more world literature, but the council chose only to publish some; soldiers called for more proletarian fiction and the council

published little—simply that these issues were under discussion is remarkable in itself. Issues, after all, must become public before they can be juridically addressed.

Indeed, as I argued (with Habermas) in the previous chapter, legitimate rights are not simply natural or granted by rulers, but produced in a complex process. They require constant discussion and affirmation in various public spheres to maintain their legitimacy. That legitimacy is produced through communicative practices—from the relatively limited context of the lifeworld to the public spheres in which an idea, developed among a limited group, is presented to a wider audience in the hopes of convincing them to sign on.<sup>xx</sup> If ideas circulate widely enough and convince large numbers of people, they ultimately become the public opinion capable of shaping juridical processes—that is, of creating new rights or extending existing rights to new social groups.

Thus I am arguing that the selection process of the Armed Services Editions constitutes a rather advanced practice of deliberative democracy. It engages not only lifeworlds and public spheres in discussions of issues of general public concern, but—more specifically—might be seen to situate a number of the fundamental rights that Habermas outlines in Between Facts and Norms. For Habermas, democracy is constituted by (at minimum) five fundamental rights: citizens must feel themselves fully vested members, with private autonomy, and the ability to participate politically. Along with these rights, Habermas notes the importance of legal due process and social welfare (122-123). Democracy, as he puts it elsewhere, is fundamentally “integrative”; it must—at bottom—“found solidarity between strangers” and give them common purpose (Inclusion 119).

Thus, for one to feel a fully vested member of society, one must feel included in cultural practices—both political (say, voting) and social (say, participating in debate). Indeed, one’s sense of private autonomy, at least in modern democracies, is dialectically tied to this mutual claim: if a woman lacks the autonomy of a man, how can she feel part of the polity? A similar argument might be made for due process rights and, indeed, for social welfare. Looked at in this light, the notion of inclusion—which I have used thus far as a touchstone in my attempt to theorize the political significance of soldierly reading practices—offers something of a fundamental grounding for Habermas’s theory of democratic practice.<sup>xxi</sup>

This is—one might object—rather high-flown language to describe a bunch of soldiers reading books like Zane Grey’s The Heritage of the Desert (1910). No doubt books cannot guarantee due process rights or the vote.<sup>xxii</sup> While one might convincingly argue that the Armed Services Editions are a form of social welfare—akin to public libraries or even free public education—more convincing arguments might be made that the books in a program like the Armed Services Editions assist in the bottom-up production of a number of democratic rights. Thus, I might say that such books contribute to a reader’s political autonomy: he reads what he wants and thinks what he wants. And, again, while such freedoms might seem nominal, they work in tandem to make a reader feel an enlarged sense of autonomy and develop ideas about the world he lives in. In Habermasian terms, this would suggest that the Armed Services Editions enable and shape democratic practices in both the ways that they grant “the status of a member in a voluntary association of consociates under law” and in how they enable the “legal form of a

horizontal association of free and equal persons” (BFN 122). Again, democracy works not just because people have legal rights, but also because they understand themselves to be bearers of those rights with “equal opportunities to participate in processes of opinion-and will-formation in which citizens exercise their political autonomy” (BFN 123). The Armed Services Editions guarantee such opportunities to soldiers by including them in its selection process—and the soldiers reciprocate by advocating an inclusive selection of books and by using books to talk about issues of general concern. In the military, in the United States, in the 1940s, this is no small thing.

Still, perhaps these communicative practices appear little more than the development of autonomy in limited, personal contexts—the meaningless autonomy of the capitalist “choice” between Frosted Flakes and Fruit Loops; what Habermas pointedly calls “staged and manipulative publicity,” in which publics are encouraged to act in ways that are symbolically democratic, but in which the choices they make are meaningless (Structural 232). Worse still, some might suggest that this production of a subjective sense of inclusion is rather limited; indeed, the program’s main audience is white men.

These are important objections that I hope to address in the next section by describing soldiers’ reading of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. I have argued that soldiers’ reading practices contribute to the production of a public sphere capable of producing and sustaining rights. Now I want to build on that scaffolding to argue that these inclusive practices operate through literature’s particular power at

showcasing the voices and narratives of others, allowing soldiers access to otherwise marginalized or ignored social positions.

### 3. Reading Practices: The Experiences of Others

Published in the summer of 1943, Betty Smith's bildungsroman was an immediate critical success. The New York Times' Orville Prescott hailed it "the best novel of any kind I have read in 1943," praising the book as "profoundly moving [...] and an honest and a true one" (Prescott). A second review in the Times, a few days later, heralds the "poetic" text for its "stringing together of memory's beads"; "the workmanship [sic] is extraordinarily good" (Berger). Undoubtedly on this strength, the novel was among the first books chosen for publication by the Armed Services Editions. After it appeared as part of the D series, Army reports note wide approval and an incredible number of letters about it—indeed, there are more letters about "The Tree," as soldiers familiarly call it, than any other book in the council archives. The book's popularity led the council to quickly reprint it (in the K series) in mid-1944. Thus, even before Elia Kazan's academy award-winning adaptation hit screens in 1945, there were over 300,000 Armed Services Editions copies of the novel circulating around the world.

The success of the text as a council book is, on one hand, not very surprising—it was a highly praised bestseller—but Smith's novel is something of an odd choice based on the program's selection criteria. The novel tells the story of a working class Williamsburg family at the turn of the twentieth century, mostly from the perspective of its elder daughter, Francie Nolan as she grows from

childhood to her early twenties. The criteria of “masculine interest,” in particular, would seem to be lacking as the text focuses on Francie and her mother, Katie, while men exist at the periphery—Francie’s father, Johnny, for instance, dies near the novel’s midpoint.

Proletarian fiction is an obvious influence on Smith’s novel, though the novel itself is not prototypically proletarian. Strongly in line with Barbara Foley’s mode of “fictional autobiography,” Smith’s text blurs “the boundaries demarcating any firm distinctions between author, narrator, and protagonist,” crucial for proletarian fictional autobiography because, as Foley puts it, “the character’s process of becoming the narrator/author who writes the book provides the main focus of the narrative” (288, 294). Yet Smith also incorporates many aspects of what Foley has termed the “collective novel.” *A Tree* offers a detailed—sometimes unwieldy—chronicle of lives in poverty. We see how children gather rubbish in the streets for pennies; how they must negotiate for food; how the school system abuses them and how they dream of escape. As Francie grows up, too, we see a kind of cross-section of semi-skilled women’s labor: she never enrolls in high school, makes fake flowers in a factory, works as a telegraph operator, clips newspaper articles, and (like her mother) cleans for others.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Along with its relentless focus on the difficulties of growing up in poverty the novel expresses, at various turns, broader ideological doubts about the American Dream. Not only do many of the characters struggle to keep themselves fed, clothed, and housed—the antithesis of the American Dream!—but Francie makes such doubts manifest. In her early teens, she writes a class play in which a



boy dreams of being a “healer,” but Fate shows him—as Francie’s stage notes describe—an “old man soldering bottom of ash can” (317).

Yet while A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is clearly shaped by proletarian fiction, it is more chronicle than jeremiad; a point driven home by the lack of political action in the novel. Indeed, as the novel ends, Francie heads off to college—having passed her Regents exam without ever attending high school—and her mother marries the stable, loving cop, McShane.<sup>xxiv</sup> Still, even in this triumphal moment of class ascension—from extreme poverty to a more genteel strata of the working class—Smith remains focused on the complexity of the family’s class transformation: Francie, for instance, wants to remain “a Brooklyn girl with a Brooklyn name and a Brooklyn accent” (468). As if to drive the point home, in the book’s final pages Francie revisits various people in the neighborhood who remain fixed in their class positions. Smith’s novel, despite its structurally hopeful conclusion, is far more Tillie Olsen than Margaret Mitchell.

Given the novel’s focus on women’s experience and its multiple criticisms of capitalism, it might seem a bit surprising not only that the council published it twice, but that soldiers liked it so much. “I got a great kick out of ‘A tree grows in Brooklyn,’ especially the part about the library, for it brought back many memories” (Heneghan). Another writes, “May I congratulate Betty Smith on her vivid and touching story, A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN,” calling the book “a source of never-ending enjoyment to me. Not only because of its story alone, but of its startling realities that I myself had known in my childhood in Brooklyn” (Mednick). Another writes “I have already had three requests for the book when I

finish it which is tonight and I know it will pass through many more hands before it becomes unreadable. I want to say that I enjoyed it immensely” (Paytg). Others ask for more copies: “I would only be too happy to pay any charges for the shipment,” promises Wesley Barker. Writes another, “I’ve heard a lot about this book, and would like to read it” (Adler).

This outpouring of readerly enthusiasm is noteworthy on its own—as are the references to readerly community (“heard a lot about this book”; “three requests”; “pass through many more hands”)—but I want to focus on two moments of readerly intervention based on “The Tree.” While these two readers are profoundly moved by the novel—and profoundly thankful to its author—both also extract particular cultural knowledge from it: one about the frailties of the American Dream; one about the social meaning and value of emotional expression.

In a letter to Harper & Bros., the novel’s original publisher, Frank W. Ebey, a commanding colonel in the European theater, narrates the long arc of his reading experience. He begins by describing a rather remarkable scene. In the midst of a firefight, one of his soldiers is reading “between bursts” and laughing to himself. Ebey commands the soldier to share the joke with the rest of the men. “He started to read us a portion about ‘giving the baby the gussie’—a part of the book—and we laughed like hell between bursts. It was sure funny.” In this section, a Brooklyn mother uses subterfuge—painting a monstrous face on her breast—to wean her three-year-old son (219-220). The contrast between the scene in the novel and the scene of the soldiers’ collective reading practice is remarkable.

The scene stays with Ebey and, sometime later, he manages to get his own copy of the novel.

I was reading it when we had to move fast. Our column got hit by a boche battalion holed up in some woods above a road and we hit the ditches and had a fire fight. Once I was tempted to read some more while they had us pinned down pretty tight, but I had to get up front and give a few orders and start them over the hill. (I was wounded slightly that day, too.) The point is... I was thinking about that book even under pretty intense fire. It was that interesting.

Ebey's surprised tone indicates just how plainly he recognizes the contrast between the martial and the literary. But for him that boundary breaks down as he thinks about reading while he should be fighting. His duty remains at the forefront of his mind, but the book seeks to intrude. And it is not exactly, as Ebey's language conveys, a wholly unwelcome intrusion; the book was "that interesting." His letter goes on to emphasize the pleasure he took in reading the novel: "It is a wonderful book. The gal that wrote it (I forget her name right now because the book is elsewhere) is sure a writer."

Yet the heart of Ebey's letter—where he describes his conclusions about the novel—hardly focuses on pleasure. He writes, "I never realized that any American children were ever unhappy in childhood until I read the book. The part about heaving Christmas trees at kids on Christmas night really got me for one thing." The scene he alludes to describes a "cruel custom" of Brooklyn in which, around midnight of Christmas Eve, tree sellers would hurl their unsold merchandise at

local children. “If a boy didn’t fall down under the impact, the tree was his. If he fell, he forfeited his chance at winning a tree” (Smith 198-199). In the scene, ten-year-old Francie and nine-year-old Neeley attempt to catch the largest tree. But the contest is marked by the tree seller’s conflict between money and ethics:

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” his soul agonized, “why don’t I just give ‘em the tree, say Merry Christmas and let ‘em go. What’s the tree to me? I can’t sell it no more this year and it won’t keep till next year.” The kids watched him solemnly as he stood there in his moment of thought. “But then,” he rationalized, “if I did that, all the other would expect to get ‘em handed to ‘em. And next year nobody a-tall would buy a tree off of me.” (200)

His moment of doubt carries on, but he eventually throws the tree “with all his strength” as “his heart wailed out, ‘It’s a God-damned, rotten, lousy world!’” (200).

The scene ends in triumph for Francie and Neeley as they manage to catch the tree and carry it home for Christmas. But Ebey’s allusion is not to the children’s success; what “got” him is not that they won the tree, but that children live in poverty—an observation that is far from a propaganda victory for the United States military. Ebey’s reading is not a distraction or an escape, but a means to discovering new knowledge—particularly, as he directly acknowledges, about the hollowness of the American Dream. Indeed, while the book has a nominal happy ending, it is not that ending on which Ebey dwells, but on the depictions of poverty.

The new knowledge the book could provide—for Ebey and others—is buttressed by the emotional, affective aspect of the reading practice. To emphasize this, let me link Ebey’s letter to what is perhaps the most emotionally flagrant

letter in the council's archive. Davis Clifton, a Marine, did not address his letter to a publisher, but directly to Betty Smith. Having read the book (by his own account) nearly three times while recuperating in a hospital at Camp Pendleton, he begins with thanks: "I feel that I'll never be square with myself unless I thank you for writing the book." The letter goes on to respond in broad terms to the novel—though its general reading is grounded, in Clifton's first paragraph, in a moment of textual attention. Clifton focuses on chapter twenty-six. Here, ten-year-old Francie (who has been living on virtual starvation rations at home) delivers an elaborate lie to her teacher to secure a pumpkin pie. The teacher recognizes the falsehood and focuses Francie on writing as a way to displace her tendency towards deception: "Tell the truth and write the story," says the teacher, not unkindly (196). Here Francie, the future writer, first "found an outlet in writing" (196). Clifton reads this scene as a parable: a person who is "so upset emotionally" must "tell someone about it, to sit down and write it out." And that is what he proceeds to do:

You see I am a 20 year old marine but I feel twice that age. I went through hell in two years of combat overseas. [...] Ever since the first time I struggled through knee deep mud carrying a stretcher from which my buddie's life dripped away in precious blood and I was powerless to help him, I have felt hard and cynical against this world and have felt sure that I was no longer capable of loving anything or anybody.

Clifton's description of wartime violence is all the more affecting for its slightly clumsy literary flair. Yet this is hardly martial braggadocio. Clifton laments both

the lost friend and his own lost sense of compassion. The book, he goes on to narrate, changed that:

I can't explain the emotional reaction that took place in this dead heart of mine and dulled mind. I only know that it happened and that this heart of mine turned over and became alive again. As I write this my heart cries out with joy and gratitude for the beautiful story that I know you wrote for me. I can't explain it but your story restored to me my faith in a Supreme Deity. A surge of confidence has swept through me and I feel that maybe a fellow has a fighting chance in this world after all.

The text is the catalyst of an "emotional reaction" that rejuvenates the soldier. This is, one must note, a unique reading of the text—not a particularly hopeful narrative and certainly not a very religious one.<sup>xxv</sup> Yet the reading's transformative power is remarkable. Clifton's triple reference to his heart—"dead heart of mine"; "this heart of mine"; "my heart cries out with joy"—situates the reading as not only affectively moving his heart, but metaphorically restarting it. His heart was dead, now it not only speaks, but "cries out with joy." In reading, he is reborn. As the letter goes on, Clifton emphasizes how central emotion is to this transformation:

I'm not ashamed but instead extremely proud of the tears that have rolled down my cheek as I reread this story I have learned to love. I suppose it is unusual for a supposedly battle hardened marine to do such an effeminate thing as weep over a piece of fiction.

Books, Clifton gives voice to a cultural norm, speak to "effeminate" emotions, not battle-hardened minds or bodies. Yet his protest that he is "not ashamed" operates

as a praeteritio—in announcing his lack of shame, he acknowledges the real possibility of shame for such a response.

Ebey's letter, too, expresses such emotions and such anxieties. Though he does not evince Clifton's emotional rebirth, he concludes his letter with emphatic gratitude:

Please just take this lengthy letter as a thank you for the wonderful book. I'm no literary person as the cadet registers, United States Military Academy, 1928-9, 1929-30 will testify. I never was in the West Point library except by order. But I liked that book. I sit here in a dug in a blacked out command post tent at the front somewhere and write this in sheer gratitude. I've been meaning to write for some time.

Though the tone of Ebey's praise might seem less striking than Clifton's, his letter emphasizes its emotional connection to the text in subtler ways. Not only is he thankful—"sheer gratitude"; "Thanks a million," as the letter concludes—but he points out that he is not a typical reader, not a "literary person" for whom such feelings might be expected. Rather he is an unlikely reader, someone who was so moved by the book that he writes, "the first sort of any type of fan letter I have ever written in my life."

Ebey's direct statement of his emotional connection to the text may be subtle, but it is vociferously expressed in the letter's anxieties about the publicity of his statement. He opens his letter by noting, "None of this is for any sort of publicity under any circumstances," marking his emphasis with the underscore. In closing, he repeats this warning in even more emphatic script: "THIS IS JUST

APPRECIATION. NOT FOR ANY PUBLICITY OF ANY SORT.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Ebey lacks Clifton’s “pride” in his emotional reaction, but in a sense, this divergence comes to the same thing: both soldiers feel something about the novel and, in putting those feelings into letters, show us the complexity of their positions, the difficulty of making such expressions public.

These letters, then, have many common threads. Both soldiers evince a strong emotional connection to the text and both are emphatically thankful to the author for producing a story so affecting. Both readers, too, find themselves altered by the text in crucial ways: Ebey’s recognition of poverty; Clifton’s emotional rebirth.

Yet these transformative readings take place in a way that is not particularly anodyne to the Habermasian arguments I describe in the preceding section. Habermas, as is well known, focuses on rational communication as the central mode of legitimate public discourse. As I showed in the previous chapter, however, working with Iris Marion Young’s sympathetic revisions of the Habermasian framework, literature can be seen as an important part of any democratic deliberative practice. In brief, Young argues that Habermas’s obsession with reasoned debate is, in itself, a kind of a priori culturalist exclusion. Rational communication can be difficult due to stratification, due to “economic dependence or political domination,” due to “the devaluation of some people’s style of speech” (“Communication” 122, 124). Young, then, embraces not just factual conversation, but different rhetorical effects: respectful verbal acknowledgements, types of figurative language to announce “the speaker’s position in relation to those of the



audience,” and storytelling (“Communication” 130). The latter, she suggests can be a particularly effective bridge. Groups often misunderstand or dwell in a “complete lack of understanding of who their interlocutors are” but narrative “fosters understanding across such differences” by revealing the particular experiences of certain social positions, by revealing values (and the cultural experiences that shape them), and crucially by doing so in the terms of the other (“Communication” 131-132). Young’s theory offers a powerful revision of Habermas from a feminist and multiculturalist perspective. Young also, rather obviously, helps to explain how letters like those of Ebey or Clifton can be part of macrosocial political transformations.

In these letters, we see the communicative practice of storytelling move through multiple iterations. The initial tale is that of the text itself, the story of Francie, the Nolans, and the various narratives that make up A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. To this story, readers like Ebey and Clifton react empathetically, learning about poverty, about how to express themselves, about how to feel. But the process continues with acts of verbal acknowledgement—the letters’ gratefulness—and, perhaps more importantly, with the rejoining stories soldiers tell of their own pain, both physical and emotional; their own redemption based on reading. These stories, too, rely on figurative language, as Clifton’s embroidered use of “heart” in his letter suggests. In each of these practices, reading fosters understanding across difference in precisely the way that Young’s theory indicates it might.

Such understanding is most plainly visible in Ebey's realization about the realities of American poverty. But it is also more subtly present in the way these communicative practices refigure the relationship between soldiers and the military. Indeed, the reading throws the masculine roles foisted onto soldiers into stark contrast. Clifton, as I describe above, troubles gender with his pride in "the tears that have rolled down my cheek"; Ebey, too, acknowledges gender in the text with his nod to the "gal that wrote it" who "is sure a writer" (my emphasis). What's more, the book takes these readers away from their soldierly duty, as when Ebey considers reading a few pages while he should be commanding his troops in a firefight. Reading Smith's novel, put simply, places both soldiers in conflict with the "institutionalized [form] of masculinity" that is the military (Connell 597).<sup>xxvii</sup>

While one might think here of Judith Butler's famous notion of gender performance, it is more useful to examine these practices through the lens of Nancy Hartsock's much-debated notion of "feminist standpoint."<sup>xxviii</sup> Hartsock argues that women's lives, "like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory [...] make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point that can ground a powerful critique of the phallographic institutions and ideology that constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy" (292). As Hartsock writes, the feminist standpoint can expose "abstract masculinity as both partial and fundamentally perverse" and "reversing the proper valuation of human activity," which she elaborates as "the substitution of death for life," the valuing, for instance, of war and killing over reproduction (301). Indeed, in reading a book about women's experience and reacting to it emotionally—in ways that these

letters construct (and are constructed to construe) as “feminine”—Ebey and Clifton utilize a “feminist standpoint” to refigure their relationship to a masculinist military.

Thus I am suggesting two kinds of understanding produced by these reading practices. Most fundamentally (and most obviously) soldiers read and extract ideas about the world from books. We might think of this as the manifest content of the text; the kind of thing that it would be hard for most readers to miss when they sit down with the book. But reading works on more subtle levels as well. The storytelling inherent in reading offers bridges between structural conditions of life—class, gender, culture—via a kind of standpoint effect. Thus readers may come to recognize less explicit issues: the sensibilities that suffuse a text, for instance, but are difficult for many readers to specify in describing their understanding.

To put this in particular terms, Ebey’s revelation that some children in the United States live in poverty would be a type of manifest interpretation. The way both letters offer implicit critique of the “abstract masculinity” of the military (and, indeed, of United States culture in the 1940s) would be the subtler consequence. Both observations are rather remarkable things for soldiers to be thinking, much less saying, as part of the masculinist U.S. military, in the midst of a masculinist war, in the masculinist 1940s.<sup>xxix</sup>

While I have followed the interpretation of a single novel closely in this section, I will conclude by turning from Smith’s text and the letters by Ebey and Clifton to the program’s more general impacts. I want to suggest that what I have

documented here is not just the subject positions of a handful of soldiers, but a large-scale cultural practice with serious consequences for the United States in the postwar years.

#### 4. Books as Weapons

In its foundational moment, in the spring of 1942, the Council on Books in Wartime announced its remarkable—and somewhat ambiguous—slogan. The phrase, “books are weapons in the war of ideas,” was affixed to the council’s letterhead and many of its public displays. The council, at least initially, understood the phrase in rather predictable ways: supporting the national war effort, enhancing knowledge about friends and enemies. But based on the reading practices I have described here I want to argue that certain aspects of the Armed Services Editions offer potent and more generalizable lessons about how books might be seen as weapons, not in the sense of being useful in a stick-up, but as means to fight for political ends. In this sense, the Armed Services Editions were successful weapons for three key reasons: volume, audience, and political imprimatur.

The cultural force of the Armed Services Editions is grounded in volume: nearly 123 million books published in four years; almost ten books for every person who served in the war; print runs of as many as 300,000 copies of a single title. And while publishing statistics can sometimes be deceptive—how many printed copies of some texts circulate beyond the remainder bin?—copies of Armed Services Editions didn’t just sit in warehouses or on bookstore shelves; they were actively distributed to readers at no cost. The letters I have quoted here

suggest that the books were particularly present in the lives of soldiers; and that they were not the property of single readers, but shared among many hands—hence the worn covers, the requests to buy more copies, and so on.

If books were transformative, that transformation was available to a striking number of readers. But I do not mean to imply that every book in the Armed Services Editions transformed its readers. My focus throughout has been on literature. Based on the letters in the council's archives, I want to argue, literary texts are particularly crucial to the practices I am describing. Indeed, it is the rich, complex literary texts in the form of novels and poems that soldiers' letters respond to in depth. The archive holds no letters that engage at such length or in such detail with pulp or middlebrow novels. It is the literary narratives that demand, the soldiers' letters suggest, fuller and more deliberate accountings—accountings that then shape future discussion of the crucial issue of inclusion. To return to the example of a feminist standpoint, let me note the various literary texts in which such a standpoint was available to soldiers: the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent-Millay and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; the novels of Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Mary Shelley, and Willa Cather; the short stories of Katherine Ann Porter and Katherine Mansfield.<sup>xxx</sup> This is not to mention texts written by men that feature strong women characters, like The Grapes of Wrath. Soldiers, reading the stories not only of Francie Nolan, but Ma Joad and Alexandra Bergson were exposed to many varieties of feminist standpoint in a number of particularly literary texts.

The Armed Services Editions published an awful lot of literary books. And they distributed them widely among a very specific audience. The unique character of this audience marks the program's second strength with respect to its mass-impact. The Armed Services Editions' target audience is large, about thirteen million soldiers. Looked at in one light, that audience is quite diverse—made up of remarkably different types of people, from different parts of the United States, with different class origins and different educational attainments. But the World War II military was also quite homogenous. While we should decry the repugnant ideologies that created the military as an abstract mass of white men by discriminating in recruitment and ignoring the achievements of people of color and women, it's important to recognize that this abstract mass (in part because of its exclusive construction) did carry significant cultural force. A soldier signifies a kind of ideal citizen—he who will not only “kill” but “willingly [...] die” for the nation; the figure whose memorials are central to national foundations (B. Anderson 7-9).<sup>xxxii</sup> These thirteen million soldiers were, then, figures of great social symbolic power. What they did in the war and what they did when they returned would constitute dominant norms, both symbolically and practically.

Thus, it's no surprise that the handful of contemporary critics who have looked at the Armed Services Editions have noted the program's broad cultural impact. Paula Rabinowitz argues that the council books—like other “wartime ephemera [...] spread ideas and images that ultimately contributed to post-war countercultures” (34). John Hench, too, sees the power of the program, noting “Historians have generally credited the ASEs with introducing books to GIs who

had read little before the war, for helping fuel the paperback boom in the postwar years, and for creating a pool of new customers” (54). Soldiers, impacted by what they read and discussed during the war, came home and shaped the culture. Not only did they become readers, but they came into contact with standpoints not their own and, as their letters show, began to understand the value of inclusion and the suffering of the disempowered. Books not only shaped postwar intellectual and aesthetic tastes, but also shaped political sensibilities. They impacted not just the ideological terrain of debates about inclusion, but also the ways in which people acted in various public spheres and civil society. Put simply, the reading practices developed under the auspices of the Armed Services Editions shaped the increasingly inclusive practices of postwar democracy.

So while one might want to suggest that I have focused here on just a few soldiers, I understand these letters to be representative cases. As one soldier puts it, writing to the Council on Books in Wartime: “Of the many who read and enjoy these books you will probably hear from few—if any—so I know I am speaking for hundreds aboard the Independence when I drop you this line of thanks” (Converse). Thus, the many enthusiastic letters responding to A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, from which I have only included snippets, imply a social body. Ebey and Clifton’s voices to speak for others who would have lacked the courage or the language to express such responses in public letters of admiration; who would have lacked the time or the wherewithal to write such letters; who died before they found the time to write.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The Armed Services Editions found a massive and culturally powerful audience. This is part of why their political impacts deserve attention. But—and this is the third point—the Armed Services Editions are always already situated within the public sphere. These books were not read in the familiar context of the classroom, the book club, or the library, but in a context explicitly marked as public and, indeed, with the imprimatur of political power: both the de facto endorsement of the military (in that they paid for and delivered the books) and a more tangible mark of governmental approval. Each Armed Services Edition, on its first page, announced that it was

published exclusively for the Armed Services of the United States of America through the cooperation of the Council on Books in Wartime and is distributed by the Special Service Division, A.S.F. for the U.S. Army and by the Bureau of Naval Personnel for the U.S. Navy.

The books are—as physical objects—branded as part of the political sphere: that of the nation (mentioned three times in this short blurb) and its military apparatus. The books were, like the uniforms soldiers wore, the transports that moved them, and the guns they fired, property of the military and, as such, “weapons in the war.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Thus it’s hardly surprising that readers were seldom spirited away by the books. They used them to reflect on their experiences as soldiers and on the experiences of others in no small part because the texts carried an institutional frame that encouraged such reading. Their reading practice—the reading, the discussion, the writing of letters—was always public and political, always in the



context of the military, of the nation, of citizenship. Even when soldiers seemed to be discussing purely literary matters, as I note above, their letters carried shades of political engagement.

The Armed Services Editions—and the communicative practices they enabled—were imbued with a profound political potential. I have tried here to specify that potential at a number of levels. First, with the help of Habermasian notions about deliberative democracy, how discussion about what kind of books soldiers should be reading shaped a lifeworld and generated a public sphere. Such practices are essential first steps in producing the shifts in civil society that can transform juridical and legislative rights. Secondly, with the help of Iris Marion Young and Nancy Hartsock, how texts operate at more subjective and affective levels, how A Tree Grows in Brooklyn exposed soldiers to a feminist standpoint and helped them see and understand experiences that would have been alien to their experience as men, but also their experience as soldiers in the sex segregated military. In doing this I have not only attempted to bring political theories—Habermas, Young, and Hartsock—into conversation with literary practices, but I have, I hope, situated familiar literary practices in a new political context. In discussing books—whether in terms of affect or in terms of their cultural force—soldiers were both developing understandings of the world that were more inclusive and developing practices for putting those ideals to work in a deliberative fashion.

So I agree with the Council on Books in Wartime. The books were weapons. They were, like guns, military property and they were carried, like ammunition, in

soldiers' pockets. Books may have helped win the war against fascism, but in shaping the cultural and political habitus of their wartime readers—a habitus that would continue to shape American culture in the subsequent decades—they opened a front in a much longer running battle. The “weapons” the Council on Books in Wartime put in the hands of soldiers around the world had a range far greater than any of the weapons deployed by the army in that (or any) war. Unlike the rusting M3 tanks and the dated eighty-eights, the books remain weapons in a war that continues still. In the reading practices I have described here, I have shown generative, transformative conversations were begun and modes of political engagement developed. Given not only the continued struggles today—for women’s equal inclusion in American political life; for adequate and respectful treatment of people living in poverty; for the inclusion of the increasing array of groups who, in the era of post-Bretton Woods global economic integration, must be not only symbolically but practically included in the political life of the United States—such weapons are perhaps as needful now as they were on the battlefields of the Second World War.

Chapter Three  
Poetry, Recognition, and Redistribution:  
The September 11 Chronocanon

Within two weeks of the September 11 attacks journalists were fired for criticizing the President, college professors were disciplined for speaking about potential motivations for terrorism, and advertisers pulled support from TV programs voicing ‘unpatriotic’ sentiments (Carter). Americans of diverse origins—particularly those with brown skin—experienced even more virulent attacks. From their ostensible compatriots, they faced increasing hostility, outright physical violence, and even murder; governments, both national and local, resorted to explicit racial profiling and extra-legal detentions.<sup>i</sup> By early October, the Bush Administration had launched a war in Afghanistan and was hinting at further battles to come, pressing a narrative—borrowed from Samuel Huntington—of a “clash of civilizations.” Since, as the President put it, “you are with us or with the terrorists,” it was only logical that borders must be locked down, immigrants (documented and otherwise) detained and questioned (Bush).

While all of this was happening, poetry was circulating with an unusual alacrity. “Poems flew through cyberspace across the country in e-mails from friend to friend” and from fax machine to fax machine; they echoed in museums, churches, YMCAs, and public libraries (Smith, Schmich). “Walking around [New York City] you would see them—stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations” even “scrawled [...] in the ash that covered everything” (D. Johnson ix). Poetry was a central part of

“improvised memorials” on the sidewalks of many cities; “on the brick walls of police stations and firehouses, behind the mountains of flowers and between photos of the dead, poetry dominated” (“Open Letter,” D. Smith, D. Johnson ix). Newspapers that hadn’t published poetry for years suddenly found themselves printing verse again. “On the radio and TV, pundits have routinely taken to dusting off half-remembered verses from their school years”; poetry was, the media kept repeating, “everywhere” (D.Smith).<sup>ii</sup>

This massive, (near)simultaneous (re)publication of poems after September 11—both in less-mediated spaces like city streets and internet message boards as well as in mass media—constitutes a chronocanon. As I describe above, the chronocanonic form insists that the critic look beyond the text and towards the relationship between texts: their overlapping themes or symbols; their aesthetic divergences and commonalities; their shared interests. And my analysis of this chronocanon will not stop at the connections between literary objects. I read the chronocanonic texts—to use V.N. Volosinov’s term—as “theme”: the limit of meaning at which an utterance is grasped as part of its temporal, spatial, and historical totality (99). I look, in other words, for the poems’ connections not only to one another, but to dominant rhetorics and practices. Here, this leads me to the poems “everywhere” in the two months following September 11 as I attempt to understand what they meant then and why readers chose to republish them.

The object of analysis in this chapter, then, is not writers writing or readers reading, but the (re)publication and (re)circulation of texts in the public sphere and the arguments those texts make. In particular, I argue that one might

understand this chronocanon as a response to the intertwined spike in racial profiling and the rise of imperialist attitudes in the United States in the wake of September 11, 2001. The chronocanon responds to these changes by affirming the existences and experiences of diverse cultures and calling for a broad multicultural—and international—solidarity. This kind of language is on display in what is perhaps this chronocanon's best-known text: W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939." But that poem's humanism is complicated by other prominent poems in this circulation. Looking closely at three poems (re)published in the September 11 chronocanon—"Palestine" (2001) by Lorna Dee Cervantes, "After the Funeral of Assam Hamady" (1971) by Sam Hamod, and Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" (2001)—I suggest the chronocanon argues for not just multicultural tolerance, but for an affirmative, critical notion of difference. It claims not only that people of color should not suffer violence, but asserts their affirmative rights to speech, to participation, to existence.

Interesting as these poems are, if only a few readers found them, any claim of political impact would be rather unconvincing. Thus I situate my claim for the political value of literature in a public sphere, as described by Jürgen Habermas. While I engage with prominent critiques of the "public sphere"—particularly those of Nancy Fraser, which Habermas has incorporated in his more recent work—I conclude by arguing that the "public sphere" remains foundational for claims about literature's political power outside of a literary sphere. Only in the public sphere is literature capable of representing those who faced discrimination while also arguing for a redistribution of civil rights. I join with Nancy Fraser, then, too, in

arguing that “justice today requires both redistribution and recognition. Neither alone is sufficient” (Recognition 9). The September 11 chronocanon, then, ultimately represents a diverse counterpublic and speaks to a broader public to put forth and actuate its redistributive claims.

I am engaged in two parallel and (I hope) mutually reinforcing arguments. I am arguing that poems, with their familiar capacity to express diverse experiences can, when they appear in a public sphere, lead to the redistribution of civil rights. More generally, though, this study provides another lens for examining how readers use texts as tactics—in this case, by forming a chronocanon of poems to amplify their voices in the public sphere. This tactical use shows in detail their practical attempts to build a new political formation that includes people of diverse identities and endows them with greater political rights.

### 1. The Chronocanon

Much has been written about the mass-circulation of W.H. Auden’s lyric “September 1, 1939” (1939) in the wake of September 11. It appeared in at least 30 newspapers, all over the web, and even on “the back page of a newsletter from Minneapolis’s leading food co-op” (Burt 534). But during this period, many other poems were widely available. So while much has been said about Auden’s poem, it is important to recognize it as part of a larger formation. Days after the attack, Lorna Dee Cervantes’s poem “Palestine,” mingled with Adrienne Rich’s “In Those Years” (1991) and Allen Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” (1961) as well as Yeats, Blake, Sandburg and Edith Sitwell on About.com’s selection “After the Attack: Poems

Worth Remembering.” Two days after the attacks, bits of Emily Dickinson and Alfred Lord Tennyson (“After great pain a formal feeling comes—” [#341, 1862]; and “In Memoriam” [1850]) appeared in the New York Times.

In mid-September, former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky read Marianne Moore’s philosophical poem “What Are Years?” (1941) on PBS’s NewsHour with Jim Lehrer—just a few days before he republished it in an article with three other poems in Slate. Moore’s poem—which begins with the piercing question “What is our innocence, / What is our guilt?”—circulated on the web, too, showing up in an anthology by Alicia Ostriker on the site MobyLives.com, under the title “Poems for the Time” with Muriel Rukeyser, Stephen Dunn’s “To a Terrorist” (1989), and others.

In October, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 64 (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced”)(1609) showed up in the Times with parts of Seamus Heaney’s translation of Philoctetes (1991), Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818). Two weeks later Sonnet 64 showed up again in the Montreal Gazette; a few days after that, it was broadcast to radio listeners around the country on Garrison Keillor’s “The Writer’s Almanac.”

Actors read verse by Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman (his “Mannahatta” [1860]), Langston Hughes, “and others” every day from September 21 to October 7 in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (“Open Letter,” Esterow). Within a week of the attacks NPR anchor Scott Simon was reading poems; Auden, but also Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, and e.e. cummings’s “i go to this window” (1926). Later in September, Simon hosted Sam Hamod who read his poem “After

the Funeral of Assam Hamady.” On Sunday September 16, Stephen Dunn read to an audience of over 100 people at the Katonah Public Library and later in the month communities gathered in libraries in Maine to hear Auden’s poem and others as well (D. Smith, Griffin). And of course there was Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America.” Self-published in early October, the poem zipped around the internet, was read by Baraka in readings from Massachusetts to Iowa to North Carolina, and later found itself featured in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and on CNN’s Connie Chung and Fox’s The O’Reilly Factor (Somebody 52, Gwiazda 466-468).

Taken together, these poems (re)published in September and October 2001 constitute the September 11 chronocanon. This collection of privileged texts—an “imaginary list” made visible through the lens of a particular moment—derived its power from its cogency, its derivative relationship to “the canon,” and its historically elevated position as literary discourse (Guillory 30). While they utilize “the canon,” though, I am not particularly concerned with how the readers and republishers working after September 11 impacted literary culture. Rather, I want to look closely here at the new constellation they produced, however fleeting its duration. These readers were, in Janice Radway’s phrase, “real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretive strategies” (221). While they may have been “lacking the specific competence” typical to most contemporary modes of canon formation—as I will describe below, the chronocanon disregards many of the frameworks of traditional literary scholarship—these canonizers created “perceptual schemes of their own ethos”



(Bourdieu 44).<sup>iii</sup> They drew on the power of “the canon” selectively as a way to amplify their own claims. I will return to the question of how the chronocanon worked in the subsequent sections. Let me now detail just what claims the canon makes.

Thinking only of Auden’s poem, one might recall the brutal echoes of September 11—the “blind skyscrapers” which “proclaim / The strength of Collective Man” as well as “The unmentionable odor of death” that “Offends the September night”—or the poem’s familiar closing affirmation: “We must love one another or die” (801-803). Yet Auden’s poem has much more to say about the particularities of global violence. While it begins in “one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street” it moves, in the space of the first stanza, to the global: “Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / and darkened lands of the earth” (801). The poem meditates even more explicitly on the perils of imperialism, ranging from Thucydides’s transcription of Pericles’s funeral oration (a speech that praises Athenian conquest) to “Imperialism’s face / And the international wrong” (802). So while the poem may end with its affirming gestures to love, it hardly offers pure comfort. As a September 16, 2001 editorial in the Baltimore Sun notes, the poem’s “power [...] does not lie in pieties of patriotism or revolution, but rather in its affirming skepticism” (Collier).

Like Auden’s, other poems both echo the particular events of September 11 and offer general affirmation. But the majority of the poems in the chronocanon side with the later Auden, who would disavow the power of love; they echo with

messages of doubt, fragmentation, and fear—often situated, again like Auden, in particular geopolitical contexts.<sup>iv</sup>

Shakespeare describes various instances of “ruin”: falling towers are one of his metaphors, but he also notes the “interchange of state, / Or state itself confounded to decay” (58). Marianne Moore, as I note, challenges her reader from the opening question (“What is our innocence, / What is our guilt?”), then announces that “All are / naked, none is safe” (95). Shelley’s “Ozymandias” ends with the “lone and level sands” of time’s indifference stretching away from a crumbling statue constructed to signify political domination (103). Even more brutally, Amichai imagines a world of violence caused not by humans, but by their faith:

God has pity on kindergarten children.  
 He has less pity on school children  
 And on grownups he has no pity at all,  
 he leaves them alone,  
 and sometimes they must crawl on all fours  
 in the burning sand  
 to reach the first-aid station  
 covered with blood. (90)

Worse than a god’s indifference, Adrienne Rich sees violent attacks by “the great dark birds of history” as punishment for the selfishness she identifies in contemporary western culture (4). This chronocanon focuses, in surprisingly brutal detail, on human suffering and consistently links suffering to political

realities, whether the hubris of Ramses II in “Ozymandias” or the smaller hubris of a self-obsessed culture where, as Rich writes, “we lost track / of the meaning of we, of you”(4).

Many of the poems, though, would seek to stop the destruction. Rukeyser, writing “in the first century of world wars” suggests this suffering leads to a community: “We would try by any means / To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves, / To let go the means, to wake” (430). Indeed the chronocanon coheres around the necessity of a kind of humanist unity: “We must love one another or die”; “We would try [...] to reach beyond ourselves”; “What is our guilt?” (my emphases).<sup>v</sup> It would be easy to dismiss such gestures as little more than words on the page (or, even accepting their value as such, dismiss them as bland claims, too vague to do much), particularly in light of the vicious and divisive realities of this moment. Yet precisely because of these material realities—the racial profiling, the hatred, fear, and violence—I think these unifying ambitions merit attention. To assert a strain of humanist pluralism, however bland, was an act of contestation. Even discussed at this general level, it seems clear that these poems work against the incipient language of the Bush administration; recall President Bush’s late September speech declaring, “You are either with us or you are with the terrorists.” There “us” is situated explicitly as part of a national collectivity; in these poems, the first-person plural maintains an inclusiveness that is far less definitely national and far, far less aggressive. In short, the first-person plural assertion of the chronocanon speaks of the perils of jingoistic nationalism and the value of pluralism.

The chronocanonic formation emphasizes inclusivity not only because it is composed of poems that assert—through their manifest content—a definition of that inclusion. Indeed, at its canonical level it practices inclusion: both of form—the variety of ways words appear on the page, the original language in which the words were composed—and content. The chronocanon brings together views from different countries, races, classes, and genders—not to mention views ranging over 2000 years of history and many points on the political spectrum.<sup>vi</sup> Even at the level of metaphor there is a grasp for inclusion; as abstract figures like “great dark birds of history” or “reach beyond ourselves” indicate, these poems are chosen, at least in part, because they are broadly applicable and might foment connections between potentially very different people.

Still, in an era when a bland multicultural “inclusion”—viz. the Bush Administration’s own pride in its racial diversity—was the order of the day, one might rightly read general announcements of a collective “we” as, on their own, simply reaffirming a neoliberal status quo. Indeed it would be absurd to confuse the assertion of an imaginary unity—one which plasters over differences and presumes we can all simply get along—with a meaningful challenge to the overt acts of discrimination, exclusion, and violence I describe above. But the chronocanon’s relationship to diversity is complex. I now want to turn to the ways in which it complicates any over-simple versions of “unity”: it produces unity while emphasizing difference by including poems that voice experiences of cultural exclusion, both historical and immediate. Poems by Sam Hamod, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Amiri Baraka contest simple notions of a unified “we,” but in doing

so, work to form a more powerful counterpublic, which utilizes its public representation to argue for the redistribution of civil rights.

## 2. Recognition and Redistribution

“After the Funeral of Assam Hamady” by Sam Hamod was originally published by a small press in Wisconsin in 1971. It is narrated from the perspective of a young Muslim. He, his grandfather, father, and father’s friend are driving across South Dakota (“the 1950s Lincoln / ninety miles an hour”) after presiding at the titular funeral (1). As the sun begins to set, the speaker’s grandfather insists the car must be stopped for salat. The old men climb out of the car by the roadside, but the speaker remains “behind the wheel / watching, my motor still running // car lights scream by” (1). In Hamod’s economical description, the speaker makes his position clear. He aligns with American car culture (it is “my motor,” not his father’s, that remains running and ready to escape), but he also feels threatened by the “scream” of the other cars. Indeed “scream” is a noteworthy metaphor; the threat of a light—which will make visible the prayer—is explained to the reader through assaultive screams. Later, as “an old woman strains a gawk,” he announces “I’m embarrassed to be with them” (3). So embarrassed that while he gets out of the car at his father’s insistence, he will not pray, only “stand guard” (2). After nearly two pages, the prayer ends (“Ameen...”) and, following a large white space, the speaker, now removed from the memorial past, speaks in the present tense (“I hear them still singing now”) and announces he is

trying so hard to join them

on that old prayer blanket—  
 as if the pain behind my eyes  
 could be absolution (3)

In his youth, the speaker remembers feeling trapped—both Muslim and not-Muslim. Now he is doubly trapped: ashamed by his repudiation of the faith that can give him what he desires. The poem expresses on these multiple levels the difficulty of living between cultures.

Yet in the context of September 11, Hamod's thirty-year-old poem takes on a new and specific meaning. In its most obvious sense, it brings forth the voice of Muslim Americans, asserting both in its manifest content and by virtue of its republication that Muslims are a threatened (hence the perceived need to "stand guard") part of the social reality of the United States. But it does more than simply assert a right to belong; it asserts a right to difference. Much of the poem is made up of the speaker's transcription and translation of the Arabic of the three older speakers: "Hysht Iyat? (What're you yelling about?)" (1). Just as the speaker expresses his position between cultures, he serves as a translator: a native informant, but one who never suppresses his own betweenness (in his tone, in his metaphors), making the reader constantly aware that he is not present solely for our understanding. Indeed the poem's central theme is the conflict inherent in its speaker's position. So while he describes the prayer in detail—"they rub their hands / then their faces / [...] their feet bare"—he does not translate the Adhan prayed by the three men, despite the fact that the words of the prayer make up nearly half of the poem (2). So while the poem validates the presence of Muslims as

part of the social reality of the United States, it does not insist that they can be fully assimilated, or even fully understood by non-Muslims. Even in a multicultural society, some things, the poem argues, are not available for translation.

Republished after September 11, 2001, the poem's textual particulars are noteworthy. But the fact that it was republished at all is perhaps more remarkable, for Sam Hamod is not a well-known poet. His work was published entirely by small presses mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, he was culturally visible after September 11 not as a poet, but as a critic of the Bush administration; he published editorials in southern California newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, and lectured on college campuses about "media terrorism" and the connections between the attacks and American foreign policy (Welch). So Hamod's republication is tied explicitly to his cultural critique.

The material texture of his republication, too, is noteworthy. As I note above, the poem was part of a series of poetry readings featured on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition." While Scott Simon, the host of "Weekend Edition," read most of the poems, Hamod's appearance, in late September, was different. His poem, as I have just discussed, speaks back explicitly to the crescendoing discourse equating Islam with terrorism. But in its republication, it does so in the poet's voice, for it was Hamod, not Simon, who read the poem on the air. After a brief introduction—as "president of the American Islamic Institute in San Diego, former director of the American Islamic Center of Washington, DC"—Hamod read "After the Funeral" ("Poet"). In this, Hamod's poem is identified explicitly with Muslim-

American reality and delivered in the voice of a Muslim American as it was broadcast across the United States.

Hamod's poem asserts one aspect of multicultural reality. Its presence is one of the chronocanon's announcements of the value of cultural "others." In expressing his difficult position, the speaker might go one step farther and help a broader public (at least partially) understand and empathize with this experience. In the two other poems I will discuss, the experience of being othered also plays a prominent role, yet these poems develop more forceful claims about the causes of such othering and its consequences.

One of the most prominent Chicana poets writing today, Lorna Dee Cervantes published "Palestine," dated 12 September 2001, on About.com shortly after the attacks. The website, which sees traffic of 40 million unique visitors (with a median age of 45) per month, is hardly a monolith in the literary world. Rather, it is most trafficked for its "expert" advice on everything from fixing cars to fixing debt ("Our Visitors"). I emphasize this publication—digital, free, and well outside poetry's mainstream venues—because it makes Cervantes's poem even more remarkable.

Cervantes's choice of title, seeming a sidestep from September 11, works to emphasize the poem's substantial intertextuality with the work of Palestinian poet and PLO activist Mahmoud Darwish, but also suggests, given its date and publication in an online anthology of poems relating to September 11, an implicit connection between the attacks and U.S. foreign policy. The poem begins with themes of travel and exile—drawn from Darwish's "We Travel Like Other People"



(1986)—and the specific description of airports offers an explicit link to the attacks. The poem’s first stanza ends with questions:

[...] Who owns  
 this property? Who owns the right  
 to no way out but a busted window  
 a hundred flights up? Who owns the key  
 to Heaven's Gate? Did it open?

Cervantes’s language is mostly ironic: the “rights” of those trapped in the World Trade Center were not rights one would desire; Cervantes also mocks the (limited) “right” to enter the Christian heaven with her triple-allusions linking paradise to private property (ownership, keys, and her implicit doubt as to whether those who died were allowed in). Though the poem announces itself, in its first line, as “Looking for some comfort,” the first stanza seems to find none at all.

The poem’s second stanza initially ratchets down its rhetoric, but quickly becomes even more pointed. The speaker announces everyday tasks: opening a newspaper, a computer, a bank account. But “account” repeats and its meaning shifts from the bank account to a reckoning “for all the terror in the world.” Indeed, the speaker herself is being made to account for it, she says, as she draws attention “in crossing / the street with my child this morning, / our Indian heads and Palestinian shrouds.” In acknowledging her ethnicity with “Indian heads” and her political solidarities with “Palestinian shrouds,” the speaker offers a clear description of the racial interpellation so prominent after the attacks—and its

absurdity. For being not-white, she is made to “account” for her presence. “With what do we pay?” she asks.

While Cervantes would be well within her rights to reject out of hand the expectation that she “account” for September 11, she, in the poem’s third stanza, does offer her own accounting. Again she looks to Darwish, who tries—in his “Psalm 2” (1980)—to understand death in the context of the ongoing war in Palestine, asking: “Show me the source of death; / Is it the dagger or the lie?” (qtd. in Cervantes). The earlier poem sets up a split between death by real, material violence and death by, in essence, ideology. Darwish would seem to make us choose—bulldozers and bullets or the Zionist ideology that underpins their onslaught? Rather than opt for Darwish’s either/or, Cervantes refuses the binary, asserting that the source is the dagger and the lie: “both. Buried deep / in the human rubble.” This allusive line expresses the poem’s argument quite clearly. The causes of September 11 and all of its deaths are, as the brutal enjambment suggests, “Buried deep.” Not in earth, not in the rubble of Ground Zero, but in the “human rubble” of global conflict: racial, ethnic, and, in the poem’s final lines, religious.

Cervantes ends the poem with an inverted allusion to the Christian hymn “Closer My God, To Thee”: “Closer to God / than thee.” The cause of the attacks, she suggests, is historical religious conflict—the legacy of the crusades, for instance—but by linking Christianity with causation (the cause is “Closer to God,” as the enjambment would have it) in the context of her insistent intertextuality with a Palestinian poet, she evokes a geopolitical arrangement as well: the link between

evangelical Christianity and the United States' support for Israel.<sup>vii</sup> Such comments—whether based in religion or geopolitics—got many prominent figures into trouble in the months after the attacks for their “implication” that the United States somehow “deserved” the attacks.

Like Hamod, then, Cervantes expresses the difficulty of living in a multicultural society—of being (dubiously) profiled and assumed to be something one is not; of aligning with Palestine in the United States.<sup>viii</sup> She also translates, speaking to an audience about the experience of being racially profiled. But she goes farther than Hamod, explicitly challenging her audience to ponder the consequences of such actions. In this, the poem not only represents a position, but also argues for a redistribution. “Palestine” clearly expresses a critical position on United States foreign policy and announces solidarity—symbolically with the speaker’s “Indian” head and her “Palestinian” shroud—among oppressed peoples within and beyond the United States. In this, Cervantes not only argues for a redistribution of the right of free speech, but a right to publically criticize the United States. While constitutionally enshrined, these rights were in jeopardy after September 11—particularly, as the poem shows, for a person of color, no matter her racial or ethnic origin.

In “Somebody Blew Up America,” Amiri Baraka raises Cervantes’s critical position to a new level. Baraka self-published what is among the best-known poems in the canon on 1 October 2001. In short order, the poem and the poet were condemned by the Anti-Defamation League and, ultimately, New Jersey’s Government, at whose pleasure Baraka was then serving as Poet Laureate.

As the controversy escalated, a budget shortfall was discovered and New Jersey thought it wise to terminate Baraka's \$10,000-a-year position to save money (Somebody 52-54).

Prefaced with what "They say" about a "barbaric / A rab, in / Afghanistan" plotting and planning, Baraka asks how we can trust what "they" say, since "they" are the ones "That have murdered black people / Terrorized reason and sanity / Most of humanity, as they pleases" (Somebody 41). The poem was pilloried for its antisemitism, in the form of its leading questions of "Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed / Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To stay home that day" (49).<sup>ix</sup> It was also held up for censure for its particularly harsh shaming of major African American political figures like "Tom Ass Clarence" or Colin Powell, here rechristened "Colon" from whose mouth "doo doo" comes (49). But whatever it presumes in the way of conspiracy theories, it seems to question its own terms by insisting, again and again, that the reader question whatever story she is told about September 11. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of the lines in the poem begin with "who":

[...] (who say? Who do the saying

Who is them paying

Who tell the lies

Who in disguise

[...]

Who/ Who / Who/

## Who stole Puerto Rico

Who stole the Indies, the Philippines, Manhattan (42-43)

This anaphoric repetition with its constant interrogation comes to a climax in the poem's final moments, when it attempts to create a partnership between its speaker and its reader in the investigation of these crimes:

We hear the questions rise

In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell

Who and Who and WHO (+) who who ^

Whoooo and Whoooooooooooooooooooooo! (50, my emphasis)

The readers become the questioners, unified in the first-person plural "we" (a familiar move in this chronocanon, as I note above). They will, the poem suggests, join the speaker in trying to figure out not who committed these atrocities, but who—on some deeper level—caused them.

Perhaps "Somebody Blew Up America" seems less concerned than "Palestine" or "After the Funeral of Assam Hamady" with expressing an othered position. Yet the poem—particularly in its mass-mediated incarnation—was repeatedly and explicitly tied to Baraka's radical, black identity; it does, one must note, begin with "the Klan" and "the Skin heads" and holds up African American political figures for particular censure. Despite its global ambitions, "Somebody Blew Up America" is, like the other poems I have been discussing, an expression of a particular othered American experience. Yet its challenge to its readers goes far

beyond simply asking for recognition of the black experience in the United States.

It does not ask just to be seen and included, but calls for redistribution—both within the United States and on a global scale. In asserting its right to challenge, to question and, indeed, to condemn the United States from within, it—even more emphatically than Cervantes—takes up the argument for a redistribution of inherent democratic rights to all in the United States and argues that the attacks should not leave them in question.

While it would be easy enough to see the poems by Baraka, Cervantes, and Hamod as distinct from the more widely circulated poems by Auden or Shakespeare, they form part of a network engaging issues of common concern and interest: about who “we” were in the United States after September 11; about the consequences of U.S. government actions, both within its jurisdiction and abroad; about guilt and innocence and the deep roots of the conflict. The chronocanon, to put it one way, performs a debate over these questions and finds some commonalities—these poems, even Baraka’s, seem to be situated loosely in a structure of feeling of general humanist unity—while also debating at length just what might constitute a humanist unity. Simple pieties—like “We must love one another or die”—are modulated through explicit questioning of who “we” are.

And the chronocanon connects that ambiguous, ambitious “we” to global concerns. Both Baraka and Cervantes literally connect the dots between United States foreign policy and September 11, while the chronocanon connects American experience to world poetry. The chronocanon’s inclusion of Israeli Yehuda Amichai and Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, Polish poets Adam Zagajewski and Czeslaw

Milosz, and Seamus Heaney as well as Pablo Neruda—all in translation!—carries out a critique of the insularity of America (and of American Literature). This argument made both by the poems and by the chronocanon's inclusion of diverse poets—that connections between the United States and the world exist and must be examined—has little to do with the reasons proffered by then-poet-laureate Billy Collins for the proliferation of global poetics: that Americans “haven't produced a poetry that has much authority in this area” (qtd. in D. Smith). Indeed, whatever their pre-emptive prominence in the U.S., the presence of international poets—their difference signified through indications that they are translated, through the specifically non-U.S. referents in their texts—stands to emphasize the chronocanon's calls for a reckoning with naïve, isolationist sentiments (like those expressed by Billy Collins). The canon's international diversity both complicates and reinforces its arguments about inclusiveness.

So while Auden and Baraka, Shakespeare and Cervantes might, under familiar academic rubrics, appear quite different, in the chronocanon they are drawn together by their generic similarities and overlapping concerns and, linked together, publicize concerns about dominant strands of American cultural discourse at this particular moment. The chronocanon which they constitute expresses both hopes for pluralism and the difficulty of living in a plural society; it brings critique of imperialism and jingoistic nationalism—voiced by W.H. Auden, William Shakespeare and Marianne Moore, as well as by Sam Hamod, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Amiri Baraka—to the fore.

As a collection of texts, this chronocanon is an interesting phenomenon. But it becomes more remarkable when we situate it in the temporal context of the months following September 11 and the material contexts of its republication. I now want to turn to these contexts in the hopes of linking its textual claims to material change. I want to emphasize how it becomes more than a chronocanon, how—via (re)publication in mass media sources—these poems become a set of resistant speech acts aimed at a broader public, able not just to assert political claims (in a literary sphere), but to take steps towards their actuation.

While poems like Baraka's—initially self-published on his own webpage in October 2001—naturally circulate within poetry communities, what makes the September 11 chronocanon remarkable is that its circulation quickly became a network visible to more than just accustomed poetry readers. It became visible both to those who early-on copied poems and pasted them up in cities, linked them online, or sent them by email and, increasingly, to a wide swath of readers—many quite distant from the literary world, like those who encountered Cervantes on About.com or Hamod on NPR. Indeed, as poems like Baraka's or Auden's began to circulate through the mass media, the chronocanon cohered and—just as 'the canon of American Literature' verified and enforced by institutions like the university is imagined to represent 'the United States'—came to represent another sort of community, which I have called a "counterpublic."

In her well-known critique of Habermas, Nancy Fraser coins this term as a way to describe the plurality of communities engaged in political debate, often outside of the "exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public [sphere]" (61). Her



example is United States feminists in the late-twentieth century, who, with a “variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places” has “invented new terms for describing reality” and reduced “the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres” (67). Similarly, the poems of the September 11 chronocanon circulate through the labors of a dissident counterpublic in a network of overlapping editorial processes that spiral upwards from readers who brought these texts to the fore and circulated them widely through alternative networks of distribution: emails, walls, memorials, city streets, and other less-mediated spaces.

The appearance of the chronocanon in mass media—by which I mean the major television networks and newspapers with national and international distribution—does not just represent the counterpublic, but is the counterpublic in its discursive form; it is their voice in the public sphere, putting forth their political ideas. In the safe spaces of Fraser’s “subaltern counterpublics”—alternative bookstores or small-press magazines—such voicing is familiar and often uncontested.<sup>x</sup> But in spaces where the counterpublic’s own language—their critique, for instance, of American multiculturalism and imperialism—might well have gone unheard, it is crucial to consider the chronocanon as a means by which the counterpublic speaks.<sup>xi</sup> To rewrite Marx, I might say, since the counterpublic cannot represent itself, it must be represented in the public sphere, with the help of the chronocanon. The chronocanon brings the counterpublic’s arguments into the public sphere and amplifies them—both in the way these texts place their high

cultural imprimatur on the arguments and in the way their cogency, through a kind of echoic function, amplifies them.

This is not, then, precisely the situation Marx describes in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), where that which represents the unrepresentable (in Marx's case Louis Napoleon for the peasants; here the chronocanon for the dissident counterpublic) is "master" or "authority over them" (117). Rather, the chronocanon is an instance of humans as they "make their own history" not "just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves," but "in present circumstances, given and inherited" (32). Thus in a cultural climate which was oppositional to their position and utilizing a mass media otherwise reluctant to air both poems and oppositional political arguments, the counterpublic succeeded, vis-à-vis the chronocanon, in broadcasting its arguments to large audiences. Let me turn, then, to the mass media of the contested Habermasian "public sphere" as the chronocanon makes it appearance there to voice the counterpublic's arguments for recognition and redistribution.

### 3. Poetry and the Public

As I note above, the months after September 11 witnessed profound restrictions on freedoms within the United States: not only violent attacks on people of color, but slightly more subtle harassment of those who expressed unpatriotic sentiments. Culminating with the passage of the PATRIOT Act in late October the government instantiated in law its power to "question [...] the patriotism of those who oppose its policies, [...] sought to discourage political activism by imposing

guilt by association, [and] restricted access to government information” (Chang 93). The mass media was a crucial part of this process with “jingoistic displays on TV” including “Dan Rather’s startling declarations that ‘George Bush is the President, he makes the decisions, and you know, as just one American, he wants me to line up, just tell me where’” (qtd. in Massing 197). Jingoism aside, the mass media blared faulty reporting—most famously about links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein’s regime aiding the spread of the American war into Iraq (Massing 198-201). In light of this—and continued instances of media malfeasance greasing the wheels of war; see, for instance, Judith Miller’s reporting on weapons of mass destruction for the New York Times in 2003—it is difficult not to imagine something of a direct line between the Bush administration’s policy decisions and the output of editors and publishers at various strata of mass media. Judith Butler puts it plainly: After September 11, “reporting itself has become a speech act in the service of the military operation” (Precarious 36-37).<sup>xii</sup>

The shoddy performance of the fourth estate is quite in keeping with Habermas’s remarkably pessimistic view of the public sphere in the twentieth century. No longer the dreamworld of the “public sphere” where in the eighteenth century a politically critical public is formed and “held together through the medium of the press and its professional criticism,” the changes both in social control and media ownership have shifted the terrain markedly (Structural 51, 54). Sounding more like Adorno than himself, Habermas argues that late twentieth century mass media “is marked by two competing tendencies”: “staged and manipulative publicity displayed by organizations over the heads of the

mediatized public” and a “process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it” (Structural 232). Quite often what makes it into newspapers and TV not only fails to represent the beliefs of various cultural blocs, but is, in fact, the arguments of massive media conglomerates—with ties to the Bush Administration themselves—staged as being “our” feelings or thoughts.<sup>xiii</sup> This is reification at its most efficient.

Yet the texts of the chronocanon run counter to these tendencies. This collection of poems, I want to argue, signifies a revived instance of what Habermas so admires in the public sphere of the eighteenth century European bourgeoisie: critical publicity. The poems, as I have already discussed, are critical—not only of imperialism and nationalism, but advocate for equal rights for all in a multicultural society. They place antiracist, anti-imperialist arguments in mass media flows. And they succeed in doing so, in no small part, because they are poems.

While the mass media reproduced some of these poems quite critically—Baraka’s was held up far more for approbation than for praise; Cervantes’s poem was given a prime location on About.com’s website; Auden’s was both praised and interrogated—they still carried out the crucial work of circulating them. However it framed the poems it republished, it still delivered them to a far wider audience than that which poems usually reach—and that audience, given the poems’ wide availability, could easily discover the full texts wherever they looked.

Not only were the poems broadly distributed, but—in the linguistic context of mass media—they stood out. On the pages of newspapers they were bordered by far wider margins than the typical feature; in nightly newscasts or on the radio

their rhyme and assonance (and, in Hamod's case, the voice in which they were read) contrasted with the standard diction of anchors. Part of their critical publicity was derived from their literary features, which were expressed positively, for instance, as rhyme or assonance and negatively in their difference from the more familiar language that surrounded them.

But it is not just because of their linguistic difference that poems circulated so widely in the mass media. In part, too the media's reproductions suggest these republications were based on the poems' status as literary objects; the prestige inherent in poetry. Thus we see poetry praised on the front page of The New York Times's Arts section on September 13 as promoting "a deeper understanding of the human condition." "Great literature," the article continues, "shows the way to clarity" (Webber). Later in the month, the Morning Call of Allentown, Pennsylvania quoted Robert Frost's famous aphorism about poetry as a "momentary stay against chaos" in a piece that called literature "our way of connecting, and not breaking apart" (Poncavage). The Atlanta Journal-Constitution offered an even more emphatic set of claims. Starting with the familiar romantic idea of poets with "their heads in the clouds, far removed from important daily concerns," the editorial goes on to conclude, "in a distraught world we realize that an artist's heightened perception of the world is an invaluable source of reality" (Ruhe). That "reality" has a double sense—here the news, which covers the 'real' world, has much to learn from poetry's superior reality, its "heightened perception"; poetry's distance from the media gives the media something it lacks. Rather than prove his point with William Carlos Williams's famous lines suggesting that you can't "get the

news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (318), this editor jumps to King Lear (1606):

Shakespeare summarizes the ideal: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

With similar conviction, poets and painters, filmmakers and composers—artists in all fields—take risks, cut through dogma and received wisdom, express the intuitive without fear of accountability.

(Ruhe)

Beyond the banal presumption that all art is opposed to "dogma and received wisdom," accountable to no one, and "intuitive," this argument showcases another way the mass media seeks to draw legitimacy from poetry—and explains why it might publish poems in the first place. Poems legitimate the media's speech about September 11 with their different knowledge of reality. Not only was poetry different, but it was powerful. And because of this, the counterpublic received a hearing in the mass media otherwise reluctant to air both poems and oppositional political arguments.

Still, it is quite reasonable to wonder what was at stake for the mass media in this broad dissemination of counterpublic language. Perhaps factions of the mass media were supportive of this message, but more often than not—and despite its own advocacy of the importance of poetry—the mass media seems genuinely confused as to why it is publishing poems. The New York Times heads a block of poems with the line: "Here are some selections from poems that have been circulating among people in the past few weeks" (D. Smith). The passive-voice

construction betrays the Times's uncertainty. Why, one can almost hear the editors asking, are we printing a bunch of poems? The answer draws its justification from one place: those "people" who have been "circulating" the poems "in the past few weeks." Put another way, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, publishing "September 1, 1939," explains directly that the poem "has been widely distributed on the Internet in the last month as readers have noted its relevance to the events of Sept. 11" ("Arguments"). Mass media publication draws its legitimacy from public circulation.

Other media outlets make similar claims. They publish poems because poems are in circulation. Again and again, the presence of the poems, both in the streets and then in mass media reproductions is figured as a sui generis production—they are not of the media but distinct from it. And just as poems appeared in the Times or the Star-Tribune because they were being posted in the street, they appeared on the radio because they appeared in newspapers. The networked quality of these practices suggests that publication, in these instances, was not a one-way street with, as Habermas sees it, the media producing its readers and manufacturing consent. Rather the media turned, on one hand, to the wisdom of poetry and, on the other hand, to the wisdom of those who had chosen to circulate it and thus threw their cultural force into the process of circulation.

Even in the 1960s, Habermas acknowledged such a possibility. Indeed, for all of the pessimism in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas notes that the "outcome of the struggle between a critical publicity and one that is merely staged for manipulative purposes remains open" (235). As I

discuss in the preceding chapters, his later work—vis-à-vis the theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy has begun to fill in one way to understand how this critical publicity is produced: through public discussion and debate over issues of general public concern. Precisely, I am arguing, what these poems—which make visible concerns about militant nationalism; about retrenchment into racist pieties within U.S. borders; about hopes for a more global consciousness—make possible. And, with the help of mass media republication, make possible for many readers well beyond the boundaries of verse culture, both official and otherwise. Thus these mainstream republications can be seen to represent a developing critical publicity, a confluence of interests voicing the prerogatives of a counterpublic, encouraging debate, moving towards agreement, and eventually civil and juridical changes in the structures of United States. All of which is to say, the appearance of the chronocanon in the mass media signifies the foundational way in which the counterpublic's assertion of affirmative rights to speech, to participation, to existence were—and would further be—brought to fruition. By publicizing discussions of these issues, the counterpublic vis-à-vis the chronocanon, makes its claims not just for recognition of its positions, but redistribution of such rights.

So while the public sphere is no longer conceivable on earlier models where certain classes used it to develop their power—it is, I mean to say, no longer able to support the utopian hopes the early Habermas placed on it—even the mediatized public sphere remains an important site of contestation. A counterpublic's drive for its own hegemonic position will grow only hesitatingly (if



at all) if it relies on purely counterpublic spaces to circulate its ideas. It must step beyond its bounds and bring new members into its fold. The public memorials and internet message boards—unaffiliated with either the canonizing power of the academy or the social power of the mass media—are good places to begin, but the true victory of this dissident counterpublic is their success in bringing their message—vis-à-vis the chronocanon—to a particularly broad audience via major newspapers, popular websites, and national radio programs.<sup>xiv</sup> As the chronocanon's circulation brings poems out of the literary sphere and to the attention of passers-by on the streets, internet surfers, and mass media elites—the editors and writers at publications aloof from both poetry and the canon's politics—the counterpublic's contestation is broadcast widely.

What's more, the appearance of poems in mainstream media suggests a crack (however slight) in the Bush Administration's own hegemonic formation, and, one might argue, the basis for a new hegemonic formation—one which, contrary to the many aftereffects of September 11, encouraged pluralism and deliberation, attempted to situate cultural "others" not just as part of American culture (a part which might one day be tolerated but marginalized, the next subject to persecution), but as voices empowered to contest that culture. If, as Gramsci argues, "[e]very relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship," then the irruption of the poems into the public sphere provides an opportunity for education and, ideally, the growth of the counterpublic as others discover its arguments thanks to its spread on the currents of mass media (350). Finding a poem she likes, the reader might pass it on—perhaps to her friends or

colleagues, perhaps pushing it further into the mass media. Indeed, stories about these poems often allude to such surprising discoveries: thus a writer finds a copy of “September 1, 1939” in the photocopier at a high school; a college student receives Baraka’s poem via an email listserv of a campus Peace Network (McHenry, Ramos-Mrosovsky). Through these actions, the counterpublic grows, among those inherently sympathetic and among those who might turn down a pamphlet, but discover these contestatory ideas in poems.

If I have revised Fraser by suggesting that counterpublics must bring their language out of counterpublic spaces and reach wider audiences by, in this case, utilizing mass media, let me offer, then, a second revision of her argument as well. Much as this counterpublic does not map cleanly onto her alternative venues for circulation, it does not map onto the identitarian notions—“women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians”—that define her subaltern counterpublics (67). What makes the chronocanon a particularly useful mode of conceiving of a public is that it allows us to avoid the potential limits of theorizing along identitarian lines. Rather than adhere to typical area-studies formulae in which the work of Chicana, Arab American, and African American writers belongs to different disciplines, I have followed the chronocanon in its implicit and explicit arguments in favor of intersectionality. Both at a literary-historical level—in its inclusion of texts by a diverse constituency of authors—and in its inclusion of diverse languages (Arabic, Spanish) and rhetorics (Baraka’s soapbox shouts, Hamod’s more plaintive tone), the chronocanon maintains differences while building power by linking shared positions of exclusion.<sup>xv</sup> The three poems I have focused on here

not only speak to one another, but also radicalize the broader chronocanon. As I note above, we necessarily read Auden and Rich, Dickinson and Shakespeare more radically in light of these poems: Auden's claims about "love" are complicated; Shakespeare's predictions of crumbling states have a more ominous resonance.

My intention is not to diminish the value of subaltern counterpublics as safe-spaces of communal cultural existence and production or to deny the necessity to study them as discrete subjects. I am suggesting (again, following the work of those who circulated these poems) that from a political perspective, it is valuable to construct counterpublics that maintain differences while working across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class to stop, most immediately, outright attacks on collective civil rights, but more broadly, to push back the forces of a bland multiculturalism that would homogenize, marginalize, and ignore. Working together, the chronocanon succeeds in producing languages that serve as the grounds for critique. And it is these languages, after all, that guarantee the chronocanon's power.<sup>xvi</sup> For the chronocanon draws on the prestige of poetry, its cultural capital, and poetry's difference from typical media language, but—at the most fundamental level—the chronocanon might succeed because of the incredible rhetorical power of the texts that constitute it, their ability to focus and clarify concepts through their aesthetic functions.

The chronocanon, then, articulates a shared struggle against the racist, imperialist and counter-deliberational voices in the United States in the wake of September 11. It carries these voices from less-mediated (and less powerful) spaces into a public sphere where their arguments serve to develop critical

publicity and, crucially, are distributed widely. So while one might be inclined to argue—as Auden did in the same year he wrote “September 1, 1939”—that “poetry makes nothing happen,” in this case, I would suggest its successes are clear. Poetry was everywhere. And it proved to be a remarkable means by which a dissident counterpublic issued warnings about the hubris of jingoism and xenophobia; questioned the causes of the September 11 attacks; urged global consciousness and local pluralism. Its work, I want to emphasize, was not simply representational, but redistributive, arguing for equal distributions of civil rights to people of color in the United States—and, indeed, around the globe—in the wake of September 11.

Its successes were noteworthy. But to end on this utopian note—while, nearly ten years later, people continue to endure illegal detention, while men and women with brown skin have been murdered in the United States and around the world as “payback” for the terrorist attacks—would be a mistake.<sup>xvii</sup> Keeping such atrocities in mind, I will emphasize a smaller utopian point: poetry’s political potential.

In a potent 2003 essay—one that takes the prominence of Auden’s “September 1, 1939” after September 11, 2001 as its focal point—Stephen Burt pithily critiques scholars for all too quickly relying on “public, social, or community as the key term in their titles and arguments” about the value of poetry (533). Burt is right. There are simply too many unsubstantiated claims about the political power of poems—claims anchored to little more than bold assertions about how readers might feel or might have felt about a poem given its form, its author’s

identity, its time and place of publication. Claims, it can't go without saying, that never bother to consider how these imaginary readers encountered a poem or in what context.

Burt would have critics move away from such claims unless we can truly detail and describe how “a poem speaks to a public concern, to a community, or for a group of (actual or potential) readers large and homogenous enough to count as a public” (550). In my argument, I have hoped to suggest we needn't abandon such “strong” claims for the value of poetry—or focus solely on singular, canonical poems. In tracing the (re)publications of many poems after September 11, I have argued for the success of this chronocanon in broadly disseminating its message of resistance. But my argument for the chronocanon's “success” has been based as much on the message as on the mode of dissemination. Given that poems were published in everything from mass media to emails and from blogs to photocopies taped up in public, we can say they encountered a large audience, both those who did the republishing and those who encountered the republication. This reading and republication of a collection of poems that cohere around particular concerns provided a powerful means for a counterpublic to announce a transformative antiracist, anti-imperialist vision and, through poetry's linguistic power, to encourage others to join in that vision. While the political claims for the value of speaking politics (rather than, say, doing them) should necessarily be tentative, with expectations of poetry's cultural force as low as they currently stand—both with poetry critics like Stephen Burt and with many other readers—to suggest its vital presence in political discourse seems no small step.

Chapter Four  
Political Action:  
Tactical Readings of The Grapes of Wrath in 2009

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) is a novel of collectivity. While often described as a chronicle of “the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s” and “the story of one Oklahoma farm family” (Steinbeck n.p.), it is more emphatically the story of many people coming together, from the partnership in the second chapter between Tom Joad and the nameless truck driver to the novel's famous final scene where Rose of Sharon offers her breast to save the life of an unnamed stranger. Notably this fictional collectivity produced something of a material collectivity shortly after its publication in March 1939. The book sold over 430,000 copies that year alone and became the talk of the nation, discussed at town hall meetings throughout California, in newspapers in many states, and in letters—including famous missives from Eleanor Roosevelt and others (Parini 276, Wartzman 7).

But who cares about collectivity these days? Is it even possible for people to—in the word's root Latin sense—“gather together” (OED)? Certainly the term's Durkheimian overtones of those shared ideas and sentiments that enable social life<sup>i</sup> are long gone; and even for many post-Marxists the division of labor, which led to “collective labor”—simultaneously the state of exploitation and the means by which revolution (“the struggle of collective labor, i.e. the working class”) would occur—is passé (Capital 344). In the early twenty-first century we—in Robert Putnam's apt phrase—bowl alone. Whatever connections we make happen via Facebook over the wireless from our techno-foxholes. And this atomism has a dual

philosophical basis in postmodern irony (where “collective” is just revolutionary chic) and poststructuralist nihilism: Surely “connection”—to say nothing of “collectivity”—is always already under erasure.

So it might seem surprising that Steinbeck’s novel suddenly was, according to the Washington Post, in “high demand” again in 2009 (Dry). It was, of course, historically relevant as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression unfolded in a series of intermeshed crises: imploding sub-prime mortgages, toppling financial institutions, collapsing industrial production, and massive government bailouts. But newfound interest in the novel was not just evidence of a conscientious trip to the repository of cultural memory wherein readers looked to the book to help them understand the present. In what follows, I will describe and examine just how Grapes was returned to relevance for some remarkable readers in Jackson, Michigan and Knoxville, Tennessee. In myriad instances of tactical reading, they utilized the novel—its themes and symbols, its philosophical claims, its powerful language—to intervene in their communities: to shape broader social movements in support of workers’ rights, to announce claims about the racialized and gendered aspects of local poverty, and—most materially—to connect people in need with necessary services, from food pantries to housing support. Working tactically they drew on the novel to produce manifest transformations beyond the sphere of ideology.

These readers did not focus explicitly on the text’s formal aspects—they are neither for nor against realism—nor on the author’s positionality. Their interests were not literary critical, rather, they focus on how the novel relates to life as lived

in the moment of their reading. The most remarkable readers engage with the text in a holistic way: they focus on the novel's themes of collectivity—from the Joad family's connections with John Casy to the lived community of the Weedpatch Camp—and try to reproduce that collectivity in their communities. To put it another way, I approach the problem of literature and politics through this praxis; I attempt to derive theoretical clarification from these readers' material intervention.

I begin with a brief methodology juxtaposing reader-response theories with my own theoretical grounding drawn from cultural anthropology and inflected by Habermasian communicative action. As in the previous chapters my argument exists at a disciplinary intersection and is ambitious to step outside of philosophies of consciousness in the hopes of producing a less-subjective literary criticism grounded in the practices of everyday communication.

I then turn to the actual work of readers, showcasing the diversity of their practices. I start with more traditional readings situated in the institutional context of the Big Read, a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) initiative promoting community reading. I spend some time describing the Big Read's ideological commitments to particular types of reading, namely reading groups gathering to discuss the book in comfortable settings. While important, I argue, these non-tactical approaches to reading exist at a distance from political action; they need tactical readings to produce the political change they philosophically endorse. Action is the focus of the third section, where I detail one of the many remarkable tactical uses that transformed The Grapes of Wrath into a springboard for political



action. This instance—a Grapes of Wrath-themed Services Fair, connecting people living in poverty with needed support—is not only communicative, but materially activist: it feeds the hungry and produces a more politically engaged community.

In the concluding section, I draw out the Gramscian notion of “articulation” to emphasize the potential of these tactical reading practices not only to deliver immediate material benefits for those in need, but to shape a powerful collectivity through networks of communicative action. Here I emphasize the argument that these practices resituate the relationship between literature and politics, suggesting the ways in which literary critics might turn away from our own reading of texts and begin to examine how other readers use literature to “do something” materially transformative.

Thus this chapter aims to show how the experience of readers (and non-readers) in Jackson and Knoxville in the early years of the twenty-first century reinvigorates not only the political power of collectivity but the theoretical value of Habermasian communicative action in describing how such power might be produced.

### 1. Reading Communities: Methodology

Already more than 160 times in this dissertation I have evoked the “reader,” a term that for literary critics seems invariably to call to mind the familiar shortcomings of reader-response theory. Indeed, its shortcomings are all too clear. For all its interest in readers, it fundamentally debases them by substituting a critic’s “reading” for how a text is or should be read. I am not much interested in ideas like

the “narratee” (Gerald Prince) or the “mock reader” (Walker Gibson)—both of which presume that all readers read the same way across classes, cultures, and temporalities. But let me clarify my position with respect to two of the most familiar thinkers in the field: Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish.

The work of Wolfgang Iser is among the richest reader-response attempts to explicate the interplay between text and reader, but it has clear limits. Consider Iser’s famous reading of the symbolic value of Leopold Bloom’s cigar in *Ulysses* (1922). Iser suggests that a reading of Bloom’s cigar is controlled by “two main structural components within the text,” first “a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes” and second “techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar” (62-63). Thus Joyce’s novel evokes this “repertoire of familiar literary patterns” to make us think of the spear of Ulysses.

Iser is nuanced—acknowledging a range of interpretation—and yet he presumes so much. Do all readers know about Ulysses’s spear? Do all readers—or just the professors Joyce professed to keep busy for centuries—read his novels looking to decode their vast symbology (qtd. in Harty xviii)? Do I admit too much when I confess that, reading the novel both as a teenager and a graduate student, I did not make this connection if I paid much attention to what Bloom smoked at all? The presumption that such interpretation is invariably part of reading puts a problematic limit on “the reader.” Iser’s reader is—as far as I can tell—a lot like him: thoughtful, very well-read, and at leisure to ponder the symbolic significance of cigars. His theory, as such, sheds little light on the broad range of interpretive moves taken by readers without extensive literary-critical training.

While more bluntly asserting “a level of experience which all readers share, independently of differences in education and culture,” Stanley Fish does more to locate readers than does Iser (5). Fish famously avoids the “rankest subjectivism” by locating the reader in a “community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature ‘he’ ‘makes’” (11). In essays like “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” (1980), Fish shows us real readers responding to texts—in that case to a fictitious “poem” written on a chalkboard in a summer class he is teaching. Most other examples, too, come from the classroom and often illustrate variations on the theme of ‘wise professor solves students’ frustration with a text’s multiple interpretability.’ Surely there is a bit of “rankest subjectivism” in such myopia. Could readers possibly read outside of the university? Could students sometimes have better answers than their professors? And what happens when reading communities aren’t directed by a professor in a classroom—which is to say, are more horizontal and less exclusive?

Perhaps, as my brief points here indicate, my truck with reader-response theory is not the familiar—and well-argued one—about how its logic predicates a total indeterminability of meaning. Nor is my concern that of Walter Benn Michaels, that reading this way “understand[s] the interpretation as producing the text rather than being produced by it” (73). Both critiques, I think, are right as far as they go. And they share a fundamental announcement of the problematic of subjectivity: a myopia that overvalues one’s personal response, which, in Benn Michaels’s emphatic critique, ultimately ties all interpretation to a form of identity

politics (13). Yet to counter the profound, atomizing, isolating subjectivism of interpretation—which links, explicitly, to the profound, atomizing, isolation of contemporary United States society—I will argue here that we need not turn away from “the reader.” Rather we must discover her in space and time and not as a solitary reader—in the garret or the (only slightly-less-isolated) ivory tower—but as part of a community engaged in reading and discussion.

To understand such communal interpretive practices, I draw heavily on Jürgen Habermas’s notion of communicative action—a theory that is fundamentally grounded in a critique of subjectivism, whether in its poststructuralist formations (Derrida and Lyotard are two of Habermas’s most central opponents) or what Habermas sees as its Marxist varieties (Horkheimer and Adorno’s “socio-psychological” reading of Luckásian reification [[TCA 1.379](#)]). Indeed Habermas concludes the first volume of his Theory of Communicative Action (1981) by announcing what the first four hundred pages have taken for granted: “the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness” (1.386). The paradigm, he suggests, is exhausted because it cannot generate a meaningful rationality. To even understand how one might do something political, one has to find a way to discover the political outside of the subject. To do this, according to Habermas, we must look to the intersubjective understanding produced in communicative action—the (mostly verbal) action that transpires when “agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding” ([TCA 1.285-86](#)).

Utilizing Habermasian communicative action as a cultural hermeneutic grounds another philosophical rejection of reader-response theory. The goal becomes not necessarily to define what a “reader” is or how she “reads”—nor, more obviously, to abstract a kind of political interpretation from the text—but to encounter readers in a moment of collective particularity and to extract some theoretical possibilities from these instances. The consequence of this is a critical position that sees reading as a historicized synthetic practice, linking texts and readers in a collective, communicative production of meaning—as well as the production of both political affect and effects, for the latter are the ultimate goals of Habermas’s rejection of subjectivity.

In applying this approach to readers, then, I had to stop speculating about how readers read and to go out and meet some readers who (mostly) lived at a distance from the academic practices I was enmeshed in. While in the preceding chapters I encountered readers through their written traces, I wanted to meet them, hear them talk about reading, and interpret their reading practices. I wanted to see what they did with books in their communities—not with the ambition of using these readers to build a grand theory of how “reading” works at a subjective level, but with the ambition of producing a portrait of the objective manifestations of how reading works as part of a collective communicative practice.

With these ambitions in mind—and conscientious of Theory of Communicative Action’s recourse to, in particular, sociology and anthropology—I decided to go into the field. I visited two communities that had read Grapes of Wrath as part of “one book, one community” reading programs. The NEA’s Big

Read provided an ideal setting and from among the eight communities that had read Grapes of Wrath in 2008-2009, I chose Jackson, Michigan and Knoxville, Tennessee.

Jackson, a small city of 35,000 people an hour and a half west of Detroit, was bleak. In the years leading up to my visit, the bulk of Jackson's blue-collar jobs, many of them tied to automakers, had disappeared. When I visited, General Motors had just declared bankruptcy and the town was anxious about what would come next. Michigan Avenue, the main drag, felt abandoned despite the upbeat music relentlessly piped in through hidden speakers. Many of the storefronts were vacant and parking was ample. Not even the bars were busy. The downtown branch of the Jackson District Library was one of the few places where I saw more than a handful of people in the same place.

Knoxville looked and felt different. A bigger city—combined with its sprawl, it accounts for over 600,000 people—its streets were busy from downtown to the main University of Tennessee campus to the far-flung suburbs near the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Yet there were also signs of economic despair in Knoxville. The city's industrial economy disappeared in the 1960s and I kept finding myself in neighborhoods of empty factories and houses. And while “new” economies—higher education, research and development—had taken over, they were hardly flush. When I was in town, the Sentinel was full of headlines about plans to build a new hospital nixed by the credit freeze.

I picked Jackson and Knoxville because they are different—northern and southern; city and town—but I found they have a surprising amount in common:

similar racial demographics and a similar median income, similarly hard-hit by the Great Recession. And in terms of reading practices, the similarities were even clearer. While I stuck to my Institutional Review Board interview procedure,<sup>ii</sup> my fieldwork was shaped predominately by contemporary cultural anthropologists committed to telling “other” stories. I modeled my approach on Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996), a book that proclaims itself “a story” on its first page and uses its narrative about rural West Virginia to respond to “an incessant narrativization of a cultural real”—that of the United States as “a prefab landscape of abstract ‘values’” (3). Stewart chronicles “the eruption of the local and the particular [...] without freezing its moves in a grand totalizing scheme of ‘objects’ and ‘gists’” (4). Stewart—and this is clearly part of why I see her as a model—tells her “story” as a response to academic expectations; her book “began with an effort to make a space for these stories in an ‘American’ academic discourse and to insert the storied sensibility of culture as a ‘truth’ that is performed and imagined in precise practices of retelling” (9). Like Stewart, I saw myself attempting to open a space for readers who, like the “other” Americans Stewart describes, had been ignored or, perhaps worse, falsely imagined by academics. These readers would not stand in for all readers, but for themselves. And I would find them in places that resisted the broad associations of literary culture with coastal cosmopolitanism.<sup>iii</sup>

In Jackson and Knoxville, I interviewed twenty-two readers: librarians and community organizers, a physicist, a minister, a principal, publicists and marketers, desk clerks, a grant writer and a mayor, students, artists, and a handful

of retired folks. This diverse array of readers participated in their community reading projects in equally diverse ways. Some screened films or gave lectures or spoke at community forums about the novel and its themes; some wrote grants and organized programming; some solely attended the programs. Nearly all discussed the book in reading groups or book clubs. And all of them—it cannot go without saying—read (or at least started) Steinbeck’s novel. Along with their stories, they shared with me textual traces of their reading practice: the promotional materials, the newspaper articles about the events, the programs for lectures, and photographs. It is on these self-narrativizations and material artifacts that I base my argument.

My approach might be faulted as more Studs Terkel than social science. While I think a more social scientific approach to such a project could also yield fruit—though perhaps of a different variety—I am pleased with the results of my hybrid cultural hermeneutic. Dwelling in the murky space between contemporary cultural anthropology and literary cultural studies, I drew on social scientific interview procedures, but positioned myself as an interpreter—someone who, in what follows, presents these interviews as cultural objects, but who also reads them attentively and in the philosophical paradigm of Habermasian communications theory. The result is—in Stewart’s word—a “story” of a complex social practice that would otherwise remain ephemeral; but while telling it, I am also attempting to describe its political consequences in the context of the broader literary critical discussions of politics.



To begin, then, I must first situate these reading practices in the context of the program that sponsored their existence: the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read. I will discuss the program's self-presentation not just as an arts program, but as a political tool. However heartening I find such characterizations, I will also engage with the limits of the form it encourages this politics to take.

## 2. Reading Communities: The Big Read

In the United States in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century reading was in trouble. According to Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America (2004), conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, not only were fewer than half of the adults in the United States reading literature, but that population had shrunk by over ten percentage points since 1982 (ix). Worse, these declines were apparent in nearly every sociocultural array: people with advanced degrees and people who hadn't finished high school; men and women, people of all races and ages (ix-xii). Everyone was reading less literature.

In Reading at Risk, Dana Gioia, the former General Foods CEO and poet who had become the NEA's chairman just a few years before, announced that the decline in reading "parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life" (vii). As reading disappeared, so would "voluntarism, philanthropy, and even political engagement" (vii). In less than two years, the NEA had devised one potential remedy: The Big Read. Disbursing the first set of grants to ten organizations in the fall of 2005, Gioia announced:

No single program can entirely reverse this trend. But if cities nationally unite to adopt The Big Read, our community-wide reading program, together we can restore reading to its essential place in American culture. Call me naïve, but I can actually envision an America in which average people talk about To Kill a Mockingbird and The Great Gatsby with the same enthusiasm as they bring to Lost or Desperate Housewives.

(“National Endowment for the Arts Announces The...”)

The next year, the program spread from ten organizations to seventy-two—some of which received grants as large as \$40,000. By 2008, the NEA was spending over \$1.5 million yearly on The Big Read (“National Endowment for the Arts Announces More...”).

With these grants—doled out to groups from the YWCA to the Boy Scouts; from public libraries to private universities—local organizers would select a single piece of “classic literature” from a list provided by the NEA and their town, city, or county would read it together over the course of a month (“About”).

“[C]omprehensive resources” including “an extensive Web site providing comprehensive information on authors and their works” would be made available by the NEA, but the local organization would be in charge of

a kick-off event to launch the program locally, ideally attended by the mayor and other local luminaries; major events devoted specifically to the book (panel discussions, author reading, and the like); events using the book as a point of departure (film screenings, theatrical readings, and so

forth); and book discussions in diverse locations and aimed at a wide range of audiences. (“About”)

In its broadest configuration, the Big Read would “encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment” for “citizens” and their “communities” (“About”). The dual emphasis is crucial; though hardly contradictory, “pleasure” and “enlightenment” are in no way intrinsically related.

Indeed the Big Read often deals in opaque dualisms. The program simultaneously emphasizes inclusivity and exclusivity, for instance wanting everyone to read, but only to read certain things.<sup>iv</sup> Thus they offer “comprehensive” support to avoid alienating potential readers—those who had a cruel, comma-splice-obsessed English teacher in high school or college; those who once tried to read Ulysses but never got the metaphor of cigar-as-spear (if they managed to read that far); those for whom English is not a primary language. Notably this inclusiveness stretches to a slightly more subtle rhetoric of racial or class differences: “diverse locations,” “a wide range of audiences,” “average people.”<sup>v</sup>

Thus when Gioia claimed in a 2007 speech, the Big Read can “make us connect with our communities,” he was not only offering a vague platitude that trades on the sacrosanct quality of “community” in contemporary American culture (National Endowment). He was announcing that the sweetness and light offered by the Big Read books might transform communities by collapsing their divisions. He makes this point emphatically in 2008 testimony to Congress, arguing “The Big Read has become a national symbol of the importance of reading in a free

society” (Gioia). A bold claim, but Gioia had supporting data at the ready: “our country is dividing into two distinct behavioral groups,” he announced.

One group spends most of its free time sitting at home as passive consumers of

electronic entertainment. The other group [participate in] a broader range of activities. They go out—to exercise, play sports, volunteer and do charity work at about three times the level of the first group. What is the defining difference between passive and active citizens? It is not income, geography or even education. It is whether or not they read for pleasure and participate in the arts. These cultural activities seem to awaken a

heightened sense of individual awareness and social responsibility. (Gioia)

Though the use of “pleasure” here echoes its deployment in the program materials I cite above, “pleasure” is hardly at the heart of Gioia’s claims. He is promoting literature’s capacity to mobilize its audience towards more socially conscious aims: community, “social responsibility,” freedom. In Gioia’s words, the Big Read is nothing short of a shot in the arm for American democracy—not just a delivery mechanism for Arnoldian “pleasure and enlightenment,” but (in some ineffable way) a political mechanism.

The mechanism is simple: reading groups. People read a book and discuss it with others who live not-too-distant and this produces a reinvigorated, democratic community. Indeed, this practice overpopulates the schedule for the month of a typical Big Read. Skimming down the list of events one sees book clubs, lectures, films, more book clubs, some reading groups, and more book clubs. The ideal

“community” for the Big Read, then, looks not unlike those pictured on a college’s recruiting brochure: a group of people, marked by appropriate signifiers of their diversity, sitting in a circle (perhaps on an autumnal lawn) discussing life’s big questions. Of course, this hypothetical recruiting brochure would lack the professorial figure in the tweedy jacket—for these clubs are conceived as a more horizontal allegiance of equals; no one gives or gets grades.

All of this, it shouldn’t go without saying, sounds very Habermasian. Gioia is no philosopher. His use of freighted keywords like “social responsibility”—not to mention weasel words like “seem”—is frustratingly vague. Yet his idealized political community is grounded precisely in “acts of reaching understanding” where “participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes”; such horizontal communities are constituted by reading and discussion groups (TCA 1.285-86). What’s more, such groups would appear to be, whether Gioia knows it or not, ideal incubators of the Habermasian “lifeworld.” The lifeworld establishes a “grammar of forms of life”: the rules by which we think and act and speak about the world (TCA 2.392). If those rules are being developed in consort with Steinbeck’s novel, one can imagine that they would countermand many of the imperatives of late capitalism. People might talk about aesthetics instead of making money; might think about their community before thinking of their own interests.

The Big Read would seem, I’m suggesting, to produce a space where lifeworld cultures might reproduce themselves and resist such takeovers. And, at least at first glance, the program seems to deliver on its political account. Nearly

everyone I interviewed in Jackson and Knoxville made such political sentiments explicit. Organizers saw the book as a way to “talk about race, racial justice, and racial issues in the community”—in particular “a really good way to talk about immigration and the Hispanic community. It was easy to connect these migrating families to immigrants today” (Baker).<sup>vi</sup> No one I talked to failed to mention, in some way, contemporary questions of poverty, the financial crisis, or immigration. A glance at some interpretive moves by other participants makes clear the Big Read’s success in encouraging this kind of engagement:

There were so many things we could connect it to—because it was read at the time when immigration was a big issue. So we had the opportunity to talk about what that means. It was the time when the economy was going down [...] so it was like this had happened before and this is how people had handled it. So the migration of poor people was an issue we discussed and how the people from not only the U.S. but outside of the U.S. migrated just to find a better life. It was very timely—an old book and an old history, but [...] a lot of things that were happening that we could relate to.

(Velazquez)

Personally, I loved it. It’s the best book I ever read. [...]. It was beautiful. Even though it was very depressing. You could just connect with the characters, even though they weren’t anybody I would probably interact with or will ever interact with. You had sympathy, he took you into their world. (Sayles)

I like the book. [...] It really opens your eyes up to what someone in that position has to go through and live through and still try to hold their dignity because it's so degrading. (Carler)

Empathy is key to these readings (“connects with the characters”; “opens your eyes up to what someone in that position has to go through”) and so is the novel’s potential to enrich the reader’s understanding of the historical moment (“very timely”; “we could relate to”). Another reader, living in transitional housing in Knoxville, claimed the book put her life in perspective. This reader needed no reminder that poverty exists; she had clear personal experience. The book, she reported, gave her a positive outlook on her future and her ability to care for herself (Baker).

Empathy should not be undervalued, whether for middle- and upper-class readers (the first two quotes above), for working class readers (the third) or for those living in poverty—particularly as, in these cases, empathy translates into a commitment to understanding contemporary experiences of poverty. That empathy is a key aspect of communal reading practices has been documented by the handful of sociologists who have studied book clubs. Book clubs can, sociologist Elizabeth Long suggests, “bring people into new relationships with themselves, each other, and the environing social world”—a description that certainly evokes the “empathy” so central to readers’ ideas (xvi).<sup>vii</sup>

I endorse the value of such responses, both affective and intellectual.<sup>viii</sup> But in my interviews, a troubling limit appeared. These empathetic readers did not

make the step of translating their empathy into action beyond their reading groups—or this step, at least, was not one they could articulate in my interviews. This is unfortunate in itself, but it also offers evidence of the disconnect between the Big Read’s institutional self-understanding and its practice. The “democracy” that Gioia brags about to Congress is carried out in very limited, often private spaces: a complex—if not outright contradictory—equation. And certainly one with limited social value. So while I am pleased with the responses of the readers I cite above, I also saw deeply troubling limits in their interpretation. Let me use one reader as an example. Judy Szink saw the injustice in John Casy’s murder and noted that the Government Camp at Weedpatch is one of the few places in the novel where the Joads exist “at least [...] on a human level.” These issues, she made clear, are not just fictional; the novel is “incredibly ripe for the times. Some things you read about in the book are happening right now in current history.”

While conscious of the book’s central arguments and conscious of need and inequity, Szink—an upper middle class woman who works part time, raises a family, and volunteers with the St. Vincent de Paul Society—can’t imagine a solution. When I reflected back her ideas about the potential for people to work together to end problems (an aspect of what I have here been calling collectivity), she immediately hedged:

I think that fact hasn’t changed, it’s just that I think the world is too complex, it’s really difficult to effect change because problems and institutions are so big and complex it’s hard to just do it on a grassroots level, but it can be done. You have to have passion. I don’t know if I have



passion, but it can be done. It's just more difficult now than it would've been years ago—because things are more complex.

After a conversation about how timely Steinbeck's novel was, suddenly she pulled back, assigning it to a simpler time in the past, when institutions were less complex, grassroots change more possible. She relegated the book to a historical position in the 1930s, which she sees as a time before the rise of complex institutions capable of hindering activism.

However empathetic, historicizing readings with similar limits became almost inevitable as I continued my interviews. Thus I would suggest it's a mistake to overvalue empathy or a clarified relationship with oneself. Such a claim assumes that political action, in some ineffable way, simply follows from such alignments. But by keeping the discussion at the level of ideology—that is, by suggesting the importance of changing people's minds, rather than changing how people behave—these claims remain intangible. Again, this is not to say they lack value; but their political value, it seems to me, must rest in no small part on their becoming something more than subjective.

Book clubs would seem to solve this problem by opening interpretation into a broader sphere. Yet the self-contained spheres of the book club—my interviews showed—offer another limit. Most participants discussed Grapes with their accustomed reading groups—which many reported were made up of people like them; for example, people whose first language is Spanish; retired teachers.<sup>ix</sup> And, among these, most of the readers are women, most of them middle-aged.<sup>x</sup> Readers like Szink and the reader living in transitional housing do not read or discuss

together. Much as the “reading community” falsely offers Fish a way out of the “rankest subjectivism” of reader-response theory, the book club constitutes something of a false public.

Acknowledged as such, perhaps this wouldn’t be so troubling. But the Big Read elides this disconnect because these homogenous groups are part of the same “community,” construed broadly in terms of space and time, not in terms of actual interaction. My interviews with Big Read participants made it all too clear that the diverse democratic potential imagined by Gioia is not being achieved by book clubs alone. We might want to call these reading groups democracies, but they are democracy in discussion only—and discussions in very limited communities at that. The familiar lines of class or race or national origin remain intact and interpretations become inward focused. This is not what democracy looks like.

In the Big Read’s preferred reading practices, I have pointed out a series of troubling limits: to community, to democracy, to political practice. First, I have suggested that the Big Read offers false claims about its political value; in particular Gioia’s emphatic announcements about the Big Read’s essential support of democracy. While I have agreed there is much to value in the reading communities nurtured by the Big Read, I am dubious of such broad claims—not only because these communities reproduce familiar social stratifications but because their self-descriptions emphasize the political mostly in terms akin to philosophies of consciousness. Put simply, to couple communication and democracy in this fashion is not only to misunderstand the consequences of conversations, but to misunderstand the nature of political action itself, mistaking

democratic conversations for democratic actions; egalitarian language for egalitarian practices. Democracy in discussion is all well and good, of course, but not necessarily productive of democracy in practice.

It is on this point that the tactical readers I met in Jackson and Knoxville intervene, offering theoretical clarification through material intervention. These readers certainly read the novel and engaged in the Big Read's institutional community building centered on acts of interpretation and conversation among people who agree and disagree. They played roles in the communicative action in the limited contexts I have just described. But they stepped beyond these predictable modes of participation and worked to produce material social benefits. These readers turn The Grapes of Wrath into a tactic. They—through reading, conversation, and interpretation—identify particular aspects of Steinbeck's text and use them as springboards to do politics. Then they put those plans into action and—in ways Gioia never imagines—they produce immediate material social benefits for people living in poverty in their communities.

For these readers, reading and interpretation were not ends, were not, in themselves, "democracy," but means—and not just a means to further communication or ideological transformation, but means to material ends. Thus the tactical readings to which I now turn showcase the practices of Habermasian communicative action—and their political potential. To put this in literary theoretical terms, they show that literature cannot be confined solely to the cabinet of superstructural curiosities. The political transformations in which it is

capable of playing of part are not just subjective shifts, but objective reworkings of the world.

### 3. Tactical Reading as Political Action

In Jackson and Knoxville, I saw many instances of tactical reading. Readers picked up The Grapes of Wrath and made it work for them in community forums that used Grapes to thematize discussions about how to reduce poverty; in public discussions led by local politicians that linked the novel's migration to contemporary debates about immigration; in a nature hike that helped people learn what indigenous plants they could forage. There were sermons, radio plays, and photographic exhibits connecting the Great Depression with the Great Recession. And in many other instances readers used Steinbeck's novel to speak to a broader public about issues of great concern.

These practices work to produce a "grammar of forms of life" which rejects individualist capital accumulation in favor of a more egalitarian, collective sensibility far more powerfully than the book clubs I have been discussing (TCA 2.392). But, as I just argued at some length, communicative action grounded in a vigorous lifeworld is not enough to make political claims. Thus in describing one of the most remarkable instances of tactical reading—Jackson's Grapes of Wrath-themed Services Fair—I show not only how literature helped these readers devise strategies for political transformation and convince others this was a good idea, but how it served as a delivery mechanism: shaping the events, generating the grant money to make them happen and the press coverage to deliver their

message even more widely. It was, put simply, a tool for organizing against local poverty. This is no small claim for literature, which is so often figured as marginal to contemporary culture, as a dead or dying elitist preoccupation.

The kick-off event of the Big Read is described as the program's centerpiece: a chance to entice new readers and encourage month-long participation. At Jackson's kick-off, program organizers and politicians followed Big Read expectations, handing out free books and reader's guides. But Jackson's kick-off event not only encouraged people to read The Grapes of Wrath, it used the economic and social clout of the text (and the Big Read) to produce a space for political action.

The planning proved difficult. Debate about the kick-off continued until just a few months before the Big Read began. Ideas included soup or bread lines as a way to re-create a sense of living in the Depression, but Jon Hart, a community organizer with Jackson's Community Action Agency (CAA), was worried: "I thought it would just go to nostalgia. I wanted to get involved so we could paint the picture of now, rather than then. There's no harm in knowing then, [but] I don't want people to think 'Oh, it was seventy years ago and everything's fine now'" (Hart). Indeed, such historical recreation would seem to parallel book club interpretive practices that draw clear distinctions between then and now. In Jackson, the ultimate outcome was something, in Hart's words, "more active."

The kick-off was held on the last day of February, a Saturday, in the gym of an elementary school on the south side of town. The school cafeteria cooked lunch;

local musicians played Woody Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Ballads" (inspired, of course, by John Ford's film of Grapes) and Depression-era blues on acoustic guitars. On display with the free copies of the novel was a giant soup pot cooking over a campfire; both the pot and the fire were constructed of canned soup gathered for the United Way food drive that would collect over 400 cans during March. The crowd heard speeches from Jackson's library director, representatives of various community agencies, Jackson's U.S. House Representative Mark Schauer, and others.

The walls were decorated with promotional material from the Big Read, the United Way, and the work of local photographer, Kate Lambert Lee, a working-class mother and a non-traditional college undergraduate. Lee's collection of images, titled "Faces of Poverty," deliberately evokes Dorothea Lange's dustbowl images, especially her famous "Migrant Mother." One image features Wanda Beavers: lit from behind, pursing her lips; determined but not humorless. One of her daughters stares with an open face in another image. Text telling the women's stories of perseverance, and successes, both small and large, accompanied the images. Betty Williams, a single mother of five, has her hand pressed to her chest, looking serious, emphatically mid-sentence. Ashley Trusty is shown in the bathroom of her apartment with her children; the kids brush their teeth while their mother watches with a slightly bemused look.

Beavers, Williams, and Trusty are all single mothers. But the collection also included images of Kerry Hart. Her story is one of growing up in poverty. Hart's narrative is clearly meant to suggest possibilities. It ends with a quote that

illuminates one commonality of each of the images: “It is our duty,” she tells us, “to understand that the success of an individual is not generally due to their independence, but rather the support of those around them. We must find a method to support people when their own systems are not enough” (“Faces” 6). Here, on the walls of the Services Fair, we see Steinbeck’s central theme emphasized: the Joads maintain their power through collectivity—the power they develop through their alliances with others living in poverty. We see this in the successful ejection of the Sheriff’s agents provocateur at the Weedpatch Camp, we see it, too, in the food sharing along the road to California, in the attempt to save the boxcar encampment with the dam, even in the book’s final scene. Again and again, social support is crucial to the survival of the migrants in Steinbeck’s novel. Importantly this thematic enunciation comes not just through the words of a Nobel laureate, but through the aesthetic work of a contemporary, local tactical reader—a working class woman.

The theme of collectivity is not only the animating theme of the Fair, but the event’s central function. This was not just a site for speeches and donations. Rather, the Fair brought together—under the aegis of the Big Read—local service agencies and those in need of their support. At the center was CAA, a federally-funded, locally-operated organization that serves as a clearinghouse for social services, helping residents in poverty with everything from tax returns to Head Start schooling, neighborhood planning to micro-loans (History). Many other service agencies were present. Big Brothers/ Big Sisters was there; so was Marriage Matters, a non-profit aimed at supporting families; the Center for Family

Health, a provider of medical services for underserved populations—all three federally-funded. Many other non-profit service groups attended as well: disAbility Connection, a local non-profit supporting people with disabilities; Love, INC., a Christian group offering immediate financial support to people in distress; Catholic Charities, The Jackson Data Network, the Girl Scouts, and, of course, Jackson District Library. The local transit authority even provided free bussing.

The question of what this coalition of social service organizations—federal and local; religious and secular; public and private—had to do with Steinbeck’s novel was on the lips of many. The next morning’s Jackson Citizen Patriot implicitly broached the question in its lede: “Stephanie Eddy hadn’t heard of ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ before this weekend, but knows she will enjoy the book” (Cummings). The piece goes on to link Eddy—who had been out of work since her employer shut down almost a year before—with the poverty many Jackson residents were facing. But the connection appears, at least initially, somewhat forced. Despite the headline that proclaims “Big Read book strikes a chord with residents,” the article focuses mostly on the Services Fair and CAA’s role in the community. The only invocation of reading comes in the inverse: Eddy wasn’t reading—hadn’t even heard of—Steinbeck’s novel.

So what was the connection? The organizers of the fair read Steinbeck’s novel with great attention and drew on two crucial chapters—those chronicling the month the Joads spend in the Weedpatch Camp—to apply the novel’s central philosophy for addressing poverty: collective, grass-roots action supported by the government. This intervention, it might go without saying, would not be obvious to



people who had never read the book—not even necessarily to people who had read it. Yet, as I will show, the approach of the Jackson organizers is clearly grounded in Steinbeck’s text. Their tactical reading makes manifest some of the text’s imagined solutions. It is a mode of reading at once remarkable for its attention to the text and its great distance from the reading practices with which many readers—especially those in the academy—are familiar.

After being burned out of the Hooverville near Bakersfield, the Joads arrive at the government camp with a jolt: “Tom turned in. The whole truck leaped into the air and crashed down again” (285). The jolt is a literal announcement of the camp’s self-protection—the guard explains the speed bump protects children—but also a symbol of the shocking difference between the conditions of life that have prevailed throughout the novel and what exists beyond the speed bump. The Joads “ain’t been treated decent for a long time,” in Tom’s words. With hot water, well-ordered streets, a self-policing public, and grassroots representative democracy the camp is, indeed, decent (288).

The Grapes of Wrath shows with brutal clarity that Californians’ reactions to the migrants ranged from calculated indifference to murder. The camps—according to Farm Securities Administration (FSA) plans from spring 1935—should have provided refuge to the approximately 200,000-person reserve army of labor then wandering through the state looking for work, food, and shelter (Benson 160). This plan proved impracticable, however, as attacks from the Farmers Association successfully stymied attempts by “red” bureaucrats from

Washington to intervene (Benson 160-163). Ultimately only a handful of camps were built as part of a pilot program.

The camps that were built, Steinbeck scholars know, carried the strong impress of one man—Tom Collins, the “Tom, who lived it” in Steinbeck’s dedication to The Grapes of Wrath. Collins’s vision for the camps was remarkable for its coherence and generosity. The camps were not “cold, bureaucratically run” or “bristling with rules” (Benson 163-164). Instead, as Steinbeck wrote in his newspaper coverage of the migrants, “From the first, the intent of the management has been to restore the dignity and decency that had been kicked out of the migrants by their intolerable mode of life”; a dignity he defines as “a register of a man’s responsibility to the community” in another clear evocation of his interest in collectivity (“Harvest” 1006).

Camps operated as grassroots democracies. Each “unit” of the camp elected a “town council” as well as one representative to the “Camp Committee”—a central governing body—and multiple representatives to camp-wide committees dealing with “fire, recreation, children’s playground, children’s welfare, and the governing board of the Women’s Club” (Benson 164-165). Along with producing a structure in which the migrants could self-govern for most needs, the camps also offered more material support beyond the infrastructure of bathrooms, roads, running water, and dances. Managers were tasked with teaching basic sanitation practices—how to wash hands before eating, how to clean dishes afterwards—and other material modes of sustenance. Through the women’s committee, short-term financial support for families to buy groceries could be disbursed; for migrants in

long-term poverty, camp managers would attempt to facilitate application to government agencies for support (Benson 176). Such historical accounts comport closely with the details of Steinbeck's novel—everything from the respectful solicitousness of the manager, Jim Rawley, to the Joad children's confusion with flush toilets, to the disbursement of emergency funds through the women's committee.

These services—and this is why I am going on at length about the FSA camps—were also available at the Jackson Services Fair. In both the fictional camp and the Services Fair, people in need could find health and disability services; they could receive food in the form of a free lunch; they could find an agency, like Love INC, that would offer help with paying overdue bills. Agencies were primed to help with child welfare (Girl Scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters) and guidance in basic skills from paying taxes to maintaining healthy relationships. While the elementary school gym couldn't be turned into even temporary shelter for the homeless, at the Services Fair they could learn about CAA's various programs to find homes for the homeless or to help freeze foreclosure proceedings. (These programs, notably, appear in the narratives of Lambert Lee's "Faces of Poverty," as well.)

In elaborating these specific connections between the text and the fair, I mean to establish a clear sense that the mode of tactical reading on display here is not purely thematic. The Services Fair's organizers did not just note a broad connection (in this case, "poverty" or "the Great Depression") but engaged with a specific aspect of the text: the way government-sponsored groups can help those living in poverty, not only with support, but by creating "decent" spaces for them

to exist, even temporarily. So while Jackson's Services Fair clearly is not Steinbeck's Weedpatch brought to life, it draws its organizational principles from those that animate the fictional camp. Indeed, these principles tie directly to the theme of collectivity so present in the novel and so central to these tactical readings.

It is, then, hardly a surprise that the camp was one of the most commonly evoked topics in my interviews—often mentioned in response to my question about what scenes the reader recalled most clearly. Judy Szink, who I mention above, “wanted to go online and find out all [...] about that wonderful government camp” and here are a few other examples. Notice the emphatic approval:

I liked the social interaction that kind of developed in the camp, the people took on roles that they weren't assigned, but they just kind of emerged out of necessity. (Sayles)

[...] living in the government camp, how well and how respected they were in those camps and how much the government camps living that way really revived their spirits. And how much the people around the area did not want those to succeed. (Claiborne)

An even more emphatic explication of this idea came in an interview with a retired teacher. Recollecting her childhood in rural Ohio, she described the punishing conditions migrant workers lived in: “dirt floors and no running water.” In the 1960s, she noted, “The government actually stepped in and said you can't have substandard housing. It really took government action. That's a little

disheartening. Many things that are right—they don't happen until the government gets in there." Then turning her personal reflection back to the government camp, she noted, "[The Joads] were taken care of" (Volk).

I would suggest that part of why the government camp sticks out in readerly recollections of the novel is that it is Steinbeck's most emphatic example of collectivity. What's more, it is the novel's only stable, institutional version of collectivity. Many readers, then, latched on to the camp as a possible solution to the problem of poverty. Indeed Jon Hart from CAA, who was instrumental in planning the Services Fair, mentioned this scene in discussing the book, as well:

[...] the government camp that's so well-kept, humane. It treats people how you'd want to be treated if you were there. It dispels the idea that poor people are scumbags; it's the system, people are being dehumanized by the system.

The Jackson Services Fair attempts to put these ideals of humane treatment into practice, to provide—on the model of Tom Collins's camps as described in Steinbeck's novel—services to people in poverty without degradation or insult. This mode of reading, then, takes two central chapters from the novel, finds their significance in the display of a workable (if temporary) solution to the problem of poverty, and attempts to reproduce this solution in the present.

Yet the Jackson Services Fair also had limits. Attendance was quite low. Only seventy-six people showed up; two-thirds as many as attended the screening of John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) later that month; one-third of the audience of the Jackson County Poetry Contest—its theme of "Meeting the

Challenges of Hard Times” also inspired by the novel. Perhaps few people attended, as Jessie Murray from CAA told the Citizen Patriot, because it was “difficult for people to seek help at a public event” (Cummings).<sup>xi</sup>

Despite this, the Services Fair stands out as an incredibly powerful model for tactical reading. Like the other tactical readings, it attempts to shape the local lifeworld in terms drawn from Steinbeck’s novel while serving as a space where different lifeworlds interact: those living in poverty, those who work locally with this population, national figures who can help attain governmental support for such efforts. And like other tactical readers, the organizers utilize close attention to Steinbeck’s text and work through a process of communicative action to design a space in which the greatest ambition of the novel can be materially realized; following the example of the Joads, they engage in collaborative work, with the help of (at least partial) government funding, to create a space where people in need can get (most of) their needs met. In this space links between reading and social justice; between books and politics; and between libraries and social service agencies are made manifest. This mode doesn’t just engineer souls to be compassionate or even activist, but marshals local power to help people stop foreclosure, get access to social services, or just get a bite to eat. Souls might get engineered along the way, but in the meantime material needs are being served.

Even if this application is limited both in temporal terms and by low participation, the material benefits delivered show clearly just how powerful it can be. The Services Fair encourages readers to translate their reading experience into action as they read the text or participate in the community events that provide a

deeper understanding of poverty or the Great Depression. It teaches a mode of textual interaction that is far from standard and one that begins a crucial alignment in the minds of readers—an alignment not only of belief, but of practice.

With its praxis-oriented approach to reading the Services Fair kicks off the month of the Big Read and, in tracing various other events over the course of the month, we see these ideas put into practice again and again. As one example, consider the two sermons delivered by Dr. Rev. Cynthia Landrum—the minister of the Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty in Jackson. In one, she reads Steinbeck’s novel as a parable about “the importance and value of anger” as a response to layoffs and bank bailouts, executive salaries and medical debt; as well as a rejection of “absolute capitalism, trickle-down, American-dream”; and a reclamation of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” (“Grapes” 6, 9). The subsequent week, Landrum linked this message to local layoffs (described by industry and closing date) and the skyrocketing unemployment rate, particularly its racial dynamics (in Jackson—as in much of the United States—disproportionately effecting African-Americans). Then she argued that social justice is the foundational belief of her Unitarian Universalist congregation, pushing them to act on their anger.

Along with her sermon—which, like the Services Fair, attempts to link interpretation and action—Landrum encouraged her congregation to share their own interpretations. After church she shifted from minister to book group leader, opening the church’s common room for a more general discussion of the book: “We talked about the economy now. What about Steinbeck is relevant to our

experience. People really got in depth about that. In ways that surprised me. It connected very strongly” (Personal).

And Landrum participated in various conversations with other populations as well—with other community members while planning for the Big Read and in the “commUnity forUm” discussing poverty at the downtown library.<sup>xii</sup> There, Landrum and Jon Hart—who works at CAA, but is also a member of Landrum’s congregation—engaged a different collectivity made up, in part, of congregants, but including diverse members of the Jackson community.

Each of these tactical readings, like the Services Fair, not only produces a social good, but clearly connects with other modes of intervention with diverse populations in the community. What these practices share is a fundamental difference from book clubs: they work in public to produce material social benefits for those in need in the community. But tactical reading is a complex social practice. In concluding I want to situate it in a broader network of practices—including book clubs—that lead not only to immediate material benefits, but to more long-term social transformation. In specifying the alignments between the tactical readings I have just discussed and the more traditional reading practices I discussed above, I mean not only to describe more clearly this complex social process, but to highlight the ways in which these practices draw together groups of people into larger, more inclusive lifeworlds, which represent more potentially hegemonic practices.

#### 4. Articulation and Political Action



The social good achieved by tactical readers with the Grapes of Wrath is remarkable. I can happily claim to have discovered a Habermasian lifeworld not only deeply concerned about the economic situation in the United States in 2009, but one committed to action: the empowerment of those currently living in poverty through a combination of self-directed collective action and governmental support structures. But its scale is small. Much greater are the numbers of readers who produced interpretations that linked the book to contemporary issues, but felt unable (or uncertain of how) to address such issues. As I note above, such ideas were present in nearly all of my interviews, and no doubt percolated into the community through not only general conversations, but through the Big Read's ancillary events, like a film screening or a lecture. As an example, Kate Lambert Lee's "Faces of Poverty" exhibit travelled around Jackson all month. Its presence in the library, in the high school, and elsewhere surely stirred conversations about these issues.<sup>xiii</sup>

I have been arguing here that the material transformations of tactical reading mark the moment at which literature becomes political. And yet, for that political transformation to do more than feed a few people, it must encompass a larger collectivity. To make this argument about how connection happens is important, for even if millions of people developed ideas at odds with hyperrationalized late capitalist culture in the solitude of their living rooms or with a few close friends, the value of these lifeworldings would certainly merit some doubt.

Just as I have, throughout, accepted Nancy Fraser's revision of the "public sphere"—that is, there are multiple spheres, constantly engaged in contestation—I am here suggesting there are multiple lifeworlds, constituting, as Habermas puts it, "a network of communicative actions that branch out through social space and historical time" (BFN 80). As I argued there, for political transformation to occur, connection is essential. How do the diverse arrays of readers (and those who come into contact more casually with these ideas) connect with one another? Tactical reading practices. While simultaneously mobilizing various support systems and resources, they also work as a kind of connective tissue. They bring people together, in ways both obvious and subtle, to form more powerful collectivities.

Rather obviously, they create public spaces where these issues can be discussed. In Jackson, this begins on the first day of the Big Read with the Services Fair—a space typified by open access and its non-hierarchical nature—and this continues throughout the month with film screenings, public lectures, community discussions, and church services. These public spaces are not all the same, of course; the authority of the pulpit, for instance, is very different from the librarian's desk; the "public" nature of transitional housing quite different from a lecture. And I want to be clear: The publicity of these actions does not make them inherently political. But their publicity allows these ideas to reach more (and more diverse) readers than are included in the typical book club (or, to name an even more exclusive space, the classroom).

And these spaces were populated by a diversity of people—not just people of different genders, races, and classes, but people of different ages, occupations,

and, crucially, relations to literature. Knoxville, as I mention above, hosted the Mayor's Book Club—a well-attended lunch-hour discussion (which also aired on local television). The panel, moderated by Knoxville Mayor Mike Ragsdale included other local politicians, members of the Hispanic Chamber of Congress, high school students, and religious leaders. Seeing critical interpretation performed not just by teachers, but by elected representatives, retirees, teenagers—to say nothing of people from different countries of origin or different classes—not only broadens the notion of what the community is, but draws different communities into a shared lifeworld. At this level, then, tactical readings amplify the shared ideas and symbols at the core of these various lifeworlds, but also work to produce communal bonds around these ideas and symbols—they make manifest the ideas expressed in the lifeworld.

While we can see tactical readings opening up social spaces which diverse collectives inhabit, however briefly, it is important to recognize that various tactical readings have presences that manifest outside of these events. Take, for instance, Kate Lambert Lee's photography exhibit, which is constantly visible, constantly available in Jackson, but also made a trip to Washington DC. When the head of Jackson's Community Action Agency testified before Congress in 2009 "she brought these documents to talk about the people in the community" (Hart). Other installations, too, were broadly available to any public: a display in the Blount County Public Library included Depression-era artifacts, encouraging anyone who passed to learn more about the Great Depression, and books, CDs, and DVDs for check-out (Van Sickle Sloan). In the YWCA's transitional housing facility, Angela

Cash, a desk clerk, produced a bulletin board that linked the Joads' migration narrative with another Depression-era experience—one notably absent from Steinbeck's narrative—that of urban, multi-racial poverty (Cash). These tactical readings expand beyond an apparent temporal frame; even if there is not a collective gathering, they speak to a collective.

Tactical readings, then, link hundreds of readers—by putting them in the same room or by engaging them in a practice of shared interpretation, even if only in parallel (but no longer isolated) situations. It is one thing to read a book and interpret it with friends at the same time as others do the same in other places; it's far more collective if members of both groups have some connection—like, say, having attended the Services Fair or heard Landrum's sermons or having seen Lambert Lee's photographs. These communally available texts link the interpretive practices, placing them within the frame of a shared lifeworld.

Tactical reading practices work to bring people together. They create real spaces and institutions for discussion and action. But they also work at an ideological level to shape interpretive frames (suggesting that people should read “politically” and link what they read to the present) and to connect such interpretation and social practice. As such, they link autonomous experiences and establish a basis for community even outside of immediate, material interaction. What's more, the practices I'm describing here militate against isolated interpretation—they work with others to endorse the notion that people need to work with others to solve problems. The power of this reduplicative property should be clear: each aspect of these interpretive frames reinforces the others.

Such practices, I'm suggesting, can bridge the large gap between tactical reading and the more private work of book clubs. As the ideas from the Services Fair show up in other practices—like Landrum's sermons—they also might well appear in book clubs and, in doing so, allow the ideas of the tactical reading to percolate in that more prosaic and private sphere. Indeed, the Unitarian Universalist book club is a prime example. Having heard Landrum's sermons, which encourage action, how could the book club discussion simply simmer in subjective reflection?

That tactical reading works to connect people—philosophically, materially, in both the present and the future—is perhaps just as crucial as its ability to deliver needed services in the present. It is, in both cases, an articulatory practice par excellence. I have already described how it enables broader discussion within the community, shaping both the space and the language to announce political ideas. Articulation, in this sense, has been crucial to my arguments throughout this dissertation. In discussing the use of poems after September 11, Habermasian theory allowed me—at least initially—to display the communicative power of literature when examined in social settings. Yet as I have tunneled deeper into the use of literature for political ends, I have moved increasingly towards emphasizing this etymologically rooted meanings of articulation. And here, tactical readings have helped me discover the way that literature can be used not just to think or to speak politics, but to connect this thinking and speaking with doing to produce political results. Tactical readings link together—“make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions”—lifeworlds and people and, in so doing,

produce a more powerful collectivity (Hall 141). This is the ultimate guarantor of their political potential.

Such a claim may seem indebted to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), where "articulation" plays a central role in the attempt to revise socialist theory for the era of "new social movements." While my descriptions of these tactical readings would seem to comport with Laclau and Mouffe's notions that "democratic struggle emerges within an ensemble of positions [...] formed by a multiplicity of practices," I am skeptical of their theory's broader applications (132). For Laclau and Mouffe identity is the lodestone of transformation: "the constitution of the very identities which will have to confront one another antagonistically, becomes now the first of political problems" (134, emphasis in original). Thus articulation is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" shifting from antagonism to association (105).

The difference between my argument and that of Laclau and Mouffe should be clear. While I agree with them that a classical Marxist class analysis would not yield insights into the constitution of the resistant collectivities I have discussed here, I do not believe that "identity" is the crucial linking factor. Tactical readers did not attempt to reshape identities—be they gendered, racialized, classed, whatever—but to reshape practices. In so doing, they have accounted for the multiplicity of those engaged in parallel work—the women in transitional housing; the upper-middle-class readers whose book clubs meet in fancy restaurants; the Spanish-language reading club; the diverse arrays who participate in film

screenings or community discussions in public libraries—by encouraging not a common identity, but a shared practice: tactical reading. And, importantly, as the diverse array of tactical readers suggest, these are practices that—unlike, say, new critical hermeneutics—are available to readers of all classes, races, genders, and other identitarian parsings.

The articulation I have argued for here, then, is practical. This is a more democratic approach to organizing collectivities in that anyone can participate without identitarian prerequisites. It is also assuredly more in keeping with the philosophical grounding of my argument. For Habermas, Laclau and Mouffe's gestures towards identity would surely be too much a nod to the philosophy of consciousness. I would go farther in this claim and suggest that the definition of articulation I have just argued for is more in keeping with the philosophical grounding claimed by Laclau and Mouffe. With their title (and throughout their work) they claim the mantle of Antonio Gramsci, but the tactical readers I have been describing in this dissertation are far more intimately involved with a Gramscian process of hegemonic formation than attempts to shape identities.<sup>xiv</sup> While it is easy enough to argue that many of these lifeworldings play a role in a kind of war of position, it seems to me more important to emphasize Gramsci's claims about the formation of hegemony not in terms of preordained classes, but in terms of cross-class education. Imagining society as a pedagogical relationship "according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher," Gramsci elaborates how hegemony spreads through

society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship [...]. (350)

Gramsci’s educational metaphor accords much more strikingly with the practices I have described than does Laclau and Mouffe’s focus on identity. The point is not to make everyone the same (even if, as Laclau and Mouffe would argue, that sameness is inherently unfixed and transitory), but to enable people to work across lines of difference (as Gramsci elaborates) to achieve (and here the Habermasian register returns) common goals.<sup>xv</sup>

While I have turned to this passage from Gramsci in the preceding chapters, it rings truest here. In chapter two, education came, in large part, from the books soldiers read; in chapter three, readers used poems to educate others. Here I have described a true process of co-education in which Grapes of Wrath shapes tactical reading practices while simultaneously being problematized, challenged, and refigured by readers. This notion of co-education is crucial: Steinbeck’s book educates readers, but readers also speak back to the book; the tactical readers help others develop new critical skills, but the participants in these tactical practices shape their ultimate outcome. Diverse practices draw support from one another and constantly transform their participants just as they are transformed by their participants.



And the consequence of these practices, too, is specified by Gramsci's ultimate formulation of hegemony. No doubt, this notion of interwoven relationships—"every individual relative to other individuals"—is part of what I have been describing, both in the manifest and the potential consequences of tactical reading. They build the actual community promised by the Big Read by linking "every individual" with others. And these educational relationships are recursive, reduplicative both of a broad philosophy and of particular material networks. Transformations, both philosophical and material, are part of building hegemony, of linking lifeworlds, of creating a powerful collectivity.

So while Habermas and Gramsci may seem strange bedfellows, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a clear expression of the potential—viewed at the level of practical consequences—of Habermasian communicative action. It seems clear that Habermas aligns himself with a Gramscian position overall in his expectations of the potential for transformation as well as in his rejection of a more traditional Marxist class analysis. And, philosophically speaking, a Habermas-Gramsci connection would provide the former a step around the Grand Hotel Abyss of the later Frankfurt School, which is to say it aligns closely with another of Habermas's central ambitions.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is this philosophical legacy that helps us to see just how, in the Habermasian paradigm, communication links to political action. In the practices of tactical readers we can glimpse how—at a practical level—"communication" and "action" intertwine. Through communicative practices of the sort I have here examined in the form of tactical reading—public, anti-hierarchical deployments of

language to particular social ends—a Gramscian hegemony can be developed as the lifeworld is shared by more and more members of a community, enabling an increase in productive communication about how to make things happen, which, in turn, enables more and more happenings and more and more opportunities for communication. These transformations are—it bears repeating—not just philosophical, for the tactical practices are grounded in material intervention.

The tactical readers in Jackson and Knoxville have not gone so far as to produce new hegemonic formations, of course. But their successes in 2009 are clarified in the light of such potential—particularly since I have read them through these Habermasian and Gramscian lenses, both of which anchor their hopes in potential future transformations (though not in teleological presumption of such transformations).<sup>xvii</sup> Based on the evidence here, I am arguing, one can foresee the continuation and development of the lifeworlds shaped by these practices, as well as the networks of allies in Jackson and Knoxville—both institutional and personal. While they may come together around the oasis of Big Read grant support, once the money has dried up and the reports have been filed, the collectivity remains, even if dormant. At an institutional level, this may enable broader conversations about applying not only for next year’s Big Read<sup>xviii</sup>, but for other grants: a literacy grant for the library which might be shared with other local agencies, a public health grant that might benefit from some literary support. In my interviews, I learned of such new and developing relationships at institutional levels (between Knoxville’s county library system and the YWCA), but at a less institutional level, too, connections have been forged. There the collectivity remains powerful. Even

readers who did not speak with one another during the Big Read now share something—at the level of a lifeworld—that should enable (if we follow Habermas) communication and more effective coordination. Not just coordination at an abstract level, but coordination aimed at producing shared political ideas. So perhaps when people come together in another context—a school board or town council meeting, a protest—they may deploy the shared grammar developed in these tactical reading practices.

These hopeful ideas are grounded in the remarkable reading practices of the tactical readers I met in Jackson and Knoxville. Building on their interventions, I have reverse engineered a way to think about how literature does something political. It has three crucial aspects. First, literature is a great articulator. Literature can be used to bring people together—not by making them the same, but by giving them shared language and practices with which they can overcome differences. I have, secondly, refined Habermas's notion of action. Aligned with his broader goals of situating discussions of politics outside of the philosophy of consciousness—that is, emphasizing his redirection of critical theory away from subjectivity—I have maintained his ultimate focus on protecting ways of life threatened by global capitalist domination.<sup>xix</sup> While none of the readers I met in Michigan and Tennessee were particularly concerned with philosophies of consciousness or global capitalist domination (these concerns, at least, didn't come up explicitly in my interviews), they, too, shared Habermas's final concern, particularly with respect to alleviating the suffering of those familiar concrete abstractions so pummeled by the invisible fists of the market that they found

themselves suddenly un- or under-employed, unable to pay their medical bills, unable to live in the places they had made their homes.

These immediate material benefits are the third crucial point. I have privileged the work of tactical readers against the traditional equation of reading as a practice of ideological shaping. Rather than assuming the abstract relations between “book” and “reader” is uni-directional, I have focused on the remarkable power of readers to responsibly refigure the text—particularly a text as complex and timely as Steinbeck’s in 2009. Through generous and sympathetic acts of interpretation, tactical readers used Steinbeck’s novel to their own political ends—ends I could not have imagined before I met them. The tactical readers worked with the novel to improve the conditions of those living in poverty. Their actions, articulated with the more traditional reading practices I found in abundance, show how crucial literature might be to ensuring such support for other marginalized or oppressed groups and, as such, part of a broader process of political transformation.

In my recounting of these practices—the “story” of the tactical readers and my interpretation of it—I hope to have produced a set of blueprints. They describe the construction of these local programs and might be borrowed by other practitioners who, like the tactical readers I have described here, work at the grassroots level in communities. My second audience has been literary critics and I hope these blueprints might suggest a new means of engaging politics from within humanities departments. Rather than debate what intrinsic features make texts political—Realism? Avant-garde experimentalism?—I have hoped to suggest that

texts are used in political ways by many readers who, as my interviews indicated, seldom engage with such questions. Following these readers, I have hoped to focus the discussion on how critics might begin to be part of shaping political change beyond our critical work, our classrooms, and our syllabi. I have argued that for literature to succeed in making political changes, it must find a broad public, but our familiar venues are simply not public enough nor constituted of diverse enough people for the political work to accomplish much.

The increasing prominence of service learning suggests that engagements with a broader public are becoming more enticing to universities. I am here suggesting we build partnerships that go beyond sending our students into the world. We could use the power and prestige of our institutions to launch community reading programs similar to the Big Read; we could become active participants—group leaders, planners, fundraisers—in such projects where they already exist. Articulating institutional prestige with the incredible work already underway could yield immediate results in our communities.

I have written about the tactical readers in Jackson and Knoxville to broadcast their theory of practice, which connects politics, literature, and action in remarkable ways—ways that I hope will be especially provocative for literary scholars. If we could learn from them, the possibilities for broader political transformation would grow exponentially.

Coda  
Teaching Tactics

I began this dissertation by announcing that literature matters. I hope, in the four subsequent chapters, I have specified not only how I make that claim—through the methodological shift to a sociology of the intersubjective relationships among readers, texts, and politics—but on what evidence I make it. I have shown literature in battle zones and in streets, in newspapers and in community centers. In these places, it has been used to think through the experiences of others; to engage large publics on issues of common concern; to organize communities in support of those in need. I have described such uses—sometimes at length—because volume is crucial to this project’s foundational arguments. The multiplicity of these uses—and their multitudinousness—will always be essential in proving (again and again) that literature matters for many people, in ways that shape, encourage, and enact political changes.

But in examining these sites of literary practice in the United States between the Great Depression and the Great Recession, I have avoided the one space “destined to play as crucial a role in the culture of postindustrial capitalism as did the monastery for medieval times”—the classroom (Jameson 393). In this brief coda, I would like to explain why I have avoided the classroom and suggest how the methodological moves I have focused on translate into a pedagogical practice.

I have avoided linking the literature classroom and political action because it is all too easy to think of the teaching of literature as political action. Teachers do

this in classrooms every day. They historicize, helping students discover activism—assigning disappeared texts that lead to new understandings of turn of the century socialism or contemporary battles for gay rights. They interpret, showing students how to detect the way in which a poem, novel, or film (often a canonical one) promotes sexist or racist ideologies or subverts dominative norms. They deconstruct hierarchy, reshaping the classroom around equitable communication and letting their students learn from one another. While all of these modes help students discover valuable skills and knowledges, they do not necessarily lead to political action.

Louis Althusser famously makes this argument, chiding the “heroes” who attempt such interventions as taking up “the few weapons they can find” to “teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped” (106). According to Althusser, these teachers ironically maintain and nourish the system they are powerless to change. Such teachers are little more than foot soldiers in the invisible army of the ideological state apparatus.

I have, in this dissertation, tracked away from the classroom as a political space not, like Althusser, because I think that teaching is inescapably structurally dominative. Rather because the pedagogies I have just outlined, it seems to me, leave students with the idea of the political as a purely analytic tool: they find the politics (whether they’re pro- or regressive) in the text; they study the history of politics; they practice politics by writing papers and discussing issues with classmates. Nowhere in this equation is the idea that those discussions need to go

beyond the classroom to reach broader publics and become actions that would work in manifest—even if small!—ways to make a better world.

This is the point, of course, at which the tactical interventions I have discussed in this dissertation excel. They don't just diagnose or criticize, but enact. Even in the least activist case—the soldiers and their reading of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—readers were building discursive communities that transcended their particular social positions (as soldiers, as men) by reading about and communicating with others very different from themselves. But, as the classroom remains perhaps the most consistent feature in the lives of faculty and students, it makes sense to think about how we might bridge these two projects: how political action beyond the classroom might reinvigorate the classroom with new political practices.

Steps in this direction, I should note, are being made all the time. In increasingly popular “service learning” courses the classroom’s walls fall away and students make connections between the real world and their reading—often around themes of literacy or cultural diversity. Similarly, reports of classes like Kathryn Miles’s “The Literature of Social Protest and Civil Disobedience”—in which her Unity College students’ final project was an act of civil disobedience—are promising (Miles 865). Yet not all courses can be service learning—indeed, not all courses benefit from this component—not all teachers can afford to be as inventive as Miles. After all the majority of instructors today teach without tenure, often in intro level courses (some with pre-set curricula) where inventive course



design—or even the inclusion of unexpected texts—is personally risky if not impossible.

Thus I propose the idea of teaching texts as tactics. A practice in which students learn to articulate past and present (which is to say, make good of the past by enabling new activism) and to articulate interpretation and change (which is to say, help ideas find material forms). To do this, rather than thinking of our teaching as a tactical political intervention—via interpreting, historicizing, dehierarchizing—we teach students about how others have used texts tactically. This will involve both historicizing a text beyond its initial publication and, more importantly, situating students' potential use in the historical present. This tactical approach, I argue, equips our students with the tools not only to read and think about texts and politics, but to become tactical readers themselves.

Let me give, then, one example of an activity scaled to a more traditional, canonically focused literature classroom. This project works not only to teach students (and remind teachers) that literature matters, but pushes students and teachers to find, from within the classroom, a definition of the political beyond its walls.

In my American Literature survey courses, I use Langston Hughes as a lodestone and guidestar for the twentieth century. We read his work from the teens through the 1940s. I like students to trace the growth of one author in a course dedicated to coverage and students (though they're often miffed at having to buy the weighty Collected Poems) find tracing Hughes's developments rewarding.

When we get to the 1930s, students who know Hughes as a “blues poet” are often shocked by both the formal and political changes in his radical decade. From “Merry Christmas” (1929) to “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (1931), Hughes attacks capitalism, classism, sexism, nationalism, and racism in poems that showcase remarkable formal innovation.

Of Hughes’s 1930s work, I focus on the tactical use of one poem: “Let America Be America Again” (1938). I begin the session by guiding students through a number of poems, from the formally rebellious like “Wait” (1933) to the more formally traditional (but overtly radical) “One more ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” (1934). We discuss these poems, working through analyses while I offer bibliographic and historical context (where the poems were first published; where Hughes wrote them; formal alterations for inclusion in the Collected). Taking time on these texts not only provides coverage, but allows us to contextualize the particularity of “Let America Be America Again.”

First we discuss “Let America” like the other poems—examining its use of rhyme, polyvocality, its attack on the American dream phrased in patriotic terms. Then I note that while most of the poems from the 1930s were published just once in Hughes’s lifetime (usually in a leftist periodical), “Let America” had a remarkably varied career. I ask students to imagine why that might be the case: Its formal accessibility? Its varied conversations with the American cultural tradition from “America the Beautiful” (1895) to “This Land is Your Land” (1940)? Its not-explicitly-African American voice—indeed, its evocation of a multiplicity of voices and races?

These questions prime students to think of the poem as a particular social, rhetorical formation, but also to see it in the broader sweep of American poetry. Yet students' responses maintain—true to their literary training—the poem as a document of the 1930s. They evoke the depression and Jim Crow laws, as well as the inherent conflicts with the internationalism voiced in the other poems.

I encourage them to keep these thoughts in mind as I break them into groups, each of which receives a copy of one of the different iterations of Hughes's poem. These are the versions I use:

- The poem's original publication (only the first 50 lines) in Esquire (1936)
- Its appearance in the International Workers Order (IWO) pamphlet A New Song (1938) at full length
- Its absence from Selected Poems (1956)
- The small Let America Be America Again (2004) "chapbook" version published by John Kerry's presidential campaign with an introduction by the candidate
- A post from the AFL-CIO blog from February 2008, linking the poem to Black History Month and—of course—the democratic primary battle between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama

I ask the groups to read their version of the poem and prepare to tell us about its differences from the source text in the Collected Poems—with emphasis (since the variations are minor, except in the case of Esquire) on its material and historical contexts.

Walking around as the groups pick apart their texts, I see how intrigued they are. They enjoy, among other things, the historical mystery of how this poem from the 1930s has maintained relevance. Sometimes the Selected Poems group will be flummoxed. But with a little prodding and the suggestion that they see what other poems from the 1930s Hughes included in that collection, they quickly begin to connect the suppression of the radical 1930s Hughes with the cultural moment of the book's publication.

After fifteen minutes, students are ready to share. Readers from the 1930s note the nature of the publication—union pamphlet versus national magazine; shorter versus longer versions. The 1950s readers showcase their acumen in discussing a publication that is not a publication at all. The richest responses seem to come from the groups discussing the contemporary uses. Both times I have done this activity, the whole classroom has become involved in a discussion of the identity politics implicit in John Kerry's choice of the poem—and the contrast between Hughes's verbal grace and rhetorical force and Kerry's speeches. I don't mean to say the class consensated that Kerry's use of the text was opportunistic or in bad faith; rather, the students found it easy to see why Kerry would adopt the poem—and why his quotations from it in speeches were often selective, stripping the poem of its leftward tilt. The contemporary context—one that was at least somewhat familiar to them—seemed to embolden the students. They are, naturally, more familiar with the cultural situation of the 2000s than the 1930s or 1950s. This, too, is important to remember when we think about teaching older

texts. While we can encourage dialectical thinking, such thought often requires a depth of knowledge to be fully productive.

During these discussions I create a timeline on the board. And, once we hear from each group, I turn the class back to their initial reflections on the poem as a “1930s poem.” Many realize, powerfully, that the poem belongs as much to today as to the 1930s—indeed, it seems quite possible that more people have encountered it in the 2000s than did in the 1930s—and that its call to “redeem / The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers. [...] And make America again!” is as relevant now as ever (191).

As the class wraps up, I explain that we have just examined the “tactical” uses of Hughes’s poems—and that such an examination of texts by Hughes or nearly any other writer we’ve studied might well prove fruitful in final papers or elsewhere. I leave them with the question of how they might use Hughes’s poems in their lives: to help friends see things in new ways, as fodder for campus newspapers, websites, blogs, or social networking sites.

There is—as at the end of most classes—so much more to do. Students could be asked to choose among the tactical interventions and describe which succeeds and why or they could be asked to pick another text and suggest who might use it today and how. Or students could be challenged to select another poem and “publish” it somewhere—whether by making copies and posting around campus (or, better, around town), on a Facebook group, or anywhere else they can imagine. This seems like a small gesture, but it carries remarkable potential—not only is the emancipatory potential of the act significant, but it encourages students

to think of ways to link their coursework to political action while building patterns of such activism.

What I'm suggesting, of course, could expand beyond Langston Hughes. One could just as easily draw on a history of "tactical" use in teaching Betty Smith, Amiri Baraka, or John Steinbeck—The Grapes of Wrath or "The Leader of the People" (1936)—to say nothing of Ayn Rand or V.S. Naipaul. But such a "tactical" activity, while it teaches students familiar literary-critical skills and shows them how literature exists in the world, has two further important consequences: it prepares students to not just to be political but to be politically active and it reminds teachers of the limits of the classroom.

Encouraging our students to study and enact tactical readings helps them to consider how the act of interpretation can be joined with political action. They are not just reading the politics, but thinking about how the text's politics might speak to current audiences; how a poem might be used—to take the example of the AFL-CIO blog post—to motivate its readers to vote, even if the poem itself had nothing to do with elections, was written 80 or 800 years ago. In short, it draws a clear equation between political interpretation and political action.

Teaching students the tactical use of texts points to a problematic philosophical underpinning for the familiar endeavor of teaching students "about" politics. The goal is not to indoctrinate students into a particular politics, but to show them just how powerfully effective the fundamentals of political practice can be. As Lukács argues in "What is Orthodox Marxism?" (1919), Marxism refers not to a set of established ideas, but "exclusively to method"; since "all social

phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other” we must understand any approach to reality “as a social process” (1, 13). To intervene politically, whether one is an orthodox Marxist or not, we must define a method—not a presumptive outcome. The aim of tactical teaching is not to produce a stable sense of what politics is, a political consciousness—or even a political unconscious—but a notion of how to put political ideas into practice with literature. If we don’t teach students how to move from interpretation to change, our practice of politics is hardly a practice at all.

What we teach in literature courses is important. And we should continue to draw from repressed-and-recovered texts to reconstruct our canons; after all, without such work, I wouldn’t be able to use Langston Hughes’s poems of the 1930 as an example here. But I hope to have shown that how we teach texts matters more. Indeed, this is a parallel position to my theoretical argument throughout this dissertation: it’s not what we read, but how. Political interpretation requires—particularly at the level of classroom discussion—little commitment. And while oaths of commitment are not something we can or should demand of students, what we can demand of ourselves—as teachers committed to political transformation that stretches beyond the classroom and the campus—is a sense that we have not just taught students about politics, but empowered them in the practice of politics.

As I noted in my introduction, scholars and critics have much to learn from the tactical interventions of non-academic readers. If we can learn from their examples, pessimism like Althusser’s is unnecessary. By enlarging our vision of

how literature matters to include how it matters to the diverse tactical readers outside of academia, we can not only better understand the practices of literature today, but better understand how to teach our students to build the world we collectively hope to live in.



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## Notes

### Prelude

<sup>i</sup> See Chapter One, note xxi, but also consider, as one recent example, Lynne Greenberg's memoir The Broken Body (2009), which concludes with a list of poems that Greenberg read during a major traumatic period of her life.

<sup>ii</sup> I emphasize "material, accessible" politics in contrast to recent theoretical work that, as Timothy Brennan has argued, "declares itself as immediately political" as if "theory is itself the practical world, the place where 'possibility' presents itself in the form of previously unthought thoughts, new constellations of meanings, percipient exercises of insight" ("Running" 280).

<sup>iii</sup> I focus here on Gramsci's use of hegemony in "The Intellectuals" where he equates hegemony with the exercise of power "throughout society" as opposed to the "'direct domination' or command exercised through the State" (12).

<sup>iv</sup> I am thinking of objections, like those of Walter Benn Michaels and others, to the political consequences of arguing that texts can have infinite meanings. I may be claiming "that the meaning of a text [...] is the experience we have of it"—which Benn Michaels would forcefully reject—but I am situating that meaning in particular sociohistorical contexts wherein disagreement and discussion over precisely this meaning leads to political transformations (Michaels 117)

<sup>v</sup> I am thinking here of the line that runs from Georg Lukács through Leo Lowenthal's later work to Pierre Bourdieu, wherein texts are studied as sociological for the ways they reflect the social. Thus, Lukács can read the decline of humanity through the degradation of the epic form and Bourdieu can claim that Flaubert's Sentimental Education "supplies all the tools necessary for its own sociological analysis" (Rules 3). In its interest in how texts reflect society, this field (in John Frow's phrase) "seeks to posit a sociality and a historicity which are internal to textual practices" ("Midlevel" 243).

<sup>vi</sup> Fortuitously this is a moment in which the sociology of literature seems to be blossoming again. See, for instance, the recent issue of New Literary History dedicated entirely to the "new" sociology of literature.

<sup>vii</sup> While Rose is generally correct on this point, in 1985 Tony Bennett noted that "the proper object for Marxist literary theory consists not in the study of texts, but in the study of reading formations" and the year before that Janice Radway published her groundbreaking Reading the Romance (1984) (7).

<sup>viii</sup> An important (and under-read) antecedent was Michèle and Armand Mattelart's The Carnival of Images (1990), which reads with nuance the transnational economy for telenovelas.

<sup>ix</sup> I am most influenced by reading historians who display sympathetic interest in non-literary readers, as in Augsts's dry goods clerks reading Emerson and Rose's

Labour MPs and their love of Dickens and Ruskin. See Augst “Emerson in the Lecture Hall,” in The Clerk’s Tale and Rose “Chapter 1,” of The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes.

<sup>x</sup> This is where I differ, too, from Bruno Latour whose Actor-Network Theory comes close enough to my ideas (though I, alas, encountered it near the end of this project) to provide a great challenge to my thinking. Ultimately, I cannot join Latour in his micro-‘slowsciology’ for doing so would, I believe, sacrifice the politics I claim is central to the work I describe. For Latour “to study is always to do politics in the sense that it collects or composes what the common world is made of” (256). True, in its way, but this is a very quiet, comfortable politics—and one that focuses on the politics of the scholar, rather than the politics of others whose actions are of crucial importance, like the readers I discuss here.

<sup>xi</sup> I am paraphrasing Raymond Williams here (who is, himself, paraphrasing Lenin): “The art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families. [...] It is not a question of relating the art to the society, but of studying all the activities and their interrelations, without any concession of priority to any one of them we may choose to abstract” (Long 61-62). Here, on the same line, is Lenin in “Once Again On The Trade Unions” (1921): “Dialectical logic demands that we should go further. Firstly, if we are to have a true knowledge of an object we must look at and examine all its facets, its connections and ‘mediacies’.”

<sup>xii</sup> While perhaps the most abstract of these thinkers, Habermas has been engaged in shaping public ideas, whether speaking with political leaders in Germany and Iran or keeping up a steady stream of op-eds and short essays on crucial topics from the politics of inclusion to human cloning.

## Chapter 1

<sup>i</sup> Martin Jay suggests that ideology critique is the central strain of Frankfurt School aesthetics and quotes Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that the “workers of the Institut für Sozialforschung converge in a critique of bourgeois consciousness” (Dialectical xvii, 292).

<sup>ii</sup> See David Ingram, Habermas: Introduction and Analysis (2010) as well as the unfortunately similarly-titled: William Outhwaite, Habermas: A Critical Introduction (2009) and Uwe Steinhoff, The Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas: A Critical Introduction (2009). The biography is Matthew Specter’s Habermas: An Intellectual Biography (2010).

<sup>iii</sup> Not all of these analyses are sympathetic of course. Colclasure and Anderson are, as well as Allen, though in more a moderate way. Others, Lasse Thomassen for instance, seek to reconcile Habermas with deconstruction; Shabani attempts to reconcile him with Foucault and Derrida. Habermas’s work has also begun to influence fields far beyond his own capacious reach; see, for instance, Habermas, Critical Theory, and Education (2009).

<sup>iv</sup> Though Benhabib also notes a few losses—in particular the shift into transcendental modes of theorizing—she sees the overall value of communicative

reason in its “emphasis on human plurality; the narrative and interpretive structures of action; the utopian hopes of a communicative access to need interpretations, and the vision of a community of justice that fosters a community of solidarity” (346).

<sup>v</sup> Even Habermas has noted that his comments on “aesthetic modernity” have “a secondary character” in his broader theory (“Questions” 410).

<sup>vi</sup> Particularly of note, see his writing on Derrida (especially, PDM 161-210); on multiculturalism, see the essays that make up The Inclusion of the Other (2002).

<sup>vii</sup> See, for instance, Philosophy in a Time of Terror (2003), the parallel post-September 11 dialogues in which the two philosophers come close to a number of agreements. Many thinkers, including Lasse Thomassen and Payrow Shabani, have taken up the work of more intimately linking their philosophies. For instance, Shabani (who is more sympathetic to Habermas) states one of the potentials of such cross-pollination: Derrida can help to “recover the critical impulse of Habermas’s theory” (12).

<sup>viii</sup> Jeffrey Alexander: Habermas’s “definition of this lifeworld is distressingly vague” (59); Jean-Jacques LeCercle suggests (wrongly) that Habermas assumes lifeworlds to be stable and unchanging (Marxist 54ff). It seems worth pointing out that Habermas begins to develop this term prior to the arrival of the Thatcher-Reagan global neoliberal regime. Perhaps lifeworlds seemed more tenable prior to this global transformation? Still, Habermas problematically clings to antiquated versions these ideas today, as he emphatically defends the shared cultural patrimony of Europe in Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe (2005).

<sup>ix</sup> Habermas, in his single elaborate example in the 800-plus pages of The Theory of Communicative Action acknowledges this problem. He imagines the way various complexities including age and being “from another region” impact the normative constraints on conversation (2.122).

<sup>x</sup> This sounds, I realize, like a particularly Gramscian definition of hegemony and, indeed, Gramsci—particularly on “State and Civil Society” and “Education”—is something of an unacknowledged interlocutor for Habermas, particularly in Between Facts and Norms.

<sup>xi</sup> One thorough history is Fred Sterbeigh’s Equal: Women Reshape American Law (2009), which discusses the legal roots of the creation of domestic violence law and the work of passing the “Violence Against Women Act” (1994).

<sup>xii</sup> In these skirmishes, Habermas argued that Derrida’s privileging of “rhetoric” had deleterious consequences, both political and philosophical. That this moment marks Habermas’s definitive shift from claiming some redemptive potential for art to seeing it as fundamentally different from other forms of communication in its lack of social power is noteworthy.

<sup>xiii</sup> This debt to Lukács is particularly noteworthy given that Habermas, in the subsequent section, traces Horkheimer and Adorno’s debt to Weber’s rationalization thesis and finds a commonality with Lukácsian reification, namely that all are indebted to (and play a role in) “the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness” (TCA 1.386). Lukácsian reification he argues

describes “that peculiar compulsion to assimilate interhuman relations (and subjectivity) to the world of things” (TCA 1.379) and Horkheimer and Adorno, “radicalize Lukács’ theory of reification in socio-psychological terms” as the “reification of consciousness” (TCA 1.372, 1.379). Thus, by Habermas’s reading, these strands of western Marxism are bounded by their recourse to subjectivity—a paradigm exhausted, he argues, because it cannot generate a meaningful rationality (viz. Adorno after Dialectic of Enlightenment) or because of its historical consequences (viz. class consciousness under Stalin).

<sup>xiv</sup> On Habermas as an alternative to—but actually an echo of—the Frankfurt School, see “Complexity and Democracy: The Seductions of Systems Theory” in Thomas McCarthy’s Ideals and Illusions (1991).

<sup>xv</sup> Not incidentally, this corporatization of art has become increasingly prominent since 1981, with the consolidation of publishing houses into corporate behemoths and the shift of the sponsorships of major visual art exhibits from private donors to corporate branding opportunities, as the “Arts and Culture” grants from Altria—Phillip Morris, Kraft, Nabisco, and Miller, to name some of its constituent brands—that underwrite major museums around the United States.

<sup>xvi</sup> Adorno, of course, held fast to the formal innovations of high modernism, “whose very essence lies in defying the power of social organization”; Marcuse comes close to Adorno’s general position, but remains more ecumenical about the forms of such autonomy (“Lyric” 213).

<sup>xvii</sup> In What is Literature? (1947), Sartre conceives of a model of politicized literature in which the “reader [...] progresses in security. However far he may go, the author has gone farther” (48). True enough; the novelist has “gone farther” insofar as she has to finish writing the novel before the reader can pick it up. Sartre sees this as a practice of “freedom,” but expresses this most precisely in the simple sentence: “In short, reading is directed creation” (39). The text not only leads the reader—with the hints of passivity wrapped up in that phrase—but it actually directs her, making the reader not just a passive follower, but one submitting to a regime of ideological expectation.

<sup>xviii</sup> Adorno uses “the spell” frequently in his late work on aesthetics. Kafka, he notes, “wisely refrains from naming, and thereby breaking, that spell. This spell in its tenacious omnipresence defines the space of Kafka’s work” (“Autonomy” 248). Later in Aesthetic Theory, Adorno suggests more directly that the spell of autonomous art “confronts reality” (252); in “Commitment,” Adorno argues Beckett’s characters are “what human beings have become. [...] The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them” (86). In the horrific absence of meaning reflected in Beckett’s work, we are made to recognize the horrific absence of meaning in contemporary life. The “spell,” then, is a key metaphor for what the “true” work of art does according to Adorno: “the spell cast by any true work of art, the halo of its uniqueness, its inherent claim to represent something absolute” (“Theses” 296).

<sup>xix</sup> Michaels: A text “can’t mean what the readers make it mean because different readers giving texts different meanings do not disagree. Perhaps, then, we want to

say that the meaning of texts really aren't the sort of things it makes sense to disagree about" (117).

<sup>xx</sup> Pieter Duvenage cites a long list of critics who have noted the paradox that "despite Habermas's emphasis on intersubjectivity, he restricts the validity of art and aesthetic judgments to the subjective sphere of the author or creator" (97).

<sup>xxi</sup> See, for instance, The Book That Changed My Life (2006) or the many op-eds and blogs with similar titles, e.g. "The Book The Changed My Life," a blog run by the Scottish Book Trust (<http://thebookthatchangedmylife.blogspot.com>); "The seven books that changed my life" by Thomas Gebremedhin in The Chronicle, Duke University's student newspaper (25 March 2010).

<sup>xxii</sup> Whether this means Habermas would assign texts to (in Austin's terms) a more perlocutionary mode of interaction is a complex question. In some ways, Habermas's thinking about literature as "dramaturgical action" would seem to align with perlocutionary language. As he puts it: "A speaker can pursue perlocutionary aims only when he deceives his partner concerning the fact that he is acting strategically" (TCA 2.294). But given Habermas's general move away from the argument about dramaturgical action, I don't think such evidence speaks to his whole theory.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This distinction is not Habermas's alone. Austin, too, marks off "serious" language from other types. In the first lecture of How To Do Things With Words, he notes that for words to do things they "must be spoken 'seriously'... I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem" (9). Rather ironically, a few sentences later he goes on to prove the point with a quote from Hippolytus that illustrates deception. So, if I understand Austin correctly, poems (like plays) do not say things that should be taken seriously; but they do say things serious enough to be quoted as evidence of a particular philosophical position!

<sup>xxiv</sup> Notably in this defense Habermas focuses less on literature, for the necessity of bridging "is more obvious in the cases of music and the plastic arts than in that of literary works, which are already formulated in the medium of language, even if it is a poetic, self-referential language" (PDM 208).

<sup>xxv</sup> Elsewhere Habermas has noted the dubious value of elevating critics in such fashion, suggesting it begs the problems of elite cultures of knowledge. Citing the danger of such an outcome, Habermas put it well in Theory and Practice (1963). The danger is "the splitting of human beings into two classes—the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions" (282). See also a longer assessment in Legitimation Crisis (1975).

<sup>xxvi</sup> I draw the term "radial reading" from Jerome McGann's The Textual Condition (1993): "'the activity of reading regularly transcends its own ocular physical bases" as "illustrated by a person who rises from reading a book in order to look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary or to check some historical or geographical reference" (116).

<sup>xxvii</sup> See, for example: "communicative utterances are always embedded in various world relations at the same time"; "the literal meaning of a sentence cannot be explained at all independently of the standard conditions of its communicative

employment”; “the literal meaning of an expression must be completed by the background of an implicit knowledge that participants normally regard as trivial and obvious” (TCA 2.120, 1.297, 1.336).

<sup>xxviii</sup> This is not to argue that literature is the sole means for speaking to people who are different, but to suggest that literature has been a crucial tool for the understanding of difference and can be—as I will argue in each of the subsequent chapters—a means for building diverse coalitions. In making this argument, I join not only Iris Marion Young, but theorists like Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib who have worked to elaborate Habermas’s theory of communicative action for a world in which working across and within linguistic and cultural difference is essential to the democratic project.

<sup>xxix</sup> This argument follows the inflection of Gramsci’s “The Intellectuals,” though perhaps substituting the role of the critic for that of the intellectuals. Thus, all readers are critics, but not all have in society the function of critics (9ff).

<sup>xxx</sup> Years before Young’s work was published, Thomas McCarthy offered a similar critique of Habermas, though without Young’s important detailed elaborations: “Habermas’s conception of practical discourse is too restrictive to serve as a model, even as an ideal model, of rational will formation and collective decision making in the democratic public sphere” (198). More recently, Axel Honneth, in “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: Situating Critical Theory Today,” has argued that respect—in particular, the way disrespect serves to “damage and distort [...] the social relations of recognition”—offers a more stable foundation for a critical theory than Habermas’s focus on language. Honneth’s essay is less helpful than Young’s work, however, for it does not recognize the aspects of “recognition” built into Habermasian communication.

<sup>xxxi</sup> See, for example, Charles Cunningham “Rethinking the Politics of The Grapes of Wrath,” Cultural Logic (2002).

## Chapter Two

<sup>i</sup> And, as John Hench has shown in great detail, how it could benefit an industry that felt under siege by radio and the impending television revolution.

<sup>ii</sup> Propagandizing may have been a concern, but the initial hurdle for the council was convincing its members that the program would not hurt their bottom lines. Publishers needed to know they would be protected. The books, the council insisted, would not be available to civilians, would degrade beyond usability before the end of the war—and if not, they would be destroyed (Johnson). This resistance suggests circumstantially that the idea for the Armed Services Editions comes from the Army to the council—and not vice versa.

<sup>iii</sup> Total expenditure—and here I’m calculating only through the “first stage” or the HH edition—is not included in any of the remaining Armed Services Editions records. Thus I am calculating from the program’s numbers, suggesting that each copy cost \$.05.9 cents to produce (Brucolli 26).

<sup>iv</sup> The book in question hardly appears so controversial: Joseph Wood Krutch’s biography Samuel Johnson (1946).

<sup>v</sup> Stern, in a letter to Ray Trautman in October 1944, notes that a book that has been approved includes “a pro-Japanese attitude throughout which the Army may not care to sponsor in wartime.” The book was never published. Such conscientious self-censorship did not stop congress from objecting. The passage of the Soldiers Vote Act (1944), which expressly prohibited distribution to the troops of “Political argument or political propaganda of any kind designed or calculated to affect the result of any election,” seems to have been inspired in part by the publication of Louis Adamic’s The Native’s Return (1934), which was falsely accused of containing explicitly pro-Communist sentiment (Council). Yet this flap died down quickly; the act was repealed and that book—and other potentially “political” books—remained among the council books.

<sup>vi</sup> In more than one letter Stern plays the Army and Navy off one another and sometimes gets more books accepted. For example, in March of 1944, the Army had approved The Great Gatsby and War Poems of the United States, but the Navy had rejected them. Would the conflict change Du Bois’s mind, Stern asked (Stern). Gatsby was published, War Poems was not.

<sup>vii</sup> Jamieson’s perspective is complex—thorough and knowledgeable, but also tendentious. While he published the only book explicitly about the program as a civilian and a professor, he also helped administer the program as an officer during the war.

<sup>viii</sup> This interest in providing many readers with different books—and books they might (not know they) like—marks the Armed Services Editions as quite distinct from both contemporary mass-reading programs like the Book of the Month Club or modern programs like the Big Read or Oprah’s Book Club. Not only does each focus on many people reading a single title, but they all explicitly predicate themselves on shaping a certain kind of reader, a certain kind of readership. See, for instance, Janice Radway A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire (1999) and Jim Collins Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture (2010).

<sup>ix</sup> By mid-1944, the sets increased to 40 titles, where they would stay until the end of hostilities.

<sup>x</sup> The number of literary texts in the “A” set (7) is the same as that of the “N” and the “Z,” for instance. But on average, literature accounts for something more than four books—somewhere around 15%—of each set. These numbers are based on analysis of the complete list of Armed Services Editions published in Books in Action: The Armed Services Editions (1984).

<sup>xi</sup> This lack—a rather remarkable feat, given both a contemporary African-American best-seller (Native Son in 1941) and African-American winner of the Pulitzer Prize (Gwendolyn Brooks in 1945)—is not as cut and dry as it seems. A few texts challenged the status quo on race. Erskine Caldwell’s God’s Little Acre (1933), for instance involves an interrogation of racist southern culture. The program published two books by Howard Fast—who had not yet become an enemy of the state—including Freedom Road (1943), his narrative of the rise of an illiterate freedman to the U.S. Senate. Another surprising choice was the

controversial Strange Fruit (1943), by Lillian Smith. The book chronicles an interracial romance in the south and culminates with a lynching and was banned in Boston for indecency—a fact that more than one curious soldier notes in letters to the council. According to W.E.B. Du Bois Strange Fruit should have been “required reading in every deanery, every parsonage—and every Legislature on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line.”

<sup>xii</sup> While the council figured they might get five or six reads from a book, Ray L. Trautman was more pessimistic: “A man reads a book to death very quickly while standing in the rain or snow without any shelter” (“Proceedings”).

<sup>xiii</sup> Jamieson—writing while still in the Special Services Division—noted “the highbrow character of some of the Armed Services Editions selections. The Education of Henry Adams was far and away, I think, the least suitable of all. In the Army office which bought the books, we all groaned when that one was selected” (“Letter to James Humphrey III”).

<sup>xiv</sup> In the council’s archive, the carbons of their responses to soldiers remain attached to copies of the original letters.

<sup>xv</sup> The military also attended to what soldiers were reading, though in a more administrative fashion than the council: They surveyed field librarians. A mid-1944 assessment of soldiers’ reading found general approval of the program, with particular interest in Tortilla Flat, Typee, Grapes of Wrath, and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (“First Field Survey”). Such research is also part of the way that the public sphere wielded influence on the selection processes.

<sup>xvi</sup> A practice which continues today. See, for instance, Jeff Sharet’s “Jesus Killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military” In Harper’s (May 2009).

<sup>xvii</sup> The council published six Marquand novels, including the Pulitzer Prize winning The Late George Apley (1937) and a reprint of Wickford Point (1939) as well as one selection of Mann’s stories.

<sup>xviii</sup> There were other letters, one quite the opposite of Wharton’s, encouraging more religious publications. Warrant Officer Charles L. Diener, writes: “While a wide variety of work is covered, I find few, if any, dealing with spiritual themes. Have they been neglected or is it just that I haven’t found them yet?” He goes on to suggest Pearl Buck’s The Exile (1936) and The Song of Bernadette (1942) among others.

<sup>xix</sup> The program did include a surprising number of texts by authors from outside of U.S. borders. Along with many British authors and Tolstoy, whom I have mentioned, the list includes Danish Isak Dinesen, Norwegian Sigrid Undset, and Polish Zofia Kossak, as well as a few representatives of French literature (Voltaire, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Maupassant), and Greek classics (Homer and Plato). The collection even included a pair of Germans—Thomas Mann and Erich Maria Remarque—both well-known anti-fascist exiles.

<sup>xx</sup> As Habermas puts it: “Democratically constituted opinion- and will-formation depends on the supply of informal public opinions that, ideally, develop in structures of an unsubverted political public sphere” (BFN 308).



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<sup>xxi</sup> “Inclusion” has remained a key word for Habermas, as he titles his late collection of essays The Inclusion of the Other (1998).

<sup>xxii</sup> John Guillory has put this pithily: “What is excluded from the syllabus is not excluded in the same way that an individual is excluded or marginalized as a member of a social minority” (33).

<sup>xxiii</sup> This focus on particularly women’s work shows the influence of the women writers of the 1930s. Smith shares much with Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur—in particular, the brutal depiction of the intersectionality of gender and class. Katie Nolan is an exemplary citizen—caretaker of children, ethical figure, chief breadwinner—but still lacks fundamental rights of citizenship.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Perhaps, as Foley notes of the “proletarian bildungsroman,” the novel suffers from “the ideological presuppositions embedded in the genre of the bildungsroman,” for—despite its depiction of the brutal conditions of poverty and its critique of the American Dream—it ends on a note of uplift (343).

<sup>xxv</sup> “The Tree” is full of characters with great expectations—Francie to be a writer; Johnny to make enough money to support his family—which are often stalled, blocked, or smashed. It is not at all surprising that Clifton does not cite a specific textual moment from which he draws this conclusion; its effect seems to be total rather than the product of specific interpretation.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ebey would likely have been quite angry with the radio play “From Hell to Brooklyn” that appears in draft form in the council’s archives. Drawing heavily on Ebey’s letter, the play works to dramatize not only his heroism, but the value of the council books. Perhaps in deference to Ebey, no record of it being performed exists.

<sup>xxvii</sup> While women were active in the military during the war, their participation was often denigrated. Marilyn Hegarty, for instance, has recently documented the presumptions among male Navy cadres that the women enrolled in the Women’s Army Corps were prostitutes made available for men’s pleasure. See Marilyn E. Hegarty, Victory Girls, Kahki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II (2008).

<sup>xxviii</sup> As Butler famously puts it, if “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time” and “instituted through the stylized repetition of acts,” these soldiers—through their reading practices—are constructing a complicated self-representation of their gender (179). Yet to conceive of these letters—though no doubt performative—as large-scale social performance seems an overstatement.

<sup>xxix</sup> The process of feminist standpoint impacting male soldiers might be seen as analogous to Hartsock’s later acknowledgement of standpoint theory as particularly useful for coalition building. She argues “that white feminists should learn the possibilities of solidarity from U.S. feminists of color and postcolonial subjects” (“Reconsidered” 241).

<sup>xxx</sup> Of the poems included—not just those by women—one might think of Michael Davidson’s arguments that the masculinity of a man reading any poetry in the mid-twentieth century was marked as somewhat dubious. See Davidson’s Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics (2004), especially 1-27.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The claim that soldiers form a kind of ideal citizen, framed in general terms by Benedict Anderson, is particularly exigent in the context of World War II in the United States, where these soldiers have come to represent the “greatest generation” in our cultural imaginary. See, for instance Kenneth D. Rose’s Myth and the Greatest Generation: a Social History of Americans in World (2008).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Speaking at the council’s annual meeting in 1945, Ray Trautman narrated such an instance: “I picked up a Council book in the operating room of a hospital in Belgium on Christmas Day—I don’t remember the title—but on about page 35 there was a thumb smudge in blood which was repeated two-thirds through the book, where it suddenly ended” (“Minutes”).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The military, as part of its arrangement with publishers, worked hard to keep the books out of public circulation after the war. While from a program so large, there are of course loose ends, surprisingly few council books have trickled into used book markets and libraries (Brucolli 23-28).

### Chapter Three

<sup>i</sup> See, for instance, Tram Nguyen, We Are All Suspects Now: Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11 (2005); Michael Welch, Scapegoats of September 11: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror (2006); and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights’ exhaustive report: “Wrong Then, Wrong Now: Racial Profiling Before & After September 11, 2001” (2002). For more stories, look at Sam Howe Verhovek, “Americans Give in to Race Profiling,” The New York Times, 23 Sept. 2001, and Robin Toner, “Civil Liberty vs. Security: Finding a Wartime Balance,” The New York Times, 18 Nov. 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Trebay: “Poetry suddenly appeared all over”; D. Smith: “improvised memorials often conceived around poems sprang up all over the city, in store windows, at bus stops, in Washington Square Park, Brooklyn Heights and elsewhere”; Billy Collins said he was “inundated with poems from friends” (qtd. in D. Smith); Eric McHenry notes, “Tragedy sends people to poetry”; Sven Birkerts puts it more poetically: “a poem that’s been everywhere in the air these days”; S. Smith: “Auden, Blake, Dickinson the musty musings of the great ones glow bright from poetry Web sites and list serves trafficked the past month by users clicking for comfort.”

<sup>iii</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, whose work shapes much reception thinking, gives countless examples of the ways in which ordinary readers lacking “specific competence” apply “perceptual schemes of their own ethos,” as when working class viewers examine an “artistic” photograph of an old woman’s hand and respond “The old girl must’ve worked hard” rather than noting the tasteful use of color or the symbolic import of the image (44).

<sup>iv</sup> Auden, before repudiating the entire poem later in life, would change the last line to “We must love one another and die”—a slightly less comforting thought (803, my emphasis). While the poem has a fascinating textual history, none of this extra-textual history is inscribed in the poem’s post-September 11 republications (Mendelson 74-79).

<sup>v</sup> These poems—particularly in their use of the first-person plural—map closely onto the type of poem Robert von Hallberg has recently named “civic”: poems that aspire to speak to or for a certain class of people, particularly, in von Hallberg’s argument, the upper-middle-class intelligentsia (von Hallberg 72ff).

<sup>vi</sup> Consider, for instance, the contrast between Auden, who like many other western intellectuals, had been drawn to Communism in the mid-1930s, and Moore. The latter was “strongly conservative,” at one point writing an ode in praise of Herbert Hoover (Molesworth 259).

<sup>vii</sup> See, for examples, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy (2007), especially 111-150.

<sup>viii</sup> In this, Hamod and Cervantes are hardly alone. Ginsberg’s “Kaddish,” in the lines quoted on About.com, draws on diverse religious traditions (“the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of Answers”) as well as global political solidarities (“the great dream of Me or China, or you and a phantom Russia.”) (217).

<sup>ix</sup> Not a first for Baraka. The Anit-Defamation League has attacked Baraka’s anti-semitism before. While many of the charges there fall into the trap of equating anti-Zionist rhetoric with anti-Jewish rhetoric, they also nail down vicious quotes from early in Baraka’s career, calling for “dagger poems in the slimy bellies of the owner-Jews” and “Another bad poem cracking steel knuckles in a jewlady’s mouth.” These most damning quotes come from Baraka’s 1960s, black nationalist awakening; predating his Village Voice “confession” where he repudiates prior anti-semitism. See “Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite.”

<sup>x</sup> We might, of course, trace poems that did appear in more literary or academic confines, as Susan Schultz does in her readings of Charles Bernstein’s poem-emails to the Buffalo Poetics listserv in September 2001. See her A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry (209-216).

<sup>xi</sup> As Fraser notes “Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard” (64).

<sup>xii</sup> For other examinations of the intimate media-administration relationship post-September 11, see “Post, Times Highlight Government’s War Efforts” by Changho Lee and “Newspaper Editorials Follow Lead of Bush Administration” by Andrew Billeaudeau et. al. in Media in an American Crisis: Studies of September 11, 2001 (2005).

<sup>xiii</sup> Conglomerates, it’s worth noting, far more inextricably intertwined with corporate and governmental interests than when Habermas critiqued them in the early 1960s.

<sup>xiv</sup> To some extent, Fraser seems to recognize this necessity. She acknowledges that the language produced by subaltern counterpublics allows these groups to become “Armed” and to “recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres” (67). The language, in other words, has to be made to work beyond the counterpublic and in the public sphere before it can be fully effectual.

<sup>xv</sup> In chapter one, I cite Iris Marion Young’s insights about the value of including not only diverse speakers, but diverse ways of speaking in public. This is the touchstone of her Inclusion and Democracy.

<sup>xvi</sup> This is another, smaller contrast with Fraser, who emphasizes “new” language—the power of naming concepts like “sexual harassment” or “date rape” (67). Obviously this is crucial in some cases, but it is hardly essential, as here the emphasis must be on “old” language—that which has been enshrined in the canon.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Michael Welch, Scapegoats of September 11: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror (2006), especially 62-125.

#### Chapter Four

<sup>i</sup> Of course, this assertion would’ve been no surprise to Durkheim, as he argues in Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) such “collective conscious” was long gone from modern societies by the time Steinbeck wrote novels.

<sup>ii</sup> I designed a pair of questionnaires: one for people who were strictly participants, had gone to book clubs or other discussions; one for facilitators, who had helped plan the various of activities, had led book clubs, or had taken on other organizational roles. To participants I asked twenty-five questions; to facilitators I asked thirty. Both covered demographic information about age, race, work, and education as well as general responses to the text (which characters they liked and disliked; what scenes they remembered most clearly, how they felt about them). To both, I provided opportunities to draw connections between the Depression-era text and the “Great Recession” of 2009. To the facilitators, I asked specific questions about how they became involved in the Big Read, how facilitating events such as these differed from other book clubs.

<sup>iii</sup> Other cultural anthropologists of Stewart’s generation offered similar support. I drew on Noenoe K. Silva, who transforms the “still and silent objects of ethnology”—including Hawaiian newspapers, songs, and poetry—into “speaking subjects” that tell the story of Native Hawaiian resistance to United States imperialism (5).

<sup>iv</sup> Paired with inclusion is the explicit focus on an exclusive canon. The Big Read believes not just in reading—but in “literary reading,” or reading texts which it deems “literary.” The pilot program offered four books: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1951) and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). While the list has grown—its traditionalist mindset modulated through various ethnic studies emphases—it remains strongly focused on the canon; that is to say, for every Louise Erdrich and Rudolfo Anaya there is a Hemingway, James, Cather, London, Fitzgerald, Longfellow, or Dickinson (“Our Books”).

<sup>v</sup> Such differences in reading were, after all, something the NEA was well aware of after its 2004 survey, where the gaps between whites (about half of whom were readers) and African Americans or Hispanics were large and growing. Literary reading was reported by 51.4% of whites, 37.1% of African-Americans, and 26.5% Hispanic Americans (x). Though education is not a perfect cipher for class, it’s

noteworthy that 66.7% of people with college degrees reported reading, contrasted with 37.7% of those with high school degrees (xi). It's also worth noting the emphasis on "citizens"; the rhetoric of inclusion is tied, explicitly, to national status. The Big Read is about the United States in some ineffable way (particularly ineffable given that the list has recently expanded to include three non-U.S. authors: The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886) by Leo Tolstoy, Naguib Mahfouz's The Thief and the Dogs (1961), and a collection of Mexican short fiction).

<sup>vi</sup> This is a particularly interesting choice, given that Steinbeck's attitudes towards immigrant labor—even before his later-life turn towards a broadly conservative politics—were dubious. In the series of essays he wrote for the San Francisco News in October 1936, he voices broadly progressive sentiments about mistreatments of immigrant workers while simultaneously deploying a veritable dictionary of racist notions: "the traditional standard of living of the Chinese was so low that white labor could not compete"; Filipinos are "little brown men" ("Harvest" 1015, 1017). Steinbeck emphasizes that "the future farm workers are to be white and American, and a rearrangement of the attitude towards and the treatment of migrant labor must be achieved" (1019). Though intensely racist, Steinbeck's assessment of the political economy of migrant labor is hardly incorrect—except, of course, his vision of future "white and American" farm laborers.

<sup>vii</sup> Similarly, as sociologist Linsey Howie puts it, such reading practices allow readers to "play with, or assert different ideas, or adopt different subject positions in the presence of others" which helps them throw off "confining self-representations" and "offer[s] novel ways of perceiving oneself as a subject-in-process" (228).

<sup>viii</sup> Particularly for those participants whose work or life seldom allows them access to such interactions: those, for instance, who never had a chance to attend (or finish) college, those who just miss taking courses. More than one of my interviewees fondly recalled participation in the Big Read as "like going back to college again. It was really fun to be with a college professor who can deconstruct a book again [...]. I was just overwhelmed by the discussion ... just getting in to a literary conversation" (Claiborne). And Mary Pom Claiborne—whose Grapes reading group was led by University of Tennessee English Professor Mary Papke—was not the only participant in such a group. Indeed, Cynthia Landrum, who I discuss below, is also an adjunct professor in Jackson.

<sup>ix</sup> Evidence of such stratification in reading groups is clear in much work on the subject. In Book Clubs (2003), Elizabeth Long points out that her sample is not only entirely white—she found it difficult to discover groups that mixed across racial lines—but overwhelmingly educated: 67% of her respondents had been to graduate school (88).

In my interviews, readers like Judy Szink and Jane Volk (both in Jackson) do report discovering occasional marks of difference in their groups. "My book club is conservative. There's only two or three of us who are not. Some discussions we drop them rather than have conflict. Actually, I pry could argue most of 'em. I'm not

gonna change their minds. Why confuse ‘em with facts?” (Volk) Amusing, but disconcerting in that rather than engage in rational conversation aimed at changing minds, Volk simply keeps the peace at the cost of deeper discussion.

<sup>x</sup> Of my 22 conversations, three quarters were with women. Perhaps more strikingly, not one was under the age of 30. These proportions are evident in Long’s work as well; two-thirds of the clubs she discovers are solely women; their average age is fifty-one (89).

<sup>xi</sup> As I mention above, this thread of reluctance is also present in records from FSA camps in the 1930s—“campers would refuse to avail themselves of food or even medicine offered to them free by the government if they had any choice in the matter”—and in Steinbeck’s novel, as when the women’s committee insists a woman take five dollars to feed her starving family and she responds “We ain’t never took no charity” (Benson 176, Steinbeck 316).

Under-attendance at the Services Fair may have had other causes as well: its location was accidentally not noted on some promotional material and, worse, that Saturday was one of the first warm days after a Michigan winter (Murray).

<sup>xii</sup> Worth noting is the success in animating action Landrum has had through other tactical readings. Among the church’s outreach events are its “CommUnity ForUms,” held at the downtown library, which tackle concerns both spiritual and of a more material nature. Since Jackson’s first Big Read, in 2007, Landrum has dedicated one of the “commUnity forUms” to a theme from the book. She is particularly proud of the forum—co-sponsored by the NAACP—that used To Kill A Mockingbird as its central text. The conversation spawned Jackson Justice Watch, a new community group dedicated to identifying and eliminating racism in Jackson. She hopes the Grapes forum on the question of how “we help each other through times of need”—over forty people attended—will lead to similar community action.

<sup>xiii</sup> Especially by living with one of these practitioners: Many of my interviewees reported discussing the novel with their spouses or children who did not actively participate.

<sup>xiv</sup> I am not the only one to notice the peculiar relationship between Laclau and Mouffe and Gramsci: their “instrumental deployment of Gramsci, for example, reduces the Italian writer to an unrecognizably sentimental and drifting figure” (Brennan, Wars 162).

<sup>xv</sup> While many educational theorists have conceived of education as replete with power struggles, Gramsci avoids this identification with his critical pedagogical notion of a dialectically supportive relationship between student/teacher.

<sup>xvi</sup> Peter Ives’s recent work on the relationship between Habermas and Gramsci finds “idealist” tendencies in Habermas, suggesting Gramsci’s contributions to a Marxist theory of language are more useful. Ives’s central attacks on Habermas—idealism, elitist philosophizing—are hard to deny. Yet when Ives suggests that Habermas would have to “convince large groups of people not only to agree with his theory but to act on it” for it to “be capable of transforming society in the way that he desires” he transposes two registers (169). Habermas needs not to

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convince anyone to 'believe' in communicative action; his theory, as I have used it here, it is a tool for understanding how communication and political action relate. It seems to me that, by linking Gramscian hegemony to Habermas's approach, I have suggested just how this might happen.

<sup>xvii</sup> By placing my focus on the future, I have emphasized, too, the contrast of the approach I have shaped in this chapter to that of the Big Read, which is relentlessly nostalgic. Gioia not only mouths Victorian platitudes about literature's ability to improve its readers, but his conception of the Big Read's cultural work looks invariably backward: Reading (in the title of the report that launched the Big Read) is "at risk"—presumably of losing its cultural position; "we can restore reading," he claims at the Big Read's inception, "to its essential place in American culture" (my emphasis). His vision of the Big Read aims at retrograde reform.

<sup>xviii</sup> While The Grapes of Wrath, particularly during the "Great Recession," offers obvious grounding for such work, many books offer a similar platform. Of those deemed appropriate by the Big Read, a text like To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) is thematically rich enough to provide launching points for such tactical intervention anywhere in the United States today, with its charged questions about racism and the judicial system. To take another example, perhaps Fahrenheit 451 (1951) could launch a town on an anti-book-banning crusade or develop sustainable practices in promoting reading among low-literacy groups.

<sup>xix</sup> I have already discussed Habermas's attacks on the philosophy of consciousness. In his conclusion, he emphatically states his ambitions to revise critical theory: "The theory of communicative action is meant to provide an alternative to the philosophy of history on which earlier critical theory still relied, but which is no longer tenable" (TCA 2.397). As well as to protect lifeworlds: "The point is to protect areas of life that are functionally dependent on social integration through values, norms, and consensus formation, to preserve them from falling prey to the systemic imperatives of economic and administrative subsystems [...]" (TCA 2.372-3).

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