

Edited and designed by artist Marisa Jahn, *Pro+agonist: The Art of Opposition* is a book that explores the productive possibilities of “agonism,” or a relationship built on mutual incitement and struggle. Designed in black and blue—the colors of a good bruise—*Pro+agonist* brings together writings by interdisciplinary artists, scientists, CEO’s, crackpots, war strategists, psychotherapists, and philosophers who raise questions about the importance of political dissent, the function of discord in discourse, the rules of escalating conflict, the roles of parasites within systems, the ins and outs of concord and congress, and more. The introduction, written as a disagreement between a cast of fictional characters, is (arguably) more stimulating than if it were written from a single, unified perspective. Readers will emerge with a greater appreciation for duking it out and taking it to the streets.



The hole in this book lets you peek through, peer at the Other, and frame them so that they are with you as you read along.

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Marisa Jahn

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# Pro+agonist: The Art of Opposition

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Marisa Jahn



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Chantal Mouffe  
Warren Sack  
Steve Shada  
Mark Shepard  
Doris Sommer  
McKenzie Wark  
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Pro+agonist:  
The Art of Opposition

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Co-presented by:  
Northern Lights.mn,  
Walker Art Center,  
and REV-

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Northern Lights.mn is a collaborative, interactive, media-oriented, non-profit arts organization from the Twin Cities for the world. It presents innovative art in the public sphere, both physical and virtual, focusing on artists creatively using technology to engender new relations between audience and artwork, and more broadly between citizenry and their built environment.  
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[walkerart.org](http://walkerart.org)

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# Pro+agonist: The Art of Opposition

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# Thank You

## To my adversaries:

To Doug Lasdon, who plays one half of the bruise in this book.; to Ben W. Stewart for his intellectual agility; to Warren Sack for his curiosity and generosity; to Stephanie Rothenberg for her patience; to Paul Falzone for his exquisite wordsmithing; to Melissa Marichal for her assistance; to Steve Shada for putting a hole through this book; to Steve Dietz at Northern Lights for his ongoing support of my work; to Susy Bielak and Ashley Duffalo at the Walker for providing me the opportunity to obsess about agonism; to Andrew Boyd and Meredith Summs for playing the agonism Rorschach test; to Luke Lozier for being my first supporter; to Stella Kyriakakis for her unflagging exactitude.

## Chantal Mouffe:

The aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an “adversary,” i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.



## William E. Connolly:

Constitute adversaries worthy of agonistic respect.

## Matthew (5:43-48):

Love your enemies.

## Sun Tzu:

When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard.

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# Preface

Michel Foucault:

Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of “agonism”—of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.



This book is produced in conjunction with “Discourse and Discord: Architecture of Agonism from the Kitchen Table to the City Street,” a public symposium organized by Steve Dietz, Susy Bielak, and Ashley Duffalo from April 12–14, 2012, co-presented by the Walker Art Center and Northern Lights. mn.

In an era of cultural conservatives and the liberal elite, Occupiers and Tea Partiers, civil uprisings and government crackdowns, perhaps the one point of agreement today is that there is no shortage of disagreement. But if that is true, then we ask, why is there not more debate—not online flame wars, not the televised jockeying of political candidates, but live, in-person dialogue?

That question was a starting point for this three-day symposium on agonism in the public sphere. A term unfamiliar to many, agonism describes an approach to politics that embraces

difference and disagreement as an important part of democracy. As a series of talks, workshops, actions, and playful experiments by thinkers and artists including John Rajchman, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Warren Sack, Carl DiSalvo, Mark Shepard, and Marisa Jahn, “Discourse and Discord” aims to explore the structures or “architectures”—whether it is the built environment, online technologies, songs, or recipes—that can draw people together for genuine dialogue and debate. It also reinforces the notion that democracy thrives on and even requires an agonistic foundation: the friction of varied publics and participation by people of different minds, views, and beliefs.

**Krzysztof Wodiczko:**

It doesn’t hurt and often helps to be an artist. Not an artistic-artist, but a life-artist.

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# Introduction

## A Ballad of Black and Blue



Marisa Jahn

Black: Don't use big words around me!

Blue: But "agonism" is one syllable shorter than "antagonism."

Black: Why don't you just use "antagonism" since everybody knows what *that* word means?

Blue: Well they're slightly different. "Antagonism" refers to oppositionality, but "agonism" refers to empathy bound up with opposition—a mutual excitement or struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Black: Okay. And what's in this notion that people don't already know? Why put together a book about it?

Blue: You mean, why bother?

Black: Sure.

Blue: Well, okay so you might agree that there is a great deal of attention—politically, philosophically, culturally—on agreement, concord, consensus. Harmony's important, but sometimes what gets occluded, tucked away, ignored, or

smooshed out is the role of disagreement, discord, dissent, and dissensus. If you repress the dark you aren't aptly depicting reality.

Black: So, you're saying that an agonistic perspective is more empirically responsible and lays claim to a brand of realism.

Blue: That's a good way of putting it.

Black: It also makes me think of struggle. Like Nietzsche.

Blue: Yes. A lot of theorists who write about agonism refer to Nietzsche who believed that struggle forms the kernel of our existence. To the extent that this is true, you can imagine that on a political level, repressing agonism, or misrepresenting it, can lead to full-on strife later on down the road.

Black: I agree! I'm the one who's always trying to get you to get mad at me. It would be so healthy. The other day you started to get testy with me but then, much to my disappointment, it just

seemed to work itself out too soon . . .

Blue: Well, it's been hard. Despite your encouraging that, we are both conflict avoidant. *Sometimes* I try to escalate conflict with you but it's tough. I try.

Black: Wait, but how come you're having such a tough time picking fights then if you say you're an agonist?

Blue: No, no. It doesn't really work like that. No one's an *agonist*, or at least that's not the common usage of the word. Agonism exists as a dynamic that many say is a productive or important thing to foster.

Black: Okay, like in the American legal system. You have the public defender who represents the accused. Then there's the prosecutor, who is beholden to justice. The prosecutor's job is to make a decision whether to prosecute based on the evidence and notions of justice. The defense attorney, on the other hand, tries to exonerate his/her client regardless of the facts but

within the boundaries of ethics. But this seems more antagonistic than what you're talking about because it is based on adversity.

Blue: Well, actually, you raise a good point. Antagonism is to enemy as agonism is to adversary. Think of an adversary like this: you're playing a game of tennis, and it's only a good game if you have a worthy opponent. The person you're playing against is an adversary, but not an enemy.<sup>2</sup> You respect them if they have good push back.

Black: Okay. So it's about mutuality. Like the counterpoint within a musical score.

Blue: Hmm. That's interesting. Reminds me of this dinner party game I've been playing where I explain a little bit about agonism. Then I say, "When I say agonism, you say . . .," and then we have a go-around to see what people come up with. It's a good Rorschach test, and people have such surprising answers.

Black: Ok, let's play. When I say agonism, you say . . .?

Blue: Well, one person said, "*Paradise Lost*." "Lucifer wrestling the angels." Then a physiologist responded that the agonist is a contracting muscle; the antagonist is the muscle that returns the limb to its natural state. Then a tech head was reminded of the symbiotic relationship between the fig wasp and the sycamore tree. And a musician likened agonism to noise . . .

Black: Noise?

Blue: As in, harmony is the reconciliation of musical temperaments. Noise is broader than harmony and contains it. Harmony is control, order. Noise is the sum of sounds; it fluctuates between harmony and cacophony. Noise is difference, polyphony, and epistemological and political pluralism.<sup>3</sup>

Black: Okay. But what would you say? When I say agonism, you say . . .?

Blue: Racism. Xenophobia. Othering.

Black: Explain.

Blue: Well, *you* know that I'm half Chinese and half Ecuadorian. For "mixies" like me, we crave heterogeneity. I see agonism as a process of encouraging differences, pushback, and adversity.

Black: So for you, agonism is to heterogeneity, adversity, and difference, as antagonism is to homogeneity, enmity, and sameness—

Blue: —and if society doesn't embrace agonism then it can easily go down the path of xenophobia and racism. Here's an example. When I was younger, I happened to be hitchhiking through Court D'Helene, Idaho, during the height of a white supremacist convo. On top of being brown, or at least kind of yellow, I looked to them like their stereotype of a lesbian—shaved head, torn jumpsuit. There were a couple of times when people would pull up to me on the road and spit at me, and ask me why I hated men; even if I was holding hands with my then-boyfriend. There was a refusal or inability to

recognize me as a person or subject.

Black: You were reduced.

Blue: Yes. I was perceived to be a foreigner so distinct that they could not possibly relate. I was made to be a scapegoat. But identity, which is composed of a set of contingencies, isn't fixed or immutable. We change over time; identity is relational.

Thus, accepting alterity—or the notion of the other within<sup>4</sup>—is the key notion upon which an agonistic democracy is founded. And dissensus is a mechanism that fosters this.

Black: “Dissensus”? There you go again.

Blue: Come on, this one I know you know what I mean. Consensus is the process by which everyone agrees; dissensus is the process by which the differences are not dissolved but done so in a way that a decision can still be made.

Black: So, there's more slop in dissensus.

Blue: Slop?

Black: Yeah—a bigger margin of error, more wiggle room. More room for difference, as you might say.

Blue: Exactly. Ideally, dissensus involves an agreement that doesn't neutralize the particular points of view.

Black: Is there a name for this set of differences that can't be neutralized?

Blue: Well, the “differend” is Jean-François Lyotard's way of describing that thing left over at the end of a division that can't be squared away. It's that nugget or residue that remains at the end of the equation, the irreducible thing that exists between incommensurate language games.<sup>5</sup> Some would say that we can think of this remainder as an indicator of a true agonistic democracy.

Black: What would others say?

Blue: Well a second group says that this first group problematically fetishizes

agonism as an end in itself, and what's more important is to focus on the reconciliation of difference. For example, they might say, “Listen. Talking about difference is important but this tends to end up in endless squabbling. Let's get on with things, agree to disagree, and focus on structures that enable concord that benefits the many. Let's not let a few exceptional cases compromise what is just.”

To this, the first group might respond and say, “Oh, you insufferable liberals! This is how you end up hogging all the power. What we are trying to do is accept the provisionality of hegemony, and make it so that we can more easily take turns with this power. But you want to neutralize things by repressing the exceptional cases. Don't you know that perhaps, in fact, these exceptions are often those that we should pay the most attention to?”<sup>6</sup>

[pause]

Blue: What?

Black: Nothing. I'm gonna let that one slide.

Blue: You mean, “provisionality of hegemony”?

Black: Okay, okay. I know what you mean I just like giving you a hard time. But let's go on because what I want to know is this. It seems like both Camp One and Camp Two both have valid claims—

Blue: —Camp Three might say something like this: “An attentiveness to the particulars of identity is essential but we can't build a society on that abstract idea alone. If we did, it would be politically volatile. We need to come to consent on certain issues because if not, we can't come up with public policies. If we can't do that—if we can't codify anything—how are we supposed to carry out justice or enact democracy?” So, this third camp feels that we need to build and politicize pathways between the two perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

Black: Hmm. I imagine that almost like a series of spokes.

Blue: Right! You might also see these “spokes” that mediate between the particular and the plural as stand-ins for structures—architecture, code, protocol—that embrace difference and foster productive friction.<sup>8</sup>

Black: What’s an example?

Blue: Well, for ancients, agon referred to both rivalry in sport and the narrative tumult within Greek tragedy. Whether in sports and tragedy, the agon provides an arc (or *telos*) to the game.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche writes about how for the Greeks, to feel competitiveness is to feel life at its fullest.<sup>10</sup>

Black: So, if through games players achieve their fullest sense of being<sup>11</sup> or even a return to what makes us human, then what’s the role of the game master?

Blue: Lyotard talks about how each game has its own logic, and even within a single game there are different sets of logic. The logic of the game master

is different from the logic of the player; they are trying to achieve different objectives and are incommensurate. Lyotard points out that we speak and conduct ourselves according to multiple sets of logic, and there is, therefore, no universal logic. In other words, there’s no game master; it’s a role that we take turns assuming.

Black: I like thinking of this process of role taking and role-playing as one that could be quite creative with lots of room for deviation, improvisation, and innovation. I like the idea that the players are inventing the rules as they go along.<sup>12</sup>

Blue: Taking that idea one step further, we might also think of the process of “code-switching” between language games as a process of creating shortcuts or pathways that bisect disparate paradigms.

Black: What’s an example?

Blue: The artist Warren Sack created a piece of software that visually mapped the

use of certain key terms in political debates. Over time, what he found was that the “winners” were those who could dominate the game by setting the terms of the debate themselves. So, victory wasn’t achieved by playing the game; victory was achieved by playing not-nice—by jumping out of the role of the player, assuming the role of the game master and changing the rules, then switching back into the role of the player.<sup>13</sup>

Black: You could see that as either cheating or unfair. But again, I see that as liberatory: the structures of the game are fungible, and with each play, the agile player expands the terrain of the game.

Blue: Right. The ideal player—the adversary—is one who can also see outside the game, one who delights in “code-switching,” and “sidestepping,”<sup>14</sup> and dialectically moving *between*.

Black: So let’s play. When I say “agonism,” you say—

Blue: —“an aesthetics of difference,”<sup>15</sup> the delight

in surprises, collisions, in-betweenness. You?

Black: I’d say, “mixie.” The acknowledgement that we are contingent beings, that identity is relational, and that one is incomplete without the other. Hence, the hole running through the center of this book . . .

Blue: Right!

And that’s why agonism is worth bothering about.

Black: Okay. *Fine*.



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# What's In This Book



Through the design of this book, Steve Shada and Marisa Jahn explore two emblems of agonism—the hole, which for them signifies the Other within, and the bruise which evidences contact.

Citing agon—or the Greek word for the struggle at the core of both sport and theater—as the central component driving not only video games but military, political, and professional conquest, MacKenzie Wark’s contribution to this volume examines the shape of agon as a vector that moves us through an otherwise undifferentiated time and space (“gamespace”). Alluding to “the cave,” Plato’s allegory about the ineluctable election of reason over ignorance, Wark postulates that when presented with these options, perhaps the contemporary subject shrinks back into his/her respective cave to play video games in the dark, preferring the mediated video game reality rather than reality itself.

In his excerpts about games, Jean-François Lyotard writes about the incommensurability

between the logic of the player and the game master. The roles, he suggests, are not immutable, and there is a fluidity between player and game master as participants in a conversation that frequently shift registers. Given the absence of a singular, universal game master or enunciator, Lyotard posits an ethical implication—that there are a multiplicity of justices, each endemic to a different logic that together ensure the justice of the multiple.

Anjum Asharia’s triptych seizes upon the expectation for immigrants to not only linguistically assimilate but to perform their fluency. She instead prescribes strategies of deflection, double valence, and clamor to foreground enunciative difference.

Chantal Mouffe’s essay about the central role of agonism in fostering democratic pluralism builds off her distinction between enemies and adversaries. An adversary, Mouffe points out, is a legitimate enemy with shared common ground. Accepting one’s adversaries

entails a radical shift that recognizes that democracy is achieved not through pure consent or compromise but through an acknowledgement of dissensus, the provisional role of hegemony, exclusion, and the ineradicability of antagonism within politics.

Warren Sack's essay outlines key contributors to the debate in political philosophy about the role of agonism. Thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Michel Foucault, Jean François Lyotard, and Bruno Latour employ metaphors that situate political engagement as a series of verbal contestations; others, like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, draw on visual schemas such as the rhizome to describe agonistic pluralism. By charting the historicity of notions of agonism, Sack tacitly questions our own biases.

Carl DiSalvo's notion of adversarial design posits that the design of things, including the relations and experiences they foster, is not neutral but instead inherently political and even contestatorial.

Mark Shepard's drawings take inspiration from the 1957 Balanchine/Stravinsky ballet entitled *Agon* whose choreography is determined by an increasing number of dancers in each successive scene. Shepard's adaptation offers instead his interpretation for the choreography of a 21st century conference—in particular, the symposium about agonism at The Walker Art Center where this very book is being launched.

As an entrepreneur whose career has involved risk-taking, John Seely Brown provides practical advice to businesses seeking to merge, outsource, or improve their competitive edge. A strong proponent of cross-sector collaboration, Brown identifies that friction inevitably emerges. The challenge for managers, then, is to emplace a “performance fabric,” or the conditions necessary to ensure this friction is “productive.” These “Four P's”—performance metrics, people, prototypes, and pattern recognition—anticipate moments when friction would naturally arise, identify the importance of

knowledge brokers to translate specialists in differential fields, identify objects that embody shared values across specialized fields, and recognize the importance of reflective processes that enable participants to identify patterns, scale, and the transferability of knowledge. Operant between highly philosophical and pragmatic terrains, Brown's recommendations compliment and contribute to more abstract theories about agonism—theories that their detractors fault for not envisioning any real-world applicability.

Pointing to the court testimonial of the indigenous Guatemalan human rights leader Rigoberta Menchu who openly announced she was keeping secrets, Doris Sommer examines the expectations of readers—their desire to devour the literary subject and the frustration felt when literary subjects resist and withhold. Sommer suggests that subaltern literature—or “particularist rhetoric”—in fact, teaches an appreciation for these “slaps and embraces”

and a self-reflexivity about the acquisitive habits of readership.

D. Graham Burnett and Cornel West's conversation deliberates the consequences of accepting that at the core of any faith is a “demon of doubt.” Is faith the maintenance of one's beliefs until the moment we die? Or, turning to “Black Guinea,” a figure in Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* that emblemizes the irreconcilable contradiction between faith and doubt, does faith emerge from the acceptance of this agon and the ability to gracefully impose order on this mess—or further, as West suggests, the ability to use techniques of deception (masks, smoke and mirrors) to “not just survive catastrophe but to try to maintain a certain kind of sanity and dignity, a certain kind of compassion, a certain kind of hope?” Burnett questions whether we might then see *The Confidence-Man* as the apotheosis of the messiah, that rascal in whom we identify, and whose struggle vindicates our own.

# Notes About the Design: The Hole and The Bruise



Steve Shada & Marisa Jahn

## Hole

The hole signifies both absence and presence, or the presence of the Other within. The hole running through the middle of this book enables you to peek through the facade to peer at the Other and frame them so that they are with you as you read along.

### John Milton:

Know ye not then,  
said Satan, fill'd with  
scorn, Know ye not  
me? Not to know me argues  
yourselves unknown.

puncture, rupture, pierce

uncolor

discrete

slit

punctuation: period

finitude

absence

## Bruise

The bruise—whose color is colloquially referred to as black and blue, the colors of this book—is the gain from a confrontation when something mars the surface of the skin but without puncture.

### Hippocrates:

A bruise is caused  
neither by a sharp  
object, nor a light one,  
but one of a blunt and  
heavy disposition.

prod, poke, mar

discolor

gradation

bump, swell

punctuation: parentheses

continuity

contiguity

# Gamer Theory

## Excerpts



McKenzie Wark

Suppose there is a business in your neighborhood called The Cave™. It offers, for an hourly fee, access to game consoles in a darkened room. Suppose it is part of a chain. The consoles form a local area network, and also link to other such networks elsewhere in the chain. Suppose you are a gamer in The Cave. You test your skills against other gamers. You have played in The Cave since childhood. Your eyes see only the monitor before you. Your ears hear only through the headphones that encase them. Your hands clutch only the controller with which you blast away at digital figures who shoot back at you on the screen. Here, gamers see the images and hear the sounds and say to each other: “Why, these images are just shadows! These sounds are just echoes! The real world is out there somewhere.” The existence of another, more real world of which The Cave provides mere copies is assumed, but nobody thinks much of it. Here reigns the wisdom of PlayStation: “Live in your world. Play in ours.”

Everything the military entertainment complex touches with its gold-plated output jacks turns to digits. Everything is digital, and yet the digital is as

nothing. No human can touch it, smell it, taste it. It just beeps, and blinks, and reports itself in growing alphanumerics, spouting stock quotes on your cell phone. Sure, there may be vivid 3D graphics. There may be pie charts, and bar graphs. There may be swirls and whorls of brightly colored polygons blazing from screen to screen. But these are just decoration. The jitter of your thumb on the button or the flicker of your wrist on the mouse connect directly to an invisible, intangible gamespace of pure contest, pure agon. It does not matter if your cave comes equipped with a PlayStation or Bloomberg terminal. It does not matter whether you think you are playing the bond market or Grand Theft Auto. It is all just an algorithm with enough unknowns to make a game of it.

Once, games required an actual place to play them, whether on the chessboard or the tennis court. Even wars had battle *fields*. Now, global positioning satellites grid the whole earth, and put all of space and time in play. Warfare, they say, now looks like video games. Well, do not kid yourself. War is a video game—for the military entertainment complex. To

them it does not matter what happens on the ground. The ground—the old-fashioned battlefield itself—is just a necessary externality to the game.

The Congo is arguably the region in which the “great game” of colonial exploitation has done the most harm and conferred the least benefit. The Congo’s first democratic leader, Patrice Lumumba, was ousted in a CIA-sponsored coup that brought to power the notorious Mobutu Sese Seku. With the collapse of the Mobutu regime, there was civil war—and uncivil war. One of the things that kept the civil war going was the coltan. Coltan both fueled the war and accelerated the destruction of wildlife habitats. So, the military entertainment complex, with previous brands to protect, did not want protest movements sully their reputation by calling attention to all of the gorillas coltan kills, or the guerillas it feeds. The military entertainment complex would like to believe, and would like you to believe that gamespace is not a Nietzschean struggle of naked forces, beyond good and evil, but a clean, well-lighted, rule-governed game.

Perhaps the gamer is always battling otherness, in an unstable relation to alterity, to blurry edges and fuzzy boundaries that threaten to overwhelm the self. Steven Poole: “One crucial component of video-gaming pleasure is in fact a certain level of anxiety. In [some video games], this feeling is rendered useful, productive, rather than paralyzing or profound. The gamer exploits the anxious relation of self to other in the act of targeting, risking the boundaries of character for the reward of promoting the character to a new level.”

To target is to blaze across the agonizing gap between self and world, between cognition and its object. Yet, the target does not stand alone and isolated. It appears not only against a background of other moments; it appears against a background of other meanings. Every target is embedded in a series of events that exceeds the moment of opportunity for targeting. To target is to discriminate and rank possibilities within an event. It is to battle one’s way in a deliberate and deliberative line from moment to moment, across the surface of the event, targeting the moment of maximum opportunity.

### Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*:

Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man’s ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life,—all this to

explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick? Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag? What skiff in tow of a seventy-four can still? For one, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet all a-rush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill.

### Johan Huizinga:

Undoubtedly the predominance of the agonistic principle does lead to the decadence in the long run.

---

# Just Games

## Excerpts



Jean-François Lyotard

If one has the viewpoint of a multiplicity of language games, and if one has the hypothesis that the social bond is not made up of a single type of statement, or, if you will, of discourse, but that it is made up of several kinds of these games, of which a certain number is known, then it follows that social partners are caught up in pragmatics that are different from each other. This multiple belonging, this belonging to several pragmatics, can manifest itself rather quickly; it is not a problem of empirical diachrony. In the same discussion one goes, one leaps from one language game to another, from the interrogative to the prescriptive, and so on. Each of these language games operates a distribution of roles, if one can put it this way. Actually, it is even more complicated than that because there are variants within the language games. Let us simplify: let us say that there is a distribution of roles that is effected by the narrative game; there is a distribution of roles (which has nothing to do with the one of the narrative) that is effected by

the prescriptive (even if there are prescriptions implied in the narration). Actually, there is, I would not even say a weaving, because a weaving requires a unity of thread, but a patchwork of language pragmatics that vibrates at all times. This means that the partners—the people who are assigned their roles by the language games in which they are caught—occupy positions that are incommensurable to each other. Not only is there an incommensurability within a game between the position of the recipient and that of the narrator, for example (it is not always pronounced, but it is extreme in the case of obligation), but, from game to game, for the “same” position, there is an incommensurability: it is not the same thing to be the recipient of a narrative, and to be the recipient of a denotative discourse with a function of truthfulness, or to be the recipient of a command.

The picture that one can draw from this observation is precisely that of an absence of unity, an absence of

totality. All of this does not make up a body. On the contrary. The idea that I think we need today in order to make decisions in political matters cannot be the idea of the totality or of the unity of a body. It can only be the idea of a multiplicity or of a diversity. Then the question arises: How can a regulatory use of this idea of the political take place? How can it be pragmatically efficacious (to the point where, for example, it would make one decision just and another unjust)? Is it possible to decide in a just way in, and according to, this multiplicity? This is where I must say that I do not know.

Can there be a plurality of justices? Or is the idea of justice the idea of a plurality? That is not the same question. I truly believe that the question we face now is that of a plurality, the idea of a justice that would at the same time be that of a plurality, and it would be a plurality of language games.

But what can this mean in practice? To state that one must draw a critique of

political judgment means today to do a politics of opinions that, at the same time, is a politics of Ideas, as you attempted to synthesize it, something that already is not easy, but in addition, it must be a politics of Ideas in which justice is not placed under a rule of convergence, but rather a rule of divergence. I believe that this is the theme that one finds constantly in present-day writing under the name of “minority.”

Basically, minorities are not social ensembles; they are territories of language. Each one of us belongs to several minorities, and—what is very important—none of them prevails. It is only then that we can say that society is just. Can there be justice without the domination of one game upon the others?

What type of relation is there between justice and the various language games? One cannot simply be indifferent to the content of the language game.

The idea of justice will consist in preserving the purity of each game, that is, for example, in insuring that the discourse

on truth be considered as a “specific” language game, that narration be played by its “specific” rules. To the extent that these language games are accompanied by prescriptions of the type “repeat me” or “carry me out” or “implement me,” then the idea of justice must regulate these obligations.

It is by means of plurality that it regulates them; it says, “Careful! There is *pléonexia* here, there is excess, there is abuse.” The person holding this discourse of knowledge, playing this knowledge game, or the person playing this narrative game, is exceeding the authority granted to her or to him by the rules of the game, and is not abiding by the pragmatics “proper” to the game played. For example, the pragmatics that rules the game of the one who knows with the one who listens and will get to know—the master-and-disciple game—or the pragmatics which rule the game of the one who tells with the one who listens. She or he is introducing another set of pragmatics, that of the Idea of justice. But the Idea

of justice resides precisely in keeping prescription in its “proper” order, just as it does in keeping narration and description in the order that is respectively “proper” to them. That is, it consists in maintaining them as different games that cannot have the value of sources of universal obligation. Just as being just is independent of telling the truth, so telling a story, in and of itself, has nothing to do with justice.

What does language want of me? In my idiom, it means that there are forms of language that are not forms of statements, that are forms of language games, that is, ways of playing that language has, that position the person who enters into the game. This person may enter here or there, he or she will be positioned by the game; in this sense, language is indeed not, and cannot be, mastered. Its very plurality makes it impossible for anyone to establish her- or himself in a field, and proceed to produce its laws in a sort of universal language or generalized metalanguage, and then to go on to extend these laws to all

the fields of language. In this tradition, there is, very clearly, an awareness that there are several classes or ways of talking, and that, in any case, the efficacy of these ways of talking varies from language game to language game (from narration to prescription, for example, between which the distance is infinite). There is, further, the awareness that one cannot signify that which tells itself as a prescription other than in narrations, which does not prevent the fact that at the same time one will never be able to extract this prescription out of narrations in the form of semantic content. That is why it is just to maintain this plurality. Any attempt to state the law, for example, to place oneself in the position of enunciator of the universal prescription, is obviously infatuation itself and absolute injustice, in point of fact.

The question of the social bond, when it is put in political terms, has always been raised in the form of a possible interruption of the social bond, which is simply called “death” in all of its forms: imprisonment,

unemployment, repression, hunger, anything you want. These are all deaths. There is something else in that impurity. Here, one would have to ask whether a language game that becomes excessive, that falls into what I was calling *pléonexia*, the “wanting to have too much of it,” that is—precisely when such a language game begins to regulate language games that are not the same as itself—is not such a language game always assisted by the sword?

To be more precise: if a language game owes its efficacy, I would not say only, but also, to the fear of death, even if it is a minority game, it is unjust. “Majority” does not mean a large number, it means a great fear. Hence my second question: In order to become a majority, is it necessary to violate the boundaries of the language game concerned? Is there not, in the pretension to regulate other language games, something like terror?

There is, first, a multiplicity of justices, each one of them defined in relation to the rules specific to each game. These

rules prescribe what must be done so that a denotative statement, or an interrogative one, or a prescriptive one, etc., is received as such, and recognized as “good” in accordance with the criteria of the game to which it belongs. Justice here does not consist merely in the observance of the rules; as in all the games, it consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules, and therefore, new games.

Then the justice of the multiplicity: it is assured, paradoxically enough, by a prescriptive of universal value. It prescribes the observance of the singular justice of each game such as it has been situated: formalism of the rules and imagination in the moves. It authorizes the “violence” that accompanies the work of the imagination. It prohibits terror, that is, the blackmail of death towards one’s partners, the blackmail that a prescriptive system does not fail to make use of in order to become the majority in most of the games, and over most of their pragmatic positions.


**Sam Weber:**

. . . struggle could only be a form of communication with another game.



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**What can you do if  
you're linguistically  
homeless?  
Or,  
The Child of  
Immigrants' Guide To  
Bad Citizenship**



Anjum Asharia

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## Part 1

----- Original Message -----

Date: 24 May 2008

Student's Name: Asharia, Anjum

Course: Chemistry

Course Number: 205

Course Section: 01

Professor's Name: [REDACTED]

Grade for Semester: C-

-----Possible Explanation-----

International student, needs more work in English as Second Language

(n.b. The student in question is not international, but the child of immigrants. Still the explanation is justified. Linguistically homeless, she cannot speak but poorly. No amount of “work in English as Second Language” will help.)

## Part 2

- People started stirring up the air. They made noise and language; this had to be done for practical purposes—and for the good of society!

- If you know a language, it is important not only to use it, but to use it to the best of your ability!

- The children of immigrants, however, cannot speak but poorly.

And so, we recommend the following:

- Use language to create an escape for yourself and a dead end for others.

- Leave your interlocutors dehydrated, not enriched.

- Make more noise, less sense.

- Remember, expression is overrated.

## Part 3

Renee Gladwell:

“Experimentation, we were saying, is an ideal mode of engagement for marginalized people, and we couldn’t understand, we continued to say, why so many people still believe that the “transparency” of conventional storytelling somehow allows one to capture what it is to exist in the world more authentically. Of course, this question has been debated within the arts for decades now, but it is no less pertinent and divisive today. As a “black lesbian poet” you enter language from a place of disorientation. Your grasp of

the authority of the subject is slippery. You feel deviant. You feel the need to fuck with things. As you gaze into words, into their relation, you see things that are not there to people who have never had to prove that they should be counted among the living. You see jungle spaces, geometric spaces inside which it is possible to point, to unfold something about the silences, the loneliness of being in the world. Really though, this opportunity exists for anyone who looks deeply into language and the moment of utterance with his mouth or body all open.”<sup>21</sup>

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# An Agonistic Model of Democracy

## Excerpts



Chantal Mouffe

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Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an “us” by the determination of a “them.” The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition—which is an impossibility—but the different way in which it is established. The crucial issue is to establish this us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

Envisaged from the point of view of “agonistic pluralism,” the aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an “adversary,” i.e., somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. This is the real meaning of liberal democratic tolerance, which does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents. This category of the “adversary”

does not eliminate antagonism, though, and it should be distinguished from the liberal notion of the competitor with which it is sometimes identified. An adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. But, we disagree on the meaning and implementation of those principles, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion. Indeed, given the ineradicable pluralism of value, there is not rational resolution of the conflict, hence its antagonistic dimension.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, of course, that adversaries can never cease to disagree, but that does not prove that antagonism has been eradicated. To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion (in the same way as Thomas Kuhn has

argued that adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a conversion). Compromises are, of course, also possible; they are part and parcel of politics; but they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation.

Introducing the category of the “adversary” requires complexifying the notion of antagonism, and distinguishing it from agonism. Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while agonism is struggle between adversaries. We can, therefore, reformulate our problem by saying that envisaged from the perspective of “agonistic pluralism” the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues, which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary. An important difference with the model of “deliberative democracy,” is that for “agonistic pluralism,”

the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.

One of the key theses of agonistic pluralism is that, far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is, in fact, its very condition of existence. Modern democracy’s specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict, and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body—which was characteristic of the holist mode of social organization—a democratic society acknowledges the pluralism of values, the “disenchantment of the world” diagnosed by Max Weber, and the unavoidable conflicts that it entails.

I agree with those who affirm that a pluralist democracy demands a certain amount of consensus, and that it requires allegiance to the values,

which constitute its “ethico-political principles.” But, since those ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations, such a consensus is bound to be a “conflictual consensus.” This is, indeed, the privileged terrain of agonistic confrontation among adversaries. Ideally such a confrontation should be staged around the diverse conceptions of citizenship, which correspond to the different interpretations of the ethico-political principles: liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical-democratic, etc. Each of them proposes its own interpretation of the “common good,” and tries to implement a different form of hegemony. To foster allegiance to its institutions, a democratic system requires the availability of those contending forms of citizenship identification. They provide the terrain in which passions can be mobilized around democratic objectives, and antagonism transformed into agonism.

A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic, political positions. If this is missing there is the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation among other forms of collective identification, as it is the case with identity politics. With political participation, too much of an emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation leads to apathy and disaffection. Worse still, the result can be the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms can tear up the very basis of civility.

It is for this reason that the ideal of a pluralist democracy cannot be to reach a rational consensus in the public sphere. Such a consensus cannot exist. We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony—as a stabilization of power—and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The idea that power could be dissolved

through a rational debate, and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality, are illusions that can endanger democratic institutions.

What the deliberative democracy model is denying is the dimension of undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonism, which are constitutive of the political. By postulating the availability of a non-exclusive public sphere of deliberation where a rational consensus could be obtained, they negate the inherently conflictual nature of modern pluralism. They are unable to recognize that bringing a deliberation to a close always results from a decision which excludes other possibilities, and for which one should never refuse to bear responsibility by invoking the commands of general rules or principles. This is why a perspective like “agonistic pluralism,” which reveals the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion, is of fundamental importance for democratic politics. By warning us again of the illusion that a fully

achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, it forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive. To make room for dissent, and to foster the institutions in which it can be manifested, is vital for a pluralist democracy, and one should abandon the very idea that there could ever be a time in which it would cease to be necessary because the society is now “well ordered.” An “agonistic” approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers, and the forms of exclusion that they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality.

Asserting the hegemonic nature of social relations and identities can contribute to subverting the ever-present temptation existing in democratic societies to naturalize its frontiers and essentialize its identities. For this reason, it is much more receptive than the deliberative model to the multiplicity of voices that contemporary pluralist societies encompass, and to the complexity of their power structure.

## Deborah Tannen:

Agonism is ritual combat.

## Friedrich Nietzsche:

Hellenic popular teaching commands that every talent must develop through a struggle: whereas modern educators fear nothing more than the unleashing of so-called ambition. Here, selfishness is feared as “evil as such”—except by the Jesuits, who think like the ancients in this, and probably, for that reason, may be the most effective educators of our times. They seem to believe that selfishness, i.e., the individual is simply the most powerful agent, which obtains its character of “good” and “evil” essentially from the aims towards which it strives. But, for the ancients, the aim of agonistic education was the well being of the whole, of state society [staatlichen Gesellschaft]. For example, every Athenian was to develop himself, through competition, to the degree to which this self was of most use to Athens, and would cause least damage.

It was not a boundless and indeterminate ambition like most modern ambition: the youth thought of the good of his native city when he ran a race or threw or sang; he wanted to increase its reputation through his own; it was to the city’s gods that he dedicated the wreaths which the umpires placed on his head in honor. From childhood, every Greek felt the burning desire within him to be an instrument of bringing salvation to his city in the contest between cities: in this, his selfishness was lit, as well as curbed and restricted. For that reason, the individuals in antiquity were freer, because their aims were nearer and easier to achieve. Modern man, on the other hand, is crossed everywhere by infinity, like swift-footed Achilles in the parable of Zeno of Elea: infinity impedes him; he cannot even overtake the tortoise.

# Agonistics: A Language Game



Warren Sack

Argument is war. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain how this is metaphorically true. The language we use to talk about arguments is a language of war. We “attack” our opponent’s position, and “defend” our own. We “shoot down” opposing arguments. We say that claims are “defensible” or “indefensible.” We talk of “winning” and “losing” arguments. In arguing we have “tactics” and “strategies.” We are “on target” or “off target” in our criticisms. We “gain ground” or “lose ground.” In fact, it is not simply that we talk about arguments like this; this is what we do. Lakoff and Johnson ask us to consider a culture in which arguments are not conceptualized as verbal warfare, but as collaborative dances: participants are not opponents but partners, and each counter-move is a balanced, graceful response. That would be a very different world.

Of course, the latter is not an alien idea. Philosophers have long distinguished the

constructive, cooperative art of conversation (dialectics) from verbal combat (rhetoric). However, the problem has often been that—when the cool reason of conversation comes in contact with the heated emotion of argumentation—rhetoric melts dialectic, and we get a shouting match rather than a reasoned debate. What can be done?

There is an argument about arguments, and it has at least two sides. On one side, the advice given is of a moral quality: To allow reason to prevail over rage, to calm everyone down. Make everyone follow the rules of calm and reasonable conversation, and disallow the shouts and unruly outbursts of the arguing parties. The other side is neither moral nor immoral, but opportunistic. This side is usually the one politicians listen to when they are running for office or ruling a state. The other side starts with the assumption that any verbal interaction will eventually become a shouting match so the best preparation is voice training and acting lessons, so that—when

the transition to shouting is at hand—one can shout loud enough to make one’s emotional appeal. The former is the utopian, Enlightenment ideal of reasoned debate, rational politics, democracy, and verbal diplomacy; the latter is our world, the world of image, charisma, negative advertising, power politics, and war.

But, if we want deliberative debate, democracy, and diplomacy, how do we get from here to there? Political philosophers have been arguing about arguing for a long time. Even though the two sides described above occupy most of this territory, a third “camp” is emerging. (Hmm. There’s that metaphor again!) The third camp tries to break up the fight between the moral conversationalists and the political rhetoricians by attempting to get everyone off the battlefield, and to reconsider the shape and forms of the field of engagement. Lakoff and Johnson do this by making us examine the language we use to describe what we are doing when we argue. Political theorists like

Chantal Mouffe provide us with alternatives by pointing out that—even if argument is war—war is just one form (although a deadly form) of contest between adversaries. Mouffe’s alternative to a utopic, moral, deliberative democracy is—what she calls—an “agonistic pluralism” where *agon* is understood as the ancient Greek term denoting a public celebration of games; a contest for the prize at those games; or, a verbal contest or dispute between two characters in a Greek play.<sup>1</sup>

Political theorists, like Mouffe, interested in the democratic potential of agonistic contests, oftentimes recast deliberative discussion as a language game—in the sense invented by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Moreover, this reimagining of politics leans heavily on Friedrich Nietzsche’s understanding of agonistics and ancient Greek philosophy. A close look at the writings of this set of political theorists (which must also include Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Bruno Latour) rewards one with the following insight:

just as Lakoff and Johnson show how everyday thinking about arguments draws on a set of metaphorical images and actions, so do these theorists assume a different set of metaphorical images and actions to describe verbal contests—specifically, game-like images and actions. Neither are these images and actions the moral frameworks of, for example, Jurgen Habermas and other moralists hoping for perfect conditions for communicative interaction. Nor, are these images and actions the violent ones implied by the commonsense metaphor “argument is war.”

What then are these images and actions? Two sorts of evidence can be gathered from a close reading of these theorists. One sort of evidence is articulated in the form of broad outlines or “sketches” for envisioning such a game. Chantal Mouffe provides an example of such a “sketch” in her article entitled “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”: “pluralist politics should be envisaged as a ‘mixed-game,’ i.e., in part collaborative and

in part conflictual, and not as a wholly co-operative game as most liberal pluralists would have it.” More specific, detailed, “diagrammatic” evidence comes from theorists who provide us with, what Gilles Deleuze calls, “thought images.” One such influential thought image is that coined by Deleuze and Guattari to describe non-hierarchical forms of knowledge and power; i.e., the rhizome. As demonstrated by online forums, like rhizome.org, such a thought image can influence an extensive, information architecture. However, even more substantial than these verbal descriptions are the graphically rendered diagrams that are sometimes ventured by theorists like Bruno Latour in his book *Science in Action*, a Nietzschean look at the agonistic dynamics of presumably democratic, scientific debate and controversy. Mouffe, Deleuze, Latour, and others have provided us with a reimagining of democratic debate as a contest to link, unlink, build, and dissolve assemblages of people and things.

# Adversarial Design

## Excerpts



Carl DiSalvo

Adversarial design straddles the boundaries of design and art, engineering and computer science, agitprop and consumer products. It spans a range of audiences and potential users, and falls under various labels, such as critical design and tactical media. But, across the differences, there is a common characteristic. Through designerly means and forms, adversarial design evokes and engages political issues. Adversarial design is a type of political design.

Within political theory, the notions of agonism and agonistic pluralism provide grounding for the idea of democracy as intrinsically contentious, and thereby, also provide a basis for understanding adversarial design, and what it means to talk about design doing the work of agonism. Agonism is a condition of disagreement and confrontation—a condition of contestation and dissensus. Those who espouse an agonistic approach to democracy encourage contestation and dissensus as fundamental to democracy. In this way, an agonistic democracy is different from

more formalized practices of deliberative democracy that privilege consensus and rationality.

Agonism is a condition of forever looping contention. The ongoing disagreement and confrontation are not detrimental to the endeavor of democracy but are productive of the democratic condition. Through contentious affect and expression, democracy is instantiated and expressed. From an agonistic perspective, democracy is a situation in which the facts, beliefs, and practices of a society are forever examined and challenged. For democracy to flourish, spaces of confrontation must exist, and contestation must occur. Perhaps the most basic purpose of adversarial design is to make these spaces of confrontation, and to provide resources and opportunities for others to participate in contestation.

The term adversary is used to characterize a relationship that includes disagreement and strife, but that lacks a



violent desire to abolish the other. In this way, agonism reveals its roots in the Greek word *agon*, or a public celebration of games; a contest for the prize at those games; or, a verbal contest between two characters in a Greek play.<sup>1</sup>

In labeling an object as adversarial, I mean to call attention to the contestational relations and experiences aroused through the designed thing, and the way it expresses dissensus. Labeling an object as adversarial also shifts the grounds for critique. It requires that the description and analysis of the object bring to the fore the way that its designed qualities enable or model the productive and ongoing to questioning, challenging, and reframing that typifies agonism.

Adversarial design is both a way of doing the work of agonism through designed things, and a way of interpreting designed things in terms of their agonistic qualities.

Identifying and making hegemonic forces and their means known is vital to the discourses of agonistic pluralism because it helps people discover and label sites and themes of contention in the political landscape. Likewise, the tactic of revealing hegemony through design provides the basis for further agonistic efforts through design or by other means. Revealing hegemony is a tactic of exposing and documenting the forces of influence in society, and the means by which social manipulation occurs.

Centrality, or neutrality, is impossible in agonistic pluralism because the broad and divisive differences of positions are considered to be constitutive of the political condition. Bias is required to do the work of agonism.<sup>2</sup>

Considering agonism as a generative frame shifts us to considering adversarial design as a process. In this process, the tactics of adversarial design—revealing hegemony, reconfiguring the remainder, and articulating agonistic

collectives—become places along a continuum of a practice. Practices of participatory design offer insights into how such a shift in adversarial design might unfold. These practices are concerned with opening the design process beyond the experts, and including those who might be affected by the designed thing in the activities of imagining, conceptualizing, and creating products and services.

Doing adversarial design and using design to do the work of agonism require a similar perspective. If we abandon the notion that any one design will completely or even adequately address our social concerns or resolve our social issues, then adversarial design can provide those spaces of confrontation—in the form of products, services, events, and processes—through which political concerns and issues can be expressed and engaged. To do adversarial design is to embrace a commitment to discovering and inventing ways to express and enable productive dissensus and contestation.

### Chantal Mouffe:

For “agonistic pluralism,” the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.

### Rosalyn Deutsche:

Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence.

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# Structures for Discord

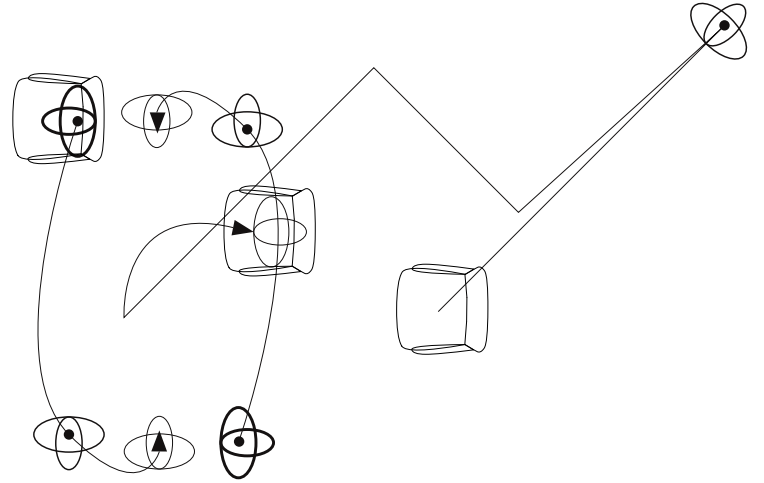
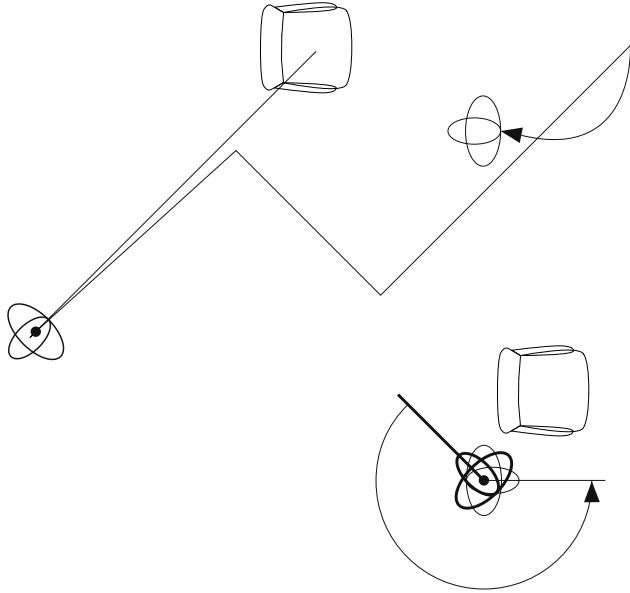
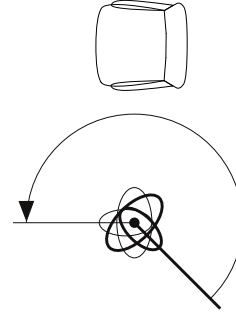
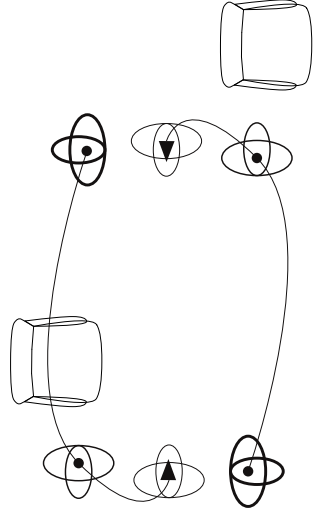
## (After Balanchine's *Agon*)

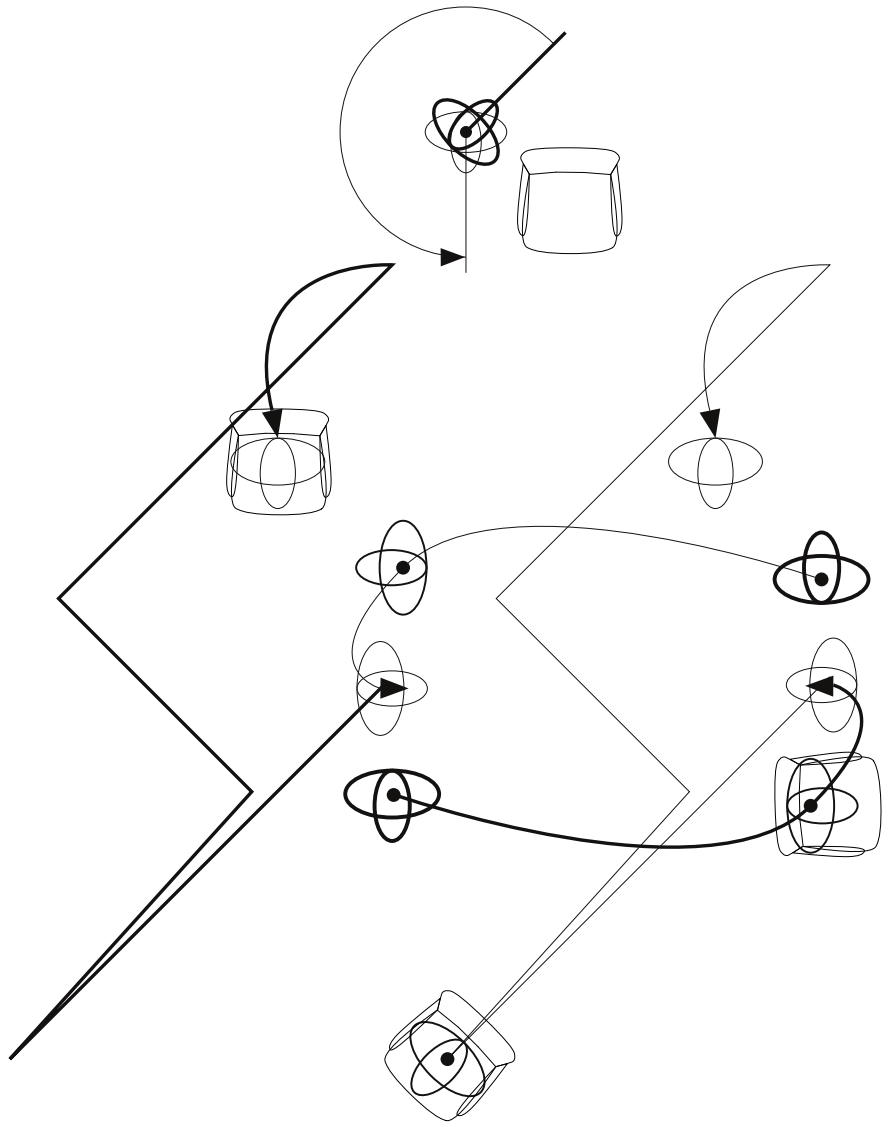
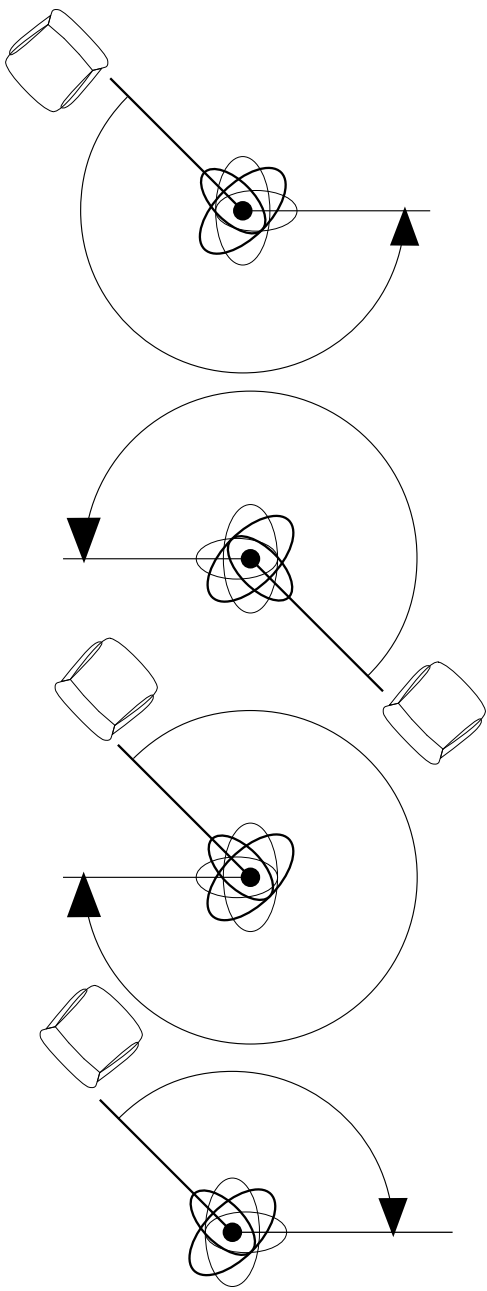


Mark Shepard

*Agon* (1957), a ballet by George Balanchine with music by Igor Stravinsky, serves as a point of departure for articulating spatial structures of contest and conflict within the context of a conversation between four people. The diagrams explore the “programming” of the event, collapsing practices associated with both the organization of a conference session and that of the space within which it takes place.

Drawing on segments of the opening Pas-de-Quatre of Balanchine's ballet, the diagrams attempt to map indications for movement and action that oscillate between stationary and traveling, homophony and canon, side-by-side and mirrored. Understood as both playing field and playbook, the diagrams aim to inject an agonistic logic into the structural relations inscribed by the arrangement of bodies and furnishings in space throughout duration of the session.





# Productive Friction



John Seely Brown

Productive friction increases the potential for innovation, learning, and capability building by gathering people from relevant specializations around difficult problems in settings that enhance creative problem solving. When people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and skill sets engage with each other on real problems, the exchange usually generates friction—that is, misunderstandings and arguments—before resolution and learning occur. Often, this friction becomes dysfunctional; misunderstanding devolves into mistrust, and opposing sides fixate on the distance between them rather than their common challenges. Yet, properly harnessed, friction can become very productive, accelerating learning, generating innovation, and fostering trust across diverse participants. Our view of productive friction relates to the concept of “creative abrasion” as originally defined by Gerald Hirshberg, director of Nissan Design International, and richly developed by Dorothy Leonard, in *Wellsprings*

*of Knowledge*. These early descriptions of creative abrasion typically focus on opportunities for knowledge building at the work-group level within the enterprise. In contrast, our discussion of productive friction focuses on opportunities for capability building across specialized enterprises within process networks. We also believe that the notion of productive friction can help shape new approaches to strategy. In the business world’s relentless quest for efficiency over the past several decades, most executives have become conditioned to believe that all friction is bad. After all, a frictionless economy was the nirvana promised to us by the dot-com visionaries, was it not? Friction was a sign of waste, and needed to be rooted out wherever it reared its ugly head. Perhaps we have been too hasty in dismissing all friction. Perhaps we should learn to embrace friction, even to seek it out and to encourage it, when it promises to provide opportunities for learning and capability building. We need institutional frameworks that

can help foster productive friction, and the learning that comes with it, rather than the dysfunctional friction that we too often encounter in large corporations around the world today.

Performance fabrics are key enablers in organizing and orchestrating process networks. Performance fabrics underlie shared meaning and dynamic trust—without these elements, loose coupling would quickly unravel, and process networks would disintegrate into rivalries. Performance fabrics and loose coupling enable not just the effective coordination of geographically distributed business participants, but also the rapid building of capability across enterprises. We call this concept “leveraged capability building” to indicate that, no matter how effectively any individual company builds its own capabilities, it will push its performance to new levels faster by forming partnerships with companies with complementary specializations. Building capabilities together requires a more systematic

understanding of the mechanisms that enhance performance across broad networks of participants.

Performance fabrics can help make friction productive rather than dysfunctional. Yet, performance fabrics alone cannot create productive friction. Some additional elements are required. We will focus on four elements—performance metrics, people, prototypes, and pattern recognition—the “Four P’s.”

#### Performance Metrics

In this context, the design of business processes can significantly increase or reduce constraints. Traditional, hardwired business processes can coerce the participant by over-specifying actions and constraining solution spaces, whereas loosely coupled business processes can remove such constraints by specifying the performance results for each module, rather than specifying the activities within the modules. Thus, loosely coupled networks enhance the potential for productive friction.

“Action points” are generally required to make these performance requirements tangible and immediate. Productive friction occurs when participants must act together, perhaps introducing specific products, addressing performance shortfalls, or resolving breakdowns in operations. Without these concrete action points, people can too easily produce abstract and general answers or perspectives that imply action, but actually hide profound disagreements or misunderstandings. Friction occurs precisely because participants can no longer conceal their differences, and must surface them to move forward.

#### People with Relevant Specialized Talent

Productive friction depends on effectively mobilizing people with relevant specializations or perspectives. When productive friction extends beyond a single enterprise, the people who must solve often come from very different institutional backgrounds, and possess

dissimilar skills. Increasingly, customers interact deeply with vendors in an interaction that generates new insights and innovation at both the product and the process level. Given the diversity of skills and backgrounds, executives should recruit “translators” and “knowledge brokers” who can bridge the knowledge gaps between the various participants. In general, people engaged in productive friction must develop a deep, textured understanding of, and respect for, the relevant context for innovation, as well as each other’s specializations and experiences.

#### Prototypes for Shared Meaning

Productive friction requires difficult negotiations among people with different skills, experiences, and mind-sets. These negotiations can be significantly enhanced by appropriate prototypes. We are using the term prototypes broadly here to describe any object that can be shared or accessed by a number of people, and can help these people negotiate across

the boundaries of distinct specializations. Prototypes might be anything from clay models and computer simulations to process maps and spreadsheets. As the requirements for innovation evolve, companies will likely use different kinds of prototypes to enhance productive friction.

#### Pattern Recognition

So far, we have discussed the elements required if productive friction is to generate innovation. To build capability, participants must capture and disseminate the results of this innovation more broadly within and across enterprises. The participants need reflective processes designed to identify the practices emerging from innovation, to recognize patterns, and to increase awareness of high-impact practices across appropriate groups of practitioners. For more modest forms of innovation, where similar business situations repeatedly emerge, teams often feel dismayed over having reinvented the wheel.

Often, innovations remain localized, and their economic impact marginalized, because organizations fail to recognize patterns or disseminate successful practices. Fortunately, new generations of information technology can help organizations reflect on the patterns of productive friction, and to communicate emergent innovative practices. Ironically, specialization in general and orchestration in particular strengthen this dimension of friction.

As discussed earlier, specialization paradoxically exposes a company to a broader range of relevant situations, enabling it to connect the dots. Rather than focusing solely on capturing local inventions, these companies can step back and spot broader patterns emerging, so that they can better assess the real significance of individual innovations.

#### The Bottom Line

As we have seen, performance fabrics do double duty. They facilitate loosely coupled coordination across a large number of enterprises, but they also provide the basis

for productive friction to occur. Executives focused on the challenge of amplifying specialization across many enterprises must ensure that the performance fabric is strong enough to support productive friction.

**Test the performance fabric.** To assess the performance fabric of your process network, you need to look at your partners. Identify the five most innovative business partners of your company. Use an independent third party to assess the degree of trust that you have established with these business partners, particularly in creating a foundation for capability building.

- How willing are these business partners to discuss some of their most creative ideas with you?
- What would these business partners expect to happen if they did discuss some of their most creative ideas with you?
- Have these business partners learned anything from you

that makes them better at what they do?

- Have you learned from these business partners anything that makes you better at what you do?
- What could be done to strengthen incentive structures on both sides of the relationship to motivate better performance against expectations?
  - What are the specific opportunities to deepen capabilities on both sides of the relationship, and to what extent are the opportunities addressed?

Reassess choices regarding process networks and business partners.

Many companies typically select business partners solely on the basis of short-term considerations. Similarly, to the extent that companies participate in process networks, the choices regarding participation may have been driven by short-term motivations. As companies begin to realize the need to accelerate capability

building, they must reassess their past criteria for creating and sustaining relationships. Ask the following questions about your choices regarding process networks and business partners:

To what extent did you choose your five most significant business partners on the basis of their ability to accelerate your own long-term capability by improving and problem solving with you?

To what extent do the orchestrators (they may be you or someone else) of our process networks focus on accelerating the capability building of the participants? What is their track record to date?

Identify the five most innovative companies with capabilities complementary to yours. Do you have effective business partnerships with them? If not, why not?

Foster productive friction. Identify a particularly difficult business problem addressed by a major business partner relationship today—perhaps a product development project, a supply-chain performance

issue, or a channel conflict that is undermining customer satisfaction. In terms of the four P's—performance metrics, people, prototypes, and pattern recognition—assess how the firm is handling the problem. Determine whether the firm could enhance the potential for more innovation and learning by strengthening one or more of these elements. Step back and evaluate the potential implications more broadly for efforts to foster productive friction.

### Ahab:

Let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!

### John Gottman:

My laboratory conducts what amounts to the most intensive studies of couples interacting ever attempted, something akin to an X-ray or CAT scan of a living relationship. My research teams have compared microsecond to microsecond, how couples talk to one another . . . We have been able to predict with startling accuracy which couples will stay together and which couples will split. In one study, for example, we were able to foretell with an astonishing 94 percent accuracy which couples were headed for divorce three years later.

. . . A lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship.

. . . But there's much more to know that how to fight well. Not all stable couples resolve conflicts in the same way.

Nor do all couples mean the same thing by "resolving" the conflict. In fact, I have found that there are three different styles of problem solving into which healthy marriages tend to settle. In a **validating marriage**, couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise. In a **conflict-avoiding marriage**, couples agree to disagree, rarely confronting their differences head-on.

And finally, in a **volatile marriage**, conflicts erupt often, resulting in passionate disputes . . . In the ecology of marriage, some degrees of negative interaction keeps the union to thrive. But in a sense a marriage lives and dies by what you might loosely call its arguments, by how well disagreements and grievances are aired. The key is how you argue—whether your style escalates tension or leads to feelings of resolution . . .

Wherever your marital journey takes you, I wish you years of joy and pleasure together—spiced with just enough negativity to keep your marriage strong.



# John Henry Days

## Excerpt

Coleson Whitehead



It was custom on nights like this, when they were far from home, to share stories of what they had seen on their journeys. For they understood things about each other that no outsider ever could. The stories passed the time through the night and sustained them.

And so it came to pass that when the van returns them to the hearth of the Talcott Motor Lodge, Dave Brown, Tiny and Frenchie repair to a room to drink and tell each other stories. Frenchie had swiped two bottles of tonic water while the bartenders put away the liquor, Dave Brown shares his stock of gin and Tiny grants his room for their meeting. After the drinks have been passed around and each man has slaked his thirst, Dave Brown says that what happened to J. reminds him of something he had seen years before, when he was young. His comrades lean forward to listen to his story and Dave Brown begins his tale.

“They were the greatest rock and roll band in the world—

do you understand what I mean when I say that? They were a thing you could never be again. Those days are over. Today the record companies have that kind of hysteria to a science. It’s a matter of mapping the demographics, man, but the thing about that time is, there wasn’t a demographic. We were all the same thing. Mick was singing about stuff we all did. Fucking around with girls in the backseat, cruising up and down the streets looking for something we couldn’t put our finger on but we knew it when we saw it. Satisfaction. We were all war babies. Mick and Keith knew what it was like to grow up in the fifties. It was the same over there as it was over here. They had the same parents. They were the war generation and we were the new generation.”

“Flower power.”

“You know me better than that. I’m saying it was different. It all seemed possible. That doesn’t sound like me, but that’s what it felt like and the Stones were a part of it. They made me

want to write about music. Do you know what I mean? Talk to any rock writer of that time and they'll talk about the Stones. You can argue for hours about the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but the dark wins every time so fuck the Beatles, just fuck em, perspective-wise. In the long view, I'd come back from college and sit in my room with my little record player with my hand on the needle and transcribe their lyrics and my annotations—which blues song Keith had taken what riff from, which words Mick was cribbing from who. Before they got their own voice. And I still consider that my first book. You can go to the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and look up their early appearances and see what I'm talking about. Ready, Steady, Go in sixty-four. The girls screaming, God, you can smell their panties. This fucking whiff. Can you imagine what it must have been like for parents to watch that on television with their children and realize that their fresh-faced daughters all wanted to fuck that mangy scarecrow on stage? Nor kiss

and nuzzle, but actually fuck Mick Jagger. Hell, I wanted to fuck Mick and I'm as straight as they come. You can still feel it in those old black-and-white museum pieces. I looked them up last year when I was researching this thing for GQ. I had some time to kill so I got out the tapes of Ready, Steady, Go and T.A.M.I. And it all held up. One of the museum interns came by and I thought it was my father going to tell me to turn it down.

### Robby Herbst:

When you can hold the stink and the light simultaneously, then aren't you really alive?

### Jean-François Lyotard

[The death instincts are like] acceleration. They are the same as the life instincts, but in a hurry. It is a difference of rhythm.

### Thomas F. Scanlon:

Not only does the competitive ideal underlie the Greek notion of *Eros* as struggle, but the essential antagonism of Agon is mitigated or resolved by its association with desire. Athletes are desired and desire; athletes worship Eros; and Eros himself indulges in athletics, even against the ultimate opponent, *Anteros*, or "reciprocal desire."

# Slaps and Embraces: A Rhetoric of Particularism



Doris Sommer

Toni Morrison:

“[African American] music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and it embraces, it slaps and it embraces.”

Rigoberta Menchú:

“I’m still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.”

Signs of democratizing difference and contingent translations are everywhere, unless we continue to ignore them. The gesture that first stirred me was Rigoberta Menchú’s peculiar insistence that she was keeping secrets in her 1983 testimony about Guatemala’s war on Indians. Why proclaim silence instead of being quiet, I wondered, as if announcing secrets mattered more than keeping them? One result was that no amount of information she shared could establish a mood of intimacy or conspiracy with me as a reader. Maybe that was the point of her performance, I began to think: to engage me without surrendering herself. A formidable lesson.<sup>1</sup>

Competent readers are unaccustomed to rebuffs, so unaccustomed and ill-prepared that slights go unattended.<sup>2</sup> Years of privileged training in literary traditions understandably add up to a kind of entitlement to know a book, possibly with the possessive and reproductive intimacy of Adam, who knew Eve. As teachers and students, we have until now welcomed resistance as coy, teasing, a summons to test and hone our competence. We may pick up a book because we find it attractive, or because mimetic desire kindles a murderous urge to displace a model reader. Always, we assume in our enlightened secular habits that the books are happy to have our attention,

like wallflowers lined up for a quick turn or an intimate tête-à-tête. If the book seems easy, if it allows possession without a struggle, and cancels the promise of flattery for an expert reading, our hands may go limp at the covers. Easy come, easy go.

The more difficult the book, the better. Difficulty is a challenge, an opportunity to struggle and to win, to overcome resistance, uncover the codes, to get on top of it, to put one's finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then to call it ours. We take up an unyielding book to conquer it, and to feel grand, enriched by the appropriation, and confident that our cunning is equal to the textual tease that had, after all, planned its own capitulation. Books want to be understood, don't they, even when they are coy and evasive? Isn't part of the game to notice that coyness is a cover-up for practically nothing, a distancing effect that produces our desire? Evasiveness and ambiguity are familiar interpretive flags that readers erect on the books they leave behind.

Feeling grand and guiltless, we proceed to the next conquest.

"I am only interested in what does not belong to me. Law of Man. Law of the Cannibal."<sup>3</sup> This is the gluttonous way in which Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade put it. Appropriation of the other is what our New World cultures feed on, as long as the other offers the spice of struggle, because cannibals reject bland and boring meat.<sup>4</sup> I thank Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda for pointing this out. In this digestion of Montaigne's essay, Europe is also constituted by ingesting its others. Walter Benjamin, for one, is horror-stricken at the literary cannibalism at home. "The reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it."<sup>5</sup> "Eating the Other" is also bell hooks' description for white appropriations of minority cultures.<sup>6</sup> Infinitely expanding Walt Whitman didn't mince words: "All this I swallow . . . and it becomes mine . . ." <sup>7</sup> Andrade's point is, after all, that devouring alterity is

what makes us modern (or just human, for Freud), as we participate in an occidental culture nourished on novelty. Therefore, provocations by Whitman and Andrade, and the revulsion of Benjamin and hooks can stand in for other, more contrite, admissions of plunder.

But how contrite is Roland Barthes' self-consciousness in *Pleasure of the Text*? It pushes reader-response theory to its eroticized limits, to an orgasmic release from the very text that gave him pleasure. Here, the Benjaminian "aura" of art, capable of reciprocating an admirer's gaze, passes over to the viewer and stays to enhance only him.<sup>8</sup> "The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me."<sup>9</sup> Dependent and eager to please, the text "must prove to me that it desires me."<sup>10</sup> As reader and object of desire, the solicited partner for an intimate entanglement, Barthes performs tirelessly in his extended essay to reciprocate. The result is a book composed of flirtatiously neurotic intermittence,<sup>11</sup> deliciously anticipated but unpredictably

syncopated interventions at gaps in the body of conventional criticism. Barthes might have taken advantage of his own point about the neurotic rhythm of desire to notice and to name the ways a text's desire for the reader is punctuated by apparent deaths of intimacy. But he hardly noticed, probably because he was flirting with Flaubert and Sade instead of exposing himself to particularists. Abrasions that heighten pleasure are, for him, an effect of reading, not of a text's abrasiveness.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Barthes' unabashed hedonism sounds scandalous against the drone of academic theories; and it rubs dangerously against the sensitive skin of correct comportment in today's American academy. Is it really foreign though, to more common strains of reader-response theory, which flatter readers as objects of textual desire, as partners, collaborators, co-authors?

In critics as different as Georges Poulet is from Wolfgang Iser, the focus has been on the readers'

agency. Whether agency is understood as interiorizing (not to say cannibalizing) the text in Poulet's version<sup>13</sup> or as talking back to set the text into dialogic motion in Iser's classic studies.<sup>14</sup> Among his many essays, one that is most promising for the readings I attempt here focuses on the particular shape of readings as imposed by the author's regulation of the process.<sup>15</sup> Readers are necessary and equal partners in the shared pleasures of esthetic production. Poulet claims passively to "accede" to a text,<sup>16</sup> but only after initiating his own surrender to the helplessly dependent objects that crave his attention:

Books are objects. On a table, on shelves, in store windows, they wait for someone to come and deliver them from their materiality, from their immobility. When I see them on display, I look at them as I would at animals for sale, kept in little cages, and so obviously hoping for a buyer. For—there is no doubting it—animals do know that their fate depends on a human intervention . . . Is not the

same true of books? . . . They wait. Are they aware that an act of man might suddenly transform their existence? They appear to be lit up with that hope. Read me, they seem to say. I find it hard to resist their appeal.<sup>17</sup>

Bookshops "cum" pet stores make a flimsy cover-up of love for sale.<sup>18</sup> Once the reader-prince commands a performance, and succumbs to his own sensitivity, the rest of his essay follows the rhythm of reciprocal possession. The first move is to purchase a partner, and to feel chosen by the book; the next is to appreciate its "offering, opening itself . . . It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it. In short, the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you."<sup>19</sup> As the entanglement proceeds, Poulet manages some distance, taking a breath for reflection on breathless activity. "On the other hand—and without contradiction—reading implies something resembling the apperception I have of myself . . . Whatever

sort of alienation I may endure, reading does not interrupt my activity as subject."<sup>20</sup> But, the repeatable rhythm of contact and consummation concludes by celebrating abandon to the writer who "reveals himself to us in us."<sup>21</sup> Celebration is in order because, far from diminishing the reader as ventriloquist or vehicle, abandon returns him to princely primacy. "The work lives its own life within me; in a certain sense, it thinks itself, and it even gives itself a meaning within me,"<sup>22</sup> a universal meaning that finally does not belong to a particular work. It is a haunting "transcendence" that is perceptible when criticism can "annihilate, or at least momentarily forget, the objective elements of the work, and to elevate itself to the apprehension of a subjectivity without objectivity."<sup>23</sup>

Poulet's immodest dance with the death of authorship suggests one limit of reader-response criticism, the frontier where self-centered ludicism overcomes the specificity of texts.<sup>24</sup>

Refusal need not be entirely coy, not simply a spur to desire. It is also a barricade against the rush of sentimental identification that lasts barely as long as the read. Refusal insures an indigestible residue from voracious mastery.<sup>25</sup> To the extent that particularist writing is provocative, it is calculated to produce the desire that makes frustration felt. A challenge for [those] like Menchú is, logically, how to be interesting without promising the dividends of ownership. It is to produce enough desire for refusal to smart, because the objective here is to engage unfamiliar, perhaps unfriendly, readers, not to be ignored by them. Through a convenient *metalepsis* that readers of René Girard's should notice, refusal itself can produce desire.<sup>26</sup> Some books claim authority, if only to deauthorize others. Before they can refuse attention, they have to elicit it. They do so by a slight to our vanity as competent critics. Irritated by the snub by an illiterate Guatemalan Indian, we may wonder what kind

of superiority in the Other accounts for our interpretive demotion.

Their tactic is neither to chastise our egotism nor to implore our ethical self-effacement. Nor do they plead for recognition by creating individual subjectivities associated with empowered men, the way some feminists have done. A limitation or boomerang-effect of either the self-effacing or the self-affirming gestures is that they reinscribe privilege for readers who can choose to be moral or welcoming. These writers exhibit no abjection to be resignified, no essences that could be known. Instead, they assume that their subject positionality is enabling, and that access to it is limited. With telling asides about the reader's difference from the narrator, with truncated allusions and purposeful incomprehensibility, their texts refuse to flow. The readings they permit, between stop signs and warnings against trespassing, can teach critics a self-doubting step too lame for conquest.

It will be objected that "Outsider" is not a fixed or impermeable category. The claim of an insider's authenticity is always suspect, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues in his "Lesson of Little Tree," about the book that passed for a Native American autobiography, and turned out to be a white man's fiction.<sup>27</sup> The revelation was a scandal. It outraged a public that had assumed it was reading the real thing. The lesson of passing, Gates concludes, is that "No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world."<sup>28</sup> This availability makes some minority critics angry, because ethnic, cultural content is eaten up by white consumers who are careless of the people they cannibalize.<sup>29</sup> But, particularist texts are different from displays of cultural content that can be consumed. Particularism offers opacity, not to watch it evaporate or to congeal in shows of transparent authenticity, but to mark difference. It plays "signifying" games of double consciousness that deal

uneven hands to monocultural readers.

It may surprise some well-meaning readers to find that particularists do not imagine their cultures to be static, nor do they welcome offers of "universal" Reason and assimilation. The ecumenical gestures to reduce otherness to sameness suggest that difference is a superable problem, rather than a source of pride or simply the way we are in the world.<sup>30</sup> A liberal embrace that squeezes out difference, to make partners equal insofar as they are the same, is a gesture that Walt Whitman helped to confuse with democratic process. Some writers resist this embrace and similar gestures that would clone citizens from one ideal type.

To ask if the subaltern can speak, as Gayatri Spivak had asked, misses a related point. The pertinent question is whether the privileged reader can listen.<sup>31</sup> Privilege gets in the way of hearing even a direct address. "They just don't listen well," minority educators complain about their white colleagues.<sup>32</sup>

Subalterns write creative literature as well as active history. My own expectations of challenges to elite language came from reading texts that send presumption on discursive tangents away from the self-criticism that can move in vicious circles around readers at the center. The tangents lead to spaces that some readers do not occupy. But, before considering the general or theoretical questions that resistance raises for literary interpretation, our habitual resistance to resistance is worth considering from another, feminist, perspective.

Sometimes, learning requires unlearning, which is not easy. Several critical fronts still cheer on the conquest of knowledge. One front is a tradition known broadly as hermeneutics. Its strategies perform something like a clean-up campaign after confrontation with texts. Hermeneutics has typically advocated an empathic quest to identify with a work, as if displacing the author were the same as being in his or her place.<sup>33</sup>

Readers of particularist texts should fret about the loss of strangeness and difference. We may worry enough to offer a version of hermeneutics that locates what we cannot know, in both epistemological and ethical senses. It seems that only the epistemological meaning has been operative in other revisions of the hermeneutical project. But, resistant texts erect ethical constraints.

My concern, therefore, is with facile confluences of understanding with identification between reader and text. In that spirit, my project to locate limited engagements fits into a broadly hermeneutical project. The focus on a rhetoric of particularism could disturb our underexamined hermeneutical habits, if we can acknowledge certain perverse tropes that resist the heat of melting horizons. Rather than persuade readers to share judgments and interests, the recalcitrant figures perform the limits of sharing.

When others speak, their appeal, I have been saying, is

not an entreaty;<sup>34</sup> it brooks no subordination, and wants no empathy or murderous mutuality from the reader.<sup>35</sup> By appeal, I mean attractiveness, the books' capacity to play on our desires, and to frustrate them with a limiting subject-effect. The life and death game is to stop us short. Sometimes, I think that Rigoberta Menchú, Jesusa Palancares, the nameless narrator of *Balún Canán*, and Richard Rodriguez, write at length about their apparently private selves precisely to withhold the anticipated intimacy, and sting readers with the rebuff. Their most provocative performance may be the cold-shoulder effect. Noticing this effect evidently allies me to reader-response critics who locate the ways a text teaches the reader how to read.<sup>36</sup> More boldly, we might say that concern for readerly responses asks how texts constitute readers through the seductive education; that is, how writing intervenes in the world.

### Syncopation:

A variety of rhythms that disturb and interrupt each other to create a new beat.

### Martin Luther King, Jr.:

There is enough stuff in me to make both a gentleman and a rogue.

### Doris Sommer:

*Jouissance* happens when one tongue invades another . . . when rubbing words the wrong way feels right.

### Counterpoint

The relationship between two or more voices, which are harmonically interdependent, but independent in contour and rhythm.

### Martin Luther King, Jr.:

There is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. There is a recalcitrant South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul.

### Doris Sommer:

Democracy works in unscored counterpoint. Precisely because citizens cannot presume to feel, or to think, or to perform alike, their ear for otherness makes justice possible.

# Metaphysics, Money, and The Messiah: a conversation about Melville's *The Confidence-Man*



D. Graham Burnett & Cornel West

P.M. Dawn:

Reality used to be a friend of mine . . .

The following is a conversation about a quintessentially American parable, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, the last long-form work of prose fiction by Herman Melville (1819–1891). This strange tale of performance, deception, and sudden intimacies is built out of a sequence of glancing encounters among the passengers of a Mississippi riverboat bound for New Orleans. Who is who in the story is never quite clear, and when money changes hands (as it often does), there are usually reasons for concern—not least because of the shadowy presence of the title character, whose rosy promises entrance even the cautious. Set on April Fool's Day (and published on April 1, 1857), *The Confidence-Man*—though a critical and commercial disaster at the time—has now puzzled, beguiled, and inspired Melville readers for a century and a half.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT: Cornel, it feels like a good time to have a serious conversation about a difficult text. I figured we could dig right in, since it is a premise of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* that here in the United States, perfect strangers can walk right up to each other and start on a serious conversation.

CORNEL WEST:

We're hardly strangers, though, brother Graham.

DGB: So true—it is almost twenty years now since I sat as a sophomore in your course [at Princeton] on “Cultural Criticism,” weeping like a baby, along with about three hundred other impressionable youths, at your lecture on the death of Socrates. Many years gone by, and now our offices are a hundred yards apart. Even so, it is a conceit of this book that in some sense we are all fundamentally strangers, no?

CW: That's right, that's true.

DGB: So let's dive in, and start with a scene that sets the stage for everything



that follows, namely, the introduction of the character called “Black Guinea.” You will remember that Melville offers us the pathetic picture of an apparently crippled, black beggar pleading for alms aboard the Mississippi steamer, *Fidèle*, where all the action of the novel will unfold. Guinea and a “purple-faced drover” strike up a conversation. The drover asks the supplicant, “But where do you live?” and Guinea replies, “All ‘long shore, sar; dough now I’se going to see brodder at der landing; but chiefly I libs in der city.” The drover replies, “St. Louis, ah? Where do you sleep there of nights?” and Black Guinea replies, “On der floor of der good baker’s oven, ser.” The drover replies, “In an oven? Whose, pray? What baker, I should like to know, bakes such black bread in his oven, alongside of his nice white rolls, too. Who is that too charitable baker, pray?” “Dar he be,” replies Black Guinea, “with a broad grin lifting his tambourine high over his head.” “The sun is the baker, eh?” replies the drover, a supposition Guinea confirms: “Yes sar, in der

city dat good baker warms der stones for dis ole darkie when he sleeps out on der pabements o’ nights.”

What’s going on here? I’m not sure, but I propose that we consider this curious exchange in light of the following excerpt from Aristotle’s *Parts of Animals*, famously cited in Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism*.

We are told about something Heraclitus said to visitors who wanted to get to see him. Approaching, they found him warming himself in an oven. Surprised, they stood there in consternation—above all because he encouraged them to come in without fear, saying: “Even here the gods are present.”<sup>1</sup>

Now the juxtaposition may seem a little far-fetched, but Heraclitus is mentioned by name in *The Confidence-Man*, so we know that Melville is engaged with this character, and the circumstantial consonances in the scenes are not trivial. Moreover that last line—“even here the gods are present,” “einai

gar kai entautha theous”—resonates in a powerful way with the larger themes of this novel. Indeed, I want to suggest that this tagline—here tacitly cited, we might say, by Melville—amounts to an antithesis of the traditional trope et in arcadia ego . . .

CW: Even here in the garden the devil is present . . .

DGB: Right. As you know, the dominant thread of twentieth-century criticism of *The Confidence-Man* reads the story’s central figure—the shape-changing huckster-demiurge who promenades through this “masquerade” in different incarnations, selling dreams, and preaching hope—as a Satanic presence. Black Guinea would appear to be the first of these incarnations, as well as the point of departure for the whole tale: his invocation of a list of “good, kind, honest ge’mman” who will vouch for his bona fides becomes the roster of con men (or, perhaps

more precisely, the roster of disguises for Black Guinea himself) we will encounter in the pages that follow.

But, against this diabolical reading, I offer the Heraclitan apothegm: “Even here, the gods are present.” Even here, as in “even in this broken, black body”; even here, as in “even here, in the heart of the Americas.” I would like to believe that at this moment Melville is self-consciously offering us this lowly figure as a kind of profound metaphysician, and asking us already, from the outset, to be worried about our inability to see philosophical profundity where we least expect it. At the same time, I see Melville staking a claim to America as a place for philosophy and theology, not merely a place for commerce and wilderness—even here, the gods are present, even here on a riverboat in the muddy, middle stretches of the Mississippi.

The most radical claim, then, would be that this Heraclitan invocation of Black Guinea signals the high ambition

of the text: to serve as the evangel of a distinctively American metaphysical posture. This is a book about what America offers to the problems of thought and being: space, movement, destabilized social hierarchies, perpetual and sequential opportunities for self-invention. At one point, in an irruption of authorial voice, Melville writes that there are only a handful of “original” characters in all of literature: original like a Hamlet, or a Don Quixote. Yet, it is clear that the confidence-man is such a character—our autochthonous, philosophical persona. America itself is the condition of possibility for this figure.

CW: It’s a fascinating reading. I mean, right off we have to keep in mind that Melville has a history of using black characters as a way of concealing an existential profundity vis-à-vis supposedly sophisticated society. You think right away of Pip, for example, in *Moby-Dick*. When Sterling Stucky talks about the crucial role of black characters and black culture in Melville, he

makes you think of the black church at the very beginning of *Moby-Dick* that becomes a kind of prefiguration of that blackness, of blackness that Melville is going to be wrestling with in the novel as a whole.

This is the grand Melville saying, “Well, let’s look at those on the underside of American civilization, the Pips and the Black Guineas, who not only have much to say, but have a power of disclosing and revealing a certain kind of shallowness and hollowness at the heart of a civilization that claims to be thick with plenitude and girded with certainty.”

But when you point to this business with Black Guinea and the oven, the stove, you get me thinking of Descartes as a stove philosopher: Descartes in Germany at his stove, wrestling with skepticism, wrestling with doubt—this is a figure who is dealing with the grounds of confidence, the problem that lies at the center of Melville’s text.

See, I think it’s key to read *The Confidence-Man* against two other literary texts in American culture: *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathanael West; and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*. I think of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where you get the hero/antihero who comes in and reveals that we have no grounds for our confidence in the world—not in the arts, not even in religion. He becomes a Christ figure who is simultaneously, in a sense, an Antichrist. He is not the devil, exactly, but he is a kind of veiled figure, a Christ in disguise who is unable to deliver like the traditional Christ figure delivered.

Similarly so, with that extraordinary character Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*. Hickey, too, is a kind of problematic Christ figure—not simply an Antichrist, but really a Christ who can’t deliver, a Christ who sells dreams. But, it is even stranger than that: he sells the death of dreams too. He sells confidence but spawns a lack of confidence. He sows hope and transformation, but

in the end he spawns radical distrust, even destruction.

These figures, these prophets of the pipe dream, are deeply rooted not just in Melville as a whole, but, particularly in this text.

Now another way of talking about all this is to look to Luke 18:8, and that famous question, “When the son of man comes will he find faith on earth?” Now by “faith” here we’re not talking about just faith in God—we’re talking about the fiducial constitution of our existence, the fiduciary dimension of the human condition. The kind of thing Michael Polanyi talked about with great insight in *Personal Knowledge*, back in 1958.

DGB: I’m struck by your reference to the fundamental preoccupation with faith in this text. It has seemed to me at different moments that *The Confidence-Man* might plausibly be read against Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* in the following way: Melville is acutely aware of the necessity of using distrust as a method for the

production of knowledge—"I have confidence in distrust" or "I have trust in distrust," his characters say, parroting the stove philosopher himself—and yet, this text seems steeped in the awareness that knowledge itself cannot save us.

CW: Yes, that's right, to be sure.

DGB: So, I think of Kierkegaard, who wants us to begin by remembering that belief—faith—is not knowledge, that there is a condition of "waiting to have revelation of what was in fact the case," and that's the experience of our lives. We do not know what follows our immediate perceptual existence, and it is only once we know what follows that the life we have lived can be understood under its proper aspect, under the aspect of eternity. This is the central problem of the small volume Kierkegaard published in the same year as *Fear and Trembling*: the book called *On Repetition*. So, we are cursed, required, to live in this suspended state, without knowledge of that which is determinative of

our condition. Can Melville's text be read as an account of the necessity of faith in a Kierkegaardian, or existential, mode?

CW: Yes, you're right on the mark in terms of shifting from the more Cartesian conception of "epistemology" to the more existential conceptions of what the great H. Richard Niebuhr, the finest American theological mind of the twentieth century, called "pistology" in his posthumous volume *Faith on Earth*. By "pistology" he means this existential belief that you are talking about, the business of trying to find some kind of meaning in a world of overwhelming chaos, in the world that Samuel Beckett calls "the mess." "Pistology" means imposing some order on the mess.

Now, take that wonderful line about Melville in Hawthorne's diary entry of November 20, 1856: "He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief." That says a great deal. Here's Melville contemplating annihilation;

he's wrestling to find some meaning—now, here. This is an existential struggle; this isn't an epistemological problem in the more technical sense used by our colleagues over in the philosophy department. This is a Kierkegaardian struggle, to be sure. We are in the realm of pistology here, since what H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind is that Greek word *pistis*, a term in the Koine Greek of the New Testament that usually gets translated as "faith." Pistology has to do with self-involved, self-invested, self-immersed conceptions of belief. It is what William James talks about in *The Will to Believe*: you're actually putting your life at stake, you're on the edge of the abyss, you're trying to find some meaning that sustains you in your trajectory from womb to tomb. So, this is existential in the deepest sense.

DGB: If we ask, "what's the difference between faith and confidence?" we get—etymologically speaking—just that little particle at the front end, "con," which has come to mean deception, but

has a prior sense of "with or among." In that latter sense at least, though perhaps in both, we catch a glimpse of the desire for each other—the spiritual and material need for each other, the appetite for each other—that is so important to this book.

CW: Absolutely. We are hungry for cultivated fellowship. This is a book about *paideia*, but it is a book that is uneasy about that too—in every "con" there's a little "con," if you know what I mean!

DGB: Let's talk about Emerson for a moment. Emerson is one of your heroes, but Melville can be read to offer a pretty damning indictment of *The Sage of Concord*.

CW: Yes, well, as we know, Melville stood in a very complicated relationship to Emerson. We know from the letters that he characterized him as a great man—as a diver, as a man who could dive. Melville said you can always see something in a man when he goes beyond mediocrity, when he goes

beyond easily discernible qualities, and Melville saw that in Ralph Waldo Emerson. On the other hand, though, maybe Waldo's just a Plato who talked through his nose. That is to say, maybe in the end he's someone who really didn't have an understanding of the depth of the darkness of the human condition—he refused to linger on the darkness. It's like Goethe's relation to Von Kleist, you know: "I don't want to deal with the darkness too long; I'm going to push the fearsome text aside, and move toward the cloudless sky."

DGB: So what about the part of *The Confidence-Man* that has been interpreted as directly satirical of Emerson and Thoreau both, namely, the encounter between the protean "cosmopolitan" and these two bizarre characters: the "mystic" Mark Winsome (usually read as Emerson), and his "practical disciple" Egbert (usually read as Thoreau). The subject of their encounter is—as always in *The Confidence-Man*—money.

CW: Part of the genius of Melville is that he understood

William James' insight: that the core of the religious and existential problem for human beings is the call for help. It's no accident that *Miss Lonelyhearts* begins with that call: the Christ figure there has to answer all these terrible anonymous letters written to the newspaper, where people bare their hearts and cry out in their pain—there is the girl with no nose, there is the victim of sexual abuse, and on and on. A suffering humanity, calling for help: that is who we are.

It is clear that Melville understood a certain version—yes, maybe a dominant version—of Emerson's conception of "self-reliance" as ultimately a philosophy that didn't allow persons authentically to call for help. On this view human beings were autonomous enough, self-sufficient enough, to make their way.

We know that Melville couldn't accept the dogmatic and orthodox Christian conception of that call for help, and of the obligation to respond. But, he nevertheless believed that the call was real, that it was inescapable, and

that a reply was indispensable. In his view anybody who plans to fly from cradle to grave without ever calling for help—at the most profound level—is somebody who is deeply confused, somebody whose philosophy has a gaping hole in the middle, a hole in its soul. So, Winsome ends up being this surface-like figure.

Yes, for sure, it's an indictment of Emerson, but we have to keep in mind that Melville also had some appreciation of the real Emerson, so we don't want to confuse Winsome with Emerson himself. In the end, Melville's argument is that Emersonian confidence in "self-reliance" is too easily earned, that this solipsistic trust is too lightly assumed, too glibly presupposed. It skipped the struggle and the call for help that Melville understood to be at the core of the human experience.

DGB: You make the call for help sound like a dark night of the soul, but in *The Confidence-Man* that call often bleats from the dark night of the wallet. What about the

money? You remember that when Winsome introduces his disciple Egbert, we get this strange line: Winsome says, "For to every philosophy there are certain rear parts, very important parts, and these, like the rear of one's head, are best seen by reflection." Yes, there's something scatological about this, as critics have been quick to point out, but I want to argue that, ultimately, in this text, the "rear part" of philosophy is money. Cornel, you know the expression "money-shot"?

CW: Yes, I do.

DGB: Well, we might say that what Melville does to Emersonian transcendentalism is toss it in front of the camera for its money-shot; and the money-shot is a tight shot on an open wallet. My sexualized term isn't gratuitous. It's explicit in the "hypothetical" disputation between the cosmopolitan and Egbert in this same scene: the cosmopolitan says (it's the refrain of the whole novel), "I am in want—urgent want of money," to which Egbert

replies dismissively that to call for a loan on the basis of friendship is “in platonic love to demand love rites.”

So, we come to the metaphysical money-shot: “I know that you have a great deal to say about God, and Jesus, and Love, and Truth, but here is the thing: I’m in want, I’m in urgent want, of a hundred dollars.” At this point, it doesn’t matter what book is on the table, what vast pronouncement is on the lips, what Buddha or Mahatma or carpenter’s son is at the front of the room—we are going to see the philosophy in action.

I take it to be a lemma of *The Confidence-Man* that you should never have a prophet or a guru or a priest or a savior to whom you have not owed actual money. When you see a promising, messianic candidate on the horizon, you have to walk right up and ask to borrow one hundred dollars, by way of opening overture.

CW: That’s a fascinating read. But I’ve got a different take

on all this. You remember at the end of Vice’s *The New Science*, where he says that one cannot be a wise man without piety, that piety is a precondition of wisdom? By piety he means what Plato is talking about in the *Euthyphro*, which is indebtedness to the sources of good in one’s life. So, piety really means acknowledging what was in place or antecedent to you as you made your entrée, and as you attempt to sustain yourself.

Another way of putting it is this: when Melville writes, “to every philosophy there are certain rear parts,” I am thinking of Heidegger, and of the implicit background conditions that are tacitly presupposed in any philosophical articulation or expression. Gadamer has made much of this. Polanyi also has made much of this, in terms of the tacit dimension of epistemic claims. It goes all the way to Edmund Burke, where prejudices are actually positive things, the very things that enable us to make the kind of knowledge claims that we make. These background conditions have to be made

explicit by means of serious interrogation, reflection, and so forth, and therefore, there’s no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of a piety—a piety that must be enacted; there’s no such thing as a legitimate autonomy independent of an acknowledgement of that which came before. Charles Taylor, of course, has offered profound insights in this regard, and Rorty, and others have picked it up.

If all this is true, then it means that some kind of historicist sensitivity—in the form of a pietistic invocation or acknowledgement of what was in place prior to any kind of philosophical claim—cannot be avoided. This means that philosophy becomes tied to history, society, tradition, the existential condition of the author, and even biographical details—so we are back with Melville, terrified of financial ruin, wrestling with death, and struggling with his complex relations to his father.

DGB: So, let’s fit that back with what we were saying

earlier about the limits of knowledge. I said before that this text knows knowledge cannot save us. So, we drew out Descartes and Kierkegaard, and suggested that *The Confidence-Man* understands the problem: “Okay, there are certain moves that you can make to try your claims to truth using radical doubt, skepticism, and so forth, but when you are finished razing the castles of deception, you are still going to need ground under your feet, and a roof over your head.” This is the foundational problem, and it remains a problem of belief. Are the “hinder parts of a philosophy” legible as the problem of belief?

CW: Well, the real question is whether Melville believes anything can save us. Can belief really save us? What if your life preserver doesn’t float? Melville might be precluding any sources of salvation here, and this is where the issue of the godhead becomes important. Remember that one line, brother, where he talks about how maybe the devil understands who we are

better than the creator does? It jumps out . . .

DGB: It's in chapter 22, "Tusculan Disputations," toward the end. And the line is—what an amazing line!—I'll read it: "The devil is very sagacious. To judge by the event, he appears to have understood man better even than the Being who made him."

CW: Yes, that's the one!

DGB: "Being" with a capital "B"? I hadn't noticed that. Talk about a Heideggerian moment . . .

CW: Reminds me a little bit of Schelling's great essay of 1809, on the essence of human freedom, where the very godhead itself becomes the center of a civil war between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It's a poetic text, and it has to do with whether the Satanic forces are actually more insightful regarding who we are as human beings than the being who supposedly created Lucifer himself. So, you get this battle in the godhead, and this is part of the problem of

evil. You know, Heidegger has great lectures on this, the lectures shortly after he left the Nazis—in the summer of 1936, at Freiburg—where he says that Schelling is the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century—other than Nietzsche, of course.

DGB: This goes beyond a traditional story of Manicheism, where the issue is mere strength. The issue here is something much stranger: it's a Manicheism of savvy, of intimacy, of even something like sympathy. Terrifying!

You put me in mind of the apocalyptic conclusion of this book, where, by the sputtering light of that histrionically allegorical "solar lamp"—with its two sides, one showing a "horned altar, from which flames arose," the other "the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo"—our possibly diabolical cosmopolitan leads the doddering, white-haired, Bible-reading, father figure into the labyrinth of scriptural apocrypha before whisking him off the stage and into the darkness. This is

worrisome, to be sure!

CW: So, you admit to the diabolism now!

DGB: It's worrisome, I can't lie. Yet, I am still resistant to interpreting the scene as a victory for the powers of darkness. I see the extinction of the solar lamp as the extinction of the whole business of truth and falsehood, the extinction of the adolescent preoccupation with epistemology, with the "really-real," and how we know it. We are being led—to invoke Nietzsche—out of the "bad air" of a cabined theology into a perfectly perspectival universe—and being led by a new kind of savior: the player, the silver-tongued belief-maker, the tambourine man of dreams. We could do a lot worse! This is no descent into blasphemous despair. Ultimately, the text presents a powerful account of faith: genuinely prohibit any gesture toward ontological fundamentals, and you have changed the game; cling to your faith right up to the moment you die, and you have made it. There is no place

from which the tightness or wrongness of your view can be assessed. The notion of your "wrongness" trades on an implicit—and formally illegitimate—God's-eye view.

CW: That is too rosy, brother—too rosy. The text is so fundamentally open-ended; it isn't going to save conventional Christianity for you. After all, even when you wander out into this new world, you're still in the hold of a ship of fools—and this takes us back to Sebastian Brandt's great work of 1494, *Das Narrenschiff*. Melville is deeper than Nietzsche here. Perspectival? Brother, Nietzsche closed a lot of questions. He was nothing if not sure about many answers.

DGB: Christianity is wrong, Judaism is wrong, Democracy is wrong, science is wrong . . .

CW: Melville is deeper than that. There is a level of existential interrogation here, and a Socratic questioning that keeps things open. Which doesn't mean the text is unreadable. I don't like it when the critics say it's

unreadable; I think it's very readable. There is play here, but it's not a Derridean-free play, because it is too earnest and serious to be Derridean. In fact, the comedy has difficulty surfacing. We get it at the very end, with the laughing of the little flame-colored boy in the last chapter, but the laughter is so tear-soaked and hard earned that it is very different from what we associate with deconstructionist readings, it seems to me. This is certainly not just about language or textuality; this is really all about the humanist notion of the soul, and the heart, and our tragic choices. Melville recognizes the price you have to pay for each option you chose, and isn't that the truth?

DGB: You have to pay to play, the cosmopolitan might say. Are we back to money, the fundamentally transactional character of the call for help?

CW: Do you remember that wonderful line in *Miss Lonelyhearts* when Nathanael West says something like, "The commercial spirit is the father of lies"? There's always a whiff of death

when we talk about lies and mendacity, so you get this existential connection with the economic, just as we have the link between epistemology and the state of one's soul. Yes, this is all a kind of Socratic questioning, an open investigation of what it means to be human—but at the same time, you're right that there is something very American here, in terms of the ubiquitous character of market relations and business transactions.

DGB: What about truth? Melville puts in the mouth of a forbidding character—the "ursine" Missourian, clad in skins—one of the most memorable lines of the whole book:

"[W]ith some minds truth is, in effect, not so cruel a thing after all, seeing that, like a loaded pistol found by poor devils of savages, it raises more wonder than terror, its peculiar virtue being unguessed, unless, indeed, by indiscreet handling, it should happen to go off of itself."

This image is a notch more complicated than the later

business about truth as a "thrashing-machine." That we get: truth is dangerous, but used correctly, it feeds us—it's a tool. Much more unsettling is this business about the loaded gun. Because what we have here is truth that is, in fact, not scary or dangerous at all at first. Rather, it's fascinating—until we screw around with it just a little too much, ignoramuses that we are. At which point, it may or may not be fatal, but its real "virtue"—death-dealing—we only realize too late. Moreover, once it has "gone off" it is, it would seem, perfectly inert forevermore. This feels to me like a powerful way of understanding the "loadedness" of the epistemological enterprise, of the whole Western philosophical tradition since Descartes.

CW: I think of the final scene again, and the voices calling from the darkness: "To bed with ye, ye divils, and don't be after burning your fingers with the likes of wisdom." We get truth as a gun that could go off at any moment, and wisdom as a consuming

fire better left untouched.

DGB: What do we make of these ways of accounting for the humanist's cherished ideals of truth and wisdom?

CW: Well, there's a sense in which you have to go back to Hamlet. One of the things that is so distinctive about that play is the sense you get that Shakespeare has seen so much, and seen through so much, that his wisdom is indeed loaded—that it's deadly. Sure enough, we see the pile of corpses at the end, and we see the death-in-life in the characters themselves, and we know that without the right kind of handling the truth could go off in us, and it just might do us in. At that point—and this is really what *The Iceman Cometh* is all about—the logic of *paideia* is self-destruction.

DGB: I think I'm going to be sick . . .

CW: Now, this is unsettling to humanists like myself, like you. We get a resonance here with Melville, because if you really see too much, see through too much,

the danger is not just the darkness, but the inability to get out of the darkness. Paul Tillich used to always say, “You can’t talk about truth without talking about the way to truth; you can’t talk about wisdom without talking about the path to wisdom.”

DGB: Suddenly, I am more interested in talking about the way back . . .

CW: You have to be wise in your quest for wisdom. It sounds paradoxical, but you do.

DGB: It makes me think of Descartes again. Since we sometimes forget that he doesn’t simply embark on his scorched earth campaign of radical doubt. First, he sets up his morale provisoire, a “provisional morality” to which he will adhere doggedly in that dangerous interval during which he intends to place all accepted ideas in the crucible of skepticism. That “placeholder” morality was, naturally, precisely conformant with quotidian ethical practices—the Jesuits at La Flèche had trained their pupil well! I had a student when I

was teaching at Columbia who described the morale provisoire as Descartes’ “ethical bungee-cord”: before leaping into the abyss of doubt he harnesses himself on a long, elastic tether to the bridge of conventional, bourgeois Christian morals.

CW: It’s the perfect image. Now, with all these warnings about truth and wisdom, there’s clearly a sense in which Melville is talking about his own text—*The Confidence-Man*—and telling us that his book is explosive, and that if it’s not handled delicately, it could lead to a cynicism, a misanthropy, and so forth. There’s a mature way of wrestling with this darkness, and there’s an immature way of wrestling with this darkness. Where does the maturity come from? Well, it’s the same issue as where we learn the wisdom to deal wisely in our quest for wisdom. There’s a paradox here. There’s a circularity here—a hermeneutical circle.

DGB: I want to go back to the business about the

convergence of the logic of paideia, and the logic of destruction. This puts me in mind of a certain character, who means a great deal to both of us. Isn’t the intersection of paideia and death exactly the story of Jesus Christ? Let me press for a moment on the personal side of all this: you and I, Cornel, we are believers; we are Christians.

CW: Oh, absolutely. Of a certain sort—a self-styled Christianity—absolutely.

DGB: I keep insisting that *The Confidence-Man* is, fundamentally, a hopeful text—and I think that is a reading conditioned by my sense . . .

CW: That you know where you have placed your bets . . .

DGB: Exactly. I read this book as a parable about the necessity of faith. When someone comes into the room and says, “Knowledge cannot save you,” I say, “Amen, I know that story.”

CW: You affirm it, recognize it, and say yes.

DGB : Cornel, I think that ultimately the confidence man is a messianic figure, that the apotheosis of the con-man is a messiah. Whoever can make us believe all the way to the end has saved us. That is what this book is about. Is that too simpleminded?

CW: Do you know that wonderful line in T. S. Eliot’s introduction to *Pascal’s Pensees*, where he says the demon of doubt ought to be part of one’s faith, ought to be always already there? Now what does that mean? Well, W. H. Auden draws this distinction between the tragedy of fate and the tragedy of possibility. The tragedy of fate is found in the Greeks—Sophocles, let’s say. The tragedy of possibility is very much the Christian story, with Good Friday, the crucifixion, and then that Beckett-like space of Saturday, waiting for God, *Waiting for Godot*, and then surprised by joy: Easter.

But then on Monday, when the resurrection has taken place, the world is still a hellish place, right? It’s not



as if the resurrection has made any real difference in the “City of Man.” Yes, for Christians it prefigures something to come. Yes, for the Christian “He is risen, hallelujah, He is risen.” But, there are still children in the gutter, eating garbage. So, for me, reading *The Confidence-Man* as a devotee of that first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus—and my Christian sensibility is profoundly Chekhovian—for me, reading this text, I am so radically unhoused as a Christian. I am pushed to the wall by Melville’s Saturday sensibility. Which is to say, the crucifixion has taken place, catastrophe has already occurred—and we’ve already noted the degree to which Melville is an artist of catastrophe. Hope? I don’t think that for him, whatever threadbare possibility there is—I don’t think there’s anything like what we need to get to Sunday, to get to Easter.

Now, yes, Melville is wrestling with the angel of meaning, he’s wrestling with the angel of death the way Jacob

did—but he can’t get a new name, you know? He’s a god-wrestler like Israel, but he remains a god-wrestler all the way down. Am I attracted to him? Yes. But I don’t see the object of faith there for him. I don’t see the end, and the aim, the telos of faith. Or, at least it isn’t ever going to be what we Christians would want. His skepticism is too deep; for him, that demon of doubt that Eliot talks about stands at the center. This is what that Hawthorne letter was about, the one I quoted before: “He can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” Wittgenstein faced the same predicament, right?

DGB: Let’s go back to Auden. You know the great line from his “Christmas Oratorio”:

“Joseph, you have heard?  
What Mary says occurred;  
Yes, it may be so.  
Is it likely?  
No.”<sup>2</sup>

CW: Right! [Laughs]

DGB: [Laughs] Well there is the beauty of it! Remember when Melville writes that the true Original character is like a “revolving Drummond light”—basically a stage spotlight?

CW: The *As You Like It* formulation of the world in general . . .

DGB: Yes, perhaps—though the reference is here mediated by technology in a strange way. But anyway, my point is this: you know the way that every Catholic church organizes the sacred space of the altar in the center of a threefold figuration of the Holy Family: the crucifix behind, Mary usually stage right, Joseph stage left?

CW: Yes.

DGB: I feel as if the Drummond light of the confidence man bathes this triptych in its own distinctive glow. There could hardly be a more fantastic confidence game than the fundamental, foundational Christian mythology: a story about parturition without sexual contact, a story of God

made man, a story of death that gives life. What we’ve got here is a project to look the most basic truths about human existence—logical, empirical—right in the face, and then to deny them flat. It was carried off with such aplomb, with such sublime confidence, that it succeeded in changing the shape of the world, and bringing radical novelty to the experience of the human across seven continents and two thousand years.

CW: I hear you.

DGB: Here’s the thing: it doesn’t scare me to have that Drummond light set up square on the very altar—to have it illuminate that threefold figuration of our faith for a moment, and to have Melville remind me that this is a kind of conjuration, possibly the most spectacular conjuration known to humanity. I’m not worried. After all, there we are enacting that faith in yet another conjuration: This is my body, . . . It is? . . . a fitting sacrament for the altar of such a faith. Perfect! Anyway, where are you going

to stand and tell me that it's all "wrong"?"

CW: But it's not that simple. Once you let loose a lie in the world, it can easily take on a life and logic of its own. So that it may initially have been sustaining or whatnot, but the canker works gradually. The danger is that lies can become habit-forming. [Laughs] That's part of what Melville is saying here too, you see?

DGB: Well now, after all, the truth has been so much our friend—the truth has done us so many favors. If I sound a little acidic here, I am borrowing Melville's acid. The truth? Oh, you want to play with the truth, well hang on, I've got it for you right here—Oh my! It's a loaded gun, and you don't know what to do with it.

CW: If not delicately handled, you're right. I mean, there's a certain practical wisdom that goes together with truth-telling, but the same is true for lie-telling. Think of Plato's "Noble Lie."

DGB: Truth? Lies? The necessity of faith is what we

are left with in this world. We have extinguished the epistemological questions—out they went with the solar lamp of the final scene. All that business of proof and evidence doesn't apply here. The tools of propositional calculus or the techniques for making a taxonomy of the cryptograms—all that stuff is irrelevant now. We are now talking about final things.

CW: But on the other hand, Melville is here to remind us that our attempt to extinguish metaphysical questions in a move toward the existential may itself be another illusion, another masquerade, another mode of evasion, another kind of distraction. Because, maybe the truth is death. You hear what I'm saying? Eternal death, eternal darkness, absolute tragedy. You see what I mean?

DGB: You say the truth may be death, but I'm holding the gun very, very carefully . . .

CW: Exactly. I hold it carefully with you, brother, absolutely. But intellectual integrity requires pushing as far as you

can; you have to try to sort things out; you have to try to achieve some coherence, some consistency.

DGB: Really?

CW: Oh yes, I think so.

DGB: Well you go ahead. I don't buy it. This is the game the folks play over in the philosophy department. They have made intellectual integrity into a little ring, a little agonistic space where there is basically one rule: the law of non-contradiction. You can't have "A" and "not-A." If they can maneuver you into that arena, they'll kick your tail.

CW: But, that agon is indispensable . . .

DGB: Really? It has nothing to do with human life. To be human is "A" and "not-A"—that is our fundamental condition.

CW: Okay, but what about cell phones and bridges? I mean, science and technology you have to acknowledge, right?

DGB: The desire to transcend the human condition can take several forms: we can aspire to be angels, or we can aspire to be machines. I prefer the former.

CW: Well, see, for somebody like myself, a Chekhovian Christian, I don't want to transcend the human at all. I want to revel in the human, acknowledge the call for help, to connect back to the human sources that sustain me in space, and time, and human history. I don't think the transcendence of the human is a positive move in any direction.

DGB: So interesting. But, what about Christian transcendence? What about Sunday?

CW: We wait for Sunday. See, you've got two levels here. Oh, this is very good stuff—this is powerful stuff! There are two levels here: one is the Dostoyevskian level, which is the inability to live Christianity—the simple impracticability of real Christian life. I'm thinking of the Sermon on the Mount, yes, but also of the Sermon

on the Plain, the sixth chapter of Luke. I'm thinking of the wrestling in *The Brothers Karamazov*. So we Christians, who have the audacity to say that the seemingly weakest force on earth—love—will ultimately transform a world of hatred, and bigotry, and cruelty, and xenophobia, and domination, and oppression; we also seem to make the best haters!

Then, on top of that, here comes Melville, saying, "But anyway, what difference does the practical part make? Since y'all are just enacting a masquerade anyway, with various kinds of masks, which hide the incongruity and the dubitability of this set of illusions that you call the Christian story." See, here is where Melville pushes a Christian like me up against the wall. Dostoyevsky already worked the gut pretty hard, and here comes Melville swinging for my head!

DGB: Oh, but Cornel, I don't buy it. You're way too smooth! These guys haven't got you against the wall . . .

CW: [Laughing] I'm swinging back, I'm like Ali on the ropes. I'm saying to myself, you know, "Foreman's not going to do me in."

DGB: [Laughing] There's no way!

CW: That's right, I'm coming off the ropes!

DGB: To be sure! Because if there was ever a character who had the moves, who had the silver tongue . . .

CW: Who's moving all the time . . .

DGB: Who can come back for Jesus—it would be you!

CW: Ha!

DGB: Let me just say it again: If, in the end, as this book suggests, it's smoke and mirrors all the way down, then I would want the smoke and the mirrors in your hands, brother.

CW: But, you have to understand, that grotesque Negro cripple with whom we started—he is part of my own heritage. Because

what you actually have there is a jazz-like figure, an improvisational figure on the ropes, a figure who's able to use smoke and mirrors not just to survive catastrophe but to try to maintain a certain kind of sanity and dignity, a certain kind of compassion, and a certain kind of hope. And Melville sees that in his grotesque Negro cripple—who signifies all those black folks in America, on the underside in America, always on the ropes, preserving a hope against hope, but doing it in such a way that they're not trying to trump somebody else's options and alternatives. That's why Black Guinea inspires me to try to be a blues man in the life of the mind, to play jazz in the world of ideas. And Melville? He's my agnostic comrade and democratic companion!

DGB: Cornel, I'll tell you what, do you remember what I said about a lesson of *The Confidence-Man* being that you should never have a philosophical champion or a prophetic hero to whom you have not owed money? Well, here is the thing: Cornel, I am

in need—I am in desperate need of a hundred dollars . . .

CW: [Laughing, taking a roll of bills from his vest-pocket] Oh, this is marvelous! Lord! Oh, this is a good time, man!

DGB: [Laughing] Oh! My! Look at all that green! Oh! That is the money shot! Oh, that is too good! OK, we'll stop, we've got to stop, stop the tape . . .

[Both continue laughing.]

# Endnotes, Bibliography & Information about Excerpts

## ENDNOTES

### *Introduction: The Ballad of Black and Blue*

1. See Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Power* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 342.

2. See Chantal Mouffe's essay in this book. Also, see William E. Connolly, *Identity|Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 164–188.

3. See Michel Serres' notion of noise, dissonance, and parasites in both Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); and also Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence R. Schehr, Introduction by Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

4. For a good mapping of differing notions of alterity, see Mark C. Taylor, *Alarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

5. See Lyotard's essay in this book as well as Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

6. William E. Connolly, *Identity|Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 164–188.

7. Ibid.

8. See John Seely Brown's essay included in this book.

9. McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

10. See Nietzsche excerpt in this book.

11. Hans Gadamer writes, "Play is a structure . . . But structure is also play, because—despite this theoretical unity—it achieves its full being only each time it is played." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second, revised edition, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 116.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second, revised edition, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

13. See Warren Sack's essay in this book. Also, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/agonistics/> (accessed 3/11/2012).

14. Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

15. Doris Sommer, *Proceed with caution when engaged by minority writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

### *What do you do if you're linguistically homeless?*

1. Zack Friedman, "Language and Landscape: Renee Gladman," *Bomblog* (December 24, 2011), <http://bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/6321> (accessed 3/15/2012).

### An Agonistic Model of Democracy

1. This antagonistic dimension, which can never be completely eliminated but only “tamed” or “sublimated” by being, so to speak, “played out” in an agonistic way is what, in my view, distinguishes my understanding of agonism from the one put forward by other “agonistic theorists,” those who are influenced by Nietzsche or Hannah Arendt, like William Connolly or Bonnie Honig. It seems to me that their conception leaves open the possibility that the political could, under certain conditions, be made absolutely congruent with the ethical optimism, which I do not share.

### Agonistics: A Language Game

1. Oxford English Dictionary, 2008.

### Adversarial Design

1. Oxford English Dictionary, 2008.

2. Chantal Mouffe, “Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 804–807.

### Slaps and Embraces: A Rhetoric of Particularism

1. For an excellent discussion of these anthropological traps, see Frederick Cooper, and Ann Laura Stoler, “Introduction,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

2. Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 27.

3. Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropofago” (“Cannibalist Manifesto,”) (1928), trans. Leslie Bary, *Latin American Literary Review* 19/38 (July-December, 1991), 35–47.

4. Ibid.

5. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 100.

6. bell hooks, “Eating the Other,” reference from Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 70.

7. Compare this with Melanie Klein’s work on infantile subject formation as a process of “introjecting,” “good objects,” and “projecting the bad ones.” Melanie Klein, “Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant,” *Developments in Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), 200.

8. Despite Walter Benjamin’s dismissal of a reader’s response (“Art . . . posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.”).

9. Roland Barthes, *Pleasures of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, with a note on the text by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 27.

10. Ibid., 6.

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ibid., 11–12.

13. Georges Poulet, “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man*, eds. Richard A. Macksey, and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 56–72. [Reprinted in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 41–49.]

14. See, as a representative piece, Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in Tompkins, 50–69. Also, for a study of the operations readers perform and the “spurs” that texts provide for interaction with the reader, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). In Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), Iser offers readings of representative novels based on their requirement of active readerly participation.

15. Wolfgang Iser, “Narrative Strategies as Means of Communication,” in *Interpretation of Narrative*, edited by Mario J. Valdés, and Owen J. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 100–117.

16. In the “Discussion” that follows Poulet’s paper, he responds that unlike

reading, conversation “becomes instead, quite the contrary, a sort of battle, a radical opposition, an insistence on differentiation. The act of reading, as I conceive it, is . . . above all, an acceding, even an adherence, provisionally at least, and without reserve.” See *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man*, eds. Richard A. Macksey, and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 73–88.

17. Georges Poulet, “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man*, eds. Richard A. Macksey, and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 56.

18. That unreflective, universalizing love can produce perverse confusions between pets and partners is provocatively argued in Marc Shell’s “The Family Pet, or The Human and the Animal,” in *Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148–175.

19. Georges Poulet, “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man*, eds. Richard A. Macksey, and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 56.

20. Ibid., 57.

21. Ibid., 60.

22. Ibid., 60.

23. Ibid., 60.

24. James Phelan is one reader-response critic who objects to this predictability as unresponsive to rhetoric, and to the possibility that certain elements of a text may be recalcitrant to interpretation. James Phelan, "Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of Beloved," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 1993), 709–728.

25. "What is important in all of this," Morrison spells out, "is that the critic not be engaged in laying claim on behalf of the text to his or her own dominance and power." Marc C. Connor, *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking The Unspeakable* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 10.

26. René Girard, "Deceit," in *Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

27. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Authenticity; or the Lesson of Little Tree," *The New York Times Book Review* 11 (November, 1991), 1, 26–30.

28. Ibid.

29. See Coco Fusco, who refers to bell hooks and Richard Fung, in *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 65–77.

30. For the collusion between the apparently opposite projects of universalizing (saming) and subordination of the "other" (othering), see Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,"

*Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 38–58. Comparing Simone de Beauvoir's call for equality with men to Irigaray's celebration of female difference, Schor observes the limitations of both. "If othering involves attributing to the objectified other a difference that serves to legitimate her oppression, saming denies the objectified other the right to her difference, submitting the other to the laws of phallic specularly. If othering assumes that the other is knowable, saming precludes any knowledge of the other in her otherness." See Naomi Schor, *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 45.

31. To be fair to Spivak, her first targets were Foucault and Deleuze who romanticized the "other" as a stable, self-aware, and therefore, desirable subject.

Because they refuse Marx's observation that subjects are formed through the contradiction between interests and desire, she argued, and lacking the self-criticism that would reveal their own economic and political interest in the third world, Foucault and Deleuze smuggle back the humanist notions of a coherent subject identity. The simplified third world or working class subject is then available for representation. Here, Spivak deployed the useful distinction between representation as a necessarily fictional *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, the more meddlesome representation by substitution (literally stepping on, or into) that she read in their work. Because they reduced and substituted the object of their academic desire, the knowledge achieved by Foucault and Deleuze is self-deluding, Spivak concluded. To complicate matters,

native informants are similarly deluded. Indians who write are elite Indians, she complained, and they sin with the same essentializing drive that blinds first-world theorists to the "irretrievably heterogeneous" subaltern subject. "[T]he intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation," but to notice what the subaltern cannot say, according to Spivak. S/he cannot say what can only be done: "elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of 'the utterance.'" Fernando Coronil has also reframed her question in "Listening to the Subaltern: The Poetics of Neocolonial States," *Poetics Today* 15:4 (Winter, 1994), 643–658.

32. Spivak, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson, and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 287.

33. See Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 13, 32. Gadamer, Warnke argues, objects to Schleiermacher's identification with the author, and the empathetic approach to understanding is criticized by Gadamer all the way through Dilthey.

34. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 82–83.

35. I am apparently siding with Kant against Schopenhauer, according to Robert Gooding Williams, in their debate about the basis of ethics. For one, it was respect for rational beings (the demand for respect constituting, it seems to me, a sign of rationality); for the other it was compassion.

36. Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 49.

### Metaphysics, Money and The Messiah: a conversation about Melville's "The Confidence-Man"

1. For an account of the translation problems this passage offers, as well as a comprehensive discussion of interpretations of its significance, see Pavel Gregoric, "The Heraclitus Anecdote: DePartibus Animalium i 5.645317 - 23," *Ancient Philosophy* 2.1 (2001): 73–85. Gregoric joins the preponderance of modern commentators in rejecting Heidegger's glossing of "pros toi ipnoi" as "in the oven," preferring "at" or "by"; admittedly, the latter was also preferred by Aristotle's early-nineteenth century English translators.

2. Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 32.

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# Bios



A native Texan, Anjum Asharia studied philosophy at Wellesley College where she hosted a weekly radio show at the campus station, WZLY. A social media coordinator and journalist for organizations including People's Production House and Newsmotion, she has previously worked with the Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights, and the Family Literacy Involvement Program at the Children's Museum of Houston.

John Seely Brown is a visiting scholar and advisor to the Provost at the University of Southern California (USC), and the independent co-chairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge. Prior to that, he was the Chief Scientist of Xerox Corporation, and the director of its Palo Alto Research Center (PARC)—a position he held for nearly two decades. He was a co-founder of the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL). His personal research interests include the management of radical innovation, digital youth culture, digital media, and new forms of communication and learning. [johnseelybrown.com](http://johnseelybrown.com)

D. Graham Burnett writes widely about nature, history, visual culture, and science. An editor at *Cabinet* magazine, based

in Brooklyn, and a professor at Princeton University, he is the author of five books: *Masters of All They Surveyed* (on the history of cartography); *Descartes and the Hyperbolic Quest* (on optics and metaphysics); *A Trial By Jury* (the memoir of a murder trial); *Trying Leviathan* (on changing ideas of natural order); and *The Sounding of the Whale* (on the cultural and scientific importance of cetaceans). In 2010, he co-curated "The Slice: Cutting to See" at the Architectural Association, and his video collaboration with Lisa Young (*Free Fall: The Life and Times of Bud "Crossbairs" MacGinitie*) recently screened at the Wellcome Collection in London. Burnett is associated with The Order of the Third Bird.

Carl DiSalvo is an assistant professor in the Digital Media program at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he runs the Public Design Workshop—a research studio for social design. His research draws together design, the humanities, and science and technology studies to increase public engagement with technology, and analyze the social and political uses of digital media. His book *Adversarial Design* (2012), explores how design does the work of agonism through computational objects



and systems. In the summer of 2012, he will be co-directing the Kitchen Laboratory workshop at the Walker Art Center as part of the Open Field program.

Marisa Jahn is an artist, writer, and co-founder of REV-. She has edited three books about culture and politics—*Recipes for an Encounter*, *Byproduct: on the Excess of Embedded Art Practices*, and *Pro+agonist: The Art of Opposition*. She was a 2007-9 MIT artist-in-residence, a community organizer with groups like the Urban Justice Center, and was recognized by UNESCO as a lead educator. She is currently the Executive and Creative Director of People's Production House, a media arts institute that pairs artists and journalists with low-wage workers, immigrants, and teens to produce nuanced stories seen and heard on BBC, PBS Newshour, *The Nation Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and more. Her work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, New Museum, MIT Museum, The Power Plant, ICA Philadelphia, and more. marisajahn.com

Jean-François Lyotard became one of the world's foremost philosophers of postmodernity

whose interdisciplinary discourse covers a wide variety of topics including knowledge and communication; the human body; modernist and postmodern art, literature, and music; film; time and memory; space, the city, and landscape; the sublime; and the relation between aesthetics and politics. At the time of his death in 1998, he was University Professor Emeritus of the University of Paris VIII, and Professor, Emory University, in Atlanta. He was a former founding director of Collège International de Philosophie Paris, and Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Irvine, as well as Visiting Professor at Yale University, and other universities in the USA, Canada, South America, and Europe. Lyotard was also Director of the exhibition "Les Immatériaux," at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, in London. She has taught and researched in many universities in Europe, North America, and South America, and she is a member of the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. She is the editor of *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*,

*Dimensions of Radical Democracy, Pluralism, Citizenship, Community, Deconstruction and Pragmatism, and The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*; the co-author with Ernesto Laclau of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*; and the author of *The Return of the Political*, and *The Democratic Paradox*.

Warren Sack is a software designer and media theorist whose work explores theories and designs for online public space and public discussion. He is chair of the Digital Arts and New Media MFA Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Warren earned a Ph.D. from the MIT Media Laboratory where he had the opportunity to study with John Rajchman and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Warren's writings on new media and computer science have been published widely, and his artwork has been shown at the ZKM|Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the artport of the Whitney Museum of American Art; and, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His artwork *Agonistics: A Language Game* was first curated by Steve Dietz for the exhibition "Database Imaginary," held

at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta, Canada, in 2004.

Steve Shada is a self-taught sculptor and activist whose collaborations with Marisa Jahn hijack natural and social systems to expose the underlying desires and fears behind everyday scripts and rituals (romances, traffic commutes, meal preparation, negotiating bodily space). From 2000–2006, Shada and Jahn co-founded and co-directed Pond, a San Francisco-based non-profit gallery dedicated to showcasing experimental art. Shada's work has been presented in venues such as ISEA/Zero One, the National Fine Art Museum of Taiwan, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His work has received acclaim in media such as the *Los Angeles Times*, Discovery Channel, *Clamor Magazine*, *Frieze*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Art in America*, and more. steveshada.com

Mark Shepard is an artist, architect and researcher whose post-disciplinary practice addresses new social spaces and signifying structures of contemporary network cultures. Recent work includes the 'Sentient City Survival Kit', a collection of artifacts

for survival in the near-future sentient city; and the “Tactical Sound Garden [TSG]”, an open source software platform for cultivating virtual sound gardens in urban public space. In 2006 he organized *Architecture and Situated Technologies* (with Omar Khan and Trebor Scholz), a symposium exploring the emerging role of “situated” technologies in the design and inhabitation of the contemporary city. In 2009, he curated *Toward the Sentient City*, an exhibition of commissioned projects that critically explored the evolving relationship between ubiquitous computing and the city. He is the editor of *Sentient City: ubiquitous computing, architecture and the future of urban space* (Architectural League of New York, MIT Press).

Doris Sommer, Harvard’s Ira Jewell Williams, Jr. Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and Professor of African and African American Studies, is also Director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University. See [culturalagents.org](http://culturalagents.org) for ways the Initiative promotes social development through arts and humanities. Among the activities are courses, publications, and Pre-Texts—a multi-arts, high-order, literacy program that amounts to civic development

in school and out of school settings. Among her books are *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991); *Proceed with Caution When Engaging Minority Literature* (1999); *Abrazos y rechazos: Cómo leer en clave menor* (2006); *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (2004); *Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations* (edited 2004); *Cultural Agency in the Americas* (edited 2006); and *The Work of Art in the World: On Humanistic Education and Civic Agency* (forthcoming). Sommer has enjoyed and is dedicated to developing good public school education; she has a B.A. from New Jersey’s Douglass College for Women, an M.A. from Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and a Ph.D. from Rutgers The State University.

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National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. Whitehead’s reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, such as the New York Times, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, Harper’s and Granta. He has received a MacArthur Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers.

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