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Is This a Dialogue? Discursive Community and the Media of the Humanities

“If we could say we (but have I not already said it?), we might ask ourselves: where are we? And who are we in the university, where apparently we are?”

Ever since Socrates, the metaphor of dialogue has guided scholarly self-understanding. When engaging with authors of the past or with students, teachers, or colleagues, proponents of liberal education repeatedly suggest that divergent forms of mediated communication are akin to a conversation or discussion. If academic life is to enable students and instructors alike to develop skills essential for democratic citizenship (as humanists have consistently argued throughout history), how could it be that this discursive community would not be ‘reciprocal,’ ‘Socratic,’ or ‘dialogical’?

And yet the more incongruity between supposedly dialogical discursive forms, the more figural—and hence the more tenuous—the metaphor of dialogue becomes. Histories of media and scholarly institutions have begun to show that it is often difficult to situate varied, often divergent modes of scholarly discourse under the conceptual umbrella of dialogue: from oral oratory to scholarly journals, from archives of national libraries to electronic circulation of research, the public manifestation of orators, authors, teachers,

2 Not only is the dialogue a popular metaphor for describing pedagogical interaction, but the dialogue as genre has displayed remarkable longevity throughout the history of scholarly publication. See Herbert Grabes’ contribution in this volume on how metaphors guide the naming and genre classifications of modes of scholarly discourse. On the genre of the dialogue see also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Über die (Wieder-) Geburt der Naturwissenschaften aus dem Geiste des Dialogs,” Siegener Studien 35.4 (1983): 66-77.
3 If, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, “the primary function of metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience” (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 154), then the dialogue operates increasingly metaphorically the more it is displaced from Schober’s definition of the dialogue as “one-on-one language use with a partner,” and “joint activity to which both participants continually contribute” (Michael F. Schober, “Dialogue and Interaction,” Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (Amsterdam/London: Elsevier, 2006) 564).
respondents, and editors depend in large part on the dominant media of the day. A related impulse to historicize various forms of scholarly practice has emerged from recent debates about the contemporary university, as writers question whether humanistic education remains the university’s driving force or whether scholarship manifests a unified intellectual community.⁴

In this light, an attempt to gain both descriptive and prescriptive clarity about scholarly communication would do well to interrogate the metaphor of dialogue. Certain theorists continue to rely on a notion of dialogue or conversation, while others are wary of it. Take Jeffrey J. Williams, who argues that

insofar as the “conversation” has become the prevalent figure synecdochically naming what we do, it occludes other dimensions of our tasks as [...] professors. [...] The figure of “the conversation” tacitly conflates our work as scholarly debate, as a self-contained genealogy of discourse, obscuring the very real parameters and effects of the institutions that mediate our work. This figure abstracts our particular and in fact rarefied activities [...] from the very real tasks that comprise our jobs, like teaching or myriad other academic duties.⁵

Drawing on recent studies of academic labour,⁶ Williams argues that the figure of conversation obscures a) our status as actors in diverse institutions, b) the “professional terms and institutional conditions of entry” into scholarly communities, and c) the often very specialized language organizing academic publics. For Williams, a critique of the notion of conversation “as a stage set apart,” should draw attention to how “our institutional location forms our work, and how we are institutional actors,” a task that his studies of the idea of the university and its institutional past undertake.⁷

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⁴ See among many others Jacques Derrida “Mochlos”; Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); and Rüdiger vom Bruch, “A Slow Farewell to Humboldt? Stages in the History of German Universities, 1810-1945,” German Universities Past and Future, ed. Mitchell Ash (Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1997) 3-27. Derrida’s opening words of an essay on Kant and the university (quoted as the epigraph of this paper) underline the precarious state of liberal education in the contemporary university. In the face of the disaggregation of scholarly knowledge production and the growing marginality of the humanities, Derrida questions the idea of universities as unified groups of individuals even as he invokes it with the pronoun ‘we.’ Nonetheless, he simultaneously points to the difficulty of doing away with the idea that the modern university has a single purpose vis-à-vis a community of individuals ‘in-’ and ‘outside’ the university.


⁷ See Jeffrey J. Williams, “History as a Challenge to the Idea of the University,” JAC 25.1 (2005): 55-74; Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Post-Welfare State University,” American Literary History 18:1 (2006): 190-216. Williams also calls upon us to ‘teach the university,’ i.e. to make the past, present and future of higher learning a topic of interdisciplinary study in
In this article I want to follow Williams and explore how two recent accounts of scholarship as dialogue by Edward Said and Mieke Bal inadequately describe concrete institutional and medial practices. I compare their embrace of dialogue to Michael Warner’s critique of the concept/metaphor. This comparison reveals both the potential and limits of each thinker’s critical methodology—in this case, Said’s hermeneutic philology, Bal’s deconstruction-inflected rhetorical analysis, and Warner’s theory of publics and the public sphere.

In particular, all three take up the idea that reading sets in motion expressly dialogical communication and thereby founds discursive communities. Said and Bal propose interdisciplinary ideals of scholarship—of what ‘we’ do as teachers, writers, students, and readers in the humanities—that re-affirm traditionally humanist medial practices. Said claims that quasi-dialogical reading is the paradigmatic form of critique, while Bal proposes that critical engagement with other scholars involves a reading practice that imagines the printed word as if issued from the speaking voice of a teacher-friend. Despite their differences, both recapitulate longstanding humanistic accounts of print and oral media in their idealization of dialogic interaction.

In contrast, Michael Warner historicizes modes of scholarly communication, attempting both to expand our conception of medial practice and to reveal the weaknesses of traditional humanistic self-understanding in describing contemporary scholarly media and institutions. Both Warner and Williams continue to conceptualize how scholarly practices generate discursive communities—how, in other words, academic situations cultivate varied ‘we’s’—and yet both call for more nuance than the metaphor of dialogue can allow.

Edward Said’s posthumously published *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* attempts to update humanism for the present day by defending anew critical, humanistic reading as a “sympathetic dialogue across ages and cultures.” In combining a hermeneutics of reading with a concept of the scholar as both part of and foreign to dominant discursive communities, Said addresses the question of the ‘we’ of scholarship in a provocative, yet traditionalist fashion.

For Said, humanistic study concerns “the products of human labor,” “the achievement of form by human will and agency.” Taking issue with decon-
struction’s destabilization of individual subjectivity, Said thinks of critical humanistic practice as a realm where distinct subjects “commit to” interpretations of the world and connect judgment to “the world in which [intellectuals and academics] live as citizens.” In turn, “attentive, imaginative close reading” is the paradigmatic practice of humanist scholars, and he defends critical reading as an emphatically philological activity. Against the idea that philology is old-fashioned or that reading can be passive and open to manipulation, Said claims that a philologically “trained openness to what a text says” sets in motion a “process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation,” a vehicle, in other words, for the development of the self through the encounter with the other.

In this way, Said draws on the methodological foundations of 19th-century hermeneutics most prominently articulated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey when he describes interpretation as entering into an empathetic, ‘dialogical’ interaction with an author: “for the humanist, the act of reading is the act therefore of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words.” Readers encounter authorial activity through empathetic identification and an “irreducibly personal act of commitment to reading and interpreting.” This putting oneself in the position of the author — a reformulation of the hermeneutic ideal of understanding the author better than he understood himself — links reading to the figuration of concrete persons, as the relationship between reader and text becomes a “sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures.” Like past hermeneuticians, Said deploys the concept of dialogue to describe the encounter of reader and text without fully interrogating its status as metaphor.

At the same time, the personificatory openness to the text/author—the genesis of a figural “we” established across ages and cultures through reading, if you will — is only one side of the philological coin for Said. The other entails ‘resistance,’ a critical stance that pertains less to the objects of study and more to the discursive communities in which such acts of reading take place. Humanistic criticism must offer a counterbalance to the “prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and pre-

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12 Said, Humanism 21f.
13 Said, Humanism 62.
14 Said, Humanism 66.
15 Said, Humanism 92.
empt democratic critique.”

Drawing on his frequent analyses of the mass media and political elites, Said sees humanistic reading as an alternative medial operation that occasions sustained critical rationality: “Humanistic reflection must literally break the hold on us of the short, headline, sound-bite format and try to induce instead a longer, more deliberate process of reflection, research, and inquiring argument.” In a world of mass media, humanistic close reading functions as media critique by arresting the transmission speed of other media and expanding the breadth of content.

On this model, the university becomes an oppositional arena, “one public space available to real alternative intellectual practices,” where the assumptions of dominant discursive communities are interrogated. The positive association with others via humanistic philology has its flip side in a critical gesture of disassociation with groups constructed on the basis of the inclusionary pronouns of ‘we’ and ‘us’ and the exclusionary ‘you all’ or ‘they:’

The deployment of such pronouns as “we” and “us” are also the stuff of lyrics and odes and dirges and tragedies, and so it becomes necessary from the training we have had to raise the questions of responsibility and values, of pride and extraordinary arrogance, of an amazing moral blindness. Who is the “we” who bombs civilians or who shrugs off the looting and pillaging of Iraq’s astonishing heritage with phrases like “stuff happens” or “freedom is untidy”? One ought to be able to say somewhere and at some length, I am not this “we” and what “you” do, you do not do in my name.

Deliberately bringing the rhetoric of anti-Iraq war protests (‘not in our name’) into resonance with literary figures of apostrophe and personification as well as with modes of scholarly address, Said emphasizes that discursive community is as much a negative as a positive concept for criticism and pedagogy.

In this way, Said likens this position of resistance to that of the exile, a conceptual Leitmotif throughout his scholarly, political, and autobiographical work. For Said, the exile is a subject position that generates new forms of thought and experience through the crossing of geographical, cultural, and cognitive borders. Even though exile is often imposed by harsh political realities, its experience can lead to the exploration of alternatives to the mass institutions of modern life, and thus stands as a metaphor for the intellectual’s provisional relationship to dominant discursive communities. Liken-
ing the necessity of forging new modes of self-presentation in exile to both
the reader’s empathetic encounter with other writers and the alienation from
majority communities, Said argues that his intellectual heroes (Joseph Con-
rad, Theodor Adorno, and Erich Auerbach, to whom one chapter of _Human-
ism and Democratic Criticism_ is devoted) achieved their literary successes in
large part through the transformation of their often very painfully real ex-
periences of exile into vigilant critical innovation.

Said’s understanding of humanistic scholarship thus comes into focus as a
dialectical process of the formation of and disassociation with discursive
communities. On the one hand, empathetic reading forms ‘dialogical,’ ‘de-
mocratic’ community, and on the other, the gaze of the exile critiques other
discursive worlds of which he or she is not fully a part. In this way, Said
updates the long-standing trope of scholar/writer as exile with a modernist,
Adornian sensibility and brings lessons of 19th and 20th century history, phi-
losophy, and culture to bear on the humanistic tradition. And yet his model
of (dis-)association with discursive communities is firmly in line with a clas-
sical self-understanding of humanist personality for whom, in the worst of
political and cultural atmospheres, “the only home truly available […] is in
writing” (as Said writes of Adorno22), and who, in the best, can find sympa-
thetic, horizon-fusing interaction with contemporary and past humanists
alike.23

That said, Said’s configuration of the scholar as exile presents certain
problems when we return to the issue of the institutional situation of scholar-
ship. Despite his exemplary engagement as scholar and public intellectual,
Said’s figuralization of scholarly discourse as dialogue tends to idealize the
university as an alternative public space not subject to the exigencies of the
rest of the professional world:

the academy—with its devotion to reflection, research, Socratic teaching, and some
measure of skeptical detachment—allows one freedom from the deadlines, the ob-
ligations to an importunate and exigent employer, and the pressures to produce on
a regular basis, that afflict so many experts in our policy-think-tank riddled age.24

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23 Here I would draw attention to the recent issue of _Cultural Critique_ entitled “Edward Said and After: Toward a New Humanism” 67 (2007). Though I agree with many points
of the editors and authors of this volume (especially Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan,
Critique_ 67 (2007): 1-12), the tendency of my paper is to question the newness of certain aspects of Said’s humanism.
Viewing the university as a quasi-exilic, Socratic space independent from external influence neglects a wide range of contemporary institutional realities; Said seems oblivious of the pressures on students and teachers that involve the same accelerated consumer culture that humanistic reading is supposed to combat. If we take the study of labor practices in the university by Williams and others seriously, it becomes questionable whether Said’s idealized account of scholarly conversation adequately theorizes the wide range of concrete discursive practices in which we as teachers and students engage. Is not interpersonal interactivity in academia more variegated and often less utopian than Said claims? Are we to neglect the medial and discursive practices of teachers and students as late-night e-mailers, job applicants, academic advisors, or research assistants — that is to say as readers, viewers, and listeners in a wide variety of situations for which the figure of free, unencumbered dialogic sociability doesn’t quite apply? Said’s concept of exilic empathy and resistance can certainly be an element of critical pedagogy, but it would seem to oversimplify the medial and institutional layering of scholarly practices and roles at work today.

II

More so than Said, Mieke Bal’s account of the humanities problematizes concepts of author, intention, and sympathetic commerce between stable subjects. Bal scrutinizes rhetorical operations that ascribe authorial voice to cultural products and imagine reciprocity between text and critic. In the end, however, she puts forth a model of critical, dialogical communication strikingly close to Said’s idealization of scholarly community.

Bal’s 2002 *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* is an admirable hands-on attempt to enable and encourage interdisciplinarity: Bal calls her reflections a ‘rough guide’ to how scholars might ‘travel’ (one of the central metaphors of the book) between disciplines. The book’s main thesis is that interdisciplinary cultural analysis must seek its basis in concepts rather than method or coverage. Concepts are sites of agreement and debate across different concerns and methods and thus “tools of intersubjectivity;” theorizing interdisciplinarity as a negotiation of concepts thus reveals the interactive, interpersonal stakes of conceptual work in the humanities. *Travelling Concepts* works through specific concepts that are particularly suggestive in their ability to function across disciplines: image, tradition, intention, framing, *mise-en-scène*, performance and others.


26 Here, I limit my focus to Bal’s configuration of pedagogy; it is hopefully a consolation that this conceptual intervention grounds the methodology of the larger book.
In a noteworthy rhetorical move, Bal proposes that we approach her exploration of concepts as if it were “happening on a stage: in a classroom, in a study.”

Bal self-consciously puts forth a notion of a scholarly text as an interplay of different voices located in an “imaginary classroom,” be they voices of actual artists, scholars, or fictional students. However, Bal is quick to note the fictional quality of this discursive space:

Academic debate is staged, not real, in a monologic text that only approaches dialogue through quotation and representation of the other voice. It is an instance of prosopopeia, a rhetorical figure that represents an imaginary or absent person as speaking and acting.

In this way, scholarly discourse deploys the trope of giving an absent or imaginary person a face and voice in order to populate its text or lecture with personal pronouns, with the ‘he,’ ‘she,’ ‘they,’ and ‘we’ of (dis-) agreement. The call to enter this imaginary classroom requests that reader and writer perform an imaginary operation, a figural transport to this hypothetical realm. Through the metaphor of the stage, Bal understands this figural quality of scholarship as a theatrical gesture that sets in motion the interpersonal interaction of subjects (elsewhere she uses the concept mise-en-scène) while at the same time maintaining an awareness of the experimental and artificial quality of those subject personae. Bal thus proposes a non-essentialist concept of the subject, what she calls “post-humanist view of subjectivity, but one that reaffirms the subject’s importance.”

And yet despite her emphasis on the figural nature of dialogue, it would initially seem that lingering with this classic trope betrays a commitment to traditionally humanistic modes of scholarly self-understanding.

The final chapter continues to explore the scene of pedagogy. In her account of the critical encounter with other writers — i.e., how one brings an interlocutor into the fictive space of reciprocal dialogue — Bal takes us through a reading of Gayatri Spivak, whom she views as an exemplification of the figure (or what she also calls “the conceptual character”) of the teacher. The act of reading another writer as a teacher takes us back to the question of the mediality of humanistic discourse under examination thus far, the question, in other words, of the relation of figure and media, of rhetoric and concrete practice that scholarly discourse sets in motion.

In circling around the concept of the teacher, Bal combines an argument about Spivak as an inspiring example of critical pedagogy with a defence of Spivak’s oft-maligned style. For Bal, an appreciation of Spivak must treat her work as inherently pedagogical. The trick with Spivak, she informs us, lies in

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27 Bal 4.
28 Bal 326.
29 Bal 132.
30 Bal 20.
Is This a Dialogue?

reading her written text as if it were spoken, in effect transporting Spivak into Bal's imaginary classroom: "Read her as if you hear her teach, and all difficulty fades away."[^31]

The injunction that Spivak's work "is best read as spoken"[^32] is based on two related claims about her style. The first addresses Spivak's tendency to write long and difficult sentences, as Bal claims that dense scholarly discourse might be better appreciated as oral instruction in a class: meandering speech is often a feature of a scholar thinking on her feet and relying on linguistic and gestural cues from her audience. On a point with higher methodological stakes, Bal proposes that Spivak's writing manifests a tentative openness that readers should approach as a pedagogical elicitation of critical response, and that it is thus inherently dialogical. "Teaching is communicative, dialogic; it operates on an authority constantly questioned in its work;"[^33] an openness to input from others, however figural, is characteristic of a pedagogy based on a sense of reciprocity between teacher and student in both actual and imaginary classrooms. The openness to self-criticism ("without self-criticism, dialogue is foreclosed")[^34] is indicative of the pedagogical core of Spivak's work, which invites us to imagine the author in the intimate role/voice of mentor, friend, and teacher. Spivak thus offers a dialogical mode of writing from which, in our personae as students, we would do well to learn through "listening, knowing that you can object to it, argue with it, 'apply' it to your own work."[^35] This configuration of study as reading/listening draws on the notion that mediated communication triggers an active response that in turn is a vehicle for the development of individual subjectivity. The reader/listener coming to free activity, to his or her 'own work.' This is a classic trope of liberal, humanistic education that we likewise encountered in Said.

Whether or not Bal's suggestions actually help us find Spivak more readable is not the point here—instead I simply want to note that Bal takes recourse to a relatively traditional logic of humanistic practice. The notion that an oralization of the text (whether actual or figural) generates a productive personalization of humanistic practice has been at the core of humanistic letters since antiquity. Take, for example, practices of reading aloud;[^36] the popularity of the 'dialogues with the dead' form in antiquity and the early modern period, which pitted literary and philosophical non-contemporaries

[^31]: Bal 316.
[^32]: Bal 296.
[^33]: Bal 316f.
[^34]: Bal 317.
[^35]: Bal 322.
against each other in scenes of face-to-face debate;\textsuperscript{37} or the foundational conceit of hermeneutics that reading sets a ‘dialogue’ with the text in motion. We might be inclined to consider how Bal’s continuity with long-standing configurations of reading, writing, speaking, and listening subverts the ‘post’-ness of her post-humanism.

Bal seems to recognize as much when she calls the conceptual figure of the teacher “both a traditionalist and a theatrical gesture.”\textsuperscript{38} The gesture is traditionalist insofar as Bal steps into the comfortable folds of dialogistic humanistic self-understanding operative since antiquity, and yet theatrical in that the role, character, or mask (persona) of the teacher is understood to be as much a performative gesture as a fixed or stable subjectivity. Here we return to the conundrum of who the ‘we’ of interdisciplinary study in the humanities really is. For Bal, this ‘we’ is a productive metaphor, a useful theatrical fiction set in motion by mediated communication. Restating her reading of Spivak, Bal writes:

> By putting a colleague in the role of main character […] I hope to reveal an element of theatre that is perhaps its most utopian: the relinquishing of the claim to authenticity that sustains the individualistic view of identity. On the premise of theatricality in these senses, then, I am willing to reinstate “we.”\textsuperscript{39}

Scholarly discursive community thus appears as a provisional compact, a suspension of medial disbelief that assumes intersubjective reciprocity but at the same time situates this assumption as an imaginary horizon organizing the humanities’ self-image.

Taking a step back, \textit{Travelling Concepts} seems to push against Said’s account of humanist subjectivity, viewing the humanities as a shifting realm of quasi-theatrical experimentation rather than as a venue for the solidification of actionable subject positions. At the same time (and this I think is a noteworthy result of comparing the two thinkers), Bal is not all that different from Said in offering intriguing, yet rather conventional modifications of a traditional logic of humanistic scholarly personhood and its media. In effect, it becomes hard to do away with the medial manifestations of the person of the scholar even when one is theoretically committed to the instability of the subject. In this way, hermeneutics and deconstruction-inflected rhetorical


\textsuperscript{38} Bal 54.

\textsuperscript{39} Bal 326.
Is This a Dialogue?

analysis seem to propagate a compatible medial logic of the humanities: both bear witness to the persistent allure of understanding scholarly practice via the trope of interpersonal ‘dialogue.’

Bal’s notion of the “imaginary classroom” certainly helps us to think about the classroom (as well as reading and writing) as a realm of possibility and experimentation. In contrast to attempts to directly link the practical/moral and the figural/performative in the arts, it can be fruitful to think about instruction as an experimental space in which students and teachers test out modes of diverse communication that are representative, however figurally, of functions that they will perform in discursive communities outside of the university. The classroom, then, as a site for role-playing, for skits and scenes, for taking opposite sides and for ‘staging’ dialogue. This idea is eminently plausible and compelling, especially for (but obviously not limited to) all of ‘us’ with any experience in a language classroom.

At the same time, an emphasis on the figurality of this discursive community tends to neglect the more concrete responsibilities and activities of teachers and students in educational institutions. If it is even plausible to say that a ‘we’ spans across all institutions of humanistic study, we would be naïve not to recognize that such a community is constituted by many different localized ‘we’s’ imbedded in concrete power structures. Following Williams, we might ask how the mise-en-scène of teacher and student roles changes across different medial practices and institutional locations. Does the ‘we’ of the imaginary classroom include adjunct faculty or graduate instructors? And do we figurally oralize student voices when grading their papers or responding to their emails? While Bal may be an exemplary citizen in her home institution, one might argue that that the more her concept of the imaginary classroom becomes strictly figural, the more our attention is shifted from the concrete plurality of discursive situations in academic institutions.

The significance of both thinkers’ accounts of the mediality of discursive community seems to me to lie in a shared traditionalism: both bear witness to the persistent allure of configuring scholarly practice through the trope of interpersonal ‘dialogue.’ In this light, Said’s hermeneutics and Bal’s rhetorical analysis are more complementary than antagonistic. Both operate with a regulative ideal of interpersonal reciprocity abstracted from (and sometimes


41 As Martha Nussbaum would have it, for example, in her account of liberal education in Cultivating Humanity.

standing in contrast to) the multi-layered practices of academic life, an ideal that follows humanists of old in theorizing our relationships to students and to cultural products alike.

III

Like Williams, Michael Warner attempts to (as he puts it) “disentangle public discourse from its self-understanding as dialogue” by historicizing the institutional and medial practices often subsumed under the term. Warner’s work explores the interrelation of media and institutions while engaging the idea that scholarly life engenders positive forms of intersubjectivity.

In contrast to Said and Bal’s description of reading through a unifying scene of dialogue, Warner questions the humanistic fixation on a normative ideal of reading where “acts of reading are understood to be replicable and uniform.” His article “Uncritical Reading” takes aim at the notion that ‘critical’ reading is the ultimate benchmark of scholarly research and pedagogy. For Warner, critical reading is not a universal ideal, but rather a manifestation of certain media and characteristic of the particular historical moment of modernity. In a move typical to histories and theories of media, Warner historicizes the hermeneutic model of textual encounter. For Warner, the unquestioned adoption of a model of critical reading can blind us to other past or present medial practices:

We tend to assume that critical reading is just a name for any self-conscious practice of reading. This assumption creates several kinds of fallout at once: it turns all reading into the uncritical material for an ever-receding horizon of reflective self-positioning; by naturalizing critical reading as mere reflection it obscures from even our own view the rather elaborate forms and disciplines of subjectivity we practice and inculcate; it universalizes the special form of modernity that unites philology with the public sphere; and it blocks from view the existence of other cultures of textualism.

For Warner, hermeneutics’ equation of ‘dialogue’ with the text with ideal intersubjective reciprocity elides the existence of multiple competing modes

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43 Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” 115.
44 “Critical reading is a historically and formally mediated practice, with an elaborate discipline of subjectivity, and one that now confronts rivals as it has done in the past.” Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” Polemic: Critical or Uncritical, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004) 35.
45 This is also a foundational gesture in Friedrich Kittler’s media theory. See Friedrich Kittler, Discourse Networks 1800/1900 (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990).
46 Warner, “Uncritical Reading” 16.
of textual encounter, rendering all reading that is not ‘critical’ compromised and alienated. We can thus read Warner to diagnose Said’s opposition of critical reading and the ‘sound-bite format’ of other media; in a corrective to the privileging of modes of reading that exclusively cultivate the modern author/subject, Warner argues that medial practices produce a wide variety of often divergent subjectivities and interpersonal relations.

To imagine a more expansive range of acts of reading, Warner calls forth the image of a composite scene of a humanities classroom, taking us back, we might say, to something like Bal’s pedagogical theatre:

Students who come to my literature classes, I find, read in all the ways they aren’t supposed to. They identify with characters. They fall in love with authors. They mime what they take to be authorized sentiment. They stock themselves with material for showing off, or for performing class membership. They shop around among taste-publics, venturing into social worlds of fandom and geekdom. They warm with pride over the national heritage. They thrill at the exotic and take reassurance in the familiar. They condemn as boring what they don’t already recognize. They look for representations that will remediate stigma by giving them “positive self-images.” They cultivate reverence and piety. They try to anticipate what the teacher wants, and sometimes to one-up the other students. They grope for the clichés that they are sure the text comes down to. Their attention wanders; they skip around. They mark pages with pink and yellow highlighters. They get caught up in suspense. They laugh, they cry. They get aroused (and stay quiet about it in class). They lose themselves in books, distracting themselves from everything else, especially homework like the reading I assign.47

Warner suggests that pedagogy intervenes in multilayered discursive contexts and thus connects the classroom to sites of mediated communication and interpersonal interaction—other ‘social worlds’ or ‘taste-publics’—that point beyond the pedagogy of critical philological dialogue. If a notion of a Socratic classroom imagines a unified exchange between teacher and student then Warner’s image of an imaginary classroom describes a multi-layered space of reading and response. For Warner, acknowledging the existence of competing modes of textual encounter can enable a more complex view of the media and institutions that we inhabit. In contrast, Said and Bal’s accounts of scholarly communication fall short of describing how teachers and students are ‘uncritical’ readers either by choice or by necessity: how we skim articles for main arguments, just read the bibliographies of scholarly books, peruse the websites of our competitors, look at encyclopaedia entries on a novel because we don’t want to read the whole thing, and sometimes — the horror! — even consult Wikipedia. Both Bal and Said seem to ignore a wide variety of medial practices that bear on the fabric of our everyday life as

teachers and researchers. Not all of our daily interactions function as an intimate conversation with a teacher/friend, nor should they.

Though he focuses most of his attention on reading in “Uncritical Reading,” I would argue that Warner offers the conceptual tools for describing how scholarly practice cultivates a multiplicity of “forms and disciplines of subjectivity” across a range of visual, aural, and textual media. In contrast to ‘dialogic’ communication that assumes an author personality behind each medial product, Warner suggests that we do different things with different texts in different situations: we instrumentalize and we appropriate, we cut-and-paste, and yes, we read ‘critically,’ too.

In a similar vein, Warner’s theory of publics serves to ‘disentangle’ the concept of discursive communities from the conceptual pitfalls of dialogism. Warner defines publics in more functional terms than Habermas’ classic theory of the public sphere, who relies on a normative conception of face-to-face conversation to organize his account of mediated communication. Taking issue with the notion that discursive communities qua publics can be imagined first and foremost through the trope of dialogic relation, Warner argues that publics should be differentiated according to the media through which discourse circulates, moving from a model that posits one, unified realm of public discourse (the public) to one of multiple, often conflicting publics. For Warner publics come into being through a layering of communicative functions, some of which can be described through a speaker-addressee model, others which cannot.

A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. This dimension is easy to forget if we think only about a speech event involving speaker and addressee. In that localized event, circulation may seem irrelevant, extraneous. That is one reason why sender/receiver or author/receiver models of public communication are so misleading.

The actual ways that a text is transmitted medially — its form, temporality, reception, etc. — can stand in contrast to a rhetoric of dialogic reciprocity that permeates it. For this reason, the claim that a text addresses a public takes the term public “to name something about the text’s worldliness, its actual destination, which may or may not resemble its addressee.” For Warner, we are better off describing the academic ‘publics’ generated around the journal in which the article you are now reading appears, for example, through reference to modes of circulation (whether we read it in print or

48 For a critique of Habermas’ grounding of his theory of communication upon a dialogic model of face-to-face interaction, see John B. Thompson, Ideology in Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990).

49 Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” 90.

50 Warner gives the example of Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography where the figural addressee (his son) is incongruous with the actual audience (a set of disparate readers).

51 Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” 72.
Is This a Dialogue?

online, whether we pick out single articles or follow ongoing debates, whether we browse indiscriminately or bring temporalities of circulation from other discursive communities to bear on our reception of articles) rather than through recourse to an abstract notion of dialogue. Warner’s injunction to recognize the figurality of certain texts’ structures of address is thus akin to Bal’s rhetorical reading of texts as only hypothetically dialogical, except that Warner wants to draw our attention to substantial differences between rhetoric and actual circulation rather than reifying the hermeneutic encounter as regulative ideal.

In particular, Warner argues that the temporality of the circulation of discourse has considerable bearing on academic publics, i.e. the variegated disciplinary, departmental, or instructional communities in which we find ourselves. Recognizing that study, instruction, and scholarship manifest varying temporal logics helps to distinguish different kinds of scholarly communities as well as to compare academic communication to other kinds of publics. For example, academic discourse sometimes approaches the punctuated speed of political debate, while in other contexts operates according to extended timelines (of review and publication, for example) that share very little with the accelerated circulation of the mass media. As Warner points out, taking account of the temporality of discursive circulation helps to condition certain blanket claims that academic discourse is properly ‘political.’ Differences in tone, medium, temporality, etc. exist between speech in a classroom and an article, in a university-wide roundtable and in a regional newspaper, and even if we conceive of each situation as in some way political, we should be cognizant of how the term’s meaning shifts across different publics.

Warner’s emphasis on medial circulation gives a more nuanced account of the multiplicity of ‘we’s’ invoked in academic life. Though he doesn’t discuss the institutional features of academia as explicitly as Williams, Warner offers tools for conceptualizing the layering of institutionally situated medial and discursive practices. The advantage of this theoretical approach lies not in abandoning scholarly philology as such, but to place it in a larger context of varied discursive forms and styles of discursive communities. To recognize that we dialogue with texts and individuals but also that we participate in many other discursive contexts is to approach the mediality of communication more open-endedly. By focusing on concrete institutional situations, both Williams and Warner historicize as well as institutionalize hermeneutic philology. They do not call for the replacement of hermeneutics by theories of media technologies, but instead situate critical reading in a larger context of professional life.

Works Cited


