

Eclipse of the Eclipse of Distance: Talking Politics in a Global Village

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Teletechnology is often credited with having drawn parts of the world nearer to one another. In this much-repeated story, technological innovation and distribution effected both the contraction of national space that the sociologist Daniel Bell called an “eclipse of distance,” and the kind of enclosed world community that the futurist Marshall McLuhan named a “global village.”¹ That is, according to a dominant narrative, telephones, televisions, and airplanes made the planet smaller and rendered it more accessible to unfettered flows of power and people, tourism, science, and capital across national boundaries. But this narrative is no mere description. The world that it purports to explain, one that has been altered by the innate human desire to communicate and build, is one that it also imagines, enables, and in part invents. In other words, the same historical motives generate teletechnologies as generate the self-justifying narrative of teletechnological advancement, and both serve the same effects. So what then, if the historically produced rhetoric of the world-shrinking powers of communications and technicity has contributed to the re-diagrammed spatial imaginations of cultures at least as much as the material developments within teletechnology itself? If it has, then it may be worth asking whether within or beyond this predominating narrative there might hide other, less-told stories—ones about the critical powers of art and community. This essay traces one such parallel but competing rhetoric that persists in the cultural archive, and that bubbles up through gaps and rifts of national and transnational discourses that invoke technology, art, and community. The anarchist critic and writer Paul Goodman gave a name to one of these rifts—“the fertile void”—which he regarded as a space of intimacy and contestation.² To eclipse Bell’s “eclipse of distance” with Goodman’s “fertile void” may be to deform a world system in which the messiness of human intimacy is too often tidied up by the efficient and self-sustaining machinery of individualism, militarization, and financialization.

Paul Goodman’s book *Growing Up Absurd* is always listed among the bibles of the New Left in the United States.³ When Goodman is cited, therefore, it is to underscore the place of anarchism, of youth culture, of pacifism, or of sex in the social movements of the 1960s. However, Goodman wrote in several genres, on numerous topics, over the course of decades. And it is his status as a literary writer, and as a theoretician of social and aesthetic form, that prompts my rereading of him in this essay, an exploration of the historical and material linkage between notions of communication and community in a time, the last sixty years or so, of tremendous technological and economic change. I posit, in part through a reading of Goodman’s “fertile void,” a way to unlink community from communication, and to envision the kinds of critical speech and action that could survive their separation. I first consider the relation of telecommunications to what has long and often been called the Cold War consensus. In a re-reading of Bell’s and McLuhan’s metaphors, I show how communication and consensus are both discursive constructions (to borrow Michel Foucault’s phrase) rather than political or technological things-in-the-world that might be either valorized or derided. Then I offer another, very different instance of postwar discourse, in Goodman’s experimental prose. For Goodman, the discursive qualities of communication culture can be made visible but, more than this, they can be interrupted. The fertile void incites a kind of bare speech, a non-communicative utterance that is of discourse but not for it: a tangible but perhaps meaningless form of minimal dissent, and a radical form of collectivity held together by “large increments of love.”⁴

1. Consensus and Communication

In 1959, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset argued: “The characteristic pattern of the stable western democracies in the mid-20th century is that of a ‘post-politics’ phase—there is relatively little difference between the democratic left and right, the socialists are moderates, and the conservatives accept the welfare state.”⁵ In his lifetime, Lipset argued, a contested and diverse world of political extremes had been replaced by the appearance of common agreement, both within and between nations, upon an even and unitary vision of the globe. Old boundaries and identities were dissolved in this agreement, it seemed, and the famous Cold War consensus was born. As Andreas Huyssen has notably argued, modernist art and culture were subsequently “domesticated in the 1950s [as] part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times, and...a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anti-communism.”⁶ Meanwhile, apparatuses of government were increasingly seen as overly complicated bureaucratic frames for the primary human activity: transparent, full speech among people who basically agreed and who could communicate this agreement straightforwardly through newly widespread technologies of communication. This vision combines two key elements: a world rebuilt around the technological and political imaginary of those nations and economies capable of producing high technology; and one nation in particular, the United States, capable of thinking, mobilizing, and making art technologically, as a coherent social body with direct access to the world. These two elements, as visions of the planet and its parts, are not simple historical contingencies, or inevitable byproducts of events that “just happened” and were later described. Rather, they are invented narratives that depend on the invented metaphors of the “global village” and the “eclipse of distance” and that have a definite birthdate: the early 1960s.

When McLuhan and his collaborator Edmund Carpenter first described the “global village” in the 1960 preface to their landmark *Explorations in Communication*, it was to imagine a bright and mutable future of telephones, televisions, and whatever other technologies might follow:

Postliterate man’s electronic media contract the world to a village or a tribe where everything happens to everyone at the same time: everyone knows about, and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the minute it happens...in the global village. This simultaneous sharing of experiences as in a village or tribe creates a village or tribal outlook, and puts a premium on togetherness. In this new tribal juxtaposition of people, nobody strives for individual excellence...At the moment, it is important...to develop an awareness about print and the newer technologies of communication so that we can orchestrate them [and] minimize their mutual frustrations and clashes.⁷

In its first consideration, the global village is inevitable, but it is manageable. Technologies of communication can be orchestrated to bring world cultures nearer to one another, thus limiting the scope and force of national identity and sovereignty. Indeed, McLuhan and Carpenter argue that if orchestrated correctly, the advancement of electronic media can bring “everyone” together into a space of minimal conflict. In drawing their image of post-national togetherness, McLuhan and Carpenter (anticipating Huyssen) presume a consensus to be at work on the global level much in the way that Lipset envisioned it to be at work on the national level. The post-political situation expands, by means of electronic media, to capture the whole world in the picture of the functioning, frictionless global village. Put another way, media might produce a sense of togetherness at a planetary scale to resemble, and to supersede, the sense of togetherness and consensus already believed to be operating nationally.

In these early visions of a liberal world order, political and cultural extremes are tolerable to the global future, as they are to the national present, only as deviations from an acceptable norm. The global village is thus a version of another liberal imaginary, the eclipse of distance. And just as the global village seems to map national community on the world, the eclipse of distance seems to envision the harmony of the global village as also having effects on the nation. In other words, to the extent that the metaphor of a “global village” aims to describe a new proximity among nations and cultures, the metaphor of an “eclipse of distance” seeks to describe a nation’s or a culture’s new proximity to itself. In the highly influential 1963 article that bears this title, Bell asks: “Is our technical civilisation only a revolution in production (and in consumption, transportation, communication)? Is it not necessarily a revolution in sensibility as well?...Every culture ‘hangs together’ in some fashion, and this we call its style...express[ing] common underlying rhythms or moods of the technical civilization.”⁸ For Bell, the cultural “style” of the postwar U.S. entailed a vanquishing of alienation, and therefore of distance. The triumph of immediacy and simultaneity within this nation echoes, in Bell’s account, the triumph of internationalism and spatial shrinkage in the “global village”—the nation, like the planet in McLuhan’s metaphor, can “hang together” because of its new technological underpinnings.

Bell realizes that national style can sustain itself over time, achieving an immediacy of the citizen to his or her national identity, and of the spectator or artist to an artwork, but only at the cost of privacy and control:

Novelty, sensation, simultaneity, immediacy, and impact run through the mass culture (where its effects and techniques are so obvious as not to need explication) and through the serious culture as well...to produce an ‘eclipse of distance’—of psychic distance, social distance, and aesthetic distance—between the speaker and an experience...The loss of psychic distance means the suspension of time...The break-up of social distance is the invasion of privacy, the increasing inability in contemporary society to define and maintain formal relations where desirable, to escape a crowd, or often, to define one’s own tasks and work. The disruption of aesthetic distance means that one has lost the control over the experience.⁹

If McLuhan and Carpenter saw the loss of individualism as the price of technically enabled togetherness, then Bell sees much the same thing: the loss of control over one’s own immediate situation in space and time as the price of a technical “style” that allows the nation to “hang together.” Neither formula would refute liberal principles of individualism or rights, and neither would see a post-individualist communitarianism to be in any way desirable. Yet both agree that community will happen, like it or not, as an after-effect of teletechnology. And both agree that, while individual sacrifices will need to be made, the inevitable technological togetherness doesn’t have to be all that bad.

Woven between the two metaphors of the global village and the eclipse of distance is the technological basis of the Cold War consensus. A nation is led to post-politics not only through the demise of malevolent forces outside its borders—communism and fascism—but also through the technology and the technophilic sensibility that the nation generates within itself, for itself. This teletechnological narrative of post-politics is less dependent on external contingencies than is Lipset’s narrative of the post-fascist and post-communist welfare state. Licensed by the narrative of post-political consensus, expansive capitalism legitimizes itself as a historical inevitability, and inventiveness remains a key aspect of the national character.¹⁰ Moreover, the place where invention

and innovation happen remains the space where shared national sensibility is possible, and where a new international order is managed. Aesthetics and technology are tied up together in arguments such as McLuhan's and Bell's. The whole world can improve, secured by national identity and international relations, now that technology has improved enough to bring diverse spaces and peoples together: this is bootstrap ideology writ large, and sustained by the myth that unique and productive collectives can rise through the force of communication technologies to overcome all challenges, regardless of whether these challenges come from population groups or identity formations with the temerity to see themselves through other, non-technological or non-communicative, means.

Critical left histories of U.S. culture often embed themselves within this ideology, in an alignment with a sanctioned technophilia and a utopian vision of communication. Here is how this history might read, not as the description of a world but as a process of world-making. Emerging at the start of the twentieth century and rising to its apex in the two decades following World War II was a massive shift in the spheres of public culture, popular representation, communication, and transportation toward what McLuhan would call the "electronic media." The old media made way for, and then gave way to, the new ones. The radical inventiveness of the twenties and thirties (the pairing of modernism and proletarianism in art) fell entirely away in the fifties, or worse, got caught in a sterile and recursive feedback loop, conducted under the repressive signs of Eisenhower, Nixon, McCarthy, etc. Then at last, beginning in the early sixties, young people in America reached their political maturity and learned to use their communications technologies, in their own maturity, to shrink the earth and make it accessible, not just to militaristic expansion but also to good liberal charity. Art and politics merged in cultural texts for the first and last time before objects such as novels and films began their long, slow slumps toward archaism, elitism, and obscurity. This narrative belongs in italics, indented, and between ellipses, since it cannot be erased entirely. It is a terrible story in a voice that speaks only about itself; it has become familiar, but it does not go away, because it is girded by common—that is, bad—sense.

Now (that is, in the diegetic "now" of the half-century-old narrative of "new" media), as never before in history, it seems likely that someone will say: "never before in history." Never before in history—it is said—has technology moved so fast and grown so quickly, and never before in history has human life across the globe been lived as one common life lived under the sign of a centralized and homogenous "we." "We" are successfully ridding "ourselves" of paper books, celluloid film, and the inconveniences of national boundaries and national identities, so the narrative goes, so that as never before in history "we" feel that "we" might even solve all problems—from the biomedical to the military—together, and to move forward together as one human community, as one America that "hangs together," and as one global village. Cultural forms that might have led elsewhere, such as literature and contentious politics, are cast as belonging to a pre-post-imperial moment. They are larval technology. In sustaining the alienation of the subject and of the artwork, they have made themselves useless to the transcendental humanism of the global village.

Such a view could be arrived at in the postwar period only at the cost of historical understanding. The liberal rhetoric of inclusion could thrive only by disavowing its reverse rhetoric, that of exclusion. This disavowal is the stubborn rhetoric that Ellen Rooney and Samuel Weber have called, following Garry Wills, the "exclusion of exclusion."¹¹ By the exclusion of exclusion, political deliberation becomes a dumbshow: tautologically, every audible voice is heard; no apparatus can amplify the quiet rumblings of dissent; and no structural analysis can explain by what means (institutional racism and sexism, say, or unregulated industry) whole groups have been effectively

silenced. This is the bad historical thinking that stems from and justifies post-politics and the eclipse of distance at the national level. At the planetary level, McLuhan can only imagine his global village by implicitly claiming to account for everything, inclusively, by fetishizing (without comprehending) the proximity entailed in the “tribal outlook”; by scotomizing those world cultures that are not reached by the long fingers of his “electronic media”; or by ignoring the fact that teletechnologies impact different cultures in different ways.

What makes McLuhan’s and Bell’s metaphors so pliable, and what folds them into diverse crevices of cultural life, is their bringing together of technology with art. But from their metaphorical language and methodological looseness there does open up, in art and more especially in literature, a whole field of possible rhetorical and poetic interruptions. What, then, if one could learn to resist the allegorical attractions of a global village? Could one expose oneself to the more generative intimacies of disjunctive community and multiple locality? And what if it were possible to read the “eclipse of distance”—to analyze it in its symbolic and narrative force—rather than simply to accept it or deny it as a fact of the present? Would it be possible to eclipse that eclipse?

2. Post-Politics

These are some of the questions that animated such books as *The Empire City*, a long novel in several volumes that Goodman wrote in the years during and after World War II (*The Grand Piano; or, The Almanac of Alienation*, 1942; *The State of Nature: A War*, 1946; *The Dead of Spring: After a War*, 1950; all three published with subsequent volumes under a single cover as *The Empire City*, 1959). The novel practices, narrates, and (to an extent) prescribes an open and non-determining form of political speech. What characterizes this form of speech is its metaphoricity, and indeed its literariness: its capacity to disarticulate certain diagrams of language and knowledge, such as consensus-based “post-politics” and communicative technocracy, that gird national historical myth. In his experimental fiction, Goodman points to an always-already-political component of twentieth-century prose formalism. That is, in his extended rumination on the potential for political speech in a purportedly post-political age, he considers how to speak when all one can do is breathe. An aesthetic like Goodman’s is a passionate response to the feeling of being trapped in the supposed consensus. It presumes that Lipset’s “characteristic pattern of stable western democracies” is just that, a pattern, a repeating symbolic formation marked by a caesura that falls between each iteration. Goodman’s “fertile void” signifies this caesura in the pattern of political forms, and names it also as a point of exclusion, indeed of the exclusion of exclusion, papered over by a consensus. Consensus is then nothing other than this papering-over: a myth, a merely compensatory but highly efficient organizational formation of language, a mutable and muffling textile, and the side-effect of the disaster of the discourse of individual rights, wherein the basic ideological assumption is that anyone is capable of speaking in any field. Out of the void—and in response to consensus, communication, individualism, and post-politics—springs a fragmentary and unmastered form of speech, a mere form of dissent.

Goodman does not fit neatly among those modernists in the United States, especially during and after World War II, who still engaged in the politics of aesthetic experiment. Much of American modernism (like much American life purporting to exist aside from art) had been seduced by an ideal of communication, a perfected American nationalism, and a stunningly effective rhetoric of post-politics. With the emergence and proliferation of telephones and televisions, but also radios, RADAR, and long-range flight, came a changed, and widely shared, notion of America’s place in the world: its capacity to reach “the rest of the world,” to picture it, to impose commercial relations and cultural values upon it, to make a fetish of it, and if judged necessary to bomb or invade it.¹²

Meanwhile, with the demise or disappearance of the most overt forms of state control, fascism and communism, the same years brought an evident and widely applauded sense that everybody felt the same about what it meant to be American; a shared identification by everybody with the traits of a people bound by national history rather than State institutions; a celebration at the inclusion within a deliberative public sphere of socially and culturally variant groups; and the moderation, in general, of “extreme” behaviors and attitudes. Art did not stand apart from these tendencies; and communication as well as consensus were myths linked in their moment, often through art, as twin fantasies that justified one another under the emergent signs of postwar liberalism and conservatism. For many artists of the moment, art was innovation like technology was innovation. Even those who would criticize the expansion of capitalism or the pervasiveness of technology in culture (one thinks of Waldo Frank or the prewar work of John dos Passos) very often incorporated literary motifs that mimicked non-literary machines, like the film or the camera. The supposed need for ever-better means of communication was grounded in the presumed existence of a global common good, while consensus was made possible, or so it was promised, by the new pace at which Americans could communicate their visions and desires.

The Empire City was modernist in many of its techniques—its employment of parataxis, broad cultural reference, proletarian politics, philosophical argument, onomatopoeia, and so on—but remained opposed to a certain modernism in its refusal to align technical experimentation with technological innovation. The book combines critical commentary on communication and consensus with a passionate plea for uncommunicative and uncooperative political speech. Under the sign of what he calls “the theory of the Fertile Void,” Goodman depicts an American public faced with the evident deaths of fascism and communism.¹³ Yet rather than mourn these extremes, Goodman shows a public that instead came to fear them, even to the point of denying that there might be other extremes lying dormant in, or immanent to, the post-political situation. The public and the majority of its cultures thus appears to drift toward a middle ground, in a political spectrum that was regarded as a straight and regular line that ran from left to right. And so, available histories tell, what few radicals remained could not themselves resist the drift toward political moderation. This, at any rate, is the story that is told about the Cold War’s early years—when disappointment, fear, and prudence were among the characterizing emotions of left thought and culture—and that has been told so often that it is now established history.¹⁴

Goodman’s novel focuses upon a pair of brothers named Horatio Alger (also known as Horace) and Lothario Alger (also called Lothair and Lothar). The characters’ names are obviously allegorical, and so is the story, which is fragmentary and abstract, playful in an overwrought mock-romantic mode, and disorienting. The episode that concerns me here is from a chapter of the 1950 volume *The Dead of Spring* and describes a meeting, *After a War*, among American pacifists in a small apartment in New York City. This scene falls squarely in the center of *The Empire City*, where the characters and their city, and indeed their author, although well established, must suddenly and quickly figure out what options exist for political life and action. Here as elsewhere in Goodman, all a group of political actors can hold in common is a conflict, between the Fertile Void and the post-political impasse. Everything else (from communication and community to historical periodization) is then just a secondary effect.

As the chapter begins, the pacifists have gathered in Lothair’s home. The narrative voice describes the scene: “Friends, we have reached the most beautiful part of our meeting: the impasse from which nevertheless we do not get up and leave. We are resting in this hell.”¹⁵ The impasse in their conversation is a point of struggle, but it is also a point of procedure: it is a regular lull of inactivity

in a collective effort toward active change; but it is also a necessary lull that the story suggests is indispensable to the least deliberative functions of the group. The life of liberatory action is stilled in a moment wherein neither the groups to be freed nor the tactic of their freedom is clear. Participants in the deliberation are “resting” in a moment when nothing concrete can be proposed. But when rest is conducted “in this hell,” it is paradoxically neither restful nor restorative. It is more like the rest in a musical score: a tense, soundless pause as an audience waits for musicians to draw breath. The narrative proceeds: “Problems for which no one can suggest anything practical. Jointly we cannot invent anything practical either; we have exhausted the strength of fraternity.”¹⁶ No identifiable or even individual character has yet been introduced: neither Lothario nor Horatio has spoken or been mentioned, and the parataxis of these first two sentences has already evoked the labored speech and hard breathing of those assembled. The characters are trapped in the silence of an impasse, and it is only by dispelling this silence, this untenable centrism, that some change might eventually arise, and a community might survive. The voice continues: “[O]h, if we friends *remain* in our impasse, close to our impasse, gratuitously suffering the awareness of being in an impasse, must not the Fertile Void yield up something? Gratuitous effort *must* lead to something unlooked-for.”¹⁷ In Goodman’s terms, the consensus is an impasse, legitimated by nothing other than collective feeling. The collective feeling, in turn, is volatile, unpredictable and, at any moment, capable of engulfing and superseding the impasse, the thread that knots the principle of political possibility tightly to the principle of political impossibility. If *The Empire City* accepts consensus as a given, then it accepts it only as a given cultural narrative and not as a given state of affairs. As such, as a narrative of conservative containment, liberal inclusion, and radical defeat, consensus is contradicted, even unwoven, by a collective feeling conceived outside the law of consent.

3. Stuckness and Speech

Before Goodman gained brief fame with the publication of several road maps of the New Left—among them *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Mis-Education* (1964)—what concerned him were the possibility and impossibility of cultural production, political speech, pacifism, anarchism, and protest under the sign of this apparent national consensus. Throughout this work, Goodman resolves that consensus, while illusory, had nonetheless succeeded in patterning social norms, and made it nearly impossible to depart from those norms. In a range of work (poems, numerous articles and reviews, a book of urban planning, and a doctoral dissertation from the University of Chicago, later published as *The Structure of Literature* [1954]) Goodman shows how, under the headings of liberalism and moderation, consensus had made extreme forms of departure unsayable. Loss of a viable political vocabulary can rob a politics only of its words, however, and the fact that an alternative is unsayable doesn’t mean that nothing can be said about it. Only by hanging on to the problem of the impasse, resting there, will the field of the void open up upon speech about “something unlooked-for,” speech that might have a sound but no meaning. This is the impasse with which, and within which, “we friends” must live. Their meeting is a space of enormous but indeterminate possibility, and their impasse can only be exploited by surrendering the old options while at the same time refusing to fantasize any definite future emancipation. The scale of their common agreement, their collective feeling, is much smaller than the one that founds the national consensus. It is limited to a tiny locality, Lothair’s apartment. And it is based only in the limits of emotional connection, friendship. If “we friends” share any kind of consensus, then “we” share a consensus turned on its head, stripped of its instrumental aims, its identification with national character, and its globalizing ambition.

One might find oneself led to “something unlooked-for” if one is only willing to suffer the void, and read the impasse. The principal purpose of the void, meanwhile, is not simply to resist the impasse

of consensus. More importantly, it is to illuminate the absent foundations of the impasse, in the discourses of individual rights and communicative community. The void marks the incompleteness of those discourses: a point of failure within the political field where an aversion to political extremes can no longer be legitimated only by the presumption of common agreement. This point of failure is what takes shape when Lothario tries to enter his voice into the impasse, but can only interrupt the proceedings:

With a mournful shriek Lothair has broken the silence, saying, “Aiiiiiy!” Wailing, “Auuuuuuuw!” and “Oo-oooh.” But Lothair’s are the cries of a human person who feels in himself a woeful pang that is his own and yet is alien to what he thought to be his. Then it speaks itself, he speaks it, but he cuts it off at the end of the scream, to limit it. Thus, Lothair has cut off the high shriek with a *y*, and he has closed the middle wail with a *w*. The low moan rose softer from his throat but he has expelled the last of it with an *h*.¹⁸

Lothario utters senseless vowel sounds and concludes each one with a breath. The pang of woe “speaks itself” and at the same time “he speaks it.” The feeling is vocalized without translation or explanation. The utterance is not adequated to the emotion; the emotion is uttered. The sound can be described barely, by a narrative voice that cannot claim access to Lothair’s interiority. And even then, the sounds only become social when the vowel sounds have given way to the semivowels, “*y*” and “*w*” and to the fricative, “*h*.” The community forms and deforms around these vocalizations. Even time seems to bend around the sounds, as the paragraph begins in the present perfect tense (“has broken”) before shifting to the simple present (the moment of immediacy and change in which Lothair “feels” and “speaks”) and ending again in the present perfect (“has expelled”). Significantly, the only gesture to the simple past tense is in reference to the “low moan” that “rose” but could not be brought to completion, or to meaning, in the present pause of the friends’ impasse.

The narrator continues, again in the simple present tense: “He is at a social meeting and he must stay within the possibilities of communication. The possibility of communication is saved by the *y*, the *w*, and the little breath *h*. This is how it is with us—this is called ‘talking politics.’”¹⁹ “Talking politics” presses back upon communication, and also upon mediatization, which in turn the book links to consensus politics and to financialization (through an additional character named Eliphaz—a financier and a father figure to Horatio, Goodman describes him as a “Marxist capitalist”).²⁰ It remains just this side of linguistic and social convention, belonging to but not upholding those matrices of recognition and representation. Lothario’s punctuated screams can, in other words, introduce a “mere noise” into a manically ordered and inclusive public sphere that can’t account for it. Goodman explains this inclusiveness and ordering in *Compulsory Mis-Education*:

This sentiment of consensus, “understanding,” is so important that much speech and reading does not even give new information, but is a ritual touching of familiar bases...The underlying consensus is assumed—is signaled by the usual words—and no important alternative is offered.²¹

What *The Empire City* already attempts, even before that later book, is to produce the “important alternative” to “the usual words.” There is rebellion in Lothair’s utterances, for example, but not in any way that would accept the dominance of historical structures in order then to reverse them. Instead, Lothair and Goodman both aim to revitalize forms of common as well as literary language, while accepting that “ritual” and “familiarity” have pushed certain procedures of speech and reading

beyond repair. Above all, this way of thinking displaces the popular “understanding” that Antonio Gramsci had named “common sense,” and that sustains so many uses of the first-person plural in social conduct—whereby *I* and *you* constitute an artificial *we* based on *our* supposed understanding of the spaces and ideals that *we* hold in common.²² This first-person plural “hangs together,” to use Bell’s phrase, in the conflictless form that McLuhan called “togetherness.”

Goodman’s use of the first-person plural is striking in its critique of the liberal use. In a later volume of *The Empire City*, Lothario grumbles discontentedly to Horatio: “Our consensus is that how we live is tolerable. If I ask, ‘How are you?’ you must say, ‘Pretty good.’ And if I do not remind you, you must not remind me.”²³ This is the social contract as a gag. Once the agreement between “us” has been established, it constrains all subsequent speech. All that remains is either common belief that “how we live is tolerable,” or else a kind of speech that will not assent but that is therefore no kind of speech at all. Motivated by the belief that real amelioration of social conditions is nearly but not entirely out of the question, this kind of speech opens up like Lothario’s screamed vowels, then closes upon the “y,” the “w,” or the “h.” Back to the impasse in the meeting at Lothair’s apartment.

We are struck dumb. Our spokesman cried out “Freedom!” But the word fell upside down. We are frozen in criticism. It is impossible to have a formulation of freedom and at the same time to do a free deed. Must we not say that we have made a formulation of freedom in order to protect ourselves from the unformulable daring of doing a free deed? How not to dream it up? Is one to call the formulation of freedom a lie when it is not a lie, just because it does not give freedom, and even though it protects against freedom? “Freedom!” is a hard problem. Meantime the people of the world are destroying one another and are destroying also our friends.²⁴

Consensus in this scene plays out not just as a weak form of political compromise, but also as a myth that could be brought to incoherence by another myth: “Freedom!” turned upside down, given without promise of futurity or understanding. The scream and the inverted word appear, in Goodman, in opposition to a largely unquestioned form of national politics that hinged upon capital flows that were increasingly motivated by narratives of technological “development” and coupled to increasingly effective narratives of technologically-enabled communication. At a 1967 London conference of left cultural figures (Allen Ginsberg, Stokely Carmichael, R.D. Laing, David Cooper, Herbert Marcuse, Lucien Goldmann, and others), Goodman would describe the need for popular forms of organization that would traverse national boundaries as against this other form of traversal. He told the assembly that the cultural place of collective dissent and dissidence had been stolen from anything resembling a proletariat and immediately occupied by a multinational technocracy. He said: “There is no such thing as a working class international... The one actual international in the world at present is the international of technology and management—that spreads its style and exchanges its persons right across the world.”²⁵ Goodman here concedes that workers’ movements are no longer likely to meet with any success: a concession that others there gathered must surely have been unwilling to accept. But in giving up hope for a proletarian globalism, Goodman can emphasize two points: first, that the felt force of the post-political impasse was devastating; and second, that there are no benefits whatsoever to any globalism, even one founded on proletarian principles. By suspending Marxist struggle in favor of anarchist struggle, in other words, Goodman can reimagine—and decentralize—McLuhan’s “global village” as a style of speech, an institutionally guaranteed style of consensus, a collapsed and homogenous vision of the world, and a technology by which communities can agree that “how we live is tolerable.”

What Goodman offers, by contrast to technophilic histories or technocratic diagnoses of American community, is a world in which power might possibly be up for grabs, but is currently in service of a corporatizing culture and economy, and held in place by a misuse of communications technology. For Goodman, it falls to popular movements to use this technology properly or else to shove it aside in favor of other, perhaps less communicative kinds of speech, in order not to speak about but rather to speak toward another form of life. This marginalization of teletechnology is a matter of style, for Goodman, but not in Bell's nationalist sense. For Goodman, style is a way of using language collectively to disrupt and tear at the dominant "style" of management; and it is a manner of moving "right across the world" that might use teletechnology but does not rely on it, and that refuses to be linked with commerce and exchange. As he said, again at the 1967 conference in London: "People expect to use political power to accomplish some excellence or grandeur. It cannot. What it can do, sometimes, is to guarantee a situation of minimal decency in which maybe something good can occur."²⁶ And this is the situation in which Lothario finds himself, in the third volume of *The Empire City*. The screamed vowels, the breathed semi-vowels, and the word "Freedom!" (fallen upside down) constitute a bare manifestation of the deployment of power, a response to the disaster of consensus and individualism that separate popular power from the instrumental aims of "technology and management."

There is significant cause for skepticism here. What, after all, is the use of a low-level, inexpressive form of political speech? Does that form not in fact mark the success of a technologized, capitalist, world-shrinking media ecology? One answer is that "mere dissent" is no kind of dissent at all, but only a kind of feeble defiance.²⁷ It seems perfectly likely that a small-scale protest is at least partly evidence that hegemony is working, either because it is one of those predicted and permitted failures of a powerful consensus, or because it expresses the true emotional cost of political suppression and silencing. But Lothario's vocalizations, although they are without meaning, do succeed in holding his friends together. In what Goodman's nameless narrative voice calls "the truest possible theory," these vocalizations emerge from a well of as-yet-unexpressed forms of emotional attachment, the world-expanding (rather than mediatized and world-shrinking) Fertile Void:²⁸

The love is boiling in the Fertile Void; it is souring and fermenting there. The Void must yield up an homunculus. (All this is occurring in the dark, on the yonder side of the impasse.) Void! Yield up the homunculus! This then is the theory of the relation of the impasse and the Fertile Void: *diminishing error but remaining close in the awareness of the impasse of nothing practical, large increments of love are released that are fermenting in the Fertile Void.*²⁹

The homunculus is a living figure whose birth "on the yonder side of the impasse" is produced by Lothario's scream, rendered provisionally whole by having been uttered, but cast "in the dark" away from political utility. It is the "woeful pang that is his own and yet is alien to what he thought was his," and it is the site of a reservoir of love that is capable of transforming the structures of social organization that house public discourse. The homunculus that emerges from the void, arriving from the yonder side of the impasse as the embodiment in style and form of large increments of communal love: that homunculus is nothing other than a kind of speech and prose that is prospective but not prescriptive, denotative but not descriptive. For what it's worth, Goodman provides not just an unclassifiable literary style, but also and more pressingly a style of unclassifiability, an informal deformatization, a social binding that is also a semantic unbinding, an active openness to "something unlooked-for" as against the closure and totality of a pre-given

political or cultural history—not a making sense of the senselessness, but rather a dissensus without sense, and a wordless, full-throated call for friends to “remain in their impasse.”³⁰

4. Mere Noise

Lothario’s vocalizations evoke another moment of despair and stuckness. This other episode occurs in Gramsci’s early prison notebooks, with the observation that a prisoner’s despair, when genuine, provides the occasion for mutual recognition: “Prison tears: others sense whether the tears are ‘mechanical’ or ‘anguished.’ A different reaction when someone screams: ‘I want to die.’ Rage and indignation or mere noise. One feels that everyone is anguished when the tears are sincere.”³¹ To Gramsci, the terrible politics of community can take shape even in the moment of a prisoner’s despair: “when someone screams: ‘I want to die.’” Is this an awful moment of solidarity when “everyone is anguished”? A community of shared fatedness and grief? Or does the sound of “rage and indignation or mere noise” manifest instead as the prisoner’s futile acknowledgment of his deprived condition and his tightly-controlled position in the machinery of state? If the latter, then what was it worth, the noise he made? What transformative force could possibly belong to this barest form of dissenting speech? But if a community is possible even under prison conditions by the force of “mere noise,” then there is a kind of political usefulness, no matter how tenuous, to be found wherever “everyone is anguished.”

The question asked by both Gramsci and Goodman is: what is the lowest-level form of protestatory speech? What minimal vocalization can cause a break in the moderate forms structuring cultural knowledge? If the answer given by Gramsci is emotive and political, then the answer given by Goodman is emotive, political and aesthetic: an insistence on negative forms as against the Cold War consensus, the celebrated “rise” of communicative mass media, and its consequent versions of liberal national and transnational relations. Translated into Gramsci’s world of incarcerated dissidents, a moan like Lothario’s is either the voice of a rage against an effective and efficient silencing machine, or else a “mere noise”—the proof of having been effectively silenced. Translated into Goodman’s world, the moan of a prisoner who “wants to die” signals less the condemnation to death than the condemnation to silence and political uselessness. In either direction, there is only an imperfect translation: the institutional efforts to silence that Goodman describes are truly not so dire as the efforts that Gramsci describes, and the stifled feeling of consensus post-politics is truly different in kind as well as degree from the terror of political imprisonment. Yet the comparison to Gramsci shows how Goodman’s style of bare speech grants his characters (because they are not imprisoned) the unique conditions for possible communal action, even if the form of that action cannot yet be imagined or, very precisely, articulated. In turn, Goodman teases the potential for communal bonds, emotional life, and vital small-scale change even out of Gramsci’s claustrophobic and often-sterile epistemology of power.

The void marks the semantically undecidable entanglement and disentanglement that occur among the era’s efforts at collective organization and action. The void is also an interruption of the discourse of communications technology, and the crack or formal incoherence in the dominant political identities and the resulting myths of consensus that have defined the American nation.³² A pacifist and communitarian position like Goodman’s can facilitate a mode of cultural thinking whose axis is aesthetic and political, rather than just technical and interpersonal. Such thinking sees subjects as formed through their acts of reading, and denies any assumption of a social or political subject who is in any way preconstituted or given before the moment of its becoming legible. This style of thinking (that’s “style” in Goodman’s sense and not in Bell’s) need not necessarily discard the metaphorical languages of description and diagnosis such as those that have followed McLuhan and

Bell. But it may well mean seeing the real transformative force of such languages in the world they mean simply to describe. The void is a spatial designation, any non-space of generation in any zone of a passage. It is a figure of narrative that, by definition, can shift the terms of a world merely by shifting the terms of those stories that the world tells itself. In the particular narrative of communication, the void is a gulf that divides a society from itself, in its failures to cohere. As W.H. Auden wrote in 1962: “If two members of the public meet and speak to each other, the function of their words is not to convey meaning or arouse passion but to conceal by noise the silence and solitude of the void.”³³ Auden, like Goodman, sees all communication as incomplete and, to a degree, inherently futile. Communication is noise, as paradoxical as that seems. And as noise, this bare version of communication can change the cast of social relations whether or not it bears a comprehensible meaning. The generative heart of “the fertile void” is in its manipulation of the non-communicative aspects of language and technology. Art is neither immaterial nor free of ideology, in this view, but it can be made meaningful without being made comprehensible. A certain style of art (and again, most emphatically not Bell’s national style) can manage the production of noise, in opposition to the imaginary world-shrinking of global telecom, industrial entertainment, and the myth of unmediated expression. An aesthetic approach to the void can therefore produce a formal language capable of prising apart the tightening stranglehold of technocratic language over art and cultural objects that are so much more than technological.

The ideology of communication and information (quite apart from communicative and informative *practices*) has facilitated a movement in politics, art, and culture away from community as a site of perpetual struggle in difference, and toward a goal of unified world culture, social sameness, and a level human economy. The diagrams for this ideological procedure are familiar, and not always drawn with a skeptical eye. After Bell and McLuhan entered with their metaphors of the “global village” and “the eclipse of distance,” the language of liberal political theory followed. Consider claims like those of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, who pursue the “ideal communication community” as a space where political air gets cleared and crises get resolved.³⁴ Such claims can slide easily into more recent, more facile spatial metaphors for the fast motion of technologically facilitated bodies and capital: the “global marketplace,” the “information superhighway,” etc. The linguist and philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle has described the appeal and promise of such (both utopian and dystopian) dreams of connection:

Dare to communicate, know how to communicate—such is the watchword of our liberal modernity. The promises held out are enticing: communication is the surest means for the individual subject to flourish; she realizes her freedom to the utmost in it, assumes her responsibility in it, enjoys control over her existence and her thought in it. To service such noble needs, a communications industry and institutions of communication have developed: they are regarded as the cutting edge of technological progress and stock-market enrichment...In one hand, modern man holds his steering wheel and in the other...his mobile, on which he is constantly communicating. For modern man is never alone and the most trivial and babbling insights must be communicated forthwith.³⁵

The discourse of aesthetic and political mediation can be held apart from the discourse of communication, or else “communication” can be made to describe even an endless circulation, even of meaningless noise. Void aesthetics may thus be allowed to stand beside communications technology as among the main social formations—indeed transformations—of the postwar period.

From a historical standpoint, a tradition that includes Goodman must be seen to move in constant interference with a tradition that includes McLuhan and Bell.³⁶ In the postwar period alone, the latter tradition founds a conservative movement as well as a basically liberal apparatus of technology and economy—what Jodi Dean has called “communicative capitalism.”³⁷ Meanwhile, the former includes a range of artworks and cultural practices that remain largely unconnected in their aesthetic and cultural radicalism. However, such radicalism is deserving of attention for having tried to limit the scope of the social and cultural diagnoses of McLuhan and Bell, among others. The “global village” still promises a new world determined by technology, in which cultural and political differences are erased through long-distance communications and the imposition of a common audio-visual language. And the “eclipse of distance” still promises a tool for organizing harmonious national and post-national communities. But something else is also possible in observations, like those of Armand Mattelart, that the sudden ability to compress time and space “has not proved to necessarily create a closer-knit world community. One is rather tempted to think...we move in leaps and bounds away from the global village toward narrow chauvinism.”³⁸ The reputedly unifying institutions and narratives of telecommunication are in fact discreet practices by which political exclusion has itself been disavowed and excluded. Rather than drawing a society together without prejudice, an impossible and possibly undesirable task anyway, the teletechnological narrative (as distinct from the technologies themselves) continues to press societies into greater and greater “chauvinism” while teaching them that prejudice, as such, belongs to a pretechnological past.

Goodman’s void breaks from this storyline so as to imagine a negative and anarchic site of “mere noise” within cultural narratives and collectives: where community is wrested from institutional norms and determined ends, as an intimacy through separation and distance, rather than without distance, whose friction leads toward non-institutional or differently institutional forms of organization and representation. And there is a very real risk of disaggregation or disorganization, as there would be with any noise, in the production of such a life that is open and productive rather than positivistic and secure.

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Notes

Note: This essay was developed over the course of several conferences—the 2012 meetings of the American Comparative Literature Association and the Society for Novel Studies, as well as Brown’s spring symposium on Emerging Perspectives in Modern Culture and Media—and owes much to the generous interventions of Nancy Armstrong, Eyal Amiran, Thomas Brockelman, and others. It owes at least as much to lengthy conversations with Ellen Rooney, Anita Starosta, and John David Rhodes.

¹ Clichés must have their beginnings, and the hackneyed political metaphors of “global village” and “eclipse of distance” appear to have begun, respectively, in the introduction to the 1960 book that McLuhan co-edited with Edmund I. Carpenter, entitled *Explorations in Communication* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1960); and in a 1963 magazine column by Bell (“The Eclipse of Distance.” *Encounter* 116: 1963: 54-55).

² This phrase—“the fertile void”—is one that reappears across *The Empire City* and across Goodman’s writing. Additionally, it was a feature of gestalt therapy, a method of treatment that Goodman helped to devise (in *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, co-written by Goodman with Fritz Perls and Ralph Hefferline [New York: Julian, 1951]). In his best-known book *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman associates this political and psychic phenomenon with the confusions of youth: “Confusion is the state of promise, the fertile void where surprise is possible again. Confusion is in fact the state that we are in, and we should be wise to cultivate it.” (Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* [New York: Vintage, 1960]: 190.)

³ On the massive influence of *Growing Up Absurd*, see Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2002) and the recent documentary film *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (directed by Jonathan Lee, 2011).

⁴ Paul Goodman, *The Empire City* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 287.

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 53.1 (1959): 100.

⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 190.

⁷ McLuhan and Carpenter, *Explorations*, xi-xii.

⁸ Bell, “The Eclipse of Distance,” 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰ This yoking together of capitalism with so-called “yankee ingenuity,” as twin predestinations of national identity, is an established component of American exceptionalism. More importantly, it is also a commonplace of historical accounts at midcentury. One might cite as an example the liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger who, in a 1940 article, endorsed a view of eighteenth-century urbanization in which: “civic spirit [and]...the pressure of urban needs...fostered American inventiveness, producing Franklin's lightning rod and the fireplace stove.” (“The City in American History,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27.1 [1940], 46). Recently, exceptionalism has re-emerged as a topic in critical American Studies—as an example of this development, see Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹¹ See Ellen Rooney, *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Samuel M. Weber, “Ambivalence, the Humanities and the Study of Literature,” *diacritics* 15.2 (1985); and Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self Made Man* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969).

¹² By far, the best address to this problem has been Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in the War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹³ Goodman, *The Empire City*, 287. It must be heard to be Goodman’s narrator, rather than Goodman himself, who grants to the void the consistency of a “theory.” While it is true that Goodman returned to the term again and again in his work (see note two above), it was always in the spirit of his ludic and libidinal politics, and never really in the interest of establishing a stable philosophy or doctrine.

¹⁴ The story of political moderation in the 1950s is one of the founding narratives of the study of postwar culture in the field of American Studies. Among the many important book-length studies on the growth of centrism in cultures of anti-communism and domesticity, for example, one finds Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Durham University Press, 1995); and the work of so-called New Americanists. More recently, the fault-lines in consensus have been exposed to narrower but more forceful political

critique by more recent classics like Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Goodman, *The Empire City*, 283.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁰ Morgan and Barbara Gibson, “Highlights of an Interview with Paul Goodman on *The Empire City*,” *Kulchur* 5 (1965): 11.

²¹ Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-Education* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964), 177.

²² Gramsci describes the problem in this way: “Every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’ which is...not something rigid and static; rather it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage...‘Common sense’ creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place” (*The Prison Notebooks, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg [New York: Columbia University Press, 1992], 173). Following Gramsci, it might be said that Goodman emphasizes the mutability—that is, the “constant change”—of a consensus that is built in to his, or to any, moment; but that Goodman also insists on rendering consensus as something that, through creative and emotional labor, might be made somewhat less “rigidifying” in its effects on political speech and time.

²³ Goodman, *The Empire City*, 456.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁵ Paul Goodman, “Objective Values,” in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1968), 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ I am grateful to Ravit Reichman for her use of this last phrase.

²⁸ Goodman, *The Empire City*, 287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 287-288.

³⁰ It is perhaps necessary at this point to separate Goodman’s poetics with those of the Beat writers whom, as it happens, he quite famously excoriated in his literary criticism (on which, see his “Underground Writing, 1960” in *The American Novel since World War II*, edited by Marcus Klein [Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications 1969]). Lines of filiation are to be drawn, however, between Goodman and Allen Ginsberg, not only for *Howl* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1959) which would seem to announce a similarly desperate and inarticulate form of political speech, but also for Ginsberg’s mystical take on Buddhism, which Goodman praised underhandedly in his late book *New Reformation*: “It is true that fundamental facts of life are more acceptable if they come in fancy dress; for instance, it is good to breathe from the diaphragm and one can learn to do this by humming OM, especially in anxious conditions as Allen Ginsberg did for seven hours in Jackson Park in Chicago” ([New York: Random House, 1970], 78).

³¹ Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks, Volume 1*, 177.

³² In comprehending terms of culture that are negative, stylistic, and too ephemeral to have survived in a canon, I am reacting in part against the unchecked growth of the field of new media studies, to the extent that field has lately evinced an appetite for cultural objects, apparatuses, and texts that were previously thought to be separate from mediatic discourses of telecommunication and

technology. Not just print or painting, but also puppetry, policing, public protest, and innumerable other objects all become, simply put, media technologies first, and objects of art or politics only in their secondary applications.

³³ W.H. Auden, “The Poet & the City,” *The Massachusetts Review* 3.3 (1962): 462.

³⁴ See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, “Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence,” *Inquiry* 13 (1970); and Karl-Otto Apel, “The A Priori of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics” in *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1980).

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 214. One might add “scholarly endeavor” to this list, alongside “technological progress and stock-market enrichment.” For among the theorists of media—including those who teach and write about so-called “old media”—nearly all engage in building knowledge about the rapidly moving hustle-bustle of “new media” now, today: that is, with the goal of communicating, to students and colleagues, the revised rules of efficiency in the conduct of a collective global and national project in communication.

³⁶ This tradition is at work in, for example, the negativist poetics of identity in Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Allen Ginsberg; the disjunctive plasticity of cinematic form in Douglas Sirk, Orson Welles, and Jonas Mekas; and the radical social and poetic imagination of certain American literary critics. On these and other instances of what I call “void aesthetics,” see my *The Projector Rests on a Pile of Books: Void and Medium in Postwar U.S. Culture* (unpublished dissertation, 2012).

³⁷ See Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

³⁸ Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794-2000*, trans. Liz Carey-Libbrecht and James A. Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 104.