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Introduction:

Into the Air

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Abstract

In this introduction to the Into the Air special issue of *Media Theory*, the editors reflect on the resonances and rhythms of John Durham Peters' *Speaking into the Air* (1999). We consider what was in the air at the time of the book's original publication, and during our time assembling this special issue. Drawing on publication and marketing materials from the book, as well as work in cultural studies, Black studies, and postcolonial theory, we expand on what we see as the generous possibilities and potential for thinking with this text across historical junctures and against conventional understandings of civilizational time. We also introduce the key themes of this special issue and provide a brief overview of the contributions.

Keywords

air, rhythm, historicity

This special issue gathers papers inspired by a January 2020 symposium, “Into the Air”, convened at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada to coincide with the 20th anniversary of John Durham Peters' book, *Speaking into the Air (SITA)*. Scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and geographic locations were invited to think-and make-with *SITA* in exploring the past, present, and future of communication and media theory. Neither the event nor this special issue seeks to celebrate or canonize the book or its author. The two initiatives, instead, offer an experiment in using a single book as an attractor with which to convene a long-form, collaborative, and critical conversation about both the ‘content’ of media theory (its pressing questions,

methods, corpuses, objects) and its ‘form’ (how it takes shape as a field in various institutional, geographic, historical, and other contexts). All featured speakers from the symposium were invited to contribute to this issue, though not all were able to accept—just one of many ways the issue is imprinted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why *SITA*? Twenty years on, the book has lost none of its intellectual relevance, vibrancy, or weirdness. It offers delight and frustration in equal measure. Peters stages his arguments through diverse and erudite readings of canonical works from Western philosophical and critical traditions that revel in linguistic and literary play. Each sentence holds open the possibility and promise that it might be read otherwise. Readers are led down obscure and forgotten pathways of media culture, such as the nineteenth century Spiritualist movement, debates about the onset of writing, the history of currency and money media, and ideas about animal, alien, and afterlife communication. The book taps into deeper historical veins than are traditional in communication studies, reaching across hundreds and sometimes thousands of years of source material. It also reads across disciplines, engaging in a promiscuous citational practice that is at once methodologically provocative and deliberate. Familiar figures—Adorno, Arendt, Derrida, James, Kierkegaard—are read against the grain. Totemic figures Socrates and Jesus are recast as theorists of communication. The problems of communication theory appear as problems of mutual belonging, of living together, and of creating a common world from shared vulnerability, not of establishing sameness or similarity between individuated beings preoccupied with misrecognition or misunderstanding.

These moves positioned the book, when published in 1999, as resolutely marginal in approach and orientation but highly ambitious in argumentation and desired readership. That ambition has been largely fulfilled. The book is widely read in many parts of the world, has been translated into several languages (sometimes twice!), and has become a mainstay in undergraduate and graduate curricula alike. *SITA* is one of precious few works that is hospitable and inviting of readers from the many corners of the notoriously post-canon and ‘undisciplined’ fields of media and communication studies. Part of this has to do with the way it reformulates the intellectual stakes and ambitions of these fields, reinventing what it is to do such research and teaching. We probably don’t need to rehearse its arguments to readers of this journal, but we can

highlight some of its most provocative and lasting contributions: to shake scholars of communication loose from the grooves of over-specialization; to revel in the plenitude of the generalist; to redeem modes of communication and fellowship degraded by modern notions of progress and efficiency; to marvel at the wondrous possibilities of being together without denying the tragic dimensions of modern life; to think about communication from the standpoint of otherness. The book demonstrates that many thought expansively about the relations between humans and media before late twentieth century professors assumed this task. It encourages us to think ethically and philosophically as well as practically and critically about the things we say and do.

Perhaps most importantly, the book addresses the feeling that something is wrong, the sense that modern life is arrhythmic or out of joint, the worry that our discontents are a permanent feature of our modern condition. Communication, as a concept, is a repository for such discontent, a “registry of modern longings”, and it “encodes our time’s confrontations with itself” (Peters, 1999: 2). This expanded sense of “our time” is among the book’s lasting accomplishments. It allows Peters to historicize the senses of breakdown, disconnect, and failure that animate our communicative worries, to cast them onto a civilizational stage, and to suggest *reading*—not mind reading—as the place where renewal struggles with inherited thought and tradition. Communication, in this respect, is contradictory, ambiguous, and inscribed with an otherness it often forgets; it is the medium that alters and transforms what humans are. The profound stakes of this inversion of the idea of communication are perhaps too often disguised by the book’s constant call backs to canonical figures—at least until Chapter Six. Revisiting the book twenty years on, it is striking how anomalous the text’s style, rhythms, and presentation of Western civilization have remained to the field, even as its conceptual and methodological moves are now taken for granted.

With this introduction, we seek not only to introduce the themes and contributions of this issue, but also to share insights into the background and preparation of *SITA* and to reflect on developments since the symposium. To do so, we pick up where Peters’ title leaves off, with the word “air”. Not only does “air” remind us of *SITA*’s redemptive reading of disseminative communication, perhaps the book’s most popular contribution, but of the racialized politics of respiration that have burst forth with a renewed urgency in recent years. Air is always shared-in-common, a realm of mutual

belonging, and a condition of human civilization. As Achille Mbembe (2020) has noted, the scarcity and weaponization of air came to the foreground once again in 2020, most notably through the COVID-19 virus's attack on human respiration, but also via the centrality of air to planetary protests for racial and climate justice. In a context when mere breathing is dangerous, when a trillion tons of carbon hang over everyone, and when our optimistic attachments to futurity feel particularly "cruel" (Berlant, 2011), *SITA's* genealogy of communication offers a tragic account of our circumstances without succumbing to despair. Tragedy, of course, situates us within temporal rhythms that frustrate simple efforts to embrace, dismiss, or otherwise be finished with events that have exhausted us. It is not happenstance that scholars who think with civilizational rhythms—Hannah Arendt, C.L.R. James, Harold Innis, Aimé Césaire—mobilize tragic conceptions of history, which, as David Scott suggests, "honor the contingent, the ambiguous, the paradoxical, and the unyielding in human affairs in such a way as to complicate our most cherished notions about the relationship of identity and difference, reason and unreason, blindness and insight, action and responsibility, guilt and innocence" (2004: 13).

We turn first to the question of what was 'in the air' in the late-1990s, the period of *SITA's* gestation and development, and then explore how the book might connect to urgent questions regarding contemporary articulations of air, power, justice, and community. In order to think *SITA* in this way, we draw on work in cultural studies, Black studies, and postcolonial theory. Our aim is to expand the resonances of the book through conceptual discussions of rhythm, historicity, and civilizational time. We then conclude with a brief overview of the pieces assembled in this special issue, tracing some of the shared concerns and themes that emerge across "Into the Air".

In the Air: 1998-99

The end of the 1990s was permeated by a sense that historical time had broken down or was ending. The sudden end to the Cold War's familiar rhythms was a decade old. The 'information superhighway' was steadily expanding and promised to deliver a global interconnectivity in 'real time'. Globalization was presented as an endpoint or overcoming of history. The possibilities for hi-tech capitalism and liberal democracy

seemed limitless to those infected with American exceptionalism, typified by Fukuyama's "End of History", and it was even imagined that the carbon accumulating in the air could be tamed by market mechanisms (remember the Kyoto Protocol?). These inanities brought out the worst forms of historical reification in response. Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations paradigm, a scathing critique of those world histories that centre Western liberalism, reified categories of civilizational difference to project a future defined by religious and cultural conflict. It was a geopolitical fantasy that translated fears of societal breakdown onto a civilizational other, notably Islam.

While techno-utopians lauded the potential of the Net as both political and existential remedy to the various problems of human Being, the disintegration of modernist narratives through which much of the twentieth century had been conceived contributed to a growing sense of anticipatory dread, a loss of the guarantees that helped us sleep well at night, as Stuart Hall (1991b) put it. These sensibilities met in the anxieties around Y2K. The idea that all computers around the globe, networked or not, would seize up and fail at the same moment due to a data entry issue seemed preposterous but also horrifying. That the collective virtuosity which generated planetary-scale computation had simply missed this banal but consequential rounding error was a lesson in hubris that would make the Ancients tremble, but it also offered pathos aplenty: who among us wasn't making such routine errors every day of our digital lives? Y2K would have been a delicious helping of *schadenfreude* for Silicon Valley if not for the fears that we might all be fucked. And the weird, precise temporality of Y2K didn't help. We weren't sure whether it would be an actual disaster, but we *did* know that we would *soon* know; in fact, we knew the *precise moment* we would know.

The Faulty Date Logic (FDL) of Y2K illuminated how paranoid fantasy (everything is connected!) brought together with the global north's increasingly flat and empty conception of time was reordering civilizational sensibilities. Given a rapid commodification of the importance of cultural difference and specificity, commonality in the time of FDL was found primarily in sharing enemies or a sense of apocalypse (or both). Circulating with these fears were a bevy of popcorn philosophical treatises that seemed to fetishize this techno-death drive, delivered in virulently white masculinist terms: *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *Office Space*. "Columbine" became synonymous with moral panic around a perceived crisis of masculinity and popular

culture's role in it. From *Dogma* to *South Park*, the cool, disaffected angst of the late 1990s was equal parts self-referential irony and earnest sense of disenchantment. In many ways, this political exhaustion was an incubator for the pervasive sense of anxiety seized upon by the so-called War on Terror that followed 9/11. The end of the twentieth century saw various attempts to work through, make sense of, and otherwise channel a generalized sense of unease that would soon find direct and specific target through programs of racialized and Islamophobic surveillance.

Intellectual culture refracted these concerns with technology and culture in various ways. In communication and media studies—small, slightly provincial outposts of the social sciences and humanities—the end of the millennium brought swelling enrollments in student cohorts and professional associations, as well as a desire to articulate the central problems and tasks of these fields for the twenty-first century. While summarizing a field that sweeps everything into its ambit is a fool's errand, it is hard to overstate the degree to which globalization dominated theoretical imaginations, institutional ambitions, and privileged objects of study. Autonomist Marxism busied itself with counterpunching the cyber-utopian grift that promised abundance and progress through computation and connectivity, but which actually delivered new and hideous forms of exploitation and proletarianization, tilting the axis of capital accumulation even further North, and West (Dyer-Witheford 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000). Meanwhile, scholars in the cultural studies tradition often worked one end of a global/local dichotomy to reconfigure questions of power and domination across a stunning variety of sites (Grossberg, 1993; Kraidy, 1999). Hall's (1991a, 1991b) influential lectures on the transformations wrought in the “huge, long-range historical processes” offered erosion (not disappearance or transcendence) as a description of our times (1991b: 45). In Hall's analysis, it was less about centring or remixing specific categories of analysis, like nation, class, gender, race, or local, than thinking with the emergence of a “new logic” of otherness that “breaks down the boundaries, between outside and inside, between those who belong and those who do not, between those whose histories have been written and those whose histories they have depended on but whose histories cannot be spoken” (Hall, 1991b: 48).

Hall's counterhistory of globalization helped situate important work on mediation (Martín-Barbero, 1993), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and glocalization (Kraidy, 1999)

with respect to questions of difference, otherness, and alterity. As one important example, Jesús Martín-Barbero's notion of *mestizaje* addressed "continuities of discontinuity and reconciliations between rhythms of life that are mutually exclusive" (cited in Kraidy, 1999: 460), an effort to recognize the contradictory and historical nature of mediation and power in Latin America. Hall's (1991a) emphasis on "hidden histories", Martín-Barbero's notion of *mestizaje*, and Marwan Kraidy's discussion of a "hybridity without guarantees" were part of a broader reckoning with commonality and difference that brought the communicative aspects of globalizing process into sharper focus (Kraidy, 2006: 148). This work was by no means representative of the wider field—far from it—but it anticipated the defensive exclusivism of racist appeals to nationhood that is virulent today.

If globalization was a communicational concept, as Fredric Jameson (1998) stated in the influential collection he co-edited with Maseo Miyoshi, *The Cultures of Globalization*, and if the field's fortunes were entwined with the futurity that globalization projected, then it is hardly surprising that scholars set out with renewed urgency to figure out just what, precisely, this thorny business of communication really was. Answers, old and new, proliferated from its many precincts and subfields. Yet, as in many other fields, information technology and network dynamics surged to the forefront in communicative explanations of geopolitical dynamics. The questions of connection, belonging, and shared vulnerability that animated cultural studies of communication were being crowded out by network epistemologies and their new emblem for thought, the internet.

...

The writing of *Speaking into the Air* stood somewhat aloof from these immediate tendencies; or, rather, it drew upon older currents of intellectual thought to orient itself within the sense of upheaval and breakdown. The exemplar texts guiding its development include Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, as well as older works like Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. These exemplars help Peters distinguish his genealogical approach from a raft of works that approached the history of communication with the nineteenth century as their starting point (for instance, Daniel Czitrom's *Media and the*

American Mind or Dan Schiller's *Theorizing Communication: A History*). It also explained the imagined peer reviewers he used to situate the book's interventions, including among them communication theorists (James Carey, Michael Schudson), but also philosophers (Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum), sociologists (Eugene Halton, Tom Streeter, Todd Gitlin), and a historian (Martin Jay).¹ Peters likely imagined these readers would be sympathetic to his desire to blot out concepts like 'network' or 'information society' in order to see what else was on the horizon. In so doing, an odd rhythm emerges, a mode of thinking, reading, and writing that upends canonical works from the Western tradition. Plato, Arendt, Marx, and Habermas are not simply deconstructed but are remixed and ported together to open Benjaminian 'wormholes'. Great thinkers and big books are made more provincial and invited into groupings not of their own choosing. Traditional modes of classifying scholarship—language, geography, discipline, historical epoch—dissolve. In *SITA*, no author masters the unruly histories and concepts that unfold, no thinker provides the skeleton key. Instead, our intellectual inheritance is humbled and brought down to Earth—sometimes by angels!—as an ongoing 'history of an error'. The style and cadence of the book upended received narratives about canonical figures, about 'communication' as a concept, and it frustrated at least two of the manuscript's peer reviewers.

The text, originally assessed for University of Chicago Press (UCP) in 1998, carried a different title, *Communication and its Discontents*, a displacement of civilization via communication that was ultimately abandoned. In a letter to his editor at UCP, Doug Mitchell, dated February 1998, Peters is already on the fence about the title:

I have considered many titles, but await your suggestions. Communication and its Discontents would be fine except that the Freudian allusion is probably hackneyed by now. The Impossibility of Communication was actually a suggestion Schudson made or encouraged (I can't remember). One of my students urges Communication Breakdown (he's a Led Zeppelin fan).

In another letter to Mitchell in July 1998, appended to a revised manuscript that had incorporated the criticism of reader reports and containing "a disc: Microsoft Word, 6.0," Peters notes,

I've mulled over lots of titles and need some more time to come up with something. At least I have an idea for a subtitle, cart before the horse:

How Communication Became such Trouble for Moderns, or
How Communication Became a Problem

Marketing correspondence shows that by February 1999 the final title had settled into place, but the unused titles provide insight into Peters' struggle to situate and convey his book's key interventions. The material condition of dissemination, "air", that is so central to the title and evocative of the book's most popular argument came late in the game. The new title cast words and ideas into the air without a clear sense of where, when, how, and which might land with readers. Note also how the approach to 'communication' has been transformed from previous titles. It is now temporal, plural, and epistemological, "A History of the Idea of Communication". It invites parable, is open to being read in multiple ways, and prepares the reader for its allusive style. It also points toward the religiosity of modern civilization in a manner uncommon in the 1990s. The exceptional nature of American democracy in the secular philosophy of Richard Rorty's liberalism and reified religious differences of Huntington's warring civilizations are equally foreign to the text. Though these documents show Peters had *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in mind as a model, he refuses Habermas' partitioning of religion from public, communicative life.

Consider how *Speaking into the Air* signals the reworked Christian ethic that underscores Peters' philosophy of communication. The title comes from a passage in Paul's epistles that serves as the book's first epigraph:

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification (1 Cor. 14:9-10, KJV).

Paul cautions against unintelligibility in ministry yet acknowledges multitude in its forms of expression. Later in the same chapter, though, he admonishes women who speak in church as shameful, reiterating that the role of women is to be submissive in the home and silent in public (1 Cor. 14:34-35, KJV).² The broader biblical context of

the book's title, then, raises an important feminist question: who gets 'air time' and receives the opportunities, pitfalls, blessings and perils associated with public speech in the first place? Who, in other words, is able to risk miscommunication? Who is otherwise simply "speaking into the void"? (Crenshaw, 2011; May, 2014).

The shifted title was just one modification that emerged through engagement with the UCP reader reports. We revisit these documents to illuminate how consistently Peters resisted the desire of readers to present the relationship of Western civilization and communication in a more systematic and ordered way. Of the four reader reports, one appears lost to time (authored by James Carey), two are glowing reports of the manuscript's potential (authored by Mark Poster and Michael Schudson), and the final one (authored by University of Chicago Press Editorial Board member and Professor, Martha Nussbaum) is a review that responds to the book through the lens of the previous three readings. Each of the three surviving reports pushes Peters in a different direction. Poster revels in the book's ontology of mediation and offers only a few minor suggestions for improvement, most notably a call to abandon a conclusion that offered no new thinking (only statements of theoretical allegiance). Poster was especially drawn to the later chapters on nineteenth century technical media and the recasting of our relationships to animals, aliens, and the afterlife. In his assessment, the irreducible and transformative conception of mediation was the book's most exciting aspect, a new way of thinking about the historiography of communication.

While Poster made no mention of dissemination in his report to the press, Schudson took this as Peters' most original and significant argument, and he puzzled over the author's failure to systematize the text around its implications. The 'dialogue/dissemination debate' is used by Peters to organize a wide array of different thinkers, according to Schudson, and to demonstrate how communicative ideals can distort our experience of history, mind, body, politics, and much else. Schudson's report was both perspicuous and prophetic insofar as it anticipated to an extraordinary degree how the field would receive the book. Yet, he was frustrated by the parts of the manuscript that most excited Poster, which veered wildly from the dialogue/dissemination argument. Schudson finds himself repeatedly lost in the initial manuscript, asking, "Just what is the point?" and puzzling over why the author refuses to develop insightful moments in terms of the conflict between dialogue and

dissemination. The allusive form and rhythm of the book, its commitment to wormholes, aphorisms, and montage, is, in Schudson's estimation, damaging of *SITA*'s contents. The targets of the argument are not identified clearly or consistently enough; the book is not systematically organized around its main arguments, and it does not distill the consequences of dissemination with enough focus.

Nussbaum's reading echoes several of the points made by Schudson and acknowledges forthrightly how Peters' style inevitably conflicts with her intellectual sensibilities. She also calls for a clearer discussion of the positions attacked and defended and is puzzled by the alignments of theorists and concepts that appear, remix, and shapeshift throughout the text: "I would ask the author to go through the manuscript and figure out what view is actually the target, and then prune anything that attacks a different target, unless it can convincingly be shown that the position attacked has a sufficiently close logical relation to the real target". The strange bundling of fellow travellers and passersby, the citational mix, and the grounding of dissemination in Jesus's thinking is distracting for Nussbaum rather than edifying. This conflict comes to a head when she suggests Peters' reading of the classics is out-of-step with contemporary intellectual discourse on Socrates, the pre-Socratics, Greek philosophy, Augustine, and so on. The book avoids the usual tethering of modern thought to Greek civilization and classical scholarship. Instead, it selectively scrambles its way to a conception of modern communication, generating incoherence with conventional accounts of Western intellectual history. It is not the only time communication scholars have been charged with trespassing.

There is little question that these reviews were helpful to Peters in reshaping the published text in important ways. His response was diplomatic and appreciative, and a new conclusion developed in consideration of how the book might engage in, as Peters put it, "a broader cultural commentary about our times". As a result, the "squeeze of the hand" that is one of the book's most memorable offerings comes only via the gentle push of reviewers. The new title was more evocative of the book's style. Most importantly, however, the style retained its allusive and meandering quality, less as a systematization of the logic of dissemination, which Peters silently declined as a recommendation for pruning the text, than as a way of figuring self/other relationships in conditions that encourage us into hospitable conflict and struggle with each other.

Time and again, Peters returns to this formulation of self and other, or alterity and difference, to figure the tasks of communication theory on a civilizational stage. Targets remain largely unidentified. Defences are usually not bolstered. Convivial mixing and syncretic borrowing are everywhere, overflowing, modelled as the means of civilizational renewal and utterly indifferent toward the ‘problems’ of transcending conflict or reifying opposition.

Take, for example, the book’s relationship to religion. Nussbaum asks why Jesus is mobilized as emblematic of dissemination when so many other starting points and practices might do just as well. The “traditional Jewish attitude toward the Torah”, or Greek law, or other religious texts seem just as viable a place to begin. In his response to the reader reports, Peters not only agrees but proliferates the possibilities: “The Torah, Greek law, astrology, Indic or Confucian texts, could all offer useful starting points”. He might have added others. The point is not that the dissemination concept has a timeless or universal applicability to all circumstances; it is its capacity to bring old divisions into new admixtures that allows our intellectual inheritances to appear in less ethnocentric and self-assured ways. Unlike most proponents of a history of the present, Peters’ mobilization of philosophical and historical materials to address pressing public matters was not the goal or end point; it was to elongate our sense of the present, or of ‘our time’, and to understand renewal in terms of new rhythms we might establish with older currents of thought, not through breaks, ruptures, or epistemological teardowns.

It is this peculiar rhythm of thinking, reading, and writing history that seems to speak most directly to our current moment. Rhythm is about style and form, as we have outlined above, but it is also about time. There is a particular tempo and cadence to Peters’ sentences and chapters. Concepts, definitions, and arguments do not unspool in linear fashion; they flit and skip across the page. They dance and duel across chapters. A commitment to plain language evades jargon at every turn, but common words veer wildly off course. Like rhythm, the book is a vibe, but we evoke this concept not simply to describe style, effect or affect. Rhythm also captures something about the ‘civilizational’ aspect of the book, how it expands the timelines along which we work, and models a way of thinking about time and history that does not rely on linear progression, conventional historical emplotment, or systematic argumentation.

Peters' book taps into alternate rhythms of thinking and writing, and it's these currents or modes that we seek to emphasize in the next section.

In the Air: 2020-21

Our stewardship of this special issue occurred during a period of pronounced global uncertainty. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic fifty-four days after the "Into the Air" symposium concluded. As breathing became precarious and air precious, it felt improper and impossible to lend oxygen to ideas, journal articles, and the traditional day-to-day of academic life. Yet, as protests for racial justice grew in transnational reach throughout the summer of 2020, air—and breath—gained ever more urgency.

Writing in the early days of the COVID pandemic, Achille Mbembe suggests "in its dank underbelly, modernity has been an interminable war on life" and that all such "wars on life begin by taking away breath" (Mbembe, 2020). It is obvious, he argues, that COVID-19 is a catalyst for a renewed understanding of breathing as a fundamental condition for life on the planet. But it would be a mistake and a missed opportunity, he continues, to reduce the weaponization of air to the virus:

If war there must be, it cannot so much be against a specific virus as against everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression. To come through this construction would mean that we conceive of breathing beyond its purely biological aspects, and instead as that which we hold in-common, that which, by definition, eludes all calculation. By which I mean, the universal right to breathe (Mbembe, 2020).

Mbembe's "universal right to breathe" is a call to situate COVID and the transformations it has wrought within global and historical totalities of oppression and struggle. In this way, he returns us to Frantz Fanon's work on colonization, in which

breath and air are always at stake. For instance, “I must free myself from my strangler because I cannot breathe” (Fanon, 2008 [1952]: 12); “It is not because the Indo-Chinese discovered a culture of their own that they revolted. Quite simply this was because it became impossible for them to breathe, in more than one sense of the word” (Fanon, 2008 [1952]: 201). Breath and air capture for Fanon the dialectic of a struggle for equality and justice that is always material, a physical defence of lives and communities disproportionately subject to state violence, yet also, always, intellectual, a generative project that requires the reconfiguration of basic premises with which human beings understand the world—the concepts, categories, distinctions, assumptions, practices, and infrastructures with which we speak about and act upon the world. For Fanon, whiteness is an empire or a cathedral that gets built into the world through violence that is physical but also conceptual. Techniques of communication are primary vehicles for this violence—how people use gesture and speech, how they are expected or allowed to stand, sit, walk, converse, look, be looked at, or pronounce words.

The black man entering France reacts against the myth of the Martinican who swallows his r’s. He’ll go to work on it and enter into open conflict with it. He will make every effort not only to roll his r’s, but also to make them stand out. On the lookout for the slightest reaction of others, listening to himself speak and not trusting his own tongue, an unfortunately lazy organ, he will lock himself in his room and read for hours—desperately working on his diction (Fanon, 2008 [1952]: 5).

To ‘pass’ in Paris, the Black subject suppresses or erases what Fanon would call their “fact of Blackness”. They adopt the “white masks” of his book’s title.

In this regard, Fanon’s work on colonialism and communication—taken expansively as a complex of gestures, speech, media forms, representations, etc.—provides a counternarrative that is particularly resonant today. His description and analysis of encounters between colonized and colonizer remind us that communication is never non-hierarchical but grounded by a racialized splitting of self and other. Contrary to facile assumptions about dialogue, democracy, and community that Peters would later deconstruct, such encounters are suffused by longer histories of slavery and colonialism. Dialogue does not produce, let alone guarantee, an equal encounter but

enforces and polices normative standards of comportment. Fanon's visceral accounts show us how imperial communication practices subjectivize, colonize, and racialize alterity. In amplifying experiences of the colonized in this way, through concrete and excruciating descriptions of actual communicative events, Fanon dissolves naïve assumptions about 'soul-to-soul' communication.

To contrast and combat communicative and other colonial logics, Fanon looked to intellectual cultures and practices of the Black diaspora. He considers, for instance, Léopold Sédar Senghor's notes on rhythm, quoted at length in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

It is the most sensory and least material of things. It is the vital element par excellence. It is the essential condition and the hallmark of Art, as breathing is to life; breathing that accelerates or slows, becomes regular or spasmodic according to the tension of the individual and the degree and nature of his emotion. Such is rhythm primordial in its purity; such it is in the masterpieces of Negro art, especially sculpture. The composition of a theme or sculptural form in opposition to a sister theme, like breathing in to breathing out, is repeated over and over again. Rhythm is not symmetry that produces monotony but is alive and free (quoted in Fanon, 2008 [1952]: 102).

Rhythm refuses and struggles with the strictures of colonial modernity. Whether human-produced or naturally occurring, a rhythm suffuses a space and invites an infinite number of movements, soundings, voicings, musics or other improvisations that might resonate alongside. It moves and bends. It supports and gathers. It holds open the possibility that it, and all things, could be otherwise. As Mbembe and Paul Gilroy have recently discussed, Senghor uses rhythm to think together Black culture (poetry, music, and dance), the natural world (tides, dawn, seasons), and the human body (the beating of the heart, the pulse, and the drawing of breath) (Gilroy and Mbembe, 2020). Rhythm can connect these cultural, natural, or biological settings, or be grounded in each to make sense of relations between people, environments, creatures, histories, and things.

As such, rhythm is a civilizational practice and concept. By this we do not mean to invoke normative colonial understandings of 'civilizing' practices, with all the

barbarism pursued in their name, as recently discussed by Karim H. Karim (2021). We contest such conceptions by using the term ‘civilizational’ to describe the practices, strategies, and concepts by which cultures articulate, to borrow Hall’s (1980; 1986) term, and hold together across vast distances in time and space. ‘Rhythm’ spans epochs. It cascades and reverberates. It is about duration, repetition, and improvisation. It stitches people, things, and places together. It invites thinking about community and communication along unconventional timelines and categories. As decades of thinking from postcolonial and Black studies has shown, a concept like ‘diaspora’ is rhythmic, thinkable only by escaping conventional colonial modes of carving and organizing the world into categories of ‘nation’, ‘property’, or ‘race’. For Karim (2003), rhythm is a medium of diasporic reterritorialization, which “occurs through sound and movement—cadencies and action”. The “rhythmic repetition” of “languages, accents and rituals spoken and performed in a space establish cultural connections to its occupants and give it an identity” (Karim, 2003: 9). For Barbara Browning (1998: 6-8), rhythm is “infectious”, spreading across the globe like a joyful contagion to create “sonic diasporas” of salsa, tango, and so-called “world” music. Rhythm drifts through Paul Gilroy’s magisterial account of the global dispersion of the *Black Atlantic*, which takes inspiration from Quincey Jones’s famous quip that “the times are always contained in the rhythm” (Gilroy, 1993: 109). John Akomfrah’s 1996 film *The Last Angel of History* similarly uses rhythm to track both the material articulations of the African diaspora and some of its Afrofuturist visions for living in common. Akomfrah and his collaborators (DJ Spooky, Goldie, Kodwo Eshun among many others) feel the rhythm of the Black Atlantic in the pulses of Drexciya and others from Detroit’s 1980s and 90s techno scene. Julian Henriques (2008) employs the concept to understand dispersion, ritual, vibe, and affect in Jamaican dancehall, while musical rhythms of the West Indian diaspora sound forth in every minute of Steve McQueen’s 2020 anthology *Small Axe*. Many more could be added to this list; our point is simply to contrast these hospitable rhythms of ‘diaspora’ to Huntington’s violent “clash” or McLuhan’s racist “tribal drum” (Towns, 2020; 2022). With the former we are invited to think about long, sedimentary histories of culture, community, care, and communication in an open and generative mode. The latter pull us into an endless loop where the past is a resource to be mastered and controlled in the present.

As practice, sound, and concept, we found ourselves wondering how ‘rhythm’ resonates with what Peters would later describe as dissemination. We read Fanon and Senghor with Mbembe in this way not to pass their work through a new colonial bottleneck, but rather in the spirit of locating theories of communication outside the conventions of discipline or canon. As Amin Alhassan argues (2007), the colonial ‘margins’ have always been central to the formation of communication theory’s concepts and frameworks, even as this centrality has been obscured and disavowed through the field’s appropriative “canonic economy”. As such, we make these connections to emphasize a mode of engaging with *SITA* that emphasizes the book’s particular rhythms of historicity, and to connect with desires for “new respiratory rhythms” that Mbembe (2019: 141) recalls from Fanon. Thinking the present together with the past—and constructing from this encounter not linearity but a renewal of demands for commonality among difference—affords legibility to our current moment. Through the resounding consistency of struggles over air, breath, and life, contemporary crises may be seen along historical timespans that expand rather than contract under the conceptual weight of periodization (e.g., ‘post-9/11’; ‘pandemic era’; ‘post-George Floyd’).

Reading *SITA* in such a way, ‘dissemination’ in the Christian tradition becomes just one among many alternatives that engage the intellectual and material harms produced by normative assumptions about communication. It offers one set of counternarratives, one mode of thinking our civilizational attachments against the grain. What would a rhythmic and racialized account of dissemination sound like? What might it do? What modes of connection and contact among civilizations would it afford? Our task is to develop ears to hear and articulate these rhythms and resonances. In other words, the most generative contribution to our thinking today about air, breath, and justice might not be the content of *SITA*, but rather the model it points toward. Of excavating hidden histories. Of cross-wiring seemingly incongruous words, things, thinkers, creatures, and epochs. Of thinking justice, hospitality and hope alongside fear and trembling. Of wrestling with angels to renew desires for commonality in, through, and with difference.

...

The contributions in this special issue are evocative of the hospitality of *SITA* to ideas and lineages that exceed conventional disciplinary boundaries around communication which we have explored above. As a result, we envision this collection as something like a mix tape best enjoyed on ‘shuffle’ mode. While the table of contents offers one order of operations, this is not intended to be prescriptive. As Jefferson Pooley argues in his contribution, “Writing onto the Clouds”, *SITA*’s style enacts its argument around the generous potential of dissemination, revelling in its “polymathic weirdness”. The pieces assembled in this collection pull on various threads that unfurl outward in multiple directions from the text, eluding easy categorization or enumeration, and the collection should be navigated accordingly.³

Some contributors, like Pooley, engage directly with Peters-as-author. Jeremy Packer pursues this by triangulating three eras of Peters’ work (“JDP Network 1999/2009/2019”) in order to draw out his historiographical tendencies across and through time. In doing so, Packer subjects Peters, and his CV, to “a thoroughly ruptured discourse of [Packer’s] own making”. Peters’ authorial style also becomes the focus of Deng Jianguo’s contribution, “Translation as a Problem of Communication”, in which he recounts the pitfalls and perils of translating *SITA* for a Chinese audience. Deng takes issue with He Daokuan’s 2003 translation, which was published under the perhaps all-too-apt title, *The Sorry State of Communication*, and reflects on his own pragmatic approach to preserving the ‘otherness’ of the text in his 2017 version. Meanwhile, by way of an interlude, Margaret Schwartz provides a first-hand account of the book’s—and the author’s—reception at Iowa after its publication.

Other contributions expand on the generative potential of dissemination. In “From Dissemination to Digitality”, Sybille Krämer considers disseminative communication in two dimensions, elaborating on what she calls the “cultural technique of flattening” that emerges via inscription media. Krämer explores the intellectual, philosophical, and artistic potential that this “artificial flatness” affords. Ghislain Thibault examines the thin line between dissemination and useless noise or mindless chatter, as in the public habituation to aerial advertising he recounts in “Celestial Apparitions”. Thibault considers cases in which the air above has been made captive to commercial interests, examining the blimps, balloons, billboards and planes that pervaded the sky during the interwar period. Yet our “adversarial” relationship to the noise of advertising—and its

cousin, promotional communication—is, as Melissa Aronczyk argues in “Advertising and its Adversaries”, also informed by a moralistic discourse around communication as authentic self-disclosure. Without such subjective anchoring, messages run the risk of becoming incoherent, or, as Tamara Kneese shows, haunted with the spectres of the dead. In Kneese’s “Breakdown as Method” she explores the epistemological and existential affordances of the screenshot; the moment of capture that may offer “a way of rematerializing transient digital cultures”.

Questions of ephemerality and ultimacy come to the foreground in other contributions as well. In “Whispers of a Secret”, Amanda Lagerkvist revisits the belated uptake of *SITA* in Sweden. While the book may have been considered ‘too religious’ for Swedish audiences when it was first published, Lagerkvist explains that *SITA*’s consideration of human vulnerability, finitude, and relationality eventually allowed it to find a home in existential media studies. The religious connotations of the text are further explored by Karim H. Karim in “Speaking into the Ear”. From Muslim philosophical understandings of humanity’s potential for perfect communication embodied by a spiritual faculty called the “creative imagination” or “active intellect”, to a version of the Immaculate Conception which theorizes Mary’s impregnation occurring via the ear canal, Karim’s contribution recentres religious questions which are core to *SITA*’s philosophy of communication.

These are not the only contributions that take *SITA* to broader contexts and locales. In “Speaking Miscommunication”, Radha Sarma Hegde examines the enormous weight of cultural and economic expectations placed on English-language skills training in India to overcome the chasms of miscommunication wrought by the neoliberal economy. Hegde’s work helps us track some of the ways that discourses around dialogue’s twin logics of deficit and cure have reverberated along familiar pathways charted by Western imperialism. Meanwhile, channelling his father’s intervention into the question of ‘canon’, Benjamin Peters asks whether such a thing as “Russian Media Theory” exists—or ought to. While drawing out themes that could make up such a corpus, Peters calls attention to our tendency to cohere media theories around national-linguistic lines of demarcation in the first place. Developing a notion of “dissociative heterophily”, Peters reminds us that otherness is much stranger than

Western forms of transnational theory exchange have imagined, an insight he offers in place of advocacy for a school, tradition, or brand of media theory.

Questions of ethics arise across the issue. In “Mutually Assured Heteronomy”, Amit Pinchevski argues against a reading of *SITA* that would position dialogue and dissemination as ontologically distinct categories. Rather, he suggests, they are mutually imbricated modes of communication which are ultimately grounded in an ethical orientation towards alterity; otherness is the fact of communication. Bringing Hannah Arendt’s work on plurality to bear on *SITA*, Pinchevski considers how we might rethink dissemination as collective, political action. Consideration for collective action is also taken up by Carrie Rentschler in “The Eavesdropper and Onlooker as Proximate Agents of Social Change”. In her contribution, Rentschler shows how “listening in” on social media can be deployed as a harm-reduction strategy within small-scale, networked activist circles. By focusing on the rhythms and forms of embodied communication, habit emerges as a key site where social change is amplified through movements that carefully model and disperse non-oppressive habits to scale their repetition. And in “Cosmomedia”, Ganaele Langlois uses the example of Japanese textile work, and the concept of cosmotechnics, to expand on the political and ethical dimensions of relationships between the human, the non-human, and the more-than-human.

By way of conclusion, we offer our own discussion with John Durham Peters, inscribed here as a conversation transcript (dialogue – disseminated!), as well as an afterword from him. Whether these serve as codas, introductions, or tangents—we leave this to the reader to decide.

It has been nearly three years since we began planning the symposium that inspired this special issue. In the interim, our thinking has been energized by the book and its author, but also by the speakers and attendees of the symposium, by our co-editor, Alyssa Tremblay, by our generous peer reviewers, Mark Hayward and John Shiga, by Simon Dawes and the editorial board at *Media Theory*, and by the contributors whose pieces make up the final published collection. As *Speaking into the Air* circulates for the third decade in print, we hope that this collection can breathe new life into some of the discordant rhythms in Peters’ text, and find new and unfamiliar resonances outside of it.

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Notes

¹ This list is not exhaustive of all the reviewers Peters proposed.

² Peters addresses these verses in his expanded commentary on Paul as a theorist of communication in chapter 1 of *Courting the Abyss* (2005) (see especially 48-49, where he argues that these verses are not consistent with Paul's more egalitarian gender politics).

³ As one reviewer of this special issue rightly pointed out, the contributions here demonstrate a "highly variable degree of engagement with [*Speaking into the Air*]".

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