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**A History of the Idea of
Speaking into the Air:
A Conversation with John
Durham Peters**

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Abstract

The following is a conversation that took place between John Durham Peters (JDP) and the editors of this special issue, Chris Russill (CR), Hannah Dick (HD), and Liam Cole Young (LCY) on November 18, 2021. The conversation transcript has been edited for clarity.

Keywords

communication, reader reports, theology

CR: Let's begin with titles. The title was among the last elements of the book to drop into place. There is the original title of the book, which I'm sure you remember, the chosen title which we all know well, and then the other possibilities that were considered at one time or another. I wrote them all down. Do you want to be reminded of them or would you prefer to never hear these titles again?

JDP: Probably never. But fire away!

CR: *Hello Across the Chasm. Food for Ghosts. The Grandeur and Pathos of Communication. The Impossibility of Communication. Communication Breakdown*, which I feel should have an exclamation mark like the dot.coms did in the 1990s. *Fellowship with Otherness. Dialogue and Dissemination. The Private and the Public*. And then there's the title for the original submission of the manuscript to the University of Chicago Press: *Communication and its Discontents*. How did you arrive at this title? Did things change as a result of landing on *Speaking into the Air*, or was the book mostly set at that point?

JDP: I think the title captures something that was already there. *Communication and its Discontents* bit the dust because that formula was so overused by that point. *Speaking into the Air* pulled together the biblical plus the broadcasting connection in a poetic way. And made the argument about dissemination.

HD: Regarding the biblical context of the title (1 Cor. 14:9-10, KJV), do you remember where that came from? Was that something that you came up with or that was given to you from someone else?

JDP: Well, everything comes from someone else ultimately, but I think a conversation with a friend in the Writer's Workshop, Holly Welker, helped me solidify the title. She said she had served a couple of times informally as a title doctor.

HD: I want to ask you to do a little bit of biblical exegesis if you're game. I was rereading First Corinthians. And the section that forms the title, but also the epigraph to the book is all about intelligible worship. But then in the same chapter, Paul has this strong prohibition against women speaking in the church that comes not too long after (1 Cor. 14: 34-35, KJV). So, there's this question of intelligibility, about legible ministry. And in some ways, I think the title captures the fact that Paul's open to multitudes of voices speaking in different kinds of ways. But then we have this very clear prohibition that women should not speak in that church and have no platform from which even to speak the unintelligible noise that he's cautioning against . . .

JDP: "let them ask their husbands at home" (v. 35) . . .

HD: Right. Exactly. So, I guess I'm wondering about this broader context around decency and orderly worship and how that has resonated with you.

JDP: Well, I take that question up in *Courting the Abyss* because the first chapter's on Paul. And I hold with those biblical scholars who think that the prohibition against women speaking is an interpolation by a later hand. And this may be the magic trick, a *Deus ex Machina* just to save Paul from his apparent misogyny. But if you look at his theology, he's pretty radical about the role of women: "neither is man without the woman, neither is woman without the man" (1 Cor. 11:11, KJV), and he's pretty clear even in other parts of Corinthians that women speak and that women have spiritual gifts. So, I really see that ban as a kind of post-Paul rearguard action clamping down on *l'écriture féminine*, a locus classicus of feminist glossolalia versus masculinist rationality. *Courting the Abyss* is a sustained defense of the value of modes of discourse that do not conform to some strict standard of 'critical-rational debate' (as Jürgen Habermas calls it). The public sphere needs to make room for stutterers and glossolaliacs! And so certainly in *Speaking into the Air* I don't want to invoke the Bible of Paul the patriarchal disciplinarian, shutting out the women. I don't know, Hannah, is that a crazy First Corinthians exegesis?

HD: I like that. I like that a lot. And actually, that's a nice kind of segue into some of the questions that we have about the reader reports. One of the things I noticed—this is in one of your letters back to Doug Mitchell, your editor at the University of Chicago Press—is that you talk about having theological ambitions, but you write that you didn't want to make those theological ambitions too explicit, either in the book or at that stage of your career. Was *Courting the Abyss* a bit of an attempt to realize some of those theological ambitions?

JDP: I don't know. Because I think *Speaking into the Air* is pretty theological. And *Courting the Abyss* is more explicitly a kind of archeology of the Jewish and Christian and Roman and Greek traditions. *The Marvelous Clouds* is pretty theological too. It explicitly talks about media theology. To judge how theological the works are or what my theological trajectory is I'd have to leave to someone else. An [early published essay](#) was on theology in 1987. Pete Simonson's reading of *Speaking into the Air* is that this is a deeply Mormon book. Thus: once upon a time, Jesus has it right: dissemination. And then there's this Christian apostasy with Augustine, in which signs and meanings have to correlate. And then along comes Emerson to restore the true gospel. So, Emerson stands in for Joseph Smith as someone who recognizes the sort of hurly burly of

material being in the world. And I think that's a good reading, a reading I acknowledge. More recently, Paddy Scannell in *Love and Communication* suggests that the book's mode of thought is essentially religious. I defer to you, Pete, and Paddy!

CR: I'm quite interested in the idea that it wasn't safe or that you weren't ready to foreground some of this stuff. In one of the reader reports you received on the original manuscript, the reviewer is pushing you for a more explicit and systematic position on religion. The reviewer's encouragement is bound up with her dislike of the text's allusive and meandering style, another motivation for the new title perhaps, but can you say more about not feeling ready to foreground such things?

JDP: It's usually wise to be discreet about ultimate things. On the other hand, during my first-year evaluation at Iowa I included that theological article. And my rhetorician colleague Michael Calvin McGee, who was chairing the review, told me: it took a lot of chutzpah to put that in your file, but I know why you did it. He respected dissident moves. Much more recently, when I interviewed at Yale, I gave my job talk on Joseph Smith, [a piece later published in *Critical Inquiry*](#). I figured if they're going to hire me, I'm going to let the freak flag fly. I've always sort of felt like it's fine to represent. But Jesus says: "Be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove", which you can take as a certain kind of endorsement of rhetorical savviness or caginess. I thought it was not the time to go full bore. It wasn't that I was worried about pushback or someone saying this is bad or wrong. I just didn't feel like the *kairos* had ripened yet.

CR: The way that theological and intellectual traditions appear, intermingle, speak through each other strikes me as an important aspect of the book's treatment of the past. For example, when one of the original reviewers of the manuscript asks you why Jesus is centred as the progenitor of dissemination when it could just as well be given Jewish or Greek origins, you respond by agreeing and by proliferating the list—Indic religions, Confucianism, even astrology, which are accounts I want to read by the way! Or, to return to Pete Simonson's take, one could interpret this to mean the text is a kind of crypto-Mormonism, or a Mormonism advanced in safer guises until it can spring forth in better climes and times; I've encountered this position over the years. But I've taken Pete's reading as a more general measure of the text's commitment to an alterability of the usual divisions we inherit. People are invited to put together the ideas they inherit in less self-assured and ethnocentric ways. All of which is to say, I

appreciate how the book allows for hesitance and ambiguity in finding our way through the past.

Do you remember the books you chose as models or exemplars of what you were trying to do with the book?

JDP: Wasn't it like *The Human Condition* and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*? *Technics and Civilization*? Those are my defaults.

CR: You also mentioned Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*. Arendt and Williams I can see. The Habermas book, that one puzzled me a little bit, although there is a genealogical sensibility there.

JDP: It's method more than style, certainly. Encyclopaedic genealogy.

CR: And then there are the marketing materials where presses ask authors to distinguish their work from similar offerings on the market. You identify Dan Schiller's *Theorizing Communication: A History*, Armand Mattelart's *Inventing Communication*, Briankle G. Chang's *Deconstructing Communication*, which I was delighted to think about again. Daniel Czitrom's *Media and the American Mind*, John B. Thompson's *The Media and Modernity*, Brian Winston's *Media, Technology and Society*. It is interesting how the exemplar texts you chose for *SITA* contrast with the popular histories of communication on offer in the 1990s.

LCY: Speaking of that moment of developing and situating the book, I was going to ask you about Doug Mitchell. We corresponded with Doug about the conference, and he expressed hope that he'd be able to join us, but he unfortunately passed away just a few months prior. None of us knew him, but he seems like such an interesting figure. His appearance in the correspondence and other records you sent us that detail the preparation of the manuscript is interesting in its own right—the steady hand of the intellectual steward. He shepherds you through the readers' reports. There's this note about the last and most contentious review where he says, basically, "this is pretty much entirely my fault. The reviewer's frustration is directed as much at me as you". But he also seems like he was kind of an intellectual force. This weird bearded, hippy pragmatist guy, a devotee of the philosopher Richard McKeon, who passes through Ideas and Methods at University of Chicago but never finishes the degree. And he's a

jazz drummer; he talked about the role of the editor as similar to the drummer in jazz—operating by intuition in discovering, following, judging, connecting ideas and books, placing them within a “[universe or a cosmos of other fields and ideas](#)”. His reputation in Sexuality Studies is that he was a force, a major intellectual figure in establishing and growing the field. This kind of figure so rarely comes up in intellectual histories, or in narratives about the emergence and formation of fields. Could you talk a little bit more about working with Doug, his role in helping give form and shape to *SITA*, or any more general reflections on him as an intellectual figure?

JDP: Doug’s passing in 2019 marks the end of an era. He was initially hard to get in with. Chicago was notoriously choosy, and I can’t remember how I actually finally made contact with him. But once you’re in he was great. I’m not sure that he really read anyone’s work carefully. So, he was not an old-style editor like Malcolm Cowley doing a number on Faulkner or Ezra Pound fixing T.S. Eliot. It wasn’t like that. But he was a broker and could figure out instantly what you were up to and know how to situate it. And you can see him doing that kind of sleight of hand here, politicking, moving everybody around. I sense that his immersion in McKeon’s system of method was the perfect preparation for being the kind of intellectual dealer that he was. He was a wonderful correspondent, although it could sometimes take months. He would sometimes just disappear and then you’d get this long email from him. He was a great lover of food, and some of the finest meals I’ve ever had were with Doug. He had this University of Chicago Press budget to take authors out to lunch. I had several really fine meals with Doug and others such as Ken Cmiel once, Sam McCormick once, who both published with Chicago, Kyle Wagner once, who took over after Doug, and Marsha Paulsen Peters once, my life-companion.

LCY: Those days are certainly gone.

JDP: They are totally gone!

LCY: I have been thinking about the title; specifically, the change of the title from *Communication and its Discontents* or *The Impossibility of Communication* to *Speaking into the Air*. The early titles seem to position the book agonistically, setting a more aggressive and hostile frame that articulates the book *against* something. *Speaking into the Air* does not do this. It sounds a more hospitable note for the book. Is this something you were

conscious of? Was that part of the attraction of *SITA* as a title, that it set a generative tone, one that stood out amidst the prevailing winds of the time? Perhaps the aggressive titles might have over-determined the reception of the book in ways that would have limited what it could go on to do?

JDP: That's a great point, Liam. And I don't think I realized that at the time, but I certainly did realize after publishing *Courting the Abyss*, because that's a much more combative book and wasn't as fun to write and had a much poorer reception. I feel bad about the occasional snarky tone in *Courting*. *Speaking into the Air* is much less partisan. You can read dissemination as a tragic condition, but you can also read it as handsome (to use Emerson's nifty term). That's the point. This is the generosity of the gift: you don't know if it connects or not, whereas 'impossibility' is just dark and echoes too much the kind of 90s deconstructive nihilism which was pervasive in academic life at that moment. 'There is no meaning', you know, and I didn't want it to be read that way.

CR: Liam's point is especially evident in your response to the readers' reports on the original manuscript. Two of those reports are pressing you to name targets and systemize arguments. I don't know how well you remember them, but there is James Carey's, which unfortunately is lost, Mark Poster's, Michael Schudson's, and Martha Nussbaum's. Poster recognizes what you are up to immediately and sends you on your way with a few suggestions. Schudson and Nussbaum are more frustrated by the book's allusiveness and want you to name your targets, focus your attacks, and shore up your defences. This is something you frequently did in the 80s, joining fights in the way that was characteristic then, and it was certainly how many of us were still trained in the 1990s. But not this time, not with this book, and as much as the book changes in response to the reviewer reports, you double down on this aspect of its style.

Actually, let's back up and clarify the story here. Doug Mitchell procures three reader reports of the original manuscript from Carey, Schudson, and Poster, and is taking the manuscript to the Board for approval. The reports are glowing and so its publication is a slam dunk. But then Mitchell writes to you again to say that a board member is unhappy with the level of philosophical and historical engagement evinced by the reviewers on your treatment of the classics. So, Nussbaum intervenes to write a fourth report on, I'd say, about half of the book, and that comes to you as a bit of last-minute

surprise. She recognizes its brilliance and still wants the book to go forward. But I imagine the wait between Doug's email about Nussbaum's intervention and the availability of her report was a tough one!

JDP: Yeah, it was terrifying, that message from Doug: "not so fast". The book is better because of her critique. She's certainly doing her classicist turf defence thing there. She asks, why are you citing books only? It's like you just went to the card catalog and looked all the books up on the *Phaedrus* and didn't look at the articles. So, I used the translation she suggested and cleaned up some points and did get some help from my classics friends at Iowa. But yeah, I'm not a classicist. I'm not worried about not being a classicist. It is an easy academic game to tell the interloper: you've got our internal debate wrong. Interdisciplinary scholars *should* be responsible to honouring internal debates so that we're as rigorous as possible but at some level, you have to say what you have to say.

CR: I think her response is caught up with questions around the allusive style, the refusal to fix targets for the arguments, and the philosophical uses of historical and classical materials. It does seem that commitments to disciplinary ways of ordering knowledge are messing up the interaction that could have unfolded. It is such a loss because you and Nussbaum are working through questions of contingency, shared vulnerability, and tragic ethics. But your style doesn't afford the smooth processing of prior knowledge or of the past. It is like picking up William James's textbook on Psychology—it explodes any conception one might have of a textbook. I'm thinking too of the weirdness of the nineteenth century and the diversity of the styles that were present there. This book is less weird if considered in that wider context.

JDP: Absolutely. People will tell me, "you write so weirdly". And I just want to say, you need to get out a little more! Have you read *Moby Dick*—something that is really monstrous in its forms and really adventuresome in its sentences? Or, indeed, William James? What I'm doing in *SITA* is small potatoes. It's hardly anything compared with the grandeur of possible experiment in English or American style.

CR: The appendix to the book is probably the most obvious or overt nod in that direction. I'm guessing it was a nonstarter to place those extracts at the front end of the text in the way Melville did. At any rate, I think scrambling our usual ways of

relating classical and modern thought brings the historical nature of our attachments to the surface. C.L.R. James does it brilliantly and with Melville sometimes too. Susan Buck-Morss' famous article on Hegel and Haiti, which dropped around the same time as your book, does it too. Innis got killed for this when he developed his civilizational approach to communication. I think this problem ruined his work on *Empire and Communications* because he ends up just cutting and pasting from source material in response to anxieties about misuse of the classics. We still read it every year with incoming students. But he should have taken the 'sub sublibrarian' approach. Liam knows a lot more than I do on this stuff.

LCY: Well, I'm not sure about that! But the argument goes that the late Innis is trying to hide. He is pulling himself back, which produces a voice that's very different from the one you find in the early works like *The Fur Trade in Canada* or *The Cod Fisheries*. There, his voice is strong, pronounced, authorial. In the communication texts, his voice recedes. It's hard to find him in there. I should say, though, that I think these interdisciplinary anxieties and challenges were also opportunities. In cutting and pasting, he was experimenting with a cut-up method way earlier than Burroughs or any of the Beats. Those texts have a weird and infectious energy to them; some of that has to do with the fact he was dying, racing against the clock. But I think at some level he must have been interested in how this method was transforming his texts and his thinking. In any case, the reaction to *Empire and Communications* at Oxford was similar to Nussbaum's reader report, we have a scholar interested in communication getting taken to task by classicists for not treating the internal debates correctly. What's missed by this reception, I think, is that the internal debates of the field are not really the point. The textual and conceptual play's the thing.

JDP: You're saying his lousy reception in the UK especially warped his style?

LCY: Yeah. Well, that's one line of argument—that his nervousness about getting taken to task by classicists and ancient historians led him to write in this more passive way. That's [Innis's biographer, Alexander J.] Watson's argument, that Innis felt he was not an expert on these matters. He did not want to position himself as an expert or appear to be making his own claims about the Greeks. So, he hid himself behind authorial sources and the passive voice. Has the passive voice ever been used so aggressively as in *The Bias of Communication*? Watson goes really deep in showing that

he sometimes parroted directly, cutting whole chunks from books and pasting them together (usually without citation). We'll never know his ultimate motivations. None of us working in the Innis archive have ever found anything definitive. Elspeth Chisholm came close in the 1970s. Watson took up the search, then William J. Buxton, Jody Berland, John Bonnett, and others I'm surely forgetting. But it's still an open question, and so we continue to debate: was he doing this to protect himself from academic and disciplinary policing, or was the great theorist of communication probing the boundaries of his textual galaxy, trying to break its monopoly of knowledge?

JDP: This was Innis's *Passagenwerk*!

LCY: Exactly, exactly. Yeah. I think it's a compelling and generative way of thinking about his late work. I wrote a [little thing](#) about this last year.

JDP: It is such an interesting question about what gets to be canonized. Note the curious and frequent victory of unlikely candidates. You can have a whole religion that's based upon the capital punishment of its founder in the most gruesome, grotesque way. What's the biblical line? The stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone. *Speaking into the Air* is a really weird thing to have as a canonical text for the field of communication studies, because it's a deconstruction of the field. Somehow there's something about the negativity, about the ability to contain those chaotic energies, that actually turns out to be useful for founding purposes. We'd have to go psychoanalytic maybe to figure this out.

CR: That is a key question we are working with in our collection here. I think it is central to the way you're dealing with canonical figures, Socrates, Jesus, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, James. One might read *SITA*, particularly in the 90s when the US field is so bereft of this kind of humanist engagement, as a breath of fresh air and become excited that all of this is in play: literature, philosophy, science, aliens. And for people that want the field to be an equal among the social sciences, it's nice to hear that all these important people with quotable phrases seem to be talking about communication. And you have mentioned the deconstructive ethos of the 90s. But I don't think these responses attend closely enough to the way the book alters what it touches. In altering the relationship of the different traditions of thought it engages, the book gives us a different story of western civilization, a picture of western

civilization as syncretic, as compiled borrowings and thefts, as composed of things from different times and places. Obviously, it leaves things out, it has blind spots, but I read it as an invitation to alter what we inherit, and not to ditch or to defend the things that surround us. I think this is such an important way of conceiving our relation to past and present. And of posing questions of canon.

JDP: Absolutely. The epigraph to the introduction is from [Hans-Georg] Gadamer. And then I talk explicitly about [Walter] Benjamin's idea of a kind of constellational mode of historiography—that the first and last order of historical business is orchestrating the encounter of past and present. And yet it is much easier to just presuppose the positivist, historicist revolution of the nineteenth century that the past is safely past and we can tell a story about it. I can't do that because the past isn't the past. It's always relational; if you want to talk about encounter or about communication, the book is enacting its theory of communication in the way that it deals with past and present.

LCY: I was just going to relay, as a quick aside, something about my experience of this book as a grad student. Like a lot of people, that's where I encountered it for the first time. And I was in a department with a really intense collective engagement with Marx and the Western Marxian tradition. The very weird encounter with the Bearded One was one of the things that drew students to *SITA* but also perplexed us. The Marx in *Speaking into the Air* was not the Marx that we were grappling with in seminars and struggling against with our supervisors and committees. Your engagement with Marx opened different trajectories and offered a more general model by which to spin thinkers and texts out, to do different things with this intellectual inheritance, as Chris so nicely put. And I think that's very much the Benjaminian ethos that you write about in the book, or the Innisian remix approach we discussed earlier, of crashing figures together, cross wiring them, opening wormholes across the vast terrains of the humanist tradition. It offers so many different ways to do that and invites so many different readers and communities into that kind of intellectual fellowship, which is at least part of the reason, I think, that it has moved into the centre of the field.

JDP: Yeah, it's definitely an 1844 Marx in the book, not a *Kapital* Marx. I imagine the program at Western featured more the *Grundrisse* or *Kapital* . . .

LCY: Yeah, yeah, very much so.

CR: I think that Nussbaum's work on vulnerability, contingency, and on tragic ethics is aligned with how you are shifting our idiom for communication. Tragic ethics isn't about dwelling in bad feelings, but about our relation to time and a relationship of thinking and acting that is grounded in historical contingency. I wonder if that engagement with Nussbaum had happened differently if a whole other series of intellectual currents would have opened. As Hannah has reminded me, a lot of feminism was working with these terms, these concepts, this attention to embodiment. It is unfortunate that the engagement didn't unfold along these lines.

JDP: Her early work is so edifying. It reads Plato, not as this big bad guy, but as someone who's figuring out that human life is precarious. *The Fragility of Goodness* is quite beautiful.

CR: Fortunately, I think Carrie Rentschler's essay in this collection brings feminism into contact with *SITA* in amazing ways. OK, let's return to the 80s for a minute because I want to compare the approach to intellectual history found in *SITA* with what you were doing well before that. I'm thinking of the dissertation's engagements with democratic theory, the way you were steering communication theory onto the terrain of Dewey's democratic theory in the 1980s, as Carey and Rorty had done, and of the "Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty" essay, where you are doing intellectual history in the way that those guys did it. You name names, as they did, you have people you call out and oppose, and you even suggest we might abolish the notion of 'communication', or at least be very careful about using it only to navigate the institutional dynamics within which the field sits. Within all of that, however, there is this passage:

"There is no lack of good theory about those activities to which *communication* points. All of Western social thought from Plato and Aristotle through Locke and Hume down to the recent work by authors such as Foucault and Habermas can be read as addressing the same cluster of problems as those that concern communication" (Peters, 1986: 545).

It seems an anticipation of *SITA*, a hint of reclamation rather than abolition.

JDP: Yeah, that essay is really a kind of *Manifesto* to which *Speaking into the Air* is maybe *Das Kapital*. It was very good of Steve Chaffee, the editor of *Communication Research* and an empirical researcher who largely disagreed with me, to publish a grad student heresy as the lead article. Communication scholars seem to enjoy being denounced. On the 100th anniversary of the National Communication Association (NCA) in 2014 I gave [a quite critical talk](#) and got a standing ovation. There's an appetite for recognizing that the field we're in is kind of messed up. Maybe every field has that appetite, or every member of a field fancies themselves the lonely voice of reason amid so much madness. I don't know.

CR: Yeah, I was at that talk, and you were channeling Innis to denounce the field's institutional form, careerists, and opportunism. NCA brings all of that together in an especially intense way, usually in the bowels of some 4-star metropolitan hotel.

JDP: I've never had patience with intellectual projects that style themselves national—at least when the nation is the world hegemon. (I might make an exception for Canada). The Institutional Sources essay was a criticism of the nationalism of communication research. And yes, the NCA talk was totally Innis: the university as a medium. And the punch line was from Innis too: it's that general studies is the real test of what a university is about.

CR: Walk us through the transition from your call to consider abolishing the concept, 'communication', which I recognize was a call situated by a critique of social science and its informational turn, to its reclamation in *SIT4*. Clearly, at some point, there's a decision made to reclaim this word, to not let it recede into social scientific operationalizations of the time, or to be determined by the institutional dynamics you're critiquing. Did this project come to you over time, or was there a moment that crystalized things for you?

JDP: I'll answer in one word: Iowa.

CR: You arrive at Iowa, start up as a professor, and these possibilities present themselves?

JDP: It's a good pragmatist principle that you take the terms you've got and you fill them up in ways that are fruitful. And I was in a Department of Communication

Studies at a university in which that had some respect, even prestige, thanks to people like Sam Becker, and it was a program that had this long history of critical engagement with theory and with crosshatching between social science and humanities. And so, it seemed much less like a vast wasteland than the Stanford program did, intellectually speaking. I came to realize I am seeking tenure in a field called ‘communication’ and have to figure out how to work with it. I don’t know if it was a compromise or a sellout or accommodation. This is one thing that everybody complains about with pragmatism: it is a philosophy of making do. Maybe I was insufficiently radical in giving up on a total ban on the use of the word ‘communication’. At Yale, no one uses it. It’s very, very rare that I hear anyone taking the term seriously, which is kind of a relief in some ways. Media is the term with the power and prestige.

CR: I wonder if there had been a different term, if it might have been different, but I can’t think of what else you could have settled on. ‘Discourse’ was too overdetermined. ‘Rhetoric’ doesn’t work. ‘Mediation’ seemed more Hegelian then, more associated with Adorno maybe. Obviously, ‘information’ was not the place to go. It seemed like there had to be a reclamation through ‘communication’ to mobilize the mixture of thought you were going to undertake.

JDP: I think that’s right. At Iowa, communication truly was the umbrella term in a department with five ‘divisions’, each one almost a unique field unto itself. I was hired in the division called Broadcasting Studies, if you can believe that!

CR: Dissemination . . .

JDP: I think being in Broadcasting Studies made me consider that term in a critical or redemptive way. Within a couple years we decided to rename the division Media Studies. This was like 1987 or 88. So at Iowa media studies was first a subordinate identity, but probably for twenty years it has been my main one. I think you’re totally right, Chris, that communication is that Schrammian crossroads that I had to liminally haunt Robert Johnson-style for a while.

CR: In a way, it isn’t even a book about communication. It’s about communication failure and breakdown. In preparing for today, I was stunned to think about how its argument reiterates in infrastructure debates, and how a lot of the visibility through

interruption and breakdown that animates infrastructure studies is addressed in this book under the sign of communication.

JDP: In its argument that communication is always materially mediated *SITA* is a media studies book!

LCY: Since we are talking about Iowa, I realized in preparing for today, John, that I've never asked you about teaching. Margaret Schwartz wrote a lovely reflection for the issue about being present at Iowa as your student when *SITA* came out. And in this 2021-22 moment of remote teaching, in which the absence of embodied presence and proximity is so visceral, I have been wondering about ways *Speaking into the Air* might have emerged from the classroom. In the acknowledgment section, you thank graduate students for their generosity in reading drafts and things like that. But there is, I think, a more pronounced pedagogical ethic at the heart of the book. Can you talk to us a bit about the relations or dynamics between your teaching, writing, and thinking?

JDP: I very rarely ever taught the book after it came out and I don't think I ever had a seminar in which I laid these things out. I've only rarely taught Kierkegaard or Marx. I don't know if I've ever taught Locke. I've certainly taught the *Phaedrus* a lot. I've taught the Gospels once. So, I don't know. But I certainly do regard the classroom, however clichéd this is, as public space. It's a realm of debate and discussion. It's a curated space because you clearly, as a teacher, have authority. And I've never been one to pretend that I don't have that. But anyway, you all know this. I love teaching and...I don't know that I can say anything smarter about it at this point.

LCY: It makes complete sense that you don't teach it, but maybe we can come up with a theory of the book's teachability. A major part of such a theory would be how *SITA* models or allows students to reflect on what it is that we are actually doing, or ought to be doing, in the classroom. There is, for instance, a way to use the book to explain, explore, and perhaps even defend the lecture as a communicative form. A form that is as much about not-knowing as knowing. We come in and we talk about these ideas, texts, thinkers, debates, problems. We wander and drift with students through our intellectual inheritance. We try to untangle the mess. We pull things apart but also articulate them in new ways. And as teachers, in every instance, we have no idea how those ideas are going to land, or when. There are no guarantees and no timelines that

govern when something clicks for somebody. That's what I mean about a pedagogical ethic that is baked into the book.

JDP: Great, very nice.

LCY: It's disseminative. And the book helps us open such a space with our students—that we are not here simply to extract information or mine data from texts, but to struggle and muddle along together. This strikes me as a powerful and even radical ethic—particularly given the shift in higher ed over the last 30 years toward language and metrics that seek to define, track, and even guarantee certain learning 'objectives', 'outcomes' and 'deliverables'.

HD: The teachability is also part of why we talk about *SITA* becoming central to some idea of a canon. But then, something that really comes through in Amit [Pinchevski]'s and Melissa [Aronczyk]'s pieces in this issue, is that the process of teaching is also what can flatten or reduce some of the nuance in our thinking and readings of books. I struggle with thinking about this—how the dissemination-dialogue pair becomes a shorthand, the two become reified as ontologically distinct categories. This is obviously not the argument you make in the book, but it becomes almost a necessity in order to teach the book. I don't know how to solve that problem. But if you have any ideas about that, I'd love to hear them.

JDP: We just read *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde* for my 19th century media class. And you know what's so weird about that? The popular reception is, there's good Jekyll, bad Hyde. And this is a parable of what everything is like. But when you start reading, you realize that Jekyll is not a very good person. Jekyll is a rich guy who is in the habit, it is implied, of consorting with prostitutes. He is two-in-one with Hyde. But Hyde is only himself. And the drama of this book is the attraction of the torn romantic soul to the appetitiveness and drive and libido of the single-minded soul. I think dialogue and dissemination are things which are necessarily twofold, though it's easy for someone to come along and say, "oh, well, Peters says there's the paradigm dissemination and then there's the paradigm of dialogue". It's hard to teach dialectic except by doing it. And this book is very dialectical. At least I want it to be dialectical. (Amit Pinchevski's essay is brilliant on this). And Liam, to your point, in a later thing about media and conversation, I think I make the argument about the legitimacy of

the lecture form more explicit, along with—I wrote this in England—the legitimacy of public service broadcasting as a more specific way to think about dissemination. As a just form.¹

CR: One of the things we were reminded of by our peer reviewers for this collection, Mark Hayward and John Shiga, is how important cultural studies is at this moment. You are obviously thinking alongside and with cultural studies. You knew Carey well. You visited Illinois. You were up on Williams' work. You are attuned to Grossberg's and Carey's importing of Stuart Hall and Birmingham School texts. Cultural studies is clearly a huge component of the conversation in communication and media studies in the 80s and 90s.

JDP: It was huge. When I got to Iowa, it was like the rhetoricians and the broadcasting/media studies people had made a kind of temporary coalition—indeed, *articulation*—around Stuart Hall. Hall had also visited Iowa, and the Iowa journal, the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, had published those famous interviews between Grossberg and Hall. I heard Hall speak in 1983 at the famous Marxist summer camp “Marxism and the interpretation of culture” at University of Illinois. And he was totally compelling. He's spell-binding, like Carey, who I also heard speak there, uttering a memorable line I thought might apply to Stanford: “chasing metaphysical bats around positivist belfries”. Hall gets up there in front of the room. There was this big fight about the voices of women vanishing amid a bunch of white-guy, famous Marxists. Stuart Hall was the one who Solomonically stepped in and gave this amazing discourse about what does inclusion mean? What does gender mean? You know, I don't know if he did it perfectly, but I thought it was a pretty courageous and really important kind of intervention. Gayatri Spivak was there and so was Catharine MacKinnon, Ellen Willis. So, it wasn't like there weren't any intellectually formidable women at the conference. But Hall was the one who stepped up to mediate. And in really inspiring ways. I think that sort of character vibe was really important for me to see as well.

As to the specifics of how I engaged with cultural studies: it was probably mostly through advising grad students, because a lot of them took cultural studies as a method for doing the kind of work that they wanted to do. I ended up teaching undergraduate classes on cultural theory, in which we would do standard cultural studies. My grad teaching in the later 1980s went in other directions, more Benjamin on the one hand

(Media and Modernity) and Dewey on the other (Mass Communication and American Democracy).

CR: I'm surprised by this alignment of cultural studies and rhetoric through Hall at Iowa.

JDP: Michael McGee again was someone who was really into Althusser and 'hailing'.

CR: How did you navigate these kinds of engagements? I can't see you traveling very far on the Althusserian road.

JDP: I have recently returned to Hall, teaching *Policing the Crisis* in fall 2020. And his biography, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (2017), derived from conversations with Bill Schwarz, is great. Here I find an embodied Hall (with some clear elisions) that is rather remote from Althusserian abstractions.

CR: This is so interesting. I think this is reflected in David Scott's conversations and interviews with Hall too. You get this mix of personal history and conceptual thought through the posing of political questions. The way that Hall reads Black diasporas into theories of globalization via memories of a conversation with his mother is so good.

LCY: I'm going to jump in while we're on the Hall thread. I just reread his lecture/essay "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism, Without Guarantees" (1986) which Armond Towns had keyed me back into in a recent conversation. And it strikes me that the ethos of that piece is similar to what we find in *Speaking into the Air*-

JDP: Absolutely.

LCY: -which is about opening space for acknowledging the tragedy of our situation, while also searching for opportunities or vectors on which to think about our intellectual inheritance in another way, or in other registers. And really, that's the only thing he's interested in. He's not interested in Marx-as-prophet, in quibbling over what exactly Marx meant on every line. And nor is Hall interested in being subsumed by the tragedy of the failure of the great Marxian project. Instead, he's interested in launching it onto these new trajectories.

JDP: Remember how he defines theorizing in that piece? Wrestling with angels. And I'll totally sign onto that. *Speaking into the Air* is wrestling with angels, both in the sense of wrestling with the angelic metaphor for communication and wrestling with angels in terms of a hermeneutic engagement with previous thinkers.

CR: Yes. I think there is something crucial here in terms of how *SITA* treats ideals. A book I find incredibly resonant with *SITA* is Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, where she is talking about the dissolution of optimistic scenarios that felt foundational, that have unraveled or become impossible, and from which we cannot just let go. A big part of our lives involves adjustments to the attrition of our optimism, involves the ambivalence of our hopes for the future, and involves maintaining attachments that convey optimism and harm at once. The way you open *SITA*, it is with this theme and the problem, and with this desire for communication that has a hold of us and is ramifying through politics, culture, ethics. Your approach isn't about identifying and fixing a mistake or solving a problem. It is like Wittgenstein trying to draw us away from an idea of language that is sickening us.

JDP: I was just going to mention Wittgenstein!

CR: Yeah, he is trying to vivify aspects of life that might congeal into a different way of seeing language. This isn't the idea that everything is constructed and that once you understand its constructed nature, you are empowered and can change things. Instead, he is trying to draw us out of the fly bottle, away from our attachments to an idea of language, so to speak. How do we get some measure of autonomy from things we desire, but that are not desirable and have hold of us?

JDP: Exactly. Maybe this is from Rorty, James, or Wittgenstein but I do see the book as having a kind of higher therapeutic value, therapy in the sense of the uncoercive rearrangement of desire. That's the beautiful definition of liberal education by Gayatri Spivak: the uncoercive rearrangement of desire. James offers comfort for coping. How can we recognize the inevitable unfulfillment of some desires as a handsome condition rather than moping? If you want to be an angel, you are sentenced to mope. I don't want to be an angel, thank you very much!

CR: Can you say a bit more about this therapeutic aspect?

JDP: I say higher therapy in the perhaps vain attempt to take distance from the thin gruel of therapeutic culture that is so pervasive everywhere. I don't think of therapy as easy. The cure has to be hard. Rorty shares with Dewey a certain kind of metaphysical shallowness or at least ease: we just need to chill a little bit, get over it. The real cure, however, means wrestling with angels, not always friendly ones, "principalities and powers" as our friend Paul would say. The dream of communication is also a nightmare, a terror, an abyss.

HD: If you're thinking of *Speaking into the Air* as a kind of therapeutic offering, then the ultimate salve at the end is the holiness of the body. And actually, I think this is a very feminist intervention that doesn't get really read as such.

JDP: Thank you!

HD: But I want to ask you about your ideas around embodiment and in particular, the "[Bowels of Mercy](#)" essay published the same year as *Speaking into the Air*. So, I'm curious, in that essay you're talking through the bowels as the site of human and divine compassion, and it resonates so perfectly with the conclusion in *Speaking into the Air*. I'd love to hear you talk about how those ideas around embodiment were circulating for you at that time.

JDP: Yeah, thank you. I think this is partly my Mormonism. Mormonism is radical in denouncing the bad read within Christianity of Platonism or even Gnosticism, that the body is a shell, that we are afflicted by this awful fleshly lumpy thing we have to carry around. For Joseph Smith, receiving a body is a step up cosmically and metaphysically, because before we were born, we were just mere spirits. Our realm of action was profoundly limited. Embodiment is not just a temporary sojourn. It is the direction to which everyone is headed, ultimately, divine embodiment. So, God has a body. God is married. God, technically, is father *and* mother. Ben [Peters] and Tamara Kneese have an interesting little piece about this ("[Mormon Mommies Will Never Die](#)"). But obviously being embodied is not always a great thing. Embodiment is suffering as well.

HD: But there's something theologically specific about the embrace of the grotesque that's also part of this. A lot of queer theorists and a lot of feminist theorists have pinpointed similar ideas—I'm thinking here for example of Lauren Berlant and

Michael Warner's work on queer counterpublics. I'm interested in why the bowels become an important locus for thinking through some of this for you.

JDP: Viscera and virtue go together! This essay arose from my surprise in studying New Testament Greek that what the King James Version calls compassion simply isn't there. There's no word for it in Greek. Instead, the term is a middle verb signifying a movement of the internal organs. When Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who sees the wounded man the Samaritan became "gutsed". Something gracious happened to his guts, and this is how we translate compassion. So maybe the way people connect is not through mind melds but through our bowels moving. Perhaps that is the most grotesque, but also the most basic way to state the argument of *Speaking into the Air*. Yet what we might defensively consider grotesque is essential and even lovable. We should be suspicious of mechanisms that ban bits of us as beyond worth! As you point out, the same mechanisms that call the bowels gross have banished women and others. (And I did write in some detail about Berlant and Warner, who is now my colleague, in *Courting the Abyss*).

CR: To Hannah's point about the ending, it is clear from the readers' reports that you throw out the conclusion they had read. Instead, the last graph is about love; it is what you leave us with when you're talking about time, touch, finitude.

HD: But also proximity, which, rereading this now, I mean, it's impossible to read *SITA* today without seeing it through the lens of our current context: the global pandemic, endless Zoom conversations, and all of the ways that we are physically isolated. This also makes me think about your work on loneliness. Touch is the most precarious and perilous thing that we can do right now!

JDP: If I remember a panel discussion of the book at NCA in 2000 or 2001 correctly, Jonathan Sterne complained that the book ended with "an ethics of the hug". He thought I was kind of defaulting to an individualist, face to face ethic. Horkheimer and Adorno complain that the command to love your neighbour mortgages love to chance, and even worse, lets charity serve an alibi for failing to acknowledge structural injustice. The scalability of love—that is the question! Are institutions necessarily loveless? I hope not. I don't know, institutions do a lot of nasty things, but people face to face can do a lot of nasty things too. Life is short and hugs are few!

CR: But there are two endings. There is the conclusion, which I guess you could call the ethics of the hug, which gives us a communal moment from *Moby Dick* as its emblem, and then there is the ethics of Melville, which is nodded at with the proliferation of extracts in the appendix, a series of fragments from a past that overflows what we know and imagine, filled with shipwrecks and mutinies, reversals and inversions, and so on.

JDP: Yes, we have to lean into the quandary.

Notes

¹ “Media as Conversation, Conversation as Media,” *Mass Media and Cultural Theory*, eds. James Curran and David Morley (London: Routledge, 2006), 115-126.

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