Gestures of Concern

Chris Ingraham

GESTURES OF CONCERN

A *Cultural Politics* Book
Edited by John Armitage, Ryan Bishop, and Douglas Kellner

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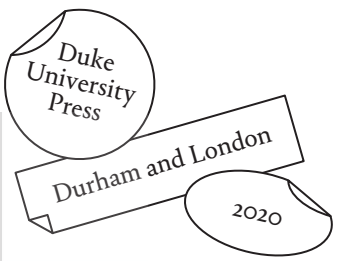

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THE AFFECT OF ABSTRACT EXCHANGE, THE FEELING THAT EVERYTHING IS FUNGIBLE—WHAT IS ITS SONG?

—Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*

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INTRODUCTION

THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

A reporter once asked Muhammad Ali, the American boxer, how many sit-ups he did in a day. Ali answered that he didn't know—he only started counting once they started to hurt. The idea was that only those actions matter whose effects have a perceivable consequence. The rest are just the status quo, the kind of condition our condition is in. This book is about a whole class of ordinary actions that resemble Ali's sit-ups in that they seem not to "count" for much because we seldom experience them as having much effect. I call such efforts gestures of concern. Maybe they involve some volunteering, or attending a protest; maybe it's just posting a photo online, or forwarding an email. Examples could as well include bringing a reusable bag to the grocery store as sitting phone-faced on a couch, scrolling through a newsfeed. Whether more forward or recessive, gestures of concern are efforts people make to join in public affairs in ways that feel participatory and beneficial, though their measurable impact remains imperceptible.

In contrast to the physical gestures people make with their bodies or tools to execute a task or to express a feeling or idea, "gestures of concern" names a way to distinguish another kind of gestural action, one that isn't quite separated from a body's gesticular movements (as if that were possible), but is rather primarily *an expression into form of an affective relation*. Such gestures might involve language, gifts, artworks, and more, but what they share is an expressive concern that acts as both a means and as an end because their most instrumental effects are exhausted in their expressivity.

The best example may be the "Get Well" card. When you send a "Get Well" card to an ailing friend, it's not likely that the card will expedite their

recovery. The card is a gesture. Its value lies less in being effective than in being expressive. Expressive acts of this kind do not seek causally to influence an outcome. They seek to express a sense of concern. These gestures enact a spirit of sociality that builds an affective commonwealth. When referring to gestures throughout this book, it's primarily these sorts of noninstrumental expressive acts that I have in mind. Concerned gestures may well be as timeless as the more principally physical gesticulations humans and animals have always made in social groups, but they are prominent enough now to merit their own attention.

When the digital affordances of our time enable more opportunities to communicate with public audiences, the resultant glut of information available for our attention tends to reduce our social participation to gestures of the sort performed knowing they will have little discernible consequence. Liking, sharing, posting, pinning: these and other concerned gestures are rhetorical in the way that rhetorical questions are. No one expects them to inspire a response. The impact of concerned gestures is rather to spread an affectability, begetting new capacities for what can be or be done, and what can be known or felt in the thereafter of proximity to their encounter. In this sense, all concerned gestures share the tendency for their power to reside in a layer of sociality that is not the layer of meaning. It's not that such gestures are *without* communicable meaning or significance, but that they require no readable response to exercise their importance. In the same way that a lawyer "practices" law or someone might refer to their yoga "practice," concerned gestures are practices that operate in service of some objective while already embodying its attainment.[1] "Get Well" cards and other concerned gestures find people beckoning toward some potential that they seldom see actualized except through the realization of reaching for it. It could be the potential for equality, or beauty, for social justice, or happiness—or many other things besides. But whatever the aim, because its deferral does not extinguish its potential, the gesture of reaching for it typically fails to achieve a new *state* of being, while affirming a new *manner* of being instead.

Recent modes of liberal governance have bequeathed us a particular manner of being in the world. Whether these go by the name of late liberalism, neoliberalism, surveillance capitalism, or something else, it's hard not to notice that we've been drawn into more than a political-economic system—into what Wendy Brown laments as "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms."[2] Inclusion and communicative participation in public life now reign as arch values of democracy, while near omnipresent connectivity and social technologies make it easier than ever for people to enact these ideals as regular parts of their everyday experience. It

was not just Obama who wanted people to believe that "Change" and "Hope" are reasonable expectations of life in the present day, politically and otherwise. Those promises are built into the very policies of participatory culture.[3] But no matter how much we Tweet, post, occupy, or doth protest, it can be difficult to survey the historical present and not feel overwhelmed. We're facing a sixth extinction of our own doing. Oceans are rising. Health epidemics are rampant. If it's not COVID-19, Ebola, HIV, malaria, then it's cancer, ALS, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's. Yet still there's genocide, nuclear armament, terrorism, shooting sprees. The planet is overpopulated. Refugees and immigrants have fewer places to go. Extremism rules much of global politics and religion. And everywhere the same old carnival of brutal -isms. All this amid a growing disparity between the rich and everyone else. But not to worry, we're told, there's an app or pharmaceutical for everything. Markets are bubbling. Surveillance is ubiquitous. Drones are overhead, and algorithms are calling the shots.

Against the melancholia invited by this state of affairs, this book aspires to affirm and justify our concerned gestures as affectively generative within a present nevertheless deserving of critical resistance. Such a project shares affinities with feminist and queer ways of addressing the feelings of exclusion and precarity, optimism and ambivalence that pervade so much of everyday experience, not just for those othered by the threat that their body or skin type, sexuality or citizenship gets taken to pose to dominant and normative exceptionalisms, but also beyond identitarian politics to those who already have everything they need to configure the worlds they want, but don't seem to want the worlds they've configured. Rosi Braidotti, for instance, describes such projects as paradoxical: "how to engage in affirmative politics, which entails the production of social horizons of hope, while at the same time doing critical theory, which means resisting the present."[4] At its most ambitious, to affirm inconsequential gestures as affectively generative is to reorient our modes of thinking or searching such that we see the potential for things to be otherwise than they are. To do so is to cultivate a sense of interdependence and connectivity that makes us worthy of sustaining such an attitude without succumbing to the cynicism wrought by its recurrent disappointment. In short, the problem is how to resist the present while still being worthy of it.

One approach to this problem—the one ventured here—is to explore some ways in which people are concerned to engage with public life through creative and critical gestures that disclose the potential for a new kind of togetherness, even if that disclosure is all they accomplish. To the extent that any potential is always expressed as a manner of being, an orientation toward a possible future that is not yet attained as a state of being, its disclosure can only be understood

as a process, not its result.[5] We are hence given to acknowledge registers of communication that matter experientially, in-the-act, as much as they might matter meaningfully, in the act's interpretation. That is, to understand the power intrinsic to those many vectors of ostensibly ineffectual public engagement today, we will need to identify a stratum of sociality whose significance cannot without loss be reduced to its propositional or symbolic content. Once we fix this engagement into an interpretable meaning, we toggle away from the *zest* that accounts for a more elusive register of any concerned gesture's influence.[6]

There is no reason to maintain that we never see results from our concerned gestures. If you serve food to the hungry, you also watch them eat. Nor is there cause to suppose such gestures and the relations they actualize are without meaning. Meaning is like adventure on a journey; it's easy enough to find for those who go out looking. Yet, as an epiphenomenon of communication, meaning alone does not account for the "presence-effects"[7] that concerned gestures also actuate, and it is these effects that are especially important in a time when we are so inundated with information that now nearly anything can be signal and anything noise, depending on whom you ask and which algorithms are doing the sorting. Considering that communicative participation in public affairs has never been easier, while not much seems to change by way of socio-political uplift, it is becoming clearer that the usual modes of communicative participation alone are insufficient to bring about the kind of world one would like to make a home in.

Though this book does not directly take on the political-economic apparatus of our historical present, I am much persuaded by arguments about its shortcomings. Jodi Dean's important 2009 study of "communicative capitalism" has proven to have legs as her thesis is as true in today's time of diplomacy-by-Twitter and the op-edification of journalism as it was in the American political climate that inspired it with its own this-can't-be-happening realities. As a byproduct of neoliberalism, communicative capitalism promotes a complacent fantasy: namely, the belief that our communicative engagement in public affairs is a guarantor of democratic legitimacy, even a means for achieving political justice, when really the materialization of such ideals through participatory technologies tends to reinforce the standing order and entrench corporate and global power structures.[8] The pages ahead also indicate a partiality to Lauren Berlant's thinking, which seems to capture something of what it feels like to be alive today when she worries that our optimistic attachments to desires about "the good life" are actually cruel obstacles to such a life's realization.[9] But if communication's potential to bring about a better world is only a fantasy, and if our personal optimism is a cruel impediment to attaining its

object, then that presents a grim outlook on change and hope. Where is the place for replenishment? What good are gestures of concern?

THE AFFECTIVE COMMONWEALTH

Gestures of concern help to build our affective commonwealth. In classic Western treatises about governance, the idea of a commonwealth reflects an earnest political obligation to constitute society in ways that enable all of its members to share its benefits in common. While globalization today may have created a kind of common world, brought us all under one roof, so to speak, that roof covers a house of many mansions—and of far too many shanties. Evoking the common need not imply some bluebird-on-the-shoulder utopia, nor the possibility of (still less the desire for) the homogenization of cultures or persons. A commonwealth accommodates pluralism and difference by providing those resources from which we all might draw in order to thrive in our own characteristic way. In its primary register, a commonwealth refers to the shared wealth of the material world: oxygen, water, sunlight, soil, stone, all of nature's cornucopia. "Nature," Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri remind us, "is just another word for the common."[10] By identifying an *affective* commonwealth in particular, I mean to indicate more than just our natural and more-than-human shared inheritance. For Hardt and Negri, the common also includes "the constitutive elements of human society, such as common languages, habits, gestures, affects, codes, and so forth."[11] In this sense an affective commonwealth is a bounty of nature and culture alike, or better yet what Donna Haraway calls "natureculture."[12] It references a shared sense of what it feels like to be alive at the present time, but as if that feeling were a resource anyone could draw on to make sense of their worlds and to affirm more sustainable ways of being interconnected within them.

Readers who hear in "affective commonwealth" a variation on Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling" are right to do so.[13] Both concepts are ways of designating a "social experience *in solution*"—a lived and felt experience *while* it is lived and felt.[14] Williams knew that because the felt experience of any social totality is only accessible retrospectively, at which point the feeling is calcified and gone, structures of feeling can only ever be a "cultural hypothesis" about a "social experience which is still *in process*."[15] There is always a differential remainder between what lived experience feels like and our ability to articulate it. For Williams, art makes up some of that difference by showing, he writes, that "in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes

the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon."[16] Where "structure of feeling" emphasizes the actual living sense as a residue, then, "affective commonwealth" emphasizes the deep community as a resource. Both are preconditions for any type of collectivity, yet also formed in the process of coming together into new relations, the experience of which leaves behind a set of new conditions with new possibilities for commonality—or its rupture.

When we talk about a commonwealth, we talk about those public resources, both material and intangible, that support a collective flourishing. But a commonwealth is always as much under construction as it is ever an existing resource from which we can draw. As I show in chapters 5 and 6—where I discuss a British community that built its own library, and various tactical attempts to disrupt Google Street View surveillance—to build an affective commonwealth through gestures of concern is to participate in fashioning a world capable of replenishing what it takes from us as we build it. As we labor in our jobs (or in trying to find one), as we talk with each other (or at each other), what we produce is more than just a public work or outcome (a profit, a road, a resolution, a policy). We produce a set of dispositions that orient us to one another and to the prospect of a shared future. All dispositions are affective. They involve the condition of experiencing social moods or ambient tones that influence how we perceive and respond to the world around us. Dispositions, we might say, are the affective shape we're in during any encounter; and, like Ali's uncounted sit-ups, the shape we're already in often isn't taken to matter.

This book urges that our dispositions do matter. They matter not just within the supposed limits of an individual human body, but within the social field itself. Our moods are as ambient as they are autonomous, as social as they are solitary. Many of those who theorize affect have observed that we all absorb one another's affectivity, which both builds a "me" that is more than "I" and a "we" that is less than "us." Social moods or tones are always shared, even as they contribute in shaping individual dispositions at the level of an enfleshed body. All dispositions are also predispositions, before *and* after they become readable, just as all conditions have already been preconditions, and are always becoming new preconditions in-the-act.

The "affect" in an affective commonwealth accordingly names a *condition of experiencing* a disposition, a mood, a social tone, but not the disposition, mood, or tone itself. This is why, to talk about particular "affects"—say, fear or desire, contempt or love—is already to be talking about something outside of affect: something only readable from a vantage beyond the unfolding condition of experiencing it as such, a condition in which the best we can say of any inchoate feelings there is that they are becoming what they eventually will

have been. Affect, in short, as I use the term here, is fundamentally not representable or reducible to the expression of any particular feeling in the form of a readable emotion or semanticized explanation. Affectivity is only capable of being experienced in-the-act. Gestures are our best hope for reading the in-the-act itself as a collective process, as a commons.

At stake, ultimately, is the receptivity we have, often without realizing it, to being among others. These others may include family and friends, or strangers, but also the other-than-human, our very planet and its many animacies—everything for which we may endeavor to fulfill an obligation of togetherness that is in some way commensurate with our sense of an obligation to us. Gestures of concern build affective commonwealths by producing a set of dispositions that orient us to one another with an imaginable future in mind. In this way, affective commonwealths enable our astonishing appetition for carrying on in a characteristic matter and manner, even while disclosing that we are constantly changing as we enter into new relations, each with the potential to refigure the known limits of what we can be and do.[17]

MEDIA EPISTEMOLOGY

This project's exigences can be tied to its academic and philosophical commitments, and one of my foundational commitments is to the belief that what we can be and do is largely determined by our media: not just "the media"—where representation is paramount, as everything from fake news to Hollywood's dismal diversity makes evident—but rather media technologies in the materialist sense that Friedrich Kittler acknowledged with his quotable maxim that "media determine our situation."[18] John Durham Peters illustrates this epistemological power of media as well as anyone in his work to rehabilitate the notion that media are elemental (air, water, fire, clouds, etc.). A philosophy of elemental media supposes that media are "modes of being," the "always in the middle" infrastructures that both contain us and support how we are.[19] Media are the means by which we live (though often oblivious to us, the way a fish is determined by water but unaware of it). How my commitment to elemental media shows up in this book is through my corresponding interest in thinking through some of the ways that communicative capitalism's wider algorithmic culture acts as a media environment in which gestures are beginning to reconfigure the social.

For example, in the summer of 2014, a small startup known as Yo became the #1 social networking app in America. Billing itself as "the simplest communication tool in the world," Yo allowed people to text someone the eponymous greeting and nothing else. "Yo," you could send to a friend. Full stop. Even

within digital culture's radical economy of symbols—all the acronyms, emojis, shorthand, and .gifs that have become ordinary parts of everyday exchange—this was an extreme distillation. Twitter's 140 characters seemed outright logorrheic by comparison. Were social relations really now being built or maintained through a *syllable*? Yo's success was short-lived, and likely owed much of its appeal to frivolous novelty. But the app's popularity among millions of people exemplifies one of the ways we may now be confronting the widespread validation of communication's essential distillation into *gesture*.

The time is right for such a confrontation. Yo's precipitous spike is one among many examples of technologies vaunted for their novelty and festooned with utopian promises (not to mention bounteous start-up funds), as if communication media could improve the content of our communication by making its transmission faster, more efficient, more multimodal. Having found word counts too general, in technologies from text messaging to Twitter we have identified a smaller unit—the character—by which to limit our exchanges. Across social media, in our profiles and feeds and webpages and texts, pictures too are replacing words. Efficiency is all. Swipe left for toward, swipe right for away. More than phatic communion—Bronisław Malinowski's term for the types of human illocution that preserve an "atmosphere of sociability" rather than convey any meaning[20]—digital communion strives toward the maximal efficiency of countability. Meaning is no longer primary; the countability of space occupied is.

The irony behind our gestures of concern having no readable effect and going uncounted like Ali's sit-ups, then, is that counted effects is about all that they are in their digital form. Kittler proposed that communication strives toward digitality as its ultimate expression: the elimination of noise. Whereas critiques of ideology throughout the twentieth century showed that ideology conceals itself by introducing noise into a modulated and layered structure of mediation, today we see that digital media eliminate that noise altogether. The indifference of digital technologies to the information they are capable of processing into binary code, which now includes nearly all kinds of information (sound, pictures, video, text), blunts the edge of ideological criticism that is inattentive to this indifference by focusing only on what is said rather than the conditions that make it sayable at all.[21] Digital communication technologies, that is, by being indifferent to the *content* of the communication they facilitate, have succeeded in translating the world into data. Google's computations don't care about ideology. Whether churning out a search result or targeting an advertisement to its ideal viewer, what matters for computational logics are the *effects* of collecting, storing, and processing some types of data and not others—effects measured by the onset of monetary data flows, clicks, eyeballs on a screen.

When communication is thus reduced into fungible and capitalizable units, those individuals producing or receiving it also get sorted into demographics, focus groups, and target markets.[22] Sneaking ideological content into public discourse is no longer the same when algorithms, working with exabytes of data, have so succeeded in fine-tuning media processes that they have minutely isolated the value and measurable impact of all digitally mediated information for its target. Witness the scandal that disclosed how Donald Trump's 2016 campaign team had hired the political firm Cambridge Analytica to help its cause, which it did in part by taking private data from millions of Facebook members in order to target ads to the most vulnerable potential voters. Although the public conversation about the scandal focused mostly on the problems raised for the invasion of privacy, conversation could just as well have focused on the reduction of political identity and conviction to static psychometrics. When attitudes and dispositions are rendered empirically measurable, they are presumed alterable less by argument or eloquence than by mere formula, by a rearrangement of some numerical recipe. Regardless of the effectiveness of such methods, it becomes clearer that the critical projects of most urgency for the twenty-first century will need to do more than look into the ideological content of our public engagement; we will also need to investigate those media processes and cultural techniques that control human behavior by quantifying our contemporary modes of being.

Because these modes are always contingent, I operate with skepticism toward the hermeneutic premise that meaning is "always already" available in any text or event, and presume instead that nothing is intrinsically meaningfull.[23] It is more accurate to say that everything is intrinsically meaning-able, but that this ability is only operationalized when so sanctioned by different configurations of an epistemic context. In this sense, I am inspired by the nonhermeneutic affinities and methodologies of Kittler, Peters, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and others who are less interested in interpretation than in processes of meaning constitution.[24] How do such processes determine what among the meaning-able to make meaning-full? Processes of meaning constitution occur materially, in the conditions of possibility determined by our technical objects, for instance, but also affectively, through adhesions and cohesions that are no less material but more impalpably dispersed across a social field of bodies in motion (I discuss such "stickiness" in chapter 2).

Now that the digital age is several decades old and even so-called new media are growing hoary, we are finally in a better position to recognize some of these cultural techniques within the new ordinary they have wrought. What we begin to see is a great proliferation of concerned gestures owing to

the conditions of widespread digital communication technologies amenable to their flourishing. The media epistemic exigence for a study of such gestures accordingly emerges from a particular conjuncture of primarily American and western European liberal democracies post-millennium, which has come to valorize "sharing" as the new great virtue of the social and political alike.[25] I am drawn to the sharedness of these gestures, and compelled by the prospect that there's enough "something doing" around their sheer prevalence as to merit a corresponding need for a critical analysis suitable to the cultural politics of their ascendance and circulation.

Though *Gestures of Concern* does not set out a theory of gestures as such, its commitment to media epistemology involves thinking of gestures as mediated acts.[26] The mediality of gestures is self-evident when thinking of gestures as physical bodily movements, but less so when thinking of concerned gestures like a "Get Well" card or holding a door open for a stranger. Along these lines, I am influenced by Giorgio Agamben's theory of the gesture as an act that exhibits the ongoing mediality of being human, what he calls "the being-in-a-medium of human beings."[27] If a gesture signals the conditionality whereby we are always *in* a medium—in society, in language, in our animal bodies—a gesture is not a message *representing* that mediality so much as a performance of the mediality itself. Paradoxically, a gesture is both a means and an end (and hence both *not* a means and *not* an end). A gesture, Agamben says, is the "communication of a communicability."[28] If there is one easily italicized definition of "gestures" I follow across these pages (and across different types of gesture), this is it. As the *communication of a communicability*, a gesture's fundamental inbetweenness acts as an ethical opening to the possibility of being otherwise. Agamben shows us that no theory of gesture is not also a theory of media. To the degree that our networked media environment today gives us participatory access to those public issues whose stakes many share, attending to the mediality of gestures (and to the gesturality of media) is also to confront the daily practice of democracy.

CREATIVE DEMOCRACY

The second of this project's foundational commitments also leads to one of its exigences, and that commitment is to what could broadly be described as a pragmatist set of methods and tenets surrounding the idea of communication. The denial of hard dualisms; the supposition that all experience is open-ended and in process; the belief that any idea's meaning, any truth proposition, any would-be action's value depends upon the consequences of its adoption—all are tendencies of thought with which I am, for the most part, in sympathy.[29] What pragmatism

offers the study of communication is far more than its being somehow practical, at least in the sense so often colloquially misconstrued as synonymous with pragmatist doctrine. To the extent that what's practical in any given case depends on whom you ask—that is, on a situated point of view—pragmatism is anything but practical. Rather, a pragmatic view of communication privileges the *communal* aspects of being-with, of coming together mutually to participate in creating a collective world. This shared project, at least for John Dewey, makes communication among strangers central to public life and politics, hence to democracy itself.

In 1939, at age eighty, Dewey prepared a short speech for a celebration of his birthday. Observing that he had lived over half as long as American democracy itself, he addressed the task for democracy that he saw still ahead. For Dewey, democracy was not a passive inheritance, vouchsafed by laws and statutes, institutions and procedures. Nor was it maintained through the occasional trip to the polling booth or by dutifully paying one's taxes. It was, rather, something to be created anew, again and again, and cultivated through a daily faith in the common person's ability to contribute valuably to its creative sustenance. These two pillars—creativity and faith—made democracy, for Dewey, an ethical ideal. Creative democracy was a daily practice of communicative participation with others, grounded in a reflective faith in the validity and worth of all humans, regardless of their differences. Accordingly, Dewey said, democracy privileges "the process of experience as end and as means."[30]

Gestures of concern, similarly, as end and as means, are one embodiment of such a process. They instantiate the ideal of creative democracy by virtue of the concern with which they are invested, not by virtue of the outcome of their effort. But concern is not always joined by intention. By invoking the idea of "concern," I will particularly draw from the concept's importance for Alfred North Whitehead, a process philosopher with pragmatist leanings for whom concern was the essence of all experience. Concern is that impalpable compulsion that calls one to action, not just from within, as a kind of autonomous volition, but from without, as a distributed energy within the social field, impossible to ignore. I discuss concern at some length in chapter 1, but presently it suffices to say that it is concerned gestures (and not just gestures of a more generic type) that contribute to affective commonwealths (and not just to commonwealths of a more generic type) because concern is what inflects all experience with the affective tone peculiar to it. What matters is that today we encounter creative democracy as an affective mode-of-being that is characterized by unprecedented cultural production and participation.

Online or off, expert or amateur, sublime or inane, nearly anyone can now contribute "content" for the public measure. Free market values encourage,

and technology facilitates, the expression of oneself through creative media and the subsequent sharing of that expression with others in a public way. Today's forays into public life often take broadly aestheticized forms (as when people share pictures, post videos, dance in flash mobs) or involve making public one's critical faculties and aesthetic tastes (as when people review books, create playlists, "like" their favorite fashions). A widespread democratization of creativity is validating and enabling everyone to be an artist or maker, while an equally widespread culture of curation is legitimating and encouraging everyone to be a critic or trendsetter.

As I show in chapters 3 and 4, these developments are deeply entangled. As more ordinary people make aestheticized contributions to the cultural landscape, we have more need to spoon through the gallimaufry and determine what's nourishing. Yet the increasing value placed on encouraging and facilitating everyone's contributions runs fundamentally counter to the values implied by the need to curate culture as a way to sort the signals from the noise. The former value extols the virtue of free individual expression, as if all resultant communication is equally important as long as it comes from one's true inner voice. The latter, meanwhile, suggests that some types of expression indeed are better than others (they're more culturally salient, more deftly executed, more aesthetically rich, etc.). As more creative expression circulates, there's more need to curate it; as curation becomes more important, curatorial acts themselves become a form of creative expression. In turn, the tension between the different suppositions behind the drive both to democratize creativity and to curate culture gives rise to new forms of sociality surrounding public involvement in that class of cultural goods loosely associated with the name of art.

Art may seem like too stately a title for most of what goes on from Flickr to Facebook, YouTube to Pinterest, Tinder to TikTok. In using it, I echo an insight that Dewey had in 1934, when he wrote that "the arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits."[31] Dewey's account sounds curiously redolent of parallel conditions today, when some of the most vital arts include ASMR videos, viral "challenges," deepfakes, and trending Tweets about the latest reality star. Jazzed music? *How pretentious*. When referring to art in these pages, then, as when to "cultural goods" or any of various other near-synonyms, the aim is not to define a singularly complex category of human creativity according to any of its supposed values or necessary and sufficient properties, aesthetic or otherwise.[32] Rather than endeavor any this-is-art-and-this-isn't disjunctions, my pragmatic approach seeks to

think about and enhance the ways everyday encounters with the aesthetic (including both its "high" and "popular" variants) can increase individual satisfaction and intensify presence to the common, inasmuch as it ever is.

The strange predicament we're in, however, is that the capacitation of people as artists or critics is making the social modes of their publicness more and more indissociable from the modes of their artfulness. Ordinary people are simply engaging with art more often and more publicly. It is nothing new to observe that we are now all photographers, writers, filmmakers—or can be with the easy click of some buttons. As art-historical treatments of participatory art have shown, the effluvia of our information age and its neoliberal rationalities over the last few decades have implicated technology and the arts alike in the commodification of sociality itself. The very notion of political engagement, of citizenship as a public subject-formation, is taking an aestheticized form. Creative democracy, in short, has become more "creative" than ever. And like democracy, art is less valuably treated as a finished product than as something always in process. It is, as Auden said of poetry, "a way of happening, a mouth."[33] The failure of any fixed *objet d'art* to represent a constantly shifting affective commonwealth is of a feather with the failure of any fixed political ideal, democratic or otherwise, to fulfill its promise without the daily public work of sustaining its possibilities—in part through our concerned gestures.

Another exigence for this study is therefore the unprecedented convergence of art and public engagement today in ways that seem so neatly to match Dewey's wish for creative democracy, while nevertheless leaving it hard to imagine that *this* is really what he had in mind. If there is something to be gained in Dewey's plea for a democratic practice that privileges "the process of experience as end and as means," then studying the concerned gestures that operate as ends and as means of their own might offer one way to gauge what that could be. A contemporary climate of political extremity makes it easy to lose sight of the ways that expressive concern for our social interdependence can take less overt or effectual forms as it gets refracted through public participation with the aesthetic. As troubling times beget troubled resignations, the less vociferous and more "idiotic" gestures that serve as their own reward become a margin at the center of public life that needs to be acknowledged.

The important question is less what concerned gestures *are*, than what they do or don't contribute to our affective commonwealth.[34] And we still don't know what repercussions the socio-aesthetic processes of our information age might have, particularly when it comes to evolving principles of Western liberal democracy, its ideals of citizenship, and the virtues of different modes of publicness. As the creative industries and creative classes rise in

the global economy, infiltrating the quotidian exchanges of everyday life, the realm of stranger relationality known as the public sphere converges with a broad range of aesthetic practices, both creative and critical, and reconfigures how ordinary people publicly express and communicate their desires for a better life amid prevailing conditions of precariousness. Regardless of where one stands on questions about the collapse or corporatization of public spheres, about their digital revival or their transformation via social media, about their actually existing capability to hold the state accountable for its actions, and so on, there can be no mistaking just how "participatory" public life has become.[35] But public participation in issues of shared attentiveness is changing its communicative form, foregrounding concerned gestures nowhere more visibly than in cultural public spheres.

RHETORIC AND CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERES

The cultural public spheres that often form the backdrop for *Gestures of Concern*'s scenes of investment are the contemporary efflorescence of the historical literary public sphere that Jürgen Habermas traced to eighteenth-century Europe.[36] As an "apolitical" precursor to the political bourgeois public sphere, the literary public sphere found the arts figuring prominently both as a vehicle for addressing society's supposedly common concerns and as a catalyst for discussion about them. In Habermas's Western-centric account, for the first time in human history, in coffee shops, salons, and reading clubs of eighteenth-century England, France, and Germany, strangers gathered to discuss matters of concern to them as individuals (such as troubles with their children), as distinct from their concerns as citizens (such as problems with the exchequer).[37] People could avoid discussing the particulars of their specific circumstances and instead refract their concerns through the safe medium of a story or theatrical performance known by many. The political stakes of such conversation may not have been overt, but by diffracting them through works of aesthetic mediation, politics could be left tacit within a more explicit conversation about identifying and achieving the life of one's desires. According to Habermas's well-trodden argument, the historical literary public sphere served to inculcate rational-critical debate as the standard bearer for public discourse when it eventually turned political.

Today, however, the reverse has occurred. As a retreat from the bewilderment and frustration of political discourse, cultural public spheres are predominantly an alternative to the space where people engage directly with politics and the larger problems of society, about which they may well feel rather disaffected because such problems are so vast as to be perplex, and because

people are not confident that their voices will be heard in a way that makes any measurable difference behind the closed doors where political choices are made. Instead, cultural public spheres are sites of avid engagement with popular culture, including smaller fan cultures in all their vernacular and online variants, to which many people, of course, do feel more emotionally accountable.[38] When such engagement happens, as Jim McGuigan suggests, it "more often than not takes a predominantly affective mode, related to the immediacy of lifeworld concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with the experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system."[39] Cultural public spheres inculcate gestures of concern as valid ways of engaging in the more everyday implications of our social interdependence.

This leads to the third and most architectonic commitment that distinguishes my project: namely, its supposition that the lessons drawn from the study of rhetoric over the last two and a half millennia may be our best resource for thinking about what concerned gestures do for our public associations today. It is in the study of rhetoric, after all, that we find the first known writing about gestures. *Cheironomia*, the custom of hand movement and gesticulation, was commonly taught by the Greek Sophists as essential for effective rhetorical delivery. Later, Cicero and Quintilian described gestures as a visual accompaniment to the verbal: the gesticulating wave, an emphatic fist, shrugging shoulders. For the Roman orators, these and other such gestures showed a speaker's emotions, drew an audience's eyes in a particular direction, and amplified or reinforced the cadence of spoken language. The trajectory cast by the first treatment of bodily gestures within the study of rhetoric is with us still, though these sorts of physical gestures differ from the concerned gestures that are my focus. (As I discuss in chapter 2, the distinction is convenient but unsatisfactory because it belies the ways all gestures are endowed with some modicum of physicality and concern.) The concerned gestures that permeate cultural public spheres today may be more than supplements to speech or corporeal forms of nonverbal symbolism directed at persuasion, but that makes them no less "rhetorical." Similarly, the concern with which they're inflected is more than just an expression of emotional investment, though it is no accident that the first extensive theory of the emotions is found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (where *pathos* conditions the very possibility of rational communication). If gestures of concern help to build the affective commonwealth, then the rhetorical tradition is an indispensable guide for understanding how.

Above all, emphasizing rhetoric brings the question of politics to the fore. Since its beginnings in ancient Athens, rhetoric has been entangled with the role of discourse in a democracy: how ordinary citizens influentially

communicate their will to those in charge, and how people reach common ground about issues of mutual consequence despite their different prerogatives and opinions. Insofar as any public sphere is organized by and through its discourse, all public spheres are rhetorically constituted. Among the many ways of thinking about public spheres available, I follow Jerry Hauser's because of his insights about their rhetorical nature and the vernacular role that ordinary citizens play in their constitution. For Hauser, the public sphere is "*a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them. It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings*."[40] In forwarding a rhetorical model of contemporary publics, Hauser suggests that although the norms of the Athenian polis are long gone, rhetoric's role in democratic life today has not diminished; it has merely changed its face.

Of course, rhetoric has always been an art with many faces. One of these is the practice of producing public discourse. As such, the study of rhetoric has been attentive to those axioms that a communicator needs to bear in mind in order to speak and act persuasively. Taken in this way as a practice (*rhetorica utens*), rhetoric is a reproducible and purposive art of composition, a *techne*, whose flexible principles make reliable guides for influential communication across contexts and situations. But rhetoric has also worn the face of a critical study (*rhetorica docens*), a framework for recognizing the ways we are influenced and persuaded by others. As a critical lens, the rhetorical tradition offers a vocabulary for thinking about the leveraging of power and the manipulation of truth (perhaps its very "creation") through the influence stimulated by social relations and cultural practices. In both faces, *utens* and *docens*, practice and theory, rhetoric is central to the ways people try to fulfill their desires or respond to the desires of others being foisted upon them.

Heretofore, rhetoric's long tradition has taken its basis in the presumption of humanity's symbolic wiring. From this view, it is because of our intrinsic capacity to be enchanted by language, or what Kenneth Burke more generally calls symbolic actions,[41] that rhetoric can exist at all. Short of sheer force, that is, it is the artful tongue, the sidelong glance, not always the argument that's best, but the one that most *moves* its audience—in a word, it is rhetoric—that draws people to form their beliefs, reach decisions, cast judgments, dispense praise or blame, and, ultimately, act. A rhetorical model of public spheres supposes that these symbolic-discursive associations are the means by which citizens come together around issues of mutual import and reach a sense for what matters most in order to act amid the contingencies of their civic and social circumstances. Indeed, Hauser describes rhetoric as "*the symbolic inducement*

of social cooperation," linking his thinking explicitly to the prevailing view that rhetoric is possible because its symbolicity suits the innate human disposition to respond to symbols.[42]

But this book tells a different story. Instead of privileging the public speaker whose persuasiveness is held to benefit others through the passage of critical judgments, I try to privilege the conceptual figure of "the idiot," whose more recessed and unassuming contributions to the social fabric are nevertheless of consequence for how we get on together—or apart. To do so, I've tried to think beyond what Carole Blair also bemoans as the "tendency to equate rhetoric with the occurrence of symbols"[43] and instead to consider the para-symbolic, affective force of our rhetorical sociality. To stress rhetoric's symbolicity is to regard the generation of *meaning*—"the referential resources of symbols"[44]—as its principal interest. A worthy task, to be sure. And certainly, when it comes to conceptualizing public spheres, Hauser's focus on "rhetorically salient meanings" reveals a strong predilection to privilege rhetoric's symbolic character. But all persuasion entails *pre*suasion. The shape we're in. It is a matter of recognizing, as Thomas Rickert has put it, "that what is public is as ambient as it is salient, indeed, that to get at salience, we already reach for and work within what is ambient."[45] If the para-symbolic rhetoricity of embodiment among an ecology of other bodies, more-than-human things, places, sounds, environs, and so on affects our public lives just as much as the meaning or importance we customarily hold human agents accountable to produce through the whole range of rhetorical symbolic action, then the challenge is to envision cultural public spheres beyond the symbolic-discursive aspects of their rhetorical constitution without losing the precept of their fundamentally rhetorical nature.

That challenge charges another of this study's animating exigences: the need to push affect theory and the study of rhetoric closer together by addressing the reciprocal ways that affect capacitates rhetoric and rhetoric activates affect. While scholars of rhetoric have been taking stock of affect theory and its implications for rhetoric (particularly in rhetoric's tangle with public affairs), affect theory in the main has shown no evident doings with the insights that rhetorical studies might contribute to the study of affect. "Rhetoric"—including its scholars, students, and practitioners, as well as whatever that energetic thing is that goes by the name—has had to defend itself since Plato first attacked it as mere cookery thousands of years ago. But the productive ways that affect theory has animated (and been animated by) work in feminist, queer, and disability studies, among other disciplinary sites that ask after the politics of exclusion, attests that affect theory and rhetoric are alike in sharing a degree of separation from the status that would obviate the need for attuning

to those vulnerabilities and privileges that delimit the political by constraining and enabling the social terrain. Running quietly in the background of *Gestures of Concern* is accordingly an effort to make kin by making conversant two areas of scholarship that have much to give one another: a rhetoric of affect, an affective rhetoric.

PROVISIONAL AFFINITIES

When I first began reading affect theory, an outsized part of its gravitational draw was its more poetic drifts through ways of languaging the ordinary yet wondrous weave of what living can feel like. Work by the likes of Katie Stewart or Lauren Berlant, and more recently by the likes of Joshua Trey Barnett or Marnie Ritchie, has felt importantly different than the trained conventions of the staid academic set that can seem, by comparison, to "all cough in ink / all wear the carpet with their shoes."[46] Though the illusion that there is something "truer" about the habitable *poiesis* of writing in a more speculative key may only be a byproduct of language's intrinsic legerdemain, it is a sensual magic that I believe in conjuring and letting enchant us nonetheless. Part of this belief comes from a sense that so much of felt experience is impervious to capture, always more-than-human, and inviolably more complicated than it seems.

> World is suddener than we fancy it.
> World is crazier and more of it than we think.
> Incorrigibly plural.[47]

Affect theory has opened a way of feeling through the "more of it" of worlds in ways that exceed whatever citable takeaways or tidy deliverables its insights may yield to scholarship.[48]

Though I try to do justice to that capaciousness in what follows, I confess to feeling somewhat amiss when writing about affect in the context of digital cultures, where the screened flatness of things, logical and clean and efficient, seems so inhospitable to the messy texture and topography of affect's many energies and movements. At their comfortable distance, digital connections just don't feel, for me, the same as the affective proxemics of bodies in a room, sharing air, occupying nearness as sensation. Part of my aim, then, is to enlist such an assorted archive of examples and cases as to keep a movement happening across the scenes and sites of this book's investments. To keep that movement happening, much of the discussion in what follows has been offloaded to endnotes. Readers wanting more might start there. Though this project may read at times as theoretical, it should not be read as advancing "a theory"—not

of whatever it is we call rhetoric, not of gestures, not of concern, not of affect, commonwealths, "the idiot," or any of the other concepts I've enlisted as shoes to shepherd its feet.

There are good reasons, urgent reasons, for the (re)turn to affect and more nonrepresentational thought over the past few decades, one of which has to do with the overemphasis on language as the end-all and be-all of our reality. As the grim facts of a heating climate make evident and our increasing reliance on technical processes and devices utterly indifferent to their content makes tangible, the experienced world is as obdurate and filled with asignifying matter as it is provisional and created through signs. As convinced by affect's hereness as I am sympathetic with critics of its theorization,[49] what I'm trying to take on is a way around the baby-for-the-bathwater dilemma of how to conceptualize our public associations with strangers as organized beyond their symbolic-discursive registers without at all abandoning the crucial importance of the symbolic-discursive in their constitution. In an attempt to do so, I assess and theorize cultural public spheres circa the second decade of the millennium as affective spaces where public dispositions are formed and the conditions of rhetoric's persuadability emerge.[50]

The convention in academic books to preview the chapters ahead does no favors for suspense. While this book has no designs on being a thriller, its commitments to unfolding experience and processes of becoming leave me disinclined to do a précis of its chapters. Suspense is less about anticipation than about presence: the ongoing creation of what is still ahead from out of what precedes it.[51] Nevertheless, some words about structure are in order. The book is organized into three sections of paired chapters. Each pair works together to advance a modular argument across the book's speculative paths. Chapters 1 and 2 try to establish that argument's theoretical footing by addressing the central ideas of concern and gestures, respectively. Chapters 3 and 4 address the dynamic of "citizen artists" and "citizen critics" posed by an algorithmic culture that has democratized creative and critical participation in public life. And chapters 5 and 6 turn to the production of affective commonwealths before leading into a short epilogue that searches for some takeaways by rereading an essay by the poet W. H. Auden.

While the cultural and political ambit of this book is limited to Western liberal democracies, and particularly to American and western European contexts, I have tried to write in a way that acknowledges the larger purview of a time when networked technologies and globalized commerce—let alone global warming—make the topics under consideration fundamentally transnational in reach and importance. The three broad commitments I've traced above

are not seeded like rotating crops in particular chapters or sections, but have been set loose to fill the book's rooms like a gas. Drawing on examples that range from TED Talks to stickers (chapters 1–2), from relational aesthetics to Goodreads.com (chapters 3–4), and from British pop-up libraries to hacks of Google Street View (chapters 5–6), I have tried throughout to show that gestures of concern—if not always understood, and if not always consequential—affirm a kind of togetherness just about anywhere we'd care to look. By being more call than response, and sometimes more ear than tongue, concerned gestures operate in between the symbolic and the affective. They carry both signification *and* its preconditions, both persuasive content and persuadability itself. Ultimately, then, the problem they pose is methodological.

The method I undertake in what follows can be understood as a nonhermeneutic rhetorical criticism. This is a speculative project that is not interested in interpretive "quests for meaning"[52] of specific texts or how they achieve ways of being understood. Instead, I feel around for the emergent and evanescent intensities of things, seeking those very conditions of experience within which affective encounters with cultural artifacts transpire. Enlisting an odd archive of everyday examples and cases, many as one-off illustrations, others pursued in greater depth, I tamper with the unanswerable. How to characterize something that is as semantically evanescent as it is ineffably lingering, a relation that can only be known in-the-act, only experienced, not represented? Even in writing at length on the subject, I have often found my only recourse in speculation, metaphor, tonal emphases, and partial glimpses. While true to the nature of concerned gestures, these may be unsatisfactory for a reader wanting the concreteness of "a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood."[53]

Nevertheless, I have tried to make the concept tall enough to reach the ground by approaching the texts and ideas under discussion with an attitude of *provisional affinity*.[54] This has meant starting not from a point of inherent skepticism, but rather from a hypothetical alignment, taking propositions seriously as "What ifs . . ." by trying them on to see how they feel. This is what I have tried to do by way of method with my curious assortment of everyday examples, and it is all I can ask of my readers in return. What follows from belief? Where does it take us? Though concerned gestures sometimes take us nowhere, they disclose the freedom locked within where we are right now.

Becoming more attuned to gestures of concern is not important for enabling us to produce more effective gestures, or somehow for scaling them up in politically efficacious ways. Rather, I wish to speculate about what happens if we suppose that before political change can take hold, people need to be primed for it affectively. How does that priming happen when overt political

participation doesn't suffice? If one answer is through gestures of concern, then the payoff is not that such gestures alone are the solution to social stagnation or a route to political emancipation. Instead, I argue that without the daily work of building our affective commonwealths we cannot expect any meaningful change to take hold at all. Often, indeed, the very process of undertaking such creative struggle can itself be democracy's great promise and reward.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

1 Part of my project in this book is to underscore the rhetorical nature of such practice. Though I don't discuss it at length, this serial notion of practice is intimately bound with habit. For an extensive treatment of rhetoric as serial practice, see Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*, particularly 97–102 on habit. For more on habit as social force, see Pedwell, *Transforming Habit*.

2 W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

3 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have observed that within a participatory culture, hope is a veritable policy: "Now hope is an orientation toward this participation in change, this participation as change. This is the hope policy rolls like tear gas into the undercommons. Policy not only tries to impose this hope, but also enacts it." See Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 80. For the neoliberal logic that enacts this policy, "hope" then becomes an investor's gamble on the free market's ability to bring about the most merited "change."

4 Braidotti, "On Putting the Active Back into Activism," 42.

5 Brian Massumi: "Potential is abstract: never actually present as such" ("Envisioning the Virtual," 56).

6 "Zest" is the word William James sometimes uses to describe the emotional register whereby, despite the inevitable suffering and hardship of living, the human subject can nevertheless be invested with endurance and find meaning in daily life. See especially, James "Is Life Worth Living?," 47; and, James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 390.

7 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the term "presence-effects" to describe a phenomenological layer of encounters with the aesthetic that attains its impact and salience without needing recourse to the interpretive extrapolation of "meaning" from that encounter in order to make sense of it. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 79.

8 Just one obvious instance of this happens when companies like Google or Facebook capitalize on the data contributed by their users. For Dean's early treatment of communicative capitalism, see *Publicity's Secret* (2002); for her most extended study of the topic, see *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (2009).

9 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

10 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 171.

11 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 171.
12 Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*, 12.
13 Lauren Berlant has already made this connection parenthetically in a published interview, where she refers to a structure of feeling as an "affective commons." My treatment of the affective commonwealth is an extension of this passing remark. See Berlant and Greenwald, "Affect in the End Times," 77.
14 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.
15 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132 (emphasis in original).
16 R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 65.
17 My language here is Spinozist, alluding particularly to his notion of the *conatus* as the endeavor of all finite things to continue existing within the inherent tendencies of their nature. A finite thing's conatus is its essence (*Ethics*, bk. 3, proposition 7). But this essence is not a set of properties that enables categorization within some taxonomy, so much as it is a form of power that all finite things constantly exercise in their encounters with other finite things and, because each encounter exercises these powers anew, finds them constantly diminishing or expanding. When Deleuze reads Spinoza to show that we don't yet know what a body can do, he is picking up on the conatus as central to Spinozist ontology: the marvel of freedom and possibility even within a world of no free will. See Deleuze, "Sur Spinoza."
18 Kittler, *Gramophone*, xxxix.
19 See Peters, *Marvelous Clouds*, 17, 12. Also note that Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker turn to the "elemental" on the last page of their book on networks, *The Exploit*, where they describe networks as similarly elemental "in the sense that their dynamics operate at levels 'above' and 'below' that of the human subject" (157).
20 Malinowski, "Problem of Meaning," 315.
21 For more on this argument, see Packer, "Epistemology Not Ideology," 297–98. Packer gives the example of the advertising industry, an ideological criticism of which would focus on the content of ads and the way their material existence rationalizes consumption. Digital culture and its "big data" model, however, make the *content* of ads irrelevant, emphasizing instead such quantifiable measures as how often people click, purchase, or spend time on a site where the ads are present. The indifference of Google, for instance, to an advertisement's message now makes epistemological criticism about the conditions of a message's possibility more urgent than ideological critiques of its content.
22 This sorting produces what Deleuze calls "dividuals." See "Postscript on the Societies of Control," 5, 7. The important point is that networked society operates on a logic of segregation that subjectivizes people as resources for capital. For more on this logic and its racist implications, see Chun, "Queering Homophily."
23 In ordinary usage, "meaningful" has come to denote something salient or rich with importance. In contrast, I use "meaning-full" to draw attention to the fallacy of supposing that some things are *already* full of meaning instead of attaining their meaning by being articulated with and interpreted according to certain contextual and contingent factors.

24 For more on this process, see Gumbrecht, "A Farewell to Interpretation," especially 395–99. Also see David Wellbery's foreword to Kittler's *Discourse Networks*, vii–xxxii.

25 This paradigm is historically quite recent. For more on the term "sharing" and how its salience to morality, economics, interpersonal relations, and mediated communication has changed over time, see John, *Age of Sharing*.

26 This commitment puts *Gestures of Concern* in league with other media-technological inflected treatments of gesture, particularly Vilém Flusser's *Gestures*, André Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech*, and Giorgio Agamben's *Means without Ends*.

27 Agamben, *Means without Ends*, 58.

28 Agamben, *Means without Ends*, 59.

29 For more on how communication has been central to the historical tradition of pragmatism and its many doctrines, see Simonson, "Varieties of Pragmatism and Communication."

30 Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 229.

31 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4.

32 Here I take a cue from Alain Locke, a radical pragmatist and unsung contributor to the Harlem renaissance, who knew better, in his important 1925 collection, *The New Negro*, than to define art or beauty. Instead he sought to enhance our appreciation of the arts in actual experience—an expansive take, not a constrictive one. Historically, *The New Negro* is the first concerted attempt at a pragmatist aesthetics, though Dewey's major work on art, *Art as Experience* (1934), is often taken as the subfield's starting point despite following *The New Negro* by almost a decade. Richard Shusterman points out that Dewey never mentions Locke's work, yet is likely to have absorbed it indirectly through the art critic Albert C. Barnes, a collaborator with Locke on *The New Negro*, whom Dewey acknowledged as a primary influence on his own aesthetic program. See Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, x. For more on Locke's pragmatist aesthetics, also see Shusterman, "Pragmatist Aesthetics."

33 Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

34 This is one way that the processual and pragmatist commitments in *Gestures of Concern* come to the fore, placing it among similar approaches to gesture, such as Erin Manning's *Minor Gesture*, Giovanni Maddalena's *Philosophy of Gesture*, and, more historically, sections of George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society*.

35 For an excellent account of "participation" as a keyword of digital culture that has nevertheless had different inflections through history, see Kelty, "Participation."

36 This work was first done in his doctoral dissertation, published in 1962 as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. English-language readers came late to the party, but gave it much fanfare, when the book was finally translated in 1990. See Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31–56, for his discussion of the literary public sphere's historical origins.

37 For just one historical variation of literary publics beyond the West (and predating Habermas's origin story), see Eiko Ikegami's *Bonds of Civility*, a history of literary and artistic communities in the "aesthetic publics" of Tokugawa Japan between 1600 and 1868. Also see Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom*, for a more feminist reading of historical literary publics.

38 For more on how fan cultures can lead to activist modes of citizenship, see Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom*.

39 McGuigan, *Cultural Analysis*, 15. McGuigan's use of the terms "affective" and "cognitive" are somewhat promiscuous. His notion of affect is not the same as the presymbolic affect I engage with here (his is something closer to emotionality or public feeling). Likewise, what he refers to as a "cognitive mode" indicates something akin to rational sense-making. Generally, the distinction he's making is between emotional-personal discourse and rational-critical discourse—a distinction I would have us trouble.

40 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 61 (emphasis in original).

41 Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

42 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 14 (emphasis in original).

43 Blair, "'We Are All Just Prisoners Here,'" 31. Blair was onto this well before the recent posthuman turn toward nonrepresentational thought. Though symbol use and misuse have long been central to the study of rhetoric, the concerted emphasis on rhetoric's symbolicity is generally thought to have reached a tipping point at the Wingspread Conference in 1970, and has since found rhetoric, Blair says elsewhere, "treated definitively, even exhaustively, as symbolic." See Blair, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites," 18. For more on Wingspread, also see Bitzer and Black, *The Prospect of Rhetoric*.

44 Blair, "'We Are All Just Prisoners Here,'" 32. Blair cautions that it would be unwise "to suggest that it is somehow wrong or incorrect to attend to rhetoric's symbolicity and its capacity to generate meaning." Rather, she says, "it is problematic to treat rhetoric as if it were exclusively symbolic or meaning-ful. There are some things that rhetoric's symbolicity simply cannot account for." See Blair, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites," 19.

45 Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 9–10.

46 Yeats, "The Scholars," 141.

47 MacNeice, "Snow."

48 See, for instance, Berlant and Stewart's *Hundreds*, which shimmers in a poetics of the noncapturable.

49 I've wrestled in particular with critiques by Ruth Leys. See Leys, "Turn to Affect"; and Leys, "'Both of Us Disgusted in *My* Insula.'" Margaret Wetherell also raises some trenchant critiques in her book *Affect and Emotion*.

50 Another way to frame the project would be to say that scholars across the theoretical humanities have been in the post-representational long enough that it may be time to go back and think about representation from within a post-representational framework. How do representational effects happen in a broader ecological context of distributed agencies and capacities? Thanks to Steve Wiley for this formulation.

51 As Dewey said of the arts, "Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is" (*Art as Experience*, 17).

52 This is Rosi Braidotti's description of critical theory that's undertaken as a project of negation instead of affirmation. My project tries to couple a similar commit-

ment to affirmative scholarship with a more materialist interest in the preconditions of interpretation. See Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 292.

53 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," 22.

54 "Provisional affinity" is my variation of what Bertrand Russell calls a *hypothetical sympathy*: "In studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt, but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to know what it feels like to believe in his theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude, which should resemble, as far as possible, the state of mind of a person abandoning opinions which he has hitherto held" (Russell, quoted in Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 38).

CHAPTER 1: IDIOT WINDS

1 See Peters, "John Locke, the Individual, and the Origin of Communication."

2 The strange merging of private and public accomplished by digital culture and surveillance capitalism alike attests to some of the difficulty in identifying rifts that once seemed much starker. This has political ramifications. As Judith Butler has argued, politics today should not be "defined as taking place exclusively in the public sphere, distinct from the private one, but it crosses those lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are equally unbound by the architecture of the house and the square" (Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 71).

3 Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 9.

4 The scholarly terrain here is already so well trodden that there are even histories of various attempts to write communication's various histories. See, e.g., Simonson et al., "History of Communication History." My personal favorites on the topic have been Mattelart, *Invention of Communication,* and Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

5 Peters, "John Locke, the Individual, and the Origin of Communication," 388.

6 For more on being withdrawn from civic life, particularly as a psychological phenomenon, see Sennett, *Together*, 182–83; and Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*.

7 Lauren Berlant has noted the autopoietic character of this process—meaning it generates and sustains itself. See Berlant, "Commons," 414.

8 In this sense, the figure of "the idiot" I'm interested in has affinities with Lee Edelman's notion of queerness being efficacious in the same degree as it refuses to accept a normative social and political order (see Edelman, *No Future*). The idiot's queerness also resonates with Jack Halberstam's interest in failure being a politics worth claiming as an alternative to more dominant and exclusionary versions of what success entails (see Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*). Queerness as willingness to exceed the common, or at least to arrest the impulse toward the common that's found in the normative order of things—that's the queerness of the idiot.

9 Chen, *Animacies*, 220.

10 Stengers, "Cosmopolitical Proposal," 995.

11 *Rhetores* were, as M. H. Hansen describes, "a small group of citizens who regularly addressed the *ecclesia*, proposed laws and decrees, and frequented the courts as prosecutors or *synegoroi* [i.e., supporting speakers]." See Hansen, "The Athenian 'Politicians,'" 46. By contrast, according to Josiah Ober, *idiotes* had a common meaning in