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**ADVANTAGEOUS INCAPACITIES:
READING THE MARGINS WITH KENNETH BURKE**

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ABSTRACT

When Kenneth Burke writes about “trained incapacity”—the dynamic by which potentially advantageous forms of training can also function as incapacitating—in his book *Permanence and Change*, he does not generate the phrase ex nihilo. Rather, Burke invokes the work of economist Thorstein Veblen, who was in turn a student of Charles Sanders Peirce, often considered the founder of semiotics. By reading Burke among these contemporaries, and using Burke’s own ideas to historiographically inform our reading of the Burkean corpus, rhetorical scholarship can recognize what I call Burke’s *fluid semiosis*: the notion that the correspondence between words and their referents can never remain static, that multiple terminologies must always coexist as both capacities and incapacities.

Fluid semiosis illuminates a paradoxical challenge faced in many nondominant discourses of identity construction: the tension between—on the one hand—using collective language that casts a net broad enough to enable corporate salience and—on the other hand—recognizing the particularity of individuals and the irreducibility of group members to one another. In this tension between collectivity and particularity, Burke’s fluid semiosis offers one strategy for navigating an ambivalent and ever-shifting rhetorical terrain.

In three disparate case studies, the dynamics of nondominant discourses come into clearer relief once assumptions of static semiosis are set aside. Feminist reclamation efforts for the derogatory terms “bitch” and “pussy” leverage fluidity by performing language in a permanent state of transition, offering multiple simultaneous critiques of linguistic patriarchy. The Indonesian novel *Laskar Pelangi* constructs multiple textual identities for itself in order to acquiesce to the seemingly contradictory demands of its discursive context. The alt-right—a

predominantly internet-based extremist group ambiguously defined by both rhetorical and ideological components—blurs the lines between the *rhetorical* alt-right and the *ideological* alt-right, making it possible for alt-right adherents to assume membership in the rhetorical alt-right long before they feel ready to assume ethical responsibility for the claims of the ideological alt-right. In each case, fluid semiosis locates the deep-seated congruity underlying the multiplicity of particular discursive moments. These linguistic identity constructions thus function as simultaneously incapacitating and advantageous.

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PREFACE

Burke in a Maelstrom of Words

The contours of identity are profoundly real: and yet no more imperishable, unchanging, or transcendent than any other things that men and women make.

- Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, p. 113

In his influential book *The Ethics of Identity*, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah grapples with the ethical relationship between individual autonomy and participation in collective group identity. Himself a gay black man, Appiah reflects on how identity-based advocacy in the American 1960s and 1970s responded to racism and homophobia by seeking to remedy denigration with celebration. Thus, “An African American after the Black Power movement takes the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a nigger, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive black life-scripts” (109). Likewise, “An American homosexual after Stonewall and gay liberation takes the old script of self-hatred, the script of the closet, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive gay life-scripts” (109). As a result of these shifts, Appiah argues, activists went beyond demanding respect merely *regardless of* or *in spite of* their black and gay identities. Instead, they sought to elevate black and gay identity by demanding respect *as black* and *as gay*. For Appiah, such a move is at once sensible and worrisome:

I hope I seem sympathetic to the stories of gay and black identity I have just told.... I see how the story goes. It may even be historically, strategically necessary for the story to go this way. But I think we need to go on to the next step, which is to ask whether the

identities constructed in this way are ones we can be happy with in the longer run.

Demanding respect for people *as blacks* and *as gays* can go along with notably rigid strictures as to how one is to be an African American or a person with same-sex desires.

In a particularly fraught and emphatic way, there will be proper modes of being black and gay: there will be demands that are made; expectations to be met; battle lines to be drawn. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously may worry whether we have replaced one kind of tyranny with another. (110)

Appiah's concern with the dual and seemingly contradictory demands placed upon discourses of identity is echoed by numerous scholars across the humanities. Though not all of these scholars share Appiah's conclusion about the foremost threat posed by a mishandling of identity, they share the recognition that dual and seemingly contradictory demands on identity discourses do indeed exist and that they pose a potential methodological problem. Broadly speaking, that is, scholarship on identity—and especially rhetorical scholarship on nondominant identities—must inevitably negotiate a tension between collectivity and particularity. How can individuals on the margins leverage their collective identities in the political sphere without essentializing and erasing their right to individuality? How, conversely, can nondominant identity groups acknowledge the inevitable difference of their members without sabotaging the political salience afforded by a coherent collective narrative? In Appiah's reading, it may be a strategic necessity to answer racism and homophobia with cognizable collective identities of blackness and gayness. Yet this very same strategic necessity risks enforcing “notably rigid strictures” on the identity narratives offered to individual group members. Assignations of identity along these lines thus offer both a potential escape from tyranny and a potential instantiation of tyranny.

It is in response to this tension between collectivity and particularity—at the intersections of nondominant identity and rhetorical theory—that this dissertation speaks. As chapter one will rehearse in greater detail, Appiah and others have offered assessments of and proposed tentative resolutions to this tension. None of these responses ameliorates, nor purports to ameliorate, Appiah’s concern altogether. Nor will mine. Rather, this dissertation looks behind and beyond the current considerations by placing critical theory discourses in conversation with Kenneth Burke. Via Burke, I offer a rhetorical reconsideration of the unsettled semiotic practices that undergird the tension between collectivity and particularity in nondominant rhetorics. Such a reconsideration illuminates the function of nondominant discourses in society, even as it interrogates the forces that move scholars like Appiah to ambivalence about “identity” on the margins.

In early drafts of this project, I was careful to expunge any discussion of my own positionality from my work. I performed the excision on grounds I believed were methodologically sound. Given the fraught nature of identity, I reasoned, I would never be able to articulate my own nexus of identities in an advantageous manner that wasn’t equally prone to the dangers of incapacitation. If my thesis was correct—if the language of identity does indeed require fluidity and renegotiation to be maximally effective—then I was loath to characterize myself with anything resembling a kind of static finality. In the end, however, a wise colleague persuaded me that my logic was askew. After all, she asked me, wasn’t my own anfractuous relationship to identity one of the catalysts for the work I had undertaken? And if so, didn’t I have an ethical and disciplinary obligation to confront the interestedness of my investigation, instead of adopting a posture of farcical impartiality?

This preface is my belated, grudging admission that my colleague was right.

The nature of identity began vexing me long before I encountered its challenges in humanistic scholarship. My own identities, after all, have never fit tidily within the collective identity groups nominally suited to them. Born to a white Christian homeschooling family in the United States, I grew up for fifteen years on the Indonesian island of Java, where my racial minority status as a white person reflected privilege rather than disadvantage, and where the sociopolitical implications of my whiteness were thus both congruent with and vastly different from their implications in my birth nation. I returned to the United States for college as a cultural smorgasbord, neither Indonesian enough to claim international student status nor American enough to align easily with the cultural habits of my ostensible compatriots. My upbringing as an evangelical Christian seemed to stand in conflict to my sexual orientation as a gay man and my politically progressive sympathies, yet I remained unable to divorce myself from evangelicalism insofar as I continued to believe the theological tenets that first undergirded it. Regardless of the ontological “truth” (capital-T or otherwise) of my identities, my ambivalent relationship to the dominant narratives characterizing each identity left me feeling sort-of-liberal, sort-of-evangelical, sort-of-gay, sort-of-white, sort-of-Asian, sort-of-American, even (by virtue of the tacit equation of masculinity with heterosexuality) sort-of-male. I was all of these things, it seemed, and yet somehow I simultaneously was none of them.

There exists a platitude about the inescapably autobiographical nature of dissertations. Although this dissertation has, I hope, far exceeded its autobiographical *raison d’être*, there is no denying that the platitude holds a bit of explanatory power for narrating the genesis of this project. What I had longed for, even from a fairly young age, was a means of understanding why the language of identity could offer me so much in the way of self-understanding and social engagement, and yet always seem to fall short of telling the whole truth. The words around me—

their accuracy or falsehood in describing my own experiences, their utility or ineffectiveness in communicating those experiences to others—seemed to change so quickly, caught up in the maelstrom of my chaotic world. Yet even as they shifted before my eyes, these transformed words also seemed to carry their linguistic histories with them, soaking up meanings and retaining them the way succulent plants soak up water. When my words became oversaturated with meaning and seemed to say too much, I decided it was preferable to say nothing at all. This logic kept me in the closet about my sexuality, and about a host of other things as well.

I began reading Kenneth Burke younger than most, in the first year of my undergraduate degree, after receiving a tee shirt emblazoned with the phrase “Kenneth Burke is my homeboy.” The tee shirt became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: by the end of my sophomore year, I had read more than half of Burke’s monographs and submitted a paper on Burke to an academic conference. What compelled me most about Burke, other than his bizarrely unforgettable analogies, was his notion of words as simultaneously reflecting, selecting, and deflecting reality. The application of language to a situation is, for Burke, always a choice over which aspects of reality to *select* to call attention towards and which aspects to *deflect* attention away from, even when a speaker’s intention is to *reflect* the state of things as closely as possible. Burke’s framework did not come close to resolving all of my identity-related angst, but it did offer the tantalizing suggestion of a rhetorical way forward, a suggestion I have been prodding and interrogating ever since.

This dissertation proceeds along the following lines. Chapter one rehearses in greater detail the tension between collectivity and particularity in nondominant group identity, especially as this tension has manifested itself within rhetoric and writing studies. I concretize the principles at play by considering the case study of *All-American Muslim*, a television show with

a complex relationship to discourses of Islamic identity construction and anti-Islamophobia. The chapter then turns to Burke, showing how his perspective on the ever-shifting nature of language responds to the static model of semiosis theorized by Charles S. Peirce.¹ Burke's *fluid semiosis*, interanimated by discourses of nondominant identity, allows for multiple seemingly contradictory frames of thought to be negotiated simultaneously, such that collectivity and particularity can be read as mutually instructive terminologies rather than as negations of one another.

The next three chapters apply the concept of fluid semiosis to case studies in which the linguistic constitution of nondominant identity appears fraught with contradictions. Chapter two analyzes feminist movements to reclaim the derogatory terms “bitch” and “pussy.” Considering these movements in light of Burke’s enticingly brief discussion of “logonomical purgatory,” I argue that such reclamation efforts are examples of *liminal reclamation*, a rhetorical strategy in which words are said to be always progressing towards a final symbolic goal without ever reaching that goal. Chapter three turns from full-throated activism to a subtler form of political engagement: the social critique leveled by Andrea Hirata’s bestselling Indonesian novel *Laskar Pelangi* (“The Rainbow Troops”). To level such critique in a cognizable way, especially in a national context where both agential and non-agential forms of censorship are an ever-present threat to discourse, requires a complex navigation of seemingly contradictory identities. Following these two chapters which deal with historically disadvantaged nondominant rhetorics, chapter four considers a historically advantaged nondominant group, the nascent alt-right. Distinguishing between the *rhetorical alt-right* and the *ideological alt-right* is necessary, I argue,

¹ Or at least attributed to Peirce, even if perhaps wrongly so. Since Burke’s engagement with Peirce came mostly at a degree of removal, the position of Peirce himself is not so relevant to Burke’s work as the theoretical uptake of Peirce by his intellectual peers.

in order to understand how alt-right identity and its corresponding social attitudes can be simultaneously adopted and disavowed. The dissertation concludes with a brief chapter reflecting on the implications of this work and possible avenues for future research.

“I write neither as identity’s friend nor as its foe,” confesses Appiah in the preface to his *Ethics of Identity*. He goes on:

As with gravity, you might as well be on good terms with it, but there’s no point in buttering it up. Indeed, in the spirit of those side-effects warnings you find in drug advertisements—those blocks of microscopic type that cause the blurred vision they warn about—I should offer a disclaimer. (xvi)

Like Appiah’s treatment of identity, mine too requires a disclaimer. I write neither as identity’s friend nor as its foe, but as someone still trying to understand it, someone captivated by its power to both invigorate and devastate our collective human life together. If Burke is to be believed, any language with which we constitute our identities can always become a source of advantage as well as disadvantage, a source of incapacity as well as capacity. Perhaps, in the pages that follow, you will come to agree with me that our linguistic identities are truly some of our most advantageous incapacities.

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Although only one name appears on the front of this dissertation, its creation has been far from a solitary process. I owe so much of this project to Cheryl Glenn, my extraordinary advisor, who first planted in my mind the seeds that would eventually take root and bloom into a dissertation. She tirelessly offered her editorial expertise, scholarly insight, and patient encouragement to me, consistently placing more confidence in my academic ability than I dared to place in myself. My other committee members—Stephen Browne, Debbie Hawhee, and Jack Selzer—likewise gave incisive commentary on my work and lent valuable support. Jack went far above and beyond the call of duty by directing my independent study in Burke, teaching me to navigate the Kenneth Burke Papers at Penn State, giving me access to his own personal Burke archive, and allowing me to tag along on a research adventure to the Burke house in Andover.

This dissertation also would not have been possible without time and resources provided by others. The dissertation was written during a generous year-long fellowship and teaching release provided by the Center for Humanities and Information (CHI) at Penn State. Revisions were finalized during an additional semester-long teaching release provided by Penn State's Department of English, which also provided travel support for me to present components of my dissertation research at four national conferences. The Center for Democratic Deliberation (CDD) at Penn State funded my travel for a Frontiers of Democracy conference which contributed to the formation of my third chapter. The Penn State Libraries gave essential research support, especially the Eberly Family Special Collections Library. Special thanks go to Rachael Dreyer and Sandy Stelts, who patiently helped me navigate the copia of Burkeana in Penn State's archives.

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Credit is due likewise to the people who kept me sane as I researched and wrote and revised my most Brobdingnagian undertaking to date. My family rejoiced with me when my work was going well, commiserated when I faced frustrations, and reminded me above all (especially my nieces and nephews) that our humanity is never reducible to our productivity. Friends far and near cheered me on and let me bore them with occasional lectures on the origins of semiotic theory. The folks at the State College Alliance Church threatened to sabotage my dissertation writing so I could stay in State College forever—and though they never carried out their threat, for which I am grateful, they made State College a delightful place to live in the meantime.

Finally, I owe a debt to the undergraduate professors who motivated me to pursue graduate study in rhetoric. Harold Hurley proved to me that English professors can be brilliant and yet still be quirky enough to arm-wrestle a student in the middle of class. Paul Stewart,

whenever I raised my hand in one of his Communication classes with a defiant look in my eyes—clearly ready to argue with what he had just said—would simply sigh and say, “Yes, Professor Coles?” Tim VandeBrake, after reading my rhetorical analysis of Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*, told me, “I hope you’re planning to pursue graduate studies.” And Elvera Berry, my inspiring and prescient advisor, guided me along the early steps of my rhetorical journey, seeming to know where that path would take me long before I myself knew it. It was she who, less than a month into my undergraduate degree, provided a tee shirt bearing the words “Kenneth Burke is my homeboy” as a door prize at a department picnic. And when that door prize went to a student with no interest in rhetoric, it was Elvera who advised the student, “Give the tee shirt to Greg. He’ll learn to appreciate it.”

As usual, she was right.

CHAPTER ONE

Between Collectivity and Particularity: Towards a Fluid Semiosis

In 2011, ten years after the September 11, 2001 terror attack sparked a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment in America, television network TLC aired a reality show called *All-American Muslim*. The show followed the lives of five Lebanese-American Muslim families, whom reviewers described as “refreshingly bland” (NPR) and “freakishly normal” (Hale). One unflattering review summarized the show as a collection of “Muslim Americans doing interminably dull American things... with the televisual difference that the females are doing them in headscarves” (Edwards). Dull or not, this normalcy was no accident; rather, it was a calculated strategy for combating Islamophobia. *All-American Muslim* set out to prove the American-ness of its stars by showing them in contexts familiar to non-Muslims viewers—coaching football, preparing for a newborn baby, getting a tattoo, even opening a nightclub. The show thus offered what reviewer Wajahat Ali called “a welcome relief from the usual tawdry caricatures of Muslims as terrorists, extremists and taxi cab drivers.” In a post-September-11 American context where Islam is all too readily equated with extremism and violence, the reassuring banality of *All-American Muslim* seemed to provide a necessary corrective.

Indeed, the virtue of this kind of anti-Islamophobic messaging was only reinforced when the show became a locus of controversy.¹ Home improvement chain Lowe’s dropped its advertising from the show after receiving complaints from the Florida Family Association that *All-American Muslim* was “propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda’s clear and present

¹ As reviewers Aisha Saad and Salma Khan argued, the controversy was proof of the self-evident need for the show, and that need far outweighed its flaws: “Let’s be real: American Muslims need all the damage-control PR they can get right now.”

danger to American liberties and traditional values” (qtd. in CNN). In other words, the fact that the show depicted Muslims living in a manner most Americans would find inoffensive was itself an offensive thing to anti-Muslim viewers. The narrative of Islam that the Florida Family Association insisted upon was a narrative in which Islamic identity was always fundamentally or predominantly at odds with American identity. Lowe’s was heavily criticized for acquiescing to this narrative; an interfaith petition calling on the company to overturn its decision gathered 200,000 signatures (Greenfield). The controversy efficiently demonstrated that the very brand of Islamophobia which *All-American Muslim* had set out to combat was still alive and well in some American minds. Meanwhile, the portrayal of an “all-American” Muslim identity offered by the show provided a fitting counterpoint to the objections of groups like the Florida Family Association, making the show an icon of anti-Islamophobia.

To label *All-American Muslim* plainly “anti-Islamophobic” and wholly praiseworthy for Muslim audiences, however, would be to oversimplify a matter that is far more complex. On one hand, the show was certainly postured to ameliorate the concerns of many non-Muslim Americans about their Muslims compatriots. Yet the show’s insistence on the all-American credentials of its Muslim subjects also had limitations. Some Muslim viewers expressed concerns that, in selecting subjects most likely to evoke sympathy among non-Muslim Americans, “the show has sort of chosen very westernized Muslims, as opposed to more conservative ones,” to represent Muslim American identity (NPR). Of the five families featured on the show, three include a woman who chooses not to wear the hijab.² In the remaining two families, one husband is a federal agent, the other a football coach who receives an invitation to the White House; their American civic virtues are readily on display. In one sense, these all-

² A head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women as a sign of modesty. Women who wear the head covering are called “hijabis.”

American Muslims pose the perfect counter-argument to Islamophobic suspicion by their obvious fit in the West. Yet the all-American credentials of these particular families are not necessarily true of every Muslim American family—nor should Westernization be a prerequisite for Muslims in the West to be treated with respect.

The depictions of Muslim identity in *All-American Muslim* are partial—and necessarily so—as is any collective group identity constructed for political purposes. The show strategically highlights similarities between exemplar American Muslims and American non-Muslims, making it an apparently productive tool in combating some forms of Islamophobia. In order to create a coherent and politically salient narrative of collective American Muslim identity, however, the show also passes over the particularities of many Muslim identities.³ Not every detail of every individual Muslim can be captured in a summative narrative. The all-American narrative inclines away from the most traditional expressions of Muslim faith by focusing attention on Muslims whose behavior more closely resembles that of the “secular” West, or Muslims whose values align more readily with liberal humanist values. This simplistic narrative, insofar as it enables politically salient action and advocacy, may be advantageous for those it

³ For instance, the show tends to treat differences of opinion within Islamic theology as relatively insignificant matters—a comforting approach for a pluralist American audience—despite the convictions of many traditional Muslims that these matters are highly important. While not all of the show’s cast agrees with the moral decisions of the others—for example, one woman’s decision to start a nightclub and two others’ trip to New York City to get tattoos are met with resistance from more traditional voices on the show—a spirit of pluralism pervades most of these conversations. When Nawal Aoude, one of the show’s hijabis, is asked in an interview whether she thinks nightclub owner Nina is “not Muslim enough,” Nawal responds, “No, not at all.... Nina chooses to practice her religion the way she wants to practice it, and that’s what Islam is about. Islam is not here to judge, and nor am I here to judge” (Cooper). Although Nawal’s hijab marks her as one of the show’s more traditional voices, her pluralist understanding of Islam does not necessarily accord with the view of all traditional Muslims. As NPR caller Abdul Hakim argues, “Islam is not a religion that you could divide and pick and choose. Islam is a way of life. So if you are a Muslim, you’re not going to open a nightclub” (NPR). The show appears to be a reasonably authentic depiction of five individual Muslim families, but it is not a universalizable depiction of all Muslim identity. Indeed, as reviewer David Knowles observes, the fact that these five families have all agreed to appear on a reality show together already limits the possible range of their conservatism, as does their common heritage as Lebanese and Shia Muslims: “There’s no doubt that a different version [of] Muslim reality exists within the town’s more traditional Palestinian or Yemeni sections.”

represents and even those it misrepresents. In order to combat the prejudices of non-Muslim Westerners, anti-Islamophobia may wisely privilege a narrative of liberality and sameness, usefully counteracting anti-Muslim paranoia by accurately observing that many Muslims are culturally and attitudinally similar to non-Muslim Westerners. However, this approach may also rightly be critiqued for its failure to address *all* types of Islamophobia against *all* types of Muslims, partially excluding many of the Muslims it seeks to protect. Insofar as the all-American brand of anti-Islamophobia does indeed reduce prejudice, it is a success; but insofar as its defense of Muslims only defends those Muslims who are deemed sufficiently Western, its success might be nothing more than the severed head of a hydra, one Islamophobia dying so that two more can take its place.

The tension which renders *All-American Muslim* both a potential triumph of anti-Islamophobia and a potential tragedy is, fundamentally, a tension between collectivity and particularity. That is, while precision requires attention to the particular differences between individuals who share a Muslim identity, a reductive collective narrative of Muslim identity may seem serviceable in the public sphere. The resulting dilemma appears to be a Sophie's choice: focus on individual difference to the detriment of collective political action, or essentialize a whole group and surrender individual particularity for the sake of coherence. It is in response to dilemmas like this one that postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak proposed the tactic of "strategic essentialism": purposefully and temporarily essentializing disparate individuals into cognizable collectives for the sake of political and rhetorical utility. Yet Spivak later came to disavow the phrase "strategic essentialism," worrying that other academics seeking a justification for essentialism had begun ignoring the "strategic" aspect of the phrase and had taken Spivak's

endorsement of it as “the union ticket for essentialism” (Danius, Jonsson, and Spivak 35).⁴ The vexing problem of nondominant representation that motivated Spivak’s concern has thus continued to vex both Spivak and others.

Paradoxical tensions between collectivity and particularity thus extend far beyond the case of *All-American Muslim*. Such tensions are an inescapable feature of rhetorical group identities, especially identities which have been relegated (or whose members perceive themselves as having been relegated) to the margins of society. To construct oneself as having a group identity is to focus on the shared interests and experiences—the sameness⁵—of otherwise disparate people. On one hand, then, identity is unifying, highlighting points of commonality between discrete selves. Yet identities are also formed on the basis of individual and personal uses of language; and, as Dana Anderson suggests, “because personal experience is *personal*, directly accessible only to the person who has experienced it, the identities we build out of our personal experience are unique points of rhetorical authority” (10). Collective identities are thus inevitably contested spaces because they are shared by distinct voices with equal claims to the self-definition of identity. Collective coherence conflicts with radical individuality.

How can individual voices be understood within the context of the nondominant identities they inhabit, without essentializing those identities or erasing the particularities of the people who inhabit them? In light of this tension, I argue, scholars of marginal rhetorics would do well to attend to the writings of Kenneth Burke—not just to Burkean theory as it has been traditionally understood, but to the messiness of Burke’s own texts. Although Burke’s direct

⁴ Still, even after announcing that she had “given up on” the phrase, Spivak did not disavow the principle which motivated her concern: “As to whether I have given up on it as a project, that is really a different idea” (Danius, Jonsson, and Spivak 35).

⁵ It is worth noting that the word “identity” comes from the Latin *idem*, “the same.” The Latin *identitas* thus meant both “sameness” and “identity.”

engagement with such rhetorics was in some cases both minimal and flawed,⁶ his approach to language has much to offer the current scholarly clime in navigating this seemingly irreconcilable paradox between the collective and the particular. Burke treats every linguistic frame—every terministic screen—as a lens having both a particular capacity for explanatory power and a simultaneous incapacity. For Burke, incapacities are necessary byproducts of symbol use, only truly incapacitating when they become static. He advocates for a self-consciously migratory journey through disparate terministic screens, a never-ending pilgrimage through incapacities as they prove themselves at once detrimental and advantageous.

Given the fraught and flexible nature of terministic screens, even the terms which form the substance of this dissertation are themselves prone to potential error and inexactitude. In hopes of maximizing clarity without abnegating complexity, then, let me offer by way of introduction some brief and partial definitions:

First, when I speak of “the margins,” I have in mind any sociopolitical, linguistic, experiential, or ideological space which exists beyond or has historically been cast outside dominant or majority power structures. Although the locations of present and past power structures may be contested matters, especially when boundaries are drawn along political lines, my hope is to delay our assignations and nominalizations of who may properly claim “the margins” long enough to first consider why group identities might be strategically constructed in terms of or in opposition to a “margin.” Moreover, the net is cast purposefully broad here,⁷

⁶ As, for example, in the case of his interactions with Ralph Ellison about racial minority rhetoric, discussed at length in chapter four.

⁷ On the one hand, I am including early notions like sociologist Robert E. Park’s “marginal man” and the “margin” demarcating the boundary between madness and civilization in Michel Foucault’s conception. However, I am also cognizant of the vision cast by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality in “Mapping the Margins” and Nancy Hartsock’s complaint that the Foucauldian margin only further essentializes and marginalizes those already marginalized in the name of “reason” (“Foucault”). Included as well is Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern” as one who lacks access to the circulation of discourse—a notion Spivak later fought to clarify and rearticulate, as

including both past and present margins, martial and political and linguistic and pecuniary disadvantages as well as sheerly numerical “minority” status. In this project, “reading the margins” certainly means studying the discourses of historically marginalized voices still struggling for social equity today; however, it also means studying numerically nondominant and widely condemned perspectives which exist in today’s ideological margins, regardless of their relationship to present or historical sociopolitical power.

Because of the breadth of this definition of “the margins,” I am consciously reaching beyond what critical theory in the humanities has traditionally referred to as “marginalized” groups: that is, those groups which have historically been forcefully assigned to a marginal role. Racial minorities in the United States, for example, are both “marginal” and “marginalized.” The alt-right, by contrast—the primary subject of my fourth chapter—is “marginal” insofar as it is numerically nondominant and exists outside broadly accepted ideological bounds in Western society; the alt-right is not thereby “marginalized,” however, insofar as its members have not historically been forcefully assigned to the role they occupy. When I use the terms “marginalized” and “marginalization,” terms which emphasize the verbal action by which the margins’ power distance is forcefully created, I have in mind that particular subset of the margins acknowledged by critical theories of marginalization—including feminist theory, postcolonial theory, comparative rhetoric, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability theory. For the sake of clarity, I distinguish “marginalized” from the more general terms “marginal” and “nondominant,” which refer often but not exclusively to historically marginalized populations.

Four other key terms of my own coinage comprise the central grammar of this project: *meta-Burkean historiography*, *static semiosis*, *fluid semiosis*, and *advantageous incapacities*.

citations of her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” took up “subaltern” as a functional synonym for any form of disadvantage or marginality.

While each of these terms will be more thoroughly defined over the course of this chapter, brief definitions may be helpful here. *Meta-Burkean historiography* describes the hybrid methodology of my investigation, a nexus of Burkean and critical theory which uses Burke's own ideas to critique and reconsider Burke. When this project refers to Burkean thought or Burkean interventions, then, I have in view not merely Burke the man or Burke as he has traditionally been read, but the whole realm of Burkeana as a self-critiquing system which exceeds its creator's conception. One of the prevailing attitudes to which Burkean thought responds is the notion of *static semiosis*, the perspective that meaning should ideally reside in univocal terminologies which are perfected (and thereby become increasingly static) over time. *Fluid semiosis*, illuminated by meta-Burkean historiography, is a rhetorical frame that rejects the static permanence of terminologies. Fluid semiosis allows for multiple seemingly contradictory frames of thought to be negotiated simultaneously. When fluid semiosis is at work in discourse, it manifests through *advantageous incapacities*: seemingly competing terminologies that illuminate by virtue of their partiality, each terminology at once advantageous and incapacitating, inviting the astute rhetor to negotiate between and among multiple frames.

How can Burke's ideas, reexamined in light of archival evidence, illuminate the multivalent linguistic terrain of "marginality" and nondominant identities? This chapter lays the theoretical and methodological groundwork necessary to answer this question. I begin by sketching out the historiographic and Burkean methodologies that undergird the project, showing that Burke himself invited constant reflexive rereadings of his own ideas. This meta-Burkean historiography is, I propose, a fitting reading practice for rhetorical scholarship on Burke. Next, I examine the tension between collectivity and particularity in greater detail, considering how this tension has manifested throughout rhetorical scholarship and especially in the study of

nondominant rhetorics. Turning again to Burke, I show how Burke's work responds to this tension by means of fluid semiosis, such that collectivity and particularity can be read as mutually instructive terminologies rather than as negations of one another. Tracing the term "incapacity" from Burke, through his immediate source Thorstein Veblen, and finally back to Veblen's teacher Charles Sanders Peirce, I argue that Burke's rethinking of incapacity lays the foundation for his fluid semiotic model in which every terminology can function as both capacity and incapacity, made advantageous by the fluid versatility of the symbol-user. Although Burke himself didn't always succeed in applying fluid semiosis to his own work, this rhetorical frame poses a valuable Burkean response to the quandary of the tension between collectivity and particularity, as this dissertation's subsequent chapters will show.

Meta-Burkean Historiography

Kenneth Burke may seem an unusual figure to invoke in the study of nondominant rhetorics. After all, Burke's claims of his ideas' universal applicability tended to assume a Western white male as the ideal universal subject, making him potentially problematic for the study of women's and feminist rhetorics, racial minority rhetorics, and non-Western rhetorics, among others.⁸ Thus, Burke must be invoked cautiously in analyzing these discourses, if at all. Yet the potential problems and limitations of Burke do not in themselves make him unfit for use in projects that exceed his original vision. Theory is often employed in ways that far outstrip the imaginations of its authors—indeed, it is by such extensions and reinvestigations of familiar theory that scholarly knowledge often progresses. Scholars like Spivak in postcolonial theory and Patricia Hill Collins in sociology have thus argued that theories written out of privilege (especially theories written from European male privilege) ought to be used with caution, rather

⁸ See, for instance, the critiques of James Chesebro ("Multiculturalism"), Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin, and Christa Olson ("Places").

than dismissed entirely (Spivak, *Outside x*; Collins 93).⁹ In keeping with Spivak and Collins, I propose not that Burke ought to replace the various critical lenses already available for the study of particular marginalized rhetorics—including feminist theory, postcolonial theory, comparative rhetoric, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability theory—but that Burke belongs in conversation with these discourses, his theories illuminating and in turn illuminated by critical theory.

In treating Burke's work and applying it to nondominant rhetorics, then, I adopt a methodology I call *meta-Burkean historiography*. By "meta-Burkean," I mean that this methodology reflexively applies Burkean criticism to Burke's own work, reading Burke's texts through the same lenses of ambivalence and possibility that Burke himself applied to other texts. A meta-Burkean approach allows Burke's texts and archives to resist and illuminate one another, their insights potentially exceeding the capacities envisioned by their author. By "historiography," I mean that my project digs beneath the plainest applications of Burke's own work to ask what undiscovered possibilities might lie dormant within the vast expanse of Burkean theory. In the words of Emily Dickinson by way of feminist historiographer Cheryl Glenn, I risk "telling it slant," acknowledging the interestedness of my rhetorical history-telling in order to ask new questions of Burke's texts and archives and explore realms necessarily shrouded in uncertainty.

This historiographic practice of (re)reading need not be applied exclusively to Burke. *Meta-authorial* historiography, conceived of more broadly, could in theory be directed toward the work of any author whose corpus is self-reflexive and posits a textual-critical frame

⁹ And of course, as Barbara Christian has argued, even theorizing which comes from less privileged locations and ostensibly seeks to overturn hegemony is at risk, if not treated cautiously, of becoming "prescriptive, exclusive, elitish" (58).

applicable to the author's own works. Perhaps the work of critics like Gloria Anzaldúa and Albert Memmi and Gayatri Spivak could be taken up similarly, resulting in meta-Anzaldúan and meta-Memmiian and meta-Spivakian historiographies. Whether such meta-authorial readings would be valid in keeping with the spirit of each author's corpus—and whether these readings would yield any valuable new insight through the author's critical apparatus—is beyond the scope of my investigation here and must be left to others. Yet while Burke's work may not be the *only* work to which meta-authorial historiography can be applied, *most* theorists' work cannot be usefully taken up in this way. One of Burke's distinctive qualities, after all, is his repeated invitations for this kind of engagement with his work. Burke makes his own self-revision a prominent feature, rather than an embarrassed footnote, in his thinking. Meta-Burkean historiography is a fitting critical move, then, both because Burke himself calls for it and because it proves to be a productive source of insight into Burke's rhetorical frame.

Indeed, the possibilities of meta-Burkean historiography are modeled in Jean Bessette's 2018 monograph *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives*. Bessette's study of the Lesbian Herstory Archives is rooted in and illuminated by Burke's work on identification as it informs identity and overlaps with the work of historiography. Yet Bessette also wrestles with the "vexed position" of Burke's theories for use in feminist and queer contexts like her own book. Bessette's wrestling is relevant here for the ways it dares to invoke Burke as a means of recovering Burke's work from its own problematic elements:

How then do we appropriate and extend a rhetorical theory derived from a 'historiography' that silences woman? Perhaps the answer comes from Burke himself, who argues that we 'need not close our eyes' to the inevitability of faction and conflict in rhetoric and human relations alike.... Turning Burke on Burke then, we can harness the

concept of rhetoric as identification to investigate the complexity of gender and sexual identity formation itself with particular attention to its inexorable fissures. (14)

Though Burke is the root of the problem in Bessette's analysis, his is also the work to which she turns in search of an answer. And indeed, she finds principles within Burke that equip her to critically reconsider and extend the applications of Burke's own ideas. Bessette's suggestion of "turning Burke on Burke," though tantalizingly brief, captures the vision of meta-Burkean historiography. This turning of Burke on Burke need not be antagonistic, a "turning on" that signifies aggressive debunking and conceptual devastation. It may, instead, be a productive "turning on," an unleashing of critical rhetorical insight that extends the power of a text even as it challenges and reconsiders.

Nor is Bessette alone in her openness to rethinking the possibilities of Burke. Meta-Burkean historiography, in its willingness to ally Burkean study with historiography and critical theory, aligns with and extends much previous scholarship on Burke. Both Debra Hawhee ("Historiography") and Victor Vitanza—to name just two scholars—have allied Burke's theories with the mission of historiography, urging by way of Burke that doing historiography is an unavoidably messy process and that we must resist impulses to make it tidy.¹⁰ Moreover, in rethinking Burke alongside critical theory, many scholars have found in their research that Burke was not as wholly opposed to historically marginalized identities as he has sometimes been portrayed. Bryan Crable's work on Ralph Ellison and Burke shows Burke both as someone

¹⁰ Even where historiography is not explicitly invoked, work on Burke often reflects aspects of a historiographic mentality. The best historiography, after all, combines careful contextual readings and archival work with a willingness to radically reconsider textual possibilities in light of subsequent developments in rhetorical theory. Scholars like Jack Selzer, Ann George, Ross Wolin, and M. Elizabeth Weiser have been exemplars of the importance of reading Burke in his own historical context. James Chesebro and Celeste Condit are outspoken in their willingness to challenge and rethink Burke through the lens of new perspectives. By combining the detailed archival research of the first group and the critical commitment of the second group, Burke scholars have often yielded new insight—including Debra Hawhee (*Moving*), Bryan Crable, Gregory Clark, and the contributors to Jessica Enoch and Dana Anderson's collection *Burke in the Archives*.

challenged by discourses of racial equity, and as someone whose work productively inspired Ellison's own masterpiece, *Invisible Man*. Jordynn Jack has shown that Burke exchanged letters with a feminist named Barbara Bate and expressed interest in making his "Definition of Man" more accommodating for women as well as men. Phyllis Japp has argued that Burke represents a "usable tradition" for feminists despite his less-than-feminist qualities, while James Klumpp has suggested that Burke's comments about the inevitability of hierarchy have often been misunderstood as racist, sexist, and ethnocentrist, but are not meant to function as such. Certainly, Burke was a product of his time, and his scholarship thus reflects certain biases of privilege—but these biases need not keep us from gleaning that which continues to be valuable in his work.

In addition to aligning with current scholarly practice, meta-Burkean historiography also—and most importantly—aligns with Burke's stated hopes for the uptake of his work. Moreover, such a methodology accords with the very nature of Burke's theoretical claims. Burke had a habit of adding new forewords and revisions and "retrospective prospects" to each republication of his monographs, showcasing the ever-evolving quality of his approach to rhetorical scholarship. He also treated the Burkean system of thought as a living organism which had the capacity to exceed the authorial control of its originator. In the poem "Know Thyself," Burke complains, "I'm flunking my Required Course / In Advanced Burkology" (*Collected* 208). The complaint is offered facetiously, of course, but it speaks to Burke's perception of "Burkology" as a realm existing outside himself, able to be misunderstood and misconceived even by Burke himself.

In recognition that he was in pursuit of a system always prone to elude him, Burke bemoaned the reification of his own ideas as a permanent means of classification in scholarship.

When Wayne Booth once teased that Burke had offered “hundreds of hints and guesses” (Booth 121) about what constituted a good terministic screen, Burke took offense at the suggestion that his failure to identify the “correct” system of classification was indeed a failure or omission on his part (Booth 127-137). What Burke sought was not a single and permanent terministic screen, but rather an acknowledgment that screens must always be in flux, at times more or less useful according to context and need, their substance always changing as the “sub-stance” around them changes. As he wrote in response to Booth’s apparent criticism of his work, “If we got it all in order, then like a child with building blocks, the next thing we’d do would be to knock it down” (qtd. in Booth 134). Burke sought not a final construction but a method for building and interrogating and destroying and rebuilding, a heuristic that would not be limited by a single settled answer.

Much more could be said about the ways in which Burke uses Burkean principles to reconsider his own prior work. For instance, in one memorable moment from his essay “The Thinking of the Body,” Burke tells the story of how he once wrote a poem about the island of Atlantis and submitted it for publication, only to realize much later that the poem was actually about defecation. Speaking of himself in the third person, as he so often did, Burke wrote with chagrin that “he simultaneously knew and did not know what he was doing” (*Language* 330) when he wrote the poem. Thus, Burke believed he had located unconscious principles that were at work in the poem without his realizing them when he wrote it. Similarly, there exists in the Kenneth Burke Papers at Penn State a folder of Burke’s analytic readings of his own poems, some of which Burke credits with claims beyond what the poet was aware of in their writing. These artifacts must await more thorough analysis in a later project. For now, it is sufficient to note that such patterns of thought were not foreign to Burke. He himself exercised what I am

calling meta-Burkean historiography. In addition to inviting this methodology of meta-Burkean historiography, Burke's resistance towards static understandings of terministic screens is also precisely what makes him such a valuable theorist for responding to the paradoxical tension between collectivity and particularity that often inhabits rhetorics of minority identity. To best understand how Burke's approach to language might enliven rhetorical scholarship within this tension, I now turn to consider the ways in which the tension has manifested in rhetorical study and informed some of our discipline's most protracted debates.

Disciplinary Roots of the Tension Between Collectivity and Particularity

Rhetorical scholarship in recent years has become increasingly attentive to voices once relegated to the margins. Women's voices, racial and sexual minority voices, non-Western voices, disability voices—all these and more are being drawn into a conversation once restricted to a privileged few. Yet the ways that members of nondominant groups construct and define their own identities is often vexed by the tension between collectivity and particularity, creating an analytical challenge for scholars, as the coming pages will explore. On the one hand, the desire to see nondominant discursive groups gain rhetorical power and combat oppression can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of those on the margins. For the sake of cognizability or political efficacy, members of disadvantaged groups may be presumed homogeneous in their attitudes and discursive practices, or their ever-evolving terminologies may be reduced to static summations. Consider, as an example, the politics of labeling an event like the 1969 Stonewall riots as a triumph of "gay rights." Such a label, by attending to the broader discursive trends surrounding the event, contributes to its political salience; but it does so by glossing over the multiplicity of identities and motivations that fed into the riots, not all of which aligned neatly with the interests of the gay rights discourse. Thus it is that Jasbir K. Puar asks, "What is the

political and cultural fallout of recentering the white gay male as ur-queer subject?” (“Coda”)

Broad depictions of marginal identity categories, and even the label “marginal” itself, may sometimes obscure the crucial differences among distinct discursive groups, falsely implying that hegemonies come from only a single source and can be combated with a single solution. At its simplest and most insidious, the codification of any “marginal rhetoric” threatens to elide the complexities of polyvocal and multivalent rhetorical practices in its fervor to theorize a coherent and politically salient vision of identity. Such an inclusion of marginal identities is a Pyrrhic victory, won by overlooking the very people it claims to represent and by reifying the very hegemony it ostensibly seeks to nullify.

In response to this danger of oversimplifying individual experiences of marginality, representational rhetoric emerging from nondominant groups can equally veer towards the opposite extreme: recognizing and celebrating particular rhetorical moments without situating these moments within broader discursive identity trends. An exclusive focus on particularities would be an equally untenable solution to the problem of representation. Within an oversaturated rhetorical market, the discourses which effectively generate social or political action are those which demonstrate their salience—and proving the breadth of a discourse’s scope is one obvious way of demonstrating salience. Consider, for example, how the legacy of the Stonewall riots might have been different had they not been taken up by the gay rights discourse—could a focus on the sheer multiplicity of voices have generated the same degree of political activism? Likewise, consider how the *All-American Muslim* narrative creates a coherent anti-Islamophobic discourse, where an abstracted claim that “no two Muslims are alike” might not generate the same salience. To treat each nondominant voice as wholly independent and discrete from others would be to neglect the collective salience of these discourses, thereby condemning them to

another form of marginality. Thus, although oversimplifying identities on the margins for the sake of salience and the pursuit of social equity—engaging in what Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”—may seem methodologically suspect, scholars like Spivak have argued that it is still better than inaction.¹¹

In what ways can rhetorical scholars negotiate this tension between homogenization and particularization as we encounter moments of seeming contradiction in the construction of nondominant group identities? What theoretical tools will equip us to develop a rhetorical theory of nondominant discourses that accounts for the necessarily partial and polyvocal nature of representational language without abnegating claims of breadth and salience? What principles can scholars invoke as we work towards a more responsible framework for studying nondominant discourses, even as those discourses are constantly fluctuating and being renegotiated by the diverse individuals who inhabit and recreate them? These questions have both haunted and invigorated our discipline, as scholars and activists alike seek out strategies for responsible representation that surrenders neither the salience of group identity nor the precision of the particular.

Anxieties about how to responsibly include nondominant voices in rhetorical scholarship are as old as inclusion attempts themselves. In fact, one of the most famous debates in rhetorical historiography centered on the first major feminist intervention in the rhetorical canon, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Campbell’s collection sought to challenge the notion of a singular, masculinist, public, and male-dominated rhetorical tradition by celebrating the rhetorical excellence of individual women rhetors, curating their words, and demonstrating their rhetorical effectiveness. Barbara Biesecker (“Coming”) objected that Campbell was guilty

¹¹ Although, as discussed above, Spivak later came to regret the phrase “strategic essentialism,” even if the heart of the project it described continued to motivate her work.

of “tokenizing” these women, elevating them as exceptional in a way that reified the phallogocentric standards of exceptional rhetoric already in place in the rhetorical canon. The inclusion of a few women, Biesecker worried, might mean the exclusion of countless others. Campbell’s retort, “Biesecker Cannot Speak for Her Either,” argued that women must be recognized for their particularities or else not recognized at all. To seek to clump all women together as rhetorical figures, in order to include them all, would be to engage in essentialism. The implications of Campbell and Biesecker’s dispute have extended far beyond these two scholars and into the discipline of feminist rhetoric more broadly. For example, Michelle Ballif has expressed concerns similar to those of Biesecker, arguing that “recovering” individual women may have the unintended impact of “covering” over the phallogocentrism of rhetorical tradition itself. Patricia Bizzell, meanwhile, has affirmed alongside Campbell the value of noting the rhetorical effectiveness of individual women and members of other traditionally excluded groups.

The tensions illuminated by Campbell and Biesecker’s debate—tensions between essentializing and tokenizing, between incorporating new voices into a scholarly conversation and resisting the hegemonic tone of the extant conversation—have been debated not only in feminist rhetoric but in other historically marginalized rhetorical discourses as well. When assumptions about feminist rhetoric are transposed from the West to other global settings, argues Rebecca Dingo, the language of “women’s empowerment” may actually serve to disempower women by eliding the unique needs of non-Western women; thus, assuming a universal feminine experience can be dangerous as well as (sometimes) politically advantageous. Queer theorists—including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Davin Allen Grindstaff, and many others—have expressed concern that gay male rhetoric and activism are often taken to stand synecdochically for all

sexual minorities, erasing identities in the name of progress. As Puar writes, “The narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the back of racialized others” (“Rethinking” 337). In disability theory, too, scholars have cautioned against monolithic depictions of disability: Jay Dolmage, for example, begins his study of disability rhetoric with an admission that the notion of disability—a category defined in opposition to an abstracted “normal”—is already rhetorical in its union of lived experiences which are not inherently alike.

Faced with the tension between a desire for salience and an aversion to essentialism, scholars of marginalized rhetorics have often struggled to unite the insights of both positions. For example, in their study of Asian American rhetoric, LuMing Mao and Morris Young choose to speak of a singular “Asian American rhetoric” rather than plural “rhetorics,” arguing that they must engage in “strategic essentialism” à la Spivak to unite a variety of rhetorical practices under a single banner in order to claim salience for these practices. Yet Mao also recognizes that salience cannot be the only guiding principle in the study of marginalized rhetorics. In his essay “Writing the Other into Histories of Rhetorics,” he notes the irony that occurs when Western scholars study non-Western rhetorics by evaluating them through Western lenses and categories. Talking about these rhetorical practices in familiar terms helps them become salient in Western scholarship, Mao acknowledges, but it also risks Othering them, silencing them with the very gesture that was intended to offer a listening ear.¹²

The tensions between identity’s desirable and limiting features are complicated, too, by the reality that many group identities are named and made recognizable within the context of discrimination and derogation. To escape this derogation, group members may choose to consciously deemphasize their shared traits and shift toward individual particularity, or they may

¹² This same irony has also been noted by a number of feminist scholars, including philosopher Linda Alcoff (whose work Mao cites), postcolonialist Chandra Mohanty, and rhetorician Cheryl Glenn.

reinforce the salience of their collective identity and reclaim it as an engine of power. As Kwame Anthony Appiah argues,

Black, woman, gay, aboriginal—so many of the identity categories that are politically salient are precisely ones that have functioned as limits, the result of the attitudes and acts of hostile or contemptuous others. Each of these categories has served as an instrument of subordination, as a constraint upon autonomy, as, indeed, a proxy for misfortune. Some identities, we can show, were *created* as part of a classificatory system for oppression. And in the context of antidiscrimination law, say, these identities are treated as a sort of handicap, to be disregarded or remedied. Yet the reversible-raincoat nature of these terms is demonstrated by the fact that categories designed for subordination can also be used to mobilize and empower people as members of a self-affirmative identity. (112, emphasis in original)

Both salience and individuality, then, can be tools of either oppression or equity—they may serve to reinscribe central and marginal positions, or to uproot the presumed center of discourse. For Appiah, the tension between the ideals of collectivity and particularity is necessary not only on pragmatic and political grounds but also on linguistic ones.

One proof of the insufficiency of univocal models of marginalized rhetoric has been the rising emphasis on intersectionality among scholars. Introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (“Mapping”), intersectional theory calls attention to the unique complexities of marginalization that occur at the intersections of multiple historically marginalized identities. Joined by fellow women of color like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, Crenshaw cautions against assuming a normative identity within any marginalized group—there is, for instance, no “average black person.” After all, the tendency of normative identity construction is to assume

that the representative member of a disadvantaged group must be in all other ways advantaged: the “normative black” is a cisgender, able-bodied straight man, the “normative queer” is a cisgender, able-bodied white man, and so forth. One of the most iconic figures to trouble this assumption of normative marginalities in the academy is Anzaldúa, a queer woman of color whose work consistently challenged the academic impulse toward settlement and instead argued for the necessity of a liminal borderland of identity, a *mestiza consciousness*. Puar pushes the critique of normative identity still further when she argues that the metaphor of intersectionality ought to be replaced with *assemblage*, an approach to identity which is “attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (*Terrorist* 212). That is, Puar urges a move toward emphasizing the contingency of identity, even when this contingency challenges the seeming constancy of the language used to describe it.

Moreover, as rhetorics of marginality become more established in academic circles, a number of scholars have worried that the naturally unsettled and radical edge of these rhetorics is blunted by their inclusion in the academy. Queer rhetoric, for example, has been defined by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes in terms of its active resistance of rhetorical norms. Agreeing with Alexander and Rhodes’s definition of queer rhetoric, Erin Rand worries that by earning a seat in the academy and developing its own brand of orthodoxy, “Queer Studies” has lost the spirit that made it queer. Lynn Worsham makes a similar case within feminist composition studies, arguing that *l’écriture féminine* (“writing the woman,” promoted by French feminists like Hélène Cixous) ceases to be itself when it is imported into the academic practice of composition studies because the structure of the academy is phallogocentric. Even “Women’s Studies” more broadly has been critiqued by scholars like Wendy Brown, Joan Wallach Scott,

and Robyn Wiegman as a paradoxical category, relying for its existence and self-definition on the very gender boundaries it claims to undo and on the very institutions it claims to critique.

If twenty-first century rhetorics of nondominant groups are to be theorized responsibly, rhetoricians must discover or refashion a theoretical lens in which the polyvocality and liminality of nondominant discourses are treated as central considerations rather than peripheral ones. We must develop a narrative of rhetorical marginality that retains the salience of a collective whole without essentializing, a narrative that attends to individuality and partiality without becoming myopic or microscopic in its focus. And most of all, we must tread cautiously in applying our own terminologies of marginality, recognizing that any time one reality is spoken, another reality becomes unspeakable. To navigate this constantly evolving linguistic terrain, the theoretical work of Kenneth Burke is remarkably apropos, as I hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow.

Kenneth Burke's Fluid Semiosis

As the previous pages have shown, nondominant rhetorics in the twenty-first century face the double bind of, on the one hand, needing the political power that comes from being collectively marked as “marginal” in order to gain collective salience, while, on the other hand, needing to resist the essentialism and commodification that come from accepting a permanent identity of “marginality” which reifies the center elsewhere. Likewise, such discourses are often caught between politically productive narratives of uniformity—as in the case of *All-American Muslim*—and rhetorical proliferations of difference that are precise but lack salience for social action. Rhetorical strategies and terminologies that are empowering in certain settings and moments may become restrictive or harmful when transposed elsewhere. What insight can the work of Kenneth Burke offer in response to such paradoxes?

At the root of the tension between the collectivity and particularity of marginal rhetorics

is an assumption about the ideal nature of semiotic inquiry. This assumption—which I call *static semiosis*—is made explicit in the work of theorists like C. S. Peirce, often hailed as the founder of semiotics.¹³ According to Peirce, language is itself the essence of thought, and thus terminologies progress towards the semiotic ideal of the “final interpretant” in which they correspond precisely to ideational realities. Peirce acknowledges that terms may be understood differently by various hearers and in various contexts, but he also insists that language contains a potential teleology of perfection in which it corresponds with reality. Thus, any contradiction in terminology will—or should—also be a contradiction in conceptual reality. Insofar as one terminology is proven true, another competing terminology must thereby be proven false.

Although Peirce’s attitude toward semiotics is no longer dominant in the academy, having been largely unseated by the deconstructionist work of figures like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, static semiosis nonetheless remains an unspoken assumption on which much subsequent academic debate occurs. Indeed, it is this assumption of static semiosis that creates

¹³ In fairness to Peirce, we must note that there is debate among Peirce scholars over whether the account I offer here accurately depicts Peirce’s view of language in its fullness. Scholars are divided, for instance, on the question of whether Peirce meant for his corpus to be read as internally consistent, or whether his later work was meant as a revision of his early work. Some scholars argue that Peirce’s early trilogy of essays in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*—which will be discussed in greater detail in the coming pages—created methodological problems for Peirce which his later work set out to resolve. Others see Peirce as building on, rather than undoing, his early work in later writings.

In this chapter, then, I must admit my agnosticism on the question of Peirce’s intentions, a question which has vexed far better Peirce scholars than I. For the purposes of the current investigation, the *truest* or *best* readings of Peirce matter less than the *prevalent* readings of Peirce, the lenses through which Burke was most likely to have encountered Peirce’s ideas. Whether or not Peirce himself was a champion of static semiosis is not the point of my inquiry; that Peirce was taken up in this way by others (perhaps unfairly) and may have become an abstracted intellectual foil for some of Burke’s work is precisely the point.

In addition, to be clear, Peirce is far from the only thinker who left a legacy of ascribing a static ideal to language. It is certainly not my intention to blame every vestige of static semiotic thought on Peirce’s influence. Earlier conceptions of Western rhetorical thought, even arguably as early as the dialectic model of Plato’s dialogues, presume a perspective in which terminological contradiction necessitates negation. I make the case here from Peirce for two reasons. First, Peirce offers a uniquely clear articulation of the ideal language in terms of its static correspondence with reality. Second, Peirce’s participation in the lineage of the word “incapacity” leading to Burke offers a useful entry point to contrast Burke’s view of semiosis with Peirce’s (alleged) view.

the binary which calls my own project into being. If language is to be used in a way that synthesizes nondominant rhetorical practices, static semiosis tells us, it must concomitantly reject particularities. If it is to reject essentialism in favor of microscopic detail, it must do so at all times and in all contexts. Thus, the *All-American Muslim* narrative of anti-Islamophobic representation must be *either* accurate or inaccurate as an ethically productive depiction of Muslim identity in post-2001 America. An event like the Stonewall Riots must be *either* a gay rights triumph or a multiplicity of marginal voices. To be acknowledged more fully on one side of this divide, these discourses must cease to inhabit the other side. As long as static semiosis prevails in the debate over representation of nondominant groups, the goals of salience and specificity must coexist in unreconciled tension, each terminological priority only as “right” as the other is “wrong.”

This dichotomy is, as I seek to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, an untenable one for the study of nondominant rhetorics. The static semiotic ideal may be well suited for analysis of dominant discursive practices, but attending to marginality requires a more fluid semantic model. Those who identify within nondominant identities, and especially those seeking out a language that progresses from marginalization towards social equity, cannot always claim their rhetorical power by finding and enforcing a single “best” terministic screen. Instead, power on the linguistic margins often resides within the negotiated space where meaning is deliberated and in flux—a space which is not inherently central or marginal in location, but which traverses both locations. In a linguistic iteration of the second law of thermodynamics, the “right language” of marginality and centrality will always and invariably fall into decay if it is not constantly being interrogated. Rhetorical theory needs a framework of language that purposefully embraces sites of ambivalence within marginal rhetorical practices. We must interrogate the unsettled

interrogatory space itself, seeking a nimble semantic model in which ambivalence is a catalyst for knowledge—not merely a theoretical problem to be solved or a chaos to be codified.

This nimble semantic model can be found, I argue, in the work of Kenneth Burke. Not only did Burke respond to Peirce and other practitioners of static semiosis with a more fluid and dynamic view of symbolic action, but he also challenged the scholarly discursive pattern that accepted static semiosis as its own *modus operandi*. Refusing to operate within preexisting terminological sets by claiming that he was “not a joiner of societies” (KB to MC, 4 June 1932; qtd. in Jay 202), Burke fought against the notion that any terministic screen—even his own—could or ought to have the final say. Burke thus models the approach I call *fluid semiosis*,¹⁴ the perspective that multiple terminologies must always coexist as both capacities and incapacities. Permanent incapacity, for Burke, is the permanence of becoming trapped within a single terministic screen, unable to step outside that screen to acknowledge its limitations. When tensions between collectivity and particularity are reconsidered through the lens of fluid semiosis, they become possible occasions to acknowledge the working of multiple *advantageous incapacities*: seemingly competing terminologies that illuminate by virtue of their partiality, inviting the astute rhetor to negotiate between and among multiple frames.¹⁵

¹⁴ My use of fluidity as metaphor here bears similarities to that of Zygmunt Bauman, who argues in *Liquid Modernity* that the “fluidity” he identifies as a defining characteristic of the new modernity allies it more closely to time than to space:

[F]luids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy; that space, after all, they fill but ‘for a moment.’ In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of the account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture. (2)

Like Bauman’s modernity, fluid semiosis too is fundamentally time-bound and can only be spoken of as a thing in motion. Unlike Bauman’s fluidity, however, fluid semiosis also names the impossibility of delimiting *one* holistic semiotic vision at any one point in time. Because of its simultaneous multiplicity, fluid semiosis cannot be captured in “snapshots.” Instead, it eludes attempts to catch and contain it, bursting free in every direction like water squeezed in a fist.

¹⁵ This notion of language’s flexibility is of course not wholly unique to Burke. It bears some resemblance to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* as well as to the post-structuralism of figures like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari,

Though the evidence for fluid semiosis appears throughout Burke's corpus, the clearest articulation appears relatively early in Burke's career, with his discussion of trained incapacity in *Permanence and Change*. Thus, my argument in the remainder of this chapter proceeds along the following lines. First, I trace the term "incapacity" from Burke back to Peirce, arguing that Peirce's approach to incapacity can illuminate our reading of Burke's trained incapacity even though Peirce himself is not invoked by name. Next, I offer a brief summary of Peirce's semiotic

and Jean-François Lyotard. Although a thorough accounting of Burke's similarity and dissimilarity with each of these approaches would exceed the scope of my current project, a brief articulation may be instructive in clarifying the notion of fluid semiosis.

For Bakhtin, writing contemporaneously with Burke in the 1930s, "language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form" (291). That is, because of the many contradictory spaces it inhabits, language itself has the capacity to function in contradictory ways. Yet as long as language comes from a single voice and has a single face, Bakhtin argues, it occupies a single socio-ideological terrain and has no need to show its heteroglot possibilities. Novels escape this single voice and single face because they simultaneously contain the voice of an author and the ventriloquized voices of characters. Thus it is by novels and their authors that *heteroglossia*, the pairing of seemingly contradictory language practices, becomes part of discourse. Burke shares with Bakhtin an awareness of language's heteroglot possibilities, and the perspective that ostensibly contradictory meanings can indeed coexist and cofunction in discourse. Within Burke's fluid semiosis, however, polysemy can and indeed must exist even apart from sociological or chronological difference. What necessitates linguistic contradiction, after all, is not mere difference in perspective but ever-compounding occasions for capacity and incapacity. Nor is fluid semiosis dependent on the simultaneity of disparate voices found in the novel for its discovery or activation. Instead, fluid semiosis occurs even and especially in the ostensible "single voice" of nonfiction writers and speakers as they seek to communicate effectively in heteroglot terrain.

Like Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari aver that "language is a heterogeneous, variable reality" (100). In true post-structuralist fashion, this heterogeneity, though it may at times give the appearance of consistency or constancy, is fully contextually dependent and therefore fully unstable at its root: "[C]onstants are drawn from the variables themselves; universals in linguistics have no more existence in themselves than they do in economics" (103). Where Burke's emphasis differs from Deleuze and Guattari's is in his attention to the possibility of negotiation between coexisting competing frames. Deleuze and Guattari's primary engagement with language is as a dominant reflection and tool of societal power, reflecting a veneer of "unity" that is "fundamentally political" (101) even if it is farcical. Fluid semiosis, on the other hand, lingers at the cracks of purported linguistic "unity," teasing apart possibilities, treating variability not only in terms of future shifts in dominant language but also in terms of ever-present strategies existing in nondominant forms of language.

Finally, Lyotard's notion of *language games* (a term borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein) shares with Burke the value of treating language at a degree of removal from itself, focusing on the insights of metanarratives rather than the claims of narratives themselves. In keeping with the post-structuralism of Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard rejects the assumption that "it is possible for all speakers to come to agreement on which rules or metaprescriptions are universally valid for language games" (65). Instead, as Fredric Jameson argues, Lyotard considers the linguistically mediated pursuit of knowledge to be "a search, not for consensus, but very precisely for 'instabilities' . . . to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous 'normal science' had been conducted" ("Foreword" xix). Burke's project, in sidestepping claims of universality while also working outside the scope of the postmodern project (see Crusius), is unlike Lyotard's in that "undermining" is not a *telos* of Burkean inquiry. Fluid semiosis is purposefully constructive rather than debunking, treating multiplicity as a means into discovery instead of a defenestration of received wisdom.

theory as it pertains to static semiosis and the nature of incapacity. Third, I show how Veblen's economic theory takes up "incapacity" in revision of Peirce, and how Burke in turn revises Veblen. With this history of "incapacity" in mind, I develop a reading of Burke's trained incapacity and his subsequent work that emphasizes the centrality of fluid semiosis to Burke's vision, even in places where Burke himself seems unaware of its presence.

The Roots of Trained Incapacity

Though Burke credited the concept of *trained incapacity* to Thorstein Veblen in *Permanence and Change*, Veblen himself made very little use of the term. Veblen used the phrase only once in print—and there seemingly in passing—in the closing pages of his economic treatise *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*. In fact, Erin Wais writes that Burke himself began to doubt later in life that the idea had come from Veblen at all. Yet Burke accorded great importance to trained incapacity, both within his own system and within the system he imagined as belonging to Veblen. How did a term that played such a small role for Veblen come to play such a large role for Burke?

This question is, of course, impossible to answer with absolute certainty. However, it is perhaps not coincidental that the term "incapacity" was already in use as a critical term in the academy prior to Veblen's passing mention of it. In fact, the man to bring this term into scholarly prominence was none other than Veblen's one-time teacher, C. S. Peirce. While Peirce was by no means the only scholar to use the term "incapacity" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, incapacity played a particularly significant role in his system. Peirce's most famous essays were a trilogy of papers published in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* titled "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" (1868), "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868), and "Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic: Further

Consequences of Four Incapacities” (1869). As the latter two titles imply, these essays took up incapacity as a critical term depicting Peirce’s belief that humans were incapable of thinking without signs. Peirce saw language use as a resolution to the problem of incapacity, a realm in which symbolic perfection might be pursued to right the imperfections of human cognition. J. H. Muirhead, discussing Peirce’s contributions to American philosophy in 1928, identifies Peirce’s treatment of the “incapacities” among his most significant intellectual contributions.¹⁶

Slightly more than a decade after the publication of Peirce’s essay trilogy, Veblen attended a series of Peirce’s lectures on Elementary Logic at Johns Hopkins University in the fall of 1881. Although Veblen dropped out of Johns Hopkins soon afterward for financial reasons, he was sufficiently interested in the lectures that he mentioned them in a letter he wrote to the University’s president that same fall (Dorfman 41). Veblen never mentioned Peirce directly in his subsequent published writings on economic theory, but several Veblen scholars agree that Peirce’s intellectual fingerprints are evident in Veblen’s work (Dyer; Griffin; Viano). Thus, as Robert Griffin argues, “the evidence is strong that the three months of general tutorials that Veblen received from Peirce made a difference in his philosophical and scientific thought” (734). Whether or not Veblen was aware of Peirce’s essays on incapacity and their substantial role in Peirce’s eventual intellectual influence, he seems to have been aware of the broader Peircean model within which Peirce’s notion of “incapacity” operated.

As for Burke, the evidence is clear that he too was aware of Peirce. As Ann George and Jack Selzer have noted, Burke “was generally familiar with Charles Sanders Peirce (probably through book reviews)” (184), and he was even more familiar with the pragmatist movement

¹⁶ Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the few other academics in the early twentieth century to use the term “incapacity” in a philosophical sense, rather than as a technical term in law or medicine, was John Dewey, another prominent pragmatist and himself a one-time student of Peirce.

inspired by Peirce and carried on by thinkers like William James and John Dewey, both of whom Burke invoked with regularity. Peirce is mentioned twice by name in Burke's *Grammar of Motives*, both times as the originator of ideas that William James would later develop in his own presentation of pragmatism (275, 277). There is thus a reasonable possibility that Burke would have possessed at least a passing familiarity with Peirce's famed essay trilogy and his notion of "incapacity." Incontrovertibly, however, Burke inherited the term from Veblen, whose work scholars have shown to bear vestiges of Peirce's teaching.

Whether either Veblen or Burke can be said to have consciously inherited or responded to Peirce's term "incapacity" in their invocations of "trained incapacity" is not, in itself, a provable claim, nor it is a necessary one for the purposes of my argument. Rather, what merits primary attention here is the ways in which the term "incapacity" evolves in its passage from Peirce to Veblen to Burke. Veblen may not have had Peirce's incapacities in mind when he spoke of "trained incapacity" as a mark of economic habituation—yet Veblen had clearly become concerned with the ways the language of workmanship created a seeming capacity which served a simultaneous incapacitating role. Thus, Veblen implicitly extends the Peircean view that language is a response and solution to incapacity. For Veblen, language can indeed offer a solution to incapacity, but the resulting linguistic capacity still has the potential to become incapacitating.

Burke takes Veblen still further, arguing that symbol use is not only a *potential* source of incapacity if improperly applied, but an *inevitable* source of incapacity when a terminology is unfit to the context in which it is applied. In this sense, Burke poses an illuminating counterpoint to Peirce: Peirce's incapacity is merely *solved* by symbol-using, whereas Burke's incapacity is both *solved* and (*re*)*created* by symbol-using. Observing these similar and yet opposing

conceptions of incapacity makes it easier to see how Burke's attitude toward semiosis incorporates and revises the model articulated by Peirce. Regardless of whether Burke considered himself to be responding to Peirce's framework, per se, the two frameworks share terms and concerns that make them fitting interlocutors for the purpose of illuminating Burke's contributions to rhetorical theory.

The Static Semiosis of C. S. Peirce

In his essay "The Ethics of Terminology," Peirce casts a vision for semiotics that shows the pervasive influence of his training as a mathematician and logician on his view of linguistic pragmatism:

As to the ideal to be aimed at, it is, in the first place, desirable for any branch of science that it should have a vocabulary furnishing a family of cognate words for each *scientific* conception, and that each word should have a single exact meaning, unless its different meanings apply to objects of different categories that can never be mistaken for one another. To be sure, this requisite might be understood in a sense which would make it utterly impossible. For every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones. But the effort of all should be to keep the *essence* of every scientific term unchanged and exact; although absolute exactitude is not so much as conceivable. (*Collected* 2.222,¹⁷ emphasis in original)

For Peirce, in short, language is ethically compelled towards an ideal of monosemy.¹⁸ This is not

¹⁷ This is the standard notation for citations from Peirce's collected papers: the volume number is followed by a period and a paragraph number.

¹⁸ Although Peirce is speaking specifically of scientific language here, since science was one of his primary fascinations, he applies the principle of fixity much more broadly.

a matter of mere convenience or preference in Peirce's system; rather, the precise correlation between words and ideas matters because ideational realities do not exist apart from the words that describe them, and Peirce insists that ideational realities must be solvable: "There is... to every question a true answer, a final conclusion, to which the opinion of every man is constantly gravitating" (*Collected* 8.12). Peirce's pragmatist orientation thus demands that words be constructed and employed in a maximally usable way. As Joel Weinsheimer explains in his analysis of "The Ethics of Terminology," Peirce's pragmatism operates by a teleological vision of symbolic perfection: "Pragmatism is a method of defining concepts teleologically, by their ends, and the definitive end of pragmatism is precisely to end things: it wants to fix belief, settle opinion, eliminate doubt, end debate. The general aim of pragmatism, then, is termination, and terminology is its appropriate language" (402). If language is to be a remedy¹⁹ of incapacity, it must be semiotically suited to perform this role. Terminologies must achieve a kind of permanence in relation to thoughts, a static fixity that makes the thoughts themselves cognizable according to pragmatic ideals.

This is not to say that symbols currently function, or will ever function, with the kind of precision for which the pragmatist advocates. After all, Peirce himself admits in this passage from "The Ethics of Terminology" that symbols are organic, and their organic nature presupposes growth and change. Thus, Weinsheimer argues, "The tension and ambivalence in this passage is evident—Peirce's desire for semantic fixity in conflict with his recognition that the symbol is amorphous and alive" (405). What Weinsheimer classifies as a desire for semantic fixity is the basis of the Peircean attitude I call *static semiosis*. Because Peirce sees linguistic symbols as necessary tools of thought, and thoughts are best evaluated according to the

¹⁹ The notion of remediation here bears a noteworthy similarity to I. A. Richards' definition of rhetoric as "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (1).

unambiguous principles of symbolic logic, words work most efficiently when they become as permanent and discrete in meaning as a logician's alphabetic premises. For Peirce, contradictions are antithetical to the symbolic ideal. Inasmuch as one semantic representation of reality²⁰ claims explanatory power, competing representations are rendered correspondingly improper.

To negotiate the tension between the ideal of semantic fixity and the reality of semantic change, Peirce develops the notion of the *final interpretant*. An *interpretant*, in Peirce's semiotics, is an interpreting thought, the third part of the signifying triad that also includes *sign* and *object*. Interpretants provide the conceptual data necessary for a sign to be understood as meaningfully connected to the object it signifies. While Peirce acknowledges that the daily function of signs includes shifting and contingent interpretants, his *final interpretant* represents "the effect the Sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect" (qtd. in Hardwick 110). That is, it occupies a fixed role as a category of semantic perfection that transcends context. The final interpretant is thus more aspirational than actual.²¹ It is the static ideal underlying the vicissitudes of contextual contingency. As T. L. Short explains, "In the case of cognition, the final interpretant is the truth, as full as is sought, about the object signified and is itself of the nature of a statement: it is what Peirce elsewhere called 'the final opinion'" (57). By means of final interpretants, Peirce can acknowledge the undeniable presence of ambiguities and partialities in language while maintaining a terminological ethics of static semiosis.

What happens when Peirce's static semiosis is applied to textual or cultural moments

²⁰ Both Peirce and Burke posit their semiotic systems as functioning in relation to a reality (or a perceived reality) external to the symbols themselves. Determining the precise nature of this reality is of less concern to both thinkers than determining the ways in which reality—or the mirage of reality—is conceived of, represented, and understood.

²¹ However, as T. L. Short writes, "Peirce often wrote as if the whole truth about a sign's object is its final interpretant..., again reflecting his preoccupation with science" (190).

where the semantic priorities of collectivity and particularity come into conflict with one another? In short, static semiosis maintains that such conflicts imply or demand the possibility of a fitting resolution. According to vision of the final interpretant, terminologies in their teleological forms ought to be capable of expressing a singular and united representation of reality—and in the contingent meantime, language ethics demand a working towards these teleologies. In the case of *All-American Muslim*, final interpretants of terms like “Islamophobia” and “Muslim” would determine the ideal precise boundaries of their application. The question of whether a particular rhetorical move is advantageous in combating Islamophobia among Muslims in America must be theoretically answerable, insofar as terms are uniformly applied. What static semiosis refuses to allow is the possibility of identities or labels needing to be at once accepted and rejected: the boundaries of “Muslim” strategically recast, or the scope of “Islamophobia” expanded and restricted according to the allowances of political salience that such moves grant. Should a narrative which emphasizes more ostensibly Western and ideologically liberal Muslims be celebrated as anti-Islamophobic, or should it be condemned as reifying a subtler form of Islamophobia? Can it be both at once, or must “Islamophobia” be bounded in such a way that any phenomenon is clearly and singularly analyzable in its terms? By the dictates of static semiosis, ambivalence on these matters is proof of language’s residual insufficiency. To the degree symbol-using can alleviate incapacity, a single answer must become clear.

Though Peirce’s semiotics can acknowledge contradictions, then, they are the logician’s contradictions, meant for resolution. For Peirce, the notion of a purposefully unresolved contradiction—or an irreconcilable contradiction—in language would be paramount to an assault on reality itself. After all, as Robert S. Corrington paraphrases Peirce, “Every act of perception...

is an act of interpretation” (78), meaning that the renegotiation of interpretative tools in language necessitates an undoing of perception itself. By the static semiotic model, even those who are aware of language’s current contingency should seek a consistency in their own terminologies that presages the coming of a final interpretant. Any disparities between or within terminologies—ambiguities, seemingly irreconcilable contradictions, and the like—are always problems to be solved, imperfections to be remedied. To the degree that final interpretants are achieved, incapacity is escaped.

Evolving Incapacities

Regardless of whether Peirce played even a glancing role in defining Burke’s vision of the reigning semiotic assumptions, the Burkean system undoubtedly responds to the sort of system articulated by Peirce. Perhaps it is mere coincidence that the term “incapacity,” the same critical term titling Peirce’s famous foundational essays for static semiosis, would also happen to form a key term in Burke’s challenge to that model. Even so, I would be remiss not to discuss the link between Peirce’s and Burke’s models of incapacity—the work of Thorstein Veblen. Considering how Veblen invoked trained incapacity in relation to semiotic practice and how Burke took up Veblen’s concern will, I propose, bring Burke’s rejection of static semiosis into clearer relief.

Although the phrase “trained incapacity” appears only once in Veblen’s *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*, the phenomenon to which Veblen referred pervades a much larger portion of his work. Veblen is concerned with the ways in which the machine age and its attendant industrial mindset have alienated people from their natural state. This natural state is, from Veblen’s perspective, a pre-technological one, “savage” insofar as it

aligns with the so-called “savages” of non-industrial societies outside the West.²² Though Veblen’s Western contemporaries have tended to think of “savagery” as a deficiency of civilization, Veblen accords “savagery” what he believes is a place of honor, regarding it as a space blissfully untouched by the modern myopic focus on monetary gain.²³ What Veblen’s European society regards as the newfound *capacity* of the machine age is for Veblen a manifestation of *incapacity*: “Neither the manner of life imposed by the machine process, nor the manner of thought inculcated by habituation to its logic, will fall in with the free movement of the human spirit, born, as it is, to fit the conditions of savage life” (334). In critiquing the manner of thought created by industrialism, Veblen notes specifically how the language of efficiency and the primacy given to pecuniary success become incapacitating. The inherent state of humans does not naturally incline them towards the discursive and cognitive frames of industrialism, Veblen argues; thus, the discursive and cognitive frames of industrialism can incapacitate even as they seem to create increased capacity. In fact, Veblen argues, the language of economic gain among his contemporaries has caused conflicts of interest and self-defeating societal patterns that are disguised by an ill-fitted vocabulary of success.

It is with these concerns in mind that Veblen invokes the phrase “trained incapacity.” Veblen uses the phrase not to designate the entirety of the problem at hand, but to specifically diagnose how a particular form of specialized training within the industrial age’s mass production model sabotages the versatile “workmanship” model—a single person’s involvement with the whole process of creation and sale—that had informed older economic systems.

²² Veblen’s uncritical acceptance of this racially charged derogatory term does not mean that he *intended* to extend the term’s racism; in fact, Veblen likely saw himself as part of an equalizing cosmopolitan project. However, neither is his attempt to praise the good qualities of the “savage” mindset an exonerating from the racial Othering in which he—perhaps unwittingly—participates.

²³ The “noble savage” is, of course, a figure that extends far beyond Veblen, appearing as a trope in literature, anthropology, and philosophy. Though ostensibly honorific towards non-Western traditions, this trope is still deeply problematic, creating a kind of exoticizing fascination with the Other.

Because individuals no longer approach economics with a broad-minded view, the disjointed system they form is ultimately self-defeating:

All this working at cross purposes is not altogether due to trained incapacity on the part of several contestants to appreciate the large and general requirements of the industrial situation; perhaps it is not even chiefly due to such inability, but rather to an habitual, and conventionally rightful, disregard of other than pecuniary considerations. It would doubtless appear that a trained inability to apprehend any other than the immediate pecuniary bearing of their manoeuvres accounts for a larger share in the conduct of the business-men who control industrial affairs than it does in that of their workmen, since the habitual employment of the former holds them more rigorously and consistently to the pecuniary valuation of whatever passes under their hands. (347)

Thus, Veblen's concern with incapacity importantly rejects Peirce's optimistic view of symbol-using. For Peirce, consistency in the application of a terminology means proximity to the final interpretant, which in turn means the best possible antidote to the problem of human incapacity. For Veblen, however, there is such a thing as a final interpretant that is itself incapacitating, if the uniformly adopted terminology works against the interests of its users. Veblen worries that the reigning terminology of economic orientation is functionally a translation of human value into explicitly monetary currency, a translation of the human being into John Stuart Mill's *homo economicus*.²⁴ Among competing terminologies, Veblen is not content to let prevailing usage reign. Instead, Veblen insists, even language itself—Peirce's capacitating instrument—can become a purveyor of incapacity.

²⁴ That is, "economic man" or "economic human." Though Mill is often credited with coining the phrase, he himself never used it. Rather, Mill's critics used it in reference to his work, and it has since come to name an economic reduction of humanity, a philosophical move for which Mill is often indicted (Persky 221-222).

In Burke's uptake of Veblen, the concern with language's incapacitating potential is extended still further. Veblen's trained incapacity named a single case in which Veblen believed the prevailing terminology had become a source of incapacity. Burke universalizes the argument, suggesting that any terministic frame can become a source of incapacity when it becomes static. In fact, there is a passage of Burke's unpublished writing preserved among his archived notes that shows him exploring the linguistic dynamics of trained incapacity. The Kenneth Burke Papers at Penn State include a folder titled "Notes, Typescripts on 'Trained Incapacity'" which contains several notes taken by Burke as he prepared to write the early portion of his book *Permanence and Change*. One of these notes in particular shows Burke exploring the possible applications of "trained incapacity" to conceptual territory beyond Veblen's original imagining. Burke writes,

note connection between Veblen's concept of "trained incapacity" and what we have called "occupational insanity" (as when a Ford selects the advisors who corroborate his views) ... - and the fish whose "abilities" and "training" as a fish unfit him to be a good pianist. ... or consider that harmless little "parlor insanity" which occurs when one asks a person to name a four-letter word ending in "-eny." one may, with this beneath his eye, readily run through the alphabet and decide that the missing letter is "d." but if the thing is kept visual, the person trying to solve it pronounces the three letters in his imagination as "en'ny" (and "any" in "many"). hence, when he runs through the alphabet, he passes up "deny" since there is no word "denny." ("P14")

Burke's first example, that of the fish, appears in a slightly altered form in the final published version of *Permanence and Change*: "The poor *pedestrian* abilities of a fish are clearly explainable in terms of his excellence as a *swimmer*" (48, emphasis in original). His linguistic

example is absent from the final publication, however, perhaps because Burke worried that it was difficult to explain the parlor trick in only written words to those who had not already experienced it. Yet the example is illuminating because it shows Burke treating linguistic capacity itself—the ability to convert written symbols into an imagined spoken word—as a potential source of incapacity.

Burke's examples of trained incapacity here also revise Veblen's approach in the sense that they allow for a simultaneity of capacity and incapacity. In Veblen's economic critique, he considered the semiotic and social model he decried to be wholly incapacitating, needing to be permanently erased by another and more capacitating frame. For Burke, however, the very same frames are at once capacitating and incapacitating. To convert written words into imagined sounds is indeed a linguistic gift, but it may become disadvantageous under certain circumstances. To be a fish is an aquatic gift, but it is not a musical or peripatetic gift. Burke treats human symbol-using not *merely* as an inevitable source of incapacity, but as an inevitable source of incapacity that is *also* and *concomitantly* an inevitable source of advantage. The incapacities of a terminology are only truly incapacitating when they become concretized. By the same token, the virtue of any supposed incapacity is its unique ability to resist other incapacities.

The Birth of Fluid Semiosis

As Burke adapts the concept of trained incapacity into a category of his own—something far exceeding Veblen's conception—he articulates the foundations of what I have called *fluid semiosis*. Fluid semiosis is a rhetorical posture which regards incapacities as necessary byproducts of symbol use, only truly incapacitating when they become static. For Burke, the true rhetorical failure would be the determination of a final answer. In fact, it is Burke's very resistance of definition, what Wayne Booth called Burke's refusal to "stay pinned and wriggling

on anyone else's wall chart" (102), that makes him such a valuable theorist for tackling the quandaries currently facing scholars of nondominant rhetorics.

Curiously, Burke credits to Veblen's trained incapacity more than Veblen directly claimed. "By trained incapacity," writes Burke at the beginning of *Permanence and Change*, "[Veblen] meant that state of affairs whereby one's very abilities can function as blindnesses" (7).²⁵ Whether by oversight or by intention, Burke attributes to Veblen a degree of the universality that Burke has read into Veblen's trained incapacity. This is not to say that Burke willfully misrepresents Veblen. Rather, he clarifies, "Veblen generally restricts the concept to the case of business men who, through long training in competitive finance, have so built their scheme of orientation about this kind of effort and ambition that they cannot see serious possibilities in any other system of production and distribution" (7). The phrase "generally restricts" suggests Burke had already forgotten that Veblen invoked trained incapacity only once, a harbinger of Burke's later uncertainty about whether Veblen really used the phrase at all. In Burke's mind, it appears, the concept of trained incapacity had already grown broad enough to address a variety of societal problems. Burke approaches trained incapacity as if its broad applicability is so obvious that it can be presumed in Veblen's work.

As he universalizes the potential applications of trained incapacity, Burke makes the case

²⁵ Much could be said about Burke's use of the language of disability—blindness, in the case of this quotation—as a metaphor for ineffectiveness and disadvantage. Such language is problematic from a disability studies perspective for two reasons. First, it assumes the inherent undesirability of minority forms of embodiment. Second, it relies on this supposed inherent undesirability as the premise upon which a subsequent argument is built. The result is a theoretical counterpart of the phenomenon David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder call *narrative prosthesis*, the conversion of disability experience into a conceptual "crutch" upon which ableist narratives and ideas are constructed. For more on the problematics of Burke's approach to disability, see Jordynn Jack's critique of Burke in light of disability studies. It bears remembering, however, that Burke's tacit attitude towards disability is also explicitly challenged by his own claims of fluid semiosis. Burke's argument that "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (*Permanence* 49), though it perhaps reflects ableist assumptions about vision, also offers something like a proto-disability-studies critique of the seeming inherencies of advantage and disadvantage. Thus, in this particular case as in many others, Burke's work offers an occasion for reflexive self-critique, a meta-Burkean historiographic reconsideration.

that anything can become a trained incapacity because the world is not comprised of static problems and solutions. Again, his opposition to the Peircean linguistic model is plain:

The problems of existence do not have one fixed, unchanging character, like the label on a bottle. They are open to many interpretations—and these interpretations in turn influence our selection of means. Hence the place of ‘trained incapacity’ in the matter of means-selecting. One adopts measures in keeping with his past training—and the very soundness of this training may lead him to adopt the wrong measures. People may be unfitted by being fit in an unfit fitness. (10)

Because of the world’s constant evolution, Burke argues, it would be foolish to assume a static semiotic posture. After all, as soon as the character of a problem changes, the terministic screen well suited to the old problem may not be suited to the new. Burke’s point is not merely that some forms of fitness become “unfit fitness,” but that all forms of fitness have this potential.

Unlike Veblen, who optimistically advocates for alternative terministic screens to the one he sees generating trained incapacity, Burke’s advocacy is more measured. There are, to be sure, claims in Burke’s system of better and worse terminologies, more and less helpful frames of analysis. Yet if Burke’s treatment of incapacity is to be applied across the whole of his corpus, these claims are nonetheless offered partially, with an awareness of their situatedness to the particular problems they address and the possibility that a change in how “the problems of existence” are interpreted may necessitate yet another change in terminology. Burke’s cheeky evaluation of other philosophers’ approaches to the nature of reality applies equally to his own approach: “The universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways—and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men’s cuts fall at the wrong places” (103).

Fluid semiosis is Burke's response to the infinite possibilities contained within this universal human "cheese." Because the orientations of human problems do not remain static, their solutions cannot be static either. Burke urges against the permanent adoption of a single screen of analysis. Though he posits his own screen of analysis and claims its value, he nonetheless caveats this offering by pointing out that it is dependent upon the circumstances which call it into being:

To live is to have a vocation, and to have a vocation is to have an ethics or scheme of values, and to have a scheme of values is to have a point of view, and to have a point of view is to have a prejudice or bias which will motivate and color our choice of means. In this respect, my thesis might be called subjective, or solipsistic. But the 'discoveries' which flow from the point of view are nothing other than revisions made necessary by the nature of the world itself. They thus have an objective validity. (257)

Had Burke written these words sixty years later, they might have been read as part of the nascent discourse on standpoint and positionality by scholars like Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock (*Feminist*), and Joseph Rouse. Although Burke does not discuss the power differentials between subject positions, his central claim about the interestedness of knowledge provides a rationale for being always willing to think beyond dominant terministic screens and consider marginal positions. Fluid semiosis is not categorical subjectivism or solipsism, though Burke acknowledges why such an accusation may seem earned. In fact, Burke explains, it is the revisability of a terminology according to new rhetorical input that enables partiality without solipsism.

As Timothy W. Crusius has argued, Burke was never interested in offering his readers *the* definitive epistemology. Even though Burke wrote at a time when philosophy was still

committed to the modern ideal of a true and final answer, Burke cleverly functioned as “postPhilosophical” by refusing to design his work within such an ideal. Ever the iconoclast, Burke rejected the static semiotic model operating around him: the perspective that terminologies must always preclude their opposites, negating competing terminologies because they exist in place of them. Burke, as we have already seen, eschews the notion that the problems to which language is applied have “one fixed, unchanging character, like the label on a bottle.” If problems are not static, responsible semiosis cannot be static.

Burke’s rejection of static semiosis and his revision of the Peircean model, begun in *Permanence and Change*, continues in later publications. His essay “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” included in the 1941 publication of *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, challenges a desire for fixity that Burke believes has pervaded semiotics. This “semantic ideal,” as Burke defines it, is “the aim *to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe*” (123). Though Burke never names the originators of this approach, it is hard not to recognize the similarity here to Peirce’s aspiration that “each word should have a single exact meaning.” Like Peirce’s “Ethics of Terminology,” the semantic ideal Burke assesses here begins with scientific discourse and then grows to envelop all terminology, aspiring to precise and unchanging representationalism in language.

Once it is fully realized, Burke argues, the semantic ideal would build up a technical mode of analysis that gave us permanently and constantly a kind of mitigated withdrawal, thereby converting a transitional stage into an institution. Like the monastic orders, it would “bureaucratize” a purgatorial mood, turning a “state of evanescence” into a fixity by giving it an established routine. It would prolong a moment into a “way of life.” (121)

Part of what makes the semantic ideal so problematic, Burke explains, is that it fails to recognize the transitional nature of terminologies. By flattening the temporalities of discursive shifts, it tries to halt the natural evolution of language, turning a fluid system into a static one. Like Peirce's teleology of final interpretants, however, the semantic ideal can never be fully realized: "It might be more just to say that the semantic ideal is the *perfection* of trends which we find here in their aggravatedly *imperfect* state" (142). The semantic ideal represents a self-defeating pursuit of unachievable perfection. It is what Burke would later, in his definition of [hu]man, call "rotten with perfection" (*Language* 16). In overturning the rotten approach of the semantic ideal, Burke offers instead a partial and fluid approach to semantics: "we should seek for neutralization *at moments*, for given purposes, and not as a blanket program for vocabulary, since the loss in *action now* (that is, in full moral asseveration) would be too great were the semantic ideal to prevail" (143). Burke advocates for a terminological frame that is fundamentally impermanent and responsive to situational need. No terminology, not even his own, is exempted from the potential to become incapacitating.

Of course, it may be objected that Burke did later settle on a single terministic which he believed worthy of static adoption: the frame of dramatism. Dramatism is, as *A Grammar of Motives* explains, Burke's attempt to classify the formations of terminologies according to the representative anecdote of drama. Rhetorical situations are thus divided into the theatrical component parts of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. This choice of metaphor causes Burke's analysis to be weighted towards "the realm of *action*, as against scientific reduction to sheer *motion*" (61)—apparently a preference of one mode of thought as permanently more advantageous than another. Dramatism is often taken up by Burke scholars as the primary contribution of Burke's work, a universalizable method of rhetorical analysis. Both the codifying

nature of the nomenclature and its uptake seem to suggest that Burke has departed from his prior vision of fluid semiosis.

Yet dramatism does not undo the evidence for fluid semiosis, I contend. In fact, Burke's incentive for the dramatistic project is grounded in part on his interest in fluid semiosis. Burke begins his introduction of dramatism in *A Grammar of Motives* with a discussion of *reflection*, *selection*, and *deflection*, a discussion that appears almost verbatim in his later essay on "Terministic Screens." In both instances, the point of the passage is to argue that while language is always purposed to mirror reality, it must also always draw attention towards certain aspects of reality and away from other aspects. In light of the tensions between these functions, Burke explains, the dramatistic method can be a heuristic for evaluating competing terminologies: "Dramatism suggests a procedure to be followed in the development of a given calculus, or terminology. It involves the search for a 'representative anecdote,' to be used as a form in conformity with which the vocabulary is constructed" (*Grammar* 59). Burke defends the value of dramatism precisely because it calls its users to attend to the variability of language. That is, dramatism is not so much meant to be an *example* of static nomenclature as it is an *antidote* to static nomenclature. It is possible, of course, that Burke might have unwittingly produced the very kind of static semiosis he meant to undo. Still, he avoids this error insofar as he acknowledges that dramatism itself is subject to the variability of language and merits constant reconsideration. Dramatism is a representative anecdote, Burke says, and therefore it must be subject to the same dramatistic fluidity as every other representative anecdote.

This is not to say that Burke applied his own ideal of fluid semiosis with perfect consistency throughout his corpus. On the contrary, as we have already seen, Burke readily admitted his own failure to achieve the full measure of the Burkean system's possibilities. Yet

fluid semiosis is an inescapable aspect of Burke's work, especially when considered in contrast to the static semiotic attitudes that preceded it. If Burke did indeed reject static semiosis in favor of a more itinerant model, then any Burkean theory which claims static finitude in its interpretation has missed the spirit of the text.

Towards a Fluid Semiosis

Static semiosis poses a particular problem for language that operates on the margins of society. After all, the narrative of the final interpretant enrolls language in an evolutionary process of quasi-Darwinian proportions, progressing towards an end in which only the fittest of interpretative frameworks survive. In this evolutionary process, social power and majority opinion are easily mistaken as the guiding principles of linguistic validity. That is, the terminologies most likely to be treated by a majority of people as the best representations of reality are not necessarily going to be the terminologies best suited to resolving the challenges facing nondominant groups. Static semiosis thus tends to advantage the powerful while further disenfranchising the disenfranchised. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich bemoans this state of affairs when she writes, "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you" (364). Rhetors speaking from nondominant subject positions are caught between two opposing rhetorical demands: Should they speak in the dominant idiom in order to be best understood, even though that idiom is poorly suited to say what they want to say? Or should they persist in using an alternative terministic screen, even at the risk of misunderstanding, in order to try to change the dominant idiom?

Some rhetors of nondominant groups have chosen to fall almost exclusively within one of these two camps. Either they consistently operate within dominant idioms, or they consistently reject them. In either case, they remain consistent—and as such, fluid semiosis may offer little

fresh insight in the analysis of these rhetors.²⁶ Other rhetors, however, or collectives of rhetors, choose to negotiate between the two camps, appropriating the dominant idiom at times and rejecting it at other times, or even appropriating and rejecting it simultaneously, as the coming chapters will show. A rhetorical critic operating predominantly within a frame of static semiosis might dismiss such variability as a rhetorical flaw, proof of terministic inconsistency and therefore proof of logical inconsistency. The fluid semiotic frame, however, offers another kind of analysis. It reveals that the seeming contradictions of terminologies that emanate from the margins are often a product of the discursive challenges faced by those who enact them.

Fluid semiosis has particular value for understanding the construction of rhetorically salient nondominant identities in a world heavily impacted by postmodern thought. Postmodernism sometimes poses a problem for individual identity construction because, as Biesecker argues in *Addressing Postmodernity*, the deconstruction of the modern subject can easily result in a complete loss of agency. What Burke offers us, Biesecker proposes, is a way of rethinking identity according to its rhetorical constitution both individually and collectively, enabling agency without reinstating modern subjectivity. Instead of writing the planned *Symbolic of Motives*, which was to be about the key term “identity,” Burke wrote *The Rhetoric of Religion*, which was about logology, “words about words.” Biesecker calls this substitution purposeful, explaining that Burke frames identity not in terms of an immutable substance but as “words about words.” For Burke, identities are as powerful and true and permanent and fluid as the language used to describe them. When brought into rhetorical scholarship’s current discourses of marginality, then, Burke serves as a means of avoiding either stark acceptance or stark rejection

²⁶ Indeed, at times marginalized voices have distinguished themselves from dominant idioms precisely by their resistance of ambiguity. As a typifying example, we might think of Sojourner Truth, whose unapologetic account of her own slavery and unapologetic demands for equal rights in the 1800s combated the slipperiness and gentility of white male rhetoric with extreme frankness.

of “marginality” itself as a category of identity. In a world where negotiating identity and marginality becomes ever more complicated, Burke’s nuance and complexity is a gift to the future of rhetorical studies.

In the chapters that follow, I will consider case studies of nondominant discourses that exhibit fluid semiosis in action. That is, they show how a rhetorical community which is, has been, or perceives itself to be on the margins of society has negotiated seemingly contradictory terminologies. Whether or not they are purposefully enacted, the fluidities of these discourses operate strategically as both critiques of and participants in a dominant idiom. They occupy a semiosis that is both right and wrong, sometimes necessary and sometimes insufficient. They show the paucity of a static semiotic model to represent the complexities of nondominant identity construction. And they show that the work of Kenneth Burke, for all its faults, can still offer much to the study of rhetoric in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER TWO

Bitches and Pussies: Liminality in the Reclamation of Derogatory Terms

In 1970, feminist activist Jo Freeman published a seven-page pamphlet called “The BITCH Manifesto.” Writing under the nom de plume “Joreen,” Freeman argued that the epithet “bitch” should be recovered as a term of honor. “Bitch” was regarded as an insult, she proposed, because it described “a class of people who do not conform to socially accepted patterns of behavior” (2). To be a bitch was to be bold and assertive in the midst of a patriarchy that encouraged such behavior from men but condemned it in women. If, Freeman reasoned, the social boundaries placed on women’s behavior were flawed, then deviating from those boundaries was not a shameful act at all: “A woman should be proud to declare she is a Bitch, because Bitch is Beautiful” (2).

In declaring that “Bitch is Beautiful,” Freeman’s manifesto plainly mimicked the language of the “Black is Beautiful” movement. “Black is Beautiful,” a campaign which had risen to prominence in the 1960s, was instrumental in reclaiming the once-derogatory term “black” as a term of power (G. Coles, “Exorcism” 431-433). The movement was so successful in its reclamation of “black” that, by the late 1960s, many African Americans had begun to prefer “black” over its once-favored counterpart “colored” as a descriptor for their own racial identity (Hughes 26). As a result of this success, “Black is Beautiful” became a model for other activist reclamation efforts of the same era. In 1968, the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations adopted the mimetic slogan “Gay is Good” (Kameny 374). Freeman’s “Bitch is Beautiful” followed in this same tradition, advocating for “bitch” to be rescued from its

derogation just as “black” and “gay” were being rescued.¹

Nearly fifty years later, “black” and “gay” are no longer considered primarily derogatory.² “Bitch,” however, remains just as contested as ever. Feminists activists from Mary Daly to Andi Zeisler have continued advocating for the term’s reclamation, and reclaimed uses are not uncommon in popular culture³; nevertheless, “bitch” has not achieved the fully reclaimed status Freeman imagined for it. Even within feminist circles, the term continues to function ambivalently as both reclaimed and derogatory. Nor is “bitch” the only word to face this challenge in reclamation by feminists. Another recent and remarkable example is the word “pussy,” which activists since the 1990s have named and performed as a site of feminist reclamation (Gabebe; Pelle; Thomashauer). Yet the term’s role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the subsequent Women’s March on Washington, discussed further in this chapter, reveal the limitations this reclamation effort has faced. The broad acceptance enjoyed by “black” and “gay” still eludes “bitch” and “pussy,” forcing rhetoricians and activists alike to wonder whether such acceptance is attainable for these terms, or whether it would be desirable if it were attained.

In my own prior work on the reclamation of derogatory terms, I have described two types of reclamation practice. *Redemptive reclamation* reclaims a derogatory term for broad

¹ Of course, the history of reclamation vastly predates all of these terms. Many terms that now seem innocuous—or at least predominantly innocuous—have a history of derogation and reclamation. These include religious terms (“Quaker,” “Pagan,” “Protestant,” “Mormon,” “Methodist”), ethnic and cultural labels (“black,” “Yankee”), and designators of sexual identity (“gay,” “queer,” “dyke”), among others. Even the word “rhetoric” has been used derogatively and then self-consciously reclaimed by rhetoricians for millennia. Some of these words are now so far removed from their derogatory past that it is difficult to remember the destructive power they once carried—what a slight it once was, for example, to mock the trembling that occurred during meetings of the Religious Society of Friends by calling those who attended the meetings “quakers.”

² Both words, however, can still occasionally function in this way, as when they are pluralized with a definite article—“the blacks” or “the gays”—as they notoriously were in 2016 by then-presidential-candidate Donald Trump (Abadi). “Gay” has also taken on the secondary derogatory meaning that a thing is foolish or undesirable—“that’s so gay”—although this use is widely condemned (“Gay”).

³ Two prominent examples are Tina Fey and Amy Poehler’s 2008 Saturday Night Live sketch about Hillary Clinton, and Madonna’s song “Bitch I’m Madonna (ft. Nicki Minaj),” both of which I discuss in greater detail below.

categorical use by asserting that the term has never been false, only misunderstood. Words like “black” and “queer” exemplify this kind of reclamation, seeming to lose their derogatory flavor almost entirely. *Restricted reclamation*, in contrast, reclaims a term only for in-group use by mockingly directing attention to its derogatory history, as in the cases of “faggot” and “nigger.”⁴ Words reclaimed in this way are still understood to be derogatory but become taboo for those outside the designated in-group. It is necessary, I have argued, to understand redemptive reclamation and restricted reclamation not as *successes* and *failures* of reclamation, but simply as *alternative strategies* of reclamation, each having its own virtues in equipping a once-derogated group with linguistic power (“Exorcism” 345-348).

These two categories of reclamation are insufficient, however, to describe the reclamation efforts for “bitch” and “pussy.” Despite the ostensible similarities between these feminist reclamations and other reclamation movements, “bitch” and “pussy” have not achieved the near-complete removal of derogation that usually accompanies redemptive reclamation. Neither have they gained the widely acknowledged taboo status and restriction to in-group members characteristic of restricted reclamation. Instead, these terms seem to inhabit a third space which resists the logic of both categories. Arguments for the reclamation of “bitch” and “pussy,” rather than producing widespread cultures of linguistic practice in which the terms’ reclaimed use becomes normal, have succeeded primarily in generating further arguments about reclamation. Both “bitch” and “pussy” continually perform the *movement towards* reclamation without ever performing the *attainment of* reclamation. They perform a reclamation that constantly subverts itself.

⁴ My use of these terms and others like them is not meant to suggest that I am comfortable invoking them for myself. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, I use derogatory terms only as reported discourse except in cases where members of the designated group have indicated their preference to be identified with these terms by non-members. I have chosen to spell out all terms for the sake of clarity.

How can rhetorical scholars make sense of the complex legacies of “bitch” and “pussy” in relation to other reclamation narratives? What makes some incendiary terms resistant to either redemptive or restricted reclamation? I argue in this chapter that “bitch” and “pussy” are examples of *liminal reclamation*, a term I coin to describe the rhetorical space in which a word appears to be in permanent transition, always approaching but never arriving at a “reclaimed” linguistic identity. Liminal reclamation calls public attention to these words’ contested status as possible sites of reclamation in order to foreground in dialogue the very issues that make them both useful and problematic. Their reclamation never concludes, then, because their contribution to social change occurs in the ongoing performance of transition. By simultaneously becoming reclaimed and refusing reclamation, liminally reclaimed words make strategic use of fluid semiosis to perpetuate their salience as sites of interrogation. They reside in a permanent state of transition.

One generative system for theorizing this permanent state of transition is Kenneth Burke’s. As I have already shown in chapter one, Burke resisted C. S. Pierce’s static semiotic ideal by arguing that static terministic frames generate incapacity. Burke thus nudges language in the direction of a productive liminality he calls “perspective by incongruity.” One manifestation of productive liminality, as I will argue in this chapter, is the possibility for language to perform its own unending process of purgation. Burke creates space for this process within his system when he uses the enigmatic phrase “logonomical purgatory” as an analogy for perspective by incongruity. Indirectly derived from Hegel, “logonomical purgatory” allows Burke to describe the space in which terms are purged as if bound for a final “heavenly” goal of semiosis and yet never arrive in this anticipated settled space. Thus, logonomical purgatory offers rhetorical scholarship a tool for theorizing liminal reclamation and other permanent states of transition in

the terministic realm.

My inquiry in this chapter will proceed along the following lines: I begin by exploring the roots of “logonomical purgatory” and the implications of Burke’s use of the term, demonstrating the theoretical possibility—and utility—of language that performs permanent transition. This exploration provides the basis for a theory of liminal reclamation, attending to how liminality has manifested in the cases of “bitch” and “pussy.” These two terms share several distinctive features that make them resistant to more straightforward patterns of reclamation—and other liminally reclaimed terms, I propose, may function liminally for the same reasons. Finally, I consider the political implications and complications of these liminally reclaimed spaces, speculating about the “endgame” of a process not oriented towards termination.

The Eternal Purgatory of Language

In 1953, Burke began work on a revised edition of *Permanence and Change* to be published by Hermes Press in 1954. He had, as he wrote to Malcolm Cowley, “decided to make only a few stylistic changes, and to leave the ideationally problematic statements as they were, but give them a semanticist twist by footnotes” (KB to MC, Jan. 16, 1953; Jay 314). As well as adding footnotes, Burke also added brief introductions to each of the book’s three sections and a prologue to the whole project. Like Burke’s added footnotes, these other additions also contributed to the “semanticist twist” of the new edition. Rather than offering a mere roadmap of his old work, Burke used these ostensibly “introductory” passages to extend and complicate his original text. As Malcolm Cowley would observe to Burke after reading the revised manuscript of *Permanence and Change*, “All your prologues are epilogues, all your first chapters are last chapters, all your introductions wander into new territory and require a knowledge of Burkeranto that transform them into afterwords” (MC to KB, 29 Aug. 1953; Jay 218). Burke’s ongoing

negotiation with his own ideas is fully on display, not only during his revision process but also in the published versions of these additions.

The phrase “logonomical purgatory” first enters Burke’s rhetorical system in this 1954 revision of *Permanence and Change*, in his new introduction to the book’s second section. The second section, titled “Perspective by Incongruity,” is concerned with the state of transition that exists as terminological orientations are negotiated and exchanged. In the new edition’s introduction, Burke explains his rationale for giving this intermediate stage the name “perspective by incongruity,” and he offers logonomical purgatory as a theoretical equivalent of perspective by incongruity:

The intermediate stage involves a shattering or fragmentation, analogous to the stage of “rending and tearing” (or *sparagmos*) in tragic ritual. (The equivalent of such a process in the Hegelian dialectic has been called a “logonomical purgatory.”) Here reasons are offered for calling it “perspective by incongruity” (with the placing of special stress upon the kinds of hermeticism, or stylistic mercureality, that are got by the merging of categories once felt to be mutually exclusive). (69)

In selecting “perspective by incongruity” as his primary terminology, Burke acknowledges that this framing is meant to lay particular emphasis on a certain aspect of the transitional state. As he had written nine years earlier, in what would become the foundation of his famous essay on terministic screens, “any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality” (*Grammar* 59). Burke thus recognizes the necessarily partial nature of the “special stress” implied by his choice of terminology, framing this emphasis as one among many possibilities. Rather than allowing the terministic screen of “perspective by incongruity” to stand alone in depicting the transitory state of Part II, Burke offers his readers two equivalent terms as

analog of perspective by incongruity. The first of these equivalent terms is *sparagmos*, the ritual dismemberment of a living creature in Greek tragic drama. Derived from drama, *sparagmos* lends itself naturally to the dramatistic frame, and dramatistic idioms have dominated Burke's recent publications. The appearance of *sparagmos* here is unsurprising, then, because it situates Burke's older work in *Permanence and Change* with his more recent writing in the *Motivorum*.

The second equivalent term, logonomical purgatory, is in this sense less predictable. Unlike perspective by incongruity and *sparagmos*, logonomical purgatory does not direct attention to any already extant realm of Burke's theory; instead, it presages Burke's later work on logology in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. The role that Burke accords to logonomical purgatory here is thus highly remarkable, even despite its brevity. Of the three terministic screens Burke offers for understanding transitory language, both perspective by incongruity and dramatism are already central facets of Burke's system. Yet Burke treats the screen of logonomical purgatory as significant enough to mention alongside the other screens in this short introductory space, as a screen that can offer additional insight for describing mercureality in language.

What drew Burke to the phrase "logonomical purgatory" as a strategy for conceiving of transition? How did it merit being included in an introduction that marked the ongoing genesis of Burke's thought? The best answers to these questions can be found by considering the phrase's roots. Burke seems to have borrowed "logonomical purgatory" from his recent reading of French philosopher Jean Wahl, whose *Petite Histoire de "L'Existentialisme"* (*A Short History of Existentialism*) was published in French in 1947 and translated into English in 1949. Wahl, it appears, coined the phrase as a means of grappling with the temporal implications of being and phenomenology in Hegel and Sartre:

Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* proclaims a possible liaison between the logomachy of Hegel

and the philosophy of existence. To become ‘existentialism,’ existence first passes through the logonomical purgatory⁵ of ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ to rediscover itself—impoverished to the limit. (38-39)

Wahl’s “purgatory” is a state of conceptual transition depicted temporally. Unlike perspective by incongruity, which frames transition through visual and spatial metaphor as “the merging of categories,” logonomical purgatory analogizes conceptual transition to the passage of time. Moreover, the phrase’s theological implications—purgatory as a space in which souls are purged and perfected in order to become admissible to heaven—are well suited to the traditional optimistic reading of Hegel’s dialect. According to this traditional reading, Hegel sees history on an inevitable trajectory toward perfection, its logomachies performed in service of its ultimate *telos* in freedom, reason, and truth. The “purgatorial” element of logonomical purgatory depicts words themselves entering into the Hegelian process of purification, participating in the teleological motion of history. Although in Sartre, the promised eschaton turns out to be nothing more than the reemergence of existence as impoverished existentialism, the same purgatorial temporality is still at work. Even in its secular nihilist rendering, purgatory promises an eventual emergence, a point of arrival on the other side of transition.

Burke’s invocation of “logonomical purgatory” seems calculated to push against this prophecy of emergence. Burke raises the example of “logonomical purgatory” as a means of situating his own theory of language alongside and against the frame of the Hegelian dialectic. The “rending and tearing” of *sparagmos*, and the “merging of categories” in perspective by incongruity, are processes equivalent to Hegel’s purgatory insofar as they implicate a metamorphic change of substance. Yet Burke is clear, both in *Permanence and Change* and

⁵ In Wahl’s original French, the phrase is “purgatoire logonomique” (69).

elsewhere in his writing, that he does not share Hegel's vision of the *telos* of language.⁶ Instead of seeing dialectic on a melioristic trajectory towards ultimate goodness—as logonomical purgatory moves terms towards an eventual terminological “heaven”—Burke views purgation as cyclical and ongoing. To be enrolled in logonomical purgatory is not, for Burke, to be promised an eventual emergence. It is instead to be shaped by the narrative of progress towards perfection, regardless of whether or not that perfection—or an ending of any kind—is ultimately reached. It is to perform the temporal process of transition, even if the transitory state never ends. Language may be transitional and yet remain in a permanent state of transition.⁷

This paradoxical conjointment of motion and motionlessness, of becoming and being, appears even in the original text of *Permanence and Change*. In the final pages of Part II—the same portion of the book introduced with a mention of logonomical purgatory in the revised edition—Burke grapples with the implications of relating historical problems of humankind as either persisting into the present day or having been transcended through “progress.” To focus on the normative and persistent nature of these problems is, Burke proposes, to adopt a philosophy of *being*, whereas the narrative of progress reflects a philosophy of *becoming*. “The whole idea of progress,” he writes, “when approached from such an angle, seems to have cloaked one long hysterical attempt to escape from a grossly mismanaged present” (163). That is, the philosophy of *becoming* and the notion of progress matter not so much for their representational quality of actual movement as for their power to transform perceptions of a present state of *being*. As

⁶ For more on Burke's resistance to the teleology of the Hegelian dialectic, see Robert Wess.

⁷ This notion of the “permanent state of transition” bears some similarity to Burke's discussion of pure persuasion in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke defines pure persuasion as “the saying of something, not for an extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying” (269). Intrinsic rhetorical self-gratification contributes to the perpetuation of rhetorical activity; pure persuasion appears to work toward a final goal of identification, but in fact it wants merely to continue seeking-to-identify. Burke expects rhetorical situations and words themselves to lie liminally unresolved at times, moving towards a *telos* without ever reaching it, a terminological Zeno's paradox.

Timothy W. Crusius explains, “Burke sees no profit in debating the Truth of Becoming. But he is very interested in the consequences of taking Becoming as the Truth” (105). Whether or not *becoming* is an ontological reality, *belief in becoming* has lived consequences. Even a functionally immobile state can be terminologically animated by claims of progress: *We have progressed. We are progressing. We will progress.* The language of movement transforms our discourse whether or not such movement actually occurs.

Consider the implications of such a view when it is brought to bear upon the phrase “logonomical purgatory.” Purgatory is a state of *being* that is fundamentally oriented around *becoming*; the soul resides in purgatory precisely because the soul must progress through imperfection to perfection. At any given moment in time, the inhabitant of purgatory can be described as “in transition” even though transition is only measurable across a collection of moments through time. The promise of transition alters the meaning of *being* even in the static space where *becoming* cannot be expressed; in other words, transition “works” on a logological level whether or not the promised *becoming* ever occurs. Likewise, whether the implied “heaven” of a logonomical purgatory ever materializes is inconsequential to the analysis of its punctiliar quality. Burke casts doubt on claims of progress without ever doubting the terminological power of “progress” as an idea to transform conceptions of reality.

The possibility for this reading of “logonomical purgatory” is bolstered by Burke’s subsequent logological frame in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. The study of logology, *words about words*, is concerned with how words reveal their linguistic nature regardless of their correspondence to reality. As Burke explains, “Regardless of whether the entity named ‘God’ exists outside his nature sheerly as key term in a system of terms, words ‘about him’ must reveal their nature as words” (2). By the same token, it makes no difference to Burke whether purgatory

exists in a theological sense, as a literal extraterrestrial place, because its logological sense is equally ripe with possibility in either case. Nor must the promised end of purgatory arrive in order for its transitional purgation to be rhetorically meaningful. Burke makes this clear in his discussion of transcendence in Augustine's *Confessions*, where he raises the possibility of terminological purgation as one means toward transcendence: "If [a transcendent terminology] is consistent with itself, then the term for the transcendent function must be there at the start, either explicitly or implicitly. Usually it is implicit, and is gradually purged of its obscurities" (128). Like the logonomical purgatory of *Permanence and Change*, this purging of terminological obscurity in *The Rhetoric of Religion* promises a pathway towards transcendence, a final arrival at a higher plane of vision. And yet, logologically, the linguistic necessity for purgation remains for as long as the verbal notion of purgation remains. Transcendence cannot be fully realized insofar as it must be invited. It is fitting, then, that Burke immediately turns to Augustine's use of the word "cling" (*inhaerere*) as proof of the fragility of transcendence. To the degree that transcendence is realized, Augustine encounters the eternity of the divine. And yet, linguistically, the pursuit of eternity is itself an eternal endeavor. Burke's logonomical purgatory is an eternal purgatory of language, an endless journey fated to result in endless journeying, a permanent state of transition. Words caught in this purgatory do not cease making meaning. On the contrary, they make meaning in transition, rendered powerful by their performed partiality.

Performing Liminal Reclamation

What does it look like in practice for words to perform an unending logonomical purgatory? A paradigmatic example of this state is the phenomenon I call *liminal reclamation*: the rhetorical space in which a word appears to be always approaching but never arriving at a "reclaimed" linguistic identity. The terms "bitch" and "pussy" exhibit this kind of reclamation, I

argue, having been taken up by repeatedly by feminist movements and yet never seeming to progress towards a fundamentally altered rhetorical state.⁸ That is, they have not come to share the traits of redemptive reclamation exemplified by words like “queer,” nor those of restricted reclamation exemplified by words like “faggot.” Instead, “bitch” and “pussy” have remained liminal, performing and calling attention to their contested status as a way of foregrounding feminist issues in dialogue. Neither wholly detrimental nor wholly constructive in their function, “bitch” and “pussy” demonstrate the fluid semiosis that makes it possible for them to be in turns a gift and a curse to feminist discourses. By remaining contested, liminally reclaimed words like these render salient the ideologies that underlie their reclamation.

Etymological Roots

Since many reclamation movements invoke terms’ etymologies as a strategy of reclamation, let me begin by considering the histories of “bitch” and “pussy” and their emergence as derogatory terms. “Bitch,” the older term, dates back to the eleventh-century Old English “bicce” and its Old Norse cognate “bikkja.” Whereas “bicce” was initially only a literal term for a female dog and was not applied opprobriously to women, “bikkja” was used derogatively from its inception. By the fourteenth century, the Middle English “bicche” had taken on the same derogation of women as its Norse counterpart, making it the oldest surviving animal insult in the English language (Hughes 23). Initially, the epithet “bicche” was directed against women regarded as sexually promiscuous, analogically comparing their behavior to that of female dogs in heat. When the term was applied to men—usually in the construction “son of a

⁸ These two words are, of course, not the only words to be taken up by feminists as possible sites of reclamation. Feminist reclamation extends back at least as far as the mid-eighteenth century, when academic women began reclaiming the insult “bluestocking” as a term of pride (Eger; Le Doeuff). Women have since proposed to reclaim such words as “slut” (Dow and Wood; Sollee; Tanenbaum), “chick” (Butler; Ferriss and Young), “witch” (Daly and Caputi; Sollee), and even “feminist” (Adichie; Moran; Redfern and Aune).

bitch,” but also sometimes independently—it did not carry the same sexual connotations.

During the eighteenth century, “bitch” gained a new non-sexual meaning for women as well, although the sexual implications of the term were not lost altogether. The new “bitch” was a harsh-tongued or angry woman, one who violated society’s expectations demanding her demure silence and acquiescence. The term has continued garnering nuance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, now also carrying connotations of the treacherous, the malicious, the aggressive, or the domineering (Hughes 24; “Bitch”). Observing these shifts, literary scholar Beverly Gross argues,

As women have become more liberated, individually and collectively, the word has taken on connotations of aggressive, hostile, selfish. In the old days a bitch was a harlot; nowadays she is likely to be a woman who won’t put out. Female sensuality, even carnality, even infidelity, have been supplanted as what men primarily fear and despise in women. Judging by the contemporary colorations of the word bitch, what men primarily fear and despise in women is power. (151)

Gross bases her observations in part on the definition of “bitch” provided by Robert L. Chapman, who proposes in a 1987 dictionary of American slang that a “bitch” is “a woman one dislikes or disapproves of” (27). Struck by the protean nature of this definition, Gross proposes that the meanings of “bitch” serve as a reflection of society’s current expressions of patriarchy. “Bitch” has changed, she argues, to keep time with the changing face of misogyny, its meaning always reflecting whatever traits men most despise or fear in the women around them. Thus, “bitch” is an exemplary linguistic battleground on which to fight for women’s right to self-definition. By the same token, it is likewise a natural candidate for Burke’s logonomical purgatory, because it bears the weight of an ever-changing derogation that can continually be purged without ever

emerging from that purgation.

“Pussy,” too, is a term well suited to mimic the process of Burkean transcendence without ever escaping the need for transcendence. Like “bitch,” “pussy” likely began as an analogical extension of an animal term.⁹ Derived from “puss,” a call name for a cat, “pussy” was used beginning in the 1500s to describe “a girl or woman exhibiting characteristics associated with a cat, esp. sweetness or amiability” (“Pussy”). Over time, amiability seems to have been conflated with openness to sexual encounters, and by the turn of the eighteenth century “pussy” had become a slang name for a woman’s vulva or vagina. In turn, “pussy” became a way of insulting a cowardly man by feminizing him. Thus, all the term’s current derogatory uses are ultimately derived from feline roots. Today, the term is sometimes used of “a woman, or women collectively, regarded as a source of sexual intercourse” (“Pussy”). Predominantly, however, the derogatory “pussy” has undergone a metonymic reduction, distilling a woman’s personhood down to her sexual organs and making them the object of a sexualized male gaze.

Unlike “bitch”—and, indeed, unlike most derogatory terms that have been the beneficiaries of reclamation movements—“pussy” does not function primarily as a derogatory *personal* label. That is, whereas one might derogate a forceful woman by calling her a “bitch” or derogate a lesbian by calling her a “dyke,” one does not typically derogate a woman by calling her a “pussy.” Rather, the term “pussy” derogates women at a degree of removal, by sexualizing them when it is used as a crass name for genitals. When used as a personal label for men deemed

⁹ Unlike “bitch,” however, “pussy” has a contested etymology. The theory presented here comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and is echoed by Bob Garfield and Mike Vuolo. *Merriam-Webster* editor Kory Stamper offers another etymology for “pussy,” arguing that the genital meaning of the word is derived from one of a few Scandinavian words meaning “vulva” or “pocket” (qtd. in Brooks). Even if Stamper’s explanation of the genital meaning is correct, the use of “pussy” as a synonym for “woman” beginning in the 1500s, and its use as an insult for a cowardly man, would still be feline in derivation. It seems likely, then, that the thinly veiled sexism of the “cowardly man” meaning is closely linked to the misogyny of the genital “pussy.” Still another theory proposes that the cowardly man “pussy” is a derivative of the Latin “pusillanimous” (Zoladz) and is therefore not misogynistic; however, no compelling proof of this link exists beyond the similar meanings of the two words.

excessively “feminine,” “pussy” indirectly derogates women by implying that stereotypically feminine traits are inferior to stereotypically masculine ones. Misogyny and heteronormativity work in tandem, as they so often do, to give “pussy” a pungent derogatory power in multiple realms. And because combatting the term in one realm often reinforces its power in another realm—as when a man who has been mocked insists, “I’m not a pussy,” thereby reinforcing the negative quality of the accusation—it easily falls into the liminal space theorized by way of Burke.

The Battle for “Bitch”

True to the liminality of their reclamation, both “bitch” and “pussy” have been repeatedly claimed as terms of feminist empowerment. With each such claim, a fresh feminist energy seems to arrive; yet no claim produces a sufficient shift in language to make subsequent claims unnecessary or blasé. Consider the reclamation argument for “bitch,” beginning with Freeman’s 1970 “BITCH Manifesto.” Seventeen years after the manifesto’s publication, Mary Daly and Jane Caputi included a quotation from Freeman in their playful feminist dictionary and defined “bitchy” as an adjective used to describe “a woman who is active, direct, blunt, obnoxious, competent, loud-mouthed, independent, stubborn, demanding, achieving, overwhelming, Lusty, strong-minded, scary, ambitious, tough, brassy, boisterous, turbulent, sprawling, strident, striding, and large (physically and/or psychically)” (108-109). Daly and Caputi’s list of synonyms for “bitchy” notably excludes words like “treacherous” and “malicious,” words that would be considered undesirable character traits for both men and women. Instead, Daly and Caputi focus their attention on the traits of the “bitch” which are discouraged in women but praised in men.

Countless other feminist projects have since followed Daly and Caputi’s line of thought.

The feminist magazine *Bitch* chose its name in 1996 as a performance of reclamation; editor Andi Zeisler argues, “When it’s being used as an insult, ‘bitch’ is an epithet hurled at women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don’t shy away from expressing them, and who don’t sit by and smile uncomfortably if they’re bothered or offended” (“About Us”).¹⁰ Feminist icon Gloria Steinem quipped in an interview, “The best thing I’ve ever thought of to say when somebody calls you a bitch is ‘Thank you’” (qtd. in J. Coles). Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro’s comic book *Bitch Planet* uses “bitch” as a synonym for “non-compliant” and urges readers to consider how the narrative’s non-compliant “bitches” reflect real women in the present day. Julie Holland’s essay “Ambitchin” puns on the seeming inseparability of ambition and “bitchiness” for women. Television personality Kelly Osbourne writes, “If being honest, standing up for myself, and staying true to who I am makes me a bitch, then fine, I’ll be a bitch. I’m the biggest bitch on earth, and that’s a label I’ll wear proudly” (15). In each of these cases and many others, arguing for the reclamation of “bitch” provides an occasion to reassert the feminist ideologies that often underlie such a reclamation. The performance of *seeking* reclamation is thus a performance of purgation, logologically meaningful regardless of whether the purgation is concluded or continues indefinitely. Within the frame of logonomical purgatory, after all, attempts to reclaim a term do not need to result in the reclamation of the term in order to be rhetorically productive.

Performed reclamations of “bitch” have also been occasions for political action. Women in politics have been especially vulnerable to the derogation of “bitch,” most famously former Secretary of State and presidential nominee Hillary Clinton.¹¹ In 1995, Kathleen Gingrich,

¹⁰ Zeisler has elsewhere argued that, in her opinion, the term “bitch” has become even more inflammatory and complex since she and others chose to adopt it as the title of their magazine in 1996 (“B-Word” 2).

¹¹ As one commentator joked, “If Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel had a nickel for every time they were called ‘bitches,’ they’d have enough money to pay off the national debt in both of their countries” (Pardes).

mother of then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, revealed in an interview on national television that Gingrich had called First Lady Clinton a “bitch.” Twelve years later, during Clinton’s first presidential bid, one of John McCain’s supporters asked him, “How do we beat the bitch?” These notorious incidents and others like them became the inspirations for a 2008 comedy sketch on *Saturday Night Live* featuring Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. In the sketch, Fey responds to accusations that Clinton is a “bitch” by declaring, “Yeah, she is. And so am I. And so is [Amy Poehler].” Poehler agrees, “Yeah, deal with it.” Fey goes on to argue that “bitches get stuff done,” taking the very label that has been used to question Clinton’s capacity as a leader and reframing that label as an advantageous identity. She concludes the sketch by inviting support for Clinton in the primary election with the catchphrase “bitch is the new black,” a phrase which earned her the ire of Barack Obama supporters and phone calls of gratitude from both Clinton and her husband (Fey, *Bossypants* 206). Fey’s sketch became virally popular and was cited in a number of subsequent feminist writings as a rationale for their own reclamations of “bitch.”¹²

Despite these persistent arguments for redemptive or restricted reclamation, however, “bitch” remains a problematic word for many women to claim. As communication scholar Karrin Vasby Anderson argues, the reclamation of “bitch” is not equally available to all women. Activists, journalists, comedians, and other women whose careers are bolstered by shock value and controversy can readily and productively identify themselves as “bitches” if they wish. However, those women for whom controversy is a detriment—politicians, business executives, and others whose roles require both authoritative self-assertion and public acceptance—are

¹² Two such examples are Helena Andrews’s 2010 memoir *Bitch is the New Black*, in which Andrews explores how her experience as a woman of color in 21st-century America has forced her to become a “bitch,” and Laurie Penny’s essay collection *Bitch Doctrine*, in which Penny argues that her “logical, reasonable arguments for social change” (6) have inspired those who disagree with her to label her a “bitch.”

inevitably limited by a label like “bitch.”¹³ Anderson makes her case using Clinton as the example par excellence. In Anderson’s analysis, any rhetoric which heightens the salience of the term “bitch” in the public sphere is disadvantageous to Clinton and most female politicians because it polarizes potential supporters, highlighting the reasons strong women might be seen as objectionable. Likewise, sociologists Sherryl Kleinman, Matthew B. Ezzell, and A. Corey Frost worry that attempts to reclaim “bitch” will increase the word’s societal ubiquity, making it seem more acceptable for nonfeminists to use “bitch” in ways that perpetuate misogyny. In fact, reclamation of “bitch” gone awry could even have the effect of exacerbating a culture of sexual violence, as Terri M. Adams and Douglas B. Fuller argue.

Do the reclamations of “bitch” and the refusals of these reclamations necessarily contradict one another? Anderson proposes that they may not, if the reclamation of “bitch” is understood to be an ambivalent process: “It is possible that when feminist activists embrace the term and women politicians resist it, both are contributing to the project of promoting women’s political agency” (615). For Anderson, the advance of women’s rights need not rely on a single settled trajectory for the reclamation of “bitch.” Rather, the contestation over “bitch”—its acceptance or rejection according to the contexts and needs of the women who encounter it—holds a strategic possibility. Women who self-identify as bitches are often perceived both by listeners and by themselves as having more power and individual agency (Galinsky et al.), and this perception is all the more pronounced in light of the term’s controversy. By continuing to argue for the reclamation of “bitch,” these women have an ongoing platform to advocate for strong women in society. Meanwhile, those whose positions would be damaged by increased acceptance of the label “bitch” benefit from the public sphere’s resistance to the term, and they

¹³ In Leora Tanenbaum’s discussion of the reclamation of “slut,” she similarly argues that reclamation is not always equally available to all bodies but may be dependent upon individual identity, social status, and cultural constraint.

may gain credibility by their own rejection of the “bitch” identity. At its best, liminal reclamation can protect vulnerable populations from the risk of a term’s increased ubiquity, while also providing an ongoing rhetorical occasion for reclaimers and resisters alike to give voice to their concerns.

The Liminal “Pussy”

Though the reclamations of “pussy” have been fewer and more recent than those of “bitch,” they likewise reflect the features of a liminal reclamation. Regena Thomashauer’s *Pussy: A Reclamation*, a manifesto reminiscent in some ways of Freeman’s “BITCH Manifesto,” provides one compelling example. Whereas “bitch” is used to derogate women who transgress societal gender boundaries, the derogatory “pussy” reifies gender boundaries either by reducing women to sexual objects of a male subject’s desire or else by banishing insufficiently “masculine” men into the realm of femininity. In both derogatory forms of “pussy,” Thomashauer observes, its derogation derives from an assumed equivalence between weakness, passivity, and femininity. Like Freeman, Thomashauer troubles these norms underlying the term’s derogation, and thus she argues that “pussy” need not function as derogatory. She declares her intention to restore the term “to its rightful place—as the highest of all possible compliments, as a sacred living prayer” (xxi). To begin this term’s journey from derogation to honor, Thomashauer urges her readers to whisper “pussy” aloud even as they are reading:

For some reason, speaking the word [“pussy”] itself is a ticket to a secret conspiracy of some kind of delightful inner knowing; like a secret handshake, or membership in a clandestine sisterhood with the map to buried treasure. We women intuitively get that when we relate to the word that has so long been banished to the obscene and pornographic. When *we* are speaking the word, the weighty reverb swings *toward us*,

rather than against us. The baggage turns into proud history. And there is an immediate feeling of reclamation, which is the first step toward actual reclamation. (27)

Thomashauer's mention of "actual reclamation" implies an anticipated future in which the term "pussy" will no longer carry its current connotative weight, coming to be seen as a simple synonym—perhaps even an honorific synonym—of other terms for genitalia. That is, her vision appears to be one of redemptive reclamation. Yet Thomashauer also links the power of "pussy" to its mystery and its forbiddenness, traits that suggest a trajectory of restricted reclamation. Only by liminal reclamation can "pussy" meet Thomashauer's dual goals of progressing towards "actual reclamation" while remaining "a ticket to a secret conspiracy." In this instance, logonomical purgatory creates a productive rhetorical space that a more semiotically static Hegelian dialectic could never achieve.

Tension between optimistic and offensive interpretations also characterizes other reclamations of "pussy." One of the word's earliest musical reclamations,¹⁴ the 1999 song "Pussy Manifesto" by punk rock duo Bitch and Animal, proposes that "pussy" is a poor insult because "every living thing comes from and returns to [it]." Since they are "sick of my genitalia being used as an insult," the duo instead proposes that "pussy" be transformed into a compliment: "That was so Pussy of you to help me move to my new place! Especially since I'm living on the 13th floor. You've really made this a Pussy move!" (qtd. in Barrie).¹⁵ According to these lyrics, the word ought to become banal and unthreatening. However, the song's repeated interjections to "Manifest this, motherfucker!" and the lyric stating that "The power of pussy

¹⁴ Even earlier, the punk band Bikini Kill, part of the riot grrrl movement, had titled their 1993 album *Pussy Whipped*.

¹⁵ Like many protest songs, "Pussy Manifesto" exists in multiple versions with varied lyrics. While these lyrics quoted in Zara Barrie's essay do not appear in the song's recording, the other lyrics used in this chapter are taken from the recorded version of the song.

could be blinding” demonstrate that banality is not the musicians’ goal for “pussy.” Although they no longer want “pussy” to be an effective weapon of shame inflicted upon women, they want it to be a word that offends because the society that speaks and hears it is deserving of offense. Comedian Margaret Cho uses a similar strategy: she names and speaks about her “pussy” on stage to critique the sexual commodification of Asian women, and she invites fans to “to create and send in their own pussy manifestas” (Pelle 34). She quite literally *performs* a reclamation of “pussy,” yet the comic and affrontive nature of her work benefits from the term’s scandalousness. Likewise, South African playwright Mary Hames stages a performed reclamation of the cognate Afrikaans word “poes” in her play *Reclaiming the P... Word*, a play which “signals that the project to reclaim a familiar term for a woman’s vagina is subversive and yet also potentially hurtful” (Baderoon 223). Over the course of the play, women express burgeoning optimism about the pleasurable possibilities of reclaiming their “poes”; simultaneously, however, the term’s dangers become more apparent. All these interventions rely on fluid semiosis, elevating seemingly contradictory frames in order to perform reclamation while subverting that reclamation.

Perhaps the most familiar appearance of “pussy” in the arts is in the name of Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot. The reappropriation implied by the band’s name figures significantly into the band’s feminist vision, as scholars like Anna Baranchuk and Ekaterina V. Haskins have observed. One band member explains in an interview, “A female sex organ, which is supposed to be receiving and shapeless, suddenly starts a radical rebellion against the cultural order, which tries to constantly define it and show its appropriate place” (qtd. in Langston). For Pussy Riot, claiming “pussy” means claiming rebellion, and rebellion must be continually claimed and enacted until the abuses that necessitate it are resolved. According to this vision of

reappropriation, the reclamation of “pussy” will not be complete until equality is fully realized. Liminal reclamation makes the rhetorical space of the “pussy” an enduringly powerful one, imbued by the ongoing existence of patriarchy with the capacity to undercut that patriarchy. As long as the miasma of patriarchy persists, perhaps the project of reclaiming the pussy will likewise persist.

Like “bitch,” “pussy” also has dramatic political implications in its liminal form. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the word appeared in a 2005 audio recording of Donald Trump bragging about his ability to “grab [women] by the pussy” with impunity. Unsurprisingly, Trump’s derogatory and sexually aggressive use of “pussy” appeared as part of a profession of sexual assault, aptly illustrating the word’s dangerous capacity. Trump himself later sought to distance his mention of “pussy” from the physical action of sexual assault by dismissing his words as innocuous “locker room talk.” The feminist response to Trump, however, purposefully kept the word “pussy” at the forefront of the national conversation. The hashtag #pussygrabsback trended in the weeks following the release of Trump’s recording, urging women to strike back at Trump by voting against him in the presidential election. On January 21, 2017, one day after Trump’s inauguration, millions of women and women’s rights supporters worldwide gathered to protest the Trump administration, and many of those who protested wore pink knitted hats with cat ears, punningly named “pussyhats.” These pink hats appeared on the February 2017 covers of both *The New Yorker* and *TIME Magazine*, a tribute to their sudden iconic status as a symbol of dissent in Trump’s America.

The reclamation implicit in #pussygrabsback and the pussyhats of the 2017 Women’s March is couched in liminality. In one sense, the campaigns encouraged broad identification with the word “pussy.” By “grabbing back,” by marching on Washington and elsewhere, people of all

genders designated themselves and their loved ones “pussies”—or bodies in possession of “pussies”—as if to declare the term neutral. Not all of those using the #pussygrabsback hashtag or participating in the Women’s March had female genitalia, yet all were in some sense joining the reclamation of “pussy.” Since the reclamation included a larger group than simply those whose bodies are literally indicated by the derogatory “pussy,” these events reflected *redemptive reclamation* by universally affirming the basic semantic meaning of the word “pussy.” *Indeed*, the protestors’ words and actions seemed to say, *people have pussies, people are pussies, and there is nothing shameful about a “pussy.”* Yet this message about the meaning of “pussy” starkly contrasts the exigence that brought “pussy” into the public eye. Trump’s use of “pussy” is far from neutral, imbricated as it is with sexually aggressive behavior. By keeping “pussy” salient in the national discourse and calling attention back to Trump’s impropriety, the “pussy” reclaimers also emphasized the word’s problematic nature and the need for its restriction. In this sense, it was *restricted reclamation* rather than redemptive reclamation being performed by means of pussyhats and #pussygrabsback.

Since reclamation efforts for “pussy” are far more recent than efforts for “bitch,” it is possible that the *telos* of “pussy” will resolve into either redemptive or restricted reclamation in a way that “bitch” has not done. But the similar features of these reclamation efforts suggest that both terms are bound to the same liminality. Their derogation has been deciduous, repeatedly condemned to a wintry death and repeatedly shedding the ice to blossom again. Yet in this liminal space, this logonomical purgatory, the ongoing performance of reclamation becomes a strategy to mobilize towards equity. Whether this strategy is preferable to cleaner narratives of redemptive and restricted reclamation is perhaps an impossible question to answer, and it is certainly an unnecessary one for the purposes of this chapter. Burke’s treatment of logonomical

purgatory is descriptive rather than hortatory. He is not concerned with whether words *should* linger in liminality but with the fact that they *do* linger there. And, if they linger, then it is incumbent upon rhetorical scholars to ask why they linger, and what they accomplish in the midst of their irresolution.

Distinctive Features of Liminally Reclaimed Terms

What makes “bitch” and “pussy” prone to liminal reclamation? There are at least three features, I argue, that make these two terms—and perhaps many other terms as well—inclined to linger in Burke’s logonomical purgatory, performing the pursuit of redemptive or restricted reclamation without ever attaining them. First, the etymologies of “bitch” and “pussy” and their multiple, conflicting meanings in present use become an obstacle to the semantic affirmations that usually accompany reclamation. Wholly reclaiming or rejecting one of a word’s meanings can have the unintended effect of simultaneously reclaiming or rejecting other meanings. Second, liminally reclaimed terms like “bitch” and “pussy” do not have clearly defined “in-groups” of people directly derogated by the terms. Without these in-groups, people are far more likely to both be derogated by a word and use the same word to derogate others. Finally, the reclamations of “bitch” and “pussy” are each motivated by two ideological visions in partial conflict with one another. Some reclaimers of “bitch” argue that “bitches” are not truly bad but are simply perceived as bad because of patriarchal expectations; others argue that “bitches” are indeed bad and that women must reclaim the right to act badly as a way of reclaiming agency. Reclaimers of “pussy” are similarly divided over the degree of sexual liberation the word should imply: should “pussy” signify the freedom of sexual self-expression that defies social mores, or should it become connotationally synonymous with “vagina” in a way that frees it from the oversexualization inflicted by patriarchy? Differing visions can have the effect of obscuring

reclamation narratives, making conclusive changes in a word's function more difficult to achieve.

These three features of “bitch” and “pussy”— ambiguities of semantic affirmation, ambiguities of identity, and ambiguities of purpose—all pose challenges to the linguistic strategies of redemptive and restricted reclamation. However, these words are not therefore unfit to play a strategic role in rhetorics of social equity. On the contrary, the liminal reclamation of “bitch” and “pussy” has functioned as a coherent strategy in its own right, responding to the words' ambiguities and partialities with a reclamation performance likewise rooted in ambiguity and partiality. When a redemptive or restricted reclamation is at risk of oversimplifying a word's complex semantics, liminal reclamation creates a transitory space in which the type of meaning being reclaimed is perpetually clarified. When in-groups are not clearly defined, liminal reclamation demands that these groups be always under negotiation. When multiple visions of reclamation are at play, the unfinished nature of liminality creates the possibility for parallel trajectories to coexist without colliding. Regardless of whether liminality is purposefully invoked as a strategy by rhetorically marginal groups or whether it is perceived as a passing purgatory on the way to total reclamation, this expression of fluid semiosis may be a gift to the linguistic communities that perform it.

Ambiguities of Semantic Affirmation

One challenge that “bitch” and “pussy” pose as sites of reclamation is their diverse etymological and semantic implications. Terms like “black,” “queer,” and even “nigger” are well-suited to reclamation in the sense that they make a single basic semantic claim which is rooted in a literal etymology and can potentially be read as positive. Both “black” and “nigger” are references to skin color, “black” having a Germanic origin and “nigger” a Romantic one.

“Queer” began as a commentary on the unconventional sexual and cultural practices of those outside the heterosexual majority. Yet among the communities they derogated, there was no need to perceive dark skin or unconventional behavior as inherently bad qualities.¹⁶ Thus, reclamation could affirm these terms in their etymological and semantic senses even as it rejected their attendant derogation.

The complexities of “bitch” and “pussy” make similar affirmations difficult for these terms. Etymologically, both terms are likely rooted in analogical comparisons of women to animals, comparisons that are not in themselves inclined towards redemption. Moreover, both terms equated women to animals by regarding them as sexual objects—“bitch” compared promiscuous women to dogs in heat, while “pussy” compared friendly women to friendly cats and then conflated friendliness with sexual openness. As the terms’ semantic implications have evolved over the centuries, some of their definitions have been well suited to reclamation, while others have not. Those who favor reclamation for each word tend to emphasize semantic values that can easily be reinterpreted as positive for empowered women. Thus, reclaimers of “bitch” emphasize its connotations of strength and aggression, and reclaimers of “pussy” treat the word as synonymous with “vagina” or “woman.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, those who object to reclamation focus on the terms’ problematic definitions, connotations, and fraught etymologies. The multiplicity of terministic frames has resulted in a multiplicity of linguistic strategies.

While this multitude of semantic values does not necessarily exclude “bitch” and “pussy” from the possibility of redemptive reclamation, that multiplicity certainly makes such a reclamation less likely. Insufficiently nuanced reclamations of the terms may risk affirming too

¹⁶ The same can be said of the semantic roots of many other reclaimed derogatory terms as well, including the “quaking” performed by Quakers and the “protesting” done by Protestants.

¹⁷ The stark difference between these two definitions poses problems of its own, as I consider briefly in the remainder of this section.

many of their semantic values at once. Increased use of “bitch” as a reclaimed identifier for women who fail to meet male expectations may likewise have the consequence of affirming the semantics of “bitch” as malicious and spiteful. If all these meanings were smuggled into reclamation together, they might reinforce the patriarchal belief that women who are “bitchy” in the sense of being bold and authoritative are inherently also “bitchy” in the sense of being cruel and unpleasant. Likewise, accepting “pussy” as a fitting category term for politically active women (in #pussygrabsback) or as a synonym for “vagina” (in Thomashauer’s reclamation) is necessarily problematic insofar as it conflates these two meanings and suggests that “woman” is ever synonymous with or reducible to genitalia. On the other hand, forbidding the words “bitch” and “pussy” to non-group members because of their problematic meanings, as restricted reclamation would do, may contribute to unnecessary shame about a woman’s boldness or her genitals, giving the impression that those things have an inherent capacity to denigrate. Whenever a term’s derogation functions through its multiplicity of meanings, the need to extricate those meanings poses an obstacle to efforts for redemptive or restricted reclamation.

The problems posed by multiple meanings in reclamation are illustrated by the parody public service announcement “Bitchy Resting Face,” a short video that went viral in 2013. In the video, women claiming to suffer from an ailment called “bitchy resting face” explain that society has labeled them “bitches” simply because they do not smile all the time. With mock seriousness, the women plead for societal understanding and sympathy for their plight. As Jessica Bennett argues in the *New York Times*, the concept of a “bitchy resting face” speaks to an imbalance in societal expectations for men and women since, as one of Bennett’s interviewees puts it, “When a man looks stern, or serious, or grumpy, it’s simply the default.” In this sense, the video catalyzes a reclamation of “bitch” which deprives the term of its derogatory power.

Yet even as it creates a space for women to have “bitchy” faces which fail to adhere to masculine expectations, the video also reaffirms the semantic link between “bitchiness” and cruelty. In the video’s closing scene, one of the women identified as having “bitchy resting face” makes an insensitive statement, which prompts another character to say, “Hey, Taylor, we think you might actually be a bitch.” Another character agrees, “Like, in real life.” The first woman insults the others and then storms off screen, prompting another woman to yell after her, “Bitch!” The video closes with these words posted on the screen: “Warning: Some people who suffer from bitchy resting face may be actual bitches.” Although this closing, and everything about the video, is clearly included for comedic effect, it functionally muddles the sort of “reclamation” suggested by the video. By blurring the semantic values of “bitch,” the video seems both to negate the possibility of reclamation and to reclaim too many of the term’s semantic values at once. Instead of accomplishing either result completely, it participates in the prolongation of the reclamation process, becoming an instrument of liminality.

Nor is this video an isolated example of such reclamatory ambiguities in “bitch.” Actor Bette Davis once observed the double standard of the word “bitch,” making what could be read as an argument for reclamation: “When a man gives his opinion, he’s a man; when a woman gives her opinion, she’s a bitch” (qtd. in Figes). However, Davis also continued to define “bitch” as an insult, once joking: “Why am I so good at playing bitches? I think it’s because I’m not a bitch. Maybe that’s why Miss [Joan] Crawford always plays ladies” (qtd. in Figes). Another similar case occurs in the comic book *Bitch Planet*. DeConnick and De Landro’s narrative purposefully equates bitchiness with nonconformity and participates in a reclamation of “bitch” identity. Even so, when the story’s heroes are confronted by a holographic projection of a woman ordering them to comply with the brutal demands of their male prison authorities, one of

the imprisoned women mutters, “I hate that bitch” (10). Although the prisoner is a “bitch” in the sense that she has been accused by men of noncompliance, the holographic woman is a different kind of “bitch” altogether, one who is compliant with hegemony and therefore treacherous. Context clarifies which definition of “bitch” is at play in each case and which definition is being reclaimed, yet the term itself remains fraught. Ambiguous reclamations like these call to mind the caution posed by Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost, who worry that the reclamation of “bitch” may increase its ubiquity without removing its derogatory potential.

Semantic challenges have likewise been raised by critics of the “pussy” reclamation. Because of the many meanings of “pussy”—as genitalia, woman in general, woman as sexual object, or cowardly man—reclaimers are faced with the near-impossible challenge of extricating these meanings. Holly Derr, analyzing the pussyhats of the 2017 Women’s March, argues that an emphasis on “pussy” is counterproductive for feminists because it conflates femaleness and vaginas:

[T]he Pussyhat Project is engaging in a form of gender essentialism, which asserts that the gendered characteristics of femininity are directly linked to the biological characteristics of femaleness and, specifically, the presence of a vagina. This binary is one that feminists have fought against for years, arguing instead that femininity is a social construction *assigned* to femaleness and that females can be feminine or masculine or any combination of the two, as can males.

Since the possible meanings of “pussy” are both behavioral and biological, Derr worries that reclaiming the word as a feminist tool aligns the feminist project with both kinds of meanings, thus reifying the very gender boundaries many feminists have fought so hard to perturb. If, for instance, women identifying as “pussies” means that they identify with the gentle, “feminine”

behavior that earns some men the insult “pussy,” such an identification reaffirms the notion that “feminine” behavior ought to be linked to the possession of a vagina. Not only does this move exclude trans women not born with a “pussy,” but it implies a kind of biological determinism for all bodies. Like “bitch,” “pussy” may be at risk of solidifying the boundaries of stereotypical gendered behavior as its use increases.

The framework of liminal reclamation offers a possible response to such concerns. Because “bitch” and “pussy” have lingered in the transitional stage of reclamation, advocates for and against the terms’ reclamations have had ample time to articulate the reclamatory possibilities inherent in some of the terms’ definitions and the dangers attendant to other definitions. While it may seem that the primary purpose of debates about reclamation is to reach a conclusion about whether “bitch” and “pussy” *ought* to be reclaimed, perhaps the far more important function of such dialogue is to make users of the terms more aware of the nuances that lie within and between these definitions. By helping women articulate the important distinction between malicious behavior and assertive “masculine” behavior, liminal reclamation of “bitch” helps to disabuse society of the notion that assertive behavior must always be evil or malicious. By challenging both the stigma of the vagina and the conflation of “femininity” and genitalia, liminal reclamation makes “pussy” part of a necessary and salient debate about the sexualization of women. The time and dialogue afforded by liminality thus serve to challenge the language of oppression even if that liminality never resolves by “arriving” at reclamation.

Ambiguities of Identity

A second and closely related challenge posed by “bitch” and “pussy” in reclamation is the ambiguity of their category boundaries. Who, precisely, comprises the groups of people derogated—or potentially derogated—by the terms? Because of their semantic ambiguities, there

is not always a clearly defined target group. While both “bitch” and “pussy” are societally problematic for women, the terms may be used to directly derogate only *certain* women. For instance, not all women have suffered the derogation of being called “bitches,” and most of those who use the term to derogate *certain* women would assert that not *all* women are “bitches.”¹⁸ In addition, “bitch” and “pussy” may be used to derogate men while carrying misogynistic undertones, as in “son of a bitch” and the “cowardly male” use of “pussy.” Who, then, should be seen as the “in-groups” derogated by these terms, and therefore the groups responsible for their reclamation? The multiple definitions of each word make it far more difficult to delineate the derogated groups which collectively hold the power for each term’s rejection or reclamation. And this difficulty in turn makes it difficult for either redemptive reclamation or restricted reclamation to be fully realized.

By contrast, most derogatory terms designate a group of people with a reasonably clear bounding. Although a lesbian woman may not prefer the label “dyke,” her choice to identify as a lesbian means that those who use the term “dyke” are tacitly including her in their derogation or reclamation, whether or not she chooses to recognize the term. By a similar token, the derogatory racial use of “black” was leveled against individuals of African descent, regardless of the speaker’s knowledge of who fit that category or the recipient’s desire to be thus identified. In both cases, the derogated person’s group identity need not have been obvious or even discernible to anyone. The lesbian may not have come out of the closet or may have been questioning her sexual identity. The person of African descent may have had a skin color and physical features that made it easy to “pass” as someone of a different race. But the semantic boundaries of “dyke” and “black” leave far less space for negotiation than do the protean boundaries of “bitch” and

¹⁸ Of course, one derogatory meaning of “bitch” refers to any woman, regardless of her behavior, but this is a less prevalent use of the word.

“pussy.”

It seems reasonable to expect that reclamation would take on a different character when those within the derogated group feel the liberty to leave that group if they wish, or to choose not to perceive themselves as part of the derogated group at all. “Bitchiness,” for example, is elective in a way that blackness is not; women may choose to be authoritative and proudly identify as “bitches,” or they may be authoritative while rejecting the word “bitch,” or they may choose—whether because of societal pressure or personal preference—to behave in an acquiescent manner that makes them far less likely to be derogated as “bitches.” Women who hear the term “pussy” used to accuse a man of weakness might regard it as an implicit insult towards women, or they may perceive it as another word entirely, something unrelated to their own concerns as women. Men who are called “pussies” can choose to continue on in the behavior that garnered the insult, or they can change their behavior in hopes of no longer being regarded as “pussies.” Because of the higher possibility of escape from a word’s derogation, these reclaimers will likely approach reclamation differently than those who, like the reclaimers of “black” and “dyke,” have little hope of escape.

The ambiguous boundaries of “bitch” and “pussy” also make it possible for some women to continue using the terms as insults against others without seeing their language as a form of self-derogation. Some women call men “pussies.”¹⁹ Some women seek to reclaim the identity of “bitch” for themselves while paradoxically continuing to use the term to derogate others. A recent and public example of this latter strategy can be found in Madonna’s 2015 hit song “Bitch I’m Madonna.” At the beginning of the song, Madonna uses a reclaimed form of the term “bitch” to announce her own agency, declaring, “You can’t touch this / Cuz I’m a bad bitch.” This self-

¹⁹ Contemporary examples abound, as in the bizarre case of a British woman who was sued for calling one of her boss’s debtors a “pussy” (Taylor and Matthews).

identification matches Madonna's own prior reclamation of "bitch" in an interview: "I'm tough, ambitious and I know what I want. If that makes me a bitch, OK" (qtd. in Figes). Despite this reclamatory flavor, the title line of "Bitch, I'm Madonna" directs the term "bitch" outward as casual insult towards the song's listeners. Taken alongside the song's other polemical moments,²⁰ this iteration of "bitch" is clearly not a reclaimed term of pride in the way Madonna's self-identification as "bitch" is. Because the boundaries of in-group "bitch" identity are so undefined, some users of the term choose to imagine themselves both inside and outside of its bounds.

Because apparent members of the derogated groups continue to use "bitch" and "pussy" as derogatory towards others, redemptive reclamation is thereby subverted. Yet restricted reclamation is made equally difficult, even though some reclaimers of "bitch" and "pussy" have advocated explicitly for this approach.²¹ One of the features of restricted reclamation, I have argued previously, is that it restricts a term's use to members of the derogated group. But this restriction is only useful for reclamation if it can safely be assumed that in-group members will not use a reclaimed term to derogate their own group—an assumption that cannot be made in these cases of liminal reclamation. As long as women still derogate one another as "bitches," restricted reclamation cannot ensure that the derogatory sense of "bitch" will be lost. Likewise, if the use of "pussy" is restricted only to women, those women who use the term to derogate weak men can still prolong its misogyny. In addition, the need for in-group restriction poses a problem when the boundaries of the in-group are unclear. Would a restricted "bitch" be acceptable for all

²⁰ The song's second verse describes Madonna's angry neighbor threatening to call the police: "The neighbor's pissed and says he's gonna call the Five-O / If they show up then we are gonna give a good show." In one scene of the music video, which features a number of famous guests, fellow pop star Miley Cyrus mouths the words "Bitch, I'm Madonna" while giving two middle fingers to the camera and viewers.

²¹ One such advocate is feminist writer Zara Barrie, who argues that "pussy" as a synonym for "vagina" can and should be reclaimed by women but is verboten for men.

women to say, even those who do not self-identify as bitches? If a woman calls a man a “pussy,” does that man become part of the in-group qualified to participate in restricted reclamation? If the genital meaning of “pussy” is available only to women, does this in-group include trans women not born with female genitalia? What about trans men born with female genitalia, whether or not they have since undergone sex reassignment surgery? As the complexities of defining in-groups for these terms proliferate, they seem to snowball out of control, making the possibility of a settled reclamation—an emergence from “purgatory” into terminological “heaven”—appear ever more distant.

The paradigm of logonomical purgatory may offer an optimistic way forward within the seeming failure of this paradoxical liminality. Because liminal reclamation resists orthodoxy and leaves a derogatory term perpetually in contest, it does not exert the same pressure on members of a derogated group to identify or disidentify with a given term. As long as a term remains liminal, unresolved conflicts about the breadth of its reach need not be resolved for the term to begin functioning in reclaimed ways. For example, since many women may be sympathetic to the reclamation of “bitch” and yet prefer not to identify themselves as “bitches,” the transitional space granted by liminal reclamation allows these women to continue functioning as allies of the spirit behind this reclamation without demanding their nominal participation in the reclamation. Likewise, women can combat genital shame by using the liminally reclaimed “pussy” even if they must always make the case for its reclamation afresh. Liminality creates space for reclamation to perform the work it was designed to perform even when the terms under scrutiny are fraught with seemingly impossible contradictions.

Ambiguities of Purpose

A third and final feature of liminal reclamations is their tendency to house two or more

significantly different visions of reclamation under the same banner. Those who agree on the value of reclamation for a term may still disagree on the ideal *telos* of that term in its reclaimed form. The virtue of liminal reclamation in such cases is that conflicting *teloi* can coexist and collaborate in battling derogation, often creating a more robust challenge to dominant discourse than a single vision of reclamation could have done. Even though it would be impossible for every vision of reclamation to be ultimately realized, liminal reclamation enables multiple purposes to strategically coincide, enjoying the salience of strength in numbers without erasing particular differences in vision.

The possibility for differing visions of reclamation is plainly evident in the word “bitch.” For some women, the reclaimed “bitch” identity is a reclamation of those traits which are celebrated in men but condemned in women. Feminist activists from Freeman to Zeisler have argued that the traits of a “bitch” are honorable traits, traits which would be considered desirable in a society where women were treated as equal to men. For these activists, the so-called “badness” of bitchy women is simply those women’s refusal to live according to rules set for them by men. A second group of women, however, has sought to reclaim “bitch” as a proud marker of “badness.” For these reclaimers, bitches are in fact mean women, and to call oneself a “bitch” is to celebrate this meanness. Rescuing women’s agency from the stranglehold of patriarchy means reclaiming the right for women to make their own choices, whether those choices are good or bad. If women’s agency is truly agency, they argue, it must include the right to be a villain as well as a heroine—the right to be a “bitch.” This approach affirms the very semantic value of “bitch” that the first set of reclaimers seeks to contradict.

The vision of reclaiming “meanness” has been adopted by scholars and activists alike. Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s study of female villains in contemporary literature, entitled *The Bitch is*

Back, argues that acknowledging and making space for women to be bad is part of affirming their humanity. She writes, “A woman who does not acknowledge her own inclinations toward evil, unsavory behavior, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness may find herself as objectified as any other silenced heroine. Indeed, morality itself may reside in the heart and mind of the bitch” (6). Angela Ridinger-Dotterman joins Aguiar in celebrating “bitchiness” as a form of agency in narrative analysis, and Roxane Gay likewise celebrates the rise of unlikeable women in fiction in her popularly acclaimed book *Bad Feminist*.²² Writers outside the scholarly community have also celebrated the rise of the “bad bitch.” One of the first to famously celebrate “bad bitches” is Elizabeth Wurtzel, who argues that women ought to feel freedom to make self-centered decisions and not be nice in pursuing their goals, and that these freedoms are the freedoms of the bitch. Cathi Hanauer argues that bitchiness is rooted in female anger and that the embrace of “bitch” provides an occasion “to consider and compare potential reasons for this seeming epidemic of female rage” (xiv). For all these authors, a “bitch” is perhaps a bad woman on some level, but like any other woman she deserves to be understood as fully human.

The two differing visions of the reclaimed “bitch” are not necessarily at odds with each other, if viewed through the lens of fluid semiosis. The central claims of each vision—that women are sometimes vilified for acting too “manly,” and that women must be accorded the same agency for selfishness as men—may both be true. Yet their existence side by side in the same reclamation movement has sometimes obscured the claims of each group. Because both groups have taken up the term “bitch” as their battleground, their definitions and intentions easily become conflated, creating the problem of mistaken semantic affirmation discussed in the

²² Unlike the other scholars mentioned here, Gay does not use the term “bitch” to describe the recovery of women’s right to badness. However, she joins these scholars in suggesting that the recovery of women’s agency must include the capacity for badness.

previous section. Those who proudly claim the term “bitch” to describe their stereotypically “masculine” assertiveness are sometimes misunderstood as proudly declaring their badness. Conversely, those who reclaim “bitch” as a space for women’s agency to make bad decisions may risk reifying the notion that any activity derogated as “bitchy”—including assertiveness and other “masculine” traits traditionally discouraged in women—is synonymous with badness.

Similar tensions are at play in the reclamation of “pussy.” For some, the word is linked to the power of sexual self-determination and self-expression. Thomashauer proposes that putting women in touch with their bodies is the best antidote to patriarchy, and “pussy” is her linguistic strategy to catalyze this shift. She writes, “The solution for the epidemic of powerlessness among women, which neither great success nor higher education is able to solve, is simple: reconnecting a woman to her pussy.” Barrie likewise proposes that “pussy” be considered a compliment because pussies “give and receive endless pleasure.” Reclaiming “pussy” for these women is a reclamation of sexuality itself. For others, however, the sexualization of “pussy” is part of its crisis. Gigi Engle, for example, links the increasing prevalence of “pussy” in vernacular to the rise of pornography; to reclaim a word away from such a phenomenon would be, it seems, to restore its neutrality. Recent trends like #pussygrabsback and pussyhats work in this direction, seeking to wrest the “pussy” away from its sexualization when spoken by Donald Trump and to treat it as a metonym for all women beyond the bounds of mere sexuality.

What liminal reclamation offers to these two strands of reclamation is a space to function in tandem without being flattened into singular reclamations of “bitch” and “pussy.” As long as the reclamation status of these terms remains in contest, those enacting either form of reclamation are compelled to explain how they are defining their term and what they perceive to be the payoffs of such a reclamation. The impulse of reclaimers to provide definitions and

rationales for their reclamations is usually characteristic of the early stages of a reclamation movement, but this impulse tends to fade over the time as the movement settles into a sort of orthodoxy out of which only dissenting voices need articulate their stances. By contrast, liminal reclamation perpetuates this need for definitions and rationales by perpetuating the cultural dynamics of an early-stage reclamation. If both “bitch” and “pussy” are capable of leveling multiple societal critiques, liminality allows them to renders all these critiques at once instead of choosing just one. The symbolic imperfection of liminal reclamation—its failure to escape from logonomical purgatory—proves to have a strategic impact on the ways “bitch” and “pussy” are employed and enacted.

The “Endgame” of Liminality

It would be a mistake to claim liminal reclamation as a bounded and predictable phenomenon, something wholly distinct from the likewise bounded categories of redemptive and restricted reclamation. On the contrary, reclamations, like words themselves, are always leaky affairs. Redemptive and restricted reclamations are not necessarily discrete from one another, and words in both categories often bear a lingering liminality even once their reclamations have been largely resolved. In the same way, the reclamations of “bitch” and “pussy” are not solely liminal in nature—aspects of their recovery can be understood in terms of redemptive or restricted reclamation. In proposing the category of liminal reclamation as a tool of rhetorical investigation, I am simply seeking the best possible explanation for phenomena too multifarious and far-reaching to ever be fully explained. As long as the words we study are alive, our analyses of them can only be vivisections, performed on subjects that constantly wriggle out of our grasp.

Liminal reclamation is not a prophecy of a linguistic future, and it is also not an

exhortation for the ideal future of certain reclaimed derogatory terms. By “not a prophecy,” I mean that liminal reclamation is not a guarantee that the words “bitch” and “pussy” will forever inhabit the same linguistic space they currently do. Although current discursive dynamics have driven these words into a state of permanent transition, this state is still impacted by shifts in the world that surrounds it and co-constructs it. Perhaps new power structures, changing social dynamics, and competing words will alter the roles of “bitch” and “pussy.” Yet these shifts will not be catalyzed, I predict, by reclamation efforts like the current ones. “Bitch” and “pussy” may be driven out of logonomical purgatory by external forces, but they will never be purified from within. As it is, they linger in a terminological holding pattern, shifting only enough to stay in place. By “not an exhortation,” I mean that liminal reclamation is not necessarily an advised strategy for rhetorically marginal groups to adopt. I have proposed that, for some words, the work performed by liminal reclamation may be even more effective in the pursuit of social equity than other forms of reclamation or expurgation would have been. Yet this analysis is not a proposal for how these or other reclamation movements ought to be enacted in the future. All such prophetic and hortatory work remains to other scholars and activists.

What, then, is the endgame of liminal reclamation? What is accomplished or altered in the world by a process of linguistic contestation not oriented towards termination? If “bitch” and “pussy” can be taken as archetypes, it seems that liminal reclamation allows words to participate in the political activity—and activism—associated with reclamation debates, without demanding an essentializing narrative that would contort the words into ideal targets for reclamation. Liminal reclamation protects polyvalent words from having their necessary complexities hewn off in pursuit of a Procrustean vision of total reclamation. In the present political climate, for example, to say that “pussy” is *merely* a word ripe for reclamation is to miss the fitting critique

of sexual aggression that exists even at the highest levels of United States political leadership. Yet to *merely* condemn it and banish it from discourse is to participate in the kind of shaming that has subjugated women (and also “feminine” men) for centuries. If every particular aspect of the term “pussy” is given voice, the resulting complexity will be too weighty for any apprehensible political action to occur. If, however, all these particularities are distilled into a single salient narrative, particularity will be lost, and some degree of truth will disappear with it.

Liminal reclamation thus works in the political realm by means of fluid semiosis, negotiating the paradoxical chasm between salient essentialism and infinitesimal particularity. Liminality is one of the strategies performed by nondominant rhetorical groups to address this chasm—the same chasm that lies at the heart of this dissertation, and at the heart of many of rhetorical historiography’s most famous debates. Burke’s logonomical purgatory serves as a reminder that words sometimes navigate paradox by lingering in a performed transition, escaping the damning contradictions between generality and specificity that would be exposed if they ever reached a final resolution. Liminality reclaimed words remain connected to the varied and sometimes contradictory experiences of the people they derogate; meanwhile, they gain enough collective weight in their generality to become salient players in public discourse.

Whether liminally reclaimed terms would have greater political effectiveness in another form—either fully reclaimed or fully expurgated—can only be the subject of speculation. What is clear, however, is that no form of reclamation can guarantee the complete success of a campaign towards social equity. The predominantly redemptive reclamations of words like “black” and “queer,” and the predominantly restricted reclamations of words like “nigger” and “faggot,” do not mean that black Americans and sexual minorities are now immune to discrimination in the United States. The determining factor of political effectiveness in the cases

of “bitch” and “pussy,” then, is not the nature of their reclamation but the degree to which society is transformed to reflect the ideals of those seeking reclamation. As long as hierarchies are with us, language reflecting those hierarchies will be with us also. If total reclamation of a derogatory term is achieved, yet prejudice and inequity persist in equal measure, the sunset of one weaponized term can only signal the sunrise of a new weapon. And if the linguistic battle must rage on, perhaps liminal reclamation is as good a battleground as any.

CHAPTER THREE

Burkean Identification, Indonesian National Identity, and the Boundaries of Unspeakability

In 1967, a renowned feminist anthropologist wrote to Burke seeking to incorporate Burke's insights into her own scholarship. The writer was Burke's daughter, Eleanor Burke Leacock, whose groundbreaking ethnographic work in Africa and the Pacific challenged the supposed inherency of male superiority and the supposed "cognitive disabilities" of non-Western minds according to the dominant Western anthropology of her contemporaries. Leacock was preparing to teach a class that would discuss "language as both enabling and hindering 'true' knowledge," and she asked Burke to recommend something from his own work addressing that question (EBL to KB, Jan. 21, 1967). Burke replied in a typically facetious fashion, by mocking himself in the third person: "You asked me to suggest 30-50 pp. of required reading in the works of Ignatz de Burp.¹ I don't know. As far as I can make out, the guy can't make up his mind. He's all over the lot, though not so much like a smear as like a cross-hatching" (KB to EBL, Jan. 25, 1967).

Burke's reluctance to codify and summarize his own work's central contribution to his daughter's interests is not itself remarkable. As we have seen in chapter one, Burke was constantly revisiting and reconsidering his ideas, inclined to see them as an organically self-critiquing infrastructure rather than as a static and distillable mass. What is far more compelling about this brief epistolary exchange is that both Burke and Leacock regard Burke's work as simultaneously proximate to and distant from Leacock's. Leacock treats her own critique of Western epistemology as fundamentally separate from her father's ideas, yet she considers it

¹ This self-given moniker is a reference to Burke's prolonged digestive and respiratory condition, discussed extensively in Chapter 7 of Debra Hawhee's book *Moving Bodies*.

natural that her students should engage Burke's ideas as a means of making their own anthropologies more robust. And Burke, whose letter gushes about the "expert info" of Leacock's research and shows high respect for her approach, characterizes his own work as "all over the lot," its cross-hatchings at once unworthy of and imbricated with Leacock's interests. When Burke makes recommendations from his own work, then, he does so hesitantly, but he does so all the same: "Your Library already has, or should have, a copy of his latest book, Language as Symbolic Action (U. of Cal. Press). I'd suggest that you glance at his chapters on 'Definition of Man' and 'Mind, Body, and the Unconscious,' including post-mortem comments on each. If they don't seem to fill the bill, [speak] – and I'll try again" (KB to EBL, Jan. 25, 1967, emphasis in original). Notably, Burke selects essays that are accompanied by his own postscriptive, "post-mortem" reconsiderations of their contents²—and he draws Leacock's attention especially to these reconsiderations. In seeking to identify a bridge between his work and his daughter's, he emphasizes the openness and evolution of his own ideas.

I propose that rhetorical scholars might take this exchange as a paradigm for how Burkean theory can productively interact with the study of non-Western rhetorics. The problematic nature of Burke's relationship to non-Western and postcolonial texts has been well-documented by scholars,³ yet these same scholars do not deny the generative possibilities that

² "Definition of Man" had been published in the *Hudson Review's* Winter 1963-1964 issue (vol. 16, no. 4). "Mind, Body, and the Unconscious" was based on a paper Burke had presented in a seminar at Columbia University in 1959. When Burke included these essays in *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966, he followed both with a few pages of additional commentary reflecting the continuing evolution of his thought on their subject matter since their original writing.

³ Christa J. Olson has argued that Burke's attempts at universality are necessarily limited because of their cultural myopia—specifically, Burke's reliance on the relatively stable United States Constitution as a representative anecdote for all constitutions "missed an opportunity to treat the breadth and mobility of motive" ("Places" 78) that has characterized some other nations' constitutions. James W. Chesebro likewise asserts that "Burke's quest for a universal system was limited by his own cultural conditioning" ("Multiculturalism" 183), while Celeste Condit argues that rhetorical scholars must turn "post-Burke" if they are to account for Burke's ethnocentrism in their own scholarship.

might exist when Burke is brought into conversation with these rhetorics.⁴ Certainly, Leacock's own ethnographic work is not immune from Western bias and cannot be taken as a metonymic substitute for non-Western voices themselves.⁵ Even so, postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Alexander Weheliye have nonetheless treated ethnographic studies as valuable contributions to the investigation of non-Western experience, and work like Leacock's was instrumental in challenging the Western biases of ethnography that had prevailed before her. Thus, rhetorical scholars might escape the binary which renders Burke either universal or useless outside the West, the binary which suggests we must either superimpose Burke's theories uncritically onto non-Western texts or abandon them entirely. As Spivak argues and Collins agrees, "the call to a complete boycott of so-called Western male theories is class-interested and dangerous. For me, the agenda has been to stake out the theories' limits, constructively to use them" (Spivak, *Outside* x; also qtd. in Collins 93). Rather than discarding ideas weighted with both promise and problems, Spivak and Collins advise scholars to engage with those ideas—to, as Burke himself proposes, "use all there is to use" (*Philosophy* 21) in the pursuit of textual understanding. Such an approach to Burke, placing him in conversational tandem with postcolonial and non-Western rhetorics, promotes the possibility of mutual edification among strands of rhetorical study that have until now remained largely discrete and siloized.

⁴ Chesebro proposes that Burke's ideas "must be continually reexamined and extended" ("Multiculturalism" 183), noting that Burke himself was an advocate of such extension. Chesebro writes, "Burke himself has returned to his original works, often forty years later, and sought to adapt them, especially in new forewords and afterwords, to deal with emerging issues.... Burke has indicated that his system is to develop and evolve, with contributions by others, rather than remain a static system and solely a reflection of himself" ("Extensions" 364). Condit agrees, explaining that she uses the term "post-Burke" not to indicate a departure from Burke but "to demarcate an effort to extend the essence of an older program into new contexts in light of new understandings" ("Post" 349). And Olson's study (*Constitutive*) demonstrates the capacity of Burke's work to reveal certain elements of a postcolonial rhetorical situation even as it conceals others.

⁵ As Aimé Césaire observed in 1950, quoting Roger Caillois, "The only ethnography is white." Césaire goes on to explain, "It is the West that studies the ethnography of the others, not the others who study the ethnography of the West." He concludes sardonically: "A cause for the greatest jubilation, is it not?" (71)

In this chapter, then, I select a particular conceptual moment within Burke’s wide-ranging “cross-hatching” of ideas and hold it up like a prism against the windowpane of the iconic Indonesian novel *Laskar Pelangi*. Like any prism against any sunlit windowpane, my two texts dance with colorful possibility as they are informed and illuminated by one another—or so I hope to demonstrate. *Laskar Pelangi*, a largely autobiographical narrative about the author’s childhood poverty, offers a number of critiques of Indonesian societal inequities and residual colonialism. It is, at times, a subversive text—yet it is also constrained by the need for identification within the Indonesian rhetorical scene. In order to level a legible critique, then, Hirata’s novel must both resist and acquiesce to the normative ideals of Indonesian rhetoric. At the same time that it captures the dissatisfied imaginations of a low-status Indonesian majority, it adheres to the limitations of cultural and institutional forms of censorship. Its resonance derives from the unfixity of its meaning—an unfixity to which Burke attunes us.

This reading of *Laskar Pelangi* likewise illumines Burke’s little-studied⁶ 1939 essay “The Calling of the Tune.” Burke’s essay emphasizes the ironic inseparability of resistance and acquiescence to authority, arguing that the contours of identification are likewise the contours of artistic and rhetorical possibility. *Laskar Pelangi* demonstrates that these contours are always articulated within a national identity determined as much by what cannot be said as by what must be said. Identification exists at the boundaries of unspeakability. As *Laskar Pelangi*’s relationship to both governmental censorship and societal preference in Indonesia exhibits, any threat of textual limitation weaves itself into our discourses and determines the possibilities of identification. Agential government censorship is thus an extreme case of a universal rhetorical

⁶ Ross Wolin, for instance, has noted that “The Calling of the Tune” is a part of *The Philosophy of Literary Form* that is often overlooked.

state.⁷ Textual limitation of any kind is *a part of* a nation's rhetorical character, not *an interruption from* it. Such limitation sets the scene for the dance of terministic unfixity which constitutes identification's most compelling choreographies.

The first section of this chapter introduces *Laskar Pelangi*, proffering it as a case study par excellence of what Burke calls the “vacillating relationship between the artist's freedom and the society's commands” (“Calling” 272), a frame of simultaneous integration and separation. The second section offers a condensed history of Indonesia's political and rhetorical development, profiling the audience identity which creates and constrains the possible “tunes” of Hirata's work. Third, I show how *Laskar Pelangi* navigates this rhetorical topography by identifying with its seemingly contradictory demands, thus demonstrating how textual restriction works within the space of terministic unfixity as both communicative impediment and communicative necessity. I conclude by using *Laskar Pelangi*'s interaction with Burke's framework to propose what I call a *substitutive immunity*: that is, a recalcitrance to the trend of interchanging postcolonial “marginality” rooted in the impossibility of transposing rhetorics onto one another. I use *substitutive immunity* to discuss the contributions of this study both for

⁷ I use the phrase “agential government censorship” to clarify my meaning in the midst of an ongoing debate about the proper range of the term “censorship.” Beginning in the 1990s, scholars like Pierre Bordieu, Judith Butler, Michael Holquist, Stanley Fish, William Mazzarella, and Raminder Kaur have argued that “censorship” is best understood not as a particular agential government act but as a ubiquitous characteristic of all discourse. Others, however, have expressed concern that the breadth of this new definition of censorship risks losing the necessarily particular critiques rendered against agential state censorship by writers like J. M. Coetzee. Robert C. Post, Beate Müller, and Helen Freshwater, for example, have posited that an inclusive definition of censorship—one which claims that all discourse is essentially censorial in nature—risks reducing discussions of censorship to impotent abstractions. Rather than cast my lot with one side of this debate, I side with Burke in seeking to unmoor the static semiosis around which the debate is constructed. Indeed, Dries Vrijders has argued that Burke's rejection of a single answer to the question of conflicting authorities is the central project of “The Calling of the Tune”: “[H]ow do we choose in this imperfect world? Or more exactly, how do [we] make the *right* choice? The answer, Burke suggests, lies not in one particular ideology” (28, emphasis in original). It is the negotiation between ideologies, the unfixity, that merits the only permanent “choice.” Thus any permanent delineation between censorship and non-censorship will necessarily illuminate even as it conceals. A capacious view of censorship rightly interrogates the supposed “freedom” of discourses that could under a narrow definition be exonerated as non-censorial. However, a narrow definition of censorship calls attention to the particularities and problems of agential censorship that might be overlooked or normalized by a broader definition.

Indonesian rhetoric and for Burkean studies, offering possible avenues of further investigation in both realms.

Calling the Tune of *Laskar Pelangi*

Andrea Hirata's 2005 novel *Laskar Pelangi* (published in English as *The Rainbow Troops*) is the best-selling Indonesian book of all time. Translated into 28 languages, with over five million legal copies and an estimated fifteen million pirated copies⁸ sold in its original language alone, the novel was a literary sensation in a country unfamiliar with literary sensations. It was reprinted 13 times within the first two years of its publication. The 2008 film adaptation of the book broke records to become the most-watched film in Indonesian cinema history, with 4.4 million theater viewers (Heryanto, "Upgraded" 77). A hit song by the popular Indonesian band Nidji boldly declares, "*Laskar Pelangi* will not be bound by time,"⁹ and this song was named Indonesia's 2010 "song of the summer" by an NPR commentator and dubbed "the most listener-friendly song in Indonesia" (NPR). In every medium it touched, *Laskar Pelangi* enjoyed astounding success, capturing the attention of the world's largest Muslim nation in an uncanny way and catapulting Hirata from obscurity to national fame.

Laskar Pelangi tells the story of Ikal, an impoverished young boy living on the Indonesian island of Belitung.¹⁰ Belitung is a wealthy island, the site of a massive tin mining company called *PN Timah* (*Perusahaan Negeri Timah*, "state-owned tin company")—but that wealth is enjoyed only by outsiders and government officials, not by the island's native residents. Ikal and his schoolmates grow up in the shadow of luxury, attending a Muhammadiyah¹¹ school

⁸ This estimate is according to the author's own report (qtd. in Riady). Print, film, and digital media piracy are all quite common in Indonesia, both because anti-piracy laws are enforced only sporadically and because many Indonesians do not regard piracy as unethical ("Now Playing").

⁹ In Indonesian, "Laskar Pelangi takkan terikat waktu."

¹⁰ "Belitung" is also sometimes spelled "Belitung."

¹¹ Muhammadiyah is an Indonesian socioreligious organization established in 1912 "to bring the Muslim faith into harmony with modern rational thought.... It established schools along modern lines, where Western subjects

which meets in a building that, “if bumped by a frenzied goat preparing to mate, would collapse and fall to pieces” (12).¹² Meanwhile, the children of the wealthy company bosses attend a private school with seemingly endless resources. This disparity of wealth is common to much of Indonesia, as Hirata is quick to point out; Ikal’s Muhammadiyah schoolhouse is “one among hundreds—maybe even thousands” (12)¹³ of Indonesian schools so poor that they appear on the verge of collapse. The Muhammadiyah schoolteacher Ibu Muslimah, whom her students affectionately call by the nickname “Bu Mus,” dubs Ikal and his schoolmates “*laskar pelangi*” (“the rainbow troops”), a name that speaks to their hopefulness and resiliency in the midst of difficulty.

As the novel unfolds, the motley *laskar pelangi* and their impoverished but quintessentially Indonesian education are continually pitted against the wealth and privilege of the *PN Timah* and its private school. The two schools compete against one another in an academic contest, which Ikal and his friends miraculously win. When the mining company decides to demolish the Muhammadiyah schoolhouse to dig up the tin lying beneath it, Bu Mus and her students confront the head of *PN Timah* to beg for their school; he has a change of heart, and the demolition never occurs. Ikal himself, despite his humble education, earns a prestigious scholarship to attend university in Europe, outperforming countless privately educated Indonesians. In these regards, the book is a story of underdog triumph, a reassurance that people from disadvantaged means can still realize their dreams.

(including Dutch) as well as religion were taught” (Encyclopædia Britannica). The Muhammadiyah movement played a role in developing a sense of shared religious and national identity in the pre-independence Indonesian islands, particularly “by the adoption of Malay, or what later came to be known as Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian), as its organizational language” (Nakamura 95). Muhammadiyah’s commitment to combining education, moderate Islam, and Indonesian identity makes it a continuing symbol of many of the earliest catalysts of national unity.

¹² In Indonesian, “jika disenggol sedikit saja oleh kambing yang senewen ingin kawin, bisa rubuh berantakan” (17). All English translations of *Laskar Pelangi* are taken from the English language publication of *The Rainbow Troops*, translated by Angie Kilbane, unless otherwise specified.

¹³ In Indonesian, “salah satu dari ratusan mungkin ribuan” (17).

Yet the book's optimistic tone is simultaneously subverted by its bleak picture of Indonesian poverty, governmental corruption, and societal apathy. Not all of Ikal's classmates are able to rise above their circumstances, even despite exceptional talent. Lintang, by far the smartest of Ikal's classmates, is forced to quit school to support his family after his father dies; ultimately, he becomes a truck driver. Although *PN Timah* eventually dissolves, removing the stark boundary between rich and poor on Belitong, Ikal's Muhammadiyah school also collapses as a result of the same capitalist strains. The book's portrayals of triumph are paired with concomitant failures, its glowing affirmations of Indonesian identity working alongside harsh critiques. Thus, it resists easy categorization as either acquiescent or resistant to hegemonic discourses. In order to resonate within the Indonesian rhetorical context, it must be semantically unmoored from the familiar narratives that have defined and limited its literary forebears.

As such, *Laskar Pelangi* provides a telling case study in how identification is enacted at the boundaries of unspeakability. That is, the book's persuasive power is heavily reminiscent of Burke's well-known definition of persuasion as identification: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*Rhetoric* 55). Yet the book's identificatory success is equally a product of the speech it *avoids*, the gestures it *suppresses*, the attitudes it *equivocates towards*. It ingratiate by what is absent as well as by what is present. It critiques government corruption and exploitation while still genuflecting to certain sanctioned political narratives that safeguard it from censorship. It offers a hopeful narrative of triumph over poverty while simultaneously subverting the notion that mere industry or intelligence are sufficient to overturn societal inequity. It argues for change—or, at least, it seems to do so—by means of placating within the status quo. It is groundbreaking by means of its reproduction of the familiar.

Laskar Pelangi's unique position—as an enormously popular novel in a young nation, critical of government authority while avoiding the threat of censorship—makes it a particularly revealing case study of Kenneth Burke's insights on the necessity of identification in art. In "The Calling of the Tune," published in *The Kenyon Review* in the summer of 1939 and then included in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in 1941, Burke argues that truly autonomous art cannot exist.¹⁴ The essay's title comes from Burke's parable of a piper who wanted the freedom

¹⁴ It is worth noting here that "The Calling of the Tune" was not originally composed as a traditional argumentative essay. In fact, the essay came to be by a series of seeming accidents. On November 4, 1938, Philip Blair Rice wrote a letter to Kenneth Burke begging him to submit poetry for *The Kenyon Review*'s inaugural issue, which would be published in early 1939. Blair, *The Kenyon Review*'s managing editor, had heard from Malcolm Cowley that Burke had recently authored a set of poems and had no arrangements yet made to publish them. "We should like very much to consider them for possible use in the first issue of the KENYON REVIEW," Blair wrote to Burke. "At the moment, we are desperately in need of poetry. We have received reams of it, but very little that is worth printing" (PBR to KB, Nov. 4, 1938). Although Burke seems to have declined Blair's request for poetry—nothing of Burke's was published in the first or second issues of *The Kenyon Review*—he had within a few months submitted a draft of the essay that would eventually become "The Calling of the Tune."

Burke's essay began not as a formal argument piece but as a joint review of two books: Grace Overmyer's *Government and the Arts* (1939) and Herbert Read's *Poetry and Anarchism* (1938). On their surface, the two books are not an obvious pairing. Overmyer's work is a detailed survey of the government systems and finances that support the fine arts in the United States and fifty-seven other nations. Read's is a paean to poetry as a tool of anarchism, defending the value of both poetry and anarchism by equating them with one another. The physical and financial support of art, not its ideology, is Overmyer's focus; in contrast, Read treats art's ideology as largely independent of the means of its production. What Burke saw in both books was insight into the complex material and societal factors that determine the ideological possibilities of art. Burke's vision to bring the two texts together within a single narrative necessarily became the throughline of his review essay.

When Burke submitted a draft of his review and apologized for its length, editor John Crowe Ransom replied, "It's pretty hefty for a review; and, on the other hand, we've been abused by a lot of good men who had promised us articles by May and haven't come through. How about changing the form and emphasis about a little and making it a short essay, say not to run much if any over 3000 words?" (JCR to KB, May 8, 1939) Based on Ransom's letter, it is clear that Burke's first-draft review already contained many of the same arguments that would form the substance of his final essay. Ransom's invitation to Burke was to expand these arguments and make them the primary driving force of the essay. "It's admirable material, politico-aesthetics," Ransom wrote, "and fits in well with our number. I imagine you had squeezed a little of the juicy effect out in the process of condensation" (JCR to KB, May 8, 1939). Since Ransom's deadline was only one week away, he urged Burke not to "attempt a heroic revision" (JCR to KB, May 8, 1939). Burke accepted the invitation, transforming his short review into "The Calling of the Tune."

This aspect of the essay's publication history matters because it emphasizes the fundamentally unitive vision of Burke's argument in "The Calling of the Tune." In locating a throughline that could unite two books as seemingly disparate as the two he was reviewing, Burke locates a logic for the evaluation of artistic production in which material concerns and ideological concerns are inseparable: the logic of identification. Whether or not Burke's identification would have developed along similar lines without such an impetus is an unnecessary and inscrutable question; what can be known is that identification did develop in this way, and that it did so in concert with his indirect approach to drafting "The Calling of the Tune." The piper, as Burke would ultimately argue, must both call his own tune and have it called for him; he must be both free and bound. Both censorship and identification are thus enrolled in the Burkean logonomical purgatory (see chapter two for more on this term) where their unending dialectical tension appears to move forever forward without ever reaching the resolution of its promised

to select which songs he would play—to “call the tune”—and yet hated to have his audience disinterested in what he played. “Though insisting upon his professional immunity,” writes Burke, “[the piper] didn't want to be too damned immune, since complete tolerance would imply the unimportance of his craft. He simultaneously wanted separation and integration” (272). This same tension between freedom and authority, Burke proposes, invigorates the production of all art. Whether or not a government body or a public audience mandates what an artist must (or must not) say, the attention, engagement, and pecuniary support of these groups subtly dictate the possible range of art.¹⁵ The need for identification creates the capacity for art, but it also tethers art to an identifying subject. Identification is both art’s lifeblood and its curse.

“The Calling of the Tune” marks an important milestone in the development of Burke’s treatment of identification. It is the first time Burke has named identification as a primary mission of art, and thus the first time he has characterized it as an express *goal* of rhetorical action. Two years prior, in *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke had offered a more limited preliminary definition of identification in a section of his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” titled “Identity, Identification” (263-273).¹⁶ Arguing that “individual identity” cannot exist, Burke proposes in that section that identity is a matter of being identified with others: “The so-called ‘I’ is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting ‘corporate we’s’” (264). Identification in *Attitudes Toward History* is thus primarily focused on the construction of the corporate we’s which comprise identity; Burke does not explicitly limit identification to this process of construction, but neither does he cast a more expansive vision of it. “In fact,” he writes,

synthesis, the prophesied Hegelian eschaton.

¹⁵ This argument is, as Mary Hedengren notes, a fitting extension of Burke’s earlier critiques of “pure art” in *Counter-Statement*.

¹⁶ Burke had also made passing mentions of identification in “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” (1935) and “Journalistic Language: Reading While You Run” (1937), but neither essay considers the implications of the term at any length.

“‘identification’ is hardly other than a name for the *function of sociality*” (267). This view of identification requires little purposeful agential action; it exists by default, without being pursued.

In “The Calling of the Tune,” however, identification takes a more capacious and active role in Burke’s thought. While the term continues to name the construction and perpetuation of identity categories, it now stretches to include the pursuit of rhetorical exchange by which these categories are inhabited, defended, and reconstituted by agents. Burke offers this expanded definition:

By “identification” I have in mind this sort of thing: one’s material and mental ways of placing oneself as a person in the groups and movements; one’s ways of sharing vicariously in the role of leader or spokesman; formation and change of allegiance; the rituals of suicide, parricide, and prolicide, the vesting and divesting of insignia, the modes of initiation and purification, that are involved in the response to allegiance and change of allegiance... one’s ways of seeing one’s reflection in the social mirror. (277)

According to Burke’s evolving conception laid out in this essay, identification creates a sense of agential responsibility for the communicator. Identification is a *doing* as well as a *being*. Because this goal of identification is so inherent to art, Burke argues, there can be no real ideological motive in art apart from some identificatory process. In fact, Burke regards identification as so central to the goals of the arts that he describes Herbert Read’s failure to account for identification as the starkest deficiency of Read’s argument. Art which succeeds as art must do so by succeeding as identification. For this reason, “An art, to be most thoroughly integrated with the national life, must represent, form, confirm, utilize, and project the national values, ideals, and expectancies” (274). Even the most anti-authoritarian art will invariably perform

identification, and this identification will function as an aesthetic authority.

Agential government censorship plays only a small role in Burke's artistic calculus, focused as he is on Western art developed in nations where freedom of the press is paramount. But the case of *Laskar Pelangi* extends Burke's proposal by pressing more deeply into the question of how the artistic necessity for identification is further strained by the threat of agential censorship, making this study generative for the extension of Burke studies. Likewise, *Laskar Pelangi* offers some preliminary insight into the realm of Indonesian rhetoric. As Burke's discussion of "tune-calling" implies, an artistic text which succeeds at the separation/integration necessary for artistic identification concomitantly reveals the topography of the rhetorical terrain it has navigated. Hirata's negotiation of the speakable and the unspeakable renders visible a topography of the Indonesian rhetorical situation. By excelling according to the contradictory demands of his audiences, Hirata illuminates these societal points of tension and demonstrates how terministic inflexibility can work advantageously in an Indonesian rhetorical context.

Laskar Pelangi thus provides a compelling entry point for scholars seeking insight into a little-studied rhetorical community. Despite being the world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia has largely escaped the attention of Western rhetorical scholarship. Research has been done on Arab Islamic rhetoric (Butterworth; Koch; Halldén), Indian rhetoric (Misra; Lloyd; Stroud; Oliver; Kennedy), and other South and East Asian rhetorics (Oliver; Kennedy; Wang; Miyahara; Jenson), and Indonesian rhetoric bears similarities to and shares histories with each of these rhetorical groups. However, Indonesian rhetoric is not reducible to any of these groups, meriting focused studies of its own. Amber Engelson provides one such focused study, considering how Indonesians' uses of English reflect or alter the religious patterns deeply embedded in Indonesian public and private discourse. If a robust conception of Indonesian

rhetorics is to be developed, more such work is needed—especially work that bears directly on Indonesia’s national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) and other local dialects as well as on English. *Laskar Pelangi* enables such an investigation, with its English translation fortuitously making the conversation accessible for scholars unfamiliar with *Bahasa Indonesia*.

In offering *Laskar Pelangi* as a window into Indonesian rhetoric, however, I am not suggesting that the novel can be reductively understood as encompassing the summation of Indonesian identification and national identity. This reductive approach to so-called “third-world” literatures was characteristic of early postcolonial scholarship, an approach famously defended by Fredric Jameson’s argument (“Third-World”) that postcolonial texts ought to be understood as “national allegories.” Aijaz Ahmad’s rebuttal to Jameson serves as a valuable reminder for any scholar of literary or political rhetoric in a postcolonial context: granting excessive representational power to individual texts, he argues, generates a scholarship of homogenization. When scholars from historically colonizing countries treat speakers in formerly colonized countries not as individual actors but as a single amalgamated Other, they engage in yet another form of colonialism.

In keeping with Ahmad, then, I am unwilling to regard *Laskar Pelangi* as “national allegory” or to posit a reductive notion of Indonesian rhetoric centered on a single text. However, I am equally cautious of the opposite error which might seek to altogether divorce broad claims about rhetoric from the interrogation of particular texts. This latter approach either must deny the possibility of theorizing Indonesian rhetoric—thereby abnegating the utility such theorizing can offer—or it must perform its theorizing bereft of close reading and textual particularity. It must, to borrow the old idiom, forsake the trees on behalf of the forest or else forsake the forest on behalf of the trees. The tension between these two poles—between salient essentialism and

infinitesimal particularity—is the same tension that invigorates this entire dissertation. As I do elsewhere in the dissertation, I reject here the semiotic binaries that set these two approaches as necessarily at odds with one another. Inasmuch as *Laskar Pelangi*'s illumination of Indonesian rhetorical possibility offers productive insight upon which future scholarship might build, I embrace such insight in the spirit of Spivak's "strategic essentialism." Yet this essentialism is not meant to replace the precision offered by particularity. I treat *Laskar Pelangi* not as a representative text of all Indonesian rhetoric, but as a singular text necessarily called into being by a broader Indonesian rhetorical situation.

Following Burke's lead in "The Calling of the Tune," I read sociocultural dynamics, threats of governmental censorship, and pecuniary considerations not as *isolated factors* contributing to an otherwise self-defined rhetorical terrain but as *inextricable co-creators* of rhetorical possibility. These features are all equally part and parcel of the terrain of identification navigated by *Laskar Pelangi*. The pressures of identification, especially the pressure of participation in a national identity, can limit discourse even apart from the explicit exercise of agential censorship. Indonesia's rhetorical situation clearly demonstrates how any nondominant rhetoric—any message that does not simply acquiesce to the "tunes" called by societal and linguistic power structures—must inhabit a paradoxical tension between critiquing dominant discourses and remaining intelligible within those discourses. As Burke predicts in "The Calling of the Tune," such work must achieve both separation and integration, goals which are semantically opposite but rhetorically congruous. Thus, the strategic polysemy of *Laskar Pelangi* is best understood in light of the elusive category of Indonesian identity with which this text succeeded so well in identifying.

Mapping Indonesian Literary Identification

To speak of “Indonesia” as such is already to assume the existence of a category that is neither inherent nor straightforward. As historian R. E. Elson notes, the idea of Indonesia did not and could not exist prior to the twentieth century. Ethnically and linguistically diverse, the thousands of islands that comprise modern-day Indonesia had no reasons for a shared identity as “Indonesian” except their relative proximity and their shared colonization by the Dutch. Yet claiming collective national identity would be crucial in these islands’ efforts to gain independence from the Dutch. When the Japanese ended their hostile occupation of the Dutch East Indies in 1945, Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno seized the opportunity to declare these newly vacated islands an independent “Indonesia.” Under Sukarno’s leadership, the nascent *Republik Indonesia Serikat* (United Indonesian Republic) asserted its linguistic unity by adopting a Malay trade dialect as its national language and renaming the dialect *Bahasa Indonesia* (“the language of Indonesia”). Remarkably, this dialect was the native language of only 5% of Indonesia’s newly declared citizenry, whereas 42% of Indonesians were native Javanese speakers. However, as linguist Ulrich Kratz argues, the choice of *Bahasa Indonesia* as national language was highly strategic for uniting an otherwise disparate group: “It was a politically fortuitous choice because it was so strongly associated with nationalism, it was already in widespread use, and it avoided the factionalism that would have resulted had the choice been one of the majority languages, such as Javanese or Sundanese” (641). Both the newly formed nation and its newly declared language were predicated on attempts to form a sense of collective belonging. This struggle for Indonesian national identity continues even today, argues political scientist Simon Philpott, and much Indonesian political discourse can therefore be understood as participating in the strain to keep Indonesia’s disparate components unified (73). Many residents of dissenting regions like Irian Jaya still prefer not to think of

themselves as Indonesian, instead identifying primarily with their localized racial and linguistic identities.

Since the nation's inception, then, and throughout the intervening seven decades, Indonesian leaders have fought to cultivate a sense of Indonesian identity. Indonesia's early parliamentary democracy, modeled largely after Western democratic models, failed to produce the necessary momentum to consolidate the floundering young nation, and so in 1957 Sukarno proposed what he called a *Demokrasi Terpimpin* (Guided Democracy), a more centrally authoritative system in which he declared himself president for life. Sukarno's new system was based on the doctrine of *Pancasila* (Five Principles): commitment to God, democracy by consensus, humanitarianism, prosperity, and national unity. The principles of *Pancasila* came to function as the most enduring articulation of Indonesia's unique national identity. The notion of democracy by consensus in particular was a reaction against models of Western democracy which called for polemical disagreement and rule by the majority. Instead, Sukarno argued that harmonious Indonesian democracy, reflecting the high value placed on harmony by most Indonesian ethnic groups, would be best achieved through the wisdom of consensus. This process of consensus, Sukarno reasoned, would inevitably be guided by a single strong leader; the danger of centralizing power within a single democratic leader was less formidable than the dangers of mob rule or chaos. Thus, Sukarno considered himself a democratic leader and yet functioned in a highly authoritative role, remaining Indonesia's sole leader until he was ousted by Suharto in 1967. Suharto's *Orde Baru* ("New Order"), though it overturned many of the Sukarno-era policies, maintained the doctrine of *Pancasila*, regarding it as foundational to the very premise of Indonesian identity.

One of the engines of Indonesian unity since the nation's earliest days has been religion,

as implied by the mention of God in the *Pancasila*. In 1960, Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java* noted the importance of Islam to the development of Indonesian national identity. Islamic influence was one of the few common ties between many of the Indonesian islands before they were collectively occupied by the Dutch, and thus it seemed a natural locus of postcolonial identity. Although religious practice in Indonesia is not fully orthodox, with many adherents still blending traditional animism into their practice of Islam, approximately 87% of Indonesians are Muslim at least in their legal identity (U.S. Dept. of State).¹⁷ *Pancasila*'s commitment to God leaves space for religious pluralism; yet it does so in a way that primarily privileges Islam. Anti-blasphemy laws exist specifically to punish those who speak out against Islam—an offense that is doubly dangerous within the Indonesian rhetorical context because it violates one of the historic unifiers of Indonesian identity as well as insulting a majority religious group. The Muslim majority also contains a small but vocal contingent of hard-line Muslim conservatives, who exercise a power disproportionate to their size in Indonesian politics.¹⁸ Religious propriety thus functions, whether implicitly or explicitly, as a source of censorship and restriction in Indonesian rhetoric.

The high value placed on consensus and unity within the *Pancasila* has also served as a rationale for agential government censorship. During the Suharto era, criticism of the

¹⁷ The notion of legal religious identity exists in Indonesia because the government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. The Indonesian identity card (called the KTP, *Kartu Tanda Penduduk*) includes a section for religious identity that can only be filled with one of these six religions. Atheists or adherents to other faiths may choose to leave this section blank, but doing so can have a variety of consequences, including loss of access to public services. Thus, many choose to identify themselves with a legal religious identity regardless of belief (U.S. Dept. of State; Hosen 339).

¹⁸ For examples of this disproportionate influence, see for instance reporting by Karishma Vaswani. The risk of angering these vocal conservatives was recently evidenced by the blasphemy trial of Ahok, former governor of Indonesia's capitol city of Jakarta. In 2017, Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison because he accused conservative Islamic teachers of misusing a verse in the Qur'an for their own political gain. Although the alleged "blasphemy" of Ahok's comments was disputable, even the mere suggestion of blasphemy was sufficient to end Ahok's political career. Cases like Ahok's are uncommon but not unfamiliar within Indonesian politics, and criticisms leveled against Islamic authority are correspondingly rare.

government or debate about Indonesia's formation and constitution was strictly forbidden on the grounds that these conversations could disrupt national unity. Suharto's New Order government "spent a great deal of resources on discovering, analyzing and propagating a particular image of the Indonesian past" (Wood xi) in an effort to keep the national conception of "Indonesia" uniform. By the same logic of harmony, writers were cautioned against addressing a set of potentially controversial topics known by the acronym *SARA*: *suku* (ethnicity), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race), and *antargolongan* (interactions between these groups). While these topics were not categorically forbidden in print, the government claimed the right to censor any discussion of *SARA* whenever it deemed necessary, "in the name of tranquility and peace" (Maier 248). In other words, the pressing identity concerns that fell under the umbrella of *SARA* could be talked about only inasmuch as they were addressed in a way that adhered to the status quo and pleased government officials. Because censorship was always a threat for work that engaged *SARA* in new ways, publishers undertook a significant financial risk investing in material that seemed prone to incite censorial wrath. Most works published on these topics were careful to adhere to familiar nationalistic tropes instead of daring to cover new ground.

And indeed, the *Pancasila*'s emphasis on consensus and unity served as an engine not only for legislation but also for public opinion. As Indonesian theologian Eka Darmaputera argues, "Pancasila is rooted in the dominant traditional ethos of Indonesia... based on the ideas of unity, balance, and harmony" (204). These principles are thus guiding "god terms," to use Burke's term, of Indonesian national discourse in the same way that liberty and equality might be in the national discourse of the United States, representing the shared values that bind otherwise disparate entities into a unitive national identity like ideological adhesive. Indonesian texts most likely to incur censorial wrath were often those that violated the nationally declared Indonesian

preference for harmony. Authors who dared to stir up controversy risked being received with hostility even if they escaped agential government censorship. Although many Indonesians might have silently agreed that their society's inequities demanded critique, even this critique needed to be leveled harmoniously in order to not be rejected as polemical ululation.

Complicating matters further still, reform and progress are also highly celebrated Indonesian ideals, lying at the center of the unification narratives given by each successive era of Indonesian leadership. The Sukarno administration presented itself as a progressive response to the oppression of the Dutch. Suharto claimed to reform the moral decay of Indonesia society reflected by the Communist movement. Megawati declared a reformation of Suharto-era corruption and a return to the progressive stances of her father Sukarno.¹⁹ And so on. Each of these narratives claimed to be antithetical to an assumed enemy; yet the confrontational aspect of each was largely downplayed in order to emphasize the unity with which the Indonesian people pursued this progress. A shared love for progress thus became part and parcel of the assumed unity of Indonesian values, a convenient rhetorical tool for those skillful enough to wield it.²⁰ Openly acknowledged ideological clashes occurred at transitional moments between administrations,²¹ but they rarely characterized the national discourse within a given administration. Instead, the best-received critiques were always also validations, not so much persuading as strategically reminding people of what they already believed to be true.

Caught within these tensions—needing to be at once progressive and harmonious and

¹⁹ Two presidents took office briefly between Suharto and Megawati. Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, the first, functioned as a temporary extension of the failing Suharto regime. Abdurrahman Wahid, the second, served a partial term while fighting against national resentment that he had won the presidency despite Megawati's earning a plurality of the popular vote.

²⁰ For an example of how the praise of progressive thinking functions as an enforcer of harmony in Indonesian discourse, see my article "“What Do I Lack as a Woman?”: The Rhetoric of Megawati Sukarnoputri.”

²¹ As, for instance, in the 1965 communist purges that marked the end of Sukarno's presidency, and the clashes of 1996-1998 that marked the demise of Suharto's rule.

evocative and familiar—Indonesian authors struggled to draw and engage audiences. Those who did effectively and evocatively address the compelling issues of their day were quickly silenced. For example, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia’s best-known twentieth century novelist, published a runaway bestseller in 1980 called *Bumi Manusia* (“This Earth of Mankind”) that dealt with the rise of Indonesian nationalism during Dutch colonization; the book was reprinted five times within ten months, circulating an estimated 50,000 legal copies and countless pirated copies, before being banned by the Suharto government (Heryanto, *State* 58). Meanwhile, those who avoided social issues in order to avoid censorship, or who emphasized harmony to the exclusion of critique, were dismissed as irrelevant. As historian Laurie J. Sears explains, “Indonesian literatures and performances of the middle New Order period [that is, the heart of the Suharto administration] were considered to be isolated from the needs of society” (212). Writers were forced to choose between critically engaging social issues or having access to the government-sanctioned publishing market, and neither choice was likely to yield literary or pecuniary success in isolation from the other. In addition, publishers were reluctant to take on potentially controversial material because they faced the risk of investing in a book which might subsequently be banned and even destroyed. As Joseph Saunders wrote in 1998, the final year of Suharto’s presidency: “Because there is no provision in the law for compensation for those whose books are seized, publishers and book stores that carry controversial works take a substantial financial risk” (46-47). Just as publishing decisions in nations with little or no agential government censorship are largely dictated by finances, so the risk of agential censorship likewise invokes a distinctly pecuniary logic. The shape of these financial considerations may differ, but their essential logic does not.

While agential government censorship became substantially less common in Indonesia

after the collapse of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s, it remained part of the law of the land and still occurred on occasion (Vickers 220). In 2004, “the parliament approved a new law that replaced the Attorney General’s authority to ‘ban’ books with the responsibility to ‘supervise’ the circulation of printed materials” (Farid), effectively reawakening censorship legislation that had seemed to lie dormant for years. Subsequent legislation would be created to deal specifically with restrictions of web content (Hartono; Baziad). Even under the administration of current president Joko Widodo, whose term began in 2014 and will continue until 2019, threats of censorship remain. In 2015, the annual Ubud Writers and Readers Festival was censored when organizers planned a number of programs to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1965 anti-communist purges (Pamuntjak).²² The censors demanded that all mention of 1965 be removed from the event, threatening to otherwise cancel future festivals altogether. One participant at the censored event wrote, “The atmosphere reminds me of the authoritarian Suharto era, when activists were always nervous, when basic distrust was the norm” (Harsono). This single instance of agential censorship reawakened longstanding fears and paranoias, as well as reminding authors inclined toward controversy of the literary and financial risks they had always been incurring.

Celebrated South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, in his study on censorship in colonial and authoritarian regimes, notes that precedents of censorship are often just as effective in regulating discourse as actual censorship would be: “Once censorship has established itself as a

²² These 1965 purges, coordinated by the Indonesian military during its overthrow of Sukarno and supported by the United States, left more than one million dead. Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary films *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), both of which discuss the 1965 massacre, have also been banned from Indonesian theaters and television. As Joseph Saunders notes, “Historical studies have been a leading target of the [Indonesian] censors” (49), particularly those studies which dwell on the Indonesian military’s sanguinary past. Saunders continues, “In almost every case, the rationale for censorship contained in the attorney general’s censorship decision is that the offending work ‘inverts the facts’ which could ‘lead the public astray’ and ultimately ‘disturb public order.’ Censorship thus presupposes an official history” (49).

regime of writing and reading, writers can be expected either to regulate themselves or, by rejecting the rules, to place themselves outside the law” (125). The effect of governmental action on a text’s rhetorical situation is defined not by future action, per se, but by the anticipation of future action; in this sense, expected censorship is indistinguishable from enacted censorship in its impact on textual creation. Although Coetzee’s observation applies differently in societies that encounter consistent agential censorship than in those like Indonesia where it occurs only infrequently, the central importance of censorship’s anticipation remains true across both cases. In fact, uncertainties about censorship in the Indonesian context can create a distinctive kind of threat unknown to regions where the same practices are more commonplace. As Tiffany Tsao observes, “Where censorship was once a constant companion, nowadays it pops in occasionally for an uncomfortable conversation over tea... or to drag you off to jail.” Like Bentham’s Panopticon, Indonesia’s intermittent censorship does not scrutinize every author but leaves every author at risk of scrutiny, thereby creating texts that function as if under scrutiny. As long as the conditions for the possibility of censorship exist, there is no such thing as an uncensored text.

How can artistic identification occur within such a terrain of national and literary identity? What does it mean for a text to be both committed to progressive critique and harmoniously aligned to the status quo, to broach oft-censored topics without invoking censorial wrath? How can the same novel that challenges the real and materially consequential divisions of Indonesian society also reaffirm the tenuous unity without which the very idea of “Indonesia” ceases to exist? For a work to succeed within these constraints is for it to be strategically unmoored from the prison of static semiosis. Artistic identification that originates from outside the realm of the politically and culturally authoritative, if it is to escape the impotence of a permanently marginal space, must engage the paradox of the both/and. The delicate

interdependence of artist, audience, and authority is a feature of Indonesian “tune-calling” as well as a feature of the Western textual determination first envisioned by Burke. To succeed in this interdependent space, as *Laskar Pelangi* has done, is to play a semiotically fluid tune that is at once one’s own tune and the tune called for by listeners.

The Violence of Hope

The fluid semiosis of *Laskar Pelangi* is exemplified by its title. Rendered as *The Rainbow Troops* in English, the name *Laskar Pelangi* juxtaposes a symbol of militancy against one of hope and innocence. This contrast, already evident in English, is more striking still in its original Indonesian, because the Indonesian word *laskar* does not have the same denotative or connotative range as the English *troops*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists eleven meanings of the noun *troop*, only five of which are military in nature. Other possible meanings include “a number of persons (or things) collected together; a party, company, band”; “Of animals: A herd, flock, swarm; esp. a group of apes or monkeys”; and “A company of performers.” Moreover, because *troop* is commonly used to describe groups of children within organizations like the Girl Scouts of the USA and Boy Scouts of America, it is not unusual for Western readers to see the word describing children. The Indonesian word *laskar*, however, has a somewhat smaller range of meaning. Denotatively, *laskar* is decidedly military in its meaning; one Indonesian-to-English dictionary defines it as “army, troops, soldier,” and its cognate *kelaskaran* means simply “military affairs” (Anwar 542). Connotatively, *laskar* usually suggests physical violence, particularly after the national visibility of the militant Islamic organization *Laskar Jihad* in the early 2000s made the word nearly synonymous with religious conflict. This is not to say that the word *laskar* cannot be used figuratively or affectionately—and therefore nonviolently—rather like the English words *soldiers* and *militia* might be. Such is certainly the case here. Even these

figurative uses, however, still implicate the words' more common and literal militaristic meanings. In this regard, a more faithful English rendering of the title might be *The Rainbow Soldiers* or *The Rainbow Militia*.²³ The title's optimism is already tinged with the possibility of violent resistance.

Yet the figurative violence of the *laskar* is strangely mitigated here because it refers to children rather than adults. Readers learn early in the book that *laskar pelangi* is the nickname given to a group of schoolchildren by their teacher (73). Had the *laskar* been a group of adults resisting governmental oppression, it might have seemed threatening to government authorities and therefore at risk of censorship. Because these warriors are children, "battling" by way of hard work and wholesome Indonesian education, they appear sufficiently harmless to escape censorship. Hirata's terminology makes space for critique which is symbolically violent by recasting it in nonviolent (and therefore nonthreatening) bodies. The unlikely marriage of these contradictions ushers in a fluid semiosis that creates the possibility for a violence of hope.

This violence of hope shapes the whole narrative of *Laskar Pelangi*. Hegemonic tensions underlie each of the book's major conflicts, yet these conflicts are resolved in favor of the disadvantaged Muhammadiyah school without ever addressing the systemic problems that brought them into being. Ikal's school faces the threat of closure from governmental officials, challenges *PN Timah*'s wealthy private school in an academic competition, and fights for survival when the mining company wants to demolish it. Each time, Ikal and the *laskar pelangi* are

²³ This is not to suggest that the choice of translation is a poor one, however, since these alternate titles would pose their own challenges to the fluid semiosis Hirata's work constructs. In fact, Hirata consulted on the English translation, and he undoubtedly had a say in the choice of the book's English title. It should be noted too that the name *laskar pelangi* is one of the many elements of the novel that is rooted in Hirata's own childhood. As Hirata explains in an interview, the character of Ibu Muslimah is based on a real fifteen-year-old who began a school for impoverished children on Belitong and became Hirata's teacher: "The little girl called us her ten students as *The Rainbow Troops*. The name then becomes the title of my first novel" (qtd. in Wong). Thus the significance of the title cannot simply be credited to Hirata's own rhetorical strategy; it is, rather, a significance residing within the language itself.

victorious through a combination of hard work, luck, and the good will of others. As they wage symbolic war against Belitong's financial and political powers, they trust in the power of education and divine justice—values which are woven into the fabric of Indonesian national identity. In a brilliantly uncensorable move, government-sanctioned values are pitted against government-sanctioned inequity. Almost always, it is hope that wins the day.

Yet that word *almost* is critical. While symbolic victory over oppression marks the majority of the novel, the final chapters trouble that straightforward optimism. Consider the narrative of Lintang, the *laskar pelangi*'s resident genius. Upon meeting him, Ikal the narrator reveals that “that impoverished coastal boy would outshine the dark nimbus clouds that had for so long overshadowed this school as he evolved into the most brilliant person I've ever met in all the years of my life” (11).²⁴ For much of the novel, the hopefulness of this promise remains true and uncomplicated; indeed, it is Lintang who leads his classmates to victory in their academic contest against the wealthy private school. Near the end of the novel, however, Lintang's poverty undoes his success when his father dies suddenly. Because Lintang is the oldest child in a poor family, he has no choice but to leave school in order to provide for his family. No amount of hard work or intellectual ability can make him immune to the ravages of poverty and the high cost of education. Twelve years later, the grown Ikal returns to Belitong to reunite with the *laskar pelangi* and discovers that Lintang is now a truck driver. Angry to see his friend's talent being wasted, Ikal allows himself a rare moment of imprecation against the privileged upper class: “I cursed all the stupid, arrogant people who acted smart. I hated those children of the rich who threw away their education” (279).²⁵

²⁴ In Indonesian, “nanti ia—seorang anak miskin pesisir—akan menerangi nebula yang melingkupi sekolah miskin ini sebab ia akan berkembang menjadi manusia paling genius yang pernah kujumpai seumur hidupku” (15).

²⁵ In Indonesian, “Aku mengutuki orang-orang bodoh sok pintar yang menyombongkan diri, dan anak-anak orang kaya yang menyia-nyiakan kesempatan pendidikan” (472).

Lintang's fate seems even crueler next to that of Ikal, who earns a scholarship to a university in Europe and has a bright future ahead of him. For Ikal, hope and hard work have been sufficient to lift him out of poverty. Yet despite the novel's insistence on the necessity of education and its ability to transform inequity, all Lintang's education and skill and persistence cannot change his tragedy. By setting an optimistic narrative beside a grim narrative, the novel ultimately refuses to privilege one of these narratives over the other. Without grimness, there can be no meaningful critique of Indonesian societal inequities. Without optimism to assuage that critique, the book runs the risk of incurring censorship or violating the Indonesian cultural and political value of harmony. Rather than representing a middle ground between the two stances, Hirata takes up a fluid semiosis that represents them both. Hope and hopelessness are both among his terministic screens, each one reflecting certain aspects of reality while deflecting other aspects, in turns capacitating and incapacitating his discourse. To navigate his rhetorical terrain, Hirata needs both screens. He needs the violence of the *laskar* as well as the rainbow hope of the *pelangi*.

This same fluidity, the concomitant celebration and subversion of optimism, appears in the book's final pages, when the divide between rich and poor on the island of Belitong finally collapses. Plummeting tin prices worldwide cause the mining company to shut down, and those who had lived in luxury because of the company find themselves suddenly poor. In a karmic twist, the once-rich inhabitants of Belitong aren't able to adjust to their newly impoverished lifestyles. They become even worse off than their always-poor neighbors, "choking on their silver spoons" (281).²⁶ Wealth becomes an impediment to happiness instead of an aid, invoking a trope that can make the impoverished more willing to accept their lot. In time, the narrative

²⁶ In Indonesian, "seperti orang tersedak sendok perak" (485).

seems to imply, oppression will give way to equality if the poor continue living upright lives and pursuing education. Hirata describes the downfall of the rich by invoking the language of imperialism: “A strong and arrogant dynasty had fallen” (283).²⁷ No violent action is necessary on the part of the oppressed in order to bring about justice; Hirata instead depicts a violence of hope, a patient pursuit of education and morality that will be rewarded in the end. The victory of oppressed over oppressor is a passive victory, one that will arrive simply because it is hoped for. Such a narrative accords easily with Indonesian values and is in no threat of censorship.

The apparent victory of hope is not total, however. Although the collapse of *PN Timah* has made inequality disappear within the microcosm of Belitong, the inequality between Belitong’s poor and the rest of Indonesia is only exacerbated: “The central government, which for years had received royalties and dividends worth billions of rupiah, suddenly acted as if our small island didn’t belong to it” (281).²⁸ Once Belitong ceases to be lucrative for Indonesia’s rich leaders, the island is ignored as if it were no longer Indonesian. The same patient hopefulness that flattens Belitong’s hierarchies simply reinforces other divisions between rich and poor. Hirata invokes an Indonesian proverb not included in the translated English text: “Habis manis sepah dibuang” (482), which means, “When the sweetness is gone, the pulp is thrown out.”²⁹ He thus accuses the government of treating Belitong as disposable, chewing it up and spitting it out. The novel deals a blow to the notion of Indonesian unity by showing how Indonesian governmental interest can be fundamentally independent from the interests of particular Indonesian populations.

The *laskar pelangi*’s fight to keep their schoolhouse from being torn down by *PN Timah*

²⁷ In Indonesian, “Sebuah dinasti yang kukuh dan congkak hancur berantakan menjadi remah-remah” (484).

²⁸ In Indonesian, “Pemerintah pusat yang rutin menerima royalti dan deviden miliaran rupiah tiba-tiba seperti tak pernah mengenal pulau kecil itu” (482).

²⁹ Translation mine.

likewise portrays passive victory alongside ongoing defeat. When the mining company decides to tear down the Muhammadiyah schoolhouse to gain access to the rich natural resources underneath, the children's teacher, Bu Mus, protests. She goes to meet with the director of the mining company, bringing a five-page speech to read to him. When the moment arrives to read the speech, however, she finds herself tongue-tied. Staying silent before a hegemonic authority, she becomes tearful, hands the director a small bundle of chalk, and leaves without a word. Although Bu Mus's silence looks at first like failure, the director is moved to compassion and decides not to destroy the school. In this instance, Bu Mus's struggle against oppression is won not by her direct verbal opposition of authority but simply by the greatness of her heart. The narrative rewards her for her silence, commending her because she is more dedicated to teaching her students (as the chalk indicates) than she is to fighting vocally against an oppressive authority. It is Bu Mus's morality and commitment to education that conquer the threat of self-interested capitalism. Even this victory, however, is ultimately turned into defeat when economic pressures force the school to close years later. A single victory, a single moment of compassion from one rich man, is not sufficient to overturn whole systems of inequity that put education at risk. Violent hope may be all that Hirata's characters have at their disposal to fight injustice, but violent hope is also not sufficient to conclude the battle.

Again and again, Hirata is careful not to violate the boundaries of censorship as established by Indonesian culture and common practice. This care is most evident in his consistent praise of Islam and his rejection of all non-orthodox forms of spirituality. Moments of symbolic victory in the novel are usually accompanied by fitting expressions of praise to Allah: when the children win the Academic Challenge against the wealthy private school, for instance,

Bu Mus gets teary-eyed and whispers, “Allah is most holy” (193).³⁰ The final destruction of the mining company is compared to the Qur’anic narrative of the Tower of Babel, evincing a grounding in Muslim tradition. When a boy named Mahar begins experimenting with animism and tries to become a shaman, the heroic Bu Mus intervenes and instructs him to live according to the teachings of the Qur’an and the imams. Although animistic practice is a reality for many Indonesian Muslims, it is not a reality publicly acknowledged as part of Indonesian national identity, and Hirata abides by this taboo.

Wherever Hirata sees soft spots in Indonesian literary censorship, however, he capitalizes upon these opportunities to mock the government and win favor with his readers. This tactic is exemplified by Hirata’s descriptions of Kucai, the class politician who grows up to become a national politician:

With all of Kucai’s other characteristics combined—opportunistic, self-centered, a little deceitful—plus his know-it-all attitude, shamelessness, and populist tendencies, he met all of the requirements to be a politician. For that reason, we unanimously appointed him to be class president. (35)³¹

Kucai stands as a tongue-in-cheek representative of the foolishness of Indonesian politics. Yet Hirata softens his blow by making the representative of corrupt politics a young boy who, however irritating he may be, is nonetheless part of a group of heroes. In one representative moment—which notably appears only in the English translation and not in the Indonesian original—Ikal bribes Kucai with a few packages of candy. Hirata’s narrator snidely remarks that Kucai, “like most politicians in this country, was that easy to buy” (121). The passage’s gentle

³⁰ In Indonesian, “Subhanallah, subhanallah” (382).

³¹ In Indonesian, “Maka jika digabungkan sifat populis, sok tahu, dan oportunis dengan otaknya yang lemot--Kucai memiliki semua kualitas untuk menjadi seorang politisi. Kenyataannya memang begitu” (70).

mockery fits easily with the rest of the novel's portrayal of Kucai, yet the passage itself remains absent from the Indonesian version, reminding readers once again that Hirata's cautious critiques are occurring along the dangerously inscrutable ridge between speakability and unspeakability.

Subtle differences between the Indonesian original and the English translation, like the above, are valuable reminders to the careful bilingual reader that *Laskar Pelangi* is performing a delicate dance of meanings that will operate differently in different languages. In fact, Hirata's commentary on the process of translating *Laskar Pelangi* is quite telling in its own right:

The challenge of its translation into other languages was how to capture the nature of the novel, which conveys the sad story of a fifteen-year old girl, Muslimah, and her uncle, who dedicate their lives to running a very poor school with ten unfortunate students who are native Belitong, with laughter and lightheartedness. It tells of oppressed people protesting in good humor, without swearing, without violence, without a divisive political movement, and without anyone to take up their cause. At the same time, the story in its original version has a strong tendency to address serious issues, such as the right to education. It also addresses corporate exploitation. It frames these issues within the tale of beautiful childhood journey and friendship. ("Translation" 1)

Hirata primarily characterizes the story as a "sad" one, yet he wants it to communicate "laughter and lightheartedness." He believes that his heroes are "protesting" but that they are doing so in "good humor." Not only do these features seem paradoxical, but they are features which are expressed differently in different cultures and languages: what constitutes "protest" in one culture may pass as mere "lightheartedness" in another. Thus, Hirata admits to the need for reorganization and even rewriting in order for the translation to satisfactorily capture the spirit of

the original. For example, he writes of the English translation that “in translating the paragraphs, the translator had to reconstruct them from their Indonesian version in order to maintain the intensity of sadness” (“Translation” 2). Faithfulness to Hirata’s creative vision means allowing for substantial change in the appearance of the text. Hirata does not pretend that the translated and original versions can achieve the same affect or play the same rhetorical function simply by rendering Indonesian sentences according to their nearest English translation.

Among the many changes made during the translation process, the English translation contains moments of added commentary on Indonesian political history and culture that do not appear in the Indonesian original. In most cases, these moments seem to exist simply to inform non-Indonesian readers of things Indonesian readers would readily know or assume. One revealing example comes during Hirata’s introduction to the mining company *PN Timah*: “The Indonesian government took over PN from the colonial Dutch. And not only the assets were seized but also the feudalistic mentality. Even after Indonesia gained its freedom, PN’s treatment of native employees remained very discriminatory” (20). Some of this information can be inferred in the Indonesian edition based on what is written; for instance, the Indonesian version states that the company began exploiting the island’s tin supply in the nineteenth century, which is an obvious reference to colonial Dutch occupation for those familiar with Indonesian history. Other parts of the passage, such as the undoubtedly discriminatory treatment toward native employees, will be obvious to anyone who knows Indonesian culture, based on the other clues given about *PN Timah*’s operations. These unspoken—but loudly implied—aspects of the Indonesian text are no less part of its fluid semiosis than those words which are plainly printed.

Hirata’s feelings about the government’s treatment of his island become especially clear

in a troubling passage where the narrator Ikal, clearly representative of Hirata himself,³² recounts one of his dreams:

I dreamed that a mysterious atomic bomb exploded in Belitong.... Many perished on the spot, and those who survived became dwarfed, putrid-smelling creatures. Seeing the dwarfed appearance of the people of Belitong, the central government in Jakarta felt shamed before the world and refused to admit that they were citizens of the republic.³³... Belitong could no longer support itself, because its natural resources had been sucked dry over hundreds of years. The island collapsed. (158)

While the middle portion of this English translation passage is taken directly from the Indonesian original, the beginning and end are not. In Indonesian, the dream sequence goes into far greater detail, taking the majority of three pages, and it is never explicitly identified as a dream until the very end. Moreover, while the cause of the devastation in English is simply “a mysterious atomic bomb,” the Indonesian tells of a monstrous tropical storm with winds above 10,000 miles per hour. This storm, the narrator explains, is caused by the greenhouse gas emissions of the *PN Timah*, which ravaged the environment of Belitong at the same time it took advantage of the people of Belitong. In either language, the government’s betrayal of Belitong is clear. But it is all the more acerbic in the Indonesian original, where the government is at fault not only for being ready to disown Belitong’s people and leave them to die, but also for causing the crisis by its avarice.

³² Hirata has discussed his similarity to Ikal often, including in an interview with P. P. Wong.

³³ In Indonesian, “Sebagian orang Belitong tewas di tempat, tertungging seperti ekstremis dibedil kompeni, dan mereka yang selamat berubah menjadi makhluk-makhluk cebol berbau busuk. Melihat penampilan orang Belitong seperti itu pemerintah pusat di Jakarta merasa malu kepada dunia internasional dan tak sudi mengakui orang Belitong sebagai warga negara republik” (302-303).

As with the novel's other critiques, these accusations of the government's abusive opportunism resonate deeply with Hirata's largely impoverished audience. Yet Hirata mitigates the sting of his words in two important ways, making sure not to overstep his boundaries as an Indonesian author. First, by situating this moment in a dream, albeit retrospectively, he allows for the possibility that the governmental attitudes revealed in the dream are in fact imagined or exaggerated. A literal reading of the text admits only that Indonesia's citizens may *feel* abandoned by their government, not that the government has in fact abandoned them or would ever do so. In addition, the dream still portrays participation in the unified Indonesian government as a desirable thing. When the government in Jakarta declares Belitong independent from Indonesia—a proclamation some Indonesian islands would count as a blessing—Hirata writes that “only a few Malays wanted to separate from the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia” (158)³⁴ and that this separation is what caused Belitong's final demise. Even though Hirata appears to critique the government's treatment of its people, he nonetheless portrays membership in the Indonesian nation as a net benefit.

In short, to read the gestures of *Laskar Pelangi* as only *either* resistant *or* acquiescent to authority and expectation is to denude Hirata's novel of its multidimensionality. The novel does not simply offer a balance of critique and affirmation, an agile leaping from one camp to the other and back again. Instead, it inhabits a liminal space in which the same gestures may be at once critique and affirmation, a particular and purposeful polyvalence. The victories of the *laskar pelangi* invite multiple readings, as do their sorrows—and it is because of this terministic unfixity that Hirata is able to placate censorial authorities, resonate with a dissatisfied lower status majority, reaffirm the boundaries of Indonesian national identity, and advance critiques

³⁴ In Indonesian, “hanya sedikit orang Melayu Belitong yang ingin memisahkan diri dari NKRI” (303).

which trouble that identity. *Laskar Pelangi* models the simultaneous separation and integration that Burke predicts will be components of any skillfully played tune.

Conclusion: Substitutive Immunity

It would be a mistake to treat the fluid semiosis of Burke's separation/integration model of artistic identification as simply a *characteristic* of Indonesian rhetoric. Even more naïve and colonizing would be to posit the model as a *universal characteristic* of all rhetorics, a frame to be superimposed everywhere. Rather, Burke's model in "The Calling of the Tune" offers a heuristic for interrogating rhetorical possibility, considering how the particulars of a text's authority—those pressures to which the text must respond by acquiescence and resistance—create a distinctive rhetorical character. That is, Indonesian rhetoric is made distinctively Indonesian precisely *by* the pressures of Indonesian national identity, societal expectation, and even the threat of censorship that call it into being as itself. Burke compares the influence of authority on a work of art to the logic of gravity: "Though I would agree that the artist will tug at the limits of authority, I still insist that his work derives its strength as much from the structure of authority as from his modes of resistance. Authority provides the gravitational pull necessary to a work's firm location" (281). Just as gravity determines the physical dynamics within an organism and its mode of engagement with the world, Burke argues, so the structure given by authority solidifies the identity of a rhetorical moment according to its rhetorical particulars.

Though Burke never extends his considerations into the realm of non-Western texts, and discusses only briefly the implications of agential censorship, the case of *Laskar Pelangi* illuminates and extends Burke's framework. Not only does Hirata's novel illuminate the boundaries of unspeakability in a little-studied nation, but it shows how the foreclosure of speech can become an engine for fluid semiosis that smuggles the unspeakable into the realm of the

speaking. This is not to say, of course, that censorship should go unchallenged as part of a nation's permanent rhetorical character. Rather, it is to say that critical texts which thrive even under the threat of censorship should be recognized for their distinctive rhetorical ingenuities. Burke's essay recognizes, if only briefly, the unique pressures censorship creates within his model, leaving the possibility open for the model to be further elaborated and illuminated by means of texts like *Laskar Pelangi*, and even texts from nations with more restrictive censorship practices. Rather than absolving censorship of its abuses, Burke recognizes that the presence of censorship does not thereby negate the rhetoricality of a text. Authorities and boundaries of unspeakability are not distractions from a rhetorical situation; they are its composite parts. By calling attention to the necessary impact of authority, especially when that authority has formed as a means of negotiating postcolonial identity, Burke invites a reading of postcolonial texts that attends to their particularities without losing the possibility to treat them collectively *as* postcolonial in the interest of salience.

Thus, as we have already seen in previous chapters, Burke's fluid semiosis offers a way out of the stark collectivity/individuality divide that has troubled so many discourses of nondominant rhetorics. Scholars of postcolonial literatures and postcolonial rhetorics have at times been charged with situating their critiques of colonialism in abstraction. As Abdul R. JanMohamed argues in his work on the Manichean allegory, even well-intentioned texts often render the native body an interchangeable body, theoretically equivalent and therefore corporeally substitutable. Alexander Weheliye's concern with Giorgio Agamben, for instance, is that Agamben's *Homo Sacer* turns the flesh of the postcolonial body into theoretical and substitutable flesh. Agamben regards the death camp as a disembodied force of violence infecting Western humanism, ignoring the racist roots that tie it to particular bodies. To deny this

history, writes Weheliye, is to risk accepting the racism that is smuggled even into our ostensibly anti-racist discourses of human rights. Saidiya V. Hartman likewise argues that, by abstracting bodies and making them theoretically substitutable for one another, scholars have overlooked “scenes of subjection” which are culturally marked as banal in the antebellum slave experience. Christina Sharpe shows how the category of “intimacy” becomes monstrous by way of coloniality when theory is abstracted from the body and bodies are treated interchangeably. In short, all these scholars are concerned that the pursuit of a politically salient vocabulary of postcoloniality has caused scholars to forsake individual embodiments and epistemologies in favor of a generalizing gesture towards “marginality.”

Read through and extended by *Laskar Pelangi* and the Indonesian rhetorical situation, Burke’s separation/integration model responds to this danger by offering postcolonial rhetoric the possibility of what I call *substitutive immunity*. *Substitutive immunity* is a text’s recalcitrance against attempts to treat it interchangeably, a recalcitrance rooted in its identification with a particular authority. That is, when a text like *Laskar Pelangi* uses fluid semiosis as a means of negotiating the contradictory demands of societal authorities within the frame of artistic identification, that text is immunized against the possibility of substitution. *Laskar Pelangi* cannot simply be taken as synecdochic of “the postcolonial text,” “the Southeast Asian text,” or “the 21st-century text,” because the authorities that determine its aesthetic possibility and its indeterminacies of meaning are not shared by all these other texts. Rhetoric that functions as a fluid separation/integration in one context may be self-contradictory, contrarian, or obsequious when measured according to a different aesthetic authority. If *Laskar Pelangi* is read as a self-contained text, calling its own tune as it commentates on Indonesian life, it might easily be misunderstood as yet another iteration of resigned postcolonial optimism, rhetorically equivalent

and therefore substitutable with other such texts. By reading it instead as a fluid identificatory navigation of sometimes contradictory authorities, we recognize the rhetorical coherence that gives it substitutive immunity.

Consider, for example, the misreadings of *Laskar Pelangi* that can occur if the text's boundaries of unspeakability are not considered. The optimistic side of the book's fluid semiosis might easily be mistaken for a whole-throated cheerfulness, its rhetorical flexibility dismissed as naïveté. A review in *The Economist*, for example, describes *Laskar Pelangi*'s English translation as "a charming and uplifting book, full of exotic Indonesian words, references to Islamic prayer times and ethnic groups that peacefully coexist" ("New"). Framing the novel in terms of its exotic Otherness, this review treats Hirata's intervention as one fundamentally meant for Western eyes.³⁵ Accordingly, it speaks to the novel's charm and to ethnic groups' peaceful coexistence, missing the nuanced tensions that lie beneath this optimism. The book is read substitutively because its fluid negotiations with a distinctively Indonesian authority are ignored.

If Hirata's optimism is overstated, his seemingly shallow criticisms of government will appear to work in support of existing power structures. *Laskar Pelangi*'s praise of Indonesian virtues like harmony and education, if spoken within a static semiosis, must thereby encourage the oppressed to rise above oppression by their own effort, or to dwell docilely within it, rather than challenging the oppressive systems that perpetuate hegemony. By this reading, the novel becomes a worrisome example of what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," a form of hopefulness which inspires people to work (or to remain stagnant) against their own self-interest.

³⁵ As Graham Huggan so rightly observes, the notion of exoticism is by its very nature an Othering of the postcolony: "The exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent quality to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (13).

The symbolic victories of Ikal and his *laskar pelangi* become an insidious literary wish fulfillment. They create a vent for downtrodden Indonesians to let off the steam of their anger, rather than allowing that anger to smolder until it bursts into an explosive, volcanic demand for reform.

Such a reading might be appropriate if *Laskar Pelangi* were only an English novel called *The Rainbow Troops*, written without any concern for the particular constraints of Indonesian authority. That is, the Berlantian critique would apply to a substitutable text. If *Laskar Pelangi* is read in accordance with its substitutive immunity, however, the novel's polysemy becomes clearer. The fluid semiosis of *Laskar Pelangi* equips it to achieve the simultaneity of integration and separation demanded by Indonesia's nascent and contested rhetorical environment. The novel's seeming acquiescence stands in concert with, not in opposition to, its sharp critique. Even as it strains against the authorities of societal limitation, cultural mores, and possible agential censorship, *Laskar Pelangi* becomes itself within the gravity of these authorities.

Let us end where we began, then, in Burke's 1967 exchange with Eleanor Leacock. What both scholars bring to that engagement, above all, is a conviction that their ideas belong in conversation with one another, and that by means of that conversation new insight might arise. If Burke and Leacock are to be believed, Burke studies will not be made any less Burkean by their engagement with and reimagining according to texts outside of Burke's original inquiry. Nor, by the same token, is the study of non-Western rhetorics made inherently Western through conversation with Western theorists. Rather, as I have argued here, both discourses are equipped to become more fully themselves when they are allowed to inform and illuminate one another. Burke's theorization of the artist's separation/integration with authority becomes more robust when faced with the particularities of a non-Western case study responding to the possibility of

agential censorship. Likewise, the fluid semiosis of Burke's model offers a theorizing of postcolonial texts through the lens of substitutive immunity, providing scholars a strategy for navigating the tension between particularity and collectivity in postcolonial rhetorical criticism. When the routes of rhetorical inquiry are allowed to expand beyond their usual silos, their cross-hatchings will inevitably overlap, creating untold new patterns at every place they intersect.

CHAPTER FOUR

“We Want to Be as Smart as African Americans about Identity”: Strategic Undefined and Identity Politics in the Rhetorical Alt-Right

We're here to talk about white privilege. We want to bring it back. Make white privilege great again.

- Richard Spencer

On November 19, 2016, a white nationalist organization called The National Policy Institute (NPI) gathered in Washington, D. C., to celebrate the U. S. presidential election of Donald Trump eleven days prior. During his remarks at the event, NPI president Richard Spencer condemned American news media as *lügenpresse* (“lying press”), a word German linguist Nina Janich described in 2015 as “contaminated by the Nazis” (qtd. in Kirschbaum) because of its use to silence dissent in the Third Reich.¹ Spencer’s speech also resembled Hitler-era Nazi rhetoric in its insistence on an Aryan / white national identity²: “America was, until this last generation, a white country, designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation and

¹ The term *lügenpresse*, spoken in relation to Donald Trump, of course brings to mind Trump’s own repeated condemnation of American news media as “dishonest” and “liars” during his campaign. While Trump himself never used the term *lügenpresse*, two of his supporters yelled the word into the press pen at a Trump rally the month before Trump’s election (Gray, “Friendly”). In response to a video of that event tweeted by political correspondent Rosie Gray, Richard Spencer commented, “Yes, I see ‘lying press’ and ‘Lügenpresse’ all over the place. It’s typical Alt Right: serious . . . ironic . . . and with a sly reference to boot” (qtd. in Gray, “so”).

² Of course, to depict the Third Reich as having drawn a single clear racial boundary between Aryan and non-Aryan—or white and non-white—races is to oversimplify a complex matter. While the Reich’s racial policies were directed towards the exclusion of Jewish and Romani peoples, German academic racism contained a more nuanced racial hierarchy that placed the Nordic race above, for example, the Slavic race. However, given the impossibility of determining racial boundaries with absolute precision, public Nazi racial rhetoric ignored such nuance in favor of a uniformly understood German master race. For more, see Christopher M. Hutton, who describes the matter in his book *Race and the Third Reich*: “The separation of academic from popular racism prevented the complexities of academic debate from interfering with the political message. But there was also considerable confusion within Nazism over the relationship of body to mind, and of body and mind to race” (166).

our inheritance, and it belongs to us.” Spencer concluded his remarks with the words, “Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!” (qtd. in Bradner). As he raised his water glass, appearing to give a toast, a number of his listeners leapt to their feet to perform the stiff-armed Nazi salute known as the *sieg heil*. In English, *sieg heil* translates to “hail victory.”

Despite his invocations of Nazi ideology and language, however, Spencer rejects terms like “white supremacist” and “Nazi,” which he and his followers consider misleading and derogatory. Spencer’s preferred term is “alt-right,” an abbreviated form of the phrase “alternative right.” The “alt-right” label, coined by Spencer in 2008,³ has grown into a loosely defined ideological banner under which white nationalists, including Spencer, have allied themselves while insisting on their distance from historic white supremacist movements—a rhetorical sleight of hand that will be explored further throughout this chapter. Because of the movement’s intellectual patricide, its emergence has seemed in many ways an *ex nihilo* development of the past decade, first coalescing once the “alt-right” name appeared and gaining both momentum and notoriety during the Trump presidential campaign. Of course, the nexus of people and ideas who would come to comprise the alt-right had intellectual roots elsewhere: in paleoconservatism, in continental philosophy, in “white advocacy” and nominal white supremacy, even in the Nazi and Ku Klux Klan symbols that would be taken up—ostensibly in jest—by alt-right adherents. Yet all of this history, especially the more plainly reprehensible bits, is carefully sidestepped by the prominent voices of the alt-right. When critics observed the obvious parallels between Spencer’s

³ The name “alternative right” first appeared in print when a speech by Paul Gottfried was published in *Taki’s Magazine* under the title, “The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right.” The speech itself does not contain the words “alternative right,” and the headline was written by Spencer, who was managing editor of *Taki’s Magazine* at the time. However, the speech does speak to the failure of traditional conservative movements to provide a satisfactory “alternative” to the political left. Spencer seems to have drawn from this notion of the need for an “alternative” in developing the title of the essay and, by extension, the name of the movement. In interviews with Jacob Siegel, Spencer described himself as having coined the term, whereas Gottfried suggested that he and Spencer had “co-created” it (qtd. in Siegel). In either event, Spencer’s role in popularizing the term remains undisputed.

November 2016 gathering and Third Reich Nazi rhetoric, Spencer claimed that his allusions to Nazis were “ironic” and thus did not validate any further comparison between Nazism and the alt-right. He argued that this brand of “exuberant” jesting is “one of the things that makes the alt-right fun, is that we’re willing to do things that are a bit cheeky” (qtd. in Jackson and Stelloh). In a 2017 interview with *Huffington Post* reporter Chris Mathias, Spencer reaffirmed his distance from Nazism: “I’m not a Nazi.... At no point in my life have I ever been a Nazi.”

To accept that any trappings of Nazism within the alt-right be excused as merely “cheeky,” when the racial ideology that accompanies them is still offered in earnest, certainly strains the limits of credulity. As a result, many of the movement’s critics continue to equate the alt-right with Nazism and other historic white supremacist ideologies, as if Richard Spencer were simply a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan repackaged into a three-piece suit. (“New look; same racist product.”) Such mere equation is a grave oversight, as I will argue in this chapter. The alt-right is far more—and, by the same token, far less—than an internet-savvy twenty-first century rebranding of previous white supremacy movements. Whereas previous movements have subordinated rhetorical strategy to ideological purpose, the alt-right inverts this logic and makes rhetorical strategy its fundamental unitive feature. That is, the sense of collective identity felt by alt-right ideologues *as alt-right ideologues* is created and maintained by a shared rhetorical sensibility that supersedes the precise nuances of alt-right ideologies.⁴

⁴ To define the alt-right in this fashion—thus contradicting certain elements of alt-right self-definition which tout the primacy of alt-right ideology—is of course an interpretative move. It is a move, moreover, which determines the boundaries of the subsequent conversation, and one I perform advisedly. After all, as social movement theorists have evinced in debate with one another, the project of identifying a movement’s boundaries and classifying it as a “movement” is always an interested process. Michael Calvin McGee, in an attack on prevailing social movement theory in 1980, proposed that social movements can never be “phenomena” but only “meanings”—that is, that the classifications of movements are purely linguistic-political assignments (“meanings”) since the objective existence (“phenomena”) of movements cannot be proven. Thus, McGee claimed, “the whole notion of ‘movement’ is mythical, a trick-of-the-mind which must be understood *as an illusion* and not as a fact” (242-243, emphasis in original). In response, scholars like Stephen E. Lucas and Herbert W. Simons challenged McGee’s presupposition of “a false dichotomy between phenomena and meaning, between objective conditions and subjective reality” (Lucas

This is not to deny the racially inflected ideologies strongly at work within alt-right identity. Rather, my intention is to show how seeming ideological contradictions within the movement—like Spencer’s disavowal of Nazism as his followers eagerly salute him with the *seig heil*—are negotiated by means of fluid semiosis. From within the rhetorical conventions of the alt-right, displays of racism and disavowals of racism function congruently as tactics of what the movement calls “trolling,” enhancing rather than contradicting one another. Whether an alt-right “troll” claims to be sincerely racist or ironically racist does not matter much to the collective identity construction of the alt-right. Attempts to understand the alt-right are thus doomed to failure if they are premised only upon an *ideological alt-right*. Instead, I propose, the alt-right is best understood as a *rhetorical alt-right*: a community of shared rhetorical practices aimed at subverting liberal ideals of racial equality.

My argument unfolds as follows. First, I show how the strategic undefinition of alt-right ideology nonetheless achieves rhetorical unity, arguing that the fluid semiosis enacted by claims of trolling creates the possibility for a sense of collective coherence within an otherwise disparate group. That is, where the ideological boundaries around the identity of “white nationalist” have proven too restrictive and particularizing to generate sufficient political salience in the twenty-first century West, the *rhetorical alt-right* essentializes numerous forms of white dissatisfaction into a discernible voice.

Next, I evaluate the alt-right tactic of mimicking historic civil rights discourses as an attempt to paradoxically align alt-right success or failure with the success or failure of racial

258) and McGee’s corresponding critique of the field. However, they agreed with McGee that “given [McGee’s] criteria, social movements are not ‘phenomena’” (Simons 310) since movements are socially constructed and therefore do not have any non-interpretative “objectivity.” My definition of the alt-right, then, like any definition of any movement, must be at least as interpretative as the social construction upon which the movement itself is established.

equity. Instead of developing a new line of coherent argument, the alt-right troll inverts rhetorics of racial equity, including the very idea of marginality and the necessity of acknowledging race difference in politics, to claim what Spencer calls “an identity politics for white people” (Roaming, “What”). The implicit alt-right suggestion is that the inverted argument must be precisely as right or wrong as the civil rights discourse it co-opts, as if to say: *If you’re right, so am I. If I’m wrong, so are you.* If this cooptation succeeds, it either earns its right to exist alongside discourses of racial equity or requires the co-opted ideas to be abandoned by the communities they were initially designed to support.

Here I turn from a more general engagement with Burke’s fluid semiosis to consider how Burke dealt specifically with notions of race difference and racial identity in his own work. Drawing from Bryan Crable’s work on Burke’s relationship with Ralph Ellison, I argue that Burke’s discomfort with the early evolution of black identity is a result of Burke’s failure to apply the logic of fluid semiosis to his own rhetorical framework of race. In fact, an archived early draft of *Permanence and Change* shows that Burke had been wrestling with the dangers of a rhetoric attuned to racial identity even years prior to meeting Ellison. Ellison’s reading of Burke on race thus turns out to be more Burkean than Burke’s own reading, because Burke fails to recognize how a racial lens might generate capacity as well as incapacity. In a sense, Burke’s very resistance to racial identity in his own time presages a well-suited critique of Spencer’s “identity politics for white people”; however, Ellison’s uptake of Burke is better suited to navigating the complexities of racial discourse across multiple registers.

Finally, I return to the present day, proposing that a Burkean rethinking of Burke via Ellison might be productively applied to competing discourses of racial identity and “identity politics” in the United States. In Ellison’s meta-Burkean reading, the acknowledgement of racial

identity in the political sphere need not be abandoned altogether simply because “identity politics” has been co-opted and subverted by alt-right voices. Fluid semiosis insists that both continual danger and continual hope lie within the rhetoric of racial identity. Downplaying racial awareness in every context, as the early Burke was inclined to do, does not solve racial inequity but merely relocates it. Statically insisting that racial identity be equally prominent in every context ensures the longevity of troll discourses like the alt-right. Rather, if every lens can take on an incapacitating quality as well as an advantageous one, then the only lasting capacity in racial dialogue comes from the always ready renegotiation of rhetorical frames.

Strategic Undefined

When the Oxford Dictionaries nearly selected “alt-right” as their word of the year in 2016,⁵ editor Katherine Connor Martin noted that the term had been a particularly difficult one to define. In the end, Oxford’s editors settled on a definition curiously devoid of specific ideological claims: “an ideological grouping associated with extreme conservative or reactionary viewpoints, characterized by a rejection of mainstream politics and by the use of online media to disseminate deliberately controversial content” (Schuessler). The most concrete statement made by Oxford’s definition refers to “online media,” an identification by rhetorical convention. The alt-right is undoubtedly “an ideological grouping,” the editors posit, but they go no further in unpacking this ideology than to describe it as “conservative or reactionary” in an “extreme” way.

The alt-right’s ideology has been notoriously difficult to define, belying its status as an ostensibly ideological grouping. This section first demonstrates and then evaluates the nature of this seeming contradiction. I argue that alt-right identity is premised upon *strategic undefined*, performing a conflation of ideology and rhetorical convention that blurs the boundaries between

⁵ That dubious honor went instead to the word “post-truth” (Schuessler).

sincerely held perspectives and statements meant merely to provoke offense by “trolling.” In computing slang, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, to “troll” is “[t]o post a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response.” While its polemical motivation is nothing new, “trolling” as such is a phenomenon unique to the internet era, assuming both the potential for anonymity and the distance between sender and receiver that are part and parcel of internet-exclusive interactions (Lallas; Phillips). This anonymity and distance, as communication scholar Whitney Phillips observes, make it difficult to identify or diagnose the precise political ramifications of trolling even when trolls’ claims are ostensibly political in nature:

Just as it would be a mistake to dismiss participating trolls’ behaviors as politically meaningless, the impulse to posit clear political meaning is similarly misguided.... First of all, there is far too much variation within the behavioral category of trolling (even with the same raiding party) to affix any singular, unified purpose to constituent trolls’ actions. Furthermore, the assertion that a given act of trolling is inherently political, or even politically motivated, suggests that a specific argument or politics is the trolls’ intended outcome. Given trolls’ anonymity, this assumption simply isn’t verifiable. Of course this doesn’t mean that specific instances of trolling can’t be political, or that individual trolls can’t be politically motivated. It just means that outside observers can’t be sure if and when it happens. (67)

In alt-right practice, trolling serves as a way to articulate radical political views—views generally considered reprehensible—while leaving the direct political implications of these views unverified and unverifiable. Thus, the alt-right movement operates within an inescapably fluid semiosis in which the intensity of an ideological stance is always subject to disavowal. What one

alt-right ideologue claims as the basis of alt-right identity, another can disavow as insincere “trolling” without being any less a participant in the rhetorical alt-right. This fluidity becomes a way for prospective white nationalists to practice inhabiting extremist racial views without immediately owning the full measure of such views’ moral or social implications. For this reason, disavowal of ideological bedfellows is a persistent trope of alt-right rhetoric, making the precise nature of the alt-right’s ideological boundaries all the more difficult to determine. Of course, in order for strategic undefinition to accomplish its intended work, the protean nature of alt-right ideology cannot be fully acknowledged by those performing it, because such an acknowledgment would violate the rhetorical guidelines that call it into being. Strategic undefinition cannot work within a static semiotic system; yet it does work, demonstrating the importance of fluid semiosis as a lens of rhetorical investigation.

Strategic undefinition as I conceive of it here is both proximate to and distinct from the rhetorical trope of *aporia*. *Aporia*, from the Greek *a-poros*, “without passage,” describes a rhetorical performance of impasse which results in “radical uncertainty” (Ingram 301), “inescapable doubt or undecidability” (Diamond). *Aporia* has figured into philosophical inquiries ranging from the unresolved tensions of Platonic dialogues to the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. Like strategic undefinition, *aporia* makes use of contradiction as a tool for accomplishing a particular rhetorical end. Unlike strategic undefinition, however, *aporia* is meant to be noticed. It achieves its desired end by calling attention to itself in order to perform the inescapability of doubt. In a sense, *aporia*’s conceptual impasse is felt because its audience assumes the restrictions of a static semiotic system—or because, as such a system is deconstructed, the implicit alternative semiotic system is one rooted in doubt. Within the fluid semiosis of strategic undefinition, on the other hand, seeming impasses are answered with

multiplicity rather than doubt, and they are downplayed rather than emphasized. Regardless of whether the moves of strategic undefinition are ethically responsible or socioculturally merited in a given case, they are rhetorically potent and therefore rhetorically significant.

The potency of strategic undefinition is evident in the case of the alt-right. As I will argue in the next section of this chapter, the alt-right's most recognizable unifying traits are rhetorical rather than directly ideological. These five traits are (1) willingness, even eagerness, to provoke offense by means of the politically incorrect; (2) use of internet as both medium and cultural purveyor, especially with regard to the potential for anonymity and the presumed irony of memes⁶; (3) claims of "trolling" as a means of excusing offense; (4) patterns of co-opting neutral or multicultural concepts and remaking them into racially inflected purveyors of offense; and (5) claims of the present or future marginalization of white men. When the term "alt-right" appears in this chapter, it designates the group bounded by these rhetorical traits rather than by a particular set of ideologies.

This is not to say that there is no ideological unity among the alt-right. According to many self-avowed alt-right ideologues, the alt-right does indeed have an articulable ideological center. Spencer, for instance, defines the movement as "an identity politics for white people in North America, and really around the world," arguing that "a concept of whiteness is essential and indispensable to the alt-right" (Roaming, "What"). Nathan Damigo, the founder of white nationalist group Identity Evropa and a co-organizer of the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, likewise claims, "The core of the alt-right is centered on identity and race: the idea that race is real and that it matters." Peter Tefft, a Unite the Right participant who calls himself a "pro-white civil rights activist," also defines his ideology in terms of an

⁶ Although the "meme" category includes a wide variety of messages that circulate on the internet, most memes are images or short video clips, often captioned, that evoke humor or interest through unexpected juxtaposition.

awareness of whiteness: “race is real, race is fundamental to our identity, and race and culture should be preserved” (“POVNOW”). That these descriptions of alt-right ideology mimic the language of racial equity is highly significant and will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. Here, it is simply necessary to note that the abstraction of these statements about race makes them theoretically agreeable to a far wider range of people than those who would agree with the racial attitudes and white nationalist policy goals of Spencer, Damigo, or Tefft. After all, the acknowledgment of whiteness is not in itself an alt-right claim and often serves an antithetical purpose to that of alt-right ideologues.⁷ Thus, definitions of the alt-right as *mere* racial awareness are not sufficiently precise to delineate the movement. The alt-right becomes itself only when white racial awareness is applied to a more precise set of ideological principles regarding the *implications* of whiteness.

But what are these implications of whiteness? At this point, the apparent ideological consistency of the alt-right begins to fracture. While prominent alt-right thinkers certainly articulate their ideologies in fuller detail, they tend both to disavow voices that claim comparable ideologies and to label voices that reject such ideologies as fellow alt-right thinkers or allies. For Spencer, the natural consequence of “identity politics for white people” is the pursuit of a white “ethnostate,” a nation whose boundaries are determined by citizens’ commitment to the ethnic heritage of whiteness. The path to the ethnostate runs through a process of demographic redistribution that Spencer has compared to “peaceful ethnic cleansing” (qtd. in McAfee).⁸

⁷ The whole project of whiteness studies in academic inquiry—as established in works like Toni Morrison’s groundbreaking *Playing in the Dark* and continued into the present day with recent works like Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe’s collection *Rhetorics of Whiteness*—is premised upon the belief that critical acknowledgement of and reckoning with white identity is necessary in order to deal responsibly with the sociopolitical implications of race. In popular discourse, Tim Wise’s book *White Like Me* enacts a close investigation of the experience of whiteness in order to demonstrate the reality of white privilege and the need for greater racial equity.

⁸ Spencer voiced his support of “peaceful ethnic redistribution” in an interview with David G. McAfee, proposing that such a goal would be enacted by “encouraging recent immigrants to return to their true homes.” He compared

Damigo echoes the need for “a more homogenous society” of white identity (“White”). The desire for separation is not, Spencer insists, synonymous with racism or white supremacy. Instead, he claims that white nationalism is necessary because, “at the end of the day, racial differences cannot fundamentally be breached, ever” (“American”). Given this irreconcilable difference, Spencer argues, the soundest path for white people is to abandon the project of racial integration and promote exclusively white interests—a move for which they should not be condemned, since other races are likewise looking out for their own interests by way of “identity politics.”

NPI, Spencer’s white nationalist organization, bills itself as “an independent organization dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States and around the world” (National). NPI’s self-description bears remarkable similarity to the white supremacist slogan called Fourteen Words, created by convicted terrorist David Lane: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” And indeed, Lane’s vocal contempt for Semitic people was echoed by Spencer’s own speech in Washington, where Spencer said of the purportedly Jewish-run news media, “One wonders if these people are people

this redistribution along ethnic lines to the redistribution of Europe dictated by the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, which Spencer labeled “peaceful ethnic cleansing.” Though this latter phrase is one Spencer is often accused of championing, he has denied using the phrase prescriptively, saying, “I did not *call for* peaceful ethnic cleansing; I was *describing* the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which is actually an example of peaceful ethnic cleansing” (“Peaceful”). In his interview with McAfee, however, Spencer responds to the question “Would you support something like that, a peaceful ethnic cleansing like that of Paris 1919, taking place in the United States?” by saying, “I would support peaceful ethnic redistribution. Yes.” While Spencer’s chosen prescriptive phrase is “peaceful ethnic *redistribution*,” then, he allows this phrase to act as a functional synonym of “peaceful ethnic *cleansing*” while disavowing the prescriptiveness of the latter.

Given that the 1919 Paris Peace Conference is Spencer’s archetype of “peaceful ethnic cleansing”—as well as, it seems, an archetype of the “peaceful ethnic redistribution” he advocates in the United States—its details are relevant to Spencer’s own vision. The 1919 accord, which concluded the First World War, sought to divide Europe into “coherent territorial states each inhabited by separate ethnically and linguistically homogeneous population” (Hobsbawm 133). Though the accord was peaceful in theory, historian E. J. Hobsbawm explains, its pragmatic outcome was “the mass expulsion or extermination of minorities” (133), since its vision could not otherwise be enforced on those not wishing to emigrate willingly. Similarly, though Spencer’s proposal is not openly genocidal in the way of other “ethnic cleansing” projects, it advocates a model of ethnic separation which has historically resulted in violence even when its articulation is ostensibly peaceful.

at all, or instead soulless golem” (qtd. in Bradner). In dehumanizing Semitic peoples, Spencer enters again into a rhetorical tradition ominously reminiscent of Nazi and white supremacist ideologues. Yet Spencer persists in distancing himself from the historic category of white supremacy and from other groups that invoke Nazi-inspired imagery in their support of a white nationalist ideal. When confronted by an interviewer who pointed out that the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville included chants of “Jews will not replace us” and at least one swastika flag, Spencer downplayed the relevance of either occurrence to alt-right ideology: “So what?... No one has any idea who this person was.... That was a public rally” (Mathias). Likewise, Spencer denies the accuracy of the term “Nazi”—an abbreviation of the German term *Nationalsozialist* (National Socialist)—even as he openly advocates a white nationalistic brand of socialism, acknowledging that he and those who share his ideology are “willing to use socialism in order to protect our identity” (Williams, “You” 28) and that “I’m not totally opposed to socialism when done right” (“Richard”).⁹ In his insistence that he is not a Nazi, Spencer has gone so far as to compare himself to a Zionist while speaking to an Israeli television audience:

[A]n Israeli citizen, someone who understands your identity, who has a sense of nationhood and peoplehood, and the history and experience of the Jewish people, you should respect someone like me, who has analogous feelings about whites. You could say

⁹ Like the Nazi ideology, Spencer’s ideology may sound more fascistic than socialistic in its expression, in spite of its nominal “socialism.” And indeed, Spencer has confessed in an interview with Donna Minkowitz, “I do have certain elective affinities with the fascist intellectual tradition” (qtd. in Minkowitz). Yet within the bounds of the white ethnostate he imagines, Spencer also supports such recognizably socialist concepts as expanded national parks and universal health care. As Minkowitz explains:

Fascism has often incorporated a pretense of holding “socialist” positions, but some members of the alt-right seem to genuinely believe that the racist state they’re fighting for will benefit what one recently called “the proletariat.” That same afternoon, in an interview in the winery’s unheated barn, Spencer said, “I support national health care. Becoming alt-right means...we have duties to our fellow [white] people. And the trillions spent in insane wars, I would much rather spend that on something that is immediately useful to whites.” About the concept of a guaranteed minimum income provided by the government, Spencer told me, “I actually really like this idea.” In the whites-only, Jews-out, no-votes-for-women ethnostate that he is trying to create, Spencer said, “We need to have a kind of altruism. We need to be willing to take care of people and not simply think of ourselves as individuals who can acquire as much wealth as possible.”

that I am a white Zionist—in the sense that I care about my people, I want us to have a secure homeland for us and ourselves. Just like you want a secure homeland in Israel.

(Haaretz)

Spencer’s dismissal of accusations of Nazism and his disavowal of Nazis, even as he rearticulates Nazi thought, is especially chilling in light of his advice to one millennial interviewer not to become overly concerned with the implications of World War II history for the present day: “I don’t think we should be obsessed with the past. I don’t think we should allow the past to weigh us down” (Roaming, “Race”). To not be weighed down by the past, specifically with regard to World War II, suggests an abandonment of any preconceived notions about the socialist pursuit of a white ethnostate. In other words, it suggests an attempt to give the Nazi ideal a new lease on life.

In light of this rhetorical sleight of hand, it is tempting to view Spencer’s denials of Nazism as a simple ploy to advance Nazism while temporarily avoiding the stigma that comes with being labeled “Nazi.” An analysis like this, however, fails to account for the fact that Spencer is already widely considered a Nazi. A video of Spencer being punched by a counter-activist went viral when it was hailed as “punching a Nazi,” sparking a media debate about the ethics of using violence to combat extreme ideology. In one tweet, Spencer urges conservative readers who consider themselves more moderate than him to accept that they too are being denigrated as Nazis by the political left and to regard themselves as sharing Spencer’s interests: “Whether Milo,¹⁰ the Alt Light,¹¹ and average Trump fans like it or not, we’re in this together. In our enemies’ eyes, we’re all ‘Nazis’ now.” Spencer clearly knows his reputation as a Nazi. What

¹⁰ That is, Milo Yiannopoulos, a provocative figure who will be further discussed below.

¹¹ That is, those who share many of the alt-right’s concerns about current political establishment but who are less extreme in their rhetoric and ideology, hence a “light” version of the alt-right.

Spencer's refusal of Nazism accomplishes, as this tweet demonstrates, is not the escape of stigma but the transcendence of his own ideological boundaries among sympathetic listeners. If Nazism is denied, and the trappings of Nazism are dismissed as cheekiness or the work of independent actors, those who are sympathetic to alt-right concerns can find common ground with the movement without being held responsible for the more offensive aspects of its ideology. That is, by subverting the boundaries of the alt-right through strategic undefinition, Spencer remakes the alt-right as a primarily rhetorical identity of open-throated dissent against the norm, a space fit for all those whose rhetoric inspires offense within a liberally pluralistic civic discourse.

Even as he denies that some of those who share his alt-right ideology in fact constitute the alt-right, then, Spencer also claims people for the alt-right who do not share the white nationalist conclusions of alt-right ideology. In one interview, he claims that political commentator Paul Joseph Watson, who disagrees with Spencer about white nationalism and does not consider himself alt-right, is nonetheless implicated with the alt-right: "Just in the fact that he'll take on Black Lives Matter, just in the fact that he was excited about the Trump campaign, kind of made him alt-right" (Roaming, "What"). In the same interview, Spencer describes people within the alt-right who "take on some highly politically incorrect ideas just merely as a means of trolling someone" and then subsequently come to claim those ideas as sincere beliefs. In these cases, although their membership within the alt-right ultimately became ideological in nature, it was also pre-ideological: what made these people alt-right in the first place was not their radical beliefs but their willingness to articulate radical beliefs under the auspices of "trolling." Thus, they experienced group identity as members of the *rhetorical* alt-right before they began claiming an *ideological* alt-right.

In fact, the primacy of rhetoricity in the alt-right and the movement's emphasis on

trolling provide an ideal recruitment tactic for inviting society's dissidents into extreme ideological stances. Trolling provides the perfect cover as alt-right sympathizers explore the terrain of alt-right ideology. By continuing to posture their participation in the movement as a joke indefinitely—by being at once joking and serious, thanks to the polysemy of web culture—they delay the moment of ideological commitment. They experience an inflated sense of solidarity with like-minded (or rather, “like-rhetoricked”) people, and they get an advance taste of the resistance they may meet by adopting alt-right ideologies. However, they are never forced to confess to others (thanks to the internet's anonymity), or even to themselves (thanks to the notion of “trolling”), the degree to which their burgeoning status as members of the rhetorical alt-right reflects an ideological shift within them. They can thus have alt-right ideology on a rhetorical level, and still not have it (or not *yet* have it) on what they perceive to be a moral level.

In order for the alt-right to be an effective space for trolling—an effective testing ground where those experimenting with extreme ideologies can explore the feeling of inhabiting them—alt-right ideologues must affirm the constant possibility that the radical claims of alt-right voices are made in jest. Yet in order for the movement to generate momentum and outrage, ideologues must also insist that they are still ideologues, committed not only in jest but also in earnest to a radical message. That these two needs exist in tension with one another does not diminish their collective rhetorical power. In fact, the primacy of the rhetorical alt-right creates a kind of sublimation in which rhetorical peers are recast as functional ideological peers. “There are some kind of hazy borders around the alt-right,” Spencer argues, “and I think that's ultimately a good thing. If someone is challenging the powers that be, if someone is talking about the concept of nation in a real way, then they become alt-right” (Roaming, “What”). That is, those who broach the same questions as Spencer and adopt the same tone “become alt-right” whether or not they

share the fullness of Spencer's white nationalist vision. Spencer goes on to propose that this hazy bordering of alt-right ideology is desirable: "We want that to happen because I don't want the alt-right ever to be this closed system" (Roaming, "What"). In contrast to previous articulations by Spencer and others, the alt-right according to this articulation is not constituted primarily by ideological unity. Framed in terms of Burke's terministic screens, the ideological screen persists where it is useful in alt-right construction; when it proves unserviceable, it is exchanged for a screen that includes a wider range of dissenting voices. What persists across these screens, binding them into a loose sense of collective alt-right identity, is a shared rhetorical practice.

One particularly fascinating case study for the strategic undefinition of the alt-right is the case of Milo Yiannopoulos. Yiannopoulos, often called only by his given name Milo, is a British-born political commentator who fashions himself a "provocateur." During his stint as an editor at the far-right media company *Breitbart News*, Yiannopoulos co-wrote with Allum Bokhari a sympathetic analysis of the alt-right movement:

[T]he alt-right openly crack jokes about the Holocaust, loudly—albeit almost entirely satirically—expresses its horror at "race-mixing," and denounces the "degeneracy" of homosexuals... while inviting Jewish gays and mixed-race Breitbart reporters to their secret dinner parties. What gives?... For the meme brigade, it's just about having fun. They have no real problem with race-mixing, homosexuality, or even diverse societies: it's just fun to watch the mayhem and outrage that erupts when those secular shibboleths are openly mocked. These younger mischief-makers instinctively understand who the authoritarians are and why and how to poke fun at them.

That an essay published by *Breitbart* should be sympathetic to the alt-right is not itself surprising. Former *Breitbart* chairman Stephen Bannon once proudly described *Breitbart* as "the

platform for the alt-right” (qtd. in Posner), although *Breitbart* and Bannon both later sought to distance themselves from alt-right thought (Sinclair). Still, Bokhari and Yiannopoulos’s treatment of the alt-right was decried by many more moderate voices as normalizing a regressive ideological movement. In his defense, Yiannopoulos sought to differentiate himself from the alt-right, saying, “The media is desperate to crown me the queen of it. All I’ve ever done as a reporter is give them a fair hearing, give them a fair crack of the whip in the press. For that crime I have been called all sorts of awful names” (“Milo”). In his insistence that he is not in fact part of the alt-right, Yiannopoulos demonstrates the strategic value of being able to distance himself from the alt-right on ideological grounds.

Yet Yiannopoulos does not place himself far afield from the alt-right crowd. When asked by a newscaster if he considers the alt-right “too extreme even for you,” Yiannopoulos responds, “No, I wouldn’t say that, I just— We’re fellow travelers on some issues” (“Milo”). Though he does not identify the issues on which he considers himself a “fellow traveler,” his description of his own rhetoric of trolling bears a resemblance to the rhetoric he ascribes to the alt-right in his essay with Bokhari. In his book *Dangerous*, Yiannopoulos argues that his brand of trolling is a kind of intellectual gift to the world: “In my mind, I play the role gays were always meant to in polite society: I test the absolute limits of acceptability” (11). As a gay man and an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump, Yiannopoulos delights in rejecting the political stances held by a majority of LGBTQ-identified individuals, proffering himself as embodied proof of the falsehood of identity politics. Such an inverse invocation of identity politics is itself a move characteristic of the alt-right, as the next section of this chapter will consider. But Yiannopoulos also claims a broader significance to his purposefully offensive rhetoric, arguing that such boundary-testing can serve to right societal wrongs which have ossified into norms: “The most

high-minded trolls should troll only in the name of debunking some untruth or exposing wrongdoing or hypocrisy. That's what I try to do" (17). Like the alt-right trolls from whom Yiannopoulos prefers to remain distinct, Yiannopoulos too has identified the tenets of non-offensive public discourse as "authoritarian" and determined to "poke fun at them" in order to unseat them from their status as "secular shibboleths."

By nominally maintaining his distance from the alt-right while participating in a parallel rhetorical project, Yiannopoulos distances himself from ideologues like Spencer and Damigo in the same fashion that Spencer distances himself from self-identified Nazis. Yet the alt-right figures whom Yiannopoulos disavows have been quick to acknowledge Yiannopoulos's value to the alt-right movement. Damigo, though he accuses Yiannopoulos of "misrepresenting or misdefining the alt-right," urges other alt-right thinkers not to "wage war with Milo," claiming that such a battle would be "mutually destructive." What Damigo chooses not to acknowledge is that a careful delineation between Yiannopoulos's ideologies and the professed ideologies of the alt-right would risk creating a barrier for those who gravitate to the trolling rhetoric that Yiannopoulos and the alt-right share. Instead, Damigo simply insists that "Milo has managed to attract a lot of people who are going to be very open to our message, very sympathetic to us." That is, Yiannopoulos's existence as a professed outsider from the alt-right movement, while still participating in the rhetorical alt-right, provides a proof of ideological innocence to those who wish to join the rhetorical alt-right under the auspices of trolling while still disavowing the ideological alt-right. This negotiation of meanings, this fluidity of semiosis, is not prior to alt-right identity; it is instead concomitant with it. Ironically, the best recruitment for alt-right ideology can only come from someone who models alt-right rhetoric while disavowing alt-right ideology.

Trolling the Margins

If the alt-right functions by a strategic undefinition that blurs rhetorical and ideological identities, what are the features of this rhetorical alt-right? As I have briefly proposed in the previous section, five features are readily apparent and often work in tandem with one another: (1) willingness, even eagerness, to provoke offense by means of the politically incorrect; (2) use of internet as both medium and cultural purveyor, especially with regard to the potential for anonymity and the presumed irony of memes¹²; (3) claims of “trolling” as a means of excusing offense; (4) patterns of co-opting neutral or multicultural concepts and remaking them into racially inflected purveyors of offense; and (5) claims of the present or future marginalization of white men. These features are not mere ornaments of a fundamentally ideological movement. Rather, they are the foundations upon which an ideological frame is constructed.

None of these features, when taken alone, is sufficient to comprise alt-right rhetorical identity. Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro has become notorious for provoking offense on matters of race and gender, yet he is also an outspoken critic of the alt-right, and the alt-right in turn has been vicious in its condemnation of Shapiro.¹³ Owen Strachan, another conservative thinker, agrees with the alt-right that “society marginalizes men” but does not engage in the same kind of trolling provocation and remains condemnatory of the movement insofar as “various alt-right voices have articulated ethnocentrism, outright racism, misogyny, decadence, and a kind of juvenile hatred, among other vile stances.” To be a participant in the rhetorical alt-right, then, is not simply to meet one or two of these criteria but to engage at the intersections of them all.

¹² Although the “meme” category includes a wide variety of messages that circulate on the internet, most memes are images or short video clips, often captioned, that evoke humor or interest through unexpected juxtaposition.

¹³ Shapiro was “one of the first to call out the alt-right movement, denouncing it as racist and anti-Semitic at a time when most people saw it as counterculture and cool”; as a consequence of his critique, “He received 38 percent of all anti-Semitic tweets aimed at journalists in 2016” (Tavernise).

An archetypal example of the rhetorical alt-right at work is the case of Pepe the Frog. Pepe, an anthropomorphic cartoon frog drawn by cartoonist Matt Furie, became popular on the internet when an image of Pepe saying, “Feels good, man,” was turned into a meme. Though Pepe was not initially drawn to communicate a racist message, and many of the Pepe memes were innocent enough, some had an intentionally offensive edge: “In some instances, Pepe wears a Hitler mustache, and his signature message is replaced with ‘Kill Jews Man’.... He’s also been spotted wearing a Nazi soldier’s uniform and in a KKK hood and robe” (Roy). The memes were sometimes dismissed as jokes or trolling, but they also circulated in anonymous online chatrooms where racist ideologies were espoused in earnest. In 2016, the Anti-Defamation League classified Pepe as a hate symbol. Furie launched a #SavePepe campaign, attempting to take back his artistic creation from the alt-right; several months later, however, Furie conceded defeat and sketched a symbolic funeral for Pepe, showing the frog lying in a casket and indicating that Pepe memes should be abandoned because of their inescapable alt-right connotations (Hunt).

The example of Pepe is important not only because it typifies the rhetorical alt-right but also because it exhibits the challenge faced by non-alt-right discourses in responding to alt-right cooptation. Though Furie’s first impulse was to try to recover Pepe, the burden of alt-right association proved too weighty to escape, an initial innocuous meaning being crowded out by a purposefully provocative one. It is difficult to imagine how any number of innocent Pepe memes could have undone the cultural memory of a racist Pepe with swastikas for eyes; perhaps Pepe was fated to be euthanized as soon as the alt-right meme makers set their sights on him. Yet it is also difficult to imagine that alt-right trolling could be powerful enough to render inert any discourse it touches. To simply abandon any figure or idea co-opted by alt-right trolling would

be to grant tremendous linguistic power to the alt-right, especially if trolling could deal a funeral blow to rhetorical strategies or concepts that have been otherwise effective in advancing social equity. Can concepts ever be inoculated against the worst onslaughts of alt-right cooptation, or is every non-racist discourse a potential casualty of alt-right trolling, a vulnerable tadpole with the capacity to grow into another Pepe the Frog?

This question matters especially to conversations about the alt-right and discourses of racial equity because one of the alt-right's central ideological claims is built upon a trolling inversion of American civil rights discourse. Whereas a previous generation of white supremacists had been thoroughly hostile to the very idea of civil rights,¹⁴ the alt-right claims a kind of sympathy for civil rights discourses while adopting them as texts ripe for cooptation and distortion. Most obviously, alt-right voices like Vincent Law and Peter Tefft have labeled the alt-right a "white civil rights" movement (Law; "POVNOW"), suggesting that race-based rights are a legitimate concern but that those in need of political intervention today are white people. But the alt-right cooptation of civil rights discourse goes far beyond simple adoption of the phrase "civil rights." The rhetorical alt-right takes up the interrelated ideas of marginalization, discrimination, racial awareness, and race-based advocacy and posits these as fitting foundations for white nationalist ideology.

In a *CNN* interview with Kamau Bell, Spencer defines the alt-right as an identity movement, offering the mantra, "Race is real, race matters, and race is the foundation of identity." Defending this mantra, Spencer compares his own racial awareness to the racial

¹⁴ William Luther Pierce, author of the influential 1978 white nationalist novel *The Turner Diaries*, typified this attitude when he said, "All of the civil rights legislation that we've had in this country since the Second World War has been destructive. I'm opposed to all of it" (qtd. in Swain and Nieli 269). Similarly, former KKK grand wizard David Duke referred to the civil rights movement of the 1960s as the "so-called civil rights movement" (qtd. in Swain and Nieli 182).

awareness of black Americans:

Spencer: So if I were to ask you, “Who are you?” Just don’t think about it, just answer.

Who are you?

Bell: Oh, no no no, I would say, “I’m a black man.” I would put those two— those two come back to back.

Spencer: But if you were to ask a white person, would they say, “I’m a white man”? No. Like, in a way, we want to be as smart as African Americans about identity.

Bell: We’re happy to help you.... I think white people do need to talk about their whiteness more, and we’re here doing it.

Spencer: Yeah. We’re here to talk about white privilege. We want to bring it back. Make white privilege great again.

As Bell notes during the interview, advocates of racial equity often do encourage white people to become aware of their whiteness rather than letting it remain the “mute, meaningless, unfathomable” (Morrison 59) slate upon which other racial texts are marked as deviations. But Spencer’s proposed racial awareness is not one that takes ethical account of the ways race has contributed both historically and presently to societal inequity. Instead, Spencer proposes that advocacy for the advancement of white people and advocacy for the advancement of black people must be ethically equivalent activities. Because it is fitting for non-white people to advocate for themselves, it is fitting for white people to do the same.

In one sense, this argument that all races engage in racial awareness has been reiterated in various ways by white supremacists for decades. In 1979, former KKK grand wizard David Duke formed an organization called the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), its name intentionally paralleling the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as if to claim that any form of advocacy appropriate to one race must be appropriate to all (Bridges). Matthew Hale, leader of a white supremacist religion called the World Church of the Creator that urges its white adherents to wage a “racial holy war” against “the Jews and the rest of the goddamned mud races” (qtd. in Lazebnik 213), answered accusations of racism by claiming that other races are also racist:

Well, we certainly are racists, and we accept that label just fine, as a badge of honor. We believe that a racist is a person who loves his own race—and that is the epitome of good, as far as we’re concerned. Now, as far as being a hate group, that’s certainly some people’s characterization of us, but we are no more of a hate group than the NAACP is a hate group or than the Republican and Democratic Parties are hate groups. What I’m getting at is that everybody basically hates, everybody has things that they love and things that they hate, and it’s only natural to hate what is happening in this country to our white race. (qtd. in Swain and Nieli 240)

What differentiates the rhetorical alt-right from these previous white nationalist efforts is a shift in tone that changes the possibilities of the discourse. Where white supremacists prior to the alt-right were consistently and openly hostile to the claims of the black civil rights movement, the alt-right postures itself wherever possible as in agreement with black civil rights. Like all alt-right rhetoric, the apparent admiration for black identity that Spencer models in his interview with Bell has a suggestion of mockery and trolling within it. But insofar as Spencer makes ideological claims about the alt-right, he frames them so as to seem like logical extensions of civil rights thought.

The plainest rebuttal to Spencer’s argument, of course, is the observation that discrimination and marginalization are both historic and ongoing realities for non-white peoples

in a way they have not been for white people on account of their race. Thus, what advocates of racial equity are seeking in twenty-first-century America is not the arbitrary advancement of one race over others but rather the overturning of ongoing systemic inequities. Yet this claim too has been taken up by alt-right ideologues and co-opted by inversion. Marginalization and discrimination do exist, alt-right voices argue, but the victims of these ongoing realities are those who inhabit historically advantaged positions, especially white men, who are thus being disadvantaged by the advancement of other races.¹⁵ And indeed, insofar as the expanding power and social capital of nonwhite races spells a proportional decrease in the power and social capital of white men, this alt-right concern is merited, its illogic rooted in logic. The loss of disproportionate control is a form of loss, even if it is ethically motivated and even if white men in general still remain remarkably privileged in comparison to members of other groups. If the scope of “privilege” in alt-right discourse is set narrowly enough to exclude nonwhite experience, then the recent experience of white men has indeed been a move toward the margins—even though this “marginalization” still appears privileged from the perspective those who stand further afield from the historic loci of sociocultural power.

In his remarks at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Spencer bemoans the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, calling the statue a symbol of “the history of our people, of white people, of Virginia, of the South, and of the entire United States.” Addressing Charlottesville’s citizens, he declares, “Your city has become a symbol of this great erasure of who we are” (“Charlottesville”). Like many of the alt-right’s ideological claims, this claim of

¹⁵ And, in addition, by the advancement of women. Although the alt-right also expresses outrage against feminist activism, queer activism, and a number of other identity-based equity movements, I have chosen to focus my analysis in this paper on race, since the most prominent alt-right voices identify race as their central ideological concern.

erasure has long been a feature of white supremacist thought.¹⁶ But what makes the alt-right's rhetorical strategy unique is its purposeful move to equate these claims of marginalization with other concerns expressed by nondominant groups. Whereas white supremacist claims of oppression prior to the rise of the alt-right seemed to deny the existence or the objectionable nature of other races' oppression, the alt-right trolls the notion of other races' oppression with a kind of saccharine enthusiasm. That is, in the process of purporting to offer whole-throated support to other civil rights movements, alt-right ideologues claim their own civil rights in a manner that subverts the very rights they have just claimed to approve of for non-white races. They imply, in essence, that their own claims of oppression must be precisely as valid as the claims of racial equity advocates. If one brand of marginalization merits concern, then so must the other. If white nationalists are to be ignored and forced to languor in their own oppressed status, so too should racial minority rights activists be ignored.

Spencer's description of himself as a "white Zionist" (Haaretz) illustrates this phenomenon rather vividly. Who better, after all, to understand the struggle of a white nationalist desiring his own ethnostate than another ethnic group that has faced this same struggle? In a superficial way, Spencer's comparison validates the concerns of Zionism, but it does so to precisely the degree that it validates Spencer's own desire to create a state free of Jews. Damigo uses a similar approach, trolling anti-racist rhetoric by accolade, when he agrees with a reporter that the word "racist" is used as an epithet against white people "in the same way that certain

¹⁶ Lothrop Stoddard's 1920 book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* offered an early requiem for the anticipated loss of global white domination. "Colored migration is a *universal* peril, menacing every part of the white world," Stoddard wrote. "The whole white race is exposed, immediately or ultimately, to the possibility of social sterilization and final replacement or absorption by the teeming colored races" (297-298). Patrick Buchanan, a political commentator who spoke favorably of South Africa's apartheid regime (Klein) and hailed the presidential campaign of Donald Trump as "the great white hope" (Buchanan, "Great"), likewise worried in 2001 that an influx of non-white immigrants would turn America into a "Third World America" (*Death*). In light of this demographic shift, he argues, "White males, now down to 31 percent of the population, have become the only Americans against whom it is not only permissible, but commendable, to discriminate" ("Great").

racial slurs are used against people of color” (“White”). That is, Damigo implies a measure of respect for the view that using racial slurs against people of color is reprehensible; but he extends this respect only insofar as the same logic can be used to defend someone like him from charges of racism. If describing people of non-white races by pejorative names is wrong, then calling white people by pejorative names like “racist” must also be wrong.

It is worth noting that, in the construction of alt-right marginality, there is a significant and often downplayed conflation between whiteness itself and the identity of white nationalism. Indeed, white nationalist claims of “marginality” are demonstrably true insofar as they claim that the white nationalist view is a minority view in America and is openly abhorred by most of those with political and rhetorical power. Yet the marginality of white nationalist ideology is vastly different than the oppression of white people, and while the former is plainly evident, the latter is far from it. As political theorist Iris Marion Young argues, though oppression is not intrinsic to any group and is thus constantly subject to renegotiation, there are nonetheless measurable ways of “refuting some people’s belief that their group is oppressed when it is not” as well as ways of “persuading others that a group is oppressed when they doubt it” (64).¹⁷ And although a number of scholars have documented a rising feeling of marginalization among white people (Gallagher; Gonyea; Hsu; Kimmel; Sommers and Norton), these scholars all note that the kind of marginalization feared by whites has little measurable basis in reality.

For the alt-right, insistence on marginalization is necessary to perform the final and most crucial turn in the trolling of alt-right rhetoric: the subversion by cooptation of what critics of racial awareness have called “identity politics.” This turn is well illustrated by Yiannopoulos, who, though he disavows the white nationalist conclusions of the alt-right, nonetheless often

¹⁷ Perhaps it goes without saying that, when measured by Young’s criteria for oppression, white men are not oppressed by virtue of their whiteness or their maleness.

functions as an exemplar of the features of the rhetorical alt-right. In a 2015 essay titled “I’m Sooo Bored of Being Gay” and published by the alt-right-friendly *Breitbart*, Yiannopoulos sardonically claims that his motivation for becoming gay was a desire to feel oppressed, and that he has been thwarted because gay people are no longer oppressed. Thus, he argues, he set out to locate a new identity within which to feel oppressed. Because the essay’s attitude is paradigmatic of the rhetorical alt-right mindset, I will quote it at some length:

Casting my eye around modern Britain, in the last few months I’ve been on the look-out for the most marginalised, ridiculed and socially ostracised slice of the population. And I think I’ve nailed it: it’s time for me to become a straight white male.

No other subset of the populace is as relentlessly maligned and demonised as those with the misfortune of being born white, straight, and a man. They are constantly bashed in the media, on the internet, and even at schools and universities, where there are very real structural disadvantages these days to being a boy.

It pains me to admit that, in today’s permissive culture, it is easier to be an outrageously gay man than it is to present with the symptoms of so-called toxic masculinity. By pure accident of birth, your skin colour, sexuality and sex can today be used with impunity against you, to dismiss your opinions and even pay you less at work: under the age of 30, women now earn more than men for the same jobs in both Britain and America.¹⁸

¹⁸ Yiannopoulos may be referring in part to the findings of a 2010 study published in *Time* showing that “in 147 out of 150 of the biggest cities in the U.S., the median full-time salaries of young women are 8% higher than those of the guys in their peer group” (Luscombe). However, the *Time* article also gives two important caveats to these findings—caveats which Yiannopoulos excludes. First, the salary advantage for women “applies only to unmarried, childless women under 30 who live in cities. The rest of working women — even those of the same age, but who are married or don’t live in a major metropolitan area — are still on the less scenic side of the wage divide” (Luscombe). Second, James Chung, who conducted the survey, attributes the earnings reversal overwhelmingly to one factor: education. For every two guys who graduate from college or get a higher degree, three women do. This is almost the exact opposite of the graduation

Since gay people have been so endlessly praised, flattered and catered to by the media and politicians, I've lost interest in sleeping with men. I want to feel oppressed again! That's why, from today, I'm going to make a go of being straight. Wish me luck!

Yiannopoulos's trolling shifts almost imperceptibly between mocking invocations of civil rights discourse and invocations meant in earnest. On the one hand, the exclamation-point-bedecked claim that "I want to feel oppressed again!" makes light of the concept of oppression as a legitimate matter for consideration in public policy dialogue. If the feeling of oppression is a thing to be enthusiastically desired, then surely oppression cannot be oppression at all. On the other hand, the discussion of a wage gap favoring women over men presumes the intrinsic unfairness of this disparity. Gone is any hint of a suggestion, so popular among some conservatives discussing women's lower wages, that such a disparity is merely a reflection of one sex's greater aptitude for the workplace. By a similar token, Yiannopoulos's constant reminders that he is gay delight a right-leaning audience eager for proof of the flaws within what they perceive to be the stifling fug of liberal identity politics. However, the essay sincerely espouses a set of white male concerns perceived to have political implications, encouraging a kind of collective awareness of and solidarity within a shared experience of white male identity. If this constitutes identity politics, Yiannopoulos seems both to mockingly agree with it and to sincerely consider it necessary.

Avowed alt-right ideologues have declared an even more enthusiastic, yet perhaps

ratio that existed when the baby boomers entered college. Studies have consistently shown that a college degree pays off in much higher wages over a lifetime, and even in many cases for entry-level positions. "These women haven't just caught up with the guys," says Chung. "In many cities, they're clocking them." (Luscombe)

A British study in 2011 similarly found that "women aged between 22 and 29 in employment are now earning more on average per hour than men of the same age" (Garner). Like the American study, this British study also found that women outside of one narrow demographic range were still paid less than men; and like the American study, it also credited young women's salary advantage to their stronger performance in higher education (Garner).

equally subversive, uptake of “identity politics.” Jared Taylor, founder of the white nationalist magazine *American Renaissance*, noted in 2011 that “non-white racial/ethnic solidarity is an entrenched part of the political landscape, and the pressure tactics to which it gives rise have been very successful” (xiv). How foolish and unreasonable, then, Taylor argues, for Americans to act as if “any form of white racial consciousness or solidarity is despicable” (xv). Taylor thus argues for a reawakening of white racial identity, apparently affirming the goodness of non-white racial identity activism while neglecting to discuss the history of disparity that made such activism necessary.¹⁹ Spencer, as we have already seen, makes a similar move, saying that the alt-right wants “to be as smart as African Americans” (Bell)—trollishly suggesting that the natural counterpart of black civil rights is white civil rights—and defining the center of alt-right ideology as “an identity politics for white people” (Roaming, “What”).

The choice of “identity politics” as a phrase to identify racial awareness and race-oriented activism is notable here. The phrase “identity politics” is commonly associated with critiques of racial awareness in politics and is sometimes regarded as derogatory by those who advocate for racial awareness (Bernstein and Taylor 1).²⁰ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who coined the critical notion of *intersectionality*, calls identity politics a “misnomer” for “the substantive work

¹⁹ By “neglecting,” I mean not that Taylor refuses to speak of the history of disparity altogether, but that he speaks of it only briefly and abstractly, speciously equating the historic injustice against nonwhites in the West to “injustice” faced by present-day Western whites—while entirely rejecting the possibility that historic inequalities might have ongoing implications for nonwhites. A typifying example of Taylor’s approach to history appears in a 1999 interview:

I think [Martin Luther King, Jr.] was a black man who was interested in the welfare of black people, and I think he struggled his entire life for the good of black people. That’s exactly what black people are supposed to do. I don’t fault him for that in the slightest. What’s aberrant here is that what he was demanding for black people came by and large at the expense of whites and whites are supposed to be grateful for this. That is what is so entirely strange. Now, I do not defend the hierarchical arrangement that prevailed in the United States before the civil rights movement. I think it was an inevitable consequence of trying to build a society that was multiracial and a society in which this biologically salient fact had to be dealt with. *Slavery was unjust, Jim Crow was also unjust, but I think our prevailing situation is likewise unjust.* (qtd. in Swain and Nieli 108-109, emphasis added)

²⁰ The same is true of “identitarian,” another term favored by Spencer which has its history in French white nationalism but was avoided by most of those whose ideology it described (Williams, “You” 26).

of critical race analysis and intersectionally minded reform” (“Mark”). To begin by taking so-called “identity politics” as a discursive given is, for Crenshaw, to weight the dice wrongly. Spencer, by choosing the very term often used to name the strategy’s weaknesses and then adopting it to perform the inverse of its usual function, heightens the degree to which his own strategy is parasitic of discourses of racial equity. If Spencer’s identity politics is confronted and overturned as “racist,” why then should identity politics in the name of racial equity not be condemned as equally racist? If the advancement of people of color is celebrated, why not equally the advancement of white people? So progresses the logic of the alt-right troll. Whether it succeeds in proving its own correctness or proving the wrongness of the discourse it mimics does not matter greatly; either outcome will be a victory for the rhetorical alt-right.

On the basis of the alt-right’s “white identity politics,” a number of voices across the political spectrum have risen to condemn all forms of “identity politics,” declaring that excessive political racial awareness among ethnic minorities is responsible in part for the abuses of the alt-right. These arguments—and their counterarguments—will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. The mere existence of such arguments, however, already indicates at least one level on which the rhetorical alt-right has been successful. A growing number of Americans consider the racial awareness of “identity politics” to be the next Pepe the Frog, and they are prepared to sketch its funeral casket.

The Racial Identity Politics of Kenneth Burke

Kenneth Burke’s fluid semiosis offers not only a means of understanding the quandary posed by the rhetorical alt-right, but also one possible strategy of response for those wishing to promote racial equity—a way to conceive of the dangers of “identity politics” as it has been taken up in alt-right discourse without neglecting the insights which a terminology of racial

identity can offer. Before addressing this debate about the utility of American racial identity politics, however, it will first be enlightening to consider how Burke himself regarded the prospects and dangers of racial awareness in political discourse. Burke's most prolonged recorded engagement with rhetorics of racial identity was in his friendship and correspondence with Ralph Ellison, author of the 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Though Ellison credited Burke's work with helping him develop his own understanding of racial identity in America, Burke never shared Ellison's assessment of the value of racial identity awareness in political discourse. Burke's anxiety with Ellison, as I will argue here, was ultimately rooted in Burke's failure to apply his own fluid semiotic model to his conception of racial identity. In fact, Burke's struggle to resolve the tension between particularity and universality with regard to the politics of race appears even before his illuminating interactions with Ellison, in an archived early draft of *Permanence and Change*. Burke's disagreement with Ellison about the value of racial identity discourse reflects how Ellison's understanding of the negotiation between terministic screens was in fact more Burkean than Burke's own view. Rereading Burke through Ellison equips rhetorical scholars with a view of fluid semiosis as it can apply to the polysemic possibilities of racial identity awareness and "identity politics" in the present day.

Burke and Ellison first met at the Third American Writers' Congress in June 1939. Burke had delivered a presentation based on his essay "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'"²¹ and Ellison found Burke's approach to language and political action revolutionary. Remembering the moment six years later in a letter to Burke, Ellison reflected on what had made Burke's talk such a turning point in his own thinking: "You were the only speaker out of the whole group who was concerned with writing *and politics*, rather than writing as an *excuse* for politics—and that in a

²¹ The essay was published that same summer in *The Southern Review*.

superficial manner” (qtd. in Crable 45). That is, Ellison admired Burke’s way of understanding rhetorical decisions as being themselves political decisions, not simply as various ways of talking *about* political decisions. For Ellison, Burke’s rhetorical frame offered a way to think around the problems he was encountering with language as an African American writer in a literary scene dominated by white voices. As he wrote to Burke, “Essentially the Negro situation is irrational to an extent which surpasses that of the rest of the world—though God knows that sounds impossible. Your method gave me the first instrument with which I could orientate myself” (qtd. in Crable 2-3). Ellison demonstrated the significance of Burke’s work to his own thinking by drawing on Burkean terminology in his novel *Invisible Man*. Moreover, Ellison dedicated the manuscript of *Invisible Man* to Burke while it was still in progress, as he explained in his letter to Burke: “I am writing a novel now and perhaps if it is worthwhile it will be my most effective means of saying thanks. Anything else seems to me inadequate and unimaginative” (Crable 80).

Despite Ellison’s enthusiasm for the insights he has gained from Burke, however, Ellison also takes Burke to task in this same 1945 letter for Burke’s “preference for an ethic which is ‘universal’ rather than ‘racial’” (qtd. in Crable 63). Burke scholar Bryan Crable discusses this portion of Ellison’s letter in detail:

Contesting the position staked out by Burke, Ellison argues that a “universal ethic” is not necessarily preferable to one based on race. For black Americans in a culture founded on white supremacy, Ellison writes, the two ethics are not easily disentangled: “I certainly agree with you that universalism is desirable, but I find that I am forced to arrive at that universe through the racial grain of sand, even though the term ‘race’ is loaded with all the lies which men like Davidson warm their values by.” For Ellison, the problem is not the quest for the universal; rather, the problem lies in the attempt to disguise racial bias

behind a “universal” ethic, in seeking to “transcend” racial identity by ignoring race-based privilege—and racial injustice. Though white Americans might be able to “transcend” race, Ellison argues that he does not have the same luxury: “I, for instance, would like to write simply as an American, or even better, a citizen of the world; but that is impossible just now because it is to dangle in the air of abstractions while the fire which alone illuminates those abstractions issues precisely from my being a Negro and in all the ‘felt experience’ which being a Negro American entails.” (63-64)

As Ellison’s letter and Crable’s analysis reveal, Ellison felt himself caught within the tension between universality and particularity—the same tension that animates this entire dissertation. On the one hand, Ellison sought a rhetorical frame capacious enough to reach all kinds of readers, a frame rooted in human universality. On the other hand, the particularities of Ellison’s own position as a black man meant that his appeals to universality would need to be mere abstractions in order to be read as universal by an audience unconcerned with race. Thus Ellison posed to Burke one of the questions that would lie at the heart of his racial exposition in *Invisible Man*: “How will a Negro writer who writes out of his full awareness of the complexity of western personality... be able to break through the stereotype-armored minds of white Americans so that they can receive his message?” (qtd. in Crable 11)

Burke never answered this question posed by Ellison. Rather, his reply to Ellison’s letter²² suggests that Burke took exception to the very basis of Ellison’s question: “Thanks much for your kindly references to my work. But as regards the high percentage of indignation with which you apparently propose to write on the conditions of the Negro, I find it extremely awkward to reply” (qtd. in Crable 3). Burke’s discomfort with Ellison’s letter stemmed, at least

²² In fact, Burke either forgot or decided not to mail this letter to Ellison upon first writing it. He later hand-delivered it to Ellison when they were together in person.

in part, from his concern that Ellison's attention to race would necessarily hobble the possibility of Ellison's entry into a transcendently human vocabulary. Burke reflects this concern in a letter he wrote to their mutual friend Stanley Edgar Hyman between receiving Ellison's letter and replying: "If [Ellison] never yields more than half to his temptation (quite justified!) to become an intellectual Garveyite, he'll go on getting better and better. And he's damned good already" (qtd. in Crable 66). Burke's use of "Garveyite" is a reference to Marcus Garvey, an advocate for black nationalism who had died five years prior. In fearing that Ellison might "become an intellectual Garveyite," then, Burke feared that Ellison would become intellectually sequestered within the particularities of his own blackness, thereby surrendering the possibility of a more universally communicable intellectual project.

In Burke's mind, then, the frames of particular attention to racial experience and universal attention to human experience were always mutually exclusive frames. Although Burke had elsewhere posited the necessity for a constant exchange of terministic screens, a fluid semiosis by which incapacities are constantly being renegotiated, it seems that he never applied this same principle to the question of racial identity rhetoric. Thus, when Burke references Ellison in his 1950 book *A Rhetoric of Motives*—calling him "the Negro intellectual, Ralph Ellison" (193)—he uses the occasion to wrestle with his own assumption of static semiosis with regard to race, his belief that universal human identity and particular racial identity are necessarily enrolled in a zero-sum game of meaning:

Striving for freedom as a human being generically, he must do so as a Negro specifically.

But to do so as a Negro is, by the same token, to prevent oneself from doing so in the generic sense; for a Negro could not be free generically except in a situation where the color of the skin had no more social meaning than the color of the eyes. (193)

Ellison took strong exception to this invocation of his work. The same year *A Rhetoric of Motives* was published, Hyman wrote to Burke, “I also saw Ralph, who wants to see you and talk over your butchery of him in *Red Taurus*²³” (qtd. in Crable 77). Their debate raged on, with Ellison insisting that the human universal and the racial particular need not be mutually exclusive, while Burke continued to worry that they were fundamentally at odds.

Though Burke’s concern with the exclusive particularity of racial awareness is most clearly evident in his engagement with Ellison, this is not the only place it appears. In fact, an archived early draft of *Permanence and Change* shows Burke wrestling with a similar tension more than a decade before his correspondence with Ellison began. This draft, titled “Religious and Poetic Piety,” contains a survey of the key ideas that would ultimately appear in the first two parts of the published *Permanence and Change*, including Burke’s definition of piety as “the sense of what properly goes with what”²⁴ and his discussion of John Dewey’s concept of “occupational psychosis.” While most of the ideas in “Religious and Poetic Piety” do make a published appearance in *Permanence and Change*, one portion of the draft that disappears before publication is Burke’s musing about the notion of a “Negro psychosis.”²⁵ In the published *Permanence and Change*, Burke mentions an abstract possibility of “still other psychoses” beyond the occupational which might also result in shifts in the character of the mind:

Though Dewey’s conception of the occupational psychosis may serve admirably to indicate how imaginative superstructures rise above productive patterns, I do not believe that it could very well serve as the basis of critical discriminations. For still other

²³ That is, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke was fond of punning in his correspondence, and Crable notes that “Red Taurus” was a favorite pun in the Burke-Hyman correspondence (201).

²⁴ This definition is given in the very first sentence of “Religious and Poetic Piety” but does not appear until Part Two of the published *Permanence and Change* (74).

²⁵ It is worth noting here that Burke, following Dewey, is not using “psychosis” as a psychiatric term. Instead, he defines it as “a *pronounced character* of the mind” (*Permanence* 40, emphasis in original).

psychoses can be readily imagined: Wherever one could note a distinction in ways of livelihood, one could reasonably look for a corresponding psychotic distinction, some special way of being interested in something or other. (48)

On page 42 of the archived “Religious and Poetic Piety” draft, however, the same passage offers a much more specific consideration of a non-occupational psychosis:

It would seem clear that the notion of ‘occupational psychosis’ would be a frail one on which to base a very rigorous scheme of critical judgments. For one can imagine still other ‘psychoses,’ such as the ‘Negro’ psychosis in the South, arising out of the fact that a color character—though in itself having to do only with a matter of adaptability to aectinic rays—has come through confusions of ‘meaning’ to involve questions of livelihood and welfare in much broader aspects. (box 9, folder 10)

Three things are particularly remarkable about this passage. First, it is notable that in casting about for an example of how frames of thought can be fundamentally altered by categories of meaning derived apart from “occupation,” Burke turns immediately to the category of race. Second, according to Burke’s definition of race’s intrinsic materiality (the “in itself”), race is properly understood as merely skin-deep, a variation in responses to sunlight. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Burke does not specify which race or races experience this “Negro psychosis”; the implication seems to be that anyone, of any race, who has experienced the “confusions of ‘meaning’” in which race becomes a factor in livelihood and welfare are subject to this psychosis. Yet Burke regionalizes the psychosis to the South, implying that race in the North does not take on the same confusions of meaning or inspire the same characters of mind.

That Burke chose to remove this “Negro psychosis” from the published version of *Permanence and Change* cannot be ignored in its analysis. Regardless of whether or not Burke

continued to agree with the passage, however, its existence shows Burke already grappling with how his vision of a universal, race-transcendent humanity could confront the material and psychological realities mapped onto racial difference in his America. Moreover, Burke's placement of this psychosis in the South only, and his explanation of race as a matter of skin responding to sunlight, display a Burke eager to prove to both himself and readers that he remains aloof from the faulty partiality of the "Negro psychosis." Burke ascribes to the human universal and refuses to be fooled by racial particulars.

Yet Burke's own framework of "psychoses" betrays him, and it is perhaps because of this that he chose to remove his discussion of "Negro psychosis" from *Permanence and Change*. As Dewey conceived of occupational psychoses—and as Burke in turn conceived of non-occupational psychoses—the psychosis is fundamentally ambivalent, having capacities for both failure and success depending upon its environment. Burke famously explains the matter in his "Occupational Psychosis" chapter of *Permanence and Change*:

Any performance is discussable either from the standpoint of what it *attains* or what it *misses*. Comprehensiveness can be discussed as superficiality, intensiveness as stricture, tolerance as uncertainty—and the poor *pedestrian* abilities of a fish are clearly explainable in terms of his excellence as a *swimmer*. A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. (49, emphasis in original).

Psychoses, then, are not fit to be rejected or accepted in their entirety as permanent frames of thought. They are partial and situational, enrolled in the same fluid semiosis that comprises Burke's whole pattern of universal classification. If the "Negro psychosis" is a psychosis, then, it is yet one more frame fit to be negotiated into and out of. And if "Negro psychosis" is, as it seems to be, an early Burkean conception of racial awareness or racial identity or even (to apply

the name anachronistically) “identity politics,” Burke’s own testimony would suggest that the invocation of racial identity ought to be discussable both according to what it attains and to what it misses—both to what it sees, and to what it cannot see.

Ironically, in insisting on the possibility of negotiating in and out of the particularities of racial identity in his pursuit of a broadly human rhetorical appeal, Ellison applies Burke’s fluid semiotic ideal to the question of race in a way that Burke himself never succeeded in doing. Ellison recognized and enacted, as Crable argues, “a more Burkean position on race than Burke himself was able to achieve” (135)—not only with regard to transcendence, as is Crable’s primary focus, but also with respect to the need for exchanges, collapses, and renegotiations of terminology. Although Burke the man may not have recognized the value of navigating situationally through degrees of racial awareness and explicitly racial meaning-making, Burke the theorist had always left ample space for such an eventuality.

Despite Burke’s own impoverished example in dealing with racial issues, then, Burke remains a compelling figure for twenty-first century considerations of race and marginality in part because of the way Ellison used Burke’s own theories to out-Burke Burke. In one sense, Burke’s fears about the potential abuses of racial awareness and the possible loss of a universal notion of shared humanity are quite apropos today: Burke offers a fitting critique of the racial psychosis exhibited by the rhetorical alt-right’s insistence on a “white identity politics.” However, Ellison’s reapplication of Burke also has potential implications for the twenty-first century American dispute over identity politics, suggesting how fluid semiosis may be at play on both sides of the identitarian conversation.

Reevaluating Identity Politics

Following the alt-right’s invocation of “identity politics” as a rhetorical basis for white

nationalist ideologies, a growing number of observers have called for the expurgation of identity politics from civic discourse. Like Pepe the Frog, they argue, racial identity-based advocacy has been co-opted by the alt-right—indeed, in many cases they aver that racial identity politics have *created* the alt-right—and so, in consequence, such tactics must be abandoned. Within the political Left, this debate began in earnest on November 18, 2016—one day before Richard Spencer’s alt-right convention in Washington, D. C., and ten days after Donald Trump’s presidential election—when historian Mark Lilla published a controversial opinion essay in *The New York Times* arguing that identity politics had outlived its utility for American liberals and crediting Trump’s election to a liberal overemphasis on identity. Liberals’ “obsession with diversity,” Lilla wrote, “has encouraged white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.” Though Lilla does not mention the alt-right by name, he credits racial equity discourses for creating the sentiment that invigorates much of the rhetorical alt-right. Moreover, he connects the rhetoric of white dissatisfaction with explicitly white supremacist ideology by comparing liberal identity politics to the racial awareness of the KKK: “Liberals should bear in mind that the first identity movement in American politics was the Ku Klux Klan, which still exists. Those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it.” For Lilla, the only path to true racial equity lies in a reliance on universalizing human narratives that can unite people of different races, genders, sexualities, classes, and experiences into a collective movement broad enough to exercise political salience.

Lilla’s pronouncement of the death of identity politics was met with consternation by many. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw observed that Lilla had sided with the notion of universality in a way that neglected the necessity of particularity; she calls his argument a “cry against

difference and plea for a universal register of political engagement that elevates sameness over the claims of marginalized populations” (“Mark”). Her critique of Lilla is thus not unlike Ellison’s critique of Burke discussed above: “I certainly agree with you that universalism is desirable, but I find that I am forced to arrive at that universe through the racial grain of sand” (qtd. in Crable 64). A universality that can be achieved only by neglecting minority experiences is, as Crenshaw argues in concert with Ellison, no universality at all. Law professor Katherine Franke, Lilla’s colleague at Columbia University, offers an even harsher indictment, accusing Lilla of “contributing to the same ideological project” as David Duke and “making white supremacy respectable again” because of his reluctance to credit Trump’s election primarily to white racism. And journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates diagnoses Lilla’s rejection of liberal identity politics as proof of the power of white identity politics:

That Trump ran and won on identity politics is beyond Lilla’s powers of conception.

What appeals to the white working class is ennobled. What appeals to black workers, and all others outside the tribe, is dastardly identitarianism. All politics are identity politics—except the politics of white people, the politics of the bloody heirloom.

Whereas writers like Coates and Franke characterize Lilla’s argument as being in concert with white nationalist ideology, journalist Thomas Chatterton Williams argues that it is in fact Coates rather than Lilla whose ideology aligns with the alt-right. Williams draws from his recent experience interviewing Richard Spencer to argue that Coates’ attitude toward race resembles Spencer’s:

Though [Coates’s approach to race] is not at all morally equivalent, it is nonetheless in sync with the toxic premises of white supremacy. Both sides eagerly reduce people to abstract color categories, all the while feeding off of and legitimizing each other, while

those of us searching for gray areas and common ground get devoured twice. Both sides mystify racial identity, interpreting it as something fixed, determinative and almost supernatural. (“How”)

During his conversation with Spencer, Williams reveals, Spencer had spoken with delight about “the all-encompassing sense of white power” perceived and feared by so many liberals as an unavoidable consequence of whiteness. Spencer described this perspective as “the photographic negative of a white supremacist” (qtd. in Williams, “How”), proposing that perhaps those who held this racially emphatic view would be most likely to come into agreement with Spencer’s desire for national separation along racial lines. Williams thus closes his piece with an ominous injunction: “[W]hat identitarians like Mr. Spencer have grasped, and what ostensibly anti-racist thinkers like Mr. Coates have lost sight of, is the fact that so long as we fetishize race, we ensure that we will never be rid of the hierarchies it imposes. We will all be doomed to stalk our separate paths” (“How”).

What the two camps in this dispute represent is, yet again, a microcosm of the tension between particularity and collectivity. Lilla’s opening salvo argues that liberalism will only achieve salience by refocusing itself as a rhetorical collective rather than a conglomeration of discrete interest groups. Crenshaw worries that an overemphasis on collectivity will result in a loss of particularity, while Williams worries in turn that an overemphasis on particularity will result in a loss of collectivity. The one matter on which both sides of the debate appear to be agreed is that particularity and collectivity cannot be mutually enhanced. To the degree collectivity is gained, particularity must be lost. If individual racial identity awareness increases, the salience of universal human narratives must decrease. For all their disagreements, voices on

both sides are united in their acceptance of static semiosis.²⁶

What each side of the debate censures most strongly in the other, then, is not the proposed *increase* of racial particularity or collective humanity in rhetorical constructions of political identity, but the presumed *decrease* of racial particularity or collective humanity that must accompany it. Those who oppose identity politics do so on the grounds that it will lead to irreconcilable sectarianism, thus reifying the marginality of certain races into self-defeating permanence. Those who advocate for racial awareness in politics imagine an alternative in which the particulars of racial history and present lived experience are elided by false universals.²⁷ If these binaries are not enshrined, however—if fluid semiosis offers a legitimate means of negotiating the tension between particularity and collectivity in such a way that both can be

²⁶ Of course, the voices advocating here for a shift away from particularity and towards collectivity, or vice versa, are not necessarily espousing a complete undoing of either particularity or collectivity. In reality, such a totality of the particular or the collective would be rhetorically impossible. Consider, for example, how any form of identity politics requires a measure of what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” That is, to claim a collective interest for a particular group according to identities like race, class, gender, or sexuality is to create an imaginary homogeneity of experience where significant difference still exists. Thus, those who advocate for continued or increased measures of racial awareness are not thereby negating the need for collectivity altogether. Meanwhile, those who posit a need for generalized human narratives have also challenged the validity of identity politics on the basis of its excessive generalization of people into group identities. Figures like the “gay conservative” (e.g. Chadwick Moore, Guy Benson) or the “pro-life feminist” (e.g. Erika Bachiochi) are sometimes cited as evidences of the insufficiency of an identity politics approach. Thus, identity politics is condemned both for generalizing too much and for generalizing too little. The notion that all sexual minorities or all feminists have identical concerns may be demonstrably false, but it is also politically advantageous.

²⁷ And indeed, many of those conservative voices that do champion the end of identity politics also speak about race with a ready dismissiveness, as if the crimes of racial inequity and their continuing systemic implications were nothing more than old carpet stains to be expunged with a spritz of carpet cleaner and a bit of elbow grease. Ben Shapiro is an exemplar of this mindset. He unites liberal identity politics and alt-right identity politics as equally reprehensible:

I agree that what we’ve seen is the rise of identity politics on the left, and I think there’s actually a rise of identity politics on the right. It’s why you see the rise of the so-called ‘alt-right,’ which is an identity-politics driven group—the idea that white people need their own... political action group. And that’s a problem to me. I’m not somebody who believes in identity politics. I think identity politics are actually evil. I don’t think that you have your own interest group because of your race or your skin color or your ethnicity or any of that.

Having negated the claims of liberal race awareness, then, he likewise denies the possibility that persons of different race might have markedly different experiences of American life based on historic and structural realities: “There is no such thing as generalized white privilege or institutional racism.... White privilege is just a way to tell you that if you are a white person, you need to shut up.” The rejection of identity politics can often signify a concomitant repudiation of racial inequity, as it does for Shapiro.

pursued simultaneously—the possibility for common ground between the two groups increases substantially.

This is where Burke and Ellison enter the scene again. Perhaps not coincidentally, Williams constructs his case against what he perceives to be the excesses of liberal identity politics by presenting Ellison as an exemplar of a better way forward. Williams quotes a story told by Ellison: “Said a young white professor of English to me after a lecture out in Northern Illinois, ‘Mr. E., how does it feel to be able to go to places most black men can’t go?’ Said I to him, ‘What you mean is, how does it feel to be able to go to places where most white men can’t go’” (qtd. in Williams, “My”). Taken in isolation, the quotation makes Ellison appear to be an advocate for the end of identity politics, someone preferring to measure achievement and societal engagement independent of racial particularities. Ironically, Burke’s concern for Ellison had been just the opposite: that he would become something of an “intellectual Garveyite,” a writer so intent on capturing the particularities of race difference that he neglected to capture or appeal to the broadly human. How does Ellison come to typify both sides of a seeming binary?

Perhaps the answer is that Ellison chose to inhabit the terministic space that Burke had theorized and yet could not find for himself: a fluid semiotic approach to negotiating racial identity. Ellison’s pattern of engagement with race, inflected as it was with a thoroughly Burkean posture toward language, demonstrates an awareness of the need to negotiate between racial and non-racial screens. Ellison did not want to be merely, as Burke had once classified him, “the Negro intellectual”; nor did he want to be deprived of the racial particularities by which he accessed a vision of human experience more generally. He chose instead to inhabit multiple screens, multiple “psychoses,” varying his ways of seeing in order to see more than a single lens could have offered alone.

Is a semiotically fluid stance like Ellison's possible in light of twenty-first century disputes about identity politics in the wake of the alt-right? It is, I propose, not only possible but even strategic. Burke the man might have insisted that the problematic implications of racial identity politics when they are taken up by the alt-right prove that the frame of racial identity is fundamentally flawed. However, Burke the theorist demonstrates—as he did for Ellison—that the same frame which proves flawed in one setting may be indispensable in another. Fluid semiosis posits that linguistically constructed identities need not be equal in prominence or permanence. To construct oneself as “marginalized” according to one terministic screen is not necessarily to say that marginality is inherent and inescapable in every screen. It may be, instead, to identify a current state of inequity which merits the construction of a collective identity in the margins. Likewise, to construct oneself along racial lines is not necessarily to insist, as alt-right ideologues have suggested, that racial difference is an independently determinative factor of human capacity. It may be, instead, to acknowledge the reality of shared histories and experiences inflected by race while denying universal claims of intrinsic racial otherness. Instead of a false choice between alt-right race essentialism and dubious claims of colorblindness, fluid semiosis allows race to play a critical role in political understanding and societal engagement without insisting that it always play that role.

Sociologist Troy Duster, weighing the debate between racial absolutists and racial relativists, writes, “So who is right? One side sees race as ever-changing. The other side sees enduring race privilege. Oddly, both sides are correct. Or, at least, both sides have an important handle on an elementary truth about race” (114). To justify the possibility of this seeming paradox, Duster compares race to water:

Race, like H₂O, can take many forms, but unlike H₂O it can transform itself in a

nanosecond. It takes time for ice to boil or for vapor to condense and freeze, but race can be *simultaneously* Janus-faced and multifac(et)ed—and also produce a singularly dominant social hierarchy. Indeed, if we make the fundamental mistake of reifying any one of those states as more real than another, we will lose basic insights into the nature and character of racial stratification in America. So it depends on when a picture is taken in this sequence and on who takes the picture as to whether race is best understood as fluid or solid or vapor—or has evaporated into a temporally locatable nonexistence, a color-blind fragment in time and space. (115, emphasis in original)

The Burkean fluid semiotic model, as applied to race by Ellison, shows how Duster's observation manifests on a rhetorical level. Overreliance on a single terministic screen—the static semiotic assumption that one rhetorical frame can be perfected to capture the whole of reality—inevitably fails when faced with a reality that is itself both determinative and constructed. Race is, as Duster proposes, conveyed in partial images, photographs taken in different times and from different locations. Any vocabulary seeking to capture this reality must be as perspectively promiscuous as its subject. Fluid semiosis thus allows for an understanding in which racial identity is at once ubiquitous and sequestered, mattering at once so much and so little.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: A Baptism of Cats

In Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead*, narrator John Ames tells of how he and his childhood friends baptized a litter of cats:

They were dusty little barn cats just steady on their legs[...]. It occurred to one of the girls to swaddle them up in a doll's dress—there was only one dress, which was just as well since the cats could hardly tolerate a moment in it and would have to have been unswaddled as soon as they were christened in any case. I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula.

Their grim old crooked-tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a good deal. So finally I asked my father in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it. He replied that the Sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect. That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the Sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. (22)

Robinson's narrative depicts how dedication to a monolithic frame of terminology can become self-contradictory. Although animal baptism is a far cry from the pious practices of their Christian parents, these children are nonetheless motivated by a deep-seated sense of piety. Ames and his playmates have been trained to view baptism as a necessary step towards eternal life, something they and their loved ones must share in to guarantee their place together in

heaven. If the children also love these cats, they reason, the cats must also be baptized. The depth of the children's piety is precisely what drives them to impiety. Because of their wholehearted commitment to a limited frame of doctrine, they misapply doctrinal rules, violating the very thing they hold dear.

Piety, Burke argues in *Permanence and Change*, is “a system-builder, a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole. Piety is *the sense of what properly goes with what*” (74, emphasis in original). Piety demands symbolic unity. Thus, the impulse towards the symbolic perfectionism of static semiosis—the desire to locate a single ideal terminological frame and perceive all the world always from within this frame—is a fundamental aspect of piety. After all, as Burke explains, the ultimate target of piety is to bring “all the significant details of the day into coördination, relating them integrally with one another by a complex interpretative network” (75). To be pious is to believe that the same static network can be applied everywhere, as long as the interpretative complexities of that network are sufficiently acknowledged. Because Burke recognizes the dangers of becoming trapped within a single terministic screen, he likewise cautions against pietistic engagement with the world. Instead, Burke counsels the willful impiety of perspective by incongruity: a habitual challenge to the ordinary pairings of words and thoughts, a permanent willingness to treat language impermanently.

Ironically, despite Burke's caution against piety, the study of Burke's ideas has often been handled pietistically. Jessica Enoch and Dana Anderson write that the system of Burke studies has created “its own pious acts and attitudes of participation within it” (4).¹ That is, rhetoricians have often sought to read Burke as the positor of a static system which is then taken

¹ Celeste Condit expresses a similar concern when she urges her fellow Burke scholars Phillip Tompkins and George Cheney to “let go of your urge to perfection... and pick up some comic glasses” (“Framing” 81).

up and imposed onto other discourses as an inorganic means of analysis. Such an uptake contradicts Burke's own desire to see his ideas be placed in dialogue with, grow alongside, and interanimate other discourses: to see the Burkean corpus function, in James Chesebro's words, "as an 'open system,' responding to changing human conditions and adapting to shifting attitudes, beliefs, and actions" ("Preface" xiii). Rhetoricians, in our commitment to be responsible and accurate readers of Burke, sometimes fail to recognize the implicit semiotic fluidity within Burke, the fluidity for which Burke himself advocates. A "pietistic" approach to Burkean theory becomes ironically self-defeating because it reads Burke through a hermeneutic lens that Burke himself eschewed. Like the cat baptizers of Robinson's novel, we miss the most enduring contributions of the Burke's theory when we approach them only from a static semiotic frame of mind. Reading Burke demands the same attention to flexibility and polysemy that Burke himself modeled in his reading of others: it demands a *meta-Burkean historiography*.

By a similar token, attempts to develop a scholarly "orthodoxy" of nondominant rhetorics can also become occasions for self-defeating piety. The search for definitive and stagnant insights is doomed to always come up short in describing discourses animated by fluidity. Discourses which emerge from or claim marginality, as we have seen, often derive their power from the negotiated space where meaning is ambivalent and in flux. Thus, any single static system of analysis will necessarily be insufficient for the analysis of many nondominant groups' rhetorical practices. As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation,

Rhetorical theory needs a framework of language that purposefully embraces sites of ambivalence within marginal rhetorical practices. We must interrogate the unsettled interrogatory space itself, seeking a nimble semantic model in which ambivalence is a

catalyst for knowledge—not merely a theoretical problem to be solved or a chaos to be codified. (24-25)

As the study of nondominant rhetorics seeks to be informed by identities that negotiate a paradoxical tension between collectivity and particularity, rhetoricians stand to gain much by embracing the partiality of seeming contradictions in terminologies rather than seeking to resolve them. Read in light of critical theory, Burke’s approach to semiosis contributes yet another tool to the rhetorical toolbox for analyzing nondominant rhetorics. Burkean theory and rhetorics of marginality offer one another a strategy for escaping the futility of intellectual “cat baptism” and for moving deeper into inquiry and insight.

This conclusion chapter unfolds as follows. First, I review the findings of the previous chapters, making the case that fluid semiosis is not a rarity but a regularity in discourse. From these findings, I turn to consider the implications of the fluid semiotic model for rhetorical studies: the ways in which a robust theory of fluid semiosis might nuance disciplinary understandings of advantage and incapacity, tensions between collectivity and particularity, claims of identity, and depictions of marginality. Next, I elucidate possible pedagogical applications of fluid semiosis, imagining how writing and rhetoric classrooms might be transformed by greater attention to fluidity. Finally, I suggest avenues of further research invited by this study.

The Regularity of Fluid Semiosis

Throughout this dissertation, I have repeatedly shown nondominant discourses coming into clearer relief once the assumptions of static semiosis are set aside. The feminist liminal reclamations of “bitch” and “pussy” leverage fluidity by performing an ongoing purgation of language, offering multiple simultaneous critiques of linguistic patriarchy. The Indonesian novel

Laskar Pelangi constructs multiple textual identities for itself in order to acquiesce to the seemingly contradictory demands of its discursive context. The strategic undefinition of the alt-right blurs the lines between the rhetorical alt-right and the ideological alt-right, making it possible for alt-right adherents to assume membership in the rhetorical alt-right long before they feel ready to assume ethical responsibility for the claims of the ideological alt-right. In each of these cases, a static semiotic reading might incline towards analyzing such tensions as rhetorical inconsistencies or irresolutions in need of remedy. Fluid semiosis, by contrast, locates the congruity underlying the multiplicity of these discursive moments.

The breadth and diversity of my examples will, I hope, suggest the potential applicability of fluid semiosis far beyond these particular cases. The wide-ranging topics considered in this dissertation are diverse not because no comparable examples existed in nearer proximity to one another, but because the cases selected here are meant to demonstrate the variety of analyses which the concept of fluid semiosis can enable, the valuable insights it can offer across multiple registers of nondominant rhetorics. Fluid semiosis is best understood not as a *rarity* but as a *regularity*. It is a common phenomenon even in rhetorical contexts that deny or fail to see it. In this sense, fluid semiosis is microbial: remaining undetected by most viewers, sometimes lying dormant among and within other rhetorical organisms, yet still carrying the power to shape and reshape discursive possibility. Even where it remains unseen, its presence can still be felt.

In claiming the regularity of fluid semiosis in nondominant rhetorics, my intention is not to suggest that all aspects of every nondominant discourse will reflect the patterns of fluid semiosis. Neither am I proposing that *only* nondominant rhetorics can be productively read through a fluid semiotic lens. Indeed, some nondominant discourses may cling stubbornly to a single terministic frame as a way of enacting linguistic resistance. In turn, dominant discourses

that feel themselves under threat—as dominant discourses so often do—may resort to fluid semiosis, for example, in a bid to marshal support from multiple interlocutors with differing rhetorical priorities.

Yet the link between fluid semiosis and nondominant rhetorics is nevertheless a significant one. Nondominant discourses are situated to benefit especially from fluid semiotic tactics because they face the challenge of constructing group identities and performing sociopolitically salient rhetorical work in relation to a dominant idiom. That is, whereas dominant rhetorics can inhabit their rhetorical context with the ease of the presumed norm, nondominant rhetorics are constantly asked to justify themselves in relation to that norm. The luxury of assuming a universal applicability for one's terminological division of the universe can belong only at the dominant center of discourse; attempts to claim universal applicability are a mode of centralization. Rather than relying on the singular dominant frame of the instantiated norm, then, effective nondominant rhetorics may turn away from static semiosis to expand the boundaries of rhetorical possibility.

Consider, for example, how the three cases of fluid semiosis examined in the previous chapters are imbricated with the nondominant position of the rhetorics they manifest within. In each case, fluid semiosis is called into being by a tension between collectivity and particularity made urgent by the nondominant space. In the case of feminist reclamations, a collective narrative of “bitch” and “pussy” proves difficult to form because the terms' contrasting screens operate with contingent utility in particular situations. Liminal reclamation serves to prolong the space of contestation indefinitely, providing a continuing platform to challenge patriarchy. Andrea Hirata's Indonesian novel faces the task of engaging and assuaging a collective national identity comprised of often irreconcilable particulars. Functional, cognizable critique can only be

leveled insofar as the novel acquiesces to aesthetic authorities that seek to limit such critique. For alt-right discourses, collective identity is rhetorically constructed to allow for individual disavowals of the collective. Because of the group's societal stigma, nascent group membership in the alt-right is equipped with a trap door. In each of these three cases, had the nondominant rhetoric come instead from a dominant position, the need for fluid semiosis would have subsided.

The range of nondominant rhetorics discussed in this dissertation also evinces the ethical (in)capacities of fluid semiosis. My initial meta-Burkean exposition of fluid semiosis as an alternative to the Peircean semiotic model focused primarily on its positive potential; meanwhile, critiques of fluid semiotic rhetorical practices sometimes equate fluidity with Janus-faced dishonesty, believing that one of the requisites of ethical language use is terminological continuity. What the previous case studies demonstrate, however, is that fluid semiosis has a range of possible ethical implications. It is not always a rhetorically productive or noble tool, nor is its subversion of nondominance always targeted towards social equity. After all, as the case of the alt-right shows, nondominant group rhetorics do not always emerge from historically marginalized groups, and the pursuit of greater group recognition through fluid semiosis may be an opprobrious task. Yet the positive capacities of fluid semiosis to shift discourses towards equity suggest that fluid semiotic strategies also need not be dismissed out of hand as irresponsible. Even if fluidity may sometimes be a tool of deception or abuse, it is not inherently so. Like most rhetorical tools, it can be marshaled towards a variety of disparate ends.

Implications of Fluid Semiosis

How could a robust theory of fluid semiosis, developed by the interanimation of Burke's theories and critical scholarship on nondominant rhetorics, nuance current rhetorical understanding? The implications of this work for our field's reading of nondominant rhetorics

are fourfold, I propose. First, fluid semiosis invites us to reinterrogate the presumed relationship between advantage and incapacity, shifting Burke's own framing of his semiotic intervention to better reflect the hopeful insights of critical theory. Second, fluid semiosis offers a strategy for thinking beyond disciplinary debates rooted in the tension between collectivity and particularity. Third, fluid semiosis extends an already rich vision of the rhetorical constitutivity of identity claims. Finally, fluid semiosis recasts the rhetorically productive category of "marginality" as itself participating in a fluid semiotic structure, as a classification which must be both unequivocal and impermanent if it is to be beneficial.

Advantage and Incapacity

What, first of all, are the implications of fluid semiosis in reading the relationship between advantage and incapacity? A comprehensive view of fluid semiosis enables analyses in which both the potential advantages and the potential incapacities of a given terminology are equally acknowledged. An exclusive emphasis on one of these components of a terministic screen—celebrating potential advantage without acknowledging the risks of incapacity, or bemoaning incapacity without asking what might be advantageous—can lead to analyses which wholly exalt certain screens and wholly denigrate others. Fluid semiosis challenges such monolithic interpretations, not by denying a terminology's advantages or incapacities, but by recognizing the ways in which advantage and incapacity are functionally inseparable from one another in the linguistic space.

When Burke borrows the phrase "trained incapacity" from Veblen in the early pages of *Permanence and Change*, he seems to mimic the emphasis Veblen has placed on locating *incapacity* within perceived *capacity*. That is, by using a phrase that focuses on the *negative turn* of something initially thought to be good rather than the *positive turn* of something initially

thought to be bad, Burke seems at a cursory reading to lay his exclusive emphasis on the negative potential of language. For Veblen, as we saw in chapter one, the perceived capacity of industrialist orientation carried with it a loss of the virtues of a craftsperson economy. Veblen, concerned with the excessively rosy view of industrial capitalism surrounding him, sought to correct this excess by pointing out that a capacity may be accompanied by incapacity. Burke extends Veblen's argument but maintains the direction of his emphasis. Thus, Burke points out that every perceived capacity may also become a trained incapacity, that "people may be unfitted by being fit in an unfit fitness" (10), that "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (49). In each of these renderings, the direction of Burke's intervention moves pessimistically, from positive potential to negative potential. He offers a criticism of static semiosis, but the idea of "trained incapacity" in itself does not seem to offer any of the optimistic hopefulness which I have located in fluid semiosis.

It is in response to the apparent pessimism of "trained incapacity" that I have framed this dissertation in terms of *advantageous incapacities*. In contrast to Veblen's emphasize on the negative potential of terministic fixity, *advantageous incapacities* places equal emphases on the possibilities and the dangers of a given terministic frame. Incapacities may be advantageous in some rhetorical situations *even as* they incapacitate, and capacities may be disadvantageous in some rhetorical situations *even as* they capacitate. The simultaneous accolade and critique that this equalizing model enables matches the kind of fluid semiosis depicted throughout the previous chapters. As chapter one has shown, Burke did indeed unite his negative assessment of each terminology's potential incapacity with a positive assessment of a terminology's possible contributions and the insight that can be gained when terminologies are fluidly negotiated. This positive assessment appears briefly, for example, in his observation that "The poor *pedestrian*

abilities of a fish are clearly explainable in terms of his excellence as a *swimmer*” (*Permanence* 48, emphasis in original). The fish’s incapacity for perambulation is simultaneously advantageous, just as the human’s capacity on land disadvantages it in the water. Burke’s ideal is not the discovery of a perfect capacity but the negotiation and celebration of varying advantageous incapacities.

The same kind of ambivalence between advantage and incapacity appears again and again as Burke is placed in conversation with discourses of critical theory and examples of nondominant rhetorics. Is an anti-Islamophobic narrative which focuses on the “all-American” credentials of its Islamic subjects an effective tool for combating Islamophobia? Are “bitch” and “pussy” more useful to feminists as reclaimed words or as forbidden ones? Does the political sphere benefit from attending to the identity categories of its participants, or is such “identity politics” a way of reinscribing division? Each of these questions demands a polyvocal response insofar as it is built upon an advantageous incapacity. Fluid semiosis impels the field beyond unilateral answers and into the contingency of the both/and, the logonomical purgatory that is always on the way to purification without ever arriving.

Collectivity and Particularity

Second, fluid semiosis offers a strategy for thinking beyond disciplinary debates which exist in the tension between collectivity and particularity. Some of the most enduring debates in the study of nondominant rhetorics—as, for example, the Campbell-Biesecker debate rehearsed in chapter one—have been fueled by differing perspectives on the appropriate relationship between collectivity and particularity. A number of scholars in critical theory have offered possible responses to this tension, strategies for converting lived individuality into political salience without sacrificing either one. Yet even these strategies have posed challenges of their

own. Probably the best known of these proposed resolutions, Gayatri Spivak's suggestion of "strategic essentialism," posited the need for ad hoc simplifications of identity in the interest of social utility. Spivak later abandoned this framing, however, believing that "strategic essentialism" had too often been reduced to mere essentialism in its subsequent uptake. Despite sophisticated interventions like this one, then, the challenge of the collectivity/particularity tension continues.

By no means can Burke's ideas be transposed from beyond this conversation and superciliously applied as an ultimate solution to its complexities. Burke's frame is, like every frame, necessarily partial. Fluid semiosis is not intended as a panchreston—an impossibly wide-reaching panacea for all rhetorical ills, so broad in its conception as to be functionally useless. What fluid semiosis offers to scholars of nondominant rhetorics, rather, is a means of reengaging other scholars' insights by reexamining one of the assumptions that may underlie disciplinary quandaries, an assumption that has sometimes motivated the dismissal of certain voices. Read together with scholars of nondominant rhetorics, Burke's fluid semiosis suggests a framing in which competing insights may be productively brought to bear upon one another instead of set agonistically at odds. Burke's voice thus joins other theoretical voices² urging that a fundamentally debunking mode of engagement be replaced with a fundamentally additive mode.

Constitutive Identity

² Perhaps the most famous of these voices are Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, whose feminist work on invitational rhetoric advocates for a "nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework" in which "the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own" ("Beyond" 5). Ironically, Foss and Griffin have elsewhere described Burke as an exemplar of hierarchy and therefore the antithesis of feminist rhetorical possibility ("Feminist"). Yet even if Burke was not effective at employing his own principles of fluid semiosis in relation to rhetorical polemics, fluid semiosis remains an effective strategy by which the kind of listening Foss and Griffin advocate may become possible. This is a case in which, as I have argued earlier, a meta-Burkean historiographic reading enables Burke's ideas to become more fully realized as they are set in conversation with others.

Third, fluid semiosis contributes to rhetorical theory's ongoing investigation of the constitutive nature of rhetorical identity. Dana Anderson argues in *Identity's Strategy* that the fundamental significance of identity is its reliance on symbol systems to call it into being and negotiate it over time:

Rhetoric needs identity not for what it might say or occlude about what we 'really' are but rather for what it might reveal about how language moves us. Rhetoric needs identity because it can help to explain how in the claims we make about who we are we might also come to *transform the world*. (13, emphasis in original)

If Anderson is correct, rhetors participate in constructing both their audience's identities and their own. Even when identity is not disputable, its apparent inherency as a means of categorization is always a mirage.³ As Maurice Charland posits, although "the ontological status of speaker, speech, audience, topic, and occasion offer themselves as unproblematic," rhetorical theory is compelled to acknowledge that "the position one embodies as a subject is a rhetorical effect" (148). Regardless of whether these constructions can be finally mapped onto a universal ontology of "real" identity, rhetorical claims of selfhood and otherness sketch the topography of the terrain within which rhetorical identification operates.

Not coincidentally, both Charland and Anderson draw from Burke's work on identity and identification in their own analyses of rhetorical identity. Their insights, already congruent with Burke's own contributions, can be still further enriched by bringing the notion of fluid semiosis

³ We might think here of the widespread rejection of Rachel Dolezal's claim of a "black identity" despite her white heritage. Insofar as racial identities are linked to historic and ongoing collective experiences of material reality, Dolezal's racial identity is not thereby subject to rhetorical alteration; yet the indisputability of racial identity does not make race an inherently fitting mode for categorizing groups of humans. By rough analogy—quite partial and imperfect, as with most analogies—we might note that a person's finger length is linked to material realities which are not open to dispute; yet finger length is not thereby an inherently and permanently useful category for distinguishing between persons. The dispute over Dolezal was repeated at an academic register when philosopher Rebecca Tuvel published a controversial comparison of transgender and "transracial" identities in *Hypatia* in 2017.

into the conversation. A static semiotic reading of Burke's identification might tacitly suggest that the identity positions of speakers and audiences are meant to operate with a holistic internal unity, developed within a single terminological framework. This static mindset seems implied in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, where Burke defines a thing's identity as "its uniqueness as an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unity having its own particular structure" (21), anticipating his exposition in the promised but never arriving *Symbolic of Motives*. The notion of structural unity conjures an image not unlike that of the "complex interpretative network" that Burke uses to define piety in *Permanence and Change* (75). If Burke's definition of identity is impiously reconsidered in light of fluid semiosis, however, the static ideal of identity collapses. Read by way of meta-Burkean historiography, the nature of identity becomes likewise fluid. Identities constituted by fluid semiosis must be renegotiated in the same way that the terminologies calling them into being are renegotiated. Every singular identity is thus open to the possibility of multiplicity, according to the advantageous incapacities that various terministic screens of identity might provide to any given rhetorical subject.

The fluidity of individual identity becomes especially crucial in negotiating the relation of the individual to collective group identity, hearkening back to the earlier discussion of collectivity and particularity. Collective group identity is often treated as a fractal: a geometrically perfect figure in mathematics whose parts are precise replicas of the whole. The unconsidered pursuit of group identity, if it becomes a pursuit of fractal identity, seeks to construct a broad frame containing a subset of identical miniatures. If an identity were indeed constructed in this way, static semiosis would suffice to express that group identity, because the same terminology which expressed the whole of the fractal could equally express its identical parts. It is because this mathematical notion of identicalness is never realized in the lives of

individual group members that a tension between collectivity and particularity must exist. In turn, it is because of the flattening that necessarily occurs in the rhetorical shift from particular to collective that fluid semiosis becomes a necessary strategy for capturing and conveying a mathematically imperfect reality.

Contingent Marginality

Within a static semiotic system, any assignation of “marginality” is fraught with the risk of self-fulfillment. That is, to name a group “marginal” is to assign a degree of permanence to a hierarchic structure that the members of that marginal group presumably wish to overturn. If “marginality” becomes definitionally aligned with certain groups, then its denotation conspires to institute a hierarchy of centrality and otherness identical to the one that advocates of marginal identity groups ostensibly work to overturn. If, on the other hand, social equity were ever fully realized for any currently marginalized group, the title “marginalized” would no longer apply to that group. This, as chapter four discussed, is the anxiety that has led some members of nondominant identity groups to call for the end of “identity politics.” In order to escape the social pattern of marginality, these thinkers reason, it is necessary to eschew the language of marginality.

For those who consider identity an important factor in political discourse, however, the erasure of individual identities or the failure to acknowledge the disadvantages faced by certain identity groups poses an even greater threat. Where marginality persists, they reason, that marginality is all the more likely to continue if it cannot be named and confronted as such. After all, even with the current vocabulary of marginality urging society toward social equity, the shift toward that equity has been little more than a sluggish trapeze, if indeed society moves in the right direction at all. Given the torpor of a society faced with undoing the numerous biases at its

roots—racialism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of systemic prejudice—the last thing advocates of social equity should do is abandon the language by which they continue to urge forward motion.

Fluid semiosis offers one rhetorical strategy for thinking around this impasse. If terministic screens are regarded as advantageous incapacities, bearing contingent potential for both liberation and debilitation, then assignations of “marginality” can be likewise be understood as subsuming both potentials. That is, there may be situations in which the screen of marginality can be strategically eschewed even as it is strategically adopted in others—times at which the frame’s advantages need to be capitalized upon, and other times at which its incapacities need to be evaded. Even though Burke did not always apply this logic to his own assessment of identity issues, the fluid semiotic posture available within Burke is modeled by Ralph Ellison’s uptake of Burke, as I have shown in chapter four:

Burke the man might have insisted that the problematic implications of racial identity politics when they are taken up by the alt-right prove that the frame of racial identity is fundamentally flawed. However, Burke the theorist demonstrates—as he did for Ellison—that the same frame which proves flawed in one setting may be indispensable in another. Fluid semiosis posits that linguistically constructed identities need not be equal in prominence or permanence. (171)

Drawing as he did from Burke, Ellison both claimed and rejected the importance of racial marginality to his rhetorical identity. He presaged the concerns of Thomas Chatterton Williams and Ta-Nehisi Coates alike, affirming by way of fluid semiosis the necessity of both frames. Ellison’s contingent marginality, transposed into the present day, thus offers the compelling possibility of common ground between competing discourses of social equity.

Fluid Semiotic Pedagogies

The implications of fluid semiosis extend not just to theory and sociopolitics but also to rhetoric and writing pedagogy. Many rhetorically oriented composition classrooms have taken care in recent years to stress the contingency of effective writing. That is, rather than mastering a purportedly universal frame of successful rhetorical engagement, students are challenged to consider the situational particulars of the rhetorical contexts they wish to address, often being required to name specific audiences and exigences for their work. This emphasis on rhetorical flexibility pairs well with the insights of fluid semiosis—indeed, it might even be taken as evidence that fluid semiosis is so much a part of our disciplinary pedagogies that the concept has little more to offer to teachers of writing. However, a dismissal of this kind would be premature. Although static semiosis no longer dominates the format of writing pedagogy, vestiges of static semiotic thought are still sometimes smuggled into the classroom. By recognizing and addressing these pervasive patterns, I believe, writing instruction can better equip students to navigate the contemporary rhetorical landscape with agility.

Perhaps the most common manner in which static semiotic assumptions infiltrate today's writing classroom is under the guise of "logic."⁴ Both teachers and students may rightfully emphasize the value of logical consistency and noncontradiction in persuasive communication. These tenets are worth emphasizing not only because they accord with the expectations of most audiences—especially Western audiences—but also because they ensure that rhetorical gestures work coherently in service of a single purpose. When logical consistency is conflated with

⁴ It is no accident, after all, that Charles Peirce was first and foremost a logician. Regardless of whether Peirce meant for his work on semiosis to be taken up and interpreted as a teleologically static system, his relationship to formal logic contributed to that uptake, as we saw in chapter one.

terminological consistency, however, the useful insights of logic for composition pedagogy can be contorted into a rationale for static semiosis.

Consider, for example, the liminal reclamations of “bitch” and “pussy” discussed in chapter two. In the name of logic, students and teachers alike might insist that these terms must be classified as derogatory, reclaimed, or somewhere between the two, and that competing or liminal classifications of the terms are evidence of logical inconsistency. By asserting that such classifications must be expressed with a singular logical accuracy, rather than treating them as participants in shifting screens of advantage and incapacity, writing classrooms may miss the sociopolitical coherence that can result from apparent linguistic contradictions. Whenever demands for logical consistency are allowed to overrule the contingencies of logonomical purgatory, students may come to mistake the rhetorical flatness of static semiosis for sound logical thinking. The insights of fluid semiosis for understanding language and identity are thus lost.

How can a fluid semiotic mode of pedagogy counteract this pattern? One writing assignment that can spark student exploration and classroom dialogue about the relationship between logical consistency and linguistic fluidity is an assignment I call the Dual Audience Identification paper. Taking its cue from Burke’s statement that “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (*Rhetoric* 55, emphasis in original), this assignment asks students to make the same argument about public policy to two groups of audiences with opposite interests in the matter—one a group of staunch progressives, the other a group of equally staunch conservatives.⁵ For example, a student might choose to propose a bipartisan compromise on

⁵ Of course, these sometimes problematic categories do not always offer the starkest possible polarity. If a student wishes to write about an issue on which there is general agreement between conservatives and progressives, that

current gun control laws in response to recent events, defending that same policy against two very separate sets of concerns. In each argument, students are asked to pay close attention to Burke's definition of persuasion and develop their argument with an eye toward Burkean identification, constructing their ethos as rhetors in such a way that they are likely to be maximally compelling to each of their audiences. After writing both versions of their argument, students conclude the assignment with a brief reflection on how their own constructed ethos—their depiction of personal identity in relation to the identities of their audiences—shifted between the two papers. In other words, how did attending to the changing demands of identification cause students to treat their own identities and terminologies fluidly? An assignment like this one allows students to experience firsthand the ways in which logical consistency and sociopolitical coherence may operate within remarkably different terministic screens according to the opportunities and constraints of rhetorical situations. Students learn the potential power of fluid semiosis by enacting it for themselves.

In order for such an assignment to be effective, it is crucial that students understand they are not being asked to deceive or dissimulate as they construct themselves to reach each audience. For many students, the notion of adapting their rhetorical screen seems synonymous to lying, because they presume a static semiotic perspective in which there is only one ideal terminological approach to honesty. In order for the assignment to be most effective in teaching the principle of fluid semiosis, however, students must work with the same set of lived realities to construct two competing ethe. In the process, they may come to find that their own identities and experiences have been multifarious enough to give rise to multiple terministic frames, even frames that appear contradictory on their surfaces. By virtue of the richness of their

student could work in consultation with the instructor to choose two groups of target audiences with strong opposing views on that issue.

particularities, these students are capable of entering more than one mode of salient collective engagement.

The Future of Advantageous Incapacities

The investigations I have laid out in this dissertation have certainly not exhausted the disciplinary possibilities of fluid semiosis. In closing, I want to briefly suggest five directions in which this study might call for future scholarship: first, scholarship on Burke; second, scholarship on derogatory terms and the perplexing nature of their reclamation; third, scholarship on Indonesian rhetoric; fourth, scholarship on the rhetoric of the alt-right; and fifth, scholarship on the tension between particularity and collectivity in the study of nondominant rhetorics, including depictions of identity and its relation to what has been called “identity politics”.

First, Burke studies stands to gain much by continuing to place Burke’s theories in conversation with present day discussions of marginality, identity, and the nature of nondominant rhetorics. Such theoretical interplay need not rely only on unidirectional scholarly models in which one of these discourses is used to critique or correct the other—although such critical scholarship can certainly have utility. Rather, as I have sought to demonstrate here, the reading practice of meta-Burkean historiography allows for Burke to be read alongside critical theory in such a way that Burke’s insights can extend far beyond Burke’s own conception of them.

Second, questions remain about how the concept of liminal reclamation, alongside the concepts of redemptive reclamation and restricted reclamation discussed in chapter two, can illuminate other derogatory terms which have been posited (or rejected) as sites of reclamation. In particular, future studies might further consider the relationship of collective group size and collective group social influence on the nature of reclamation. What happens when a derogatory

term is applied to a group that comprises a socially powerful majority, as when the term “cracker” is used to derogate white people in America? What about terms for minority groups who are socially privileged, like the derogatory Indonesian term *orang Cina* to refer to wealthy Chinese Indonesians more politely known as *orang Tionghoa*? By considering the diverse expressions of reclamation as group size and group influence vary, rhetorical theory stands to learn much more about the nature of this remarkable means of linguistic evolution.

Third, as I hope chapter three has demonstrated, the study of Indonesian rhetoric is still in its nascent phase, and its best days lie ahead. Apart from Amber Engelson’s essay on Indonesian religious rhetoric in *College English* and my own work on Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri in *Rhetorica*, no sustained work on the distinctive character of Indonesian rhetoric has yet been published in our field. Because of the unique constraints of the Indonesian rhetorical situation and the propensity for paradox in Indonesian culture, fluid semiosis may prove itself a particularly generative tool for illuminating the features of this rhetorical treasure trove.

Fourth, the distinction between ideological alt-right and rhetorical alt-right proposed in chapter four provides one tactical approach for future investigations into the nature and function of the vexingly amoebic but politically significant alt-right. By conceiving of the alt-right’s protean boundaries as a feature of group identity rather than an impediment to group identity, future scholars may be better equipped to grapple with the social dynamics that draw disenchanting white men in particular into this dissident collective. Future studies may wish to consider in particular the impact of internet mediation on political “trolling,” the presence and participation of women in a movement partially defined by men’s rights, and the use of counter-reclamation to trouble the usual patterns of derogation and reclamation.

Fifth, far more remains to be done in considering how fluid semiosis works alongside or competes with other possible explanations of the tension between particularity and collectivity in the construction of nondominant identity and its implications for political action. How does fluid semiosis have explanatory power—or how does it fail to explain—when applied to specific critical theory discourses of nondominant identity, especially those discourses which are not directly implicated in the case studies this dissertation has considered? After all, though rhetorical subfields in feminist rhetorics, racial and sexual minority rhetorics, postcolonial rhetorics, disability rhetorics, and others are united in the sense that they share a concern with nondominant rhetorics, they are by no means substitutable for one another. Like any other terminological frame, fluid semiosis too must be evaluated according to both its advantages and its incapacities for each rhetorical context, its power to conceal as well as to reveal.

This reaffirmation of the partiality of fluid semiosis is as good a place as any to conclude. It will not do to claim a grandiose, universal importance for a theoretical intervention whose very lifeblood is a caution against universal interventions. Such a claim would be simply another self-defeating piety, another baptism of cats. Burke's tongue-in-cheek analogy from *Permanence and Change* bears repeating: "The universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways—and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men's cuts fall at the wrong places" (*Permanence* 103). No doubt the pattern of slicing I have modeled here will conflict with patterns that others have found serviceable. And yet, if fluid semiosis has any validity, this conflict need not be taken as proof of either model's paucity. Both the nomenclature of fluid semiosis and the conceptual framework it signifies have virtue insofar as they have utility for expanding our understanding of rhetoric. Following Burke's injunction "to use all that is there to use" (*Philosophy* 21) in textual criticism, I offer the notion

of fluid semiosis to the reader and the field in the same spirit Burke himself might have offered it—as one among infinite ways of dividing the rhetorical universe into cognizable slices—in hopes that others may find it, as I have found it, a very advantageous incapacity.

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Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

- Ph.D., English**, The Pennsylvania State University (May 2019)
Specialization: Rhetoric and Composition
- M.A., English**, The Pennsylvania State University (May 2015)
Specialization: Rhetoric & Composition
- B.A., Communication**, Roberts Wesleyan College, *summa cum laude* (May 2012)

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

- “Gendering the Unsaid and the Unsayable.” Coauthored with Cheryl Glenn. Forthcoming in *Qualitative Studies of Silence: The Unsaid as Social Action*, edited by Amy Jo Murray and Kevin Durrheim, Cambridge University Press.
- “‘What Do I Lack as a Woman?’: The Rhetoric of Megawati Sukarnoputri.” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2018, pp. 58-91.
- “The Exorcism of Language: Reclaimed Derogatory Terms and Their Limits.” *College English*, vol. 78, no. 5, 2016, pp. 424-446.

SELECTED AWARDS & HONORS

- Predoctoral Fellowship*. Center for Humanities and Information, The Pennsylvania State University. (2017-2018)
- Kenneth Burke Prize in Rhetoric*. Center for Democratic Deliberation, The Pennsylvania State University. (2017)
- English Department Top Publication Award*. The Pennsylvania State University. (2016)
- MA Excellence in Teaching Award*. Dept. of English, The Pennsylvania State University. (2015)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- The Pennsylvania State University**, University Park, PA (2013 - 2019)
- ENGL 005: Individual Writing Tutorials (2 semesters)
 - ENGL 015: Rhetoric and Composition (4 semesters)
 - ENGL 030: Honors Rhetoric and Composition (1 semester)
 - ENGL 137H: Rhetoric and Civic Life I (1 semester)
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 - ENGL 202B: Effective Writing: Writing in the Humanities (1 semester)