

(An)Other Terrain for Thought: “Good Gossip”

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Working right at the limits of several categories and approaches means that one is neither inside or outside. One has to push...to the borderlines, where one never stops walking on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit.¹

INTRODUCTION

This essay proposes to work the limits of a taken-for-granted system of thought in order to name the multiple at work in the classroom through the educator's and student's body. It both promotes the “theoretical rupture” currently challenging traditional Anglo-American studies of philosophy, literary theory, and the so-called “sciences of man,” and diverges from much of poststructural thought by adding a specific sexual inflection to the seemingly common goal of “redefining the subject.” It is not my desire here to construct yet another bad utopian vision nor to lead us down some path of righteous destruction. I position the following deconstructions not as destruction but rather as a kind of historical affirmation that not only resists the rancor of failed historical ideals but *works that site of failure* to resignify the very terms that, having become unmoored from their ground, are at once the tenants of that loss and the resources from which to articulate the future. My attempt involves investigation into a practice I call “good gossip” in some effort to help re\fuse the social imaginary about liberal discourses of dialogue, identity and community in academic research, pedagogy, and philosophical frameworks.² My aim here is to map a different space in which other performances, other thinking, power, and pleasures are undertaken. The very notion of gossip, positioned as it is, outside of if not contrary to normalized, disciplinary philosophical convention, suggests to me a possible route of escape, providing moments to re\think, to re\fuse what we are, to con\test the dominant in order to move to some place which might be named a counter discourse of feminist imaginaries. In some ways, then, this is an experiment to open up possibilities for thinking complexities through a familiar practice that often moves through different registers, its participants often speaking through multiple codes. My goal is not a facile for or against institutionalized knowledge claims of disciplines, methods of verification and communication, but rather an exploration of their possibilities in the face of limit questions, questions that are both insistent and interminable in approaching the boundary on which the tree of knowledge has its roots.

Troubling the desire for subjective autonomy and the use of language that assumes legitimation by its mirroring relation between the word and the world, both of which are well established in the liberal image of thought, in the canonized, institutionalized tradition of the history of philosophy and inherent in what Michael Walzer has (re)described as “Liberalism 1 and Liberalism 2,” will take some doing.³ The arguments for the “word and deed” of liberal individualism in democratic and political thought are as strong as they are well rehearsed in practice. I will just remind us here that the traditional individualist position *and* the communitarian are founded

on the liberal idea that as subjects of a state, it is individuals who make the *autonomous* decision to communicate with each other. All speech interactions are mediated through the abstract idea of a nation-state which underpins the very possibility of communication and civil society. (Dead)center to our thought about what constitutes community, in a national culture of the nation-state, is voluntary communication. And, in fact, recently there have been numerous calls from both within and outside the academy to join in conversation and dialogue across/about our differences. A new alliance has been formed by public intellectuals such as Richard Rorty, Amy Gutmann, Catherine Stimpson, Anthony Appiah, Charles Taylor, and not least, Jürgen Habermas who call upon the “tradition” of standards and values and its underlying epistemology to argue for general educational goals based on the “tradition of liberal (communicative) democracy,” by which they can only mean the particular, modern twentieth century rendition.⁴ Unable to resist the lure of speaking from a position in which the academic subject takes itself to incarnate the singular voice of the universal, they fuse an Anglo-American technological progressivism with neoclassical norms of the Good and Truth to recommend policy makers, citizens, and intellectuals engage in the medium of dialogue. In my view, their efforts, if successful, will serve to rebuild a ghost town where “our culture” (thought to be modeled by the universities) is positioned as the mediating resynthesis of knowledges. They would return us to some primordial unity and immediacy of a lost origin as a linguistically unified nation-state, interestingly reinstantiating a proposal once endorsed by the German idealists in which hermeneutic reworking returned “tradition” to a new unity and vitality, a renaissance.⁵ Fueled by pop-psychology which often claims that talking-it-out solves problems and heals emotional wounds by bringing about a meeting of the minds, most adherents, including academic faculty, administrators and conference organizers use the term conversation as if it provided the Lincoln Logs of community building.

For Habermas, cultural synthesis is achieved through the practice of communication. Communicative rationality creates and embodies consensus.⁶ Stanley Fish appeals to a horizon of rational institutional consensus rather than a cultural identity to compose an “interpretive community” capable of arriving at determinations through free and rational discussions.⁷ Among the Left, in general, the egalitarian assumption regarded to be at the heart of communication can come to full realization only within communicational transparency. Thus domination becomes an effect of failed communication. All problems in communicating and differences of idiom are merely secondary or parasitical on a fundamental clarity of communication — an ideal speech situation. What is required to set things “straight” is clearer (read “true”) reasoning, skills, and “match” of language. This belief undergirds the idea that engaging in dialogue not only develops within the autonomous subject attitudes of civility, decorum, moderation, and tolerance, but helps the participants to clarify their own “identities” and to come to a recognition and respect of others’ as well. Charles Taylor, for instance, apparently appealing to some neutral and universal description concerning the definition of identity argues that “we define our identity *always* in dialogue.”⁸

The work of Derrida, Lyotard, Irigaray, and Deleuze raises fundamental doubts that communication is in principle transparent, challenging the “logic of individual

exchange" that pervades Western liberal notions of communication, language, community, and not incidentally sexual identity. Derrida's powerful readings of the Western philosophical tradition are marked by his insistence that every attempt at communication is attended by a foundational violence (the *reduction* of the Other to the status of addressee) and by a structurally implicit *failure* of representation. This is because the possibility of reference can only be *thought* as the failure of linguistic transparency, as the internal opacity or thickening of language, which permits the flawed assumption of worldly reference under linguistic meaning.⁹ Lyotard has insisted upon the radical heterogeneity of idioms in a way that renders the organization of phrases under a common horizon of truth impossible.¹⁰ It is hard to imagine a view of language or discourse that is more removed from Habermas's ideal of a universal norm of communicative action, which is said to be immanent in speech itself and which allegedly enables participants to arrive at consensus without distortion or external constraint. The universalist's dream of a "noise-free," fully transparent sphere of communication based on consensus contrasts sharply with poststructural inquiry into the opacities inherent in language and the conclusion that consensus can be established only on the basis of acts of exclusion.

There is no claim that we cannot "speak" to each other. It's just to describe *what happens* in terms of an ideal notion of community or, as the Left would have it, in degrees of success in achieving it, is to *miss the point*. Effects of communication may occur; speech *contexts* may be temporarily stabilized by the apparent assent between speakers, but such occurrences are never *more than acts*; they are not revelations of a fundamental stability or transparency to communicating. Furthermore, such stabilizations are never total, since the very phrases that seek to establish assent to the ground rules of communication cannot themselves be subject to the rules they establish.¹⁴ All of this matters to feminists of course because the ontological approach of liberal discourse, of subject-centered reason and political agency dictates a notion of community based on the bounded and coherent identity of one group — historically male. The ideal of liberal discourse postulates a "public" that comes into being through a rational consensus. As such it reveals itself as a tendency to stop the relations between form and the processes of human life in its tracks, to turn invisible relations into separate countable things, to position the *sum* of human relations outside of substantive differences and the heterogeneity that characterizes most social practices. The formal individuality of the rationally oriented, freely contracting subject brackets out the interdependence of the "public" and "private" realms of life along with most substantive needs and cares, oblivious to the power relations that promote the daily suffering, oppression, poverty, and violence lived out by differently positioned social groups, glossing over racial, ethnic, class, sexual, and national cultural differences. The (specious) dichotomy articulated in traditional conceptions of "personhood," a claimant before the Law, a "citizen," elides a sexualized, exclusionary, hierarchical structuring of lived relations.

Elaborating alternative accounts of the processes constitutive of thought and subjectivity, feminists using the work of Deleuze and others have begun an inquiry into how women locate and articulate their own subjectivity. Beginning with the always provisional, problematized notion that differences exist between "man" and

“woman,” indeed, between “you and I,” French feminists especially argue that these binaries are not simply mirror equivalents but are instead fundamentally different. Their deliberate resistance to conventional, masculine conceptual patterns of analysis reflects in part their conviction that social change beneficial to all depends not least upon an understanding of as well as the change of women’s thinking and language.

This feminist epistemology which proposes a radically different vision of subjectivity as embodied, sexually differentiated, multiple, and relational, remains very much within a politics of every day life. Central then, to the starting point for new conceptual and political schemes of thought remains the simultaneous use and problematization of all women’s experience and activities. By defending *female* feminist specificity in terms of a new, relational mode of thought, this brand of feminism is seeking reconnection while accepting non-complimentarity and multiplicity. In re-valORIZING the lived experience and the embodied nature of the subject, this view works to give a positive value to the embodied self as a material-symbolic agent of change. This is not some lyrical celebration of natural female positivity, however. There is the recognition that this positivity needs to be *constructed* through action.

Luce Irigaray, particularly works upon opening out conditions of possibility for such a difference to be enacted. Without falling onto biological reductivism, she sees the body as a libidinal surface which allows for the construction of subjectivity through the complex *interplay* of identifications, language and alterity mobilized through action. Her work displays a quest for an analysis of characteristics of what might be enactments of women’s communication.¹¹ As such, her provisional approach gives privileged relation to play and laughter (registering a very different meaning to the idea of “seriousness”), to what is near, shifting *and* connected, and to notions of interdependence in order to “discover” forms of talk among women. Her interest is in articulating and embodying a different set of relations which in turn would help to promote a new subjectivity. Subjectivity here is a process vitally connected to *all* of ordinary life. Her aim, as is mine, is to encourage us to re/signify our/selves and our mode of thinking. Here the function of language becomes not one of copying or imaging reality, the governing technique for social normalization, legitimation, and cohesion; it is rather to form ideas and guides for action so that transformations may occur that better satisfy our immediate needs and desires. The different idea of how language functions helps to challenge the “language net of common sense” and the dogmatism that falsifies the totality of our experience into mechanisms of signification reflecting the powerfilled techniques of disciplining, surveilling, ordering and punishing. What we can hope to interrupt is a system of thought that has never reached an understanding of the multiple, a binary logic and biunivocal relationships which dominate State philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, structuralism, information science, and certainly our forms of formal education.

In what follows I’d like to take a good look at an activity in which we all engage, although women have been particularly implicated. My purpose is to explore this activity in light of the themes outlined above — those of processes, identities, the self defined in relation to other *relations* and praxis as determinative of self. My idea here

is to focus on what happens when we talk to each other in our everyday lives, what we (particularly women) are *practicing* when we gossip with one another that seems to elude description in our liberal stipulations constitutive of discourse. What we can ferret out about the kinds of relations constructed when we engage in some serious gossiping might well be worth noting in our efforts to connect meaningfully with each other so that all participants can be said to be engaged in actions that place exclusion under erasure.

Our approach recalls Irigaray's primacy of place for play, laughter, and seriousness, but disrupts the vision of subjectivity that posits rationality as the dominant mode of praxis. It also, I hope, fits with feminist's active seeking of a re\definition of the community bond, and consequently of the heterosexual social contact; countering the "molarization" and the exacerbated individualism of traditional philosophical thought.

CONCEPTIONS OF GOSSIP

I am not going to begin with a definition of gossip. Not unlike poetry, gossip means many things to many people, and even at different times and in different contexts, to a single person. At its extreme, however, it's easy to think of all gossip as petty, ill willed, too often unfounded, as either trivial and thus demeaning to those whose lives it rakes over, or outright malicious. Indeed, dictionary definitions reinforce this view.¹² Three kinds of gossip that have been judged reprehensible are distinguishable: breaking a promise of secrecy, intentionally misleading others about peoples' lives, intentionally deceiving listeners, and passing along matters that can unquestionably injure the person talked about are all activities we can generally agree may be judged, at least in the abstract, as morally indefensible. Morally questionable, at least, is talk that gains prestige, power, affection or income for the speaker who passes on gossip best left untold. The stuff of scandal which serves to damage competitors or enemies, gratify envy or rage by diminishing another, or which generates disparaging or discreditable representations in hopes of benefiting one's own position obviously invites our moral condemnations.

There is no doubt that gossip enjoys a terrible reputation. In religious and secular contexts, by standards of morality and of decorum, "loose" talk about people and events has been deplored. Few activities so nearly universal have been the object of such sustained and passionate attack. A short rundown of distinguished thinkers who adopt a normative point of view against gossip will give some sense of its traditional, overwhelmingly negative evaluation. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, although variously, concern themselves with the avowed *content*, the subject matter of this talk which refers to nothing beneath the apparent. They condemn a mode of chatter that deviates from the "ideal point of view," "trivial facts," that "meaningless talk" largely based on personal rather than public values. Talk in the kind of detail that interests gossips concerns itself with events in "language that having no original taking-place, occurs on unauthorized epistemological grounds." Gossip or rumor blurs the distinction between the public nature of the important, the "true" grounds of "being," and that talk which communicates the "ordinary." In their view this deters knowing the *true* "nature of the entity talked about."¹³

Still, I think there are a number of things to look at here that can generate some interest, not least a feminist one. Indeed, gossip as an activity has been recognized in a less dismissive way by at least two current authors, both women, interestingly. Even after her careful consideration of the moral problems some forms of gossip clearly raise, Sissela Bok in her book, *Secrets*, takes pains to address some of its uses in a more positive light. Her careful delineations show gossip in its subject matter as well as its practice to be at least *ambiguous* across a number of important issues of concern. Patricia Spacks, in her book on gossip, draws on its complex psychological dynamic to perform analyses to three centuries of literary works — published letters, biographies, Restoration drama, and novels. Her work, I believe, immediately problematizes the practice of gossip as merely a private mode of discourse, showing how traditional literary genres have long relied on it to establish necessary connections between narrators and readers. Her analyses reveals that what we normally think of as a private mode of talking is not all that private or that simple.¹⁴

GOSSIP AS CONTENT

It is clear from objections voiced earlier that most thinkers, certainly the philosophers mentioned, have focused on the avowed subject matter of gossip to ground their condemnations. Their focus is embedded in a number of questionable assumptions, however. Important for our purpose is their view of language and how it functions. Heidegger, for example, speaks of “Being-with,” which “develops in listening to one another.” His formulations, as do the others, suggest a *passive* role for the listener: at most, two or more people *take turns* listening to one another.

Communication here appears to involve *transmission* of ideas from mouth to ear, certainly not a *transaction* of exchange and mutual modification. In fact, Heidegger’s worry is that in the transmission, stray utterances which are not imputable to a knowable origin will contaminate the space of internal, formal, private structures of a literary language. He wants to protect the purity of his language from external, referential and public effects, establishing in effect a “rumor control center” for great thoughts. His view is rooted in our now traditional view of a singular subject as the site of Being, knowledge and virtue; the subject *as opposed* to the object or another subject. It is rooted too in the idea that the subject matter unproblematically *determines* meaning. Meaning inheres in concepts and propositions which are transparent, merely expressing “facts” that need only to be laid out to be agreed upon, that is, *if* the speaker is “clear,” exhibiting a communicative competence based on some universal standard for measuring discourse. This view of how ideas are *to be understood* at the very least flattens the relationship between language and participants. At its worst, it reinscribes and reinforces the complicity between discourse, normativity, and exclusion.

This “literalness” imposed on the listener by the speaker belies any series of complex relations, consonances, and dissonances of meanings. It denies *active* understandings and nuanced constructings. It also reveals a desire for some magisterial “central intelligence” which can legitimately police the participants who may evoke implicitly the struggle to *assert* meaning in the face of competing assertions, actual or potential. To presuppose a certain meaning of content is to make the

acceptance of that content a precondition for *further* dialogue. This is not merely a causal transformation tied to the fact that any enunciation influences the beliefs, desires, and interests of the listener. On the contrary, it is a juridical or institutional transformation.¹⁵ Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's semantic efforts to define the "appropriate" content of dialogical discourse effectively erases difference and effectively hides the power relations embedded in the description. Their fierce efforts, like others, reveal a fear of the unleashing of impulse in language, its subversive possibilities, its openings that resist closing off or being shut down by the declarations of meaning by authorities interested in removing language from the terrain of contestation. Proposing gossip as a serious discourse helps to illustrate and question those boundaries and dividing lines that make the normative, prevailing discourses legitimate. As a discursive production it reveals the play of forces as a polymorphous network which invests the subjects' coporeal field. It suggests reflexive readings of "talk" that question the inclusions/exclusions, orderings/disorderings, and valuations/revaluations of routinized practices of communications as the basis of democratic praxis. Its nomadic quality can be translated into a feminist problematic in philosophy which help us address fundamental traits of the Western theoretical system: its chronic *inability* to recognize a state of flow, fluidity, incompleteness, inconclusiveness, and the relational import of engagement: the *becoming* that emerges in the personal transaction of talking.

Indeed, I think that rumorological paranoia derives partially from the challenge to authorial control it presents — its incalculable scope. We can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes, how and by whom it is understood. In that way, it could prove to exemplify a Deleuzian rhizomatic network which would strangle the roots of that infamous tree of knowledge, the "arborescent" model of thought constructing "the proudly erect tree under whose spreading boughs later-day Plato's discharge their function."¹⁶ Taking gossip seriously gives substance to the idea that the personal is not only the political, it is also the basis for the theoretical. As such, its exploration may also help us open out the traditional figures of philosophical discourse, for example, Idea, presence, transcendental subjectivity, and absolute knowledge to expose how these have been constructed from, yet have radically subverted the feminine, submerging the idea of women's entitlement to theoretical subjectivity. It frequently leads us to question the surface of what is said and done, to try to account for conflicting appearances of official institutional stories and then to test these contra\dictions, to evaluate them with others in conversations. Not so different from some current recommendations for critical pedagogical excellence, I think.

GOSSIP AS PRACTICE

What seems to have been overlooked by most is its value as an activity in which all humans engage in ordinary life, one which I claimed earlier has a number of elements which speak to its power as a social mode of contracting relations. The settled practice of gossip can be analyzed as *a form of relating*, not one which involves participants relation to ideas so much as *to each other*. It is this focus that I think may prove the most fruitful in our search for a way to understand differently notions of identity, subjectivity, and thought.

Gossiping can be understood as a relatively freeing activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary social inhibitions and established rules for discourse. As such, talkers often engage in a “non-sense” performance, exhibiting energy-filled manifestations of a sense of fun in an atmosphere of play and laughter. Indeed one can wonder if our critics’ admonitions stem from their realization of the intensity, un-selfconscious impulses, creative imagination and genuine satisfaction derived from this kind of interaction as opposed to the more “profound” they have deemed essentially educational or important.

The often joyous and playful aspects of gossiping suggest compelling motives for relations which incorporate a libidinal economy quite different from orgasmic orientation. In gossiping there is no pretense to finality. Mind, affect, and body become defined uniquely in a circulation of states, a *play* of differences that produces meanings, though of course no guarantee of the same (or “right”) kind. The latitude of free play in which parties engage can release the passionate sub-structures of thought and feeling in a space safe to wonder about or speculate on diverse forms of evidence about our/selves or others’ humanness. At times we “try on” different emotions, ideas, attitudes, attributes, or personas to embrace their “fit” or see what re\actions they may elicit. To do this we dredge up our personal myths where pain and hilarity blur, where anguish coexists with joy, and sanity flirts with its opposite, a schizoanalytic practice, perhaps. We re\construct early memories, high points, low points, and turning points of our lives. We express in these, our unique embrace of the “facts” and “themes” of the past, the strivings of the present, and hopes for the future. In doing so, we reveal the values that have kept us vital. At its best, the emotional geography of engagement in this environment, like art, changes the way we look at the world.

The contrast between these relations and “public” or what we might want to label “educational” conversation calls attention to all that the latter eliminates, particularly the neither-not yet of what we have come to call a “self.” Unlike more didactic efforts, which often try too hard to *instill* meaning, these conversations become the treasures we re\member. In them we find the setting up of relations that *precede* the specific predicates others come to attribute to the substance they see as our “self.” I’m talking about finding an actual contextual mode of representation which better accounts for the creation and originality of a complex moment of self-relation — the being-to-come. I think as a practice, gossiping shows us an alternative terrain in which to find the actual *conditions of possibility* for both the creation and examination of differences, in this case a non-dialectizable difference in a dynamic Bergson might call “indetermination.” Importantly we also observe the aim of a practice which is to help *unburden*: not to load life with the weight of higher values, but to create new values which are those *of* life, which make life light and active. While or perhaps because gossip inhabits the borderlands of socially sanctioned oral discourse, it expresses the minutiae of relations which create the texture of life, the small “truths” like the “small” talk that infuse the *details* of living with meaning.

Present day “story tellers” are not exempt; they do much of the same work as gossips. An action-in-knowing inheres in both practices whether storytellers want to acknowledge it or not. Linking the two as loci of uncertainty, both being as they

are fundamental interpretive activities often possessing the *forms* of certainty, reveals the artificiality of opposing activities of the “outer,” “public,” (male) realm to goings on in the supposedly privatized realm most associated with women. It certainly serves to challenge the cherished distinctions we make and forces us to wonder why the one is an often admired and accepted social skill while the other has gathered such censure. What’s going on here?

Etymologically, gossip means “god-related.” What happened? How is the change in our views of the gossip related to the increasing pose of the subject who knows, the disdain of the body and the public order of the masculine? In what ways does the practice of gossip both appropriate and undercut traditional representations of dialogue, stereotypical representations of women’s talk and the everyday? How does the paradox gossip presents force us out of our fixed categories, displacing polarities? And, a most important question for feminists — how can the focus on the relations constructed in our practice of ordinary talk help us in our effort toward living that which is no longer but cannot yet be — help us in the service of transition? Inquiring minds want to know.”

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1. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 218.
 2. This term is taken from Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben Ze’ev eds., *Good Gossip* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 1994.
 3. Michael Walzer, “Comment,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 99.
 4. *Ibid.*, entire.
 5. See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 70-88.
 6. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
 7. See Stanley Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
 8. Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Gutmann, *Multiculturalism*, 33.
 9. For exposition of this notion, see Michael Theunissen, *The Other*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).
 10. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).
 11. See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum and the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) and Luce Irigaray, *Elementary Passions*, trans. Collie and Still (New York: Routledge, 1992).
 12. See Goodman and Ben-Ze’ev, *Good Gossip*, 106-14.
 13. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 94; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 69, 71-72; and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 212-13.
 14. Sessela Bok, *Secrets* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 89-101 and Patricia Sparks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
 15. For exposition of the nominative aspects of institutionalized discourses, see Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1972).
 16. See Brian Massumi, *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 1-25.
 17. *Ibid.*, 168-70.