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Feminist Theory and the Mode of Address: towards a semiprivate room<sup>1</sup>

## I. prelude

A gathering such as this, which brings together philosophers and literary scholars and then raises the question of address, which it is fair to say is native to neither field, inevitably confronts questions of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. Indeed, the latter formation may ironically intensify the former: the possibility of interdisciplinary exchange and conflict often seems to lead to the most deliberate (and sometimes the bluntest) articulations of disciplinary assumptions and biases. That we have convened in part to speak about questions of address only underscores the question of how we can fruitfully interrogate these topics across our disciplinary disaffiliations.

While the problem of disciplinarity is thus obviously general in our meeting here, it has a specific relation to my paper, especially if we think of disciplinarity very broadly as a problem of location. My talk today is a portion of a much longer piece I have been working on about the relations between disciplines, their characteristic mode(s) of address and the problem of location or positionality, up to and including positioning in the so-called "public sphere." The paper you

will hear today retains these themes to argue very broadly that disciplines inhabit a "semiprivate" space and that they foster therein modes of address that are both valuable and potentially generalizable beyond their current arenas. (I will concede that the range of possible sites to be considered introduces some marked difficulties; for instance, within the academy, disciplines have a naturalizing effect, casting their objects into something like common sense; outside the academy, disciplinarity defamiliarizes, appearing in the derided form of "jargon." Yet, in both contexts, something like the effects of the semiprivate seem to be at work.) Address is for my purposes today one of the forms of disciplinary practice, a disciplinary rhetoric. As such, it lends itself to an examination that can illuminate disciplinarity in general, as well as particular disciplines, including aesthetics. Such an inquiry may also help us interrogate the idioms in which disciplines that appear to be sequestered in the disciplines can actually move and speak abroad in a wider field.

In an earlier version of this paper, I gave it the subtitle: "or, who do you think you're talking to?" In American English, this expression is idiomatic, aggressive, aggrieved. In the course of rereading and revising (and retitling) my paper, I noticed how strongly idiomatic it is, and I considered seriously whether one of its basic tropes -- the trope of the semiprivate room -- would travel and usefully address the topic of address in this space. (The word itself is not one found even in many European languages.)

As you can plainly see, I have retained the trope, but, as a result, I consider my paper a kind of experiment in address, which is to say, I am prepared for it to fail, at least at a rhetorical level. Its success or failure -- which is not the same thing as its persuasiveness or its failure to persuade this audience in particular -- will in one sense help us to think about whether or not this space, the disciplinary and rhetorical space we occupy together today, is itself a semiprivate room, in the peculiar sense that I wish to give to that expression. And if it is, what are the legible consequences of that fact for our various modes of address?

The paper has three parts and several subsections: the first is devoted to the figure of the semiprivate room; the second, to address as an essential a feature of theory, particularly when it engages with/in narrative -- my brief example is feminist theory; the last, to disciplinarity as a mode of address, inclusive and exclusive, with affects that importantly include pleasure and speak, in that register, to the question of the aesthetic. That at least is my hope; the experiment's success rests entirely on its reception, which is to say, on its own mode(s) of address.

II. are you taking this class?

The classroom is a semiprivate room. As such, it is a site of the peculiar intimacies and coercions, the self-revelations and decisive restraints, that characterize a space neither public nor private, both exclusionary (perhaps even exclusive?) and

impersonal: as a work space, the classroom entails a relation to the unfamiliar, the as-yet-unknown, the potentially difficult. Its very existence testifies that common sense is not enough and that ordinary language is what we speak at home. In other words, the semiprivate room is one site of the disciplines. I want to propose the form of practice proper to the semiprivate room as a possible model for the public discourse of the academic intellectual, that is, as a model for the "public intellectual"; for the practice of cultural studies; and, by extension, for the practice of the aesthetic. Such a proposition involves a certain amount of impropriety in the face of commonplaces about what a public discourse -- including a properly aesthetic discourse -- is or ought to be. Before beginning to unpack my sense of this possible discourse and its paradigmatic scene, let me linger for a time in the semiprivate.

My American Heritage Dictionary tells me that the adjective semiprivate means "shared with usually one to three other hospital patients." The definition proper is followed by an example of use, so the entire entry reads: "shared with usually one to three other hospital patients: a semiprivate room." This use of illustration is not a feature that characterizes most of the definitions in the American Heritage (in this respect, it differs, for example, from the OED).<sup>ii</sup> I notice, for example, that semipermeable, semiprecious and semper fidelis (this last sem- is a different root) appear on the same page with the semi-private; each is defined, but none is illustrated with a phrase or a sentence. I take this special emphasis in

the exemplification of the semiprivate, its explicit restriction to the rooms of hospital patients, as a sign that this adjective is not widely used in American English to characterize other sorts of spaces or relations. My usage is thus, in some sense, a nonstandard one or a neologism, a kind of semiprivate joke. This circumstance precisely suits my purposes. The semi-private room spawns neologisms.

Although it is common for people -- travelling to conferences or for pleasure or both -- to share rooms, they typically refer to their shared accommodations in hotels or inns as doubles or triples or even shares, not as semiprivate. This is due to what I have called the peculiar intimacy, quite different from the intimacy of friends or lovers or siblings who share a room, that marks the "semiprivate" as a distinctive locale. A semiprivate room in a hospital, for example, is exclusive, with obvious constraints on entry (and for that matter egress) and sometimes rigid protocols governing the timing and even the character of visitors. And yet it is simultaneously an essentially open, public space, one in which strangers are proximate and inevitably interact and where only the very rash (or the gravely ill) would assume any real privacy or confidentiality: after all, a text detailing one's bodily functions hangs in a folder on the door, which often stands ajar.

Yet the commonality of those who share such a room is at best partial, as the term semiprivate announces; semi- means half, partly or partially. Indeed, the semiprivate room always

has a wholly contingent or accidental aspect. To remain with the example of the hospital room for a moment, we note that patients are assigned empty beds more or less as they arise, at random. Their common room is configured by public interests in an indifferent public process, part economic, part cultural, part epidemiological. And yet, in some very broad sense, these roommates share an ontological condition: the semiprivate room shelters people who have in common the quite particular neediness that brings them there, in close proximity to each other and, crucially, available to a host of other people, most of them strangers. In the hospital, these other people include visitors, nurses and doctors, aides and orderlies. The semiprivate is in this respect a structure that regulates and facilitates a certain mode of attention. It is in a practical sense a kind of discipline and, as I will argue below, it thus entails a mode of address.<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, it was this power of the semiprivate to construct and elaborate a mode of address that initially suggested to me the idea that the classroom is also a semiprivate room. Both the hospital room and the classroom are sites marked by an operation of power-knowledge that has become familiar to all of us in recent years: a certain discourse or contract of cooperation and compromise reigns, although it is always and everywhere vulnerable to renegotiation, and coercion, legal and physical, remains a real possibility. The avenues for this coercion flow in many directions, which is not to say that the semiprivate room is an egalitarian space. There is always a

ruling authority, so recognized, in the semiprivate room, but it is not lodged in a sovereign body, and the questioning of authority is also a regular feature of its practice. "Opinion" and the clash of opinions are critical elements here, too. To get a second opinion is to acknowledge as much. Some quantum of fear or anxiety accompanies this clashing of opinions, along with desire and hope, of course, and real dangers are by no means completely absent, whether from the intrinsic situation of those present -- their prior conditions -- or due to the specific procedures undertaken during their stays. Ultimately, the occupants of this space may even threaten one another.

The economy of the semiprivate room is also marked by a peculiar partiality. Commodity relations are hardly banished: by now no one in the US needs to be told that "health care" and education are growth industries. Yet, public money is inevitably at stake in the construction of the semiprivate room, and a direct financial or economic relationship among its inhabitants is not generally the rule (though this may be changing). Teachers are of course paid; teaching is a job. Indeed, unions and strikes are more and more likely as forms of academic dissent.<sup>iv</sup> However, the student rarely pays his teacher directly; and even in those important instances where an adult works and studies and pays her own tuition bills, those payments rarely cover the full cost of maintaining the semiprivate room -- and they most definitely do not create a relation of employee and employer between teacher and student (this despite efforts to retool students as consumers). While the semiprivate room

enables power and fear to flow in every direction, even as it repeatedly breaks down and re-establishes figures of authority, direct economic exploitation is not the most salient form of power here. The injuries of class have a more significant if elusive force.<sup>v</sup>

In the last few passages, I have been working to loosen the semantic restriction of the semiprivate to the space of the hospital and to enumerate qualities that seem to me also to describe the semiprivacy of the classroom. A public space marked by essential exclusions; a site of individual crisis and urgency where a certain impersonality and vulnerability to public scrutiny is the structuring principle of even the most deeply-felt personal events; an enclosure where the unknown or unfamiliar is a required and indeed welcome presence; an enclave where everything that happens is overheard -- this is a semiprivate room.

I am aware of the reductions involved in this as a description of the classroom, even if we limit this description to the United States. I have bracketed a host of questions about the specificity of disparate classrooms, about public and private schools, rich and poor districts, elementary schools and graduate schools. In this sketch, economics, the state, intellectual culture, teacher-training, ideological interpellation, and bodies inscribed with all their differences are subordinated to a general proposition: that is, in a space that straddles the public-private distinction in a particular, even peculiar way, a certain form of critical practice is



possible; a form of critical encounter, disciplinary practice, and with it a form of address, emerges, which I will argue might be generalized both by the work of public intellectuals who are also academics and in the work of culture we call the aesthetic. But while my account is stripped down and in that respect reductive, I do not think it is necessarily idealist or idealizing. The semiprivate (class)room is no little eden, free of conflict, resentment or anger, and my intention is not to romanticize it or even to "celebrate" it, any more than one would celebrate the semiprivate hospital room. I am interested, though, in the way it works, whether in the mode of intellectual inquiry or aesthetic practice.

Andrew Ross has observed that the academy "is a massive public sphere in itself, involving millions of people in this country alone, and so the idea that you break out of the academy into the public is rather nonsense."<sup>vi</sup> This observation seems unassailable to me. "There are no private intellectuals," as Stanley Fish has remarked (Fish 117). But the polemical notion of the ivory tower (however discredited) points at a critical principle of exclusion, a disciplinary principle or mode of address that operates at both a practical and a theoretical level within the semiprivate and within the academy. This disciplinary effect puts into question one of the mantras of the polemic against the academy and its specialized knowledges, a mantra often spoken by academics accusing other academics of being hopelessly constrained by disciplinarity and thus of having failed to construct a politically effective public

discourse, the mantra of accessibility. The semiprivate room depends on public support, embodies public policy and is shaped by public opinion. Yet it is by no means a freely entered space: not just anyone can walk into your classroom and take a seat. Those individuals who take a class (in every sense of the verb) both recognize and help elaborate the practices of a kind of "public exclusion," an inaccessibility that gives the semiprivate room its form and format and makes it a familiar if peculiar space where the appearance of the unfamiliar is the norm. Such a space may well fall under the rubric of the aesthetic.

The public intimacy that is established among a teacher and the students who take her class in a semiprivate room creates an opening for the as-yet-unthought that is the enabling condition, the disciplinary ground, for any pedagogy whatsoever. The semiprivate room and the forms of address it engenders are the specificity of academic practice in the classroom and in scholarship. Another way of putting this would be to say that disciplines require semiprivate space. (I use the term discipline here in its most abstract and inclusive sense: chemistry is a discipline; classics is a discipline; art history is a discipline. But so is sculpture.) The semiprivate room enables, even seeks out -- though it hardly guarantees -- new thought, where new may sometimes indicate merely the unknown and at other times the genuinely original, new objects of knowledge, new forms of aesthetic practice. It is a space where accessibility is radically redefined, where we find an

impersonal intimacy in the form of something like an inside joke, in the form of something unfamiliar that we had never thought of before. The forms of address at work in this space might be reproduced in a less literally enclosed context, and those semiprivate forms-- rather than any imaginable content -- constitute the particular contribution academics might make to debates in the public sphere proper.<sup>vii</sup>

Academic intellectuals have opinions, of course, and some have particular expertise, for example, about alcoholism, for example, or extinction rates or dating Renaissance paintings. But insofar as there exists a public debate on issues of general importance, the public sphere suffers no shortage of opinion makers, and I agree with scholars who see no grounds for the argument that the opinions of academic intellectuals are per se superior to others and therefore essential. But I do see the particular value of the disciplinary form and modes of address of academic discourse and the need to extend it, to encourage a public larger than our current enrollments to return to its idioms in the realm we call the public sphere. If the semiprivate room is a space where accessibility is at the very least redefined, if it is a form of public intimacy that enables thought to take up the unfamiliar, to displace the already-known, it has also generally been a specific and even fixed locale. How can we transport this form beyond its familiar precincts? What is the semiprivate in what has seemed to be a wholly public space?

III. ...let me tell you about myself....

Obviously, these kinds of questions border upon a number of critical debates with significant histories in (of course) different disciplines. One is the argument about what exactly ought to count as the "public" in the phrase "public space." From some perspectives, the public sphere is the site of citizenship and free debate, as opposed to both the marketplace and the state; in Habermas' words, the public sphere is "the sphere of private people come together to form a public." Yet in quite common feminist idioms, the public is precisely the world of labor and the state, while the private is the domestic or the family, only in living memory genuinely subject to the rule of law. At the same time, in both the lingua franca and the technical idioms of capitalist democracy in the US, the private is the market and the public is the state and its interfering bureaucrats. I am persuaded that publicity "is a quantity appearing in the market as well as the state, and in numerous spots in between; [consequently] no sites are inherently or eternally public" (Robbins xv). In the context of my argument about the possibility of extending the modes of address of the semiprivate room outside the academy, I take public only to mean beyond the confines of the university and the disciplines it shelters, in the space outside the semiprivate room. Mine is thus a rather unreflective deployment of the term public at this point, a matter we may want to discuss later at some length.

There is also by now a body of fairly recent work addressed to the rhetorics and poetics of the classroom, teaching as seduction and the (usually private) play of pleasure and desire in the work of knowledge, stretching at least from Barbara Johnson's The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre (1982) to Jane Gallop's Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation (1995) and beyond. This genre of work builds, of course, on a much older, even ancient literature of pedagogy; ironically, it has persuaded me -- against some of its own explicit thematizations -- that the erotic charge of some teaching is fueled by the fact that a classroom collects an ensemble of (relative) strangers. As the semester wears on, familiarities are established and friendships grow; while the tones of discussion almost inevitably become more forgiving and less spectacular, the possibilities for transference often fade and dissipate -- solidarity rather than seduction becomes the predominate mode. The impersonal erotic and intellectual potential of the classroom is one of the lessons this work.

This puts it at odds with the critical problematic that goes in the United States by the name "personal criticism." In speaking of a semi-private space as a possible locus of impersonal intimacy, I in no sense want to contribute to this critical discourse. Some have argued that personal criticism is "the expression of neither private nor public life, [but] a complex interweaving of the two" (MacDonald 237). I am skeptical about this claim and dismayed by the thought that it may seem to resemble my own argument. Personal criticism, self-

writing, and autobiographical criticism remain burgeoning areas of discourse in the US. Within feminist theory, which is the field I know best, their growth is bound up with several problematics, including the call for academics to work as public intellectuals and feminism's constant interrogation of disciplinary limits and assumptions. As such it borders upon my topic. But from the perspective of the semiprivate, personal criticism is a screen-formation. Often indistinguishable from confession, marked by self-revelation, anecdote and pathos, it appears capable of reaching the larger audience that the academic intellectual longing for the public sphere seeks and to adopt the mode of the semiprivate on a broader stage. Its stories are infinitely "accessible." It admits a certain kind of affect. Its addressee is apparently anyone. But personal criticism seems to me too often a failed oxymoron: the personal function blocks rather than sharpening the critical one. This is true in part because its authors often seem caught up in the self-justifications that (not surprisingly) tend to cling to self-revelation: I tell you about myself so you will understand me better and criticize and judge me less harshly. (This is an effective deterrent to critical readers -- to respond unsympathetically is unthinkable. A close reading and critique of the mode of personal criticism I am here admittedly denigrating seems to me a form of gratuitous violence; I could not justify it, even for the sake of making my case against its impact stronger. Thus does personal criticism regress from the disciplinary form it mimes.)

Instead, I will speak for the "impersonal intimacy" of the semiprivate as a gesture against personal criticism, but one that retains the insight that the personal is the political. Personal criticism is alleged to flow from that insight, but it all too often privatizes criticism and with that domesticating gesture (and I choose my word with care) robs the slogan of all its energy. Ultimately, personal criticism may repackage identity politics after poststructuralism and the sustained critique of our canons (of literature and theory) by the broad currents of multi-culturalism and post-colonialism. In the wake of the critiques of experience as its own self-evident ground and of identity as a homogeneous and bounded fact, personal criticism asserts its concern with subjectivity, standpoints and the textuality of experience and offers a response. But whereas identity politics, for all of its limitations, does imagine solidarity and collective thought and action under the rubric of a shared but agonistic identity, personal criticism often shrinks identity to the experience of an individual unsettled by identity's politics and proffers that experience to every reader -- addresses the reader only to demand in return the intimacy of identification. This mode of address cannot attain the status of the semiprivate because it is too entrenched in the private as such. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, and I will close this exorbitant polemic by acknowledging my debt to figures like Patricia Williams and Jane Gallop. Williams' field is law, a discourse that genuinely seeks to sanction her remarkable mode of "personal" intervention, yet her anecdotes

become both cases and texts, studded with astonishing moments of artifice as testimony (see her "consistency of polar bears"). These moments break the bonds of personal criticism. Gallop relentlessly writes her subjectivity into her theoretical work, but she then subjects it to an impersonal, textual reading, which is remorseless and refuses the safety of experience as ground. For both of these theorists, writing unmoors mere experience and makes it a site of contestation.

The mode of address characteristic of the semiprivate room is one in which the personal is profoundly stylized -- indeed, aestheticized -- and in that gesture, it achieves a kind of powerful "de-identification," to use Gayatri Spivak's term. When the personal becomes a "text" in this sense, it becomes semi-private, intimate but impersonal; personal criticism is then its own critique. Sara Suleri has written that such work follows "a strategy of dismantlement that dispenses with such dichotomies as public and private or inside and outside in order to position itself at the border of outsideness" (175). In this "unsequestered idiom," "the question of identity [is] translated into the more vertiginous problem of positionality," and the individual, rather than a teller of secrets, is "open on all sides, ...all surface" (174). In the semiprivate room, identity is precisely open on all sides, a problem of positioning and "public language," a problem of address and of object. It is to the operation of that public language and the mode of attention it enables that I would now like to turn.



**iv. this story begins: "you would have been so angry..."**

I have written elsewhere at some length of the problem of address as essential to the problem of feminist theory, and I would like now viciously to schematize that argument for you by asserting that the problem of relocating the semiprivate room and of adapting its insights for a discourse on the aesthetic is a problem of address.<sup>viii</sup>

Your feminism will win you a place in other people's stories. This fact alone makes feminist theory a potential exemplar of the impersonal intimacies of the semiprivate. Indeed, I would suggest that an enormous range of the topoi of both feminist criticism and feminism as social practice -- from the deconstruction of the opposition between the personal and the political to the interrogation of the privacy of the private sphere to our concern for the domestic novel and autobiography as genres -- announces feminism's investment in this evolving field of interpretative play. Another person's story is in this sense a strategy that helps us enter one another's narratives and, paradoxically, discover our "own" readings (or politics); and in such circumstances, the correct address is both essential and impossible to derive or calculate fully in advance.

By the term address, I mean a rhetoric that positions an addressee -- and willy nilly and reciprocally -- an addressor -- and then proceeds to manipulate (in the best sense of that word) their relationship. I am not, in other words, using the term address to refer to an empirical audience or to histories of reception. The value of an emphasis on address is that it frees

us from our (and much of feminism's) obsessive interest in who is speaking and turns us towards the matter of whom they are speaking to, all the while holding open the position of the addressee, allowing us to examine the textual moves that sculpt that position before any reading subject approaches.<sup>ix</sup> (Quintillian and contemporary rhetoricians of apostrophe are more relevant proof texts than any work of phenomenology or history of readership.) Furthermore, the problematic of address makes inescapable the realization that the feminist subject, her objects and her narratives/theories/politics are the product of a discursive practice without guarantees and without end. To borrow a phrase from Stanley Fish that appears at the end of my paper, an emphasis on the problematic of address is invaluable because it makes it clear that feminist theory is a project that must "keep going."

More precisely, I would argue that feminist theory has been built upon a series of narrative permutations that describe the complex relationship between a (feminist) narrator and the necessarily intersubjective (semiprivate) substance or source of her tale and that can be captured by three sentences:

- (1) I tell my story as the story of your feminism.
- (2) I tell my story as the story of my feminism.
- (3) I tell your story as the story of my feminism.

Without fully rehearsing my argument concerning each of these possibilities (and the fourth temporarily excluded one -- I tell your story as the story of your feminism), let me shameless leap

to my conclusions about the way in which they provide an outline of feminist theoretical practice.

These sentences map the problems of representation, subjectivity and experience in feminist discourse. They expose the feminist subject as an effect of a narrative relation not determined by content or (unmediated) experience. They thus figure the discursive and rhetorical gap across which any feminism must articulate itself. The first, "I tell my story as the story of my feminism," tends to dissemble this gap somewhat. It engages its addressee in the imperative: "Listen!" Generically, it appears as confession, autobiography, memoir; politically, such a narrative can seem to affirm the adequation of women to feminism and to render suspect if not impossible the category of men in feminism. Experience often emerges here as the bedrock of authentic political commitment. These are familiar stories in feminism (and other movements of all kinds), and they have produced undeniably powerful political and aesthetic effects.

The second sentence, "I tell my story as the story of your feminism," which may sound tinnily in your ear, tends to exaggerate the gap between the narrator and his own tale, as well as that between the narrator and the addressee. This sentence dissembles the narrator's feminism by projecting it onto another, generally more "appropriate" figure, to be more precise, on to the addressee. This is a story I have analyzed at length, demonstrating the way in which it engages its address with an apostrophe that makes the female addressee the feminist

subject of the story to come, wins her a place in another person's story, as I put it above, often by beginning with the apostrophe: "You would have been so angry." The addressee is assigned the narrator's disavowed anger, and she thus becomes the feminist in his story. Finally, the third sentence, "I tell your story as the story of my feminism," openly appropriates another's story as text; it engages its addressee as a reader. Its own reading of a story that it acknowledges as coming from elsewhere is partial and provisional. And yet leaps across the natural barrier of experience-as-one's-own and renders the private public, the intimate impersonal, insofar as it is now the subject/object of general and "open-on-all-sides" discussion. This last possibility is by far the most daunting mode of narrative and of address, but it is perhaps also the most rewarding. How can an unfamiliar object be read without violence or addressed in an unsequestered idiom that achieves an impersonal intimacy? How can apostrophe travel across political boundaries and avoid the pitfalls of appropriation?

In principle, such a safe passage is impossible. In the place of any assurance that we can do no harm, I will invoke the practice Gayatri Spivak. Spivak seems to me to be the theorist who has most thoroughly investigated the possibility of a position that emerges as a relation between address and the disclosure of a new object, often another person's story. With no claim to an authentic voice, she locates a critical position through the impersonal intimacy that is established by telling

another person's story and acknowledging its feminism as her own, by positing a semiprivate space of exchange.

Indeed, Spivak's account of even the most seemingly self-revelatory narrative presents it as the explication of a previously inaccessible (and markedly disciplinary) object:

Assuming that there is such a thing as the story of a life..., [mine] would sound rather different from all the other talkings about myself that I engage in. I believe that the way to counter the authority of either objective, disinterested positioning or the attitude of there being no author...is by thinking of oneself as an example of certain kinds of historical, psycho-sexual narratives that one must in fact use...When one represents oneself in such a way, it becomes, curiously enough, a deidentification of oneself, a claiming of an identity from a text that comes from somewhere else (1989 130, my emphasis).

This deidentification is an impersonal apostrophe through the looking glass, in which we can read the third form of feminist narrative. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" concludes with another woman's story, that of a young Brahmin member of a group fighting for Indian independence, who killed herself in 1926 when she could not bring herself to commit a political murder. Bhuvanewari Bhaduri hanged herself while menstruating, so her suicide would not mistakenly be attributed to an illicit pregnancy. Spivak refuses insider-status in relation to this Indian example: "I was born in India and received my primary, secondary and university education there...My Indian example could thus be seen as a nostalgic investigation of the lost roots of my own identity. Yet even as I know that one cannot freely enter the thickets of 'motivation,' I would maintain that

my chief project is to point out the positivist-idealist variety of such nostalgia" (1988 281). She argues that Bhaduri perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way...she generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny) in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion.....Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide" (1988 308).

What I find exemplary about Spivak's analysis is her insistence that one must take up the critical position inscribed by the retelling of Bhaduri's narrative without the sanction of an authentic voice, without relying on one's own story, and without claiming to recover the female subaltern as a speaking subject. One narrates, foregrounding the complicitous and hazardous process of representation, and calling the place of the investigator into question, in order to produce a critical position, an address and an object -- this position, rather than voice or identity or authenticity, is the end (in every sense) of this story. As Spivak says: I "was really trying to analyze and represent her text. She wasn't particularly trying to speak to me. I was representing her, I was reinscribing her" (1990 57). Representation is not limited to or identified with inclusion here. Indeed, Spivak's work makes clear that this process of reinscribing with no adequate warrant inhabits all stories, even those that seem to be most familiar, most our own. Disciplinarity and its semiprivate idiom is the principle of this critical practice of deidentification: of narratives, of objects, of identity. As we enter into it, serious errors are

unavoidable. Many narratives will be discarded, rewritten, derided, refused, by those we address; yet, to risk failure and the painful consequences of failure in the interests of what Alice Walker cunningly calls a "mere representative[ness]" (371), to displace the phantasm of the familiar, which renders us "unable to construct theories about experiences [we] haven't had" (5), with new and unfamiliar objects, may be the only way to earn a place in other people's stories, to build a public intimacy in the idioms of the semiprivate room.

v. Coda: Providence always provides

The phrase "providence always provides" is a citation from Stanley Fish's Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Correctness. Fish is celebrating the convenient falling into his hands of a book by Alan Sinfield (Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading) which allows Fish to answer the question: "what would the Cultural Critic say?" about his own arguments; it thus provides him with a certain figure of the reader, a target to address, and a particular representation of the public intellectual. Professional Correctness is providential for my purposes because it both anticipates my argument and radically opposes it, and, finally, provides me with a last word.

Professional Correctness argues on behalf of the disciplinary "distinctiveness" of literary studies and against the view, attributed to cultural critics, that literary studies could be (not should be, but could be) transformed so "that it

is more immediately engaged with the political issues that are today so urgent: oppression, terrorism, violence against women and homosexuals, cultural imperialism" (1). According to Fish, this cannot happen -- however much we may need and wish for it to happen. His reasoning is deceptively simply: "It is not so much that literary critics have nothing to say about these issues, but that so long as they say it as literary critics," which is to say, as long as they speak about what literary works mean, "no one but a few of their friends will be listening" (1). In this account, the audience interested in being told what literary works mean is apparently already tuned in, and "we" are few (though fit, indeed, too fit). Given that "interpretations of literary works, no matter what their emphasis and independently of the motives of those who produce them, do not connect up strongly with the issues being debated in the public arena" (51), Fish argues, "no revisionary interpretation will ever have a public career.....no one cares very much about literary criticism outside the confines of its professional practice" (54-55).

Fish's example of the isolation that disciplinarity imposes is the fate of new historicist readings of Shakespeare. (He aligns new historicism with cultural studies in a move some might quarrel with; for my purposes here, this is not a problem.) In his view:

An interpretation of Othello that marks out the dynamics of race-consciousness in a manner that might



gain its publication in Representations is not in itself going to constitute an effective intervention in our anguished national conversation about race.....both the fear provoked by the new historicism, that it will lead to the substitution of partisan political agendas for the decorums and standards thought proper to the academy, and the hope attached to the new historicism, that it will lead to the substitution of partisan political agendas for the decorums and standards thought proper to the academy, are...unrealizable; the fear because performances in the academy must take a certain obligatory form; the hope because the form academic performances take...will not allow those performances to be effective outside the very special precincts of the academic world (51-52, my emphases).

The problem of form is the essence of this argument: "obligatory form" shapes acceptable performances within the academy and beyond its "very special precincts"; improper forms can never realize their feared or hoped for effects. Form excludes, and its exclusions mark the limits of the hopes and fears of critics everywhere.

It is crucial to take the pressure of Fish's argument in terms of this privileging of form. He does not say that literary studies should avoid politics. Indeed, he insists that he makes no claims whatsoever about what literary studies ought

to do. He argues rather that such politicization is a "practical impossibility" (65). The politics of literary objects will never interest a large number of people (that is, the public) because the distinctive form of literary studies is as foreign to them as the "alien murmurings of a galaxy far away" (91).

I suppose by now it is obvious why I would find this argument of interest. I echoed Fish at the opening of this essay in saying that literary intellectuals are not more qualified than anyone else to be public intellectuals in their capacity as opinion makers. And I agree with Fish's claim that literary studies has a significant kind of disciplinary distinctiveness, a form. While Fish mainly focuses here on literary studies as such, and I have been speaking about the most general level of disciplinarity, the emphasis on form cuts across this difference. But where Fish sees literary criticism's current form as a hobble to the radical dreams of the public intellectual, I see an opening, both at the level of disciplinary form and in the special case of literature. The problem, of course, is a matter of address.

Numerous sub-arguments in Professional Correctness support its thesis about form, most of which I must neglect today. Fish argues, for example, that a discipline will have a (non-trivial) political impact on our wider culture only if it finds a route to the formal councils of "those who inhabit the centres of power" (52). And he tends, as he often does in his powerful readings of interpretative communities, to think literary

studies one critic at a time -- though that individual critic is always deeply embedded in the institutions of scholarship, indeed, so deeply embedded that knowledge of his situation can do nothing to change it. The result is a "professional criticism" that bears an uncanny relation to the personal criticism it essentially eschews: the individual critic's experience of the profession (and of the effects of his or her work) is the whole story, precisely because his embeddedness makes his "subjectivity" a kind of "objectivity," a matter of public forms.

But if we think literary studies not as an anthology of individual interventions, but as a gargantuan, dispersed yet collective enterprise with no one at its head, it is easier to see its impact in shifting norms of public discourse, the unavoidable consequences of hundreds, even thousands of literary readings of Othello and Paradise Lost, Beloved and Pride and Prejudice. These consequences are not in themselves literary criticism, but they do result from literary critics speaking as literary critics. Similarly, if we view the mass media and cyberlife (along with the law and the legislature) as realms of public culture, we will easily detect the route of our collective efforts as teachers and critics to distant venues of political force, if not into the platforms of those who inhabit the institutional centers of explicitly political power. "We" are really not so few.

But leaving these disagreements aside, I want to focus on the fact that Fish says a number of things that seem true to me,

including one I have already repeated: literary studies has a significant kind of specificity, and literary intellectuals are not per se more qualified than anyone else to work as public intellectuals -- the "issues" are larger than our training. It is when he defines the nature and the consequences of this specificity that it seems to me he stacks the deck against the possibility of a kind of generalization of what I would call the semiprivate discourse of the literary intellectual/critic.

Fish defines that specificity as the "desire to interpret the poem -- to get it right" (66). The form he attributes to literary studies has to do with determining the meaning of individual texts: "the purpose of literary criticism is to determine what works of literature mean" (66, 25). Fish concedes that this definition is "somewhat dated" (25); but this only serves his purpose in that it demonstrates that "literariness is a historical rather than an essential matter" (25). This historicity is a history of forms -- or perhaps the history of their absence, in periods when "anything is literary interpretation," which are by necessity periods when "nothing is literary interpretation" (29).

The catch-22 is unavoidable: insofar as literary studies is a discipline distinct from others, with its own forms of practice and modes of address, it will be literary studies and not some other thing. And should history deliver us to the point where "anything is literary interpretation," literary interpretation as such will cease to exist. For now, literary interpretation exists to determine what works of literature

mean; this cannot simultaneously be the work of the public intellectual because the public will never care -- as the literary critic and his friends do -- about what literary works mean. This indifference cannot be overcome by well-meaning "addresses," however earnestly delivered.

But what if "literariness" as such is primarily a "somewhat dated" concept for literature studies? What if literary studies itself has already substantively reconfigured literariness as "signification," which would make those of us who were once literary critics semioticians, and would allow the readings that Fish finds stranded in Representations to claim larger audiences and urgencies by virtue of the fields of signification that they share? Of course, this might simply mean that "nothing is literary interpretation." But even without recourse to the notion of the sign, Fish's definition of literary studies as the disclosure of the meaning of literary texts is oddly out of step with his own argument. I have been arguing for a different understanding of disciplinary academic practice, (implicitly literary, though I have not pressed that point). The content of a revisionary reading of Middlemarch or Othello -- the claim that there is a new meaning to be found in Dorothea's ambition or Iago's jealousy -- may be of no interest outside the semiprivate "haven" of our own classrooms and journals. But this fact is less confining than Fish implies precisely because literary study proper has long been primarily concerned with the way meaning is produced, rather than with particular meanings. (It is perhaps not inappropriate, not merely personal, to say

that Stanley Fish was (literally) my teacher in this regard.) And the procedures literary studies and now semiotics have developed for disclosing textual strategies that produce meaning seem to be of interest well beyond the boundaries of our academic fields; certainly they are not limited to poems and novels. Indeed, I would propose that methods of reading -- beginning with the hermeneutics of suspicion -- might stand as a kind of example for the sort of as-yet-unthought practices that would come to one's attention in the discourse of the semi-private room -- and might very easily travel beyond it.

Fish naturally anticipates these points in arguing that "the preeminent question of literary interpretation -- what does this poem...mean? -- is properly answered...by a refusal directly to answer it. Something must always be left over" (34). But he repeatedly erases this refusal, assigning literary studies to the naming of content rather than the tracing of forms. One of the virtues of Professional Correctness is that it completely exposes this erasure in the end.

I have turned to the providentially published Professional Correctness for just this reason. If it is true that the semiprivate space of the classroom supports the forms of public language, impersonal intimacies and modes of attention turned toward the unfamiliar that I have suggested; if Fish's definition of literary studies is just "somewhat dated" enough so as to pose no real stumbling block to extending its disciplinary practices beyond the semiprivate room, and if we are indeed well-embarked on such a project, we must still

somehow imagine a way to reconstitute these practices in a fully open public sphere. If the seemingly inaccessible form is in fact a lure rather than a barrier, how is one to publicize that fact? My narrative instances were meant to suggest that the solution is a matter of address, where address is understood as a rhetoric and a structure of persuasion, and new objects, that is, unfamiliar objects. We thus turn our attention away from the problem of who can speak and toward other questions: question of who we think we are talking to -- and how we might draw them into the practice of the semiprivate room, what we might offer other than more of the evermore ordinary language of public discourse.

Stanley Fish has a suggestion, one that runs directly counter to the strictures that warn against the possibility of a public intervention by the intellectual as literary critic. In its closing pages, Professional Correctness becomes personal criticism. Faced with the task of justifying the existence of literary studies, Fish makes a "confession" (his word):

Literary interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward. I do it because I like the way I feel when I'm doing it. I like being brought up short by an effect I have experienced but do not yet understand analytically. I like trying to describe in flatly prosaic words the achievements of words that are anything but flat and prosaic. I like savouring the physical "taste" of language at the same time that I

work to lay bare its physics. I like uncovering the incredibly dense pyro-technics of a master artifice, not least because in praising the artifice I can claim a share in it. And when those pleasures have been (temporarily) exhausted, I like linking one moment in a poem to others and then to moment in other works, works by the same author or by his predecessor or contemporaries or successors. It doesn't finally matter which, so long as I can keep going (110).

Nothing is going on in this passage that Stanley Fish is unaware of -- the rhetorician he describes is the rhetorician he is. There are many things to say about it, and he makes several trenchant observations concerning the relations among the aesthetic, "self-delight," dominant modes of thought and "just plain enjoying."

I, however, want to end by depersonalizing this moment of aesthetic, intellectual and visceral pleasure. The dilemma of the literary critic as public intellectual emerges when individuals whose ideal profession is one that enables them to "keep going" to school for the rest of their lives go looking for an audience that graduated long ago. Our "address" must think of the pleasure as well as the judgment of our longed for addressee; indeed, the category of pleasure entails an orientation towards audience or addressee that situates the aesthetic at the heart of the possibility of the semiprivate, even as it engenders the possibility of critique. Public



intimacy is impossible without that pleasure, and we have yet really to test its limits. As Roland Barthes once asked, "what if knowledge were delicious?"

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Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> I have made only minimal editorial changes in my text and so retained the marks of its original presentation in Utrecht in February 2000, adding just a handful of endnotes. I realize that this strategy may produce a mild alienation affect for the reader who occupies a quite different context and necessarily meets the essay on another ground, but the resulting wrinkle in the essay's mode of address should serve to illustrate the larger point I am seeking to make about the way in which address forms readers and disciplinary spaces and thus constitutes a semiprivate room -- or rooms. I am very grateful to Monique Roelofs and Rob van Gerwen for inviting me to participate in their colloquium and for their readings of my work.

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ii The OED offers as its first example of the semiprivate a dramatic reference to the Black Madcap Violet, which speaks of a "semiprivate thoroughfare" (1876). "Semipublic" is an older term, appearing in the Edinburgh Review in 1804.

iii One very obvious place where some sense of this discipline (though certainly not a strictly academic one) is articulated is in Michel Foucault's The Birth of the Clinic. In the humanities, generally, this is not one of the mostly frequently cited of Foucault texts.

iv A segment of the teaching assistants at Brown University have recently voted on the question of affiliating with the Teamsters' Union for the purposes of collective bargaining. The ballots have been impounded while the university appeals the National Labor Relations Board decision that authorized the vote. The Modern Language Association newsletter of Winter 2001 reports the members' approval of a resolution supporting unionization for university employees. Nurses have long been unionized in certain U.S. hospitals, and physicians may not be far behind.

v Pierre Bourdieu's work on the concept of cultural capital would obviously be relevant here, though the limits of that concept, insofar as it retains the form of an analogy with economic capital, have become increasingly visible.

vi This remark appears in a discussion in the Cultural Studies Times 1/2 (Fall 1994), p. A11. Cited in Fish 117.

vii From this point of view, home-schooling is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms precisely because the intimacy of the private home is too intense, even in the coldest domestic scene, for the critical relation I want to privilege.

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viii See my "What's the Story? Feminist Theory, Narrative, Address,"  
differences 8:1 (1996): 1-30.

ix For an example of a range of views of these themes, see Who Can Speak?  
Authority and Critical Identity. Eds. Judith Roof and Robyn  
Wiegman. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1995.