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# TAKING CONVERSATION, DIALOGUE, AND THERAPY PUBLIC

MARI BOOR TONN

*This essay interrogates “conversation,” “dialogue,” and the language of therapy as framing devices for various public deliberative processes in the 1990s and since. Although “conversation” and “dialogue” are often trumpeted as a means to restore civility, egalitarianism, and community into the public sphere, this essay argues that these communication modes, coupled with the language of therapy in which they frequently have been couched, are problematic as paradigms for conflict and problem resolution on public issues. The essay argues, first, that a conversational model for deliberation may impede rather than further democratic goals, and, second, that conversation may function as a therapeutic substitute for policy formation necessary to remedy social ills.*

As the last century neared its close, the second-wave feminist slogan “The Personal Is Political” was turned on its head: the political became highly personalized. In this new politics of intimacy, candidates whistled on Oprah Winfrey, political journalists posed as psychotherapists, and President “I feel your pain” Clinton presided in the popular imagination as The Great Empathizer and the Commander in Grief. Emblematic of this conflation of the private and the public was the increasing casting of social controversies such as affirmative action, escalating crime, and welfare reform in the language of “conversation,” “dialogue,” and the therapeutic talk of healing, dysfunction, coping, self-esteem, and empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

Among academics, this cult of conversation has been championed most ardently by communitarian political theorists, civic journalists, cultural feminists, postmodernists, multiculturalists, family therapists, and a number of communication scholars concerned with identity, the public sphere, conflict and negotiation, and counseling. In many cases, the rationale for a conversational

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turn in the ways citizens conduct business, solve problems, and approach conflict is couched in a language interpolating “conversation” or “dialogue” with spirituality and therapy. Particularly visible is Deborah Tannen’s 1998 bestseller *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*, wherein she blames a culture of critique for “corroding our spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the earlier *The Conversation of Journalism* proposed supplanting the “disabling” monological approach to news reporting with a more inclusive dialogic paradigm overtly engaging citizens.<sup>3</sup> So, too, at the University of New Hampshire in the late 1990s, administrators and some faculty proposed replacing the existing Academic Senate, which they termed “dysfunctional,” with a nonvoting University Forum aimed to “advance functional conversation” and attendant community.<sup>4</sup> And the conflation of the conversational and therapeutic for approaching public controversies is made explicit in the Boston *Public Conversations Project*, premised on “[t]he idea that family *therapy* skills can be fruitfully applied in the realm of ‘public conversations’” on “divisive public issues” such as abortion.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous effort at replacing public debate with therapeutic dialogue was President Clinton’s *Conversation on Race*, launched in mid-1997. Controversial from its inception for its ideological bent, the initiative met further widespread criticism for its encounter-group approaches to racial stratification and strife, critiques echoing previously articulated concerns—my own among them<sup>6</sup>—that certain dangers lurk in employing private or social communication modes for public problem-solving.<sup>7</sup> Since then, others have joined in contesting the treating of public problems with narrative and psychological approaches, which—in the name of promoting civility, cooperation, personal empowerment, and socially constructed or idiosyncratic truths—actually work to contain dissent, locate systemic social problems solely within individual neurosis, and otherwise fortify hegemony.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly noteworthy is Michael Schudson’s challenge to the utopian equating of “conversation” with the “soul of democracy.” Schudson points to pivotal differences in the goals and architecture of conversational and democratic deliberative processes. To him, political (or democratic) conversation is a contradiction in terms. Political deliberation entails a clear instrumental purpose, ideally remaining ever mindful of its implications beyond an individual case. Marked by disagreement—even pain—democratic deliberation contains transparent prescribed procedures governing participation and decision making so as to protect the timid or otherwise weak. In such processes, written records chronicle the interactional journey toward resolution, and in the case of writing law especially, provide accessible justification for decisions rendered. In sharp contrast, conversation is often “small talk” exchanged among family, friends, or candidates for intimacy, unbridled by set agendas, and prone to egocentric rather than altruistic goals. Subject only to unstated

“rules” such as turn-taking and politeness, conversation tends to advantage the gregarious or articulate over the shy or slight of tongue.<sup>9</sup>

The events of 9/11, the onset of war with Afghanistan and Iraq, and the subsequent failure to locate Iraqi weapons of mass destruction have resuscitated some faith in debate, argument, warrant, and facts as crucial to the public sphere. Still, the romance with public conversation persists. As examples among communication scholars, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s 2001 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture treated what she termed “the rhetoric of conversation” as a means to “manage controversy” and empower non-dominant voices<sup>10</sup>; multiple essays in a 2002 special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* on deliberative democracy couch a deliberative democratic ideal in dialogic terms<sup>11</sup>; and the 2005 Southern States Communication Convention featured family therapist Sallyann Roth, founding member and trainer of the *Public Conversations Project*, as keynote speaker.<sup>12</sup> Representative of the dialogic turn in deliberative democracy scholarship is Gerard A. Hauser and Chantal Benoit-Barne’s critique of the traditional procedural, reasoning model of public problem solving: “A deliberative model of democracy . . . constru[es] democracy in terms of participation in the ongoing *conversation* about how we shall act and interact—our political relations” and “Civil society redirects our attention to the *language of social dialogue* on which our understanding of political interests and possibility rests.”<sup>13</sup> And on the political front, British Prime Minister Tony Blair—facing declining poll numbers and mounting criticism of his indifference to public opinion on issues ranging from the Iraq war to steep tuition hike proposals—launched *The Big Conversation* on November 28, 2003. Trumpeted as “as way of enriching the Labour Party’s policy making process by listening to the British public about their priorities,” the initiative includes an interactive government website and community meetings ostensibly designed to solicit citizens’ voices on public issues.<sup>14</sup> In their own way, each treatment of public conversation positions it as a democratic good, a mode that heals divisions and carves out spaces wherein ordinary voices can be heard.

In certain ways, Schudson’s initial reluctance to dismiss public conversation echoes my own early reservations, given the ideals of egalitarianism, empowerment, and mutual respect conversational advocates champion. Still, in the spirit of the dialectic ostensibly underlying dialogic premises, this essay argues that various negative consequences can result from transporting conversational and therapeutic paradigms into public problem solving. In what follows, I extend Schudson’s critique of a conversational model for democracy in two ways: First, whereas Schudson primarily offers a theoretical analysis, I interrogate public conversation as a praxis in a variety of venues, illustrating how public “conversation” and “dialogue” have been coopted to silence rather

than empower marginalized or dissenting voices. In practice, public conversation easily can emulate what feminist political scientist Jo Freeman termed “the tyranny of structurelessness” in her classic 1970 critique of consciousness-raising groups in the women’s liberation movement,<sup>15</sup> as well as the key traits Irving L. Janis ascribes to “groupthink.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, contrary to its promotion as a means to neutralize hierarchy and exclusion in the public sphere, public conversation can and has accomplished the reverse. When such moves are rendered transparent, public conversation and dialogue, I contend, risk increasing rather than diminishing political cynicism and alienation.

Second, whereas Schudson focuses largely on ways a conversational model for democracy may mute an individual’s voice in crafting a resolution on a given question at a given time, I draw upon insights of Dana L. Cloud and others to consider ways in which a therapeutic, conversational approach to public problems can stymie productive, collective action in two respects.<sup>17</sup> First, because conversation has no clearly defined goal, a public conversation may engender inertia as participants become mired in repeated airings of personal experiences without a mechanism to lend such expressions direction and closure. As Freeman aptly notes, although “[u]nstructured groups may be very effective in getting [people] to talk about their lives[,] they aren’t very good for getting things done. Unless their mode of operation changes, groups flounder at the point where people tire of ‘just talking.’”<sup>18</sup> Second, because the therapeutic bent of much public conversation locates social ills and remedies within individuals or dynamics of interpersonal relationships, public conversations and dialogues risk becoming *substitutes* for policy formation necessary to correct structural dimensions of social problems. In mimicking the emphasis on the individual in therapy, Cloud warns, the therapeutic rhetoric of “healing, consolation, and adaptation or adjustment” tends to “encourage citizens to perceive political issues, conflicts, and inequities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration.”<sup>19</sup>

### **SOCIAL CONVERSATION, THERAPY, AND PUBLIC DELIBERATION**

The allure of conversation or dialogue to remedy corrosive political alienation and disaffection undoubtedly lies in social talk as a primary site for locating a sense of self, creating and performing social identity, and developing and sustaining relationships.<sup>20</sup> On its face, conversation appears less threatening than traditional modes of public deliberation in several respects. First, conventional conceptions of expertise are significantly refigured in social conversations. In social settings, evidence often consists of lived experiences, hearsay, anecdotes, and personal feelings and opinions rather than, for example, statistics or studied conclusions from authorities. Moreover, because social conversations fre-

quently engage with the trivial, quotidian, or entertaining, persons with social or cultural knowledge and interpersonal skills—the talent, say, to tell a joke, discuss sports, or narrate travails of childbearing and rearing—may find themselves prized in a conversational arena. Indeed, conversational “expertise” often is equated with the gift for eliciting and validating personal experiences and opinions of others, even in the face of disagreement.

Additionally, whereas informal rules of conversation are familiar and accessible to most individuals, *formal* processes common to public deliberation may intimidate the uninitiated in parliamentary procedure. Although conversations are not without norms, such talk unfolds spontaneously through informal, unstated conventions of politeness linked to turn-taking; topic initiation, acceptance, and refusal; leave-taking; and so forth. Participants who violate conventions by interrupting, monopolizing talk, or even voicing racism or sexism, for example, seldom face the type of reprimand often encountered in formal deliberations.

In a related vein, then, the priority placed on forging and maintaining *relationships* in social conversations privileges avoiding conflict, even when conversational partners violate norms or make outlandish claims. Because the presumption of trust governs, Ronald Wardbaugh notes, “good behavior in conversations is *cooperative* behavior” and confrontation becomes anathema: challenging or “correcting others . . . directly questions an underlying assumption of conversation—that everybody is telling the truth.”<sup>21</sup> If friction threatens or erupts, parties skirt conflict through capitulation or compromise, silence, shifting topics, or polite physical escape.<sup>22</sup> Even some argumentation scholars agree that eluding discord trumps effective decision making when talk is “conversational.” Thomas A. Hollihan and Kevin T. Baaske, for example, counsel conversationalists to consider, “How might [a dispute] affect our relationship?” and “What good is securing a victory in an argument, if the person [I] have argued with . . . refuses to be a friend, or comes to . . . dislike [me]?”<sup>23</sup>

Therapeutic dialogue is likewise highly personal, although such talk directly engages with some conflict or struggle: addiction, familial strife, grief, eating disorders, low self-esteem, or other personal or relational issues. Therapeutic discourse—be it in encounter groups, 12-step programs, or individual counseling—travels a course of self-discovery aimed ultimately at *personal*, not *social*, reform. In therapeutic talk, the self monopolizes; the individual is central subject, provider of evidence, and solution, even if the “problem” entails external structures such as work-related stress or navigating racism, sexism, or homophobia.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, although the postmodern turn in therapy challenges the concept of an isolated self by emphasizing identity and knowledge as products of relational dialogue,<sup>25</sup> some postmodern dialogic therapists nonetheless regard external data that might contradict a client’s self-

reports as not germane. Sheila McNamee, for example, terms as “monologic” rather than her preferred “dialogic” the “modernist belief that we can objectively assess a person, a situation, or a relationship based on the notion that there are (or could be) some clear standards for evaluation. . . . The discourse of reason is so commonplace” that “[w]e simply *expect* others to be able to provide rational and objective evidence supporting their claims.”<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, certain conventional boundaries between public and private forms of communication and problem solving are artificial; deliberation over facts, values, and courses of action inhere in essentially all human decision making, whether it be over foreign policy or navigating daily life. So, too, some rhetorical scholars, myself included, have noted that some rhetors may mobilize oppressed or politically disaffected constituencies by transferring certain communication skills acquired in the private sphere into the public domain, especially if the rhetor’s aims entail transforming disempowered audiences into confident and skilled political actors.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Campbell’s treatment of the “rhetoric of conversation” in the talk of three historical female figures greatly mirrors the consciousness-raising that she earlier analyzed in the women’s liberation movement.<sup>28</sup>

Still, in important respects, received conceptions of democracy and public deliberation stand in sharp relief to social conversations and therapeutic dialogues. First, unlike the scrupulous avoidance of conflict in social conversations, democratic argument, as Kenneth Burke contends, is necessarily an admixture of “competition” and “cooperation.” As he argues, “Only if all reports were in and if there were no vital questions still unanswered, could a social body dispense with the assistance of a vocal *opposition* in the maturing of our chart as to what is going on, which social functions are helpful and which are harmful.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, contrary to the relational harmony privileged in social conversations, true civic deliberation fully recognizes, in Schudson’s words, that “Democracy is deeply uncomfortable.”<sup>30</sup> Public arguments are catalyzed by predicament or dispute, placing them at odds with the social convention prescribing divisive issues such as politics and religion as off-limits in “polite conversation.”

Rather than developing relationships of equality, the conversational privileging of affective criteria over reasonable problem solving in public deliberations can invite, as I have said, what Janis terms “groupthink.” Among the primary contributors to groupthink, explains Janis, is the goal of group cohesiveness. To maintain the god-term of “community,” self-appointed group mindguards paint dissenters as disloyal or uncooperative, limit future membership to like-minded individuals, and frame out-group opposition as too evil, ignorant, or unintelligent to warrant consideration. Similar to social conversations, in groupthink, parties concerned about appearing unduly

quarrelsome avoid conflict by denying or diluting their reservations about a proposed action, shifting or tabling discussion of thorny topics, or resorting to silence or physical absence. Such self-censorship, coupled with the faulty assumption that silence equals consent, results in the illusion of unanimity.<sup>31</sup> Although name-calling and ostracism can and do occur in traditional democratic processes, the prioritizing of group harmony and cohesiveness in conversational models grants freer license to scapegoat.

Second, democratic processes and public problem solving necessarily diverge from social conversations by articulating objectives at the outset; adhering to formal rules for participating in, managing, and achieving problem resolution; and documenting outcomes. Through the scrupulous recording of motions, discussions, amendments, and votes, the dynamics of such joint action are *rendered visible, accessible, and retrievable*, even to persons not party to the immediate deliberative process. “Democracies,” Schudson writes, “put great store in the power of writing to secure, verify, and make public. Democracies require public memories.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, contrary to the framing of conversation and dialogue as egalitarian public problem-solving models, they, in truth, can reify pecking orders by licensing group members with social authority to set agendas, steer and dominate discussion, and—absent the polling and recording of votes—interpret the “will” of the group. Moreover, such informal processes can reward those who speak the loudest, the longest, are the most articulate, or even the most recalcitrant. Freeman’s analysis of consciousness-raising groups is instructive:

At any small group meeting anyone with a sharp eye and an acute ear can tell who is influencing whom. The members of the friendship group will relate more to each other than to other people. They listen more attentively, and interrupt less; they repeat each other’s points and tend to give in amiably; they tend to ignore or grapple with the “outs” whose approval is not necessary for making a decision . . . They are nuances of interaction, not prewritten scripts. But they are discernible, and they do have their effect. Once one knows . . . whose approval is the stamp of acceptance, one knows who is running things.<sup>33</sup>

As a result, Freeman argues that purportedly “structureless” organizations are a “deceptive . . . smokescreen,” given that “‘structurelessness’ does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones . . . For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved . . . and to participate . . . the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can only happen if they are formalized.”<sup>34</sup> Schudson likewise argues that the inherently “threatening” nature of political deliberation demands procedures guaranteeing “equal access to the

floor, equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplifications, and widely apportioned speaking rights.”<sup>35</sup>

Third, whereas in social and therapeutic talk, personal experience, opinion, and individual well-being reign supreme, the force of “opinion” in a democracy demands allegiance both to reasonableness and to the larger collective good. Unlike certain postmodern dialogic therapists, responsible public deliberators view neither facts as inescapably elusive nor appeals to the rational uniformly suspect. Rather, democratic arguers apply rigorous standards for evidence and, above all, writes Schudson, subscribe to “norms of reasonableness.”<sup>36</sup> A key groupthink feature—uncritical, self-righteous faith in the group’s inherent morality and traditions—is nourished by privileging lived experiences and personal opinions, the primary content of social and therapeutic talk. As Donal Carbaugh points out, because the “self” becomes the “locus of conversational life,” conversationalists may “disprefer consensual truths, or standards of and for public judgment,” which they view to “unduly constrain ‘self.’”<sup>37</sup> Such an egocentric focus can enable members of *deliberative* bodies to discount crucial, formal types of external evidence that counters existing personal and group assumptions, resulting in what Lisa M. Gring-Pemble characterizes as forming public policies such as welfare reform “by anecdote.”<sup>38</sup>

Fourth, a communicative model that views public issues through a relational, personal, or therapeutic lens nourishes hegemony by inviting political inaction. Whereas the objective of conventional public argument is achieving an instrumental goal such as a verdict or legislation, the aim of social conversation generally stops with self-expression. As Schudson puts it, “Conversation has no end outside itself.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, modeling therapeutic paradigms that trumpet “talking cures” can discourage a search for political solutions to public problems by casting cathartic talk as sufficient remedy. As Campbell’s analysis of consciousness-raising groups in the women’s liberation movement points out, “[S]olutions must be structural, not merely personal, and analysis must move beyond personal experience and feeling . . . Unless such transcendence occurs, there is no persuasive campaign . . . [but] only the very limited realm of therapeutic, small group interaction.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, and related, a therapeutic framing of social problems threatens to locate the source and solution to such ills solely within the individual, the “self-help” on which much therapy rests. A postmodern therapeutic framing of conflicts as relational misunderstandings occasioned by a lack of dialogue not only assumes that familiarity inevitably breeds caring (rather than, say, irritation or contempt) but, more importantly, provides cover for ignoring the *structural* dimensions of social problems such as disproportionate black

poverty. If objective reality is unavoidably a fiction, as Sheila McNamee claims, all suffering can be dismissed as *psychological* rather than based in real, material circumstance, enabling defenders of the status quo to admonish citizens to “heal” themselves.

Below, various exemplars of public interactions and decision-making processes couched as “conversations” and “dialogues” expose the promotion of these private communication models as balm for the inequities, discord, and inertia of civic life as often more romantic than realistic, what Burke might term an “idealistic lie.”<sup>41</sup> As importantly, such cases illustrate his contention that ostensible “cures” for social problems often “take on the quality of the disease.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, rather than remedying exclusion, hierarchy, polarization, and inertia in civic life, the appropriation of conversation and dialogue into the public realm can foster and sustain such problems.

### CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUE AS EXCLUSIVE AND SILENCING

Despite the valorization of public conversation and dialogue as egalitarian, various public endeavors packaged as conversations and dialogues reveal a coopting of the terms as a means to consolidate rather than neutralize power, a move accompanied by groupthink traits. Particularly conspicuous is Clinton’s aforementioned *Conversation on Race*, an initiative purportedly designed to tackle vexing racial discord by engaging citizens of diverse opinions and racial backgrounds in open dialogue. In a speech inaugurating this “great and unprecedented conversation about race,” Clinton broached the enduring controversy over affirmative action by invoking purported conversational tenets of tolerance and inclusion:

To those who oppose affirmative action, I ask you to come up with an alternative. I would embrace it if I could find a better way. And to those of us who support it, I say we should continue to stand for it, [but] *we should reach out to those who disagree* or are uncertain and talk about the practical impact of these issues, and *we should never be unwilling to work with those who disagree with us.*<sup>43</sup>

Yet, from the outset, Clinton’s appointed seven-member advisory board on the *Conversation on Race* was noticeably insular, entirely composed, for example, of supporters of affirmative action.<sup>44</sup> So, too, commission chair John Hope Franklin summarily dismissed demands by Native Americans for representation on the board as well as the hope voiced by a fellow board member, Asian American Angela Oh, at the panel’s first meeting to move the racial dialogue beyond a “black-white paradigm.” Contending the board would become too cumbersome if it were more racially and ethnically diverse, the accomplished

black historian also offered a selective reading of the nation's racial past: "[T]his country cut its eyeteeth on racism with black-white relations. They didn't do it with Native Americans, they did it on black-white relations. . . . And we have to go by this."<sup>45</sup> Franklin likewise played mindguard by refusing even to hear testimony from opponents of affirmative action, invoking the conversational paradigm as justification. "I make a distinction between a dialogue and a debate," he said. "A debate almost by its very definition suggests controversy, wild and wide differences of opinion, and I must say, I'm not interested in that."<sup>46</sup> A senior Clinton administration official working with the panel defended its ideological homogeneity by saying, "The point of the committee is to help formulate White House policy. So why should we appoint people who disagree with the President? Why hear testimony from people who disagree with him?"<sup>47</sup> And reportedly doors were shut and whites kept away from a commission-sanctioned Dallas community meeting led by a Clinton cabinet member.<sup>48</sup>

Other groupthink traits also featured prominently in the *Conversation on Race*. Franklin, White House spokespersons, and the commission's senior advisor, Christopher Edley Jr., implicitly or overtly cast opposition as unduly quarrelsome, uncooperative, self-serving, polarizing, and even criminal, a discrediting tactic Janus argues stems from a group's self-righteousness. Franklin, for example, couched prospective dissent from outside as uncivil—"recrimination and sniping"—and warned that he expected anyone granted a hearing "not to scream that affirmative action is bad." White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart contended that critics charging Franklin with running a tightly scripted "monologue" rather than the promised dialogue "are playing partisan politics and trying to set up racially motivated wedge issues for [the] 1998 [election]."<sup>49</sup> Most vitriolic were charges by Edley, empowered to write the panel's final report, that Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom's book criticizing affirmative action constituted "a crime against humanity."<sup>50</sup>

The deleterious self-censorship common to groupthink also constrained the board leading the national dialogue from engaging in a real dialogue among themselves, despite Clinton's promise that the conversation would be probing and infused with disagreement. As board member Governor Thomas Kean said, "When you get a very sensitive issue like race, you don't want to appear as if you're fighting."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the board's commitment to a veneer of unanimity and camaraderie was evident in Oh's revisionist version of her initial televised exchange with Franklin—punctuated with repeated interruptions of each other—over the racial and ethnic scope of the *Conversation on Race*. "From the first day of the Board," she said in a later interview, "the media manufactured a conflict between John Hope and me . . . John Hope did not disagree with me at all."<sup>52</sup>

Even in its initial few days, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's *Big Conversation* likewise evinced groupthink traits emulating Clinton's *Conversation on Race*, including exclusiveness, top-level orchestration, moral certainty, and overt or implicit suggestions that dissenters, skeptics, or the populace at large were disloyal, roguish, woefully naïve, or simply unintelligent. "The big conversation," claimed the government's official webpage, "is about having a dialogue with the British people about the challenges facing our country in the future and the right priorities in solving them."<sup>53</sup> From the beginning, however, the initiative manifested an elitism that loyalists of conversational models critique as endemic in traditional deliberative processes. Launched amid great media fanfare in Newport, Wales—a country recognized by the Welsh Assembly as bilingual—and mere hours before Blair attended a required review of the Good Friday Irish Peace Accord's commitment to bilingualism in the United Kingdom, the official *Big Conversation* interactive website ironically operated solely in English. Inquiries into the monolingual "conversational" website by Welsh officials was greeted by a London official's dismissive comment, "Can't they speak English?" Using the groupthink tactic of reducing complaints from the excluded to cheap maneuvers of troublemakers, a Blair spokesperson termed petitions to allow Welsh speakers to participate in their indigenous tongue as "making mis-chief" during this major government effort at consulting the public.<sup>54</sup> Discrediting of *Big Conversation* skeptics likewise emerged in cabinet office minister Douglas Alexander's response to reporters' queries about how this grand new pledge to "listen" to the public squared with recent competing messages: Blair's "I've not got a reverse gear" speech just the previous month on unpopular issues—Iraq, proposed steep tuition hikes, and the UK's joining the European Union—and Home Secretary David Blunkett's framing of Labour's legislative agenda, unveiled but two days before the *Big Conversation's* premier, as "Not negotiable." Invoking a devil-angel dichotomy, Alexander painted media prying into such glaring contradictions as "everything that [is] wrong with some of the political journalism we see today," "a kind of gladiatorial contest rather than a conversation."<sup>55</sup>

Suspicions that the *Big Conversation* was a "Big Con" soon proved warranted. Within days, red-faced Labour officials were pressed to explain a media report detailing how "many of the [citizen] stories on the website were crafted by Labour officials who interviewed carefully selected individuals known to be broadly sympathetic to Labour—and then cut out any negative comments," including sharp criticisms over the Iraq invasion.<sup>56</sup> The week before, another newspaper promptly had discovered that the first "conversation" between Blair and "the people" in a blighted neighborhood was, in truth, a tightly scripted, invitation-only affair starring a host of Labour Party

members, bussed-in citizens, and handpicked media, but actually closed to local citizens and reporters.<sup>57</sup> Compounding such embarrassments was the accidental borrowing of the initiative's name from a nongovernment website: *TheBigConversation.org*. The blunder produced ironic results as citizen comments flooded the *wrong* website, "revealing a picture of public opinion that has not been censored or retouched . . ." <sup>58</sup> Implicit in such clumsy efforts at control—couched in the egalitarian language of "conversation" and "dialogue"—were assumptions that the public would neither notice nor interrogate, a groupthink trait of viewing outsiders as too weak or unintelligent to counter group power.

Exclusion cloaked in the velvet glove of civic conversation and democratic dialogue has not been peculiar to national political leaders. Bill Moyers's 1996 ten-week televised series *Genesis: The Living Conversation* exhibited similar properties but also revealed how purveyors of public dialogues often marry democracy to the spiritual or therapeutic. Echoing Clinton and Blair, Moyers introduced the first episode of his religious "conversation" by emphasizing the need for community, lamenting that "The Bible is often used as a wedge to drive us apart." Approaching religion "in a democratic spirit, with respect for the person whose opinion we disagree with," he said, might produce "some common ground."<sup>59</sup> Yet, contrary to his televised claim of having "invited people of different opinions to talk about these old stories,"<sup>60</sup> Moyers opted to exclude Christian fundamentalists—a group currently comprising 42 percent of the population<sup>61</sup>—from his religious conversation. Instead, he confined this ostensibly "democratic" dialogue to theologians, novelists, poets, psychologists, and academics with progressive religious perspectives parallel to his own. In rationalizing his select circle of like-minded conversationalists, Moyers cast the uninvited as demented Others. Christian fundamentalists, he contended, cling to an "alien ideology" of literal biblical interpretation, embracing beliefs that are "less a set of ideas than . . . a pathological distemper, a militant anger."<sup>62</sup> Other religious fundamentalists, though, fared far better in his *Moyers in Conversation* series, aired immediately following September 11, 2001. In those conversations designed to "promote a process of healing," Moyers addressed "the need to cultivate pluralistic dialogue in America, the most religiously diverse country in the world." To that end, he offered airtime to an American Afghanistan-born Muslim who, while not defending the massacre of American civilians, detailed the anger of Islamic fundamentalists toward the United States, which lay behind the atrocities.<sup>63</sup>

Albeit different ventures, these public conversations followed strikingly similar patterns. Promoted by their socially powerful architects as vehicles to forge a coveted sense of community out of social estrangement, all masqueraded as open forums welcoming diverse opinions even as they engaged in ide-

ological silencing on two levels. First, each employed an ideological litmus test to control access to their public dialogues. Second, these conversations, collectively considered, framed dissent in tragic terms: uncivil, irrational, deranged, pathological, and even criminal. But real democracy, Burke argues, requires a comic perspective wherein opponents are seen as merely mistaken rather than as evil, a worldview that acknowledges the “rowdiness” of public argument that Robert L. Ivie claims is endemic in any free society.<sup>64</sup>

Particularly insidious, though, is when “conversation” and “dialogue” are coopted to erode existing formal processes, including the ballot, a defining feature of democracy. Following years of protracted salary disputes, administrators at the University of New Hampshire in 1996 wedded the language of therapy and dialogue in their proposal to replace the traditional legislative Academic Faculty Senate, which they termed “dysfunctional,” with a “conversational” University Forum stripped of voting rights. “The object is to try to find a unifying force,” said the interim president, “a way to arrive at a better understanding of the issues, a greater freedom to speak, more emphasis on honest discussions, rather than [on] who has the votes.” The provost concurred that “shared governance” should not be the crucial concern, stressing that formal deliberative processes jeopardized relational priorities: “The forum as a non-legislative body . . . offers everybody a chance to talk. . . . It’s an opportunity for a real conversation. . . . Maybe it can rebuild trust.”<sup>65</sup>

In such talk, the most sacred guarantee of political voice in a democracy—the ballot—is pejoratively cast in the therapeutic language of “dysfunction,” while the effort to rescind that right is couched in the Orwellian language of increased “freedom to speak” and “honest discussions.” Here, the crucial competitive half of the competitive-cooperative dialectical equation is factored out in the ostensible pursuit of “unity” and “trust,” maneuvers typical of group-think. As Burke argues, genuine democracy “institutionaliz[es] the dialectic process, by setting up a political structure that gives full opportunity for the use of competition to a cooperative end.” Beyond “the individual’s freedom depend[ing] upon the traditions of the collectivity,” a mature society requires constant self-testing through challenges, rethinking, and revision. “[T]he dialectic process *absolutely must* be unimpeded,” Burke writes, “if society is to perfect its understanding of reality by the necessary method of give-and-take (yield and advance).”<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, deliberative bodies guided by interpersonal dynamics rather than formal procedures can foster fear of reprisals rather than “honest discussions” or “trust.” Illustrative is Freeman’s choice to use the pseudonym “Joreen” to critique early feminist consciousness-raising groups she likened to “sororities” in that “people listen to others because they like them and not because they say significant things.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, epidemic ostracism in those

informal groups is the theme of Freeman's later essay, "Trashing," wherein she describes ritualized character assassination thinly veiled as "therapy."<sup>68</sup>

Beyond centralizing rather than distributing power, conversational models can also rupture an existing sense of communal goodwill. One classroom experience illustrates. Several years ago, I co-taught a course in feminist rhetoric and film with a media colleague committed to collaborative learning, empowerment, and consensus, which she defined as unanimity. Part of her dialogic pedagogy entailed requiring the class to determine collectively the parameters for an impending essay exam. Almost immediately, civil disagreements arose over the most germane approach, which several students sought to resolve by proposing a vote. My colleague, however, promptly objected, claiming both that voting historically had been a patriarchal, elitist tool and that majority rule silenced minority perspectives. She likewise opposed my attempt to mediate the conflict, casting faculty intervention as a top-down encroachment. Consequently, given the refusal of a stubborn minority to surrender any ground, negotiations grew protracted, factions formed, and hostilities erupted. Deprived of means to reach formal resolution or even forge compromise, the weary majority eventually capitulated to the will of the inflexible few. In the end, the "consensus" reached was not only phantom but costly. Rather than equalizing power, the process had accomplished the reverse: concentrating and conceding control to certain individuals, those whose recalcitrance, ironically, most violated my colleague's dialogic ideal. Moreover, the class never fully recuperated from the animosity occasioned by what the majority rightly viewed as a tyranny of the few.

Still, the experience bore pedagogical fruit. At least for some, the incident triggered a more thoughtful examination of the premise of egalitarian empowerment underlying informal conflict resolution paradigms for public disagreements, models that traffic uncritically in terms such as community, dialogue, conversation, collaboration, and consensus. In so doing, they reappraised poststructuralist critiques that equate the competitive, reason-giving, and formal traditional model for civic deliberation with divisiveness and elitism. In their own way, some acquired an inchoate appreciation for what Schudson would later claim: "Democracy creates democratic conversation more than conversation naturally creates democracy."<sup>69</sup>

### **CONVERSATION AS IMPEDING POLITICAL ACTION**

Approaching public controversies through a conversational model informed by therapy also enables political inaction in two respects. First, an open-ended process lacking mechanisms for closure thwarts progress toward resolution. As Freeman writes of consciousness raising, an unstructured, informal discussion

“leaves people with no place to go and the lack of structure leaves them with no way of getting there.”<sup>70</sup> Second, the therapeutic impulse to emphasize the self as both problem and solution ignores structural impediments constraining individual agency. “Therapy,” Cloud argues, “offers consolation rather than compensation, individual adaptation rather than social change, and an experience of politics that is impoverished in its isolation from structural critique and collective action.” Public discourse emphasizing healing and coping, she claims, “locates blame and responsibility for solutions in the private sphere.”<sup>71</sup>

Clinton’s *Conversation on Race* not only exemplified the frequent wedding of public dialogue and therapeutic themes but also illustrated the failure of a conversation-as-counseling model to achieve meaningful social reform. In his speech inaugurating the initiative, Clinton said, “Basing our self-esteem on the ability to look down on others is not the American way . . . Honest dialogue will not be easy at first . . . Emotions may be rubbed raw, but we must begin.” Tempering his stated goal of “concrete solutions” was the caveat that “power cannot compel” racial “community,” which “can come only from the human spirit.”<sup>72</sup>

Following the president’s cue to self-disclose emotions, citizens chiefly aired personal experiences and perspectives during the various community dialogues. In keeping with their talk-show formats, the forums showcased what Orlando Patterson described as “performative ‘race’ talk,” “public speech acts” of denial, proclamation, defense, exhortation, and even apology, in short, performances of “self” that left little room for productive public argument.<sup>73</sup> Such personal evidence overshadowed the “facts” and “realities” Clinton also had promised to explore, including, for example, statistics on discrimination patterns in employment, lending, and criminal justice or expert testimony on cycles of dependency, poverty, illegitimacy, and violence.

Whereas Clinton had encouraged “honest dialogue” in the name of “responsibility” and “community,” Burke argues that “The Cathartic Principle” often produces the reverse. “[C]onfessional,” he writes, “contains in itself a kind of ‘personal *irresponsibility*,’ as we may even relieve ourselves of private burdens by befouling the public medium.” More to the point, “a thoroughly ‘confessional’ art may enact a kind of ‘individual salvation *at the expense of the group*,’” performing a “sinister function, from the standpoint of *overall-social necessities*.”<sup>74</sup> Frustrated observers of the racial dialogue—many of them African Americans—echoed Burke’s concerns. Patterson, for example, noted, “when a young Euro-American woman spent nearly five minutes of our ‘conversation’ in Martha’s Vineyard . . . publicly confessing her racial insensitivities, she was directly unburdening herself of all sorts of racial guilt feeling. There was nothing to argue about.”<sup>75</sup> *Boston Globe* columnist Derrick Z. Jackson invoked the game metaphor communication theorists often link to

skills in conversation,<sup>76</sup> voicing suspicion of a talking cure for racial ailments that included neither exhaustive racial data nor concrete goals. “The game,” wrote Jackson, “is to get ‘rid’ of responsibility for racism while doing nothing to solve it.”<sup>77</sup>

Contributing to the ineffectiveness of a therapeutic approach in redressing social problems is its common pairing with what Burke terms “incantatory” imagery, wherein rhetors invite persons to see themselves in an idealized form.<sup>78</sup> Comparing a current conflicted self against a future self individuals aspire to become is a therapeutic staple, a technique Clinton mimics in his speech on race. In one breath, he acknowledges persistent racial “discrimination and prejudice”; in another, he overtly invites audience members to picture themselves in saintly fashion: “Can we be one America respecting, even celebrating, our differences, but embracing even more what we have in common?”<sup>79</sup> But outside private therapy, this strategy rarely results in honest self-disclosure, especially regarding thorny issues such as race. Andrew Hacker argues that individuals seldom speak candidly about race in public; rather, they express an “idealized” self with ideas and feelings they desire or, more commonly, believe they should possess, a phenomenon evident even in anonymous polling.<sup>80</sup> The hazard of blending the confessional with the incantatory, Burke writes, is a “sentimental and hypocritical” false reassurance that society is on the proper course, rendering remedial action unnecessary.<sup>81</sup> This danger is compounded if the problem initially has been couched as essentially *attitudinal* rather than structural, as Clinton did: “We have torn down the barriers in our laws. Now we must break down the barriers in our lives, our minds and our hearts.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in commenting on the therapeutic bent of the *Conversation on Race*, William L. Taylor argues that the late Bayard Rustin’s reservations about the social-psychological approach to race were prescient: “Rustin said he could envision America being persuaded figuratively to lie down on the psychiatrist’s couch to examine their feelings about race. They would likely arise, he said, pronouncing themselves either free or purged of any bias. And nothing would have changed.”<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, identification intrinsic in narrative experiences is double-edged; while identification can neutralize domination by creating empathy, identification also can fortify hegemony. As Cornell West warns, the privileging of emotional responses to racism and racial self-identities over other data can contribute to “racial reasoning,” which blacks employ to their peril. To illustrate, he points to the failure of black leadership to challenge the *qualifications* by typical measures of black Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, opting instead to submit to deceptive racial solidarity built upon premises of “black authenticity.”<sup>84</sup> Because the problems plaguing contemporary black America, West writes, result from a complex amalgam of structural

and behavioral factors,<sup>85</sup> weaving solutions demands analysis of data beyond subjective personal narratives and performances of self-identity.

*The Conversation on Race* visibly demonstrates the inertia endemic in a discursive model lacking direction and mechanisms for closure. Five months into the racial dialogue, White House aides conceded no consensus had emerged even on fundamental goals: whether the initiative should formulate race-related policy or merely explore racial attitudes.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Clinton himself expressed weariness over the failure in public meetings to move beyond the repetitive airing of personal opinion on issues such as affirmative action,<sup>87</sup> concurring with critics that “we need structure for the discussion . . . so we can actually get something done.”<sup>88</sup> Months more of racial conversation, however, produced few substantive results.

The University of New Hampshire’s extended dialogue over the proposed conversational forum engendered similar fatigue and inaction. Arguments forwarded by both camps centered on pivotal differences between “debate” and “conversation,” problem-solving tasks and relational aims, and formal and informal modes of gauging opinions. Ironically, more than one lengthy “conversation” over the conversational proposal produced no action, leading one exhausted participant to observe, “This [process] goes to the heart of my frustration with ever making this [conversational Forum] viable.”<sup>89</sup> As Burke maintains, while some symbolic forms contain “a ‘way in,’ ‘way through,’ and ‘way out,’” others “*lead us in and leave us there.*”<sup>90</sup>

Finally, a key weakness in a dialogic model for treating systemic social problems is its reliance on a crucial non-sequitur: increased intimacy will spawn an ethic of care, which, in turn, will produce an ethic of justice.<sup>91</sup> But at the University of New Hampshire, the mistrust and estrangement that a “real conversation” purportedly would rectify had resulted, not from a lack of familiarity among principals, but from *structural* concerns, including the widening gap between faculty and administrative salaries, shrinking resources, and maneuvers to erode faculty governance. Likewise, the personal proximity between white families and their black slaves or servants reveals that intimacy means little in the face of structural inequities, nor does it necessarily induce removal of injustices. Illustrative is the recent revelation that South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond had fathered a daughter by his family’s black domestic in 1925, an intimacy that failed to alter the 1948 Dixiecrat presidential candidate’s stance on segregation.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, although the lessening of hostility over abortion reported by some participants in the *Public Conversations Project* may have some merit, project leaders themselves concede their “vision for a ‘conflict resolution’ process for a complex issue [such as abortion] is not necessarily resolution.”<sup>93</sup> As such, the utility of such dialogues on public policies affecting the *material* lives of women seeking legal reproductive choices is sorely limited. As

Burke notes when drawing crucial distinctions between psychological and material spheres, “[T]o some degree, solution of conflict must always be done purely in the symbolic realm (by ‘transcendence’) if it is to be done at all.” Still, a “*symbolic drama*,” he writes, differs from “*the drama of living . . . and [its] real obstacles . . .* Hence, at times [people] try to solve symbolically kinds of conflict that can and should be solved by material means.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, as Clinton rightly said in launching his *Conversation on Race*, political or military power cannot compel caring. Yet political power *can* command *justice* as evidenced in the nation’s record of dismantling racial and gender barriers through judicial and legislative means.

To be sure, an ethic of care and an ethic of justice need not be mutually exclusive.<sup>95</sup> But precisely because therapeutic and conversational approaches are unable to address structural problems, “conversation” and “dialogue” should be approached with healthy suspicion when championed by those enjoying significant power. As Freeman astutely notes, “[S]tructurelessness becomes a way of masking power . . . and it is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful.”<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In some cases, informal political talk akin to conversations may foster public participation, mitigate cynicism and alienation, and nourish public deliberation. For example, an impressive number of citizens in focus groups following the 1992 presidential debates reported renewed respect for the political process and increased tolerance for competing perspectives. To the surprise of many, the discussions kindled their yearning for what John Dewey might describe as a “creative democracy”: political engagement generated by “civic conversation.”<sup>97</sup> Still, their appraisals of the candidates and the debate process contained an acute appreciation of key properties of conventional public deliberation: the ability of candidates to pinpoint structural problems and articulate remedies, to supply sufficient data and apply sound reasoning, to tackle risky issues for the collective good, and to refrain from exploiting personal issues to credential themselves or discredit an opponent. Participants likewise expressed a keen sensitivity to formal rules guaranteeing some modicum of equal opportunity for participation by the candidates.<sup>98</sup> But although many citizens found their talk with others enriching, these pseudo-dialogues were no *substitute* for their democratic birthright: the vote. Doubtless no amount of conversation, its alleged recuperative powers notwithstanding, would blunt outrage provoked by unilateral disenfranchisement in the name of furthering “dialogue.”

So, too, certain aspects of a dialogic approach to public conflicts may help bridge entrenched differences, particularly if facilitated by experts skilled in

mediation techniques. As illustration, Senator George Mitchell himself characterized his brokering of the 1998 historic peace accord in Northern Ireland as a “democratic dialogue,” given the unprecedented inclusion of representatives from all warring sides.<sup>99</sup> Yet in crucial respects, the process Mitchell oversaw enacted the type of deliberative model Hauser and Benoit-Barne would replace with civic “conversation.” The conventional “procedural view” of democracy, they argue, “is prone to reducing deliberation to exchanges among an epistemic elite credentialed to engage in critical rational deliberation. Moreover, it rules out the impact of attachments, which motivate citizens to become involved in political issues.”<sup>100</sup> Yet, from the outset, the 22-month-long negotiation leading to the treaty was *highly procedural*. A fixed set of ground rules for managing participation, including apportioned speaking rights, guided the difficult discussions as did six basic principles demanding that parties eschew what Hauser and Benoit-Barne might term their “attachments” to violence. A firm deadline for resolution was implemented and observed. And, most significantly, the final 69-page document required ratification through referendum by Irish citizens.<sup>101</sup>

This widespread recognition that access to public deliberative processes and the ballot is a baseline of any genuine democracy points to the most curious irony of the conversation movement: portions of its constituency. Numbering among the most fervid dialogic loyalists have been some feminists and multiculturalists who represent groups historically denied both the right to speak in public and the ballot. Oddly, some feminists who championed the slogan “The Personal Is Political” to emphasize ways relational power can oppress tend to ignore similar dangers lurking in the appropriation of conversation and dialogue in public deliberation. Yet the conversational model’s emphasis on empowerment through intimacy can duplicate the power networks that traditionally excluded females and nonwhites and gave rise to numerous, sometimes necessarily uncivil, demands for democratic inclusion. Formalized participation structures in deliberative processes obviously cannot ensure the elimination of relational power blocs, but, as Freeman pointed out, the absence of formal rules leaves relational power unchecked and potentially capricious. Moreover, the privileging of the self, personal experiences, and individual perspectives of reality intrinsic in the conversational paradigm mirrors justifications once used by dominant groups who used their own lives, beliefs, and interests as templates for hegemonic social premises to oppress women, the lower class, and people of color. Paradigms infused with the therapeutic language of emotional healing and coping likewise flirt with the type of psychological diagnoses once ascribed to disaffected women. But as Betty Friedan’s landmark 1963 *The Feminist Mystique* argued, the cure for female alienation was neither tranquilizers nor attitude adjustments fostered through psychotherapy but, rather, unrestricted opportunities.<sup>102</sup>

The price exacted by promoting approaches to complex public issues—models that cast conventional deliberative processes, including the marshaling of evidence beyond individual subjectivity, as “elitist” or “monologic”—can be steep. Consider comments of an aide to President George W. Bush made before reports concluding Iraq harbored no weapons of mass destruction, the primary justification for a U.S.-led war costing thousands of lives. Investigative reporters and other persons sleuthing for hard facts, he claimed, operate “in what we call the reality-based community.” Such people “believe that solutions emerge from [the] judicious study of discernible reality.” Then baldly flexing the muscle afforded by increasingly popular social-constructionist and poststructuralist models for conflict resolution, he added: “That’s not the way the world really works anymore . . . We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities.”<sup>103</sup>

The recent fascination with public conversation and dialogue most likely is a product of frustration with the tone of much public, political discourse. Such concerns are neither new nor completely without merit. Yet, as Burke insightfully pointed out nearly six decades ago, “A perennial embarrassment in liberal apologetics has arisen from its ‘surgical’ proclivity: its attempt to outlaw a malfunction by outlawing the function.” The attempt to eliminate flaws in a process by eliminating the entire process, he writes, “is like trying to eliminate heart disease by eliminating hearts.”<sup>104</sup> Because public argument and deliberative processes are the “heart” of true democracy, supplanting those models with social and therapeutic conversation and dialogue jeopardizes the very pulse and lifeblood of democracy itself.

## NOTES

1. See, as illustrations of “conversation” invoked in public controversies, William J. Clinton, National Press Conference, C-Span, March 2, 1995; Ray Suarez, Talk of the Nation, National Public Radio, December 13, 1994; Lani Guanier, speech before the National Press Club, C-Span, December 6, 1994; Fenton Johnson, “Wedded to an Illusion: Do Gays and Lesbians Really Want the Right to Marry?” *Harper’s*, November 1996, 43; “Public Conversations,” *Campus Journal*, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, February 15, 1996, 4; Laura Chasin et al., “The Citizen Clinician: The Family Therapist in the Public Forum,” *AFTA Newsletter* 46 (1991): 36–42.
2. Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Ballentine, 1998), 82.
3. *Communications* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996/97), 19; Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne, and George M. Killenberg, *The Conversation of Journalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).
4. “Academic Senate Adjourns without a Vote,” *Campus Journal*, University of New Hampshire, February 15, 1996, 1–2.

5. Sallyann Roth et al., "Creating Conditions for Dialogue on the Abortion Issue: A Report from the Public Conversations Project," [http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/resources/resource\\_detail.asp?ref\\_id=90](http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/resources/resource_detail.asp?ref_id=90).
6. Mari Boor Tonn, "Public Discourse as 'Conversation': Implications of a Metaphor on Deliberation and Democracy," paper presented at National Communication Association Annual Convention, San Diego, November 1996; Mari Boor Tonn, "Taking 'Conversation' Public: The Tyrannical and Therapeutic Threat to Democratic Deliberative Processes," paper presented at Metaphor and Politics Symposium at International Society for Political Psychology, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 1999.
7. A decade earlier, for example, Robert C. Rowland warned that "narrative modes of argument are not necessarily democratic . . . Stories may be used to increase public participation, but they also may be used to prevent such participation or justify the oppression of a minority." More recently, Lisa M. Gring-Pemle's analysis of anecdotal evidence in welfare reform hearings and debates contended "that some narrative forms facilitate elite discourse, discourage the inclusion of alternative public views, and delegitimize particular public voices." Robert C. Rowland, "Narrative: Mode of Discourse or Paradigm?" *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 272–73; Lisa M. Gring-Pemle, "Are We Going to Now Govern by Anecdote?: Rhetorical Constructions of Welfare Recipients in Congressional Hearings, Debate, and Legislation, 1992–1996," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 341.
8. For examples of discussions of why a healthy democracy must remain "rowdy" and "agonistic," see Robert L. Ivie, "Democratic Deliberation in a Rhetorical Republic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 491–505; Robert L. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (2002): 277–85; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000). For discussion of therapeutic appeals as a means to mask power and sustain hegemony, see Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: The Rhetoric of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).
9. Michael Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 14 (1997): 297–309.
10. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Three Tall Women: Radical Challenges to Criticism, Pedagogy, and Theory*, Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture, National Communication Association Annual Convention, November 2001 (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), 4–5. Campbell concedes that the "the term [conversation] creates some problems," although she does not articulate their nature.
11. William Keith, ed., "Special Issue on Deliberative Democracy," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (2002).
12. <http://www.scca.net/convention/2005/keynote.htm>.
13. Gerard A. Hauser and Chantal Benoit-Barne, "Reflections on Rhetoric, Deliberative Democracy, Civil Society, and Trust," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (2002): 265, 267. Emphasis added.
14. To access the interactive website and to find a transcript of Blair's speech inaugurating the project, go to <http://bigconversation.org.uk>.
15. This 1970 essay has been reprinted in various forms, including Jo Freeman [aka "Joreen"], "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Ann Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 283–99, and <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45/112.html>. For purposes of this essay, however, I have opted to use the

version Jo Freeman herself includes on her website, <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

16. In brief, the eight symptoms of groupthink are an illusion of invulnerability, belief in the inherent group morality, rationalization of group views, stereotyping of out-groups, self-censorship, direct pressure on dissenters, self-appointed mindguards, and the illusion of unanimity. For discussion of these symptoms, see Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 197–204.
17. Dana L. Cloud, “Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in ‘Oprah’ Winfrey’s Rags-to-Riches Biography,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 115–37; and Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics*. For analyses of similar therapeutic approaches to public issues such as racial or sexual oppression, see also Janice Peck, “Talk About Racism: Framing a Popular Discourse of Race on *Oprah Winfrey*,” *Cultural Critique*, 1994, 89–125; Bonnie J. Dow, “*Ellen*, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18 (2001): 123–40.
18. Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.”
19. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics*, 3.
20. For an overview of various properties of social conversations, see Donal Carbaugh, “‘Soul’ and ‘Self’: Soviet and American Cultures in Conversation,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 182–200; Robert Nofsinger, *Everyday Conversation* (Newbury Park: CA: Sage, 1991); Ronald Wardbaugh, *How Conversation Works* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Sally Jackson and Scott Jacobs, “Structure of Conversational Argument: Pragmatic Bases for the Enthymeme,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 251–65; Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
21. Wardbaugh, *How Conversation Works*, 63, 152. Emphasis added.
22. William L. Benoit and Pamela J. Benoit, “Everyday Argument Practices of Naive Social Actors,” in *Argument and Critical Practices*, ed. Joseph W. Wenzel (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1987).
23. Thomas A. Hollihan and Kevin T. Baaske, *Arguments and Arguing: The Products and Processes of Human Decision Making* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 226.
24. See Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics*, 1–21.
25. Sheila McNamee, “Research as Relationally Situated Activity: Ethical Implications,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 6 (1994): 72.
26. Sheila McNamee, “Therapy and Identity Construction in a Postmodern World,” in *Constructing Self in a Mediated World*, ed. D. Grodin and T. Lindlof (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 145.
27. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59 (1973): 73–86; Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, “‘Feminine Style’ and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 286–302; Mari Boor Tonn, “Militant Motherhood: Labor’s Mary Harris ‘Mother’ Jones,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 1–21; Mari Boor Tonn and Mark S. Kuhn, “Co-constructed Oratory: Speaker-Audience Interaction in the Labor Union Rhetoric of Mary Harris ‘Mother’ Jones,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 313–30.
28. Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation.”
29. Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. rev. (1941; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 444. Emphasis added.

30. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 304.
31. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 197–204.
32. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 305.
33. Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness."
34. Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness."
35. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 307.
36. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 302.
37. Carbaugh, "'Soul' and 'Self,'" 190, 196.
38. Gring-Pemble, "'Are We Going to Govern by Anecdote?'" 341.
39. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 299.
40. Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation," 81, 84.
41. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 118.
42. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 76.
43. William J. Clinton, "June 14, 1997, Remarks by the President at the University of California at San Diego Commencement," <http://civic.net/civic.net/civic-values.archive/199706/msg00085.html>. Emphasis added.
44. James Carney, "Why Talk Is Not Cheap," *Time*, December 22, 1997, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/12/15/time/carney.html>.
45. Evan Gahr, "Racial Monologue," *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/130ct97/gahr101397.html>; Frank Wu, "Not Just Black and White," *Asian Week*, February 5–11, 1998, <http://www.asianweek.com.020598/coverstory.html>.
46. Ann Scales, "Panel Chief Says He Won't Debate Affirmative Action," *Boston Globe*, November 26, 1997, 1, A14.
47. Franklin Foer, "The Sound of One Hand Talking," *Slate*, November 28, 1997, <http://www.slate.msn.com/id/2480/>.
48. Carney, "Why Talk Is Not Cheap."
49. Scales, "Panel Chief Says He Won't Debate Affirmative Action," 1, A14.
50. Foer, "The Sound of One Hand Talking."
51. Gail Russell Chaddock, "Will 'Year of Dialogue' Matter?" *Christian Science Monitor*, June 12, 1998, <http://www.search.sc.monitor.com/durable/1998/06/12/pls4.htm>.
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53. <http://www.bigconversation.org.uk>.
54. See "Blair Launches Initiative," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/wales/3247994.stm>; Eryl Crump, "Talk to Me—But Not in Welsh," [http://www.icnorthwales.icenetowork.co.uk/news/regionalnews/content\\_objectid=1389397\\_method.html?](http://www.icnorthwales.icenetowork.co.uk/news/regionalnews/content_objectid=1389397_method.html?)
55. Gavin Esler interview with Douglas Alexander, "The Big Conversation," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/3252826.stm>.
56. Susan Bisset and Chris Hastings, "Revealed: Labour's Big Conversation Is a Fix," *Telegraph*, December 8, 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml+/news/2003/11/30/ncon30.xml&sSheet=/p...>

57. Noteworthy is that the handpicked reporters attending the event were from the *Guardian*, the event's unofficial host, which wrote a glowing account of Blair's efforts at reconnecting with the people. For comparisons between the *Guardian's* version and the *Evening Post*, which uncovered the event's exclusivity and orchestration, see Jonathan Freedland, "Tea and Empathy: Let the Conversation Begin," *Guardian*, November 29, 2003, <http://society.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4808272-108586,00.html>; and Ian Onions, "Ordinary Folk Miss Out on Chance to Talk to PM," *Evening Post*, November 28, 2003, <http://www.thisisbristol.co.uk/display/Node.jsp?nodeId=86419&command=displayContent>.
58. "The Big Conversation: Crossed Wires Accidentally Start Genuine Big Conversation as Thousands Swamp Independent Non-Government Website," <http://www.wiredsussex.com/news/0312/bigconversation.asp>. Emphasis added.
59. Bill Moyers, *Genesis: The Living Conversation*, episode 1, October 21, 1996, Public Broadcasting System.
60. Bill Moyers, *Genesis: The Living Conversation*, episode 2, October 27, 1996, Public Broadcasting System.
61. Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, 51.
62. "Baptist Bill," *Portsmouth (NH) Herald*, November 15, 1996; David Van Biema, "Genesis Reconsidered," *Time*, October 26, 1966, 72.
63. For descriptions and transcripts of *11th of September, Moyers in Conversation*, see [http://www.viewingrace.org/browse\\_title.php?film-id=390&curr\\_letter=\\*](http://www.viewingrace.org/browse_title.php?film-id=390&curr_letter=*) and <http://www.pbs.org/americasponds/moyers918.html>.
64. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics," 278–80.
65. "Academic Senate Adjourns Without a Vote," *Campus Journal*, University of New Hampshire, February 29, 1996, 1, 4. The administration's moves to disenfranchise faculty were supported by a small band of well-positioned faculty. And certain departments embracing a conversational mode of decision making cast faculty's insisting upon formal procedures, including the ballot, as lacking collegiality.
66. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 444, 446.
67. Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness."
68. Freeman's essay was first published in *Ms.* magazine in April 1976. For the purposes of this essay, I use the version available on Freeman's website: Joreen, "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood," <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm>.
69. Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 306.
70. Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness."
71. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics*, 3–4.
72. Clinton, "June 14, 1997, Remarks by the President"
73. Orlando Patterson, "We've Already Been Talking," *Boston Globe*, January 5, 1998, A13.
74. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 116–17.
75. Patterson, "We've Already Been Talking," A13.
76. Wardbaugh, *How Conversation Works*, 38; Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 301.
77. Derrick Z. Jackson, "Will National Discussion on Race Be All Bark or Some Bite, Too?" *Boston Globe*, December 3, 1997, A25.

78. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 116–17.
79. Clinton, “June 14, 1997, Remarks of the President.”
80. Quoted in Felicia R. Lee, “The Honest Dialogue That Is Neither,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1997, 5.
81. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 118.
82. Clinton, “June 14, 1997, Remarks of the President.”
83. William L. Taylor, “Take Another Year,” Advice to the Advisory Board: Part II, Poverty and Race Research Action Council, [www.prrac.org/topics/race/advicepartII.htm#pres](http://www.prrac.org/topics/race/advicepartII.htm#pres).
84. Cornell West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 23–32.
85. West, *Race Matters*, 11–20.
86. Steven A. Holmes and James Bennett, “Presidential Panel on Race Recovers from Slow Start,” January 14, 1998, <http://www.uoregon.edu/~jbloom/race/0114clin.htm>.
87. Steven A. Holmes, “Thinking About Race with a One-Track Mind,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1997, section 4, 12.
88. “Full Text of White House Meeting,” December 19, 1997.
89. “Academic Senate Adjourns Without a Vote,” 4.
90. Here Burke is describing the difference between the symphonic form and the tone poem. *Philosophy in Literary Form*, 119.
91. For a discussion of differences between an “ethic of care” and an “ethic of justice,” see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
92. See, for example, Darryl Fears, “At Last I Feel Completely Free,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2003, A2.
93. Roth et al., “Creating Conditions for Dialogue on the Abortion Issue.”
94. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 312.
95. See Tonn, “Militant Motherhood”; and Grace Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice: Feminism and the Ethic of Care* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996).
96. Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.”
97. Diana B. Carlin and Mitchell S. McKinney, *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954).
98. Carlin and McKinney, *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus*.
99. Elisabeth Farnsworth and George Mitchell, “Peace Prevails,” *Online Newshour*, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/jan-june98/ireland\\_4-10.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/jan-june98/ireland_4-10.html).
100. Hauser and Benoit-Barne, “Reflections on Rhetoric, Deliberative Democracy, Civil Society, and Trust,” 265.
101. Farnsworth and Mitchell, “Peace Prevails,” *Online Newshour*; Elisabeth Farnsworth and George Mitchell, *Online Newshour*, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/august97/mitchell\\_8-4.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/august97/mitchell_8-4.html); Geoffrey Corry, “George Mitchell: Role Model for Mediation,” <http://www.mediate.com/articles/corry.cfm>; <http://www.mediate.com/articles/corry.cfm>. The Ireland treaty process vividly illustrates Schudson’s quarrel with John Dewey’s framing of the relationship between talk and print; whereas Dewey viewed the printed word as a precursor to public conversation, Schudson contends that “face-to-face conversation leads up to something written rather than print culminating in something conversational. The con-

summation of democratic talk may be a signed petition, a posted notice, a written law, a written judicial opinion, a written executive order. Democracies put great store in the power of writing to secure, verify, and make public." Schudson, "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," 305. Beyond Mitchell's remarks cited in the text, I have heard Mitchell speak repeatedly since then of the excruciating precision used to apportion speaking rights equitably and follow procedures given the degree of hostilities involved.

102. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).
103. Suskind, "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush," 63–64.
104. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 446.