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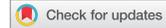
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## New normals, from talk to gesture

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### ABSTRACT

Despite all the news coverage and online chatter about the repercussions of COVID-19, the pandemic has underscored the material limitations of public discourse to redress a health crisis of such magnitude. No amount of talk or deliberation will cure a virus of this scale. If part of the work of cultural studies is to identify the ways a given conjuncture shapes and delimits the felt experience of everyday life, then one charge of our work now is to examine the emergence of those ‘new normals’ that the novel coronavirus has spawned. One of these emergent new configurations of the everyday has been the spread of concerned gestures as a counterpoint to the usual *talk talk* of communicative capitalism. Gestures of concern, from chalking sidewalks to applauding essential workers, build the affective commonwealths that cultivate solidarity in times of protracted precarity. Exceeding Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘structures of feeling,’ affective commonwealths are a resource built from ordinary people whose gestural rituals enact the sorts of worlds that talk alone just can’t bring about. This essay makes a case for the importance of such gestures and suggests they deserve further attention in and beyond the context of the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS** Gestures; communicative capitalism; affect; structures of feeling; democracy

The pandemic has underscored the material limitations of public discourse to redress a health crisis of such magnitude. Unfortunately, there’s no ‘talking cure’ for COVID-19. More than ever, we need the guidance of epidemiologists and other scientists whose expertise can teach us best-practices for safe collective action. Yet, in a time when digital media have, at least in specific contexts, sought to democratize communicative participation in public affairs, the evidential knowledge of experts is often held as coeval with the conviction of anyone’s bald opinion. Under such circumstances, public discourse comes to be seen as ever more essential to democracy at the same time that its shortcomings become ever harder to ignore. Though this problem now exists in all liberal democracies – and has long been evident in aspiring or threatened ones, wherever citizens rely on communication to express their will to one another but hit obstacles when they express it to those in power –

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America's valorization of such communication makes it particularly suited for scrutiny.

American democracy, like many others, has generally faced the challenge of living interdependently among others with an insistence that communicative participation in public life is what helps societies to form the public opinions that, in principle, serve to guide state action according to the will of the people. Regardless of where you stand on whether that principle has lost its shine in the age of corporate governance, executive orders, and above-the-law leadership, even its optimal version would be insufficient to deal with the catastrophe of a public health crisis as massive as the one caused by the novel coronavirus. The idea that citizens should deliberate about issues of collective import, and that governments should codify whatever 'public opinion' determines, may sound like representative democracy at its boilerplate best if we're talking about adding new parking meters downtown. During a pandemic, though, when even minor administrative delays or failures in response can lead, as they did in America, to at least 130,000 unnecessary deaths by October 2020 alone (Redlener et al. 2020), the limitations of citizen talk to guide state actions is difficult to deny.

In all cultures and societies, regardless of their governing system, decisions with wide ramifications sometimes need to be made quickly, and ideally made using the insight of those whose expertise typically exceeds even the informed opinions of politicians and invested citizens. One of the great challenges of democracy is to vouchsafe that decisions of urgent consequence can be made swiftly from the top while also maintaining the 'checks and balances' needed to ensure that such privileges will not be misguided, abused, or follow a slippery slope toward authoritarianism. In light of this challenge, political theorists and scholars of social change have been noticing the shortcomings of (American) democracy for some time, whatever name its recent iteration might take: neoliberalism (Dean 2009), late liberalism (Povinelli 2011, p. 25-42), technocapitalism (Suarez-Villa 2009), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), or something else. One theme of such critiques is a strident concern that the role of discourse in democracy has been supplanted by the machinations of power and corporate interest. What Jodi Dean (2009, p. 17-18) calls the democratic fantasy of 'communicative capitalism' captures the fundamental problem with its supposition that the mantle of democracy now 'fetishizes speech, opinion, and participation' to such a degree that 'conviction is indistinguishable from knowledge and certainty triumphs over evidence.'

Though Dean formulated these ideas in 2009, during the aftermath of the Bush-Gore election fiasco, the trends she identified then are all too familiar now. Consider the tension that played out publicly during the pandemic's American onset between President Donald Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's chief infectious disease expert, over the appropriate public

health response. As Trump asserted with no basis beyond his own certainty that face masks weren't needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, that hydroxychloroquine could effectively treat the virus, even that injecting household bleach might do the trick, Fauci's more modestly articulated yet genuine expertise became positioned as just another communicative counterpoint to the President's own: an opinion, merely, and perhaps a biased one at that. Such is the quintessential move of communicative capitalism: to render complexity vulnerable to conviction, and to make conspiracy a legitimate currency.

Pandemics aside, the United States need not have reached this point. Nearly a century earlier, two prominent American public figures of their own time – Walter Lippman and John Dewey – clashed over their own not-unrelated concerns, in their case whether or not the complexity of modern, technological life made it impossible anymore for ordinary citizens to have the competence needed to decide about issues with wide societal ramifications. The question for Lippman and Dewey was whether ordinary citizens could viably (or should axiomatically) be involved in the public discussion of how to redress human actions that impact them despite their having no direct impact on those actions themselves.<sup>1</sup> For Dewey (1927), the answer was affirmative: only by participating in the discussion of shared issues would the promise of democracy be achieved for its citizens. For Lippman (1925), the answer was no: governments shouldn't listen to the opinions of inexpert citizens to guide important decisions better left for those with the competence to chart informed courses forward.

Though history seems to have favored Dewey for now, the rise of digital culture as an essentially commercial enterprise – especially through the participatory ethos wrought by so-called Web 2.0 and its successors – has 'democratized' public communication in ways that enable the spread of falsities without bothering to curb them, because to do so would run counter to the spirit of capital gain that charges the whole enterprise. 'User-generated content' is just too good to curtail. It drives traffic, gets clicks, and glues eyeballs to the screen. Advertising and subscription revenues grow from unpaid labor while the ones and zeros that drive it all remain cleanly indifferent to the truths or fabrications on the surface – though these features of course do influence human perceptions of broader public feelings, roiling as they do the ordinary experience of being alive at this particular moment.

Part of the work of cultural studies is to identify how a given conjuncture maps affectively onto the texture of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as the pandemic has brought forth an array of 'new normals' around work, education, domesticity, dating, shopping, travel, recreation – virtually everything in the ambit of ordinary experience – the importance of cultural studies to help chart and navigate these emergent tremors is as urgent as ever. The modest point I wish to make in this essay is that some of the most fertile scenes of

investment in the formation of new ordinaries during the pandemic are not where it might be most tempting to look: in the fracas of national politics and policy, in the advice of presidents and epidemiologists, or even online where so much of public discourse now transpires. Though these are all among the valuable sites of attention for studying the pandemic's monumental influence on everyday life – and on the workings of politics and democracy – the deployment of symbolic communication to advance assertions or arguments alike is secondary to the more constitutive role of expressive acts whose force registers affectively more than meaningfully or logically.

In my recent book, *Gestures of Concern* (2020), I argue that focusing principally on the role of discourse in democracy neglects the more primary role of concerned gestures for building affective commonwealths. Written before, but published during, the pandemic, the book doesn't take on the many examples of concerned gestures that COVID-19 has inspired. If the pandemic has illustrated anything, however, it's just how essential such gestures are for the building and maintenance of communities and coalitions that foster the resilience needed to endure prolonged precarity. The prototypical gesture of concern is a 'Get Well' card. Such cards are expressive acts performed in full recognition, by sender and receiver alike, that the card will do nothing to cure the ailment that it exists to acknowledge. Yet, people do send these cards, and they do make a difference, though that difference is analogous to the difference between their 'effects' and 'affects.' To be sure, the *effect* of 'Get Well' cards is minimal. They certainly won't cure COVID, if that's the idea. The capacity of such gestures to *affect* a social relation, however, is inseparable from their purpose, despite such affects defying quantification or interpretability according to the logic of use-values.

Readers of this journal will likely be familiar with Raymond Williams's concept, 'structures of feeling.' What may be less remembered is how much Williams, in his constant sensitivity to the historical baggage of words, hesitated over the inadequacy of his term. Even when he first introduces it in *Preface to Film* (1954, p. 33), he hedges over the concept's shortcomings but says that his term is more accurate 'than *ideas* or *general life*,' because there is a difference between how we *study* particular aspects of life and how we *experience* them (Williams wanted to understand the latter). Some two decades later, though, in *Marxism and Literature*, his most extended treatment of the topic, his misgivings remain: 'The term is difficult,' he writes, 'but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology' (Williams 1977, p. 132). He goes on to say that, actually, 'experience' would make 'the better and wider word' (Williams 1977, p. 132). In this way, over time, by situating the structure of feeling concept within this constellation of related terms – *ideas*, *general life*, *world-view*, *ideology*, *experience* – Williams offers an

associative map of its contours. Doing so marks the concept, paradoxically, as at once both excessive and insufficient.

This liminal position – between too much and not enough, between past and future, between the complex whole of a social totality and the particular forms of its materialization – is what makes the concept alluring as a heuristic for cultural inquiry. By promising only speculation, it never reduces the cultural field to ‘belief-systems, institutions, or explicit relationships,’ though these are part of what a structure of feeling means to designate (Williams 1977, p. 133). Instead, Williams expands the range of cultural analysis by identifying a felt register of sociality that, as both a traceable structure and elusive register, can accommodate materialist projects invested in more than mere talk or theory. The lingering trouble – for him, as for those of us inspired by his insights – remains that identifying the ‘felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time’ is exceptionally difficult to do (Williams 1975, p. 47).<sup>3</sup> Our best hope, Williams wagers, is to find the residue of a structure of feeling left behind in art and other artifacts of cultural production. My wager is that a structure of feeling can become a resource, not just a residue – that is, it can become an *affective commonwealth* – when we identify its expression through concerned gestures that do some work to close the differential between what lived experience feels like and our ability to articulate it.

Living through the novel coronavirus pandemic has felt like lots of things, and no doubt different things for different people living in diverse geo-political contexts. But one of the ways to draw upon the affective commonwealths that this strange conjuncture has built is not to focus on the *talk talk talk* that attends digital culture and public affairs, but rather to treat gestures of concern as the ‘mattering maps’ that highlight what Lawrence Grossberg would call the ‘things that do and can matter to those living within the map’ (1992, p. 398). By enacting the sort of worlds one would like to make a home in, gestures of concern embody the principle of Gandhi to ‘be the change.’ Though such a principle, as Auden says of poetry, ‘survives / in the valley of its making where executives / would never want to tamper,’ its expression through concerned gestures need not be leveled-up to something more effectual: to a changed policy, say, or to overt political action. Rather, these gestures are their own reward, a resource for building the shared dispositions and fellow-feeling that sees even individual struggles within a community as mutual struggles.

Examples of such gestures have been all over during the pandemic. In New York, for instance, the city with the highest urban density in America, gestures of concern became regular acts of solidarity, from the nightly playing of the national anthem over electrified guitar off an East Village apartment balcony (à la Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock) to the applause given across the city to healthcare and other essential workers as they got off work around 7:00 each night. Manhattan’s unenviable position as the American epicenter

of the pandemic during its first peaks in April 2020 gave these gestures an affirmative quality of in-this-togetherness despite most people living holed up in their apartments (except, in many cases, for the rich, who were privileged enough to leave the city altogether). For those who stuck around, by choice or not, the on-cue hoots and claps and banging pots ricocheting down the city's chrome canyons offered an aural, embodied counterpoint to the all-online interactions that were beginning in their new normalcy to affirm Shelly Turkle's (2012) thesis about technology making us 'alone together.' Though initially acts of gratitude for the essential workers risking their own lives to help the afflicted – particularly the many who had come from out-of-state to do so – the nightly applause evolved into a performance of something bigger. Amanda Hess (2020), writing in the *New York Times* during the phenomenon's height, called the marvel 'a communal outburst,' noting that 'the more the ritual is repeated, the more it feels as if it's for the rest of us, too.'

Far away on the front range of the Rocky Mountains in the state of Colorado, concerned citizens Shelsea Ochoa and Brice Maiurro offered their own small gesture through a Facebook group called 'Go Outside and Howl at 8 pm' Soon they spawned a ritual that caught on in all 50 states and 99 other countries. Although hearing yips and bays through your neighborhood as the sun went down had its charms (just as making them had its primal joys), the howling of course did nothing to abate the pandemic, to reduce one's risk of exposure, or to push health policy in a particular direction. But that did not make the gestures useless, at least not in a pejorative sense. In the context of stay-at-home orders and a looming fear of contagion, a good nightly howl makes a fine equivalent to what James Carey must have had in mind when he wrote about the ritual view of communication. 'A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (Carey 2009, p. 15). The purpose of these nightly howls wasn't to transmit messages with readily interpretable meanings; it was to enact a shared sensibility, to draw 'persons together in fellowship and community,' as Carey described ritual communication's archetypal function (2009, p. 15).

In my neighborhood in Salt Lake City, Utah, all kinds of ritual gestures were also on display, each of which subtly shifted the felt experience of living in that time and place. Kids and grown-ups alike had suddenly become chalk artists, leaving messages of encouragement on sidewalks – *Stay safe! We got this!* – as well as the occasional drawing, hopscotch course, or walking maze for pedestrians to play along with and enjoy. Many houses now had teddy bears and other stuffed animals in their windows: part of a global trend, during the pandemic, to give children something to do during lockdown in communities in which walking around outdoors was safe but

undirected enough to benefit from being gamified with a scavenger hunt. Find the bears! Odd sightings of painted river rocks also began showing up in strange places. Here on a fire hydrant, there on a mailbox, elsewhere tucked amid ordinary stones in a xeriscaped yard or at the base of a street sign. These too had a communal function. Alongside stones painted with hearts or trees were others with a message of support and solidarity. ‘SLC.’ ‘Love.’ ‘Science.’ Some stones were painted to look like animal or human faces – wearing a facemask. Juvenile or trite they may have been, but the point wasn’t art or poetry. It wasn’t even inspiration. The painted stones, the teddy bears, the chalk art: all were concerned gestures that built an affective commonwealth for strangers to share through challenging times [Figure 1](#).

Yet, if the shared quality of affective commonwealths built through concerned gestures is a resource, it’s not one that can be taken to market. Carey’s apparent interest in ritual models of communication was based on a similar observation. If we understand communication as mere transmission, we also understand it to produce a more or less clean ledger of exchange, to begin and end in finite and measurable terms. Transmission models see communication as being ‘for the purpose of control’ and characterized by ‘instruction and admonition’ (Carey 2009, 15). Though Carey didn’t quite put it this way, it’s not hard to see conceptually that there’s an imposing, patriarchal and economic aspect to this sort of understanding. By contrast, ritual models, grounded in repetitive or ongoing acts like gestures of concern, serve to maintain communities over time, building fellowship in the process. They don’t expire in the same way – or yield the same calculable effects. And it’s in this sense that gestures of concern can become a resource,



**Figure 1.** Painted River Rocks, Salt Lake City, UT. December 2020. Photo: Author.

if only a qualitative one: they change what it feels like to be living among others under circumstances that might bring isolation or despair without the affirmative gesture of disclosing affective bonds that may otherwise go unnoticed. These gestures say, *Others are in this with you*.

In this sense, even when the chalk art began to disappear, when newly painted river rocks stopped showing up, or when the teddy bears left the windows, my neighborhood was already primed to sustain its affective commonwealth. This became clear near the end of 2020, when anti-mask protesters began showing up in the neighborhood, making tacit threats outside the home of Dr. Angela Dunn, Utah's State Epidemiologist, who had supported a mask mandate given the virus's rising transmission rates in Salt Lake County. The protestors had posted Dr. Dunn's home address online and showed up day and night outside her house, waving their flags and fury, forcing her and her family to stay inside and draw the blinds. But that's when the yard signs started popping up, like clovers, all over the neighborhood: 'We Stand with Dr. Angela Dunn.' Neighbors began parking their cars along the roads, instead of in driveways, so protestors would have nowhere to park theirs. These minor gestures, fraught with concern, went beyond the positional work of the many 'We Believe ...' signs that professed a list of values about Black lives mattering and science being real, which could be found in yards across different pockets of the city and country. They even exceeded the more gestural yard signs, also not uncommon elsewhere, that expressed some variation of, 'Thank You, Essential Workers.' The overnight yard signs for Dr. Dunn, rather, were primarily limited to our neighborhood, which saw Dr. Dunn not just as a representative of the State, but as a member of our community. They showed a solidarity that operated in a different key than more vociferous protests or public discourse was equipped to do. Though yard signs and river rocks probably can't galvanize or sustain a revolution, they can lead to resilience and togetherness in a more affirmative spirit [Figure 2](#).

The lure of such gestures, of course, does not make them impervious to capture. One example is the work of actor John Krasinski, who created a YouTube series called *Some Good News* from his home office while quarantining. The show's handwritten sign made of poster-board taped on the wall behind him said it all. *Some Good News* was a low budget, DIY news program that reported positive, uplifting stories intended as an alternative to doomscrolling through all the bleak social media content and ominous reporting by the broadcast news. The germinal idea, Krasinski (2020) later reflected, was that the pandemic had made things seem so grim that 'we all just wanted good news to be more fully represented in our everyday lives.' The eight-episode series captured a genuine spirit of coalition and solidarity born from concern. Featuring a reunion of castmates from *The Office*, a performance from *Hamilton*, a virtual prom and wedding, not to mention all



**Figure 2.** Yard Signs, Salt Lake City, UT, December 2020. Photo: Author.

the dance-moves, laughter, and celebrity guests, *Some Good News* was a feel-good palliative that fulfilled its purpose just by being there.

It should not be surprising, though, that an amateur web-series born as a gesture should soon enough be seized by capital in a bidding war to own the rights to profit from it. Despite a backlash from the show's 2.5 million subscribers, Krasinski eventually sold the concept to ViacomCBS. But this is just what communicative capitalism does: it takes even quasi-counterpublics and swallows them whole, only to be digested and served again to the mainstream, this time for major cash. Communicative capitalism is also what's at work when decisions in the interest of boosting the economy trump more scientifically prudent decisions in the interest of public health. Though the pandemic has underscored the limitations of public discourse alone for resolving a health crisis of such material and life-threatening stakes, it has also given us maps to find and build what matters most in times of precarity and uncertainty: minor affective commonwealths worth sharing and savoring, if only for now.

## Notes

1. For more, see Marres 2005, p. 213.
2. See, e.g., Hall 1988; Grossberg 2006.
3. James Aune notes on this regard that, 'The most interesting aspect of studying culture is the most difficult to achieve' (1994, p. 99).

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## Further information

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