

Solidarity Words

*T*here's that meme: "solidarity is a verb." Widely favored on Twitter in the twenty-first century, it also whips up organizing retreats, T-shirts, and corporate diversity consultancies. Slogans as a genre inevitably court cooptation. But there is something astute in this one, both in content and in form. The substance instructs: mutual responsibility is action, not abstraction; the state of holding in common needs not only shared sensibilities but also moving arms. Etymologically derived from *solid* (firm, compact, dense), *solidarity* is the animation of firming, composing, massing; to participate in the virtue of solidarity is to do something. No one needs an essay theorizing solidarity, since solidarity is practice. The meme crystallizes this activist principle: we are stronger together and that means we have to actively do the togetherness. Verb it.

As the content of the meme suggests, solidarity is beyond speech: the realm of all action, no talk. Walk the walk. In this, the meme distills a consensus in political theory across liberal and radical orientations. When Karl Marx first used the word, addressing the First International in 1864, he lamented that "there had been no solidarity of action between the British and

the continental working classes.” For Hannah Arendt, solidarity only exists in practice as the surpassing of mere sentiment by collective political action that is irreversible, “boundless” (*Human* 190–91) and “engaged in changing our common world” (*Life* 200). In Catholic Social Teaching, according to Pope John Paul II, solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.”¹ In such elevations of almost sublime action, solidarity is desubstantialized, present only in motion. As Richard Rorty encapsulates it, “There is nothing deep inside of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity [. . .]. There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them” (177). He argues for the contingency (the arising in action, in concrete circumstances) of all “solidarity as made rather than found, produced in the course of history” (195). In its objective dimension, such production is the work of human sociopolitical organization; thus the Charter of the European Union makes solidarity one of its six core chapters, focusing on the rights of workers to employment, to organize, to workplace and consumer protections, and to security in social reproduction, such as health care, welfare, and environmental sustainability. In its more subjective dimension, such production is the work of activists acting concertedly. As Jodi Dean avers, “[T]he primary virtue of comrades is solidarity; fidelity is demonstrated through reliable, consistent, practical action” (95). That these ongoing actions must have a deliberate dimension is underscored by bell hooks, who frames solidarity as the attribute of those who “accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals” (62). And parrying the false sentimentalization of commonality, Lauren Berlant elaborates “a solidarity that calls not on full subjective or affective convergence but concerted practical activity that manifests attentiveness, tenderness, respect, and pleasure” (23). Reliable, consistent, practical action, contingent and collective, objective in the federation or subjective in tenderness: this is solidarity articulated by political theory and circulated by meme theory.

One might be forgiven for looking to psychoanalysis, home of the talking cure, for a contrasting perspective on this consensus about the worthlessness of talk. But in many instances, across some other differences, psychoanalytic theorists have also understood solidarity and its aftermath as unsymbolizable. Indeed, the measureless stuff of revolutionary fervor and the irrepressibility of civilizational discontent have persistently figured as the real. Slavoj Žižek situates solidarity in the Jewish injunction to

“love thy neighbor,” where the neighbor is not a semblable but a “traumatic Thing” (*Neighbor* 138–40). Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua invoke the concept of “agonistic solidarity” “to be forged on the basis of social antagonism” (22, 1). Timothy Morton redefines solidarity in an explicit evocation of the real that contrasts with the imaginary, described as a “traumatic fissure between, to put it in stark Lacanian terms, *reality* (the human-correlated world) and *the real* (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere). [. . .] [S]olidarity is the noise made by the symbiotic real as such” (22, 25). For Tracy McNulty, “[R]eal change necessarily involves the falling away of imaginary supports and thus the loss of ideals and values as motives for action” (“Demanding” 9). And in perhaps the starkest case, Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan proclaim that everyone “claims to want solidarity, but few want to pay the price for it. It does not require hatred of an enemy or the willingness to kill for the collective but the self-inflicted violence of the rupture. The solidarity that forms in the rupture is a solidarity without ground because the bond that exists is nothing but the shared absence of ground” (94).

This would seem to be the properly psychoanalytic theory of solidarity: solidarity is in the real; there are no guarantees. A question of antagonism not identification, it exists only in its eruptions. The advantage of this position over colloquial definitions is certainly obvious: real-ing solidarity belies the fantasy that solidarity is common feeling. Psychoanalysis questions the projections and assimilations propelling that prevalent understanding, cautioning against the lapping of the imaginary in empathy, allyship, communion of interests—all so much ego business. Actions speak louder than words.

Psychoanalytic political theories elevating the real (the real of antagonism, the real of nonrelation) have done much to expose the flaws in liberalism and the entwining of representation, norms, and order with objectification and harm. Yet while this psychoanalytic intensification of the verb view of solidarity imparts important insights that can guide action, it can also ensnare itself in a romance of the negative. If solidarity is unspecifiable, all sublime abyss and infinite action, it is unavailable for and as strategy, and is instead immanentized in the radical alterity of spontaneity. But solidarity is not immediate, or shit wouldn’t be this way. It has to be produced. Overly romantic notions of the real in psychoanalytic political theory omit the dialectical character of the real’s constitution by the symbolic. Theory must evade the pitfalls of the imaginary, but so, too, must it abstract from the lure of the real. The symbolic is the medium of sociality, and without its

material support, the eruptive, evanescent real of revolutionary fervor cannot be sustained. Solidarity is nothing other than this sustaining: ongoing, formalizing. Its subsistence in the symbolic must root any psychoanalytic political theory.

The form of the meme with which we began actually inscribes this symbolic dimension, for in the sentence “solidarity is a verb,” “verb” is not in fact a verb. At the level of its form, the formula makes the crucial point: *solidarity* is a word, a part of speech not identical with itself, a thing whose being obtains in language. Solidarity belongs to the symbolic medium of signifiers, their mutually constitutive system of relations, and the social order they effectuate. For this reason does it prevail as an exclamation, above all: solidarity is when we fervently declare “Solidarity!” The necessity to reciprocate and repeat such declarations is beautifully encoded in the medium of the meme (repeatable and circulable almost endlessly, accreting partisans as it goes). However efficacious it may be in general to counter the imaginary dimension by insisting on the real, the specifically psychoanalytic contribution to the critique of solidarity also counters the romance of the real by accentuating the symbolic: solidarity is a word.

Although no one needs an essay, although solidarity is practice not theory, the following pages explore the centrality of the symbolic to the practice of psychoanalysis. Solidarity is laminated action, sustained engagement, collective determination. It only exists if it abides; fellows must come together again; repetition is constitutive. Symbolization works as both cause and effect of those generative repetitions. Psychoanalytic political inquiry has more frequently turned on the imaginary (fantasy and identification, investment and misrecognition) or the real (antagonism and impossibility, insuperability and unrepresentability). But it is the practice of the symbolic (free association and construction, institutes and the Pass, a new signifier) where psychoanalysis’s own political activities have been most irrepressible, and we should look to those practices for insights into political topoi of the sort of which solidarity is paramount. To put it all too schematically, theories of how we enjoy our own immiseration are abundant and theologies of the ineffable are sovereign, but projects of symbolization are wanting. What installs a new sociality? What are the forms that sustain it? What is the register in which the social order may be collectively determined? The symbolic is the answer to these questions.

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Just what is the symbolic? One of the three interdependent registers of psychic experience named by Lacan, the symbolic consists of signifiers, mediations, installations, and institutions. Too often in cultural theory circles, including those inflected by psychoanalysis, the symbolic is reduced to norms, law, ideology, and positive content—to what is said and written in the interest of cohering the social. But such a realm of ideation more aptly describes the imaginary, the register of images and egos, identifications and projections. The symbolic introduces a cut into the imaginary, a material letter that subtends and exceeds any content symbolized. The signifier inscribes and accrues otherness and mediation, difference and production and lack that rend norms, law, ideas. It is thus a medium for sustaining collectivity, the difference and sameness of social coexistence, which also capacitates creativity. Moreover, as both Freud and Lacan insist, the symbolic is the matter of psychoanalysis itself, since “nothing takes place in a psycho-analytic treatment but an interchange of words between the patient and the analyst” (Freud, *Introductory* 17) and since psychoanalysts can be foremost defined as “practitioners of the symbolic function” (Lacan, *Écrits* 72). The symbolic is the sine qua non: “Freud’s discovery is that of the field of the effects, in the nature of man, produced by his relation to the symbolic order. To ignore this symbolic order is to condemn the discovery to oblivion” (Lacan, *Écrits* 64). A psychoanalytic theory of solidarity (or anything else) that deals only in the real is scarcely a psychoanalytic theory.

Both the beginning and the end of analysis furnish in their specifications some illustration of the psychoanalytic practice of the symbolic as the medium of counterhegemonic rapport—which may well be a synonym for solidarity. Speech that engenders and sustains alternative relations to lessen misery, speech that opens a disjuncture in the ordinary exchanges of normative capitalist sociality, speech that forms a new discourse: psychoanalysis’s matter sounds quite a lot like solidarity’s. To begin psychoanalysis is to agree with an other to speak otherwise, and to end it is to construct a new signifier as the product of that alternative bond; psychoanalytic transformations are in the word.

The origins of psychoanalysis in the treatment of hysterics inspired Freud’s principles for commencing the analytic situation. Hysterical symptoms, Freud assessed, should be understood as “symbolic,” a re-presentation of that which cannot be empirically manifest: the unconscious. Hysterics are distinguished by unusual symbolic activity (“patients who [. . .] make the most copious use of this sort of symbolization” [Breuer and Freud 5]) and their treatment involves not de-symbolization, but adding

more: more “associative thought-activity” atop what would otherwise remain “ideational content [. . .] with restricted association” (15). Psychoanalytic treatment took shape as this additional or surplus symbolization that allows the idea’s “strangled affect to find a way out through speech” (17), and of course the very phrase “talking cure” was coined by none other than a hysteric: Anna O, who spoke it in English. The shift from German to English, and the affirmative marking of this work of surplus symbolization by the worker herself, hint at the torque of analytic symbolization. The kind of talk that allows something to transpire between the analysand and analyst and allows the analysand to suffer less acutely makes of speech a medium of transformative action.

Freud therefore centered the talking cure as the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis in the *Introductory Lectures*:

The patient talks, tells of his past experiences and present impressions, complains, confesses to his wishes and his emotional impulses. The doctor listens, tries to direct the patient’s processes of thought, exhorts, forces his attention in certain directions, gives him explanations. [. . .] Words were originally magic and to this day words have retained much of their ancient magical power. By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair, by words the teacher conveys his knowledge to his pupils, by words the orator carries his audience with him and determines their judgments and decisions. Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men [. . .]. The talk of which psycho-analytic treatment consists brooks no listener; it cannot be demonstrated [. . .] you cannot be present as an audience at a psycho-analytic treatment. You can only be told about it, and, in the strictest sense of the word, it is only by hearsay that you will get to know psycho-analysis. (20)

The talking cure is not just any kind of talk. Provocative but not informative, its content cannot be transmitted to a third party; it is very tricky to relay to a friend what has transpired in one’s own analysis, since the signifiers will lack their clap. Speaking without ordinary logos, it contrives freer associations. The talk is known only in its effects, which have analogs in intimate stimulation and conflicts, in education, in public speaking, and—most importantly for our purposes—in relations among men. “Words are in general the means of mutual influence among men” prestates our thesis that the symbolic is the medium of solidarity.

The basis of the analytic situation consists of an incitement to words that alter normative communication and dislodge the order engendering the neurotic suffering. Freud's instructions for free association explicitly oppose it to ordinary relation—both conversation that gives the illusion of communication and self-regard that gives the illusion of coherence:

One more thing before you start. What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you and any side-issues, so as not to wander too far from the point. But in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms [. . .]. So say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveler sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside. (Treatment 134)

“Saying” whatever is taking up an orientation toward speech as a medium of externality, as having a logic of its own undirected by the ego, as constituting an environment through which the subject travels. The process of free association objectivates language in this way, which makes it available as matter for solidarity. Lacan describes this objectivity as a “universe”: “In analysis one lets go of all the moorings of the speaking relationship, one eschews courtesy, respect, and dutifulness towards the other. Free association, this term is a very poor one for defining what is involved—we try to cut off the moorings of the conversation with the other. From then on, the subject finds himself relatively mobile in relation to this universe of language in which we engage him” (*Freud's* 174).

This “relatively mobile relation” involves not just the will of the analysand to free association but also the mutuality of that will, the solidarity of the analyst who reciprocates free association with free association: “[W]ith our free-floating attention we hear what the analysand said, sometimes simply due to a kind of equivocation, in other words, a material equivalence. We realize that what he said can be understood completely differently. And it is precisely in hearing it completely differently that we allow

him to perceive whence his thoughts emerge: they emerge from nothing other than the ex-sistence of language. Language ex-sists elsewhere than in what he believes his world to be” (qtd. in Fink 37). Lacan educes a paradoxical relationality from the analyst’s freedom requiring the analysand’s in materializing the ex-sistence of language. Freud discovered that words can cure, and Lacan accentuates the performative faculty of language operative in this discovery: the unconscious can only be known by its effects in speech, and in turn analysis contrives a speech situation that causes a new state of affairs. Because the kind of speech at stake is not expressive but percussive (“all that is of the unconscious only plays on the effects of language. It is something that is said, without the subject representing himself or saying himself in it, or knowing what he says” [Lacan, “La méprise” 333]), the practitioners of the symbolic function must engage speaking without presumptions of representation or knowledge: again, a figure of the kind of symbolic action—an exclamation, even—where solidarity lives.

Lacan’s strategy for such engagement was *punctuation*: bringing to a point, a kind of marking occurring at intervals. Punctuation is fundamentally a technique for “showing the subject that he is saying more than he thinks he is” (*Freud’s* 54). It hums best not by the analyst interpreting (“your words mean you want X”) nor even by the analyst questioning (“what does that word make you think of?”), but by the analyst intervening in the analysand’s discourse to make it palpable *as discourse*. The most useful mode of intervention is simply repetition: the analyst repeats a word or phrase, and this respeaking materializes the speech and dislocates its unreflective ordinariness. “Changing the punctuation renews or upsets” the analysand’s speech (Lacan, *Écrits* 99) such that they would be incited to de-intuit a word or phrase, invited to hear it, to palpate its polyvalence and puns (perhaps the most dramatic of such puns is the homophonic “*tu es ma mere*” / “*tuer ma mere*” [you are my mother, kill my mother]) (269).

Punctuation as verbal repetition also has a nonverbal counterpart: terminating the session. The International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) had codified the fifty-minute session in the 1920s as part of their institutional commitment to professionalizing analysis. But Lacan countered this standardization with his practice of varying the length of the session, finding the form for the session not in its standardized regulation but in the dynamic of punctuation stimulated by the analysand’s speech. Ending the session served to reciprocate the analysand’s speech with analytic discourse, since “the cut is part of speech” (Allouch 101). A modality of question, it unexpectedly suspends and estranges speech, inviting the analysand to

wonder about their words instead of continuing the session. And it is also a modality of repetition, a reply borrowing topoi from the initiant. Lacan thus homologizes punctuation to poetry and music: “the adjournment of a session [. . .] plays the part of a metric beat (*une scansion*) which has the full value of an intervention by the analyst” (*Écrits* 252). Scansion educes the mechanics of a poem, its meter, rhythm, and form. Scansion of the analysand’s speech comparably parses the logics, associations, and tropes by which the unconscious effectuates itself. The use of verbal repetition or of caesurae in the session punctuates by according “signifierness” without granting signification, bobbing musicality without semantics. In activating this resonant capacity of the signifier, psychoanalysis practices the symbolic not as meaning that cathects, but as beat that reverberates, a social tie of form and matter oblique to content.

This possibility of speech via formation effectuates analytic discourse as a social tie operant in uncertainty rather than surety, in lack rather than plenitude, in structuration (the form of the session and its repetition another day) rather than substance (content, identification, values). It therefore underscores the formal qualities of sociation and the symbolic structuring that capacitates solidarity. No wonder, then, that of all the many Lacanian innovations, this was the most scandalous, defying institutional professionalization and destabilizing commercial exchange—all on the way to some different ties. For its political potential, Lacan thus paid a dear price for his punctuated session, delegitimated and singled out for nonrecognition as he was by the IPA. In 1964, he formed the *École freudienne de Paris*, which was dissolved in 1980 and reconstituted in 1981 as the *École de la Cause freudienne*. Such institutional uproar symptomatizes, as it were, the power of the punctual formation to reorganize social relation.

Variable sessions seek a contingent form for the relation between analysand and analyst, a form that hosts the effects of speech differently than does an insured transaction or diagnostic lecture. The dyad’s highly structured quality allows the contingent tenor of the signifier to emerge: there must be two people, there must be a space of the clinic, there must be kept appointments. And of course, there must be the constraint of the analyst’s reticence, a formal emptiness that transforms ordinary speech into analytic speech, a lack of speech that materializes lack itself. The analyst’s silence hystericizes, thwarting expectation, disowning signifiers of mastery. Silence, McNulty argues, works toward “not the staging of an interpersonal relation, but a solicitation of the unconscious” (“Demanding” 22). For Lacan, this solicitation culminates in novel speech: “by his silence when he is the

Other with a capital O,” the analyst prepares for “the acceptance of a word” (*Écrits* 140, 430). This word reorients the analysand and constitutes what Willy Apollon explicitly characterizes as a “minimal social link” (qtd. in McNulty, “Demanding” 8).

Freud called this word that symbolizes the unusual tether of analytic discourse “a construction” (*Constructions* 257–69). Materializing the minimal social link roused between the analyst and analysand by means of repetition and punctuation, a construction might illustrate what is at stake in a specifically psychoanalytic theory of solidarity in and through the symbolic. A construction is the product of psychoanalytic work that differs from interpretation, and that Freud preferred to interpretation as “the far more appropriate description” of analytic ends. It is the kind of symbolization emergent from free association and free floating: a signifier or image, or perhaps “a fragment of historical truth,” but amounts only to “a conjecture” (267, 265). Erroneous or ineffective constructions preoccupy Freud’s discussion of them; it is difficult to foretell what signifiers will hit. What is certain is that a construction is enunciated in the free discourse unique to the analytic relation, the reverberative volley of association, repetition, rearticulation. When the effect does take place, a construction enables the analysand to participate in the “firm, compact, dense” relationality of a solidary symbolic.

The construction results in a different relation: the subject relates to their own symptom askance; the subject’s discourse hosts her contingencies so that her unconscious and her body need not suffer them in the same way; the subject takes on a posture akin to the analyst’s. To emphasize all this altered relationality, Lacan refers to the end of analysis with the phrase “a new signifier.” For the subject, a new signifier is not one among many, but a new tethering of an entire chain, which propels a different order of symbolization. Lacan writes of the new signifier that it must “strike” at the existing order, and like all strikes, it works through solidarity and repetition, a ringing rending of regular exchange (*Other* 33). It is not incidental to the political potential of this striking that Lacan proposes the notion of the new signifier in the early seventies, at a moment of swerving away from his recent focus on the real—a moment of embrace of the project of constructing symbolization in the face of that which eludes it. And a moment as well in which he articulated a radical political commitment of his own in terms that affirm the social power of strikes: “You cannot imagine the respect I have for the geniality of this thing known as a strike, industrial action. What sensitivity, to go no further than that. A strike is the most social thing there

is in the whole world. It represents fabulous respect for the social bond” (. . . or *Worse* 159). Solidary action and the constructed signifiers that equally constitute “this thing known as a strike” are superlatively, elementarily social. Impossibility and unrepresentability magnetize our fascination, but signifiers strike at the ordinary order and strike up the bond.

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The practices of the symbolic afforded by psychoanalysis as the fodder of new social links generate the best indications for the psychoanalytic theory of solidarity. For what is solidarity other than the forming of a compact and the sustaining of that form? We only know solidarity in its effects, but solidarity is itself an effect of signifiers that enable ties to take hold, to be invoked, to be repeated. The importance of a minimal signifying function for political activity has often been rejected by emancipatory theorists, including those of psychoanalytic persuasion. Demands, plans, and even slogans incite insatiable suspicion for daring to exceed the allegedly more radical ether of indeterminacy and unrepresentability. Theory’s habit of reveling in the unrepresentable, the ineffable, the impossible becomes a quasi-spiritual alibi for inertia.

Psychoanalysis is unique among theoretical traditions in its affirmation of the capacitating role of the signifier and formalization. It is not enough to withdraw the capacity of the symbolic to forge a new social link; there must be enunciation. Žižek concluded a very recent reflection on Chilean politics with this imperative:

At the level of theory, this search for a new signifier indicates that [Lacan] desperately tried to move beyond the central topic of his teaching in [the] 1960s, the obsession with the Real, a traumatic/impossible core of jouissance that eludes every symbolization and can only be briefly confronted in an authentic act of blinding force. Lacan is no longer satisfied with such an encounter of a central gap or impossibility as the ultimate human experience: he sees the true task in the move that should follow such an experience, the invention of a new Master Signifier, which will locate the gap/impossibility in a new way. In politics, this means that one should leave behind the false poetry of great revolts that dissolve the hegemonic order. The true task is to impose a new order, and this process begins with new signifiers. Without new signifiers, there is no real social change. (“Chile”)

The indispensability of the signifier for social change suggests a certain *adequacy* of the signifier, a modest sufficiency for palpable effect. So much momentum of theory in the humanities presumes the inadequacy of symbolization: revering sublime heterogeneity for its ceaseless exception to signification, problematizing generalizations for their occlusion of particulars, rhapsodizing complexity and indeterminacy against the simplicity of causality, asymptoting the ineffable in perpetual deferral of synthesis. These habits starkly unite otherwise disparate modes of micrological and micropolitical thought.² Psychoanalysis provides something else: the enabling and ameliorating effects of the cut of symbolization. The question of solidarity and of the sustainedness of political projects turns on the repeatability, simplicity, and contingency of the *merely* adequate signifier.

If ordinary theory too often ignores such adequacy in favor of romancing the negative, the basic operations of contemporary social movements fortunately counter. Consider “We Are the 99%,” “Black Lives Matter,” “There Is No Planet B.” Little bits of language that hold a movement together encompass names, nouns, negations, slogans, demands, visions—and bits that have a suturing, accretive, convocative capacity actuated in repetition. Such bits might be regarded by literary theorists or philosophers of language as “performatives”—language that calls into being new states of affairs. Words, like names, that permit address (“this is what a feminist looks like”) or slogans that illustrate vision (“yes we can”) are performatives integral to the actions that carry solidarity. *We* is a powerful one, hailing a collective subject in the form of its collocation, above or beyond any identificatory content like empathy. Using “we” calls us in to a plurality, a group collected; it pronounces the effect of our gathering above and beyond the mere fact of our differing. “Solidarity is a verb” and also solidarity is a pronoun.

A pronoun like *we* is just a tiny signifier, a few letters long, and it takes on even more force when paired with a preposition of conflict like *against*. As the political theorist Corey Robin argues, “what are we against?” is the first question of solidarity. (Second, what do we wish to do about it? Third, how will we do it? And fourth, who will help us make it happen?) He emphasizes that this first question is itself against egoic identity politics; it is not “who are we? who am I?” but, most fundamentally, “which side are you on?” The question of conflict as against the question of identity encapsulates the difference between the signifier as signification and the signifier as incitement to linkage.

The questions of which side are crucial levers in language for mapping a field of contradiction and relation. It is essential that they are

questions spoken in the basic interactions of organizing solidarity, for, as McNulty writes, “Unlike the dyadic model of communication or identification, speech always supposes a third locus, the Other. It follows that the human being who speaks is not transmitting information to another member of the species, but rather addressing the locus of the Other in and beyond any given interlocutor” (*Wrestling* 68). Such unsemantic address can be suppositional, gestural, rhetorical—a compulsory constituting of the symbolic order in which imaginary content like information, communication, or recognition is secondary to the enacting of relationality without guarantees. Solidarity does not take its own solidity for granted; it is always emergent, always recurrent. For people to hold alongside one another as a common subject impelled by common projects, they need signifiers that magnetize and, indeed, signify.

The magnetic field of the solidary signifier may be more admissible, or more readily palpable, in art, that mode of symbolization with overt license to contravene ordinary speech. Molly Anne Rothenberg recognizes that such hazarded formalizations are likely to elicit from theorists charges of the dangers of signifying, including exclusion, and the “aestheticization” of politics, which Walter Benjamin famously formulated as the definition of fascism. But she uses Benjamin himself to differentiate between what we might call “symbolization qua aestheticization” and “symbolization qua *constellation*”: “[T]he constellation is not the aestheticization of the political, but rather an aestheticizing *for* the political. In constellative activity, the subject aestheticizes itself by means of a formal gesture, creating the self-distance that brings it into contact with the objective, and setting aside the given content (sociohistorical *données*) of the social universe in order to make a space for the new” (Rothenberg 178). As Benjamin and Rothenberg allude, artistic works may be fellows to psychoanalysis in this process of constructing new symbolizations. Circulating as they do acts of and occasions for sensuous making irreducible to sense, signifying in excess of signification, art poses a companion practice of the symbolic that can help answer the perpetual conundrum for psychoanalytic political theory of how to scale its practices for transformative relation beyond the clinical dyad.

It is also to art that we might look for succinct articulations of the politically felicitous effects of repetitions, percussions, harmonizations, and constructions, since such illustrations render themselves with more vivid contour than does our immediate actuality. The simply marvelous smash music film *Pitch Perfect* (2012) mediates the symbolic support of solidarity. It stages the social conflict between a joyless, univocal, hierarchical,

norm-governed group and a joyless, creative, antisocial outlaw, and finds in collective music a sublation of the clash. The dominant crew is a performing troupe and the maverick is a DJ. Ultimately, a new social link emerges in the medium of medleys for *a cappella* arrangement, which integrate polyvocality and mix diverse tempos and styles. After much disharmony, the pivotal transformation hinges on dislodging the group from its habitual structure and undertaking a free association of freestyle track merging that hosts solidarity. As the renegade walks the group to an unusual physical space, she exhorts, “alright, let’s remix this business,” and hesitatingly asks one member, “um, Aubrey, would you pick a song for us please?,” recoiling minorly at the response in uncertainty, and then asking another member, “okay, Chloe, are you okay to take the lead?” Chloe merely nods, then utters, “yeah.” Stilted ordinary speech and ordinary comportment are shaken off (hands wave, necks stretch, shoulders shimmy), and an alternative tonality emerges. Beca the DJ measures off a pitch, and Chloe begins Bruno Mars’s “Just the Way You Are.” The camera slowly pans over each member of the ensemble as they find their own way into the rhythm, contriving individual beats and notes that are for the most part repetitive (“oooh oooh ooooooh”/“tss tss tss”) but in total make something collective. Beca then counts her way into a mix, conducting the first song with her hands but nodding her head in a different rhythm, beginning to vocalize repeated monosyllables “uh uh uh uh” and finally blending a second song’s lyrics—Nelly’s “Just a Dream”—into the loop. Although there has been no explicit plan, she eventually makes eye contact with Aubrey, who is engaged in rhythmic repetition of a note from the first song, and when Beca points, a physically literal punctuation of Aubrey’s repetitions, they shift, so that Aubrey joins Beca in the chorus of the second song. The resulting lamination quickens the group, and this is the turning point for their trajectory in the film, their momentum as a collective ready to take on the world (or at least nationals). Solidarity is concerted action, mobilized in material repetition. The composited medium they find for sustaining a new link crucially transgresses the ironclad rule to which the group had hitherto adhered: only perform songs by women artists. Both of the pieces mixed in this scene are by men, men of color (Mars is Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Ashkenazi, raised in Hawaii; Nelly is Black from Texas and Saint Louis), bringing genres of R&B, funk, and hip-hop into the pop lexicon the Bellas regularly speak. Even more importantly, both song titles start with “Just,” their repeated signifier a hinge for their free union. The medley concludes with a similarly repeated word, *face*, from the Mars track resounded by alto “face” from the Nelly track. The shot structure

echoes the orality, spending the entire improvised song in tight close-ups but panning out at the end to the masses plotted in a setting. Music's super-signifying sensuousness affords its sociating link; Beca and the group suffer less and govern differently through the medium of its oohs and uhs, its beats and repeats. That repetitions and para-signifying tiny words find onramps for solidary massing is all we are trying to say.

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If this argument for centering practices of the symbolic in conceptualizing and enacting solidarity has heft generically and could take up some compelling examples aesthetically, it nonetheless also confronts a context that is determined historically. And that context is not at present propitious for construction. The work of a construction is never easy and rarely undertaken, just as the struggle for collective determination is not looking victorious. There is a novelty in the present moment—the universality of the catastrophe confronting human existence in the ecocide, even though its particular manifestations are unevenly distributed. This is an occasion for solidarity of the broadest sort: fighting for those you don't know, fighting alongside those whose exposure differs from yours, fighting against the fallacious rapacious plutocrats. But carbon concentration in the atmosphere diminishes cognitive capacity, leaving subjects dimmer and more rash. Our ability to undertake deliberate measures to ameliorate the climate crisis has been in question throughout the decades of the great acceleration, as corporations have lied about fossil fuel fallout, regulators have cheated, and leaders have denied. Now, things look even worse. There are pockets of localized resistance (antipipeline movements led by Indigenous people in the upper Midwest of the U.S., awareness movements led by school children in Scandinavia, accountability demands posed by Pacific Islanders), and there was even one concerted event involving millions of people in an estimated 185 countries, #climatestrike, in 2019. What will it take to sustain and coordinate these efforts? The material conditions that necessitate solidarity could not be more forceful.

These exigencies issue from the forces of surplus accumulation and advanced immiseration whose institutional face (the world's largest companies by market capitalization) is big data tech (Apple no. 1, Microsoft no. 2, Alphabet no. 4, Amazon no. 5, Meta no. 6). The everyday operations of platform capitalism involve lithium mining and server-farm hydro-cooling, million-square-foot real estate holdings and workplace death, all as backstage for the main attraction of information exchange, image

entrepreneurship, and pattern monetizing. As a result of all this activity, most citizens of the developed world—who happen to be, for the most part, the people with the power to do something about the climate crisis—are living in a media ecosphere in which the practices of the symbolic essential to solidarity are eviscerated.

A change in the functioning of social norms and linguistic meaning is discernable in such recent phenomena as “post truth,” “alternative facts,” “infoglut,” “context collapse,” “norm erosion,” and the twilight of institutions. Scholars of media who are also psychoanalytic theorists—like Jodi Dean, Todd McGowan, Byung-Chul Han, and Jacob Johanssen—have sought to understand these changes as a “decline of symbolic efficiency” in which the imaginary realm of images and egos and an irruptive ebb of the real disequilibrate the interdependence of the imaginary and the real with the symbolic. This decline can be sourced to developments and shifts in the communications industries like corporate conglomerations, individualized image technology, and deregulated political advertising. Speak your truth, do your own research, share your selfie: everyone is a sole proprietor news media agency.

The two-dimensional images on screens seek to simulate the sensory immersiveness of off-screen experience but lack the richness and depth of field; repetitive mindless behavior like scrolling ensues in search of dopamine hits that mimic full sensory experience; observation of events via moving images virtually coincides with events themselves—whether we’re filming ourselves seeing a famous work of art in a museum or attending a protest, sharing viral video of police violence or fixating on hashtags for immanent transmissions from active shooter situations. Images, clicks, dopamine hits, and their capture as data become the modalities in which we live out our self-presence.

The decline of symbolic efficiency confounds the symbolic practice of solidarity. Not only are individuals immersed in their own imaginaries, tenuously able to act in common with others, not only are the disintegrations of common meaning or expertise a condition for eruptions of nonsensical and nihilist violence, but the very medium in which solidarity might be activated is also harder to come by. These material circumstances make it all the more essential that theorists and activists eschew the ecstasy of the unrepresentable and instead deliberately practice symbolization.

Psychoanalysis offers some tactics for that practice, for those who aspire to solidarity. Use your words. It is up to us. Start by talking to people. Face to face. Where you work, where you live. What do they want? What

do they know isn't right? Organizers ask questions and resound the other's answers. Hystericizing is galvanizing. What can you punctuate in their speech? What signifiers can you repeat and reposition to percuss inspiration, desire, momentum, and echo among other people? Contrary to the abundant political rhetoric of immediacy, horizontalism, and spontaneity, struggles do not surge *sui generis*. They require constructions. Risk representation! Ramify resonance. Talk about it. Put a name on it. Formalize. The romance of the unnamable, ineffable, and unsymbolizable brings political theorists and political activists again and again to the precipice without a construction. But it takes composition to get firm, compact, dense. Which side are you on? Solidarity!

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Notes

- 1 The Pope's stance has been praised by historians as pivotal for the success of the Solidarity Trade Union in Poland and its campaign for democratic freedoms.
- 2 For elaboration of this unity, see Kornbluh, *Order of Forms*.

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