One of the institutional demands of the university these days is to not use jargon in one's work, to speak in a language that anyone and everyone could understand. Of course what the articulators of the demand mean is that one should not use a particular language for a general audience. Jargon is a term "(a)plied contemptuously to any mode of speech abounding in unfamiliar terms, or peculiar to a particular set of persons, as the language of scholars or philosophers, the terminology of a science or art, the cant of a class, sect, trade, or profession." Our analysis though does not have to stop at what is meant by those specific individuals charged with the task of keeping jargon confined to its proper setting. What work is done, we might add, by the institutional demand to not use jargon?

The work of this demand is of and for consensus, and particularly 'consensus democracy', a representational regime premised on the ideal of eliminating dissensus. I base my claim partly on a skepticism toward the institutional insistence on a language that is supposedly proper to the qualities defining the audience to which it is addressed. This language would be general to suit a like audience, presumably accessible to everyone, whoever this 'everyone' may be; it would be a transparently communicative and 'interdisciplinary' language, one that transcended the narrow scope of any discipline. This aspect of the demand would in and of itself be enough to warrant critical attention and analysis. But there is something else to consider here, the fact that "jargon" has another meaning: "A barbarous, rude, or debased language or variety of speech; a 'lingo'; used esp. of a hybrid speech arising from a mixture of languages. Also applied contemptuously to a language by one who does not understand it." The two meanings of 'jargon' might at first seem to be opposed. In the first sense, the incomprehensibility of a language stems from its overly particular nature; in the second, from its mixture of dissimilar elements. Both definitions though suppose the ideal state of language to be characterized by propriety. The first understanding then does not preclude but operates according to the same logic as the second, if what is at stake in both is the question of what is the exact nature of the relationship between a language and the parties involved in any language event. If there is a double anxiety at stake here then—that language may be
simultaneously too specific, and not specific enough—both elements of this anxiety attest to a language that is somehow improper to the identities of the parties involved. Inherent in the very definitions of jargon, and explicit in the demand to not use it, is the idea that incomprehensibility is something to be shut down in the name of communication and consensus. This is of course as if we could solve such a ‘problem’ of language so easily.

If the two definitions operate according to the same logic, nevertheless they are not equivalent in their respective designations of classes of people. “Scholars or philosophers, scientists or artists” evokes a different image and responds to a different concern than “the Negro of the United States.” Along with the fear of miscegenation suggested in the reference to the ‘hybrid’ and the ‘barbarous, rude, and debased’, we have here an example of jargon being considered incomprehensible because it is the speech of a racial type, and one that inhabits a low position in the hierarchy of such types. In this sense, the connection of the second meaning of jargon to the first, to the one we are more familiar with, may seem counterintuitive: after all, the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second. We will want to examine, however, how the two are complicit. Understanding this complicity goes to the question of how the university institution envisions its relationship to the public; we might say that the demand to not use jargon responds not just to the decision-making needs of individuals, but reflects back to the university an image of itself as the purveyor of democratic values to a larger society as it strives to achieve the goal of greater inclusion. In other words, the first definition of jargon is employed to supposedly work against the kind of bald racism reflected in the second.
Language as Jargon

So, we are saying that jargon—that language itself—is both not specific enough and too specific, and furthermore that not only can we not simply shut down these operations of language, but also that the effort to do so in the name of a democratic representationalism should suggest to us a point of critical investigation. But how is it that language is simultaneously too specific and not specific enough? Gayatri Spivak poses and answers this question within the framework of a discussion of nominalism, a critical practice of naming that is mindful of the simultaneity of the necessity of naming and the ‘misfiring’ that is the work of any name.6 In making any sort of argument that wants to locate and address problems of privilege and injustice (Spivak gives the example of the use of ‘power’ to do this), the well-intentioned scholar must nonetheless rely upon language and how it means. And this ‘how’ of meaning is violent; language is violent in its very foundation. Any naming, any definition, is enabled by difference (as both differing and deferral).7 So nominalism is not merely pragmatic, a contingency imposed after the fact given the imperfect functioning of language. Rather it is necessary, insofar as meaning is only possible as an epistemic violence. In this regard, Spivak’s analysis shows how it is that catachresis, the perversion of tropes or acts of naming that are only ever proximate, can exist in simultaneity with paleonymy, with specificity or the empirical. Any name misnames. Nevertheless a name is needed; we have no choice but to use a name.8

To have an understanding of the catachrestic nature of the name is to say that language is not an imposition upon a natural immediacy of speech to mind because of its distance from the referent. If representation is often thought of as being most proper when it takes a ‘democratic’ form, this is because language is often understood as a tool for the purpose of an expressive representation, though a tool that is often doomed to fail because of its distance from the referent ‘itself’. At the same time, while the notion of catachresis might at first seem to make us safe from the many drawbacks of assuming that we can ‘use’ language to accurately name and fully represent someone or something, even having this understanding of language cannot allow us to escape empiricism, given those traces of the referent that are “the consequences of paleonymy.”9 Or to put it another way, even if we recognize the impossibility of the meeting of the representation and the referent, this does not mean that we can exempt ourselves, as intellectuals, from the work of representation. For the withering away of representation would be the same as its achievement; it would be the ultimate success of expression, the making transparent of language. Understanding the necessity of nominalism and hence the inescapability of the empirical “is not to ‘fail’, this is the new making-visible of a ‘success’ that does not conceal or bracket problems.”10 It is a problem to name because naming is always a success.

Why is this understanding of language of concern to us at all when it comes to the issue of the representative functions of the university? Because it gets us to a notion of the ‘problems’ of language that does not take these problems to be ones of misunderstanding, miscommunication, or misreading—that is, as problems that can or should be solved per se. The relationship
between catachresis and paleonymy, between underspecificity and overspecificity, is never definitive, because language itself is limited, it is not identical to itself—”(o)ne bleeds into the other at all times.”11 The thinking of catachresis and paleonymy as having a relationship other than one of opposition may be crucial if we are interested in rethinking the relationship between the two senses of jargon. Or, we might say that it suggests the very need to think this relationship in the first place. It suggests that the question at stake is not that of how, as members of the university, we participate in the goal of achieving a more perfect representation of the until-now-excluded, but rather that of what work is done by the very presumption that we could either on the one hand have the ability to achieve such an inclusion, or on the other hand willfully and completely detach ourselves from the tricky representational mandates of the institution. Even if our skepticism of the demand to not use jargon has led us to a critique of the university’s preferred methods of inclusion, we are nonetheless complicit with them. Thus we must address the racialism inherent in the definition of these functions of language as the two primary ways in which it ‘fails’: the barbarity of the language of mixed origin; the inability of the too specific language to adequately represent an implied racialized public, a public that has not yet but should (will) be included.

**Remember to Take Your Language Medicine**

How many times must the demand to not use jargon be repeated? An infinite number of times, for language is jargony. The work of the demand is never complete, although it wants to be and works toward this potentiality (which it posits as an inevitability). Why this anxiety over the jargony aspects of language? One answer, the answer I am most concerned with here, is that they threaten the work of “consensus democracy,” and the logic of inclusion undergirding it.

If the proposed inclusion would be achieved precisely via a shutting down of catachresis and paleonymy, we will want to ask to what extent this ‘inclusion’ in fact aims to effect a management of difference.

Jacques Rancière’s concern with precisely this question is motivated by his attention to the current popularity of the lauding of the ‘fall’ of totalitarianism and the ‘rise’ of democracy. Questioning what is at stake in this particular interpretation of the current scene of state power leads him to a profound critique of consensus democracy and its demand for inclusion (of everyone, and of all different categories of identity). In the end, consensus democracy’s logic of inclusion is a logic of extermination. It may seem strange to us at first that consensus democracy could be ‘for’ anything other than inclusion. For Rancière, however, the question to be asked here is not that of how inclusion can best be achieved, but of what understanding of the relationship between the political community as a whole and its constituent parts enables the very argument for inclusion. Asking how bodies are seen as being distributed in the community gets us to what is at stake in the consensus system, which seems to be so
invested in implementing an equal opportunity for everyone's voice to be heard. The positing of democracy as consensus calls for representation to be achieved through a profoundly sociological gesture, one that would match up names with their appropriate bodies: “The declared success of democracy is accompanied by a reduction of democracy to a certain state of social relationships. The success of democracy, in our societies, would then consist in its hitting on a coincidence between its political form and its tangible being.”

The new racism that has been attendant upon the so-called rise of democracy, and that is the object of Rancière’s concern, is a determined effort to simultaneously enforce a proper identity for individual groups and to eliminate those identities which are improper to ‘the people’, where what is proper in a sociological sense is the ultimate measure of value. The form that racism takes in the consensus society is that of a demand for “the identity between the people and the population reflected in each person.” If the conception of the people as a political community is supposed to be identical to the sociological characteristics of the population, then the individual must be of a certain appropriate type. This is how ‘inclusion’ becomes achieved in consensus, as in fact the management of difference through the exclusion of the improper. The law “turns its unity into the mode of reflection of a community separating itself from its Other. In dealing with the problem of immigrants, the law, of course, proposes to act for justice and peace.” In demanding that individual voices be heard insofar as they represent a (racial or ethnic) identity, the consensus system is in its basic logic no different from the project of exterminating the improper identity.

The consensus system represents itself to itself as the world of law as opposed to the world of nonlaw—the world of barbaric identity, religion, or ethnicity. But in that world of subjects strictly identified with their ethnicity, their race, or with that people guided by divine light, in these wars between tribes fighting to occupy the entire territory of those who share their identity, the consensus system also contemplates the extreme caricature of its reasonable dream: a world cleansed of surplus identities, peopled by real bodies endowed with properties expressed by their name.

Consensus democracy claims to inaugurate the new order of equal-rights humanitarianism in a world divided by a blindly traditionalist allegiance to identity. In fact, it simply proposes to do a better job of that project which it is supposed to be working against, the project of racism. For a fully realized inclusion would put an end to inequality by eliminating the basis for dissensus or disagreement, the impropriety of the name that is at once both too specific and not specific enough. Consensual law proposes to eliminate the tendency to think of people as belonging to ill-defined identity groups—this is what it takes racism to be, the classification of people according to inaccurate categories—and hence to eliminate exclusionary thinking itself. But in the end this can only be done “at the cost of putting a face to this indefinable Other who excites feelings of fear and rejection.” What must be identified, and then eliminated, is precisely that barbarous element which is charged with invoking exclusion.

Language is dangerous to the consensus system because it creates the possibility of the
‘supernumerary’ body or identity, the properties of which are in question because they are not expressed by a name. In taking language to be primarily instrumentalist and ideally communicative, the demand to not use jargon is also a demand for the propriety of the identity or group being represented (in language, or institutionally, or politically). “The arguments of misconstruction and misunderstanding ... call for two types of language medicine, both consisting similarly in finding out what speaking means.”17 It is a particular understanding of language then that motivates and enables consensus democracy, a community built through clear communication, in which political representation is matched by a semiotic representation that does a good job of counting and accounting for. That is, consensus democracy wants to find out what speaking means, rather than ask what makes speech possible or what motivates our very account of speech itself. Speech after all is, and has been, so closely allied with the concepts of liberty, of freedom through proper representation, that to question how we understand democracy we of necessity come to another question, that of how we understand speech.

“An Ethnocentrism Thinking Itself as Anti-Ethnocentrism”

In Rancière’s democracy, a democracy not characterized by consensus, the possibility for politics is located in the conditions of a speech situation, that is, in disagreement.18 All political argument, indeed ‘any interlocutionary situation’, is founded in a dispute over what we can ascertain about this very situation, a situation premised upon the idea that a language is being understood by the parties involved. What can be concluded from the fact that understanding is occurring in any given speech situation? On one side of the dispute we have the instrumentalist approach to language: what can be said about the condition of understanding is that something has been successfully transmitted (and in Rancière, this ‘something’ is more specifically a command given to an inferior). On the other side, we have a proposal that is radically upsetting to consensus democracy, because it does not suppose equality to be something that needs to be achieved: “the inferior has understood the superior’s order because the inferior takes part in the same community of speaking beings and so is, in this sense, their equal.”19 Hence ‘equality’ is ‘democratic’ for Rancière not because it is the unfolding of democracy’s internal logic, but because it is the paradoxical foundation of inequality: “there is a common speech situation because an inferior understands what a superior is saying.”20 Equality comes about because the part and the whole are fundamentally mismatched, disidentified. It is the condition of an irresolvable dispute, as the people, “this party that is not one identifies its improper property with the exclusive principle of community and identifies its name—the name of the indistinct mass of men of no position—with the name of the community itself.”21

Consensus democracy wants to bring about equality by shutting politics down, ending it. In all of the discourses that Rancière considers, it is the achievement of a ‘real politics’—
speaking to and for the public, by accurately accounting for their identities, matching up names with bodies—that is called for precisely in the effort to end politics. And this achievement is, over and over again, articulated as possible through the elimination of miscommunication, as if this would do away with the different accounts that are made of speech, or disagreement itself. If the argument for democratic communication expresses an anxiety toward and attempts to mitigate the simultaneously paleonymic and catachrestic nature of language, this then necessarily bears upon not only speech but the account that is made of it.

The problem is not for people speaking ‘different languages’, literally or figuratively, to understand each other, any more that it is for ‘linguistic breakdowns’ to be overcome by the invention of new languages. The problem is knowing whether the subjects who count in the interlocution ‘are’ or ‘are not’, whether they are speaking or just making a noise. The quarrel has nothing to do with more or less transparent or opaque linguistic contents; it has to do with consideration of speaking beings as such.

Hence the understanding of non-consensual speech as miscommunication ultimately bars consideration of which identities ‘speech’ is seen as being proper to in the first place. The demand for consensus operates with an understanding of language as fallen in its representative function, as violent not in an epistemic sense but in a secondary sense. And the perception of the violence of language as secondary—as breakdown, miscommunication, misunderstanding—founders a particular description of the civilizational path of man.

Is it the degeneration of democracy (a democracy more true to itself) that has brought about the rise of intensified state racisms? Does injustice work secondarily—as a degradation of the social order, as a wrong that occurs because of inequality—arising after the fact, interjecting itself? Or does the decrying of such a degeneration itself express a desire for a past originary community, to be achieved again through a sociological account? The latter is Jacques Derrida’s question in Grammatology. We will also remember that here he traces the complicity of a long history of thought on democratic political community with a profound ethnocentrism—but more than this, and important to this discussion in particular, “an ethnocentrism thinking itself as anti-ethnocentrism.” This is an ethnocentrism that is motivated by an ethics of building a political community that is properly representative, and that even lauds the (imagined) small, native, pre-contact community as the symbol of this ideal. This ethnocentric celebration of a supposedly anti-ethnocentric embrace of the native community relies upon an understanding of language that would split speech and writing, making the latter an incursion upon the self-presence expressed in speech. Thus ‘writing’ is described as a fundamental characteristic of civilization even as it represents the loss of an ideal political community. For example, in Levi-Strauss there is on the one hand “the theme of a necessary or rather fatal degradation, as the very form of progress; on the other hand, nostalgia for what preceded this degradation, ... the small communities that have provisionally protected themselves from corruption ... a corruption linked, as in Rousseau, to writing and to the dislocation of a unanimous people assembled in the self-presence of its
Lévi-Strauss is decrying the violence of language (and in particular the violence of writing) as interpretation imposed upon those subject to the violence of contact itself. Given this ‘critical’ account of colonialist knowledge production, it then falls upon the anthropologist to restore our belief in the proximity of mind and voice, to locate the living example of man’s fundamental capacity for speech. Hence “the anthropologist’s mission carries an ethical significance: to find and fix on that terrain the ‘levels of authenticity.’ The criterion of authenticity is the ‘neighborliness’ in the small communities where ‘everyone knows everyone else.’”

The sympathy of Derrida’s critique of such a presumed ‘ethical significance’ with Rancière’s own critique of consensus democracy suggests to us the extent to which inclusion within the consensus regime is in the name of an ethnocentrism thinking itself as anti-ethnocentrism. Or, in the terms of the new racism that Rancière wants to describe, an inclusion of ethnic and racial identities through the goal of making the part equivalent to and expressive of the qualities of the whole. “Everyone is included in advance, every individual is the nucleus and image of a community of opinions that are equal to parties, of problems that are reducible to shortages, and of rights that are identical to energies.” If on Rancière’s account inclusion is equivalent to the elimination of the disidentification of the part and the whole, we might say that he too understands speech to be neither that natural quality inherent to man nor that which would ensure an authenticity of the ‘democratic process’ through the matching up of political claims with sociological identities. Politics then, in Rancière’s sense, would not be based in identification, in self-sameness. It would arise in a moment of disidentification, in which the capacity for speech is claimed despite the equation of a particular identity with the capacity only to produce noise. “Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise.”

The ethnocentrism of the desire for the self-present community is, in the jargon-free university, evident in the argument for the ability of the subaltern to represent her own interests: we must learn to make our own language more inclusive, in order to better recognize her own voice. We will remember Spivak’s famous critique here: In already answering with a yes the implied though unasked question of ‘can the subaltern speak?’, the well-meaning intellectual does nothing more than reaffirm that the subaltern emits a noise. The mistake Spivak is pointing to is the assumption that because we have a critique of the subject—and particularly of the representative functions of the intellectual as unified, coherent, knowing subject—the intellectual can now acknowledge the subaltern’s self-made identity, from which would be produced a political claim. This reinstalls, uncritically, the subject, and in this sense what cannot be recognized is the account given of speech; it is still supposed that, from the condition of understanding, we can construe that something has been transmitted. The inevitable contamination of the catachrestic by the empirical—the fact that our very critiques of the status quo rely on this operation of language, the fact that our analyses always center the subject—goes unacknowledged in this understanding of ‘speech’. And the resulting definition of politics is as enacted by a pre-constituted social entity, identical to itself.
To work against the demand to represent oneself in the purity of a specifically defined identity, we might understand the claiming of speech as a moment of disidentification (not emitting a noise, but making heard a discourse). If politics for Rancière is precisely that which attends to the question of the speech situation, what Spivak allows us to understand is that, nonetheless, we are not saying that we can (or should) ‘do away with empiricism’ in order to engage in a critique of a sociological account of identity (as what would lead to the best manifestation of consensus democracy). If we cannot shut down the operation of empiricism, this suggests then the need for an attention to the failures of success. In consensus democracy, “... there emerges here, there, and everywhere an ethnic people pinned down as identical to themselves, as one body set up against others.”32 Thus it is a profound skepticism toward success that in fact underlies Rancière’s insistence that politics is rare, precisely because of the threat that it will be ended through its very achievement.

Democracy is an Impropriety

Disagreement is the very condition of possibility of democracy, if we take democracy to be the disruption of precisely the demand for propriety that is made by the system of consensual political representation in its sociological count of identities. The demand for propriety is a demand not only for accuracy (which I have talked about in terms of which kinds of languages are supposed to match which kinds of bodies, and hence provide the expressive means of representation), but furthermore decency. If one of the implied messages of the demand to not use jargon is a devaluation of ‘theory’, we might also draw a complicity between two of the concepts that this demand deploys: the decent and the useful. In this regard, Rancière takes up the presumed indecency of speaking of, thinking about, those events in the history of racism and ethnocentrism that are recognized to be the most horrible. This presumed indecency is indebted to the same logic of ‘realism’ that calls for the pinning down of a group as identical to itself through the elimination of the remainder: “… the advocates of progress as well as those of law and order have decided to accept as legitimate only those claims made by real groups that take the floor in person and themselves state their own identity. No one had the right now to call themselves a prole, a black, a Jew, or a woman if they are not, if they do not possess native entitlement and the social experience.”33 For the purposes of effecting ‘genuine political’ change, realism demands not only empirical accuracy, but furthermore a decent form of speaking. These two realist demands correspond with two senses of ‘propriety’: essence, individuality, on the one hand; correct behavior, good manners, and a moral sensibility on the other. “Rightness, correctness, justice, accuracy.”34 Under the logic of realism, “political dispute is impossible for two reasons, because its violence cripples reasonable dispute between parties and because the facetiousness of its polemical embodiments is an insult to the victims of absolute wrong. Politics must then yield before massacre, thought bow out before the unthinkable.”35
The absolutely crucial aspect of Rancière’s analysis in this regard is the implication that the kind of argument that says ‘mere thought does not do anything political’, while made in the name of inclusion, is in fact allied with the same logic that calls for extermination of the supernumerary body (the individual who is not of an appropriate type to secure the identity of the people and the population). ‘Mere thought’—and according to the demand to not use jargon, language that misfires, and hence has no effective use—has become indecent, and furthermore this indecency extends to political subjectification itself. Dispute is indecent because it is unreasonable, because it supposedly causes miscommunication, ‘closes down conversation’ between parties, and is an “insult to the victims of absolute wrong.”36 One cannot in effect discuss an event like the holocaust, think about it, posit it as in the realm of the thinkable at all. Because this would be to question the consensual logic that demands the matching up of identities and bodies without remainder—ultimate accuracy and decency, ‘justice’ in fact.

The ‘unthinkable’ is thought as such because of the demand for representation, for a self-present identity that voices the truth of its being. This is not a situation confined to a recognizably racist event like the holocaust; it is Rancière’s ‘utopia of postdemocracy’ at work, working to achieve itself and end the problems with ‘mistrepresentation’—“(i)n it the people are never again uneven, uncountable, or unrepresentable.”37 We might say then that it is her place within a particular ‘phrase regimen’, but also the situation of being pinned down to an identity, that makes it impossible for the victim of oppression to claim speech (in Rancière’s sense).38

To have ‘really seen with his own eyes’ a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber.39

The unthinkable is thought as such because of a consensual demand for a sociological form of proof. The victim can only speak to her identity, which (in the instance Lyotard gives of the holocaust victim) is defined by death, disappearance, an ultimate silence. This means that, in being true to her identity, the ‘victim’ cannot speak and hence cannot prove her victimization. At the same time, it is in the name of better representation that human rights become emptied of any political possibility; subjectification, speech as the capacity for discourse, cannot be claimed. Humanity itself has become ‘victim’, and no one in particular can lay claim to the identity of humanity, as this would be inaccurate and indecent: “The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible.”40 Humanity as victim: the part matches the whole.

If Rancière has a quarrel with a universal humanity defined by wordless victimhood, this is not because he advocates a catalogue of proper identities through representation in speech.
He would question, along with Derrida, the understanding of speech as an innate quality of man even at his most naked and dispossessed. And this question arises not because it is supposed that an original capacity for speech has been lost with the advent of a nonpolitical humanity, but because speech neither signifies nor secures self-presence. Democracy is an impropriety for Rancière because it does not institute a politics that is oriented toward achievement of its true nature. Politics ‘consists of’ difference to itself.41 The ‘solution’ most commonly offered up to this supposed problem is “to achieve the essence of politics by eliminating this difference from itself,” to make names cohere with bodies in order to ‘really do’ politics.42 How does Rancière describe the difference of politics from itself? I read in Disagreement a sense that politics erupts, in a moment of radical contingency, from a space that is neither precisely inside nor outside what he calls the police order (the institutionalization and legitimization of standards for the proper distribution of bodies and the achievement of consensus).43 This is what a consideration of the impropriety of language gets us: politics happens not as a movement from the outside, as if the police order itself were self-sufficient and self-identical in its power to police, but as the upwelling of that upon which the police order relies and yet which is not identical to it. This gives us the sense of Rancière’s political subjection, which for him is always in the mode of a disidentification. This is not just the refusal of an identity (as if this were possible); the disidentification in question is of the part and the whole. Rather than being the organic development of a community coming to consciousness of itself, political subjection is a heterological condition. Politics is about a basic miscount of community parts, a miscount that is the impossible equality of the multiple and the whole. And so it is dispute that institutes politics. This dispute is, crucially, not between “constituted parties of the population, for it is a conflict over the very count of those parties.”44 Or, we can say that it is a conflict over the meaning of equality that can be ascertained from the condition of understanding, “... the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings.”45

How then do we understand this argument in the context of the university’s own efforts to define decency, to describe what can or cannot be said, in the name of a more fully realized project of inclusion? Can a transparent, perfectly interdisciplinary language arrive after the fact, to restore order and self-proximity—the speech that is the capacity of man even at his most naked—to the degraded political community of the university, degraded through the institution of artificial exclusions and barriers to communication? Or is language itself a function of difference, a violence that can never be redressed? In fact, when Rancière comes to describe what he understands by ‘disagreement’, one of the first examples he provides is of an academic moment of anxiety over the simultaneous overspecifity and underspecifity of language. The violence of language, its jargony aspects, could never be ended in the name of transparent communication and ideal representation:

It would no doubt be convenient if, to say just what he understands by justice, the philosopher had entirely different words at his disposal from those of the poet, the merchant, the orator, or the politician. Where philosophy runs up against poetry, politics, and the wisdom of honest merchants, it has to borrow the others’ words in
order to say that it is saying something else entirely. It is in this that disagreement lies and not mere misunderstanding, which can be resolved by a simple explanation of what the other’s sentence is saying—unbeknownst to this other.46

To say something specific, in the name of a specific disciplinary work, words must be borrowed. This is the bleeding-in of catachresis and paleonymy.

The end of jargon, the achievement of a jargon-free discourse, would be the achievement and hence end of politics in the university. The call for clear communication in a form that ‘we all’ can understand does nothing more than support and further ‘the reign of a humanity equal to itself’, in which ‘humanity’ is the name “for a whole that is equal to the sum of its elements, each having the common property of the whole.”47 Yet if speech is not a capacity inherent in man even at his most naked—if writing, representational language, does not supervene upon this capacity—then it might be claimed by those who are only supposed to emit a noise. Claimed in the moment of political subjectification, it would be a capacity not rightly belonging to any particular identity; it would be a barbarous, rude, and debased language. Democracy happens in the university not because of an inclusion of those who we presume cannot understand us by making ourselves more intelligible; it happens when such an attempt to make the part equivalent to the whole is refused. But this debased language cannot simply and conclusively be reclaimed for the side of the good, or what we can now recognize to be the right choice of a better-informed, politically-minded constituency. For speech is claimed, and political subjectification arises, precisely at the moment of the threat that it will be shut down through a reestablished propriety between name and body.

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Notes

1. For example in funding applications, job letters, course descriptions, speaking engagements.
3. Jacques Rancière sees ‘consensus democracy’ as a contradiction in terms, which is his way of suggesting a profound skepticism toward the demand for consensus, whether that take the form of consent or agreed-upon dissent. He understands democracy as, rather, disagreement. Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999).
4. “Jargon” OED online.
5. One of the examples given in the OED in support of the ‘barbarous, rude, or debased’ definition is a reference to ‘the Negro jargon of the United States’.
7. Spivak, “More on Power/Knowledge” 27. This of course references the idea that difference is the source of meaning or linguistic value. See Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) 52.


18. “Democracy is not the parliamentary system or the legitimate State. It is not a state of the social either, the reign of individualism or of the masses. Democracy is, in general, politics’ mode of subjectification if, by politics, we mean something other than the organization of bodies as a community and the management of places, powers, and functions. Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualize in the broader concept of the police.” Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 99.


22. “The equality of anyone and everyone becomes the immediate effectiveness of a sovereign people, itself identical to scientific modeling and forecasting operating on an empirical population carved up exactly into its parts.” Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 105.

23. “Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt.” Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 22-23.


25. Derrida, Of Grammatology 120.

26. “The ideal profoundly underlying this philosophy of writing is therefore the image of a community immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members are within earshot.” Derrida, Of Grammatology 136. It is in the interest of exposing and critiquing this ideal that Derrida suggests that all language is “writing.”

27. Derrida, Of Grammatology 134.


34. “Propriety,” OED online.


38. Rancière clearly takes much inspiration from Jean-François Lyotard’s The Differend: Phrases in
Dispute, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). However, Rancière distinguishes his own approach in locating disagreement not in the conditions of a 'phrase regimen' but in that of a 'speech situation': “Disagreement clearly is not to do with words alone. It generally bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves. In this, disagreement differs from what Jean-François Lyotard has conceptualized as a differend. Disagreement is not concerned with issues such as the heterogeneity of regimes of sentences and the presence or absence of a rule for assessing different types of heterogeneous discourse. It is less concerned with arguing than with what can be argued, the presence or absence of a common object between X and Y.” Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy xi-xii. So my discussion of Lyotard here is through the lens of Rancière.

42. Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 63.
44. Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 100.
47. Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy 125.