Talking with Europeans

Tales of free speech, democracy, and culture

Hoegaerts, J.

He tells her that the world is flat

He knows the facts, and that is that

In altercations fierce and long

She tries her best to prove him wrong.

But he has learned to argue well,

He calls her argument unsound

And often asks her not to yell

She cannot win. He stands his ground.

The planet goes on being round.

(Wendy Cope)

Mister Rector Magnificus, Madam Dean, dear colleagues and friends,

When Wendy Cope wrote *Differences of opinion,* in 2006, she might have had an inkling about the changes and portmanteaus to come.[1] The poem is often cited as an early iteration of the now fairly common term 'mansplaining'.[2] This is how it is read, almost exclusively. *He* has learned to argue well. *She,* poor thing, has not. There are, of course, many things to be said about gendered practices of disagreement (and I will probably say some of them today), but I increasingly find myself reading the line slightly differently. He has *learned* to argue well. In the briefest moment of existentialism, Cope calls our attention to the constructed quality of the act of disagreement. Good debate is made, not given. One is not born, but rather becomes argumentative.

There is value, I think, in trying to understand how this process works, and how it has worked in the past. To not only study what it means 'to argue well', but also to lay bare how this particular skill has been passed on, and who has been allowed to develop it. And to pay attention to whose skills are recognized as arguing well. Being able to communicate convincingly may seem intrinsically important, but its particular shape is historically and culturally contingent: what counts as *arguing well* in the Aula of the university of Amsterdam may earn you ridicule at a dinner table in Flanders, and vice versa. And although clever repartee, frank statements of opinion and stringent debate are central parts of various cultures around the world, we can probably claim that 'arguing well' as it is defined by Cope (that is, with sound arguments and composure) has been central to a European sense of self for centuries.

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[1] Wendy Cope, 'Differences of Opinion', *Poetry Magazine,* 2006.

[2] The term mainsplaining is usually attributed to Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me,* Haymarket Books, 2014.

Those of us who study the histories and practices of arguing (that is, rhetoric) often claim – perhaps a little grandiosely – that speech and debate are crucial in performing identity, and thus also crucial in performing the cultural work of being European. In other words, by constructing arguments according to the tacit rules of debate, and by modulating our voice to a tone that will be heard as reasonable by our colleagues, or friends, or even (or especially) our enemies, we turn ourselves into acceptable inhabitants of this part of the world. Additionally, by talking in such a manner – by talking with Europeans, but also by talking *as* Europeans - we also help to shape a modern European identity.

Most of us do so intuitively: the rules of *arguing well* are the soup we swim in, and especially in education we unwittingly pass them on too. We teach a generation of young critical European citizens to become part of an international community built on principles of democratic exchange of opinion, of negotiation, of mutual understanding, and of *arguing well.* Or those, at least, are the tales we tell ourselves. Because while we are mounting our reasonable arguments and managing our moderate tone, the rules of debate are changing.

This is nothing new, of course, rhetorical styles and conversational fashions come and go, we know the ancient Greeks had very particular preferences and rules for speech, Renaissance thinkers published widely on how to speak well, and in some places the eighteenth century turned into a 'golden age' of oratory because people cared so deeply about rhetoric and conversation – and yet something fundamental seems to be at stake now, as the very basic assumptions about good debate are increasingly called into question. Most obvious, perhaps, are the rising questions about *who* is in fact allowed into public spaces of debate, and whose voices are taken seriously when they ring out. Movements like #MeToo and BlackLivesMatter have exposed the myths that underpin so many of our beliefs about the intrinsically democratic quality of the European tacit rules of debate. That is, they have shown that the promise of arguing well only holds for those who have a seat at the table to begin with, and that the admonishment to not yell is not directed at all equally. Current anxieties about perceived threats to the old order of arguing well (the spectre of cancel culture) are in many ways a reaction to this exposure of the imperfections of the European democratic rules of debate. After all, if our implicit basic rules of debate do *not* hold up, if insisting on a balanced, reasonable tone does *not* ensure fair representation for all, where does that leave our carefully crafted image of a society of mutual understanding, built on enlightened ideals of unity and diversity? And what about our prized tradition, our hard-fought liberty. What about free speech?

Private opinions, public speech

The idea, or perhaps the ideal, of free speech has become such a symbol of western modernity, and has lately been such a contested issue, that most of us will now have a pretty good idea of what it commonly means – even if we may disagree on exactly how it should be enforced. In fact, free speech is so familiar to us as a trope that it is easy to forget that its definition can, should and indeed has been changeable over time. Although the general idea of freedom of expression has been around for a while – it is closely intertwined with liberalism as an ideology – the terminology of freedom of expression has changed considerably in recent history. John Pentland Mahaffy, for example, who wrote extensively both on politics and on the mechanics of speech during the second half of the nineteenth century, saw liberty of opinion as the 'right to private judgment'.[3] In other

[3] John Pentland Mahaffy, *The Decay of Modern Preaching: an Essay*, Macmillan & co, 1882.

words, holding and formulating opinions was, to him, deeply important, but it was separated from making those opinions public. At the same time, we know that Mahaffy lived in a time when there was a great appetite for public speech: this was the time of platform speeches, of hedge preachers, and of the heydays of speaker's corner in Hyde Park: the connection between freedom of opinion and freedom of speech was arguably formed as well at this time.

The last couple of years have seen a number of innovative and illuminating studies of ideologies of freedom in which an intellectual history of free speech can be imagined. Annelien De Dijn's 'unruly' history of freedom for example, or Hedwig Richter's new history of democracy.[4] But, as the very visceral tension around so-called cancel culture shows, free speech is not only an idea, it is also a conglomerate of very concrete practices. Even if our current obsession with online messaging and broadcasting of opinions obscures it, free speech is also, quite crucially, a matter of speech – it resounds with both the individual eccentricities and the shared cultural norms we inhabit.

This was understood by the classical authors we generally recognize as the 'founding fathers' of the European tradition of arguing well. Quintillian, in his *Institutio Oratoria,* accorded a very high value to delivery as the only means to actually make rhetorical style *work* in practice.[5] Our spaces for public speech are not the agora, of course (even if some would like to pretend that the internet is a modern agora), but I would like to suggest that *pronunctiatio* and *actio* have remained important well beyond the advent of modernity. In fact, they may have become of a more general value as the role of rhetoric in our lives has changed. Unlike the democracies that Artistotle or Quintillian inhabited, most of us now live in world where political speech *is* in fact fairly achievable to all of us. Sure, most of us have sketchy memories and even worse habits when it comes to putting together a stylized or structured argument, and most of us mumble a bit too much to really embrace the rules of pronunctiatio, but rhetoric in its modern form lies at least in theory within reach for all of us. It is easy to believe, in modern western democracies, what rhetoric promises: that freedom and political agency are in fact entangled with good speech. Or, to put it more bluntly, that anyone can have power and influence as long as they manage to sell themselves well enough. This is in fact a common complaint in modern democracies, and the following comment by self-described stammering professor Benjamin Beasley, at the turn of the twentieth century, may very well sound familiar to many of you:

> Where only the power of speech, or vulgarly speaking "the gift of the gab" is present, the owner of it will always make himself superior to those around him of his own class. […] We have only to look at the House of Commons to see there, men possessing neither a great amount of knowledge nor a great amount of brains, but who have made themselves acquainted with a few set phrases, bring themselves forward, and are looked upon amongst their own class as marvellous men.[6]

The promise that a democracy based on talk carries – that anyone can just speak up and be heard – is an appealing one, but ultimately undercut by realizations like Benjamin Beasley's. In parliament, a place that literally was made for talking, its name derived from the word 'parlare',[7] that was as true

[4] Annelien De Dijn, *Freedom: an Unruly History,* Harvard University Press, 2020; Hedwig Richter, *Demokratie: eine Deutsche Affäre,* C.H. Beck, 2020.
[5] Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria,* translated by Harold Edgeworth Butler, *Loeb Classical Library,* 1920.
[6] Benjamin Beasley, *Reminiscences of a stammerer*, The Roxburghe Press, 1902.
[7] See e.g. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More,* MIT Press, 2005.

as it was elsewhere. For parliament, no matter how liberal the regime, is governed by rules.[8] In other words, the democratic chamber, a place explicitly designed for equality and inclusion can turn into a place of exclusion. Not knowing the tacit rules for political exchange could and can significantly curtail one's access to political debate.[9]

This is perhaps why 'learning how to argue well' became such an important part of schooling – and particularly of wealthy young men's schooling. Debating clubs specifically became a tool to instil the skills and confidence that Wendy Cope knew so well – and that we still encounter, occasionally, on parliamentary benches *and* on school benches. As so called 'nurseries' for political talent, debating clubs were especially suited to straddle the complex ambiguity of the promises of free speech and democracy. They somehow both express values of universality and inclusivity (join us!'' they say, you can learn how to be part of the club here!''), and at the same time they are very active in upholding the exclusionary practices of political participation by supporting a number of peculiar traditions, habits, and modes of speech.

The democracy of speech

The ideals as well as the practices embedded in debating clubs are expressed clearly in a song entitled *Our Debating Society*, and published at the beginning of the twentieth century in a volume gathering a number of unison songs for boys for the use of boy schools. The first verse delineated the goals of such societies simply (a recording of the song by *Akateeminen Laulu* conducted by Dominik Vogt can be consulted in conjunction with this paper. **Recording 1**).[10]

> I'm sure you'll hear with pleasure
>
> to occupy our leisure,
>
> We've form'd a big society
>
> debating once a week.
>
> And ev'ry blessed fellow
>
> Who'd talk or bawl or bellow
>
> Has join'd us and considers it
>
> a privilege to speak.

According to debating societies like the one described in this song, speech was a universal tool for political participation. "Every blessed fellow" could learn it, and a slew of handbooks came out in the nineteenth century to introduce all these fellows to the logic of debate, and the finer points of speaking well. The instructions in these manuals could be remarkably specific – and they also demonstrate some of the finer differences between different European cultures of speech and debate. A well-known handbook published in the first half of the nineteenth century in France, for

[8] See e.g. Anne Heyer, Anne Petterson and Henk te Velde (eds.) "Ruling the Assembly: Procedural fairness, popular emotion, and access to democracy in Western Europe, in the nineteenth to twentieth centuryies", special issue of *Parliaments, Estates and Representation,* vol. 44, 2024.

[9] For a more fully developed argument on this issue, see Josephine Hoegaerts, "Fairness and Fluency: the political audibility of 'newcomers' in Victorian debating clubs and public meetings, 1870–1910, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 44:1, 34-47

[10] W.J. Foxell, 'Our Debating Society', *Unison Songs. 6 Songs for Boys,* Augener &co, [ca.1910].

example, detailed where one was to hold one's hands during a speech, documenting a rather theatrical style geared toward the communication of emotion.

> La main joue un très grand rôle dans la recitation. C'est elle qui fait connaître ce que nous désirons et ce que nous repoussons. Lorsqu'elle exprime le désir de posséder ou d'attirer, le dedans de la main est toujour tourné vers le corps. *Venez à moi!*
>
> Tandis que, lorsqu'elle marque la répulsion, le dedans de la main est tourné en dehors. *Vous me faites horreur!*[11]

Toward the end of the century, a British collection of 'hints to speakers' contained a rather stern warning to speakers to not overstay their welcome on the house floor:

> When a man rises to address a meeting, called for business rather than talk, he should make up his mind beforehand to deal only with a few salient ideas, and to stick to them. There are very few men in every-day life who can effectively cover a large number of points, and secure the willing attention of their hearers for as long as 20 minutes. Hence my reason for suggesting that a speaker who is no more than an average one (whatever he may fancy himself to be), should exclusively confine himself to 2 or 3, or a very few distinct points, and then sit down. [12]

In short, to argue well required a speaker to stick to the subject, to be strictly for or against something, to express a recognizable emotion – or rather, convey an emotion for the audience to pick up on – and to be able to express all his arguments on said subject in one coherent narrative, that was not too long.

Upholding these rules was the chairman of the meeting, who was expected to be 'scrupulously fair', as the second verse of our song for boys points out.

> A scrupulously fair man
>
> has been elected Chairman
>
> and he from strict impartiality will never budge
>
> If on a row we border
>
> He cries out "Order! Order!"
>
> Of parliament'ry terms he is
>
> an admirable judge.

If the handbooks for speakers mostly presented the rules of debate as a practice of politeness – and presented politeness as a natural precondition for a fair debate – the handbooks for chairmen explained how such a practice of civility and fairness could be achieved collectively. The chairman was expected to perform leadership in a heavily politicized context, but his own role was presented as intrinsically a-political. Unlike anybody else in the room, the chairman was supposed to *not* voice an opinion, but to be the gatekeeper of free and fair speech for others. This gatekeeping implied, of course, that despite the lofty promises of debate, of free and equal access to a speaking platform,

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[11] Julien Duquesnois, *Manuel de l'orateur et du lecteur*, Chez Vaton, 1843.
[12] G.F. Chambers, *Handbooks for Public Meetings,* Stevens and Sons,1878*,* 47.

such freedom was regulated not only by rules, but also by a particular person interpreting them. Ultimately, the chairman decided if your contribution actually *was* relevant to the debate at hand, whether it actually was your turn, and when your time was up. In other words, the chairman was the final arbiter of what constituted 'arguing well', and could exclude modes of speech that did not conform to the reigning rules of civility. In today's parlance: the chairman did, in fact, tone police.

> We're proud of one debater
>
> the image of his pater
>
> Who's got a seat in parliament
>
> he's reckon'd quite a dab
>
> We've speakers who to atoms
>
> could smash your Burkes and Chathams.
>
> They've such a gift of orat'ry
>
> and talent for the 'gab'

The rules of good debate, designed to ensure fairness and equal access to all, therefore almost necessarily favoured conservative speakers. That is, not so much speakers with conservative views, but rather those with conservative voices: those whose modes of speech, whose sounds, connected them to already existing model images of good public speech (like the great orators in parliament, "your Burkes and Chathams). It won't be a surprise to anyone that the very structures put in place to ensure democratic fairness therefore effectively favoured already privileged members of a society that was quite selective about the voices they were willing to listen to. Especially those who could convincingly extend intergenerational traditions would be heard as good speakers. (In other words, sounding like your dad could be a very good thing, provided you had the right father). That does not mean, however, that only elite young men were being trained in the art of arguing well. As for example Helen Sunderland has shown recently, young elite women received their own education towards arguing well, from a similarly young age,[13] and cultured women around Europe were active in literary circles, salons and other spaces for conversation – where they debated issues like the ethics of vivisection, the personal charms of the prime minister, the merits of Shakespeare and Austen, and the public role women might play in the world. Nevertheless, women were more likely to be the subject of political debate than they were to be participants in it until well into the twentieth century.

> We've got a fierce Home Ruler
>
> (I wish he would be cooler!)
>
> His adjectives are copious
>
> and his epithets are strong;

[13] Helen Sunderland, 'Politics in Schoolgirl Debating Cultures in England, 1886-1914', *The Historical Journal* 63, (2020), 935-57.

His brogue is quite delicious

Although his grammar's vicious

and all his facts are fictions

and his history is wrong

An other oft delights, sir

to talk of Women's Rights, sir

While all the time we find it hard

to see quite what he means.

And then he waxes frantic,

and now and then romantic

Although this champion of the sex

is only in his teens.

Like women, speakers with a 'brogue' were more likely to be objects of commentary than they were to deliver commentary themselves. It seems that, to the ear of the nineteenth-century political observer, numerous voices appeared as mere noise: the high-pitched sounds of women, the strange inflections of colonial subjects who had to speak an enforced second language, the exoticized melody of voices attuned to local rural dialects, to various creoles or to very different models of disagreement…all of these voices were reduced to their mere *sound*. An acoustic experience that could entertain, amuse, or even move the listener, but that did not count as rational speech.

Nina Eidsheim, in her 2018 book *The Race of Sound*, has noted that "in the same way that culturally derived systems of pitches organized into scales render a given vibrational field *in tune* or *out of tune*, a culturally derived system of race renders a given vibrational field attached to a person as a *white voice,* a *black voice* – that is 'in tune' with expected correlations between skin color and vocal timbre".[14] But being *in tune* with the acoustic expectations of a particularly ethnicized voice, often resulted in being *out of tune* with what counted as proper political speech. That seems to be exactly how 'other' voices in European debating clubs, parliaments and other political meetings were heard. An observer of the Cambridge debating club, at the turn of the twentieth century, described the sound of the contributions of the first handful of Indian speakers who managed to gain entrance to the student Union as follows:

> An unbroken stream of broken patter, word follows word, words too crowded to be intelligible, too disconnected to be humorous, words merely, unmeaning, tedious, voluble. One by one the few poor whites remaining slip away in disgust. More Asiatics enter and sit in compact masses drinking in the turgid stream of verbose inanity with apparent avidity. [15]

[14] Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music,* Duke University Press, 2018.

[15] "The Black Peril", *The Granta,* 4 February 1901, 5.

There was something distinctly colonial – not only in the insistence that anything Indian must resemble chai, but also in the very practices of listening. A sort of imperial ear, that simply could not hear anything other than sheer physicality and difference.[16] Amy Wong, in her recent book on the poetics of talk, has noted that in modern fiction 'speech' calls forth modes of authority and autonomy that are inherent to what could be called an imperial order of narrative.[17] Those who are not in *command* of their tongues, whether they are Indians, women, or even pirates and parrots, are reduced to mere talk. For all of the promises of the inherent accessibility of democracy through speech, good speech itself is not universally attainable.

Many, or probably most, of the assumptions that underpinned norms of good speech, were entirely unquestioned and intuitive. Whilst one could define good rhetoric (after all, that was taught in school), very few listeners would have been able to articulate just what it was that made Indian speech sound so foreign, and how exactly they distinguished proper speech from mere talk. They did so almost entirely by ear. Arguing well was heard in musical terms – it required not only *pleasant* voices, but also carefully managed ones. By contrast, voices that were modulated differently, were heard as discordant, and to be discordant was to be disruptive. Parliamentary reporting of the time contains numerous descriptions of speakers 'screeching like gulls', 'singing as if in a chapel' or in one memorable example sounding like 'a big trombone that is out of tune'.[18]

Things have changed considerably since the nineteenth century – but the tacit expectations, cultural tropes and musical metaphors of 'fair debate' still haunt us. Further democratization of the access to political and public spheres has done little to dispel the notion that all voices should contribute to the harmony of proceedings. A good debate today is expected to be a great deal more polyphonous, a multi-vocal performance shared by a large variety of participants. But it does not give up on the carefully calibrated contrapuntal quality we have come to expect of civilized agreement. Contemporary debates may very well contain more voices, but does not allow for trombones either.

Discord and dysfluency: undisciplining debate.

Our rules of debate are, in a sense, designed for homogeneity: they aim to manage disagreement by avoiding discord. They are, I would suggest, still rooted in the nineteenth century, a period in which Europe was deeply invested in discourses of cohesion, unity, and thoughts of universal values. Until not so very long ago, the kind of scholarship that addressed questions like the ones I'm interested in largely followed the rules of belonging and cohesion set out in this period: it placed questions of identity almost exclusively in national and ethnic contexts, and questions of rhetoric in terms of universality. It is only in the last handful of decades that questions about European identity have begun to be framed along lines of diversity, multilingualism, and transnational practices of exchange and transfer. The sheer existence of a group of scholars (and a growing contingent of students) dedicated to 'European studies' would have been unthinkable to the debaters I study. And research like mine owes much of its inspiration and resources to a previous generation of scholars who laid the foundation for a field of European studies in which national identities can be deconstructed,

[16] For a more fully developed argument on this issue, see Josephine Hoegaerts, "Learning English at the Expense of the Union? The (Colonized) Voice as a Vehicle of Knowledge and Political Transfer", *Ennen & Nyt,* vol.19, n.4, 2019.

[17] Amy Wong, *Refiguring Speech. Late Victorian Fictions of Empire and the Poetics of Talk,* Stanford University Press, 2023.

[18] See also Josephine Hoegaerts, Speaking like Intelligent Men: Vocal Articulations of Authority and Identity in the House of Commons in the Nineteenth Century. *Radical History Review, 121* (2015) 123-144.

stereotypes questioned, contextualized and dismantled, and claims of universality are relegated to the realm of ideology.

Images of 'democratization' – both of Europe itself, and the kind of scholarship that could be done about Europe – have played an important role in re-imagining Europe as a mosaic of diverse identities, languages, and cultures. Disentangling one of the central aspects of democratization – the growing multi-vocality of debate – is perhaps a logical next step. It is also one that puts socio-political analyses of European identities in conversation with current developments in literary studies. In recent years, calls to 'undiscipline' our thinking about literary production, and about culture in general, have given new direction to literary scholarship: Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Christoff, Amy Wong, and others have suggested we should call into question not only explicit narratives about belonging and exclusion, but also to acknowledge and identify what they call 'the fantasies of an unmarked universality' that are stitched into our thinking about European identity.[19] The same fantasies are, arguably, also woven into our disciplinary methods and theories itself. A couple of months ago, my colleague Theresa Kuhn stood in this spot, calling for an understanding of European identities now and in the future as hybrid – and of moving away from an insistence of clear tethers to European identity - as a way to allow for inner diversity to co-exist with strong modes of solidarity.[20] From my perspective on Europe's past, and on the unsteady conjunctures of cultural change, it is a call I would echo – and one that an undisciplined confederacy of social and cultural scholars could no doubt amplify.

So how do we begin to disassemble the 'fantasies of unmarked universality' of democratic debate? One point of entry might be to seek out the kind of speech that *is* marked, and therefore indirectly undermines claims of universality by its sheer presence. The rules of debate I have described earlier, of clarity and cohesion, these rules demand a very particular level of fluency – an ability to erase the body producing speech, rather than exposing it. This naturally comes easier to speakers whose bodies are under less scrutiny, but is nevertheless a demand that requires very particular practices of speech. Paying attention to those speakers who do not conform to our tacit rules of fluency, whether that is because their linguistic sounds are foreign to us, or because their physiological or neurological differences produce rhythms we do not recognize – paying attention to dysfluent speakers – offers one avenue toward an understanding of modern democracies and identities that does not take the nineteenth century rules for political access for granted.

Doing so would also require us to move beyond classical definitions of what constitutes 'good speech'. Deaf scholar Brenda Brueggeman has noted

> Speech [good speech as it has been defined in the way I've described so far] must convey the force of the speaker's passionate conviction without transgressing cultural codes of conduct and deportment. It must, that is, perform 'normalcy' even as it incites and inspires some difference (otherwise, we would not be moved by, or remember, it).[21]

To attend to 'good speech' without assuming the universal value of an able body, or that of a native speaker, means to move away from an equation of good speech with rhetoric or 'arguing well'. It requires us to consider the cultural work speech does from a much broader perspective, and to take

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[19] Ronjauna Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff and Amy R. Wong, "Introductions: Undisciplining Victorian Studies", *Victorian Studies,* 62: 3 (2020), 369-391.

[20] Theresa Kuhn, "Common institutions, diverging identities? Supranational institution building and collective identity formation in the European Union", Inaugural lecture at the University of Amsterdam 13 October 2023.

[21] Brenda Brueggemann, *Lend me your ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness*, Gallaudet University Press, 1999.

into account the intersubjective nature of speech. Quite simply, this means we have to think about 'good speech' not only as a matter of talking, but to also take listening seriously as a practice. And, crucially, to approach listening not as a passive consumption of what a good speaker can offer us, but to see it as a generative practice, what Kate Lacey has called 'adventurous hearing', which includes being open to voices that are "unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear".[22]

And this, I think, is where scholarship in the humanities can really make a difference – and particularly scholarschip on culture, which necessarily drifts between discourse and practice, between stories about the past and their salience in the present, between close reading and ironic detachment, between a love of art and innovative esthetics and an almost compulsive drive to critique it. For all its structural and institutional problems, scholarship in the humanities has a long and rich history of attending to exactly that what is specific, peculiar, outside of the norm…to not just hear but to attentively listen to that which is unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear.

Now, I am – somewhat painfully – aware of the irony of me extolling the value of listening as I stand here monologuing at you. So rather than trying to convince you with a well-constructed, coherent, argument in which I clearly pick a side, I would like to invite you (*venez à moi*) into the kind of 'undisciplined' conversations that is pushing scholarship in European culture in new directions.

The section in *cursive* below are transcripts of the sound-recordings played at the lecture, featuring the insights (and the voices) of various members of the chair of European Culture after 1800. Part of the experience of hearing these voices was an explicit experience of polyphony: the recording contained not only a variety of languages and voices, but also expressed the sometimes messy or chaotic character of what it might mean to listen to multiple people and multiple perspectives at once. A more substantial recording of their thoughts can be consulted (**recording 2**)

> *Ik ben het meest nieuwsgierig in het onderzoek naar, misschien toch wel naar de verhalen, de verhalen van mensen. Dat vat ik breed op, dat zijn mensen die met de ziekte leven,…we don't want to have all these uniform, homogenous stories from this, let's say, general western perspective. You want to have all liberty to express stories in their own way, whatever it takes. … Digital tools would help to tell multi-focal and multi-vocal histories, that would challenge the existing mono-cultural narratives of the past … trying to step in the shoes of another, trying to see another perspective on what Europe is like, what it feels like to be European … het begrijpen van de complexiteit of van nuances van culturele uitingen helpt tot beter wederzijds begrip*

The love of stories has driven scholars of literature, of history, of culture, for generations, and this interest increasingly extends to more, different, less fluent and less normative stories. In the small microcosm that is the University of Amsterdam's chairgroup of European culture, conversation turns on stories in different languages, different genres, different media, and different forms.

> *and they could be formal histories, or histories of ideas, or they could be more informal impressions…diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, all kinds of narratives … we encourage students to read texts from ancient times to the present day … historical novels, historical films, tv series, costume drama, etc, etc,…a range of different travel accounts by West European travellers to East Europe, and some by East European travellers to West Europe, Northerners to the South and Southerners to the North*

[22] Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: the Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age,* Polity, 2013.

In fact, for a cultural scholar, almost everything can be a story – or can at least be read as such. And discovering the tropes that govern the way we tell stories about ourselves, about the world, and about how the world works, has been a central feature of rhetoric long before it became a research method. Tropes and cultural codes tell us a lot about the tacit rules of a society: what is allowed, what is desired, and what is considered shocking or improper (and that includes, of course, the rules of good speech). Building on the call for 'adventurous listening', I would argue, not only encourages us to search for different tropes by making room for different stories…it also allows us to listen to these stories differently. Not just as a way to 'deconstruct' power relations, or to discover implicit hierarchies, but also to think of power beyond simple dichotomies, to make room for a conceptualization of social power that is messy, inconsistent, culturally refracted through multi-focal lenses, and therefore impossible to explain through the means of social models or clearly defined theories. Sometimes, the only way to make sense of stories, is through a method that refuses systematic consistency, through 'undisciplining' our categories of analysis. That is true for the many stories encapsulated in literature, but it also holds for the stories that are contained in music, in the way we eat food, or even the experience of going to the mall.

> *en aan de voorkant van die mall stond heel groot 'wees lief, houd afstand' in neonletters. En na Covid is dat houd afstand, is weggehaald, maar dat wees lief, dat staat er nog steeds, en ik denk dat als je niet in staat bent om dat te contextualiseren in een cultuur die dus zegt…why, and on what terms, are we defining Italian music, German music, Spanish music, Hungarian music, all these terms that we use in everyday language. But what exactly are our perceptions about these musical idioms and styles based. … Food also has codes. There are practices about how we eat, how we grow our food, how food is distributed, how it's prepared, how it is served, all these are not just practical, technical matters, they also serve to delineate and demarcate specific cultural identities … dan zie je dat ook als een keurslijf. Het is een heel letterlijk voorbeeld, maar dan kan je het dus niet contextualiseren en dan voel je je beperkt in dat idee van lief zijn.*

The ability to disentangle stories has gained a new urgency lately, and developing methods of 'adventurous listening' is perhaps even more crucial in a context in which such adventures also encompass some obvious dangers. Not all that can be heard is innocent, after all,

> *when the blurring of fact and fiction takes central stage, like we see nowadays, and at a time when all these political ideologies frequently draw upon historical narratives, it is very important to us to be very much aware of where this overlap between fiction and fact is … het idee dat heeft postgevat van een tijd waarin fake news dominant is, en desinformatie, en deze tijd van post truth politics. Maar wat ik heel interessant vind, is dat dat idee niet nieuw is…ik denk dat je hier iets heel boeiends ziet in, dat van het begin van de jaren tachtig speelt: hoe framen we dit? Maar dat punt spreekt tot een wat breder punt, namelijk hoe begrijpen we wat er gebeurt … nieuwe media en die maken het wel wat complexer, en die maken het gemakkelijker om desinformatie te verspreiden … we live in a time in which algorithms shape our epistemology, our way of knowing … maar veel van de zorgen voor desinformatie, en wantrouwen jegens de overheid…en dan is er dus ruimte tussen het letterlijke dat je ziet, en wat je moet leren interpreteren*

In discussions of 'free speech', and much more broadly, in the way in which we conceptualize how public opinion is formed, who gets to take part in forming it, and who can be affected by it, spinners of yarns and tellers of tales can be objects of analysis, of course

> *cultuur is niet alleen een spiegel van de maatschappij, maar geeft het ook mee vorm*

storytellers also remind us of the responsibilities that come with scholarship

> *an urge to find others sources, other stories that didn't fit in that canon of an individual taking control of his life, writing his life story …er zit volgens mij toch wel een interessante spanning in that iedereen wil stigma vermijden, maar dat betekent natuurlijk wel dat iedereen achter de schermen wel weet wat het stigma is, en dat er dus heel hard iets niet gezegd wordt waarvan iedereen weet…the historian Burke once said of cultural history that it reaches the part that other forms of history cannot reach*

Clever listeners will have noted that I am maneuvering toward the end of this talk, but I have one important message left to convey. If good speech is an intersubjective practice, requiring speakers as well as listeners, good scholarship is an even more collaborative undertaking, and I would not have been able to tell you this particular story without the support of a great many people.

I would like to thank the Executive Board of the University of Amsterdam for the trust they have expressed in my work by appointing me, and prof Marieke de Goede, dean of the faculty of humanities as well as the appointment committee headed by prof. Remieg Aerts for nominating me for this post. I'm very fortunate to have landed in a department lead with exceptional attentiveness and professionalism…my thanks go to head of the department prof. Geert Janssen as well as the members of the management team, Andrea Haker, Minou van Beurden, Martina Teders, and Roos de Wit. My fellow members of the somewhat misleadingy titled DB, Micha Kemper, Luiza Bialacewicz, Theresa Kuhn, Guido Snel and Anne Van Wageningen … it has been a true pleasure to be enveloped in a team that displays such commitment, dynamism and energy (even if the latter is sometimes fuelled by coffee).

I was welcomed to European studies with the unique mixture of brisk efficiency and genuine warmth that I have since learned is part of its intrinsic nature, and that is to no small degree carried by Nienke Rentenaar and Tatjana Das: many thanks, not only for being the very first people to welcome me to Amsterdam, but also for keeping me on Teams, into the right rooms, and occasionally out of a psycho-social conundrum. My thanks also goes out to the whole European Studies community: my spirited colleagues, and our equally bright students. It is a continuous pleasure to see so much commitment to expanding repertoires of thought (even if it sometimes has to come at the expense of sitting through very, very slow movies), and nothing gives me more confidence in the future of scholarship than reading the sometimes truly amazing work our students produce.

Very special thanks must go to 'my' team, the chair group of European culture. I salute my predecessor, prof. Joep Leerssen, for bringing together such an exceptional array of multi-lingual quick wit, good humor, and intellectual flexibility – but most of all, I'm looking forward to further scheming with all of you. Yolanda Rodriguez-Perez, Alex Drace-Francis, Marleen Rensen, Guido Snel, Krisztina Lajosi, Marjet Brolsma, Linde Luijnenburg, Jesse van Amelsvoort, Nuri Kurnaz, Francesca Zantedeschi, Marta Pelacani, and of course Melania – many thanks.

I would also like to thank the many people that helped me on my way here – at the University of Helsinki, prof. Hanna Snellman, prof. Saari Kivistö were instrumental in appointing me and giving me the opportunity to develop a research agenda that, for the last five years, was also carried by the CALLIOPE team, Karen Lauwers, Esha Sil, Ludovic Marionneau, Liesl Yamaguchi, Taru Auranne, and Mo Horstmann. Somewhat further afield, geographically, but no less important, were those who enabled me to expand my research over the years. I'm grateful to prof. Steve Connor, for welcoming me to the Cambridge Centre for Research of Arts and Social Sciences, to prof. Panos Panopoulos for inviting me to the University of the Aegean, prof. Simon Richter for hosting me at the University of

Pennsylvania, prof. Joanna Bourke and dr. Sean Brady for sponsoring my stay at Birkbeck college, and dr. Anne-Christine Mecke for hosting me at the Leipzig conservatory.

And as we go back in time, we also come somewhat closer to home. When, about fifteen years ago, I told my then supervisor, prof. Leen van Molle, that I was planning to include fiction into my historical research, she told me she shuddered at the thought, but, with typical good grace, encouraged me to do it anyway. I'm glad we're united here today – and grateful for a broad education in the kind of scholarly tolerance and open-mindedness I hope to display.

As the previous few minutes have probably demonstrated, my path to Amsterdam led through most of Europe, and I have been lucky to have been surrounded by amazingly harmonious voices along the way, most recently in Akateeminen Laulu, Ceciliakoren, Ralph Sordo and Lelikoor. I have been lucky to pick up excellent friends in these choirs, and elsewhere. In no particular order, I'm very grateful for the many chats, walks, coffees, and wines I have shared with Griet, Roel, Edith, Jan, Jens and Nikkie on my frantic trips to all-of-Flanders-in-one week, with the ladies of international mystery, Suzie, Xenia and Liz; with my Helsinki home front, Anna, Sophie, and Sasha, and with Hanna, Michael, Allan, Ben, and Danielle, who always manage to cheer me on from afar, no matter where I've ended up now.

To anyone who has ever witnessed the Hoegaerts household at dinner, my interest in debate and opportunities to question the rules of conversation will come as no surprise. My thanks to my parents, who let me break the mould – and to my brothers and sister, Wouter, Dolf and Veerle – who consistently help me break it with great enthusiasm. For years, returning to the family house has been an opportunity to return to a warm nest – which now also contains a growing contingent of nieces and nephews. It's a privilege I know to be unavailable to many, and I'm grateful to know that I am one of the lucky people who has a whole gang at her disposal to always have her back.

Finally, to Nico, who has very quickly become my anchor in Amsterdam, and made this not just a landing place but home: I can't think of a better adventurous listener, or anyone I'd rather listen to.

Ik heb gezegd.