

Introduction

Night Terrors

“We” is a flexible pronoun.
—Brian Richardson¹

Is assembly revolutionary? For centuries, human action *en masse* has been associated with violence, and justly feared for enforcing majoritarian privileges over the civil and humanitarian demands of minority populations. The words mob violence, lynching, or pogrom still catch the heart. At the same time, we wonder and debate whether a crowd might be an effective instrument of change from below. Might it not offer a sense of agency with new powers to the subject who has felt her ability to make effective political demands in the world to be chimerical? Recall the crowds occupying Tahrir Square in 2011 before the fall of Hosni Mubarek, sharing scanty food, working around official and unofficial interference with communications and basic services, facing down the expert police forces from the interior ministry, checkpoints and barricades operated by the army, and the weapons, cavalry charges, and flaming explosives of the “unacknowledged” pro-Mubarek paramilitaries. Those who occupy squares or other public arenas in similar adoptions of solidarity do not, in general, share a class, age, gender, degree of strictness in religious observance, level of education, nor even a set of specific political aspirations (apart from symbolic demands such as the “immediate resignation of President Hosni Mubarek”). Two weeks before the commencement of the occupation of Tahrir Square, Cairo’s protesting crowds might not have called themselves a “we”; since then, protesting groups in Egypt have withdrawn, realigned, and shifted their interactional strategies; in future, new formations may produce a different shuffling of identities. As Brian Richardson has said, in a phrase that is a lodestar for my argument, “‘We’ is a flexible pronoun.”

Even when public protests begin in relative homogeneity, the originators of change are apt to welcome a variety of allies, becoming a vanguard

or storefront for a heterogeneous, unevenly sympathetic, and decidedly pro tempore multitude. An *Adbusters*-inspired anti-consumerist protest, say, or a march by neighborhood residents in places such as Ferguson, Missouri, Oakland, California, or Bloomington, Minnesota, a pipeline protest by Native people in the Dakotas, or tent cities in major cities across North America, may spread, ally, and diversify to become Native Nations Rise, Black Lives Matter, or Occupy Wall Street. Such physical formations remain provisional and mutable. Counter-demonstrators may show up and abscond with the reportage of a nonviolent teach-in or street theater performance. Police and national military may combine to disperse citizens who occupy public roads and parks. During a mass shooting event, there is a sense of a collective and non-exclusive yet contingent and elusive “we” under attack, not strictly concomitant with identity, but rather with the accident of proximity. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That is one perspective. Crowds also arouse pervasive dread and anxiety. In the manuscript he laid down for the last time a week before his death in 1939, committed socialist Emil Lederer renounces Karl Marx’s prediction of the classless society, which Lederer believed had finally been realized, but only as a fascist-produced disaster.² Nazism’s nightmarish deployment of popular masses “as the basis of a movement which aims not only at permanence but at the domination, the swallowing up of the state” depicts the crowd as a menace to progressive society, says Lederer, and bequeaths that mass to modernity as the sole remaining smallest unit of political analysis, supplanting the autonomous individual.³ In Lederer’s view, the destruction of the individual and the generation in its place of a permanent *folla oceanica* (oceanic crowd), a key term in the modernist period for the political assemblage, produces pure *anomie*, even the loss of sociality itself. Lederer’s analysis was made at the outbreak of the Second World War and during a period of vastly scaled multiple-target genocide. Nevertheless, even now, with the politics and status conditions of many nation-states and regions very altered, Lederer’s anxieties about fascism still penetrate deeply, a modern culmination of millennia of concern about humanity’s subsistence, experience, and behavior in crowds.

Anglophone modernist writings were once conventionally supposed to speak for the alienated elite individual, whose senses of self-coherence and social connection are depleted by a mechanizing modernity. Instead, this project discovers works obsessed with group identifications and attachments, structurations of collective intelligence, and configurations of the collective’s ecologies. The crowd is everywhere in modern fiction. Joseph Conrad produces anatomies of servile and rebellious crowds in novels such

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as *Nostramo* and *Under Western Eyes*; James Joyce and Virginia Woolf work with paradigmatic figures of the crowd such as Hynes and Jacob; Djuna Barnes and Jean Rhys annotate the crowd's marginalization and alienation in *Nightwood* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. Cumulatively, during the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, intellectual fields concerned with popular and mass politics in European and North American societies demonstrate a high level of social adrenaline about their populace, and generally endorse the perception that crowd dangers were coming to a simultaneous, nearly global, crisis point. They called their time "the age of the crowd." The modernist archive catalogues writers' engagements with these involvements, but I argue that a key subset of modernist artists were also deeply interested in the positive potentials of collective life, perhaps even more than in the period's looming angst over social forces, which they confronted directly in their art.

This book compares patterns of crowd performativity in modernist literature to simultaneous historical arrangements and various explanatory theories of democracy and group life. The latter theories cover a large field which may be roughly outlined as ranging from the dangers and risks of crowd experience to its potentials, pleasures, and enjoyments. I am especially interested in how a number of modernists represent a more positive version of crowd politics and of the crowd's democratic behaviors in the face of the period's characteristic fascist-crowd formations. In my readings, modernism's collective subjects deploy polymorphic and expansive identities and the energies of their enthusiasm to create a new repertoire of idiolects, gestures, and involvements in counterpoint to populist authoritarianism – taken together, they build *avant la lettre* what I think of as a theory of performativity for the collective subject, as well as a counter argument to the appeal of the fascist masses. My hypothesis is that a significant subset of modernist writers wants to explore how modern crowds are on the move during the period and tend either to greater democratic freedom and agency, or, on the other hand, to greater servitude and more lasting capture by the forces of authoritarian power and empire. This project's most important critical-analytical finding is that an abstract fictional construction discovered in modernism, which I name "modernism's agile crowd," functions as a useful conceptual hinge or bridge between the older conception of subjectivity as a liberal citizenry concerned with natural rights on the one hand, and on the other the contemporary sense of a heterogeneous assemblage of political multitudes that must negotiate and struggle over the terms and intersectional conditions of their existence. In short, a crucial subset of modernist works represents

a wished-for change in political life, and confronts its historical moment with a democratic argument: modernism's agile crowds are irreformably heterogeneous, their performative identities functional and fleeting, and their norms temporary and pragmatic. Such an aspirational model still holds interest and relevance for contemporary democratic movements once again coming to themselves in a moment of rising ethno-nationalisms, spreading populist authoritarian governmentality, and renascent fascism.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: "This is our hypothesis: a multiplicity is defined not by the elements that compose it in extension, not by the characteristics that compose it in comprehension, but by the lines and dimensions it encompasses in 'intension.'"⁴ Intensities in *A Thousand Plateaus* are the affectual drivers for various forms that becoming and virtuality may adopt and discard. Under my account, the crowd of theory is better conceived as a set of relations which produce a term than vice versa. What I am calling the "agile crowd" emerges in an arena of modernist play where the flexible subject with a strategy to stand its collectivist ground can rearticulate group memberships and political demands. The literatures with which this analysis dwells are concerned with the performative ways in which subjectivities might be transformed through semantic and symbolic play. There is a certain agility in the ease with which Stephen puts an abrupt end to time and space with the name of Siegfried's sword and an accompanying gesture, or in Rudy's comfortable materialization to Bloom, reading Hebrew, which should have been a lost language to him, or in the general transformations of roles in "Circe."⁵ It clarifies the original "pulse" experience of city life, as Raymond Williams feels it: "so many people, with so many purposes," "the aching press of strange crowds" in foreign cities.⁶ It affords the mass body a chance to practice the kind of agile virtuosity that is capable of a politics, of establishing networks of care, or of coexisting peacefully in a place together.

This is not a triumphalist perspective. The literary crowds I examine include revolutionary, reactionary, and failed crowds, some of whom are doomed not to survive. The pleasure of being one in a crowd is not entirely benign, for the experience may be perilous in many ways. Moreover, the agile crowd is largely a hypothetical construction. If it has had a historical existence, it is fleeting and hard to see. Correspondingly, its appearances in texts are also easy to miss, ephemeral, and contingent, its power more inference than certainty, its appeal more critical and theoretical than evidentiary. If the agile crowd only exists in the interstices of writers' texts, it still becomes available as a conceptualization of equality. It has

the power of a fundament. While historical comparisons are instructive, the agile crowd's persuasiveness may derive less from history's evidence than from its own explanatory appeal, as well as its inherent optimism for us as social beings living among and hoping to thrive in crowds.

Now crowds are in the headlines once again, from Moscow, Catalan, Turkey, Gaza, Egypt, and India to Hong Kong, the United States, Venezuela, Ecuador, and by the time this is read by the scholarly public, somewhere else. When the Occupy movement was put down in the United States over the space of weeks in a series of coordinated police actions, some academics and media bloggers wondered whether a government which cannot abide a continuing protest is no longer democratic, and those fears have only resurged as this book goes to press in 2020. The scale of the Women's Marches held the day after the American presidential inauguration in January 2017 gave some concern that such a widely popular street movement might be strong enough to reverse a US constitutional election. Despite hostile news media, automated social media accounts coordinated by a variety of powers, executive action, and police opposition, movements such as Black Lives Matter and those in support of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant families thrive around the world. Political anxieties and conspiratorial fantasies once again rally around the flag theories of crowd dynamics, some of which are hoary and decidedly not modern. Yet I would argue the energy underlying many contemporary collectivist phenomena comes directly from the modernist movements.

What is most important about a sense of the collective – its self-imagined identity or its eventful history? Another project of this argument is to reassert the speculative complexity that aesthetic form, fictionalization, and narrative add to accounts of the modern crowd developed from within the ecologies of other disciplines. The effects of naming remain a living issue in crowd studies. Some crowd theorists set up binaries, such as herd and horde, intended to stand in for healthy and dysfunctional group identifications. The herd is orderly and obedient; the horde is primitivized and fearful. The modernist archive brings into clearer focus how these are aesthetic categories as much as they are political or ideological. Moreover, the modernist aestheticization of its crowds is not an arbitrary choice; there are meaningful relations between modernism's verbal and artistic figures and the actual world's twentieth-century crowds of Western Europe, Wales, Britain, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as decolonizing movements and migrant and diasporic populations on the move during the period. The style of crowd politics in the public squares borrows from the aesthetics of modernism, and modernist writers aestheticize the crowds they

fictionalize in ways that advance the style. European and Anglophone modernist works, therefore, may be said to carry a burden of responsibility in the dynamics, perspectives, ideologies, and fantasies of twentieth-century worldwide politics, because their currency consists of specific forms of symbolic language which were recirculated in the political realm, often nefariously.

Recently, modernist studies has become more uneasy about its critical relationship to the mass and populist politics ascendant in various political and social movements of the 1880s through 1940s. *Modernism and the Idea of the Crowd* contributes to ongoing conversations in cultural and literary criticism by critics such as John Plotz, Sheldon Brivic, Mary Esteve, Patrick McGee, Tyrus Miller, and Michael Tratner. At the same time, theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and Paolo Virno have put the coherence of modern subjectivity under question, and doubted whether gathering is an effective political lever, or whether indeed political systems as such can be moved. They have produced a critique of group thinking within the context of global capitalism, that still makes room for, as Butler's recent title suggests, a performative theory of assembly. My intervention aligns with that work, but here I offer it through an aesthetic modernist lens because of the urgent, crucial, and specific contribution artistic modernism has made to performativity in general and especially to its collectivist iteration. I aim to produce a resignification of traditional and governing vocabularies around collective identity, experience, and action, and look to amplify the sense of new arrangements of forces and voices that call out from the crowded margins of sociality.

Other works to which I am indebted and from which I build my arguments include Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005), which demonstrates how and what kind of political relations between differential identities are constituted by a special discourse of political demand, and Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* (translated into English in 2004), which argues for the multitude as a "persistent plurality" that has never embraced the social contract. Jacques Rancière's analysis of the hatred of democracy contrasts the "two opposed logics of police and politics," and gives me a model for a collective intervention to regulate life in public space.⁷ I consider Hardt and Negri's *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), in which biopolitical forms of life imposed upon various categories of workers force them into "a common substrate," and their 2017 title *Assembly*, which reviews contemporary social movements. To understand the cultural history of interpretation describing the

dynamics in play among group members, I read group psychologists such as Wilfred Bion, an analyst of Melanie Klein but a highly independent thinker, and at a greater distance, his predecessors, Klein and Sigmund Freud. I also consider the legacies of terms and concepts left by the early sociologists such as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, especially as they were adapted from nineteenth-century sources and repurposed by later critics such as Serge Moscovici, responding to the twentieth-century history of state aggression, war, and genocide. Étienne Balibar's *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy* has guided my arguments about political strategy and representation. Butler's *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* models well-grounded political reflection which remains sensitive to the reality of personal suffering.

Within modernist studies, Naomi Schor's illuminating study titled *Zola's Crowds* (1978) delves into the centrality of sacrifice and the scapegoat in Zola's "founding myth" about the crowd, bearing on my concern with the crowd's relation to its margins. Tratner challenged field orthodoxies in his 1995 publication *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* when he said the period's mass politics and the idea of an unconscious mass mind were of interest to central and left-leaning modernist writers and not only to those who had fascist, catholic, or totalizing inclinations. When Plotz's field-opening monograph *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* appeared in December 2000, it was advertised as "the first book devoted to an analysis of crowds in British literature," a remarkable fact. Plotz's book is on crowds and popular political demonstrations in nineteenth century British public life and literature; he argues that British literary texts from 1800–1850 participated in a historic contest over what would count as public speech and social space by chronicling "new sorts of claim-making" by "new crowds, riots and demonstrations."⁸ Since my project's inception, I have thought of it as a sequel to his. Esteve's thorough and careful study of *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* was reviewed and saluted similarly in 2003 for opening a "neglected" topic of analysis.

Relatively little has followed. The Stanford Humanities Lab's "Crowds" project, which resulted in the 2006 publication titled *Crowds*, edited by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, and a companion website, is purposefully eclectic, broad in topic, and widely interdisciplinary; it contains a set of suggestive essays on types of historical crowds, from those of Rome or the medieval pilgrimage, to crowds of the French Revolution, to sports crowds. Michael Levenson proposed what might now be seen as a transitional treatment, bringing the traditional critical view forward into

the present, of modernist mass society and the opposition of the modernist subject to the mass in *Modernism* (2011). In the 2017 book *Revolutionary Damnation*, Brivic locates revolutionary art as the catalyst for the production of unifying connections, addressing one of the major problematics in political theory. Also relevant to my project among the recent wave of publications interested in democratic assembly is McGee's *Political Monsters and the Democratic Imagination: Spinoza, Blake, Hugo, Joyce* (2016), which traces the influence of Spinoza's philosophy on the shape of democratic thought through the long literary archive named in the title. McGee, reading Spinoza through Negri, contends that institutional political power, *potestas*, is continuously posited and given its existence by a perpetual act of thought of the multitude, exercising its *potentia*, and that potentia comes into being through an act of assembly.⁹

Modernism and the Idea of the Crowd is divided into four chapters (supplemented by an introduction and conclusion), attending, first, to an anatomy of the modernist crowd's modes of existence, that is, to its compositions and ecologies, second, to an analysis of its affective life, mental involvements, and standing commitments, third, to its various transformations and self-revisions, and finally, to conclusions about the appearance of its fully developed virtuosic agency and agility. The argument thus proceeds conceptually rather than by chronology or literary author, and subheadings guide the reader through each chapter's definitions, evidence, readings, and arguments.

Chapter 1, "Compositions of the Crowds of Modernism," introduces some of the new thinking happening around crowds and collective life in the early twentieth century, both inside and outside of literature. It gives a preliminary assessment of modernist crowds' of-what and with-what, that is, the experimental taxonomies and relations of collective life, as composed in fiction by writers such as Conrad, Woolf, and H.G. Wells. The chapter describes some of the terrains and territories of modern crowds, including the structures and political ecologies within which mass societies were forming and to which modernist literatures respond. It enlists concepts such as equal relations, virtuality, and crowd symbols to understand the twentieth century's disruptive struggles over inherited and established identities such as nation, gender, class, or race. Modernism's fictional revisions and dislocations of the urban crowd produce disruptions that may hold decolonizing potentials. Conrad's *Nostromo* shows a collectivity on a trajectory from a traditionally imagined people through a series of revolutions and dictators to a totalitarian version of itself – I argue that in *Nostromo*, Conrad plays with Le Bon's stereotypes of crowds, but even more

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closely anticipates Hannah Arendt's study of the origins of the totalitarian masses. An examination of group dynamics in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" show how a "failed" performance, one created out of poor materials, such as Hynes's poem, nevertheless may unite the group in a crowd-thought and serve up an artistic expression, which produces a temporary and provisional equality. The chapter takes up relations of the crowd to transformation, and power through a study of Elias Canetti's crowd symbols across texts, especially Joyce's *Ulysses*. The chapter closes with an account of modernism's sense of virtuality as it applies to collective life, supported by a reading of the violations of narrative level and realism in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Chapter 2, "Crowd Involvements and Attachments," moves from crowd composition to joint and shared engagements and commitments. It analyzes and classifies group affect and other forms of thinking together, such as heraclitean flows of group thought, sensation, and experience made available through new structures of collective feeling. The chapter counters arguments about the rise of the leader principle in crowd theory (that a crowd is united by its strong attachment to a leader) with the proposition that the crowd may behave as an assemblage governed by a hidden attractor, figured by characters such as James Wait, aboard the *Narcissus*, or Stevie in *The Secret Agent*. The function of a figure such as Bloom for the crowd in the pub in "Cyclops" speaks to the crowd's management of its anxieties and their effects. The chapter explores the interpenetration of public and private spaces in Sean O'Casey's plays to understand crowds' precise attachments to and exercise of design over the histories and semiotics of the metropolis, testing whether and in what manner they gain the sense of a shared life and act as a performative mass body. The subject of group involvements culminates in a discussion of how changes in the conventions of protest funerals illustrate an evolution in the imagined citizen-selves of the Victorian crowd toward the non-rights-based performative self of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3, "Crowds and Transformation," synthesizes concepts of self-recovery, play, and collective intellect to explore what transformative tools and practices crowds were developing (in modernist fictional and dramatic worlds) in order to identify and represent themselves, or to have as tactical weapons ready-to-hand during their conflicts with elite authority. Conventional identity is creatively reworked by disarticulated performances such as Clarissa's or the Captain in *The Secret Sharer*. The chapter maps mechanisms that produce modernity's porous and transmissible social mind, exemplified in readings of *Jacob's Room* and "Ithaca," for

example. Historical examples of street demonstrations and popular movements in the first decades of the twentieth century in England and Ireland are compared with readings of the permeable and suggestible crowds of “Wandering Rocks” and Wyndham Lewis’ writings, to differentiate what I identify as rising crowds from Lewis’ crowds of “extinction.” Finally, I transition to the concept of crowdedness as an ethical experience, where crowd behavior is treated as more than a problem of scale, and in light of Butler’s and Adorno’s questions about how to “lead a good life in a bad life.”¹⁰ I show how the agile crowd’s libidinous dexterity and its strategic use of masquerade facilitate its transformation.

In Chapter 4, “Crowds and Agility,” the project turns to the fully imagined agile movement and potential virtuosity of modernist crowds, their reworked vocabularies across and between media, their effectiveness in turning situations to advantage, and their conflictual relations with federating powers, established inequities, and inherited elitisms. In order to demonstrate the full scope of potentials involved, the chapter opens up to range more widely across a variety of media, aesthetics, and categories of works within modernism that simultaneously contribute to contriving a social space and interfering with its undemocratic spectacularization. In its most fully realized form, the modernist agile crowd claims to be unclassifiable within previous categories of social fields, and insists on a fundamental heterogeneity at the level of demand and composition.

In summary, *Modernism and the Idea of the Crowd* discovers a genealogy of the contemporary political multitude in modernism’s representations of crowds, and focuses on the agile crowd’s status as a strategic political articulation competing with established imagined communities. It compares verbal figurations in Anglophone literature produced between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries to models operating in the realms of political philosophy, critical theory, and social theory. It posits that these figurations taken together constitute a coherent project among a group of modernist writers which aspires to anatomize the modern crowd, to explore alternative collective forms of experience, and to positively imagine the crowd’s future. It proposes a reading of the fictional crowd that offers a fresh account of its sense of authorization and efficacy, concluding that the crowd recognizes itself as an agile network that supervises its own world-making and negotiates powerfully in its material and cultural exchanges. A favorable view of gathered heterogeneities has recently been in profound tension with anxieties about crowds globally; thus, we are currently re-engaged with matters of concern very similar to those of the first-named Age of the Crowd. In the conclusion, I summarize