Deliberative democratic theorists have defended deliberation as a normative and procedural form of democracy that enables people with deep moral disagreements to engage each other across those differences. Recently, Robert Gooding-Williams has identified deliberative democracy as the most fruitful approach for establishing a race-conscious multicultural democracy.\(^1\) For Gooding-Williams, the model of deliberative democracy that has hitherto been developed primarily as a way to establish a democratic politics in a morally plural society can be successfully applied to culturally and racially plural societies. However, Lynn Sanders worries that deliberative democracy is limited as a theory and practice of democracy given the deep racial and class divides that haunt the United States.\(^2\) Sanders, with other critics such as Iris Young, argues that deliberative democracy requires detached rational debate that produces a consensus. To call for deliberation under conditions of deep racial and class inequality will simply reinforce those divisions. Instead, Sanders promotes a notion of testimony that allows for the airing of perspectives, experiences, identities, and interests to highlight existing inequalities. Testimony thus avoids the presumed shortcomings of deliberative democracy, for Sanders, since it does not presuppose a consensus.\(^3\)

This disagreement requires a reexamination of some crucial questions: What are we to do if we want to work toward a just multiracial democracy? Is deliberative democracy applicable to multiracial democracy? Can deliberative democracy serve as the means to the end of multiracial democracy or are extensive changes (in social and political structures, collective attitudes, etc.) needed before we can institutionalize deliberative democracy? Can deliberation occur within formal and informal political spaces? This article offers some answers to these questions.

In part one, I examine recent deliberative democratic theory in light of four criticisms leveled against it by Sanders, Iris Young, and others. I am sympathetic to these criticisms. However, I suggest that deliberative democratic theory can be, and in some important respects already has been, redefined in ways that respond to these criticisms. In the second part of this article, I focus on two issues that are not fully addressed by Sanders’ alternative to deliberation, the concept of testimony. First, there is no discussion of what, if any, limits are needed to direct testimony toward collective decisions and actions. For Sanders and Young, deliberation carries the risk of seeking a common “voice” that may replicate the exclusion of plural and
conflicting voices. While this is indeed a risk, I draw on the practices of multiracial “mediating groups” to highlight a theoretical linkage, and slippage, between talk and action. Second, Sanders’ only example of where “testimony” can take place is jury deliberation. Instead, I argue that both deliberation and testimony are evident in formal institutions as well as in a heterogeneous civil society. I provide brief examples of how political engagement in civil society illustrates both testimony (establishing spaces in which diverse perspectives, experiences, and issues can be voiced) and deliberation (dialogue that identifies problems, potential solutions, and reaches decisions on how to act even if these decisions are not consensual and are open to revision).

Politics is, however, not just about talking but acting. Thus, in the third part of this article, I argue that deliberative democracy must attend to the points at which an ongoing dialogue within civil society and political deliberation within institutions of decision-making authority connect, or fails to connect, to collective action by groups within civil society and government agencies. Examining these points highlights the power, and limits, of talk. I then conclude with suggestions for the future development of deliberative democratic theory.

I. The Critique, and Defense, of Deliberation

Sanders, Young, and other critics offer four lines of criticism against recent versions of deliberative democratic theory: (i) it presupposes consensus; (ii) it presupposes a rational, detached mode of deliberation that reinforces exclusions based on gender, race, and class; (iii) it does not adequately address issues of racial conflict; and (iv) it does not address the socioeconomic or policy changes that are prerequisites to equal access to spaces of deliberative democracy and equal standing within those spaces. In rejecting deliberation as an inherently flawed concept, Sanders treats conservative, political-liberal, and democratic theorists such as Edmund Burke, John Rawls, and Benjamin Barber as proponents of the approach. Much of Sanders’ argument is indeed a powerful critique of deliberation, but is more appropriate as a critique of communitarianism, organic conservatism, and political liberalism and how each of these theories employs deliberation. Nevertheless, these four lines of criticism must be taken seriously by deliberative democrats, and thus deserve a detailed response.

(i) The first line of criticism against deliberative democratic theory is that a consensus is presumed and common interests are the only legitimate topic of conversation. This strikes many theorists as unnecessarily restricting the scope of discussion to certain predetermined issues without recognizing that new issues will likely emerge in the course of the dialogue. The goal of a consensus fails to recognize that continued disagreement is just as likely as consensus. It also fails to recognize that requiring a consensus risks imposing a “false” consensus that masks, and reinforces, asymmetrical power relations. Further, a consensus
should not be the goal since dialogue often heightens our awareness of conflict, or even produces conflict as it unfolds.  

While some versions of recent deliberative democracy hold out the hope of a consensus on issues of the common or public good, this assumption has been relaxed. When, for example, Joshua Cohen argues that deliberation is focused on “the common good” and “ideal deliberation aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus,” he seems to equate deliberation and consensus and assume there can be a consensus on “the” common good. However, Cohen is explicating an ideal, and is quick to add that “Even under ideal conditions there is no promise that consensual reasons will be forthcoming. If they are not, then deliberation concludes with voting, subject to some form of majority rule.” This second best alternative to the ideal deliberative procedure is more frequently how democratic discussion unfolds.

Contrary to Sanders’ claims, not all theorists of deliberative democracy presuppose a consensus nor do they presuppose that deliberation is directed at “the” common good. Seyla Benhabib argues that a critical theory of discourse must focus on distinguishing “genuine agreement” from “pseudo-compromises based on the intractability of power relations.” Elsewhere, Amy Gutmann acknowledges that “the aim of deliberation is not agreement but justice.” Agreements need not be the deep consensus that Sanders fears. Further, in developing the norm of mutual respect, Gutmann and Thompson suggest that “mutual respect is a form of agreeing to disagree. But mutual respect demands more than toleration. It requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees.” Further, deliberation helps people cooperate even when they disagree, since “[d]eliberation promotes an economy of moral disagreement in which citizens manifest mutual respect as they continue to disagree about morally important issues in politics.” Mutual respect is a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, interaction.

In this respect, Sanders’ critique of deliberation over simplifies it to the point that democratic deliberation is conflated with a communitarian commitment to the common good. Sanders’ emphasis on consensus as a fundamental flaw of deliberation unnecessarily equates deliberation with consensus. This obscures many important issues, especially since deliberative theorists are often the first to admit that conflict is as – or more – likely as consensus. Deliberation is not intended to produce consensus, but to defend democratic procedures that enable us to negotiate and discuss our differences and conflicts. Instead, following James Bohman, deliberation is more fruitfully viewed as a political method by which people agree to continue cooperating with each other given the lack of consensus and the presence of deep moral and cultural differences. In short, deliberative democratic theory can be modified, and indeed it has shifted in this direction in the last few years, so that it does not inherently presuppose nor impose a consensus. By not recognizing or acknowledging this shift, Sanders’ more powerful criticisms of deliberation, to which we now turn, are obscured.
The second line of criticism is that the norms of mutual respect, reasonableness, and civility operate not just as norms governing deliberation but as exclusionary devices. The result is that rational discussion is privileged and other forms of communication such as rhetoric and impassioned speech, and the groups that employ these forms of communication such as the poor, women, people of color, or people whose second language is English, are excluded. For example, Jennifer Hochschild points out how class and language barriers can undermine both equal access to public forums such as school board meetings and the ability to speak and be heard by fellow citizens. Further, Stanley Fish argues that deliberative democratic theory smuggles into its norms of “mutual respect” and “reasonableness” the very gag rules and bracketing strategies employed by political-liberal theorists that they purportedly reject. As a result, certain groups, their perspectives, and their interests are likely to be excluded from political deliberation on the grounds that those interests are partial rather than common and emotional rather than objective. Thus, Young urges us to reject deliberative democracy in favor of a communicative model of political dialogue. However, Young overdraws the distinction between deliberative and communicative models of discourse. For example, the three conditions of communicative democracy that Young identifies, “significant interdependence, formally equal respect, and agreed-on procedures,” can be stipulated by deliberative democratic theorists.

Following Jane Mansbridge, who argues that “subordinates sometimes need the battering ram of rage,” I agree that deliberative democracy risks building barriers to dialogue with the norms of civility and mutual respect. However, if deliberation is redefined as one of many forms of political talk, then storytelling, emotional and passionate arguments, as well as calm discussion are admitted into a range of “everyday talk.” Thus, contra critics such as Sanders and Young, deliberative democratic theory need not exclude contestation, rhetoric, and impassioned pleas, but can admit them as part of the range of more commonly used forms of democratic talk. Further, these various forms of everyday talk are expressed not just in formal institutions, but also within the more informal public spaces of a heterogeneous public sphere. This public sphere is constituted by a range of “mutually interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation, contestation and argumentation.” Since political disagreements, and differences of experience, are expressed in a variety of modes of communication in these formal and informal spaces, deliberative democratic theorists can respond to the second line of criticism.

The third line of criticism against deliberative democratic theory is that it does not take race, nor racial conflict, into account. One theorist that Sanders targets in her critique of deliberation is Benjamin Barber. At times, Barber employs the language of public participation in a way that promotes a unity that
may exclude differences. For instance, Barber’s declaration that “[d]ifference divides, principle unites”\(^2^3\) presupposes a consensus in two crucial respects. First, it fails to capture how cultural and racial histories have created both shared and competing definitions and interpretations of those principles. For example, “freedom” and “liberty” are unifying principles, yet the history of racial politics in the United States illustrates that these terms have competing and conflicting definitions that reflect both the historical era and the experiences of various groups.\(^2^4\) Second, some activists, such as Pete Kellogg of the Coalition to Promote Respect (CPR) in Green Bay Wisconsin, turn this phrase around to say that “it is our respect for our differences that unites us.”\(^2^5\) In other words, contra Barber, a principle of respecting difference can unify without erasing or homogenizing differences.

For Barber, “Human association depends on imagination: the capacity to see in others beings like ourselves. It is thus through imagination that we render others sufficiently like ourselves for them to become subjects of tolerance and respect, sometimes even affection.”\(^2^6\) Imagination is undoubtedly important, yet there is a danger that we only relate to others insofar as they are “like us.” Here, Young and Sanders’ concerns that deliberative democracy leads to the homogenization of differences, the imposition of dominant norms, and the lack of listening to others are evident.

We can guard against this by remembering Martha Minow’s discussion of the “golden rule” that enjoins us to treat others as we would have them treat us. For Minow, this imperative carries the twin risks of either over-emphasizing our similarities or over-emphasizing our differences. Both have harmful consequences for deliberation since the first risk “creates a false unity or universalism, treating others as though they were just like us, replicas with no different qualities. The second risk creates a false dichotomy, treating others as though they were sharply and essentially different from us.”\(^2^7\) For Minow, we must stop short of using our own experience as the norm to which others are compared, and remember that the “real chance to learn about the other is by talking with that person.”\(^2^8\) Concrete interaction enables participants both to hear what others have to say and to recognize that the differences among us are relational instead of static. Further, to balance Barber’s emphasis on imagination, Minow suggests “[i]t is not even enough to imagine the perspective of the other; we must also try to share deliberations with the other person.”\(^2^9\)

It is only through acknowledgment of complexity, conflict, and difference that we can uncover solutions to the many unjustifiable inequalities that continue to vex us. In short, bracketing or sweeping differences under the rug limits the range of public debate and in turn limits our range of solutions. Other theories that presuppose a consensus, or ask participants to bracket or transcend differences, are equally ineffective for addressing our cultural, ethnic, and racial similarities and differences.\(^3^0\) Recognizing and discussing these differences does not guarantee that a consensus will be produced. Instead, it is likely to produce a more
thoughtful examination of the issues given that new perspectives and complexities will be introduced. Such an examination allows for conflict when we work through our cultural and ideological differences in a shared political framework.  

When we admit and recognize these conflicts and differences, we should not take this as a sign that we do not have a community or that deliberation has failed. Community is not the same thing as consensus and uniformity, and deliberation includes conflict and disagreement. For example, there are ways of interacting that help us invoke common ideals and histories as well as different understandings and interpretations of these ideals and histories as influenced by our own personal (and group) experiences. There are also ways of creating new commonalities, as Barber suggests, through interaction, common talk, and common action. However, these commonalities need not trump or erase differences.  

Rather than seeing racial and ethnic differences as a barrier to deliberation, some theorists argue that deliberation is enhanced by multiculturalism. Amy Gutmann suggests that “[m]ulticulturalism requires deliberation on many matters of social justice. It can also aid adequate deliberation. Our moral understanding of many-sided issues, like legalizing abortion, is furthered by discussions with people with whom we respectfully disagree especially when these people have cultural identities different from our own.” Gutmann continues by pointing out “[m]any of us whose judgments about abortion were once largely unconsidered have revised our views, perhaps not radically but significantly, by being confronted with well-reasoned defenses of an opposing point of view.”

I agree that deliberation is enhanced by multiculturalism and that deliberation helps us come to grips with political conflicts in multicultural societies. However, as discussed above, racial conflict can occur within a shared cultural framework due to different experiences and inequalities. Thus, additional investigation into areas of racial and cultural conflict is necessary. Recently, Gutmann as well as Gooding-Williams have directed the attention of deliberative democratic theorists to issues of race, culture, and identity. However, Gutmann avoids a discussion of “race” in favor of “color,” for fear of reinforcing pseudo-scientific notions of biological racial differences. In contrast, Gooding-Williams offers an account of race and plural African-American identities that is historical, social, and contextualizes the formation of racial identities not just as a reaction to oppression but as a positive, constitutive element of social identity. Such identities, while not biological or essentially “real,” are nevertheless real in the sense that race has and continues to shape our material lives. Thus, deliberative democratic theorists are grappling with how to theorize race and identity without reinforcing discredited biological arguments. Nevertheless, they do respond to the third line of criticism that deliberative democratic theory does not consider race.  

(iv) The fourth line of criticism leveled at deliberative democratic theory is aimed at the prerequisite that all affected citizens have access to public deliberation and that entry to the conversation is “free, open, and fair” to all. This side of
the theoretical coin has been asserted by nearly every contemporary deliberative democratic theorist but has received comparatively little of their attention. For example, Gutmann argues that deliberation is necessary but insufficient for social justice. In addition to deliberation, there must be “substantive principles that are necessary to secure basic human well-being.” Further, in order to establish spaces for, and ensure access to, deliberation, “certain background conditions must hold.” Unfortunately, Gutmann leaves these background conditions unspecified and unexplicated. This exemplifies an insight offered by Anne Phillips, who observes that recent literature on public deliberation “assume[s] equality of access (without necessarily exploring the conditions that would deliver this result).”

Further, deliberative theorists have focused on formal institutions such as Congress, juries, or expert committees to which average citizens have either no access or limited direct experience with. This has led to some important theoretical examination of the procedures of deliberation within juries and expert committees that Sanders and Gutmann use as examples of where successful, and failed, deliberation takes place.

However, politics also occurs in more informal public spaces within the deliberative system. What Mansbridge describes as the “deliberative system” includes both formal institutions such as Congress in which deliberation is aimed at making legitimate, authoritative decisions and informal institutions such as civic groups, social movements, and mass media in which everyday talk shapes opinions, contests the issues that the public ought to discuss, and is aimed at continuing the dialogue. In short, certain people may be excluded not just by a conversational norm but may be excluded well before the deliberation begins by being blocked out of these informal and formal settings in which everyday political talk unfolds.

Indeed, this is why Young recently has suggested that “inclusion” be added to Gutmann and Thompson’s six criteria of deliberative democracy. I suggest that inclusion is best understood as a twofold criterion that is important for political deliberation. On one hand, it recalls John Dewey’s idea that citizens and experts must be linked by a “consultation and discussion which uncover[s] social needs and troubles” to prevent experts from becoming an aristocratic class “shut off from the needs which they are supposed to serve.” Further, the “public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”

This aspect of inclusion has received some attention by Ian Shapiro and Young in their respective critiques of the deliberative democratic theory of Gutmann and Thompson put forth in Democracy and Disagreement. Specifically, Shapiro points out how the non-elderly poor were unrepresented in public deliberations regarding health care reform in Oregon and Young points out that low-income single mothers were unrepresented in the welfare debate of 1992–1996. In both
cases, Shapiro and Young argue that the tone of the debates and the issues included in deliberations would likely have differed if the groups affected were represented. Even if the tone of the deliberation and issues discussed did not change, simply including the affected groups would have increased the legitimacy of the resulting decisions.

On the other hand, the criterion of “inclusion” focuses our attention on the range of ideas being discussed and the people who are discussing them. Again, Dewey points out that “[s]ince those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transactions in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected.” Thus, representatives must serve as advocates for the affected groups. However, if there are no representatives to give voice to the concerns of the affected groups, and if members of those affected groups are not present to speak for themselves and be heard by others, this brings up a classic dilemma of access and representation that is captured in Anne Phillips’ discussion of the “politics of ideas” and the “politics of presence.” Phillips argues that a wide-ranging, inclusive public deliberation requires both a wide range of ideas and the physical presence of previously un- and under-represented groups such as women, African Americans, the working class, gays and lesbians, and others who are affected by policies.

The importance of the politics of presence, to give a brief example, is evident in the Congressional debate regarding the patent on the Confederate flag, which is part of the official seal of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). When the US Senate was debating the renewal of patent, it took Carol Moseley-Braun (D-IL), then the only African-American Senator, to speak on behalf of the millions of Americans who see the Confederate flag as a symbol of segregation and Jim Crow racism that should not have the official approval of the US Senate. Moseley-Braun’s impassioned testimony persuaded, or shamed, enough of her colleagues that the Senate did not renew the patent. Had Moseley-Braun not been a Senator at the time, the debate would have likely led to an easy renewal of the patent. Moseley-Braun’s presence in the Senate injected a perspective that had been missing from Senate deliberations, and this perspective altered the way in which enough of her fellow Senators looked at the issue to influence the outcome.

Gutmann and Thompson view this incident as an illustration of the ways in which deliberation can be consistent with impassioned and immoderate speech. First, even extreme nondeliberative methods may be justified as necessary steps to deliberation. The Senate had never taken this issue seriously in the past and was on the verge of treating it as routine once again. The legislative process is deficient if it neglects or excludes perspectives that deserve serious consideration and can contribute to a justifiable resolution of the issue. When reasonable perspectives are neglected, there is a strong argument from the premises of deliberative democracy itself to use any legal means necessary to get those views taken seriously. Second,
deliberation itself does not always have to take the form of a reasoned argument of the kind that philosophers are inclined to favor. Moseley-Braun’s speech may have been impassioned, but it made substantive points, to which members could respond with their own arguments.49

Gutmann and Thompson’s first reason presumes that Moseley-Braun’s speech is nondeliberative but can be reconciled with deliberative democratic theory given the results of the speech. Thus, impassioned speech is separate from deliberation. However, their second reason then treats the same impassioned speech as a form of deliberation. This second reason is compatible with my argument that testimony, storytelling, and rhetoric are forms of communication, along with calm, dispassionate discussion, that can and should be included as part of the everyday talk of deliberative democratic theory.

The Moseley-Braun speech, I suggest, is not just important for reworking what we mean by “deliberation,” but it also serves as a lesson on the importance of Phillips’ notion of the politics of presence. Having, or lacking, access to the spaces of democratic debate and deliberation goes to the core of this fourth line of criticism against deliberative democratic theory. Sanders rightfully argues that a focus on the common good and consensus is premature when considering the gulf between black and white Americans (along lines of class and opinion about the causes and cures for racial discrimination and the resulting inequalities).50

This gulf has important consequences for policies, since Sanders points out that the deep differences of opinion between black and white Americans precludes any consensus on policies that will alleviate the effects of racial discrimination. Sanders rightfully reminds us that when structural inequalities combine with moral disagreements, or with deep differences of experience and perspective, there is indeed a risk that deliberation will result in a false – or no – consensus, or will simply reinforce the existing inequalities. This is an unsatisfactory outcome, for even if we do not require consensus as the outcome of deliberation, Sanders is calling attention to the fact that we cannot assume the deliberative process is neutral, fair, and equally accessible to all.

Thus, Sanders argues the only way that public deliberation can be seen as fair is if socioeconomic and political changes that ensure economic equity and political access are enacted prior to deliberation. But here we come to the “chicken or egg” problem: do we need policy and structural changes prior to deliberation, or is deliberation the way that we collectively figure out what structural changes must be undertaken? This is difficult to untangle, yet it is at the core of the disagreement between Gooding-Williams and Sanders.

II. Beyond the “For or Against Deliberation” Divide: Mediating Groups and Civil Society

Young and Sanders’ notions of storytelling and testimony are intriguing, but have implications that have not been fully addressed. Theoretically, one question that
arises is to what extent empowering excluded groups and individuals to speak creates an obligation to listen on the part of those already empowered. Sanders rightly worries that empowered groups will not truly listen to the powerless, which then undermines the egalitarianism assumed by deliberative procedures. This is indeed a crucial issue to which deliberative democratic theorists must respond. One way to answer this is to follow Susan Bickford and specify that democratic citizenship not only guarantees a right to speak, but also an obligation to listen to those speaking. Sanders also argues that speaking and listening are both components of dialogue. Dialogue is, after all, a process of speaking and listening. This requires, as Gutmann and Thompson point out, a norm of mutual respect between those engaged in deliberation to ensure that conflicting perspectives and experiences are openly spoken and heard.

There remain two unresolved issues regarding the boundaries of, and spaces for, testimony. First, Sanders does not identify what, if any, limits are placed on testimony. This raises some important questions: is this an endless process or are there limits? When, if at all, will a decision be reached and action be undertaken? To help answer these questions, Mansbridge’s notion of “using power/fighting power" is helpful because it highlights how dialogue must be continual within formal and informal institutions, but decisions eventually must be made. These decisions are not final and irrevocable, but are tentative and revisable in the future.

Second, since both Gutmann and Sanders use jury deliberations as an example of public spaces of deliberation and both highlight the power dynamics which unfold within them, are there any other public spaces in which we might be able to find multiracial deliberation and testimony which carve out spaces of equitable interracial dialogue? If there are any, what can this tell us about the structuring and content of deliberation, dialogue, and testimony? To answer these questions, I draw on the practices of selected community groups to argue that such community groups can be arenas in which deliberation, dialogue, and testimony unfold. To help us theorize the importance of these community groups, I turn to recent work on civil society and the public sphere and illustrate how it is intertwined with Mansbridge’s notion of using power/fighting power.

Many scholars have argued that patterns of housing segregation and other manifestations of racial inequality preclude the existence of interracial public spaces for political talk. Further, the absence of such public spaces, combined with persistent stereotypes and prejudices, preclude a truly equal give-and-take across racial lines. Granting this line of argument, I suggest that there are some community groups which respond to these barriers by acting as spaces in civil society in which people interact across racial lines. Further, within these groups we find various practices of dialogue, storytelling, and testimony. Additionally, these forms of communication are linked to decisions regarding collective action by these groups acting alone or in coalition with others. It is at this link between talk and action that I think we can gain some insight into a democratic politics in which everyday talk is central, but also has limits.
Scholars have specified some of these public spaces as “contact points,” “counterpublics,” “safe spaces,” and “free spaces.” To capture how some community groups possess characteristics of all of these (e.g., they serve as spaces for people to join together and learn how to live and work with complexity but also to strategize about democratic change), I describe some citizens groups as “mediating groups.” Such groups act at the local level to first establish spaces for multiracial contact and dialogue, and second to find ways to direct this dialogue to political action.

a. Mediating Groups as Spaces for Multiple Modes of Communication

Dialogue, storytelling, and testimony unfold within mediating groups in two important ways. First, the dialogue does not presuppose consensus. Instead, it is within dialogues that conflict, differences of perspective and identity, and even different definitions of shared ideals such as “equality” are examined. This is illustrated in the case of the Madison, when Chuck Pfeifer discusses their use of small study groups based on Urban Ministry the study circle model widely used in countries like Sweden:

one goal is attitudinal changes, maybe not in world view or political ideology, but changes in how we view differences. To get us to appreciate differences of whatever sort: whether they be race, gender, or religious. . . . The idea of study circles is to promote new ways of looking at issues that get beyond the rigid choices of liberal and conservative, to get beyond old patterns of viewing things and create new ways of viewing things.56

Further, the goal of dialogue is not always to prove one position right and the other wrong, or even to reach a consensus, but to realize, as Pfeifer says, “that my right answer is only a partially right answer, as is yours.” This reflects a more pragmatic approach to dialogue as a continual negotiation of commonalities and differences. In addition to study circles, MUM also publishes a newsletter and holds a variety of public forums in which testimony (and testifying) unfolds.57

Second, the dialogues within mediating groups allow for multiple forms of expression and communication. It is within these mediating groups that dialogue and storytelling unfold. Testimony, for Sanders, allows for the “telling of one’s particular story to a broader group.”58 Further, testimony is different from deliberation because while deliberation presupposes the “pursuit of commonality,” testimony “allows for the expression of different perspectives rather than seeking what’s common.”59 Sanders argues that “[w]hat is fundamental about giving testimony is telling one’s own story, not seeking communal dialogue.”60 Similarly, Young argues that spaces for “storytelling” must be defended to allow for more diverse voices in the public sphere.61

Dialogue within mediating groups illustrates this. For example, Charlotte Holloman of the Beyond Racism Project describes the importance of interracial dialogue because it allows people to “tell their story.”62 Further, dialogue and
testimony is purposely emphasized to preclude the assumption of essential racial experiences and identities. In other words, testimony allows a person to tell her story, but as Holloman emphasizes, it also requires that others not take her story to represent “the” perspective or experiences of all women or all black people. 63

Additionally, multiple forms of communication are emphasized within dialogue. The Coalition to Promote Respect is made up of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Hmong and Lao immigrants, and European Americans. This leads the CPR to allow for a variety of modes of communication, given that English is a second-language for some of their members. “Communication” is more than verbal, and includes visual forms of communication. With this in mind, one project they undertook was to donate disposable cameras to Hmong teenagers who then took pictures about their daily lives. These photographs were then displayed at a local museum and served as a starting point for discussions around immigration experiences, Hmong culture and identities, cross-cultural understanding, and the need for local changes such as public agencies and schools hiring staff and faculty who are fluent in different Hmong dialects.

The multiple forms of communication within mediating groups capture what some theorists have identified as Bakhtinian “polyphony” as well as “multicultural literacy.” In other words, communication unfolds in an open-ended, inclusive manner, and this dialogue enables people to navigate and interact across cultural and racial boundaries. 64 When dialogue allows for “the interplay of equally audible voices,” it serves as a means for decentering the perspectives of participants, enhancing the self-awareness of participants, and enabling participants to speak for themselves. 65 As Barbara Golden, founder of the Interracial Family Network describes it:

I think some of it has to do with all of us being willing to move out of center and look at everybody in a way that puts us on the outside. Because being a person of color, I can still, I can be with a group of people who are Asian or be with a group of people who are speaking Spanish – which has happened to me, they were all speaking Spanish and I don’t speak Spanish – and feel like, I had a real feeling what it feels like to be on the margins. And I think we all need that experience. 67

Golden then suggests this decentering experience also broadens our collective knowledge because it makes people aware of different perspectives. Dialogue and interaction are important given the possibility that concrete interaction opens up avenues for self-transformation and for decentering dominant perspectives and experiences as the norm to which everyone is compared.

b. Mediating Groups as Counterpublics

Mediating groups also exist as a type of counterpublic in their cities. Mediating groups such as the CPR and MUM monitor local media for stereotypes and biased images of people of color. To counteract these stereotypes, MUM publishes a
newsletter which includes articles and essays that critically examine various aspects of power and inequality at the local level and some Vision of Race and Unity and CPR members write essays for a “Diverse Voices” column in the Green Bay Press-Gazette. The VRU and CPR are currently forming an alternative community newspaper in which all groups of color will have representation.

In this respect, mediating groups as counterpublics are examples of Nancy Fraser’s notion of “weak publics” because they operate in the realm of public opinion formation. They are not able to make authoritative political decisions, but instead provide alternative accounts and viewpoints on questions of racial diversity and equality at the local level.68

However, mediating groups also seek out ways to link dialogue, testimony, and storytelling to action. Thus, they are finding ways to administer social programs themselves as well as influence local politics. To give a few examples: the CPR and VRU have helped form the Brown County Fair Housing Council, and have advocated changes in hiring and curriculum for Green Bay public schools; and MUM has formed teen mentoring programs, transitional housing programs, and has entered into coalition with the NAACP for voter registration drives. In so doing, the CPR, VRU, and MUM act alone and in coalition with other community groups. The CPR, for example, always approaches local authorities with what they call a “multiracial united front” both when they are giving voice to shared concerns that cut across the various racial and ethnic groups of Green Bay (such as school curriculum reform and hiring bilingual teachers) and when they stand in solidarity with groups on issues that are unique to them (such as defending the sovereignty and land rights of the Oneida Nation). Further, when they act, they do so in a more pragmatic fashion. The CPR and MUM describe their efforts as “pilot projects,” “experimental projects,” and “ad hoc committees” that reflect a desire to act to address local issues yet a willingness to revisit decisions and efforts and revise them if necessary. Since mediating groups try to aim dialogue toward collective action, they also embody elements of a “strong public” when they find ways to alter the institutions and policies at the local level.69

While storytelling, testimony, and dialogue are important components of mediating groups, there are times when testimony must connect to decisions, actions, and local decision-making institutions. This does not require a consensus within the mediating group,70 but dialogue and testimony must be structured to enable the group to reach a decision regarding local actions that could be undertaken to change policies and reform institutions.

This represents two interconnected levels of political activity. On one level, mediating groups continue their internal dialogue and testimony as well as their efforts as “weak publics” to influence local opinion formation. It is here that mediating groups promote a type of consciousness raising similar to, but more heterogeneous than, what Michael Schudson calls the “sociable model of conversation.”71 On another level, these mediating groups have been able to reach decisions and act as “strong publics” to address concerns that emerge through the
process of testimony and in ways that connect these mediating groups to more formal political institutions at the local level. It is here that mediating groups promote what Schudson calls “problem-solving conversation.”

This suggests that dialogue and testimony need not end, but must be connected in some way to provisional decisions about collective action. In other words, this first level of sociable conversation is continuous, but is connected to a second level of problem-solving conversation directed toward various goals on which the group can take political actions. These groups must simultaneously use power by injecting their interests and views into local problem-solving conversations and fight power so that any decision to act is open to revision to guard against unintended consequences such as the reimposition of inequalities.

It is in this second level of politics that we must think about the status of mediating groups and coalition politics. Here it helps to recall what a variety of theorists have described as a “coalition identity,” “pan-identity,” and “principled coalition.” Whatever the terminology, principled coalitions draw groups together around shared goals, interests, or an inclusive identity yet allow for some disagreement, distinct concerns, and identities of constituent groups.

Further, we must examine possible changes in electoral systems, such as cumulative voting, to enable previously underrepresented groups to have more presence and influence in decision-making bodies. At the local level, activists from the CPR have been appointed to committees empowered to make recommendations in hiring and curriculum changes in Green Bay schools. However, the question of access to decision-making bodies brings up the possibility that establishing a more equal grounds for deliberation might include solutions such as group rights, cumulative voting, redistricting with the goal of establishing majority-minority districts, and/or proportional representation, to increase the presence of underrepresented groups in formal political institutions.

III. When the Power of Talk Meets the Talk of Power

Whether the dialogue within mediating groups, contact points, free spaces, or consciousness-raising groups is governed by the norms of mutual respect or civility is an important theoretical question. Groups such as the Beyond Racism Project do set up “ground rules” for discussions, since discussions of racism often bring out conflict and disagreement. It is the ability of everyone to tell their story and be heard, and the structural changes to help guarantee this, that are important however we describe the norms governing this dialogue.

Gooding-Williams and Sanders, although they differ on the usefulness of deliberative democracy, both identify one crucial problem for interracial deliberation: perception and standing. Gooding-Williams highlights how one’s race is a visible marker of blackness (unless one can “pass” for white). He invokes deliberative democratic theory as a model for promoting “a form of public reasoning” that can “cultivate a mutual understanding of the differences in conviction that
divide them, so they can formulate reasons (say, for implementing or not implementing a proposed policy) that will be generally acceptable despite those differences." However, Gooding-Williams also links the pursuit of mutual understanding to the notion of “reversibility of perspectives” so that deliberation is not solely aimed at agreement but is a cross-cultural dialogue that promotes the recognition and willingness to live with complexity. This promotes the recognition of relational differences, so that cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogue highlights the ways in which we are relationally shaped by interaction and contrast.

The BRP’s program of “Building Community” is an example of this in practice: multiracial groups of participants who go into each others’ neighborhoods, homes, community centers, and gain a richer (but not perfect) understanding of others through experiential contact. The goal, as Holloman of the BRP states it, is to get people to “stretch our comfort zones.” This phrasing captures the notion of enlarged mentality and how it can be achieved through experience and self-reflection in addition to Barber’s emphasis on imagination.

The goal of interaction and dialogue, for Holloman, is not to get beyond race in a naive color-blind fashion, but to fight racism in a way that promotes respect for differences at the same time that it draws out commonalities. Further, Vernon Taylor of the CPR echoes this when he describes his hope for cross-racial dialogue:

many of us have been isolated in segregated communities where we’re all black, you know, and/or we live in areas where we only work with white people and never really interact on a social level. So, for many people of color it also gives them an opportunity to better understand where whites are coming from in terms of their own perspectives. . . . And there is a reason – a lot of people don’t understand – that whites need to be told, taught, basically, about how to co-exist with us. Because they don’t know, they never had to, they never did, so how can they know? It just doesn’t happen automatically.

It is on this issue of relationality and the reversibility of perspectives that the deliberative democracy that Gooding-Williams advocates comes up against the critique of deliberative democracy offered by Young and Sanders. Concrete interaction alone will not promote cross-racial coalitions or respect if asymmetries of power and perception are too great. Young and Sanders worry that asymmetries of power, standing, and respect, particularly across racial lines, preclude the reversibility of perspectives as well as mutual respect. Young criticizes the notion of reversibility as an impossible goal since humans are not transparent to each other. We can never fully place ourselves into another’s position and see the world from their perspective (when at most, Young suggests, this is a partial achievement). Further, the goal of reversibility risks overemphasizing commonalities and obscuring differences in a way that would simply reinforce the existing asymmetries of power. Additionally, Sanders argues that white conversationalists will not “hear” or listen to what black conversationalists have
to say, or will give it less credence, given historical patterns of social hierarchy and the attributions of superiority/inferiority and reason/emotion that accompany them. The reversibility of perspectives assumes that participants in various forms of everyday political talk have equal standing and are situated as equals in the polity. However, inequalities of power and asymmetries of political standing undermine the notion of reversibility.

Activists in groups like the CPR, VRU, BRP, IFN, and MUM are aware of these inequalities of power and how they can distort honest discussion among equals. Thus, they can help us theorize the difficulty, the possibility, and the limits of dialogue across asymmetries of power, experience, and identity. Dialogue is seen as a way to negotiate differences and commonalities, and (recall Minow’s insights above) concrete interaction is a way to humanize each other while recognizing the impossibility of totally reversing perspectives.

Indeed, Young reconceptualizes reciprocity across asymmetries of power in a way that Gooding-Williams, Minow, and many of the activists in the CPR, MUM, and BRP would see as reasonable. This reconceptualization holds out the possibility of agreement and shared experiences, but also reminds us of the concrete particularity of human experiences that can never be fully experienced or felt by others who have a concrete particularity of their own. This concrete particularity, for Young, is connected to an openness to learn new things which, I suggest, resonates with Gooding-Williams’ notion that we ought to be willing to live with complexity and ambiguity.

Asymmetries of power bring us to the importance of trust, particularly cross-racial trust, in forming cross-racial coalitions. Charles Pfeifer of MUM illustrates this as an important concern:

Talking makes the dominant group members and white folks feel good, but we need to change the interaction. Often times black people comment that white folk can go back to the suburbs after all is said and done, and that they themselves have to go back to parts of the city where there is more violence, poor housing, and fewer job opportunities. There needs to be some opportunity to ask “How is my life changing as a result of dialogues?” This is the weakness of the dialogical approach: energy is lessened because it goes into dialogue and doesn’t carry over to changes in institutions and patterns of interaction. Establishing relations requires commitment, and for dominant group members, they need to begin to ask themselves why is it that things are the way they are. For example, why is it that 98% of the people at their workplace are white? We must begin to look at patterns of interaction and institutions, and be committed to changing them. Often times black people feel that white people pat them on the back with one hand and stab them in the back with the other when talk isn’t followed up by changes in interactions and institutions.

Despite Pfeifer’s belief in dialogue, it is also clear that he recognizes its limits if it is not linked to action. While dialogue may result in the participants broadening their perspectives and views, which is an important consequence of multiracial dialogue, such talk can impede the achievement of the structural and policy
changes that a multiracial democracy requires if participants equate talk with collective action. Importantly, Pfeifer also implies that establishing cross-racial trust is important, and can be achieved not just by a willingness to enter into dialogue but also a willingness to undertake the changes (in attitudes, social structures, policies, and patterns of social interaction) necessary to move toward racial justice.

This brings us back to the chicken-or-the-egg puzzle that is at the core of the disagreement between Gooding-Williams and Sanders. Pfeifer’s comments help us reframe the puzzle not as a choice but as an interactive process of linking dialogue and structural change. Dialogue can help identify policy and institutional changes that are needed, and move people toward collective action regarding these changes. These changes then restructure the social and political environment in which dialogue continues to unfold. Thus, dialogue and structural change co-exist in an interactive and dialectical relationship.

If participants in democratic dialogue are unwilling to address issues of power and conflict, then a purely talk centered politics, though not entirely useless, is nevertheless limited. Thus, everyday talk is necessary but insufficient as a theory and practice of politics. Indeed, activists in VRU, MUM, CPR, and BRP all lamented the limits of dialogue (e.g., preaching to the choir, inability to translate talk into action, the difficulty in honestly talking about race, the recognition that many problems of inequality require national-level legal/legislative solutions, to name a few). At the same time, however, they held out hope for its transformative power.

The transformative power of talk is too often blocked when the topic of discussion turns to power, inequality, and the potential redistribution of resources. This is evident at all levels of politics. One local group that was created with the intention of becoming a politically active mediating group in Madison, Wisconsin, is the Multiracial Alliance of Wisconsin. Originally, its founding members envisioned the MAW as a group of interracial families (both by marriage and adoption) that would serve as a bridge between the local black and white communities. However, when it came time to draft and vote on a mission statement, any critical potential for the MAW was stunted from the start. Some members wanted an explicit statement that the MAW would fight racism in its mission statement. Others thought that the MAW should not be politically active but simply be a support group and serve as an example of interracial harmony by its mere existence. A vote was taken, and those that advocated fighting racism as a core goal of the MAW lost. Immediately, one of the founders left to form another organization, the IFN, which does explicitly include fighting racism as part of its mission statement. Thus, the IFN is active in local debates about school curriculum, diversification of hiring, and other local issues, while the MAW is not.

The avoidance of racism at the MAW’s founding serves as an important counterexample to the power of race-conscious deliberation. Simply put, refusing to address, or fight, racism is a form of power which undercuts the use of deliberation.
as a method of altering world views or policies in the way that Gooding-Williams proposes. Further, the refusal to fight racism by the MAW turned it from a potential mediating group that could serve as an important bridge group in local politics into a “comfort zone” that withdrew from political engagement.86

At the national level, President Clinton’s Advisory Commission on Race serves as a problematic example of the use of talk to achieve racial understanding and policy recommendations. The public forums held by the Commission were intended to be an inclusive, civil method of addressing deep and persistent racial divides. However, some activists and citizens voiced concerns regarding the goals of, and the rules that governed, the dialogue. In particular, the goal of a “candid conversation” leading to racial reconciliation was seen by some as worthy but risky. Mary Frances Barry observed that President Clinton’s race initiative would leave us with “a paean to the diversity of an American rainbow on top, and hard, resistant subordination of African-Americans just below the surface.”87 Others observed that the initiative produced mild policy reforms at best, and even these reforms were not strongly promoted by the president nor pursued by members of Congress. Critics have suggested that President Clinton oversaw the Race Initiative as the “therapist in chief” to create the impression of concern and action rather than pursing substantive efforts to address deep inequalities.88 In short, even when political leaders direct their attention to issues of racial inequality, the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion often papers over deep, persistent problems that plague African Americans in the US. This is precisely why Sanders rejects deliberation.

If a president cannot inspire an inclusive discussion about racial inequality that leads to concrete policy proposals during an unprecedented period of economic growth, we are left with a concern that maybe such a national level dialogue may never be successful at instilling a more genuine multiracial democracy. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that certain conditions must obtain before concrete policies are enacted to achieve a stronger measure of economic and political justice. Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith have recently argued that significant progress toward a more just multiracial democracy occurs when three conditions converge: a war that requires mass mobilization of all Americans, political leaders who invoke democratic ideals as part of this mobilization, and advocacy groups to prompt policy changes that close the gap between the rhetoric of these democratic ideals and discriminatory practices that mock them. Further, the post-war demobilizations that occur are typically periods of retrenchment.89 Similarly, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that many of the civil rights victories of the 1960s faced resistance in the 1970s as racial justice was re-articulated away from substantive equality toward individual formal rights.90 This draws our attention to important non-deliberative social conditions that may promote or hinder the achievement of a more genuine multiracial democracy.

Examples such as these illustrate that while democratic talk has perspective-changing, transformative potential, too often the power of talk is often stopped...
once the topic of conversation shifts to issues of power and redistributing resources. The way to respond to this dilemma is threefold. First, if Klinkner, Smith, Omi, and Winant are right, then we must be aware that at times democratic deliberation must occur in a political environment that is not conducive to progressive multiracial deliberation nor to any substantive policy or institutional changes to build a more genuine multiracial democracy. It may indeed be the case that without a national emergency it is difficult to mobilize people around the ideals of a multiracial democracy. If President Clinton’s Race Initiative was the moral equivalent of war, then at best it was only a qualified success. Second, we should not reject deliberation, but redefine political deliberation to include a variety of forms of communication. The everyday talk of democracy, when carried on in civil society, mediating groups, and even in legislative bodies, can at the very least promote a valuable decentering of perspectives that is the result of injecting the views, experiences, interests, and stories from underrepresented groups. When democratic talk is linked to concrete interaction it is an important step in achieving (even partially) Gooding-Williams’ notion of the reversibility of perspectives and Minow’s notion of sharing deliberations with concrete others. This form of deliberation is important, and it is occurring within the informal spaces of civil society. But we need more of it, and we need to find ways of linking this richer notion of democratic talk with political decisions. Thus, third, if we are to bring this richer style of deliberation into existing political institutions, we must focus our attention on the structural barriers that preclude equal access to the informal public spaces of everyday talk and the formal political institutions in which political decisions are made.

Regarding the focus of political theory, one place to start is to revive and reinvigorate two important concepts. First, the theoretical focus on emancipation, once a core theme of critical theory, has been neglected by recent critical and deliberative theorists in the wake of critical theory’s “linguistic turn” and ought to be retrieved. Second, the concept of representation should continue to be reoriented and linked to the goals of substantive self-representation and access to political deliberation. Such representation, whether it is Phillips’ combination of the politics of ideas and politics of presence or Melissa Williams’ recent work reorienting representation to ensure access to legislative bodies for marginalized groups, is important for promoting a more inclusive discussion, a decentering of perspectives, and cultivating trust in democratic institutions. Deliberative democratic theorists should focus on the barriers to formal and informal spaces of political deliberation rather than, as Phillips worries, merely assume that access is already free and fair. On the political side of these theoretical concerns, one place to start is to experiment with proportional representation, cumulative voting, and other mechanisms to increase the representation of under-represented groups in formal political institutions. Mediating groups, as part of a larger deliberative system, also inject new perspectives onto the public agenda at national and local levels by engaging in coalition building and creating alternative media outlets.
Further, given that some of the mediating groups I have discussed have been able to get members appointed to local task forces, this helps us think of creative ways to implement Dewey’s goal of ongoing consultation between citizens and officials in which citizens have more input into the definition of problems and the development of potential solutions.

Such reforms are one step in living up to Phillips’ combination of the politics of ideas and the politics of presence. Although debate in formal institutions will not likely produce a consensus on most issues (remember, Cohen, Gutmann, and others admit that deliberative democracy will have to live with some form of majority rule), the range of interests, experiences, and ideas included in any deliberation will be expanded so as to at least inject previously neglected views and at most such views might lead to significant policy changes. By including a wider range of interests and experiences in any political deliberation, any decision regarding policy changes will have a stronger claim to legitimacy due to the inclusion of different voices in the debate leading up to the decision.

IV. Conclusions and Implications

The arguments made in this article have several implications for the future elaboration of deliberative democratic theory. First, I have outlined how deliberative democratic theory can be defended against four lines of criticism. Rather than continuing a debate between deliberation or testimony, I suggest an approach to deliberative democratic theory that includes conversation, non-verbal forms of communication, deliberation, and testimony. Further, while the conversation of democracy may produce consensus, more often it is a continual unfolding of conflict, polyphony, and provisional agreements about how to act. If we disengage deliberation from the idea of consensus, we don’t have to follow Sanders and be “against deliberation.” Instead, we must ensure a more vigorous, just, and inclusive democracy in which deliberation includes a variety of forms of talk and communication that unfold within a set of democratic procedures that enable us to negotiate our conflicts and differences.

Second, to supplement the analyses of formal political institutions offered by deliberative democratic theorists, I have shown that dialogue, deliberation, storytelling, and testimony also occur within the informal spaces in a heterogeneous civil society embodied in part by mediating groups. Mediating groups direct us to include informal public spaces in the everyday talk of democracy. This article described some of these mediating groups and how they create spaces of contact, dialogue, testimony, that is directed at decentering the perspectives of participants and leading them to experimental problem solving at the local level. This range of communication styles can lead to advocacy (confrontational styles) as well as negotiation (compromising styles) within national and local formal political institutions.

Third, underlying this democratic politics rests an ethics of conversation in
which the willingness and ability to live with, instead of avoid or ignore, ambiguity and complexity is a political virtue. Such an ethics not only promotes the notion of respectful dialogue but also the ability of citizens to tell their story and an obligation for others to listen. This ethics is closely tied to the democratic pragmatism found in the mediating groups discussed above, but also in John Dewey’s pragmatism which emphasizes the importance of face-to-face give and take. Indeed, Dewey’s notion that “[v]ision is a spectator; hearing is a participator” highlights the importance of speaking and hearing in democratic politics that I have stressed throughout this article. Critics might suggest that talk without resulting action is useless. If the standard is policy and structural change, this is probably true. However, if we look at what talk and concrete interaction can do – allow participants to tell their story, decenter dominant perspectives, bring new experiences and viewpoints to a conversation, raise awareness of complexities, and raise awareness of how commonalities and differences can be negotiated – then we must admit that democratic talk and interaction are indeed important.

Finally, talk has its limits. When talk reinforces the power of already powerful groups or interests, when certain topics are ruled off-limits, or when talk does not lead to substantive policy changes at the local or national level, then it is clear that a purely talk-centered politics is limited in theory and anemic in practice. While democratic talk is important, deliberative democratic theory requires finding ways to connect this ongoing conversation with structural reforms that will help create the social, economic, and political conditions needed for a just multiracial democracy.

NOTES

3. Sanders, “Against Deliberation” and Iris Marion Young, Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 60–74. Indeed, Young acknowledges the similarities her argument has with that of Sanders.
4. I employ the term “mediating groups” to describe civic groups at the local level that set out to a) establish spaces for multiracial contact and dialogue, and b) find ways to direct this dialogue to political action at the local level. The idea of these groups acting as a mediator, or bridge, is reflected in their formation. The CPR, for example, formed specifically to be a mediating group between African Americans and the local police due to tension over the police response to a racially charged fight at a local high school. The goal was to establish a space for dialogue, and to identify solutions and suggestions to ameliorate the tension (primarily by recommending ways that the police could respond to any future attacks with more sensitivity, hiring more African-American officers, etc.). For purposes of this article, I draw on selected examples from the Beyond Racism Project (BRP) of Milwaukee, the Madison Urban Ministry (MUM), the Coalition to Promote Respect (CPR) in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and the Multiracial Alliance of Wisconsin (MAW) and Interracial Family Network (IFN) of Madison, Wisconsin. For a more detailed discussion of mediating groups, see G. Streich,


8. Ibid., 23.


18. Young, Intersecting Voices, 67.


20. Ibid.


22. This is an argument made by Sanders, “Against Deliberation.”


28. Minow, Making All the Difference, 263.

29. Ibid., 383.

30. While this article focuses on deliberative democratic theory, the critique that Sanders levels
against it are equally applicable to political liberalism which promotes an overlapping consensus, conversational restraints, neutral conversational grounds, etc., that evade or avoid moral conflicts by requiring conversationalists to bracket or transcend particularities of their identity but also to bracket moral conflict. For discussions of the important arguments made by political liberals, see John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Bruce Ackerman, “Why Dialogue?” Journal of Philosophy 86 (1989): 5–22; and J. Donald Moon, Constructing Community: Moral Pluralism and Tragic Conflicts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).


34. Ibid., 203–04.

35. Because theories of political liberalism focus on moral, philosophical, and religious pluralism, political liberalism cannot adequately account for political disagreements that emerge under conditions of cultural and racial pluralism. Cultural and racial conflict often occur within a shared moral or political framework and have less to do with competing moral frameworks than they do with different historical experiences that produce multiple and competing interpretations and perspectives from different cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. While political liberalism is important and lends some insights into the moral and political responses to pluralism, it is not entirely satisfactory since not all cultural and racial pluralism can be reduced to, or understood as, incommensurable moral frameworks.


37. Gooding-Williams argues that the racial identities of African Americans is not simply a negative reaction to racism and discrimination, but are simultaneously a positive source of identity, see “Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy.” K. Anthony Appiah also has acknowledged, after an ongoing debate with Lucius Outlaw, that racial identity is not just a reactive identity but can also be a “positive script” which provides a sense of self independently of external impositions. See Appiah’s essay, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in Color Conscious. For Outlaw’s critique of Appiah, see his chapter “Against the Grain of Modernity: The Politics of Difference and the Conservation of ‘Race’”; in On Race and Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1996), 135–57.


40. Sanders, “Against Deliberation,” 363–69; see also, Gutmann, “The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics,” and Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement. In “The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics,” 204–5, Gutmann uses the public spaces of an expert Human Fetal Transplantation Panel, the jury in the trial of the four Los Angeles police officers who attacked Rodney King, and the Senate Judiciary Committee Confirmation hearings for Justice Clarence Thomas to discuss where deliberation worked and failed. While important, Gutmann, like Sanders, both fail to identify public or civic spaces that capture the “everyday” aspect of political life in which citizens participate.


42. See Young, “Justice, Inclusion, and Deliberative Democracy,” in Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement, ed. Stephen Macedo, 151–58. Ironically, in this essay, Young treats deliberative democratic theory favorably, and no longer differentiates it from communicative democratic theory as she does in Intersecting Voices. Recall that Gutmann and Thompson’s six criteria of deliberation are: reciprocity, publicity, accountability, basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity. Young argues that the criterion of basic opportunity does not go far enough, which is why inclusion ought to be specifically added.

44. Ibid., 15–16.
48. Gutmann and Thompson use Moseley-Braun’s speech and her threat of a filibuster as non-deliberative tactics that were justified because they “pried open” a political space for deliberation, see Democracy and Disagreement, 135–36. Fish takes Moseley-Braun’s speech, and Gutmann and Thompson’s treatment of it, as an illustration of the limits of deliberation since impassioned rhetoric is typically bracketed out of rational deliberation. See Fish, “Mutual Respect as a Device of Exclusion,” 100.
49. Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, 135.
50. See Kinder and Sanders, Divided by Color.
51. Similarly, but from different philosophical frameworks, other theorists also emphasize the importance of speaking and listening to contemporary citizenship in multicultural societies. See Susan Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy; Mark Kingwell, A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); and Brian Walker, “John Rawls, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the Praxis of Toleration,” Political Theory 23 (February 1995): 101–27.
52. For more on the two sides of dialogue – guaranteeing access to political arenas to speak and the obligation to listen to those who are speaking – see Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
55. Richard Sennett describes the importance of “contact points” in public life which allow people to become comfortable with differences in The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 153. Nancy Fraser employs the notions of competing counterpublics to illustrate the conflict and power asymmetries that exist within public life in Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition (New York: Routledge, 1997), 72–77. Patricia Hill Collins employs the notion of “safe spaces” to describe the spaces in which marginalized groups can meet, talk, and strategize on ways to fight disempowerment in Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 95–96, 144–45. Also, Sara Evans and Harry Boyte use the notion of “free spaces” to describe the spaces of democratic mobilization in Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).
57. For example, in a recent newsletter, Dialogue: A Reflective Journal About Faith and Action (February–March 1999), they highlight an effort to combat racism and counteract a Ku Klux Klan rally. This effort exemplifies their coalition-building approach that emphasizes not just connecting
talk to action but also organizing within and across faith communities, labor activists, and community groups.


59. Ibid., 371. To distinguish between the “common voice” of deliberation and the plural “critical voices” of testimony, Sanders’ argument is supported by the insights of bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 27.

60. Sanders, “Against Deliberation,” 372.


63. In the Moseley-Braun speech discussed above, because she was the only African-American Senator, her speech was likely taken by some as representing “the” perspective of African Americans to her colleagues. This struggle to “de-essentialize” perspectives is a continual process, a burden that cannot be eliminated but perhaps made easier by finding ways to increase the number of women and people of color in decision-making bodies.


65. Fred Evans invokes this as the goal of justice in multicultural societies, but does not fully address what it would look like in practice; see Evans, “Bakhtin, Communication, and the Politics of Multiculturalism,” 417. Given the affinity between the interplay of equally audible voices and the notions of storytelling, testimony, and dialogue, this article is an attempt to show how various forms of communication are compatible within a theory of democracy and to sketch out the locations and practices of such a politics.


68. Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 90.

69. Ibid. To be clear, the policy changes advocated by these mediating groups have been more in the area of reform rather than radical structural change. However, to the extent they operate to influence politics, I think they illustrate an important aspect of Fraser’s notion of “strong publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making.”

70. Only one of the six groups I studied used a consensus rule of decision-making, the Multiracial Alliance of Wisconsin (MAW) of Madison, Wisconsin.


72. Schudson, “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy.”

73. See Mansbridge, “Using Power/Fighting Power.” The notion of two layers is implicit in the argument made by James Bohman, “Public Reason and Cultural Pluralism: Political Liberalism and the Problem of Moral Conflict,” *Political Theory* 23 (May 1995): 253–79, esp. 271–74, where he discusses cultural pluralism and political representation. It is also evident in the argument made by Nina Eliasoph, “Making a Fragile Public: A Talk-Centered Study of Citizenship and Power,” *Sociological Theory* 14 (November 1996): 262–89, where Eliasoph uses the language of “backstage” and “frontstage” to illustrate the political interaction among citizens groups outside the public eye and in front of it. While I do not want to negate the subtle differences between these theorists, I also think that these layers overlap with Fraser’s notion of “weak public” and “strong public” which distinguishes the continual dialogue and effort to alter dominant ideas and opinions in civil
society (weak public) from actual decision-making authority to make changes in laws and policies (strong public); see Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, 90.


76. At this point, Kingwell’s notion of “civility” compared to Gutmann and Thompson’s notion of “mutual respect” may be unnecessary hair-splitting. What is worth noting at this point is that both these concepts, as well as Sanders’ concept of “testimony,” resonate with John Stuart Mill’s notion of civil discourse. Sanders cites Mill’s argument that women have not had the chance to give testimony on their own behalf to the general public to make the claim that dismantling gendered barriers to public participation is an important structural change that is a prerequisite for fair and equal deliberation; see Sanders, “Against Deliberation,” 372. Further, Kingwell’s idea of civility and Gutmann and Thompson’s notion of mutual respect both resonate with Mill’s argument that political discussion should be governed by norms which require the “studied moderation of language and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence” and prohibit the “worst offense of this kind which . . . is to stigmatize those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men.” See Mill, *On Liberty* ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 51.

77. Gooding-Williams, “Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy,” 30.

78. Gooding-Williams invokes Lorenzo Simpson’s phrasing of “reversibility of perspectives” (30) and argues that cross-cultural dialogue promotes not just the recognition of complexity between conversationalists but also a self-awareness of each person’s own complex identity (32). Such a strategy thus makes multiracial and multicultural dialogue important for highlighting intergroup/personal complexity but also intra-group/personal complexity.

79. Vernon Taylor, member of the VRU and CPR, interview by author, 27 May 1996, tape recording.

80. Sanders provides a detailed discussion of how gender, class, and race distort deliberation because people of color, women, or poor people are not taken seriously by members of dominant social groups, see “Against Deliberation,” 362–69. This concern, that because a person is black or Latino or a woman, whatever they have to say should not be given serious consideration by other (i.e., white) conversationalists, has deep roots in modern Western political theory. For example, recall the often cited line of Immanuel Kant, “This fellow was quite black . . . a clear proof that what he said was stupid,” cited and discussed in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 38–64.


83. Perception and image must be included in this discussion of power. For instance, Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki argue that since most white Americans learn about black Americans not from personal friendships and contacts but through the mass media of television, movies, and news, the socially constructed images of race and race relations in US media reflect and reinforce © Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002
racial hierarchy. Such hierarchy then adds to the difficulty of reversing perspectives when, and if, actual cross-racial contact occurs. See The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

84. Young, Intersecting Voices, 49–53.

85. These concerns were shared by many activists interviewed by the author. Further, one additional concern was the difficulty of getting white people to talk openly about race when they were fearful of saying something prejudiced or uninformed and thus embarrass themselves. This fear of embarrassment resembles what Jane Mansbridge described as one of many practical problems with face-to-face democracy in Beyond Adversary Democracy (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

86. For more on MAW and IFN, see Streich, “After the Celebration: Theories of Community and Practices of Interracial Dialogue.”

87. Mary Frances Berry, “Pie in the Sky? Clinton’s Race Initiative offers Promise and the Potential for Peril,” Emerge (September 1997), 68.


91. Another recent example of this is the United States’ refusing to participate in the United Nations Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa. Prior to the Conference, the US State Department made it clear that the US wanted to ensure that certain language (e.g., language equating Zionism with racism, language asking for Europe and the US to apologize for slavery, etc.) was kept out of the final document. Such a position seems to violate the nature of an open-ended, inclusive deliberation I am describing, within which the US could have attended the Conference and still made their position clear as the deliberations unfolded.

92. Deliberative theorists such as Gutmann and Thompson, in Democracy and Disagreement, have basic opportunity and fair opportunity as two of their six criteria of deliberative democracy. These two criteria could be the basis of reviving a focus on the structural barriers that block access to political deliberation. The focus on emancipation is slowly being reintroduced to critical theory. For a recent article that begins such a reintroduction, see Dieter Freundlieb, “Rethinking Critical Theory: Weaknesses and New Directions,” Constellations 7 (2000): 80–99.


94. For the advantages of proportional representation as a means of increasing the representation of previously marginalized constituencies, see Alex Willingham, “The Voting Rights Movement in Perspective,” in Without Justice For All, ed. Adolph Reed, 235–54. Also, see Williams, Voice, Trust, and Memory.

95. See Phillips, The Politics of Presence, for a discussion of the tensions between negotiation and advocacy. For examples of groups that use a more confrontational style when necessary, see John Anner, ed. Beyond Identity Politics: Emerging Social Justice Movements in Communities of Color (Boston: South End, 1996).


97. Additionally, Dewey’s insights also overlap with the importance of the politics of presence and dialogue. See Dewey, The Public and Its Problems, 219.