

“The Globe is All One”: *Wars I Have Seen* as Proto-Network Narrative

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Abstract

“The Globe is All One: Wars I Have Seen as Proto-Network Narrative” charts Gertrude Stein’s characterization of the human mind as an data-processor by tracing the conceptual correspondences between her writings and early information theory, including the work of Norbert Weiner, Claude Shannon, and Vannevar Bush. The article argues that Stein first sees language as data that human beings are compelled to parse in even the most contextless and semantically “noisy” frameworks, which shapes the purpose and form of Stein’s notoriously difficult prose poem, “Tender Buttons”; the ease with which meaning can be exchanged emphasizes the importance of the ways in which a given meaning is selected from a set of possible meanings rather than interpreted or revealed. While this may simply reiterate the mode of “Tender Buttons” in different terms, the paper’s crucial intervention is in its positioning of the chance selection of significance as the mode of signification that animates her wartime memoir “Wars I Have Seen”. Like words in the poem, political identity in occupied France is unstable and waits to be parsed in the act of encounters with others and with history. In her narrative’s foregrounding of and experimental play with the conventions of memoir, Stein discovers the shifting nature of her main character (herself) in a series of ruminations and chance meetings; an early version of the network narrative emerges in the nodal structure of the story that undermines chronological and nationalist frames of signification.

Organization is a failure and everywhere the world over everybody has to begin again. (Gertrude Stein, “My Last about Money,” 1936)

When data of any sort are placed in storage, they are filed alphabetically or numerically, and information is found (when it is) by tracing it down from subclass to subclass.... The human mind does not work that way. It operates by association. With one item in its grasp, [the human mind] snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain. (Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think,” 1945)

In the final passage of one of her last brief essays, “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” (1945), Gertrude Stein figures atomic technology as an informational effect. Having insisted that she could never take any interest in something “as destructive as all that” (i.e. the atomic bomb), Stein implies that atomic military technology has drawn much *undue* attention. There is no logical reason, she argues, for anyone to be *scared* of the atomic bomb, and “if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.” Thus, as if to account sociologically for what must now be deemed merely *pseudo* interest, she writes,

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story. [Stein 1990, 823]

The vagueness of Stein's reference to *information* (information about what? Where does "everybody" get it?) throws into relief the sense of sheer *quantity* conveyed by the sentence. The apposition of the first and second sentences implies that it is by "listening *so much*" that "everybody gets *so much* information." This great quantity of information, moreover, is what alienates one from constitutive elements of self, namely "common sense" and being "natural" (human nature, perhaps?); according to Stein's logic in this essay, this alienation of one's *natural* "common sense" leaves one susceptible to an overwhelming fear, which results in one becoming preoccupied with the atomic bomb. As if in an attempt to remedy this alienating effect, Stein redirects both the essay's topic as well as its reader's attention with her last sentence. "This is a nice story," she writes, indicating with what at first seems to be a non-sequitur, that neither a bombardment of information, nor its destruction of one's "common sense," can undermine the cheerful, intractable, utterly human practice of narration.

It would seem that, as long as there is a mode of narrative capable of comprehending and inoculating the human mind against modernity's ever-widening informational flow, Stein fears no evil. In this paper, I argue that Stein's last memoir of the war years, *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), is such a narrative, one whose understanding of the way that meaning can become radically uncertain in heavily syntactical modes of signification essentially performs in experimental memoir form the work that *Tender Buttons* (1914) had done in poetic form years earlier. I position Stein as presciently concerned with distinguishing meaning from what cyberneticists would come to describe properly as *information*, and I demonstrate how *Tender Buttons* reaches the same conclusions about the relationship between the two as would the information theorists of the cybernetic era. Finally, I suggest that the story Stein tells in *Wars I Have Seen* is an early network narrative in that it searches for a form to express the nodal value of both individuals and nations at a time when global technologies (radio, world war) dramatically altered what it meant to be connected to the rest of the world. The memoir is not only about the experience of living in France during the occupation but also, on a metadiegetic level, about the need for narrative to adapt to modern forms of global connectivity, which are fostered as much by the wireless as they are by the patterns evinced by world war. In *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein foregrounds the uncertainties of meaning and identity inherent in narrating the contemporary political and historical landscape as she experienced it during the Second World War. Stein's anxious anticipation of the outcome of war is not the only thing that produces the narrative's texture of uncertainty; Stein understands that the dominant *ways of seeing* during World War II incorporate individuals and nations as nodes capable of having their identities switched on and off by networks of communication and power. *Wars I Have Seen* is thus Stein's answer to the modern composition of the burgeoning information age. In it, semiosis is as contingent on immediate situation as the nouns of *Tender Buttons* are on syntax and subjective associations with their surrounding words. Unlike the "nineteenth century," whose science, politics, and literature saw the globe as a canvas of commodities to be controlled and stabilized, Stein finds the "twentieth century" (whose commencement she dates irreverently to approximately 1942) to be characterized by a global interconnectedness so thorough that the question is not how to stabilize meaning but how to maintain identity *through a narrative of the informational nature of contemporary experience*.

Cybernetics and Stein: The Problem Information

The kind of rhetorical maneuver that Stein performs in her remarks about the atomic bomb would lift easily into the vernacular of our twenty-first century in which steady streams of news and entertainment cross the globe and travel into our homes and personal electronic devices along numerous channels of communication each and every day. In its current phase of morphogenesis, the dominant usage of *information* signifies a powerful if ether-like substance. *Information* can be invoked today as anything from a paradigm of economic development to a psychological bane. One need not cast out very far to find public figures aligning social and psychological ills, like job insecurity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, with the contemporary proliferations of information technology.^[1] But what does it mean for Stein to diagnose her *atomic age* reading audience, subjected to "so much information" and overly indulgent in habits of listening, with a loss of "common sense" and the failure to remember "to be natural"? What context shapes and expresses Stein's recognition of *information* as something capable of altering the mind without having to negotiate with

the physical substrate of the body? Moreover, how can we characterize her gesture of singling out *information* as culprit for misapprehension? Is it condemnatory? Celebratory? I suggest that her remarks express a less tendentious (though by no means indifferent) investment in and awareness of the growing dependence of nations on communications technology to establish not only their power but also their identity. On one level, Stein's stance of irreverence toward the devastating potentials of atomic technology, which she dismisses with edifying remarks about *information*, takes for granted the materiality of the bodies recently eliminated or injured by the atomic blasts in Japan; her naïve lack of "interest" in the atomic bomb enacts a secondary "vaporization" of the corporeal subject. On another level, the attention she pays to the "human mind" also attests to anxieties about subjective composition that were contained by the discourses of science and technology at the end of World War II.

If Stein invokes *information* as a figure capable of weaving minds and bombs, words and bodies, human beings and machines, into a complex network of signification, she adds a faint but prescient voice to the discursive chorus accompanying new techno-scientific practices which would produce a reified concept of information in the post-war era. In her "nice story," Stein highlights a destabilization of the boundary separating communication technologies and human life — a destabilization that literary and historical narratives would later situate in the advent of the cybernetic worldview. The project of cybernetics and Stein's (especially later) writing, moreover, reflect common cultural concerns and experiences situated in the changing scientific, military, and political practices of the Second World War. If the structure of literary narrative was altered by the cybernetic desire to view the human being as simply one module in a web of communication systems without stable hierarchy or linearity — i.e., in a *network*, Stein's prescient representation of this modularity begs to be understood as a part of an ongoing cross-disciplinary genealogy (rather than an anomalous preview of a movement that began with cybernetics and simply diffused over time into the field of Literature).

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Genius to the Rescue

As a response to the realization that human minds had begun to be inundated with information, Stein enacts in "Reflection" what, in one of her oft-cited lectures of the 1930s, she described as the essence of "genius, of being most intensely alive" [Stein 1990, 290]. That is, her essay demonstrates what it is "to be at once talking and listening, doing both things, not as if there were one thing." It is as if, she suggests, there were always at least an implied listener for every speaker and vice-versa, a dynamic communication channel formed by dialogue (even if intrasubjective) rather than just one "thing." When, at the conclusion of her brief essay, she writes "This is a nice story," she retroactively imbues the text with a dialogic voice, proving that *listening* is not going on to the exclusion of telling. The combination of these two acts would seem to recuperate and relocate the source of the essay's *information* from the news of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the reflexive, highly self-conscious dialogism of her own literary modernism.

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In one sense, Stein's essay succeeds in evading its own topic, subverting the referential function of writing by becoming a playful meta-commentary upon the essay's narrative potential. For Stein, that is, to reflect on the atom bomb is to reflect on *narrative* — the subject she took up explicitly in her American lectures but was an implied theme of her writing generally. In a complementary sense, the essay denies the gruesome potency of atomic technology. As is well known, the United States dropped the uranium-fueled "Little Boy" on Hiroshima and then the plutonium-fueled "Fat Man" on Nagasaki within days of one another during the month of August, 1945. Tens of thousands of people were vaporized instantly and thousands more left injured and afflicted with radiation poisoning.^[2]

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While disturbingly ironic, the dismissive tone of Stein's "Reflection" also bespeaks a wish to render the atomic bomb a subject less formidable than allied newspaper and radio coverage had inscribed it in the public mind between the bombings and Victory Japan Day (August 15, 1945). Indeed, the text of the Japanese surrender figured the atomic bomb as an imminent and global threat to human life. By August 15th, Japanese Emperor Hirohito was prepared to surrender his country, which he did officially by broadcasting his intentions to the nation at noon. In the "Imperial Rescript on Surrender," Hirohito noted the uncompromising pressure that the United States' use of atomic weaponry had placed on the country's attitude toward the proposed Potsdam Declaration, explaining that

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...the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, not only

would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the *total extinction of human civilization*. (emphasis added) [Wikipedia]

While the military restricted the release of all information regarding the development of the bomb, news coverage *following* the attacks was controlled to “bombard” readers with the sense of the military campaign’s overwhelming strength. Governments in both the U.S. and Japan quieted questions about the mysterious “disease x,” symptoms of which would ultimately be diagnosed as radiation poisoning from atomic fallout, but stories of the bombs’ terrifying power were constructed and disseminated freely in Allied news reports. After the Hiroshima bombing, President Truman broadcast a message threatening utter destruction for Japan unless the country’s leaders surrendered unconditionally. The message, which would be excerpted in western news channels in the following days, reached Japan on the day of the Hiroshima bombing and stated that the U.S. was

...now prepared to obliterate rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have....It was to spare the Japanese from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on earth. [Wikipedia]

The topic instantly glutted news channels.^[3] Indeed, the subject of the atom bomb “exploded” in what must be seen retrospectively as more than an extended metaphor; this news explosion was a sign of the strategy of fear tactics enabled by atomic power and international communications technology, a strategy that would pervade the Cold War era.

A BBC news story of 9 August 1945 similarly conveyed an image of information bombardment:

More than three million leaflets were dropped over the country today from American aeroplanes warning the Japanese people that more atomic weapons would be used “again and again” to destroy the country unless they ended the war forthwith. [BBC 1945]

On whatever side of the war one found oneself, the ability to invoke instant and utter destruction on an entire nation in a bathetic downpour of printed leaflets, would be terrifying indeed. The image ironically deploys the print medium which had already been eclipsed by radio as the primary mode of national address; taken together, the images invoked by Roosevelt, of the “obliteration” of every “productive enterprise” of the nation as a whole, and the performative “bombing” of the land with a redundancy of print messages — on “leaflets,” as if to call to mind the individual-oriented practice of reading a book or newspaper — constitute a two-front psychological assault on both the agency of the collectivity and on that of the individual.

The leaflet “bombing” was an accessory to the unprecedented display of power to end or sustain life of which the nation had just proven itself capable. And by deploying her theory of “genius” in “Reflection,” Stein refuses to be *subjected* to the message of awe and fear that news of the atomic blasts has recently spread. While it has been suggested that Stein’s ascent to celebrity status in the 1930s forced her to abandon “genius” as an heuristic model for writing, I contend that “genius” emerges here.^[4] It appears uncannily in the form of Stein’s meta-narrative commentary, which defends her conception of the human mind as an autopoietic entity from the bombardment of dehumanizing information. Indeed, it is the mind’s ability to harness and assimilate the ever-increasing quantities of information flowing through widening channels of communications technologies for socio-biopolitical ends that constituted the most pressing intellectual problem for Stein at the end of her career.

Though she often intimated her commitment to teaching her readers and audiences how to cultivate and maintain “genius,” she rarely indicated *why* it was such a challenge to cultivate or *what* threatened its persistence. And as she waited until the last years of her life to explain the hypothesis of her literary experiment, so too would she wait until the last moment to suggest that the threat to “genius” was something the twenty-first century will readily recognize: information. Stein, whose humanism depended on the concept of “genius,” as she defined it, was like an early information theorist in that she was committed to understanding and elucidating the way in which the human mind makes sense of and uses information.

The salient issue raised by considering Stein's experimental writing in conjunction with the information theory of the 1940s lies in the way that both projects began to model communication on the constituent technologies of everyday practices: In Stein's case, these were literary and artistic, and in Claude Shannon's and Norbert Wiener's, they were electrical and computational. But both would reflect a growing conception of *life* that no longer afforded the human being either a stable political or cultural identity or a relationship to the world based primarily on a notion of agency underwritten by volition and desire; to understand how messages were conveyed, whether verbally or electronically, entailed a notion of the sender/receiver already spliced into often invisible networks of signification. In the case of *human* sender/receivers, meaning was — for information theorists as much as for Stein — primarily a matter of how well, albeit only temporarily, one could stabilize the information flowing through those networks.

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Information = Uncertainty

Stein, through her radical literary experiments like *Tender Buttons*, and the cyberneticists, through their work to develop faster and more robust telecommunications lines (Claude Shannon) and smart anti-aircraft missiles (Norbert Wiener), discovered that the true nature of information was, in fact, uncertainty. Though it preceded her explicit recognition of the threat of *information* to the organization of the human mind, *Tender Buttons* had already evinced Stein's investment in understanding how communication functions meaningfully when communication channels lose most of the conventions that receivers usually rely on to stabilize semantic content. In *Tender Buttons*, she engineers words to make sense primarily at the level of syntax by defamiliarizing the reading conventions. In the first stanza of the first section, "Objects," Stein offers her reader a clue about how to read the rest of the prose poem:

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A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. [Stein 1990, 461]

The capitalized heading preceding the paragraph pretends to draw the reader into a familiar hermeneutical process. It seems as if to say, "The paragraph will consist of the author's description of the object referred to in the heading." The familiar referential design instructs the eye (as traditionally do the titles of works in the pictorial arts, which of course heavily inflected Stein's writing experiments) to regard the heading as the primary, or least ambiguous sign of the *object* being viewed by the author. Yet embedded in the heading sits a secondary heading, "THAT IS A BLIND GLASS," which denies the simplicity of that literary construct; the comma separating "A CARAFE" from "THAT IS A BLIND GLASS" functions to yoke unambiguous *name* and ambiguous *description* in a proximity canceling out the referential distance between referent and description, which the conventional heading purports to create. The relationship of the capitalized heading to the paragraph below, moreover, serves as overture to what Stein performs within the first line of the stanza: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing." As Peter Schwenger has suggested in a reading that correctly challenges an interpretation of *Tender Buttons* as a display of the "senseless" materiality of words existing on their own, a carafe is plausibly, in fact, "a blind glass." Unlike its "cousin," the drinking "glass," the carafe has a flared lip, which "makes it extremely difficult to drink from....The 'eye' that is the vessel's opening has, then, a certain negative quality that might be equated to blindness." The carafe, a vessel of *cut* glass, moreover, might produce the idea of its "hurt color" [Schwenger 2001, 104]. Yet one might also read this line as a comparison of a carafe to a *pitcher*, rather than a drinking glass; a carafe often lacks the pitcher's handle, which creates an oval hole when seen in side view. Like an animal of prey, the pitcher stands with one eye viewable along its profile. The carafe, then, looks like a "kind" of "blind" animal represented "in glass." The overdetermined nature of the object in this stanza works to figure it as "an arrangement in a system to pointing," "nothing strange," and while unusual and unfamiliar, "not unordered in not resembling" what the reader expects to find in poetry. Like the "WAY LAY VEGETABLE" of "Food," the reader must not rely on names in headings to remain stable referents. She can only "suppose it is ex." That is, the reader can only suppose that the vegetable garden will be waylaid for any number of things, such as a visit from "sam," or preparation for a "meal"; or the vegetable might be saved this ambush by "a cake" eaten before the vegetables can be picked and thus not harming the "nervous bed rows" for another day (yet another "new mercy"). "Rooms," in which Stein no longer offers her reader the conventional headings, continues to "suppose"

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sense:

If comparing a piece that is a size that is recognized as not a size but a piece, comparing a piece with what is not recognized but what is used as it is held by holding, comparing these two comes to be repeated. Suppose they are put together, suppose that there is an interruption....Is there an exchange, is there a resemblance to the sky which is admitted to be there and the stars which can be seen. Is there. That was a question. There was no certainty. Fitting a failing meant that any two were indifferent and yet they were all connecting that.

This passage outlines the processes involved in Stein's theory of writing. The habitual repetition of an unfamiliar comparison of two words can produce an "interruption" of the sense one or both of those words make. Words can "exchange" their "resemblance" to things "admitted to be there," — abstract concepts, x-rays, or, like the sky, the vault of empty space which lacks particular location — for resemblances to things "which can be seen" and mapped (even if only as the trace of their, perhaps, now extinguished presence). Stein finds, in *Tender Buttons*, that no words or objects are so "indifferent" that they are exempt from the system "connecting" "failing" and "fittings" — as in the knowledge gained having tried on a dress in the wrong size. What Stein sees, when she looks at objects, food, and rooms, is the uncertainty underwriting the process of sense-making; like a question, the act of reference implies uncertainty.

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Three years after Stein invoked *information* in her essay on the atomic bomb, Claude Shannon would publish a theory of communication — one formulated in studies on telegraphic transmission by Bell Labs engineers in the interwar years — in which messages signified according to a similarly *uncertain* "system to pointing."

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The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem. The significant aspect is that the actual message is one selected from a set of possible messages. The system must be designed to operate for each possible selection, not just the one which will actually be chosen since this is unknown at the time of design. [Shannon & Weaver 1949, 1]

In a sense, Shannon seeks to generate a mathematical system of communication akin to Stein's theory of language. To ensure proper operation, the message, for Shannon, had to remain a question of possible selection, since "at the time of design," the electronic receiver could not know which would constitute the consequential "bit" of information transmitted. Shannon's work drew from the technical definition of "information," which, as I stated above, had been worked out by his predecessors at Bell Laboratories. In what may have amounted to a trivial decision, Hartley substituted the word *information* for what his colleague Nyquist had been referring to as *intelligence* to describe, in 1928, the matter which telegraphs transmit. Because it smacked less of a human capacity than *intelligence*, *information* theory was born to produce a more sophisticated understanding of the way electronic media transmit messages and communicate with one another. Communication, until the advent of the information sciences, had been a matter of three basic problems: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The information theory that Shannon and Wiener would promulgate (however differently they would conceive of the relationship of *information* to *entropy*) restricted the concept of *information* to its stochastic sense, explicitly cleaving it from *meaning*. Thus, they narrowed down communication to the problem of syntax. Bracketing semantics for the specific purpose of emphasizing syntax allows for an accurate measure of information, which, in Shannon's theory, constitutes all of the "possible messages" which the receiver can "select." The content of communication in this model is possibility to select. While one cannot say, despite her transgressions of conventional word usage, that Stein obviates or ignores semantics, it is fair to say that her use of syntax was self-consciously "informational," in the sense of Shannon's theory of communication.

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That Stein and the cyberneticists demonstrate congruent theories of information belies the distance between experimental writing and scientific research at mid-century. This is not to say that there was collaboration or even recognition across the two cultures in this instance. In fact, the only recognition that Stein received from the sciences occurred when, in 1934, B.F. Skinner patently *diagnosed* her with normal motor automatism in response to reading

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Tender Buttons.^[5] While the two sides might not have admitted it, however, Stein and the cyberneticists were essentially realizing, in parallel, that meaning owes as much (if not more) to chance association as (than) it does to predetermined organizations of signifiers and signifieds. In effect, Stein discovered the informational nature of the human mind, years before Vannevar Bush would declare, that

[the human mind] operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain. [Bush 1945]

It was with this Steinian, “web”-like, associational human mind that Bush envisioned his “Memex,” a machine and interface that would, more efficiently than any existing logical system, access the “record” of all extant scientific knowledge. In describing the organizing principle of what now sounds uncannily like the modern personal computer, Bush’s verbal schema of the Memex could have as easily described the organizing principle of Stein’s experimental (*not automatic*) writing.

From Uncertainty in Language to Uncertain Times: Stein’s Network Narrative

Stein’s informational treatment of language and meaning reemerged in prose as she searched for an appropriate form by which to describe global connectivity in the twentieth century. While Stein’s discovery of the informational nature of language in *Tender Buttons* is primarily celebratory, when she applies the same principles of composition to the memoir form in *Wars I Have Seen*, her inscription of the uncertainty underwriting meaning becomes more ambivalent. Though less obviously experimental than *Tender Buttons*, *Wars* does not simply record Stein’s experiences in occupied France; the form and content of the text play irreverently with memoirist conventions of chronology, and the international cast of characters (including several Gertrude Steins) become progressively less well-defined as wartime collusions of power take shape through the exposition. Form and content commence conventionally, as Stein seduces us into taking her to be the subject of just another memoir in which she marvels both at the nineteenth-century project of discovering and thereby uniting the globe as well as at the sense of safety bestowed upon the world by the systematic observations of the evolutionist’s outlook. But as the narrative draws into the present, it becomes clearer that the subject of the memoir is really a question: How does one tell the story of the particular present in which Stein writes? I suggest that Stein’s attempt to answer that question constitutes an early network narrative in which temporalities and power structures become progressively less stable as frames of meaning. In the scenes she records, Stein loses frame after frame of both local and global reference until she shows that even she is no longer in command of her national, cultural, and political identity. Being part of a network narrative for Stein means submitting oneself to uncertainty not merely at the level of situational knowledge but more radically at the levels of history and identity (that is, socio-political history and personal history).

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In the early pages of *Wars*, Stein calls the 19th century “the gradual domination of the globe as piece by piece by piece it became known and became all of a piece....” The totalization of the globe through colonization, translation, assimilation, and electronic communication technologies, for Stein, characterizes “the 19th century,” which, however chronologically denoted, anachronistically includes the period of the two World Wars as well. Only in 1943 would she concede that the “19th century” was coming to an end because “[n]ow they can do the radio in so many languages that nobody any longer dreams of a single language, and there should not any longer be dreams of conquest because the globe is all one....” For Stein, the century “turns” when geopolitical and technological mobilization make the globe a known object and render obsolete any “dreams of a single language.” [Stein 1984, 17] Thus, according to Stein, being globally connected in the 19th century depended on the logic of uncovering what was covered, homogenizing what was heterogeneous, rendering “all one.”

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While Zamenhoff’s Esperanto may offer Stein a working symbol for the logic of “19th-century” global connection, she spends the rest of the memoir mining her experiences in occupied France for a similarly “objective correlative,” as it were, for the logic of 20th-century global connection. The most consistent theme to emerge from her records, however, is uncertainty. On one level, Stein draws our attention to the uncertainty she and fellow French countryside villagers felt

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about what course the war would take, who to trust, and what the world would look like after the war. On another level, the uncertainty is about Stein's ambivalent national affiliation and moments of alienation from her American and Jewish identities. Though Stein might have composed *Wars I Have Seen* in the manner of a daily journal, her decision to foreground the instability of identity and the uncertain future of world events is strategic. Out of the ruins of late "19th-century" certainty, Stein hopes to find that her ruminations, her encounters with French villagers, Vichy officials, and, finally, American GIs, will perform the pattern of identity-production and global contact characteristic of the yet unknown postwar world order.

What's At Stake

At stake in approaching Stein's memoir as a cultural inscription of the experience of a global network is the assumption that such experience did not demand a new narrative form until complex negotiations between what Manuel Castells calls "the Net and the Self" became the main source of meaning for individuals. Leaving this assumption untroubled encourages one to seek for the network narrative's formal prototype, as it were, in postmodern texts like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1968) or the narrative production concurrent with the development of personal electronic devices in the 1970s, "in the United States, and to some extent in California" [Castells 2000, 5]. Stein's *Wars I Have Seen*, as I will demonstrate, troubles this very assumption by documenting the rise of the network society before it consummated its relationship with the postwar era and the first tech boom of the late 20th century. For, if we take the form of Stein's recorded experiences, observations, and meditations during the Second World War as seriously as her content, we behold a self-conscious record of a shift from a relatively stable, hierarchical system of global connectivity associated with the 19th century to a radically unpredictable, uncertain, shifting network associated with the 20th century.

Reading *Wars I Have Seen* as a precursor to the modern network narrative also gives us a chance to relate Stein's aggressively experimental formal strategies to the political collusion and conservatism that her critics have been surprised to find imbued in her later writings. This analysis is useful, therefore, not only for the attention it gives an archive usually considered out of bounds of network theory, but also for the way it frames Stein's later work without conflating the semantic instability of poetics with reductive politics. Adaptations of Kristevan concepts to figure Stein's experimental modernism as a performative disruption of the subjective stability of the word,^[6] though useful in articulations of feminist poetics, have also fueled reductive political rhetoric. Stein biographer Ulla Dydo, for instance, appears to make a slippage from formal analysis to a celebratory equation of poetics and politics when she writes,

Stein's disembodied words inhabit the enchanted forest of *As You Like It*, where figures join and part, marriages are made and unmade, names and identities change naturally. Free to change their referential ties, Stein's texts are written in the language of true comedy, where nothing is absolute, hierarchies are not respected, roles and indignities can change, and *the only authority is the wide democratic freedom of the word that can move, make, and remake itself*. (emphasis added) [Dydo 2003, 18–9]

"Disembodied words" enjoy a "conjugal" freedom, in which a "naturally" endowed instability of identity translates into "the wide democratic freedom of the word." I would by no means disagree with Dydo's claims that Stein's poetics push against the boundaries of verbal convention to the extent that her words play with, more than they submissively "respect," any hierarchies of order. But in glossing Stein's poetics as a "democratic" challenge to anything "absolute" (except, perhaps, for the absolute "freedom" of movement of the Steinian word), Dydo commits her reading to a literary theory which appears tenuous when confronted by the ideological differences animating the respective political agency of Dydo and her subject, especially considering the deeply entrenched political ambiguities of Stein's historical situation during World War II.

The way that Stein scholarship has developed since 1996, moreover, has especially vexed the question of what it means to see politics in Stein's poetics. Wanda Van Dusen's "outing" ^[7] of the full text of Stein's introduction to a series of translations that she made of Vichy leader Philippe (Maréchal) Pétain's speeches in the early 1940s, for instance, occasions a reconsideration of the ways in which Stein criticism has been polarized by the political and theoretical

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investments in her writing experiments. Van Dusen's paper, published in *Modernism/ Modernity* in 1996, focuses on Stein's glorification of Pétain in terms of American historical figures; Van Dusen reads Stein's "Introduction" to his speeches as an expression of fascist leanings and nationalist essentialism, which challenges positionings of Stein as a theorist of "anti-patriarchal" poetics. Van Dusen's Stein writes in thrall to reified images of the national leader, for whom she willingly erases any trace of her Jewish and lesbian identity, and whom she allows to eclipse her antipatriarchal poetics in a fetishized image of the masculine war hero.

As Van Dusen's paper implies, it is almost as difficult to account for these radically different Steins, presented by the juxtaposition of the author of *Tender Buttons* and that of the "Introduction," as it is to broach the distance between those who would redeem modernism's revolutionary authoritarianism by dressing Stein in anti-patriarchal poetics and those who would prefer to anatomize her work as an example of the anti-Semitic, racist, imperialist modernism of a privileged woman obsessed with authority. Invoking the "presymbolic" or the "choral" disruption of the symbolic register, then, circumscribes Stein's writing with a formula in which mobile, disembodied words that act to dissipate the sense of subjective presence in the text are equated with a certain degree of freedom or agency. This renders a nuanced analysis of her political investments problematic at best.

Barbara Will, who entered the conversation on Stein's Vichy "collaboration" in 2004, considers the alarming passivity of the translations themselves as the sign of Stein's recognition of the *failure* of writing to assure a space of subjective agency ("riant" or otherwise). The literal renderings of French syntactical constructions which Will highlights in manuscripts of the translations attest, she argues, to a passivity implying the defeat of Stein's *genius* and a reluctant submission to an overpowering figure of authority (as opposed to the fetishistic celebration Van Dusen describes).

In 1999, John Whittier-Ferguson had made a stronger challenge to the portrait of Stein as the fascist mouthpiece swooning in the presence of French figures of authority. He claimed that Van Dusen assimilates the identity politics of the 1990s to the political climate in which Stein wrote, committing the same conceptual archaism characteristic of the fascist ideology she perceives inscribed in Stein's "Introduction." Whittier-Ferguson would remind Van Dusen of the complex political landscape in the moment of French history in which Stein was ensconced, and he suggests that this complexity entails a meditation, prior to evaluation, on the different valence that the critical category of "politics" possesses for Stein's historical moment compared with that of a student like Van Dusen.^[8]

In her reading of the introduction to the translated speeches of Marechal Pétain, Van Dusen sees Stein's expression of national affiliation as reified and essentialized; Will and Whittier-Ferguson would like to comprehend her relationship to "nation" as a more complicated condition of her writing during the forties. Building upon their inquiries, the analysis that follows suggests that Stein's last memoir expresses the complicated condition of deriving meaning at a time in which not only national identity but also modernity itself became tenuous ontological categories.

The daily experience of living through World War II, with its unpredictable disappearances, incessantly shifting political boundaries, and increasingly prominent aural communications media (especially radio), destabilizes the structures of the material and cognitive environment in which Stein writes. Following Whittier-Ferguson's continued work on Stein's war writings, I agree that war must be understood as a conscious factor in Stein's compositional theories and practices. One does not do enough merely to take war as a crucial *context* for Stein's work. When reading her essay "Paris, France" (1940), for example, one must grasp that for Stein,

... the phenomenon of war is a manifestation and a crucial cause of the excitements and horrors of modernity. These excitements and horrors are as much aesthetic and ontological as they are sociopolitical and military. And in her intimate conjoining of the relations of war and art, Stein displays her modernity every bit as much as she does in her gnostic, avant-garde writings.

[Whittier-Ferguson 2001, 406–7]

Similarly, *Wars I have Seen* comprises an "intimate conjoining of the relations of war and art" which, like her more "gnostic, avant-garde" experiments, seeks to divine and represent the mechanisms and processes by which the mind forms like a pearl around the grain of the word. But the experiences which Stein records in this memoir reveal that it is no longer simply art and words that circulate in unpredictable oscillations of pattern and randomness; rather, the

categories by which one might define oneself during war — enemy, ally, American, French, German — begin to quake and crumble into pieces which Stein reconstructs into a network of significations and identities which admit of no rest, no comfort, no essences, only encounters with possibilities of meaning which can be neither anticipated nor stabilized. Departing from Whittier-Ferguson, however, I believe that Stein ceases simply to “display[] her modernity”; in *Wars*, Stein calls modernity itself into question.

Wars Stein Has Seen

By the time Stein wrote of her experiences in World War II, she had already interpolated war into her theory of the modern “composition” and its expression in the writing of the period. The First World War had accelerated the literary and artistic modernist revolution and had created conditions of aesthetic appreciation such that, as Stein said in her interwar lecture, “Composition as Explanation” (1926):

...we who created the expression of the modern composition were to be recognized before we were dead....And so war may be said to have advanced a general recognition of the expression of the contemporary composition by almost thirty years. [Stein 1990, 521]

War, that is, participated in the phenomenological production of “the contemporary composition.” It is important to note that, by “composition,” Stein signifies not how one sees the world or what there is *out there* to be seen, but rather “what *is* seen.” During World War I, as Stein explains, disillusionment with an older faith in reason and progress modulated knowledge production and accelerated epistemic change such that those “who created the expression of the modern composition” would gain recognition in their lifetimes.

But if Stein’s 1926 lecture demonstrates the modern composition in terms of the systematic, rational process of “explanation,” her 1945 memoir demonstrates it in terms of the unpredictable, shifting knowledge and experience she accrues during her peregrinations through occupied France. Just as her prose poetry in *Tender Buttons* would work to foreground the conventions of sense-making by maximizing the indeterminacy of any particular object or description, Stein’s prose in *Wars I Have Seen* puts pressure on conventional temporalities and “certain” knowledge. She writes,

...when I was a baby and then on to fourteen, the nineteenth century was full on. In the nineteenth century, there was reading, there was evolution, there was war and anti-war which was the same thing, and there was eating. [Stein 1984, 17]

Stein appears here to characterize time in terms of linear movements; she seems to say that the nineteenth century was a time when evolution came into vogue and sentiment about war was utterly conflicted. But that “there was eating” *then* inserts into this equation a practice which, the reader suspects, cannot be temporally bound. For, though Stein may wish to emphasize here the intermittent scarcity of certain foods^[9] in occupied France, could there *not* be “eating” in the twentieth century? Indeed, by imbuing this temporal construction of the nineteenth century with the quotidian narrative of her personal history (which includes unremarkable habits like eating), Stein destabilizes the very temporal grounds on which she proposes to stand. She continues,

When I was then I liked revolutions I liked to eat I liked to eat I liked to cry not in real life but in books in real life there was nothing much to cry about but in books dear me, it was wonderful there was so much to cry about and then there was evolution. Evolution was all over my childhood, walks abroad with an evolutionist and the world was full of evolution, biological and botanical evolution, with music as a background for emotion and books as reality, and a great deal of fresh air as a necessity, and a great deal of eating as an excitement and as an orgy.... [Stein 1984, 17]

Stein connects emotional affect, geopolitical movement, scientific materialism, and aesthetic appreciation in a narrative that conflates the particular with the universal in a hybridization of nature and culture, bodies and textualities. Scientific paradigms determined what she saw and enjoyed as a child, when “the world was full of evolution”; books, music, and walking in the “fresh air” constituted her encounters with the “real” world of narrative and emotion; and food was merely a diversion.

The nineteenth century ends, moreover, not according to the dictates of conventional chronology, but rather, when the aestheticist worldview, which it represents for Stein, is “killed” by war: The world comprising “music as a background for emotion and books as a reality” is both Stein’s childhood and the 19th century (“It was all that between babyhood and fourteen”), both of which, she suggests, have lived on borrowed time ever since: “[T]he nineteenth century dies hard all centuries do that is why the last war to kill it is so long, it is still being killed now in 1942...” [Stein 1984, 16]. The war kills the century in part by forcing Stein to see how modernity in the 19th century comprised two practices: one that mingles science, literature, and human bodies, and one that sublimates all three into a developmental phase of the modern human subject.

Though she mobilizes war to describe the anachronous temporal rift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Stein also exposes the mutability of the narratives underwriting geopolitical military goals. The twentieth century begins, that is, when the global access of information through radio, undermines the narrative seduction of territorial conquest along with the idea of *progress* which it entailed. For Stein, there was

nothing more interesting in the nineteenth century than little by little realizing the detail of natural selection in insects flowers and birds and butterflies and comparing things and animals and noticing protective coloring nothing more interesting, and this made the nineteenth century what it is, the white man’s burden, the gradual domination of the globe as piece by piece by piece it became known and became all of a piece, and the hope of Esperanto or a universal language. Now they can do the radio in so many languages that nobody any longer dreams of a single language, and there should not any longer be dreams of conquest because the globe is all one, anybody can hear everything and everybody can hear the same thing so what is the use of conquering, and so the nineteenth century now in ’43 is slowly coming to an end. [Stein 1984, 17]

If the evolutionary goal of comprehending the variation and “speciation” of living organisms constituted the nineteenth-century narrative girding aesthetic appreciation and territorial exploration to the projects of imperial expansion and colonial conquest, “there should not any longer be dreams of conquest because the globe is all one.” Stein’s assessment of the causes of war may be naïve, however, by exposing this naiveté she implicates herself in an intellectual movement which sought evidence of a universal notion of humanity in deep structures; Freud’s unconscious, for instance, can be seen as a psychological Esperanto, a structure embedded within the mind which could facilitate an understanding of the processes and affects of every individual *on equal terms*. “Now” that “they can do the radio in so many languages,” Stein writes, such deep structures have disappeared from the scientific and artistic narratives of the slowly-awakening twentieth century.

If Stein displays translations between science, war, technology, and social experience, she does so to expose the absence of a new, 20th-century, narrative of purification. Without the ability to assimilate the goals of scientists, armies, and individuals into a single “human” category, Stein cannot maintain a sense of being modern. Rather, as she suggests by asking “anybody can hear everything and everybody can hear the same thing so what is the use of conquering[?],” the natural correspondence between science, war, and technology no longer holds up to scrutiny. War persists, even as she writes and despite anything the nineteenth century taught her. Thus, the first feat Stein accomplishes within her memoir is to introduce her reader to the twentieth century, characterized as a temporality without a story.

Stein exposes her version of the 19th-century master narrative (that progress and discovery will lead to Utopian civilization) to highlight its insufficiency as a way to represent or understand the unpredictable cultural and political circumstances of World War II. To compensate for this insufficiency, Stein, in the manner of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), invokes tropes of history and subjective development to characterize the present moment. She supports the chronological convention of the memoir by organizing her meditations on war according to successive periods in her life (hence, for instance, the above refrain “when I was a baby and then on to fourteen...”); but whereas the first few pages of the narrative appear grounded in the periodizing construct of the individual’s phases of life, the relative distance between past and present soon collapses under the pressure of Stein’s need to make sense of what she sees during World War II. The grounding construct of her narrative thus begins to look less clear. She writes,

Mediaeval means, that life and place and the crops you plant and your wife and children, all are uncertain....And now and here, it is like that, you take a train, you disappear, you move away your house is gone, your children too, your crops are taken away....So at fifteen there comes to be a realization of what living was in mediaeval times and as a pioneer. It is very near. And now in 1943 it is here....And here and now in 1943, now that the war is coming to an end, everybody that is nobody knows whether there is or is not any future and at fifteen it is like that everybody and nobody knows whether there is or is not any future. [Stein 1984, 26, 8]

The “uncertain” state of being “mediaeval” characterizes both the present moment, in which people and things can vanish unaccountably. But it also characterizes the adolescent period in which everything is new and unknown to one, as to a “pioneer.” Stein subverts the narrative construct which gives priority to past experiences when describing present ones –the fifteen-year-old “realization of what living was in mediaeval times” is now “here” in 1943 — by bringing two stories so “very near” that what stands out most clearly amid the uncertainty of both present and future is the rhyme “near/here.” That is, by looping back to the experience of uncertainty “at fifteen,” Stein’s meditations on the present yield no further knowledge but lead her into an incessant cycle of reflexivity. In essence, Stein offers her reader a modernist narrative with a difference: She does not deploy deep history simply to create an encyclopedic frame for modern experience, but again shows how living through the war in occupied territory has undermined her ability to see the 20th century as a modern phenomenon.

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Like many of her contemporaries who were experimenting with narrative form, Stein worked against the grain of received genres. Without a narrative form capable of “purifying” the admixtures of scientific and military interests, historical and personal temporalities, Stein’s memoir devolves into mainly a string of anecdotal stories about the direction of the war and the shape of the postwar world. But instead of submitting completely to the whimsical narrative hybrids of the contemporary composition, she punctuates the rumor and speculation with compensatory passages that exude strong (albeit spurious) certainty. For example, Stein’s narrative erupts into a strangely conclusive meditation on the uniqueness of national aesthetics. Deprived of letters and newspapers, she observes what she can about the world beyond her remote village in the Rhone Valley by tuning into her wireless. As if having found a new medium on which to base an expression of her present moment, she renders the cultural imprint that each nation leaves in its broadcast announcement:

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The English always begin with Here is London, or the BBC home service, or the overseas service, always part of a pleasant home life, of supreme importance to any English man or any English woman. The Americans say with poetry and fire, This is the Voice of America, and then with modesty and good neighborliness, one of the United Nations, it is the voice of America speaking to you across the Atlantic. Then the Frenchman say, Frenchman [sic] speaking to Frenchmen, they always begin like that, and the Belgians are simple and direct, they just announce, radio Belge, and the national anthem, and the Frenchman [sic] also say, Honor and Country, and the Swiss so politely say, the studio of Geneva, at the instant of the broadcasting station of Berne will give you the latest news, and Italy says live Mussolini live Italy, and they make a bird noise and then they start, and Germany starts like this, Germany calling, Germany calling.^[10] [Stein 1984, 155]

England, America, Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Italy each, Stein claims, produces a distinct radio personality.

In the distinctness of each national personality, we learn, lies a possible explanation as to why war persists even though the “globe is all one.” After ventriloquizing the peculiar style in which each country announced its radio hour, she writes,

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In the last war I said that the camouflage was the distinctive characteristic of each country, each nation stamped itself upon its camouflage, but in this war it is the heading of the broadcast that makes national life so complete and determined. It is that a nation is even stronger than the personality of anyone, it certainly is so nations must go on, they certainly must. [Stein 1984, 155–6]

Reading the passage as printed, one notices a punctuational pattern: two complete sentences broken into thirds by

commas. Despite the punctuational symmetry, the second sentence sounds rushed and lacks the logic and clarity of the first. However the second-to-last clause is read (“it certainly is/so nations must go on” or “it certainly is so/nations must go on” or “it certainly is so [that] nations must go on”), the reader hears a fanatical enthusiasm for the overpowering strength of national identity.

Though omitting punctuation is not uncommon for Stein, who is known for deliberately leaving syntax indeterminate, we might read her failure to indicate a pause here, before the phrases “a nation is” and “so nations must,” as the creation of a voice so excited that it forgets to accent its own words. It speaks, that is, in a manner Stein had come to know as “hysterical” during her days studying under the tutelage of psychologist William James. James based his theory of *split personality* on Pierre Janet’s conception of hysteria — namely “the disintegration of ideas and functions, which, when united, form the personal consciousness” — and remained Stein’s mentor for years after she left Harvard Annex and then Johns Hopkins medical school. According to the study on Normal Motor Automatism that Stein published in the late nineties, hysteria is a disease of “attention” [Solomons & Stein 1896, 502]. She and her colleague Leon Solomons had concluded that a “large number of acts ordinarily called intelligent, such as reading, writing, etc. can go on quite automatically in ordinary people” when adequately distracted. Such automatism or “non-voluntary” activity was often monotonous and marked by its “perfect ease...smoothness...perfect characterlessness, and unaccented pencil movement” [Solomons & Stein 1896, 508]. The second, “unaccented,” sentence of Stein’s passage on nations performs this hysterical logic, in which the excitement of realizing *what* makes nations so “complete and determined” — or perhaps *that* they seem to be thus — draws the subject’s attention away from the act of representing her thoughts.

Polarizations of national identity, Stein shows us, are entailed upon the contemporary composition (the international network) no less than they were before the globe was “all one.” Indeed, the instability of national identity amid the dynamic international network of the 1940s becomes the dominant theme of the remainder of *Wars I Have Seen*. The Stein who waxes with “hysterical” impassivity about the strength, endurance, and determination (or determinacy) of nations is also the Stein who sees how the war has created shifting, international, political and economic networks.

The “bipolar” manner in which Stein deals with the value of national identity in the latter pages of her memoir echoes the kind of concerns she had expressed in a series of short essays in 1936 (see “Money,” “More about Money,” “Still More about Money,” “All about Money,” and “My Last about Money,” collected in [Stein 1974a, 106–112]) about the value of an even more abstract concept: money. In fact, her concerns over the value of money resurface in *Wars I Have Seen*. But in contrast to the speculative manner of her 1936 essays, her thoughts on money in the spring of 1944^[11] come across as “determined” as the nations she hears in the radio broadcasts. Recounting a conversation she had with a friend about “after war, and the future organization of the world,” Stein writes,

...I realized suddenly and completely, that really gold has almost a religious quality it really has and that this is the reason it is always the standard of money, it has to be. The reason why is this, it is the only metal in the world that is of no use.... It is really marvelous that the only metal in all this world of ours that is absolutely entirely and completely useless is gold, and therefore it must have the mystic quality of aloofness which makes which always will make it the standard of money.
[Stein 1984, 181]

Even if Stein had not directly read or heard the news of the upcoming international monetary summit that would take place at Bretton Woods, it is hard to believe that neither she nor the interlocutor with whom she discusses gold have gathered some sense of the debate about the planned postwar currency stabilization. American newspapers during the spring of 1944 were rife with rhetoric about the proposed rehabilitation of the U.S. gold standard. One *New York Times* columnist wrote,

The greatest single contribution that the United States could make to world currency stability after the war would be to declare its determination to stabilize its own currency...It could do this by balancing the budget and by announcing that the dollar was no longer on a “twenty-four-hour basis,” and subject to every rumor, but firmly anchored to a fixed quantity of gold. [Hazlitt 1944]

Stein, like the *Times* columnist, is “completely” convinced that gold must be the standard of money. Stein’s “religious”

appeal to gold's "mystic quality of aloofness," and her causal fallacy (gold is the "only metal in all this world of ours that is absolutely entirely and completely useless," and so it must always be the standard of money), moreover, voices the kind of economic rumor that the gold "anchor," according to the *Times*, would silence. Stein's punctationally hysterical desire to believe in the quality "which makes which will always make [gold] the standard of money," in fact, mirrors the leap of faith that government advisors were taking to advocate the rehabilitation of an international economy based on the U.S. gold standard. Making his bid for the gold standard before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Princeton University professor Edwin Walter Kemmerer admitted that the gold standard had not truly been tested since 1914 even as he "declared that no other currency system would so quickly restore public confidence in the post-war world..." [Times 1944]. Like Kemmerer and other contemporary advocates of the gold standard, Stein desires a vision of postwar stability; yet Stein's hysterical wish to believe in the gold standard, like her intermittent conviction about the power of nations, represents her narrative disorientation in a century that has yet to reveal to her a story productive of stable social meaning.

As Stein records her daily life following the landing of American troops on French soil, her experiences indeed challenge the "complete" and "determined," abstracted nation depicted in the particularity of the radio broadcast; the social and political network through which she circulates in occupied France frenetically switches on and off not only Stein's national, but also religious identity. When Stein first hears of the "landing," she records her excitement, marking the day with a fairly tenuous verbal suture: "Well that was yesterday and to-day is the landing and we heard Eisenhower tell us he was here they were here...and we are singing hallelujah, and feeling very nicely, and everybody has been telephoning to us congratulatory messages..." [Stein 1984, 194]. Stein's distracted conflation of Eisenhower and the troops confirms, even while it begins to fragment, the hysterical abstraction of the nations she hears in the radio broadcast –indeed Eisenhower's radio announcement forces Stein to *conjugate* the message in the singular and plural third-persons, respectively. Similarly, Stein's ability to identify with the abstract "voice" of America begins to fracture as the troops draw inland. Stein considers the shortsightedness of the American troops who, having forwarded the request via the Swiss consul, wish to profile the population of her village, with a moiety of both indignance and amusement:

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We giggled and said that is optimism. Naturally American authorities, not really realizing what it is to live in an occupied country, ask you to put down your religion your property and its value, as if anybody would as long as Germans are in the country and in a position to take letters and read them if they want to. [Stein 1984, 200]

The "optimism" at which Stein and Toklas "giggle" denies Stein the sense of miraculous safety the initial reports of their landing had represented ("...we are singing hallelujah, and feeling very nicely..."). What strikes Stein as a funny sort of optimism illustrates the network's power to switch on her national identity while switching off her Jewish identity.

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The local scale of Stein's experiences, moreover, imperils even the global network's vouchsafing of her ability to identify as American. To be sure, the American military forces have not yet made their way to her region of the countryside at this point in the narrative, and the fear of occupying German troops remains strong. The threat of German troops merges with the sense of safety promised by the imminent approach of the Americans during one of Stein's encounters. On one of the many long walks which she records, Stein finds herself approached by a French woman who asks her about a package that her husband has found dropped, presumably by a war-plane passing by. Stein recognizes the item in question as a package of malted milk tablets and narrates the ensuing exchange:

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...I told her and she said is it good and I said yes for children have you some and she said yes she had two, well I said eat one yourself and if it is good give it to them it will do them good, I suggested that she try it first, because I thought it might be something bad that the Germans had put out to discourage the people with gifts from America. [Stein 1984, 219]

Stein moves quickly from identifying the malt tablets as safe American edibles to suspecting them of being found war loot, poisoned by the Germans and dropped on the ground to carry out a kind of bio-terrorism based on fear tactics. Her suspicion sabotages another opportunity to imagine both the American troops and herself as bearers of safety. The possession of a national product, which in this case would endow Stein with a sense of national agency, is confounded

by the awareness that even the values of indigenous consumables have become compromised in by the war.

While Stein can momentarily afford to question the salubriousness of American “goods,” she notes how her fellow French villagers cannot. Following shortly upon her encounter with the malt tablets, Stein recounts her conversation with an old man who said he had seen a lot of American airplanes flying by that day. She writes,

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...yes he said reflectively leaning on his farming implement and I leaning on my cane, yes he said, we depend on America to pick us up out of our troubles, we have always been friends we helped them when they needed us and they helped us when we needed them, the English are all right but it is America that we count on to take care of us to see we keep our colonies, to be sure they will want naval stations and of course we will be pleased to have them have them. [Stein 1984, 221]

Despite Stein’s desire to mirror the old man, he “leaning on his farming implement and I leaning on my cane,” her encounter switches back on her American identity. To be American in the current modulation of the political and economic network, moreover, means to possess monetary resources capable of stabilizing a fragmenting colonial, international economy. The desire to believe in the “complete” and “determined” quality of not only America, but also its economic robustness, has been transferred to the old man who has co-opted Stein’s desire to see American currency anchored by gold.

Stein’s imagined co-optations of American products and anxieties (respectively, the malt tablets and the resurrected gold standard) foreshadow a scene that replays her uncanny orientation toward American identity. For, after the Americans have finally arrived in the region, Stein has returned to meditating on the differences and similarities between what she has seen in this war as compared with the last. And, now that the American army is in town, Stein begins a series of musings on what makes this army distinct not from the other national armies but, rather, from the American army which she saw in the last world war. Entrusted with the job of chaperoning the daughter of a French friend to meet the American soldiers, Stein again finds herself positioned to be the bearer of a distinctly American experience. The little girl in question has been praying every night to meet an American soldier and her mother asks Stein to help answer her daughter’s prayers. Stein gladly accepts her charge and, in considering the gift of chewing gum which Stein sees the soldiers give the little girl, records how proud she is that, in their particular sweetness toward children, this army is no different than the last. Yet upon cautioning the child to make sure only to chew but not to swallow the gum — for she would not, Stein guesses, be familiar with the peculiarly American product — Stein experiences a modulation of her own identity. For the little girl replies,

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Oh yes I know...How do you know that I asked oh she said because when there was the last war my mother was a little girl and the American soldiers gave her chewing gum and all through this war my mother used to tell us about it, and she gave a rapturous sigh and said and now I have it. [Stein 1984, 254]

In reproducing the kindness to children that had constituted Stein’s impression of the last American army, the soldiers of WWII inadvertently spoil Stein’s opportunity to represent herself as the bearer of a distinctly American product and experience. Thus, the story she would tell herself *about* herself as an American is subverted by a story passed down from mother to daughter, a generation which parallels the second generation of world war in the twentieth century. Indeed, Stein’s elision of the interwar period in describing the way in which the nineteenth century was slowly being “killed” from 1914 on proves a suitable transgression of conventional historical chronology; for the uncanny encounter with a deracinated cultural product, which Stein records here, had already, in a sense, been prescribed in the French mother’s “American experience” instantiated when she was a child in the first war and reproduced in her child during the second.

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Stein closes her memoir with yet another performance of the desire to maintain a stable sense of national identity and a temporal partition between the past and the present. She meditates on what makes the soldiers of this war so different than those of the last, and in her last words she parodies the very notions of national determinacy and modernity that lured her into the untenable narratives she has attempted in vain to construct for herself. The American soldiers of this war, she notes, are interesting, optimistic, show a marked curiosity for new knowledge, whereas their World War I

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counterparts had been, to her view, rather dull, given to excessive drink, and suspicious of foreign habits. One of Stein's French acquaintances suggests that it must be the cinema that has made them "men of the world." Some of the soldiers themselves suggest that it is the radio (and especially the quiz shows) that convinced them that they might as well be intelligent rather than dull. Still others cite the country's bold emergence from the depression as the source of their sureness, conversational savvy, and urbane poise. Stein, however, offers her own theory of what has produced the difference. She decides that the salient factor in understanding what makes these Americans "so complete and determined," and so distinct from their predecessors, is their belated possession of a unique national language. As if to explain, Stein writes,

I think of the Americans of the last war, they had their language but they were not yet in possession of it, and the children of the depression as that generation called itself it was beginning to possess its language and in dominating their language which is now all theirs they have ceased to be adolescents and have become men...they have become more American all American, and the G.I. Joes show it and know it, God bless them. [Stein 1984, 259]

Reducing the distinctness of "Americans," and particularly those of *this war*, to linguistic phenomena, Stein mocks her very attempt to preserve nationality and modernity as absolute categories. Without being able to offer her reader a new narrative paradigm for the slowly awakening "20th century," Stein again exposes the insufficiency of the "19th-century" narrative paradigm. While conquest and "domination" provided the previous century with a way to purify the hybridized techno-scientific and military cultures of Europe and America into a single "human" *agon*, Stein ultimately discovers that nationality and modernity, in the "contemporary composition" are all-together trickier and more transitory categories than they were for the "19th century." If Stein's relationship to chewing gum, malt tablets, and gold are any indication, the GIs will not be able to "possess" their new "All American" language absolutely.

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But does Stein leave the 20th century nothing but a deconstructed 19th century? No. By recording the bipolar relationship between identity and an ever shifting network of international political and economic interests, Stein gives her reader a glimpse of the mode of social production of meaning that would come to dominate the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Her very failure to devise a story that could cognitively partition the practices of international and temporal hybridization from those of purification, moreover, signals the passing of a modernist paradigm. If we return to one of Stein's 1936 essays on money — again, I suggest that Stein's concerns over the value of money are symptomatic of the author's broader anxieties about globalization and cultural change — we learn that, even before the outbreak of World War II, Stein sees a paradigmatic narrative shift on the global horizon. Noting a contemporary tendency to value the machinery of industrialism over free will and thought, Stein writes,

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That is the logical end of organization and that is where the world is today, the beginning of the eighteenth century went in for freedom and ended in the beginning of the nineteenth century that went in for organization.

Now organization is getting kind of used up.

The virgin lands are getting kind of used up, the whole surface of the world is known and also the air....

Organization is a failure and everywhere the world over everybody has to begin again. [Stein 1974]

Stein could sense that *organization*, the word she uses to represent the homogenizing and systematizing practices characteristic of 19th-century progress, was becoming an outmoded narrative paradigm. Only her personal record of daily life during the next war in occupied France, however, would reveal that to "begin again" meant sacrificing a stable sense of nationality and modernity to the network narrative.

Notes

[1] Regarding concern in the labor market, one might witness Alan Greenspan's comment that the difficulty involved in the transition to a high-tech industry was "most evident in the rising fear of job skill obsolescence that has induced a marked increase in experienced workers going

back to school — often community colleges — to upgrade their skills for a rapidly changing work environment” [Greenspan 1999]. Media scholar David Shenk, moreover, coined the phrases *data smog* and *information glut* in 1997 to describe the overwhelming psychological effects of information culture in the United States [Shenk 1997].

[2] The bombs also inflicted long-term destruction on the surviving populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the form of genetic mutations, which has caused a high incidence of leukemia to appear several generations away in descendants of the blasts.

[3] According to Venezuelan journalist, Silvia Lidia González Longoria, on the day after the bombing of Hiroshima, the words *atom* and *atomic* appeared in the *New York Times* two hundred and nine times [González Longoria 2004].

[4] For instance, in her recent analysis of Stein’s controversial translation work for Vichy leader Marshal Phillipe Petain, Barbara Will argues that the “emergence of a public audience” for Stein’s writing after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) can help account for what appears, in the utterly “passive” syntax of the translations, to be Stein’s shift away from her “complex sense of ‘genius’ as a guiding aesthetic principle” [Will 2004, 657].

[5] This accusation was particularly cutting because Skinner was essentially accusing Stein of exhibiting a condition she had studied and described in experiments she published with Leon M. Solomons in 1896 under the guidance of eminent psychologist, and her mentor, William James. In her work on normal motor automatism, Stein described a behavior that would come to be known as “automatic writing.” However, Stein not only denied that she wrote in this mode but also claimed such writing to be impossible. Unlike Solomons, Stein did not believe in automatic writing: “There are automatic movements but not automatic writing. Writing for the normal person is too complicated an activity to be indulged in automatically” [Meyer 2001, 221].

[6] Lisa Ruddick reads *Tender Buttons* in terms of Julia Kristeva’s concept of presymbolic *jouissance* in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (1990); Mary DeKoven likens Stein’s experimental writings to Derrida’s deconstructivist poetics in *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (1983).

[7] As one critic has called it; see [Norton 2004, 395]

[8] Citing a weak sense of historical memory as a the crucial fault in Van Dusen’s “materialist” analysis, Whittier-Ferguson writes, “. . .the very familiarity of Stein’s failings to Van Dusen — and the utter familiarity of the terms in which Van Dusen finds fault with Stein — . . .betray Van Dusen’s by no means uncommon abridgment of time’s passing. . . .The political ruler Van Dusen applies to Stein is calibrated for 1996: ‘politics’ is a practice that begins and ends with a forthright assertion of one’s identity and involves a careful measuring of one’s socioeconomic, racial, and sexual positions vis-à-vis the dominant sociopolitical order. . . . Even before we turn to Pétain and Stein, we should understand that being a Jew in occupied France, rather than encouraging a public declaration of solidarity with marginalized populations or recriminations against France’s puppet government, would have been more likely to encourage Stein in her longstanding preference for avoiding risky, public, political stands” [Whittier-Ferguson 2001, 118].

[9] Foods like butter and sugar were unavailable to Stein and Toklas for periods of their stay in the occupied French countryside.

[10] Stein used conventional spelling. In the context, I presume these ungrammatical instances of “Frenchman,” which I find unevenly in copies issued by Brilliance Books in 1984 and by B.T. Batesford Ltd. in 1945, to be editorial oversights.

[11] The memoir advances chronologically throughout, and Stein intermittently works the day and/or year of composition into her prose. Though quotidian, asides like “. . .any way it is the first of May nineteen forty four. . .” and markers like “[i]t is now nearly the fifteenth of May” do not undermine the argument that *Wars* is more than a daily journal since the fact remains that Stein did edit the manuscript prior to publication. [Stein 1984, 176, 180]

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