

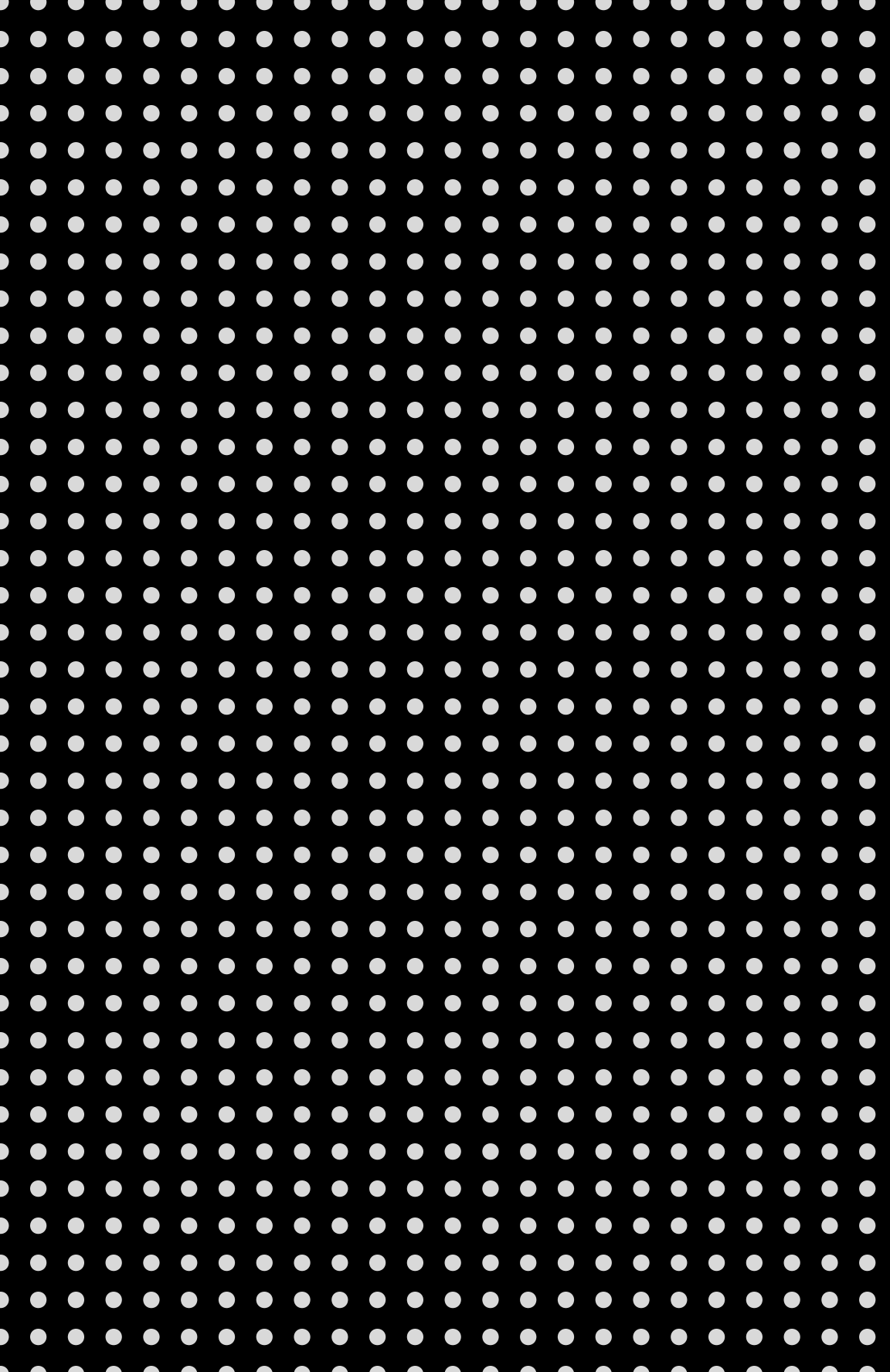
Punctuation:

ART, POLITICS, AND PLAY



Jennifer
DeVere Brody

Punctuation



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Jennifer DeVere Brody

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Punctuation. Four stops, two
marks of movement, and a stroke,
or expression of the indefinite or
fragmentary.

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, notebook
draft of an essay on punctuation, repro-
duced in *The Complete Poems*

She would take on their punctua-
tion. . . . Theirs. Punctuation.

—THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA, *Dictée*



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For(e)thought:

Pre/Script: gesturestyluspunctum

“I grew up with a lot of punctuation myself, so I can understand your nostalgia for parentheses,” the dashing Sister Kâ exclaimed to her dingbat friend across the periodic table.

—Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*

History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation.

—Theodor Adorno, “Punctuation Marks”

Nostalgia. History. Punctuation? Yes. Punctuation—ubiquitous, understudied, unconscious, undone, present, presentational, peripatetic, imported, important. Repeated, albeit differently, in the epigraphs above, is the issue of what is lost (in punctuation), which is to say, what is found there. The dynamics of this discursive as well as cursive and recursive formation give us pause in both senses of the term. How do these marks function and how do we come to know them even before we understand them? Whatever their value or number (are there nine marks? eleven?), we cannot refute their (im)material existence.

Dear reader, you should know right away, here, upfront and in the very beginning, that I do not count myself among those punctuationists for whom prescriptivist rules rule (go Truss yourself should you wish to be bound by convention!); rather, this study errs with the errant—tolerating and even encouraging circulation among artistic representations of punctuation marks in a mode closer to those linguists who call themselves descriptivists (and even this may be inaccurate given my distrust

of concepts such as found or natural language, not to mention the prescriptivist/descriptivist binary).¹ Unlike most punctuationists, I eschew a punctilious approach to punctuation. As a result, this book, rather than arguing a point, argues and plays with points—specifically points made about punctuation. The previous statement can be read as a tautological phrase given that previously and elsewhere—namely in the early modern period in Great Britain—punctuation marks were known as points. The readings that follow rely upon the work of experimental artists—poets, painters, dancers—many of whom can be seen as championing the “visual” or “spatial” turn in cultural studies. Concerned less with “logo (the word)” than with “logo (the icon)” —such artists struggle with predominately visual rather than strictly grammatical understandings of punctuation.² Thus, this book focuses on punctuation marks as visual (re)marks.

Disagreeing with the speaker in e.e. cummings’s poem “since feeling is first,” who asserts that “life’s not a paragraph/And death i think is no parenthesis,” this book argues that punctuation can indeed be thought of as (a) matter of life and death as well as embodiment. Certainly, I believe that punctuation pertains to an “archive of feelings”—we need only recall the nostalgia cited above—for punctuation marks historically have provided much of the affect of Western print culture since the Enlightenment. We may be tempted to ask: Who invented punctuation and why? We cannot answer such an impossible question and yet we know that “it wasn’t there before us so we must have invented it, like we invented Yes and No.”³ The advent of punctuation remains and shall remain unwritten. Nevertheless, some of its origin stories will be replayed, obliquely, in and on the pages that follow. Let us begin with one origin story composed for this occasion.

A Handmaid’s Tale

Allegory can be an ally. Let’s hear from Mr. Herd (himself herded among a series of quotations selected by Mr. Eric Partridge, to whom any good punctuationist must pay homage, for it was he, Partridge, who understood that we are altogether too much guided in the matter of punctuation). As Mr. Herd (as quoted by Partridge) states: “When punctuation was first employed, it was in the role of the handmaid of prose; later the handmaid was transformed by the pedants into a harsh-faced chaperone, pervertedly ingenious in the contriving of stiff regulations and starched

rules of decorum; now, happily, she is content to act as an auxiliary to the writer and as a guide to the reader.”⁴ By what alchemy or agency was punctuation “first employed” as a handmaid? When, how, and why was it transformed from chaperone to auxiliary and guide? There is little doubt that, when first employed, punctuation was handmade. Tracing its trajectory from maid to chaperone and ultimately to guide mimics shifts not only in time, type (of work), or demeanor, but also shifts in gender, sexuality, age, nationality, class, and ethnicity. The often-feminized punctuation becomes not only *content*, but also *content*. The representation of Herd’s quotation marks a shift from anonymous prose to that of a mediator between a dyad known as the writer and the reader. This “handmaid’s tale” traces a teleological trajectory that transmogrifies the handmaid into an auxiliary (old) maid. Such, perhaps, has been the way of the wor(l)d.

Punctuation’s Aspirations

Punctuation’s aspirations are problematic. Punctuation is not a proper object: it is neither speech nor writing; art nor craft; sound nor silence. It may be neither here nor there and yet somehow it is everywhere. As such, punctuation performs as a type of (im)material event or, perhaps, as a supplement.⁵ Relatively unexamined and certainly undertheorized, punctuation proves to be an unwieldy subject of inquiry. Pedants and language mavens alike have worried about and over (not to mention with) punctuation’s properties—What is its proper placement? How does it affect meaning? In their ongoing efforts to pinpoint punctuation’s ambiguous movements and to rein in punctuation’s tendency toward excess, countless guides to punctuation caution against its misuse, which most frequently is characterized by the trope of overuse or excess. In such treatises, punctuation’s proliferation often leads to the devaluation of the prose that employs it. Attempting to reduce punctuation to a system, such tomes codify the marks rather than think of them as art (or at least think of them artfully, as subject to poetic license). Numerous other texts historicize punctuation’s appearances—schematizing its presence and absence in and for different eras and areas. There are those who argue that excess punctuation is an effect of style (rather than merely an effete defect or evidence of an overly affected style). Still others see too much punctuation as a mark of “bad” writing and “poor” literary style where “literary style [may be] the power to move freely in length and breadth of linguistic thinking without slipping into banality.”⁶ According to most manuals,

excessive use of punctuation produces writing that is banal rather than original; illiterate rather than literate; crude rather than erudite.

On the matter of literary value and literacy, I follow those who advocate for an expanded view of writing: one that cannot demarcate the ends of speech and the beginning of writing, and where it is impossible to have a text without a “con” or context. It is precisely punctuation’s ambiguous excessive *tendencies* that attract me.⁷ Here, we should remember that the invention of punctuation is a belated addition in all histories of writing. As the title of this section reveals, *scriptio continua* was the norm in earlier periods (before the period). Although there is no origin(al) of writing, historical scripts describe punctuation as an after/effect of writing and ascribe to it literally and figuratively a secondary position, akin to certain versions of the story of Eve. To recall Adorno’s words in the epigraph, such is the residue of history retained, and contained, in a personification, in every mark of punctuation. As mentioned previously, with some frequency punctuation performs a feminized, ephemeral, nonessential (and yet fundamental) role to the construction of meaning. A belated, belittled, nonessential substance (to understanding), punctuation is thought to serve as a mere assistant to authors and other supposed authorities. In truth, there are no authors of punctuation although authorities on the subject abound.

The number of tracts about punctuation is far too vast to analyze in this monograph. My goal is to encourage readers to be attuned to punctuation’s contradictory performances. This book moves consciously but not teleologically among handwriting, print graphics, performative painting, digital art, dancing texts, and more. It does so because despite the fact that some histories see these technologies as “progressive”—where each new innovation supplants the previous one—in practice, the progress proves to be jagged, uneven, and overlapping. Despite “being digital” we have not yet surpassed the era of the pen and paper—not yet is the entire world wired.

Punctuation marks are thought to have little literary value, in part because there is a question about who authors punctuation and how it is authorized—this despite the fact that since at least the eighteenth century, authorities on the proper use of punctuation have increased. By remembering the uncredited role that copyeditors and compositors play and have played in (re)placing punctuation marks we may understand how these workers (not artists) served as mere “mechanical” assistants

to “authors” who were given authority over what were in fact complex collaborations.⁸ In such settings, punctuation marks function as shadow figures that both compose and haunt writing’s substance. The problem of who “authors” punctuation appears in a stylebook that queries: “Has any critic or reviewer ever praised an author for being a master [note gender] of punctuation, a virtuoso of commas? Has anyone ever won a Pulitzer prize, much less a Nobel, for elegant distinctions between dash and colon, semicolon and comma?”⁹ In fact, there have been studies of a single author’s use of particular punctuation marks. Moreover, writers themselves often have articulated interesting ideas about punctuation. As Truman Capote says: “I think of myself as a stylist and stylists can become notoriously obsessed with the placing of a comma, the weight of a semi-colon.”¹⁰ Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, John Steinbeck, and Nadine Gordimer, to name only a very few, are among the writers who believe that quotation marks in dialogue intrude on the printed page and therefore refuse to use them.

How, then, can we approach the “subject” (of) punctuation? Is it possible to breathe (new) life into this matter? In this study I argue that punctuation’s paradoxical performances produce excessive meaning, and that such performances are part and parcel of both the politics and poetics of punctuation. I look at how punctuation marks mediate, express, (re)present, and perform—the interactions between the stage of the page and the work of the mind. Because I concur with Gertrude Stein’s statement that “some punctuation is interesting and some is not,” I have organized the book around different “points” that I have found interesting. The book’s chapters are performative “think pieces” designed to take readers on a peripatetic intellectual journey. The chapters move creatively among different kinds of textual material. This strategy has allowed me to limit the scope of the project that touches upon so many research areas—the history of technology, the physiology of reading, the psychology of perception, and the philosophical investigations into the linguistics of writing, to name only a few. I have aimed to engage readers in thinking about and with punctuation marks—to see punctuation proliferate and take on different guises. While I at times discuss specific sociohistorical and geopolitical contexts for the artistic texts I analyze, it is the structural uncertainties, paradoxical figures, and theoretical conundrums that provide the jagged through line to this study.

How do these performed gestures work and what kind of work do

they do? Are they affect or effect? By thinking of (and with) punctuation marks as “material” events, in this study I explore how and why punctuation is matter that performs affect effectively and vice versa. Moreover, by examining punctuation’s (inter)actions as cultural performances, I argue that punctuation plays a key role in our quotidian movements and missteps by stopping, staying, and delaying the incessant flows of information to which we are subject. In this book I read dots, ellipses, hyphens, quotation marks, semicolons, colons, and exclamation points through the trans and/or interdisciplinary lens of performance studies (which includes cultural and visual studies). I query punctuation’s engagements with issues of life, death, art, and (identity) politics. Riffing on the famous collaboration by William Strunk and his student E. B. White, I look at the ways in which selected punctuation marks perform as forms of style as well as the ways in which they style form. As suggested by Kobena Mercer, among others (including unwittingly if wittily Strunk and White), aesthetic style is deeply political.¹¹

This book shows how punctuation simultaneously comprises, composes, and compromises thought through its gestures. Punctuation marks matter in both senses of the term. The discussion above that conceptualized punctuation as the “handmaiden” and “helpmeet” to speech reveals the gendered as well as raced, classed, and sexualized discourse through which we have come to understand punctuation. Indeed, the discursive production of punctuation depends upon the repeated (and I would add nostalgic, especially in our posthuman era) reproduction of anthropomorphic terms. It is easy to personify punctuation. This may be a result of the fact that one of punctuation’s many functions is to endow print with affect and emotion. Punctuation marks can serve as both sense and sensibility—as the most human element in certain sentences.

Let’s call this element affect. Human “being” leaps off the page when we see a question mark, a period, or exclamation mark. We react viscerally to punctuation. Here, punctuation is performative. Punctuation’s figurations are read, discussed, represented, and felt in bodily terms, and by turns talk of punctuation returns us to elements of the body as both tenor and vehicle of communication. In a recent advertisement by the communications conglomerate Comcast, the smiley face icon was replaced in a horizontal diptych by a photographed human smile—bringing such linguistic circuits full circle.

In certain Roman texts interpuncts were not carved but added in

paint by scribes. Such inscriptions/handwriting may be understood literally and figuratively as strokes of humanism. One of the originary myths about punctuation is that the Romans invented it to help senate orators remember their political speeches and to deliver them with dramatic effect.¹² Cicero's concepts of the *sermo corporis* and the *eloquentia corporis* referred to "the entire delivery of a speech, both the voice (as an emanation of the body) and the gesticulation accompanying it."¹³ Punctuation serves as a form of non-verbal communication. As with kinesics, there is a correspondence between punctuation marks and other kinds of bodily discourse. As such, punctuation's performances are vital forms of interaction. "The difference between a face-to-face encounter and a telephone conversation is a reminder of the extent to which facial expression and bodily movements can amplify, modify, confirm, or subvert verbal utterance," in short, can "act" like punctuation and vice versa.¹⁴

Punctuation appears in/as writing as a means of inscribing bodily affect and presence imagined to be lost in translation. Punctuation's performances situate and suture the indivisible doubled relation captured in and by the phrase "embodied text." We must remember, however, that, as Jonathan Goldberg argues, "the hand moves in language, and its movement retraces the 'being' of the individual inscribed within simulative social practices that are lived as ordinary experience . . . Touching and seeing are not immediate but mediated through the letter-blocks [or punctuation], sensitizing the hand and eye to a world of inscription re-inscribed in the practice of writing . . . such that we recognize the ways in which being (human, material) is scripted."¹⁵

This project proposes to remove punctuation from the province of linguistics, semantics, and grammar, and place it in what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "global contact zone" where literary, visual, and performance studies meet. The book should be read as participating in a much larger scholarly project that shifts its focus away from master narrative/subjects to "other" constituencies. While there may not be spoken-language equivalents of punctuation, except perhaps performatively, I want to expand the definition delimited previously by claiming that beyond intonation—what we might call the trace of the sound of punctuation—punctuation may be read in bodily inscription as and through gesture. The title of this opening chapter recalls this connection. Gesture, as defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, is a "significant movement of limb or body; use of such movements as expression of feeling or rhetorical device." This

book eschews a systematized study of punctuation in favor of elaborating upon the ludic, lewd, and lived if not always live performances of specific punctuation marks.

In a sense “silent” by design, one wonders that if punctuation marks could speak then what would they say and how would they say it? Avital Ronell writes that “punctuation hails our sonic gaze.”¹⁶ The oral/aural optic and sound vision through and by which Ronell understands and underscores the undecidability of punctuation informs my own project, which similarly seeks to mute and obscure the priority given to either side of the false binary between speech and writing. The use of such a paradox seems (seams) apt. For punctuation cuts “up and across,” which is to say into imagined depths and across fictive surfaces.¹⁷ As it lifts itself from the page, like a lifting belly, punctuation moves from the “flat” two-dimensional surface to become a three-dimensional frame. Writing cuts into the page and moves out from it as if it were embossed—as if it were simultaneously concave and convex. “Graphesis and incision are etymologically one.”¹⁸ Cross-stitch, cross-hatch, hatchet.

Phenomenologically it is difficult if not impossible to hear the voice of punctuation marks and to be with punctuation. In the comedic parodic performances of Victor Borge, however, we have heard the sound of punctuation marks voiced.¹⁹ In Borge’s routine, a question mark is sounded out as a “yip” while a period is heard as a “bip.” Marjorie Garber also mentions the performances by Victor Borge in which he translates different punctuation marks into aural/oral cues such that two commas would be rendered as “squeaky pop, squeaky pop.”²⁰ Punctuation marks can be marked by corresponding sounds—by the act of translation, which necessarily transforms transcription. They allow us to enter a disorienting circuit among voice, thought, body, writing, and graphicity as a number of educational videos that use actors to perform as punctuation marks help to underscore.

In sign language (is there any other kind?), punctuation marks are represented by an arched brow or other bodily movements. By contrast, as Della Pollock theorizes in her important essay on metonymic performative writing, such writing “tends [to] displace itself, to unwrite itself at the very moment of composition, opening language to what it is not and can never be. Writing performed *in extremis* [in extremities?] becomes unwriting. It un/does itself. Even this phrase—‘un/does itself’—is a minor metonymy. It marks the materiality of the sign with the use of a practically unspeakable, non- or counter-presentational element of punc-

tuation, an element intelligible only by reference to visual grammatical codes by which a slash or ‘/’ is distinguishable from a ‘!’ or ‘;’, that in its particular use here to divide and double a word—to make the word mean at least two things at once and so to refuse identification with a unitary system of meaning—locates language itself within the medium of print-play.”²¹ My project extends Pollock’s ideas about writing in an extreme manner by thinking of punctuation as extremities, as phantom limbs. This is another way of understanding punctuation’s performative excess and bodily play. Punctuation points out the problem, the (k)not of connection that ties together binary terms such as orality and literacy, as well as mind and body. Punctuation stages an intervention between utterance and inscription, speech and writing, activism/activity and apathy, body and gesture. It is seen and unspoken, sounded and unseen.

According to the authorities Strunk and White (who are discussed in chapter 3), innovative uses of punctuation often come from the area of advertising. Indeed, we can learn something of punctuation’s value when placing an ad in a newspaper. For example, the guidelines for one paper state that the inclusion of “punctuation does not affect the word count.” In other words, it will not cost you to use it, unless you hyphenate a word or delete spaces. This is but one example of the value of punctuation. “The ‘exact value’ of the individual points is arbitrary: there can be no single exact value, for every point varies in syntactical importance and in elocutionary duration according to the almost infinite potential variations of the contexts. But the relative importance, whether syntactical and logical, or elocutionary and rhetorical, is not arbitrary.”²²

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge drafted an essay on punctuation in which he conceptualizes, in a very performative manner, his own theory of punctuation. The essay begins:

Punctuation. Four stops, two marks of movement, and a stroke, or expression of the indefinite or fragmentary—
Comma , Semicolon ; Colon : Period . Mark Interrogation ? Note of Admiration ! Stroke – .

He then writes:

It appears next to self-evident, that the first four or five characters can never be made to represent all the modes and subtle distinctions of connection, accumulation, disjunction, and completion of sense—it would be quite as absurd as to imagine that the ? and ! should des-

ignite all the moods of passion, that we convey by interrogation or wonder—as the simple question for information—the ironical—the impetuous—the ratiocinative &c—No! this must be left to the understanding of the Reader or Hearer. What then is their use?²³

Coleridge is hardly the first writer to question the purpose of these marks. What he decides in the course of his musings on the subject is that they correspond to a speaker's breath. Coleridge considers "each stop separately" before offering his main thesis that punctuation is, relatively speaking, more rhetorical than syntactical, although he too understands that these are not binary oppositions. I quote Coleridge at length because his poetic prose complements my own ideas about "connection, accumulation and disjunction" as these actions can be attributed to punctuation. For example, he outlines my understanding of punctuation as political and performative. In explicating Coleridge's text, we should not overlook the significance of his example for demonstrating punctuation's function. By taking slavery as his example his treatise becomes part of abolitionist discourse. Historically, then, punctuation has had a role to play in the era's circum-Atlantic debates about literacy, slavery, and freedom.²⁴ By explicitly invoking the slave trade in his essay, Coleridge betrays his abolitionist sympathies. Unlike the thinkers who characterized the trade in purely logical terms (attending to its economic aspects), Coleridge, working from his Romantic stance, weds passion with intellect.²⁵ In humanist discourse, punctuation marks can be personified (we do not, for example, think about punctuation's animalistic qualities). What then do we make of the figure of the slave—the chattel personal? Can it be seen as a close relation if not another example of punctuation? A black mark of affective labor? A supplement to the Human? As I read it, such questions pertain to Coleridge's academic disquisition on the drama of punctuation. He writes:

I look on the stops not as logical Symbols, but rather as dramatic *directions* representing the process of Thinking and Speaking conjointly—either therefore the regulation of the Breath simply, for in very long periods of exceedingly close reasoning this occurs; or as the movements in the Speaker's Thoughts make him regulate his Breath, pause longer or shorter, & prepare his voice before the pause for the pause—As for instance—[and his example is telling and timely given that Britain ended the slave trade in 1807] "No good man can contem-

plate the African Slave-Trade without horror, who has once read an account of the wars & atrocious kidnapping practised in the procuring of the Slaves, the horrors of the middle passage in the conveyance of them, or the outrage to our common nature in the too frequent and always possible final cruelty in employing & punishing them. Then, too, the fearful effect on the oppressors' own minds, the hardness, pride, proneness to frantic anger, sensuality, and the deadening of the moral sense—respecting the distinctions between Thing & Person will force the thoughts thro' a fresh Channel to the common Bay and Receptacle, in which the mind floats at anchor upon its accumulated Thoughts, deep & with a sure bottom of arguments & grounds, yet wavy with the pas[s]ions of honest Indignation.” Now here the later sense is equally the ground of the proposition with the former—; but the former might be, & is gracefully regarded as the whole, at the commencement in the Speaker's view. He pauses—then the activity of the mind, generating upon its generations, starts anew—& the pause is not, for which I am contending, at all *retrospective*, but always prospective—that is, the pause is not affected by what actually follows, but by what anterior to it was foreseen as following. (423–24)

Coleridge's thinking about time here emphasizes the dramatic moment of the pause that anticipates a future via a sense of *déjà vu*. Like performance theorists' invocation of “twice-restored behavior”—the echo in the pause—Coleridge underscores the convention of expectation—of set lines of communication that (pre)determine interaction. So, too, he shows how punctuation marks both orient and represent Thinking and Speaking (the active gerund forms of thought and speech) conjointly. He amplifies punctuation and reads it in several registers. These ideas will recur in my study along with Coleridge's wonderful concept-metaphor of “generating on generations [that] starts anew” and where “the pause is not retrospective but prospective” thereby showing punctuation's prospects. This may be an appropriately prescient invocation of contemporary conceptions of performance. Coleridge's performance piece characterizes his own *métier* and medium (that of a writer) in multimedia terms—as “an artist in words” akin to a sculptor or a painter as makers of tangible things. As he concludes:

It is the first and simplest duty of a Writer, i.e. an artist in words, as a Statuary is in Marble, or a Painter in coloured Surfaces—to make