

Situated Civility: Anna Julia Cooper and Hannah Gadsby on Politeness and Public-Mindedness

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In public life, the problem of civility is often presented as a choice over whether citizens should recover social norms of civility to sustain politics in the face of polarization or else contest demands for civility to politicize social inequalities. Political theorists often respond by treating this as an epistemological problem requiring conceptual clarification. By distinguishing between civility as politeness and civility as public-mindedness, for instance, they promise to clarify when it is appropriate to conform to social norms and when it might be morally permissible to be rude or disrespectful. While valid in its own terms, such an approach presupposes an impoverished conception of both the subject and the politics of civility. Rather than ask when and why we should choose to be civil (or not), in this article we ask: what is produced when citizens are civil or uncivil within a given *situation*? We consider this by turning to two feminist interlocutors: Anna Julia Cooper and Hannah Gadsby. Engaging with their reflections on and interventions within situations in which civility rises to the level of explicit attention provides the basis for a more adequate understanding of the *subject* of civility. Cooper and Gadsby each highlight how the subject does not simply choose whether to conform to social norms but is both constituted by the situation within which they act while also constituting the situation of which they are a part. This opens the way to a more adequate understanding of the *politics* of civility. As an embodied negotiation of social norms and political principles, Cooper and Gadsby show how this involves reading situations, expanding situations to interpellate others, and disclosing the limits of a situation.

They may be little things, the amenities of life, the little nothings which cost nothing and come to nothing, and yet can make a sentient being so comfortable or so miserable in this life, the oil of social machinery, which we call the courtesies of life, all are under the magic key of women's permit.

—Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

I get a bit tense. Mainly because I am this situation.

—Hannah Gadsby, 2018

The question of how citizens can and should relate to one another as a matter of civility has once again risen to the forefront of public debate (Cusk 2017; Bonotti and Zech 2021; Gay 2022). An apparent reason for this is the continuous change in societal norms, which has made it harder than before to assume a shared understanding of how to speak and act in concert with others. Whereas some lament this lack of commonality (Goodhardt 2018), others see it as a necessary step in the struggle for a more inclusive and tolerant society (Nyong'o and Tompkins 2018). In both cases, the issue hinges just as much on the situation itself as it does on the principles that inform how we, as theorists and engaged citizens, judge this or that case of civility (or incivility). The situation of civility—its “situatedness”—is indeed where the contestation of social norms and political principles is most apparent. As Anna Julia Cooper and Hannah Gadsby highlight in the epigraphs here, civility functions as the “oil of social machinery” that enables citizens to interact within a shared world. Like Heidegger's hammer becoming “unready-to-hand,” therefore, civility rises to the level of explicit attention when the machine breaks down (see Cerborne 1999). It becomes, as it were, “this

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situation,” in terms of which we might make sense of “what’s going on here” (Jaworski 2023, 87).

Although Gadsby released her Netflix show *Nanette* more than 120 years after Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* was published in 1892, they highlight in mutually illuminating ways how marginalized subjects’ appearance often becomes the occasion in which the question of what it means to be civil arises. As a self-avowed “Black Woman of the South,” on one hand, and a queer person who is “only a man at a glance,” on the other, Cooper and Gadsby each confront the “distinctive dilemma” that Lida Maxwell (2019, 30) describes (in a different context): “how to be seen and heard by other outsiders and perhaps even a public audience while refusing public and private terms of visibility and audibility that distort the outsider’s person ... and threaten their survival.” Similarly faced with this dilemma, Cooper and Gadsby both offer important insights about civility not only by reflecting on its nature as recorded in their texts but also in the performance of their texts as they negotiate social norms in the context of two public-minded debates: women’s suffrage in late nineteenth-century America and marriage equality in twenty-first century Australia.

By engaging with Cooper and Gadsby as two feminist interlocutors, who both reflect on and intervene in situations in which the problem of civility arises, in this article we step back from the somewhat contrived debate between “civilitarians” and “civility-sceptics” (cf. Edyvane 2017, 351) to ask what civility produces within situations. As such, our goal is not to arbitrate, from an abstract point of view, when and why civility is normatively desirable but to interpret what citizens are doing when they act in civil or uncivil ways. What kind of agency does civility/incivility afford? What subject-positions arise from this agency? What are the modalities by which subjects negotiate their position as civil/uncivil? Answering these questions, we argue, is crucial for advancing the discussion on civility. Not only do the questions bring the discussion closer to embodied experiences of *subjects* within specific situations but they open the way to a more adequate understanding of the *politics* of civility as an activity through which social norms and moral-political principles are negotiated.¹

We turn to Cooper’s and Gadsby’s texts and extended contexts because they, concretely and historically, take up a liminal position from which civility’s explication as politeness and public-mindedness becomes available for analysis. Our starting point for reflection on their public interventions is Erving Goffman’s (1964, 135) definition of a situation as “an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities” within which participants are co-present (see also Goffman 1963). A situation guides and constrains social interaction according to its structure, that is, the expectations through which its participants are jointly oriented according to what kind of occasion they judge it to be (Jaworski 2023, 82; see also Gonos 1977,

856-861). Anticipating what is now called a sensorial orientation to politics (Tønder 2013, 13-19; see also Davidson and Brash 2021; Krause 2011; Panagia 2009), Goffman’s hermeneutic device of the situation allows us to compare how Cooper and Gadsby, each in their own way, encounter the expectations of civility in ways that allow for general consideration. Considering them alongside each other is especially fruitful since they share a feminist sensibility attuned to how civility revolves around embodied—and, hence, contestable—notions of politeness and public-mindedness. Moreover, they each draw attention to how inequalitarian citizenship regimes are reproduced through situations within which embodied subjects appear conspicuous according to social norms. Together these insights reveal how civility, in its agentic situatedness, is an index for the social bond (or the particular “way of life” that citizens perceive themselves to share) and the negotiations surrounding it. To be perceived to *be* the situation, as Cooper and Gadsby make evident, is to interact from a marginalized position that affords both more and less agency than other citizens might have.²

Our basic claim is that appreciating the struggles involved in these situations is crucial for the discussion of how and when to contest or recover civility (or, as is more likely, both at the same time). We begin by reviewing existing accounts of civility to show how attending to its situatedness brings into focus an embodied subject and politics of civility.³ We then turn, first, to Cooper and, second, to Gadsby, offering a close analysis of their divergent but also overlapping encounters with civility claims, and how they negotiate and reflect on these. We conclude with a discussion of how understanding civility as situated provides insight into how politeness and public-mindedness are reconstituted by subjects through reading, expanding and making visible the limits of situations.

The Intertwinement of Politeness and Public-Mindedness

Disagreement over the value of civility typically turns on its dual nature as politeness and public-mindedness. For so-called civilitarians, the value of abiding by unwritten social norms of politeness is not only that this facilitates interaction with those who we find disagreeable but that it communicates moral respect for each other across social differences (Meyer 2000, 71-73; Boyd 2006, 864-868; Læggaard 2011, 86; Edyvane 2017, 345). For civility skeptics, in contrast, the social conformism demanded by civility too often functions to keep people in their place: it depoliticizes social harms and pacifies political dissent by policing what counts as appropriate expression of political claim-making (Zurn 2013, 356-358; Zerilli 2014; Delmas 2018; Zamalin 2021). Political theorists typically respond to this characterization of the challenge of civility by treating it as an epistemological problem, i.e., as a problem of knowing how to define and apply any

given concept irrespective of the situation in which it appears (and, as such, as subject to adjudication detached from its embodied instantiations).⁴

A first response to this framing of the problem of civility is to seek a middle way between civilitarianism and civility skepticism. Reflecting on seventeenth century debates about religious toleration, for instance, Teresa Bejan (2017), recuperates a “thin” conception of “mere civility” based on socially contingent norms. For Bejan (148), the problem with the thicker, “moralised” (Lockean) conception of civility that predominates in contemporary politics is that it is too demanding: it becomes exclusionary because the sincerity, openness to difference, and willingness to change one’s mind that it requires can only be sustained among those who already share a commitment to substantive principles of public-mindedness while casting those who appear not to demonstrate these virtues as uncivil. In contrast, the “thinner” conception of mere civility as “unmurderous coexistence” (which Bejan attributes to Roger Williams) involves a “minimal adherence to culturally contingent rules of respectful behaviour compatible with, and occasionally, expressive of, contempt for others” (Bejan 2017, 166, 14). For Bejan (2017, 153, 159-160, 164), “mere civility” is preferable to thicker, moralized conceptions of civility because it only requires outward conformity to social norms and, as such, avoids a moral obligation to respect the social differences or political opinions of others, to keep one’s negative judgement of others to oneself, or even to treat others as equal persons. However, mere civility does require one to remain present and continue to engage others in conversation despite the unpleasantness of publicly interacting with those with whom one fundamentally differs or disagrees (Bejan 2017, 74; cf. Waldron 2014). This demands a certain “mental toughness” on the part of citizens, requiring them to cultivate both an “insensitivity” to opinions of those with whom they deeply disagree and an “identity separate from that immersed in the debate” (Bejan 2017, 162).

As Bejan (2017, 162) acknowledges but does not adequately address, however, the embodied burdens of civility typically “fall disproportionately on the disenfranchised and disaffected, thus adding insult to injury while reaffirming their subjection.” For it is often those most dominated within a social order who are required to sustain it by conforming to social norms of politeness (Allen 2004; Hooker 2016; Whitten 2022; McTernan 2023). As we will see, Cooper and Gadsby both highlight how those culturally contingent rules of respectful behavior on which mere civility is predicated are often internally exclusive since they require some to adjust their conduct and bodily appearance more than others to accommodate themselves to a situation (Young 1990, 136-141; Young 2000, 56-57; Dazey 2021; Whitten 2022). The embodied burdens of civility may involve

having to endure aversive or condescending behavior of others or risk being accused of “completely misperceiving the situation” if one tries to challenge this (Young 1990, 134; McTernan 2023, 62-85). Moreover, the social weight of debates about what public-mindedness requires are often disproportionately borne by people who are marked as socially different and therefore often find themselves to be the object of deliberation: they are treated as “debatable citizens” as Hannah Gadsby (2022) puts it in relation to public deliberation over marriage equality in Australia (cf. Daly 2015).

A second response by political theorists to the epistemological framing of the problem of civility is to reconcile the competing claims of civilitarians and civility skeptics by showing how civility as politeness sustains civility as public-mindedness. Employing the same ontological language as Bejan, for instance, Aurélia Bardon et al. (2022) distinguish the “thin” aspect of civility as politeness (which only requires us to recognize others as *co-members* of society with whom we must coexist) from the “thick” aspect of civility as public-mindedness (which requires us to recognize others as *free and equal* members of society) (cf. Meyer 2000, 71-73). Politeness demands only that we demonstrate “forbearance from roughness or unpleasantness” in our interaction with others based on a “superficial compliance with social norms,” which (as Bejan also emphasizes) can be pragmatically motivated (Bardon et al. 2022, 2). In contrast, public-mindedness entails a “deeper moral commitment to moral and political principles based on respect for others” (Bardon et al. 2022, 2). We give proper weight and recognition to others as free and equal members of society by complying with the constraints of public reason and displaying respect for the basic rights and equal civic standing of others (Bardon et al. 2022, 4-5).

Rather than regarding these as two competing conceptions of civility as Bejan does, Bardon et al. (2022) treat them as two aspects of one coherent concept of civility.⁵ From this perspective, compliance with socially contingent norms of politeness is valuable if it advances public-mindedness by communicating respect for others as free and equal (“deep civility”). Conversely, impolite behavior is morally wrong if it is used as a means of disrespecting someone by treating them as less than equal (“deep incivility”). However, there are also two ways in which politeness and public-mindedness might not align. On the one hand, in the case of “surface level politeness”, polite behavior might be used to treat people disrespectfully (Bardon et al. 2022, 13). This might be done, for instance, by making someone uncomfortable by highlighting that they lack the social competence to “fit in” to a particular situation. On the other hand, in the case of “critical impoliteness,” one might act impolitely for public-minded reasons, for instance, through rude behavior that is intended to draw attention to institutionalized forms of disrespect (Bardon et al. 2022, 14). By insisting on the

normative priority of public-mindedness over politeness, then, Bardon et al. claim to reconcile the competing perspectives of civilitarians and civility skeptics: while civility is often worth recovering (because it can be “deep”), politeness also sometimes deserves to be contested (when it is “superficial”) and impoliteness might sometimes be justified to do that (through a “critical” orientation to public-mindedness).

Bardon et al. (2022) recognize how social norms of politeness are often concerned with bodily appearance (Calhoun 2000, 259; Buss 1999, 798; Edyvane 2017, 346). However, they rely on implausible assumptions about embodied agency in treating civility as a choice about whether to display respect or disrespect according to one’s rational commitments to public-mindedness. For this presupposes a rational subject who exists prior to their specific and historically situated embodiment in the world (a “doer behind the deed”). This is evident in the mind-body dualism underpinning the binary distinctions that pervade their disaggregation of civility into public-mindedness and politeness. These include thick/thin, political/social, right/pleasant, intrinsic/instrumental, principles/mores, commitment/conformity, respect/forbearance, just/pleasant, citizenship/civility, and liberal democracy/peaceful coexistence.

In other words, because they treat the embodied realm of the social as matter to be animated by the rational realm of the political, Bardon et al. (2022) elide how bodies are sites of power within which subjectivity emerges and efficacy is realized or thwarted through interaction with other bodies (Krause 2011, 304-312). As Cooper and Gadsby both highlight, embodied subjects become aware of a situation by experiencing themselves as part of it. The situation becomes a matter of explicit attention, is experienced as a problem, as it announces itself to the senses through social emotions (for instance, through discomfort, tension, anxiety, shame, disgust, offence, contempt, or embarrassment) in view of how one appears and perceives oneself to appear to others (Coole 2007, 417-423; cf. Goffman 1963, 33). In this context, civility involves bodily techniques that are not only deployed by subjects as “strategies for interaction and self-presentation” but which shape subjects’ own sense of self through their performance (Daly 2015, 312; Gonos 1977, 863). Treating civility as a matter of choosing whether to conform to social norms in view of one’s rational commitment to public-mindedness therefore obscures how embodied subjectivity is constituted by situations that pre-exist and shape one’s sense of self and the possibility of its enactments.

Attending to the situation thus highlights a blind spot in current debates about civility that treat it primarily as an epistemological problem (as understood by the phenomenological-sensorial tradition) but are haunted by ontological questions concerning the subject for whom

civility is both an ideal and a lived experience. Bejan rightly emphasizes the inherent disagreeableness of disagreement and, therefore, the embodied nature of communicative exchanges. However, the demand not to be too sensitive to odious opinions nor to identify too closely with contested social differences is implausible once we recognize how subjects both constitute and are constituted by the situations in which they find themselves. In contrast to Bejan, Bardon et al. rightly recognize how politeness and public-mindedness are inherently related. However, the normative priority that they ascribe to public-mindedness over politeness similarly relies on a conception of the subject who chooses whether to conform or not to social expectations as master of their own body, which is difficult to sustain when we begin to attend to how situations shape embodied encounters.

Once we recognize the inadequacy of the conception of the autonomous subject that the epistemological framing of the problem of civility presupposes, it follows that the politics of civility also cannot be adequately grasped by treating it as a choice over social conformism in view of our moral-political commitments. For, as Cooper and Gadsby both highlight, civility works through processes of subjectivization, including normalization, keeping some people in their place according to their unequal social standing despite formal recognition of their equal civic standing (Whitten 2022; McTernan 2023). While public-mindedness is predicated on a “discursive commitment to equality for all” that can be readily verbalized, the exercise of public-mindedness takes place in the context of everyday civic interactions that are regulated by a sense of propriety that conditions what is perceived as pleasant or unpleasant interaction (Young 1990, 124; Goffman 1963, 24). It is at this level of practical consciousness that some bodies are more likely to encounter signs of avoidance or aversion from others that make it more difficult to “fit in” to a situation (Young 1990, 130-136). Acknowledging how civility works not primarily through prohibition (e.g., limits on acceptable language) but through normalization (e.g., expectations of appropriate self-presentation), therefore shifts our perspective on how politeness and public-mindedness are related (cf. Whitten 2022, 160-176).

Indeed, understanding civility as situated indicates how politeness and public-mindedness are intertwined in practice. We treat these two aspects of civility as mutually constitutive since what it means to appear pleasant or unpleasant, agreeable or disagreeable, is constantly negotiated as a matter of judging the situation at hand. Rather than treating the “thinner” formal norms of politeness either as sufficient on their own to sustain politics (as does Bejan) or as a means to realize the “thicker” substantive principles of public-mindedness (as do Bardon et al.), we treat these as two sensorial registers within any situation (Gayet-Viaud 2015, 6).⁶ We are therefore interested in how subjects negotiate both social norms of politeness and

political principles of public-mindedness by selecting and twisting them, as Carole Gayet-Viaud (2015, 5-6) puts it, to reflect their feelings “towards a situation and its other participants.”

Given these arguments for approaching civility as situated, we now propose to consider how Anna Julia Cooper and Hannah Gadsby exemplify its potential to initiate reflexivity about the demands of both politeness and public-mindedness (Zurn 2013, 358). As already noted, we turn to Gadsby and Cooper because they enact forms of feminist consciousness, which bring to awareness how violence and power are often concealed in practices of civility (Ahmed 2010, 86). Moreover, they each exploit the distinction between politeness and public-mindedness to challenge their audiences’ sensibilities of what a civil response to a situation requires. By engaging with Cooper and Gadsby, we therefore aim to deepen our understanding of civility as an embodied practice of seeking to define “from within situations, what should be done, what can be done, at the very moment of doing” (Gayet-Viaud 2015, 12).

Politeness as the Oil of Social Machinery

Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) is today recognized as a pioneering Black Feminist political thinker (Guy-Sheftall 2009). Surprisingly, although her canonical text, *A Voice from the South*, was composed in a social context that was deeply preoccupied with civility, Cooper herself has not yet been taken seriously as a theorist of civility (Cooper 2017, 2). In late nineteenth-century America, there was a profusion of etiquette manuals providing advice on minute structures of everyday conduct, including how to interpret the character of strangers in urban encounters, bodily management in public, emotional self-restraint, table manners, and the proper behavior of audiences (Kasson 1990, 7). Such works became popular in response to social changes associated with the shift to an industrial and urban society, which provided opportunities for social mobility while at the same time creating anxieties of both public self-presentation and private self-definition. Etiquette manuals of the time promised that good manners and social respectability could be learned and were key to both personal success and social progress. An increasing number of authors of etiquette manuals were middle-class women of fashionable society, such as suffragist and public lecturer Florence Marion Hall, who insisted on the importance of etiquette for social reform in published works such as *The Correct Thing in Good Society* (1888) (cited in and discussed by Kasson 1990, 51).

It is likely that Cooper was familiar with this literary genre when composing the essays that were published in *A Voice from the South* in 1892. In fact, the subtitle of her book (“By a Black Woman of the South”) could be an allusion to the genre itself, since the many anonymous or pseudonymous authors of these texts often claimed social authority in their signatures, e.g., “by an American lady”,

“woman of fashion”, or “a member of New York’s most exclusive circles” (Kasson 1990, 48). Since lynching, racial segregation, and disenfranchisement were also intensifying at this time, by “writing her body” into her work, Cooper highlights how she both constitutes and is constituted by the situations in which social norms of politeness were so explicitly a political concern (Alexander 1995, 338; cf. May 2009b). By interpreting Cooper within this context, we show how she reflects on and participates in the politics of civility by reading her body into situations through citational practice, expanding situations to interpellate her audience and calling attention to the limits of the situations that she negotiates.

The question of the relation between politeness and public-mindedness is, indeed, at the center of Cooper’s well-known essay, “Woman versus the Indian”. Significantly, the situation within which Cooper (2007, 57) here reflects on the “reputation of [the American] nation for general politeness and good manners” arose in the context of the public debate about women’s suffrage. Reading the parameters of the situation, testing and adjusting to its underlying limits and structure, Cooper takes the “unfortunately worded” title of her essay from that of a speech given by suffragist Anna Shaw at the National Women’s Council in Washington in 1891, placing it in quotation marks to indicate that this is not her own choice of words (Cooper 2007, 68; Cahill 2020, 17-19). Speaking just a couple of months after the Wounded Knee massacre (when U.S. Army soldiers killed approximately three hundred Lakota people), Shaw had advocated for the enfranchisement of women by polemically contrasting their civic status to that of native American men, wondering how “marvellous” it was “how little an Indian, or any other kind of a man, needs to know before he may be regarded as a valuable citizen, and how much a woman needs to know before she becomes any kind of citizen whatever” (Shaw, cited in Cahill 2020, 18-19). While Cooper supports the public-minded orientation of women’s struggle for emancipation, she dismisses the idea that “woman become a plaintiff in a suit versus the Indian, or the Negro or any other race or class” because, she insists, women’s rights are predicated on the rights of all (Cooper 2007, 71; see Belle 2015; May 2007, 73-74).

Attention to Cooper’s citational practices adds further insight to her intervention as an exemplary instance of situated civility. Indeed, Cooper’s text was likely to have originally been performed as a speech and Cooper continued to present many of the essays in *A Voice from the South* as speeches throughout the 1890s (Alexander 1995, 337, n2). Throughout the text, Cooper deploys rhetorical strategies and techniques, such as irony and parody, to address her audience in ways that likely appeared rude to some (May 2009a, 82). Cooper prepares her audience for this apparent affront by reading the situation in terms of the self-understanding of the women she addresses and

their expressed desire to bring about social reform through the cultivation of good manners. She appeals to the sensibilities of the predominantly white Northern liberal women in her audience, confirming their self-understanding as an “assembly committed to propagating liberal and progressive ideas” (Cooper 2007, 52). She opens with pleasantries as she describes the Reverend Anna Shaw as “broad and just and liberal in principle” and applauds her for having taken a public-minded stand within the women’s association of which she is president (Cooper 2007, 52).

Cooper’s reading of the situation shifts according to how she addresses her audience. To begin with, she reads the situation in terms of her audience’s understanding of the occasion as a congregation of the politically like-minded and socially similar. She adopts the first-person plural to declare, “*We* assume to be leaders of thought and guardians of society” according to which “our country’s manners and morals are under our tutoring. Our standards are law in our several little worlds” (Cooper 2007, 53; emphasis added). By invoking women’s traditional social role in cultivating civility, Cooper can be seen to treat politeness as a means to advance public-mindedness, similarly to Bardon et al. (2022). She asserts, for instance, that “the science of politeness” and the “secret of universal courtesy” is ultimately nothing but the practical application of the Golden Rule (Cooper 2007, 72, 68). This moralized conception of civility was common among writers of etiquette manuals in the late nineteenth century who often asserted that “manners and morals were one” (Kasson 1990, 116). Cooper’s instrumental metaphor of politeness as the “oil of social machinery” also seems to accord normative priority to public-mindedness. For, if the point of manners is to “lubricate the joints and minimise the friction of society”, it should be in the service of morals which are instilled in individual conscience and acquired through education (Cooper 2007, 70). Given its associations with the emergence of industrial capitalism, however, the metaphor of social machinery also unsettles a moralized conception of civility with connotations of its market value as a means to financial and social success (Kasson 1990, 68).⁷

At the same time, Cooper reads the situation in a way that questions the normative priority of public-mindedness over politeness by showing how it is gendered, given that she (like the women she addresses) is supposed to hold the “magic key” to socially reproducing civility. For, she insists, “public sentiment precedes and begets all laws, good and bad” and “our women are to be credited largely as teachers and moulders of public sentiment” (Cooper 2007, 57). Indeed, while men may claim to be arbiters of the standards of public-mindedness, they remain dependent on women’s judgments about what is appropriate to situations of everyday social interaction. What happens in these “little worlds” is politically significant, Cooper observes, since it

conditions how people interact within wider public spaces (Cooper 2007, 53). In this sense, politeness norms can be regarded as thicker than those of public-mindedness in that they are more ubiquitous, conditioning the meaning of social interaction in any and every situation in ways that profoundly shape how subjects perceive themselves and others (Buss 1999, 208; Kasson 1990, 3; Mullany 2024, 10). Despite politeness seeming to relate merely to “little nothings which cost nothing and come to nothing,” Cooper (2007, 53) emphasizes how the situations in which we experience civility or incivility shape subjectivity, since they “can make a sentient being so comfortable or uncomfortable in this life.”⁸ The apparent “thinness” of politeness is therefore belied by the often-powerful affective responses of subjects—how they feel about a situation—when they are treated impolitely: the “keen sting that comes through the finer sensibilities” that are the focus of Cooper’s (2007, 56) intervention.

As a subject of civility constituted in and through the situation, Cooper not only adjusts to its demands; she also shows how its situatedness affords agency to contest and to challenge her audience’s sense of the principles of public-mindedness from the perspective of white women (Belle 2015; May 2007, 77). To make her point, she shifts from speaking about herself in the first-person plural (“we women”) to the third person singular (“the Black Woman”). In doing so, Cooper expands the situation to interpellate her addressees as subjects responsible not only for cultivating good manners but, by implication, as complicit in producing racialized incivilities.⁹ With this expansion of the situation through disidentifying as the subject of civility (“guardian of society”) to center her experiences as the object of incivility (“touchstone of American courtesy”), Cooper implicitly identifies with the “Indian” in the “unfortunately worded” title of Shaw’s speech (Cooper 2007, 68). In this way, she indicates how, as Hannah Gadsby later describes it, she experiences herself in the third person as constituting “the situation” in relation to which the question of civility arises while also expanding the situation to interpellate her audience as participants in those situations that produce the unpleasant experiences she recounts.

Speaking in the third person, Cooper recounts several situations she encounters as she “ventures forth,” negotiating expectations about bodily management and emotional control in public places as a Black Woman (Kasson 1990, 112f.). She contrasts the way she is treated when travelling the country to the “ease and facility, the comfort and safety” that is presumed to be typical even for unaccompanied American girls due to “our gentlemanly and efficient corps of officials and public servants” (Cooper 2007, 55).¹⁰ Alluding to the legally contested removal of Ida B. Wells’s from a train just a few years previously (Cooper 2017, 8), Cooper (2007, 56) says that she will “purposely forbear to mention instances of personal violence to coloured women travelling in less civilised sections

of our country.” Instead, she focuses her attention on experiences of being treated rudely through embodied interactions of aversion and avoidance (Young 1990, 130-136). For instance, she recounts how she tries to fit into the situation of travelling by train, comporting herself appropriately according to the etiquette manuals of the day, by making herself to be “quiet and unobtrusive in her manner, simple and inconspicuous in her dress” so as not to be singled out for “any marked consideration” (Cooper 2007, 55; cf. Kasson 1990, 129). However, rather than offer assistance to her as they do the white women passengers, the train station workers “deliberately fold their arms and turn round when the Black Woman’s turn came to alight” (Cooper 2007, 55). She recounts her embodied experience of this situation (the “feeling of slighted womanhood”) and the double injury of being treated discourteously while subjected to social norms of emotional control (“since proud self-vindication is checked and shamed by the consciousness that self-assertion would outrage still further the same delicate instinct”) (Cooper 2007, 56; see Kasson 1990, 161; McTernan 2023, 153-157).

In contrast to her instrumental metaphor of politeness as the “oil of social machinery,” Cooper further expands the situation by introducing metaphors of atmospheric charge and electrical circuits. In doing so, she highlights how politeness works through normalization as a decentralized micro-politics that shapes the macro-politics of public-mindedness (which Cooper associates with “strong, centralised government”). Thus, she describes the “subtle exhalation of atmospheric odors of which woman is accountable, the indefinable, unplaceable aroma which seems to exude from the very pores in her fingertips like the delicate sachet so dexterously hidden and concealed in her linens” (Cooper 2007, 56). In the context of an inequalitarian citizen regime (Holston 2011) in which white women fear losing their racial privileges, Cooper highlights how civility can be hierarchical and exclusive when she observes how the pose of a white Lady signals who should be treated with respect: “the microscopic angle at which her pencilled brows are elevated signifies who may be recognized and who are beyond the pale” (Cooper 2007, 54). Indeed, the atmosphere of public places (hotels, cafes, street cars, parks, and boulevards) is “charged and surcharged” by women within private spaces via “sentiments and restrictions” that are expressed within the drawing room (Cooper 2007, 54).¹¹

Through her attention to the gendered nature of civility, Cooper thus subverts the hierarchy of public-mindedness over politeness, showing how norms of public-mindedness are put into play as interconnected sensorial registers within embodied interactions. By making explicit how her own corporeality both constitutes and is constituted by the situations that she recounts, Cooper demonstrates how “Black women’s bodies ... mark

possibilities and generative tensions” through which politeness and public-mindedness are reconstituted (Cooper 2017, 8). This contested-yet-unevenly-distributed burden is evident, for instance, in a much-discussed passage in which Cooper describes searching for a restroom at a train station and being faced with a choice with one door marked “for ladies” and the other “for coloured people” and wonders “under which head I come” (Cooper 2007, 96). The choice between amenities that Cooper is confronted with recalls that posed by Shaw between the emancipatory struggles of “woman versus the Indian.” Cooper’s rhetorical reflection on which door is meant for her thereby calls attention to the limits of the situation in which the choice of public facilities available to attend to one’s bodily needs in private, “renders her a literally impossible body in her time and space” (Alexander 1995, 344). In highlighting how expanding the situation only goes so far—and, thus, how recovering civility through practices of contestation is both necessary and politically fraught—Cooper calls explicit attention to how principles of public-mindedness and social norms of politeness are intertwined.

On Being the Situation

Set in a different context, and articulated in and through a different genre, which offers an alternative set of citational practices and audience expectations, Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* extends many of Cooper’s insights. Indeed, the context in which Gadsby (1978–) began performing *Nanette* was the lead up to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey in 2017, which was a de facto referendum on marriage equality (Balkin 2020, 83).¹² While the positive outcome of the survey in December 2017 led to the legalization of same sex marriage in Australia and has been celebrated as a victory for liberal-minded society, the public debate caused significant harm to the well-being of queer people (Ecker et al. 2019; Anderson, Campbell and Koc 2020). Hence, when later reflecting on the situation in which they first began performing *Nanette* live in Australia, Gadsby observed: “I was not coping with all the public debating of marriage equality. It was ... physically hurting me ... and I just couldn’t bear having any more people having their first ever thoughts on the matter, out loud and unfiltered” (Gadsby 2022, 371, 411-412). *Nanette* was named after a “barista” Gadsby encountered in a small-town cafe who had scowled at them because of their non-conforming gender appearance. They later recalled: “I don’t walk or talk fast enough to flourish in a city. I belong in a small town, but I didn’t live in a small town, because people like Nanette had the habit of making me feel very unwelcome” (Gadsby 2022, 356-357).¹³ Despite its apparently obscure origin, the show was both shaped by and also shaped a wider political moment in which it emerged.

Unlike Cooper's citation of social norms authorized by etiquette manuals as a response to a similarly uneven distribution of embodied burdens and agentive possibilities, Gadsby invokes comedy, together with satire, ridicule, and humor, as the genre with which to expand and reconfigure the situation in which demands for civility are posed. Invocation of such embodied experiences draws on a longer tradition in political theory (Giamario 2022; Tønder 2014) that often has fallen out of the purview of debates about civility—or, alternatively, is taken to constitute a direct threat to civility—but should be seen as crucial to understanding how to simultaneously contest and recover the subject positions produced by its sensorially-inflected appeals to both politeness and public-mindedness. As Ross Carroll (2021, 17) notes in his exploration of philosophical debates about civic and uncivic mirth in the context of eighteenth-century England, while we should be careful not to overlook “ridicule's capacity to humiliate the already vulnerable,” we should be equally careful not to declare it “uncivil” without interrogating its specific work within this or that situation (cf. McTernan 2023, ch.5). Gadsby, as already suggested, makes rich use of this ambiguity. Indeed, like Cooper's response to Anna Shaw, Gadsby's comedy performance is not only a reflection *on* civility but an exemplary instance *of* situated civility. On one hand, Gadsby uses comedic tropes of superiority, release, and incongruity to expand the situation and to implicate their audience in the uneven distribution of agency.¹⁴ On the other hand, they use the very same tropes to demarcate their situation from that of the more privileged in society: “I am this situation ... this masculine, off-centre, lesbian situation,” Gadsby (2018) declares while gesturing to their own appearance.

Let us consider these tropes and shifts in more detail to appreciate how Gadsby reads the situation through citational practices of the genre of stand-up comedy. Their first move is to note the discomfort that arises when social faux pas are made, which, in the case of Gadsby, is an all-too common occurrence because they are “only a man at a glance” (Gadsby 2018). By inviting their audience to share their incredulity and laugh at how they are treated in everyday social interactions, Gadsby settles this experience of discomfort by reaffirming the audience members' ability to correct acts of incivility through a higher sense of public-mindedness, sharing the joke as they make fun of people who treat Gadsby impolitely due to social ignorance. As a customer, for instance, Gadsby often finds themselves standing “in front of the person who's just called me ‘sir’ ... and deeply regrets it.” They joke that the best customer service agents who make this mistake often perform a clever trick: through a “combination of hypnosis and, the magic word. They go, ‘Can I help you, sir. Madam?’ And it works. Gone. I do not remember being called ‘sir’ if someone calls me madam immediately after”

(Gadsby 2018). They similarly joke about a homophobic young man who threatened to assault them at a bus stop for flirting with his girlfriend until he realized that Gadsby was not a man. According to his own street-code of civility, he restrained himself because, he said, “I don't hit women”, offering the excuse that he had been confused because he thought they were a gay man. Gadsby jokes that, despite recognizing their “responsibility to lead people out of ignorance,” they decided not to enlighten him on this occasion: “I left him there, people. Safety first.” Following established conventions of comedy, at this stage in their show, Gadsby invokes a shared feeling of superiority that confirms the audience in its sophisticated liberal mindedness (Lintott 2020, 614; Jenzen 2020, 37; see also Giamario 2022, 150-155).¹⁵

Yet like Cooper, Gadsby begins to trouble the feeling of their audience members as conveyors of public-mindedness by expanding the situation, interpellating them as implicated in situations of incivility previously marked as failures of being polite and public-minded. Reflecting on comedy as a genre that interrogates the very structure of a situation, including its distribution of power and agency, Gadsby explains that a joke consists of a setup and a punchline: while the setup creates tension, the punchline relieves it. It was for this reason that they took up comedy from a young age, not as a hobby but as a “survival tactic” since making people laugh was a way of diffusing the tension, which often made social interactions unpleasant. Indeed, to tell their jokes, Gadsby (2018) says, they did not have to invent the tension because they *were* the tension. Midway through *Nanette*, however, they refuse to play along and, in a manner that turns the show into a genre-defying intervention, making it, as one commentator notes, “an exercise in building tension and then not releasing it” (Balkin 2023, 153), they break away from the conventions of comedy to demarcate a distance between their own situation and that of the audience. Gadsby does so by returning to the situation of the man who threatened to hit them but decided not to. The real ending, the audience is now told, was the opposite of what they initially thought: the man did indeed return to seriously assault them (Gadsby 2018).

Interrupting the original narrative, Gadsby thus subverts the expectations of the situation by inhabiting the persona of the “feminist killjoy” who prefers not “to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (Ahmed 2010, 65; see Balkin 2020, 78; Jenzen 2020, 38). Just as Cooper describes containing her sense of indignation to avoid outraging the “delicate instinct” of white people, Gadsby describes how they were “taught to be invisible” and put themselves down in order to speak, while being told that they were a “man-hater” and that they need to “lighten up” and “stop being so sensitive” when confronted by homophobic incivilities. However, Gadsby publicly refuses to accept the burdens of civility

(as they are configured in the present). Rather than continuing to tell jokes to oil the social machinery, Gadsby (2018) challenges the “gender-normals” in their audience when they declare that “this tension, it’s yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like ... this tension is what non-normals carry inside themselves all the time because it is dangerous to be different.” Similar to the effect of Cooper’s rhetorical shift from the first person plural to the third person singular, this intervention brings about an “atmospheric shift” as they personalize and politicize the divide between themselves and audience members who are implicated in the violence that they have been exposed to (Bennett 2023, 147). Gadsby starts their performance by reflecting that they had named the show after a woman they had met who they thought was “very interesting. So interesting. ‘Nanette,’ I thought, ‘I reckon I can squeeze a good hour of laughs out of you, Nanette, I reckon.’ But ... turns out ... no.” Midway through the show they expand the situation to reveal that, although it is not about Nanette, it is (at least in this moment) addressed to her. Gadsby effectively interpellates the gender-normals in their audience with: “Hey you there! You *are* Nanette. *You* are the situation” (Althusser 2001, 118; see n14).¹⁶

Rather than telling jokes to relieve the tension of their audience and make them feel more connected, Gadsby says they need to tell their story so that people with similar experiences might feel less alone. Whereas a joke only has two parts (a set up and a punchline), they explain, a story has a beginning, middle, and an end. Returning to their joke about the ignorant man at the bus stop who wanted to beat them up because he mistook their appearance, they recount that it was only funny because they chose to leave out the ending. By re-telling the joke as a story that includes being assaulted and the shame that they felt because of it, Gadsby thus transforms the situation that they embody to deflect tension back on their audience. They shift between joking and storytelling to interrupt the established configuration of the demands and burdens of civility. In doing so, moreover, they show how and why politeness and public-mindedness, rather than being separate categories that can be mobilized to regulate each other, are sensorially inflected registers of the very experience of being “civil.”

Indeed, the shift between joking and storytelling, which, in the context of stand-up comedy, seems to mirror the difference between the performer’s “comic persona” and their “real self” (Balkin 2023, 153), can be read as a comment on the concern for sincerity and appearance in many discourses on civility. Historically divided between a “French” discourse that privileges courtesy and outward appearances over sincerity and a “German” discourse that sees authenticity as the *sine qua non* of being cultured (Elias 2000, 5–43), Gadsby’s intervention works in between them to reveal the unequal burdens of both. To

appear civil by using a comic persona to distance themselves from uncivil insults, to demonstrate the “mental toughness” that “mere civility” demands (Bejan 2017, 162), is emotionally and affectively unsustainable given the threats to life itself. The problem with Gadsby’s self-deprecating comic persona, which enabled them to inhabit an “identity separate from that immersed in the debate,” was that it relied on both presenting and truncating their traumatic experience (Bejan 2017, 162; Balkin 2020, 72). But the sincerity of being a nonconforming gendered self is equally unsustainable. In shifting persona between self-deprecating person (who jokes about themselves to find their voice) and feminist killjoy (who tells their story without apology), Gadsby demonstrates how self-presentation (associated with politeness) and moral personhood (associated with public-mindedness) are closely intertwined.

As Gadsby later reflected, the first part of their show was designed to build trust in order that they could then “take that safety away and not give it back” because “that is the shape of trauma” (Gadsby 2022, 24). Rather than conforming to gendered expectations of emotional control on stage, Gadsby (2018) voices their anger at the misogyny of men in public life while acknowledging it is not their “place to be angry on a comedy stage” since they are expected to do “self-deprecating humour.” When women and queer people perform anger, Gadsby points out, they are seen to be “ruining all the fun and the banter” whereas angry male comedians are seen as “heroes of free speech” (see Kay 2020). Parallel to public debates about queerness and gender norms, the extended context for this way of posing the issue is a consideration of the limits of free speech (including comedic license) and how the demands for civility, in the case of what is now referred to as “cancel culture,” may (or may not) justify the exclusion of particularly controversial or hurtful discourses (see McTernan 2023, 114–131). In this parallel context, Gadsby’s most immediate counterpart is the American comedian Dave Chappelle, who, like Gadsby, traverses the line between comic persona and his real self but, unlike Gadsby, finds no reason to protect transgender people from ridicule and other “uncivil” expressions, stipulating/joking that, before he will converse with them, his LGBTQI+ critics should watch the whole of his show and admit that “Hannah Gadsby is not funny” (Chappelle cited in Balkin 2023, 151).

Rather than accepting the terms of this situation, Gadsby once again answers with a comment that discloses the uneven distribution of power and agency that the situation affords to different persons or personae. As they put it in response to Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos’ defence of Dave Chappelle: “You didn’t pay me nearly enough to deal with the real world consequences of the hate speech dog whistling you refuse to acknowledge ... I do shits with more backbone than you. That’s just a joke!” (cited in

Balkin 2023, 153). Gadsby captioned their post with: “Yes I watched the whole thing. Leave me alone. #transisbeautiful #comedyisdead #ikilledit.” Gadsby’s comment reveals a tension inherent in the expectation that being civil requires one to stay present in the face of insult and criticism: although Gadsby ultimately may want to be left alone from the public eye, they can only achieve such privacy by entering into the exhausting fray of public debate that they want to leave behind. To stay present and to mind one’s own business are in that sense intimately linked, with some people more routinely faced with unwarranted intrusions than others (McTernan 2023, 70–71), revealing how social norms of politeness and political principles of public-mindedness, and our affective investments in them, are intertwined in situations.

In this context, it is perhaps significant that the Netflix production of *Nanette* begins (as it finishes) with Gadsby in the private space of their own home, enjoying a cup of tea while sitting on their sofa, a place where they are “nurtured, safe, and loved by their dogs” (Krefting 2019, 168). Gadsby (2022, 414) says that it was important to them to show to their audience that the public space of the Sydney Opera House, in which the Netflix production of *Nanette* was filmed in January 2018, was not their “natural habitat.” Moreover, they underline their love of the quietness of home in contrast to the rowdiness of public life when they explain that they never felt compelled to join the Mardi Gras parade because their “favourite sound in the whole world is the sound of a teacup finding its place on a saucer” (Gadsby 2018).¹⁷ In fact, Gadsby (2022, 385) later reflected, their reference to this sound, which “comes attached with memories of being loved and feeling safe,” was a safety phrase that they included in the show to enable them to recount traumatic experiences without melting down, a real concern that surfaced when Gadsby first performed *Nanette* in front of a live audience. Moreover, the mediatized version of *Nanette*, performed and recorded live but watched and consumed in private homes and on small and big screens across the world, adds a new temporal dimension to the situation, which no longer is purely contemporaneous but also includes an asynchronicity that both amplifies and displaces the grip of the situation. To paraphrase Goffman (1967, 110), it enables the protagonist(s) to “slip the skin the situation would clothe [them] in” by importing elements into the situation from outside, by momentarily stepping out and back in to the situation and by “extending interaction from one situation to another and then another again” through their citational practices (Jaworksi 2023, 81).

Situating the Subject and Politics of Civility

Together with Cooper’s attention to the “social machine,” Hannah Gadsby’s observation that they *are* the situation has provided us with a different perspective from which to

reflect on the politics of civility than is afforded from within the debate between civilitarians and civility skeptics. Within social and political theory, the situation is not simply an explanatory concept but a “rhetorical device, a way of marking off a particular kind of analysis” such as that we have pursued here (Jaworksi 2023, 74). In sociology, the term was opposed to the concept of nature. In contrast to the explanatory certainty sought by behavioral approaches, Goffman’s analyses were always provisional due to his attentiveness to the “inherent troublesomeness of situations—their tendency to breakdown, to generate embarrassment, to lead to havoc” (Jaworksi 2023, 78; cf. Gonos 1977, 858–861). In phenomenology, the term was opposed to objective knowledge. By insisting that the relation of a knowing subject to a known object always takes place within a situation, phenomenologists highlighted how subjectivity is “embodied, intersubjective and practical” while not being reducible to any of these aspects (Kruks 1990, 13).¹⁸

Writing from within phenomenology, Simone de Beauvoir (1997, 29) observed that what “peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other.” The situations in which women find themselves therefore afford them “fewer possibilities” than men (de Beauvoir 1997, 24; Kruks 1990, 102).¹⁹ From this perspective, de Beauvoir (1997, 29) asked: “How can a human being in woman’s situation find fulfilment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked?” We have posed similar questions about the subject of civility, by engaging with two feminist interlocutors who inhabit the situation of “women” in ambiguous ways.²⁰ Both Cooper and Gadsby find themselves in invidious situations in which the burdens of civility weigh more heavily upon them than on others. Yet we have shown how they also intervene by acting and speaking in ways that interrupt the flow and conviviality of those situations for others. Beginning with the ways that they write their own bodies into their performances, both Cooper and Gadsby highlight how civility is never worked out in the abstract but always-already embedded in the social norms and political principles that make a given situation legible as an occasion for interaction. For someone on the margins of society—excluded or repressed due to race, sexuality, gender, or some other category—this embeddedness affords a limited space of contestation in which how one is seen and heard depends on the ability to cite the majority’s perception of what is proper and tactful. In reflecting on how they are each perceived “to be” the situation, Cooper and Gadsby not only draw attention to the “distinctive dilemma” that this poses (Maxwell 2019, 30); they also show how citation itself harbors possibilities for contestation and subversion given the right rhetorical and bodily strategies. Rather than being restricted to the

epistemological level, as implied by recent contributions from Bejan and Bardon et al., civility is indeed an ontological matter.

The “oil in the machine” that Cooper encounters in her account of social life in late nineteenth-century America, and that Gadsby faces and tries to halt more than a hundred years later in Australia, is in that sense a structure that must be repeated for it to have material effect. As anticipated by Butler (1990) in their now classical account of gender, this way of playing on civility’s own contingencies—shifting from civility to incivility and back again—must be seen as inherent in the performativity of the situation, and in that sense as the basis for any intervention into the current delimitation of what counts (or should count) as politeness and public-mindedness, respectively. Even though this situated approach to civility does not provide us with the kind of universality that the moralized conception of civility proposed by Bardon et al. (2022) aspires to, it does indicate a politics that simultaneously is messier and more productive, politically speaking. For just as all those gathered together both constitute and are constituted by the situation in which they find themselves, situations are themselves always also indeterminate despite the social weight (including the threat of violence) that particular subjects encounter within them. Indeed, this is a condition of possibility of the politics of civility that Gadsby and Cooper each enact through their readings of the situations within which they find themselves to be conspicuous, their expansion of those situations to interpellate their audience as implicated, and the ways they call attention to the limits of “their” situation.

First, Cooper and Gadsby read the situations they intervene in and those that they recount in their performances in ways that attune their audiences to the nuances and possibilities that are hidden in plain view within and around each and every identity. As Cooper and Gadsby both highlight, while the situations we find ourselves in are largely unchosen, it is through our involvement in them that we appear to act civilly or uncivilly. Whether we act habitually or reflexively, our interpretation of what a situation demands requires tact, which is not simply a matter of conforming to social norms but of practical judgement of what is appropriate (Lægaard 2011, 949; Heyd 1995, 224). Moreover, insofar as one *is* (part of what constitutes) the situation, as Gadsby highlights, the enactment of civility is never only a matter of individual choice, as Bardon et al. (2022) presuppose, but is always socially distributed: it is “the product of bodily encounters, self-understandings and social interpretations” (Krause 2011, 308). Within the situation it often makes sense, therefore, to understand the politics of civility less in terms of a direct confrontation (i.e. whether one is “for” or “against” civility) and more, as Michel Foucault (2000, 342) puts it, in terms of “a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle” (cf. Bhabha 1985). In this

context, the value of the social norms of politeness is not only instrumental but also expressive (Edyvane 2020, 102–105). Within the situation, being civil or uncivil is not simply a matter of choice between whether or not to conform to social norms, as Bardon et al. (2022) presuppose, but a matter of practical judgement of what constitutes appropriate conduct and how one might appear to others.

Second, and in continuation of this shift in orientation to lived experience, the politics of civility enacted by Cooper and Gadsby cultivates a sensibility to the situation that insists on the equality of all (as stated by the principle of public-mindedness) but also acknowledges how the interpretation of this principle itself is circumscribed by the situation, making it necessary to continuously contest and revise its meaning and justification. This sensibility is produced by expanding the situation in ways that interpellate their audiences as complicit participants by simultaneously performing and contesting the expectations that a dominant culture, at any point in time and space, has to civility and civil interactions. As we have seen, Cooper expands the situation in her rhetorical shift from speaking in the first-person plural (on behalf of women as guardians of society) to the third person singular (as the “Black Woman from the South” who is the touchstone of civility). Gadsby expands the situation by building a sense of trust with her audience, fostering conviviality through self-deprecating humor before withdrawing the sense of safety they have established by recounting their own trauma. In their own way, each thus appears otherwise than demanded by the situation. They “slip the skin” that a situation would clothe them in, as Goffman (1967, 110) says, so that their (im)politeness is not simply a means to realize public-mindedness but an expressive act that brings about a shift in perception of what it means to *be* public-minded to those gathered in a situation.

Calling attention to the unequal distribution of the embodied burdens of a situation in this way redirects the demand of civility away from that imposed on dominated subjects to maintain an “identity separate from that immersed in the debate” (Bejan 2017, 162) and toward more privileged subjects who also both constitute and are constituted by the situation. By withdrawing their emotional labor, for instance, Gadsby expands the situation in a way that disrupts their audiences’ habits of perception of what civility requires. They thereby reverse the demand for civility from being a way of marginalizing those with gender non-conforming bodies and toward a claim on members of dominant groups to take responsibility for the violence that they are implicated in. Cooper similarly redirects the demand for civility when she highlights how progressive women in polite society are often responsible for the atmosphere in public places that are charged by the racializing threat of violence. Of course, the social weight of the burden of civility cannot simply be

redistributed to those for whom civility is not a matter of survival precisely because it is embodied in the ways demonstrated so forcefully by Cooper and Gadsby. However, as we have seen, a shift in perception of what civility demands within a situation might be brought about by the refusal of those who are regularly exposed to such violence to host a situation, to get along as expected and laugh in all the right places (see Schaap 2020; Honig 2021).

Third, Cooper and Gadsby call attention to the limits of the situation by making visible the forms of violence that they experience, which otherwise tends to disappear due to the meaning that a majority ascribes to the value of being public-minded (Baumgarten, Gosewinkel, and Rucht 2011, 289). From a dominant culture perspective, within the context of the public-minded debates (about women's suffrage and marriage equality) in which they each intervened, Cooper and Gadsby are the ones transgressing the established assumptions of appropriate behavior, and, hence, the ones disrupting the order of society. When civility is framed as an epistemological problem, it is more difficult to recognize this veiling of violence since public-mindedness is presumed to be untainted by the social interactions through which the principle attains its meaning and value. As we have seen throughout this article, Cooper and Gadsby do not take this approach to mean a rejection of public-mindedness altogether, *tout court*. Rather, they use it—or, better, they perform it—as a way of redefining its embodied meaning, and, with this redefinition, as a way of recalibrating the opportunities and limitations associated with using it as a yardstick for social and political interactions in a context of disagreement and conflict. As such, calling attention to the limits of the situation can be understood as a way of making visible the “partition of the perceptible,” according to which some bodies, modes of comportment, and forms of expression appear more or less civil (Rancière 1999). By drawing attention to the limits of the situation, Cooper and Gadsby “put matters of principle into play” (Gayet-Viaud 2015, 5).

All this, as we suggested in our introduction of this article, is not meant to create a politics that is either “for” or “against” civility. Rather, it emphasizes the need—and also normative value—to continuously contest and recover civility in the context of ongoing public debates about political inclusion and social justice. Yet an attentive reader might wonder whether, far from stepping back from the civilitarian-skeptic debate, we end up coming down on the side of fellow travellers, such as Linda Zerilli (2014), who insist on the importance of contesting civility for the sake of a radically democratic politics. By treating civility as situated, however, we have not sought to demonstrate *whether* civility should be contested but rather *how* civility is contested and *what* that contestation produces. Despite its political importance, the radical democrat's standard objection to civility similarly falls into the

trap of treating civility as an epistemological problem as those who seek to find a middle way or else to reconcile the competing claims of civilitarians and civility skeptics. For it characterizes civility only as a disciplining discourse that should be resisted, rather than recognizing it as an ensemble of social practices that embodied subjects cannot step outside of: while one might slip the skin that a situation would clothe one in, one cannot avoid the ubiquitous social norms according to which situations can be read at all (Buss 1999, 208). Moreover, the radical democrat's standard critique misses what distinguishes civility as a specific mode of politics from the emancipatory conception of politics that it presupposes. Indeed, as a mode of politics, civility is concerned with (re)constituting the social bond in relation to which struggles for emancipation take place (see Balibar 2002; Schaap 2021). We therefore disagree that civility has no significant role to play in a radically democratic politics because it is necessarily “linked to particular normative conceptions of democratic politics,” as Zerilli (2014, 107) asserts. Not only are civility norms ubiquitous but their ongoing contestation within situations also serves to constitute the social bond in more or less egalitarian ways. The problem and practice of civility is, therefore, an integral aspect of any radical democratic agenda.

Our wager has been that to bring these aspects into view, debates about civility must take a sensorial orientation to politics, which begins from within the situatedness that defines each and every account of what civility and incivility mean at any point in space and time. The situation, as Gadsby states so eloquently in the epigraph to this article, is both a condition and a possibility, a structure and an invitation to contest and to reconfigure this very same structure. So far, the literature about civility within political theory has tended to avoid this sensorially-inflected situatedness, which might explain how and why the academic debate has tended to focus on resolving the ambiguities that arise between civility as politeness and public-mindedness, between social conformity and rational commitment. This epistemological framing of the problem of civility, we suggest, tends toward analytical reductiveness, precluding us from appreciating civility's many aspects as mutually constitutive, especially since what it means to *appear* pleasant or unpleasant, agreeable or disagreeable, is constantly negotiated and a matter of judging the situation at hand. Consequently, it tends to distract from engaging civility performatively, with all the messiness and struggle that come with this. The reasons for embracing these aspects are both political and normative: to reclaim civility for a radically democratic politics, as Robin Celikates (2020, 86-87) suggests we should, we also need to attend to the many and variegated situations in which civility helps to distribute access to power and privilege. Cooper and Gadsby, each in their own way, show how and why this should be a priority for us all.

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Notes

- 1 While Haugh, Davies, and Merrison (2011, 7) propose the nominally similar notion of “situated politeness,” their approach is not informed by the sensorial orientation to politics on which our understanding of “situated civility” is predicated due to their socio-linguistic perspective.
- 2 As Maxwell (2019, 30, 41-43) describes with direct reference to Cooper (but not Gadsby), each can be seen to negotiate social norms and political principles by reconfiguring situations such that “outsiders can speak to and act within a public realm without being absorbed by it.”
- 3 Importantly, we do not associate embodiment *per se* with members of marginalized social groups. On the contrary, we engage with the political thinking of Cooper and Gadsby because of the insights they offer into how the politics of civility turns on how some bodies are rendered conspicuous according to social norms.
- 4 While broader in scope than in most other traditions, this conception of epistemology is prominent in the phenomenological-sensorial tradition that underpins our approach to civility. For a general appraisal, see Henry Pietersma (2000).
- 5 By treating politeness and public-mindedness as two distinct but related aspects of civility, Bardon et al. (2022) arguably avoid what Bejan (2017, 160) refers to as a “*reductio ad respectum*” according to which “civility becomes just another example of our respect or recognition of others’ equal dignity, rather than a distinct or distinctive virtue.” This is because they retain the insight that civility is not simply a matter of respect but of how respect is *displayed* through conduct that observes social norms.
- 6 In this sense, Derek Edyvane (forthcoming, ch.1) rightly insists, “politeness is political.”]
- 7 The metaphor of social machinery was commonly invoked in etiquette manuals of the late nineteenth century to indicate the value of a well-regulated social order that contained both democratic excesses and social inequalities produced by capitalism. In this way, as one etiquette advisor insisted, the importance of politeness is that it “keeps every cog and wheel in its place, at its own work, which prevents jostling, and carries all things along comfortably to their consummation” (Kasson 1990, 60).
- 8 In this way, Cooper anticipates Goffman’s (1967, 91) observation that “the gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all.”
- 9 We use the concept of interpellation here with reference to Louis Althusser’s (2001, 118) account of how “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’”
- 10 While women were often congratulated in etiquette books on the relative freedom that they enjoyed in America to travel unaccompanied in public, they were also often advised not to abuse that freedom and to “err on the side of caution rather than ... boldness” as one etiquette manual stated (cited by Kasson 1990, 132).
- 11 Social cues about how to communicate respect or disrespect to others are distributed, Cooper (2007, 54) says, through “a system of codes and countersigns” that “forms a network of perfect subordination and unquestioning obedience.” Discourtesy and disrespect are communicated through embodied displays of displeasure at having to share such public spaces with those deemed beyond the pale either by withdrawing from (becoming curt or taciturn or looking the other way) or bearing down on others (by snarling, scowling, jostling, pushing, threatening, snapping, striking, or hissing).
- 12 As Sarah Balkin (2020, 72-73) notes, “Gadsby’s show contributed to and benefited from a moment of special cultural attunement to the relationship between a performer’s actions and their work, and our responsibilities as audiences to that work” since the context in which it was performed live and eventually recorded and released on Netflix also included “the international #MeToo movement against sexual assault sparked by allegations against American film producer Harvey Weinstein (October 2017 onward), Louis C.K.’s admission that sexual harassment allegations against him are true (November 2017), Bill Cosby’s trial and subsequent conviction for sexual assault (April 2018), and Roseanne Barr’s show’s cancellation after she posted racist comments on Twitter (May 2018).”
- 13 To underscore this point, Gadsby (2018) concludes the show by saying that they do not want to unite their audience with laughter or anger but instead hope that some people might “feel less alone” and more

“connected” as their story is “felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own.” As Gadsby later reflected (2022, 24), the show was meant to “create an experience of communal empathy in a room full of strangers. Not just for me, but for all the people who have ever gone to comedy shows and been triggered by all the rape celebrations, violence, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia that gets spewed into microphones the whole world over.”

- 14 Comedy and its associated genres and experiences such as satire, ridicule, and laughter are traditionally divided into three categories: 1) superiority, 2) relief, and 3) incongruity. Each category entails a different subject position and, hence, produces different effects on those implicated. Whereas superiority-comedy engenders situations of inequality, release and incongruity are said to create situations of empowerment and difference, respectively. For overview and helpful discussion, see Critchley (2002).
- 15 As Olu Jenzen (2020, 37) elaborates, “having laughed at this joke, the audience shares not only the enjoyment of being credited for not being homophobic, but may also credit themselves for being on the ‘inside’ of getting Gadsby’s gender right. So, in this way Gadsby rallies the audience around a shared (or aspirational) ‘cosmopolitan’, current, and urbane like-mindedness.”
- 16 For this reason, we do not share the view that Gadsby leaves their audience feeling “comfortably woke”, putting the burden on “fellow queers to be more respectful, more civil, to display our pain in ways that cis, straight people can appreciate” (Moskovitz 2018; cf. Nair n.d.). While this may be the feeling that sustains the first part of *Nanette*, the second part of the show is intended to shift the burden and to mobilize civility against the majority culture, as we here argue (cf. Posey 2019, 6f).
- 17 Of course, the sense of domestic solace and safety that the sound of the teacup provides Gadsby with might trigger different responses for others in similar situations.
- 18 Consequently, as Sonia Kruks (1990, 17) explains, within phenomenology the subject is not characterized as the “possessor of private, individual consciousness, but is an ‘impure’ subject. The situated subject is an opening, through the body and perceptual experience, on to a common being and is always an intersubjectivity.”
- 19 Significantly, the situation of women is constituted not only by both social institutions and conventions, such as marriage, but a woman’s body is “one the essential elements of her situation in the world,” which is both a ‘material thing in the world and a point of view towards this world’ (de Beauvoir 1997, 69, 39). As Sonia Kruks elaborates, although women experience the “thinghood of the body more profoundly

than man,” de Beauvoir insists on the ambiguity of human existence as embodied being, as both determined and determining and this ambiguity also pervades men’s existence, despite the ideal of the autonomous subject in charge of its own body.

- 20 While de Beauvoir has been criticized for privileging the experience of white, bourgeois women (Gines 2017) and relying on a dualist view of the sex/gender distinction (Butler 1990), we follow Sonia Kruks (1990) and Lori Marso (2017), who emphasize the ethics of ambiguity in de Beauvoir’s thought.

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