In Lynne Tillman’s 1991 novel *Motion Sickness*, the protagonist-narrator describes her frustration with her limitations in knowing:

The mirror ought to become a window. To provide the real adventure of seeing through oneself. To see through to something outside, something beyond. Mirrors are defeating because they don’t tell you what you look like to someone else. As if you could get out of your skin. In a fantasy the sublime mirror would . . . permit a true tourism in which you would find yourself outside your homeland, and outside your body, and see yourself with emotional vividness, as you can’t, and in the roles you play to others. . . . (120–21)

Instead of providing transparency—to “see through” herself and the world—the mirror offers only opacity, divulging nothing but the reflection of herself and the world. The narrator knows that the “true tourism” that she desires is fundamentally impossible, and this thwarted desire is what constitutes the key drama in the novel. Precisely this thwarted desire for intersubjective transparency provides another vantage point into contemporary fiction’s expression of ambivalent community. The fact that transparency between individuals operates as a fundamental *expectation* announces the presence of idealized community in fictions of Davis and Tillman. At the same time, the impossibility of intersubjec-
tive transparency in these fictions announces the presence of dissenting community discourse. Revolving around the topic of transparency, then, are two competing models of conceptualizing the first-person plural “we.”

The leap from intersubjective transparency to community might seem an unlikely one, yet this leap is instrumental in transforming multiple individuals into a body of individuals. In the literary works analyzed in the previous chapters, despite the different ideals employed to supersede the paradox of community, such as identification, humanism, and universalism, multiple individuals became a body through transparency: one is wholly knowable to the other, and therefore wholly continuous with the other. The epiphanic moments of identification and reciprocal appropriation in Morrison’s novels are inconceivable without the wordless knowing that fuses multiple subjects into one, whether it be a community of two individuals, like Violet and Alice, or of multiple individuals, like the women of the Convent. Intersubjective transparency, too, enabled humanism’s answer to posthumanism in Powers’s novels, as the supercomputer Helen and the human trainer Rick meet in the realm of the ineffable, and Adie and Tamur meet in the fantastic realm of the Imagination. In Yamashita’s romantic universalism, the simultaneous bursting into song that joined the global north and the south suggested that when subjects are transparent to each other, they become continuous with each other.

The wordless, voluntary, and instantaneous nature of community, in these instances, highlights the connection between intersubjective transparency and communion. As a word whose etymology invokes a spiritual or religious union, “communion” retains a strong influence in contemporary idealization of community. The possibility of communion operates through a figurative language of “sight” in the discourse of idealized community, in which “seeing through” someone is more than a descriptor of visual clarity; it is a descriptor of intersubjective clarity. As sight becomes insight, and transparency leads to a silent fusion, communion suggests a theory of knowing so absolute and transcendental in nature that the full meaning of one subject is revealed to the other. As the ultimate realization of transparency between multiple individuals, then, communion comes to stand for the achievement of fusion. That I am fully knowable to you, and you to me, is the realization of communion, and the final evidence of community. Thus communion suggests a theory of knowing that can transform multiple individuals into a body, a knowing so complete that it can supersede the paradox of community.
This transformation of many into one is what the discourse of dissenting community negates. As Nancy writes most emphatically: “From one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up. All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation” (*Being Singular Plural* 5). By highlighting the fact that contiguity—the fact that I am in contact with you—does not deliver continuity—that I am *one with* you—Nancy’s dissenting community negates idealized community’s transformation of contact, proximity, and intimacy into a oneness.

The works of Davis and Tillman target precisely this ideal of transparency in intersubjective relations. In mundane, everyday settings, their characters experience the other’s contiguity—as an acquaintance, a lover, an ex-husband, a friend, strangers on the bus, the person across the counter, the list goes on—and the other’s impenetrability. However “close” one is to the other, relationally or physically, one cannot “know,” “figure out,” or “see through” the other. The condition of opacity is the ruling principle of intersubjective relations, and the taunt of transparency remains the most pressing task for the prototypical protagonist of these writers. However hard they try—indeed, all the works under discussion demonstrate the mind’s attempt to make the other transparent—the contiguous other remains stubbornly impenetrable to in/sight.

Of course, exploration of knowing is a familiar terrain in contemporary fiction, especially in those fictions using the detective genre to engage the larger cultural, political, or philosophical issues. In fictions of Pynchon, DeLillo, or Auster, epistemological quests are inextricable from the development of the narrative itself, as the protagonist’s quest to know is deeply interwoven with the detective quest. But unlike these quests to reach the “truth” of a mystery, the quest to know in the fictions in Davis and Tillman is more than an epistemological concern. It is an ontological concern: how to know the other is at once a question of how to *conceive* the other as a being. In their literary worlds, knowing is a function of achieving intersubjective transparency and, through transparency, of achieving continuity with the other. Thus intersubjective transparency is a desire not just for epistemological transparency but for *ontological continuity*. In this way, their literary treatment of knowing best demonstrates the role of communion as a theory of knowing.

Furthermore, there is an interesting complementarity in Davis’s and Tillman’s treatment of contiguity without continuity. Throughout her numerous story collections as well as in her novel *The End of the Story* (1995), Davis’s fiction approaches intersubjective opacity through the
concept of *alterity*—the state of being another. Alterity asserts more than the difference of individuals: it asserts the *singularity* of each individual. More than the sense of individual differentiation from others, alterity announces the irrefutable fact that I am not you and you are not me. This most obvious fact, however, becomes elided in the discourse of idealized community when you and I do become one through intersubjective transparency. By fully knowing each other, you and I become continuous with each other. Davis’s protagonists manifest the desire for intersubjective transparency through the most ordinary moments of interaction. They ask: When my husband, lover, friend, or stranger said that, did he/she mean this or that? Why did I do that? Why did he do that? Was he telling the truth? What was she thinking when she did that? What am I like, really? The immeasurable number and ways of knowing the other testify to the alterity of subjects that informs Davis’s literary vision of community.

If there are just too many ways of knowing the other in Davis, in Tillman the inverse is true: there are too few, and too predictable ones at that. From her first novel, *Haunted Houses* (1987), to her latest, *American Genius: A Comedy* (2006), Tillman’s novels are inspired by the dilemma: how is knowing less a revelation of something new and more a confirmation of the already-known? This question comes forth most strongly in *Motion Sickness* (1991) in which the protagonist’s attempt to know, at every turn, falls upon the congealed ways of knowing—of stereotypes; “grand narratives” about “national characteristics”; and plots, images, and typologies from mass media, popular culture, and literature. In tackling knowing as inevitably well-worn ways of knowing, Tillman imbues the concept of *recognition* with a profoundly different set of meanings than it possesses in the discourse of idealized community. Tillman applies the term under poststructuralist pressure and examines the ways in which recognition is a way of knowing by repetition—not a knowing-affresh but a knowing-again. If the ways in which I know the other are not mine, but instead are acquired through means already existent, established, and used, what can I claim to know about the strangeness of each being I encounter? This suspicion has severe repercussion to the idealized community that holds communion as the final destination of multiple individuals. When the very terms of knowing are contaminated as knowing-again, there cannot be any “wordless” epiphany that transcends ideology or sign-systems. There cannot be a sudden transparency that reveals one subject to another. When the possibility of transparency is emptied out through congealed ways of knowing, multiple individuals remain just that—multiple, sin-
gular, opaque. Rather than being the final objective of community, communion becomes a myth that has no foothold. No wonder, then, that Tillman’s protagonist wishes for “true tourism,” the proper recognition that will allow her “to see through to something outside, something beyond” (120). Thus the two writers approach opacity from opposite directions: there are too many ways of knowing to make transparency possible, or the ways of knowing are too predictable to make it possible. In either case, when questions of knowing generate deeply unsatisfying answers and just spiral into more questions, proximity, intimacy, and contact are experienced as distance, and the ideal of unbroken continuity is dispelled. That their protagonists persistently try to close that distance signals the idealized community vision in these fictions. Thus the ideal of transparency lingers as an irresolvable problem and an impossible expectation, and in the hands of Lydia Davis and Lynne Tillman, communion stands as a memory of a community that cannot be reenacted. That their fictions begin from the logic of dissenting community, but move toward the transparency of idealized community, is what generates their ambivalent vision of community.

Immeasurable Ways of Knowing

Alterity in Fictions of Lydia Davis

The following is a representative anxiety propelling much of Davis’s fiction. In the short story “What Was Interesting” (Almost No Memory), a woman writing a story is worried that the plot is too simple to be interesting:

Maybe there is no way to make it interesting, because it is so simple: a woman, slightly drunk but not too drunk to discuss a plan for the summer, was put into a cab and told to go home by her lover, the man with whom she thought she was going to discuss this plan. . . . It is not entirely clear, in the story, why being put in a cab by this man should cause so much anger in her. Or rather, it is perfectly clear to her, but hard to explain to anyone else. (70)

The rest of the story follows the writer-narrator’s attempt to make “entirely clear” why the man would have done such a thing and why the woman would have responded in such anger. Was the man deliberately
rejecting the woman’s overtures? Or was it simply an inconsiderate act? Why did his action outrage the woman so that she would cry and rail against the man? If the man was always this inconsiderate, why is the woman so shocked? The possibilities for understanding the true nature of their relationship are endless, and the story becomes an exercise in unfurling endless combinations of meaning.

The writer’s frustrated attempt at imagining intersubjective transparency between the man and the woman highlights the structure of the drama in much of Davis’s fiction. The story situations are almost always of the “simple” nature—why someone did what he did, what someone meant by what she said, why something happened the way it did. The answers, or more precisely the literary attempts at representing intersubjective transparency, are not in the least simple. The “simple” nature of Davis’s narrative premises is one reason that the term “minimalism” dominates critical descriptions of her work. On the other hand, the stark discrepancy between the nature of the question and that of the answer explains why some find the term “minimalist” inadequate in describing Davis’s fiction. Majorie Perloff explains the “parable” quality in Davis’s ingenuous use of “ordinary language” by pointing to a well-known Maurice Blanchot essay which Davis translated, “Literature and the Right to Death”: “Ordinary language is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence” (Blanchot 59). By exploiting the “misunderstanding’ inherent in ordinary language,” Perloff points out, Davis creates the parablelike effect (205). Likewise, “Davis’s familiar tactic is to subject the mental stuff of daily life—our rationalizations, memories, and methods of communication—to a kind of studious mock logic, to ‘break it down,’ a process that tends to reveal less about the everyday than it does about the limits of self-analysis” (Mobilio 26). The proliferation of possible answers that emerge from “simple” questions further explains the philosophical nature of Davis’s stories, the “sestina-like effect that might be called ‘High Analytical Vertigo’” (Ziolkowski 108).

Indeed, the “high analytical vertigo” inherent in Davis’s seemingly simple quest offers a profound challenge for the discourse of idealized community. That is, the stark discrepancy between the “simple” nature of the questions and the impossibility of answering them highlights the inverse situation in the discourse of idealized community—the ease with which the “simple” questions are answered by wordless knowing
between individuals. What interrelated assumptions make intersubjective transparency possible? What theory of knowing enables communion in the discourse of idealized community?

Postmodernist philosophy has long critiqued intersubjective transparency as a delusion based on metaphysical, foundational, and logocentric theory of subjectivity. More pointedly, theorists of dissenting community emphasize alterity as the unbreachable singularity of being that thwarts any claims of fusion. For Iris Marion Young, “the ideal of community presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects” (302). For Nancy, metaphors of space underpin his theory of alterity. “Spacing” is [the] absolute condition” of being-together (4), and the spacing “between” us has “neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge.” Analogous to the “strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot, . . . the ‘between’ is the stretching out [distension] and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning” (Being Singular Plural 5). Indeed, presence, or the meaning of the singular, comes about through the distancing: “Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart in order to be itself as such. This ‘as’ presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence” (2). Far from being the evidence of failure or lack of community, the unbridgeable distance between one individual and the other announces the originary model of community: the distance “is nothing other than the meaning of originary coexistence. The alterity of the other is its being-origin” (Being Singular Plural 11). Community, far from being located in fusion or communion, is “located in the interstices of mutual exposure” of singularities (Dallmeyer 181).

Most importantly, the unbridgeable distance that announces the “originary coexistence” constitutes the source of one individual’s interest in another:

discrete spacing between us, as between us and the rest of the world, as between all beings. We find this alterity primarily and essentially intriguing. It intrigues us because it exposes the always-other origin, always inappropriable and always there, each and everytime present as inimitable. This is why we are primarily and essentially curious about the world and about ourselves. (Nancy 19; original emphasis)

This curiosity about the alterity of the other, Nancy explains, is best manifest through the desire for art: “Is this not what interests us or
touches us in ‘literature’ and in ‘the arts’? . . . What else are they but the exposition of an access concealed in its own opening, an access that is, then, ‘inimicable,’ untransportable, untranslatable” (14). Nancy’s use of literature and arts to exemplify the alterity of each singular being finds its analogy in the way Davis’s characters turn to the person next to her—her lover, ex-lover, friend, coworker, or stranger—and marvel at the unbridgeable distance that separates them. The intriguing nature of another’s unbridgeable alterity, I am proposing, finds its literary expression in Davis’s obsessive turn to intersubjective opacity.

These dissenting community visions of alterity and singularity infiltrate Davis’s construction of anonymity in intersubjective relations. Davis literalizes the inaccessibility of another singular being through a formal strategy. In most of her stories, Davis omits crucial exposition, such as information about the story’s setting, context, characters’ personal histories, or analysis of motivation. The most consistently omitted piece of exposition, however, is the proper names of characters. Davis explains her preference for the use of pronouns (“he,” “she”) and nouns (“the woman,” “the man”) in lieu of proper names: “I guess my interest is more in creating or talking about the abstract situation of a ‘he’ or ‘she’ who could be anyone but happens to be particular. . . . The truth is that I resist locating anything too particularly. Often, when I think of naming something that would locate a story too specifically, I pull back and generalize it” (McCaffery 72; original emphasis). While Davis more generally explains her strategy of anonymity as a strategy towards “philosophical investigation” (Knight 534), novelist and critic Aurelie Sheehan more fully comments on the generative force of anonymity in Davis’s fiction:

By shedding the name, something else emerges—in this sense, a deep sense of the personal. (Think about how you know those closest to you, a family member or a lover. Frequently, darkly and deeply, as he, as she. The vast she that you live within, like the weather.) The namelessness of the lover creates heightened particularity, at the same time giving his character the edge of the purely subjective. (n.p.)

Indeed, the simultaneous effect of generality and intimacy that emerges from Davis’s omission of proper names reveals the paradoxical effect of anonymity. Anonymity at once speaks to the alterity of the other as well as to the intimacy with the other. Here is the story “The Other” (Almost No Memory) in its entirety:
She changes this thing in the house to annoy the other, and the other is annoyed and changes it back, and she changes this other thing in the house to annoy the other, and the other is annoyed and changes it back, and she tells all this the way it happens to some others and they think it is funny, but the other hears it and does not think it is funny, but can’t change it back. (115)

In the absence of narrative exposition, the story becomes a bare-bones rendition of the unbridgeable distance between the couple. The inarticulate nature of their struggle implies the long history of unspoken hurts, anger, and retribution. As the title of the story announces, “she” will only experience the other as “the other,” just as the other will experience her as alterity. Stripped to the fundamental struggle of two individuals, the anonymity of the two subjects in this story enacts the “distancing, spacing, and division of presence” (Nancy 2). “Agreement” (Almost No Memory) follows the conflict of a couple who cannot agree on who walked out of an argument first: “First she walked out, and then while she was out he walked out. No, before she walked out, he walked out on her, not long after he came home, because of something she said” (65). An overly simplified rendition of a couple’s fight, the monotonous sentence structure (he says, she is angry, she thinks, she declares) renders the strife itself monotonous. At the same time, the very monotonous delivery heightens the emotional impact, sharpening the edges of the strife.

Even when proper names are used in a story, the exaggeratedly convoluted and disorganized narration of the conflict renders the particularity of the characters flat. “Jack in the Country” (Almost No Memory) begins: “Henry encounters Jack on the street and asks how his weekend with Laura was. Jack says he hasn’t spoken to Laura in at least a month. Henry is angry. He thinks Ellen has been lying to him about Laura. Ellen says she has been telling the truth: Laura told her over the phone that Jack was coming for the weekend to her house up there in the country” (8). As the list of characters proliferate with each new sentence, the proper names lose their distinction to mark a particular being, and all that remains constant is that the subject experiences the other as an alterity, as an opaque being whose “meaning” cannot be known. In the most extreme case of anonymity, Davis removes the subject entirely from the story, as in “The Outing” (Almost No Memory): “An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt to be
friendly in the water, a refusal to end the argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes” (179). In this story, the anonymity of the singular extends beyond intersubjective relations of the characters; the text extends the anonymity of its subjects to its relationship with the reader. In the absence of proper names or even pronouns, the story becomes a narration about subjects who are, ultimately, inaccessible to the reader.

But Davis pushes the impossibility of communion beyond intersubjective relationships. A recurring topic of analysis in her fiction is the alterity of the self from oneself. In “A Friend of Mine” (Almost No Memory), the narrator ruminates on the nature of self-perception: “I am thinking about a friend of mine, how she is not only what she believes she is, she is also what friends believe her to be, and what her family believes her to be, and even what she is in the eyes of chance acquaintances and total strangers” (116). The partiality and multiplicity of views at work lead the narrator to conclude that attempts to figure out the friend’s “meaning” are too numerous to count: “Perhaps it must be true that the things about which we all agree are part of what she really is, or what she really would be if there were such a thing as what she really is, because when I look for what she really is, I find only contradictions everywhere” (116). The familiar discrepancy between the simplistic nature of the question (“what she really is”) and the immeasurability of the answers leads the narrator to conclude: “All this being true of my friend, it occurs to me that I must not know altogether what I am, either, and that others know certain things about me better than I do, though I think I ought to know all there is to know and I proceed as if I do” (117). The narrator of “A Position at the University” (Almost No Memory) continues this dilemma:

I think I know what sort of person I am. But then I think, But this stranger will imagine me quite otherwise when he or she hears that to my credit, for instance that I have a position at the university. . . . [P]erhaps I really am the sort of person you imagine when you hear that a person has a position at the university. But on the other hand, I know I am not the sort of person I imagine when I hear that a person has a position at the university. (180)

As every being, including oneself, stands as unbreachable alterity, Davis’s repeated explorations of the opacity of being represent a literary fascination with the impossibility of communion. Indeed, the fundamental drama that Davis draws from mundane, ordinary moments
of intersubjective opacity directly illustrates the compelling fact that “people are strange” (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 6). Like alterity that is more than difference, strangeness here speaks to more than oddity or aberration. Nancy writes:

“Strangeness” refers to the fact that each singularity is another access to the world. . . . In the singularity that he exposes, each child that is born has already concealed the access that he is ‘for himself.’ . . . That is why we scrutinize these faces with such curiosity, in search of identification. . . . What we are looking for there, like in the photograph, is not an image; it is an access. (14)

People are strange because “[t]he other origin is incomparable or inas-similable, not because it is simply ‘other’ but because it is an origin and touch of meaning. . . . You are absolutely strange because the world begins *its turn with you*” (Nancy 6; original emphasis). In Davis’s fiction, each being—spouse, ex-lover, friend, coworker, acquaintance, friend, even oneself—is strange because each being exposes a depthless meaning that is “inimitable, untransportable, untranslatable” (Nancy 14).

**Obsessive Thinking as Motion in Stasis**

In structuring literary vision with alterity, singularity, and anonymity, Davis’s fiction might seem to be a literary enactment of dissenting community: a community founded not on transparency but on opacity, not on communion but on the very *im*possibility of communion, and not on the final telos of fusion but on the unbreachable singularity of each being. But to read Davis’s fiction as a literary argument for dissenting community is to miss a vital disjunction in her treatment of alterity. While “contiguity without continuity” is the foundational fact of Nancy’s dissenting community, it is a foundational fact that Davis’s characters repeatedly try to revoke. While alterity is the ultimate correction to the idealization of communion in dissenting community, it is precisely the obstruction that Davis’s characters try to overcome. Hence, Davis’s repeated visits to the impossibility of communion generate an ambivalent community, a vision of community that begins with the alterity central to dissenting community but moves towards the communion of idealized community. That this quest is an ultimately hopeless one is irrelevant to the protagonists; what matters is the way in which they cannot help pursuing it.
Davis’s primary venue for pursuing intersubjective transparency is through love relationships. Davis explains her recurring topical interest this way: “Obsessive or foiled or frustrated love is very compelling because you don’t have control over it. It’s the most extreme example of not being able to control another person” (Prose n.p.). Even more specifically, I suggest, love relationships exert the greatest amount of pressure on alterity and singularity, as the ideology of love calls up the greatest drive towards fusion. Thus the attempt to breach the other’s alterity and achieve continuity with the other takes place most forcefully in one lover’s attempt to attain communion with the other. Within the ostensibly simple structure of “he said, she said” dramatic paradigm, Davis highlights the perennial struggle to “know” the one “closest” to you. In “Story” (Break It Down) a woman tries to “figure it out,” that is, to discern whether her lover is telling the truth or not. Her lover offers a series of reasons why he missed their designated meeting; the reasons he offers are not impossible but, due to their highly complicated and convoluted nature, are highly unlikely, and the woman suspects that he may have met his old girlfriend instead. The “Story” consists of the woman’s recounting of each one of these excuses, putting them into a pattern, and holding possible versions against each other, asking herself: “What is the truth?” (6). “Could he and she both really have come back in that short interval between my last phone call and my arrival at his place? Or is the truth really that during his call to me she waited outside or in his garage. . . . Or is the truth that she did leave and did come back later but that he remained and let the phone ring without answering?” (7).

These stories of obsessive, unrequited love pursue an enormous task—to have complete access to the “meaning,” or the presence, of another being. In contrast, the enormity of the task is approached through the most simplistic of questions—Was he lying or not? Did she mean it or not?—as if the answers to those questions could help the questioner “figure out,” “know,” or get a “picture of” the meaning of another being. In “Break It Down” (Break It Down) a man sorts his memory after the end of an affair, trying to “break down” what the relationship fiscally cost him. This mundane task turns into an obsessive recounting of the relationship, as event after event, day after day, and utterance after utterance come under scrutiny for their emotional veracity. “And then when the pictures start to go you start asking some questions, just little questions, that sit on your mind without any answers, like why did she have the light on when you come in to bed one night, but it was off the next. . . . And finally the pictures go and these dry little questions
just sit there without any answers and you’re left with this large heavy pain in you” (25–26). He concludes in the most dissatisfaction manner that he will “never know” if she meant it when she said she loved him (28).

In direct contrast to the physical and emotional continuity that one expects to locate in love relationships, Davis’s characters find only the immovable alterity of another. In direct contrast to the wordless knowing that will, ultimately, “reveal” one individual to the other in idealized community, Davis’s subjects possess no guarantee of attaining intersubjective transparency. Thus, in a profoundly distinct way, Davis’s literary vision departs from those of the other authors previously discussed in this book. It is a dissenting community devoid of any means of intersubjective continuity, such as the epiphanic moments of communion between Morrison’s women characters, Powers’s human and the machine, or Yamashita’s global fusion. What Davis’s fiction negates, then, is more than the possibility of communion: it is a negation of the teleological theory of community. In contrast to theorizing community as a “progress” towards wordless knowing between subjects, the stubborn opacity of subjects in Davis’s dissenting community short-circuits any such movement towards communion.

That Davis’s prototypical protagonist keeps moving towards this nonexistent telos, then, takes on all the more significance and best exemplifies the ambivalent nature of community in her fiction. What Davis’s characters seek is what her literary vision does not support: the true knowing that will breach the other’s alterity and achieve intersubjective transparency. This paradoxical movement between dissenting community and idealized community best explains the obsessive dimension in Davis’s narration.

That is, the protagonists’ obsessive thinking can be seen as a motion in stasis. As Knight astutely observes in his interview with Davis, “there is a clear interest in the dimension of the hypothetical” in Davis’s reliance on words such as “if,” “either,” and “or” (532). Precisely a hypothetical dimension is what remains in the absence of any teleological “progress” towards knowing another singular being. Likewise, Davis explains her interest in “or” as the “posing [of] all the different possible interpretations of a certain reality” (Knight 533). In the absence of final knowing that will deliver transparency and communion, Davis’s subjects bounce between infinite multiplicity of questions and “possible interpretations” that Davis explains as follows: “What is there to be known? What are you supposed to know? Is it a composite of everyone else’s impressions? Is that what the self is? Or is it only the things that
are most consistently true? Then it becomes this shifting thing” (Knight 532–33).

Davis identifies obsessive thinking as the consequence of intersubjective opacity in those stories that directly connect the protagonist’s obsession with her inability to know the reasons for the end of an affair. Thus the quest for intersubjective transparency becomes a quest to understand—and breach—the alterity and singularity of the other in the most intimate and intense relationship. “A Few Things Wrong with Me” (Break It Down) begins with the most damning of statements for ending an affair: “He said there were things about me that he hadn’t liked from the very beginning” (91). The story recounts the woman’s attempt to understand—and to live with—that assessment. She relives what she knows of him, what she may not know of him, the ways in which she might have been wrong about him, what he may have had in mind as he said it, what he may have intended as he said it. The story becomes her desire to “talk about him until I begin to get a better picture of him” (91). Likewise, the narration of “Go Away” (Almost No Memory) consists entirely of a woman’s attempt to understand exactly what her lover meant by the statement, “Go away and don’t come back” (120). Indeed, the novel The End of the Story explains the protagonist’s obsession over an affair, which ended fifteen years ago, as the consequences of her inability to fully understand why it ended. “Maybe another reason I couldn’t let go of it later was that I did not have good answers for my questions. I could always find a few answers for each question, but I wasn’t satisfied with them: though they seemed to answer the question, the question did not go away” (198). The series of questions proliferate, and the novel “move[s] further into the realm of questions themselves, with questions looming over answers” (Knight 542). What this subject lacks, like all Davis’s subjects, is the possession of communion that will breach alterity.

In Davis’s ambivalent community, we encounter the strangeness of the singular as well as the anonymity of people. Although we are contiguous, the fact I am sitting next to you, that you are looking at me, that we are talking, that we are/were lovers/friends, leads to no possibility of transparency. The fact that alterity consistently appears as the insurmountable problem in Davis’s fiction demonstrates its fundamentally different significance from the role it plays in dissenting community discourse. Far from being evidence of “nothing other than the meaning of originary coexistence” (Nancy, Being Singular Plural 11), or evidence of “the irreducible particularity of entities” (Young 304), alterity is the obstacle that Davis’s protagonists try to overcome. This
characteristic motion in stasis towards transparency cannot be seen as a literary vision of dissenting community, as “a bond that forms ties without attachments, or even less fusion, of a bond that unbinds by binding, that reunites through the infinite exposition of an irreducible finitude” (Nancy, *Inoperative Community* 41).

Thus, although Davis’s characters inhabit a dissenting community in which communion is an impossible illusion, they operate as if that illusion is still possible and, most importantly, as if that illusion is still desirable. That the telos of Davis’s literary vision more closely resembles the communion of idealized community means that ultimately Davis’s theory of community breaks from the discourse of dissenting community. To the paradox of community—can multiple individuals become a body of individuals?—Davis’s protagonists answer both yes and no. In their feverish motion in stasis, Davis’s protagonists succinctly capture the ambivalence of the contemporary moment towards the very concept of communion.

**Congealed Ways of Knowing**

*Recognition in Fictions of Lynne Tillman*

Like Davis’s fiction, Tillman’s fiction is compelled by a key dissenting community vision: the intriguing nature of intersubjective opacity. And like Davis’s protagonists who are compelled to breach that opacity, Tillman’s protagonists regard the fact of opacity with ceaseless wonderment. Ambivalent community emerges in the way intersubjective transparency remains an unshakable expectation in these fictions. What Tillman uniquely targets is the assumption, in the ideal of communion, that intersubjective transparency occurs when knowing transcends human-made sign-systems. We need only remember the wordless nature of epiphany in Morrison’s, Powers’s, and Yamashita’s visions of communion. What each of these silent, spontaneous, and voluntary moments declares is that the paradox of community is superseded by means other than verbal communication. Indeed, the very stature of communion as an ideal draws its strength from the fact that the achievement of communion transcends human-made sign-systems, such as language, symbols, or discourse.

In her exploration of intersubjective opacity, Tillman targets this claim of transcendence in the idealization of communion. Her fictions tackle the wordless dimension of communion by highlighting the fact
that when it comes to knowing the self or the other, words are all we have. Tillman announces her linguistic exploration of “knowing” in her first novel, *Haunted Houses*, in which a protagonist writes in her journal: “The phrase ‘words fail me’ took on new meaning as she grew to distrust her thoughts, which were the same as her needs, she supposed. Words fail me. Words fail me. Words fail me, she wrote again and again in her notebook” (191).

Tillman’s central means of opposing the transcendental claim of communion is through the double meaning of recognition. “To recognize” can mean: (1) “To know again; to perceive to be identical with something previously known . . . To know by means of some distinctive feature; to identify from knowledge of appearance or character”; and (2) “To perceive clearly, realize” (*OED* online). The first set of definitions denotes the act of recognizing as the act of knowing by knowing-again—to know in reference to what one already knows, to know by association. The second definition, however, denotes something entirely different. One knows (perceives, realizes) without recourse to knowing-again. Unmistakably, this second definition of knowing-afresh is foundational to the ideal of communion as the transparency between multiple subjects.

Hence within its definition, “recognition” carries the seeds of the paradox that constitutes one of the key philosophical and theoretical challenges of contemporary fiction and theory: how can knowing be at once a knowing-again and a knowing-afresh? After poststructuralism mapped knowing as fundamentally an operation bound within preexisting codes and systems, how can recognition claim an “outside” from when one may know-afresh? How do I recognize others? How do they recognize me? Ultimately, what are the criteria for discerning the difference between misrecognition and proper recognition? If I cannot discern the difference, are they one and the same phenomenon? Built around the drama of recognition and its paradoxical meanings, *Motion Sickness* draws out the opacity of the other from the fundamental unreliability of recognition.

In theorizing recognition as the obstacle to communion, I now turn to two of the most influential theories on the concept—Althusser’s theory of interpellation which cast the concept firmly within the operations of power and social organization; and Barthes’s poststructural semiotics which pressed us to distrust the conditions of all that is “readable,” “familiar,” “stereotypical,” and “recognizable.” Although they emerge from different intellectual traditions, Althusser’s Marxist critique of recognition and Barthes’s semiotic critique of recognition converge upon a
negation of communion, the key ingredient in the discourse of idealized community. Considering Tillman’s contestation of the wordless dimension in the ideal of communion, these theorists’ emphasis on the ideological, political, symbolic, and discursive dimension of recognition plays a crucial role in characterizing recognition as misrecognition. Thus, by giving ideological and symbolic heft to the operation of recognition, Althusser and Barthes short-circuit any theory of knowing from operating within the realm of transcendence. In Althusser’s landmark essay “Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses” (1969), recognition lies at the heart of his theory of interpellation. Althusser uses the analogy of “hailing” (“hey, you there!”) as the means by which the state identifies and reproduces subject positioning (as worker, student, family member, consumer; of specific race, gender, religion). The individual’s response to that hail—the proverbial act of turning around—completes the state’s inscription of individuals into “subjects” of ideological apparatuses (such as systems of education, religion, family; and legal, political, labor, capitalist systems). Thus recognition enables interpellation because that automatic response—of turning around to the hail—is naturalized as a self-evident response. Althusser uses a scenario of recognition familiar to all of us: a close friend knocks on my door; I ask, “Who is it?” S/he responds, “It’s me.” This answer reveals nothing except the fact that my visitor/hailer and I have an already-familiar relationship. I open the door not because my visitor/hailer identified her particular relevance to me (such as “It’s Jane”; “It’s your friend”; “I’m your neighbor”) but because I obey the logic of knowing-again.

Such is the way, Althusser argues, that the state maintains and reproduces the conditions of production, the positioning of subjects within capitalist relations of exploitation. As we respond to the numerous “hails,” we are performing “rituals of ideological recognition” which not only make us subjects of ideological apparatus but also naturalize the very logic of interpellation. “They ‘recognize’ the existing state of affairs (das Bestehende), that ‘it really is true that it is so and not otherwise,’ and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer” (123). In the Althusserian theory of interpellation, then, recognition is the logic of acceding to a prior arrangement and relationship. Thus recognition is already a misrecognition: “The reality which is necessarily ignored . . . in the very forms of recognition (ideology = misrecognition/ignorance) is indeed, in the last resort, the reproduction of the relations of production and the relations deriving from them” (124).

Although Althusser’s thinking on interpellation specifically targets
the reproduction of capitalist labor relations and the maintenance of a class system, his theory of recognition-as-misrecognition fundamentally informs late-twentieth-century political and critical interrogations of (racial, ethnic, sexual, national, and many other categories of) identity and subjectivity. You are not what you say you are: you are what you are hailed. And the ways you are hailed are so familiar, so repetitive, that you believe that your response is of your own volition: “a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (123). What is recognition, then, but an act of ideological submission? At the heart of Althusser’s theory of recognition lies a distrust of repetition, the knowing-again that accedes to the logic of the repeated.

Likewise, a distrust of repetition underpins Barthes’s lifelong study of semiotic systems. In his study of the signs and codes that span human expressions, in literature, fashion, photography, advertising, or political discourse, Barthes locates repetition as the indispensable logic of knowing by knowing-again. His overriding term for signifying the danger of repetition is “doxa,” a term crucial to his interrogation of what constitutes the “familiar,” the “recognizable,” the “stereotypical,” and “stupidity.” Most extensively introduced in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, doxa is “never defined by its content, only by its form, and that invariably wrong form is doubtless: repetition” (70). It isn’t that all repetition is the wrong form, Barthes clarifies; he distinguishes a “good form,” such as an individual’s repetition of a “theme” to strengthen her point (“The repetition that comes from the body is good, is right” [71]). The wrong form of repetition, or doxa, is the repetition of an unlocatable discourse that comes from nowhere and everywhere—public opinion, cliché, stereotype, commonplace: “Doxa is the wrong object because it is dead repetition, because it comes from no one’s body—except perhaps, indeed, from the body of the Dead” (71; original emphasis). “The Doxa is current opinion, meaning repeated as if nothing had happened. It is Medusa, who petrifies those who look at her” (122). As an unlocatable discourse whose omnipresence passes as the probable, the likely, and the real, dead repetition sits at the heart of knowing by knowing-again. What is recognition, hence, but an epistemological operation within the bounds of doxa?

The form of repetition, then, links Althusserian formulation of interpellation and Barthesian analysis of doxa. What Althusser identifies as the self-naturalizing logic of knowing-again—that “it [“the existing state of affairs”] really is true that it is so and not otherwise” (123)—finds a parallel in Barthes’s identification of doxa’s omnipres-
ence: “The Doxa . . . is Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice” (RB 47). “The Doxa is not triumphalist; it is content to reign; it diffuses, blurs; it is a legal, a natural dominance; a general layer, spread with the blessing of Power; a universal Discourse” (153). What Althusser and Barthes bring to the fore, then, is a fundamental distrust of the condition of knowing-again. As they highlight the political work of repetition in the concept of recognition, a suspicion of repetition infiltrates our everyday acts—how we recognize others, how we are recognized, how we announce a certain representation’s familiarity or realism, and how we evaluate the probability or likelihood of certain accounts.

Tillman’s construction of girlhood in Haunted Houses, in fact, is inspired by a distrust of repetition, frozen language, and familiar conventions and stereotypes concerning female identity. In an interview, Tillman explains: “I felt angry that the way in which girls had been written about traditionally was so pallid. . . . Being a girl, becoming a girl, is extremely difficult. It was on my agenda to write a novel that was literary, formally unusual, and also took no prisoners in terms of its attitude toward these girls—a really tough-minded book about girls” (Sharpen p.). In No Lease on Life, repeated language gives a hilarious and disturbing turn as jokes. The novel begins with an Amish drive-by shooting joke, set apart typographically from the narrative, and not directly related to the events of the story. But the proliferation of jokes—bawdy jokes, racial jokes, sexual jokes, offensive jokes, psychiatry jokes, juvenile jokes—appear as unlocatable, repeated language, and in a novel about the frenetic energy of New York’s East Village, these jokes represent “the fabric of the city,” as Tillman identifies in an interview (Hogan n. p.).

But the most thorough interrogation of repeated language takes place in Motion Sickness, in which the contaminated nature of knowing infiltrates all aspects of life and every intersubjective relationship. The wandering life of the protagonist, a young white American woman who travels across Europe, is essentially a life of continuous skepticism in recognition. Her itinerant lifestyle is reluctantly funded by her mother who implores her to return home and “face the music” (88). She moves from one city to another at whim, accountable to no person or schedule; travel acquaintances, friends, and lovers of brief affairs constitute the shifting cohort. As the most emblematic sign of her hermetic status, she is a prolific collector and writer of postcards that she never sends. The “motion sickness” of the story, then, is the inevitable by-product of an unattached life. As Tillman describes in an interview, Motion Sick-
ness explores “the anxiety of recognizing how really unstable your identity is. . . . You’re not going to achieve a stable existence, but that’s not so terrible in a way. It might make you sick, though, once in awhile, because of that motion” (Nicholls 276).

As the narrator lives the paradoxical condition of permanent travel, her biggest challenge is to exercise proper recognition—of unfamiliar cultural contexts, mores, gestures, and interactions. Each city, with its unfamiliar language, national characteristics, and cultural gestures, presents her with an oblique façade, where even basic social interactions are laden with multiplicity in meaning. In an Istanbul hotel, for instance, what does the silent nod from the hotel manager signify? Is it an indication of minimal courtesy, curiosity, or approval? How do her own “smile and nod and gesture” participate in the interaction (10)? In her uncertainty, mimicry becomes her default response: “The Englishman, when we passed [in the hallway], touched his hand to his head, a kind of salute, and I did likewise, a gesture that has absolutely no meaning to me at all” (10). As she has no means of confirming the “truth” of her understanding, and even less of controlling the meaning of her participation, her interpretations ultimately reveal nothing but her own epistemological framework: “I decide he [the hotel manager] does like me, as I have a need anyway to feel I am liked. No doubt this marks me as an American. I must be full of national characteristics that are hidden from me and are palpable to others” (10).

Thus, unlike Rick, in Powers’s Galatea 2.2, whose humanism relies on the belief that his interpretation of the machine is knowing-afresh, Tillman’s protagonist has no illusions about the tautological nature of her knowing. The knowing-again nature of her interpretation impresses upon her the predetermined condition of her hermeneutic system—how her American cultural inclination towards amiability, for instance, shapes her practice of recognition: “I may emit naïveté and hope in a limited way, the grand narrative I’m thrust out of overwhelming my individual predilections and deviations. The mirror over the hotel dresser offers no relief, no clue to my role in the larger story . . . [you] can’t take the country out of the girl when the girl is out of the country” (188–89; emphasis added). This self-consciousness over “national characteristics” is elaborated more fully by Emily, one of the female protagonists in Haunted Houses. A young American girl living in Amsterdam, Emily “found herself wanting to say, Find a place of your own. You can do it, it would be good for you. She recognized an Americanness in ideas like: Things can change. Everything is possible. Just leave him. Her. You’ll get the money somehow. Ideas about the frontier and a young country
are unavoidable” (191). Inextricable from Emily’s knowing is the large body of trite expressions, stock responses, and sound bites, precisely the “dead language” of repetition that constitutes doxa.

When recognition takes place within the web of “grand narratives,” and one’s unconscious responses manifest “national characteristics,” what informs personal interactions but frozen plot typologies, characters, and clichés about those grand narratives? Where is the possibility for intersubjective transparency in this tired formula of knowing-again? Throughout her travels, she watches her individual identity performing various roles in numerous ready-made plots of race, gender, and national identity. In England, when she disputes a fare change made by the train conductor, she sees the predictability of her actions in the responses of her fellow passengers: “From the expressions on their faces, mirrors behind which their opinions sit, I see myself as the ugly, that is, the imperialistic American and, alternatively, the bossy New York woman. Or, less problematically, as just plain rude. Instantly I’m a set of conditions and positions, a reluctant but undeniable conduit” (35). Instantly, she bears the representational weight of a national character or, more specifically, a gendered national character, and she is helpless to resist her utility as a “conduit” in her fellow passengers’ interpellation of her. As her visibility as a subject is contingent upon the repetition of a grand narrative regarding “American identity” (i.e., that Americans, especially New Yorkers, are loud and rude), Tillman’s protagonist finds herself confined within the dead repetition of doxa—what passes as public opinion, the commonplace, the stereotype. One is known-again because the units of knowing (particular interpellation, cultural code, and grand narrative) already exist, a condition that Barthes describes thusly: “the name is the exact, irrefutable trace, as solid as a scientific fact, of a certain already-written, already-read, already-done; to find the name is to find that already which constitutes the code” (“The Sequence of Actions” 141; original emphasis).

Thus the protagonist experiences each encounter as another confirmation that knowing-again thwarts any prospect of intersubjective transparency. Individual interactions, in fact, become not an interaction between two individuals but an interaction between grand narratives. In a casual train conversation she reveals to a fellow passenger, a Pakistani man, that she does not wish to be married. “Ahh, he says, scrutinizing me, then may God be with you. I thank him. The rest of the journey he and I are noticeably silent, as if something portentous had occurred. . . . I’m sure he watched me throw my bag into the taxi and shook his head, certain I was meant for tragedy” (73). For the Pakistani
man, her revelation is at once descriptive and confirmatory of the tragic plot typology of the Western woman who eschews marriage. To Alfred, an English traveler she meets in Italy, she is cast in the mold of an independently wealthy American expatriate: “I have begun to enjoy his fantasy of me, as if I were a projection of his or a twentieth-century American woman. . . . An F. Scott Fitzgerald flapper. Or a Hemingway woman, narrow-hipped, tight-lipped and disappointed in her man” (59). Recognition, in these scenes, is nothing but a repetition of preexisting characterizations, plot typologies, and tensions. These moments of recognition accumulate towards one conclusion in the novel: the insurmountable wall of frozen language, dead repetition, and stereotypes means that there is no transparency between individuals, only opacity.

What Tillman highlights, through her protagonist’s mistrust of recognition, is that knowing by knowing-again operates on a version of fusion. Foreign travel—of being outside one’s linguistic, national, and cultural context—highlights the large-scale nature of one’s interpellation. At the intersection of encountering the other’s “difference,” the act of recognition is simultaneously an act of subsuming “I” into a collective “we,” and “you” into a collective “you,” of fusing a single individual into the body of a larger identity. To a hotel manager in Venice, the protagonist is one individual who is at once the body America: “New York, he says, looking at the postmark [of a card she receives], you have a big problem with drugs? I want instantly to resist the you of his question—but agree, yes, we do. He says that he or they have drug problems too” (42). This coerced fusion into a national identity is an experience that Emily, an American in Amsterdam, experiences: “As one of the representatives of a powerful and dangerous nation, Emily was hard pressed to explain that she and it were not the same” (Haunted Houses 191). Hence interpellation is never an exchange between two individuals but between grand narratives—what Althusser identified as the predetermined ideological state apparatuses and what Barthes identified as the omnipresent layer of repetition in language use. “I am indeed behind the door; certainly I should like to pass through, certainly I should like to see what is being said, I too participate in the communal scene; I am constantly listening to what I am excluded from; I am in a stunned state, dazed, cut off from the popularity of language” (RB 123). Like Barthes’s speaker who objects to “what is being said” but cannot “pass through” the frozen repetition of language, Tillman’s protagonists are keenly aware that they are helpless to resist the coerced fusion into a national identity.

As a subject trapped within/by recognition, the protagonist responds with two responses—of reveling in her trapped condition, and of han-
kering for the unrealizable. And it is the startling difference between these responses that best manifests the novel’s ambivalence towards the ideal of communion. Accepting the fact that her knowing is always a knowing-again, the protagonist throws herself in a free play of repetition—of popular discourses, icons, stock characters, stereotypes, and national characteristics. She responds to her immersion in grand narratives by gleefully employing her own stock of grand narratives in her interpellation of others and even of herself. The protagonist’s own grand narratives are heavily influenced by the long arm of mass culture, especially by American popular culture—for example, by Hollywood movies, bestsellers, and game shows. In an Amsterdam inn, the innkeepers, spanning three generations, remind her of a myriad of American TV shows: “Actually, looking more carefully, they’re closer to Western types, on the order of ‘Rawhide’ or ‘Bonanza’ or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, and from now on whenever I see them, either the theme song from ‘Bonanza,’ or ‘I’m a Lonesome Polecat’ from *Seven Brides* plays in my mind” (10–11). A café scene in Venice becomes a stage where the patrons enact various well-known scenarios: a scene of an older woman with two younger men suggests the possibilities of an “international intrigue party” involving the CIA and the KGB, or, perhaps, a “gigolo scenario”; as they leave, they are “followed closely by new players,” a middle-aged woman with a lapdog who courts the attention of an elderly man (43–44). “I wait for someone to appear who’s as fascinating as Tadzio in *Death in Venice*. I wait for a little girl, dressed in a red slicker, like the daughter Donald Sutherland searched for in *Don’t Look Now*” (45). As she comprehends the foreign setting and people by anchoring them to the plots, scenarios, settings, and characters from her archive of movies, musicals, and books, her mind’s wanderings represent a subjectivity dominated by ready-made signs of a postmodern image culture.

The degree of her confinement in the logic of repetition can best be seen her application of literary codes to herself. Her self-interpellation takes place through well-established, familiar literary characterizations and typology. As the narrative begins, she is in London, reading *The Portrait of a Lady*. At her narrative’s end, she invokes Isabel Archer again, an emblematic female figure of New World innocence hopelessly out of place in the Old World: “Isabel Archer’s end in *The Portrait of a Lady* may be worse than mine. It’s impossible to tell. I’ve begun to repeat some stories, but is this the same thing as repeating myself?” (203). As she travels through Tangiers, she mulls over the cultural familiarity of her role through the literary trope of the “wandering woman”—a woman
who renounces her Western society for a renegade life of freedom in the desert:

A long time ago a young woman from France or Germany or Great Britain arrived here on the start of a journey. She left home to travel when travel was hard and when few women traveled alone. I can see her. In a long brown skirt of durable material, a dark jacket, sensible shoes, a broad-brimmed hat and a scarf, she is tall and solid, short and slight, blond, dark. She does not fall in love with anything but adventure. (116)

The descriptive flexibility in this rendition generates a parodic tone, as the specifics of the heroine’s nationality, age, or appearance are all deemed interchangeable under the iconic status of a cultural code of the liberated heroine, the white woman who renounces her Western society for a renegade life in the desert (as she later names some names: Freya Stark, Isbelle Eberhardt, Kit Moresby). Like the few, quick sketches of a caricaturist, the narrator’s use of the desert adventuress calls upon the most pronounced—the most congealed—features of the cultural code. In the way the narrator holds up the stories as a convention, however, the target of the parody is not so much the heroines and their actions as it is their iconic stature as “untethered” women. The nod of acknowledgment to the feminist import of these stories is countered by mocking their archetypal—their congealed—stature. For the narrator, their very familiarity and popularity transform them into just another grand narrative that is used to recognize her—in fact, just as the Pakistani man on the train did. The narrator’s immersion in cultural codes, however, has a critical dimension: even as she enacts recognition through popular cultural stereotypes and familiar literary tropes, her ironic use of them as caricatures renders them trite. Certainly, it is a critique that she turns on herself, as she explicitly throws herself into “the discourse of others,” what Barthes calls the pervasive influence of cultural codes (S/Z 184).

As a counterpart to this gleeful play in knowing-again is the lingering sense of oppression by knowing-again and a hankering for knowing-afresh. If the protagonist’s frenetic movement through cultural codes, dead language, doxa, and grand narratives represents the acceptance of recognition-as-misrecognition, her enduring hope for intersubjective transparency represents the perennial refusal to give up the hope of transparency. As a way of highlighting the peculiar nature of this ambivalence, I will compare the protagonist’s response to the Lacanian vision of the analysand as the corrective to misrecognition. Pivotal to this com-
parison is the fundamental role of language in shaping the subject and knowledge in Tillman’s and Lacan’s theories of knowing. Pivotal to their contrast, however, is the vastly different significance that transparency, or knowing as knowing-afresh, holds for Tillman’s and Lacan’s theories of knowing. The enduring appeal of transparent knowing is what announces the ideal role of communion, and the idealized community discourse, in Tillman’s literary epistemology.

Méconnaissance (to misconstrue or to misrecognize), in Lacan’s theory of knowing, describes a flawed way of knowing that results in radical error. The subject of méconnaissance is a knower who equates herself only with her conscious ego: that is, foundational to her sense of self and to her epistemology is the rejection of her unconscious, what cannot be brought into speech, the Other of the Symbolic order. As a defensive repudiation of the unconscious, this way of knowing results in méconnaissance—an imaginary knowing that believes one’s ego and the world to be permanent, stable entities that yield transparent, univocal meaning. Thus, like Tillman’s protagonist who strives to discern “what someone really is,” the subject of méconnaissance believes that she is operating in a world of transparent meaning.

Precisely this misrecognition is targeted for correction in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and practice. Unlike the subject of méconnaissance, the analysand is the subject who refutes the equation of the self with the conscious ego, and the concomitant vision of the self as a unity, fixed, stable, and transparent. Lacan writes: “[i]t is in the disintegration of the imaginary unity constituted by the ego that the subject finds the signifying material of his symptom” (Écrits 151). The “signifying material” emerges from the subject’s unconscious, for it is the “unconscious which speaks the truth about the truth” (qtd. in Campbell 39). As the analysand brings the formally repudiated unconscious and its desires into speech, the subject moves from méconnaissance to correct knowing: “he has verbalized it[;] . . . he has made it pass into the Word, or more precisely, into the epos by which he brings back into the present time the origins of his own person” (Écrits 51). Key to this move from being a subject of méconnaissance to analysand, then, is the subject’s ability to bring into speech—into the Symbolic order—that which was previously impossible.

In situating his psychoanalytic theory within the field of language, Lacan’s theory of the subject is, like Tillman’s protagonists, fundamentally a subject of language. The subject is fundamentally a “parlêtre” (“the speaking being”), one who comes into being through the Symbolic order of language (Écrits 337). Lacan writes: “[T]here is no such thing
as a metalanguage[,] . . . no language able to say the truth about the truth, since truth is grounded in the fact that it speaks, and that it has no other means with which to do so” (qtd. in Campbell 35). As Campbell explains, “A knower is a linguistic event, because language constitutes it as speaking object. It is no more than a stable structure of signifiers, a subjective position in language” (33). In Lacanian epistemology, then, the analysand who escapes méconnaissance is fundamentally a subject who refutes the first way of knowing—the belief in the self and the world as transparent, fixed, and univocal.

And herein lies the crucial difference between Tillman’s and Lacan’s treatment of epistemological transparency. While Tillman’s protagonist accedes to the fact that intersubjective transparency is an untenable myth, and while she even revels in the proliferation of frozen signs and doxa, she does not dismiss the intersubjective transparency, even while fully cognizant of its false promise. Thus, unlike the Lacanian analysand whose escape from misrecognition is founded on the rejection of transparency, Tillman’s protagonist continues to operate within the appeal of transparency. This divergent response to the primacy of language is what richly illustrates the peculiar nature of ambivalent community in Motion Sickness. Impossible as it is in the novel’s literary vision, communion continues to operate as the most desirable end-point, the telos, of intersubjective relations. This teleological thinking marks the presence of idealized community values in a novel that begins in the dissenting community suspicion of communion.

Repeatedly, the protagonist experiences her immersion in grand narratives as a case of entrapment in/by recognition. For instance, she compares her congealed state of interpellation to that of her fellow traveler, an Irish man with ties to the IRA:

Maybe I’m as trapped as Pete. Although I may be in a melodrama, not a tragedy, white middle-class young woman, from yet another dying empire. . . . National identity is like armor. On permanent loan from a museum. It’s dull armor that I clink around in. Could I get an operation that would make me oblivious to symbols? Could I be like human Switzerland, always neutral to the partisan demands of birthplace? Get a transnational operation, get placed in a different body politic? (127)

When individuals interact through symbols and only through symbols, how can there be a process of recognition that is “oblivious to symbols”? The condition of being trapped in symbols is the protagonist’s negation of the wordless communion in idealized community. After all,
epiphanic moments of communion are moments of knowing-afresh precisely because they take place outside language, sign-systems, symbols, discourse, or any conventions of knowing. The protagonist’s inability to escape the “dull armor” of national identity, or any other ready-made sign-systems, highlights the way communion, in the discourse of idealized community, delivers such an escape.

At the same time, the protagonist’s negation of the possibility of transcendental knowing is at once an expression of longing for transparency—of the self, of the other, of the self to the other—that will ultimately deliver the communion of idealized community. The protagonist expresses her frustration with the opacity of intersubjective relations through the analogy of reading: “In my hotel room I draw mental pictures. Connect the dots. . . . A hostage to psychology and history. I’m Arlette’s reader, for instance, or Jessica’s, and I’m my own. I’m almost certain we can’t be read like books, though” (175). Being a reader whose reading practices are “hostage to psychology and history,” the protagonist’s reading never attains the certainty of knowing-afresh but knowing by knowing-again. Similarly, she holds up the metaphor of a complete jigsaw puzzle to highlight her dissatisfaction with knowing-again. Describing her attempt at representing one person to another person, she writes: “And like the jigsaw puzzle that always comes to mind when someone says my life is in pieces, one wants to fashion a whole, something like a personality or a character, but I never finished those giant puzzles when I was a kid, and the way I pick up the pieces and display them for Jessica must be nearly useless” (18). Like the analogy of reading, the completed jigsaw puzzle as the desirable model for intersubjective relations articulates all the attributes of knowing that she cannot attain in her dissenting community—wholeness rather than partiality, fullness rather than incompleteness, knowing rather than reading. Ultimately, her desire for the access to the “personality” or “character” of another is the desire to breach the alterity of the other.

Thus we come to the desire for “true tourism” that began the chapter—the narrator’s desire for “the real adventure of seeing through oneself. To see through to something outside, something beyond” (120). Like Davis’s characters who try to “really know,” “figure out,” or “get a better picture of” the other, Tillman’s protagonist longs to break out of the rules of dissenting community shaping her reality—to break out of the nonteleological community in which communion is forestalled. Like the postcards she writes prolifically and never sends, the protagonist exists in a hermetic circle, reading furiously without the hope of reading-afresh, evading the interpellation of home only to be locked
in another network of interpellation. Tillman, in an interview, voices a rebuttal to the assessment of the protagonist’s immobilized condition: “A sociologist who read *Motion Sickness* in manuscript said he was disgusted by it because the narrator was so passive. And I said what do you mean ‘passive’? She thinks all the time” (Nicholls 278). She certainly thinks all the time; perhaps thinking all the time is the inevitable condition of a subject who experiences knowing as a confinement in opacity.

Thinking all the time about the inadequacies of thinking all the time, these ambivalent subjects look over the fence to a reality ordered by idealized community: over there, those people experience oneself, others, and oneself *with* others in a continuous relationship. That there is no “over there,” that there never was such a reality in another time or place, is a fact that these subjects know too well, as time after time they hold up the rules of idealized community as myths. But their demystification of the idealized community vision does not result in a comfortable acceptance of the dissenting community vision. Unlike the theorists of dissenting community, they cannot experience the opacity of being as the *originary* condition of community, nor can they experience the unbridgeable distance between one and the other as the *evidence* of community. Instead, these subjects occupy their dissenting community with more than a slight unease, and they interject myths of idealized community as the implicit guidelines of intersubjective relations. Thus they ceaselessly manifest their ambivalent community through questions guided towards the telos of communion. What does that stranger think of me? Was my lover telling the truth? What is my friend really like? What am *I* really like? What did she mean by that? Does he mean it? Why did he do that? Why did I say that? In the ambivalent community of Davis and Tillman, the quest to know becomes a motion in stasis, an unspoken prompt towards that world in which after all that thinking, one is assured transparency and communion.