

# The Rushdie Affair and Perceived Reader Response

## Preface

For several weeks after Dr. Marta Werner told us we could do whatever we wanted for the Textual Criticism seminar project, I had no answer. I wanted to do something focused within the Indian subcontinent but access was an issue, and I did not completely understand how to apply the ideas of the archives and editions that we were discussing to the digital materials I did get my hands on.

On a whim, I decided to visit my Goodreads page, to see if there was something interesting that would come up, a long-forgotten book I had read and obsessed over and could find to work with. No such book popped up, but one author did. Salman Rushdie.

From *Midnight's Children* to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, to *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Golden House* and *Luka and the Fire of Life*, going back to my list of 'read' books reminded me how thoroughly I enjoyed his works, more because he was the Indian writer I could look up to; a writer who kept the voice and texture of the language I have come to love, in the way I have come to love it.

But which book of his? Why? How do I present the project? What do I say?

*The Satanic Verses* was an obvious choice. It was his most (in)famous work, the book that had changed his life, and those of many others, forever. It had an impact that was not restricted to books and literature, but was more 'mass' in scale, and had implications on areas as varied as foreign policy, publishing, law, religious studies and more. It intersected directly with another field of studies I love: media.

I started reading *The Satanic Verses*, and reading about it, when a thought began to take shape, a thought which seemed like it had not been explored before. It stemmed as much from my own experiences with Book Instagram or #bookstagram, and Book Twitter, and general work in mass media, as from reading the responses to the book and about, of course, reader-response and reception theories.

Thus was born, after many iterations with Dr Werner, the idea of the perceived reader response and how it could play out in a digital age.

## Theoretical Contexts

Who is the reader? Depending on what theoretical background one is looking at, as well as which field, whether literary or not, differing definitions of the reader may emerge. For the purpose of the project, we will look at the reader's role in book history, in reader-response and reception theories, and in distant reading, as well as the dual reader/audience role in communication studies.

In book history, the reader is part of the “circuit of production”.<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton writes in *The Book History Reader*, “The reader completes the circuit because he influences the author before and after the act of composition,”<sup>2</sup> thus placing the reader as part of a communications circuit which starts with the author and the publisher, and includes agents such as printers and suppliers, shippers, booksellers, binders and then, readers. These agents are in turn influenced by factors such as intellectual influences and publicity, economic and social conjuncture, and political and legal sanctions.<sup>3</sup>

In reader-response theories, the reader is placed in an active role, where the readers’ responses at least partly make the meaning of the text, diluting, or complicating, the objectivity of the author’s intended meaning of their work.

Reception theory, an application of reader-response theory, was first framed by Hans Robert Jauss, who “emphasized the altering interpretive and evaluative responses of generations of readers to a text.”<sup>4</sup> Here, the reader and the reader-response is not a fixed state, but one that moves across time and context.

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<sup>1</sup> Marta Werner, “Queries on Project,” November 22, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds., *The Book History Reader*, 2nd ed (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein and McCleery.

<sup>4</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, “Key Theories of Hans Robert Jauss,” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, February 1, 2018, <https://literariness.org/2018/02/01/key-theories-of-hans-robert-jauss/>.

All of the reader-response theories put the reader under the spotlight on the stage that is literature. This paper draws on the unified whole, including Wolfgang Iser, Walter Ong, Jonathan Cullen, Stanley Fish, and David Bleich and their notions of “fictitious audiences, implicit readers, and interpretive communities”<sup>5</sup>, as also of reading as an experience.

Each theorist has put their own spin on reader-response, the role and nature of the reader and more, but all of them try to traverse the distance between text and meaning, or author and reader, or artistic and aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> They all also assume that the readers have actually read the books closely; a tenet removed in the other two important frameworks this paper draws upon – distant reading and mass media.

It is important to draw attention here to Ted Underwood’s succinct, yet accurately summarized critique of the term ‘distant reading’: “By defining a new mode of ‘reader’, the phrase [distant reading] suggests to some that this project is still contained in literary studies”.<sup>7</sup> The modern, tech-driven, computer-reliant role of the distant reader, where the reader takes on the role of an analyst, without really engaging with the texts themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> Finkelstein and McCleery, *The Book History Reader*.

<sup>6</sup> K. M. Newton, “Wolfgang Iser: ‘Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response,’” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K. M. Newton (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1997), 195–99, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2\\_39](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_39).

<sup>7</sup> “44. Distant Reading and Recent Intellectual History | Ted Underwood’ in ‘Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016’ on Manifold,” Debates in the Digital Humanities, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/3b96956c-aab2-4037-9894-dc4ff9aa1ec5#ch44>.

This paper will explore one other field that distant reading is or at least, could be, contained in; mass media and mass communication, and how the nature of reader-responses changes when texts leaves the literary sphere, and are met with 'readers' or simply audiences, who are not equipped with the same tools that literary readers acquire over time.

For this, we will look at Stuart Hall's audience theory, from his essay 'Encoding and Decoding Television Discourse', which focuses "on the encoding and the decoding of the content given to the audience no matter the form of media such as magazines/papers, television/radios, game."

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Hall's audience reception includes three stages: the first, message creation, concurs with Jauss' ideas on reception, the second stage is circulation which speaks to how the message is sent and perceived by the audience, stating that "sending and delivery has an influence on audience's action or response", and the final is the reproduction stage, which speaks directly to how the audience interprets and reacts to the message.

A media text, according to Hall, can be categorized into three types of readings; dominant readings, negotiated readings, and oppositional readings. The dominant readings are produced by "those whose social situations favors the preferred reading, negotiated readings are produced by those who inflect the preferred reading to take account of their social position,

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Teel, "The Application of Stuart Hall's Audience Reception Theory to Help Us Understand #WhichLivesMatter?," Medium, May 3, 2017, <https://medium.com/@ateel/the-application-of-stuart-halls-audience-reception-theory-to-help-us-understand-whichlivesmatter-3d4e9e10dae5>.

and oppositional readings are produced by those whose social position puts them in direct conflict with the preferred reading".<sup>9</sup>

It is important to bring the theories of mass communication in contemporary recording of literary messages and responses, as literary discussions, interactions and more move to new and social media, which increasingly behave like mass media.<sup>10</sup> Discussions about books are taking place not just in traditional channels like book clubs, review columns, meetups or even journals, all driven by close-readings of the texts, but on social networking platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, that in their reach and influence and in how they evoke responses, mimic media technologies such as radio and television.

What happens when mass media wedges itself in that interim space of text and meaning that drives reader-response theory?

Perhaps the answer lies in a story that began 30 years ago.

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<sup>9</sup> "Marxist Media Theory," December 26, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141226091604/http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/marxism/marxism11.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Prakruti Maniar, "Twitter Thread on New Media," (November 13, 2019), <https://twitter.com/pramankapranam/status/1195110175918571520>.

## The Rushdie Affair

The Rushdie Affair, as this story has come to be called, is an important case-study, perhaps the most extreme of its kind, in understanding the complexity of the diffusion of literature in mass media.

October 1988. *The Satanic Verses* has just released in the UK (on September 26, 1988), published by Viking Books, a division of Penguin Books Ltd. It's Indian arm had already denied publication of the book, a cautionary move by then editor Khushwant Singh, who perceived that certain chapters of the book which satirized and fictionalized the Prophet Muhammad's life, would offend the Muslim population of India.

On October 5, 1988, India became the first country to ban *The Satanic Verses*, because, "Syed Shahabuddin, an opposition Muslim Member of Parliament, launched a campaign against the book."<sup>11</sup> In the same month in UK, the Man Booker ceremony was being held. *The Satanic Verses* (henceforth, TSV) was nominated, and Rushdie was a frontrunner. By Peter Carey's account in *The Guardian*, that was the first time the book came to be associated with anything dangerous and a sense of fear that would haunt it for the rest of its run; security was heightened, there were whispers of a potential attack on Salman Rushdie.<sup>12</sup> Soon after,

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<sup>11</sup> Werner, "Queries on Project," November 22, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Guardian Staff, "Looking Back at Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/14/looking-at-salman-rushdies-satanic-verses>.

Muslims across the UK started objecting to the book, with a book burning held in Bradford, in January 1989.

In November 1988, the TSV review first appeared in a literary supplement of a newspaper in Tehran. Conjecture is that the Ayatollah Khomeini did not read the book, but perhaps members on his advisory council did.<sup>13</sup>

Four months later, on February 14, 1989, just two weeks after TSV was published in the United States of America, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and at the time the country's Supreme Leader, issued a fatwa (a formal ruling according to Islamic law) on Tehran radio: "I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of 'The Satanic Verses,' a book which is against Islam, the prophet and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are hereby sentenced to death."

From this point onwards, the book was taken out of its literary sphere, and the critical responses to the book, in the form of reviews, were overshadowed by the fatwa and its validity, which received unprecedented support, so much that Rushdie had to go into hiding in Britain, which upheld the freedom of speech and refused to ban the book.

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<sup>13</sup> BERNARD LEWIS, "Behind the Rushdie Affair," *The American Scholar* 60, no. 2 (1991): 185–96.



There was extensive news coverage of the global protests, in newspapers across the board, from *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Telegraph* and more.

The world was quickly polarized and debates took on socio-political textures; West vs East, the novel as a form in West and in Islam, religious equality in Britain which refused to recognize Islamic blasphemy and more. While the intended theme of TSV was the issue of migration, few spoke about it, focusing on the four chapters that had evoked such emotion and outrage.

Several writers and artists across the world took up arms against the protest, hailing freedom of speech as the founding tenet of democracy, while protestors continued to show their dissent by attacking bookstores, killing translators, and adding to the bounty on Rushdie's life, which at its peak had reached \$6 million.

At the same time, the initial print run of 50,000 was soon sold out, fueled by the controversy, and Viking continued to discreetly print and send more. Television and newspapers continued to report on the incidents, Rushdie stayed in public life through interviews made under utmost security, through an apology printed in *The Independent*.

The struggle to return Rushdie his safety continued for a whole decade after, and to date, he has not been fully forgiven. He is yet to return to India for a public event, for each time an

announcement is made, there are protests. Most of his visits to public gatherings in the decade of his hiding was enabled only by discretion, stealth, and the element of surprise.

While the first two years were focused on little else, as soon as the media frenzy reduced, calmer voices began to appear; in print compilations by Muslim clerics and leaders, that gave voice to the community in which the text was situated.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that all Muslims across the world wanted him dead, and while their numbers could be in the thousands, it was a small percent of the total Muslim population of the world.

There were those that saw his point, even agreed with what he supposedly said about Islam. In 1989, a Pakistani reader wrote to The Observer newspaper in London: “Salman Rushdie speaks for me in *The Satanic Verses*, and mine is a voice that has not yet found expression in newspaper columns ... Someone who does not live in an Islamic society cannot imagine the sanctions, both self-imposed and external, that militate against expressing religious disbelief ... Then, along comes Rushdie and speaks for us. Tells the world that we exist – that we are not simply a fabrication of some Jewish conspiracy.”<sup>15</sup>

This is where the notoriety of mass media comes in, with its agenda-setting attitudes, that focus on one narrative, one interpretation, relegating some voices to the background, and

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<sup>14</sup> M. M. Ahsan and Abdur Raheem Kidwai, eds., *Sacrilege versus Civility: Muslim Perspectives on the Satanic Verses Affair* (Markfield, Leicester, U.K: Islamic Foundation, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> “Can There Ever Be Another Novel like The Satanic Verses? – Bruce Fudge | Aeon Essays,” Aeon, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/can-there-ever-be-another-novel-like-the-satanic-verses>.

amplifying others. Rushdie's was certainly not the only text that has been banned by the public; but it demonstrated just how threatening and dangerous such responses could be. What arose from this clash of the subjectivity inherent in literature and the objectivity expected of mass media, is what I want to call a '*Perceived Reader Response*'.

## Perceived Reader Response

Reader-response theories so far have acknowledged the subjectivity of responses, as a "joint product of the reader's own horizon of expectations and the confirmations, disappointments, refutations and reformulations of these expectations." <sup>16</sup>

But they have not discussed how a reader responds to texts they have not read, but simply been exposed to, the nature of which is similar to the role of audiences in mass media.

In placing the reception of works like TSV in mass media, we see some characteristics that emerge:

1. That 'general public', or those who have no literary interest in the book and are simply exposed to it, can potentially react to secondary sources, creating what Hall has called oppositional readings to the text, but one could be still be *perceived as a reader response* to those looking at reader responses at large;

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<sup>16</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, "Reception Theory: A Brief Note," Literary Theory and Criticism, November 2, 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/11/02/reception-theory-a-brief-note/>.

2. How readers or audiences interpret the message is as much contextual as textual, but mass media exaggerates how difficult it can be to bring context back to discussion, creating *perceptions of readers and readership* who were neither the target audience, nor share the same contextual codes as the author;
3. That with mass media, the news and opinions about the literary text and its subject often predates publication and release, which leads to reader responses that are based on perceptions which are premature, ill-informed, and could unfairly impact the text's release and thus also 'break' the communication circuit that Darnton had proposed;
4. People's responses are often influenced by what is portrayed and perceived as a majority opinion in media; responses made under a social pressure to conform. Because of this, responses in the realm of mass media create a domino effect, which may or may not be representative of the readers' actual responses, once again, creating a *perception of response* in a direction that may be totally misleading (as in the case of the Rushdie affair).

The term "perceived reader response" functions in various contexts: that the reader has not read the text but has certain perceptions based on exposure to the text, that mass media puts readers in closer proximity to texts that they share little context with which creates the perception of a response which may be unfair to the author and the text, that the reader often

creates a perceived response out of pressure to confine to a majority opinion, and that the reader is exposed to a singular meaning and perceives it to be 'the one' meaning and responds to it accordingly.

Perceived reader response is similar to reception theory in one aspect; it speaks to the time and place the response was made in.

For *The Satanic Verses*, several articles about the book since mid-2000s highlight how the work which stood for freedom of speech then, could today be berated for being insensitive to Muslims and for being racist.<sup>17</sup> So time can change the perception of responses too.

This collective pool of perceived reader responses also creates a perception about the text itself, as is evident in how TSV was eclipsed by the Rushdie Affair. (It is interesting to note here that under genre, the book is categorized as 'Spiritual Fiction', even though the author has maintained from the started it does not have anything to do with religion, and that migration remains its dominant theme.)

Perceived reader response fills that gap between critical responses (which were highly positive for TSV) and misconceptions (where a reader misreads a text for any number of reasons.).

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<sup>17</sup> The Washington Times <http://www.washingtontimes.com>, "'Satanic Verses' Author Salman Rushdie: 'Today, I Would Be Accused of Islamophobia, Racism,'" The Washington Times, accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/sep/6/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses-author-today-i-would/>.

In one line, it is the sum of *perceived* responses and responses by *perceived readers*, that are placed in a “continuum” <sup>18</sup> with those who have actually read the book.

Most of what one reads on the web is a secondary reading. The unique feature of mass media on the web (also new media, also social media), is that reading and opining (or commenting) happens in the same space. Building on this, we can now talk about why it is important identify perceived reader responses.

## Significance

It’s important to discuss the nature of literary responses in mass media for two reasons:

1. The migration of literary communities to social media and the new dynamics between author and reader and between reader and medium;
2. The emergence of distant reading as a prominent tool in literary analysis.

In 2012, an article in Slate by Jacob Silverman highlighted how popular on social networking sites like Twitter were encouraging authors and readers to connect at a personal level and how that affects the literary culture of today.

He says, “But let’s say you’re part of this web of writers, fiction-lovers, literary editors, and readers in the social-media world, and you’re assigned a review of *Laura Lamont’s Life in Pictures*. What if you don’t like it? Or what if you like it, but not unreservedly? Are you willing to say so? Would you be willing to critique Straub’s novel after watching her life scroll out on

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<sup>18</sup> Werner, “Queries on Project,” November 22, 2019.

social media over the last year—indeed, after likely being the recipient or admirer of some small word or act of kindness on Straub’s part?

To the uninitiated, this might seem immaterial, or like the kind of navel-gazing tabulation of credentials that can make the New York literary world insufferable. As a relatively recent arrival to New York, I can say that both are true. But it also matters, because the situation of someone like Straub epitomizes the mutual admiration society that is today’s literary culture, particularly online.” <sup>19</sup>

Twitter is one channel. This same phenomenon can be observed on Instagram, under the hashtag #Bookstagram, the same phenomenon is reflected in paid Amazon reviews, or reviews demanded in exchange of free books by publishers. It is not that publishers did not market the books before, but now, with massive online communities, these perceived responses reach more audiences, who are only the secondary readers to books.

Another literary anecdote, this time from a February 2019 article in the New York Times <sup>20</sup>, highlights how perceived reader responses are premature and could be ill-informed, and how it impacts publishing. In talking about the best way to deal with social media critics, Jonah Winter gives the example of young adult author Amélie Wen Zhao, who, “confronted with allegations

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<sup>19</sup> Jacob Silverman, “Hey, Writers on Twitter: Stop Being So Nice to One Another,” *Slate Magazine*, August 4, 2012, <https://slate.com/culture/2012/08/writers-and-readers-on-twitter-and-tumblr-we-need-more-criticism-less-liking.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “When Social Media Goes After Your Book, What’s the Right Response?,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 2019, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/books/amelie-wen-zhao-blood-heir-keira-drake-continent-jonah-winter-secret-project.html>.

on social media that her debut fantasy novel, “Blood Heir,” was racist, she asked her publisher to cancel the book, four months before the publication date.”

As Winter writes, “Zhao said she has a different perspective on slavery than the one on which we tend to focus in America, explaining that she was not envisioning American slavery when she wrote the book. “The issues around Affinite indenturement in the story represent a specific critique of the epidemic of indentured labor and human trafficking prevalent in many industries across Asia, including in my own home country,” she said. That social media critics would expect that she, a Chinese immigrant, frame the depiction of slavery in her book to reflect an American narrative is the height of cultural solipsism and American arrogance.” <sup>21</sup>

Zhao eventually pulled the book, saying, “The narrative and history of slavery in the United States is not something I can, would or intended to write, but I recognize that I am not writing in merely my own cultural context. I am so sorry for the pain this has caused.” <sup>22</sup> [Wow. I find this quite disturbing. Was her own experience not also important?]

Social media has made writers and writing more sensitive to a vast majority of communities, and I don’t mean to take away from it. However, social media, like mass media, has shown a tendency to set an agenda, create a dominant narrative, from which perceived reader responses can emerge just as easily as they had for Rushdie. While the casualty for Rushdie

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<sup>21</sup> “When Social Media Goes After Your Book, What’s the Right Response?”

<sup>22</sup> Alexandra Alter, “Y.A. Author Pulls Her Debut After Pre-Publication Accusations of Racism,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2019, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/books/amelie-wen-zhao-blood-heir-ya-author-pulls-debut-accusations-racism.html>.



was the death of humans, the casualty for authors today is the demise of their work, even before it has had the chance to be critiqued by the intended readers at large, and not just a handful. [Good critique.]

**These incidents are important; information today is the dataset for tomorrow, the narrative today becomes metadata tomorrow.** [Yes!] When one looks at *The Satanic Verses*, the tags attached to it include ‘international relations’, ‘threats and threatening messages’, ‘book trade’, ‘terrorism’, ‘demonstrations and riots’, ‘publishing’, ‘bombs and bomb plots’, among others. But the word ‘migration’ which was the intended theme of the book, does not appear in any form. [Wow!]

It is evident, that the perceived reader responses to the book shaped its entire narrative, one with only tangential relations to the text.

“Because we cannot witness past reading practices directly, our evidence of reading processes can only be inferred from “representations of reading”<sup>23</sup>, and as good investigators, literary theorists, analysts and others in the field must correctly mark evidence such as reader responses. This is not to say that the variety of responses should be ignored, just that a distinction should be made.

Additionally, as distant reading, or alien reading, becomes more prominent, and computers start ‘reading’ this data to analyze literary history, the boundaries between critical and perceived reader responses which are already blurred threaten to be blurred further, and,

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<sup>23</sup> *The Fluid Text*, accessed December 4, 2019, [https://www.press.umich.edu/12020/fluid\\_text](https://www.press.umich.edu/12020/fluid_text).

“[these] text-mining methods could potentially give us an ideologically skewed picture of literary and cultural history.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The literary tradition calls for calm, measure, weighted responses, that are objective critiques of the work. As the tradition moves to fuse with the culture of mass media, which has historically served only the purpose of objective dissemination of information, literary analysis threatens to be subsumed by the unwritten laws that govern mass media. A distinction of reader responses to literary texts in a media setting, as perceived reader responses, is the first step to sift through the “vast and unknown readership”<sup>25</sup>, that distant reading methods will go on to analyze.

## Future scope and further exploration

This is by no means a comprehensive exploration of the idea of perceived reader responses. There are several questions that remain unanswered; in particular how the nature of responses and the degree of their perceptions changes across time, medium, region. A thorough analysis

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<sup>24</sup> “‘18. Alien Reading: Text Mining, Language Standardization, and the Humanities | Jeffrey M. Binder’ in ‘Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016’ on Manifold,” Debates in the Digital Humanities, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/4b276a04-c110-4cba-b93d-4ded8fcfafc9#ch18>.

<sup>25</sup> Werner, “Queries on Project,” November 22, 2019.

of everything written about The Satanic Verses, using DH Tools such as Voyant, can help paint the picture better. But that is beyond the scope and scale of this project.

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**Another unanswered question is how perceived reader responses stretch the fluidity of the text, in what direction and to what effect, and the impact this has on how the book is read historically. Later iterations of this idea could take these questions and methods further.**

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