

Emergent Meanings: Reconciling Dispositional and Situational Accounts of Meaning-Making from Cultural Objects¹

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Across a wide variety of topics and methodological approaches, researchers find that meaning is segregated along sociodemographic lines. Using real-world data, this article evaluates and helps reconcile the often-theorized but rarely tested mechanisms that segregate meaning. Shared meaning is defined as both greater agreement on a cultural object's interpretive dimensions and a similar schema organizing how these interpretive dimensions interrelate. The setting is 21 book groups across the United States, all discussing the same previously unknown novel. The authors find that, through their interactions with similar others, the meanings individuals make out of cultural objects rapidly become demographically situated as individuals resonate with one another and the work itself. Results indicate that sociodemographically segregated meanings for even nonideological cultural objects may be the routine outcome of social structure and interaction. Researchers, by focusing largely on snapshots of segregated meanings on specific issues rather than on meaning-making processes, may contribute to an overly ingrained view of a divided culture.

From the meanings of Hollywood westerns (Shively 1992) to the meanings of lattes (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015), perfume scents (Cerulo 2018),

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and financial investment (Davis 2009), there is ample evidence for the segregation of meaning along demographic lines. Although routinely theorized, the mechanisms that produce such demographic differences in meaning-making remain largely unexamined (Lizardo 2014), and a stability of meaning that maps onto demographic backgrounds is assumed (Kaufman 2004). Yet, as concern grows that Americans are segregated into self-reinforcing bubbles of meaning—and even truth—how demographically distributed meanings are initially produced is a particularly salient and timely puzzle.

As summarized by Lahire (2011), theories on where meaning comes from usually emphasize *situational* or *dispositional* accounts. Ethnographers and social network scholars usually focus on situational accounts of meaning construction; namely, through interaction and influence, agreements in meaning are formed and then spread (e.g., Mark 2003; Fine 2012). Interviews and cross-sectional survey methods, however, sometimes explicitly (and often implicitly) suggest a dispositional account of meaning construction, in which the mechanisms that generate demographically segregated meaning have been built up through the life course and cleave along cultural and sociodemographic lines (Bourdieu 1984; Rodriguez 2006; Bennett et al. 2009). These two accounts of meaning construction can be seen as rooted in oppositional theories of how culture gets into individuals and shapes what they pull out of objects. Yet, we see them as plausibly complimentary and co-constitutive aspects of the meaning-making process.

To formally and fairly test accounts of how cross-sectionally distributed meanings initially form requires data with a rare combination of features. First, the cultural object under consideration should be initially unknown, lest uncaptured priors exert influence on the meanings constructed out of it. Likewise, the object should have been created with the intention of being ideologically neutral and open to multiple meanings, such that its purpose is not to generate the demographic differences in meaning-making that may result from it. The data collected regarding the meaning of such an object should be sensitive to both dispositional and situational accounts of meaning-making. That is, the data should be longitudinal in order to best capture the effects of different proposed mechanisms, though the longitudinal time window should be relatively short and within an observable and semicontrolled context to mitigate against uncaptured longitudinal exogenous influences.

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Rather than a lab setting, those data would ideally be captured in situ—in everyday nonexperimental settings in which meaning is already a regular focal topic of interest and cultural representations are routinely filtered by interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). As meaning is an often evoked but sometimes poorly defined concept in sociology, these data should also be sensitive to multiple definitions.

In this work, we draw on such data to test dispositional and situational mechanisms explaining cross-sectional distributions in meaning. Although these frameworks are rarely put in concert, we treat them as potentially complementary. To this end, we employ survey data on preexisting book groups across the United States, collected both immediately before and immediately after group discussions to eliminate unmeasured longitudinal exogenous effects. A number of simulation-based models have proposed how segregated meanings may emerge through interaction and influence (Axelrod 1997; Flache and Macy 2011; DellaPosta et al. 2015). To the best of our knowledge, however, we provide the first in-depth formal analysis of how meanings become segregated for a previously unknown cultural object using real-world settings and data that can speak to multiple theoretical perspectives (Benzecry 2011, p. 180).

We believe that an analysis of a cultural object to investigate how segregated meanings are structurally produced is useful for several reasons. First, cultural objects and the meanings produced from them reveal something about cohesion and conflict both within (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Bryson 1996; Lizardo and Skiles 2016) and across societies (Griswold 1987*a*; Liebes and Katz 1990; Corse 1997). Second, cultural objects (such as the novel we study) are both *polysemous* and *heteroglossic*, meaning they are open to multiple interpretations and often contain conflicting views (Bakhtin 1982). Third, unlike values and political opinions about recent events, most new cultural objects do not come with strong or entrenched priors; under the right conditions, the mechanisms of taste or meaning construction can be more easily empirically isolated and studied (Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006). Finally, discussing cultural objects and their meanings is an everyday practice that may produce more generalizable findings than the analysis of a hot-button issue, for which the production of meanings may operate differently given their ideological high stakes, high potential for strongly entrenched priors, and comparative infrequency (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007).

Our findings suggest that dispositional approaches have overstated the degree to which shared meanings are sociodemographically ingrained, while situational approaches have overstated the chaotic and random nature of meaning-making processes. We offer a reconciliation of the two approaches by bringing social constructivist theories of meaning-making in small groups into greater dialogue with theories of homophily and resonance (McPherson et al. 2001; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavorly 2017). In our view, sociodemo-

graphic and cultural dispositions are largely latent orientations to meanings, which become activated as guideposts for meaning-making only through interactions on a resonant topic of common interest. As a result, to the extent that individuals tend to interact with similar others—and therefore have common ground concerning what about an object is “good to talk with”—they will jointly draw similar meanings from the same cultural objects. Thus, our approach adds greater specificity, formalization, and falsifiability to what has long been at the core of symbolic interactionism and other constructivist accounts, as we uncover the social interactive roots from which observed demographic differences in meaning-making emerge.

In the next section, we define what we mean by “meaning” and explain the basic contours of the two definitions we employ. We briefly discuss the generally uncontested assertion that within the focal area of our empirical analysis—cultural objects—taste and meaning are cross-sectionally distributed across sociocultural and demographic lines. We then discuss in greater detail dispositional and situational frameworks through which these regularly observed cross-sectional distributions in meaning may be produced. Rather than pitting these theoretical approaches against each other, we offer a third framework that treats them as nested and potentially mutually reinforcing. We then move on to discuss our data and methods, our results, limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Meaning as Consensus and as Tightness

The meaning of an event, issue, or object (hereafter object) is a set of cognitive and affective orientations concerning its qualities and significance. Research in social psychology typically refers to these orientations as attitudes (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Here, in reference to the specific domain of cultural objects, we refer to them as interpretations. These interpretations are inclusive of assorted beliefs and sentiments that are used to deductively and inductively make sense of objects (Lizardo and Strand 2010). Together, interpretations form the bases of shared meanings, which may be “created, affirmed, [and] transformed” through a process of social interaction (Blumer 1969, p. 12).

As with work in the related domain of belief systems, we think of meaning as rooted in shared cultural sense making, which may operate as *consensus* or as *tightness* (Martin 2002; see also Converse 1962; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). Consensus and tightness reflect two important approaches to the study of culture. A consensus approach to meaning treats culture as shared sets of ideas, beliefs, and practices and thus, with respect to cultural objects, defines shared meanings as agreement on one or more interpretations. In con-

trast, a tightness approach looks to the pattern of ties among ideas, beliefs, and practices, seeing culture as shared schemas that organize these elements through webs of implications (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Mohr 1998). While consensus looks to individuals' agreements and disagreements on key interpretative dimensions, tightness looks to individuals' positions across these dimensions to how they reveal shared ways of making sense of the world. While a group with complete consensus would necessarily also have complete tightness, individuals who disagree may either (1) still agree on how these issues go together, in which case they would have lower consensus but higher tightness (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Goldberg 2011; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017), or (2) disagree on both the content of issues and the interconnections among them, in which case they would have both low consensus and low tightness.

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between consensus and tightness through a simplified example based on our own data. In figure 1 there are four survey items and the responses to them by two respondents, with respondent 1 represented by shaded points and respondent 2 represented by nonshaded points. The questions ask the respondents about a novel they have just read and their meaning-making with regard to who (Martha; Nick) or what (racism; the Civil War) is responsible for the dissolution of the relationship between the two main characters (again, Martha and Nick). To better illustrate "consensus" and "tightness" conceptually, lines are included across respondents' data points to highlight response patterns.

In figure 1, respondent 1 and respondent 2 have zero consensus in meaning on each of the four items. Respondent 1 thinks Martha and Nick get full and equal blame for the dissolution of their relationship, and racism and the Civil War are nonfactors. In contrast, respondent 2 accords no responsibility to Martha and Nick for the dissolution of their relationship and full responsibility to the roles of racism and the Civil War. According to meaning-

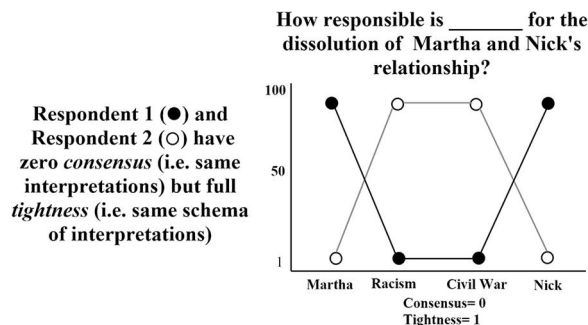


FIG. 1.—Hypothetical dyad with low consensus and high tightness

as-consensus, respondent 1 and respondent 2 demonstrate perfect *dissensus*: on these four items, they fundamentally disagree on the meaning they make out of the novel.

Although respondent 1 and respondent 2 demonstrate zero consensus, they have full tightness in their shared meaning-making schema across the dimensions. Though they fundamentally disagree in their interpretations on each dimension, their schemas of interpretations are perfect mirrors: they are reading the novel within the same interpretive schema. For tightness, respondent 1 and respondent 2 agree that to hold Martha responsible or not means to hold Nick equally responsible or not and that to hold the main characters responsible or not also means to hold the structural factors of racism and the Civil War in the opposite position. Their shared meaning-making schema is predicated on a cleavage between structure (racism and war) and agency (Martha and Nick).² This formulation of consensus and tightness follows that seen in the study by DiMaggio et al. (2018), who note that a person who puts full trust in science and zero trust in religion may lack consensus with a person who puts full trust in religion and zero trust in science, but that these two people share a meaning-making schema (i.e., have high tightness) in thinking that faith in science and faith in religion are oppositional. In short, they share an overall schema about “which beliefs are compatible with one another” (Goldberg and Stein 2018, p. 2).

As we summarize below, across multiple methods and objects of study, meaning-as-consensus has been associated with demographic groups; to at least some degree, there appear to be sociodemographically segregated “bubbles” of meaning. Regarding tightness, simulation-based work suggests that shared meaning-making schemas may facilitate rapid convergence toward group consensus (Friedkin et al. 2016), and experimental work confirms the importance of shared schemas in how understandings emerge and spread (Hunzaker 2016). Less is understood about tightness and sociodemographic subgroups. A robust analysis of how meanings emerge would therefore consider both consensus and tightness beyond cross-sectional “snapshots” of an object’s meaning vis-à-vis different groups. In the following sections, we briefly summarize the wealth of scholarship on demographic differences in meaning-making for everyday cultural objects and then discuss the multiple proposed mechanisms for these findings and how they motivate our hypotheses.

² Research on tastes has drawn on this view of the tightness of positive or negative attitudes toward cultural genres to examine underlying schemas rather than specific divisions among Americans with respect to individual likes and dislikes or shared profiles of tastes (Goldberg 2011).

Segregated Meanings

Demographic differences in meaning-making from cultural objects have been found using qualitative methods (e.g., DeVault 1990; Rodriguez 2006), mixed methods (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Bennett et al. 2009), and cross-sectional survey research (e.g., Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright 2005; Thomas 2017). Across this range of methods, researchers have found that evaluations and interpretations of cultural objects vary along lines of gender (Lizardo 2006; Christin 2012), social class and education (DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Bourdieu 1984), race and ethnicity (Jhally 1992; Shively 1992; Rodriguez 2006), age (Holbrook and Schindler 1994; Bennett 2004, 2013; Reeves 2014), national origin (Griswold 1987*a*; Liebes and Katz 1990; Kaufman and Patterson 2005; Kuipers 2015), and region (Schwartz 2000; Griswold and Wright 2004; Griswold and Wohl 2015).

With objects treated more or less as Rorschach inkblots from which a range of evaluations or interpretations can be drawn out, such objects often reflect and are even used to reinforce societal divisions (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Bryson 1996; Friedman 2014; Lizardo and Skiles 2016). Despite a wealth of data on the association between interpreted meanings and demographic backgrounds, the mechanisms producing these associations have remained largely untested (Lizardo 2014), and particularly so with consideration to multiple accounts. This is not, we believe, due to a lack of interest, but to a lack of data sufficient to isolate causal mechanisms in what is likely a complex and multitudinous process. Most broadly, in sociological theory the causal mechanisms that may result in demographically situated meanings can be thought of as operating within dispositional and situational accounts (Lahire 2011). Although these accounts rarely overlap, they are not necessarily in conflict and may, in fact, be commensurable.

Dispositional Accounts for the Segregation of Meaning

There may be a direct causal relationship between sociodemographic background and meaning construction. In this formulation, people read meaning into cultural objects using the tools they possess. The meanings people make are generated through their social positions, which throughout the life course have been infused with sense and meaning-making standpoints. In short, in a dispositional account of meaning construction, where people come from and who they are is the engine that drives the interpretive meanings that they make out of things. In examples of dispositional accounts of meaning construction, through life experiences and exposures, those of a high social class may appreciate a new work of impressionist painting more than others of low social class (Bourdieu 1984); men and women, because of their gendered experiences, may read different meanings in the same novel (DeVault

1990); and whites and Indigenous Americans may make different meanings out of Hollywood westerns because of the different positions they occupy in social space (Shively 1992). Bourdieu (1984) gives perhaps the most succinct summary of a dispositional account of meaning construction, in which the habitus—a durable and transposable disposition that is formed in childhood and early education—is “internalized and converted into a disposition that generates . . . meaning-giving perceptions” (p. 170). As McLean (2016) puts it, the habitus “guides practical activity and sense-making, not only with respect to familiar objects and activities, but also with respect to new objects, people, and activities as they are encountered” (p. 44). Through this framework, we see a dispositional correspondence between *status homophily* (i.e., social class, education, sociocultural demographics) and *values homophily* (i.e., norms, beliefs, values, scripts, schemas), which correlates with preferences for and meanings attributed to cultural objects.

While Bourdieu (1984) theorizes that social class is the primary dispositional mechanism through which segregated meanings emerge, as discussed above, demographically segregated meanings have been found across a wide array of identity characteristics. In support of these findings, using mixed-methods data within a Bourdieusian framework, Warde et al. (2009) find that, in addition to social class, demographically segregated meaning-making also occurs for gender, ethnicity, and age. Given that in a dispositional account meaning-making is occurring “within the skin” of the individual (i.e., the mechanism is her developed disposition up to the point of engaging with the previously unknown object), our first set of hypotheses are concerned with interpretive meaning-making prior to any group interaction. Dispositional accounts in meaning-making overwhelmingly focus on meaning-as-consensus, and yet we are aware of no prior research that suggests tightness should operate differently. As such, our first hypothesis regards both consensus and tightness.

*HYPOTHESIS 1.—For both consensus and tightness, prior to interacting, sociodemographically similar individuals (along lines of gender, age, education, or region) will make similar meanings of the same cultural object.*³

If dispositional backgrounds and experiences “get into” and guide the meanings that are made of new objects, perhaps a more refined version of this mechanism would look to competencies and expertise within the cultural domain in which the object is located. As demographics are associated with cultural preferences, competencies, and schemas (Peterson and Kern 1996; Griswold et al. 2005; Thomas 2017), sociodemographic associations with meaning construction may simply be a blunt measure of more refined dispositional preferences and competencies within a field space. While still

³ The specific sociodemographic characteristics will likely vary from case to case. Here and in what follows, we posit those characteristics germane to our case and data collection.

operating within a dispositional framework, this is our second hypothesis, which we test for both consensus and tightness:

HYPOTHESIS 2.—For both consensus and tightness, prior to interacting, individuals with similar tastes (genre likes and dislikes; degree of omnivorousness) and competencies (frequency of reading fiction) within an object's field space will make similar meanings of that object.

If dispositions that have been developed over the life course are the primary causal mechanism in meaning construction, this would also suggest that the meanings constructed through this mechanism will be stable over time. As Kaufman (2004) notes, “the canon on cultural consumption assumes that audiences have more or less static worldviews around which they reconcile their respective interpretations of cultural goods” (p. 339). Put another way, as dispositions are durable and create meaning-giving perceptions that are transposable to new objects, we would expect those meaning-giving perceptions to be durable, at least over the short term.

Judged overall, a dispositional account of meaning construction seems both theoretically and empirically well supported, and perhaps even intuitive. Yet evidence for it has never been empirically isolated from alternative meaning-making accounts, particularly those that track meaning over time (Warde 2014). As DellaPosta et al. (2015, p. 1476) argue, demographic explanations are often “constrained by the absence of network relations in the random samples.” For this reason, it may be that interpersonal influence networks produce the cross-sectional correlations detected in surveys, which are then, in a snapshot, attributed to more deeply ingrained dispositional mechanisms. Without longitudinal and relational data, one cannot differentiate between selection into meaning based on shared dispositions afforded by positions in social space and meaning derived from more situational accounts.

Situational Accounts for the Segregation of Meaning

A second plausible explanation for the correspondence between demographic backgrounds and meanings sees meaning as emerging or spreading in the interactions of discrete situations, be they in small groups (Fine 2012) or diffusing through interpersonal networks (Friedkin 2006). As argued by Swidler (2008, p. 617), “cultural meanings are organized and brought to bear at the collective and social, not the individual level.” On the topic of cultural tastes in particular, Hennion (2007) juxtaposes the situational account of meaning construction with dispositional frameworks, advocating for the former: “Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity. . . . In displacing the question of taste towards personal dispositions, norms and collective frames, sociology makes of tasting an obvious, ordinary experience. [In the dispositional account] the actual taste, in a situation, is

but a more or less mechanical or unconscious application of dispositions, which themselves originate from social determinants. . . . But such a stable judgment, consistent with its determinisms, is very rarely observed” (2007, p. 101). As Hennion suggests, a situational account would suggest that interpreted meanings are not dispositionally fixed, but in fact unstable, and even over the short term change through interactions in discrete situations. In support of this formulation, research on small-group dynamics in established communities suggests that social influence processes are often idiosyncratic in shaping meanings that are specific to the social order of that group (Perrin 2005; Fine 2012; Gibson 2012). In relation to objects, this perspective is most clearly expressed by Blumer (1969, p.12), who writes that “the meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through a process of indication—a process that is necessarily a social process . . . in which people are forming, sustaining, and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give [them] meaning.”

Other lines of work have demonstrated that potentially random factors, such as the sequential ordering of evaluations, create stochastic outcomes in the ultimate evaluations of cultural objects (Salganik et al. 2006) and that, over time, meanings fracture and set off down different paths in unpredictable ways (McDonnell 2016).⁴ Axelrod (1997) used agent-based simulations to model how interpersonal influence among adjacent individuals with random cultural traits may eventually result in group polarization, with greater realism added to the simulations by Flache and Macy (2011). In turn, Baldassarri and Bearman (2007) and DellaPosta et al. (2015) have extended such models to simulate how specific issues may “take off” in polarizing a population. These theoretical simulations suggest that a dispositional account of meaning-making may overestimate stabilities in meaning and that snapshots finding demographic differences in meaning-making may just be routinely missing the social influence processes that generate such differences. Just as dispositional accounts of meaning-making seem to be theoretically and empirically well supported, so too do more situational and interactionist accounts. Any potential cleavage between dispositional and situational accounts emerges because what is treated as evidence for each account often formally neglects the other account as a serious consideration (cf. Benzecry 2011).

While dispositional accounts would predict a stability of meaning (at least over the short term), a situational account would predict measurable shifts in meaning over the short term, if interaction on the object has occurred. Through interaction in small groups, meanings can swing dramatically over

⁴ Key to McDonnell’s (2016) situational account of “cultural entropy” is the materiality of objects. In our analysis to follow there is no variation on materiality for the cultural object, and it is not a part of our analysis.

short periods of time (Gibson 2012), and intended meanings can fracture into local understandings and codes that are idiosyncratic across groups and situations (McDonnell 2016). Yet, as with dispositional accounts of meaning construction, situational accounts of meaning-making, in analyses, also overwhelmingly have focused on meaning-as-consensus rather than on meaning-as-tightness. Friedkin et al. (2016) have recently extended formal interactional influence models to situations in which issues are interconnected, and Goldberg and Stein (2018) have shown in simulations that the tightness of schemas can spread even without sustained interaction, though direct interpersonal influences on the linking of issues (i.e., the “tightening” of attitudes) remains unexamined territory. In sum, a situational account of meaning-making would predict that, over time, meanings will cohere within interactive groups and diverge across interactive groups. This perspective would predict the same results for both consensus and tightness:

HYPOTHESIS 3.—For both consensus and tightness, from time 1 to time 2 individuals within groups will converge on shared meanings.

To be clear, just as a dispositional account may seem to have a lot of face validity in advance of empirical testing, the same can be said of hypothesis 3; and yet, it should not be taken as an empirical given. Also plausible from a situational account could be a sectarian process of group polarization, or an interactional swapping of meaning, resulting in no group-level change. As interaction is the causal mechanism in this account, hypothesis 4 flows from hypothesis 3:

HYPOTHESIS 4.—For both consensus and tightness, from time 1 to time 2 individuals who are not in the same interactional groups will not tend to converge on similar meanings.

Although situational accounts may tend to focus on face-to-face interaction within groups, the mechanism in meaning-making is the influence of others, which in some situations can also occur at a distance, as in the experimental design of Salganik et al. (2006). Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) “two-step flow” model of mass communication is a different type of situational account, in which opinion leaders who are more informed on the topic at hand mediate the meaning-making of others, preventing an otherwise hegemonic reception of meaning (e.g., Zaller 1992). A situational account would posit that those exposed to the influence of an opinion leader (i.e., a reviewer) would adapt to that situation and make different meanings than would those who are not so exposed. At the same time, further evidence of a purely situational account would also predict that new situations create new meanings, such that the meanings made through the prior external influences of an opinion leader are absorbed by later influences within the group. Any time 1 traces of these influences would disappear at time 2. Our data provide this additional elaboration and test of a situational account of meaning construction.

Identity and Interactional Resonance

To this point, we have treated dispositional and situational accounts of meaning-making as separate processes. Indeed, while not necessarily antagonistic, they rely on different implicit definitions of social structure and its effects on meaning-making. We now consider their fusion—how dispositional and situational accounts could be complementary.

While interpersonal influence in a situational account is an established mechanism through which meanings may be constructed *de novo*, the end result would be an overall fracturing of meaning in which small groups drive each other into situationally derived meanings that are consistent within but chaotic across groups (i.e., local convergence leads to global divergence). Consequently, without additional mechanisms and further context, it is unclear how situational accounts would result in the cross-sectional distribution of meanings along demographic lines that are regularly observed. Given this predicament, our combined hypotheses so far would suggest a world in which cross-sectional distributions in meaning are created by dispositional mechanisms and subsequent situational effects dampen these correspondences. Yet given additional scope conditions in society, a situational account could result in, or even strengthen, the effects of dispositional meaning-making. Key here is the well-known fact that interactions and social influences are not randomly distributed across the population.

We link dispositional and situational accounts in part via *homophily*, that is, the likelihood that demographically similar individuals will tend to interact with and influence one another's interpretations of cultural objects over time, such that interpretations diffuse unequally through demographically segregated channels. As argued by Feld (1981), demographics may operate as an "extra-network social structure that systematically produce[s] patterns in a social network," which, by way of networks, may then cause shifts in interpretation and meaning (p. 1016). Feld gives the example of common residency in a neighborhood as a weakly constraining focus, whereas a reading group in an elementary school would present a more constraining focus (p. 1018). Feld's insight is essentially a theory of dispositionally infused situations, in which the latter (more constraining situation) results in the making of meanings. Benzecry (2011), for his part, refers to this as the interplay between "background" (i.e., dispositional) and "foreground" (i.e., situational) processes in meaning-making. In this formulation, a world of cross-sectionally distributed meanings could be produced by three different sources: (1) pure dispositional meaning-making, (2) an epiphenomenal outcome of homophilous interactions in discrete situations, or (3) homophilous interactions having a ratcheting effect on dispositionally derived meanings.

In support of the third scenario, some scholars have posited a kind of "epidemiology of representations" (Sperber 1994; Kashima 2000), noting that

interpersonal networks lead to the emergence and spread of tastes within demographic groups. Using the case of music genres, Mark (2003) shows how homophily produces sociocultural contagion that results in demographically structured cultural niches of taste. Similarly, an “influence plus homophily” model forms the basis of simulations by DellaPosta et al. (2015); these strongly suggest that many lifestyle formations may be routinely produced by a society’s segregated and consolidated social structures. We test this proposition with the following hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS 5.—For both consensus and tightness, after homophilous interactions that occur between time 1 and time 2, global meanings will converge within demographic and taste-based groups.

So far, we have proposed two general frameworks for empirical testing in which meanings may be structurally produced and segregated, as well as a third more integrative and potentially additive framework. Yet none of these formulations includes what may be a key variable in meaning constructions: the encoded contents of the object for which meanings are being made. To paraphrase Griswold on a related point, our inclusion of the encoded contents of the object itself as a potentially important factor in meaning-making “may seem a sign of theoretical naiveté, but it is a sign of common sense as well” (1993, p. 465).

Consider that, for the most part, both dispositional and situational accounts of meaning-making treat the objects on which meanings are made as essentially Rorschach inkblots. Put another way, through dispositional or situational mechanisms, meanings are drawn out of objects that are open to near-infinite meanings. Yet while most cultural objects may allow for a range of interpretations, this range does not mean that they are reasonably open to infinite interpretations, nor that they do not cue some interpretive frames, identity markers, or conversational topics (and not others). Using the example from our data in figure 1, the proposition is that the characteristics of the object itself—the dissolution of a heterosexual relationship in a border town immediately following the Civil War—may catalyze some demographic cues more than others (e.g., gender and region more than income or education) and spur some interpretative dimensions more than others (i.e., as a story of agentic or structural failings more than as a parable of the superiority of nine-pin over 10-pin bowling), which maps onto those demographic cues. As succinctly summarized by Benzecry (2011, p. 194), when studying the mechanisms that generate meaning-making for objects, “the object/work is an active part of the explanation.” For most objects, most of the time, we believe situational approaches may have overcorrected by shifting away from dispositional accounts that have tended to derive “just-so” stories of why some types of people have certain tastes and cultural orientations. Even such a deserved correction may lead to an untenable position: that across all instances, just about any meaning can be made by any subgroup on any object.

Arguing that objects should be brought back in, McDonnell et al. (2017) posit that cultural objects gain resonance in an interactive exchange between individuals in discrete interactions. For McDonnell et al., what an object means and the problems it solves for people are dependent on both the object's characteristics, as well as the meanings created around it in contingent situations. Certain objects may resonate more with certain groups, consequently leading them to derive similar meanings through interaction. By way of examples, Tavory (2016) examines how interactional density "summons" the members of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood into shared meaning systems, and in observing book groups, Long (1992) concludes that "reading in groups not only offers occasions for explicitly collective textual interpretation, but encourages new forms of association and nurtures new ideas that are developed in conversation" (p. 112). In their work on culture in interaction, Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) use two detailed studies to show that meaning-making takes place within groups with styles that filter larger cultural representations, but often in the same ways, using the same underlying cultural codes, and through enacted rituals come to similar kinds of interpretations.

In short, through homophilous interaction on the topic of a focal object that cues some latent demographic positions and not others, individuals may evoke shared understandings and cross-sectionally distributed meanings might emerge, and do so even over the short term. This leads to our final hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS 6.—For both consensus and tightness, after homophilous interactions that occur between time 1 and time 2, individuals with identity markers that resonate with the focal topics embedded within the cultural object (gender, region) will converge on similar meanings.

DATA AND METHODS

Book Groups

We rely on data from 132 individuals in 21 book groups in the West, Northeast, and South of the United States.⁵ As predicted by Feld, and as is true of book groups more generally (Radway 1984; Hartley and Turvey 2002; Long 2003), members had self-created the more strongly constraining foci of their groups (i.e., monthly meetings to congregate and discuss an object of shared attention) through the weakly constraining foci of status homophily, be it for

⁵ Twenty of these groups were truly naturally occurring in that they had existed as book groups for, at a minimum, 12 months prior to recruitment into the study. One was a group of friends who heard about the study and contacted the author to participate as an occasion to launch a book group. The inclusion or exclusion of this group has no meaningful effect on our results.

demographics (e.g., gender, age, education), occupation (e.g., groups disproportionately made up of teachers or lawyers), neighborhoods, co-attendance by children in the same school, nonprofit organizations (libraries, faith-based community centers), or friends and friends-of-friends. Book groups recruited for participation were scouted in three ways: (1) groups had members who were neither directly nor indirectly connected to the author (Childress) at the time of data collection (seven groups); (2) groups were referred by bookstore employees or coordinated through public or nonprofit institutions (five groups); and (3) groups resulted from a snowball sample from these other groups (nine groups). Three groups declined to participate in the study, and several others were not ultimately recruited into the study for reasons that would violate the quasi-natural experiment of this work.⁶

In the United States, reading novels for pleasure is disproportionately an elite activity, and it correlates with education, income, and race. Women, more than men, read for pleasure, particularly when it comes to fiction. As compared to the general population, our book groups are reflective of what Griswold et al. (2005) term the “reading class” and are even a particular segment of the reading class in that they have self-selected into being members of book groups. The demographics of our book groups follow those of self-reported book group participants from the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA): they are, disproportionately, highly educated upper-middle-class women of advanced middle age who identify as white (making race a demographic limitation on our data, as we lack variation).⁷ Our members are more likely to have advanced degrees than SPPA estimates.

Book groups are an appropriate setting for our analyses for several reasons. First, unlike a laboratory setting, book groups are settings in which people explicitly self-select into discussion and interpretation of cultural objects. For a researcher, then, these are more or less quasi-formal focus groups “in the wild,” ripe for the implementation of a pre- and postdiscussion survey design. Book group meetings vary in length (the discussions in groups we observed ranged from 45 minutes to nearly two hours), but they have finite beginnings and ends, allowing researchers to control for exogenous influences.

⁶ Namely, these were groups for whom the insertion of the novel into their reading schedule would violate the norms of book selection within the group (e.g., groups that read only nonfiction or science fiction, groups that read only award winners, and so on).

⁷ Members of book groups in our data are 94% white, 10 percentage points higher than the 2012 SPPA estimate for book group participation (with a sizable margin of error due to sparseness). In searching for naturally occurring book groups for recruitment (for which introduction of the novel would not be a major divergence from typical group selections), Childress (2017) concluded that a choice had to be made between finding variation on gender and variation on race. Gender was selected because the book centered on a romantic relationship between a man and a woman and the story was told equally from the first-person perspectives of a man and a woman.

Second, book groups are more representative than most survey research sites when it comes to capturing how cultural objects are consumed. Just as people tend to go to and discuss cultural events together (e.g., an art exhibit, movie, concert, or play), book groups provide a setting in which people of their own volition discuss cultural objects together. They are not high-stakes events, in which the meanings made may be imbued with weighty moral consequences, but everyday gatherings between friends that are generally low-stakes and social. Should situational meaning-making occur, book groups are an ideal setting to test its occurrence. Likewise, as the members of book groups are dedicated and regular readers of fiction, we would also predict that should dispositional meaning-making occur, this population should best allow researchers to capture its measurable effects (this is particularly true for measurements of cultural tastes and competencies). Because we hypothesize that meaning-making will generally arise from some combination of structural and local interactional processes, we can think of few more appropriate settings in which to find these processes.

The Novel

The object of meaning under discussion across all groups is the same previously unknown novel: *Jarrettsville*. A work of mainstream, literary-historical fiction, it has a clear story and plot that take place in a border town at the end of the Civil War and involves clear issues of gender and regional identity in America. As a work of literary-historical fiction, the novel does not aim to guide the reader to an ideological takeaway, but to engage readers' imaginations through competing sympathies, ambiguities, and moral complexities in the actions of main characters operating under a divided and oppressive social structure. Both the author and her novel were entirely unknown to readers before entry into the study.

Authored by Cornelia Nixon and published by Counterpoint Press in 2009, *Jarrettsville* is based on real people and events. It is set in postbellum Jarrettsville, Maryland, and tells the story of the betrothal and eventual dissolution (by way of murder) of Martha Jane Cairnes (hereafter, Martha) and Nicholas McComas (hereafter Nick). Martha comes from a family of Confederate sympathizers, including Mary, her mother, and Richard, her brother (who in the story is an accomplice in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln). Martha meets and falls in love with Nick, who hails from an abolitionist Union family. When Martha becomes pregnant, her brother Richard nearly beats Nick to death. Nick leaves town while Martha is still pregnant, returning to Jarrettsville later to attend a parade commemorating the Confederate surrender. Martha shoots and kills Nick at point-blank range with some 50 eyewitnesses, yet she is found innocent by a jury of southern sympathizers on the ad hoc grounds "justifiable homicide."

Jarrettsville is the third published novel by an author whose career has earned good reviews and literary awards. The skill and craft of her writing are documented, yet only 4% of book club members reported having prior awareness of this author or this novel (and this small segment is likely artificially inflated).⁸ This combination of a moderately successful author who is unknown to our participants ensures that uncaptured exogenous influences cannot bias our results regarding the direct effects of meaning construction. Additionally, the novel is not overtly or intentionally ideologically driven, and the author's goal was to make the readers think rather than infuse them with a particular takeaway (as may be the intent in written texts such as sermons or political pamphlets). *Jarrettsville* is deliberately polysemous, and the author actively tried to highlight moral ambiguities. The novel also relies on heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1982), as its story is told through the first-person perspectives of multiple narrators. Primarily, these perspectives are those of Martha and Nick, but the beginning and end of the story are told from the perspectives of 11 additional characters.

Even the novel's genre assignment is unsettled and open to interpretation. The author wrote the novel with the intention of spanning the genres of literary fiction and popular fiction, and the publisher was concerned with this lack of clarity. The first third of the novel could be read as romance fiction, whereas the end of the novel is more of a courtroom procedural. Taken together, all of these characteristics mean that, even among modern novels, *Jarrettsville* may be particularly open to polysemous meaning-making. As in the setting of book groups, this specific novel is a highly appropriate object with which to test our hypotheses.

Data Collection Procedures

Across all groups, all members agreed to read the novel and abstain from discussing it until their group discussions. They filled out three surveys: an identical time 1 and time 2 survey and a third regarding intergroup dynamics in the group discussion. The time 1 survey was filled out prior to the participants' book club meetings and covered a wide range of evaluative and interpretive questions about the novel (e.g., the reader's sympathies for each of the characters; attributions of blame to different characters and structural-level factors in the story; interpretations of plot, pacing, and genre; and their weighted beliefs about the novel's most climactic scene). In this survey, respondents also filled out a battery of demographic questions, questions about their genre reading preferences across 11 fiction genres, and, in replication of

⁸ In Salganik et al. (2006), 14% of MusicLab respondents reported familiarity with the fictitious band Peter on Fire, likely because of social desirability bias. We expect the same in a book club, whose members might inflate their knowledge of authors for the same reason.

SPPA data, the number of novels they had read for pleasure in the prior 12 months. To control for exogenous influences, readers were asked to report and weight for influence any reviews they read about the novel.

After their group discussions, group members again answered this survey, now at time 2. The third survey instrument was adapted from the standard networks survey used by Friedkin to study interpersonal influence within small groups (see Friedkin 2006; Friedkin and Johnsen 2011) as pertaining to the specific group meeting that had just ended.

At time 1, readers were asked to fill out a more generalizable (i.e., across-meetings) influence survey. The limited data collected from this survey were ultimately dropped; groups self-reported that the survey illogically assumed stable group dynamics of influence that did not exist. Respondents told us, instead, that group mates may be very influential about some books and not others, on the basis of rotating discussion leaders (e.g., in groups with rotating discussion leaders, the structural position affords influence as much as or more than the person who occupies the position); the story setting (e.g., personal familiarity with the region or culture in which the story takes place); life experiences (e.g., divorced members are more influential in novels about divorce); genre (e.g., a member who is known for disliking a genre has her opinion discounted when discussing works of that genre); shifting longitudinal group dynamics (e.g., reconfigurations of typical conversations as based on members' entries into or exits from the group or inconsistent attendance across meetings); and inconsistent commitment to the foci across meetings (e.g., influence accorded to those members who for any particular meeting seemed to have read most closely and thought most deeply about the book). Put differently, through multiple groups' independent objections to the validity of a survey designed to capture a longitudinally stable influence structure, it became clear that, at least for our respondents, the potential for situational influence on meaning-making in book groups truly was situational.

Given that our club members are mostly friends and friends-of-friends discussing an everyday cultural object for which opinion shifts are low-stakes, one concern might be that in recording their time 2 influence surveys, club members might "gift" social influence that was not actually felt or change their interpretations in an effort to go along to get along with the group. For two reasons this is not a major concern in our data. First, in our book groups, as in others (Hartley and Turvey 2002; Long 2003), generating conversations through divergent interpretations of a book is often the point of the discussion. As our respondents clarified, if everyone agrees on everything, even an excellent book makes for a bad and pointless meeting, as the book has failed to generate interesting discussion. For this reason, book club members know that feigning agreement where it does not exist would disrupt the point of congregating to discuss a book: the new ideas and perspectives generated in conversation (Long 2003).

The second reasonable concern is that, in our time 2 surveys, club members would protect social relationships by according influence that was not truly felt. Put another way, there may be a social penalty to conversing with a friend for an hour and then declaring that the friend had zero influence on one's opinions. Yet, in our data, privately recorded rather than publicly declared after the group discussions, the modal group member did precisely that: she accorded her modal group mate zero influence on her interpretations. Of 100 available influence points, the average club member assigned just 13 influence points to all influential group mates, with an average of 6 points to each individual who was accorded influence. Because of this, we can proceed knowing that in privately recorded time 2 influence surveys, club members were not gifting tokenistic influence to each other for insincere reasons or for ulterior social motives.

Measures

Consensus.—To measure interpretive consensus, we selected a set of 27 interpretive questions concerning the possible meanings of the novel (the characters, setting, and plot). Questions were constructed in consultation with the book's author and its publisher and scaled between 1 (total disagreement) and 100 (total agreement). We use factor analysis to reduce the complexity of these attitudes and because the latent combinations of interpretations are more clearly revealed through scaling procedures.⁹ The attitudes on the issues can be reduced to six interpretive dimensions (with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and explaining a cumulative 62% of variance). We use unrotated factors to position respondents in this space rather than forcing greater separation or orthogonality. We derive the factor loadings and we use them to create factor-weighted indices to position each individual in the six-dimensional space on the basis of his or her reported interpretations prior to and after group discussions. For individual-level models, we predict individuals' positions on each of the interpretive dimensions as $y(i)_i$; for dyadic models, we measure dyadic distances for each ij pair on each dimension y as $|y(i)_i - y(j)_i|$.

Tightness.—While consensus concerns overall agreement on an issue or set of issues, tightness concerns how the same issues correlate (positively or negatively) with one another within an overall schema of meaning-making. Researchers have approached tightness as a group-level property; a group may contain one or more schemas that organize their attitudes, and these schemas may vary in overall clarity and strength. However, tightness is neither solely nor inherently a property of collectivities. In the same way in which

⁹ We examined the sensitivity of results to this decision by performing analyses on each of the 27 issues separately and found results consistent with what we present here.

many social qualities (e.g., social capital) can be measured as properties of individuals or subgroups, tightness also exists at various levels. Because we are interested in the extent to which individual interpretive schemas are ingrained (i.e., dispositional) in comparison to how susceptible they are to social influence (i.e., situational), we examine shared tightness at the level of dyads over time. We construct a dyadic measure for each ij pair of individuals in our data set, gauging to what degree i and j share an underlying interpretive schema. For all the 27 issues (interpretive questions) in aggregate, we construct ij tightness as the absolute value of the correlation across these issues. To the extent that i and j share an interpretive schema (even if they lack consensus on one or more issues), it will be evinced in a higher absolute correlation (alignment) in the issues. Using the absolute values allows for aligned disagreements on individual issues to contribute equally to the overall tightness measure.

Figure 2 builds from figure 1 by graphically representing configurations for how consensus and tightness might shift for a dyad from time 1 (before interaction) to time 2 (after interaction).

In the first row, we see that, from time 1 to time 2, the two book group members increase in their consensus for each of the four items: they get closer to each other on the roles of Martha, racism, the Civil War, and Nick in the dissolution of Martha and Nick's relationship. Notably, this occurs without changing the overall tightness of their meaning-making schemas. In the second row, consensus again increases, with respondent 1 moving closer to respondent 2 on the responsibility of racism and respondent 2 moving closer to respondent 1 on the responsibility of Nick. Yet because they shift toward each other on these two items and remain polarized and in the same positions on the other two items, the tightness of their meaning-making schemas breaks apart (from 1 to .66): in this scenario, how similarly respondent 1 and respondent 2 feel about one issue is now less predictive of how they will feel about other issues. In the third row, consensus decreases (respondents 1 and 2 get further apart on Martha, racism, and the Civil War and slightly closer on Nick), but tightness increases as their meanings across items get closer to being inverse while remaining within the same schema, as in figure 1.

Demographic characteristics.—We include background characteristics for each individual respondent, including age, gender, highest level of education (high school, college, graduate degree), and geographic region of birth or primary socialization (South vs. North).¹⁰ For dyadic models, we create variables indicating whether individuals i and j have the same or similar demographic characteristics.

¹⁰ We dichotomized region in this way because southern identity is central to the novel and is salient on some discrete interpretive dimensions (Childress 2017).

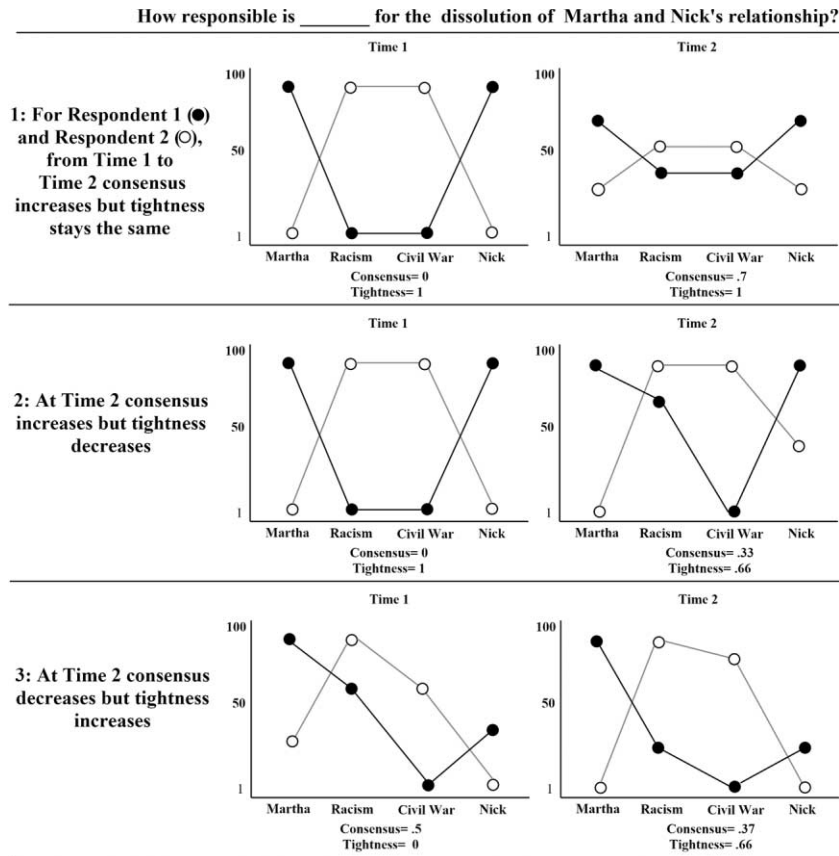


FIG. 2.—Three ways consensus and tightness may shift through discussion

Cultural competencies.—We include cultural field-related factors, including the genre preferences of each reader in his or her stated preferences for literary, historical, popular, and romance fiction (the four major genres through which *Jarrettsville*'s author and publisher discussed the work), as well as the number of seven other genre fiction categories they indicate enjoying reading, a volume measure of omnivorousness in their reading tastes. For dyadic models, we create a Jaccard similarity index for each ij pair based on their reading preferences. Where both individuals like seven or more of 11 fiction genres, we include the measure “both omnivores.” We gauge field competencies by including the total number of fiction books read annually by each individual (in individual-level models) and the absolute difference in this number in dyadic models.

Social influence.—After the group discussions, all book group members were asked to determine who, if anyone, in the group had been influential in reshaping their interpretations of the novel. Drawing on prior research on social influence (Friedkin and Johnsen 2011), respondents were asked to allocate 100 points of influence. Respondents could keep any number of these points, allocating a self-influence score on the basis of the degree to which they felt their interpretations remained stable from time 1 to time 2. The remaining influence points were then divided among one or more of those j members of the group, according to the weight of their perceived influence on i . For dyadic models, we create a *dyad influence sum* as the total amount of influence accorded to one another ($ij + ji$).¹¹

Social influence may also come from outside the group, to the extent that individuals talked with nongroup members or were exposed to other influential interpretations. It is a unique feature of these data that they include a measure of external media influence based on a single, very negative, *New York Times* review of the novel. This was published before many of the book group meetings, and several book group members read and felt influenced by this review as they went into their discussions. As with the dyadic influence measure, the review influence variable ranges from 1 to 100 and affords an opportunity to gauge the relative strength of this single powerful media message. Our situational-channeling models therefore gauge not only the closed system of local social influences within the group but also the relative strength of these endogenous influences vis-à-vis a potentially authoritative and hegemonic media message (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).¹² (For descriptive statistics, see appendix.)

Hypothesis Tests

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predict that individuals with similar demographic backgrounds and taste positions will make similar meanings of the novel. In terms of shared meaning as consensus, for example, women would tend to be, on average, higher or lower than men on one or more interpretive dimensions because of their shared experiences and socialization. To test these hypotheses in terms of consensus, our models take the common linear form of ordinary least squares regressions in which each individual's score on each interpretive dimension is the dependent variable, regressed on demographic and cultural field predictors. This approach largely follows the logic of sur-

¹¹ In models not reported here, we created directed influence models and weighted influence models consistent with Friedkin's (2006) convex combination approach. Results were consistent with those presented here.

¹² As a robustness check, we estimated models omitting anyone who read the review. This did not substantively change the results, suggesting that the review was not as influential as one might expect, given the *Times*'s culturally authoritative profile and distinct point of view and the power this review had on individuals prior to group discussions.

vey research but in our case uses a previously unknown object and gauges interpretations prior to any interpersonal interactions. If such survey results are rooted in ingrained demographic differences, we would expect to see consensus among similar readers prior to group interaction and across groups.

However, as discussed above, people may lack consensus on a number of specific interpretive dimensions but still draw on the same underlying schema (i.e., tightness) in their interpretations across them. If an interpretive schema is ingrained, at time 1 we would expect people with the same or similar background characteristics to be tighter in their interpretive schema even across book groups than those who come from dissimilar backgrounds, even if they are in the same book groups.

To test hypotheses 1 and 2 for tightness, we construct a dyadic data set in which all 8,464 unordered ij pairs $((132^2 - 132)/2)$ in our data are observed prior to discussions. Such dyadic data present the challenge of correcting for standard errors biased downward because of nonindependence. Scholars have proposed various ways to account for dyadic data structures (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006; Snijders, van de Bunt, and Steglich 2010), and we follow a growing number of studies using multiway clustering and the estimation procedures outlined in Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller (2011). This approach has been shown by Lindgren (2010) to produce coefficients that are consistent with other network-based approaches. We estimate a linear regression predicting ij tightness scores prior to discussion as

$$y_{ij(t=1)} = \alpha_{ij} + DS_{ij}\beta_1 + CS_{ij}\beta_2 + e_{ij}, \quad (1)$$

where α_{ij} is an estimated baseline tightness when other predictors in the model are zero (i.e., when dyads are maximally dissimilar), DS_{ij} contains variables for demographic similarity, CS contains variables for cultural field similarity, and e_{ij} is an error term that is multiway clustered for each ij dyad. Coefficients contained in β_1 and β_2 test hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 focus on the interactional mechanisms of meaning-making. To test these hypotheses, we return to a dyadic framework, elaborating on the model in equation (1) above by looking at dyads over time. Thus, data sets include an additional 8,464 dyads for postdiscussion interpretations. In models predicting shifts on interpretive dimensions, we are interested in gauging emergent consensus, and so we examine each dyad's proximity over time on each interpretive dimension. For consensus models, the dependent variables are dyadic distances on each interpretive dimension prior to and after the discussions. For each ij dyad, on each interpretive dimension y , we calculate the Euclidean distance d_{ij} as follows: $|y(i)_t - y(j)_t|$. These dynamic models take the form

$$d_{ij(t)} = \alpha_{ij(t1)} + \tau_2 + \beta_1 G_{ij} + \beta_2(\tau_2 \times G_{ij}) + \beta_3 I_{ij} + \beta_4(\tau_2 \times I_{ij}) + e_{ij}, \quad (2)$$

where $\alpha_{ij(t_1)}$ is a baseline dyadic distance prior to discussions for dyads in different groups; τ_2 is the general temporal effect on shifts in interpretation after discussions for dyads in different groups; G_{ij} indicates when i and j are in the same group; and I_{ij} is the amount of dyadic influence accorded within dyad ij . The coefficient β_1 gauges the extent to which individuals in the same groups have similar interpretations prior to interaction; β_2 tests hypothesis 3's prediction that people in the same groups will converge more rapidly on shared meanings; and, consequently, τ_2 tests hypothesis 4's prediction that people in different groups will not converge on shared meanings. The coefficient β_3 tests the extent to which dyads with more accorded influence are more interpretively similar prior to interaction, and β_4 provides a test of a more precise social influence mechanism in which influence directly accorded within the dyad generates greater consensus (as opposed to the indirect influences of simply being in the same room during the discussion).¹³ For tightness models, the estimation is the same as in equation (2) above, but the dependent variable is the aforementioned dyadic tightness measure at time t .

Hypotheses 5 and 6 predict that shared meanings emerge through identity-related resonance within homophilous groups. To evaluate whether groups converge on meanings and the extent to which the novel may have resonated with some groups more than others, we examine postdiscussion consensus and tightness. Where do men, women, southerners, and northerners (the main cleavages in the novel, according to both its author and publisher) end up in interpretive space after discussions? The hypotheses predict that it is through discussions with similar others that individuals do (or do not) find identity-infused resonance with an object. For consensus and tightness, we repeat the models used to evaluate initial disposition for meaning-making with the same panel of respondents after group discussions. By comparing postdiscussion results to those initially derived from the novel prior to any discussion, we can evaluate the extent to which the novel led some demographic groups to derive similar meanings.

RESULTS

Interpreting *Jarrettsville*

Table 1 shows loadings of the six retained factors from the factor analysis of 27 questions concerning how individuals interpreted the novel. Our summary of these interpretations is informed by ethnographic field notes from 19 book groups and audio recordings of discussions from all 21 book groups.

¹³ In models not reported here, we follow the Friedkin-Johnsen approach to weighted social influence processes. Results are consistent with the reported models; i.e., individuals shifted on specific issues on the basis of to whom they accorded more or less influence.

The factor loadings illustrate how latent readings of the novel consist of linear combinations of various interpretations that are correlated positively or negatively (ranging from -1.0 to 1.0). Each factor can be understood as a dimension of meaning commonly made from the novel and on which readers may have more or less agreement. The first factor explains 18% of the variance and can therefore be treated as the most common reading of the novel. On the basis of the combination of factor loadings, this demonstrates a “literary-historical” reading, in which readers interpret the novel as a work of literary fiction, sympathize and identify with the main characters, and attribute responsibility for the main events of the story to racism and the Civil War. In-depth interviews and participation in meetings with the author and publisher indicate that a literary-historical reading, along with a “deep structure” reading, most closely align with the author and publisher’s intended reading of the novel, whereas “agentic moralism” (in particular), “gender divided,” “traditional gender,” and “mother sympathy” readings of the novel were deduced meanings they were trying to avoid.

A gender divided reading, rather than orienting toward structural factors as the causal drivers of the story, interprets the novel as a battle of the sexes, identifying with Nick and siding against Martha as the agentic driver of the murderous outcome of their relationship. Unlike the literary-historical reading, which is concerned with structural effects on individual actions, the gender divided reading focuses on individuated sympathy and blame: the individual failings of a guilty woman and what she has done to a just man. The deep structure and agentic moralism readings are elaborations of the literary-historical and gender divided readings, respectively. Like the literary-historical reading, the deep structure reading finds even deeper structural, causal factors in race and war, but with a complicated understanding of the main character Nick, who is seen as just, but not a source of identification. Readers making a deep structure meaning of the novel were also unable to identify with Richard, the other main male character. The agentic moralism reading flips and complicates the gender divided reading and treats *Jarrettsville* as a romance novel in which Martha is victimized by a scurrilous paramour (Nick) and evil mother (Mary), while also showing greater sympathy for the racist Richard than for the former slave Tim. The traditional gender reading of the novel is in accordance with traditional gender roles, while the mother sympathy reading interprets *Jarrettsville* as a romance novel in which the reader sympathizes with Martha’s mother Mary, who has seen embarrassment and shame brought on her family.

Dispositional Meaning-Making

Table 2 shows results from models predicting individuals’ positions on each of the dimensions prior to group discussions. For meaning-as-consensus,

TABLE 1
 FACTOR LOADINGS FOR ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES USED IN INTERPRETIVE INDICES

QUESTION	INTERPRETIVE DIMENSION AND LABEL					
	Literary- Historical (1)	Gender Divided (2)	Deep Structure (3)	Agentic Moralism (4)	Traditional Gender (5)	Mother Sympathy (6)
How funny did you find the story?			-.34			
How sad did you find the story? . . . . .	.47					
How much would you call <i>Jarrettsville</i> a love story? . . . . .	.35					
In your estimation how traditionally "feminine" was Martha with regard to her needs, wants, thoughts, and actions compared to societal expectations of women in that place and of that time? . . . . .					.43	
In your estimation how traditionally "masculine" was Nick with regard to his needs, wants, thoughts, and actions compared to societal expectations of men in that place and of that time? . . . . .					.53	
How responsible was Martha for the failure of her and Nick's relationship? . . . . .		.51				
How responsible was Nick for the failure of his and Martha's relationship?		-.56				
How responsible was Richard for the failure of Martha and Nick's relationship? . . . . .	.34					
How responsible was Mary Ann (Martha's mom) for the failure of Martha and Nick's relationship? . . . . .				.48		-.30
How important were the competing sympathies for the Confederacy and the Union in Maryland after the Civil War in the dissolution of Martha and Nick's relationship? . . . . .	.34		.53			
How important was racism, slavery, and rumors of interracial sex in the dissolution of Martha and Nick's relationship? . . . . .	.32		.58			

How important were the class differences between Martha's and Nick's families in the dissolution of their relationship? . . . . .	.43	.36
Given what happened to him, how justified was Nick in leaving for Amish country after having been beaten by Richard and his militia? . . . . .	.43	.31
Given what happened to her, how justified was Martha in shooting Nick after he left her pregnant and did not show himself at their wedding? . . . . .	.33	.31
How much did you identify with the character of Martha? . . . . .	.60	
How much did you identify with the character of Nick? . . . . .	.40	-.40
How sympathetic were you to the character of Martha and her actions? . . . . .	.64	
How sympathetic were you to the character of Nick and his actions? . . . . .	.48	-.40
How sympathetic were you to the character of Richard (Martha's brother) and his actions? . . . . .	.34	-.38
How sympathetic were you to the character of Mary Ann (Martha's mother) and her actions? . . . . .		.57
How sympathetic were you to the character of Tim and his actions?		-.42
Climactic scene is the murder: Martha's murder of Nick		
Climactic scene is the trial: the final verdict in the trial		
Wedding; Nick in the barn watching his wedding below	-.35	-.32
Describes novel as a work of historical fiction . . . . .	.30	-.31
Describes novel as a work of literary fiction . . . . .	.34	-.35
Describes novel as a work of romance fiction . . . . .		.30

NOTE.—All variables are scaled 0–100, with 50 representing neutrality/indifference. We omit loadings that are below .3 to facilitate interpretation.

TABLE 2
BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND PREDISCUSSION INTERPRETATIONS

VARIABLE	INTERPRETIVE DIMENSION					
	Literary- Historical	Gender Divided	Deep Structure	Agentic Moralism	Traditional Gender	Mother Sympathy
Hypothesis 1:						
Age	-.13 (.87)	1.12 (1.26)	1.08*** (.27)	.95 (.85)	-.25 (.28)	.61 (1.30)
Male	-14.60 (37.42)	-7.45 (54.34)	-3.02 (11.73)	-4.13 (36.75)	2.86 (12.18)	-17.50 (56.19)
College (vs. high school)	-18.81 (51.51)	-9.18 (74.80)	15.25 (16.14)	-.79 (50.58)	-6.19 (16.77)	-23.79 (77.35)
Graduate school (vs. high school) . .	-8.07 (50.83)	24.22 (73.81)	10.10 (15.93)	21.74 (49.91)	-3.53 (16.55)	32.27 (76.32)
Southern	30.54 (28.82)	56.46 (41.86)	8.06 (9.03)	33.60 (28.30)	-2.61 (9.38)	50.63 (43.28)
Hypothesis 2:						
Annual fiction number read . . . . .	.96 (.61)	1.83* (.89)	-.01 (.19)	.78 (.60)	-.50* (.199)	1.37 (.92)
Reviews influence	-1.60 (.91)	-3.81** (1.32)	.19 (.29)	-2.32* (.90)	.62* (.30)	-3.45* (1.37)
Likes literary fiction.	-7.55 (35.07)	2.26 (50.93)	8.12 (10.99)	17.09 (34.44)	-13.56 (11.42)	35.76 (52.66)
Likes historical fiction.	35.78 (32.56)	-2.84 (47.29)	-2.64 (10.21)	-21.92 (31.98)	2.93 (10.60)	-27.75 (48.90)
Likes popular fiction.	-12.27 (25.35)	-32.93 (36.81)	8.46 (7.95)	-14.84 (24.89)	20.95* (8.25)	-20.92 (38.07)
Likes romance fiction.	38.41 (34.61)	11.81 (50.26)	-2.55 (10.85)	25.82 (33.99)	3.77 (11.27)	47.97 (51.97)
Number of genre fiction liked . . . . .	.73 (9.26)	-3.99 (13.45)	-2.69 (2.90)	-1.71 (9.09)	.70 (3.02)	-6.19 (13.91)
Constant	556.53*** (85.23)	239.14 (123.75)	29.19 (26.71)	93.61 (83.69)	27.45 (27.74)	268.13* (127.97)
df	12	12	12	12	12	12

NOTE.— $N = 132$.
* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$.

results offer almost no support for hypothesis 1 (that initial interpretations of otherwise unknown cultural objects can be dispositionally explained by demographic differences). While older readers were more likely to draw a deeper structural meaning from the text, individuals brought little in the way of demographically conditioned interpretations to the novel. To further underscore this point, consider that there is no underlying association between a reader's gender and the degree to which he or she drew out a specific interpretation, including a gender divided interpretation of the novel. Results offer somewhat more support for hypothesis 2's assertion that individuals' positions as consumers in the literary field shape the meanings they bring to, and therefore draw out of, the text. Individuals who tend to read fewer works of fiction also tend to derive a more traditional gender interpretation, while those with a taste for popular fiction are more likely see the novel in traditional gender terms.

Some of the strongest effects come from having been influenced by the *New York Times* review. Prior to group discussions, those who were more influenced by the review were less inclined to draw gender divided, agentic moralism, and mother sympathy in their readings and were more inclined toward gender traditionalism. This is most likely caused by the content of the review, which asserted that *Jarrettsville* was, in effect, a poorly crafted romance novel.

Table 3 reports coefficients from models predicting prediscussion tightness of interpretive schemas. For meaning-as-tightness, results offer consid-

TABLE 3
PREDISCUSSION DYADIC TIGHTNESS OF INTERPRETIVE SCHEMAS

	β	SE	β	SE
Hypothesis 1:				
Age difference	-.002***	(.00)	-.002***	(.00)
Both female. . . . .	.05***	(.02)	.06***	(.02)
Both male	-.04**	(.01)	-.04**	(.01)
Both from South. . . . .	.03*	(.01)	.02	(.01)
Both from North.	-.01	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Education level difference . . . . .	.00	(.00)	.00	(.00)
Hypothesis 2:				
Reviews influence difference . . . . .			.00	(.00)
Reading amount difference. . . . .			.001**	(.00)
Reading taste similarity . . . . .			.07*	(.03)
Both omnivores.			-.01	(.03)
Constant . . . . .	.45***		.40***	(.02)
<i>df</i>	6		10	

NOTE.— $N = 8,646$.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

erable support for hypothesis 1 in demonstrating that when dyads contain two women, their interpretive schemas overlap more than for different gender or male dyads. Dyads closer in age also tend to share an underlying schema of interpretation. Dyads both from the South have a more similar schema than different region pairs (although this shared understanding is mediated by similar reading habits). In contrast, male dyads have less overall tightness in their interpretation of the novel. In concert with results concerning consensus, this suggests that demographic backgrounds do not shape exactly what individuals thought about the novel, but are significant in shaping how individuals assemble their interpretations into more or less coherent schemas. Apparently, in this case at least, men do not form a constrained interpretive group in either their agreements/disagreements or the alignment of these attitudes; that is, their interpretations are all over the map. In partial support of hypothesis 2 with respect to tightness, findings indicate that individuals who share similar profiles of tastes in literary genres are more likely to share interpretive schemas. Somewhat counterintuitively, individuals who read different amounts have tighter schemas than those reading similar amounts.

Situational Meaning-Making

We now consider a processual account that includes consensus and tightness in pre- and postdiscussion attitudes. A situational approach asserts that within book groups there will be a growth in shared meanings; yet, at the same time, there will be a fracturing of meaning between book groups. In this framework, the cultural object is an inkblot onto which largely idiosyncratic meanings are locally inscribed.

To evaluate this proposition, we predict dyadic shifts toward agreement on each of the interpretive dimensions, as well as changes in dyadic tightness within and between book groups. The results in table 4 offer support for hypothesis 3, indicating that social interaction matters: on average, dyads within the same book groups shift more rapidly toward agreement than dyads not in the same book group on the first two (and consequently most important) interpretative dimensions. The coefficients show that, on average, dyads in separate groups moved further apart (by 22.07 points) on the literary-historical dimension, while dyads in the same groups, on average, moved slightly closer over the course of discussing the novel (by around 3 points). The difference is more pronounced for shifts in the gender divided reading.

Interestingly, the effects for consensus operate through being in the overall same discussion and not through dyadic attributions of influence. In other words, whether or not two individuals directly accorded each other influence in the postdiscussion influence survey, as long as they were present in

TABLE 4
 HYPOTHESES 3 AND 4: DYNAMIC DYADIC MODELS OF SHIFTS IN INTERPRETIVE CONSENSUS AND TIGHTNESS AFTER BOOK GROUP DISCUSSIONS

	DYAD DISTANCE ON INTERPRETIVE DIMENSIONS					DYAD CORRELATION:	
	Literary-Historical	Gender Divided	Deep Structure	Agentic Moralism	Traditional Gender	Mother Sympathy	TIGHTNESS OF SCHEMA
Postdiscussion	22.07*** (6.26)	19.24** (7.35)	-4.04 (2.18)	8.66 (4.52)	-1.83 (2.47)	-1.83 (2.47)	-.02 (.01)
Same group	-.21 (7.06)	5.71 (10.16)	-2.12 (2.21)	3.94 (7.85)	-1.77 (2.48)	-1.77 (2.48)	.02 (.01)
Postdiscussion × same group	-25.30* (9.88)	-29.14* (14.41)	-2.70 (2.83)	-14.91 (9.96)	-3.46 (3.61)	-3.46 (3.61)	-.00 (.02)
Dyad influence	31.69 (90.90)	5.52 (125.50)	4.88 (23.51)	66.50 (87.67)	18.11 (28.65)	18.11 (28.65)	-.15 (.12)
Postdiscussion × dyad influence	-12.53 (102.88)	73.044 (134.08)	37.93 (26.44)	9.21 (108.48)	13.30 (34.68)	13.30 (34.68)	.49* (.21)
Constant	154.91*** (5.02)	228.14*** (7.50)	48.34*** (2.17)	153.29*** (4.92)	52.38*** (2.15)	52.38*** (2.15)	.45*** (.01)
df	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

NOTE.— $N = 17,292$.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

the same interactional setting, they tended to achieve greater overall agreement in their attitudes toward the novel. This points to indirect influences that spill over and move the group toward consensus.

In further support of hypothesis 3, the tightness models show that interaction, once again, matters. In contrast to the consensus models, however, tightness is produced through direct interpersonal influence. Dyads with greater amounts of interpersonal influence increased in tightness over the course of discussions by a nontrivial amount. A dyad in which each individual accorded 25 points of influence to the other would have attitude profiles with a tightness score of around .70 as compared to a tightness score of .45 in a dyad with no social influence. While being present in the same group is sufficient for generating greater consensus, these additional findings point to the importance of interpersonal influence in shaping the tightness of meaning systems and the movement toward greater shared interpretive schemas.

Hypothesis 4 stated that interpersonal influences move meanings together within groups but further apart, on average, between groups. The coefficients for the postdiscussion effects in models with interaction effects are read as the effect for dyads in different groups (dyads in which there was no interaction or influence). Here, we see that for the first two dimensions, dyads in different groups tend to move away from one another by a nontrivial amount. This supports hypothesis 4's contention that consensus is a product of interaction that simultaneously produces fractured meanings at the global level. The support does not extend to meaning as tightness. The coefficient for the postdiscussion period in the tightness models is not significant, indicating that tightness, on average, neither increases nor decreases outside dyadic influences within groups. In short, while consensus increases and spreads widely within groups, tightness flows through narrower channels.

Identity-Based Resonance in Meaning-Making

We now present evidence that homophily and interpersonal influence may combine to produce aggregate associations, such as those commonly found in cross-sectional survey research. As we discussed in presenting our setting, book groups, as interactional situations, present a highly constraining focus (discussion of the same novel) buttressed by a more weakly constraining focus (status homophily). Moreover, the channels of interpersonal influences within these groups are segregated among socially similar individuals; that is, people tend to attribute more influence to those of the same gender, same region, similar education, and similar age.¹⁴ Our remaining hypotheses sug-

¹⁴ In models not reported here, but available on request, we used dyadic fractional logit models to predict directed interpersonal influence based on shared demographic characteristics, finding gender, age, and region predictive of greater interpersonal influence within groups.

gest that interaction and influence among demographically similar individuals may enhance or even produce the appearance of purely dispositionally derived meaning-making.

Table 5 repeats models from table 2 but examines postdiscussion consensus. Here, we see the emergence of new, stronger demographic associations with interpretations. Consistent with situational results above, we see gender (specifically women) as having a significantly more literary-historical reading and a deep structure reading of the novel after group discussions. In addition, after but not prior to discussions, higher levels of education, being southern, and reading fewer genres of fiction are all correlated with the deep structure reading. While prediscussion interpretations found only older people higher on this dimension, after group discussions, it has emerged as a sociodemographically coherent interpretive position. In addition, the cultural field effects (i.e., reading tastes and frequency) that were significant in predicting initial positions in this space are no longer significant after group discussions. And, consistent with a situational approach, the prediscussion influence of the *New York Times* review disappears, suggesting that its impact was absorbed by local influence structures within book groups.

Table 6 examines the tightness of the interpretive schema after discussions. In contrast to the increasing consensus and emergence of stronger associations between demographic groups and interpretive positions, meaning, in terms of tightness, does not increase among socially similar dyads. Tightness remains largely stable among similar dyads in terms of demographic groups. The similar schema among dyads in terms of shared reading habits and tastes prior to discussions disappears over the course of those interactions. It appears, then, that interaction tends to increase consensus along demographic lines while lessening consensus from readers' positions in the literary field. Interaction also tends to decrease initial tightness among those with similar reading habits, which gave some initial schematic dispositional effects to interpretations.¹⁵

Our final hypothesis predicted that through the resonance of identity, interaction, and object, meanings would shift as readers collectively used the object to solve problems or, rather, to talk through the meaning of the novel in reference to their own lives and vice versa. From table 5, here we focus on

¹⁵ To gain a better sense of these results, we examined changes in underlying schemas used to interpret the novel by using the Relational Class Analysis (RCA) and Correlational Class Analysis (CCA) packages in R. Both techniques showed that some individuals shifted significantly in their underlying schemas, but most did not. The number of interpretive classes across all groups remains largely stable, and the strength of the tightness within each of these also appears fairly consistent. The largest interpretive class was consistent with factor 1 from the factor analysis, namely, a schema in which various interpretations were fairly weakly correlated in a more or less sympathetic and literary reading of the novel.

TABLE 5
HYPOTHESES 5 AND 6: POSTDISCUSSION INDIVIDUAL POSITIONS
ON INTERPRETIVE DIMENSIONS

	INTERPRETIVE DIMENSION					
	Literary- Historical	Gender Divided	Deep Structure	Agentic Moralism	Traditional Gender	Mother Sympathy
Age . . . . .	.36 (1.02)	2.63 (1.42)	1.09*** (.23)	1.76 (.93)	-.47 (.30)	1.59 (1.40)
Male	-83.29* (41.10)	-79.84 (61.24)	-23.80* (9.86)	-52.41 (40.11)	8.90 (13.00)	-71.52 (60.78)
College (vs. high school)	-31.44 (60.70)	-34.95 (84.29)	32.23* (13.57)	4.89 (55.20)	-6.22 (17.90)	-40.99 (83.66)
Graduate school (vs. high school) . . .	-27.08 (59.89)	9.12 (83.18)	34.00* (13.39)	26.18 (54.47)	-12.22 (17.66)	14.60 (82.56)
Southern	-.21 (33.96)	24.78 (47.17)	15.21* (7.59)	12.85 (30.89)	11.74 (10.02)	7.79 (46.82)
Annual fiction number read	1.01 (.72)	1.84 (1.00)	.09 (.16)	.75 (.65)	-.29 (.21)	1.35 (.99)
Reviews influence . . .	-.47 (1.07)	-1.98 (1.49)	.01 (.24)	-.92 (.98)	.36 (.32)	-1.49 (1.48)
Likes literary fiction.	-37.63 (41.33)	-37.27 (57.39)	-2.42 (9.24)	-7.08 (37.59)	.48 (12.19)	-17.61 (56.96)
Likes historical fiction.	-17.05 (38.37)	-77.82 (53.29)	-8.81 (8.58)	-52.16 (34.90)	11.42 (11.31)	-70.02 (52.89)
Likes popular fiction.	-9.54 (29.87)	-15.35 (41.49)	.75 (6.68)	-10.57 (27.17)	7.58 (8.81)	-3.82 (41.18)
Likes romance fiction.	46.50 (40.79)	46.85 (56.64)	3.47 (9.12)	36.37 (37.09)	-7.24 (12.03)	76.28 (56.22)
Number of genre fiction liked	-.96 (10.91)	2.71 (15.15)	-6.14* (2.44)	2.22 (9.93)	-.60 (3.22)	2.41 (15.04)
Constant	599.26*** (100.42)	240.93 (139.46)	32.16 (22.45)	81.95 (91.34)	30.14 (29.61)	268.84 (138.42)
df	12	12	12	12	12	12

NOTE.— $N = 132$.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

women converging on a literary-historical reading of the novel and southerners converging on a deep structure reading of the novel, providing qualitative data from two group discussions to show these resonance processes in action.

Emergent Meanings

TABLE 6
HYPOTHESES 5 AND 6: POSTDISCUSSION DYADIC TIGHTNESS
OF INTERPRETIVE SCHEMA

	β	SE
Age difference	-.001***	(.00)
Both female . . . . .	.05**	(.02)
Both male	-.04***	(.01)
Both South	-.01	(.01)
Both North . . . . .	.01	(.01)
Education level difference . . . . .	.00	(.01)
Reviews influence difference . . . . .	.00	(.00)
Reading amount difference . . . . .	.00	(.00)
Reading taste similarity . . . . .	.04	(.02)
Both omnivores	-.09	(.05)
Constant . . . . .	.40***	(.02)
<i>df</i>	10	

NOTE.— $N = 8,646$.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

Women converge on a literary-historical reading of the novel, in which *Jarrettsville* is a sad love story, and readers sympathize and identify with both Martha and Nick. Prior to the discussions, there were no demographic or taste-based backgrounds associated with this overall interpretation. After the discussions, women had converged on this interpretive dimension. This was exemplified by the discussion of a group of women in Virginia, in which Martha's murder of Nick resonated with one reader's experiences, and from her experiences a dialogical understanding of the text and its relationship to her life, as spurred on by her book group of fellow women, emerged:

A: Do you remember a couple years ago a Fairfax County teacher—I remember this, I was teaching, so it was, what, [names year] probably—killed her husband?

[*pause*]

B: What?

A: Three months—not even—three weeks after giving birth.

D: It's a hard [inaudible] . . .

E: Oh my god. Really?

[*cross talk*]

F: I do remember. She got off, didn't she?

A: I was going to say, she got off for postpartum depression.

F: Yep. She sure did.

Here, the group members introduce a recent local event to help make sense of Martha's actions. This does not immediately shift group members into agreement on the exact cause of Martha's actions, but it does build up sympathy for and identification with her. Other women suggest that her actions may have been due to untreated mental illness, citing some passages from the book; another thought it could be due to her being in extreme pain from surgery. Afterward, they put Martha in the context of their own lives and make sense of her as having fallen in love with an "ass":

A: I think she [Martha] had postpartum, and just lost it.

B: I think she was just sick of everybody treating her like crap and took matters into her own hands.

C: I think she was just miserable, poor thing . . .

[*cross talk*]

D: Can we go home and make our husbands read this book?

[*laughter*]

A: I think she really loved him. And in her mind, he never came to get the marriage. Even though he did, she didn't know that.

[*pause*]

B: He was such an ass . . .

A: He was such a dumbass at that point . . .

C: He was so stupid about it . . .

A: That was the dumbest moment in the whole book though . . .

B: We have all loved cowards . . .

C: Let's be honest, we have all liked men who were not the greatest.

In this interaction and many others, we see a group of women for whom the encoded contents of the novel resonate with their own lives, and they use a dialogical reading of the text and their own experiences to solve a "problem" in making sense of both their own experiences and the novel. These respondents empathize with Martha on the basis of their own experiences but can also draw sympathy for Nick, who they believe tried to make things right (if too late) and was a "coward" and an "ass" in ways that remind them of men they have loved before. In short, talking together about *Jarrettsville* catalyzed a conversation that resonated with women about male and female romantic relationships, and in that talk women shifted to greater consensus on a reading of the novel that centered on sympathy for the main character in what, through conversation, became a sad love story.

Emergent Meanings

Similarly, through interaction, southerners converged on a deep structure reading of the novel, in which the Civil War and racism—the weight of history—are the causal drivers in the dissolution of Martha and Nick’s relationship. At time 1, this deep structure reading did not correspond with southern identity when readers made their meanings in isolation; it was through homophilous interaction between southerners that its correspondence with southern identity emerged. In their book clubs, southerners took turns sharing stories of the echoes of the Civil War they had seen across their lives in the South: from hearing “Dixie” at school functions, to a controversial local statue memorializing a Confederate general and Klansman, to stories of racism and lingering tension in their otherwise comparatively progressive southern families.

In one Nashville group, readers’ conversation coalesced around the topic of what group members thought of as a long-standing southern culture of honor, silence, and denial that for them both felt personally familiar and explained the novel:

A: I know that things—we’re saying they’re different [from *Jarrettsville*, now in the modern South]—but even when I remember speaking to my mother-in-law about a topic of someone in the family getting divorced she just looked at me like, “we . . .

B: Exactly

A: . . . don’t discuss this.”

[*cross talk*]

A: It’s not just stuff from the movies that’s made up. It’s real. That part [of the South as depicted in *Jarrettsville*] is real.

C: My uncle married and then he divorced and then married again, and she was Catholic and so he couldn’t tell anybody because her parents wouldn’t have let her marry a man—so no one knows, even his now today children, that he was once married. This is my uncle!

[. . .]

D: I went to Thanksgiving dinner. I was married when I was in my twenties, divorced, came home, lived with my parents . . .

[*cross talk*]

E: I went to Thanksgiving dinner and one of my, uh, cousins asked where my husband was. And there was just silence at the table, because I had been divorced for six months, but we didn’t talk about it.

[*understanding “ahhhs”*]

Here, a group of southern women engage in a similar process of turning over their reading of the book with their own lives and experiences. As in their

own lives, they conclude that in the novel a particular southern culture of silence prevented Martha and Nick from having an open conversation that would resolve the problems in their relationship and that a southern culture of honor led to Nick's death (because he had brought shame on Martha's family for impregnating but not marrying her). Through the process of interaction—both with each other as southerners and with a text that catalyzes this type of group identification and discussion—a particular southern reading of the novel emerged.

Evocatively, for nonsoutherners, what was interpreted by southerners as the structural weight of southern honor and silence on the outcome of the story did not resonate in meaning-making. Instead, some explained the lack of open communication between Martha and Nick as simply a plotting device: without the resonance of southern honor and silence in their own experiences, readers saw this silence as a plot contrivance. Likewise, a group-level resonance for regional identity did not occur in groups in which self-identifying southerners were regional isolates in their groups, such as a southerner in a group in Los Angeles and another in San Francisco. In these groups, the southern-identifying member cued on her own experiences growing up in the South (and on topics similar to those raised by southerners in groups in the South), yet the generally encouraged and appreciated contributions did not go anywhere. Instead, conversations in these groups quickly shifted to other topics, because regional identity as portrayed in the novel did not seem to resonate with the experiences of the majority nonsouthern group members. In short, even in these cases, it was clear that the novel resonated with southern identity, but it took shared resonance among groups of southerners for conversations to manifest into new "southern" meanings.

DISCUSSION

Demographically segregated meanings for events, issues, and objects are regularly found across a range of cultural milieus, despite the wide variety of methods used to study them. In this article, we have theorized and empirically tested how these differences may routinely emerge for previously unknown cultural objects that are even intended to be ideologically open and ambiguous. The key implication of our results is that through interactions with similar others, the meanings individuals ascribe to cultural objects may rapidly become demographically situated as individuals resonate with one another and the encoded content of the object itself.

We examined meaning as both the consensus and tightness of attitudes toward a cultural object—a novel. In terms of consensus, we find little evidence for purely dispositionally derived meanings. Prior to interaction, demographics and predefined cultural tastes weakly predict overall interpretive agreement. Reading a single negative review (itself an influence process

of sorts) is, in fact, more predictive of one's initial position on a set of interpretations. In terms of tightness, we see stronger evidence for a demographic and cultural predisposition toward meaning: similar people tend to share a schema with which they made sense of the novel, even though they did not necessarily initially agree on specific themes. It is through interaction and homophilous encounters that a demographic consensus on the meaning of the object begins to emerge. At the same time, interaction weakens the influence of the review and initial dispositions shaped by one's cultural consumption (here, reading) habits. In their place, a "female reading" or "southern interpretation" for the novel emerges as a by-product of conversations and influence flowing among similar people.

While numerous simulation-based models have demonstrated how local cultural convergence may lead to a global divergence, we have presented the first in-depth analysis of this phenomenon using real-world data in naturally occurring settings in which meanings are regularly made. Our findings are consistent with a number of related studies in social psychology, which find that interaction may routinely produce social division and status beliefs (Ridgeway 1991), even when there is initially little or no within-group division on which these social and cultural divisions are anchored (Mark, Smith-Lovin, and Ridgeway 2009). Similarly, we found that even regarding what was intended to be a nonideologically driven object, the situations in which meaning-making occurs within homophilous groups may routinely produce segregated meanings at the macrolevel. This applies only to consensus and not tightness, which remains relatively stable. Indeed, it seems that the presence of a shared schema among women, as well as the lack of a shared schema among men, might allow for the rapid emergence of greater female consensus; women did not need to convince one another on each and every specific interpretation arising from the novel; instead movement on one interpretation reverberated into movement across interpretations organized by the schema. As is generally true in book groups, most discussions flowed freely back and forth between specific issues in the novel and events in readers' own lives that were cued through it. Yet, because women readers of the novel shared an interpretive schema, a collaborative shift in a few interpretations of the novel (which were guided by talk of their shared experiences) reshaped the overall meaning they made of it.

Our findings are also consistent with studies of opinion polarization in the United States in recent decades: Americans are not, in general, very polarized, especially with respect to the overall alignment of issues (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). Our results suggest that meanings emerge through growing agreement via social influence on specific issues rather than a diffusion of an underlying schema organizing attitudes. In another consistency with the tradition of public opinion research, we find that the power of external media influence weakens in group settings, as those readers having read the

negative review of the novel shifted toward the influence structure of their groups. Again, we see the malleability of meaning even on specific issues. In sum, this points to the interactional bases for increased fragmentation on the consensus dimension of meaning (the most common basis for assessing meaning) and simultaneous decreased fragmentation on the tightness dimension of meaning (which is more generally overlooked). People who are not strong ideologues in their interpretations and schemas appear to change; their assessments are subject to interpersonal influence. While most studies of opinion polarization focus on deliberately polarizing objects and issues, we show that the meanings for even nonideologically driven or deliberately divisive objects can fragment as they become crystallized within groups through routine social interaction.

Our work therefore contributes to social influence research well beyond book groups. Social influence research has focused on consensus, and our findings add to the nonexperimental evidence that people strongly shape one another's evaluations and understandings, and do so through an emergent social influence network. While social influence models are currently being extended to include simulations in which issues are interconnected (i.e., where there is an underlying tightness to the code or schema in which attitudes are joined), to date there has been no empirical evidence that interpersonal influences directly affect such schemas. Our findings point to such a possibility. Specifically, we find that dyads in which there was greater accorded influence became tighter in terms of their interpretation of the novel, and the overall organization of one's interpretive schema appears directly influenced by others'. Influence models have incorporated such a possibility as an exogenous and preexisting logical constraint in which interpersonal influences unfold, while our results suggest that the connections among issues may at times also be endogenous to the influence process itself.

We see our work as also pointing toward many opportunities for exploring an underutilized affinity between network analysis and symbolic interactionism (Pachuki and Breiger 2010; Norton 2014). As argued by Fine and Kleinman (1983, p. 106), "understanding actors' meanings is crucial for any analysis of social structure. Researchers must examine respondents' meanings and the networks of which they are a part." While social network scholars have long recognized that tastes flow through networks, they have overlooked how new meanings are catalyzed into being through interactive processes. Through the incorporation of theories and methods from symbolic interactionism, network scholars can tease out a fuller picture of how culture forms, spreads, and is altered through interaction. In turn, symbolic interactionism has been discounted as nonfalsifiable. Yet, as we show, dispositional accounts of meaning-making provide a testable counterfactual to symbolic interactionist approaches. The incorporation of some network approaches may also provide more precise measurement, scope conditions,

and hypotheses that can elaborate and test the utility and limits of a symbolic interactionist approach. Small groups with highly constrained foci (such as a book group discussing a resonant cultural object) that are buttressed by the weaker foci of interacting with demographically similar individuals should afford the conditions under which the results predicted from a symbolic interactionist perspective are most likely to take shape. Thus, we begin to place symbolic interactionism into a sociodemographic framework and articulate when resonant meaning-making is more or less likely to occur.

Our results may be partially conditioned on the populations we studied: self-selected and naturally occurring book groups. Current research on the evaluation of cultural objects within small groups suggests that preexisting in-group ties may in fact dampen the effects of an accorded influence rather than heighten it (Wang, Lu, and Iyengar 2018). As such, our findings may ultimately be seen as a conservative case of the effects of interpersonal situations on structure and meaning. The novel read by group members was typical of one our readers would have selected without this study. This suggests that the initial selection of new cultural objects by certain demographic groups, specifically those who have a greater potential for resonance, is likely a major factor in how meanings are more broadly made from objects in demographically conditioned ways. Studies of situational accounts of meaning-making may derive more precision by incorporating selection and resonance into formal models of how such meanings emerge.

Each widely known cultural object has its own unique trajectory of influences. By starting at the beginning of these trajectories (i.e., with a previously unknown object), we show how different meanings first form within sociodemographic groups. They do so through homophilous group interactions on objects with more or less potential for group resonance. Future research will benefit from examining a wider array of objects, varied in terms of their potential for being selected by and resonating with specific subgroups. The novel we studied does not follow a predetermined genre-based plot—as is the case for romance novels (Radway 1984)—nor is it an exceedingly abstract or experimental one. We would expect that a formula-hewing romance novel might leave less room for heterogeneous, interpretive meaning-making, whereas a very experimental novel would leave more.

Likewise, we have examined the short-term durability of dispositions toward one object and not the transposability of dispositions across object types. In addition to the exploration of other similar cultural objects (e.g., novels) and dissimilar classes of cultural objects (e.g., films), this line of research may thus fruitfully extend out from the meaning-making of objects and into the attitudes of more everyday values and belief systems, such as morals, political values, communal sentiments, and interpretations of religious faiths. How new topics in these domains are initially selected and understood by groups may follow a pattern similar to those we observed. Like-

wise, through the resonance of identity and object, deliberately divisive objects that resonate with “take-off” issues or objects made with the express intent to flatter some demographic groups and deride others may require less situational interaction and therefore have meanings that are more purely dispositionally informed. Finally, our findings may raise a particularly salient concern for the use of in-group-based focus groups in studying cross-sectionally distributed meanings (e.g., Liebes and Katz 1990; Shively 1992), signaling that it may be the data collection procedure itself that is producing much of the results.

This work, we hope, might also reinvigorate studies of meaning-making in reception processes, which have largely fallen out of favor in the core of mainstream sociology as more formalized studies of consumption and taste have gained prominence. Largely in a quest for greater formalization, as argued by Griswold (1987*b*), the sociology of culture has “throw[n] meaning overboard in some sort of disciplinary triage” (p. 4). While we agree with Griswold’s assessment and believe that for the study of cultural objects it still holds, our work demonstrates that formalization and the study of interpretive meaning need not be mutually exclusive (Mohr 1998). Reception studies, in our opinion, may have leaned too heavily on de facto dispositional explanations for meaning construction, whereas qualitative situationalist approaches to reception and meaning are bearing more fruit (Perrin 2005; McDonnell 2016; Tavory 2016). By bringing analyses of structure and meaning into greater alignment with work on structure, evaluation, and taste, as we have begun to do here, we can broaden our understandings of their interrelations and, perhaps, revive the study of meaning-making in cultural reception processes. In line with other recent examples (e.g., Benzecry 2011; McDonnell et al. 2017), we call on scholars to consider the processual nature through which cross-sectionally distributed meaning may emerge, be it through formalized models as is done here, through mixed methods, or through qualitative means.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VARIABLES USED IN MODELS

Variable	Individuals	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Literary-historical time 1	132	581.15	132.96	271.68	817.77
Gender divided time 1	132	327.40	199.68	−86.36	730.30
Deep structure time 1	132	105.63	41.93	−29.20	226.90
Agentic moralism time 1	132	161.70	132.34	−105.89	433.00
Traditional gender time 1	132	.05	45.54	−118.76	120.86
Mother sympathy time 1	132	331.26	199.07	−8.41	709.74
Literary-historical time 2	132	558.06	153.65	214.97	858.05

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TABLE A1 (Continued)

Variable	Individuals	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Gender divided time 2	132	315.57	216.27	-53.38	739.64
Deep structure time 2	132	108.21	38.96	18.94	198.88
Agentic moralism time 2	132	159.62	139.88	-108.28	409.95
Traditional gender time 2	132	5.39	45.50	-164.15	88.49
Mother sympathy time 2	132	307.69	211.70	-27.76	692.02
Age	132	52.82	14.86	22.00	90.00
Male	132	.14	.35	.00	1.00
High school education	132	.06	.23	.00	1.00
College graduate	132	.43	.50	.00	1.00
Graduate school	132	.51	.50	.00	1.00
Southern	132	.28	.45	.00	1.00
Annual fiction amount	132	27.21	22.63	.00	175.00
Likes literary fiction	132	.87	.34	.00	1.00
Likes historical fiction	132	.82	.38	.00	1.00
Likes popular fiction	132	.55	.50	.00	1.00
Likes romance fiction	132	.16	.37	.00	1.00
Total genre literature liked.	132	1.57	1.50	.00	7.00
Reviews influence	132	2.90	12.05	.00	99.00
Total influence accorded	132	.17	.19	.00	1.00

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