

**LES MOTS DITS: DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND
REPRESENTATION IN TEXT BASED AUDIO ART**

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ABSTRACT

Les Mots Dits is both an experimental audio documentary and an essay. The essay portion explores ideas surrounding identity and representation within diasporic cultures, examined through the lens of text-based audio art and popular music. Ideas explored include a look at the hermeneutics of music/text, “significance” within speech, and text and representation within diasporic and hybrid culture. The companion audio work is comprised of narrative text and allegorical soundscapes. The text is derived from interviews with the author and his grandparents, the soundscapes from recordings made by the author in Europe during the summer of 2004. An appendix included in the essay provides a detailed timeline of the piece with commentary by the author/composer. Both the essay and the composition are submitted in partial completion of the MFA programme at the School for the Contemporary Arts at SFU.

DEDICATION

For George Forbath (1922 – 2002)

We miss you, grandpapa.

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Grandpapa, Grandmama, mom, dad, Lisa, Leona, Lila, Peter, Janet, Suzie, Mairian,
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Cordeliaugh, Bori, Bala, Kaci and everyone who shared
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Introduction

“Every now and again, the quaint idea of radio as a kind of Talking Drum for the Global Village comes around for one more spin. In these romantic scenarios, radio art is cast as an electronic echo of oral culture, harking back to ancient storytellers spinning yarns in front of village fires. The idea has a seductive ring to it, and can be embellished in all kinds of ways, making room for everything from Finnegans Wake to Street Rap: Radio as Universal Language, Electronic Community, Planetary Boombox, Here Comes Everybody, like let’s just hang out and tell stories and maybe dance. Radio Talking Drum – a utopian transposition that loves to forget.”.

Gregory Whitehead, “Holes In the Head,” *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission*, ed. Dan Lander & Daina Augaitis (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), p. 153

In examining the vanguard of the creative discipline of sound and music today, the practice of electroacoustics or sound art situates itself as the ultimate usage of the ethereal medium of the electrically transduced sound wave. Electroacoustics differentiates itself aesthetically from popular music or even contemporary music composition partly through its reliance on the electrically amplified or transduced sound. In addition, electroacoustics diverges from the popular schema of music production through its emphasis on the spatialization of sound and the focus upon and transformation of a sound’s frequencies, spectral dynamics and timbral qualities over time.

A growing sub-genre of electroacoustics is known as “radiophonics”¹, or text-based sound art. Initially associated with actual radio programming that blurred the line between documentary, music and theatre, it has come to define any piece of sound art that features text (here defined as the recorded human voice) as the focal point of the piece’s reception. My aim is to focus on text-based composition that interrogates dominant cultural narratives, power hierarchies and effectively engages the political through the situation of the personal (voice) within the aesthetic structure of electroacoustics. To do this, I will situate the use of the voice within both a historical context and contemporary critical theory.

¹ Dan Lander, “Radiocasting: Musings on Radio and Art,” Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission, ed. Dan Lander & Daina Augaitis (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), pp. 11-31

CHAPTER 1

Most composers, historians and thinkers within the world of electroacoustics would agree that contemporary radiophonics extends directly from the “contrapuntal radio”² works of Glenn Gould, the renowned Canadian pianist. The works that exemplify this stream in Gould’s work are known as the *Solitude Trilogy*, three one-hour long pieces composed for CBC Radio in 1967. The *Trilogy* employs mixing technology to interpolate several recorded interviews and narratives over each other, sometimes causing multiple streams of text to occur simultaneously, while at other times individual texts drift to the fore of the mix.

The best known work in the *Trilogy* is “The Idea of North”. This work thematically focuses on several Canadian reflections on life on the Arctic tundra, and contains tales of an outsider’s exposure to Innu culture. Snippets of text emerge, the narratives can be followed for several minutes, and then the recorded speaker recedes into the background, demurring space for yet another voice. The predominant effect plays upon what is referred to as “masking”, known to audiologists as the perceptual absorption of one frequency into a broader and louder frequency³. Gould was very adamant about the proper reception of the piece and made extensive liner notes for the record to situate the work properly for the listener. “The point about these scenes, I think, is that they test, in a sense, the degree to which one can listen simultaneously to more than one

² Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould: Music & Mind* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1984), p. 128

³ Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (Netherlands: Overseas publishers Association, 1996), pp. 152-155

conversation or vocal impression.”⁴ Gould’s apparent ability to stream (and comprehend) diverse and simultaneous sound sources may have informed his support for and fascination with the emerging concepts and theories surrounding communications and media. It is interesting to note that Marshal McLuhan’s concepts on media and technology had a strong impact on Gould’s approach to recording and eventual abandonment of live performance.

The impact of McLuhan’s ideas about media is implicit in Gould’s New Philosophy of recording⁵ where he refers to the difference in reception of live and recorded sound as subverting the relationship between the identity of the performer (as virtuoso, personality, star) and the projection of the music, through time and apparatus, to reception by one listener at another time. Gould seemed at ease with the increasingly accelerated reception and projection of media. This may have informed his text manipulations, and explained the fact that the content, the information imparted by the speakers (in both the textual data and vocalized presence) is not of primary importance. The medium has become the message for Gould, and the message here subsumes the individual’s claim to difference and independence. The voice becomes instrument, yet another beam in the structure. Gould’s work with text has helped form the basis of contemporary thought surrounding the use of text based sound art, and the subjugation of the subject within this genre (in deference to structure) has persisted in composition to the present.

⁴ Geoffrey Payzant, Glenn Gould: Music & Mind (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1984), p. 130

⁵ Geoffrey Payzant, Glenn Gould: Music & Mind (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1984), pp. 36-39

CHAPTER 2

In the scant writing that exists specifically about Radiophonics, Dan Lander stands out as a chronicler and commentator on this branch of sound based media. His compositions and writings have been upheld in the electroacoustic community as definitive of the genre of text-based media and his recordings can be found in many radio art and text-based art compilations. His recording “Zoo” makes heavy use of pastiche in its composition and adheres to a post-modern sense of aesthetics in its collage-based structure.

This work ends with a “call and response” segment that sounds like a voice intoning liturgically in a pinched middle frequency (indicating a telephone speaker? A portable tape recorder?). The voices chant McLuhanesque rhetoric such as “Communication is community. I dream of a time when every body on the planet lives, breathes and touches each other on air...”⁶, while a mixed crowd of people “sing” the speaker’s words back to him. This approach folds irony upon irony. The recorded voice transmits a message to the recorded audience that “preaches” disconnection from the corporeal to create a new type of community. This stance dispenses with the very practical social concerns about technological accessibility, and by extension issues of race, gender, class and perceptual/cognitive abilities.

The recorded voice may be one of the most powerful signifiers of the self, of the personal. The projection and reception of the voice is an area where messages addressing

⁶ Dan Lander “Zoo”, (Montreal: Empreintes Digitales, 1995) IMED 9526

cultural/economic/social disparities have the potential to be conveyed with more expediency than the instrument. Lander, in his “Radiocasting: Musings on Radio and Art”, reaches conclusions that suggest a subversion of dominant cultural narratives is inherent in the manipulated and abstracted text. He reasons this through a decontextualised quote from filmmaker/composer Trinh T. Minh-ha, explaining, “She argues for an opening up of interpretation, for a different kind of listening, one that is as dependant on the ear’s work as it is on the minds.”⁷

While Lander’s intentions are to open up new meaning within the text and allow more space for the hybrid voice, he pivots around the phenomenological aspects of audio reception to unpack this intention. In this, Lander seems to be straining the relationship between the phenomenology of listening with the transmission of sociocultural data. Before beginning to construct more layered and socially relevant usage of the spoken voice within sound art, new hermeneutics must be developed at the composition level that does not read from a merely structural sense, but draws necessary links to the recorded speaker. Other forms of art practise have moved through this hermeneutical reconstruction, leaving music composition (and ironically, contemporary composition in particular) as a structure seemingly independent of sociological and historical contingency.

⁷ Dan Lander, “Radiocasting: Musings on Radio and Art,” Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission, ed. Dan Lander & Daina Augaitis (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), p. 26

CHAPTER 3

Hip hop and Dancehall music have become an effective vehicle for exploring issues around the African Diasporic identity. The link between the two is the emphasis on the transmission of cultural data through “storytelling” within a musical context. More importantly, my work is attempting to wrestle with the “transmission” of experience, as it relates to cultural assimilation and the Jewish Diaspora, which should be differentiated from the “representation” of experience.⁸ This is where the common ground exists between the reception of African and Jewish narrative, in regards to the diasporic experience and the phenomenon of assimilation. Though significantly different experiences, the concepts behind the transmission of experience through art, music and writing bear many similarities.

What is of similar importance to both diasporic cultures, vis-à-vis reinforcing cultural identity is that memory not be transformed into history, but rather for experience to be incarnated, made real and transmitted.⁹ Walter Benn Michaels points to a distinction in the appropriate transmission/reception of text dealing with the holocaust as being “performative” or “accomplishing a speech act”, rather than simply relaying or reporting information¹⁰. In this way, the reader (or listener) is not simply passively receiving data, as in a traditional documentary, but confronted with the event, made a part of it, rather

⁸ See Appendix A, p. 17

⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, “You Who Was never There: Slavery and the New Historicism – Deconstruction and the Holocaust,” The Americanization of the Holocaust ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) p.190

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 191

than diminishing the importance through a factual historical reception of text. It is in this vein that my composition, “Les Mots Dits”, attempts to engage with issues of Jewish Diaspora, Zionism, concepts of “Home” and cultural assimilation by making use of a subjective storytelling format concerned only with my family, in lieu of a broader and more factual examination of the history surrounding the Hungarian Jewish experience of 1944.

Although my composition “Les Mots Dits” bears little immediate aesthetic similarities to hip hop or dancehall production, it is informed by my experience as a hip hop and dancehall DJ and producer. In both these forms of music, I have discovered a unique emphasis on the use of voice as a signifier which, in many cases, serves as a subjective space to engage a dialogue which confronts dominant cultural narratives and helps form identities within diasporic and/or marginalized communities.

In his essay “The Grain of the Voice”, Roland Barthes distills the idea of hearing the recorded voice into a phenomenological indicator, which “signifies” a body, yet leaves little room for the personality, or identity of the speaker or singer.¹¹ This idea of a voice that goes beyond individual persona to speak of a relation between individual and language has been absorbed into western musical thought as a more expedient approach to criticism and theory. Remove the “signified”, and there is a flat, objective space for critical reception of a work. Once the spoken or sung voice has signified more than a body, has unashamedly infused personal/political signifiers into the text, traditional criticism becomes harder to reinforce. This objective mode of critical thought is reinforced by Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionalism, in which he posits that there is no

¹¹ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”, The Responsibility of Forms, Roland Barthes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 270

'outside' to the text, which can be construed to indicate that there is nothing "real" or "signified" extratextually or outside of language itself.¹² The recorded voice however, provides a text outside the words being spoken, and the keen listener picks up many clues as to the history and personality of the speaker. The history and personality of the speaker's utterances may therefore lead the listener to extrapolate an interpretation of the larger social body that the speaker represents. Jamaican patois, Eastern European accents, French Canadian accents, first nations voices, all these inflections represent the speaker not only personally, but reference political, historical and social significances as well.

Interestingly, an often-used word in early recordings of "raps" and rhyming stories by African Americans is the word "signifyin'", which is used as a part of a nascent postcolonial urge to reclaim power through language, and to subvert the imposed culture by the remoulding of the imposed language of the dominant culture. Signifyin(g) in this case is a methodology of "double-voice", making use of the slave master's language to transmit metaphors that counter the dominant rhetoric of the oppressive 19th century southern white culture, while also acting as an oral reinforcement of African culture in a storytelling format.¹³ These early rhythmic stories laid the textual and ideological foundation for hip hop, which continues to be a very politically potent use of speech within music.

¹² Mustapha Marrouchi, Signifying With A Vengeance: Theories, Literatures, Storytellers, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 107

¹³ Henry Louis Gates jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.xxv

Ironically, it seems to be the popular music such as hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall that, as musical movements, are moving closer to this comprehension of hermeneutics and sociohistorical contingency, while the aesthetic vanguard of electroacoustics, musique concrete and experimental electronic music seem more and more disassociative in their use of recorded speech. Qualitative distinctions have been drawn between the repetition motifs in minimalist composers such as Steve Reich or Philip Glass and the repetitive breakbeat of hip-hop.

In discussions with other composers, I have often encountered pejorative criticism for perceived “popular” electronic music (rhythmic, tonal). Jokingly referred to as “PhotoShop music”¹⁴ within the academe, the repetitious sounds and street vernacular associated with “popular” electronic music is seen as base and purposeless. The term Photoshop music tends to refer to “popular” music, and is considered to involve less skill and focus in terms of musical literacy than academic composition.¹⁵ For example, composer Paul Lansky, who makes use of spoken text in many of his works, describes the actual “meaning” of the chosen text as “arbitrary”.¹⁶

Interestingly, upon close examination, it is the maligned music of hip-hop culture and other emerging popular forms of diasporic music such as Jamaican dancehall that are aware of the personal/political referents and relevance of their chosen form. The text, the subject and the vocal instrument in hip-hop or dancehall are as important (or more so) as

¹⁴ The term Photoshop music is intended to make a distinction between academic electroacoustic composition and popular electronic music, which is seen as being less sonically literate, contending that popular electronic artists have a limited literacy with the form, restricted to using plugins and cutting and pasting as one would with the Photoshop program for visual pieces. The term assumes that artists within the popular genre haven't a deeper understanding of composition.

¹⁵ Austin, Kevin. “Re: Other Music's”. Online posting. 20 Aug. 1999. CECdiscuss Archives. 21 Feb. 2005 <<http://elists.resynthesize.com/cecdiscuss/1999/08/804654/>>

¹⁶ Lansky, Paul. “More Than Idle Chatter”. Liner Notes. 1994. 21 Feb. 2005 <http://silvertone.princeton.edu/~paul/liner_notes/morethanidlechatter.html>

the compositional structure. By way of illustration, popular dancehall artist Sizzla Kalonji vocalizes specific concerns of his community such as neo-colonialist rule, apartheid, diaspora and globalization in the piece “Dem Ah Try Ah Ting” with the chanted text

“Dem system design for business / Judge and politician all run dem business / whey dem ah train ah fi protect dem business / But never yuh worry yuh brain and try to puzzle out who this is / Babylon yuh stutter easy words from yuh mouth / When we tell yuh say "I ah come bun out King's House" / Nyabinghi that's de fire inna White House / Sound the trumpet because ah black woman ah shout / dem build dem house, ghetto youths doh live no wey / de homeless over King's House me ah bring dem over dey / Fi dem share and care until dem ready fi go 'way / Repatriation ah hail de ghetto youths ah say--ey!”¹⁷

The same recorded music for this piece (or “Riddim”) was also vocalized over by a plethora of other dancehall artists. In dancehall, as in hip hop, old compositional hierarchies begin to fall apart, as process, subject and text are no longer subordinate to product, object and structure. In his essay “Music and Identity”, Simon Frith stresses that

“Hip-hop, in other words, with its cut-ups, its scratches, breaks and samples, is best understood as producing not new texts but new ways of performing texts, new ways of performing *the making of meaning*. The pleasure of montage comes from the act of juxtaposition rather than from the labour of interpretation- and for the listener and dancer too, the fun lies

¹⁷ Kalonji, Sizzla. “Dem Ah Try Ah Ting.” Freedom Cry. VP Records, 1998.

in the process not the result. Not for nothing is rap a voice-based form with an exceptionally strong sense of presence.”¹⁸

What Frith is referring to is the unique aspect of rap as being predominantly about the voice, and particularly about the identity of the speaker behind the voice. In the realm of hip hop production, many different MCs can vocalize over the exact same piece of music, rendering the music to a second tier level of importance in the composition. This phenomenon is also found in Jamaican dancehall music.

Hip hop’s progenitor, Jamaican dancehall, also situates itself as a political form of speech transmission within the cadre of electronic music. While the popular allure of dancehall is the accessible and unique rhythm of the music, a close look at the text of many “conscious”¹⁹ dancehall pieces reveals a focused political engagement that addresses the unique concerns of the diasporic identity of the lower class Jamaicans.²⁰ The rural dancehall “soundclashes”, musical events where giant sound systems (conglomerations of deejays and selectors wielding massive towers of loudspeakers) face off against each other, each trying to outdo the other in volume and vocal ability, carry a subtext of storytelling in the form of the contemporary griot of the deejay. The deejay keeps a lively patter going over the selector’s choice of rhythms, often improvising a text that criticizes local and global issues of violence, poverty, political repression, race and often is infused with Rastafarian concepts of exile (forced slavery) in Babylon (the western world, i.e. not Ethiopia)²¹. In a direct sense, the music has become secondary to

¹⁸ Simon Frith “Music and Identity,” *Questioning Cultural Identity* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage publications, 1996 p. 115

¹⁹ The word Conscious in dancehall refers to text that is of a non violent nature.

²⁰ Norman C. Stolzoff *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall culture In Jamaica* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000) pp. 51-57

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-19

the importance of the text. Often, many “deejays” will vocalize over the same “riddim”, recorded once and passed around from artist to artist. This is a striking difference from the Western stream of composition, as text effectively subverts the dominance of compositional form, relegating it to secondary importance to the text while furnishing the music with direct political agency and using it as a poetic platform to reinforce identity and criticize the dominant and repressive neo-colonialist culture in Jamaica.

This unique engagement with text and subversion of dominant compositional form in exploring issues of identity and cultural representation have informed my composition efforts for Les Mots Dits. Taking the example of hip hop and dancehall recordings, Les Mots Dits allows the speakers to be situated in a subjective space, while the stories behind the voice hold multiple significances for the receiver.

CHAPTER 4

Les Mots Dits is presented in three major parts, with an epilogue. They are named Beit Kevarot (House of Graves), Beit Hayyim (House of Life) and Beit Olam (House of Eternity). The titles are a reference to the burial process within Judaic tradition. I have chosen this as a way of reinforcing the spiritual and personal nature of the work, as it is both a prayer for my ancestors lost to a brutal history, and a tribute to their spirits, which live on through their children. The concept of death and the liberation of the spirit exists here as an allegory to my own transformation as a person, a composer and a Jew.

Part one, Beit Kevarot, focuses on my grandparent's story of survival through the holocaust. My grandfather explains his luck in narrowly escaping death in Buchenwald by virtues of his skills with machinery and return to Budapest to find that his entire family had been wiped out during the brutal New Year's massacre of December 31, 1944. During this genocide the Black Cross (the Hungarian Nazis) rounded up thousands of the remaining Jews in Budapest, shot them, and dumped the bodies into the Danube river. My Grandmother's family fared better, as they had a period of safety granted by their protection under Raoul Wallenberg's "Schutzepasse" program, which offered protection for Jewish families for a time under the Swiss government. They nevertheless had to go into hiding in a storage shed for several months. Illustrating the story are the sounds of bells, chains, gates and doors and a lone voice singing in Hungarian. It is perhaps the most sombre portion of the entire piece.

Beit Hayyim, the second part deals with my family's flight from Hungary, eleven years later, during the 1956 revolution. We travel with my grandparents as they flee into Austria first by train, then on foot, then being accepted into Canada as refugees, and their establishment of a new life in Montreal. The symbolic language for this portion makes use of train sounds, birds, children and violin.

The final portion, Beit Olam shifts attention to the present, and I become the focus of the story, speaking from my perspective as the child of an immigrant in contemporary Quebecois culture.

All sounds for the composition, save the interview portions, were gathered on minidisk in Europe from May to July in 2004. The sounds were then assembled and edited with the text portions first on a Protools system, then on Cooledit Pro. *Les Mots Dits* represent an aesthetic shift that has emerged in my work since beginning my career at SFU. In previous work, I made heavy use of processing and effects to achieve compositional goals. Gradually over the last two years, I have begun to focus on leaving the sounds alone, and making only sparing use of tools such as reverb, delay or equalization in my work. Juxtaposition, montage and the inherent qualities of a sound became more evocative to me within soundscape composition. This approach is influenced by the work of Pascale Trudel, whose 1999 piece *Ce N'est Pas Ici* is comprised of small pieces of unprocessed soundscapes juxtaposed in a very compelling fashion. I still however, maintain some editing and processing in the work, and in this respect I am informed by the work of Hildegard Westerkamp, in whose work one can grasp the essential qualities of a sound, while being invited to absorb deeper connotations imbued by the subtlety of the processing of sound.

In my use of text in this piece, I have found little in the realm of radiophonics to inform my work, as a great deal of this mode of composition is concerned with arbitrary deconstruction of text. I have looked instead to other music that makes interesting use of text, notably hip hop and dancehall, where I found the aesthetic tended towards extrapolating subjective significances and representations from the spoken text. One radiophonic piece within the “academic” stream that has greatly influenced me was Rachel McInturff’s *By Heart*, a harrowing look at physical and mental abuse within a family. The stark, unprocessed nature of the text within the piece was a refreshing departure for me, and has influence to my use of text within my radiophonic work.

I have approached the work as an audio documentary. There is a definite sense of a linear trajectory of the piece, and the story is supported and illustrated by the soundscape passages. My grandparents are natural storytellers, compelling and at times very humorous.

The telling of stories in Jewish culture has always served as a succinct and effective means of reinforcing identity and community. Jews (like many diasporic cultures), no matter how disparate they are in terms of theological and ideological agreement, tend to share a common bond, a spark that unites and lends a sense of strength to the individual. These stories are what connects the group to the larger community. Storytelling and music have played a major role to reinforce this bond. Interestingly, this transmission does not appear to be always contingent on language. One can hear a song or story in a language not understood, and still gain the essential meaning from the inflections, modes and emotions behind the syllables. Vic Seidler examines this phenomenon in his essay “Diasporic Sounds”:

“My mother-in-law who came from a Polish background but who had emigrated to Brazil in the 1950s was much easier with babies. She was able to enter the sound world of babies. She would appreciate and respond to the sounds they make rather than dismiss them as somehow irrational. She would be able to communicate through sound, recognizing the meaning that sounds carried before they had transformed into words.”

When I was young, I was often comforted by the sounds of my grandparents, mother and uncle speaking quietly in Hungarian around me. Raised a bilingual Anglophone, with no comprehension of Hungarian, the pure sound of this language was not only comforting, as I associated it with family and security, but I found I was able to understand what they were saying on an almost intuitive level. Siedler continues:

“Sound is linked to gesture and so to bodily movement. Often sounds are not disembodied and we appreciate this when we connect sound to movement and so to dance. When the young child makes a sound reaching towards an apple that is beyond its reach on the table, this is a way of saying that it wants the apple. Later the child may learn to say this so that it does not have to reach out any longer, hoping that someone might reach the apple. This is a simple example but it questions the relationship of meaning to language and so the Lacanian vision that it is through language that the child somehow enters culture.”²²

This to me makes an important point about the linkages one makes to culture. Growing up partly in the secular, rural world of small town Quebec, and partly in the immigrant enclave of the Plateau in Montreal, I have been imbued with a sense of multiple identities, and given several doors through which I may enter these identities.

²² Vic Seidler, “Diasporic Sounds: Dis/Located Sounds,” *The Auditory Culture Reader* ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (New York: Berg, 2003) pp. 400-401

Language is not necessary for this entry, and this point is emphasized in my recorded piece by the contrast of my grandparents' strong Hungarian accent, and my lack of one.

While travelling through Hungary, collecting sounds for my piece, I was surrounded by the Hungarian language. In fact, I spent some time with a surviving branch of my grandfather's family, and though I cannot speak Hungarian and they could barely speak English, we communicated through laughter, food and music. It struck me how quickly culture and language are lost, as it took only one generation for my family to assimilate into Quebecois and Canadian culture. In discovering more about the history of Hungary, and in particular Jews in Hungary, the reasons for this desire to assimilate, to melt into secular Canadian culture and adopt the dominant languages of English and French have deep historical reasons. Hungarian Jews in World War II were subjected to unspeakable brutality, but even after the war ended there were still rural pogroms, and atrocities committed daily to the remaining (or returning) Jewish population.²³ It is not surprising that my family would eventually leave for the promise of the more egalitarian, inclusive culture of North America. In Montreal, the diasporic condition would once again assert itself, and I found myself growing up caught between two cultures and three languages. While hearing the Hungarian language spoken around me while growing up, I learned only English and French. Jewish identity, which had attracted so much suffering during the war, was completely suppressed within my family to the extent of celebrating a secularized Christmas, complete with tree and Yule log. Despite this, I have chosen to re-enter and explore my cultural heritage and identity through sound art... through this, I have gained a sense of connection to my European, and ultimately Jewish identity. While

²³ Vera Ranki, The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Jews and Nationalism in Hungary (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999) p. 194

the psychology of the survivor and the intergenerational transmission of trauma is a subject that warrants its own essay, in the scope of my work of the last year I have chosen to focus on the transition of culture and language through the filter of diasporic shifts in location and identity. In examining my position as a Quebecois, Canadian, Jew, Hungarian, Acadian and Cree (my father is Métis), I have had to learn the intricacies of speaking from a hybrid space. This is foundationally different from Gregory Whitehead's utopian talking drum, as it does not "love to forget", nor does this path of discourse assume an essentialist position in addressing issues of identity. Filmmaker and Composer Trinh Minh-Ha describes this eloquently in "Framer Framed", "'Identity' has now become more a point of departure than an end point in the struggle. So although we understand the necessity of acknowledging this notion of identity in politicizing the personal, we also don't want to be limited to it. Dominated and marginalized people have been socialized to see always more than their own point of view. In the complex reality of postcoloniality it is therefore vital to assume one's radical 'impurity' and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying two, three things at a time."²⁴

It is from this "hybrid" space that I have found the ability to extrapolate my ideas around the contemporary diasporic identity, help sharpen the blurred territory of sound art and radiophonics in particular, and to explore the techniques of text based art while maintaining the historical and political contingency of the voices, with which I both work and speak.

²⁴ Trinh Minh-Ha, Framer Framed (New York: Routledge, 1992) p.140

LES MOTS DITS TIMELINE

Part I

00:00

The entire piece begins with the sound of a picture being taken. In my family, pictures were always taken in voluminous quantities. In fact, one could probably make a flip card movie of me growing up if you stacked all the photos from my birthdays on top of each other. I believe that the photo has strong importance in my family as it is the image of the person that helps sharpen the memory of one who has died (or been killed).

00:26

My grandmother's voice is the first to appear, and she begins by saying, "Matthew, look at me...", then we hear the sound of the camera again. My grandfather pipes up and there is an amusing exchange as to whether or not my head was "cut off" in the frame of the photo. This sets the stage for the story to come, it is clear that I am directly involved in the piece, and bears reference to one of the repeating motifs of the piece; that of the missing heads in photographs. This recurs in the epilogue, and is established by the concert poster itself, which is a photograph of my great grandmother (killed by Hungarian Nazis in 1944) on my grandfather's side, whose head has been torn out of the photo, and then reattached with tape. The allegory of missing heads (which is underlined in the epilogues when my grandfather explains that the missing heads in his photo album were sent to "Vad Yashem", the holocaust museum and library in Israel.

00:58

An unprocessed soundscape, recorded in the former Jewish district of Amsterdam. The sound is rich, layered; there are many small gestures and events happening in this small clip. Foreshadowing occurs in the sound of bells, a recurring symbol, and the tram passing by. Spectral voices are heard, both on radio and live. The spectral voice, in this case meaning voices that occur peripherally in recordings, yet are unintelligible occur in portions of the piece. For me, this evokes the feeling of wandering through Europe and constantly encountering reminders of Jewish cultures that had been, but were no longer, or had been greatly diminished by the holocaust.

01:52

The sound from Amsterdam fades into a recording, again unprocessed of a labyrinth under Buda castle in Budapest. The timbral quality of the Amsterdam bells narrows and is mirrored by the sound of chains hanging in the labyrinth clicking against each other. An ominous feel is imparted by the drone, which was generated by a speaker somewhere in the labyrinth. There are wet sounds of footsteps, we feel claustrophobic, and there is a real sense of being in a dark and confined space. This is analogous to the feeling of the unknown of one's history, and the hidden and dark passages, wherein it is easy to get lost.

02:31

My grandfather begins the story by introducing himself. “My name is George Forbath...” He speaks almost officiously, as if he knew he was leaving an aural document. You can hear the soldier in him as he gives a report and evenly and quickly describes his capture on the Romanian frontier, his imprisonment in Buchenwald, forced labour in a munitions factory, and arrival home to find his family killed by the Hungarian Nazis. Underneath, you can barely hear a recording of room tone from within the oven building at Buchenwald. This audio continues as my grandfather fades and ends with German voices reverberating in the space, and then a door is shut and locked. Perhaps overused, the door is nevertheless an effective allegory in this instance to impart both a sense of closure, of having gone through something and transcended, which is how I think my grandfather viewed things. In this piece, I chose to begin with the holocaust and move from there because it is important to lend a feeling of change and forward motion to the story. One thing I found disturbing about holocaust memorials and museums in Europe was the finite nature of the story. History did not end by 1945, people continue, culture continues, life continues...

05:57

I cannot, however gloss over the holocaust as a visceral feeling. My visit to Buchenwald left me feeling quite numb, and it was not until later, after a panic attack in Budapest did I realize what was happening. Dwelling on these images and horrors can be a quite harmful experience, and can leave lasting damage to the psyche of anyone trying to grasp meaning in what happened. Obsessively, we examine the ‘how’ of the matter, but the “why” can never adequately be imparted or examined. There is truly a banality to

what we consider “evil”, and never did I feel it more strongly than in Buchenwald. The sad wasteland of the area, ringed by barbed wire, does in fact evoke a feeling of dread, as if the very air, sky and ground had been permantly altered by the events that took place there. You feel as if you are walking on cursed ground. The sound I chose to evoke this was a gate I had discovered in a tunnel in Prague. It was huge, rusted, and perfect to illustrate the feeling of dread. This sound was processed with a low frequency resonator. Halfway through the sound clip, a series of voices fades in, taken from a recording of the main museum room in Buchenwald, which had video interviews playing on a loop. The last voice, a man speaking in French, is describing how they survived intellectually in all that “shame”. On the periphery of the recording, you can hear more spectral voices.

09:44

My grandmother describes her experiences of hiding in her father’s printing press storage room during the worst period of the reign of the Black Cross Hungarian Nazis.

14:00

A low repeating sound that begins to fade in during my grandmother’s story is heard, looping, unchanging. It is a tiny snippet of a fiddle drone from a “doina” or lament song. It is also the first instance (however obscured) of violin. The violin is a potent symbol in Jewish culture. Chagall included the violin in many of his prints, I believe because of the inherent duality of the instrument. It can express both joy and sorrow simultaneously. This also references back to the concert photo, where my great grandmother is posing with a violin.

A voice, singing in Hungarian breaks the reverie. You can hear the vestiges of Turkish culture in the words through the microtonal mode he uses. Although I could not understand the words, not being taught Hungarian, the pure depth of feeling coming from the voice makes me begin to cry, which is audible in the recording.

Part II

00:00

Beginning abruptly with the sound of trains in Berlin, a small bell is heard, fades away and a tour guide's voice begins. The trains foreshadow the trains involved in my grandparents escape from Hungary later in the story, as well as refer to the trains used to transport Jews to extermination camps (many of my family among them). The bell serves as a herald, much like the use of the door sounds in the piece. Change, a major theme in the piece is about to occur. We hear the tour guide clearly only at times, his voice often drowned out by the sounds of the street and trains. He is describing the life of German Jews leading up to the Holocaust, and how they endured heavy taxation on literally every aspect of their lives. Again, the feeling of the ghosts of a lost culture is imparted here, as in the Amsterdam recording.

A loop taken from a recording of a traditional Hungarian dance in Buda fades in, and ends abruptly, bringing back the focus to Hungary and my grandparents story.

03:20

The second portion of my grandparents' story begins. They fled Budapest in 1956, with my mother and uncle, just ahead of the Russian tanks. It is hard to imagine leaving the world you grew up in, and fleeing with your whole family, risking arrest and possibly death. Particularly striking are all the little details in the story, like my mother's "brand new apple-green dress..."

Trains become a pertinent symbol in this part, as in this case they brought my family to freedom and safety, while little over ten years prior, trains brought many of them to their deaths in concentration camps.

07:42

The Hungarian voices return, as well as some evocative sounds of violin. Mixed through this portion is the sound of trains moving through tunnels. A feeling of motion is given, as well as the bittersweet sensation of moving towards better things, yet leaving behind one's sense of culture and belonging.

09:43

The story continues as my grandparents are applying to get into Canada. They tell the interesting side story of a family denied access because of a Russian stamp on their passports. This family ultimately went to Israel. My grandfather was allowed in, despite his being a member of the Party. This portion reinforces the almost arbitrary nature of the movement and change inherent within diasporic culture. I could have just as easily grown up Israeli, but for a stamp on a passport in 1956. The mention of Israel sets up Part III of the piece, while the reference to communism introduces the next segment in Part II.

11:45

The sound for this section was recorded around the Citadel and the Liberation Monument on Gellért Hill in Budapest. The Citadel is a fortress built by the Hapsburgs in 1851 to demonstrate their control over the Hungarians, and the Liberation Monument, a large statue of a woman holding aloft an olive branch was built in 1947 to commemorate the Russian “Liberation” of Budapest. Birds are heard, chirping away, then the sounds of children playing. Around the citadel there are some women chipping old plaster off the walls with hammers, whistling as they work. A grandmother is supervising her two grandchildren who are playing around old tanks and guns on top of the citadel, she can be heard explaining what the guns are, and making rocket sounds for the kids. Ambient tones drift into this peaceful scene, derived from a recording of myself playing guitar near the Liberation Monument.

The birds are of course a reference to freedom, and the children in the soundscape symbolize hope. The small, almost delicate sounds of the hammers represent the new Hungary being revealed beneath the old. Hungary, like the Czech Republic is still in a state of flux, and the excitement of change was in the air when I visited, as the country had just joined the EU, and left behind its ties to the now tattered and dented iron curtain. This casting off of identity, and passing through a period of change is a reference to Part III, which discusses my own transformation and move towards change.

16:50

My grandparents' story concludes with their arrival in Montreal, and goes into their absorption into modern Quebecois culture. They find a place to live, despite resistance to renting to refugees with children, find work, and become part of Quebecois/Canadian culture. They end the interview discussing how times have changed, economically, and how immigration policy is reflecting that. Once again, I am reminded of how fickle the process of immigration is, dependant on a myriad of factors, especially economic and political climates of the time.

PART III

00:00

We hear birds flapping wings, panning and shifting in and out of reverberance. As in Trevor Wishart's *Red Bird*, the bird sounds throughout this piece represent freedom, and the idea of freedom.

00:49

As the bird sounds die, the processed sound of church bells fades in. While the focus is on the sounds of the harmonic partials of the bell sounds, they are still recognizable as church bells. I felt it was an appropriate segue, as we are closing in on the present, my own perspective, and my own memories and identifications. Growing up in the Plateau in Montreal and in a small Quebec town, the sound of bells is ubiquitous, and the sound evokes very strong memories of being a child. As a child, my religious involvement was actually a secular form of Protestantism. I was baptized in the United church, and went to Sunday school. We even celebrated Christmas. While I was aware

that we were Jewish, I grew to understand that this adoption of secularized Christian traditions was also a way of “blending in”. A strong psychological imperative for immigrants, almost a survival imperative for my Grandparents, for whom “sticking out” or being noticeably different from the surrounding culture, had in the past resulted in death. Thus, I was raised as a secular Christian for a short time.

The sound of fireworks enters the soundscape, which I chose as also an ambiguous sonic signal, much like the train and violin sounds. Fireworks, out of context can be heard as bombs and gunfire. Montreal is big on fireworks displays, and I always wondered what refugees from war torn countries must think initially when they hear sudden explosions echoing over the city.

03:58

A door is locked, signalling the new dialogue about to begin. We are approaching the present, and my own story, a continuation of my grandparents, but with fresh concerns and issues.

04:00

My interview (conducted by Michael Springate), begins with an examination of my identifications as Quebecois, Canadian, Hungarian, rural, urban, lower class, Jewish, etc...

My voice has no accent. By the pure grain of the voice (contrasted with the thick Hungarian accents of my grandparents), one knows that the assimilation process is “complete”, in that I have become Canadian, in one generation, and have immediate identifications with the culture I grew up in.

05:25

This is somewhat like a dream sequence, a reverie. We hear sounds of cicadas and grasshoppers, the throb of a drone concocted out of an organ recorded in a cathedral, a heartbeat like sound recorded in the labyrinth in Budapest, and just barely, the sibilance of my voice floating in there. This portion represents the awakening into a fresh understanding of the multiplicity of my identity, and ultimately the acceptance of Jewish identity back into my life.

09:42

I describe an epiphanous moment on a bus in Vancouver, where suddenly I feel an urge to travel to Israel. This urge may not be an actual need to travel physically to Israel, but may represent a non-religious impulse to reconnect to Judaism, at least culturally. There is a word for this awakening in Yiddish. "Pintele Yid" or the Jewish spark. From about the age of ten, my stepfather, who became an orthodox Jew, started teaching me Hebrew and studying Torah with me. This was very foreign to me, in the context I was in (a secular, mostly working class Protestant town in Quebec), but I went along, and eventually read the entire Torah in Hebrew. After this and the divorce of my parents that my step father's religious transformation ultimately caused, the Jewish "thing" lay dormant within me, and I struggled with my feelings throughout college and university on what it meant to be Jewish, and what Israel meant to me. Could I go along with what seemed like a violent maintenance of a "Jewish" state? Ultimately, Israel becomes a concept for me, not yet a physical place on earth. It is supposed to be the ultimate home and haven for Jews, but this simplicity (it was always presented to me in

this facile way as a kid) is really fraught with problems and ethical inconsistencies. In the piece, when I speak of Israel, I most likely am moving closer intellectually to an acceptance of my identity as hybrid, not fully Jewish, but a blend that has been affected by being Jewish, but speaks not from this essential position, but from the perspective of a Jewish/Hungarian/French/Canadian/Cree . I do not involve my First Nations heritage in the piece, as that is not something I have had the opportunity to examine, not knowing my biological father until later in life, and having almost no experience within First Nation culture beyond what he has shown me. It is however a part of me, and when Michael and I eventually discuss the concept of Home, it figures in my mind that home is such a transmutable, diaphanous concept, and that my cultural hybridity has reinforced this.

13:51

Simultaneously, we hear a calliope in the streets of Amsterdam, an accordion player in Cassis, France, a Roma Band in a bar in Cesky Krumlov, and a Hungarian dance in Budapest. The cacophony acts as a playful fugue state where many similar instruments concoct a musical stew. The Ives-esque mix of disparate music is like my memory flitting over places I have been in retracing my grandparents' voyage from Europe.

15:23

Michael ties everything up with an almost psychiatric synopsis, yet we finish on an ambiguous note by both iterating that we ultimately believe there is no home. I prefer this ambiguous end to a more decisive and definitive statement, because it truly reflects the fluidity and capacity for change that people are capable of. There is extreme

uncertainty in the world, and people above all are adaptable and need to adapt to change. This perspective has guided me to absorbing a great many diverse musical fields and intellectual foci, and has given me access to a myriad of perspectives, and I feel lucky to have developed this capacity. In fact, it is because my history and family's history is so storied and full of change that I have come to this perspective, and to me it is one of the most edifying aspects of survival.

22:07

We end the piece with the sound of a Hungarian Cimbalom player mixing with the sounds of the Mediterranean Sea. A simple enough allegory of the acceptance of change while having a grasp of one's history.

Epilogue

In the epilogue, we come back to the beginning. My Grandparents and I are looking at old photos, you can hear the rustling of pages turning, people talking about pictures the listener cannot see. We ask my grandfather why the heads are cut out, and he explains that he did that for papers he made on each murdered family member to be sent to the holocaust museum in Israel. This segment exists as a nice closing bracket that ties in the poster concept, as well as the very beginning of the piece, where my grandmother takes a picture of me and then worries about whether my head was in the shot.

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