

**Tales of the Tape:  
The Ontological, Discursive, and Ethical Lives of  
Literary Audio Artifacts**

**by  
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the  
Department of English  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Summer 2019

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## Abstract

*Tales of the Tape: The Ontological, Discursive, and Ethical Lives of Literary Audio Artifacts* argues for the importance of listening as a theoretical and methodological practice in the study of literature. In addition to forms of listening that direct themselves toward a literary work's aesthetic qualities in performance, this text also listens to and for the social subtext of literary production. Drawing on audio artifacts from a diverse range of production scenarios—home recordings, literary performances, sound-based poetry, and oral history interviews—*Tales of the Tape* demonstrates how listening remaps literary histories differently than those that focus on print-based production. For one, audio recordings make audible the significant amount of labour that goes into building and maintaining communities as sites of cultural production. This labour is affective and immaterial in nature and is unevenly distributed along gendered lines. For these reasons, it has been overlooked traditional forms of literary history. Audio recordings, especially those that are candid and conversational in nature, make that labour audible so that we can recognize, compensate, and distribute that labour more equitably. Audio recordings can also be mobilized toward a political aesthetic in poetry, as it is in the sounded works of contemporary poets Jordan Abel and Jordan Scott. In these works, recorded sound acts as a layer of mediation that disrupts the normally transparent processes of representation and symbolization. In confronting us with an absent speaker, as well as the distortions, cuts, and alternate temporalizations of recorded sound, these works foreground the twinned structure of lack and excess at the heart of every act of signification. A formal emphasis on lack carries forward to the content of these works, intervening in the symbolic systems of racialization and political subjectivity. Overall this text meditates on the lacking ontology of auditory media, carrying that structure forward in analogous ways to speech, subjectivity, and political reality.

**Keywords:** Contemporary poetry; sound recording; oral history; listening; labour; gender

## **Dedication**

For the women—past, present, and future. For the connections between us.

## Acknowledgements

Writing is the product of many labours and kindnesses. I would like to thank my supervisor, Clint Burnham, whose intellectual rigour and generosity have shaped my thinking in countless ways. I would also like to thank my committee members, Peter Dickinson and Michelle Levy for their invaluable feedback on this project, their expertise and critical thinking, and above all their continuing support as my ideas and writing developed. I am indebted to a number of people for their emotional support, dialogue, and feedback on the work in progress: Ryan Fitzpatrick, Janey Dodd, Danielle LaFrance, Ben Hynes, Jon Saklofske, Cecily Nicholson, Haida Arsenault-Antolick, and Patrick Brownson, who have given me the gifts of expansive listening, provocation, critique, and care. Thanks to Karis Shearer at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, for our ongoing dialogue and collaboration, our ever-open Google documents, and the improvisational performance that continues to be our work together. I am hugely grateful to those who shared their thoughts, reflections and stories with me, on and off the record: Jordan Abel, Pauline Butling, Judith Copithorne, Frank Davey, Maxine Gadd, Maria Hindmarch, Robert Hogg, Carole Itter, Daphne Marlatt, Helen Potrebenco, Rhoda Rosenfeld, Trudy Rubenfeld, and Fred Wah. I hope what we've shared so far is just the beginning of that thing called conversation. Thank you to the estates of Roy Kiyooka and Warren Tallman, particularly Fumiko Kiyooka and Karen Tallman, for giving me permission to work with and reproduce transcripts of the audio recordings that I discuss in this text. Thanks to Tony Power and the library staff at SFU Special Collections for supporting me at the frontlines of my research. A nod to my wonderful cohort in the English Department for our journey together: Kim O'Donnell, Lindsay Bannister, Melissa McGregor, and George Temple. Love to my incredible family—Layne and Ross Hammond, Eric Fong and Tanya Barrett, Judy and Angelo Fragapane—for all the ways that you've supported me, big and small. Thanks to all those who helped get me through the ups and downs of everyday life: Spokenweb, Carlson Gracie Team Montreal and Gracie Barra Team Vancouver, the women of the Book Club, the Special Lady Friends, the Westrose Bakery—especially Jason Camlot, Sarah Vresk, Anne Dorward, and Nania Sergi. An extra heartfelt thank you to my husband, Justin Fragapane who has been with me through it all, and whose love and support have been unwavering and manifold from the very beginning. We made this together.

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## Introduction:

### Learning to Listen

*Listen to your breathing.*

*Listen to your child breathing.*

*Listen to your friend breathing.*

*Keep listening.*

*-Yoko Ono, "Sound Piece II" (1996). Sent to me via text by Anne Bourne on April 26, 2019.<sup>1</sup>*

I am sitting in the Westrose bakery on Greene Avenue in Westmount, Quebec. The day is grey and overcast, the first in almost a week without heavy rain. I close my eyes and listen. I hear the low hum of the bakery's refrigerated display cases, chilling tarts and pâtes-à-choux. Through the speakers above my head, to my left and right, Sam Cooke's "What a Wonderful World" pipes into the room: "But I do know that I love you / And I know that if you loved me, too, / What a wonderful world this would be." My mind flashes to the way these lines get picked up and reworked in Anahita Jamali Rad's book of poetry *For Love and Autonomy II* and the paper that Ryan Fitzpatrick and I are currently writing about it. It is a Sunday afternoon and the bakery is bustling—not a single open seat in the house. Multiple strands of conversation converge into decibel, then pull apart: "*Pour ici ou pour emporter?*"—"But it's good. The taste is good."—"On à la chance que..."—"Oh, come on!" There is a German lesson taking place directly behind me that I do not have the linguistic wherewithal to transcribe. A peal of laughter erupts from a group of older women in the corner. Above it all, the sound of my fingertips clacking the keys of my laptop as I type these words—a wet blast of steam from the espresso

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Bourne is a composer, performer, teacher, and writer based in Toronto, Ontario. In addition to her own interdisciplinary sound and performance practice, she leads workshops on Pauline Oliveros' text scores and deep listening philosophy. Bourne sent me this text from Ono's exhibition at the Fondation-Phi in Montreal after our conversations that morning with Rajni Shah at Concordia University's Listening Lab where Bourne will lead a workshop in the fall of 2019. Our discussion that morning was broad ranging and inquisitive, balancing speaking and listening. We discussed the default structures of auditory space, the performative possibilities of sounding trauma, and methods to engage different modes of listening, among many other topics.

machine—and, if I focus carefully inward, the barely audible sound of my own breath moving in and out, in and out.

I have been to this place many times before. Working here has been an almost daily ritual for the past nine months, reading and writing, editing, and taking care of the daily tasks that make up my professional life. I am in this soundscape so regularly that I rarely hear it as I do now with my attention focused on listening. It is the same and different every day, composed as much in its minute fluctuations as it is in its rhythms and repetitions. Even in this receptive state, with my ears turned all the way up, I am amazed at how much escapes me: the way my listening fails to follow a thread of conversation beyond a few words before being picked up and carried off by some other sound, the way I cannot focus on speech and ambience at the same time, the way that my listening as a *directional* practice within my control can be swept away by the vagaries of the sonic environment around me. In this moment I am acutely aware of my body as a mediator between my cognitive perception and the world around me; that nothing makes sense to me without its continuous, often imperceptible, practices of filtering, editing, and channelling.

The text before you is about what happens when we *listen* in the study of literature. It argues for listening as an important critical practice on many levels. Listening not only gives us a different kind of interpretive insight into literary works, it is also charged with the possibility of social and political change on a material level. I believe that listening is revolutionary work. Because of a longstanding focus on textuality, listening has neither been a site of theoretical inquiry nor a widespread methodological practice in traditional literary study, with the exception of metrical and elocutionary analysis as it relates to poetic form (Camlot 2019) and the discussion of poetic voice, often as a metaphor for expressive style rather than a truly sonic phenomenon (Davey 2011). However, beginning in the late 1990s there has been a turn toward “close listening” in the study of contemporary poetry (Bernstein 1998; Morris 2002; Davidson 1997) as a corrective to the New Critical practices of close reading that dominated English departments in the first half of the twentieth century. As Charles Bernstein writes in his introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, close listening directs attention to “the performance and sounding of poetry” (3), which have been overlooked in favour of the poem’s appearance on the page. This interest in listening as critical practice poses significant intervention in the ways that we read and

interpret literature. For one, close listening asks us to consider the meaning of extralexical features such as intonation, pitch, amplitude, and pace in addition to the poem's words and appearance on the page. It rejects the idea of an authoritative version of a literary work, given that the subtle variations of expression in each of its performances modulate its meaning—it is a different poem every time it is performed. Additionally, close listening directs our attention to the body and its social and physical situation, asking how text as an abstract representational form can meaningfully interact with the world around it, using the body as mediator. A number of innovative digital resources have cropped up based on the conviction that listening to poetry matters. PennSound, a digital repository of sounded poetry based at the University of Pennsylvania, hosts thousands of hours of downloadable digital audio and its attendant Massive Open Online Course, ModPo, draws thousands of students from around the world, all invested in listening to, discussing, and debating poetry and poetics in an online forum.

As it is conceived of at the turn of the century, close listening offers a number of important inroads into the study of literature and its aesthetic, semantic, and social dimensions. However, this turn towards listening keeps the text as its primary object of contemplation—that is, what we are listening *for* are properties in the text that are activated by its oral performance. So while there is a renewed interest in the sociality of literature (renewed from, say, the social function of the salon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the focus remains on the transformative effects of sociality on literature, rather than an interest in literary sociality as a form legible in its own right.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the turn to close listening has generally focused on genres of Modernist, conceptual, and innovative poetry that have already enjoyed considerable tenure in the North American canon. As a result, close listening in this context has generally served to broaden works' aesthetic parameters without significantly altering the social status quo around canonicity and literary value.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this observation only holds true of the specific scenario of close listening in contemporary poetry as championed by Bernstein and his contemporaries. Indeed, there has been much contemporary scholarship on oral performance that focuses on social circulation of literature—for example, work by Indigenous scholars such as Lee Maracle's *Memory Serves* (NeWest, 2015) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* (Arbeiter Ring, 2011). There is also a body of contemporaneous scholarship focusing on the sociality of literature in other contexts, such as Maria Damon's *The Dark End of the Street* (U of Minnesota P, 2013) and Lytle Shaw's *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (U of Iowa P, 2006), but there is overall little criticism addressing the nexus of oral performance, poetry, and sociality.

*Tales of the Tape* undertakes a different kind of listening in relation to literature, asking what it would mean to instead direct our listening practices toward the *social subtext* of literary production. That is, rather than focus on a literary work's reiteration as sound, to ask what happens when we listen to and for the conversations *around* literary production that shape the manifold relations of the literary field. In one sense, this approach takes its cues from the practices of social bibliography developed by scholars such as D.F. McKenzie and Pierre Bourdieu who emphasize the role of social actors (authors, publishers, booksellers, agents, readers, etc.) in determining notions of value and legitimacy in the literary field. Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*, for example, examines "the role of culture in the reproduction of social structures, or the way in which unequal power relations, unrecognized as such and thus accepted as legitimate, are embedded in the systems of...everyday life" (2). Far from accepting notions of literary value as universal and self-evident, a sociological approach to literary study interrogates the way that agents of the field and the relations between them construct value. It argues that power and ideology are optimally operative wherever pronouncements about culture seem the most neutral and most obvious. Bourdieu insists that it is the social historian's task to make visible and critique the everyday "self-evident givens [*données*]" (31) that inform our assumptions about cultural value, especially when these are so prevalent and entrenched that they appear to us as ordinary truths. Social history must take into account "persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are 'in the air' and circulate orally in gossip and rumour" (32) to contour these everyday *données*. When we turn our attention to an oral economy that we approach through listening, we enter into a site where cultural value is built from the ground up. I argue that when we listen to the conversations *around* literary production, many contested and previously silent histories become audible: of community-building and labour, of gendered and racialized experience, of social antagonism and alliance.

Of course, we cannot speak to sociality without first considering its constituent parts: subjects and the relations between them. On this point, sociality at a material level is deeply rooted in philosophical inquiry when we ask: 1) how do we define a subject? and 2) how does this subject interact with other entities in the world? These are the questions that drive my opening chapter, "Sounding the Void: Decisional and Relational Events across Auditory Media." This chapter asks what happens when subjects

encounter one another, and what constitutes an event on cognitive, intersubjective, and structural levels. Here, I emphasize the high political stakes of using the event as a theoretical model: events are not just a series of occurrences that together form a historical continuum, but rather sites of emergence for the radically new—where the impossible suddenly reverses into reality. Here, I argue that events have a twofold structure: in one sense, events are *decisional*—a point of cutting off, a subtraction of elements from a totalizing pure multiple. This decisional aspect of an event is sensible in my description of listening at the bakery: my reality comes into being only by perceiving some aspects of the external world at the expense of others. There are at once things that I cannot hear (i.e. those that are outside of my range of hearing), and things to which I cannot listen (i.e. things that I cannot deliberately focus my attention on without diminishing my attention on others).

As a medium through which we experience reality, the body is just one site where decisional events occur. This chapter triangulates the event's subtractive ontology between the listening body, the lacking affordances of auditory media (specifically, the compact cassette tape), and what Alain Badiou calls the political "state of the situation" in *Being in Event*. The latter site, which Badiou illustrates through the axioms of mathematical set theory, refers to a political reality in which subjects come to count-as-one under the nation-state, bound up as it is with an increasingly neoliberal global agenda. In an analogous way to the other two evental sites, body and medium, the making of a coherent set of subjects happens only through the negation of certain subjects, who form an empty set apart from an otherwise positively defined body. This empty set points us toward the logic of the count itself, the mathematical function that conceptually orders reality as we understand it. However, there is always an element that exceeds the count. This element is not a positively extant entity, but rather the very site of lack or subtraction occasioned by the count. The lacking structure of the decisional event points us toward its structural counterpart: events are also *relational*—points of return, re-enactment, and citation. The lacking structure of decision creates a relational point for future encounter as an ever-receding horizon. Lack is something we return to again and again to fill in with different placeholders, without fully exhausting the possibilities of the set as structure. This chapter parses the ways that decision and relation are inextricable from one another, each stepping in at the other's point of impossibility.

Identifying the interplay of decision and relation is not an abstract philosophical exercise, but rather points to the ways that difference and antagonism exist in tandem with totality. Here, I advocate for a politics of the event that is faithful to the lack engendered by decision and relation—that directs itself toward the logic of the count itself and the immense possibility in what it fails to capture. As a concrete example of how the politics of the event might be harnessed in a critical and creative way, I turn to Jordan Scott's multimedia poetic project *Clearance Process*, which draws upon sound and images that Scott collected at Guantánamo Bay Detention Center in Cuba in 2015. As a documentary work, *Clearance Process* refuses to present us with what is available for capture, but rather uses form to point our attention toward that which escapes us: another's experience, perception, bodily sensation, and pain. The piece foregrounds lack and absence at several overlapping sites: the redaction of detainees' bodies, the suspension of basic human rights, the impossible physical relation between one body's knowledge and another's, the failure of all media to record or manifest experience. In encountering these imbricated gaps, we offer our own listening bodies as relational placeholders, feeling alongside another without trying to speak for or represent another's pain.

The second chapter, "Listening to Labour," moves from an ontological exploration of the event in a media-specific way to discuss how listening to sound recording can reframe and refocus community histories. Using the 1960s Canadian poetry collective TISH as a case study, I argue that the labour that has traditionally been the focus of print-based histories of this movement effectively obscures another form of labour essential to that community's constitution. Written accounts such as Frank Davey's autobiographical history *When TISH Happens* (ECW Press, 2011) emphasize the work that goes into producing and editing the poetry newsletter *TISH* and the attendant development of a readerly public. However, an exclusive focus on this public-facing form of community-building obscures another form of labour that plays out unevenly along gendered lines: the affective, immaterial labour of reproducing the community through activities of care. I argue that this form of labour has been undertheorized in accounts of literary history (both in relation to TISH and more broadly) for two reasons: one, it is involved in the immaterial labour of defining and reproducing notions of cultural value—an argument mobilized by the Italian Autonomists that aligns with Bourdieu's critique of the cultural field. Two, it is closely related to what Marxist-feminist theorist Silvia Federici

defines as reproductive labour—the labour of satisfying the physical and emotional needs of the household in order to keep the workforce operative for production. I argue that, much like the workplace and the household, literary communities are structured by these two forms of labour and are therefore prone to reproducing their ideological exclusion as *labour* because of their differential relationship to commodity production. Importantly, not only are these labouring forms affective in nature, they are also administered and disciplined through affect: in cultural value work, producers are asked to offer their labour for free under the mantra “art for art’s sake” and in reproductive work the mantle of womanly or motherly love covers over the immense amount of labour needed to reproduce the workforce.

As a corrective to the elision of gendered, affective labour around TISH, I turn to a number of sound recordings in which this labour is made audible. The first is a recording titled “DHL 100 Tape,” from the SoundBox Collection at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus (Karis Shearer, director), which records a 1969 conversation between Warren Tallman, (Gladys) Maria Hindmarch, and Stan Persky, about the history of avant-garde writing in Vancouver.<sup>3</sup> The recording forms the basis for Tallman’s 1974 print article “Wonder Merchants” that details the writerly activities of the TISH group and their engagement with New American poetics. The second recording is an interview that poet-scholar Roy Miki conducts with Warren and Ellen Tallman in 1983, which details the latter’s connection to poetry scenes in San Francisco and Berkeley, and illustrates her pivotal role in the organization of the events surrounding the 1963 Poetry Conference in Vancouver. On both these tapes, we hear evidence of alternative configurations of sociality that revolve around listening, feedback, conviviality, and care—narratives that do not make their way into official histories because of their private, rather than public status. I argue that sound recording is one way to make affective labour audible as *labour* and, in so doing, open up a conversation around the distribution, valorization, and compensation of that labour.

Chapter Three, “Performing Sonic Subjects: Racialization, Mediatization, and Non-relation,” moves from an analysis of sound and listening in an archival or documentary context to discuss the ways that sound can be mobilized as a political aesthetic in poetry. This chapter builds upon my analysis of the event in the first chapter,

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<sup>3</sup> Hindmarch published most of her work under the first name, Gladys; however, here and elsewhere in the dissertation I refer to her by her preferred first name, Maria.



figuring the lack at the heart of the event as a *non-relation*, to use the operative term in Alenka Zupančič's psychoanalytic study *What IS Sex?* Following Jacques Lacan, she posits sex and sexual difference (that is, the difference between masculine and feminine positions) as properly ontological problems that extend into a number of material scenarios. Non-relation is an antinomic structure that exists between two entities whereby the lack in one constitutes the being of the other. Slavoj Žižek, for example, posits a non-relation between the voice and the gaze in *Less Than Nothing* when he writes that the relationship between the two objects "is mediated by an impossibility: ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything" (670). Where one object fails, the other steps in as a counteractive perspective or vantage point, but these two opposing viewpoints do not cohere to make a whole. Rather, they persist in their intertwining separation, never meeting. I use non-relation as a conceptual apparatus to parse the aesthetics and politics of a lineage of avant-garde sound poetry that begins with the vocal experiments of the Zurich Dadaists in the early 20th century and continues through the contemporary Canadian sound poetry practiced by The Four Horsemen. In this lineage, the search for a vocal Ur-language that precedes meaning is pinned upon the vocalizations of a fetishized and racialized other, whose speech is fantasmatically characterized as "non-meaning." This fetishism ignores the non-relation between pre- and post-linguistic scenarios, mistaking a lack for a loss, and through disavowal seeks to suture over the traumatic split of linguistic articulation.

Against this fetishism of the voice and the desire for non-meaning, I analyze Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel's performance of his 2016 book of poems *Injun* at the Pyatt Hall in Vancouver in the spring of 2016. Abel's performed work uses a digital sampler to cut up pre-recorded segments of his reading voice, subjecting them to increasing levels of distortion and disintegration. I argue that the performance of this work analogizes form and content, using a non-relation between the performer's voice and body to signal and critique the disavowed non-relation between Indigenous subjects and their symbolic coding through racial difference. The work in performance uses digital mediation to open up a "cut" or "break" (Moten 2003) in the word and introduce indeterminacy into the process of signification. This cut does not intend to produce non-meaning in the same way that Dadaist sound poetry intends, but rather points toward the minimal, irreducible gap within the sign itself as bound to, and produced by, structure. Abel's work

thematizes the cut in both content and method, instructing us to read for the formal intervention of the cut rather than to (only) read the material that it cuts through.

My final chapter, “Towards an Ethics of Listening in Oral Literary History,” is written in a more personal register, reflecting on a series of interviews that I conducted in the spring of 2017 with the women whose voices feature in Roy Kiyooka’s audio archives. In this chapter, I outline a research ethics around acts of listening, recording, retelling and interpreting in the context of literary study. The notion of non-relation that I develop in Chapter 3 carries forward here, as I suggest that an ethics of listening must equally turn around what can’t be said as much as what can—that silence and speech carry equal weight in the transmission of historical narratives. The chapter begins by exploring the ethics of interviewing and publishing as they have been articulated in the field of oral history. Drawing on scholarship by Dana Anderson and Kathryn C. Jack, Michael Frisch, Alessandro Portelli, Joan Sangster, and Valerie Yow, I probe a split at the heart of oral history which views speakers’ testimony as history, *plus some other foreign element*. The status of this element modulates in these critical texts as scholars seek to define what *it* is and, consequently, what makes oral history different from other historical discourses. I argue that two types of silence structure oral history as a speech-based form: ontological and material. The first refers to the way that language is structured around a missing signifier, a lack that drives the frenetic activity of articulation in an attempt to bridge the insurmountable gap of meaning. Here, I point to Lacan’s idea of the signifying chain, which can never be completed because there is always the possibility of adding another signifier to it, *ad infinitum*. Interviews give us a sense of this ontological silence, as it is impossible to narrate our lives as continuous, coherent phenomena. No matter how much of our story we tell, no matter how many causes we name to an explain an effect, there is always a certain x-factor that persists above and beyond what we can articulate under any given circumstances. The second form of silence is material in nature, in that it addresses what can and can’t be said under the governance of social norms and conventions. Social structure dictates different rules for different subjects, and these often unspoken rules of enunciability very much shape the public and private registers of speech—in the context of an oral history interview as much as in any other setting.

This chapter argues that it is essential to listen *to* and *for* these silences in addition to the manifest content of an interview. As a concrete case study for the kind of

formal listening that I propose, I analyze my 2017 interview with Maxine Gadd, Rhoda Rosenfeld, and Trudy Rubinfeld, where a discussion of the countercultural ethos of Vancouver in the 1960s traces that unsayable *thing* that persists above and beyond the narration of experience. I also detail my experiences feeling through the boundaries of privacy and publicity in my interviewing practices, especially where they express themselves around gender, inequality, and trauma. Here, I argue that those who are most sensitive to the division between private and public speech are generally those who have experienced negative consequences for their participation the public sphere—including women, femmes, and other marginalized groups. While it is difficult to talk about private speech because it occurs off the record, removed from the demands of citability, I maintain that it is important to talk around its absence on the public record, since it is an equally viable form of history that shapes the way we perceive the social world. Responding to these two forms of silence, the chapter concludes by offering some best practices and anxieties around oral history interviewing that at once express ambivalence around the researcher's interpretive impetus—making a tenuous connection between the historian and the psychoanalyst—while at the same time putting forward suggestions for how silence can be respected, foregrounded, and made legible in its own right.

There are two continuous presences in this document—wellsprings to which I have returned again and again for inspiration and provocation. The first is a body of psychoanalytic writing, most prominently the works of Jacques Lacan, but also the reading and generative expansion of his work by contemporary critics Mladen Dolar, Bruce Fink, Slavoj Žižek, and Alenka Zupančič. If I carried around a tape recorder of my own, I would by now have recorded numerous conversations in which friends, colleagues, and acquaintances have taken me to task for my fidelity to psychoanalysis—on charges of its insular focus on the subject, its political lassitude, its abstraction and erudition, its adulation of language, and its essentialist definitions of gender. Given the social focus of this study I have been asked (and have asked myself): what can psychoanalysis, the theory of psychical subjectivity, tell us about social scenarios at a molar level? How far can we push the comparison between the individual and the body politic? How can a theory of non-relation account for difference and intersection in the granular way that identity politics require? To answer these questions I will simply say that, against its detractors, psychoanalysis is first and foremost a theory of how

individuals relate to one another, making it a theory of sociality at its most fundamental level. Indeed, Lacan himself conceives of the signifier at the heart of his language-driven theory of the subject as “a link between those who speak” (*Sem. XX*: 30), requiring us to deeply engage with ideas of positionality, forms of address, and our relation to otherness, all of which form the weft and warp of social and political reality.

Furthermore, making sounded poetry an object of inquiry provides a compelling case study to work through the claims that psychoanalysis puts forth about language, the voice, the signifier, the meaning-effects of speech, and myriad other fundamental concepts. The poetic texts that I read in this document put pressure on these concepts in a useful way, asking, for example, what constitutes a signifying unit in a poem (letter, phoneme, word, line, sentence) or where we draw the line between meaning and vocal jouissance in sound-based poetic works. Thus in reading sounded poetry psychoanalytically—and, to a certain degree, reading psychoanalysis performatively, vocally, and medially—I wish to mutually enlarge each field through the other, probing the tenuous limits of selfhood and alterity, individuality and sociality, the voice and its extension through recording. This dissertation is, first and foremost, an investigation into how we move among and alongside one another *sonically*; how we are shaped by different relations of proximity (within earshot, across the space/time of recording); and how non-relation and antagonism structure us and our relations with each other at every level. As Fred Moten evocatively phrases it in *In the Break*:

It's as if at the end of philosophy...one returns to the dark matter or continent of philosophy's unconscious to shed some light. Psychoanalysis is not this unconscious though it might be said to operate in that process through which one is given back (to) what one already has, that to which one is always and never returning. (77)

I read these lines as a conviction to hold space for the contradictions and paradoxes at the core of the psychoanalytic project, where always and never, excess and void, having and lacking, are articulated through and against one another. As I insist in Chapter 3, we need not choose between material and philosophical registers of discourse because, by way of a minimally reflective twist, the singular and the generic pronounce each other into being—one as the effect of a structure, and one as a form of structuration in itself. With its focus on structure and lack, psychoanalysis is key in conceptualizing this contradiction, allowing us to grasp cause and effect as simultaneous and co-productive of one another.

The second presence in this text is the collection of audio recordings that Japanese-Canadian poet Roy Kiyooka produced between 1963 and 1991, which are held at Simon Fraser University's Special Collections in Burnaby, BC. I discovered this incredible collection of tapes soon after arriving in Vancouver to begin my PhD—by happenstance, a box from his archive happened to be out on the table the first day I visited Special Collections because Kiyooka's daughter, Fumiko, had been consulting them for a film she was working on. I was immediately drawn to them as material artifacts—not only because I love the aesthetic of analog recording technologies of that era (with their bold geometric shapes and vivid colour palettes), but also by the beauty of Kiyooka's handwriting and the cryptic titles it inscribed: "Weiner Roast at Emma Lake, '72", "Conversations at 1455 Cypress", "Roy Yakking", "At the Cecil Hotel". Precipitating my arrival in Vancouver, I had proposed a doctoral project on the performance of poetry in public-facing readings and events, such as the Vancouver 1963 Poetry Conference, and the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium associated with the Kootenay School of Writing. You can imagine my dismay when I listened to the tapes in Kiyooka's collection and found that there was little to no poetry contained therein. There were conversations *around* poetry, sure, but the majority of the tapes captured the ins and outs of everyday life—chatter and gossip with friends, the soundscapes of home life and journeys abroad, phone calls and drop-ins, passing thoughts and reflections. Even though this was not the content I was searching for, I could not help but listen to more and more of it. I came to intimately know the voices of people whom I had never met—or who I was about to meet—their daily ruminations, their idiosyncratic vocabularies and verbal tics, their laughter distinct as a fingerprint. The discovery of this collection knocked my project off its course in the best possible way. I began to conceptualize what it was that I was listening to and its import for arts and literary history, taking the conversation as a serious literary genre and object of scholarly contemplation. I grappled with how to make sense of such a vast, amorphous cache of speech and considered what kinds of listening and interpretive techniques I would need to meaningfully engage with it. The work before you is the culmination of the thinking that this particular collection has occasioned.

I often think about why Kiyooka felt it important to document his life in this way, and if I was the intended auditor of these recordings. On the one hand, the recordings are so intimate, so *private* that I wondered if I should be listening to them at all. Indeed,

in a sense, this kind of mediated listening seemed almost more personal than a face-to-face conversation, with another person's voice pouring into my ear through my headphones. On the other hand, it is hard to escape the sensation that my listening to these tapes so many years later is an instance of "the letter arriving at its destination" (to borrow Lacan's concept from the Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*)—that my listening to them completes call for contact issued so many years ago in the act of their making. Many of the speakers that I interviewed have suggested as much. It is possible that both these scenarios are true. Ultimately, these artifacts remind me of the radical openness of listening and the ways that sound as a temporal medium can be reanimated, again and again, across time. As much as there is a real and immediate connection when I stand in as the addressee of Kiyooka's recorded statements I know that the tape itself invites innumerable future encounters with other listening bodies who will take in his words and be moved and shaped by them. In a recording made on June 19, 1982, Kiyooka asks, "I wonder if there's a connection, say, between my addressing you, and my listening to the local CBC French Canadian station." His recorded words fill my ears as double-melodied conversation unfolds around me in French and in English at the bakery. To listen is to connect: one time to another, one place to another, one sign to another, one body to another. In those articulations we open ourselves to new possibilities, such that even the most tightly sealed situations are given to degrees of change, anticipating and calling toward the emergence of something radically new.

-Deanna Fong  
Montreal, QC, spring 2019

## Chapter 1:

### Sounding the Void: Decisional and Relational Events across Auditory Media

Fred Moten: I would say that, on an intellectual level, maybe my worst habit is trying to assimilate, or come to some kind of rapprochement with stuff that's probably not good for me. It's complicated. Because now that I think about it and I've been talking for a minute, I would say my biggest bad habit, which is probably like a lot of people's, is I kinda got this impulse to critique stuff sometimes. And sometimes I get involved in writing about stuff that I hate. [...] And it doesn't get any better until I can figure out a way to love what it was that I thought I hated. This is certainly my relationship to maybe, like, Hannah Arendt. And actually, dude, it would kind of be my relationship to you. Because my impulse would be to think about you as a human being, and think about you as a person who could be a potential ally. To think about you as the kind of person who could be a friend, and maybe even bend over backwards, in a certain way. To not protect the people who you would tend to attack, but to extend love toward you. And that's probably dangerous. Because I'm wondering if you have the capacity to think about how fucked up what you just did is.

Man in audience: Are you talking to me?

Moten: Yeah, I'm talking to you.

Man in audience: Oh, I didn't hear any of that. I thought you were talking to him.

Moten: I know you didn't. I know you didn't hear any of it. That's the problem. (00:53:07 - 00:55:43)

This transcript is excerpted from the Q&A that followed Fred Moten's reading at the Or Gallery in Vancouver's downtown eastside on Saturday, October 23, 2015. Moten is a black poet and scholar who lives in New York and teaches Performance Studies in the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. In the recital that precedes the Q&A, he reads a section from his then forthcoming book, *The Service Porch*, called "Anacrits," which explores the intersections of affect and critique in the art world. The man in the audience is a white-reading Vancouverite who lives above the gallery, a fact that he announces frequently and insistently, which strikes me as either a justification or a defense—for what, I'm not exactly sure. I remember him sitting at the front right-hand

side of the venue wearing a black hoodie, a six-pack of beer at his feet. The man is the first speaker during the Q&A and eagerly asks Moten where he's from ("Compton? Los Angeles?"). He speaks enthusiastically about his love for gangsta rap—the Wu-Tang Clan, NWA, and about how "fucked up" it is in the United States. His questions and dialogue with Moten hold the floor for an uncomfortably long time. When local poet Cecily Nicholson suggests that they move on to a better question, he verbally attacks her using misogynist language. A shocked murmur reverberates through the room. The man quickly issues an apology, and then another local poet, Peter Quartermain, asks Moten a nervous, somewhat superficial question as an attempt to get the conversation back on track: "What is your worst writing habit?" (response excerpted above). In the minutes that follow, the situation becomes even more volatile: Moten asks the man to leave. The latter responds with a barrage of racist slurs and insults ("rich kids," "art school pukes"), interspersed with genuine emotional appeals: "I thought we had a connection, man." Several male members of the poetry community lay hands on the man, ushering him to the door like so many nightclub bouncers. There are appeals to "calm down" and to "talk about it outside." There is a point where the tape captures three competing strands of dialogue: the man outside the gallery pounding on the windows, yelling expletives and hate speech, the event coordinator on the phone with the police describing the incident, and the measured voice of Anishnaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker noting how profoundly *uneventful* this kind of incident is in the lives of people of colour.

This account of the event is not mine alone. It is pieced together from my own recollection as well as that of others (Nicholson, Ryan Fitzpatrick), and what was recorded on the tape. I chose this excerpt from a number of other possibilities because it most vividly reflects my memory of the event. Upon listening to the audio recording years after the fact, I was surprised to discover that I remembered this portion of Moten's speech nearly verbatim. For whatever reason, that moment in the evening's events was salient to me: it arrested me where I sat and has stuck with me ever since. As I listen to the recording after the fact, my own listening body, here, in the present, remembers my listening body of that night—internally stirred by a kind of compulsion to act that would not translate into movement. Feeling fixed to my seat. Remembering how Dorothy Lusk, a writer and friend several decades my senior who was sitting next to me at the reading, put her hand on my leg as the situation escalated as a kind of protective gesture. As the



recorded voices shake my eardrums, things return to me and impress upon me here, now, as I sit and type these words almost four years later—emotions, sensations in my body, a vision of my own placement in the room. Yet there are details that escape my memory, too: the names of other audience members with whom I did not converse that night, what I did before or after the reading. In fact, in approaching the event after such a long hiatus, I am most struck with the fact that there is no consistency to what we might consider its salient details. When I speak to Nicholson about it years later, some of what she most prominently remembers are the men laying hands and the fact that a white male poet repeated the racial slurs in his comments when the Q&A resumed—the latter a detail that my mind did not record. Indeed, the tape recorder picks up this secondary repetition of these slurs more audibly than their original utterance by the man in the audience. Fitzpatrick remembers that it was Quartermain asked the question about bad writing habits (not his contemporary Colin Browne as I had remembered it). He also remembers expressing his utter sense of shock in a conversation after the event, wherein he was reminded that such occurrences are not out of the ordinary for racialized folk.<sup>4</sup>

I begin with Moten’s reading as a point of departure, because I think it demonstrates both the high stakes and the difficulty of talking about the event as a theoretical frame and method, in literary study and beyond. As a matter of personal conviction, I believe that our discussion of the event cannot be limited to a hermetically sealed notion of ontology—metaphysical questions of “what is” or “what it means to be”—nor to a purely aesthetic discussion of reality and representation. Rather, eventness is charged with the material struggle for social and political justice, the possibility of, and dedication to, radical change. Indeed, as Alain Badiou insists in *Being and Event*, “Rather than a warrior beneath the walls of the State, a political activist is a patient watchman of the void instructed by the event, for it is only when grappling with the event that the State blinds itself to its own mastery” (115). In theorizing the event, one must take seriously the task of identifying cracks in a dominant sociopolitical situation that marginalizes, silences, and commits violence against its subjects. In the case of Moten’s reading, these subjects are those with racialized and gendered bodies, and also possibly subjects displaced by gentrification and capitalist expansion—though

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<sup>4</sup> Impressions of the event recollected in oral and written form (conversations and email) in the spring of 2019.

the latter can by no means be read with the same transparency as the former.<sup>5</sup> The eventness of this particular event exposes the pressures of Vancouver's social, economic, and political situation as well as the fantasy that makes that situation operative: on the one hand, it shows which bodies *count*—as visible, as invisible, as hypervisible, as targets of censure and harm. On the other, it reveals the power discourse of the count itself, whose operations depend on censoring and covering over this disparity. Perhaps what shocks us most about this event is not the fact that racism exists (since we all know very well that it does), but that it is made obscenely public in a milieu that works so very hard to disavow it.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty of talking about the event lies in its temporally and spatially dispersed structure. Temporally, the event of the reading belongs to a non-returning time: its only remainder in the present is the audio recording that captures speech and sound, as well as the memories of those who were there. But it also belongs to the activity that continues after that moment, which draws upon, and articulates to, the artifacts that document it: the call to hold a follow-up discussion at the Or Gallery, considerations of what, if anything, to do with the audio recording (publication, dissemination, etc.), conversations and writing around the event, and calls for accountability from the gallery to create safer space for women/femmes and people of colour. Spatially, too, the event is difficult to pinpoint because of the way it spreads across scale. That is, we can think this event at the level of the subject, the community, the city, and even the larger contexts of region and nation. But how do we begin a dialogue about *the* event as a consistent phenomenon when its definition at any one of these levels might contradict its definition at another? That is, this is a very different event for me, someone whose body is sometimes-but-not-always read as white, than it is for someone whose body is habitually racialized. It is a different event for members who count themselves within a community rather than outside it. Calling the police has

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<sup>5</sup> In the discussion that followed most prominently in my communities, there was a fair bit of speculation about the role that class politics and gentrification played in this incident—indeed, many of the man's insults expressed anger about class disparity and economic privilege. These comments in no way excuse his behaviour, nor can they be read as unequivocally as a misogynist remark or a racial slur. However, they do expose the logic of a different kind of count particular to the structuring space of artistic communities—what subjects are considered within and without.

<sup>6</sup> Here my use of the first-person plural, "we/us" to designate a subject of the event is clearly fraught. The way I use it above speaks to the "delusional whiteness of the avant-garde" (Cathy Park Hong), which covers its own obscene racist desire with a rhetoric that strikes us as spontaneously apolitical: conceptualism, aesthetic experimentation, freedom of speech. In what follows, I want to explore the ways that eventness can speak to intersectionality while still providing a conceptual model to talk about change and novelty.

very different implications in Vancouver than it would in, say, Los Angeles where Moten lived at the time, or Winnipeg where Annharte lives. As Diana Taylor reminds us, events, like performance, are in a sense intractably local: what one society considers an event might be “a nonevent elsewhere” (3).

Despite these challenges, I maintain that it is possible, and indeed politically exigent, to discuss the event from a universal position. I argue that the event has a bifurcate structure that plays out along temporal and spatial axes. On the one hand, the event is *decisional*: a cutting-off, a point of no return, an actualization of desire. Decisional events follow a *subtractive ontology* by which contingency reverses into necessity (in Slavoj Žižek’s formulation) or presentation reverses into representation (Badiou). In this way, decisional events are structured by *lack*, to use the operative term in Jacques Lacan’s theory of psychical subjectivity: “The lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists” (1991: 223). Lack emerges with the subject’s induction into the symbolic order, whereby articulation fails and a remainder or *objet a* persists as an inassimilable symbol of the Real. On the other hand, events are *relational*: a return, a re-encounter, a concrescence. Relational events follow an *additive ontology* that links two moments in time or two states of affairs. They open toward futurity as a virtual (Deleuze), undecidable (Badiou) or creative (Whitehead) encounter that is projected, imagined, or engrained at the moment of the decisional event. Where decisional events are structured by lack, relational events are structured by plenitude to the point of excess. Rather than the binary “is”/“is not” structure of being, there are infinite, shifting states of becoming. These undecidable states act as lures to future decisional acts, asking us to respond by “hailing” us (Schneider 166). Crucially, the relational event is never complete in any single interaction, but remains open to innumerable future encounters.

In this chapter, I will show how we must consider decisional and relational events as *inextricable from one another*, part of one and the same structure. Unlike Alexander Galloway who maintains that “the only true theory of the event is one that withdraws absolutely from both relation and decision” (81), I believe that parsing the connections between the decisional and relational events is the key to understanding the link between generic truth and a particular situation. In the activity of detecting and responding to absence, lack, and closure, we uncover what is most universal about a situation—that which Badiou terms the “singularity” (103) or “empty set” (90). Negotiating

between the situation and its lack allows difference to exist within a totalizing system, and this negotiation is nothing other than what Badiou terms *fidelity to the Truth-Event*. As a way into the event's complex structure, in this chapter I will discuss two discursive formations in which scholars have conceptualized being, happening and representation: mid-twentieth century media theory, and performance studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The inquiries that drive these formations are enmeshed with eventness: How does unmediated experience differ from mediated experience? What kinds of artistic products and psychological states are conditioned by speech and writing? What is the "original" essence of a reproducible work? Such questions allow us to describe the *effects* of performance and mediation up to a point, but quickly reach an impasse without the radical intervention of the event. In media theory (and adjacent fields, print culture and the digital humanities) a melancholic lament for a lost object perverts the retroactive temporality of the event. In performance studies, the opposition of materiality and immateriality has obscured a more important discussion about the specific losses of each medium, and how such losses persist and signify in the present. As a litmus test for the claims put forth in these fields, I examine audio recordings from the Roy Kiyooka audio archive to show how the vocabulary and methodology in these fields is insufficient to engage with this type of artifact. Sound recordings provide an ideal case study for thinking through the relation between media and event for several reasons: one, the affordances of auditory media (especially analog formats) make us acutely aware of the lack that structures their existence. Unlike writing and film, sound recording confronts us with an absent speaker, owing to the disconnection between what we see (or fail to see) and what we hear. This is not to suggest that these other media *lack* lack, so to speak, but rather to observe that sound recording has been ideologically constructed as an inherently lacking medium compared to the fullness of live speech and the malleability of writing. Two, audio recordings, portable through space and embodied in time, enable strongly affective experiences of "touching time" (35), to use Rebecca Schneider's tactile phrasing. They overlay one discrete section of time on another, such that relationality of the event is sometimes dizzyingly manifest. I need only cite, as a brief example, the forty-seven minutes and thirty seconds of rainfall that Roy Kiyooka recorded on June 26, 1982—a recording that I've listened to ninety-one times as background noise over the course of writing my dissertation. In Vancouver, the times where the recording accords with reality (it is raining) are more frequent than when it does not (it is not raining), but the point is that it is simultaneously the same and a different rainstorm in each

successive play. I conclude this chapter by claiming the philosophy of the event as the basis for an oppositional politics and poetics that is rooted in a *fidelity to lack*, which opens up critical space in a socio-political situation that aims for hermetic totality. There, I examine the work of Jordan Scott, a contemporary poet and sound practitioner who uses the materiality of the recording to counter systems of representational and physical violence.

## **A lack is not a loss**

To begin thinking through the relationship between being and event, I turn first to a group of mid-century media theory texts that have had an enduring influence on successive work, both within and outside the field. Now in its sixteenth printing, Marshall McLuhan's 1962 *Gutenberg Galaxy* remains one of the most frequently cited works of media theory, even after the emergence of a substantial body of criticism in the 1970s and '80s.<sup>7</sup> *The Gutenberg Galaxy* studies the effects of communication technologies on human experience and the psyche, with particular emphasis on the effects of the fifteenth-century Gutenberg printing press. According to McLuhan, the widespread circulation of print media has several adverse effects on human psychology and society. First, visuality is isolated from the other senses and comes to dominate our mental and cognitive activity. This disturbance in the "ratio of the senses" (27) results in a loss of identity and, furthermore, a sense of numbness to the world or "hypoaesthesia" (27). Second, print enacts a shift from a centralist to specialist organizational structure because of the individualized activity that reading involves. This isolationist tendency plays out in a number of social arenas: integrated roles turn into specialist jobs, while continuous, immersive time is segmented into linear teleology. The shift from orality to print is the overall "translation or reduction of diverse modes into a single mode of homogenized things" (295) in every facet of daily life. Shared human activities are segregated into individual tasks, while a unified, harmonious sensorium is rent apart and forced into an exclusively visual mechanism. McLuhan's argument is built on a set of ideological assumptions about speech and writing—what Jonathan Sterne dubs the

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<sup>7</sup> Notably Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London and New York: Routledge, 1974) and Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979); however, this debate continues to unfold and has seen substantial rebuttal from scholars like Adrian Johns in *Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, IL and London, UK: U of Chicago P, 2000).

“audiovisual litany” (15) in his *Audible Past*. The litany presents a number of naturalized assumptions about sight and sound—for example that sight isolates while sound incorporates, or that sight is individual whereas sound is social. The problem with such formulations, as Sterne points out, is that they are too often assumed to be self-evident truths about physiological faculties and/or stimuli. Such assumptions obscure the fact that sight and hearing are themselves historical and material products conditioned by technologies, environments, and scenarios of listening. Thus, it is only through polemical flourish that McLuhan can declare that sound is “immediate” (25), “simultaneous” (49), “multidirectional” (76) and “sacral” (78), while sight is “successive” (127), “enclosed” (114), “isolated” (390), and “profane” (79). Naturalized assumptions about sight and sound (and, by extension, literate and oral cultures) form the basis for a traumatic fall from grace—a narrative that we see again and again in techno-determinist media theories. For McLuhan, the printing press produces a “schizophrenic” (26) split between image and voice. In his words, “Only the phonetic alphabet makes a break between the eye and the ear, between semantic meaning and visual code” (31). This break is properly traumatic, a loss to be mourned. It is this trauma that Typographic Man continually strives to overcome.

Writing contemporaneously with McLuhan, Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963) offers a complementary analysis of speech and writing in classical Greek society, examining Plato’s rejection of poetry in the *Republic*. According to Havelock, the philosopher criticizes poetry not as a genre of writing (in the way that we think about it today), but as an episteme structured by the mnemonic technology of oral verse. Havelock insists that for classical Greek culture, poetry was “the instrument of a cultural indoctrination, the ultimate purpose of which was the preservation of group identity” (100). The danger of such a technology, in Plato’s estimation, is not only in a degraded, automatic kind of thought, but also the *pleasure* of relinquishing meaning to the sonic and rhythmic qualities of verse. Plato champions a conceptual rather than poetic episteme, founded on the philosophical revolution of subjectivity in the fifth century BC. It is here, according to Havelock, that the autonomous psyche emerges, fragmenting the thinking self from a larger cosmic life force. This split brings “the self into relation with what is not self” (216) producing both subject and object as discrete entities. Whether autonomous selfhood is the cause or the effect of writing, Havelock is uncertain;

however, the obvious parallels with McLuhan's work can be seen in a fundamental split within a unified, original source.<sup>8</sup>

Havelock's and McLuhan's work profoundly influences later media theory, including Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) and Michel Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1982). The former extends orality and literacy into transhistorical, psychical categories, while the latter interrogates the effects of the "talking pictures" that emerge in the early twentieth century. Drawing on both classical literature and contemporary ethnography, Ong's work rehearses the audiovisual litany, claiming that oral cultures are conservative and traditionalist, closer to the human lifeworld, empathetic and participatory. Once the technology of writing is internalized, "hearing-dominance" yields to "sight-dominance," thought becomes abstract and indexical, and a modern sense of privacy makes language protectable property. Ong is at once nostalgic about oral cultures, and yet thoroughly convinced that their "eradication" is part of an inevitable teleology when he writes, "Like any other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, [writing] is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior human potentials" (81). Chion, for his part, constructs his fall narrative around the introduction of sound in cinema: for the first time in history a voice can appear without a body (what he calls the *acousmêtre* or "acoustic being"), and this intrusion shatters the unity of language and body. With the introduction of the disembodied voice, he insists, "there has been a break, a separation from innocence. But this break testifies to a change in our sensibility, and of investment in a new cinematic object: the voice, from the same unchangeable mythology of paradise lost" (13).

## The decisional event

In a sense, these texts *describe events* in media history, but they fall short of theorizing *the Event*. That is, we get a sense of how certain technologies produce real-world effects, whether technical, social, or psychological. What is missing, however, is

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Havelock's text deals primarily with the split between speech and writing as articulated in Plato's *Republic* and so does not take on the obverse argument mounted in *Phaedrus*, which indicts writing as a "pharmakon" that corrupts man's mnemonic faculties (an argument later deconstructed in Jacques Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy"). While I do not address *Phaedrus* specifically here, as it is outside the scope of Havelock's work, it is important to note that this text, too, laments a split in a unified source, occasioned by the emergence of writing—a split that manifests itself as the privilege of logocentrism and the relegation of writing to a supplemental status.

attention to a retroactive structure whereby the effects of these technologies *establish their causes after the fact*. In his 2014 monograph *Event: Philosophy in Transit*, Slavoj Žižek defines an event as “something shocking, out of joint that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernable causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation” (1). However, to recognize an event as *something* relies upon “a circular structure in which the eventual effect retroactively determines its causes or reasons” (2) and yet remains somehow in excess of those reasons. The chapter “Felix Culpa” (the fortunate fall) examines two occasions where “the ultimate Event is the Fall itself” (55): falling in love and the Christ-event in the Christian church. In the case of the former, say one day you are walking down the street and you slip on a banana peel. A woman stops to help you and it turns out she is the love of your life. You get married, have kids, and love each other until the day you die.<sup>9</sup> When viewed through a retroactive lens, the banana peel is the cause that brings you together. However, it is only through the unfolding of subsequent events that the banana peel takes on its eventual significance; otherwise it might have just meant a ripped pair of jeans and a bruised ego. Likewise in the Christ-event: following Nicholas Malebranche, Žižek asks, if Christ had to die for our sins, does this mean that God in some sadistic way *requires us to sin* so that he can sacrifice his son for our salvation? Does he secretly want humanity to suffer so that we will love him for delivering us from our suffering? “No,” Žižek replies, because this logic is a perversion of the Event’s retroactive temporality. When an event happens, “not yet” reverses instantaneously into “always already” with no vantage to speculate about anteriority. The only way to avoid perverting retroactivity, Žižek insists, “is to fully accept that the Fall is actually the starting point which creates the conditions of Salvation in the first place: there is nothing previous to the Fall from which we fall, the Fall itself creates that from which we fall” (44). To apply this provocation to the lapsarian narratives of media theory, McLuhan’s lament for oral culture fails to realize that *the event of writing produces both literacy and orality*.<sup>10</sup> Pre-graphic unity never existed before the fall itself—this is just a retroactive illusion. Likewise, it is pure fantasy to think that, before

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<sup>9</sup> While Žižek talks about love in this chapter, the banana peel example is taken from a contemporaneous video lecture made for The Guardian, “What is Freedom Today?”

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this point has been compellingly argued in the field of print culture by scholars such as Paula McDowell in *The Invention of the Oral* (Chicago, IL and London, UK: U of Chicago P, 2016) and Adrian Johns in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, IL and London, UK: U of Chicago P, 2000).



writing, our bodies were consistent in themselves—that there was harmony between the senses, that human beings were fully integrated with their communities and environments. So, too, with Chion and the emergence of sonic cinema: it is not as if silent films “lacked lack” before the introduction of sound—indeed, quite the opposite, if we consider the absolute incommensurateness of image and text in the intertitle. Rather, sound isolates *both voice and image* as discrete, lacking objects, illuminating how lack always already structures the filmic medium before sound comes into play. Chion gets closer to the mark when he admits, “It was necessary to lose this innocence [i.e. of silent film] before we could perceive it as such” (13), but it is important to remember that a lack is not the same as a loss. In Lacanian terms, lack and loss overlap in the *objet petit a*, which is both the object and the cause of desire. In one sense, it is the series of objects that serve as placeholders for the void itself, the metonymic slide of desiring one thing after another, none of which ever succeed in closing the gap. But at a more fundamental level, the object is nothing other than the insatiable void itself, what Lacan (after Freud) terms the drive. Here, *loss itself becomes an object*; the goal is no longer fill in the void with this object or that, but to take pleasure in very fact of the object’s unobtainability. I will further discuss lack and loss in relation to the subtractive ontology of the event below, but for now, suffice it to say that each of the texts above in their own way commit a double fault in their accounts of the fall: one, they mistake a lack for a loss, imagining that the prelapsarian object, whether orality or silent film, was something that once actually existed and not just a retroactively imposed fantasy. Two, they fail to see that subjects and objects alike consist *only* in their lack. As I will show, being pronounces itself only through subtraction, in taking away from a plenum whose wholeness can only be imagined after the fact.

The second conversation I want to address arises in the field performance studies, between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Within this field, I am interested in the ways liveness enters into a differential relationship with reproduction, documentation and registration. This opposition is expressed as a series of specialized terms. Peggy Phelan’s Lacanian-feminist treatise *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) views performance and reproduction as antinomic ontological categories: wherein one exists, the other cannot. Once the live enters into the economy of reproduction—the representation *of* representation—it ceases to be performance. For her, “performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or

otherwise participate in the circulation of representation of representations” (146, original emphasis); it “plunges into visibility—in a manically charged present—and disappears into memory...where it eludes regulation and control” (148). For Phelan, performance’s invisibility or “unmarking” is imbued with radical potential that aligns with a feminist political project. By becoming itself through disappearance, performance disrupts the appropriative incursions of the gaze—that is, the gaze of male desire turned upon the female body in the visual media of photography and film.

Philip Auslander picks up these threads in his 2002 monograph *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. He *apposes*, rather than opposes, liveness and mediatization, rejecting their status as mutually exclusive ontological categories. Liveness, he insists, must be examined “not as a global, undifferentiated phenomenon but within specific cultural and social contexts” (3). In these contexts, liveness increasingly takes on the mediated features of television broadcast, and this trend leads him to rebuff Phelan’s claim that performance resists regulation and control. He insists that all transmissive media are “locked in combat for cultural and economic dominance” (1) and that “our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representations” (9). Auslander’s martial and colonialist metaphors—“combat” (1), “domination” (1), “displacement” (7), and “colonization” (13)—raise the question: if liveness and mediatization are *not* ontological categories, then how can one replace or displace the other? That is, if we reject the notion that a performance “is” or “is not” live, how can we speak about it “becoming” mediatized? That is, in Auslander’s work we can read the suggestion that the live is always already mediated in some form—not only the mass media he describes in his chapters on mid-twentieth century American theatre and the spectacular live events of sport and rock music, but also mediated through the citational gestures of the body. However, I would argue that his use of metaphors—struggle, combat, cooption, and colonization—in the end demand thinking in oppositional rather than mutual terms, reinforcing rather than sublating a binary division.

Diana Taylor offers a more nuanced account about the ontological status of performance in her 2003 monograph *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. She reminds us that “[t]o say something *is* a performance amounts to an ontological affirmation, though a thoroughly localized one” (3). A performance is only a performance within a specific social and historical context. She is thus careful to draw a distinction between what *is* a performance and the

methodological lens that allows us to analyze events as performance. The shift from verb to preposition puts epistemology in the driver’s seat, asking what cues allow us to recognize performance in itself. This new line of inquiry focuses on systems of knowledge transmission; however, here again, we return to the familiar distinctions of materiality and immateriality. Taylor pits “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials” against the “so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge” (19, original emphasis); however, her diction (“supposedly,” “so-called”) makes it clear that these categories are provisional and mutable. She emphasizes the concomitance and interdependence of archive and repertoire, noting “they usually work in tandem and they work alongside other systems of transmission—the digital and the visual, to name two” (21).

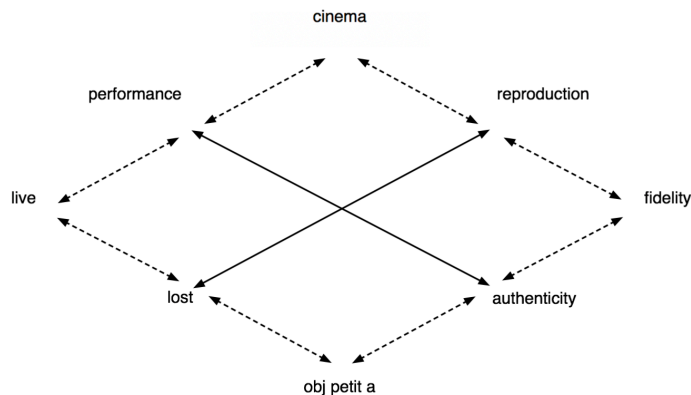


Figure 1: Semiotic square mapping concepts of mediation in Performance Studies texts

Though the oppositional concepts mobilized in performance and media studies often appear as dyadic pairs (performance/reproduction; liveness/mediatization; repertoire/archive), these formulations belie a more complex set of relationships that involve *affect as well as form*, which can be mapped onto a semiotic square.<sup>11</sup> Here, one-to-one relationships of contradiction do not exist simply between performance and reproduction as expressive forms. These concepts are also tethered to, and inflected by, their underlying ideological counterpoints: against performance, the notion of authenticity, which conceptually rejects the exceptional or artificial parameters of the

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Clint Burnham for this mapping, which he sent me after reviewing an early draft of this chapter.

performance (more on this later in relation to John Cage). Against reproduction there is the notion of loss, undercut with its currents of melancholy, nostalgia, and unsuccessful mourning. According to this schema, the live exists at the nexus between the form of performance and the concept of loss—Phelan’s notion of the singular, irretrievable, undocumented event. Between performance and reproduction lies cinema with its lacking referent—what Kaja Silverman refers to as the castration of the live by the filmic medium. On the right side, between reproduction and authenticity, is the notion of fidelity that we see in the discourses around early sound recording. The most ideal sonic media are the ones that are the least there—which cover up their own lack via an idealization of auditory verisimilitude. The concept of “fidelity” as it appears in this mapping differs from fidelity to the truth event, which I discuss later in the chapter. Here, the notion of authenticity is ideologically differentiated from the artificial scenario of performance *and* shot through with the notion of continuity with a historical past (i.e. an authentic artifact). Audio fidelity appeals to both these senses. Finally, in the bottom quadrant we have the *objet petit a*, representing that which is at once lost and authentic. Here, authenticity takes on a double valence corresponding to the *objet a*’s twinned status as both lack and loss: the loss of it strikes us as authentic, as something we once had in our possession, but now have no longer. However, more than the ontologically positive sense of authenticity that crops up in the discourses of audio fidelity, authenticity resounds on a much deeper level for the *objet a*. Unlike the other three quadrants (liveness, cinema, and fidelity) the *objet a* confronts us with a constitutive loss through which being itself is made operative. It is this truly radical dimension of the event as *lack* that is missing in the accounts of performance and media studies that I describe above.

Thus while, at first blush, the works of Phelan, Auslander, and Taylor seem diametrically opposed, a moment of critique shows how all three are structured by the same limitation. In the final chapter of *Liveness*, Auslander rejects Phelan’s claim that performance is transitory, evanescent, and as such resists commodification and control. Drawing upon two spheres of jurisprudence—evidence law and intellectual property—he demonstrates how *even memory is subject to the invasion of law*. In the case of the former, he shows how the American legal system strongly prefers live testimony to pre-recorded video deposition, in fact demanding it in the Confrontation Clause of the Sixth Amendment. The act of memory retrieval, publically performed in front of a jury at a trial, is considered more authentic, immediate, and truthful than one given outside the spatial

and temporal event of the courtroom. In the case of copyright law, he analyzes the legal proceedings of *Bright Tunes Music Corp. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd.* (1976), in which George Harrison was sued for copyright infringement because the melody of his song “My Sweet Lord” closely resembled that of an earlier tune, “He’s So Fine,” composed by Robert Mack and performed by the Chiffons. Harrison claimed he never heard the other song and so could not be guilty of infringement. The courts, however, reasoned otherwise: while it is possible that Harrison did not deliberately plagiarize “He’s So Fine,” they nonetheless ruled that “his subconscious knew...a song his conscious mind did not remember” (qtd Auslander 178). Such “unknown knowns” (to cop a phrase from Slavoj Žižek) are subject to the same legal actions as the “known knowns” of conscious thought.<sup>12</sup> These two examples show how memory can be pressed into the service of the law, but more importantly how it is *objectified even in immaterial form* and therefore legally actionable in its own right. Here, Auslander creates a hypertrophic One of representation: liveness, like mediatization, is always already representative in nature—that is, already written into the structure of what Badiou calls the “state of the situation,” maintaining its consistency and power. Auslander’s unhappy conclusion is that our current cultural moment is one of inescapable closure: in order to avoid regulation, “performance must not only disappear but must be excluded from memory” (181). While he aims to contradict Phelan’s claim, Auslander in fact exposes a common supposition held by all three theorists: *that performance, whether live or recorded, is always already inscriptive in nature and therefore imbued with a positive, knowable ontology*. For Phelan, live performance is inscribed in the unconscious, where it is sheltered from the law; for Taylor, embodied and archival inscription equally share the burden of knowledge transmission; for Auslander, the only writing is the writing of the law—there is nothing outside legal inscription. All three theorists deal exclusively in what Lacan might term the symbolic dimensions of the event, ignoring the pre-subjective or pre-inscriptive horizon from which it emerges. This is problematic for two reasons: one, it presents us with a false choice between inscriptive media that differ in degree rather than kind. Two, it

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek develops a fourfold epistemology around knowing and not knowing, revelation and obfuscation in his 2008 *In Defense of Lost Causes*: “In March 2003, [Donald] Rumsfeld engaged in a little bit of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown: ‘There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.’ What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the ‘unknown knowns,’ the things we don’t know that we know—which is precisely, the Freudian unconscious, the ‘knowledge which doesn’t know itself,’ as Lacan used to say” (457).

creates a deadlock in which all being must be assimilated into one of two a priori categories—live experience or mediatized reproduction—and so does not sufficiently account for the emergence of something genuinely new or unexpected. What is there beyond inscription? Or, to reformulate the question in Badiou’s cryptic phrasing, “What could there be, which is not?” (23).

### **Auditory objects: “Pacific Rim Express”**

A merely inscriptive ontology seems insufficient to explain what we hear when we listen to certain audio recordings. Yes, we hear the manifest or inscribed content—a song, a speech, a rainstorm—but we also always hear something else *which is not*. In the recording of Moten’s reading and Q&A, this “something else” announces itself in the form of an absent visibility around which acts of reading, interpreting, and reacting to the body take place. The fact that we cannot see any of the speakers involved in this event reminds me of David Chariandy’s statement in *I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* that the silence of the body is often louder than what one says, or can say, with one’s voice (29). An articulate lack of being also announces its presence on the tapes in Roy Kiyooka’s audio archive, held at Simon Fraser University’s Special Collections. Recorded on a variety of formats (reel-to-reel, cassette tapes, and mini cassettes), these artifacts register the voices of Vancouver’s musical, literary, and artistic avant-garde between 1963 and 1991. Besides a few poetry readings and radio broadcasts, the tapes’ contents are mostly spontaneous or improvisational. One group of recordings captures conversations between friends, family, and community members in bars, kitchens, art galleries, and log cabins. Another group can loosely be termed environmental or field recordings: the ambient, background noise at bus stations, cafes, movie theatres, and even the Canada-US border. A common feature of these tapes is that their content always seems to spill over their containers. Sounds and conversations are cut off abruptly; there is always less than was said, and more than we can hear. Any deliberate sense of completion is suspended indefinitely. These cuts create something sensible beyond what is positively inscribed on the tape—something that speaks to us through sheer absence, pointing to a kernel of unrepresentable matter.

We hear this matter on the recording titled “Pacific Rim Express,” which documents a trip that Kiyooka and seven other poets (George Bowering, Brian Fawcett, Dwight Gardiner, Gerry Gilbert, Maria Hindmarch, Carole Itter, and Daphne Marlatt) took

to Prince George for a public reading in April of 1974.<sup>13</sup> The tape is an audio letter addressed to Penny Chalmers (Penn Kemp). In the background, we hear the train whistle, indiscernible conversation, and the clatter of typewriter keys. Marlatt and Kiyooka take turns narrating:

Daphne: <laughs> Are we going to start the tape for Penny?

Roy: Yes, I think we should start the tape for Penny.

Daphne: Okay. Penny, you are being spoken to from a couple of turquoise seats on the first coach of the British Columbia Railway, formerly the Pacific Great Eastern, now the "P" Pacific, "G" Grim, Grime, Rim, Rhyme, "E" Express. <Roy laughs>

Roy: Hi, Penny. Daphne's on my left. Across from her and one seat up is George. To the right, beside George, is Gladly. In front of Gladly is Brian. George is interjecting here. In front of me—I'm on the window side—is Dwight. He's got the shades half drawn. Beside Dwight is Gerry, his nose buried in a sheaf of paper, typewriter on his lap. Two seats up and to the right is Carole, sitting beside all the media paraphernalia [...] You can't hear Daphne smile on this little machine. Shall I describe it to you? <laughs>

Daphne: How would you describe it, Roy?

Roy: <pause> <laughs> She, uh... She, uh... She...<laughs> She...

Daphne: Penny, you can hear the feet of men walking in the aisle past my left shoulder. You can hear the door slam. When the door opens you can hear the moving wheels on the track. You can hear Gerry typing in short, sporadic bursts. You can hear George reading. You can hear the long hoot of the train as it turns the next curve <train whistle sounds>. You can hear minds working phenomenally, writing what is, as Roy would say, nominally, a story. (00:37 – 05:07)

There are a few curious features here that turn around equivocation and absence. First, the tape recording defies generic classification: it is at once the document of a live performance, correspondence, stream-of-consciousness composition, and recitation (after the "letter" portion, Marlatt goes on to read from some of the work in production). However, it is important to note that the tape recorder not only *registers* the results of these different literary and theatrical products, but *produces them*: the performance of

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<sup>13</sup> The occasion of the trip was a poetry festival that Barry McKinnon and Gerry Gilbert organized at the College of New Caledonia. Marlatt's *The Story, She Said* was the product of artistic and literary collaboration on the trip. See *Line 13* (1989): 10-12.

describing the space around them—people’s actions, proximities, colours, textures and sounds—uniquely compensates for the fact that the listener has no access to the visual dimensions of the event. It is not that the tape neutrally documents some activity that is happening “outside” or independent of the act of recording; rather, in an evental sense, *the act of recording itself creates the very occasion that it records*.<sup>14</sup> Second, the tape records what Roland Barthes calls the grain of the voice: “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (182) through tone, timbre, breath, and accent. The grain is part of a larger set of sounds that belong to what Friedrich Kittler terms “the bodily real” (12): the unintentional noises of bodies and physical environments. No longer bottlenecked through subjective, symbolic representation, the recorder makes the “physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies” (16) as audible as purposeful speech. For this reason, Kittler identifies the gramophone (and sound recording more broadly) with the Lacanian Real. There are many incidental sounds on the tape that are extralexical but not extrasemantic: the speakers’ spontaneous laughter, hesitation, and stuttering. However, to me, the Real that is most resonant lies not in incidental sound, but in what we simply cannot hear.

On this particular tape, a gap opens up around the object of Daphne’s smile: it is a little piece of the Real that the recorder can’t translate into electromagnetic signals and that Kiyooka can’t translate into words. It defies representation, yet is still somehow present in its absence—perhaps lurking somewhere behind Kiyooka’s stammering and nervous laughter. The smile-as-object points to the symbolically inassimilable in both the live and its document. There is something in it more than we can describe, and even if we could describe it, it would not bring us any closer to the thing itself. On the tape, the smile is inaccessible but not inarticulate; the fact of its absence—as well as Kiyooka’s stammering around it—lures us into imagining it. Here, we must not commit the same error of mistaking a lack for a loss: as a particular lost object, the smile points us toward the structuring lack of the recording itself. Not only can we not see *it*, the smile, we can’t see anything at all. This lack is the product of a human decision (whether deliberate or

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sterne is adamant about this point in his chapter on “The Social Construction of Sound Fidelity” in *The Audible Past*. Writing about the production of early commercial music recordings, he insists: “[T]he ‘original’ sound embedded in the recording—regardless of whether the process is ‘continuous’—certainly bears a causal relationship with the reproduction, but only because the original itself is an artifact of the process of reproduction. Without the technology of reproduction the copies do not exist, but, then neither would the originals... ‘Original’ sounds are as much a product of the medium as are copies—reproduced sounds are not simply versions of unmediated original sounds” (219).



not) to press record or to press stop, where to position the microphone, and how to narrate the journey through the event. But decision also inheres in the affordances of the medium itself: the tape can only record thirty minutes of sound at a time, and thus imposes an arbitrary frame on its contents. If sound never stops, then the tape must cut it off arbitrarily. Not only does the tape recorder condition the temporality of the event, it also conditions its spatiality: a speaker's proximity to the device determines what counts as intelligible speech versus unintelligible noise. The recorder also subtracts the haptic and visual dimensions of the event to produce a purely sonic object. We have only a hazy sense of how many people are present, who they are, what they look like, or where they are positioned in the room or in relation to each other (but, again, we are lured into imagining through Kiyooka's description). We also lack the visual cues that condition speech, such as facial expressions, posture, and eye contact.

The tape's many overlapping lacks evocatively trace what Alain Badiou calls the subtractive nature of ontology in *Being and Event*—a structure closely tied to his conception of the event as that which is “prohibited” (93) by the situation. This major theoretical work emerges in the materialist turn of the late 1980s, during the aftermath (or one might say, total discursive hegemony) of poststructuralism and the linguistic turn. In this climate, a fear of totality is engendered by, on the one hand, identity politics and liberal multiculturalism and, on the other, the radical openness of the postmodern signifier exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Badiou offers his mathematical theory of the universal as an alternative to another spurious totality: neoliberalism, which sutures together corrupt electoral democracy and the corrosive global finance market. This all-encompassing structure, he argues, is “the abstract universality of our epoch” (xiv-xv). In order to obscure the workings that sustain its power, neoliberalism offers its subjects false choices between myriad personal and cultural identities, leading to a widespread doctrine of relativism, tolerance, and universal democratic values. Badiou argues that to manoeuvre within this situation is no real choice at all, as there is no outside space for critique or radical change. His solution is to reconceptualize the situation mathematically, using the axioms of set theory to interrogate the very structure of sociopolitical reality. “Mathematics is ontology” (3), Badiou insists. It is only in thinking mathematically that we may approach a truth that is unaffected by the vicissitudes of language.

Working through contemporary advances in set theory (Cantor, Cohen, Zermelo and Fraenkel), Badiou views reality as “a regime of presentation” (26), which describes the human activity of ordering, representing, and structuring. This regime is twofold in nature: first, there is the pure multiple, being-qua-being, an inconsistent or undecidable jumble that has not yet been structured by the count. Second, there is the situation, which is a “structured” presentation, by which beings are individuated and come to count-as-one. Badiou’s ontology is indebted to Zermelo and Fraenkel’s major mathematical innovation, which is the rejection of a universal set. They argue that to delimit a set of entities (say, plants) does not make a one out of everything outside that set (animals, insects, humans, clouds, computers, etc.) The complement (that which is outside the set) is negatively defined and therefore does not meaningfully tell us anything about the entities “contained” therein. In this way, both the situation and the pure multiple emerge as a result of the count, the former a structured but lacking group, and the latter an inconsistent multiplicity defined only through negation. The point we must emphasize is that there is *nothing anterior to the count itself*. To imagine a totalizing set that contains both “plant” and “non-plant” sets is a purely speculative exercise. Or, to loop back onto Žižek’s *Event*, the fall retroactively creates the current situation or effect, as well as the (fantasmatic) concept of the originary unity from which we fell. Mathematical ontology can hence be viewed as a function, rather than an entity—it is the presentation *of* presentation, the threshold through which all things become knowable and sayable.

Badiou’s key insight is that to move between presentation and representation is always a matter of decision, a subjective leap of faith. This decision is mathematically codified in the axiom of choice, which states that for every set there is a function that associates each non-empty subset with a unique member (Moore 1). To put this axiom into concrete terms, imagine you have a basketball, and along its circumference there are an infinite number of mathematically describable points. This is not the “bad” Hegelian infinity that we imagine as  $n + 1$ , but rather an undecidable infinity of *infinite divisibility*. It would be impossible to sequence or “count” such an infinite set of (aptly termed) Real numbers: whenever we try to impose an order, they recede into smaller and smaller units of divisibility, *ad infinitum*. The axiom of choice takes a leap of faith saying, “I draw the line *here*,” moving from the divisive infinity of the uncountable set to the structured infinity of a countable set of Rational numbers. Crucially, the move

between the undecidable Real and the decidable Rational creates both lack and loss. To “clip” an irrational number at two decimal points, say, 3.14 to represent  $\pi$  is, in a sense, to “lose” the subsequent chain of digits that yield greater calculational specificity. But on another level, counting or structuring itself *is lack*, as we see with Russell’s paradox: if we imagine a set that contains all sets, such a set would be prohibited because the set cannot belong to itself.<sup>15</sup> That is, it cannot be both an element and a structuring principle at the same time. Therefore, there is always something in the count that exceeds it, a void or empty set (expressed as  $\emptyset$  or  $\{\}$ ) that the function of the count cannot compute, and it is from this point that events issue, *ex nihilo*.

Badiou expresses the event as the matheme  $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ , which states that the event ( $e_x$ ) is composed of (=) the set ( $\{\}$ ) of multiples ( $x$ ) belonging to ( $\in$ ) the evental site of the event ( $X$ ), plus the *proper name of the event itself* ( $e_x$ ). As a concrete example through which to parse this claim, we can think about John Cage’s avant-garde sound piece “4’33””, which in effect structures or brackets both time and space to produce a decisional event. In *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, Brandon Labelle notes how sound creates an “intrinsically and unignorably relational contract” (xi) between space, time and bodies. It interacts acoustically with architecture, ricocheting and reverberating between structures. It has a duration that produces anticipation, fulfillment, and memory. It also occurs inside and between bodies, generating multiple “acoustical viewpoints” (xii). The congregation of these elements—sound and space, time and body—yield an evental site. It is evental because its elements are multiple to the point of inconsistency. My experience of sound in the orchestra pit is not the same as yours up on the second balcony. Likewise, the spatiality of the event is multiple, as it is impossible to delimit the area in which the performance takes place. In the case of “4’33””, we can offer a provisional definition when the piece is performed in a concert hall—say, within the four walls of the auditorium or inside the building—but such distinctions quickly fall apart when the piece is performed in an open public space, as it was in Harvard Square in 1972. These multiples belong to the evental site, but as Badiou reminds us, an evental site is only the condition of an event, and should not be

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<sup>15</sup> The standard illustration of Russell’s Paradox is phrased in the following way: in a village in which all men are either shaved by the barber or shave themselves, who shaves the barber (presumably the barber in this scenario is male)? That is, as the function that delimits the set and the complement (those who are shaved by the barber and those who shave themselves), the barber cannot belong to either set.

confused with the event itself. The fact that a site exists does not guarantee that an event will happen. The decision that actuates the event of 4'33" is the addition of a proper name: the title, which outlines the temporal and spatial parameters of the performance. For the four minutes and thirty-three seconds that the piece unfolds, this proper name determines what counts-as-one in the performance, such that all ambient sound—coughing, breathing, sighing, heckling, jack-hammering on the street—becomes its substance. Framing or bracketing off is the quintessential fact of the decisional event, and it exists in all the mechanisms we use to register reality, whether the faculties of our bodies (sight, hearing, touch, memory) or technological prostheses (audio recording, video, film). In every instance, there is a subtraction or closure, as well as the residue of that closure—the little cuts and gaps in the fabric of reality that are a product of its provisional consistency.

To my mind, there are a number of potential pitfalls in Badiou's matheme, which anticipate the question of relationality that I will discuss in a moment. One, the emphasis on naming can easily succumb to the idealist fantasy that the mind creates reality, wholly independent of the material world.<sup>16</sup> In the case of 4'33" (and other conceptual works like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* or Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*), we risk viewing the authors, artists, and composers of these works as the heroes of the event, the individual geniuses who speak the event into being. Žižek rightly critiques this aspect of Badiou's work in *The Ticklish Subject*, where he writes, "one can already get a presentiment of what one is tempted to call, in all naivety, the intuitive power of Badiou's notion of the subject: it effectively describes the experience each of us has when he or she is fully engaged in some Cause which is 'his or her own'" (141). Put differently, Badiou sees the subject as consubstantial with his or her decision; by naming the event he or she confirms that an event has taken place and, in this sense, lifts it out of an otherwise undecidable pure multiple. In designating the name as the terminus of an event, Badiou effectively remains within the desire-structure outlined by Lacan, filling lack with signifier without recognizing lack as an object *in itself*. As remedy, Žižek implores us to be good hysterical subjects in the Lacanian sense: rather than make the Master's assertion, "This

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<sup>16</sup> I admit I'm being a bit unfair to Badiou on this point, for he himself insists, "What the doctrine of the event teaches us is rather that the entire effort lies in following the event's consequences, not in glorifying its occurrence. There is no more an angelic herald of the event than there is a hero" (221). However, his emphasis on naming, for the reasons I mention above, let us slip into the heroic mode if we're not careful; indeed this is something I continually struggle with in talking about the event is the question, "Who names?" and why I want to move away from it.

is the name of the event,” we should instead remain vigilant in asking, “Why is this the name of the event?” (1999: 164). Secondly, as I hope my introduction to this chapter has made clear, naming the event is a power struggle that plays out in the material world, inflected by the pressures of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. There are a number of names that one could give to the event of Moten’s reading. Its salience is determined by how one is interpellated by the multiple elements that form its evental site, not all of which register for every subject. Indeed, Nicholson and I have discussed the problem of who gets to name that event—who is its subject, singular or plural?—noting how the conversations that featured most prominently in my communities were quite different from those that featured in hers. There is a risk that by naming a hero of the event, we too easily cede interpretive power to those who already have the greatest capacity to mobilize their narratives in the public domain. This is why it is of crucial importance that we maintain a fidelity not to the name as a single, concrete pronouncement, but a fidelity to the name in its mathematical form,  $e_x$ , a variable to be filled in.

Likewise, in the case of 4’33”, it is unquestionably clear that the performance is a decisional event with discrete parameters, which interrupts the flow of everyday activity. But on another level, it seems impossible to reconcile this idea with the fact that for some people it simply does not register as such—say someone walking through Harvard Square ensconced in conversation, totally oblivious to the fact that a performance is even happening, or someone who cannot access the space because of restricted mobility. Žižek’s remark that Badiouian fidelity closely resembles Althusserian interpellation is apt here. It would seem that the subject is the one in the evental site who turns around at the call, “Hey, you there!” Obviously, different subjects will respond to different events, or respond to the same event but give it a different name. In any case, a grain of suspicion always accompanies the naming of an event: “How do we know this truly is the Event, and not just another semblance of the Event?” (Žižek 2014: 139). Such skepticism, as I explain later, should not be seized upon to the point of paralysis, which is the fallacy of relativist and postmodern philosophy. Rather, skepticism should be a principle in all subjective relations to the event—a fidelity not to the name, but to loss and subtraction itself. Finally, to insist that all events have a proper name—the French Revolution, Chiaroscuro, the Digital Age, Occupy—is to seriously limit the scope of the event’s interventional capacity. Hence, why for Badiou there are only a handful of

events per century, whereas for Žižek, events happen every day: slipping on a banana peel, falling in love.

## The Relational Event

The tensions around naming and decision point to different aspects of the event: that of relation. This side of the argument becomes very important for another contingent of the materialist turn, one that begins with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and trickles down into the immanent philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and various strands of noncorrelationist thought (speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and vital materialism), offering a different twist on Badiou's provocation, "What could there be, which is not?" Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929) shifts the focus from substance to relation, focusing on the movements of what he interchangeably calls "actual entities" or "actual occasions." "Actual entities" are the basic units of reality in Whiteheadian philosophy, as opposed to subjects or substances. These entities consist only in their dynamic relations or "prehensions" with other entities, whereby they enter into, and disperse from, patterns or "concrescences." Prehension takes on a much wider spectrum of relations than have been the focus of traditional philosophical inquiry; it is not limited, say, to "disclosure" (Heidegger), "thought" (Descartes) or "enunciation" (Foucault and Derrida). Rather, prehension can be defined as "any process—causal, perceptual, or of another nature entirely—in which an entity grasps, registers the presence of, responds to, or is affected by another entity" (Shaviro 29). Prehension equally describes the relationship between a wasp and an orchid, a lover and a beloved, a subject and an object. Importantly, Whitehead is as much interested in affective prehensions as he is in causal or physical ones. The tiniest events, fluctuations in emotion and thought, are given the same eventual status as an earthquake or a coup d'état, because for him, "experience is being; what an entity feels, an entity *is*" (Shaviro 56). Because he dispenses with the fixity of substance, Whitehead's philosophy is truly revolutionary, but also difficult to grasp: if nothing *exists* transcendentally, then how can we distinguish novel conditions from previous ones? How do we delimit abstract ideas or even physical entities if they consist in nothing but a series of relations? For Whitehead, everything is subject to a rule of 'perpetual perishing,' for "no thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice" (Whitehead 29). In this

case, everything is an event. There is no single, privileged moment of transition, no radical final decision in the same way that Badiou imagines.

Decisional and relational philosophies of the event seem incompatible (indeed, so their proponents aver). But I want to interrogate the ways that they overlap and interpenetrate one another, turning to Jacques Lacan's concept of the *point de capiton* as a heuristic. In the *point de capiton's* retroactive workings, we discover how the void created by signification (that is, decision, necessity, representation) provides the impetus for future articulation (relation). The *point de capiton* describes the way that language recursively makes meaning as it unfolds across a linear syntax. Translated as a "button tie" (Bruce Fink) or "anchoring point" (Alan Sheridan), it metaphorically refers to the way a quilter's stitch ties together two pieces of fabric or batting without anchoring to anything but itself. The tenor of the metaphor refers to the way that successive signifiers in the chain of a sentence refer back to the ones that precede it, "stop[ping] the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification (Lacan 2002: 681). For example, take Marlatt's sentence from the "Pacific Rim Express" tape: "You can hear minds working phenomenally, writing what is, as Roy would say, nominally, a story." The first three words, "You can hear," create the anticipation of an auditory noun, based on the habitual context of the verb "to hear." When we hear the word "mind," however, we retroactively "return" and adjust the meaning of the word "hear" from a literal to a metaphoric or at least synaesthetic one that has us imagine the workings of the mind as an auditory event. In the process, we foreclose other anticipated words, say, "my voice" or "the wheels." Yet, while these other alternatives are not explicitly present in Marlatt's speech, they are not *not* present—another instance of an articulate loss.

Importantly, both the synchronic and diachronic vectors of *capitonage* "are related to the offer of the signifier that is constituted by the hole in the real, the one as a hollow for concealment, the other as drilling toward a way out" (Lacan 2002: 682). The "hollowness" of the signifier is the *loss* that opens up in the moment of its articulation, closing, but not entirely eliminating other possible meanings. But is also the undissolvable materiality of the signifier itself, what Lacan calls its letter: "the material medium *support* that concrete discourse borrows from language" (2002: 495, original emphasis). The letter is indissoluble matter, the cause and not the object of desire, and no number of successive signifiers will manifest its being. But the structuring lack of the letter is what drives the twinned activities of desire and articulation—the way that a

subject is compelled to “drill toward a way out.” A subject tries to articulate itself through a signifying chain, this articulation fails, and the subject emerges as a split or barred entity (\$). This split status sets in motion the frenetic activity of desire and further articulation, as the subject tries to suture over the void produced by signification itself. While articulation is bound to fail, this does not make it a fruitless endeavour. Even in failure, meaning miraculously occurs. Lacan reminds us that “meaning occurs in nonmeaning” (2002: 508), in the rapprochement of signifiers, despite their absolute non-relation with their signified.

I want to suggest that the lack in language analogizes the lack in material media that I discussed earlier—that the silences and erasures of these media are the very things that drive us to engage with them, over and over. To experience their losses anew. Indeed, there is an analogous metonymic slide between encounters with the “hollow” signifier and encounters with the “hollow” artifact. On the “Pacific Rim” recording, the pronoun “you” slides between its designated recipient (Penny) and a virtual listener who exists some place and some time in an as yet unrealized future. One can step into the role of the addressee for the duration of the tape: “*You* can hear the feet of men walking in the aisle past my left shoulder. *You* can hear the door slam,” but the space of the address remains open, even during its temporary occupation. This openness is even more tangible when an address has no intended recipient, for example, when Kiyooka invites friends to “say a few words to the folks” on a 1970 recording at the Cecil Hotel, or when Gerry Gilbert and Alvin Balkind joke about how their taped conversations will be the evidence that eventually puts them behind bars in a 1986 conversation at the Blue Mule Gallery. In every present moment, there is always the future-oriented sense that “what we are doing now is (will have been) history” (Deleuze qtd Žižek 2014: 140).

Rebecca Schneider’s notion of “inter(in)animation”—a term that she adapts from Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*—speaks to this future-oriented quality in documentary artifacts. Her 2011 *Performance Remains* defines inter(in)animation as “the ways in which live art and media of mechanical and technological reproduction...cross-identify, and, more radically, cross-constitute and improvise each other” (7). In photography, this improvisation plays out in the citational gesture of the pose. People act out familiar theatrical scenarios in front of the camera, and the poses they stage draw upon a complex gestural lexicon that we read in a way



not unlike language. Following Richard Schechner, Schneider argues that poses are “twice-behaved behaviours” (127) that draw upon and repeat socially and historically specific codes of signification. In a manner similar to the photographic still, then, speech and sound function citationally, a refrain of twice-spoken language inherited from the symbolic order. Lacan suggests as much when he tells us “the unconscious is the Other’s discourse” (2002: 459) a set of signs that issue from, and are directed back toward, this Other. Thus, even though they are fixed at the moment of their capture, media are always enmeshed with the past through citation, whether gestural or linguistic. They are also part of a longer, future-oriented durational event when they issue a “hail or call” (160) posing a question that demands a response. Again meditating on photography, Schneider asks, “Can we think of the still not as an artifact of a non-returning time, but as situated in a live moment of its encounter that it, through its articulation as a gesture or hail, predicts?” (141). While the idea of an interrogative artifact remains strictly metaphoric in the case of the photograph, it is sometimes arrestingly literal in the case of audio recordings: “Is it loud enough? Can you hear me?” Future subjects are hailed in the then-present act of enunciation. Those who answer this call—“Hey, you there!”—are the subjects of fidelity. In this sense, the contract of meaning between speaker and listener does not occur solely in a past time, nor even in a singular present. Rather, it is enmeshed in a series of virtual and actual encounters, in reappearance and repetition, “with all the tangled stuff of difference/sameness that anachronism, or syncopated time, or basic citationality affords” (Schneider 143).

It is important to remember that there is a political imperative in every mediated encounter. As Schneider insists, encounters with media are “a way of opening up, of negotiating and moving history into its alternatives” (163). Responding to the hail is political because it shapes how these artifacts signify in the present and how we may cite them in the future. The question is: if artifacts lure us into response by hailing us, how do we know that we’re responding the right way when the hail is essentially agnostic? That is, how do we know that we’re truly being faithful to the event, and not misguidedly supporting some false cause? The answer to this question, I would argue, is inextricable from the answer to a question posed by Phaniel Antwi in later discussion at Moten’s reading: “How do we prepare to meet each other in our difference?” (01:28:05). I would argue that the only possible answer to these questions is to *maintain a fidelity to loss itself*, to be vigilant absence-detectors who hold open, rather than suture shut, the

lack at the heart of the event. For me, this is an especially important tenet through which to approach this particular recording (Moten's reading), given that it speaks not only as a record of a specific community at a historically situated place and time, but also as a record of trauma. For some, this trauma is perhaps a foundational hurt in the discovery of that misogynist and racist behaviour exists not only "out there," outside of and in opposition to their communities that they imagine as bastions of progress and tolerance, but that its gestures are unwittingly replicated by people who are close to them and who they consider their allies. Indeed, Moten expresses something of this hurt when he explains that his impulse is to extend love to the man in the audience, despite knowing that this makes him vulnerable to further harm. For others, it might take the form of an ongoing trauma that grooms a bodily and psychological orientation towards the world. Subjects responding to such harm might want to turn away from such spaces where they feel unsafe—indeed, there was such a response to the Or Gallery after this incident; they might seek to delimit new space and new boundaries for themselves and their communities; or, they might simply feel this as yet another moment in a cumulative series of microevents that come to determine how they view themselves and their relation to the social milieu that surrounds them. The event can mean all these things and hail us in different and sometimes contradictory ways. My own personal experience lies somewhere among and between these possibilities, which are only a few among innumerable others. I know what it is like to be silenced and censored as a woman speaking out in a public space by someone who feels a greater sense of entitlement to public audition. I do not know what it feels like to be visibly and unequivocally the target of racialized violence, as my own personal experience with racialization as person of mixed race has taken a different form—questioning, uncertainty, doubt, ambivalence. I do know what it's like to feel disappointed by members of my community who I believed to be my allies. I also know what it's like to disappoint someone with bad allyship, whether through ignorance, or self-importance, or a simple inability to see beyond my own perspective. All of these are possible names of the event and they are as yet unfolding, even now, several years after the fact. I return to these names again and again with different inflection as I continue to write, to converse, and to listen.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> That is, as I continue to work with this present text, I hope to have further conversations about the significance of this event and its manifold names with those who were in attendance in the form of interviews, correspondence, and conversation.

I think that this is what Badiou is truly advocating when he says “truth is always that which makes a hole in knowledge” (345). Truth is the condition of its undecidability, the remainder of that which is the event more than itself. Hence, fidelity to a truth event has nothing to do with a mimetic fidelity between an original and its copy, as is its sense in the discourse that surrounds audio recording.<sup>18</sup> Nor is it the gendered fidelity of romantic love, unless we treat love as surrender to the void, as Žižek does in *The Plague of Fantasies*: I love “that which is ‘in you more than you’ and thus makes me desire you” (xviii). Rather, when we meditate on the relationship between void and excess, decision and relation, we expose what is most universal in the situation itself: the way that all subjects are barred under structure of the count, and the way that the principles of liberal democracy—freedom, equality, enfranchisement, and legal protection—are made operative only through their suspension in certain cases. This is our only recourse as subjects whose particular bodies and experiences (marked by gender, ability, sexuality, class, and race) are profoundly incommensurate: when we recognize that we are united in the fact of our being counted. Practically speaking, this is to recognize that men and women are both divided and oppressed by patriarchy, through this division manifests itself materially in different ways. It is also to recognize that to enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship is also to submit oneself to the obverse fact: that those rights and privileges can be revoked by the State or distributed unevenly, as it decides who counts (or does not count) as one. Thus, while we all have different experiences of an event—that is, different accounts of what is happening when we say “something is happening”—we achieve some rapprochement as subjects *in our difference* by meditating on the structuring divide that makes that difference operative.

### **Feeling alongside: Jordan Scott’s *Clearance Process***

Fidelity to the truth event can be a guiding principle in our interactions with, and interpretations of, historical or archival events (more on this in Chapter 4). However, it can also act as an ethical locus for a poetics of documentation, witness, and representation. Contra the widespread belief that the avant-garde is at its most

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<sup>18</sup> See Alexander Galloway, “The Black Box of Philosophy: Compression and Obfuscation” (Incredible Machines Conference, Vancouver 2014); Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012): 4-6; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 218-219.

revolutionary when it foregrounds the way we use language,<sup>19</sup> I want to assert that some of the most potent feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist art couples the politics of the media encounter with a fidelity to the event. An exemplary work in this genre is Jordan Scott's 2016 digital multimedia project, *Clearance Process*, which stays faithful to several imbricated sites of lack and, in so doing, holds its own author-subject to a highly ethical standard. In 2015, Scott visited the Guantánamo Bay detention center in Cuba after undergoing a yearlong clearance process with the American Military. Touring the facility as a "poet," he was permitted to collect digital sound recordings, photographs, and writing on his iPhone. The first curated presentation of these documentary materials, *Clearance Process* pairs ambient sound sequenced and edited by Scott and Jason Starnes with photographs that focus on light, texture, and the traces of habitus: tire tracks, TV monitors, furniture, and building materials as images in medias res.



Figure 2: Photographs of Guantánamo Bay detention center from Jordan Scott's *Clearance Process*

The project's sonic component is a seven-minute digital sound file that opens with a barely perceptible hum of machinery. This auditory surface is shot through with clusters of percussive sound, an erratic rapping with vaguely metallic undertones—maybe pockets of air hissing and popping in the gas line of a generator. Next, the sound of crickets, footsteps crunching on gravel, pinched breath through the nasal passage, the microphone bumping clumsily against the body. A voice echoes, sounding out the boundaries of a space: "Inside a cell, Camp VI" (1:02). If, as R. Murray Schafer says, "noises are the sounds that we have learned to ignore" (4), then what we hear on this recording is anything but noisy: we strain to hear and make sense of it. Rather than

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<sup>19</sup> See Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1981); Kostelantz, *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (1993); Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009); Betts, *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* (2013).

dissolving into background noise, the ambience of Guantánamo isolates individual sounds, heightening our awareness that we do not always know what we are listening to. Our listening is acute, attentive, curious. The sounds we hear are not representational in any easy sense. The sources they reference are often unnameable to us. In craning to place and make sense of them, we dig into our own aural repertoires, our cache of sensory experience, making us intensely aware not only of what we are listening *to*, but also what we are listening *for*. What do I expect to hear on a recording from Guantánamo Bay? Why do I want to hear it? What do I want my listening to confirm or deny?

Indeed, there are few sonic cues that line up with Guantánamo Bay as it exists in our cultural imagination, shaped by newsreel, leaked photographs, state address and later prisoner testimony. Military personnel guide Scott through the compound, directing and circumscribing his movements. Banal conversation reverberates between slices of official discourse. Outside, waves crest and break on the shore, mingling with the sound of birdsong and the hum of generators.<sup>20</sup> Much like Kiyooka's "Pacific Rim" tape—though with very different context and consequence—what is most resonant in this soundscape is not in what the recorder captures, but in what escapes it: any cue of the detainees whose basic rights are suspended indefinitely and who are subject to torture, degradation, and humiliation with absolute impunity. The only traces we hear of these subjects are in a military doctor's nine-second description of the intubation procedure used to force-feed detainees on hunger strike: "this goes through the nose and into the stomach to provide the actual nutrition" (1:42). Yet even this direct reference to the prisoners strikes us as already redacted somehow: the nose and stomach stand in metonymically for the subject, whose entire body (and attendant thoughts, feelings, and sensations) must be obfuscated like blotted-out text in a classified document. Another

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<sup>20</sup> Compellingly, the soundscape that Scott captures closely aligns with the opening paragraphs of Sami Alhaj's memoir *Prisoner 345: My Six Years in Guantánamo*, which also focus on the auditory: "I sit alone in the darkness of night, listening to the sound of my breath and the beating of my heart, a soft breeze bearing light warmth towards me. The shushing waves of the nearby Arabian Gulf reach my ears as I recall the strongholds of a different gulf, a strange gulf. A night bird lands near me, singing faintly, as if beseeching an absent mate. I can't tell what kind of bird it is and try to make out its body in the night, but the sadness of its song sweeps me back into my thoughts; to an hour and place very much unlike this" (7). However, the similarities between these written and recorded accounts only serve to foreground the impasse between perspectives—of Scott's as visitor and Alhaj's as prisoner.

sound that signifies through absence is the persistent sound of air-conditioners and generators that thrums like a bass note throughout the piece. As Scott explains in his essay accompanying the project:

A lot of the torture at Guantánamo is done through air-conditioners, by freezing a detainee in a room for a long time, in order to get him to speak, or to say whatever they want him to say...If you think about the sound that you are hearing, it is essentially the sound of a specific kind of torture. Without the body. (par. 13)

In listening to the sound recording, we are acutely aware of the body's absence—a fact that might not have been the case if Scott were to have simply written a book of verse as his “poet” designation might have occasioned. Rather, there is a heightened sensation that the tape recorder's limited affordances bar us from getting closer to another's body in any significant way. Its documentary reality is cut short by what it cannot record. In this sense, as a documentary medium the tape runs against the grain of language. Where the latter seeks to bridge the impassable gap between subjects, the former holds this gap open by thematizing absence. The post-production sequencing of sounds highlights this effect as the soundscapes flit from one environment to another. We question what has been omitted, reordered, edited, redacted, and this practice conceptually paves the way for thinking about the situation of Guantánamo in an analogous way as a detention site where what goes on under the aegis of state security is deliberately hidden from us.

There is a conceptual echo between the project's two media forms—photograph and sound recording—in the way that they frame absence and redaction. As Scott suggests, ambient recordings are “a kind of empty form that resonates with the visually-redacted photo or the lexically-redacted poem” (par. 9). Similarly, the photographs point to erasure and redaction at several levels: one, the inherent redaction of the medium itself, which literally brings certain elements into view while foreclosing others; two, the photographer's subjective framing at the moment of capture, fragmenting human subjects or omitting them altogether (an instance of metonymy that parallels the nose and stomach in the audio recording); three, the textual description that accompanies the photographs which details OPSEC's procedures for cropping or deleting “violating” photographs. In both these media, we are exposed to a site that is always already redacted: Scott's movements through the space were highly restricted. The space was presented to him in a controlled and deliberate way. However, his self-reflexive use of

framing and editing techniques make redaction itself an object of contemplation, shifting the focus from redacted content to the mechanisms that allow redaction to take place, to be normalized, to be thought of as necessary and transparent. As Žižek writes in *Less Than Nothing*, “What cannot be described should be *inscribed* into the artistic form as its uncanny distortion” (25, original emphasis), and indeed, Scott’s work inscribes through artistic form, pointing at once to redaction and absence, and also the unbreachable divide between subjects and their bodies.

While the media forms mirror each other in the ways that they present absence—especially the absent body—they produce very different affective responses. In viewing the photographs, there is a tension between their aesthetically pleasing quality and our knowledge of the cultural trauma taking place in the spaces they represent. A surveillance tower stands against a brilliant blue sky, as hexagonal bokeh dapple the foreground. Barbed wire fences dissolve into a horizon of white cloud.



*Figure 3: Photograph of Guantánamo Bay detention center from Jordan Scott’s Clearance Process*

There is an uneasy contrast between the image and that which it symbolizes, tempting the viewer to succumb to aesthetic enjoyment, but resolutely denying that possibility through the minute traces that signal context. That is, if we did not know these were photographs from Guantánamo Bay, we might imagine them belonging to a coffee table photo book or a travel guide. But our knowledge of the context shapes our experience of

gazing upon them. The audio, by contrast, produces a different kind of anxiety: the sounds are by no means beautiful but banal, whenever one can place them. In this sense, we are struck not by the contrast between content and context, but their unsettling *coincidence*. Auditory and visual documentation, then, shift between detachment from, and over-proximity to, trauma. The work allows us no comfortable distance from it. It demands the active engagement of viewer-listeners as they work through these conflicting affective reactions. But what does it mean to *feel* in response to these images and sounds? Where does Scott's project place us as observers, as witnesses, as *others* interpellated by, and yet separated from, this history of trauma?

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed tells us that bodily sensation, especially pain and suffering, is the territory of a deep, secret interiority: my pain is my pain alone, and no other body can feel it with me or for me. Pain resists transfer between subjects, is intractably interior. We might argue that pain aligns with the Lacanian Real—inarticulable, extimate, beyond language. Yet it also participates in a complex sociality that is bound up with its expression, witness, and response. Pain is connected to acts of symbolization that attempt to manifest it in an exterior way as sensible and legible to others. Because this process is mobilized through language—I tell you about my pain and in the telling you yourself are moved—it is by necessity entangled in intersubjective power relations that are disciplined by the state of the situation. As Ahmed explains, “the language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that involve injuries to bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or ‘work’ of other bodies” (20). Scott is conscious of what histories his own telling might participate in or obscure. As he writes in his essay, as a representational form, poetry “has the potential...create the same conditions that brought those men to Guantánamo in the first place” (par. 20)—that is, the symbolic coding of another's body as having a certain meaning in the eyes of a western liberal-democratic subject. Acts of coding allowed detainees' bodies to be read as threats in the first place, as injurious to the national body, and as such to be interned without due process and basic human rights. At the same time, an overemphasis on this particular history of harm—both to individual bodies in acts of terrorism and to the collective body through narratives of infiltration, threatened security, and religious extremism—works to conceal or obscure other histories of violence. This coding is nothing other than the count—the presentation of presentation—through which



a coherent set is solidified (i.e. members of the predominantly white national body) while another empty set (the detainees) is barred from that set and disavowed.

While poetry does not necessarily participate in the same *kinds* of coding as the nation state and its cultural body (in that it can be critical, oppositional, subversive, etc.) it nonetheless employs the symbolic register of a subject who enunciates.<sup>21</sup> Scott is wary of the ways that this subject can too easily become the focus of a history of pain that is not his own. Bearing witness is a fraught act because of the line between empathy and appropriation can be perilously thin. As an empathetic gesture—perhaps even a gesture of love—I might want to feel another’s pain so that I can understand it. My language might rise to meet his language in an effort to understand. While this gesture has at its basis an empathic desire to know and feel for someone else, Ahmed demonstrates how cannily it can slide into practices of spectacle, appropriation, and fetishization. Rather than focus on the sufferer’s pain—and, most importantly, the material and historical scenario of that pain—the rhetoric around witnessing can shift the emphasis onto the feelings of the observer, who may feel shame, guilt, or rage on the other’s behalf. The observer may feel implicated in the narrative and desire justice, vengeance, or healing. Ahmed’s point is not that we should condemn these acts of “feeling alongside” but rather to recognize that there is a *politics of pain* that produces uneven effects: “pain does not produce a group of homogenous bodies who are together in their pain” (31), it opens up a profound non-relation between subjects who feel. How, then, can one respond ethically to a pain that is not one’s own? Or, to return to Antwi’s question, “How do we prepare to meet each other in our difference?”

When we meditate on the gaps in documentary media—especially when these gaps are deliberately foregrounded, such as they are in *Clearance Process*—we open ourselves to contemplate the relational addition of our own bodies listening and feeling alongside others. That is, while we cannot feel the pain of others, we can be attuned in a proprioceptive way to how our own bodies move and are moved by the pain of others in

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that Lacan uses the term “subject of enunciation” not only to designate a subject who has control over what he says, but also a subject whose language eludes him—who is spoken *by* language as much as he speaks it. In this sense, we can draw an analogy between the collective subject of enunciation in the case nation state and its cultural body and the individual subject of enunciation in the poet. They both speak, but there is always something that eludes them: the empty set in the former, and the hollow signifier in latter. In both cases, however, there is a disavowal of lack, which serves to make a coherent one out of the speaking body; as I argue in this chapter, the mediality of Scott’s work adamantly refuses this disavowal.

a way that does not attempt to feel or speak *in its name*. This is, as Ahmed insists, perhaps the only ethical way to meet each other in difference: “an ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected to that which one cannot know or feel...[T]he ethical demand is that I must act about that which I cannot know rather than act insofar as I know” (30). I am struck by the potency of not knowing as I sit and listen to the sounds in *Clearance Process* some 2,500 kilometres away from where it was recorded, almost four years ago to the day. I sit in a silent study room on the fifth floor of the Concordia Library in Montreal on a bright, chilly day. It is the end of the semester and I am surrounded by students studying for their final exams, most focused on their laptops with expressions of deep concentration on their faces. The sound of the generators vibrates my eardrums—I am literally moved by this sound. I hear Scott’s voice echo in the empty cell and wonder what he was looking at as his words filled the space around him; I cannot picture it. I imagine him there, similarly transfixed by a moment of unfathomability—he can see it but he cannot picture it: being held there, in this space, unable to leave. We cannot picture it, either of us, because in the next instant we are transported somewhere else: a cafeteria or a medical bay, somewhere cold and metallic-sounding. I hear a man’s voice, but I cannot make out what he is saying. In the next instant, the female doctor talking about intubation in an upbeat cadence. My body shudders. Perhaps Scott’s body also shuddered upon hearing it. We can imagine it but we cannot feel it; the thought of it is unbelievable and yet we know that it is someone else’s lived experience. I am suddenly conscious of the library’s dry air moving through my nasal passage, the soft tissues of my throat.

At the heart of *Clearance Process* is a pain I cannot understand. It is an encounter that cannot be consummated, but that *moves* the listener nonetheless through the failure of this consummation. This type of witnessing, which focuses not on what we know but what we can never know adopts “the status of an event, a happening in the world” (Ahmed 29), and indeed this resonates with the idea that the event is not an ontologically positive entity with this or that name, but site of lack, a gap, through which innumerable other encounters become possible. With its emphasis on the lacking status of documentary media, coupled with the absent bodies that it dare not represent, Scott’s work is vigilant in keeping the gap between subjects open and in the fore, never resolving them. He acknowledges the possibility that his own representational activity risks replicating the systems of power that make institutions like Guantánamo operative

tout court, and seeks ways to divert from that representational activity. *Clearance Process* is politically exigent in the ways that it points to erasure, refusing to disclose, reveal or otherwise pretend to know. The auditory and visual documents point to this impasse without trying to cover it with the representational activity of description, exposition, interpretation—speaking about, or speaking for, another. Rather than fantasizing that sound or vision can bring us closer to someone else’s experience, *Clearance Process* resolutely holds open space—between subjects, between reality and its representation, between media forms. In the hermetically sealed sonic and visual economies of Guantánamo, such a gap functions as an important site to critique the systems of power that redact bodies and subjects in the name of democratic freedom.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Cecily Nicholson for her generous feedback and dialogue on several versions of this chapter. I also thank Fred Moten and the estate of Roy Kiyooka for giving me permission to reproduce transcripts of the audio that appear here, and Jordan Scott for giving me permission to reproduce photographs from *Clearance Process*.

## Chapter 2:

### Listening to Labour

*What do you know about novels that tell the story of women's work obsessively observed by an idle, malicious, and sometimes fierce gaze? Are there any? I'm interested in anything that focuses on the female body at work.*

*-Elena Ferrante, Letter to Sandra regarding an abandoned manuscript, 1998. Reproduced in Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey (Penguin, 2016). Read aloud to me by Maria Hindmarch on March 2, 2017.*

What kinds of labour are visible in historical accounts of literary communities? What kinds of labour are *audible*? This chapter moves from an ontological exploration of when and how an event takes place to discuss how audio artifacts can reframe the cultural and material histories of arts and literary communities. Using the 1960s poetry collective TISH as a case study, I posit that the labour that has been the focus of traditional historical accounts is that of DIY production and distribution—labour that is seen as empowering, even foundational, for those who undertake it. However, through a set of rhetorical strategies, this labour is almost exclusively aligned with male collective members and as a result excludes women from the power and cultural capital that it engenders. Examining a series of conversational audio artifacts from contemporaneous communities, I argue that recordings of this genre make audible the feminized, affective labour of community-building. Though other forms visible/valorized labour are broadly affective in nature, this particular form of affective labour has been under-represented and under-theorized in traditional accounts for two reasons: One, it deals in the immaterial labour that the Italian Autonomists attribute to postindustrial global capitalism, the “activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (Lazzarato 1996: 133). Two, it is closely aligned with what Italian Marxist-feminist Silvia Federici terms reproductive labour: “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labour are daily reconstituted” (2012: 5), including housework, activities of care, sexuality, and emotional support. Contra Michael Hardt’s assertion that economic postmodernization has “positioned affective labour in a role that is not only directly productive of capital but

at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of labouring forms” (1999: 90), I argue that affective labour is unevenly divided along gendered lines and has a differential relation to value production. That is, a large portion of gendered affective labour remains invisible as labour and therefore uncompensated. For this reason it constitutes the hidden base upon which capitalist operations uniquely depend.

This chapter works through an articulation of its two operative terms: affect and labour. In the case of the former term, I draw upon theories of affect elaborated by Brian Massumi and Sara Ahmed, using them to interrogate what is specifically affective about the kind of labour that I listen to and for in these audio artifacts. Taking Benedict de Spinoza’s definition of affect as “the power affect and be affected” as a starting point, this section moves through the aesthetic, cultural, and political registers of the affective encounter, from Massumi’s Deleuzian notion of the virtual to Ahmed’s concept of affect as that which surfaces collective and individual bodies. In the case of the latter term, labour, I read affective labour alongside and against theories of cognitive and immaterial labour advanced by Autonomist thinkers Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Michael Hardt, and Maurizio Lazzarato as well as cultural critical and feminist theories by Pierre Bourdieu and Silvia Federici. Following these theorists, I suggest that affective labour is, on the one hand, a newfound source of value-production as work is increasingly dematerialized and requires cognitive, creative, and emotional activity. If creativity has, as Berardi suggests, been coopted by economic valorization, one of capital’s sleight-of-hand manoeuvres is to entice workers to cathect their desires into productive process, creating an *affection for labour*. On the other hand, affective labour is also, problematically, not considered work when it is outside the worker’s waged relation to capital, as is in the case of reproductive labour. As such, it has been made invisible in historical struggles over workers’ rights, despite the fact that “capitalism requires [this] unwaged reproductive labour in order to contain the cost of labour power” (2012: 8), as Federici insists. Both forms of affective labour are managed and enforced through the ideological demands for normative or “appropriate” affective responses to labour: in reproductive labour, household duties are naturalized as “labours of love” that one does for one’s own fulfillment as feminized subject. In immaterial labour, affect is mobilized as feelings of fulfillment and autonomy in the mantra “art for art’s sake.”

The latter half of the chapter examines affective labour at a historically situated site: the Vancouver poetry collective TISH, who published a number of collectively edited

books and little magazines in the 1960s and '70s. TISH is a compelling case study because its material history is extensive and varied. It is inscribed in monographs, panel proceedings, articles, reviews, interviews, and essays that were produced both at the peak of the collective's activity and well after it had dispersed. One bias that cuts across these diverse artifacts is the focus on print production—the minutiae of mimeographing, the ins and outs of mail circulation, the polemic editorial wars. Reading these literary documents for what labour is visible—perhaps overly visible—is a way of contouring the gaps in the discourse of community-building. Indeed, while DIY production is in some ways an important anticommercial, antiauthoritarian practice, it risks replicating the structures it positions itself against because, at the end of the day, it's not in the interest of those who benefit from those structures to get rid of them. My goal here is not to diminish the radical potential of small press, but rather to ask what other forms of labour ought to be accounted for when we talk about literary publics. To this end, I analyze a number of archival audio recordings that register affective labour *in situ*, as community members support and critique one another, challenge official narratives, and emit harmonizing and discordant sound, building, at a granular level, the intellectual culture of an era.

## **Affect**

What makes certain kinds of labour “affective”? What are the conditions under which that labour is performed? At a moment when all labour is becoming increasingly networked and relational, is it even possible to distinguish affective labour from other forms of labour? In his seminal essay “Affective Labour” published in 1999, Michael Hardt insists that affective labour “is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities” (89). Closely related to the practices of “kin work” and “care work,” affective labour is the complex of activities that relate to human contact and interaction, which engender states of wellbeing, satisfaction, and care. Encompassing a wide variety of services and sectors, the practices of affective labour “produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself” (89), and as such have the power to counteract the exploitive processes of capitalism. However, as we will see later on in this chapter, this is precisely why capital employs a number of safeguards and strategies to conceal the worth of affective labour, so that it might neutralize its subversive potential *and* accumulate its value for free. Before we can define the

activities and practices in which affective labour is composed, it is important to explore what affect *is*—or more properly, what it *does*—in order to theorize its relation to labour.

In his 2015 book of interviews *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi insists that affect is, in essence, a relational force. Taking Spinoza's definition "to affect and be affected" (Massumi xii) as a starting point, he argues that affect provides us with "ways of connecting to others and to other situations" (6). Affect passes from body to body in the form of both physical sensation and emotional intensity, in the process contouring the subjects through which they pass. Because affect exists in relation, it is also processual. It is not an entity "in itself" that an individual possesses (I feel 'x,' the feeling is *mine*) but rather a shifting state, duration, or intensity. Affect is related to, yet not coterminous with, cognition and the language we use to express it. According to Massumi, *emotion* is "the way the depth of...ongoing experience registers personally at any given moment" (4)—a conscious, articulable, reflection of feeling. *Affect*, meanwhile, is a virtual, cumulative repertoire of the body's experiential encounters that indicate an array of different positions-toward. It is a body's receptivity or openness to the world. Affect is always virtual to certain degree because we can't experience the full range of our emotions simultaneously at any given moment. Certain emotional states are antinomic, such as fear and boredom, while others are of differing intensities and durations—the difference, say, between a flash of rage and a sustained, casual interest, to cite one of Sianne Ngai's lesser affects. Affect, as the sum of a subject's possible positions toward the world, is marked by an excess, composed in whatever affects are deactivated in the moment of conscious feeling.

For Massumi, this affective excess connects to a larger political project that introduces indeterminacy into even the most rigid situations. The depth of our affective potential—bound up as it is in relations to other entities and forces—opens up a "margin of manoeuvrability" (2) whereby we might take an experimental "next step" that changes the makeup of the situation, however incrementally. The more a body can do, the greater the range of possible outcomes—indeed, potentially radical or even impossible outcomes. To relay this definition of affect back to the event, affect magnifies the potency of an evental site because it introduces elements of contingency and indeterminacy. In this sense, we can imagine affective labour as work that broadens, deepens, or otherwise intensifies the potentiality of relations, in turn thickening the margin of manoeuvrability in a given situation. As a concrete example, we can think of a

friend or colleague offering feedback on a manuscript who, in their encounter with the work, opens up new critical or creative avenues to be pursued by the author (who among us hasn't had such an encounter?). We can also think of the work of counsellors—professional or informal—who, through patient listening and consideration, offer new perspective on a problem, perhaps realizing a previously hidden connection between two scenarios, or suggesting an alternative course of action to deal with an obstacle. The point to be taken is that affect is, at base, a process of relating that opens up space for events. Its political potential resides in this fact. Operating at a micro-level, affect is an x-factor that causes minute swerves and fluctuations, which in turn can amplify and reverberate into larger movements within a given situation. Massumi emphasizes what we might call the deterritorializing possibilities of affect. For him, the contingency of affect is the closest thing to what we call hope—even though, in its experimental nature, it is always a wager without guarantees.

Where Massumi emphasizes the ways that affect can destabilize a socio-political situation, Sara Ahmed, by contrast, is interested in the ways that affect stabilizes both identity and social structure through repetitive encounters. Her 2004 work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* interrogates the ways that both individual and collective bodies are surfaced and shaped by encountering others—through contact, as well as through proximity and distance. Our movement through the world involves participation in what Ahmed terms an “affective economy,” wherein “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (8). While circulation involves movement and process, to which Massumi assigns a deterritorializing function, Ahmed shows how circulation is key in the production of boundaries, the regulation of space, and the reinforcement of social norms.

At its most fundamental level, the circulation of affect produces the boundedness of both subjects and objects. Encountering others in the world (both human and non-human; animate and inanimate) involves a moment of contact that leaves an *impression* on both parties, contouring identity and sounding the tenuous limit of where our own experience ends and the other's begins. These encounters involve the body at the level of physical sensation. Touching or being touched, for example, creates an awareness of our bodies as discrete entities bounded by skin, drawing attention to the otherwise transparent fact of our embodiment. Our bodies can be impressed upon through intrusion, violence and pain, which can leave a bruise or scar on the body; they can also



be impressed upon by pleasure, opening the body to new sensations and cultivating receptivity to another's presence. While encounters are first and foremost rooted in the body, they also involve complex cognitive acts of reading and attribution, in which subjects assign symbolic meaning to the moment of encounter. The subject's psyche is analogously impressed upon or surfaced by contact with another. One might read an encounter as beneficial or harmful, pleasant or unpleasant, foundational or traumatic. These acts of reading alter the subject's position towards the object being read: one might be compelled to draw nearer to it, withdraw from it, or cast it out. These physical and psychical position-takings form the subject. However, they also form the other, who appears to take on the properties of the encounter as natural or inherent qualities. We read others as alike or unlike us, as friends or enemies, as objects of love, respect, desire, or hatred. These properties do not positively reside in others themselves, they only appear to do so through a misrecognition of our own position-taking. Cognitive acts of attribution partake in a social feedback loop: our encounters with others shape our impressions of them, and these impressions in turn shape or script future encounters. These myriad daily exchanges accumulate to form relatively stable patterns over time—what Ahmed refers to as an affective economy.

Encounters and exchanges that take place at the level of the individual scale up to form larger social structures, producing the boundaries of collective subjectivities. Indeed, the identification of a foreign body that is separate from the collective body (thinking of immigrants and asylum seekers as outside the white, national body, to use Ahmed's example) is the very thing that produces that collective body's tenuous sense of coherency and stability. It not only produces the boundary between "us" and "them," it is the very event that allows "us" and "them" to emerge as coherent sets in the first place.<sup>22</sup> This delineation is a symbolic/semantic one, coding the meaning of encounters and affixing signs to bodies as though they were inherent, self-evident properties. Affect not only moves (i.e. circulates) but also "sticks." It clusters signs together, congealing

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<sup>22</sup> It's instructive here to think of Žižek's example for the "part-of-no-part" in *Less Than Nothing*. He writes: "it is a mistake to divide the genus of all human beings into Greeks and barbarians: 'barbarian' is not a proper form because it does not designate a positively defined group (species), but merely all persons who are not Greeks. The positivity of the term 'barbarian' thus conceals the fact that it serves as the container for all those who do not fit the form 'Greek'" (39). That is, the other that confirms the positive identity of one collective group (the Greeks, the white nation, the majority subject) depends upon the creation of a null or empty set (barbarians). As Zermelo and Fraenkel remind us, there is no universal set, as the complement to any set does not itself a set make (see Chapter 1).

them around certain bodies through repetitive iteration. As signs circulate they accumulate affective value, such that they are habitually read in a certain way—ideal or transgressive, compliant or treacherous—culminating in the establishment of cultural norms. The fact that these delineations are symbolic and only arbitrarily related to real-world referents does not undermine their ability to produce effects in the material world. Symbolic coding profoundly affects “what the body can do,” to cite Spinoza’s second definition of affect. It can limit a body’s mobility in space, thinking, for example, of bodies that are barred from crossing borders or are at risk of detainment. It can limit social mobility in the case of professional and economic inequalities based upon gender, race, sexuality, or ability. It can limit the body’s expression and gesture—for example, the expression of queer love in heteronormative spaces. It can threaten the body’s very existence—considering the murder of black subjects whose bodies are coded as threats by the police. Affect, as the basis for public forms of culture, plays a major role in determining who or what counts-as-one, in the Badiouan sense—as a subject of the nation, as an illegitimate subject, as an ideal subject. As we have seen, counting is the method by which the state of the situation exercises its power. As an act of cognitively interpreting encounters, counting produces material positions-toward, which may have profound and potentially disastrous consequences for certain bodies.

Crucially, Ahmed reminds us that the cultural norms conditioned by affect are not just imposed from the top down. Rather, they are the product of the human labour of reading, interpreting, and circulating signs. Affective labour is a form of reproductive labour that reproduces “life as we know it,” the cultural status quo. Labour underpins the reproduction of ideals about bodies, tastes, practices, and orientations. However, this labour is concealed when norms are presented as a priori, self-evident facts: they overlook the work that goes into conserving and reproducing them *as norms*. As such, bodies labour *differently* based on whether they embody a normative ideal or a failure of that ideal. The labour of reproducing cultural norms is compensated by an extension of the kinds of identities they support (i.e. extension into more expansive physical and social spaces, the extension of economic power, etc.). Meanwhile, the labour of failing to reproduce cultural ideals, while largely uncompensated, works on the normative itself. It exposes how structures and spaces extend themselves unevenly to some bodies and not others, and ultimately makes space to inhabit norms differently through the pronouncement of alternative social forms.

The role of affect in labour has a dual nature: on the one hand, in its potential or virtual capacity, it carries with it the political imperative for change. Like the Heraclitus' clinamen—that minute swerve of atoms that sets the whole of history on a new course—it may open up new manoeuvres in even the most hermetic situations. Affective labour in this sense involves dedicating oneself to practices that cultivate degrees of openness. These practices take place on the micropolitical level of the interpersonal—taking the time to listen and be moved by another's speech, investing in a conversation, or seeking out dialogue with someone with a markedly different subject position than one's own. On the other hand, affect plays a crucial role in the ways that social structures cohere and stabilize, drawing attention to the labour of social reproduction, and enabling alternative forms of stability for non-normative subjects. Affective labour in this sense might involve what Larissa Lai terms a "politics of solidarity" (as a complement to the politics of protest) in her recent essay on the Telling It collective in Vancouver. Where the politics of protest involves refusal, unrest, and a destabilization of the status quo, the politics of solidarity involve building transversal connections between individuals and groups—for example, the alliance of poor, racialized, and lesbian women in the 1980s feminist Telling It collective. The affective labour of solidarity-building here involves practices such as defining group structure, organizing public events and conferences, participating in debate and dialogue, conflict resolution, maintaining community archives, as well as identifying and critiquing behaviours within the group that reproduce oppressive structures. Importantly, affective labour does the simultaneous work of destabilizing structure and opening new possible ways of being, while at the same time broadening the affective potential of groups and individuals through solidarity work.

## **Labour**

The account above outlines the considerable political power of affect—not only in the space it opens up for social reform at a granular level, but also in the production of alternate social forms based on equality, collectivity, and reciprocal care. For this reason, it also attests to the very real threat that affect poses to dominant power structures and the reasons why it must be contained at all costs. Affect poses not only a social threat, but also an economic one. Indeed, as Karl Marx insists in *Grundrisse*, a worker's sense of alienation from the products of his labour is experienced not only as a political and economic loss of power, but also as an affective state: a mournful loss of

self—perhaps even, as Italian autonomist Franco “Bifo” Berardi suggests, an anxiety or panic that precipitates a deep depression (98). Yet the affective experience of alienation is also the event that creates the presuppositions of its abolition. Anticapitalist protests such as the Compositionist workers’ strikes in 1970s Italy were founded on a common rejection of alienation, transforming it instead into an autonomous and collective mode of estrangement.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of such movements, the ideological management of affect has become a ubiquitous strategy to control an increasingly stratified working class. Affect masks the exploitive practices of late-capitalist cognitive labour by cultivating a libidinous investment in the workplace, muddying the boundary between self-fulfillment and the production of capital. It is also the primary means of naturalizing reproductive labour to feminized subjects while at the same time devaluing this labour in order to contain the cost of reproducing the workforce. In this sense, affect is an operative factor linking productive and non-productive relations to capital, which can in turn open up more inclusive terms for labour reform.

What makes an affective activity *labour*? Is the transmission and management of affects always work? If so, how do we separate the affective labour that we perform for our own well-being and the well-being of our communities from the affective labour demanded by capital? Can we ever be certain that our labour is our own? There is a porousness to affective labour that, as we have seen, results from the porousness of affect itself, which cannot be confined to a single subject, time, or state. As Western postindustrial capitalism shifts away from the factory as the site of both wage labour and workers’ struggles, labour takes on increasingly immaterial forms, coopting the human faculties of emotion, creativity and intellect.<sup>24</sup> This shift is the topic of Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s 2009 book, *The Soul at Work*, which identifies a trend in postindustrial capitalism in which not only the body but the soul—that is, the creative, intellectual, and affective forces that animate the body—is pressed into economic valorization. In the

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<sup>23</sup> Italian Workerism asserted that this limit posed by alienation—our fundamental disconnection with others—“does not involve a loss, an impoverishment: it opens instead the possibility of collective experience, based on conflict.” Estrangement is the term given to the active, productive embrace of self-alienation.

<sup>24</sup> As I discuss below, both Berardi and Lazzarato’s narratives about the emergence of Semiocapitalism/immaterial labour deal only with a narrow set of relations within a larger capitalist assemblage and, by virtue of what they leave out, tend to universalize that particular set of relations. Indeed, a discussion of the cooption of intellectual and affective labour in postindustrial capitalism needs to be read alongside other global social relations, including the exploitation of the hemispheric south, and the continued subjugation of women, children, and minority subjects.

1960s and '70s, he argues, there is a reformation of capitalist procedures that responds not only to rapid post-War technological, social, and political changes, but also emerges in response to workers' struggles that culminate in communal self-organization and the refusal to work. During this period, several forces cohere to produce a new kind of workforce, what Berardi terms the "cognitariat" (35) which labours under "Semiocapitalism" (21).<sup>25</sup> In Semiocapitalism, the production of value coincides with the production of signs, meaning that labour becomes a predominantly mental process. Rather than working to transform materials into commodities, as was the standard under industrial capitalism, the cognitariat produces surplus value through the generation, circulation, and interpretation of signs.

The "soul" labour that Berardi outlines involves more than just thought and cognition. Drinking from the same theoretical spring as Massumi and Ahmed, including works by Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari, Berardi's notion of the soul has deep affective resonance. For him, too, the soul is "[w]hat the body can do" (21). It is neither hermetic nor interior, but profoundly social—the very condition that allows us to relate to others through energies of attraction and conflict, cooperation and competition. To Berardi, the soul is what holds bodies together in a social relation, evoking the notion of affect's surfacing delimitations as well as its ability to socially "stick" bodies together, as Ahmed has suggested. Thus, while Berardi throughout refers to soul labour interchangeably as "cognitive" or "intellectual," it is important to remember that what is at stake is the affective economy of sociality itself—the degree to which we can meaningfully connect with others and invest our energies into bonds of solidarity, collaboration, and love. In soul labour, subjects are asked to invest their intellectual and creative capacities into their working life, such that work itself becomes the primary site of desire and self-realization. Under Semiocapitalism, "workers invest their specific competences, their creative, innovative and communicative energies in the labour process; that is, the best part of their intellectual capacities" (78) creating an aura of voluntary, even ecstatic, participation in work life. Affective energies that were once invested in relations with others and the material world are captured by production and cathected into the workplace, resulting in "a catastrophic overturning of the investments of collective desire"

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<sup>25</sup> See also Maurizio Lazzarato "Immaterial Labour," where he defines immaterial labour as "the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity" (133). Like Berardi, he is interested in the dispersion of the factory as a centralized labour site, and the cooption of mental, affective, and critical activities into the production cycle.

(139). Through these affective tactics, the capital relation is reproduced at the expense of all other social relations.

The arts and literary scenes that emerge contemporaneously with Semiocapitalism are conscious of—and resistant to—its bid for affective, creative, and intellectual labour. There are numerous discussions in this period about the potential of art and literature to intervene in mass-media-driven popular culture—considering Charles Olson’s return to localism and the breath line in *The Maximus Poems* as correctives to telenetworked globalism and commercial “muzak,” or Allen Ginsberg’s invectives against the machinic enslavements of the mind and the environment in *Planet News* and *The Fall of America*. There is an explosion of micropress and little magazine publishing that knits together coteries and counterpublics, such as *Origin*, *Floating Bear*, and *Black Mountain Review* in the United States, transnational publications such as *Pacific Nation*, *SUM*, *The Magazine of Further Studies*, and *Fathar*, and Canadian counterparts *TISH*, *Imago*, *grOnk* and *blewointment*, among many others.<sup>26</sup> The cultural nationalist debates of this period are also underwritten with a deep anti-commercialist sentiment, aligning (whether deservedly or not) American cultural imperialism with a commodification of the arts. In this context, we might usefully test some of the claims that Berardi makes about soul labour. On the one hand, these productions are defiant acts of refusal, pushing back against capital’s bid for our souls and revitalizing a network of affective and intellectual connections between individuals. On the other, perhaps more cynically, one can’t deny that while these publications and communities begin with anti-commercial and anti-capitalist aspirations, many of them are coopted into mainstream culture with dizzying velocity. The very productions launched as missiles against the establishment are quickly transmuted into keystones of high art, canonicity, and cultural value.

This fact resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s argument in *The Field of Cultural Production* that it is impossible for the literary field to have a truly oppositional relation to capital because it is enclosed within it as the dominant socioeconomic field. While the literary field can achieve a certain degree of autonomy in the logic of its values and the specific forms that capital takes, “whatever its degree of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and

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<sup>26</sup> For a chronology of relevant small press publications, see Butling and Rudy, “Chronology 1 (1957-1979): From the Canada Council to Writing in Our Time,” pp. 1-17 in *Writing in Our Time*.

political profit” (39). In other words, participation in the literary field is, at base, participation in the struggle for capital. Within the literary field, there are greater and lesser degrees of concordance with the dominant field power—what Bourdieu terms “heteronomous” and “autonomous” principles of hierarchization. The heteronomous principle closely follows the logic of the dominant field: its successes are measured in economic profit (book sales, commercial success, adaptations, etc.) and it makes no claims toward a subversive or oppositional stance. By contrast, the autonomous principle is “the economic world reversed” (29), wherein producers take a stance of “disinterestedness” (40) in commercial success, labouring under the principle of “art for art’s sake” (40). This restricted mode of production has as its audience a limited number of likeminded cultural producers who carefully guard consecration and entry into the field. While art for art’s sake yields little, if any economic profit, it garners an inversely proportionate level of cultural capital. Art for art’s sake imagines itself as a non-economic form because it eschews the material success of the dominant field; however, it is nonetheless involved in the productive cycle at several levels: one, it produces cultural products with a high degree of symbolic value that, long-term, is reconvertible into economic profit. Two, it produces the definition of cultural legitimacy itself, making a bid to define what counts-as-one in the cultural situation—i.e. the very definition of a work of art, a genre, or an artist.

This latter work, Lazzarato reminds us in his 1996 essay in *Radical Thought in Italy*, is the “cultural content” of immaterial labour: “defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (133). Cultural values are never universal, self-apparent, or transhistorical but are “put to work” (146) giving commodities their meaning, and in the process inflating or diminishing their symbolic capital. Problematically, this cultural-content work is often not considered work because it occurs at a different stage in the productive cycle. Because immaterial commodities are not exhausted at the moment of their consumption in the same way as material goods, “the consumer intervenes in an active way in the composition of the product” (1996: 146), leaving an imprint on the commodity’s symbolic status. As a concrete example in the literary world, we can think of review culture, which takes on participatory forms (i.e. Amazon or Goodreads reviews) and social forms (i.e. book clubs, informal discussion, classroom instruction, etc.) in addition to more culturally authoritative forms like published reviews. A great deal of this labour happens off the

clock and without compensation because it is conceptually separated from the productive cycle—it makes no material “goods” to speak of—despite its power to exponentially increase the surplus value of a commodity. Cultural-content work is also concealed by an idealistic belief in the separation of art and economy—art for art’s sake—that is managed through the regulation of the affects surrounding the function of art and beauty. Bourdieu insists that the labour we undertake in the cultural field hinges upon the illusion that it is “a pleasure which we take only because ‘we *want* to take it’...the pleasure of the love of art” (73, original emphasis). We undertake these endeavours out of an authentic feeling of self-fulfillment and not for the production of capital. This illusion creates the conditions to accumulate a great deal of immaterial labour-power for free by framing these activities as ennobling, individual pursuits. Thus, the literary field not only conceals its own labour as *labour*, it also conceals its own ties to the dominant field of power and the field of class relations. Bourdieu is adamant about this point: “to utter ‘in public’ the true nature of the field”—that is, its role in the production of capital—“is sacrilege *par excellence*, the unforgivable sin which all the censorships constituting the field seek to repress” (73).

The truth about “autonomous” artistic production (which includes the consumer-end production of cultural value), then, comes to us in the form of an event: even our most consciously resistant creative and affective activities can be hijacked by capital. Only when this happens do we come to understand, retroactively, that our labour *will have been* in the service of value-production all along. Berardi asks but falls just short of answering the question: How is it that cognitive labourers are “no longer opposing the lengthening of their working day and instead spontaneously choosing to increase it” (80)? To insist that the content of waged work has become more affective and immaterial is only part of the answer. The other side of the equation is that a great deal of immaterial labour is pressed into unwaged economic valorization through the regulation of affect itself, especially work that has the creation and evaluation of cultural matter as its content.

This is not to say that art is impotent in effecting social change by virtue of its intrinsic relation to the economic field. In fact, Bourdieu insists that “cultural producers are able to use the power conferred on them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength of the dominated classes to subvert the order prevailing in the field of power”



(44). However, we must acknowledge the dual position of art—especially the highly autonomous art of the avant-garde—as labour that produces social relations and, indeed often times the capital relation, whether intentionally or not. We must also acknowledge the fact that the field of autonomous art is deeply undercut by the social hierarchies of the dominant field, and that consecration by, and participation in, the restricted public sphere of the avant-garde is structured by exclusions based on race, gender, and class. As Bourdieu notes, those who are most likely to achieve the long-term conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital are those subjects who already occupy economically privileged positions who can weather the storm. Though many agents participate in the cultural-content work of defining taste, values, and cultural norms through debate, public discourse, writing, etc., not everyone will be consecrated (and thus compensated) to the same degree for their labour. Thus the unifying banner “art for art’s sake” conceals uneven social and class relations by asking everyone to participate equally under the auspices of self-fulfillment, without seeking financial compensation for their labour.

But there is more to the story. In the same way that Berardi’s account fails to differentiate between *types* of cognitive labour (the difference, say, between drafting a social media marketing plan for a wage versus painting an abstract painting for a gallery), he also imagines the cognitariat as a homogenous group and thus fails to account for the social relations that articulate that labour differently for different subjects. Like Marx before him, he overlooks a gendered division of labour within this “new” workforce. When one takes gender into consideration—thinking of the pronouncedly affective, immaterial character of reproductive labour and the mental load of managing a household—soul labour is not exactly new. As Silvia Federici demonstrates in her 2004 *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, women and feminized subjects have been performing this labour for several centuries, and their fixation to reproductive labour has only intensified in the progression to late capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In these works, Federici employs a binary definition of gender, whereby gender identity is synonymous with biological sex—i.e. her definition of a woman is someone who is born female and socialized as female. While this binary definition of womanhood is apt for the historical framing of her thesis (dealing, in *Caliban and the Witch* with the post-feudal period in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the tradition of 1970s radical feminism in *Revolution at Ground Zero*), we must also be attuned to the ways that genderqueer and non-binary individuals are implicated in the uneven distribution of reproductive labour via ideological discourses about femininity/feminization. See Drucilla K. Barker, “Querying the Paradox of Caring Labor”

Beginning with Karl Marx's notion of primitive accumulation—the idea developed in *Capital, Vol. 1* that capitalism required an accumulation of labour and capital to secure its position as a dominant economic system—she explains how women's social subjugation and confinement to reproductive labour were crucial to this process. Her important corrective to Marx's theory is that primitive accumulation is not only an accumulation of resources and standing-reserve labour, but also "*an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*" (2014: 63, original emphasis) along the lines of gender and race. Capital must work continually to disavow and conceal this fact. It does so because differentiating between waged work and unwaged reproductive labour divides and hierarchizes the working class, thus concealing a large portion of productive activity and making it more difficult to collectively organize.

What is reproductive labour, and how does it differ from other forms of labour? This is the topic of Federici's 2012 *Revolution at Point Zero*, which issues from the author's decades of involvement with the Wages for Housework movement that began in Italy and the UK in the 1970s. According to Federici, reproductive labour involves

servicing the wage earners physically, emotionally, sexually, getting them ready for work day after day. It is taking care of our children—the future workers—assisting them from birth through their school years, ensuring that they too perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism. This means that behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine there is the hidden work of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labour, producing the labour power that works in those factories, schools, offices, or mines. (31)

In short, reproductive labour is labour that reproduces the workforce itself. It can be found in activities such as cooking meals, household chores, washing and mending clothing; it can be found in the activities of childcare and parenting, including nurturance, teaching, and discipline; it can also be found in the care we provide to our life partners—emotional support, sexual gratification, and physical comfort. Though its activities are complex and varied, there are three characteristics that mark reproductive labour. The first is that *it is unwaged*. The vast majority of reproductive labour is performed without remuneration because it is done in the service of our loved ones and ourselves. Reproductive labour can be waged when it is hired out as a service to others—for example, nannying, housekeeping, caregiving, etc.—but when it is performed in one's

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(*Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 24, Issue 4) and Jane Ward "Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression" (*Sexualities* Vol. 13, Issue 2).

own household it is naturalized as a 'labour of love' and thus expected to be freely given. The wageless status of reproductive labour, Federici insists, is capital's most "pervasive manipulation"—its "subtlest violence" (2012: 16)—because it is the primary means by which profit is extracted from the workforce. More than the lengthening of the workday or the mechanisms that increase productivity, the extraction of unpaid reproductive labour serves to contain the costs of labour power, allowing employers to reap the benefits. Where in pre-capitalist society reproductive labour was shared by women and men and integrated into economic relations (particularly around subsistence farming and commonly held lands), under capitalism this labour is divided along gendered lines and devalued as work, such that all members of a household depend on the wage for monetary subsistence, while the value of reproductive labour is accumulated for free (Federici 2014: 97-98). Hence, Federici insists, "women's unpaid labour in the home has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers, 'wage slavery,' has been built, and the secret of its productivity" (2014: 8).

The second characteristic of reproductive labour is that *it is feminized*. The gendering of reproductive labour takes place over the centuries-long transition between feudalism and capitalism. It is made operative through a series of social, economic, religious, and political reforms, including the enclosure of common lands, the systematic exclusion of women from the wage market, the legislation and surveillance of women's reproduction and, Federici emphasizes, the centuries-long "war on women" (2014: 14) administered through the great witch-hunt in Europe and later colonized countries. These pervasive strategies enact the "accumulation of difference" upon which primitive accumulation depends. Positioning women as socially, psychologically, and morally inferior to men at once neutralizes the threat that women pose to ruling power (i.e. through traditional matrilineal knowledge, reproductive autonomy, and revolutionary activity), while at the same time creating a hierarchy within the working class that redirects the bad affects of alienation toward internal (i.e. gender) rather than external (i.e. class) divisions. In this manner, women are increasingly confined to services of reproductive labour as a means of subsistence, just as that labour is devalued to the point of wagelessness. At the same time, because of women's circumscription to this field, reproductive labour is naturalized as "women's work"—that is, tasks to which women are physically and emotionally predisposed and amenable. The naturalization of reproductive labour is doubly exploitive for women of colour during periods of

colonization, slavery, and their aftermath where both racial and gendered hierarchies are established on the false grounds of “moral superiority” to justify wagelessness and brutal forms of domination and control.

The third characteristic of reproductive labour, which results from the former two characteristics, is that *it is hidden*. It is hidden because it is outside of both the wage structure and the circuit of commodity production, and therefore not considered work. As the point-zero site of the “social factory” (2012: 31) the household’s products are not articles that circulate on the market but affects, subjectivities, and labour power itself. The immateriality of this labour makes it easier for capital to devalue it and ideologically code it not as work, but *something else*—call it love, duty, or self-fulfillment. Through this logic, capital both conceals the surplus value that it gains from this labour and creates a rift between a waged proletariat and an unwaged reproductive body. Reproductive labour has also been overlooked in both historical workers’ struggles and theories of the political left because both have taken wage labour as the site of their critique and intervention. As Federici explains in her 1975 essay “Counterplanning from the Kitchen” (co-written with Nicole Cox), in its relegation of reproductive labour to a subordinate or incidental status to the wage, the left “reproduce[s] in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class that characterize the capitalist division of labour” (2012: 29). That is, for precisely the same reasons that reproductive labour has been concealed by capital—its feminization, its immateriality, its consignment to domestic spaces—it has not been the object of class reform, despite its immanence for class relations.

**“They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.”**

By now, the parallels between cognitive “soul” labour and reproductive labour as affective forms should be clear. Both collapse the boundary between working life and the everyday, shrinking the time, space, and energy that we give to ourselves and productivizing every relation. Both lengthen the workday and decentralize the factory, demanding workers to be ever on call for the productive cycle. Both create precarious and hyper-exploitable workforces by devaluing labourers’ work as work. Most insidiously, both forms of labour are regulated through the control of affect, manipulating subjects into believing that they perform this labour for their own self-fulfillment and not for the production of value. Federici starkly reminds us: “not a wage but ‘love’ has always paid

for this work” (2012: 37). Failure to take the correct affective disposition toward this labour is met with opprobrium, casting those who display the wrong affects as bad mothers, bad wives, bad lovers, bad artists. Capital is sure to convince us that it is the always the subject who fails and never the structure that makes success impossible. To feel overburdened by the pressures of balancing a career and family life, for example, is to be told in countless ways that one fails an ideal—to have one’s priorities straight, or to manage one’s time correctly. To express frustration at the uneven distribution of resources in the cultural field is to be reminded of the meritocratic principle and the universal truth of aesthetic value. Normative affect conceals structural issues under the guise of the personal. In this way, capital can continue to extract surplus value by concealing it within the vanishing mediator of “love.”

I want to bring the arguments of the two previous sections together and suggest that the structures that enable the devaluation of reproductive and cognitive labour are not limited to the household and the marketplace of immaterial commodities. Rather, these structures are mirrored in community spaces, which remain inflected by the demands of the dominant socioeconomic field, regardless of their degree of autonomy. Indeed, artists’ and writers’ collectives are perhaps even more susceptible to reproducing dominant power relations (or, maybe more accurately, equally susceptible but in a different way) because they at once involve intimate forms of sociality not unlike the family structure and are also deeply invested in the articulation of aesthetic taste, value, and legitimacy. The normative regulation of affect around these topics makes them incredibly difficult to talk about.<sup>28</sup> Many arts and literary collectives, especially those on the autonomous side of production, are invested in the idea of their progressiveness, positioned as they often are against mainstream culture. Community members who shoulder an uneven share of affective labour may feel reticent to critique the division of labour because they fear censure or attack. They may have internalized their own roles as affective providers, such that to admit dissatisfaction could provoke feelings of shame, guilt, and failure. Perhaps most pressingly, the security of autonomous communities can often feel under threat from commercial or centralized modes cultural production, such that creating a historical narrative which ballasts itself on certain shared memories, values, and interests is a crucial means for that

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<sup>28</sup> See discussion of enunciability and material silence in Chapter 4, pp. 149-150.

community's survival. In this context, critique might feel, or be read as, a betrayal of the community and a compromise of communal identity. One of the greatest challenges of social history, then, is in finding ways to confront and critique the hegemony of official narratives and to reintroduce difference without fragmenting the collective identity of the scene.

## **Labour and the community: TISH, a case study**

What labour holds communities together and who performs it? What are the shared assumptions, values, experiences, and stances-toward that foster a sense of communal identity? As a constellation within a series of nested fields, the literary collective, for example, is composed not only by a number of agents—writers, publishers, artists, critics, and readers, to name a few—but also in the relations *between* those agents, whether competitive or collegial. The collective is also shaped by a number of non-human and symbolic entities: texts and works of art, manifestos and polemics, cultural and institutional opinions about the function and value of art, processes of anthologization and canonization, as well as broader, social, political, and economic forces that inflect and put pressure on the relationships between agents. Considering the nebulous shape of the collective, how does it develop and maintain definitive borders, a coherent sense of self-identity? Who or what gets displaced in establishing the boundaries of “inside” and “outside”?

I would like to direct these questions at a focused case study, asking what held—and still holds—together the Vancouver poetry collective, TISH. TISH designates not only the poetry newsletter that was published out of the University of British Columbia beginning in 1961, that was edited, supported, and included work by a number of Vancouver writers, including Peter Auxier, Carol Bolt [Johnson], George Bowering, Pauline Butling, David Cull, Frank Davey, David Dawson, Maria [Gladys] Hindmarch, Robert Hogg, Lionel Kearns, Daphne Marlatt, Dan McLeod, Sam Perry, Jamie Reid, Warren Tallman, and Fred Wah. TISH also designates the complex of publications, collaborations, conferences, critiques, histories, readings, performances, events, conversations, and arguments that precede and follow after it. To get a sense of this variegated material culture, my reading focuses on the narratives that surround TISH's first editorial phase from 1961-1963 (*TISH* 1-19), as these narratives remain the most frequently circulated and commented upon.

In its storied literary and critical history, community members and scholars alike have put forth theories about what unifies the TISH collective. Some accounts, such as C.H. Gervais' *TISH: A Movement* and Warren Tallman's "Wonder Merchants" name a shared aesthetic disposition: a common interest in an Olsonian proprioceptive sensibility, with emphasis on speech-based meters and forms. Others, such as Frank Davey's *When TISH Happens* and Fred Wah's *Permissions* emphasize a common geopolitical stance that champions the local and the rural over the hegemony of the national and the urban. Related, though not coterminous, with these aesthetic and geographic designations is Pauline Butling's assessment in *Writing in Our Time* that the TISH poets "shared a class-consciousness, or at least an outsider experience, in that most of them came from working-class and/or non-urban families" (49-50). It is this common experience of class that I want to interrogate, asking: if *class* is indeed a factor that holds the collective together, how do we characterize that collective's *labour*, the primary substance in which the class relation is expressed? What kinds of labour do we see in historical documents: memories, testimonies, and archival artifacts? Or, to put it differently, what is the consensus about the labour that *matters* to the collective? Examining a temporally and generically diverse selection of texts—articles, monographs, interviews, and panel discussions written between 1963 and 2014—several modes of visible labour emerge: the labour of artistic production and dissemination, the labour of community-building, and the labour of teaching, among others. On an individual level, these labours are transformative and rewarding for the people who undertake them. They also foster a vital sense of community, which serves as a vector for the burgeoning artistic and literary activities in Vancouver in the 1960s and the years that follow. However, despite the considerable affective tenor of all these categories, the most visible labour revolves around the production of the printed little magazine itself, and is aligned almost exclusively with male collective members through a number of rhetorical and figurative strategies.

When we observe the labour of print production in historical accounts of TISH, the first remarkable characteristic is its tactility and materiality. In his 2011 autobiographical book, *When TISH Happens*, Frank Davey emphasizes the hands-on, DIY character of 1960s poetic production, describing the affordances and materials of printing machinery in great detail:

Back in Abbotsford for a weekend, I discover a grimy, used mimeograph machine in the local second-hand store. It's a hand-crank model, made in Holland...After I get some solvent and remove layers of old ink, I discover it has a non-standard mount for the stencils, but I can cut them and punch new mounting holes to make them fit. (131)

Similar technical argot accompanies the purchase of an offset printing press in 1962:

We buy a used Addressograph-Multilith Model 80 and install it in the small room near Bill New's desk [...] The principle of the printing method is that ink sticks to the typed or drawn surfaces of the master while the wet solution sticks to the other areas. The master transfers or 'offsets' a reverse ink image to a rubber drum, which then transfers a printed positive image to the paper. Fred is sure that he can make all this work. (149)

For TISH, little magazine production, with its roll-up-your-sleeves-and-pop-the-hood gusto, has a significantly different tenor than the labour practices traditionally associated with literary publishing (at least, according to these accounts). Rather than relying on the skills of genteel sociality—networking, self-promotion, seeing and being seen—this radical, new mode of production instead requires an aptitude for, and real working knowledge of, the mechanical skills associated with working-class experience and physical labour. Speaking of himself and Fred Wah, the newsletter's primary printers, Davey continues, "It had been our rudimentary understandings of mechanics that had made first the Dutch mimeograph and then the Model 80 perform as well as they had, to meet those storied monthly deadlines" (178). These DIY practices are viewed as a profoundly democratizing gesture. At a time when literary production is controlled by a handful of publishing houses and literary journals, most of them several provinces away in Toronto and Montreal, the mimeograph machine and offset press allow the emerging TISH writers to take production into their own hands. As Wah insists in his 2013 *Permissions*,

the dynamics of 'hands-on' and 'immediacy' became generative factors in poetic production. It was that sense, at least for us in Vancouver, of taking on the staid and controlled sense of publishing by 'doing it' ourselves that helped answer, at the time, a certain marginalization from central Canada that we desired to resist. (27)

For Wah and Davey, little magazine production not only articulates a *social position* (working class), it also articulates a *geographical position* (the local/west coast, as opposed to the national/central Canada) as well as a countercultural *aesthetic position*



(handmade, unpolished, DIY, for us and by us). In so doing, this labour powerfully defines a collective, whose members share stock in these valuable new modes of production and dissemination. As Wah notes later on in *Permissions*, “the materiality of producing the newsletter by hand showed us the value of controlling our own production. But most importantly, because we mailed it out free...we came to experience ‘collectivity’ and ‘community’ as a valuable dynamic in writing” (14). Jamie Reid expresses a similar sentiment in a 2008 interview on WordArc when he notes, “We certainly became more aware of our group identity once we had actually launched the magazine itself, and we all defended a certain sense of group solidarity, which continues to function even today, long after TISH has been formally abandoned [...] all of us participated in the physical production of the magazine itself, from the typing to the printing, stapling and distribution” (Q1, par 4).

There is *consensus* among historical accounts that this shift in the means of production was crucial for opening up new possibilities in the literary field: collectivity, sociality, and aesthetic experimentation. However, while there is consensus about the pivotal role of artistic production and its attendant labour practices, the *attribution* of that labour is highly contested. In her 1990 essay in *Open Letter*, “Hall of Fame Blocks Women,” Pauline Butling notes that while most magazines in the sixties were produced and edited by men, including first-wave *TISH*, women “participated informally in editorial discussions, [and] perhaps helped with production and distribution” (187). Davey, however, is adamant that the labour of production was exclusively performed by men, going out of his way to state, “For the record, I can recall none of Hindmarch, Johnson or Marlatt visiting the *TISH* office to help, as Butling suggests, with ‘production and distribution.’ If such help had been routine, I know I would remember. I would have probably written poems about it” (198). Whether women were in actuality never involved in production during *TISH*’s first editorial wave or whether their contributions have been forgotten by history is uncertain. The point to be taken is that this highly visible form of labour, valorized for its radical potential, categorically excludes female collective members from partaking in the cultural capital it engenders. Davey dismisses women’s lack of participation as a product of the times, insisting that “whatever was ‘blocking’ these women from participating was probably as much their own internalization of the assumptions of the time...as it was any conscious attempt by the men to exclude them” (197). This complicity with the doxa of the era signals a curious paradox: while the anti-

institutional aspirations of the collective position it outside of the dominant cultural, economic, and political fields, they also in many ways replicate the gendered division of labour that makes those fields operative. In the case of *TISH*, while the DIY, hand-printed poetry newsletter renounces the market logic of economic success and large-scale distribution, it nonetheless vies for cultural capital in ways that do not necessarily disrupt the social status quo. As Butling and Rudy remind us, there is often “an assumption that aesthetic innovation goes hand in hand with progressive social relations” (141) but this is not always the case. Communities and their practices can be aesthetically radical *and* socially conservative. Indeed, such a position is often rewarded when cultural capital reconverts into economic capital in the form of teaching positions, grants, and awards, which tend to have a socially conservative function.

If women’s labour in *TISH* is not to be found in the realm of artistic production (at least, not according to most historical accounts) where, then, does it reside? Butling gives us a clue when she writes, in *Writing In Our Time*:

I have spent thousands of hours doing volunteer work in various literary communities: I have organized poetry readings, hosted visiting writers, helped plan workshops and conferences, cooked party meals and cleaned up party wine spills, made posters, written press releases, helped with magazine production—all the while taking part in the ongoing dialogue, gossip, debate, and argument that is the life-blood of any community. (141)

The complex of activities that Butling describes falls under the broad banner of affective labour as we have defined it above. There is a prominent sense of the reproductive labour of the household—cooking, cleaning, and hosting to be sure, but also participating in discussion, and offering counsel and support. The crucial reproductive function of this work is intimated in the metaphor of the community’s “life-blood”—the very substance that *animates* it and sustains its being over time. However, this labour is not nearly as visible in historical accounts of the era as the labour of artistic production. Butling notes the discrepancy between how it felt to be part of the community at the time and how invisible her participation was when viewed through the retroactive lens of the archive. At the time, she viewed herself as an important member of the community who actively participated in its intellectual culture and who significantly shaped its identity. However, in perusing the archives after the fact, she found that she appeared only as the object of men’s writing, and not a vocalizing agent herself:

The jolt came when I also saw that my position within those communities was often peripheral, that my memory of myself as a person with power and agency within those communities was somewhat illusory. How and why do I construct a memory narrative with an empowered 'I' when, in the historical record, 'she' was often invisible? (2003: 142)

The answer to Butling's question, I think, has much to do with the structural inequalities of affective labour that we have outlined thus far. In addition to the concealment of affective labour through the manipulation of affect itself, there is also the problem that labour that reproduces the community doesn't yield a product (i.e. commodity) in the same way as other forms of labour. As a result, affective labour is recognized neither by masthead, nor by the institutions that demand citability: anthologies, reviews, critical essays, awards and, indeed, the archive. The question, then, is how do we make affective labour visible, despite the challenges it poses by being non-productive, intersubjective, and ephemeral? One possibility might be to shift the material ground of the archive and *listen* to—and for—the social scenarios in which affect goes to work. As I hope to demonstrate, listening to labour requires a different methodological approach to the archive, rethinking not only what counts as literary, but also what counts as historical. It also calls for reform to the disciplinary practices of literary history and criticism, asking us to consider alternative relations and forms of testimony that may not be compatible with the archive and its demands for citability. These forms of listening point our attention toward a different kind of production that is thickly social, which includes the production of space, time, and relation, as well as individual and collective identity.

Finally, in listening to the diverse modes of labour that are inscribed both in the material artifacts of the archive and the memories of participants, it is crucial to ensure that we do not reinscribe a gendered division of labour by naturalizing certain labours as "women's work." Indeed, I do not wish to suggest that women's participation in the communities I examine is limited to affective labour—this is simply not true. As we shall see, tapes record the details of a rich variety of women's activities, including the production of art (painting, writing, music, and printing), teaching, criticism, and wage-labour, alongside a great variety of reproductive and affective activities. However, as Federici insists in her introduction to *Revolution at Point Zero*, the recognition and valorization of affective labour should be our foremost priority. For it is only when the value of affective and reproductive labour are recognized that we can begin to reform the

practices around that labour, whether by compensating it, redistributing it, or rejecting it outright.

## Listening to Labour

It is difficult to conceive of the vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field and which all contemporaries immediately invest in their reading of works: information about institutions – e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. – and about persons, their relationships, liaisons, quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are ‘in the air’ and circulate orally in gossip and rumour. (Bourdieu 31)

The advent of sound recording offers new possibilities for studying the kind of social dialogue that Bourdieu here describes—ideas ‘in the air’ that pass from subject to subject, shaping individual and collective identities as they go. The SoundBox Collection, directed by Karis Shearer, is one such collection that contains a wealth of information about the contemporary everyday situation surrounding literary production—here, of the west coast poetry scene in the 1960s. Housed in the AMPLab at The University of British Columbia (Okanagan campus), the collection contains over 50 distinct tapes, which record a variety of conversational speech genres including unpublished interviews, group discussion, intimate one-on-one conversations, workshops, and informal lectures. The SoundBox tapes come from multiple donors, including Frank Davey, one of the founding editors of *TISH*, and Warren Tallman, an American-born professor of English at UBC who taught the *TISH* writers in both creative and academic courses. With his wife Ellen, Tallman also helped organize and facilitate many of the social events that populate the histories of *TISH*, such as the student study group that gathered at the Tallmans’ home in the spring of 1961 to discuss Donald Allen’s newly released *New American Poetry*, and the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, which brought local writers into contact with members of the American poetic avant-garde, and which has been hailed as a “landmark” event for Canadian poetry (McTavish 2013; Wah 2004). The tapes contain fascinating dialogue around these events and the formation of *TISH* more generally, which bring to light previously obscured information about timelines, participants, proceedings, and planning. More importantly, they foreground the affective labour, largely performed by women, that supported both major events in *TISH*’s history and the writing community that becomes renowned for its radical, anti-establishmentarian aesthetics and politics. Affective labour comes to us in twofold form

on these tapes: one, through the testimony of community members who provide crucial attribution of the work that went into building the community in a social sense and, two, through listening to the practices of that labour *in situ* as it plays out in shaping community histories.

The analysis that I develop in this section is one of many instantiations of a larger ongoing collaborative project with Dr. Shearer. We have spent many hours listening together in shared settings (cafes, living rooms, and university labs), mapping out the common currents of the audio fonds at our respective institutions and working our way through a larger conversation about gender, labour, historiography, and literary communities. We have worked together transcribing and editing audio artifacts (the ever-open Google docs on our browser windows), and have kept up a lively exchange of critical texts, articles, thoughts and ideas that have crucially shaped my thinking—in a broad and foundational sense as much as for this chapter. In many ways, this collaborative exchange anticipates and responds to the call issued in this chapter for the valorization of non-competitive social forms and the acknowledgment of immaterial and affective labour. However, this collaborative work has not been without its challenges, as it maps uncomfortably onto the structures of the academy that value individualist, proprietary modes of production—the scholarly article, the monograph, and the dissertation—still holding them in the highest esteem for the processes of hiring, tenure review, and grant funding. Our forthcoming article, “Women, Gendered labour, and Audio Recordings in the 1960s Vancouver Poetry Scene” brings an analysis of gendered labour in arts and literary community spaces into conversation with the structures of intellectual labour in the academy, interrogating how the two spaces have mutually reinforced norms around competition, exceptionalism, and exclusion. The academy, whether through its espousal or disavowal, is an undercurrent that runs through all the literary historical material presented here. By speaking about our own personal experience in this capacity, we aim to expose the common mechanisms through which hierarchies are created and maintained in these tandem spaces. I am grateful to Dr. Shearer for her generous spirit in making these materials available for our shared research, and I am indebted to her and her team at UBCO for their intellectual and technical labour in making these tapes accessible for scholarly use.

A digitized reel-to-reel titled “100 Class DHL Tape” from the SoundBox Collection records a 1969 conversation between Tallman, Stan Persky, and Maria Hindmarch. The

occasion of the tape's recording is that Tallman has been commissioned to write a 150-page historical sketch of west coast poetry as it has emerged over the past decade: 1959 to 1969. Michael Gnarowski solicits the document for his Critical Views series that he edits for Ryerson University Press. Tallman employs the tape recorder as a compositional aid to help him organize his thoughts. However, he insists that "if you're alone with a tape machine you can't talk somehow" (2:58) and so enlists the help of Hindmarch and Persky to act as interlocutors who will work through the narrative with him and verify the historical details "as kind of check thing" (3:12). Hindmarch and Persky are selected for their expertise as community historians, as participants who know "the whole story" (3:14). The contents of the tape will be transcribed and edited into a single-author book that will appear under Tallman's name. While the book commissioned by Gnarowski never came to fruition, it is almost certain that this tape forms the basis for Tallman's article "Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver during the 1960s," which first appeared in the Canadian poetics journal *boundary 2* in 1974.

Tallman's account of Vancouver poetry in the 1960s has two central theses. The first is that he wants to "get the history straight" (32:29) about the development of an experimental poetry on the west coast in relation to concurrent activity in Toronto and Montreal. He is adamant that while central Canadian poets such as Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, and Raymond Souster had earlier contact with the same avant-garde American poets that influenced the west coast scene in the 1960s (Creeley, Olson, Spicer, Ginsberg, and Duncan), they profoundly misinterpret what he calls the "Modernist" spirit of these writers.<sup>29</sup> In Tallman's estimation, the central Canadian trinity is invested in a *perceptive* humanist mode of writing that makes the self the object of contemplation, rather than a properly Modernist *proprioceptive* mode of writing that takes the self as the subject of writing – an organism which senses itself moving through, responding to, and incorporating the world around it. His second thesis involves tracing a narrative in which Vancouver poetry is activated by contact with the American poets. This narrative serves the double purpose of casting Vancouver as the singular locale in which American avant-garde poetry finds its fullest expression, owing to the malleable, receptive young

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<sup>29</sup> Tallman's use of the term "Modernist" is somewhat eclectic. He neither uses it as a historical designation (generally referring to works produced in the first half of the twentieth century), nor as a generic designation in the usual sense (referring to the high modernist works Pound, Eliot, HD, Williams, etc.) but rather to describe a specific aesthetic quality that aligns with the philosophical notion of proprioception.

minds in its poetry scene. It also designates a young generation of west coast writers as the true inheritors of the American poetic avant-garde tradition, against the competing claims from central Canada and other “academic” American poetry scenes.

An important ideological move that Tallman must make to secure the narrative that he proposes is to return again and again to a cultural *terra nullius* trope, claiming that there is no significant poetic activity in Vancouver before the arrival of the American poets.<sup>30</sup> In “Wonder Merchants” he writes that Vancouver proved fertile ground for the dissemination of New American poetics because of its as yet “unformed spirit” (76), going even further to say that the “environment itself, the manifest reaches of humanly untouched space, creates in Western children an aching spirit as of an emptiness, wanting to be filled” (76). On the DHL tape he tells a similar story: “When I got to Vancouver in ’56 there was no poetry scene. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Just nothing” (20:05). However, co-historians Hindmarch and Persky contest this statement, pointing out that there were many active poets in Vancouver prior to Tallman’s arrival, including Phyllis Webb, Alden Nowlan, and Al Purdy (19:18-19:51). When Tallman expresses how excited he was that Duncan was coming up to read because they would “finally have somebody from out of town reading in Vancouver” (40:21), Hindmarch interjects that Marianne Moore and Steven Spender read shortly before Duncan’s arrival in 1959. Hindmarch also speaks up at points to correct certain of Tallman’s statements, and though they are small details, they create a more nuanced and inclusive portrait of the writing scene than Tallman’s narrative permits. Hindmarch corrects the fact that Fred Wah wasn’t in Earle Birney’s creative writing class alongside George Bowering and Frank Davey as Tallman had imagined, but that Daphne Marlatt and Maxine Gadd were (22:05), challenging the conception of an all-male cohort responding in a unified fashion to the staid poetics of the academy. Tallman cites a student-led poetry reading, given at the end of Robert Duncan’s month-long lecturing stint in the summer of 1961, as a seminal moment for the TISH collective (the first issue of the poetry newsletter would come out a few short weeks later). On the tape he describes how “everybody went out to

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the use of the cultural *terra nullius* trope in the histories of Vancouver poetry in the 1960s, see Karis Shearer, “It’s all a curious dream”: Nostalgia, Old Media, and the Vancouver Poetry Conference, 1963.” *Can Lit Across Media*. Ed. Katherine McLeod and Jason Camlot. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2019 [Forthcoming]; Lara Halina Tomaszewska, *Borderlines of Poetry and Art: Vancouver, American Modernism, and the Formation of the West Coast Avant-Garde 1961-1969*. 2007. U of British Columbia, PhD Dissertation; and Deanna Fong and Janey Dodd, “Event and Archive: Remapping the Poetry Reading Series in Canada, 1957-1974.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2018): 1-18.

the penthouse at UBC, the Bubbledome, and gave a reading for Duncan – all of the people that were involved [in the study group]...read their poems for him” (50:37–51:04). Here, Hindmarch again corrects Tallman, replying, “Not everyone, the ones he selected” (50:48): Frank Davey, George Bowering, Jamie Reid, Fred Wah, and David Dawson. She reminds Tallman that she didn’t read at the event and in fact wasn’t invited, which prompts a surprised reaction from the two men in the room: “You didn’t get invited? [...] Didn’t you go to that, Gladly?” Hindmarch responds, “I guess I’m the wrong sex” (51:22).

In myriad small but substantial ways, the speakers on this tape take part in the affective labour that Ahmed calls the (re)production of “life as we know it”: making an argument about the stories, events, and people that matter in this community’s history. The speakers on the tape are conscious of this fact. Persky insists, “How you tell the story *is* the story...I’m saying what we’re up to now is we’re making it up” (1:12:52, emphasis added). Tallman concurs: “We’re imagining it” (1:13:02). Here, we sense the virtual possibility and openness of the encounter: histories that are not yet resolved into fact, wherein details are contested, remembered differently, and given different emotional valence. However, when the conversation is transposed into a single-authored print publication, many of these affective, dialogic possibilities are closed off. Tallman does not mention the literary activities that predate his arrival in Vancouver, nor does he bring up the readings prior to 1959 that Hindmarch mentions. These details are omitted because they do not fit the instrumental narrative that Tallman seeks to craft: the emergence of a completely spontaneous, unstudied, innovative poetry catalyzed by contact with the American avant-garde. Likewise, there is no mention of the recorded conversation with Hindmarch and Persky as the basis for writing the article, such that the multiple, competing narratives therein are resolved into a single, unified speaking voice.

I want to emphasize the considerable affective labour Hindmarch undertakes on this tape as she speaks up frequently to reinsert women’s names onto the record: Phyllis Webb, Marianne Moore, Daphne Marlatt, Maxine Gadd, Ginny Smith. She also does the important work of pointing out gaps and omissions where they occur: reminding Tallman of her absence at the reading for Duncan, and pointing out Wah’s central, not secondary, role in the physical production the poetry newsletter (1:32:46). Indeed, it comes up time and again in recorded conversations and print documents alike that Hindmarch acts as an unofficial community historian—one who knows “the whole story” as Tallman says, or a kind of mnemonic authority as George Bowering suggests on



another tape: “Well, Gladys says I didn’t [attend], so I guess I didn’t” (4:33).<sup>31</sup> Hindmarch takes on this role of historian because of the substantial time and energy that she devotes to cultivating meaningful interpersonal relationships with others in the community: reading people’s writing, offering feedback and critique, attending readings and events, participating in dialogue and debate, and providing a space where collective activity might take place (the editorial meetings for *Motion* and second-wave *TISH* took place at her house). Along with Butling and Marlatt, Tallman is one of Hindmarch’s most vocal supporters in crediting the labour that she puts into the community. In “Wonder Merchants” he writes, “A seventh, unnamed ‘editor,’ Gladys Hindmarch, was near the centre of their [TISH’s] energy vortex [...] she provided endless hours of direct personal response to the lives and poems of the other editors” (77). Tallman is unequivocal about Hindmarch’s role in shaping the newsletter’s contents, despite not being credited as an editor: “when she said ‘no’ to a poem, or went silent, the other editors tended to put that poem aside” (77). On the tape, Hindmarch describes her own role in a slightly different way: “I really was the listener in terms of those poems. I would argue for hours over a line” (1:29:02).

What Tallman and Hindmarch point to is a particular form of affective labour around listening—that is, the important care work of making others feel heard, offering advice and counsel (“my truth,” as Hindmarch once put it to me colloquially), as well as support and encouragement. This work is an extremely powerful community-building practice because it thickens the connections between individuals, at once taking on the important solidarity work of creating empathy and mutual understanding, and also deepening the potential affective reservoir of possibilities, experimental steps, and ways of moving through the world and among each other. Indeed, active, participatory listening has become a foundational practice for many feminist collectives, some of whom formalize the practice of “rounds” at the beginning of meetings to create space for the expression of thoughts and feelings. However, it should also be noted that listening as a form of affective labour is disproportionately performed by women, and as a result naturalized as an inherently feminine trait. Tallman participates in this naturalization when he expounds upon Hindmarch’s role as listener on the tape:

One curious thing about writing groups, at least the Vancouver thing and maybe everywhere, is that if you have a group of writers there also has to

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<sup>31</sup> Miki/Tallman Interviews, Tape 10, Side 2 (with W. Tallman, Miki, Hindmarch, and Bowering).

be a woman or women who are part of that, who then become the person who listens or at another level they become the person who's enthusiastic [about the work]...Gladys was always the centre at that time." (1:26:30)

These naturalizing suppositions about listening and gender make their way into the print article, too, where Tallman writes of Hindmarch, "she became for all of the others whatever image of the feminine they happened to need: mother, sister, muse, lover, consolation, inspiration, sounding-board, scold, conscience, mover of leaves on poet's trees" (77). Tallman's figure of the muse—a topic to which he devotes a great deal of breath on other tapes—conflates the *practices* of affective labour (listening, critiquing, consoling, inspiring) with feminine social *positions* (mother, sister, lover), in the process naturalizing these practices as women's work and also concealing their value as labour. The muse as an inert figure is lauded for what she enables for her counterpart, the artist, but the inspiration she provides is imagined to flow from who she *is*, rather than what she *does*. Thus while it is significant that the tapes provide first-person testimony about Hindmarch's central role in the Vancouver poetry scene, it is important that we as the receiving audience of that testimony frame her contributions *as labour* that reproduces the community around her in an absolutely vital manner. Indeed, we can hear this labour at work on the tape as she takes on the role of listener, historian, and advisor in ways that are anything but passive. Sound recording is one way of quantifying and concretizing this labour so that we can valorize and credit it, and also begin a conversation about how that labour is distributed and the conditions under which it is performed.

### **“But you can't put that in a book”: Affective Labour and Literary Legitimacy**

One topic that the speakers on the DHL tape frequently turn to is the imagined “origin” of the Vancouver poetry scene—the moment that sparks a movement and from which all other literary activity ensues. Tallman insists, both on the tape and in the print article that follows, that Robert Duncan's 1959 reading was the moment at which “the whole field was activated” (“Wonder Merchants” 59). Given Tallman's insistence on the seminal status of this event, Persky prompts him to recount the details of how Duncan came to read in Vancouver at that time. Tallman explains that the event came into being through a chance connection: Ellen's father suffered a heart attack in November of 1959, and so she returned to Berkeley to be with him as he convalesced. On her way, she

stayed at Kenneth and Marthe Rexroth's San Francisco home where Duncan also happened to be staying, about to embark on the inaugural reading tour of his *The Opening of the Field*. Since he was already reading at The University of Washington in Seattle, Ellen persuaded him to come up to Vancouver and give a reading there as well. However, since the date of his reading fell during the exam period at The University of British Columbia it was impossible to make arrangements for Duncan to read on campus, and so he gave his reading in the Tallmans' basement. This reading was the first in a series of important social literary events to take place in the Tallmans' home (34:01–37:21).

As Tallman continues talking, we get a sense of the vital role that Ellen plays in the organization and facilitation of poetry events in Vancouver, which come to fruition in large part through her social connections in the United States. Studying English at Berkeley University from 1947 to 1949, Ellen develops close connections with Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, and later Robert Creeley, in large part because her home is a central hub for the social activities of a hip, young literary community. She hosts parties at her parents' large Berkeley home and puts up visiting poets when they come through town.<sup>32</sup> She also regularly attends dinners at the homes of local writers, which serve as important spaces for the dissemination of new work and news about the poetry world. In her words, "Dinners were mainly a trading of information about who's doing what. I can remember one night at dinner Kenneth [Rexroth] talking about the difficulties that Williams was having with various sections of *Paterson*...They were keeping track of each others' work."<sup>33</sup> Ellen's role as a social facilitator continues when she and Warren move to Vancouver in 1956, where she provides both a physical space for writers to gather and an atmosphere of conviviality that catalyzes the literary activities of TISH.

We get a detailed description of Ellen's work in this capacity in a series of recorded interviews that Roy Miki conducts with Tallman and his contemporaries in 1983. The purpose of the interviews is to gather information for a research project about Tallman, centring on his involvement in the Vancouver poetry scene. However, like the

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<sup>32</sup> Miki/Tallman Interviews, Tape 8, Side 2, 8:20 – 9:22. This series of tapes was transcribed and edited by Karis Shearer and Deanna Fong in the winter of 2017/2018. Transcripts have been edited for clarity.

<sup>33</sup> Miki/Tallman Interviews, Tape 8, Side 2, 11:52.

book commissioned by Gnarowski in 1969, this project was also not seen to completion and the tapes are now housed in Miki's fonds at Simon Fraser University Special Collections. The ninth tape in the series records dialogue between Warren and Ellen Tallman, who discuss Duncan's 1961 sojourn in Vancouver and their respective roles in organizing that event. Ellen describes Warren as having a kind of instrumental relationship with the writers around him: "you immediately move all those people into a context where they can be used by a lot of other people" (1:41). She is referring to activities that take place in the literary public sphere—publishing, writing criticism, planning readings, and promoting the work of contemporaries—for which Warren has a certain aptitude. Her own contributions, however, she frames in a markedly different way. Like Hindmarch, she positions herself as an ideal reader and listener for Duncan's work: "I think that in some ways Marthe [Rexroth] and I are a lot alike in that we're everybody's ideal reader. Because we haven't been writing ourselves, we're not in the relation to the other people as wanting to be recognized as another writer. We did function for a lot of people as close readers of their work" (0:07). Contra Warren's kinetic social activities, Ellen views herself as "someone who's just there in an expansively passive way" (2:27). I would argue that her use of the word "expansive" to describe her reading and listening practices belies the negative connotations that are generally associated with passivity.<sup>34</sup> Passivity momentarily stills the productive cycle of cultural capital—neither increasing the surplus value of the work through public forms of consumer-end activity (reviewing, anthologizing, writing criticism, etc.), nor making an argument for the text's consecration in the field. Rather, the work of expansive reading and listening opens up space for critical reflection, asking that we approach work on its own terms and allow ourselves to be moved and shaped through our contact with it. In short, it is work that cultivates affective receptivity, expanding the possibilities of affecting and being affected by others through their creative endeavours. Passivity means opening oneself up to manifold modes of engagement with a work: affective, personal, and intellectual, as well historical, critical, and evaluative. Following Massumi, we might think of passive engagement in its expansiveness as widening a "margin of manoeuvrability" (2) around the work, such that there are many experimental "next

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<sup>34</sup> I'm reminded of Žižek's observation in *Less Than Nothing* that there is genre of "active passivity" that has the ability to profoundly disrupt the status quo by refusing to participate in the frenetic activities of (re)production (i.e. of signs, of meaning, of tropes), instead intervening simply by *standing still*. He writes, "'standing still' as a sudden interruption of movement, disturbs the peace of the harmonious functioning (the circular movement) of the Whole" (947).

steps” to take beyond cyclical revolutions of cultural capital. In practice, this manoeuvrability plays out in a unique way: Ellen describes how Duncan invited her to choose and order the poems that he read for his numerous Vancouver readings, owing to the relationship of trust and mutual respect that she had cultivated through her engagement with his work (3:11). The readings that Duncan gave in Vancouver were a performance of Ellen Tallman’s Robert Duncan; the seminal experience of his work in Vancouver is a co-production of her reading and his writing, which no doubt profoundly shaped the reception of his work in that milieu.

Beyond Ellen’s role as an ideal listener and reader, she also describes herself as a kind of social architect in the way that she transforms their home into a space of comfort and conviviality. She explains:

I provided a social atmosphere in which there was the most amount of luxury possible for those days and times, and bringing together the most amount of people that we could find for the occasion, the event, and the content—more often than not, the content. A lot of the people we had weren’t that interested poetry, they were more interested in having an event. When people started listening to Robert and Bob and other people read, they had very little idea about poetry. (3:38)

The social form of the events that Ellen here describes is neither incidental nor subordinate to their literary “content.” As Karis Shearer notes in her chapter in *CanLit Across Media*, the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference—one of the major events in TISH’s history—was underwritten from its conception with a “liberatory, anti-establishment ethos” (204) that would fly in the face of “cooked” academic poetry and the institutions that championed it.<sup>35</sup> In correspondence about the event, Tallman expresses his intent to make it a “jamboree”; a “big open house with everybody available to everybody and it all swinging” (qtd. Shearer 204). Likewise, in his interview with Miki, Tallman proclaims, “‘Give them the maximum,’ was my idea. ‘Do anything and don’t care about what the department thinks,’ was my idea. Like, let’s have a ball” (6:01). It is important to him that the event not be considered a traditional academic conference or

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<sup>35</sup> In his 1960 acceptance speech for the Poetry Award for *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell famously remarked: “Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal” (Nationalbook.org). This primary tension between academic poetry and countercultural poetry in the 1960s is well summed up by Lowell’s metaphor, and is a prominent line of argument in the histories of TISH.

course but something that spills over the spatial boundaries and conventional protocols of the university in a transgressive way. However, the radical aspirations of such an event require access to para-institutional space. Here, the domestic space of the home—the Tallmans', as well as Fred Wah and Pauline Butling's home—steps in to fulfill that requirement.<sup>36</sup> In the intimate, casual space of the living room (kitchen, basement, etc.) conversation takes on a less formal register, allowing ideas to flourish in a more candid and spontaneous way. The home makes the hierarchies of the academy elastic, enabling different kinds of interactions and exchanges possible, both laterally between colleagues and vertically between faculty and students. In her essay "Robert Duncan in Vancouver," Butling describes in detail the social atmosphere of the 1963 Poetry Conference and the events leading up to it. She writes, "Warren and Ellen Tallman had what seemed like a continuous stream of parties where the young writers, artists, students and professors etc. came together and formed a community" (2005: 11). She discusses how her close personal and professional contact with Duncan during these years had a profoundly "transformative effect" (2005: 10) on her critical practice. Arguably, as much as the poetry newsletter with its DIY aesthetic, the social literary events that took place in the 1960s were just as important in cultivating the both the strong sense of community and the anti-establishmentarian ethos that the TISH group would come to be lauded for.

It is critical to recognize, however, that domestic spaces as sites of camaraderie, community-building, and discourse, do not organize themselves. Rather, *domestic spaces are the product of ongoing affective and reproductive labour*. This significant fact is missing from the written historical record. On the tape, Tallman recognizes Ellen's capacity for facilitating social relations—her ability to make people feel comfortable and cared for. He says, "I've always felt, I've known, that Ellen has a social genius that all through those years I was counting on" (4:33). He laughs when Miki jokes that if it were up to him, he "couldn't have gathered three people together" (6:48). There is an acknowledgement that many of the people who became invested in the genres of experimental writing that impressed so deeply on the west coast tradition did so because they were drawn to the scene at a social level, rather than any specific interest in the

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<sup>36</sup> On the significance of Fred Wah and Pauline Butling's home as para-academic space, see Pauline Butling, "Robert Duncan in Vancouver: on Reading, Writing, and Non-upmanship." *W* 10 (Spring 2005): 17; Charles Olson, *Reading at Berkeley*. Transcribed by Zoe Brown. San Francisco: Coyote, 1966: 19.

writing itself. Indeed, Tallman himself had never met Duncan before Ellen invited to him read in Vancouver, and had read very little of his work. This was equally true for the audience that attended his reading.<sup>37</sup> This social energy existed in large part because of the labour that Ellen dedicated to cultivating interpersonal relationships and maintaining an inviting physical space that was ground zero for so many literary events. However, Tallman, while recognizing the importance of Ellen's labour on a social level wants to compartmentalize that part of history from the "literary proper" aspects of its content. Regarding Duncan's 1961 visit he says,

I had a weird literary passion going on that was very strong. I can remember taking Duncan out to that place on University Boulevard, to a hamburger joint. With this man, I am thinking literary thoughts [...] This to me is not social, it's a literary conversation. I don't really know what [Duncan's] been writing. But at least I'm goddamn well trying to get it straightened out in my head, and not to be a social occasion like the poet coming to town. I want to know, and I'm counting on Ellen to take care of the social circumstance. (6:52).

To Tallman, the literary significance of the event is not only separated from its social milieu, it is elevated above it. The "social circumstance" of literary activity is something that must be set aside in favour of serious dialogue and debate, however he stops short of acknowledging that the social setting is the very ground for this discourse to take place. Tallman's position is thus underwritten by an unspoken contradiction: he embraces the unruly, transgressive social atmosphere of the Vancouver poetry scene in the 1960s as a mechanism of distinguishing it from the polite academic poetry that precedes it, but at some point must cordon the social off from what he views as official literary matter.

On the DHL tape, Tallman spends a great deal of time laying out the social circumstances that precede and surround the development of TISH: Ellen's connections with Duncan, Spicer, and Rexroth; her invitation to Duncan to read in Vancouver; the circumstances of their first meeting Robert Creeley through Marthe Rexroth; all the books that were exchanged via the movement of itinerant poets, which sparked Tallman's own interest in avant-garde American writing. After this extensive tally of social comings and goings, Persky suggests to Tallman that he's just composed the first part of his book: a description of the events that brought the Vancouver writing

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<sup>37</sup> DHL Tape, 39:37.

community into contact with American poets that begins with Ellen's connections in Berkeley and her visit down to see her father. Tallman admits that, yes, "it's always been linked with things that initiate with Ellen," but after a pause he remarks, "But, you can't put that in a book" (1:03:56). Why?

There are several reasons why Tallman is unwilling to take Ellen's social connections as a starting point. One, he worries that by focusing too much on their personal lives, he will be detracting focus from the young group of writers that he wishes to champion in the book. He insists, "For me, it's too *inside* in this sense. That begins to become an ego thing, rather than what's happening to Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah" (1:06:54, emphasis added). He also worries that beginning with the social provenance of the writing scene will position him at its centre, since so many major events took place at their home. Persky is conscious of this fact when he comments, "You've got a problem now of you're going to tell a history, which for all the rest of us...is going to be seen as 'you started it.'" (52:06). Beyond the reasons that are professed on the tape, however, I would argue that there are two other unspoken reasons that the social history of the scene seldom gets mentioned in print-based documents: one, the longstanding bias that literature is autonomous from the social field that produces it, and that the social itself is not legible as a text in its own right. As Bourdieu usefully reminds us, in the realm of highly autonomous spheres of cultural production (such as the poetic avant-garde) there is vested interest in divesting "pure" art from the social field that produces it, giving rise to stance of "art for art's sake." By covering over the social milieu of the 1960s Vancouver poetry scene, Tallman effectively conceals the "cultural content" labour that goes into producing value, opinion, and taste. This strategy props up the narrative of a spontaneous effusion of poetic activity in 1960s Vancouver that arises independently of influences from the outside world. Two, is the enduring belief that affective, reproductive labour is not labour because it is not part of the productive cycle. That is, Tallman is not interested in discussing how a community is formed, he is interested in telling the story of "how a city gets a poetry" (DHL Tape 23:13). "Wonder Merchants" is filled with expository details about significant events in the 1960s Vancouver poetry scene: Duncan's 1959 reading and 1961 lectures, Robert Creeley's 1962 performances at the UBC Festival of the Arts, the 1963 Poetry Conference, Michael McClure and Jack Spicer's respective readings in 1964 and 1965. But these details are adduced to lend legitimacy to the cultural product of TISH poetics as



instantiated in the print magazine—a cultural product that distinguishes itself from competing products in the same field. Ultimately, Tallman keeps to his conviction that “you can’t put that in a book”: for all the discussion on the tapes of Ellen’s pivotal role in making connections, cultivating relationships, listening expansively, participating in dialogue, hosting visiting writers, and fostering an atmosphere of sociality, she is not mentioned once in “Wonder Merchants.”

The DHL Tape and the Miki/Tallman interviews shed important light on how media—and the cultural conventions that surround them—shape what can and cannot be said, as they are perceived as different kinds of historical records. As Miki’s and Gnarowski’s abandoned book projects suggest, there is a sense that audio recording is imagined as a rehearsal space for the more official record of the print document. In this manner, audio recordings can offer a more capacious dialogic space wherein multiple voices sound competing, contradictory accounts of events, and where different paths through history might run their course. As Tallman reminds us, “if you’re alone with a tape machine you can’t talk somehow,” and to have a conversation necessitates differing points of view—antagonism as well as concordance and consensus. Audio recordings capture the “self-evident givens” (31) or everyday *données* that Bourdieu insists it is the social historian’s task to reconstruct. Among these everyday givens are the activities and practices of care that go into reconstituting “life as we know it” for communities as well as individuals. In the act of listening to and for affective labour we begin to remap the histories of communities as we’ve received them. Our notions of centrality and marginality shift. Perhaps most importantly, we witness and valorize the incredible amount of labour that goes into building and maintaining community spaces and relations, and in so doing, provide a concrete foundation to analyze and reform the practices around that labour.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Karis Shearer and for her generous, collaborative spirit in sharing the tapes discussed in this chapter, as well as her dialogue, feedback and editorial insight throughout my writing process. I am also grateful for the support of Karen Tallman and the estate of Warren and Ellen Tallman, as well as Roy Miki and Maria Hindmarch for giving their permission to work with, reproduce, and write about these audio artifacts.

## Chapter 3:

### Performing Sonic Subjects: Racialization, Mediatization, and Non-relation



*Figure 4: Raymond Boisjoly, "From age to age, as its shape slowly unravelled..." Vox, 2015.  
Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver*

Raymond Boisjoly's 2015 work "From age to age, as its shape slowly unravelled..." is a series of large-format, inkjet prints generated by scanning a digital film on a flatbed scanner as it plays on an iPhone or iPad.<sup>38</sup> The resulting images are ghostly digital blurs, stutter-steps, the image in the original film refracted by a minute passage of time. The film at the heart of Boisjoly's inquiry is Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's 1953 *Statues Also Die*, an anticolonial film essay that meditates on the appropriation of non-Western cultural artifacts by Western institutions. The opening voiceover insists, "When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what

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<sup>38</sup> This work showed at VOX: Centre de l'image contemporaine in Montreal from April 17 to June 27, 2015. The exhibition guide is available at [www.centrevox.ca/](http://www.centrevox.ca/)

we call culture” (1:33).<sup>39</sup> The film argues that introducing artifacts into the space of the museum or the gallery affixes them to a singular context—that of a work of art—placing them at a remove from the original context of their circulation: the affects, values, and meanings of their culture of origin. The film is largely composed of head-on still, hovering, or panning shots of African statuary, usually framing them in isolation or focusing on details such as the eyes of a mask or a statue’s carved hands. The film indicts the colonial violence that has lain waste to the cultural heritage surrounding these artifacts: “In the past century, the flames of conquerors turned this whole past into an absolute enigma... the sinking has left us only with the beautiful wreckage which we interrogate” (8:26). Although the film pointedly critiques the legacy of colonialism on the African continent, it is also tinged with a certain melancholy mourning that relegates African cultural heritage to the past: “These great empires are now dead kingdoms to history...they are even more unknown to us than those of Sumer and Babylon” (8:14). At the same time it claims that contemporary black art “becomes a dead language” (20:20) that has been replaced by western capitalist decadence and the commodity art object. Implicit in this critique is a longing for the “lost” context of these African artifacts, in which there is no differentiation between function and aesthetic form: they are objects in which the integration of art and life praxis is seamless and complete.<sup>40</sup> In this manner, the film indulges in a primitivist fetishism that idolizes pre-colonial African society as a utopian antecedent of capitalism. This fantasy demands a clean temporal break between the ideal past of black art—with its spiritually embedded cultural objects—and the present colonial reality. This ideological move is not a remarkable one. We see it again and again in late-twentieth century avant-garde movements: a teleological reading of history perverts the temporality of the event, mistaking a lack for a loss, and fixing the colonized other within a romanticized, nostalgic past.

Boisjoly’s intervention, then, is to resist this teleological model through remediation, thematizing a non-relation between forms. An artist of Haida and Québécois descent, Boisjoly is attuned to the parallels between the colonial situation in Africa that is the subject Marker and Resnais’ film and the colonial situation of

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<sup>39</sup> These sentiments are presaged in Tristan Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto 1918” when he writes, “A work of art shouldn’t be beauty *per se*, because it is dead” (123). Tzara, incidentally, is thanked by name in the film’s opening credits.

<sup>40</sup> The argument mobilized in this film resonates with contemporaneous art criticism from Renato Poggioli (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1946) and Henri Lefebvre (*The Critique of Everyday Life*, 1947), which call for the reintegration of art and everyday life.

Indigenous peoples in North America, without collapsing their differences. In a 2015 interview at the Vox Gallery, he expresses that he is interested in the ways that the institutional art gallery has transformed the material practices of his own people: in the gallery we find “totem poles cut down like trees and shipped to institutions all over the world, in a state that they were never meant to be seen” (2:13). On the one hand, Boisjoly finds an affinity between the fate of the cultural objects of his own people and those in *Statues Also Die*: they are extracted without compensation and sealed into silence in the space of the colonial museum. However, I would argue that the critique mobilized by Boisjoly’s work is aimed not only at the museum or gallery as edifice of bourgeois culture, but also at the aesthetic avant-garde that participates in the appropriation, fixation, and fetishization of non-Western art.<sup>41</sup> This critique is mounted by focusing our attention on a series of overlapping non-relations, bringing them into proximity with one another through a concert of form and content. By non-relation, I mean a structure that exists between two properly antinomic entities, perspectives, or discourses, such that one can never be fully named as the cause of the other’s effect. It is not simply that these two entities exist independently of one another, never meeting, but rather that *the lack in the one constitutes the other*. Non-relation is an important conceptual apparatus because it allows us to imagine totality without erasing difference and antagonism. As Žižek puts it in *The Parallax View*, “there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist...we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective” (31). Boisjoly’s work mobilizes its critique by analogizing non-relation in form and content. Formally, the work explores the interface between two digital devices—iPhone/iPad and the flatbed scanner—as a space of non-relation. Rather than working in tandem to produce a faithfully remediated object, the two devices arrest the image “between two frames” to use Žižek’s phrase: the film frame and the document table, each tethered to their own specific temporal unfolding.<sup>42</sup> Like the split between the gaze and the eye that Lacan discusses in *The Four Fundamental*

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<sup>41</sup> Cultural artifacts such as masks, headdresses, and totem poles of the Northwest Indigenous peoples were acquired at the turn of the century not only by American and European cultural institutions, but also by members of notable artistic vanguard movements. Surrealist poet André Breton, for example, acquired a Kwakwaka’wakw headdress from British Columbia made of maple, abalone, ermine and sea-lion whiskers, which he kept on his desk. The headdress was seized during a raid on a local potlatch in 1921 (See Yaxwiwe’ description on Living Tradition: the Kwakwaka’wakw Potlatch site).

<sup>42</sup> See Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 31; *Less Than Nothing*, 87.

*Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the scanner requires a still object to gaze upon, whereas the film requires an unmoving eye to watch it.<sup>43</sup> The two can never meet in the way that each intends, creating a non-relation between the two. The resulting image is the remainder of the incomplete consummation of the interface, the impossibility of their establishing a relationship. The formal qualities of the work map onto its content, asking us to read the colonial event not as a loss in the way that Resnais and Marker imagine—brimming with nostalgic affect—but rather a non-relation between two scenarios, each structured by each other’s lack: the precolonial scenario and the aftermath of the colonial event.

I begin with this brief reflection on Boisjoly’s work because it provides a way in to the questions that drive this chapter, which turn around notions of subjectivity, representation, and non-relation. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that mediatisation—especially mediatisation of sound in live performance poetry—pushes against notions of vocal authenticity and subjective coherency, thematizing non-relation in both its materially specific and universal dimensions. Doing so unsettles a long history of cultural appropriation and racial fetishism in the avant-garde sound poetry that begins with Zurich Dadaism in the early twentieth century and continues into the practices of contemporary Canadian sound poetry. In tracing this history, I argue that such works, which adulate the human voice and its capacity for creating “non-meaning,” have as their foundation the desire for an Ur-language—a scenario in which the signifier is coincident with its utterance, in which the violent split between language and subject is undone. Again, this fantasy mistakes a lack for a loss by imagining that a return to pre-linguistic unity is possible when, in actuality, it is the split of language that occasions the retroactive emergence of this fantasmatic unity in the first place. This fantasy requires an object on which to cathect its hopes and desires and, as we shall see, too often this object becomes the racialized other, whose “primitive” vocalizations are imagined as the panacea for capitalist alienation and aesthetic vacuity. Like the chapter that precedes it, this chapter is also interested in the ways that normative discourses around gender are mobilized, using Lacan’s notion of sexual difference to talk about the fantasies that cover up the fundamental non-relation between genders. Drawing from Lacan’s graph of sexuation, which posits a non-relation between male and female sides *at an ontological level*, I analyze the patrilineal rhetoric that surrounds the tradition of sound poetry—

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<sup>43</sup> See Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 67-79.

replete with Dadas and daddies—to interrogate the fantasies that cover over the trauma of symbolic castration on the masculine side of the graph.

Moving from the fantasmatic function of sound in these works, I examine the poetic performance of contemporary Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel who uses mediatized sound in performance as the basis of a socially radical and politically oppositional poetic praxis. Abel's play between textual erasure and auditory plenitude in printed and performed instantiations of his book of poems *Injun* not only makes visible the erasure of Indigenous peoples and communities in the Western canon but, in performance, create an uncontainable, vital auditory excess that insists on the presence—the present-tense-ness—of Indigenous voices. In this manner, such performances, like Boisjoly's prints, remind us that there is a non-relation between the voice and the subject—that the two are on separate tracks that can never meet—and it is only in oscillating between the two that we arrive at a philosophical and political twist in perspective. The non-coincidence of the voice in these performances serves as model to think through other parallax gaps: between being and event, between brutal forms of State power and aesthetically radical art, and between the particular racialized body and genericized racial form.

### **The Fantasy of the Unbroken Voice: Poems Without Words at the Cabaret Voltaire**

*He adores his body. He adores it. Because he believes he has it. In reality he does not have it. (72)*

*-Jacques Lacan, Seminar XXIII: Joyce and the Sinthome*

On July 16, 1915, Hugo Ball—one of the earliest practitioners of sound poetry and co-founder of the Zurich-based Cabaret Voltaire—wrote in his journal:

The word has been abandoned; it used to dwell among us.

The word has become commodity.

The word should be left alone.

The word has lost all dignity. (1996: 26)

Written less than a year into World War I, these words express Ball's reaction to an era of unprecedented scarcity and precarity in his homeland, Germany. A conscientious objector to the War, Ball is critical of the machinic co-operations of capitalism and

warfare that, in his view, impoverish and instrumentalize the human spirit. He believes that a brutal means-end rationality has taken hold of Europe, subordinating human creativity and spirituality to a utilitarian pragmatism that views subjects solely in terms of their use-value. Crucially, for Ball, language is the primary instrument through which the exploits of capitalism are made operative: he decries journalistic language and rationalist philosophy as tools of an oppressive state, as well as lyric poetry, which he views as merely paregoric, writing, “One must give up lyrical feelings. It is tactless to flaunt feelings at such a time” (27). However, because language is the primary force suppressing humanity’s creative expression, it is also ground zero for social and spiritual revolution. By transforming the way that one speaks, one might alter his psychic apparatus and, consequently, his relationships to others, the state, and society. For Ball, it is paramount that political revolution be mobilized on aesthetic and psychological grounds, as any programmatic agenda could be coopted by the enemy—indeed, he sees this scenario play out over and over in Wartime Germany. Hence, he insists, “It is no longer enough to have economic and political recommendations...What is necessary is a league of all men who want to escape from the mechanical world, a way of life opposed to mere utility. Orgiastic devotion to the opposite of everything serviceable and useful” (1996: 3-4).

It is in this context that Ball begins his activities with Cabaret Voltaire and Zurich Dada, an artistic movement whose members include Jean Arp, Emmy Hennings, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara. Branching off from the humanist aesthetics of Expressionism, the group seeks to revitalize the co-opted cultural field through spontaneity, sociality, and liveness. Cabaret Voltaire hosts live shows six nights a week for a period of six months in 1916, whose activities include musical performances, chanting, dance, puppetry, and recitations of poetry and prose, all against the backdrop of the contemporary Cubist and Futurist paintings that grace the Cabaret’s walls.<sup>44</sup> Ball begins composing *lautgedichte* (sound poems) or *verse ohne worte* (poems without words) for these occasions as a direct attack on the language of utilitarianism and daily means-end existence. These poems divest themselves of semantic structures of grammar and syntax—eschewing even words themselves—instead focusing on vocal patterns and intonation as their organizing principle. Ball’s artistic vision for his *lautgedichte* is clearly articulated in his diaries, *Flucht Aus Der Zeit* (1927), published in

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<sup>44</sup> For more on Cabaret Voltaire’s activities during this period, see Green ii-v; Ball 1996, 100-101.

English as *Flight Out of Time* in 1996 (Trans. Ann Raimés). He is obsessed with uncovering what he calls the word's "evangelical" (68) substance—that is, its primordial character as sound, cry or utterance that precedes the communicative act. After his first performance of the *lautgedichte* at Cabaret Voltaire he writes in his journal, "In these phonetic poems, we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word, too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge" (1996: 71). Ball considers his sound pieces poetry—perhaps the purest form of poetry—because of their absolute refusal of instrumental language. In his poetic forbearers Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Voltaire he finds flashes of inspiration as language tends toward abstraction and non-objectivity, where the materiality of language as sound trumps the semantic code of its meaning. However, in his opinion, these poets do not withdraw far enough from representation. Indeed, Ball finds the most compelling analog for his sound poems in the works of abstract, Futurist and Cubist painters, among them Kandinsky, Picasso, Carrà and Russolo. Like the colour block or brush stroke in abstract painting, the phoneme as the base material unit in the sound poem evokes non-objective impressions of sense and emotion. It *conjures* meaning without the containment of the signifier.

The radically transformative potential of sound poetry, then, lies in its ability to circumvent the conscious structures of language, thereby tapping into an emotionally resonant reservoir of human Ur-language. Language is not the only means of expression, Ball insists; it is insufficient, for example, for communicating intensely subjective experiences of affect and bodily reality (see Chapter 2), or of spirituality and intuition. Sound poems mobilize familiar vocal patterns that *evoke* meaning without being ensnared by the finality of the signifier. For example, take the opening lines of Ball's sound poem "Gadji Beri Bimba" (1916):

gadji beri bimba

glandridi lauli lonni cadori

gadjama bim beri glassala (Ball 1996: 70)<sup>45</sup>

Though none of the words "make sense" in the usual way—that is, by pointing to or indexing a real-world referent—the poem reminds us of certain things within our frame of

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<sup>45</sup> A recording of this poem, performed by Trio Exvoco can be heard on UbuWeb at [https://ubusound.memoryoftheworld.org/ball\\_hugo/Ball-Hugo\\_Gadji-beri-bimba.mp3](https://ubusound.memoryoftheworld.org/ball_hugo/Ball-Hugo_Gadji-beri-bimba.mp3)



reference. For example, the “G” and “B” sounds evoke languages that have a high frequency of labial and velar consonants—among them, Ball’s native tongue German, as well as Russian and Japanese.<sup>46</sup> The “i” endings, on the other hand, are reminiscent of the Latinate plural ending, especially when coupled with the frequency of lateral consonants like “L” and “N” in the second line.<sup>47</sup> Beyond these general linguistic impressions, there are more specific associations that arise in relation to particular words. “Bimba,” for example, might remind us of the word “bimbo” and its etymological origins in the Italian word “*bambino*” (child), infusing the poem with the sense of playful, childish babble (a word also within arm’s reach of “bimba”). The word “glassala,” on the other hand, might draw connections to the word “glossolalia,” which evokes the Biblical scenario of speaking in tongues and the fantasy of a language shared by all humankind. The repeated word “bim” might conjure the incantation “simsalabim,” a nonsense word from Scandinavian and Germanic folklore that initiates a magical spell, similar to “abracadabra” in English.<sup>48</sup> If, indeed, this is a poem aimed at revitalizing human language by elevating it to a mystical or evangelical level, then it certainly gives us enough sonic cues to feel our way to this idea without any of this information being overtly conveyed.

Thus, there is an elasticity to non-objective language that allows us to recognize certain patterns or referents in a cluster of phonemes, even if this recognition depends to a great degree upon the idiosyncrasies of the listener—the language she speaks, her vocabulary, and her symbolic frame of reference. Far from meaning *nothing*, the poem confronts us with excess meaning at every turn: while two readers might agree on some things, other associations might be intractably personal. This is the peril of all language: excess meaning constantly threatens to undermine the stability of its communicative function. Ball explains this concept in the following way:

We have loaded the word with strengths and energies that helped us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the ‘word’ (logos) as a magical complex image [...] We tried to give the isolated vocables the fullness of an oath, the glow of a star. And curiously enough, the magically inspired vocables conceived and gave birth to a *new* sentence that was not limited

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<sup>46</sup> See the UCLA Phonological Segment Inventory Database [UPSID], a database that analyzes the frequency of phonemes and phonological families across different languages.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See Conley, Craig. *Magic Words: A Dictionary*. San Francisco, CA and Newport, MA: Weisler Books, 2008: 304-306.

and confined by any conventional meaning. *Touching lightly on a hundred ideas at once without naming them*, this sentence made it possible to hear the innately playful, but hidden, irrational character of the listener. (1996: 68, emphasis added)

Ball's notion of "touching lightly on a thousand ideas at once without naming them" yearns for a ludic mode of signification in which excess meaning is the *goal* and not the *by-product* of the communicative act. To put this into Lacanian terms, Ball fantasizes about language without *capitonnage*—that is, as we will recall from Chapter 1, the points where the sliding of the signified under the signifier is temporarily stopped. As a sentence unfolds across time, the later elements of the sentence retroactively determine the meaning of those that precede them, in the process closing off other potential avenues of meaning. For example, in the quotation above, the modifying clause "but hidden" loops back to adjust the listener's "innately playful" character. The contrast, expressed by the comparative conjunction "but," acts as a kind of semantic *recul*, bringing up the playful, irrational character of listening, only to plunge it back into obscurity with the postponed clause "but hidden." As sentences move forward in time (spoken) or space (written), the parameters of interpretation become narrower and narrower, instructing the listener/reader how to (re)interpret the beginning of the sentence.<sup>49</sup> Against utilitarianism in language, sound poetry turns to the *jouissance* of linguistic failure—by a minimal shift in perspective we move from desire to drive, in which failure itself becomes the object or goal of pleasure. It is important to note, however, that it is impossible to extricate *jouissance* from the structure of utilitarian language itself, as the drive emerges coevally with the failure of this language to "hit its mark" as it were—to secure its communicative function between subjects. As Lacan reminds us, "Enjoyment is what is of no use" (2010a: 3), but we cannot cut in line to enjoyment without first experiencing the failure of use.

Could the sliding of the signified be suspended indefinitely if the signified itself were occluded? This is Ball's preoccupation throughout his literary career, and he labours intensively to bring this idea to fruition with the goal of disrupting instrumental language to the utmost degree. One of his ideas is to dispense with the social contract of

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<sup>49</sup> Bruce Fink's example from *Lacan to the Letter* is edifying here. The beginning of the sentence "Dick and Jane were exposed to..." is modified by the words that follow: 1) "harmful radiation"; 2) "foreign languages"; 3) "their uncle the exhibitionist" (90). It is only in receiving the final words that we understand the meaning of the word "exposed" as either "forced to feel the effects of", "experienced", or "flashed at." In each instance, the sliding of the signified is temporarily stopped.

language altogether by inventing a lexicon of signifiers that are opaque to anyone but the speaker. He writes, “All the words are other people’s inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too [...] Why can’t a tree be called a Pluplusch, and a Pluplubasch when it is raining?” (1996: 221). In a tantalizing accidental plagiarism, Ball anticipates the example that Ferdinand de Saussure will use in his *Course in General Linguistics*—the figure of a tree—to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the signifier in relation to the signified. That is, there is no natural or causal relationship between the sound-image “tree” and its real-world referent (a tree; the concept of tree); it is only through the contract of language *as a social system of rules and regulations* that the two are yoked together. In pointing to the arbitrariness of signs, Ball also anticipates what Lacan will term the “materiality of the signifier” (2002: 16), by which he means the material support that language borrows from discourse—a combination of vocal sound, the concreteness of the sound-image imprinted upon the psyche, and the structural place occupied by the signifier at the level of the phoneme, word, phrase, and sentence (*Écrits* 495). While signifiers are not concrete things-in-the-world in the same way as the referents they represent, they nonetheless have real-world efficiency in the effects they produce, allowing us to imagine them as objects in their own right, un beholden to that which they signify.<sup>50</sup> Ball touches on this point when he writes, “Each thing has its word, but the word has become a thing by itself” (1996: 221)—that is, it has a material quality in its own right, untethered from its signified. The name Dada itself is meant to be one such free-floating signifier. On the one hand, as Richard Huelsenbeck expresses in “En Avant de Dada: A History of Dada” (1920), “Dada...is nothing, nothing, nothing” (1981: 37).<sup>51</sup> It is not meant to signify anything in particular; it is anti-meaning, a blank card or placeholder for an asignifying void. On the other hand, Dada as signifier also overflows

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that fellow Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, for his part, attempts to go in the opposite direction and dispense with the signifier rather than the signified. Similarly to Ball, he is invested in doing away with representation in art; however, his Bruitist poems with their hoots, crashes, and roars, aim to incorporate the sounds of objective reality *into* the poem. He writes, “Life appears as a simultaneous whirl of noises, colors, and spiritual rhythms, which Dada takes unflinchingly into its art...The Bruitist poem represents the streetcar as it is” (1981: 1-2). In the same way that Picasso incorporates pieces of newspaper into his early 20th-century collages not as an *artistic representation* of current events but as a *direct index* of life and its state of affairs, the Bruitist poem operates under the premise that “every movement produces a noise” (1981: 6) and that these noises *are* art in their own right; they do not need another layer of abstraction to represent them.

<sup>51</sup> See also Huelsenbeck “What did Expressionism Want”: “Dada wants nothing...Dadaism is nothing” (1993: 44); Picabia, “Cannibal Dada Manifesto”: “DADA, as for it, it smells of nothing it is nothing, nothing, nothing” (56); Tzara, “Dada Manifesto 1918”: “Dada does not mean anything” (122).

with excess meaning, as Ball expresses in his own “Dada Manifesto” (1916): “Dada comes from the dictionary. It is terribly simple. In French it means ‘hobby horse.’ In German it means ‘good-by,’ [sic] ‘Get off my back,’ ‘Be seeing you sometime.’ In Romanian: ‘Yes, indeed, you are right, that’s it. But of course, yes, definitely, right.’ And so on” (1996: 220). In a single word, we find ourselves teetering precariously on a precipice between void and excess, non-meaning and surplus meaning, the singular and the universal.

In exposing the arbitrariness of the sign and foregrounding the materiality of signifier, sound poetry practitioners like Ball complicate the idea of language as a merely functional medium of transmission between subjects. But the question persists: how, if at all, does the disruption of utilitarian language translate into social and political change? Artistic practice is always a wager without guarantees, as Žižek reminds us in *The Parallax View*, because art and politics are separated by their own non-relation that permits no crossover without passing through the *ex nihilo* site of the event.<sup>52</sup> However, it is worth paying close attention to the rhetorical and discursive strategies through which the revolutionary aspirations of early sound poetry are articulated, as these give us cues about the desire that subtends the Dadaists’ artistic vision. That is to say that these desires are key to deciphering the fantasy that seeks to disavow and suture over the insurmountable gap between art and politics in their particular historical situation.

The first thing to note is that Ball, Huelsenbeck and Tzara, despite their aesthetic and methodological differences, view their practice as *restoring wholeness* to an artistic object that has been fragmented by linguistic and artistic representation. Under the pseudonym Alexander Partens, Tzara, Arp and Walter Serner write that Cubist painters view the objects of their paintings from multiple perspectives—vertically from above, diagonally, sliced down their middle—in order to “capture [their] totality more effectively than by attempting to depict the object as a whole” (1993: 91). The philosophical argument underpinning the trio’s reading of Cubism is that behind phenomenological experience (which replicates itself in representational, perspectival painting) there is a unified noumenal world that can be approached through the refraction and proliferation

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<sup>52</sup> In fact, Žižek insists in *The Parallax View* that the fantasy of Lenin meeting the Dadaists at Cabaret Voltaire during his year of exile in Zurich is the paramount suturing of this gap (4). The same fantasy wends its way into the discourse of Canadian sound poetry as well: Stephen Scobie’s 1974 article “I Dreamed I Saw Hugo Ball: bpNichol, Dada, and Sound Poetry concludes with a poem called “Lenin at the Cabaret Voltaire” (222-223).

of perspective.<sup>53</sup> Where objective painting and language have done violence to the noumenal world by forcing it into a container that it does not quite fit (the artist's gaze, the signifier), Dada seeks to restore its plenum through quaquaversal perspective and anarchic sound. Ball describes a similar ethos in literature when he writes that the Dadaist "no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of view, and yet he is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things" (1996: 66, original emphasis). His experiments with Huelsenbeck in the performance of "simultaneous poems" offer a literary correlate to Cubism: multiple voices sing, speak, chant, and whistle contrapuntally, and through this multiplicity of sound, "the willful [sic] quality of an organic work is given powerful expression" (Ball 1996: 57). In the Cubist painting and the simultaneous poem, the act of *making multiple* gives rise to a universal whole that is greater than the sum of its component parts.<sup>54</sup>

In short, the Zurich Dadaists desire "an absolute art" (Tzara 1993: 125) that encompasses all positions and subjects. They want to see it all, as it were: to not be limited by their own subjective gaze, but to see the object through the Other's eyes at the same time as their own. They want to circumvent the signifier with all of its wavering uncertainty and doubt and create a direct line into the Other's psyche. They desire a scenario of subjectivity without the primal repression that conditions the subject's induction into the symbolic order—what Freud names *Urverdrängung*. This is, of course, an impossible desire. As Lacan reminds us, the subject is coincident with this repression: a subject tries to articulate himself, this articulation fails, and the subject emerges as a split entity through the act of this failed articulation. Yet we must not mistake a lack for a loss: it is not as though the subject were whole before the act that occasions the split within him; rather, the subject emerges only as a result of this split, leaving a fantasmatic illusion of wholeness in its wake. Thus, the fantasy of completion—

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<sup>53</sup> Foster et al. discuss the rejection of the viewer's singular gaze with regard to Picasso's seminal Cubist painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. As the five nudes unwaveringly returned the viewer's gaze, "Picasso both revealed the fixity of the viewer's position as established by the monocular perspective on which Western painting had been based and, by recasting it as petrification, demonized it" (82). However, as comedian and art historian Hannah Gadsby points out in her 2018 Netflix special *Nanette*, for all of Cubism's multiple perspectives, not one of them is a woman's.

<sup>54</sup> The Dadaists are not alone in their desire for a new theory of wholeness and unity after the major break of World War I. See also Novalis and Wassily Kandinsky's notion of *Totalwissenschaft*, a totality of knowledge to be realized in poetic form, and Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ideal unification of all art forms under the banner of theatre.

especially linguistic or discursive wholeness—aligns with the masculine side of Lacan’s graph of sexualization, which turns around the castrating function of the signifier.<sup>55</sup> The graph outlines two logical equations—two positions responding to the fact of non-relation—which can be parsed in the following manner: on the masculine side (left) all are submitted to the function of castration ( $\forall x \Phi x$ ), but there exists one exception to that function ( $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ ); on the feminine side (right) not-all are castrated ( $\overline{\forall x \Phi x}$ ) and there is no exception to this lack of castration ( $\overline{\exists x \overline{\Phi x}}$ ). The Dadaist fantasy of wholeness revolves around the masculine side of the graph. To cover over the fact of castration—that is, the limits of perspectival sight and the impotence of language—their project imagines the existence of One who is not castrated: the primordial father who has unlimited access to jouissance, who has direct and unmediated access to the Other without the obstacle of the *objet a*.

This fantasy maps onto the body as the site of holistic unity *par excellence*—a wellspring of primordial, sexual energy. The Dadaists believe that the intellect, mediated as it is through language, interferes with a more direct emotional apprehension of reality; thus, a return to the body in art is the only possible way to circumvent the intellect, thereby reversing the castration of language.<sup>56</sup> Huelsenbeck imagines an artistic practice emancipated from the page and the canvas, which instead “brands the essence of life into our flesh” (1993: 45). Similarly, Ball fantasizes about requiring poets to get their poems tattooed on their skin every time they publish, with the aim of discouraging the creation of unnecessary text (1996: 41). Raoul Hausmann, whose sound poems tend even further toward non-objectivity than Ball and Huelsenbeck’s, focusing solely on phonemes and consonants, desires an “elementary” voice that is “stripped bare of the customary raiments of language” (qtd. Thiérard 26). Tzara, Arp, and Serner, for their part, imagine a body-centred artistic practice that returns to a serene, pre-linguistic

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<sup>55</sup> See *Seminar XX*: 39. It is important to recall that Lacan’s radical departure from Freud is to untether the phallus from the organ of sexual difference, barring all subjects under the linguistic sign. In this manner, the masculine and feminine sides of Lacan’s theory of sexual difference exist in a properly antinomic relation—we might say a non-relation, following Žižek and Zupančič. For Lacan, sex itself is not simply an anatomical difference, but is rather inscribed in the sign: “man” and “woman” are both signifiers in their own right, prompting differential relations to signification and its attendant desire.

<sup>56</sup> See Tzara, Arp, and Serner, 92: “The intercession of intellect, in order either to pose problems or give explanations, weakens the emotions and makes them indirect, or even excludes their possibility”; Tzara 1993: 130: “Logic is a complication. Logic is always false. It draws the superficial threads of concepts and words towards illusory conclusions and centre. Its chains kill, an enormous myriapod that asphyxiates independence.”

naturalism: they want “a direct form of production, one that exactly conform[s] to the way a stone breaks off from a mountain, a flower blossoms, or an animal perpetuates itself” (1993: 93). This latter quotation, which imagines the production of art as akin to animal sexuality, is a telling one, imagining art without artifice and being without the radical negative ontology of sexualization. As Alenka Zupančič explains in *What IS Sex?*, Freud-Lacanian thought teaches us that sexual difference is an ontological problem of the first order, the primary site at which non-relation is inscribed. The difference between animal and human sexuality, she suggests, revolves around two different forms of “not knowing.” For animals, it is a simple sense of not knowing, in that animals “do not know (that they do not know)...sexuality is not problematic for animals because they do not know that it is actually problematic” (16). Human sexuality, on the other hand, is structured by a different kind of “not knowing”—that is, “*not knowing that we know* (...that we don’t know)” (16, original emphasis), by which we mean the unconscious. More simply put, the unconscious is the place where the fact of non-relation becomes sensible to us *through sheer absence*; it is not that something is missing (i.e. something that registers positively as extant) but rather that there is an insurmountable non-relation between being and its opposite—call it the Real (Lacan) or the Event (Badiou). In this manner, the Dadaists wish to substitute one kind of “not knowing” for another: they want a naïve animal production (merely reproductive, generative) in the place of human production, unbound by the strictures of language and symbolization. Zupančič notes that in the instances where sexuality is most zealously repressed, it is not to direct us towards a more normal, productive sexual relationship, but rather a means of covering up the fact that the sexual relation itself does not exist. Indeed, the same might be said of the Dadaist’s exuberant, sexually charged discourse of the body. Rather than taking pleasure in a “*jouissance* of the body” (Zupančič 14, original emphasis)—that is, celebrating the body’s status as incoherent, partial and, as the epigraph to this chapter reminds us, non-existent—the Dadaists deeply desire to make the body whole again, to assert that a relation *does* exist between the subject and the object, the subject and his body, the subject and the signifier.

The human voice, too, gets bound up in this utopian project of wholeness, imagined as a pure spiritual essence that flows from the body. In Mladen Dolar’s 2006 monograph *A Voice and Nothing More*, he describes how the voice is split at its very core between two functions: one, as the material support for meaning (logos) and, two,

as an aesthetic object in its own right (4). There is a non-relation between these two vocal functions that expresses itself as a form of *extimacy*—Lacan’s neologism for that which is excluded while remaining at the very core *as a function of this exclusion*. Just as speech cannot be separated from its material base (the voice *as such*, the voice as a series of physiological processes), the voice as *pure sound* (say, in acts of screaming, singing, babbling, coughing) never stands on its own but always presupposes an Other to whom it is addressed. The usual way of covering up this non-relation is to insist on the primacy of the word, which takes its cues from the Judeo-Christian tradition of God as the Word made flesh, such that the voice’s signifying function—its message and meaning—comes to occlude its material support.<sup>57</sup> Religious logocentrism finds its secular correlate in structural linguistics, where language as an ideational system of binary oppositions becomes the object of study, obliterating the voice that carries it. The Dadaists, by contrast, wish to take the opposite route around non-relation. The Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, whose work had a profound influence on Ball, desires to dispense with the signifying voice altogether, outlining a method towards this practice in his 1911 work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Like Ball, he is interested in cultivating a pre-linguistic voice that slowly kills off the semantic meaning of a word through repetition, letting its pure sound (*inner klang*) ring through:

The frequent repetition of a word...deprives the word of its original external meaning...Sometimes perhaps we unconsciously hear this real harmony sounding together with the material or later on with the non-material sense of the object...pure sound exercises a direct impression on the soul. (45-46)

For Kandinsky it is sound and not sense that harbours the voice’s secret spiritual potency. That is, we only hear the voice’s truly spiritual character once it has been slowly evacuated of its meaning. Indeed, a different kind of voice emerges when attention is diverted away from content: one only has to recall the childish game of saying “pyjamas” over and over until the word becomes a strangely null symbol against one’s tongue. However, as Dolar reminds us, isolating the voice as a fetish object is not a corrective to the vocal non-relation. Rather, all fetish objects, the voice included, serve the double

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<sup>57</sup> Dolar gives the example found in Saint Augustine’s sermon 288, where he interprets the Gospel of St. John as the relationship between two voices: the holy word of God and the voice of St. John the Baptist that acts as a vehicle to carry the word. John 3:30 reads, “He has to increase, I have to diminish”, meaning that the material voice must disappear before the ideal, spiritual word.



purpose of evoking and disavowing castration. The fetish object is a temporary stop-gap for desire *which drives desire itself*, owing to the object's partial nature. Thus the Dadaist appeal to the pre-linguistic voice as a spiritually elevated form must be read for its particular deployment of disavowal, which again involves mistaking a lack for a loss. The reason that we are able to conceive of a pre-linguistic voice at all (or post-linguistic voice, for that matter) *is because of the structuring function of language itself*. Dolar is adamant about this point:

The voice as the bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing [or otherwise asignifying] voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order. (31)

In the sound poem, there is an exclusion or repression of a more disturbing vocal object: the voice that is, at its core, split between meaning and sound. The voice is reducible to neither of these categories and every time we try to separate the one from the other, the difference collapses in on itself. There is a sense in which Dadaist sound works like Hugo Ball's *lautegedichte* in fact hold this space of vocal non-relation open in a productive way. In listening to the poems in performance, our attention wavers between the elements that make meaning (i.e. words and phonemes) and the materiality of the voice (its timbre, intonation, and musicality), but it is almost as if one cannot make sense of both elements at the same time. Rather, one's listening jumps back and forth across the non-relation that separates them, filling in the lack of one with the substance of the other.<sup>58</sup> However, the *desire* subtending these works, as articulated in the Dadaist's description of their *intentions* with the work, labours tirelessly to disavow that gap, instead claiming a spurious unity in the asignifying voice.

We have seen how the Dadaist project responds to two imbricated non-relations: the non-relation between the signifier and the signified, and the non-relation between the two functions of the voice (as carrier of meaning / as fetish object). In both cases there is a disavowal of non-relation, articulated as a fantasy of completion and wholeness, which serves to obfuscate the antagonism at the heart of the matter. There is a third non-relation that must be addressed in order to fully make sense of the aesthetics of Dadaist sound poetry, which deals with social rather than ontological antagonism—though these

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<sup>58</sup> As another example of auditory non-relation, see the discussion of directional listening vs. incidental hearing in the Introduction, pp.1-2. We can hear or we can listen, but we can't do both simultaneously.

two categories can hardly be disentangled from one another. This third space deals with the primitivist fantasy at the core of the avant-garde—a scenario that *appears* to realize fantasies of pre-linguistic naturalism by making them flesh-and-blood, cathecting their desires onto the subjectivity and productions of a racialized other. By appropriating and codifying the language, artistic styles, and artifacts of non-Western cultures, Dada (and other contemporaneous movements such as Surrealism, Cubism, and Fauvism) shores up its own fantasies of discursive and spiritual wholeness, while at the same time disavowing its own disavowal.

An ideological and libidinal investment in “the primitive” is central to Dadaist thought and production. Huelsenbeck writes in his “Dada Manifesto” that the word Dada “symbolizes the most primitive relation to surrounding reality, a relation with which Dadaism in turn establishes a new reality” (1993: 46). Ball, for his part, writes that “all living art will be irrational, primitive, and complex” (1996: 49) and that “in the midst of the enormous unnaturalness [of life], the direct and the primitive seem incredible” (1996: 65). But what, precisely, does “the primitive” mean in the context of Dadaist art? Why and how does it usher in a “new reality” that is perceived as more authentic, vital, and natural than the reality of European life during the First World War and the interwar years, when Dada finds its fullest expression? Hal Foster et al in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, and Postmodernism* define primitivism as “a fantasy...projected onto the tribal cultures of racial others, especially in Oceania and Africa” (64), wherein tropes of origin, animalism, and sexual liberation find their expression. Art critic Sally Price, meanwhile, argues in her 1989 book *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, that “primitive” in art historical circles operates on two different registers: one delimited by a certain historical advent (i.e. before the advent of writing, of class struggle, industrialism, etc.) and one that subtly expresses value-laden notions of cultural hierarchy. In the latter, primitive art is defined by underlying fantasies about its culture of origin—as less repressed or less civilized, as being closer to an animal nature, as evoking a cultural imaginary of pagan rites and rituals (fertility, cannibalism, spirit possession, etc.). Yet it is also defined in economic terms as “any artistic tradition for which the market value of an object inflates by a factor of ten or more upon export out of its original cultural setting” (3), evoking the extractive and exploitive practices of the Western art world critiqued in *Statues Also Die*. Primitivism, in the context of Dada art and elsewhere, both produces and is the product of these symbolic and material registers. On the one hand, it draws

from and reproduces fantasies about the exotic Other, in the process producing, as Edward Said reminds us, the meaning of the European subject.<sup>59</sup> On the other, it has very real material effects on the art market—the acquisition, sale, circulation, and exhibition of non-Western artifacts—which are themselves inextricable from the flows of European imperialism.<sup>60</sup>

The key figures of Dada were profoundly influenced by contact with non-Western art—especially African and Oceanic tribal artifacts and songs. Huelsenbeck and Tzara both visited the African continent (though only after their activities at the Cabaret Voltaire), while Tzara in later life became a connoisseur and collector of African and Oceanic art.<sup>61</sup> However, the influence of non-Western art takes many different directions in Dadaist cultural production, and it is worth examining each in turn. Tzara is adamant about the negative function of Dadaist art and its power to subvert, undermine, and destroy the bourgeois art market and polite European society. For him, tools for the task are given through primitive art, in which Tzara sees a more authentic artistic practice and, ultimately, way of living. Tzara's work takes a research-driven, ethnographic approach to the primitive, collecting the war songs, work songs, and other everyday oral material from African and Oceanic peoples from anthropology magazines in the Zurich University library.<sup>62</sup> Many of these he translated and performed at the Cabaret Voltaire's literary soirées, often leaving lines untranslated from their language of origin—for example, the four *Negerlieder* (Negro poems) that he publishes in the 1920 *Dada Almanach* edited by Huelsenbeck.<sup>63</sup> These poems, purportedly “unearthed and translated” (1993: 145) by Tzara are titled by either their locale or dialect of origin (“Zanzibar,” “Sotho Negroes,” and “Ewe – Gè dialect” and “Swahili”).

While they are not sound poems in the same sense as Ball or Huelsenbeck's works—maintaining, for the most part, their semantic sense and regular syntax—the untranslated lines have been no doubt retained for their sonic qualities—for example, “o mam re de mi ky” (145) in the poem “Zanzibar.” This fetishization of sound is even more

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<sup>59</sup> See Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Random House, 1979): 28-31.

<sup>60</sup> See Foster et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004): 64.

<sup>61</sup> See Béhar in Tzara 1975: 714-718

<sup>62</sup> See White, “Umba! Umba!” 166.

<sup>63</sup> Reproduced in *Dada Almanach* 1993: 145-147.

apparent in Tzara's poem "Maori. Toto Vaca", published in the same anthology, which functions as a genre of readymade sound poetry. The piece appears with no contextualizing support other than the proper noun "Maori" in the title and the hand-drawn silhouette of its island of origin. In Malcolm Green's 1993 English-language edition of the *Almanach*, the poem is footnoted as "A genuine Maori work song for hauling tree trunks" (58). Other critical sources describe it as a slightly altered phonetic transcription of a Maori work song that originally appeared in Karl Bücher's 1909 ethnographic study of Maori culture.<sup>64</sup> However, in *The Approximate Man and Other Writings*, Tzara tells a different story about the poem's origin. He writes of the piece, "I had tried to take away from words their meaning, and to use them in order to give a new global sense to the verse by the tonality and the auditory contrast. These experiments ended with an abstract poem, 'Toto-Vaca,' composed of pure sounds invented by me and containing no allusion to reality" (2005: 34). Here, Tzara expresses an aesthetic intention akin to Kandinsky's *The Spiritual in Art*: he wants to access pure vocal sound and dispense with the word's semantic content. For him, the foreign Other's language is evacuated of meaning, at once elevated to *cri pur* and relegated to irrational, childish babble. Crucially, while Tzara does, in other instances, convey the semantic meaning of the works that he translates, the formal conventions that carry across poems—of titling them after their language or place of origin, for example—has the metonymic effect of levelling the abstract and the ethnographic, and imagining all foreign songs and poetry as an analeptic to beat the blood of the flagging European cultural body.<sup>65</sup>

This returns us to the issue of non-relation at the heart of the Dadaist project, where the non-relation between subject and other expresses itself in a particular colonial context. Tzara's interest in the language and traditional cultural material of African and Oceanic peoples stems from *the desire to recuperate a lost cultural object*, which he describes in his note on "Oceanian Art" (1951):

Against the aesthetic concerns of an Apollinaire—who thought of art as a more or less intentional *product* of man, somehow separable from his inner nature—DADA opposed a grander concept wherein the art of

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<sup>64</sup> See Kaufmann, "Dada Reads Ethnological Sources", 99-100.

<sup>65</sup> The same can be said of Huelsenbeck's "pseudo-Negro" verse such as *Fantastic Prayers*, which, contra Tzara's ethnological exactitude, operates through a pastiche of African tropes and phrases, none of them specific or authentic, but all with the same purpose of shocking, awakening, and reviving European art, culture and language.

primitive peoples, with its overlap of social and religious functions, appeared as the direct expression of their life... For DADA, art was one of the forms—common to all mankind—of a poetic activity whose deep roots commingled with the primitive structures of sentient life. DADA attempted to put theory into practice—to join Black African and Oceanian art to the life of the mind and its expressions on an immediate level...The issue for DADA was to recover from the depths of consciousness the exalted source of the poetic function. (1983: 30)

This passage contains echoes the lost object around which Marker and Resnais' film circles—art objects in which we find a direct expression of life praxis and spirituality, created without self-conscious involvement in the bourgeois art market. What the European subject has lost, the tribal Other has in spades—the direct expression of life and an intimate, perhaps even perverse, knowledge of a poetic language that is deeply subterranean to conscious thought. In short, the Dadaists project the notion of the Primordial father onto a racialized non-Western other, imagining him has having unlimited access to poetic or discursive jouissance, as the logical exception to the function of symbolic castration. However, this ideological move can only be secured by rendering the other's speech irrational, devoid of meaning, somehow outside the signifying order. On the one hand, this act plays into racist tropes that hear the non-Western other's speech as a series of asignifying ululations—a process crucial to dehumanizing racialized subjects in order to justify their dispossession, elimination, and subjugation by colonial power. On the other, the act is a means of disavowing non-relation itself, imagining that the break between Ur-poetic and utilitarian language is localizable and, furthermore, able to be overcome—if only we could regain what was lost. This notion is a fantasy of the first order, knotting together the disavowal of non-relation at discursive, subjective, and social levels.

### **Canadada: The Four Horsemen and the Hugo Ball they rode in on**

While there is a great variety of sound poetry between European Dada and the sound poetry that emerges in Canada almost a half-century later, Dada's socially oriented aesthetics had a profound impact on the Canadian scene.<sup>66</sup> Practitioners such as The Four Horsemen, Bill Bissett, and later performers like Christian Bök, Owen Sound in Toronto (Michael Dean, David Penhale, Steven Ross Smith, Richard Truhlar),

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<sup>66</sup> For a comprehensive overview of sound poetry in the 1930s-1960s, see McCaffery's chapter "Voice in Extremis" in *Prior to Meaning*, 161-186; McCaffery "Sound Poetry: A Survey" in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, 6-18; Higgins, "Taxonomy of Sound Poetry" in *UbuWeb Papers*.

Re:Sounding in Edmonton (Douglas Barbour, Stephen Scobie), and Quatuor Gualuor in Ottawa (jwcurry, Conyer Clayton, Nina Drystek, Chris Johnson, and Alastair Larwill) in various ways assume, transform, and amplify the aesthetic and political tenets of Dada. Where the Dadaists railed against the scenario of global warfare that degraded the human spirit, sound poetry in the Canadian context offers itself as a corrective to official, establishmentarian culture, bound as it is in this era to nationalism, material wealth, censorship, and middle-class morality.<sup>67</sup> This section analyzes the influence of Dadaist aesthetics, politics, and fantasies on the Canadian sound poetry collective The Four Horsemen, using their critical and creative work as a case study to trace an intergenerational and trans-Atlantic paradigm of influence. While there are a number of other Canadian sound poets whose work could be examined in this context, I selectively focus on The Four Horsemen for two reasons: one, because of the comparatively large body of scholarship about their work, written by members of the group itself and other contemporary scholars; two, because of the group's strong collective ethos—what McCaffery terms a “performed community” (2001: 185)—which draws a compelling parallel to the collective activities of Dada in the early twentieth century.

The Four Horsemen were Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, and bpNichol. The group formed in 1972 and was active until 1988. They performed exuberant, polyvocal sound poems that ranged between vocally braided lyrics to non-objective poems that foregrounded the physiological mechanics of the voice: breathing, intonation, pitch, and timbre. The Four Horsemen published a number of recordings of their performed work on different formats—two full-length LPs, *Nada Canadada* (1972) and *Live in the West* (1977), and two cassette tapes, *Bootleg* (1981) and *2 Nights* (1988)—as well as a number of print volumes containing the scores of their sound poetry, which take on the formal qualities of concrete poetry.

The group's members wrote and performed sound poetry individually before their collaboration and have expressed extremely varied, often contradictory, accounts of the interventions—aesthetic, political or otherwise—that sound poetry makes in the contemporary cultural field. bpNichol began composing sound and concrete poetry in the

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<sup>67</sup> The social and political climate of Canada (and particularly Vancouver) in the 1960s, which sets the scene for the emergence of sound poetry in Canada, is discussed at length in Lawrence Aronsen's *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties* (Vancouver: New Star, 2010); see also McCaffery's discussion of the socio-political climate of the 1970s in *Prior to Meaning*, 182.

mid-1960s, having been exposed to work by the Zurich Dadaists, as well as other contemporary practitioners such as Henry Chopin, Ernest Jandl, Cavan McCarthy, and his compatriot Bill Bissett.<sup>68</sup> Nichol's sound poetics are closest to Hugo Ball's in the ways that he imagines the word as a vessel of deep spiritual resonance, capable of reviving broken ties between subjects. Ball's influence on Nichol is visible in many of the latter's written and recorded texts. The Four Horsemen's first LP, *Nada Canadada*, opens with Nichol's wavering a cappella voice singing the words: "I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball / The night was cold / I couldn't even call / his name, though I tried / so I hung my head and cried."<sup>69</sup> Ball is imagined as a paternal forbear for the collective, a point of origin, and so it seems appropriate that their seminal album begins by naming him. Nichol also wrote a solo sound poem titled "Dada Lama" in 1966, which he performed and revised extensively throughout the following decades. The piece is rhythmic, halfway between singing and chanting, alternating long vowel sounds with quick, playful, consonant-driven phonemes.<sup>70</sup> By way of an introduction to this piece at his 1968 reading at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Nichol says,

Hugo Ball was the daddy of us all, and he was a very fine Dadaist who lived in Switzerland during the First World War and did the first sound poems. It was very strange. If you read Hugo Ball's diaries, it's rather fascinating because when he gave his final public reading he got really carried away in the midst of a sound poem and got thrown back into sort of a—how to put this?—an earlier space in his mind...So this is for Hugo Ball. (29:06, edited for clarity)

Punning on "daddy" and "Dada," Nichol designates Ball as the originator of some collective formation ("us all"—though he does not specify to whom that collective refers). Ball's writing has a profound impact on Nichol: the latter's approach to sound is similarly anchored in the voice's spiritual, mystic character. He too imagines the non-word as The Word: pure, ecstatic vocal utterance. In Nichol's 1973 essay "Sound and the Lung

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<sup>68</sup> See Davey, "Not Just Representation," 138.

<sup>69</sup> A digital version of this recording is available on Pennsound:

[https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/groups/4-Horsemen/Canadada/01-Four-Horsemen\\_From-Beast\\_Canadada.mp3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/groups/4-Horsemen/Canadada/01-Four-Horsemen_From-Beast_Canadada.mp3)

<sup>70</sup> Digital recordings of this poem are available on SpokenWeb (1968):

<http://spokenweb.ca/sgw-poetry-readings/bpnichol-and-lionel-kearns-at-sgwu-1968/#1>;

Also on Pennsound (1982):

[https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/authors/bpNichol/Ear-Rational-1982/bpNichol\\_01\\_Dada-Lama\\_1966.mp3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pensound/authors/bpNichol/Ear-Rational-1982/bpNichol_01_Dada-Lama_1966.mp3)

Wage” he offers a McLuhanesque reading of contemporary sensory experience, arguing that we live in a sight-dominant culture as a result of the hegemony of the printed word. He insists that, in every facet of life, we see “the ascendancy of the eye over the ear that lays the groundwork for the eventual domination by print (the eye)” (107). As a result, human beings fear the expressive capabilities of sound, imposing strict regulation on public displays of “disruptive” emotion—i.e., anything that does not follow the quiet decorum of socially normative behaviour. In Nichol’s estimation, sound’s most threatening characteristic—the primary reason that it must be contained—is that it poses a threat to the “ONE STATEMENT = ONE MEANING” (110) logic of the printed word. That is, unlike the written word, there is instability in spoken language—the slips, puns, and ambiguities that we plumb in psychoanalysis—which threatens to undermine the fixity of meaning. “TO SPEAK MULTIPLY MEANS DESTRUCTION” (108), Nichol insists. But destruction is a creative rather than entropic force because it unlaces the “straightjacket [placed] upon our social madness” (110).

For Nichol, sound is a corrective to the constraints of the printed word, perhaps taking on “the glow of a star, the fullness of an oath” that Ball imagined in his writing. Nichol associates sound with myth and magic against a regime of scientific and historical phenomena, which he aligns with the visual. Cultivating these arcane spiritual forces is a way to heal the wound inflicted by graphism: drawing on a Hopi creation myth in which the human world is destroyed for its literal dissonance with the universe, Nichol insists, “sound is an expression of the total organism...man as an organism must be in harmony with the organic universe he lives in & that the medium thru which that harmony can be achieved is human sound” (104-105).<sup>71</sup> In so doing, however, he is not looking to reverse the hierarchy between oral/aural and visual experience; rather, he is looking to close “the real gap between the eye & the ear” (107), to find a “middle ground” (107) between the two. This metaphor should, by now, raise some red flags. First, as discussed in Chapter One, the fall narrative of the printing press and its effects on oral culture must be approached with a certain amount of skepticism. For one, it creates a temporal break between oral and visual cultures that simply does not exist in the way that Nichol and others (Ong, McLuhan, Tzara, Marker, Resnais) imagine it. Oral culture continues alongside print and visual culture in vital, irreplaceable ways, and it is only

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<sup>71</sup> Nichol’s version of this myth focuses on Palongawhoya, one of the two living beings created by the Spider Woman, who sends out sound across the earth so that it vibrates with the energy of the Creator. See Oswald White Bear Fredricks, “The Four Creations.” (University of Georgia).



through a process of ideological kerning that we can imagine it as a lost object, consigned to an irretrievable past. Second, the idea of suturing the gap between the eye and the ear must be read as a disavowal of non-relation in its own right. That is, this idea of harmonizing the sensorium—creating a “total organism” (104) as Nichol suggests—aligns with the fantasies of discursive wholeness and multiple perspective that we see formulated in various ways by Dada. As Žižek reminds us in *Less Than Nothing*, the eye and the ear are also separated by a non-relation. Their relationship is mediated by an impossibility: “ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything” (670).<sup>72</sup> Rather than acknowledge this antinomy and lean into it, Nichol is swept up in a fantasy of wholeness that might be achieved through the reparative capabilities of sound.

We can imagine Steve McCaffery, by contrast, playing Tristan Tzara to bpNichol’s Hugo Ball, rejecting the humanist impulse at the heart of bpNichol’s poetics and instead reorienting sound in poetry toward radical negativity, as well as bodily and subjective excess. McCaffery begins his career as a sound poet in the late 1960s, translating his titanic, wall-sized concrete poem *Carnival* into vocal performance.<sup>73</sup> In this early period, McCaffery champions the primordial, sexual energies of the voice much like his Dadaist precursors—a position he will renounce later in his career in favour of the negative possibilities of mediatized sonic production. In his essay “for a poetry of blood” published in Richard Kostelantz’s anthology *Text-Sound Text*, McCaffery extols the transformative power of raw, human vocalization, writing, “sound poetry is *the* poetry of direct emotional confrontation: there is no pausing for intellectualization” (1980b: 275). These lines espouse the common conviction that the voice channels a realm of human experience beyond (or, more accurately *before*) the intellect and conscious speech. The essay is also loaded with the same genre of sexual metaphors linking artistic and sexual (re-)production that we find in Tzara, Arp and Serner: the poet’s spontaneous

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<sup>72</sup> To illustrate this tension, Žižek discusses the voice and the gaze as objects, showing the point at which the one fills in the gap of the other. In the case of seeing what we cannot hear, he discusses the “silent scream” figured in paintings such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* and Caravaggio’s *Medusa*. These images figure the object-voice as a “bone in the throat,” the structural point of impossibility where the voice fails. In the case of hearing what we cannot see, by contrast, he refers to the acousmatic voice in *Psycho* and *Dr. Mabuse*, where an off-screen voice “cuts a hole” in the visual reality of the film. Read together, these objects show us the radically constitutive exclusion of the voice and the gaze from each other’s structuring realities at the point at which they fail to consummate a relation.

<sup>73</sup> A digital recording of McCaffery reading from *Carnival* is available on PennSound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/McCaffery.php>

vocalization is “the spirit of our thighs,” “the very basis of every sexual act,” “the true cosmic orgasm” (1980b: 275). These metaphors spring from idea of the voice’s pure sonic capabilities, bound up with fantasies of naturalism, animalism, and origin. The voice is aligned with *zoē*—the Greek notion of life that is common to all things—rather than the strictly human language of *bios*.<sup>74</sup> He insists that we must “get down to the wormed roots of poetry: sound & rhythm & pulse – region of interaction of the primitive and the animal” (1980b: 275) if we are to free ourselves from the strictures of instrumental language. This conviction is put into practice through his work with The Four Horsemen, who eschewed mediation (with the exception of recording their performances on vinyl and cassette) and instrumentation (with the exception of a few percussive and tonal accents in otherwise a capella vocal performances). As McCaffery explains in his 1978 essay “Discussion...Genesis...Continuity: Some Reflections on the Current Work of The Four Horsemen” *vox humana* is preferable to any kind of mediated sound because of its immediacy and directness in communicating with an audience. He writes, “The Horsemen have a decided preference for the pure acoustic, eschewal of microphones, of electroacoustical treatment of any kind...What we wanted was to preserve the human factor of a pure vocal energy as the kinetic axis of the piece” (1980a: 280).

McCaffery might be pleased that, despite Ball’s insistence, he was not required to get “for a poetry of blood” tattooed onto his skin, as he radically switches positions in the decades following the publication of that essay. The chapter “Voice in Extremis” in his 2001 collection of essays *Prior to Meaning* begins with a quotation from Michel de Certeau concerning the illicit relationship between the organ of speech and the organ of audition. “How, then,” McCaffery asks, are we “to define the ear’s most intimate lover—the voice?” (161). To answer this question, McCaffery suggests there are two voices, as far as poetry is concerned: the one, “a phenomenological voice that serves in its self-evidence as the unquestionable guarantee of presence” (2001: 161). What he means is the voice-as-vehicle that has traditionally been associated with *logos*—the bearer of

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<sup>74</sup> Giorgio Agamben fleshes out this distinction in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, explaining that the Greeks had two morphologically distinct words for “life”: “*zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (9). This distinction produces the paradoxical position of *homo sacer*, Agamben’s figure for “bare life” that at once belongs to, and is excluded from both these orders. Mladen Dolar discusses the connection between *zoē* and *bios* with reference to the voice in his chapter “The Politics of the Voice,” 105-107.

conscious, communicable speech. This is the notion of the poetic voice that is *metaphorically* linked with the poet's particular manner of speaking or writing—the way that they linguistically frame their experience of the world.<sup>75</sup> The other voice is “a thanatic voice triply destined to lines of flight and escape, to the expenditure of pulsional intensities, and to its own dispersal in sounds between body and language” (161). This second voice is not, as one might expect, the purely material voice that is fetishized by the Dadaists. Rather, in its wavering position between sound and sense, bodily and symbolic intensities, the second voice that McCaffery hits upon—via a long lineage of European and American sound poetry from the Russian Futurists, to the French *ultralettristes*, to mediated *musique concrète*—is closer to what Dolar refers to as the object voice: the *with-without* vocal phenomenon that is split at its core by a non-relation.

Yet for all McCaffery's extremely nuanced analysis of the voice—the ways in which it evokes and eludes meaning across sound poetry's various formulations—he is not willing to concede the idea of a prelinguistic voice. That is, he holds fast to something *prior to meaning*, as his book's title suggests—something anterior to the subject's induction into language. Indeed, McCaffery's poetic and critical career quests for the holy grail of poetic form wherein language might, as the Talking Heads put it, stop making sense. His experiments with *The Four Horsemen* in the 1970s and '80s ultimately revealed the limits of decomposing the word with the human voice. No matter how radically alienated from meaningful speech, the voice invariably leads us back to the signifier and the language that speaks us as subjects. McCaffery's later poetic works such as *The Black Debt* (1989) use the sentence rather than the phoneme as the compositional unit, interrogating the relationships *between* words as they emerge in a layered, processual semantic cloud. Like a good hysterical subject (in the Lacanian sense) McCaffery cycles through different poetic objects, holding each one up to the light and declaring, “That's not it!”<sup>76</sup> And so, the search for the protosemantic continues.

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<sup>75</sup> Davey underscores this point in “Not Just Representation,” 135.

<sup>76</sup> I'm here playing on Žižek's joke in *Less Than Nothing*: “It is like in the old joke about the conscript who pleaded insanity in order to avoid military service: his ‘symptom’ was to compulsively examine every paper within reach and exclaim, “That's not it! ” When examined by the military psychiatrists, he does the same, so the psychiatrists finally gave him a paper confirming his release from military service. The conscript reaches for it, examines it, and exclaims: ‘That's it!’” (151).

For McCaffery, non-meaning reaches its apogee with the advent of the tape recorder, whereby the human voice is at last forgiven of its debt to presence and bodily expression. Like Ong and McLuhan, McCaffery sees the tape recorder ushering in an era of “secondary orality” in which mediation is, counterintuitively, the very thing that reconnects us with the voice in its most elemental form. He writes, “There exists then, through recourse to the tape recorder as an active compositional tool, a possibility of ‘over-taking’ speech by the machine. Electro-acoustic sound poetry mobilizes a technicism to further decompose the word, allowing through speed changes the granular structure of language to emerge and make itself evident” (176). It is only through the tape recorder’s temporal and sonic distortions that the voice’s truly intimate character as *sound* is revealed. McCaffery takes Henri Chopin’s *audio-poèmes* as a paramount case study—poems that use the tape recorder to slow down, accelerate, and layer human vocal productions, especially asignifying gestures such as breaths, lip-smacks and coughs. The tape recorder captures and amplifies the body’s stochastic, unintentional noises—the physiological byproducts of speech that we cognitively suppress in order to focus on meaning. This gesture, McCaffery argues, “repossess[es] vocality as a new nonsemantic lexicon, a material modified, purified of the Logos and then returned to a performative, gestural poetics” (179). The irony is that McCaffery ends up substituting one idea of subjective authenticity and presence for another. While the tape recorder brings a different kind of speaking subject to the fore—one revered for his dumb physiology rather than his linguistic artifice—he remains a coherent subject nonetheless. “*Le poème c’est moi*” (180) McCaffery (via Chopin) asserts: though I may be but body without organs, *I am*, nevertheless. McCaffery ontologizes the non-relation, so to speak. Rather than recognizing the fundamental antagonism between being and its opposite—that which “is not,” to return to Badiou’s phrasing—he instead imagines a binary relation between meaning and its opposite, non-meaning, which finds its fullest expression in the mediatized voice. This is not a true non-relation, but a spurious bifurcation of linguistic form. The split between meaning and non-meaning in sound poetry can be figured through Zeno’s paradox: no matter where we draw the line—the sentence, the word, the syllable, the phoneme, the consonant, the breath—horizon of meaning recedes from us infinitely. As Dolar reminds us, there is no *ne plus ultra* of signification: even the most meaningless vocal sounds are part of the symbolic order, embodying “the structure as such, the structure as minimal” (32), and the mediatization of the voice does not, in itself, change this fact. McCaffery’s chapter opens with a figurative sexual relation—between

the voice and the ear—and ultimately finds a way to consummate it: with the marital aid of the tape recorder. However, this relationship can only be consummated by disavowing ontological non-relation: the outside of meaning is not non-meaning, it is *absence itself*, made sensible only through the point at which the symbolization folds in upon itself, collapsing at the point of its own logical inconsistency.

The final question we must touch on is how The Four Horsemen approach the non-relation that turns around the subject-other antagonism, particularly as it is manifest in a colonial context of settlers and racialized others. Though “the primitive” is not specifically located in the vocal productions of a racialized cultural other in the way that it is for the Dadaists, the idea still holds a magnetic allure for these contemporary Canadian sound poets. The teleological thinking that undergirds Dadaism carries forward into the present, where its fantasy about meaning and non-meaning, progress and return, are rehearsed with only a slight change in key. McCaffery’s “Voice in Extremis” chapter, for example, creates a stadial model of sound poetry that moves through successive phases. The first phase, which he terms the “paleotechnic era” of sound poetry, is “the vast, intractable territory of archaic and primitive poetics, the many instances of chant structures and incantation, of syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions [that are] still evident among many North American, African, Asian, and Oceanic peoples” (2001: 163). He locates the second phase between 1875 and 1928, distinguished by self-reflexive investigations of the acoustic properties of the voice, which he sees in the work of Dada, and Russian and Italian futurism. The third phase begins in the 1950s with the advent of widespread acousmatization as the tape recorder becomes a viable compositional medium.

The designation “paleotechnic” with reference to sound poetry is a problematic one for several reasons. It unites a great variety of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse groups under a single banner of “the primitive,” failing to account for the historical and material specificity of their vocal productions, and communities of practice and reception. It also creates a paradoxical temporality for these works, at once relegating them to an anterior position (i.e. before the intervention of avant-garde self-reflexivity) while fully acknowledging that traditional songs, chants, and verse were and are performed contemporaneously alongside successive phases of sound poetry. How is this possible? Part of the problem is that the term “paleotechnic”—much like “the primitive”—is used interchangeably as a sociohistorical designation and an aesthetic

designation. To recall Sally Price's important observation, the primitive is, on the surface, a descriptive category, but its wink-nudge, connotative meaning is steeped in fantasy, value, and hierarchy. This elision is what permits McCaffery to refer to The Four Horsemen's poetry as "paleotechnic" (180), despite the fact that it neither fits the time frame that he establishes in the outset of the chapter (i.e. before 1875), and has no ties to the cultures he lists (North American—presumably Indigenous—African, Asian, and Oceanic). Rather, McCaffery uses the term as an aesthetic designation to indicate that the work is invested in certain ideas and formal qualities: the unmediated voice, emotional and libidinal authenticity, the performance's immanence, and the communion between speaker and audience. However, as Frank Davey aptly explains in "Not Just Representation: The Sound and Concrete Poetries of The Four Horsemen," "the goal of the performance was to create work that was 'prior to meaning'—to avoid at all costs representational and thematic writing in order to avoid all commodifiable content" (136). McCaffery himself confirms this point when he discusses with The Horsemen in "Voice in Extremis," writing, "There is a Greek term—*hyponoia* (the underneath sense)—that aptly describes the telos of those performances" (2001: 183). By way of a sly elision between the aesthetic and the social, the paleotechnic codes the cultural productions of non-Western peoples as "prior to meaning" or "underneath sense." While this logic is not as obvious as it is in Dadaism—the racialized other *has it*; we *want it*—it nonetheless undergirds McCaffery and Nichol's poetics as an interest in the temporally anterior, and the spatially subjacent.

Members of a white Western poetic avant-garde have a certain degree of mobility across these boundaries. They can "go paleotechnic" for a period of time or as the occasion demands. They can just as easily slough off the designation in pursuit of some other, more favourable artistic or critical form—for example, the self-reflexive interrogation of the phoneme, or the mediatized decomposition of the voice. This mobility is not equally afforded to racialized writers and sound practitioners. As Timothy Yu argues in *Race and the Avant-Garde*, whiteness is at once read as a concrete, historical position when it is advantageous to do so, but it can just as easily be extended into a universal, abstract aesthetic and discursive position. Racialized writers, by contrast, are consigned to the function of "ethnicization" (36), such that that race becomes the primary sign through which their work is read. Ultimately, despite the fact that McCaffery and Nichol crack open the performative possibilities of the voice—especially in thinking about

the object-voice and the antagonism between sense and sound—they also rehearse the same problematic fantasies of anteriority and return as the members of Zurich Dada that preceded them.

## **Against Origin: Indigeneity and ‘The Cut’ in Performances of Jordan Abel’s *Injun***

*April 26, 2016*

The stage and the auditorium in Vancouver’s Pyatt Hall are dark. I am sitting in the first row of the balcony and, in the darkness, the audience suddenly seems more sensible to me—a vibration of breath, a rumble of murmur, seats creaking, the occasional cough. Palpable cues of anticipation, of being on the verge. When Abel takes the stage there are only three points of light: his glowing green mask, its piped lines luminously tracing the shape of a wolf’s head, and the “Exit” signs on the wings of the stage, announcing their message in red sans serif.<sup>77</sup> A voice cuts through the darkness. It is a recording of Abel’s voice, measured, legato and, one might say, serene: “he played injun in gods country / where boys proved themselves clean / dumb beasts who could cut fire / out of the whitest sand...” The caesuras are heavy weights pressing against the eardrums. The recorded voice gives us no information about its provenance. It sounds neither close nor far away, seems somehow bracketed from the physical space of its making. A second voice cuts in suddenly, though it is hard to tell if this voice is repeating what was previously said or is beginning anew. It is Abel’s voice again—or still—interlacing the words of the first stanza with the lines “he heard snatches of comment / going up from the river bank...” The words in the first and second stanzas knock together uncomfortably. We cannot focus on both simultaneously, and one voice or the other emerges momentarily from the din, only to ebb into ambiguity. Then, suddenly, we hear it for the first time: a tiny auditory fissure in the centre of a word—“played.” It sounds maybe like a CD skipping or a video buffering, though it is barely audible and we second-guess ourselves—did we hear it at all? But our hearing is confirmed when the word “beasts” in the first stanza splits open into skipping syllables. It is as though the voice, once warm and with lulling cadence, has hit a snag, a computational error that

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<sup>77</sup> A photograph of Abel performing his work can be viewed at <http://211blog.drawnandquarterly.com/2016/03/recap-anne-boyer-jordan-abel-and-sonnet.html>

throws the whole project of auditory similitude off, abruptly exposing the mechanism behind its smooth surface: parcels of kilobytes, algorithms of sonic compression. Things start to shudder out of alignment, as if a minute swerve had set the whole project off on a different course—one which the voice desperately tries to right, but cannot set the wheels back on the track. The voice begins to disintegrate, breaking down into smaller and smaller units and repeating them—first syllables, then consonant and vowel sounds, then finally the breath itself. There is moment when the glitch “catches” on the breath, signalling a strange asphyxiation: it is as though the digital voice is gasping for air, its breaths bisected by a digital *cut*. I am suddenly aware of a strange paradox between what is happening on the stage and what is happening in my body: the more the voice breaks down and reveals itself as a digital surrogate, the more my body feels a kind of physiological empathy for it. There is a tightness in my chest and realize that I have been holding my breath....

This is my recollection of Abel’s performance of his 2016 book of poems, *Injun* at the Talonbooks 2016 spring launch in Vancouver. I am interested in the ways Abel transposes visual and graphic elements in his work, particularly through the mediatization and acousmatization of his voice, which cuts against the grain of the historical avant-garde and its fetishism of the embodied voice. For while Abel’s performances of his work might be subjected to the usual lines of questioning that we see in voice-centred sound poetry—the primacy of the written vs. the oral/aural, the location of meaning in poetry and language more broadly, the threshold of sense-making—I would argue that the more compelling and indeed politically salient feature of his work emerges via an analogy of form and content. The formal features of both the printed text and the text in performance operate on the text’s expressive content—that is, the production of racial difference and its use as a justification of dispossession and resource extraction. Specifically, the work in performance, via the digital manipulation and decomposition of the voice, opens up a tiny break or *cut* in the sign (sentence, word, phoneme, breath). It does not intend to produce “non-meaning” but rather shows a minimal degree of alienation of the word *from itself*, a minute yet irreducible gap at the core of the sign itself. This gap is none other than the non-relation of sexual difference—“the gap that separates the One from itself” (Žižek 2006: 4). In holding that gap open, refusing to ideologically suture its inconsistency, Abel’s work rebuffs both the production



of racial difference that underwrites the colonialist project *and* the utopian desire for origin that underwrites avant-garde sound poetry.

In order to think through the nature of this gap as it relates to sound, I want to draw upon Fred Moten's notion of "the cut" that he articulates in his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Drawing on works by Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Claude Levi-Strauss (among a diverse and wide-ranging constellation of other cultural objects and theorists), Moten uses the cut to theorize the ways in which black radical aesthetics defy a number of binary oppositions imposed by Western philosophy and literary criticism—among them, the opposition of speech and writing, of phenomenological experience and the noumenal world, difference and repetition, presence and absence. Above all, Moten conceives of the cut as a short circuit between the singular and the universal—the point at which the operating function of ontological/epistemological/racial differentiation folds in upon itself, lingering in an oscillating indeterminacy. Before I proceed, however, I wish to hold open and acknowledge the gap between the set of texts, productions, and authors that form the speculative body Moten's work and the context in which I wish to discuss his work here. Moten's critique hinges upon Marx's inability to conceive of a "commodity who speaks" (8), that is, a commodity who reflects upon, is subjectivized by, the function of having been exchanged. The emergence of the commodity who speaks—the subject-made-object in the advent of the slave trade—strikes us as an Event in the most radical way: "The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign" (12). Thus, Moten's work is, intractably, about the nature black experience, structured by the double erasure of the commodity who speaks from the impossible vantage of doing so. As Patrick Wolfe notes in his article "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," while settler colonialism is always driven by a desire for access to land and resources, and this desire is made operative through "the organizing grammar of race" (387) which mobilizes racial difference *differently and multiply* in accordance with economic profit; "[t]hus we cannot simply say that settler colonialism or genocide have been targeted at particular races, since a race cannot be taken as given. It is made in the targeting" (388). Moten's text deftly sounds the particular ways that the organizing grammar of settler colonialism has constituted blackness, as well as the ways that blackness is, and has always been, in excess of that grammar. In bringing Moten's theoretical work into conversation with Abel's poetry and

performance, I am not suggesting a consonance or transferability between experiences and aesthetics; rather, I am interested in the specific ways that Abel's work parses the sign of Indigeneity through and against a settler colonial grammar, showing the particular ways that it resists its appropriative desire through symbolic negation and excess.

*In the Break* figures "the cut" in a number of different ways, shifting its meaning across cultural objects and registers, but refusing to be fully present in any one of them. In this way, Moten's writing *performs* the theoretical concept that it tries, and generatively fails, to conjure in writing. Moten conceives of the cut as "the space between expression and meaning or between meaning and reference" (92)—a space in which we might linger or stall before the closing gates of signification. The cut, for Moten, is subterranean and fugitive. It is once attends every representational act (speech, poetry, music) and yet is audible only through a kind of "bone-deep" (67) listening where we attune ourselves to the interplay of what is *there* and *not there*. The cut is most sensible in improvisation when speech acts are emergent and extemporaneous, when the enjeu of meaning-making has not yet played out to its conclusion. The "ensemble" is one of the primary figures of the cut, referring to the improvisatory jazz ensembles that are the subject of the book, in which no one musician leads or follows but rather the music emerges organically, in excess of the agency of its actors. However, ensemble also leads us down different paths, to the text as a synaesthetic object that is produced both orally and graphically, in which "the verbal" is something that oscillates between writing and speech, inextricable from either form. In the ensemble, "the aesthetic is 'ongoingly' reconfigured and reconfiguring" (60) via a complex, continuous interplay of elements.

The point to be emphasized, however, is that the ensemble for Moten is not a figure for totality or completion—some groovy unity that is achieved when parts converge into a whole. Rather, the cut is inseparable from the ensemble and the ensemble from the cut because the ensemble *is cut by* the same with-without structure as language—what we have elsewhere referred to as sexual difference. Let's unpack how this works specifically in Moten's text. In the chapter "The Sentimental Avant-Garde" Moten discusses the cut in relation to a passage from Jacques Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." He uses this text to explain the interplay of phonic, musical, and graphic elements in Cecil Taylor's spoken word text *Chinampas*, describing the performance—and the recording of the

performance—as an Event (Moten’s capital-“E”). What does it mean for a poem to be an event (or an Event)? Derrida contends that an event’s “exterior form would be that of a *rupture* and a redoubling” (qtd Moten 53, original emphasis), something that exposes the very “structurality of structure” (qtd Moten 53) itself. The event parses the relationship between structure (as system) and structuralization (as function) by delimiting the elements within the structure and making rules to govern their interaction. In Derrida’s words, “the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (qtd Moten 53). Derrida’s notion of structure is curiously resonant with Badiou’s notion of representation, which he arrives at by way of set theory. As discussed in Chapter 1, representation is itself a supplementary function imposed upon a group of elements (what he describes as a “presentation”), an additional symbolic layer that structures their meaning by delimiting them and defining their relation to one another. However, as we will recall from Russell’s Paradox, there is a logical point of inconsistency in which the set, as a function, cannot contain itself as an element. Derrida picks up on this point with regard to structure: “Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (53). By virtue of excluding itself as an element in the set that it delimits, structuralization emerges as a gap within the structure itself, becoming, as Badiou reminds us, the point where “the State blinds itself to its own mastery” (111). Thus there is always a certain x-factor or site of evental potential in even the most hermetic situations because the set cannot, by nature, contain its own organizing principle as a member. Therefore, the center is always inside and outside itself. It is extimate to the set it delimits.

While Moten approaches the idea of the ensemble and its cut from a different theoretical and philosophical tradition (i.e. the poststructuralist rather than the psychoanalytic), the affinities between the two are clear. Indeed, Moten makes this connection explicit when he writes, “It will never be possible to think of this set [i.e. the ensemble] outside of the theme of sexual difference, a theme now inseparable from psychoanalysis” (74). For Moten, sexual difference is mobilized as “an impossible natal occasion” (14) that produces the subject. This impossible origin is at once universal *and* grounded in a subject’s specific geographical, social, and economic position. At one level, the impossible natal occasion aligns with the severed familial ties (and figuratively

maternal relations in the case of the motherland) precipitated by the transatlantic slave trade. Here, the event of colonialism makes a return to state or place of origin impossible, in a material sense. At another level, however, a return to origin is universally impossible because of the subject's lack. Moten gets at this idea when he discusses Freud's observation that the drives (eros and death) tend "towards a return to an earlier state" (29) despite the fact that there is *nothing to return to* because of the fundamental antagonism (i.e. a non-relation) between the two drives. The drives render the idea of an originary unity impossible because they are always "working in tandem, against, or with each other across the cut of a ruptured and im/possible origin [...] each is reducible to the other's origin and one is reducible to its own" (28). The cut, then, is "a rupture of two circles, the familial and the hermeneutic" (14) neither of which will permit a return to an anterior state. We need not choose between the material and philosophical registers of the cut, because the cut is itself "the improvisation of singularity and totality *through* their opposition" (89, original emphasis). Most importantly, the cut asserts itself against the suturing function of fantasy that we see in Dada and its successors, insisting on the impossibility of return, reconciliation, and relation. Yet this fact ought not be read as a barrier to political or social change—in fact, the opposite. By holding open the space of the cut—that is, of non-relation, of antagonism, or ensemble as it has been variously figured—constraint reverses into its opposite, *freedom*, as we linger "in the cut between the dangers and saving powers of (the refusals of) totality and singularity; an improvisation of (the) ensemble" (Moten 96).

Abel's book of poems *Injun* enacts Moten's notion of the cut at the level of form, concept and technique. The book is a conceptual project that extracts and re-sequences phrases from 91 public-domain western novels, turning them into lyric and visual poetry, concordance, and collation. To compose the poems in the book, Abel gathered the novels into a single digital source text and then used the CTRL+F function to search for instances of the word "injun," a query that returned 509 unique results, yielding a twenty-six page document. Each of the twenty-six pages forms the basis for a section of the long poem that opens the book. Abel describes his composition process in the following way:

Sometimes I would cut up the page into three- to five-word clusters. Sometimes I would cut up a page without looking. Sometimes I would rearrange the pieces until something sounded right. Sometimes I would just write down how the pieces fell together. (2016: 83)

Employing the modernist cut-up techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, the resulting poem at first reads as lyric verse, grouped into left-aligned couplets using conventional syntax and grammar, which suggest that we read it for its content. As the poem progresses, however, these structures become increasingly unstable. Stanzas drift from their margins. Lines, then words, are interrupted by caesura and eventually the text's semantic and linguistic content cedes to the materiality of language and the printed text. Single letters and phonemes constellate in a visual field that defies linear reading, instead asking the eye to move saccadically, to fix on different points and yoke them together to produce partial nodes of meaning. In latter sections the poem turns on its head, the text printed upside-down, converging and pulling apart a lexicon of racism, hierarchy, extraction, and dispossession.

The cut is, at first pass, a methodological intervention in *Injun*. That is, poem teaches us how to read (for) the cut itself rather than to read the material that it cuts through. The poem's gradual progression toward the materiality of language edges the threshold of legibility, and yet the poem's overall structure—each of its 26 sections named by a letter of the alphabet—refuses to name an outside to signification. It is not interested in a nostalgic return to a *cri pur* that is before language. Neither is the poem interested in a Mallarméan *coup-de-dés*, attempting to circumvent conscious thought through aleatory writing. While there are elements of chance in Abel's compositional process, the resulting text is charged with a powerful anticolonial message that emerges only through the author's deliberate intervention in the text. This pointed critique is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the "Notes" section that follows the central poem, in which certain words that have been footnoted throughout the poem are expanded into keyword-in-context concordances. These words fall into four different lexical groupings: 1) words that are charged with the valence of racial difference, such as "whitest," "half-breed," and "redskin"; 2) words that relate to the symbolic coding of territory, such as "frontier," "bordering," and "country"; 3) words that relate to economic exploitation and resource extraction: "money," "gold," and "possession"; and 4) words that express affective states, such as "tenderness," "thankful," and "faith." By aggregating words from these different lexical categories, the notes trace a colonizing ensemble wherein the production of racial difference is inextricably linked to the management of affect, land dispossession, and economic exploitation, each depending on the other for justification and symbolic support. The cut(-up) as method in Abel's work does not seek to transcend

meaning (i.e. through decomposition or automatic writing), but rather illuminates the inner workings of structuralization itself. Structuralization is at once the rules of language and the structuralization of settler-colonialism—the process by which certain subjects come to count or not count within ideological formations such as the national body, or the body of white or racialized subjects. The book’s formal qualities make visible the ways that both forms of structuralization work in tandem to produce the racist signifier “injun.”

For his performances of *Injun*, Abel uses the (aptly titled) DJ software Ableton to transpose the visual elements of the text into a sonic analogue. Abel recorded himself reading sequences of the poem aloud, and in performance these recorded sequences are channelled through an Akai APC Mini controller, where he mixes them together in real time. In Ableton, the sequences are subjected to different degrees of distortion. The primary effect of this distortion, as my account of the performance above describes, is to cut the recorded audio arbitrarily into parcels and then loop those parcels in a repeating cycle, which sounds something like a CD skipping or a file buffering. In this manner, words are bisected by the digital cut, their meaning caught in sound like a Fichtean ‘bone in the throat.’<sup>78</sup> The cut makes audible the obstacle to meaning that is inherent in the word itself: its capacity to be infinitely divided into smaller and smaller units of signification without ever extricating itself from the system *tout court*. Like the difference between the divisive infinity of uncountable Real numbers and the structured infinity of countable Rational numbers (see Chapter 1), the digital cut splits the word at its very core between the discreteness of the signifier (as engaged a system of relational differences) and the ambiguity and radical withdrawal of sound. Importantly, neither of these facets is outside of signification. Rather, there is a non-relation between them: the one fills in the gap in the other’s perspective and the two co-constitute each other in this

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<sup>78</sup> As Žižek explains in *Less Than Nothing*, the ‘bone in the throat’ (which he relates to Fichte’s concept of *Anstoss*) is that “which prevents the direct expression of the subject (and which – since the ‘subject’ is the failure of its own direct expression – is strictly correlative to the subject)” (174-175). The ‘bone in the throat’ also points us towards Hegel’s reading of “the Spirit is a bone,” wherein the noble function of the phallus (insemination) cannot be arrived at without first passing through the “wrong” or vulgar function of urination. In this way, what Hegel calls *aufhebung* or sublation contends that “true speculative meaning emerges only through the repeated reading, as the after-effect (or by-product) of the first, ‘wrong,’ reading” (Žižek 2006: 33). It also glosses the famous episode of in Plato’s *symposium* where Aristophanes’ speech about love is interrupted by a bout of the hiccups. Because they mean nothing in themselves, the hiccups reverse into their opposite, the highest form of meaning in the fact that, as Dolar reminds us “*it means that it means*” (25, original emphasis).

process. As we have seen, language depends upon the voice for its material support, but the voice itself is not the other of signification. Rather, it stands in as the structuring logic of signification, the vanishing point of language itself, the moment at which the *actual* division of language is forestalled by a *conceptual* indeterminacy and ambiguity. This is a fact of all language, even when it is used in the most conventional ways. However, mediatisation makes this fact opaque where it is normally transparent. “Where is the poem?” Moten asks, “Is the entirety of the poem ever present to us in any of its manifestations?” (96). Abel’s work resolutely answers: no. The text is an ensemble improvised between its written and performed components, and the impassable cut between them. We hear it, we read it, we feel it; its meaning is not fully present in any one form, but rather emerges in the failure to fully consummate meaning in each of instance.

The question remains, how do the methodological and formal manifestations of the cut bear upon the poems’ content? That is, what does the cut tell us about racialization as a system that governs difference, and how is that difference conceptually undermined or forestalled through its use of the cut as a formal device? One way to answer these questions is to read the word “injun” itself as a kind of cut—a cut that at once engenders a separation (i.e. a structuralization) and that inflicts a wound. The text returns over and over to the primal scene of this cut—indeed, the book’s Appendix collates all 509 sentences in which the word appears, stacking them end-to-end. In reading these sentences, one gets a profound sense of the labour that this term performs in separating “us” from “them,” white settlers from racialized Indigenous peoples and culture. However, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, words and ideas pick up their charge via circulation in an affective economy, and it is the ongoing circulation of these that builds a more or less stable conception of them over time. Even though the value of these symbols comes to seem natural or self-apparent after a while, we must never forget that symbolic coding is the product of ongoing labour. In assembling the instances of the word “injun” together, in the context of their original usage, this normally concealed labour of symbolic coding is made visible. It is impossible to make a clean break between “us” and “them”; rather, the cut of racial difference must be (re)produced

over and over in order to maintain its efficacy.<sup>79</sup> This move responds to a fundamental anxiety about the impossibility of racial disambiguation because, under close scrutiny, the symbolic terms that encode racialization fail to produce difference once and for all. This is why mutually exclusive racial stereotypes can co-exist simultaneously: racialized others are imagined as at once docile and militaristic, noble and degenerate, lazy and conniving. The content of the stereotype is subservient to its difference-producing function. In other words, the desire to express an oppositional relation between races covers up a more fundamental non-relation: that race itself is a barred sign, which exists only in its failure to consummate racial difference at a material level.

There is an ultimate degree of freedom when we move from thinking about race as opposition to race as non-relation. Moten articulates this in radical way: “if we imagine a space between repetitions then we imagine something impossible to locate” (69). This is what Abel’s work deftly accomplishes, pointing toward “something impossible to locate” that vibrates underneath and between the repetitions of racial difference. On the one hand this is enacted by cutting up and remixing the language of the source texts, exposing the astronomical number of linguistic permutations within it. Abel’s inclusion of the source text from which the poem is drawn shows just how many other combinations might have been produced from it. This reservoir of potential language dwells in excess of its manifest content, haunting any attempts to make it perform in the “right” way. Every assertion of difference is (under)cut by a fundamental ambiguity in which that difference falls apart—indeed, this is sensible in the poem’s many resistant, indeed impossible, metaphors like “that injun smell” (6), which point to all the ways in which the other is always unknowable, unable to be contained. Analogously, the cut-up technique foregrounds the ways in which Indigenous experience is always in excess of its representation. The text brings together linguistic instability and racial ambiguity, giving a particular material and political character to the fact that the signified always exceeds the signifier that attempts to capture it. I would argue that this is why the signifier “injun” itself drops out of the Appendix, a blank space appearing in its stead. On the one hand, this represents a refusal to reproduce the wounding word, the primal scene of its trauma,

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<sup>79</sup> Homi Bhabha picks up on this point in “The Other Word,” when he writes that “the [racial] ‘stereotype’ requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes” (29).



even though its absence conjures the very scene it attempts to repress.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, representing the word as a blank space is a way of signalling its lacking core, the fact that it always fails to represent its target, and that Indigenous experience cannot and will not be defined by the organizing grammar of settler-colonialism. The work in performance analogously uses the digital cut to figure this blankness. Inserting a break, a shuddering syllable inside the word, is a means of “lingering in the psychoanalytic break” (Moten 4)—that is, revelling in the indeterminacy of the signified and its unmoored improvisation between signifiers.

Ultimately, Abel’s work resists the idea that there is an anterior subjectivity that we might return to by discovering an “outside” to language. Rather, the text compellingly insists upon “the absence, the irrecoverability of an originary and constitutive event” (Moten 94). This illusory event is at once the generic event of language and the specific, material event of colonization that produces an unassailable grammar of race. Both of these specious events turn around the idea of a loss of something that might be recovered, whether the plenum of an Ur-language or cultural body without otherness. Abel’s work, however, is faithful to an event in a different sense—the event as coincident with lack, non-relation, and antagonism. The formal qualities of the work reverberate through its content, particularly in performance, where the mediatized voice is cut by the digital sample, analogizing the lack in both the word and the voice that serves as its carrier. This kind of event is characterized by a radical openness, whereby the very terms of possibility are negotiated in an ongoing and improvisational way. It is not a matter of changing the patterns of play within the structure, but acting upon the process of structuralization itself.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Jordan Abel for generously discussing his work with me in an interview in the spring of 2017. This interview has been included as Appendix A.

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<sup>80</sup> Moten discusses this dynamic of evocation and repression with regard to Saidiya Hartman’s refusal to reproduce Fredrick Douglass’ description of the beating of his Aunt Hester in *Scenes of Subjection*. See Moten 1-5.

## Chapter 4:

### Towards an Ethics of Listening in Oral Literary History

*But I realized as Lisa and I were talking that I couldn't bring up the recorder, because it would have wiped out our conversation. She is a very private person and changes quite a bit when I bring out a camera, and I know she would have with a tape recorder, too. I do the same thing in conversation. Someone would bring it out to record some of our conversation and I'd just shut up like a clam. Nothing would happen from then on as we talked. There's something about that because conversation is, for me, not like writing a letter that can be read over and over again. It's a very immediate thing. One leaves a conversation just remembering the fragments that you want to remember and leaving it to sift in its own very real, present state of being alive when it was alive. Not now.*

*-Carole Itter, Start / Continue*

The quotation above is excerpted from a 1973 recording in the Roy Kiyooka Audio Archive, titled “Start/Continue.” The tape is an audio letter addressed to Kiyooka from Vancouver artist Carole Itter, then a new mother, daughter Lara still a babe in arms. Itter casually talks about her day and life with the new baby. She describes a hen party that she attended that night with a group of women while their male partners were off at a stag. She offers a detailed description of what they ate for dinner and the conversations they had. Her account of the get-together is narrated after the fact and not documented in the moment because Itter is very conscious of the power dynamics that attend the tape recorder. To record rather than to listen shifts private conversation into the public sphere—an arena that, as we have seen in Chapter 2, is structured by a number of barriers to equal participation, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Indeed, while many of the audio recordings that I examined in previous chapters serve a recuperative function, making audible and revalorizing women’s labour in domestic and community spaces, still others reproduce gendered hierarchies that rest on implicit assumptions about privacy and publicity, and a sense of entitlement to auditory space. With these issues in mind, this chapter seeks to parse *an ethics of listening, recording, and retelling* in academic, personal, and creative contexts. By ethics, I mean not only the standards of ethical conduct that guide our practices as researchers, but also the

philosophical precepts underpinning these standards that are concerned with notions of empathy, collective benefit, and freedom from harm.

However, ethics are by no means universal or transhistorical principles. Ethical conduct is context-specific, defined at once by geographical and cultural milieu, as well as by the actors involved and the relations between them. The meaning of ethics also changes as we shift scale, creating intractable antagonisms as networks expand and thicken. That is, what may be considered ethical conduct in our dealings with an individual might reverse into its opposite as we involve others, scaling up to the pair, the family, the community, the region, the nation, and so on. My goal in this chapter, therefore, is to analyze ethics in site-specific contexts without seeking to resolve these antagonisms of scale. Rather, I want to tease out the particularities of scenarios that are marked by contradiction: for example, when individuals have different approaches towards the disclosure of personal or collective history, or when testimonies contradict one another. These moments put pressure on the ideals underlying ethical conduct in research, forcing us to consider what we value, to what ends our scholarship is put to use, and who benefits from the telling of personal and community histories in this context. Contradiction also puts considerable pressure on the ways that we as scholars interpret and represent histories given to us in oral form, from our modes of listening, interviewing and transcription methods, and writing about, framing, or otherwise representing others' stories.

To think through listening, recording and retelling in an academic context, I first draw on a body of oral historical scholarship that probes the ethics of interviewing and publishing, testing its recommendations against my own experiences conducting interviews from the spring of 2017 to the fall of 2018. These interviews originally aimed to provide context for the Roy Kiyooka Audio Archive; however, they entered into a much broader dialogue about artistic production, gender, and the liminal space between the personal and the political. I interviewed the women artists and writers whose voices sound in Kiyooka's archive: Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Maria Hindmarch, Carole Itter, Daphne Marlatt, Rhoda Rosenfeld and Trudy Rubinfeld. The interviews involved substantial contact with the interviewees before and after the interviews "proper"—in person, by email, and by phone. I believe that these colloquial, undocumented interactions equally form a part of the interview experience and the history I attempt to work through. My inquiry into ethics here is guided by a number of questions at the

intersection of historical theory and practice: Is the goal to present an unbiased historical portrait—the “whole truth” (55) as oral historian Valerie Yow calls it—desirable or even possible? How do we characterize the relationship between an interviewer and an interviewee, and where do we draw the line between the personal and the professional, between friendship and research? Is it possible to create truly collaborative, lateral relations between interviewer and interviewee or is the nature of this relationship inherently structured by a power imbalance that turns around speaking and listening? How do social formations such as race, class, and gender structure auditory space, and how can we counter engrained norms around speech and audition in private and public settings? As a concrete case study in which to test these questions, I examine the theory, methods, and practices that guided my interviewing. Here, I discuss not only the successes of the interviews—the moments in which I truly felt a sense of “shared authority” (Frisch) in the making of a historical narrative—but also moments where that process was fraught, emotional, uncertain, or frustrating.

### **Towards an Ethics of Listening: Theory**

What makes oral history different than other forms of historical representation? What assessments do we make, perhaps implicitly, about information that comes to us in conversational rather than written form? What do these judgements reveal about our values surrounding history, facticity, authenticity, and truth? What does it mean to *listen* in an active, generous, and expansive way, and what are we listening *for* when we direct our listening toward the historical? In her article, “Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research,” Valerie Yow describes oral historians as “collectors and preservers of accounts of human experience...[who] can inspire people to speak honestly and fully about their experiences” (51). Above and beyond their role as researchers, oral historians are entrusted with the responsibility of creating meaningful interpersonal relationships with the subjects of their research, which in turn creates the conditions for the communication of personal narratives that might otherwise remain hidden. Yow’s article parses these two aspects of oral historical work: on the one hand, acting as “collectors and preservers of human experience”, which she aligns with an objective facticity to which the historian is duty-bound; on the other, “inspir[ing] people to speak honestly”—that is, fostering and maintaining respectful, meaningful relationships with the narrators from whose testimony the capital-H “Historical” is drawn. These two

facets of oral history work are in constantly shifting interplay. Under ideal circumstances they complement and mutually reinforce one another; however, this is not always the case. As Yow tells us, “dilemmas often arise over which takes priority—the narrator’s well-being or the respect for evidence” (52) because both make ethical demands on the researcher: the former in relation to their dealings with research subjects and the latter in their professional conduct within the field. In practice, these two aspects of oral historical work are often in tension—for example, when speakers reveal important information about the study topic off the record, or when one person’s testimony may harm another’s physical, emotional, or economic wellbeing. Researchers must respect the conditions of privacy and respect outlined in consent forms and yet ought not to suppress information that may lead to a more accurate historical picture. How are we to navigate these competing claims? Yow’s thoughtful self-assessment in a number of scenarios lead her to a rule of thumb that balances objectivity and ethical behaviour: “tell as much of the truth as you can without hurting anybody living now” (55).

The opposition of these two ethical poles pulls us into a broader conversation about what we think we are capturing when we conduct this kind of research. Yow’s desire to find a balance between truth and harm carries an implicit suggestion what we receive in oral historical testimony is something other than truth—or at least is the truth plus some other kind of supplement. Indeed, in discussing a series of interviews that she conducted with a hospital’s medical staff and administration she tells how she was conscious to separate people’s personal biases from a larger institutional history, especially when the details were about interpersonal conflict. “I approached the testimony critically,” she writes, “[as] social groups—work groups, families, communities—always have some gossip floating around” (54). In the end, she chose to omit personal details about conflict within the institution in favour of a larger structural analysis. To her mind, this was the best way to strike the ethical balance that she describes in her article: truth with mitigated harm. I do not wish to evaluate Yow’s particular approach to disclosure, nor do I want to critique her definition of ethical conduct in the field. What I do want to push against is the idea that *gossip is not history*. While she does not concretely define what she means by gossip, we can assume that her use of the word takes on the trivialized and indeed feminized valence that it does in everyday speech. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines gossip as “casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details

which are not confirmed as true” (*OED*, “Gossip”). On the one hand, gossip relates to a mode or scenario of speech marked by its informality—one that we might imagine as in-person, undocumented, *entre nous*. On the other, gossip is marked by its suspect veracity, the idea that its citability and therefore credibility are suspect.

Questions about the nature of the supplementary object that we receive alongside historical fact and what we ought to do with it preoccupies a substantial body of oral historical literature. Michael Frisch, for example, elaborates this point in his 1990 book *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History* when he notes two common assumptions about oral history that play out in a polarized, often dichotomous manner. On the one hand, oral history is characterized as “pure memory” (10): conveyed through subjective, firsthand recollection, which adds some embellishment on top of objective historical fact. It is history plus *something else* that is not history, and it is the historian’s job to sift history proper from this other matter. On the other hand, precisely because of its subjective nature it is at the same time viewed as “pure history” (10)—that is, “as more or less direct and unmediated experience, rather than as the abstracted and ordered rendering of objective historical intelligence” (7).<sup>81</sup> Like eyewitnesses in a court case, oral sources are deemed authentic and true because the speakers were present for the events that they describe, and can recall them on demand.<sup>82</sup> Assumptions about the nature of oral testimony shuttle between these two positions—often indiscriminately and uncritically—demonstrating the anxieties within and outside of the field about its historical and scholarly legitimacy.<sup>83</sup> Frisch moves closer to unravelling this dichotomy when he points to the complex interplay of temporalities in oral history as the past is narrated in the present: oral histories involve “historical statements rather than, or in addition to, historical evidence” (7). In other words, they indicate a narrator’s position towards the act of telling (the present) just as much as the story’s content (the past).

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<sup>81</sup> Joan Sangster describes a similar dichotomy in her article, “Telling Our Stories” when she writes, “We need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works, of treating oral history only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history, compensating where we have no other sources, or ‘better’ history, a ‘purer’ version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it” (88).

<sup>82</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 27-28, Philip Auslander on the preference of live oral testimony in evidence law.

<sup>83</sup> See H. Hodysk and G. McIntosh, “Problems of objectivity in oral history.” *Historical Studies in Education* 1.1 (1989).

Alessandro Portelli expresses a similar idea in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* when he writes, “Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (36). There is a complex and retroactive temporality in oral history that functions as a kind of *capitonnage*, fastening our cumulative life experience back onto the past and in the process giving it its meaning. Because of this inevitable condition, there is no fixed, stable description of a past event. Rather, we receive a version of that event brought into focus through the lens of the present, with all of its attendant filtering and distortion. However, to imagine that we might access objective historical truth by simply bypassing this subjective, present-tense lens is a fiction, mistaking a lack for a loss: the telling of history *is only possible* through the application of this retroactive distortion. This is why the same story cannot be told exactly the same way twice: myriad fluctuations in wording, intonation, and ordering occur every time one tells and retells a story because the story itself consists in those details, too. Details of form (that is, oral delivery) vacillate in the evental site of the story’s telling: the auditors, the space, the occasion for telling, the presence of a recording device...<sup>84</sup> In oral history, just as in literature, form is tantamount to content in the production of meaning.

This is perhaps what Slavoj Žižek means in *Less Than Nothing* when he insists that we must make a distinction between “(factual) truth and truthfulness” (24) when approaching a narrative: the former is concerned with the manifest content of speech, while the latter has to do with the formal effect of the telling itself, which is legible in its own way. In making this distinction, Žižek connects with Jacques Lacan’s famous dictum that “the truth has the structure of a fiction.”<sup>85</sup> By this, Lacan simply means that it is impossible to reproduce the facts of an event in a documentary way since there is always some intervention given in the narrator’s subjective position. Not only does this mean that the neutral, transparent documentation of an event is impossible, but that the truth *only exists* in this distorting swerve of symbolization. Žižek relates this point

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<sup>84</sup> On March 4, 2018, I went for dinner at Erin Moure’s house with a group of eight or ten other people. The occasion for the gathering was that New York poet Alice Notley was in town for a reading, and she accepted the invitation to have dinner and give a private reading at Erin’s the night before. She read from her incredible new work “Malorum Sanatio” and told a story about meeting Jimi Hendrix and Alan Watts at the same New York party in the 1960s. After the reading, I expressed how much I was moved by her words and how much I wished I had recorded it. She simply said, “You wouldn’t have heard what you heard tonight if you had.”

<sup>85</sup> See *Écrits*, 642: “truth shows itself [s’avere] in a fictional structure” (translation by Bruce Fink).

explicitly to the narration of trauma when he comments on Theodore Adorno's injunction that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz: on the contrary, he argues, "the Holocaust can *only* be represented by the arts: it is not the aestheticization of the Holocaust which is false, but its reduction to being the object of a documentary report" (23). This fictional structure is especially relevant in the narration of trauma, where the unspeakable facts of the traumatic event prevent it from being articulated by the narrator in a coherent way—we can think, for example, of the testimonies given in cases of violence or trauma in which the objective details and sequential ordering of the event often recede from view and are instead obscured by temporally disjointed, unmoored feeling.

However, this lack of symbolic coherency is equally relevant to the foundational trauma of *articulation itself*—what Lacan terms symbolic castration, which I have discussed at various points throughout this text—a condition which prevents a speaker from narrating her own life as a coherent, continuous phenomenon. Our self-narration—who we are, what happened to us, the causes that produced certain effects in our lives—by necessity misses some essential part: there is more than we can tell and even if we could tell it, it would not fully explain the effects that ripple out into our personal and social histories. This is both the strength and the challenge of working with oral history: we must hold different kinds of truths together simultaneously even when they are partial or even contradictory. The subjective truth of an event—what someone believes about a particular event in her life or a broader historical phenomenon—is *true* even if it is factually *inaccurate*. The field of oral history has been attuned to this fact for quite some time, moving away from a model of objective history and concerning itself more and more about historical truthfulness that emerges through the formal characteristics of narrators' speech. As Portelli explains, "Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge... [T]he diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts" (37, original emphasis). An emphasis on differential kinds of truths does not mean that we deny speakers a sense of historical agency, or to suggest that it is impossible to speak to a greater sense of causality in historical work. Rather, it suggests that we ought to pay close attention to the tension between what is said and the formal



mechanisms that contour how it is said, what is left unsaid, or perhaps what is unsayable.

In line with my conviction in previous chapters that we must be attentive to the ways that artistic and narrative form *speak around an absent core*, I want to suggest here that oral history might orient itself around a similar kind of fidelity to lack which pays attention to the articulate meaning of what cannot be spoken or uttered. Ludwig Wittgenstein declares in *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (89) and this chapter seeks to theorize and concretize the “whereof” and “thereof” in one particular context. Here *silence*, as a figure for what cannot be said, takes on two distinct valences. The first is an ontological sense that exclusively deals with the missing signifier, the in-built failure of language to express everything (or anything) and meaningfully connect with a real-world referent. The second is a material sense, in which social context determines the enunciability of certain topics according to societal mores, values, and conventions—in short, through structure. In this second context, the barrier to articulation is not the failure of language itself—though, indeed, this oftentimes comes into play (more on this later). Rather, in this second scenario, enunciability is conditioned by a codified set of social rules that discipline speech in private and public settings, and which play out differently according to a speaker’s subject position. The first scenario refers to what cannot be said *under any circumstances*; the second refers to what cannot be said, here, now, in this place, under these *particular circumstances*.

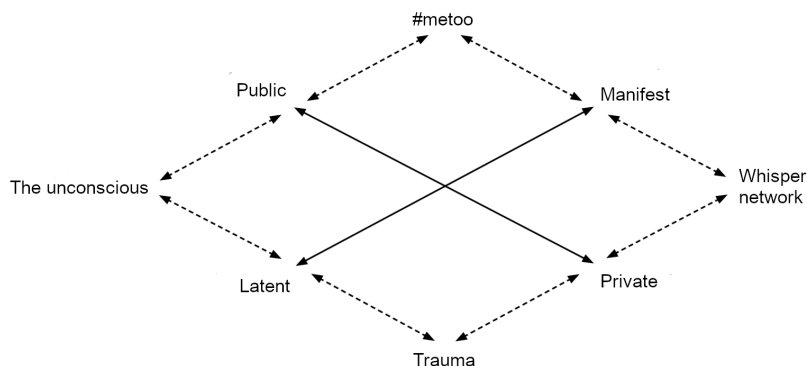


Figure 5: Semiotic square mapping ontological and material axes of enunciability

We can usefully map out these two structures of enunciability using a semiotic square that opposes speech that is given in private and public settings (material), and speech content that is manifest and latent (ontological). In the former axis, we distinguish between speech that is public (documented, citeable, available for public witness, and therefore deemed historical in the sense described by Frisch above) and private (undocumented, materially unfixed, available to only a select group of people, and therefore deemed hearsay, conjecture, or gossip in the sense described by Yow above). In the latter axis, we differentiate between manifest and latent content in the psychoanalytic sense; the former term referring what can be said or uttered in a conscious way and the latter referring to imprint of the unconscious mind, which can only be grasped through its absence and formal distortions on the manifest content of speech. In the top quadrant, between public and manifest, we have the hashtag #metoo, which catalyzed a discussion of sexual harassment, violence, discrimination, and abuses of power in the public sphere beginning in the fall of 2017. The #metoo movement transported the formerly private discourse of the whisper network (the right-hand quadrant of the square) into the public sphere, leading to a public discussion and indictment of gendered violence. The whisper network or “back channel” refers to the private conversations held between individuals, mostly women, femmes, and other vulnerable groups, that served as a means of warning and protecting one another without leaving a public-facing paper trail that could be leveraged for litigation, censure, and harm. On the left-hand side of the quadrant is the unconscious, in the way that Lacan defines it as simultaneously public—in that it issues from, belongs to, and is direct towards another, the big Other—and latent—that is, outside our control and prone to slips, errors, and telling omissions. Finally, between the latent and the private there is trauma—that which cannot truly be expressed in any forum, private or public. While a certain aspect of trauma is no doubt articulated in all the other quadrants (i.e. the #metoo movement, the whisper network, etc.), it also retains a quality that cannot be expressed under any circumstances—neither in public nor in private. This unspeakable character of trauma refers to its persistence in the unconscious as a symbolically unassimilable object—something that we can only talk around, or talk of through its after-effects.

With these two different structures of silence in mind, I’d like to examine some excerpts from the interviews that I conducted to sound out their gaps and overlaps.

However, in applying these claims I make about enunciability to others' speech, I want to take a self-reflexive position that does not purport to hold incontestable interpretive authority. Rather, following the lead of feminist oral historian Joan Sangster, I want to probe which ethics are involved in *reading and interpreting* these silences: for while they are audible as a kind of formal twist, their meanings can be multiple, uncertain, and contradictory. That is, if we view narrative form as semantically tantamount to the content of a narrator's speech, then there is a parallel to be drawn between the interpretive activities of the historian and the psychoanalyst: both interest themselves in the speaker's slips, metaphors, puns, jokes, intonations, hesitations, repetitions, refusals, and silences—those moments where speech is not quite fully in one's control. If this is the case, then another ethical quandary pronounces itself: is it possible to truly have symmetrical relationships between interviewees and interviewers when the onus of interpretation falls on the latter? Can there ever be an equal relationship between one who speaks and one who listens?

### **Listening in the Contours: Ontological Silence**

My interview with Maxine Gadd, Rhoda Rosenfeld, and Trudy Rubinfeld took place on March 17th, 2017 in the Strathcona home that Rosenfeld and Rubinfeld have shared for several decades. Born in England just before World War II, Gadd is a Vancouver-based poet and resident in Vancouver's downtown eastside. She was a founding figure in several aesthetically experimental arts and writing movements from the 1960s onwards, including Intermedia, an interdisciplinary arts collective, and *blewointment*, a small publishing operation edited by bill bissett.<sup>86</sup> Gadd published extensively in the little magazines and mimeographed newsletters of the 1960s, and was a longstanding participant in collective, improvisational performances with various members of Vancouver's literary, artistic, and musical avant-garde. She is the author of numerous books and chapbooks of poetry, including a two-volume collected works published by Newstar Books under the titles *Backup to Babylon* (2006) and *The Subway*

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<sup>86</sup> The Vancouver arts collective Intermedia began in 1967 as "a society and a public workshop dedicated to the collaborative exploration of new technologies by artists" (*Vancouver Art in the Sixties*). Responding to Marshall McLuhan's notion of the "global village," Intermedia included in its ranks artists, poets, musicians, dancers and academics, many of who worked between and across these media. *blewointment* was a book publishing company that grew out of the literary periodical of the same name, founded in 1962 by the poet bill bissett. It was noted for its lowercase, phonetic spellings and for its hand-decorated and mixed-media covers and inserts (*Geist*).

*Under Byzantium* (2008). Rhoda Rosenfeld is originally from Montreal. Her artistic practice unfolds at the intersections of textuality and visuality, using video and audio media to explode the semantic and temporal possibilities of language. She published work in 1970s and '80s little magazines such as *BC Monthly*, edited by Gerry Gilbert and Bob Amussen. Trudy Rubinfeld grew up in New York and moved to Canada in the early 1960s. She is a visual artist whose practice has involved painting, video, photography, and performance. Her work is interested in documenting the lived process behind the painting as an artifactual object. Past works involved photographing the transformations of a painted canvas across iterations, and her more recent work interrogates the idea of the painting's fixity through the intervention of digital video. All three women were involved in longstanding collaborative projects with Roy Kiyooka that incorporated vocalization, improvisation, and conversation, and as such their voices feature prominently in his sound archive.

I arrive a few minutes late for the interview and I'm out of breath and have sopping sneakers from sprinting through marshy Maclean Park, in my memory a blur of green dotted with a vast number of white geese. We sit around the large, dark-grain wood dining room table, which is set with an assortment of snacks—fresh strawberries, homemade cookies, raw almonds, pistachios, and an open bottle of red wine. The light is particularly warm for early springtime in Vancouver and hits the welded metal sculpture of ovoid shapes that hangs in the window, casting banded shadows on the table between us. This is not the first time I've met the trio of women who now sit around the table. Rubinfeld asks if I'm warm enough and I'm reminded of the first time I met the three of them at Turk's coffee in Gastown: as I shook Gadd's hand to introduce myself, she exclaimed, "My god, your hands are freezing!" and insisted that I take her gloves, reassuring me that she keeps an abundance of extra pairs in her apartment for just such an occasion. The wine glasses fill and we settle into our seats around the table. I turn on the recorder and the conversation takes off at a breakneck pace. In the presence of these women, I am struck with the sensation that I am entering into a conversation that has been going on intermittently for many years—decades, even. The three of them talk at such a clip that I hardly have time to glance down at my interview guide, which now strikes me as overly structured and not particularly useful for the occasion. Speech is like a ghost zinging around the table, entering someone's mouth and inhabiting them for a few seconds before moving on to someone else. Laughter is provoked easily and spills

out raucously; the three of them reminisce, tease each other, speak on each other's heels, finish each other's sentences. They ask each other questions and ask me questions, too—"But tell us, how did you end up in Montreal?" and "How are you these days?" They ask each other questions frequently and earnestly, such that I feel like we all take turns acting as interviewer and interviewee—"And what year was that?" "How did you two meet?" "But how did that make you *feel*?" I sense that these friends share a deep repertory of knowledge and reference—not just personal history, though they've clearly done more than a few things together over the course of their intertwining lives. But there is also a common cache of cultural matter that is significant to them, both individually and as a group—a webby network of paintings, texts, songs, quotations, sayings, and jokes. References to work produced by their friends and contemporaries move seamlessly alongside the canonical masters—de Kooning, Carole Itter. Socrates, Roy Kiyooka. Ernest Hemingway, Sheila Watson.

The conversation wanders of its own accord as we chat about a variety of things: Kiyooka's love of the Polish bakery on Powell Street, Rosenfeld and Rubinfeld's respective undergraduate studies at McGill and Sir George Williams University in the 1960s, the student occupation that took place at the latter in winter of 1969, Gadd's young single-parenthood when she was a student at the University of British Columbia. A topic that crops up more than once, however, is the incredible cultural energy of Vancouver in the 1960s and what that moment meant to those involved. Near the beginning of the interview, just as I switch on the tape recorder, the three of them are discussing Kitsilano in the 1960s and all the little community shops that no longer exist.<sup>87</sup> This specific memory interludes a broader reflection on that time in their respective lives:

Rosenfeld: I remember reading George Bowering saying, "There was something in the air in those days that you can't describe to young people." It's so hard to describe what was going on.

Gadd: It's a lot different.

Rubinfeld: Well, no, all time is like that.

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<sup>87</sup> Kitsilano, a neighbourhood in Vancouver's west end, was a hub for countercultural activities in the 1960s and '70s, and was home to many of the artists and writers who I interviewed over the course of my work. The neighbourhood is the subject of Maria Hindmarch's poem "Kitsilano 1963-1969," in which she details all the collective activities of cooking, making, talking, and socializing—a different documentary approach this particular neighbourhood's history (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148059/kitsilano>). The poem was the topic of a recent PoemTalk with myself, Al Filreis, Karis Shearer and Erin Moure.

Gadd: No.

Rosenfeld: No, no, I don't think so. The whole rest of my life didn't have feelings like that in it.

Rubinfeld: But everybody's life has a time.

Gadd: The sixties was the last reaching for liberty of self, and soul, and mind.

Rosenfeld: That's true.

Rubinfeld: That was the last of the culture's reaching for your own—

Gadd: Your own person.

Rubinfeld: Did you give it up?

Gadd: What was my own?

Rosenfeld: Reaching for liberty. (01:04 – 01:46)

The discussion resumes later on in the interview with more specificity as we talk about the Intermedia Society as a singular moment in Vancouver arts production history. Here, we discuss not only this sensation of living in an unrepeatably time—one might say an *event* in the sense that I discuss in Chapter 1—but also some of the particular material circumstances that made it so unique:

Gadd: Well, it [Intermedia] was a limited space, you know. There wasn't that much money to get stuff.

Rubinfeld: But you did very well by using the Roneo.<sup>88</sup>

Gadd: The Roneo was great, yeah.

Rubinfeld: You made a book. That's pretty amazing.

Gadd: *Practical Knowledge*.<sup>89</sup> I went downtown and got some male pornography and put—

Rubinfeld: <overlaps, exclaiming> What?

Gadd: I did the cover of *Practical Knowledge* as a male torso covering

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<sup>88</sup> i.e. The Roneo mimeograph machine to produce chapbooks and other publications.

<sup>89</sup> *Practical Knowledge* is a self-published chapbook of poetry and images that Gadd produced using the Roneo mimeograph machine at Intermedia in 1969. It is reproduced in Gadd's book *Westerns*, published by Air Press in 1975.

itself here <laughs>.

Rosenfeld: <overlaps> Oh my god. I never noticed it.

Gadd: But then it was lots of things from magazines and things like that.

Rosenfeld: The amazing thing was that you could go and somebody would teach you to use something in an hour. Later, all these things became institutionalized and there were workshops where you'd pay hundreds of dollars to learn the same thing. So we were all teaching each other. I learned to use the halftone printing.

Gadd: The Roneo?

Rosenfeld: No, it was halftones that put dots into—

Rubinfeld: Newspaper?

Rosenfeld: —that put dots into a photograph so that you could print it like pixels are now.

Rubinfeld: You were doing that?

Rosenfeld: Ed Varney taught me how to do that for printing purposes.<sup>90</sup>

Rubinfeld: Remember Ed Varney?

Rosenfeld: And I set up a dark room there, at Intermedia. If you had an idea and you wanted to do something, you could just go and somebody would show you how to use whatever.

Fong: That kind of model doesn't really exist anymore, does it?

Rosenfeld: Not anymore, no. It became institutionalized and monetized.

Gadd: Yeah, monetization is the view, isn't it?

Rosenfeld: Suddenly there were classes and workshops that cost hundreds of dollars for the same thing.

Gadd: And the things you'd produce would be—

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<sup>90</sup> Ed Varney is a Vancouver-based artist and curator who works across media, including writing, painting, collage, sculpture, printmaking, photography, concrete poetry, and Mail Art. He was a member of Intermedia, Fluxus, Dada, the Mail Art Network, AVA (Avenue for the Arts), and a founding member of the Vancouver Poetry Front, Pacific Rim Consciousness, The Roundhouse, CVAA, Grupo des Artistes, Artropolis, the Poem Factory, Intermedia Press, and the Museo Internazionale de Neu Art. (ava-artists.org)

Rubinfeld: Suddenly you had to buy a glass of wine at a gallery opening.

Rosenfeld: Yeah! Remember those days when they used to have free wine?

Gadd: Free wine, yeah.

Rosenfeld: And cheese and crackers.

Gadd: And cheese. And sometimes you hadn't eaten all day <laughs>! There was a lot of poverty. But it was poverty that was—

Rosenfeld: We were young and poor.

Gadd: It was much easier.

Fong: It also seems that there's just not the same amount of space for it.

Rosenfeld: Physical space?

Fong: Yeah.

Gadd: Yeah, all the spaces die.

Rosenfeld: But it wasn't easy then either, because Intermedia kept moving from place to place. The bulldozers were always one step behind you.

Annotation: <all laugh>

Rosenfeld: I mean, every time I moved into a place in Kitsilano, all my friends would help me paint, and paint, and paint.

Rubinfeld: We painted so many houses. We promised ourselves, "I'm never painting another place!" and then would wind up having to paint yet another place.

Rosenfeld: I lived in so many places. Like, I think 11 places in 12 years.

Rubinfeld: I bet it was more than that.

Gadd: Yeah, me too.

Rubinfeld: But it cannot be compared. It can't be compared, one time to another time. What we were able to experience in that time, there is no way that it can be experienced now.

Gadd: It's hard to know, though—



Rubinfeld: Oh, please. The economic and political, the commercialization, the corporate control...

Rosenfeld: Even the population. The population is so much greater now. There's so much pressure and stress on people.

Gadd: Property, too. I mean rents now are just outrageous.

Rubinfeld: I mean we had "drop out, turn on." That was an ethos.

Annotation: <overlapping inaudible speech>

Rosenfeld: And Mothers of Invention, that kind of thing, that you would begin again and you would invent your way forward. A lot of things that are now a part of the college movement started as— You know, we thought there would be solar energy in ten years, that everyone would have it. That kind of thing. The whole food thing.

Rubinfeld <to Maxine, about snacks> No, no, 'cause I don't want to eat too much. You take some.

Rosenfeld: Organic. You know, we were all eating Indian food and vegetarian, and the spirituality that went along with that. You know all this. We're telling you stuff.

Gadd: And what was that stuff from Mexico?

Rosenfeld: Cosmic consciousness. Mind-space and space-space. Are we telling you anything you need to know?

Fong: Yes. Definitely. (1:45:44 - 1:50:54)

I am interested in these two moments in the interview because we get a sense of *that thing* beyond the historical. It is something that is sensible if only as a wavering feeling that we reach toward but cannot quite grasp. The discussion begins with a general feeling of something that *can't be articulated*, which Rosenfeld evokes when she quotes George Bowering: "There was something in the air in those days that you can't describe to young people." While Rubinfeld probes the idea that perhaps this is a universal condition of all experience—"Well, no, all time is like that"—there seems to be consensus in the end that there was something uniquely compelling about Vancouver in the 1960s and its particular combination of place, people, time, and cultural zeitgeist. These conditions created something singular, formative, and unrepeatable, both in terms of their impact on individuals' lives and how they experienced themselves as part of a community. In the latter excerpt, we delve into the material specifics that contributed to this feeling. On the one hand, it had to do with a certain set of sociocultural

circumstances around Intermedia: the fact that the Society was funded by the fledgling Canada Council for the Arts, which allowed the collective to offer its space, services, and shared knowledge without charge, as Gadd and Rosenfeld describe. However, it was also the result of a particular set of local socioeconomic circumstances, which are thrown into sharp relief against the situation of contemporary life in the same city: while poverty, economic disparity, and gentrification were as much a part of life in the 1960s as they are now, there is a sense that their detrimental effects were at least partially mitigated by access to common resources and a spirit of fraternal support. Descriptions of shared food, communal space, and collective forms of labour and reproduction feature not only in this interview with Gadd, Rosenfeld, and Rubinfeld, but in all the interviews I conducted with women of that generation.

However, these memories cannot be articulated without some inflection from the speakers' experience of the present. As Rubinfeld expresses—perhaps in exasperation (“Oh, please!”)—the circumstances of the 1960s cannot be replicated in the current moment because of the “economic and political, the commercialization, the corporate control”—to which Rosenfeld adds, “Even the population.” Access to the dwindling resources that support cultural production, coupled with a larger producing population means that competition, rather than collaboration becomes the primary paradigm. In this manner, there is a sense that the meaning of the past becomes clarified by virtue of what is no longer possible in the present, even if the present circumstances are precisely what makes the meaning of the past so hard to articulate (i.e. to “young people”, today). Finally, following on the heels of this very situated and material discussion—of material space, of socioeconomic reality, of collective social formations, all of them specific to Vancouver in a given period—the speakers allude to a more widespread countercultural ethos, expressed in Rubinfeld’s quotation of the phrase Timothy Leary spoke at the 1967 Human Be-in in San Francisco: “Turn on, tune in, drop out.” In one sense, these words seem infused with a very profound and personal meaning. The idea of inventing a way forward through turning on and tuning in is at the heart of the group’s longstanding collective vocalization/music-making project with Kiyooka.<sup>91</sup> However, there is also an acknowledgement that these phrases have lost something of their meaning through their

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<sup>91</sup> In Michael de Courcy’s 1998 film *Voice: Roy Kiyooka* (1998), Gadd says of their music-making practice, “If we talk, the words are so destructive sometimes...The music’s not an escape from what we do subjectively, alone. It’s an escape from what we do with words together, collectively” (00:12:24.07).

repeated circulation as tropes—a fact that Rosenfeld acknowledges in when she says, “You know all this. We’re telling you stuff,” and then asks, “Are we telling you anything you need to know?”

The way the conversation unfolds allows me to tenuously grasp the “something in the air” that marked a historical period for which I was not present. I feel it analogously alongside my own experience of things that I have known—for me, the punk scene in the late-1990s with its dumpster diving, hall shows, and Xeroxed zines—while at the same time knowing that it is nowhere near the same. Through the interview, I come to understand something about this cultural moment on an affective level—to feel alongside it, as Sara Ahmed says—though by the end I am perhaps more reticent than ever to make any pronouncements about what this period meant, or why it was possible, or why it cannot be replicated in the current moment. Even in this short conversation, there is a potent sense of how the event is overdetermined by its causes. The fact that the conversation moves, almost hysterically (in the psychoanalytic sense), from topic to topic illustrates the restless frustration with enunciability, as if to say in each circumstance, “That’s not it!”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, there are several competing truths in this discussion: for example, the observation that Intermedia could not exist in the present because there is no space for it while, in actuality, it could not even exist *in the past* because there was no space for it; that the doxa of the countercultural era can at once be powerful mantras of political resistance and self-actualization even as they are commodified as t-shirt slogans and car commercial taglines. In the layering these different explanations of cause, however, a form emerges of *that which is in the event more than itself*—something impossible to articulate in its fullness and yet legible nonetheless. For me, this phenomenon aligns with the naming of an event that I discuss in Chapter 1: to name an event is not to assign it a singular cause or meaning, but to remain faithful to its proper name as an empty sign, mathematic variable, or placeholder. It is in cycling through these different names as objects that a kind of formal reading of the event’s truth takes place, and to me, this is where oral history makes its most significant intervention. It gives us the chance to return to history again and again under the banner of different names without closing off the past as an evental site. Not only does oral history name certain factual truths, it also contours a *truthfulness* that can only

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<sup>92</sup> Here referring to Slavoj Žižek’s joke about the conscripted soldier in *Less Than Nothing*; see Chapter 3, p.115 – footnote 77.

be expressed through multiple tellings, self-contradictions, and a variety of statements, none of which quite fit. However, the question remains: what can historians *really* say about this unsayable matter? What interpretive activity can possibly exist in relation to a historical truth that can only be defined through negation? Before I can meaningfully answer these questions, it is important address a second type of silence that turns around what can and can't be said within specific material contexts.

## Listening in the Contours: Material Silence

In “Learning to Listen: Interview Technique and Analyses” in the feminist oral history reader *Women’s Words*, Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack discuss a particular vacuum around gendered experience in oral history. They write, “the expression of women’s unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women’s interests and experiences are at variance with those of men” (11). The authors’ use of the metaphor “muting” has important resonance for what we hear on archival recordings and in oral histories alike. In the case of the former, oftentimes the act of recording structures itself in accordance with set conventions around gender, amplifying certain voices while diminishing others. For example, a 1975 recording from Kiyooka’s archive records “Conversations at 1455 Cypress Street,” the address of the home that Daphne Marlatt and Kiyooka shared in the early to mid-1970s. The recording captures a conversation between literary critic John Bentley Mays and UBC professor Warren Tallman about an article that Mays is writing on Marlatt’s work for *Open Letter*.<sup>93</sup> Mays and Tallman have a lengthy conversation about the contemporary reception of Marlatt’s work and how it hasn’t gotten the critical attention that it deserves. Tallman insists that there is a “time lag” that surrounds all great works of poetry, arguing that twenty years thence, Marlatt will be one of the most lauded poets in Canada (in retrospect a savvy prediction). While Marlatt is the subject of this conversation—a conversation for which she is presumably present, for the most part—she is not one of the primary participants, interjecting only once to say, “Well, god help me if I ever appear on the cover of *Maclean’s*. I want to continue being an underground writer. I don’t want to ever come up from underground” (11:09). She also interjects at some point to ask,

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<sup>93</sup> The completed article appears under the title “Ariadne: Prolegomenon to the Poetry of Daphne Marlatt” in *Open Letter* 3.3 (Fall 1975).

“Who’s boiling the coffee?” (5:54), shortly after which she and Carole Itter retreat to another room—presumably the kitchen—and have a separate conversation, just the two of them. This conversation is *audible*—that is, we can hear just enough of it to know that it is happening—but it is *muted*. We cannot make out any of the words that Marlatt and Itter speak to each other. While it is easy to chalk up this phenomenon a gendered division of space—the men in the public-facing front room, closer to the *polis* than the *oikos*—the fact that this recording and countless others like it *mute* women’s voices is inextricable from Itter’s earlier statement that the tape recorder makes public space around it. Public space, *instantiated by the recorder itself*, is much more easily inhabited, navigated, and held by those in dominant subject positions—in this case, white men with a certain degree of cultural capital and public presence (Tallman with his faculty position at the University of British Columbia; Mays with his long-running column in the *Globe and Mail*). Indeed, the gendered organization of space that we hear on this recording is not a unique phenomenon, but something that occurs again and again in recordings in Kiyooka’s archive: of all the tapes containing mixed-gender speakers that I have transcribed from this collection, women’s statements are much less likely to be audible than men’s simply because they are not within close proximity to the tape recorder.

If this gendered “muting” is a common characteristic of sounded archives—and, indeed the low number of female speakers in SFU’s collections as a whole seem to suggest that this is the case—then oral history offers important restitution for those silences, allowing historians to give space to and amplify marginalized voices. Indeed, I believe that many of the interviews that I conducted are a way of putting women’s thoughts, opinions, labour, contributions, and achievements back on the public record. For example, Judith Copithorne and Carole Itter both speak of UBC professor Helen Goodwin’s important contributions to the development of a unique and longstanding multimedia practice in the West Coast avant-garde; Maria Hindmarch describes Ellen Tallman’s pivotal role in the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference by mobilizing her connections with writers south of the border, and the important presence of Margaret Avison and Denise Levertov at that event, especially for the young female writers in attendance. However, I also noticed over the course of my interviews that oral histories are not exempt from a social structuring of speech that plays out along gendered lines. As Anderson and Jack suggest, evidence of this gendered structuring *within oral history interviews themselves* takes many forms, including women’s self-censorship,

downplaying their own contributions, emphasizing facts over feelings, and combining two conflicting perspectives on an event—one that reflects the concepts and values of patriarchal culture, and one that reflects a more intimate register of personal experience at odds with those values.

In my experience, the most obvious gendered structuring of speech plays out around things that were said on and off the record. That is, there were clear boundaries around statements that could be made in private and statements that could be made in public, and it was the presence of the tape recorder that mediated that space of publicity. I think one reason for this division is that there exist certain historical truths that cannot be transferred from private to public registers without risking significant harm to the people who have experienced them—and yet, these truths deeply inflect our sense of history even when we cannot talk about them in a public way. It stands to reason that subjects who have been harmed or marginalized by their efforts to participate in the public sphere often are most sensitive to these boundaries and therefore most likely to monitor them. I first got a sense of this particular type of material silence when I entered into conversations with art historian Lisa Marshall and Artspeak's then-curator Kim Nguyen in the winter of 2014.<sup>94</sup> I had just arrived in Vancouver to begin my PhD at Simon Fraser, and the three of us talked about organizing a series of readings, talks, and lectures at the gallery that could mobilize our historical work in a public way. Marshall had recently completed a residency at Artspeak during which she undertook dozens of oral history interviews with members of Vancouver's contemporary visual arts scene.<sup>95</sup> We commonly found in our work that there were a number of topics at the intersections of gender and labour that interviewees were reluctant to discuss in a formal (that is, recorded) setting. These topics included: the uneven distribution of visual and aural space in public forums (artists/writers talks, galleries, classrooms, workshops, readings, etc.); the gendered disparity of administrative and other forms of immaterial and affective labour in communities and coteries; the withdrawal of female artists and

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<sup>94</sup>Artspeak is a non-profit artist run centre established in 1986. The mandate of the gallery is to encourage a dialogue between visual art and writing (Artspeak.ca). The gallery follows in the multidisciplinary lineage of spaces like Intermedia, having shown and hosted many writers and artists involved with the Society, and was closely aligned with the Kootenay School of Writing, a Vancouver-based writing collective active that formed in the late 1980s.

<sup>95</sup>The output of this residency is a digital script entitled "Talk: A postscript to some recorded conversations about art and text, in and around Vancouver," which weaves together fragments from her interviews, the archive, and art historical texts < <http://www.artspeak.ca/talk/>>

writers from their professional communities as they became increasingly involved in domestic life and care for their families; the gender bias in anthologization and canonization, and the quotidian performances of affiliation and camaraderie that shape these practices. Oftentimes we found that the discussion of these issues happened off the record in candid, one-on-one conversations. There, speakers felt more comfortable discussing these issues without the fear that they would be censured for their opinions or that their statements would have a negative impact on their personal or professional lives. We found that these particular strands of dialogue could not be replicated on the record and furthermore that when they did crop up, speakers often wished to edit or omit statements that they had made.

Marshall, Nguyen, and I wondered what kind of event structure would make it possible to talk about these issues in a more public way. We ran through different scenarios that we hoped would mitigate the barriers to equal participation in public speech: What if we had an informal discussion where there was no discernable division between speakers and audience members? What if the space were limited to the participation of self-identified women and non-binary individuals? What if we gave participants the opportunity to respond anonymously and we read their statements aloud to the group? What if part of the event involved making space for one-on-one conversations *en masse*, i.e. where audience members could go talk to the artists and poets we had interviewed in an intimate space with no recording devices or other people present—including us as organizers? In the end—perhaps fittingly, given the private nature of the speech that was its object—the series never materialized. We could not secure funding for events that were not inclusively geared toward public knowledge mobilization, and our precarious status in our respective professional milieus (mine as a graduate student; Marshall's as limited-term resident) meant that we did not, in the end, have the time or affective resources to carry the series out on our own. It was, however, an interesting speculative exercise to think about how to go about making private speech public, and indeed whether we could or even *should*, for that matter. Many of the women we approached as participants were hesitant to speak publically about these topics even with our proposed adjustments to the event structure, leading us to ask: what do we do when speakers want to tell us their stories in ways that conflict with the public-facing demands of the academy, gallery, and/or the historical record? What is my ethical

responsibility as the auditor of these private statements and as someone who wishes to write about this community history?

These questions become all the more pressing when a kernel of private matter cannot be represented on the public record because it involves an incident of trauma or violence. If the #metoo movement has taught us anything it is that no community history is without its narratives of gendered misconduct, harassment, abuse, and verbal and physical violence. Literary history in Canada is not exempt from these narratives. In fact, a series of events in 2017 and 2018 revealed just how prevalent these kinds of abuses are in both the Canadian writing community and the academy that supports it.<sup>96</sup> As these events unfolded while I was conducting my interviews, many of the conversations I had off the record tended toward the state of contemporary Canadian literature and the gendered inequalities of its social field. The then-current events served as a gateway to talk about the workings of structural power not just as contemporary problem, but one with a deep-seated history. There was the observation, for example, of a connection between the 1960s sexual revolution and contemporary rape culture, each with their focus on access to women's bodies: where the former encourages women to cast off the yoke of repressive sexuality by granting men sexual access, the latter recasts that access as an object of male entitlement that is met with violent reaction when it is denied. Similarly, there was a critical discussion of ethos of conviviality that was so important to fledgling creative writing programs in the 1960s as bound up with transgressed professional boundaries in the cases of sexual misconduct that occurred decades later. Beyond the discussion of these topics in a general way, there was also a quiet discussion of specific incidents of violence and trauma within the community itself—not just in my conversations with interviewees, but also with my contemporaries and other community members. These discussions deeply informed decisions that I made regarding my own research, though I do not feel at liberty to write about them here. Indeed, I feel a strong sense of the boundary between public and private discourse that writing, like tape recording, occasions. Even without having disclosed any personal details, there is a sense that I risk breaching that boundary simply by citing my knowledge of those details in this forum.

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<sup>96</sup> Notably, the events surrounding the dismissal of UBC Creative Writing professor Steven Galloway in response to allegations of sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse, and the investigation of two Creative Writing professors at Concordia University. See Erin Wunker, Hannah McGregor and Julie Rak, *Refuse: Canlit in Ruins* (Book\*hug, 2018).



My experience with off-the-record discussions in oral history interviewing resonates with Emma Healey's personal essay "Stories Like Passwords," which was published on feminist media site *The Hairpin* in 2014, and which catalyzed an inquiry into sexist, abusive, and violent practices in Canadian Creative Writing programs—particularly Concordia University. In the article, Healey discusses her experience attending the Banff Writer's Workshop where, behind closed doors, a group of women shared their experiences with abusive men in the writing scene. "A story like this is a password," Healey writes, "Once you say it out loud, doors start to open" (par. 3). Healey points to the fact that when histories of violence circulate, oftentimes they tend to do so through the backchannels—the whisper network—through face-to-face conversations between individuals or in small groups. As Itter says on the "Start/Continue" tape, the making of a public record oftentimes wipes out private conversation precisely because of its citability—a feature desired as much for the processes of litigation as it is for the historical record. Indeed, as the #metoo movement proved all too well, survivors of gendered and sexualized violence may be hesitant to come forward in a public manner for fear of negative consequences, from public ridicule, to threats of physical violence, to the looming risk of professionally and economically ruinous litigation. On the one hand, it is essential that we provide public space where the stories of survivors of gendered violence can be heard, and oral history can offer itself as one space of audition among others—in tandem with the digital where so many of these contemporary conversations have played out. Oral histories about gendered violence could provide space for these narratives to be heard *differently*—that is, outside the economy of factual truth, where the truthfulness of subjective, affective experience might make itself heard. On the other hand, this is only a desirable goal if it serves the communities we work with, and it is up to those communities to determine how and when their stories make the transition from private to public space. In this manner, I want to think of oral history as a liminal space that bridges between private and public domains. It need not be bound to the demands of objective history in the way that Yow describes, even as it gives us a meaningful sense of causality, intersubjective connection, and meaning. Rather, it gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the silences, material and ontological, that act as open sites to which we can return, again and again, to negotiate new channels of historical meaning. Perhaps most importantly, however, to approach oral history in this way—as a field that offers a method for listening to, and making meaning of, silence and contradiction—is to provide a blueprint for different kinds of listening, ones in which

subjective truth is brought into focus by attention to narrative form and registers of enunciability.

## Best Practices and Anxieties

With these goals in mind, I would like to conclude by discussing my own practices, intuitions, leanings, and sympathies in response to the many questions that I have raised (and deferred) in this chapter. Approaching the interviews with little formal training in oral history has been both a boon and a challenge. On the one hand, I believe my background in literary study has made me amenable to reading the historical in a literary way—one in which form is paramount in making meaning, and in which factual details can only be read within the context in which they are uttered. On the other hand, this interest in reading form has made it difficult for me to say much of historical import in the documentary sense, for while I do believe that there are a number of factual revelations in the interviews I conducted, it is not my position (nor my interest) to forge these into a coherent, argumentative narrative about a particular moment in history. Rather, I see my role as a literary historian as having a more exploratory function: to probe the gaps and silences in both historical records and the narratives that we offer to fill in those gaps. In this way, I find myself reading the texts of oral history as a literary critic, asking, “Why this choice of words?” “Why this particular metaphor?” or “Why this sudden jump in time?” Such experiments yield interesting results, but I am *anxious* about the ethical implications of this kind of reading.

Earlier in the chapter I asked, in what sounds like the setup of a joke, “What’s the difference between a historian and a psychoanalyst?” Both are figured as subjects supposed to know, to use Jacques Lacan’s key term in the analytic process: the subject supposed to know is one who the analysand believes holds the key to interpreting their speech, who will unlock the meaning of their symptom. There is an ethical impetus to this position because the analysand *trusts* that the analyst knows “what it is all about [i.e. the symptom]” (Lacan 1998: 231, original emphasis), even if this is not in actuality true. Rather, the analyst’s symbolic position as subject supposed to know occasions the event of *transference*—that is, a structured intersubjective relationship between the analyst and analysand, through which the analytic process takes place. Transference occurs when the analysand attributes knowledge to the analyst, and in so doing directs his speech toward discovering the analyst’s desire (*‘Che vuoi?’* he asks –“What do you want

[from me]?”). He performs his speech in accordance with what he imagines is the analyst’s desire and, in so doing, exposes something of his own desire in the process. In this way, the desire of the analyst and analysand are inseparable. In Lacan’s formulation, “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (1998: 235), with the analyst standing in for the big Other from whom and to whom all speech issues.

Thus, there is a parallel between the position of the historian and the analyst—both with the mantle of knowledge conferred upon them by their respective social bodies. In the process of an interview, one gets a sense that the speaker does, in some sense, perform for the desire of the historian as Other, as a representative for some larger, future-oriented body. Rosenfeld asks me: “Are we telling you anything you need to know?”—presuming that I myself know what I need to know. In this manner, coupled with the fact that the historian must produce an object of knowledge at the end of the interview, there is a structural power imbalance inherent in the interviewing process, just as there is in the process of analysis: the one who listens is imbued with a certain power because speech is directed toward her. She is presumed to know because she approaches the interview with a historical hypothesis in mind and this in itself structures the way knowledge and truth circulate in that context—as *directed toward* and *performing for* the historian-as-Other’s desire. This is where I find a limitation to the notion of a “shared authority” in oral history interviewing, as Michael Frisch describes it: yes, every interview is a co-production between the interviewer’s questions and the speaker’s testimony. And, yes, it is of the utmost importance to give discursive and interpretive authority to speakers at every opportunity: in reviewing and editing transcripts and publications, in being able to withdraw their consent from a study with impunity, and in ongoing dialogue about the work and its present and future dissemination. However, the relationship of speaking and listening is never one of perfectly reciprocal balance and this is something we must be mindful of when conducting oral history research. The rhetoric of shared authority can mask power imbalances, especially when there is a disparity between the social and economic position of the researcher and the interviewee. Just as it is unethical for historians to deny the authority of their interview subjects by treating them as mute objects that need speaking *for*, so too is it unethical to uncritically adopt a stance that sees a merely lateral or non-hierarchical stance between researcher and subject.

Admitting the uneven power dynamics in interviewer-interviewee relationships is not to say that the researcher is without her own desire, however. There is also an obverse structure of desire that plays out in the fact that the researcher similarly views the interview subject as possessing a certain knowledge that she does not have, but desires to know. Discourses of truth and authenticity in oral history speak to this desire: the interviewee's personal experience of a historical event means that she has something the historian wants—especially when this experience authenticates the latter's claim. In my own experience, I have oftentimes had a hunch about “something in the air,” as it were, about the historical period that is the object of my study, and my lines of questioning and habits of listening are attuned to the evidence that supports those hunches. This is not to suggest that there is something inherently mercenary or extractive about this kind of historical work—even though there have been many cases in which it has—but simply to say that the historian is implicated in desire just as much as the research subject, albeit in a different way, and this is perhaps where she parts ways with the analyst.

Here, I have outlined two structures of desire that take place on an intersubjective level in the interviewing process. We can perhaps say that these two desires intertwine to the point of being co-constitutive, but ultimately they run on separate parallel tracks without intersecting. The gap that separates them is the idea of truth as *truthfulness* that cannot be fully manifest by either party. Just as the speaker cannot ever fully manifest the story of herself in a coherent way, so too the listener can never fully know the other's experience, much less retell it in a way that is not filtered through her own desire. However, each in her own way strives to overcome this gap and, in the process, the two attain some form of rapprochement. On a practical level, I think there are a number of best practices that keep these desiring structures in the fore without attempting to cover over their contradiction or non-relation. The first is that both parties, researcher and interviewee, should be as open as possible to the vicissitudes of the interview process as an event. For the interviewer, this means being attentive to topics of conversation that digress from the purported “purpose” of the interview. Some of the most compelling insights I gained from the interviewing process had ostensibly little to do with the main discussion topic. For example, I was most interested in the moments when speakers discussed their families of origin because, as I discovered, these reflections often contained important, formative perspective on speakers' attitudes and values toward

gender roles, the division of labour, and sociality. It seemed, too, that speakers were often more relaxed and animated when discussing these lateral topics because there was less pressure to offer the “right” answer or to say something profound about the study topic. Secondly, I found immense value in returning for successive interviews whenever possible, as this gave the opportunity to revisit stories and listen to the minute fluctuations in their retelling. I found, too, that oftentimes in my first round of interviewing that I had difficulty letting silences speak for themselves—that I was too eager to step in with new questions, too keen to fill any dead air, when a more productive approach would have been to use silence as an organic space for reflection. While listening to and transcribing the original interviews, I made note of the places where more space was needed and returned to these moments in successive interviews to expand the dialogue around them. In experiencing multiple tellings of a story, a sense of *truthfulness* thickens around them; we begin to grasp what is at the heart of the narrative that is in it more than any one of its instantiations. Finally, I believe that the most compelling interviews are those in which the desires of the interviewer and interviewee can play out in a forthright, complex, and improvisational way, as they did in my interview with Gadd, Rosenfeld, and Rubenfeld. In this scenario, I found myself performing as a speaking subject as much as a listening subject, and was many times called upon to clarify my own position and intentions vis-à-vis the interviewing process and my intentions in asking certain questions. While I believe that this is in some capacity unique to this particular interview—a combination of the interviewees’ incisive thinking and comfort level with each other—I think this self-reflexive capacity can be fostered in all interviewing scenarios by making oneself open to questions, by clarifying or interrogating one’s motivation in asking certain questions, and by offering personal opinions and testimony about the topics introduced to interviewees. Overall, an ethics of listening, to me, is as much about expanding space around content of speech as it is listening *for* a manifest historical truth. This means developing different aspects of audition that are attuned to listening to form as well as silence, and to open ourselves to talking *around* the absences at the core of every speech act. This kind of listening addresses itself to the truth *as an event* that I have reformulated in various ways across this document: truth not as a name that can be given or as a cause that we aver, but in its most radical sense as a lack that we return to, again and again, wavering with slightly different frequency in each successive play.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Maria Hindmarch, Carole Itter, Daphne Marlatt, Rhoda Rosenfeld, and Trudy Rubinfeld for sharing their time and invaluable insights during our conversations in the spring of 2017 and beyond. Selected transcripts of the interviews are attached as Appendices B-D, with the interviewees' permission.

## Coda:

### On Listening Hysterically

*To really listen is a skill in which one must generate acute sensitivity, and an active receptivity. To reiterate, being receptive is not passive, it is active. Being receptive is not 'feminine' (here used pejoratively), it is just intelligent. If you think of the best person you know, I bet that person is a good listener, and the worst person you know is not a good listener, at least not to you...A good listener/reader is often an empathetic person and an empathetic person is empathetic because they are able to perform the act of listening with the maximum perspective possible. Perspective comes from what else but a lot of listening, and reading is an alchemical form of listening.*

*-Laura Broadbent, In on the Great Joke. (42-43)*

It is my hope that this text has illustrated the radical, transformative possibilities that listening affords—in the study of literature and beyond. As the above passage from Laura Broadbent's book of poems *In on the Great Joke* insists, listening is anything but passive: in cultivating a receptivity to others' speech (sound and gesture), we broaden our capacity for affective engagement with the world—the key to opening greater degrees of manoeuvrability and change. It is fitting that Broadbent makes listening into an ethical benchmark—good listening makes good people—and not only because the statement is so anecdotally true. In Benedict de Spinoza's *Ethics*, he insists that living an ethical life is first and foremost about increasing “what the body can do” (71) in relation to others—amplifying the conditions under which “the body's power of acting is increased” (70) rather than diminished or restrained. Along these lines, Broadbent rightly suggests that listening affords us the maximum perspective possible, but reminds us that this perspective is hard-won by cultivating listening as a conscious, everyday practice.

Listening in the context of literary study attunes us to the ways that careful audition can amplify the frequencies that are muted in our day-to-day lives. In listening to documentary recordings, for example, we hear the social parole that goes on behind the scenes of literary production, allowing us to hear vocal constellations that perform affiliation and influence much differently than in print-based networks. Documentary close listening can amplify women's voices, labour, and contributions, as it does in the

1969 recorded conversation between Warren Tallman, Maria Hindmarch, and Stan Persky. In this conversation, Hindmarch's role as auditor is not only generous and receptive, but also one of active critique, revision, and commentary. Time and again, she intervenes to insert women's names back on the record, and our role as contemporary listeners is to register that speech and carry it forward into successive histories.

Listening also factors into our reception of sounded literary works in a way that not only broadens their aesthetic parameters, but also asks us to be attentive to sonic and linguistic form—the ways that cutting, sequencing, distortion, and temporal manipulation operate on meaning. Here, our listening is directed toward instances where auditory verisimilitude is shattered, making us conscious of the ways that representation and symbolization in language are acts that leave a gap or lack in their wake. When our attention is focused on lack, we become conscious of the multiple, analogous ways that it structures the world: the political systems that count subjects in order to make political reality operative, and the construction of racial difference, which must assert itself over and over to cover up its own status as a sign that cannot close.

Finally, listening makes us sensitive to the boundaries between private and public speech and the ways that the personal disclosure has different consequences for different subjects. In the practice of oral history interviewing, this at once involves listening for the formal qualities of speech that signal something beyond what is uttered in a manifest way, and also asks us to develop a sensitivity for how and why certain statements are made on and off the record, and what we can do to as researchers and auditors to give each form of statement as much space as possible. When we are attentive to the implicit rules that govern enunciability, we can slowly and deliberately start to shift the space around those rules, challenging our default behaviors around the division of auditory space and the hierarchization of voices.

I want to close by returning to the active/passive distinction that Broadbent troubles in regards to listening and insist that receptivity *is itself active*—not in the frenetic, productive ways demanded by capital, but as an expansive stilling, as Ellen Tallman says in her 1983 conversation with Roy Miki. This stilling acts as grounds for reflection and cultivation, wherein relations might thicken, solidify and grow. Listening is also active in the sense that, on its flip side, it involves tirelessly asking questions that in turn invite further listening—return, clarification, edification, reversal. A related thread



that runs through this text is the focus on what we might call the politics of hysterics. Rather than asserting, “This is the Master Signifier” (the cause, the solution, the answer, the cure to the symptom) the hysteric asks, “Why is this the Master Signifier?” That is, she recognizes the object’s spurious designation as that which fills the void (of desire, of signification, etc.) Of Lacan’s four discourses (Master, university, analyst, and hysteric), the hysteric’s discourse is the only one with the *objet a* in the driver’s seat, so to speak. The hysteric’s discourse employs an interrogative rather than affirmative address, and I think that this approach can to certain extent codified as methodology, against its pathological aura. Each chapter in this text in its own way issues a call to put lack in a position of highest esteem without ontologizing it—which is to say, without making it about a lack of this or that but staying true to its structural position. I believe that a politics of hysterics is extremely timely, especially at a moment when the statement of facts is an all too ubiquitous discursive mode. A good ethico-political rule of thumb is to ask more questions than one makes statements. The adoption of an instrumentally hysterical stance is a means of holding open difference, lack, and non-relation and, in so doing, staying true to an evental site wherein radical change is truly possible.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Interview with Jordan Abel**

**Annotation**

00:00:03.76

<Skype ringing>

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:11.84

Hey!

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:12.62

Hey!

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:13.89

How's it going?

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:15.13

Good, how are you?

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:16.96

Good.

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:17.44

Are you back home now?

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:19.54

Yeah, I'm in Robson.

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:23.83

How was the Olympia trip?

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:26.48

<laughs> It turns out Evergreen College is in the middle of the woods, and all of the professors and students also live in the woods, some in houses and some in tents.

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:40.23

Whoa.

**Annotation**

00:00:41.04

<both laugh>

**Deanna Fong**

00:00:42.89

So where did you stay?

**Jordan Abel**

00:00:47.76

It was so weird. I ended up staying in two houses and they were both the weirdest hippy shacks I've ever seen. I just never imagined tenured professors would live that way.

**Deanna Fong**

00:01:04.79

That's kind of cool, though.

**Jordan Abel**

00:01:08.66

Yeah, it was interesting. There was this dinner party that I was at, and the people who were in attendance didn't drive there, they just like wandered in out of the woods.

**Annotation**

00:01:22.24

<both laugh>

**Jordan Abel**

00:01:25.15

It was super densely wooded, but I guess everybody lived close together. Yeah, that was kind of weird.

**Deanna Fong**

00:01:36.00

That must have been a weird sight, just people coming out of the forest. Convening.

**Jordan Abel**

00:01:39.86

Yeah, it was bizarre.

**Deanna Fong**

00:01:45.96

Yeah, man, that's a different academic world. I guess SFU is a tiny bit woodsy on the way up, but that's something else.

**Jordan Abel**

00:01:53.22

<laughs>

**Deanna Fong**

00:01:57.07

And how was the talk?

**Jordan Abel**

00:01:57.78

The talk was good. Basically, the day before I was writing all of this stuff and I ended up with so much material that I didn't get to it all.

**Deanna Fong**

00:02:17.92

That's always a good situation to be in. Sometimes you never know if it's going to take 10 minutes or 45 minutes.

**Jordan Abel**

00:02:26.82

<laughs> Totally. I'm so glad that it took 45 as opposed to 10. It gave me a lot of room to work with.

**Deanna Fong**

00:02:37.70

That's always my approach for TAing. Just have two hours of material ready in case they whip through everything at a breakneck speed. Then at least you'll have something for them to do.

**Jordan Abel**

00:02:50.67

Exactly.

**Deanna Fong**

00:02:52.19

And usually you only get to one tenth of it.

**Jordan Abel**

00:02:55.86

Yeah, it's perfect. Then you have more material for next time.

**Deanna Fong**

00:02:58.67

Totally. Good strategy. Over-preparation.

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:06.65

Yeah, no doubt.

**Deanna Fong**

00:03:06.90

So, I'm awkwardly writing this paper about your work. It's so weird because so many times I'm like, "Jordan's work..." And I have to erase it and write, "Abel's work."

**Annotation**

00:03:20.27

<both laugh>

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:23.42

Oh, that's for real! For reals work.

**Deanna Fong**

00:03:26.94

Separating the king's symbolic body from the king's actual body, so to speak. Pretty weird.

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:31.24

<laughs>

**Deanna Fong**

00:03:34.40

So did you have a chance to look at those pretty half-assedly formed questions that I sent you?

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:41.51

Yeah, I totally did.

**Deanna Fong**

00:03:42.50

Sweet.

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:44.27

Let me just find them here.

**Deanna Fong**

00:03:44.93

Okay.

**Jordan Abel**

00:03:55.77

Yeah, I'm pretty sure I had thoughts about all of them. Are you recording?

**Deanna Fong**

00:04:05.19

Yeah. It's making a waveform, so I'm assuming that it means that it's all audible. If not, I can always just try and remember it.

**Jordan Abel**

00:04:19.02

I never understand how people do that. Sometimes I'll watch Chelsea do interviews and she won't have her recorder out and she'll make some notes and I'm like, "How do you pull quotes from that?"

**Deanna Fong**

00:04:38.25

I'd be so afraid to misquote somebody, or just be like, "That's the general spirit, I think, of what they said."



**Jordan Abel**

00:04:44.35

"I mean, that's kind of what I remember about it."

**Annotation**

00:04:44.35

<both laugh>

**Deanna Fong**

00:04:48.66

If my arguments with Justin are any indication, my memory is definitely not verbatim.

**Jordan Abel**

00:04:57.55

Oh, yeah, mine too. Very, very selective. <laughs>

**Deanna Fong**

00:05:00.83

Selective and also... Inventive?

**Jordan Abel**

00:05:07.64

That's fair. So should we just start with the first one?

**Deanna Fong**

00:05:16.58

Yeah, totally. I'm going to pull it up.

**Jordan Abel**

00:05:19.21

<reading> "What is the technical process behind the performed work? What software/hardware do you use?" Okay, so I use a program called Ableton...

**Deanna Fong**

00:05:23.09

Appropriately named.

**Jordan Abel**

00:05:35.81

A fitting name. <laughs> Ableton's a DJ software. So the way it works is that it's designed so that you can have these repeating clips, multiple repeating clips, and you can switch between and across clip sections. So that's the software, and I use a DJ controller that's specifically designed for Ableton called an Akai APC Mini. In the past I've used an Akai APC 40. They basically do the same thing, one's just significantly smaller than the other.

**Deanna Fong**

00:06:33.97

And that's the mechanism that controls how you switch between multiple channels?

**Jordan Abel**

00:06:39.42

Yes. So, it's very tactile. Basically, each button on the controller represents the clip, so using that technology allows me to control audio in a much different way than if I was in front of a microphone.

**Deanna Fong**

00:07:12.78

Yeah. I've been writing around Wayde's turntable performances, and he's using the turntable as a way of taking his work, cutting it up and sampling it, and putting it into a paratactic relationship with all of these different texts. He's really interested in the materiality of the turntable, whereas I think— What is the device called? Is it a sampler?

**Jordan Abel**

00:07:44.76

Oh, it's a controller.

**Deanna Fong**

00:07:48.06

It's a controller. My vocabulary for these things is out of date.

**Jordan Abel**

00:07:53.32

No, no, it's all good. It operates via samples. Just thinking about the differences between Wayde's turntable performances and my performance is that the physical medium has been removed. All of the samples are pre-recorded digital pieces. Potentially they could do very similar stuff or accomplish similar end goals.

**Deanna Fong**

00:08:57.21

Yeah, but the affordances of the medium are so different. Instead of having the two tracks on the turntables and mixing them together as this kind of call-and-response formation, this is so dispersed and diffuse.

**Jordan Abel**

00:09:26.54

Yeah, that is true. So I think just having the two records on two turntables and doing the call-and-response thing, I guess it essentially limits you to two track formations or two simultaneous audio outputs, whereas the Akai APC Mini, plus Abelton, I can do up to eight simultaneous tracks, so it's four times the amount of track information. Plus the ease of switching back and forth between tracks is really very quick. I can have up to eight different things playing simultaneously, and also switching one of those eight things out takes a matter of seconds.

**Deanna Fong**

00:10:31.48

As opposed to changing the record or flipping it over.

**Jordan Abel**

00:10:36.58

Yeah, exactly. So there's definitely a kind of digital immediacy.

**Deanna Fong**

00:10:46.99

Definitely. So what is the actual process of putting a performance together like? Is that largely intuitive? Presumably it's different every time.

**Jordan Abel**

00:11:02.64

Yeah, so before I perform these things publically I spend a bunch of time feeling things out and seeing what works and what doesn't work, and that process is actually really time-consuming trial and error. So much of it depends on not only the quality of the recording that I produced, but the degree to which I remix it and cut it before I put it into Ableton. There's some pre-production work where I'll take a bunch of clips and put them together in certain kinds of ways and then put it into Ableton, so that the clip isn't necessarily just my voice. There are also potentially other editing layers that happen before. So I think maybe the best way to describe it is that I've always tried to create audio that somehow matches up with the book that I'm attempting to represent. For example, my performance of *Injun* has got these two simultaneous tracks. One of them is distorted and one of them is undistorted. Those two tracks have a really long playing time before I introduce other tracks. So it's actually just two channels for the first ten minutes or so. Then, at the ten-minute mark, there's this moment where I start adding in a bunch of additional tracks that are all distorted, and then I continue to add those additional tracks until essentially you can just hear this kind of distorted noise. Then I turn off the opening tracks and switch them out for the two closing segments. To me, the way I'm thinking through this performance is that when I look at the book on the page, there's this kind of trajectory that leads towards this gradual disintegration and inverting that happens in the text. That trajectory, after that moment of inversion, coalesces back together somehow. I think that pattern and movement is something that I was really interested in attempting to capture somehow. To me, that's what I'm thinking through in attempting to bring that performance out. In order to get there, I've tried a bunch of ways to let that happen. Some of them have been less successful than others.

**Deanna Fong**

00:15:43.88

Well, this anticipates my next question, because definitely there's a shape to the performance that acoustically mirrors what's happening in the book, but at the same time, distortion is not the same thing as disintegration or dispersal. It's a different effect. Where in the printed text language breaks down into this single-letter materiality—it's isolating phonemes and making meaning in this very provisional way that depends on the reader's movement through that text—in a way, distorted sound is in excess of the fixed materiality of the letter. Distortion draws syllables out as repeated, noisy sounds, right?

**Jordan Abel**

00:17:15.75

Sure.

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:16.38

So, I'm interested in the ways that sound in that case is maybe less contained than the text. Not that the text itself is necessarily contained, because it's dispersing and reversing things.

**Jordan Abel**

00:17:44.06

I totally get what you're saying. I think the thing you're talking about is something that is something that I've been conscious of. That the sound performance of my work at times takes on a totally different character than the work itself. The way that I've been trying to think through that is that the work on the page is my starting place. The work in performance is, perhaps necessarily, a different entity. It is potentially informed by what happens on the page, but maybe not contained by it. The way I've talked about it before is performance is almost a parallel artistic practice to writing for me. I've been interested in thinking about what performance is and what it means, and how it makes sense to potentially perform my work differently than it appears on the page while still talking about it or represent different aspects of it somehow.

**Deanna Fong**

00:19:29.36

Yes, because it asks a whole different set of questions.

**Jordan Abel**

00:19:34.66

One of those questions to me is the position of the author. Because I think on the page, especially if we're thinking about *Injun*, on the page it almost does appear that there's a singular authorial presence. Especially in the way it starts out kind of lyrically. But, of course that's a lie. There are 91 different books and 20 different authors, including myself. That, to me, becomes clearer later on, on the page. But in the performance space, especially the way poetry performance spaces are... I don't know if "curated" is quite the right word, but there's a very particular vibe that poetry spaces have.

**Deanna Fong**

00:20:40.63

Yeah. And like poem voice. Up-speak.

**Jordan Abel**

00:20:40.83

<laughs> Yeah, the poet-speak, the podium, the microphone. Maybe no podium. But there's this very singular vibe that poetry performance spaces have. They're all very focused on the idea of the singular author. To me, that's something that I've been interested in thinking about and maybe rethinking or disrupting. One of the ways that I've been trying to do that is in performance, when I'm playing clips of my voice but not speaking, the position of the author is somewhat compromised or shifted somehow. To me that's really interesting. I'm not totally sure if that lines up with how those authors are represented and distributed on the page, but I think it's a gesture towards authorial presence somehow.

**Deanna Fong**

00:22:04.01

Yeah. I'm also thinking through these performances maybe through the lens of Fred Moten, what he calls the call to order, that the call to order is all these modulations of the univocal voice of the sovereign. He's talking about the teacher calling the class to order, or the conductor calling the orchestra to order, or the university calling the lecture to

order. All these different ways that colonialism as an assemblage tries to fix subjects into these unilateral positions. So then having that polyvocal performance that mirrors what is already a polyvocal performance in the work, it's a call and response in that sense that totally disrupts this idea, both in the author and these representational structures of colonialism.

**Jordan Abel**

00:23:25.82

Yeah, there's a lot of that.

**Deanna Fong**

00:23:32.27

So one of the things that Wayde said about his performances is that mediatizing it in that way, he's inserting the turntable as a mediator between his body and the audience, and in that way it's both disrupting this notion of authorial isolation, but also in his mind disrupting the specularization of the racialized body. There's a demand on that body to produce this kind of authentic voice, and so mediatization is a way of refusing that call.

**Jordan Abel**

00:24:20.25

That is really interesting. I do wonder about that. I was just listening to a conversation between three Indigenous authors happening on CBC that was in response to that appropriation prize thing. These three Indigenous writers are basically just talking about their positionality as Indigenous peoples in the writing and publishing world. One of the things that got brought up was from this Anishinaabe scholar at U of M, Niigaan Sinclair, and he was talking about the ways in which we perform or are expected to perform Indigeneity, and about what happens when we don't perform Indigeneity in the ways that we're expected to. I've never really articulated this before in the ways that Wayde seems to have articulated it, but I do think there is a very specific way that Indigeneity is performed and also not performed in the context of these performances. It operates outside of a lot of different understandings of what Indigeneity is or can be. I'm interested in thinking about that. One of my main interests as a writer is the appropriation of texts that talk about Indigenous peoples. I do think that's largely because of my position in Indigeneity as being both an intergenerational survivor of residential schools and an

urban Indigenous person. Both of those positions have led me to be disconnected from my home community for various reasons. I think about how other Indigenous authors have navigated the world and how what they've written is so much about Indigenous nationalism and relationship to Indigenous community, and writing about Indigenous knowledges, worldviews, and understandings. My particular performance doesn't necessarily engage with those things. To me that's really interesting. The things I engage with instead are these representations of Indigenous peoples through text. Somehow, there is a mediation between myself and Indigenous community, and specifically the Nisga'a community. And I think potentially there's a link there between performance and community.

**Deanna Fong**

00:28:58.49

Yeah, definitely. Relatedly, one of the links that Aldon Lynn Nielsen makes when he's talking about African-American postmodernism is that there are formal and aesthetic strategies that get a particular kind of experience of black subjectivity that can't be expressed in any other way. There's no way that realist prose gets at that experience. But the consequence that these texts are disavowed from this community of black writing that sees itself as having a kind of authentic voice, that there's a kind of voice that can be known, and this is not one of the voices that it seems to represent. But then it's also removed from the canon of avant-garde writing, too, because it doesn't totally fit that paradigm either. So we're talking about the ways that texts like this, that are operating at the intersection of formal innovation and trying to express a very particular racialized subjectivity, are just deaccessioned because no one knows what the fuck to do with them.

**Jordan Abel**

00:30:41.02

Shit. That's messed up, yo.

**Deanna Fong**

00:30:45.41

Totally. But just speaking to what you were saying, there's such a breadth to the experience of Indigeneity that we need so many different strategies, aesthetically and



politically, to speak to that. But it makes it uncomfortable for people who have an essentialist notion of what those categories are.

**Jordan Abel**

00:31:20.82

Totally. I definitely agree with that.

**Deanna Fong**

00:31:34.17

So I have to ask you a question about the mask.

**Jordan Abel**

00:31:44.70

Oh, the mask. When did I first don the mask? Wait, I know the answer to that. Shit. Maybe I don't know the answer to that. So, I first did the AKAI-Ableton thing at the CCWWP Conference at UBC in I want to say 2014. It was the summer of 2014, I think, that I first did that performance. I wore a different mask. It was a red plastic mask. I don't know if it had any defining characteristics. It was this matte, red, cheap plastic mask. That was the first mask I wore. Shortly after that, I ordered the other mask, the green one with the L-wire. But I can't recall which performance specifically I first used it at. It was somewhere in 2014, I think.

**Deanna Fong**

00:33:39.26

Is there a way in which putting on the mask is a way of mediating between yourself and the audience? Was that in your mind when you decided to do that? Or is it something totally different?

**Jordan Abel**

00:33:48.58

I think I was interested in mediating and displacing. This goes back to the role of the author. My vision of what the mask would do is that I'd turn down all the lights and just have the mask, and would play clips of my voice without actually saying anything. I don't know if I was thinking mediation, but I was definitely thinking of interrupting and

displacing authorial presence. Which potentially could be mediation.

**Deanna Fong**

00:34:53.21

Yeah. Well, I was thinking, too, about all the different ways that the mask signifies. Like...Was it Gillian Wearing? I definitely had Gillian Wearing in my mind when I wrote it, but that's not it. Angelika Festa. That's it. So she has this performance where she goes into public spaces and she's got this mirror for a mask.

**Jordan Abel**

00:35:24.40

Oh, cool.

**Deanna Fong**

00:35:24.46

So I think the idea is refusing or bouncing back a gaze, in this case a patriarchal gaze. Rather than being an object of the gaze, casting the gazer's gaze back on them. But I'm also thinking about the mask in DJ culture, too, because the software for your performances draws on that culture. So someone like Deadmaus with the mouse head.

**Jordan Abel**

00:35:58.78

<laughs> The big mouse head! I do have to admit, I think that is a part of it for me as well. I think about my own creative practice on the page as having these interesting connections to remixing and sampling that all DJ culture is about. It made sense to continue to draw those connections. I don't know if it was Deadmaus specifically. Probably not.

**Deanna Fong**

00:36:49.95

Maybe not.

**Jordan Abel**

00:36:51.28

But that whole culture of mask-wearing DJs makes a lot of sense to me when you're up there pressing buttons.

**Deanna Fong**

00:37:05.45

Yeah. But there's also a celebrity culture thing, too, that you get to be anonymous and have a personal life that's separate from the persona that you put forth on the stage.

**Jordan Abel**

00:37:22.88

Yeah, that part definitely didn't work out for me.

**Annotation**

00:37:24.80

<both laugh>

**Deanna Fong**

00:37:26.31

Everyone knows it's you. <laughs> [...] Oh, here's a question: are you thinking of releasing the performance as a kind of text or art object in its own right?

**Jordan Abel**

00:39:30.53

Oh, that's interesting. I feel like a few people have asked me about that. I don't know, maybe. At one point I did look into what it would take to put together a cassette tape with an MP3 code on it. [...] I think I'd be open to it if it were the right circumstance and medium. At the same time, though, I'm interested in what it means to have it just exist in a performance setting. Especially because my performance of *Injun* has changed substantially since I first wrote it. I used to just read it out essentially in front of a microphone. And likewise, my performance of *The Place of Scraps* has changed pretty substantially, too, and has gone through different phases of technology and mediation. That's something that I find really interesting about performance is how as an artist I can continue to reimagine what these books sound like in a performance space. Not that it isn't worth documenting these things, but I think I'm also interested in the uncapturable

moments of performance.

**Deanna Fong**

00:42:20.19

Yeah, the way the performance itself is always kind of fugitive, any specific performance. I suppose there's an argument that the minute that you record that and cut it up, then it's a *thing*, right? People refer to that performance instead of the performance as a concept, right?

**Jordan Abel**

00:43:00.02

Yeah, but I think it could also be cool. Potentially I'll make that happen.

## Appendix B.

### Excerpt from Interview with Daphne Marlatt

*This interview took place on June 17, 2017, at Marlatt's home in Vancouver, BC. The excerpt begins with Marlatt discussing her attendance at poetry readings and other creative writing events at Warren and Ellen Tallman's house in the 1960s.*

#### **Daphne Marlatt**

00:45:50.91

Because I lived in North Van, I wasn't always present. It was a big deal for me to get the family car to come over for the evening at the Tallmans' and so I couldn't be there for everything. I still felt, at that point, a little shy. It seemed a very male discussion, a lot of joking around as usual, but also a bit of competitiveness, and as a young woman in the '60s, coming out of the '50s, I was still struggling with how to be in a group like that. I never wanted to be seen as a poetry groupie because of my gender, my sex. I wanted to be seen as an equal poet and I always felt it was a struggle to do that. And I didn't want to get involved with anybody. That was one of the reasons I didn't want to.

#### **Annotation**

00:47:17.31

<both laugh>

#### **Deanna Fong**

00:47:17.64

Say no more.

#### **Daphne Marlatt**

00:47:17.87

Yes. So there was that motivation to be seen as an equal without having the reading behind me or the ability to articulate very clearly what I was thinking in response to what they were putting out, and it was always a very swift give and take.

**Deanna Fong**

00:47:42.40

Yeah, it seems that in those recordings from way later down the road certainly the discussion is more equitable—say in that recording with you and Gerry, and Carole, and Roy.<sup>97</sup> But part of what I was interested in listening to these tapes is when we're talking about the social parole that goes on around literary production, all the conversations that people have, I kept thinking, "Maybe this will be a much more democratic space in terms of hearing and equal number of men's and women's voices," but...

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:48:27.97

But no!

**Deanna Fong**

00:48:28.34

There are so many tapes that just replicate exactly the same structures as anything else, as the literary world.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:48:40.30

It was very liberating for me when I met Carole and Gerry, through Roy who introduced me to them. Then through them I met Rhoda Rosenfeld, Trudy Rubinfeld, and Renee Rodin.<sup>98</sup> Max [Maxine Gadd] was part of that group for a while. Ingrid Klassen was part of that group, and Ellie Epp, the filmmaker.<sup>99</sup> We would all meet for coffee quite regularly

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<sup>97</sup> "Log Cabin / PRE Express" Side B. (1974). Roy Kiyooka Audio Archive. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University Special Collections.

<sup>98</sup> "Renee Rodin is a Montreal-born writer, visual artist and cultural worker. In the 1980s she founded the Vancouver bookstore R2B2, running its popular reading series for eight years, and she was the literary co-ordinator of the Western Front from 1992-93. Her writing has appeared in numerous periodicals, and her visual work, generally photographic, has been displayed widely... Rodin is the author of *Bread and Salt* (Talonbooks, 1996), *Ready for Freddy* (Nomados, 2005), and *Subject to Change* (Talonbooks, 2010)" (Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies).

<sup>99</sup> "Ingrid Klassen is editor of *D'Sonoqua: An Anthology of Women Poets of British Columbia* (Intermedia Press, 1979, two volumes)—featuring writers such as Marilyn Bowering, Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Leona Gom, Carole Itter, Beth Jankola, Stephanie Judy, Pat Lowther, and Daphne Marlatt—and co-editor with Daphne Marlatt a collection of the work of Maxine Gadd, *Lost Language: Selected Poems* (Coach House Press, 1982). She was also influential in the

and have fantastic conversations. Of course there was none of that holding back that there was for me in a mixed group. I was so impressed with the articulateness of these women. There was teasing that would go on, too, but there was a definite feeling that everyone was exercising her creativity in that group.

**Deanna Fong**

00:49:54.95

Especially Trudy, and Max, and Rhoda, having just met them for coffee, I was so impressed with the language play that comes out. They're so sharp and so quick. I can imagine an entire room of women conversing like that would be such a boon. Because I think, as you say, the ways to be among women are definitely different than the ways to be in a mixed group or being among men. I still kind of feel that way.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:50:29.45

Still?

**Deanna Fong**

00:50:30.43

A little bit. I think it's getting better. But in the academic classroom, for example, I've certainly had lots of experiences where you have one or two guys only talking to each other.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:50:42.30

Back and forth, yeah.

**Deanna Fong**

00:50:42.87

Only making eye contact with each other, and you'll try to get in there.

---

founding of Caitlin Press (established in 1977), a feminist literary press" (Vancouver Art in the Sixties).

Ellie Epp is a Vancouver-based artist and filmmaker whose work includes the films *Trampoline*, *Currents* and *Notes in Origin*. Epp also works in other media, in particular writing, photography and performance (Pleasure Dome).

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:50:48.83

Yeah, yeah. I know. I know. <sighs>

**Deanna Fong**

00:50:54.66

It's shifting, though. I hope, anyway.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:50:59.49

I hope it is. It's been such a long time already since the seventies and that beginning of that second wheel of the feminist movement. It's been such a long time. And you think things would have improved more than they have.

**Deanna Fong**

00:51:17.28

Yeah. But this is another interesting thing. I've just come back from this conference in Toronto and there was a lot of discussion about how it feels as though we're just having this horrible case of déjà-vu, in which we're having all of the same conversations that we've always had. We're still having conversations about why cultural appropriation is bad. The "appropriation prize," which is exactly the same thing that Writing Thru Race was responding to.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:51:47.84

Exactly, yes, and at the third International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal it was a big feature of that meeting.

**Deanna Fong**

00:52:00.79

So in a sense, certainly the terms of the argument seem a bit different, but at the same time it seems like not a whole lot has really shifted.



**Daphne Marlatt**

00:52:13.95

There are such ingrained patriarchal and racial assumptions. They're so ingrained and so many people don't want to examine them.

**Deanna Fong**

00:52:25.63

Yeah. Which is the question then, how does one go about shifting those structures? Is it through writing?

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:52:36.19

Well, that's a good question, Deanna. That's a question I keep asking myself. What's the point of writing? Of course, there's always the hope— I mean, I never want to be preachy in my work. That's the last thing I want. I'm a poet, for heaven's sake! I want there to be pleasure in the reading of my work. But I also have a subversive goal, which is to try and shift people's way of thinking about life, and about their connection with other people and the biosphere around us. So, it's always a big question. How do we do that? How do I do that? I can never ensure that that will happen. It's always—what's the word I want?—It's always fortuitous when a reader takes something away from what you've written. It's the combination of that person's world experience and the writer's. And sometimes there's a real mesh, and sometimes there isn't. They just slip past one another.

**Deanna Fong**

00:54:04.84

Yeah. But it's really amazing when those sparks do ignite.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:54:11.45

That's right. That's right.

**Deanna Fong**

00:54:14.00

And there's an openness to that, too. Part of what we were talking about at this conference, and that I felt personally convicted by, was that I need to supplement my academic work and my creative work with something more directly political.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:54:32.26

Right.

**Deanna Fong**

00:54:34.84

Because there are ways in which it doesn't quite connect. It doesn't always connect in that way. But there's a brilliant openness to literature that direct political action doesn't always have. It has a slow burn or something like that.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:54:50.98

Yeah, well, books have changed people's thinking in big ways. But right now we seem to be on the brink of something so major that I don't know whether... I mean, writing alone can't do it. I think you're right, there has to be action on some level, some front.

**Deanna Fong**

00:55:23.38

Well, I think, too, so many of the writers in the '60s, thinking of Bill Bissett's queer activism and Maxine's anti-poverty and feminist organization, that's always been a longstanding tradition. It's not like the two are ever really separate from one another, if you're a writer with a conscience.

**Daphne Marlatt**

00:55:52.10

<laughs> That's right, that's right.

## Appendix C:

### Excerpt from Interview with Maxine Gadd, Rhoda Rosenfeld, and Trudy Rubenfeld

*This interview was recorded on March 17, 2017 at Rosenfeld and Rubenfeld's home in Vancouver. This portion of the interview was published in The Capilano Review 3.35 (spring 2018).*

#### Annotation

00:03:37.44

<overlapping discussion: Rubenfeld talking with Gadd, Rosenfeld talking with Fong> I felt it when I woke up – Rhoda felt that way – That's why I'm wearing them – It's not a fashion statement? – I think it's Scorpio, you have Scorpio in your chart, don't you? – I made them. It's interesting because what I was doing when I made them was I was transcribing – I don't know anything other than what she told me – I should take it all down again, because I've learned – 'cause I did a bit of that for awhile – I know, you used to know what you did with them – my eyes became so strained and tired, so I invented these – maybe you still know – they really help a lot – What? – You know, about the whole astrological – That'll be good to know when I'm doing the transcription. You're like, "God, I haven't blinked in two hours." – You know how you are then – But there's also a different focal point because there's a screen – And you know how different bodies of information – I call them my digital glasses. I invented them – It leaves us. We have it for a while, and then a lot of it goes – That's why we tried to keep our books – I gave away a lot – I'm going to fill up my wine...

#### Rhoda Rosenfeld

00:11:41.71

So hit us with a question, Deanna.

#### Deanna Fong

00:11:43.87

Well, let's start with an easy one.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:11:45.99

Nothing will be easy.

**Annotation**

00:11:47.48

<laughter>

**Deanna Fong**

00:11:49.18

There will be no easy questions. How did you all meet each other?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:11:52.73

Oh, my god.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:11:52.86

Where did we meet each other?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:11:54.52

Well, we'll all have different stories.

**Deanna Fong**

00:11:55.66

Yeah. Everyone has to weigh in.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:11:57.88

Well, we met each other, and then we met each other, so there are two stories here.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:12:00.52

Yeah, you guys met each other back east.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:02.19

Montreal. Came to Vancouver.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:12:04.50

And you came from New York.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:06.69

New York to Montreal.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:12:10.08

How did you two meet? Tell us! Tell us the story. I want to know.

**Annotation**

00:12:15.22

<laughter>

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:16.72

What is the significance of telling this story?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:12:17.60

We'll be here for years! We mentioned to you last time we were living on Bishop Street and Trudy was in Roy's class.

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:12:22.29

I wasn't in Roy's class when we—

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:12:33.52

The first year.

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:12:34.02

Oh, yeah, the first year was my last year.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:12:35.98

What university was that?

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:12:37.49

Roy came in my last year.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:12:38.32

Sir George Williams.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:12:39.60

Oh, that was Sir George Williams. The place with the elevators?

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:12:44.70

No.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:12:45.78

The new building, maybe.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:48.51

It was the old Sir George Williams University.

**Deanna Fong**

00:12:51.14

It's the one that's just like a big box.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:53.39

It was the one on Drummond. Yes, it was a box.

**Deanna Fong**

00:12:53.87

Oh, it was on Drummond?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:12:54.81

Yeah, it was an old— Even before that one. The big box is on Bishop.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:12:59.22

Part of it was the YMCA. It was created out of the YMCA, I think, and over the years in became a university. But it was a small place.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:13:14.79

Yeah, the time I saw it—

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:13:17.36

But people came there.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:13:18.34

But Trudy was Roy's student and we lived across the street, so he would come over all the time and have coffee. And that's how we first started hanging out together.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:13:29.64

Come over to where?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:13:31.22

Where we lived across the street. Trudy and I lived on—

**Maxine Gadd**

00:13:33.59

You invited him over.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:13:34.33

No! He would just show up. He did that all the time.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:13:36.56

He was my professor in my fourth year in Fine Arts. It was a painting class, and he had a core group of a few students that were—

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:13:50.84

Serious.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:13:51.93

Yeah, that he took seriously. So they would go to the Yacht Club with him to have a beer



after certain occasions.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:13:59.11

Oh, the Yacht Club!

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:14:01.25

Yeah, it was a bar.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:14:02.46

Montreal has bars. Taverns were only for men. I did the census one year, I was like 19, and I had to go into the tavern and there were no women in the tavern. You had to walk through all these men and go up to the bar and ask the questions.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:14:20.86

So what were the Yacht Clubs, then?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:14:22.67

They were bars. They were just like two steps down and dark.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:14:26.65

Dark, small tables, you know.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:14:28.85

Are they still there, some of them?

**Deanna Fong**

00:14:30.47

Where was it?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:14:32.05

Did you have to go downstairs into—

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:14:32.64

This was just down the street.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:14:35.48

Montreal has a lot of places like that.

**Deanna Fong**

00:14:36.48

There's that Ziggy's Bar. That's where Mordecai Richler used to always go hang out. That's on Crescent. That's been there for a long time.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:14:43.76

The Yacht Club was on Crescent. It was Crescent, McKay, Bishop.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:14:53.31

There was one across the street. We could see it from our place.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:14:53.37

There was one across, but the Yacht Club was straight down Bishop [...]

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:15:17.87

So anyway, that's how we met Roy. Then in 1968 we came here.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:15:23.42

When did Roy come out here?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:15:25.48

In the summer.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:15:26.87

He had been out here already. He came to Sir George. He was at Sir George for five years. So he came in 1965 and stayed five years, and then left and came back to Vancouver.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:15:44.34

So 1970.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:15:45.30

Yeah, I guess it was '70.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:15:49.88

He was there when the crisis happened. I think that was in 1970, when the riots happened. You remember that?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:15:57.25

I remember that, yeah.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:15:58.47

At Sir George and they threw the computers out the window.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:00.20

It was very heavy, yeah.

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:03.22

And the sit-in in the library?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:16:04.61

Yeah.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:16:05.23

I just remember going to Montreal and getting off the bus and going deeper and deeper into this circle of cops—

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:05.36

<overlaps, to Deanna> How long were you in Montreal?

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:09.52

<overlaps> About ten years.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:16:13.85

—and went deeper and deeper into it and then there's other circles of cops inside that, and then finally inside there was this big plaza with bright lights and lots of cops and everybody had guns.

**Annotation**

00:16:25.89

<laughter>

**Maxine Gadd**

00:16:27.71

I guess it was the army.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:29.39

Did you go to Montreal to go to school?

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:31.21

No, I was in love. And then I stayed there.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:33.23

Oh! That's why you go.

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:35.74

Well, it didn't last. Then I fell in love with the city and that's a whole different story. But, yeah, it's a great city.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:43.37

So you followed someone that you loved there...

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:45.23

Yeah. And then broke up almost immediately.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:16:45.79

Who?

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:49.47

We took the bus. We took the bus from Vancouver to Montreal. It took about three days.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:16:51.63

From here?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:53.60

That's a long trip.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:16:54.21

I've done that. It was hell.

**Deanna Fong**

00:16:56.73

It is.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:16:57.41

I did it on the train, too. Hell.

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:00.75

The worst part is when you get to Winnipeg and you're like, "Ugh, we're only halfway there."

**Annotation**

00:17:04.02

<laughter>

**Maxine Gadd**

00:17:05.95

You just have to relax and ooze into your seat. You just ooze into your seat. Everybody oozes.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:11.65

<overlaps> Oh, sure. There's no way! Relax with everybody around you. Oh, my god.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:17:18.10

But the landscape is so fantastic.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:20.35

You can only do that when you're young. You can't keep doing that.

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:24.00

So how is it that—?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:17:24.31

Yes, you can.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:26.11

Go ahead. Keep going.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:17:27.45

Go ahead, Deanna.

**Annotation**

00:17:29.43

<laughter>

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:31.56

How is it that Roy came to just come over to your place for coffee?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:35.99

Roy?

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:36.72

Yeah.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:37.42

We clicked, you know, in that way. In those early years, you're talking about?

**Deanna Fong**

00:17:43.05

Yeah.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:17:43.45

But he was like that.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:45.95

He had certain people that he would go and visit.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:17:50.59



All his life. He would knock on someone's door.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:17:52.65

People he was interested in.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:17:56.68

Nobody made appointments then. People just showed up.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:17:59.75

Yeah, we used to visit each other a lot. I used to visit you guys.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:18:04.91

You just knock on the door. Different era.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:18:07.40

Now you say, "Where? What do you want?"

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:18:10.01

"What time is it?"

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:18:16.49

So what happened was— Yes, I was his student. That lasted for a few years, a number of years. I just fed him.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:18:29.67

Food?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:18:30.28

No.

**Annotation**

00:18:30.53

<laughter>

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:18:35.63

Lots of coffee.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:18:36.28

Trudy's great. She really makes good food. So does Rhoda. Between the two of them, they make wonderful food.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:18:43.00

Okay, so you fed him.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:18:47.11

Yes. And he fed me.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:18:48.26

He fed you.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:18:49.82

There was a lot to exchange and I had a lot to learn. I had to learn. I had to fight him. That took a while because he had that aura about him.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:09.25

Dominating.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:11.03

He was very powerful in my life in that time, in that way, which I didn't like.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:14.97

The master. He was the master.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:19:16.94

But he was also twenty years older.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:18.54

Yeah.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:20.08

Maestro.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:21.23

More than twenty. People wanted to please him.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:29.77

Did you want to please him?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:31.66

Well, of course I did.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:33.91

But you're such a rebel.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:35.16

Of course I wanted to. One wanted to give what one has.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:43.51

But I always got into fights with him. We always, the three of us, would get into fights with Roy.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:19:49.39

I wouldn't say fights.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:19:50.69

No, there were struggles...

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:20:28.05

Struggles. But Roy, his brilliance, his way in which he was able to bring in the world, and talk in interesting ways, and try to get you to speak, and say what you think... You wanted to be able to give him that. To be smart enough to be there. Smarter even.

**Annotation**

00:20:57.93

<laughter>

**Maxine Gadd**

00:20:58.59

Well, of course, you always want to outdo the master. You want to become a master yourself.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:21:02.81

So that was for a number of years and then I started to say— I couldn't go on being who I was with him. It was going change. There's an actual— <sighs> There's a video in which we actually have that first fight.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:21:26.03

Really?

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:21:26.71

It's not really a fight, let's say, but it's me saying, "That's it."

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:21:29.19

It's a break.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:21:33.23

Not "That's it," but, "This is a limit." That was it. That was the beginning. I broke through and I was able to be an equal at that point. So it was and so it continues to be.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:21:36.63

It took 20 or 25 years.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:21:50.70

How long ago was that?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:21:51.52

That was the '90s, Trude.

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:21:52.94

No, that was the '80s. When was the tape made?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:21:55.22

Still.

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:21:59.50

When was the tape made?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:00.22

I don't know, I would have to look

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:02.25

What year were you at Sir George?

**Trudy Rubenfeld**

00:22:03.65

I was at Sir George, Rhoda was at McGill.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:06.02

Oh, you were? And what years were they?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:11.20

'65 - '66. That's when we met Roy.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:19.65

That's much earlier. That's when it was all happening. That's when people were breaking out and accepting it.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:22:27.31

That's right.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:28.38

And things were way ahead in Vancouver because you all had those amazing scenes going on.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:22:36.45

The poetry scene.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:39.43

Where?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:40.49

The storefronts on 4th Avenue, all that stuff. Montreal was—

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:44.62

They didn't have those in Montreal?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:47.14

It was very different.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:22:47.86

It must have been in French, though.

**Deanna Fong**

00:22:50.51

Yeah. Les Nuits de la Poésie?

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:22:53.27

I don't know. I don't even know. There were people doing things and amazing things happened, but Vancouver already had that community that you're talking about, where people were working in collaboration with each other in the mid-'60s. That was maybe a little bit in Montreal.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:23:15.68

There was so much belief, and trust, and hope.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:18.80

We met Maxine— My memory was she was making a book on a machine called a Roneo at Intermedia.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:23:29.11

At Intermedia.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:29.42



You know about Intermedia?

**Deanna Fong**

00:23:30.32

Yeah, yeah.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:32.36

Maxine was working in Kitsilano on 4th Avenue.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:23:37.42

And you were living not that far from me.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:42.83

That's where I first met you, and that's so vivid to me. There you were making a book!

**Annotation**

00:23:47.90

<laughter>

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:48.71

It was so much fun. It was amazing. It was fantastic.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:23:50.56

It was a sort of double-barrelled thing and one barrel had this little—

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:23:58.32

It was like a copying machine separated into copying and printing.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:24:02.09

Yeah. It had this little electronic eye or something that was like a laser.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:24:06.93

It scanned. It went back and forth.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:24:08.88

Yeah, it was scanned, and then it went into a brain somewhere, which I never did know where that was, and then it would print it out on the next one, which had very simple—

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:24:21.70

<overlaps> Like mimeo.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:24:22.44

—like ink and paper, and that's what you do. You'd write your stuff onto that. You could type it on or you could draw it on, or else you could put in different magazines and stuff. You could pick up certain amount of memes, which I guess are— I'm having a hard time with that word, meme.

**Deanna Fong**

00:24:50.29

Yeah, it signifies differently now, doesn't it?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:24:51.94

But I think it's always slightly mystical, isn't it? I think it is involved with image. And it picked those up. It could pick up colour, too, but I chose the colours when I did mine.

**Deanna Fong**

00:25:13.30

What was it that drew you to each other as people that you wanted to be with?

**Maxine Gadd**

00:25:19.48

You know, they're so cute.

**Annotation**

00:25:21.25

<laughter>

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:25:23.32

I think you knew immediately in those days. You could sense who wanted to know.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:25:28.66

These wonderful, beautiful women.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:25:31.99

But it's also we were all struggling to become artists. We were just budding, looking for ways to—

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:25:40.26

We were looking for ways to survive.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:25:42.28

And to express.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:25:49.16

The office world. The commerce world. The commerce world was terrifying. It still is.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:25:54.93

It still is.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:25:55.55

It has won and is winning.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:26:00.20

Then Intermedia was happening here when we came.

**Maxine Gadd**

00:26:02.75

Yes! That was quite fun.

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:26:03.64

Just amazing.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

00:26:05.13

But that also came through to Montreal. I think it was probably in *ArtsCanada* or something.<sup>100</sup>

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:26:11.81

We were hearing about it and reading about it.

**Trudy Rubinfeld**

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<sup>100</sup> A quarterly art magazine published in Toronto focusing on Canadian contemporary art.

00:26:16.70

We read about it. It sounded amazing. Rhoda led the way to Vancouver, actually. I followed Rhoda.

**Annotation**

00:26:32.05

<laughter>

**Rhoda Rosenfeld**

00:26:36.28

If she's not following me, I'm following her.

## Appendix D:

### Excerpt of Interview with Maria Hindmarch

*This interview was recorded on March 20, 2017 at Maria Hindmarch's home in Vancouver, BC.*

**Deanna Fong**

00:21:44

So how did you come to meet all of the folks in the quote-unquote TISH group?

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:22:06

I took the creative writing course in my second year and Frank was in that class and we quickly got to the point of sitting together, sitting next to each other. George published something, a short story in *The Raven*. I believe that was in my first year. So the issue with his story in *The Raven* came out '58 and I read it and I really liked it. There was a table in the cafeteria where a lot of the literary types evidently hung out, but I didn't know that. I was talking to someone, and I said, "I really like this story." And he said, "Well, the person who wrote that is just over there," so I went up and introduced myself to George. I don't think it started in that year that we were taking creative writing, but maybe it did. Maybe he had worked himself into it, or not. I don't know. I'd have to check that out in Frank's book, *When TISH Happens*.

**Deanna Fong**

00:23:54

Frank's got such an amazing, detailed memory. He must have been keeping journals or something at the time, too, because it's down to the day.

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:24:04

Well, he checked a lot of things with me.

**Deanna Fong**

00:24:05

Oh, yeah? <both laugh>

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:24:07

So I'm the one who should be able to remember. But, yeah, he checked with some other people, too. I read that book at least twice before it came out. Argued with him about some things.

**Deanna Fong**

00:24:28

Yeah, it seems like there are some aspects of that timeline and the way that it's narrated that are contested. He gets into a bit of that at the end of that second chapter, or third chapter maybe, where he talks about Pauline [Butling]'s critiques of TISH. That had been on my mind to ask you in a little bit.

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:25:04

Well, Frank listens really— Like, I wouldn't know when I wrote him a letter what he was paying attention to. But I argued a bit about Fred [Wah].<sup>101</sup> And for some reason or other, some things he changed and I'd be quite pleasantly surprised, and other things he didn't.

**Deanna Fong**

00:25:30

Yes. So you lived with the Tallmans at some point?

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:25:35

In my second year, I moved to Acadia Camp, which was on the opposite side of the UBC at those days. Warren and Ellen had a place in Acadia Camp, and so I'd go over there. They said, "Well, if you want to do your laundry here rather than in the dorms..." I thought, "Well, that's nice." I think Kenny [Tallman] was still in diapers at that point. I had

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<sup>101</sup> i.e. about Fred Wah's central role in the publication of the *TISH* newsletter.

a lot of times there. Elliot Gose and his wife also lived on the campus. He's another professor at UBC. So, yeah, it was quite a little community.

**Deanna Fong**

00:26:35

When did you start seeing Warren and Ellen in more of a social sense?

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:26:41

Well, at the end of my first year, I went back to Ladysmith. I didn't work that summer. I was depressed. I didn't like university other than Warren's class. So my parents suggested we invite the Tallmans over to our place for an overnight weekend. I think it was just an overnight. So Ellen and Warren, and Karen and Kenny came in their flip-flops <both laugh>, which you really shouldn't wear on the ferries, between railings and little lurches. But they came and stayed. I guess Warren must have spoken to Jake Zilber,<sup>102</sup> because I don't remember submitting anything to get into Creative Writing. Everybody was supposed to submit something so maybe Warren just put in some of the little essays I had written in first year English. I'm not sure. But by the end of the summer I knew I was going back. So it was probably a strategy on my mom's part to make sure that I do continue, or do something, or at least get out of the house.

**Deanna Fong**

00:27:30

What do you remember from that visit?

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:27:35

Not many things. I know that Warren and I went for a walk to the dump. There was a dump near a creek and people would just sort of dump things. Warren went fishing with my dad. But I don't remember much about Karen, Kenny or Ellen from that. Ellen's a good cook. My mom's a good plain cook and I had done the cooking at home for three years, from Grade 10, 11, 12, so, I'm sure we had some nice meals. I don't recall

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<sup>102</sup> Jake Zilber was a professor who taught Creative Writing classes at UBC in the 1960s.



swimming or anything like that. Normally I would swim in the summertime. Maybe that's what we did, went down to the beach. But there are not many strong moments that I recall from that time.

**Deanna Fong**

00:29:26

There's lots written about Warren's influence on the west coast poetry scene, but I'm also very interested in Ellen and her presence in that moment, and what your relationship was like with her.

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:29:43

Well, she was a very strong presence. She was the one in Berkeley when Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan and then Robin Blaser were there. She was a flautist, but she transferred to Berkeley, I think it was in her third year. She was in Mills College, a specialty girls' college, but she definitely hung out with them a bit and really liked them. So she had stories to tell about all these characters. She was the one who was able to get Robert Duncan to come up, and then later Spicer. So she was the key in that way. <pause> Did you ever read that poem that Jamie Reid wrote about Ellen in her nightie? It talks about this imposing woman sitting down and talking.

**Deanna Fong**

00:31:09

No, I haven't read that. I'll have to look it up.

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:31:11

It's somewhere. It hits it on how she's very warm. We would talk for hours. We'd do the dishes after she did the cooking in the house. I didn't cook I don't think anything while I was there, but we would do the dishes together afterwards and we would take forever. I remember when I discovered Beckett, "And then another onion, and then another peppermint, and then another onion, and then another peppermint..." and it goes on for about five pages. I just kept doing it all the time. We just thought it was so incredibly funny. We had a lot of fun. Ellen read a lot. She read differently than Warren. She would

read Bellow, and she liked Henry Miller. There was a whole range of things. But I don't think I ended up picking up any of the books that she was reading. She was always at the library or buying books.

**Deanna Fong**

00:32:29

Did you guys have a lot of literary discussion in the same way that you and Warren and the group did?

**Maria Hindmarch**

00:32:39

I think we were heavily into gossip. <both laugh> So, "What happened today?" And then all the sudden that would be there for one or two hours. So we would talk quite a bit about everybody and whatever we thought was going on.