On “The Dream Life of Voice:” A Rerecording of Bernadette Mayer Reading from The Ethics of Sleep

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Abstract

Welcome to Voices Carry. . . a forum meditating on the material production of human voices the social, historical, and political material freighting our voices in various contexts. What are voices? Where do they come from and how are their expressions carried? What information can voices carry? Why, how, and to what end?

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Digital Media, Listening, Noise, Poetry/Poets, Recording



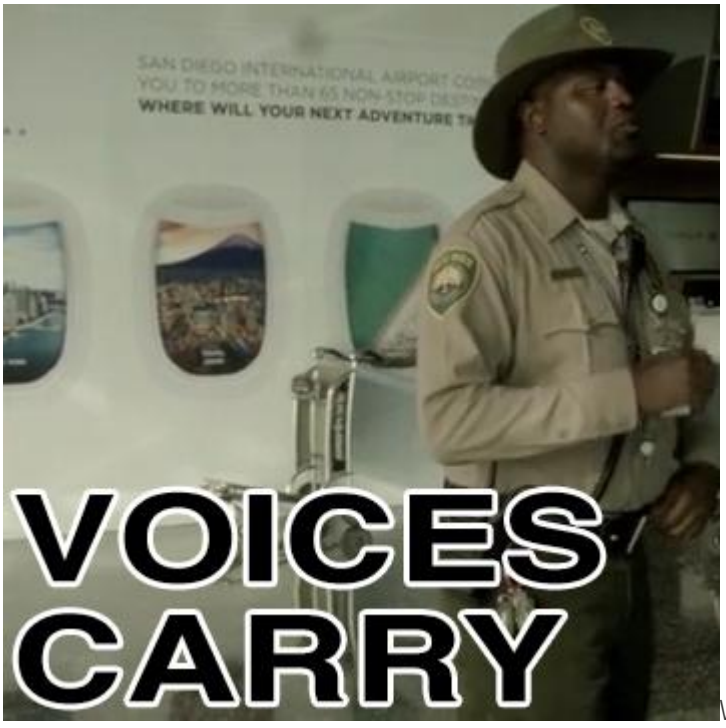
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Welcome to *Voices Carry*. . . a forum meditating on the material production of human voices the social, historical, and political material freighting our voices in various contexts. What are voices? Where do they come from and how are their expressions carried? What information can voices carry? Why, how, and to what end? Today John Melillo offers us a multi-track rerecording of Bernadette Mayer reading from *The Ethics of Sleep*. He urges us to “value illegibility over legibility and the abstract over the figured. If

we deemphasize voice, we acknowledge the ways in which voices can undo themselves in their production.” **–SO! Ed. Jennifer Stoever**

What separates voice from noise? At what point does a voice dissipate into the sounds that surround and, at times, threaten to overwhelm it? In “The Dream Life of Voice,” I draw special attention to the ways in which attending to voice—and its precarity—entails a heightened sensation of noise. Through my manipulation of recorded audio in this project, I argue that noise is not merely an unwanted or surprising sound: it is the material sonic trace of an unconscious listening that continues to work beneath, around, and within a conscious listening to voice.

In this audio recording, I have taken a selection from a reading by the poet Bernadette Mayer that I recorded for the Tucson-based poetry and arts organization, POG, on February 6, 2016. I used a standard SM58 microphone, a digital audio recording interface, and the software program Logic. Mayer is known as a poet who has tested the boundaries of poetic statement through poems that engage with the conscious and unconscious uses of language. In this selection, she reads a long poem from her book *The Ethics of Sleep* (Trembling Pillow Press, 2011) on the power of dreams and dream language. In the performance, the poem and her voice create a sense of continuous movement, with quick and unpredictable turns of phrase sutured together by a syntactic and rhythmic familiarity. In this audio project, I flatten the sonic space in this recording of Mayer in order to abstract the voice and place it within a wider frequency spectrum of noise. Just as Mayer’s words engage her book’s title, my audio project argues for the possibility of an unconscious but engaged listening to noise.

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"Bernadette Mayer's 1971 performance piece, Memory, for which she shot a roll of 35 mm film and composed a documentation, along with the possibilities of art and poetry in relation to perception and remembrance." – M

Roland Barthes famously defined listening as "a psychological act" and hearing as a mere "physiological phenomenon" (Barthes 246). In a kind of doubling of listening's action, the work of formulating or understanding a voice involves a selecting for sounds as a significant figure—the mark of a person or persona. Yopie Prins calls the recorded, mediated voice of 19th century poetry a "voice inverse," a prosthetic figure composed out of its imprint by mechanical means, whether those means be metrical, print-based, or phonographic (48). Of such mechanical means—in particular, audio recording—Charles Bernstein argues, "the mechanical semblance of voice has become the signal in a medium whose material base is sonic, not vocal. In such a phonic economy, noise is sound that can't be recuperated as voice" (110). In taking up this binary phonic economy, however, I want to hear how voice and noise interweave and interpenetrate, with the sonic figuration of voice as a threshold that opens out to other sounds not ostensibly included in its composition.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/the-dream-life-of-voice-a-rerecording-of-bernadette-mayer-reading-from-the-ethics-of-sleep-.wav

***Press Play to hear "The Dream Life of Voice" by John Melillo, a rerecording of Bernadette Mayer reading from* The Ethics of Sleep.**

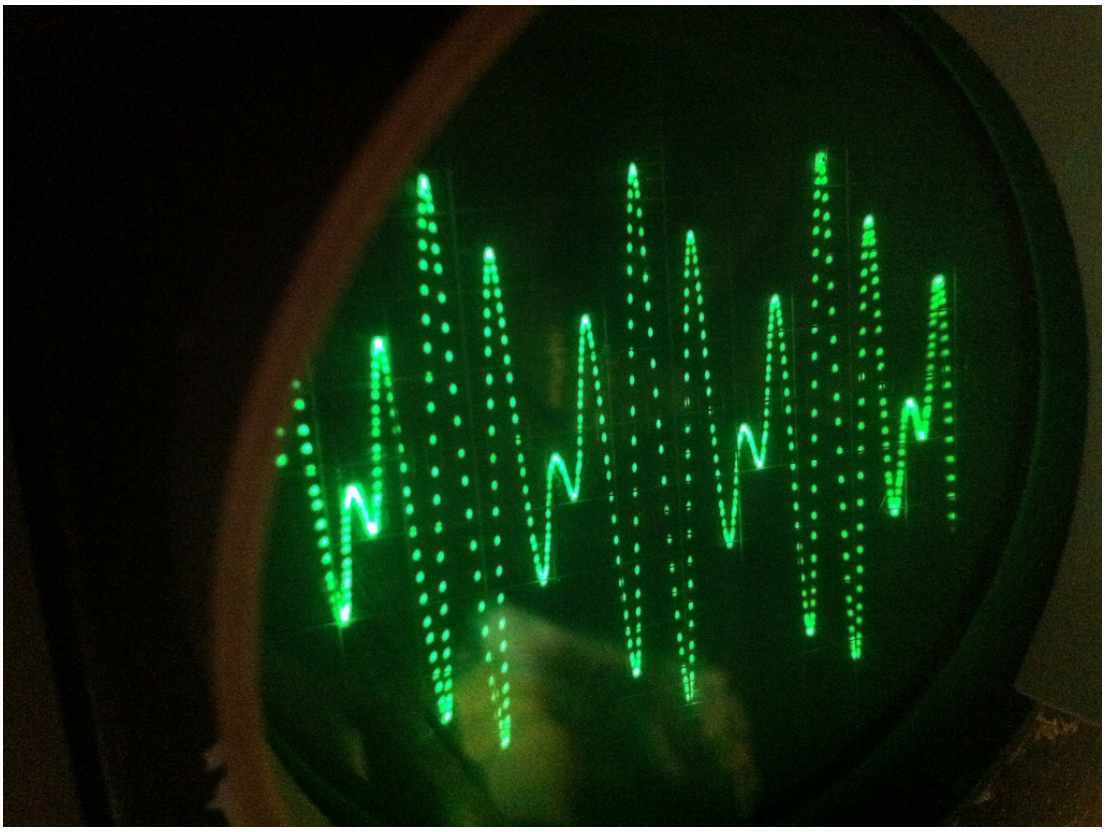
In this 12'43" audio recording, I have devised an analytic and synthetic method that allows listeners to reframe and refocus their hearing toward the trace of noise in voice, as well as the voice's trace in noise. The final recording is composed of three simultaneous tracks, each of which represents a different "noise regime" in relation to the poet's voice.

The first, original, track contains the "straight" recording of Mayer's voice and speech: one hears her performance of the poem loud and clear. This is the imprint of voice on the recording mechanism in a phonic economy of voice and noise, in which voice seems to counteract and silence its opposite.

The second track contains a manipulated version of the original track, in which I have removed all the audio of Mayer's voice and constructed a "background noise" track from what remains. In this method, I simply cut out Mayer's voice from the audio file, keeping only the "silent" moments of the reading. I then combined and looped these fragments to create an amplified track of the background sounds—sounds of the people in the room, cars outside, a train passing, and the recording medium itself (hiss). In this way, I flip the binary toward that which is explicitly unheard in the recording.

For the third track, I manipulated the original recording by applying a Fast Fourier Transform with the software program Spear. This method breaks down the sounds into a collection of sine wave frequencies that can be graphically manipulated in the software program. I then removed the loudest frequencies (present mostly as Mayer's voice) in order to emphasize the upper partials

and continuous non-vocal frequencies masked by the force of the voice. This track marks a synthesis in which voice blends with and disappears into the frequency spectrum.



“Unsmoothed” by Flickr user Felix Morgner, CC BY-SA 2.0

I combined these three tracks and slowly adjusted the volume for each one. The track with Mayer’s voice starts off as the loudest of the three. Her comments on the noise from a train that has just passed begin the montage. This track then undergoes a long, slow diminuendo, and by the end of the piece, it is silenced. At the same time, the background noise track becomes louder and peaks in the middle, interfering with and working alongside the voice. The track of synthesized frequencies slowly crescendos so that it is loudest at the end of the piece.

By distributing the volumes in this chiasmatic way, I want to call attention to the layered listenings happening within the situation of Mayer’s reading. Just as the figure of voice arises out of the ground of noise, it also contains frequencies that are not so easily differentiated from their background. A voice is an acoustic entity figured by a body and a performance. However habitual and repetitive the action is, it takes effort to suture vocal sounds to the body, place, and apparatus that they emanate from. In this track I want to find a way to hear a drifting, unconscious meandering within that focused effort. I want to materialize listening’s paratactic wavering of attention to one thing after another.

In the production of this movement toward noise, I value illegibility over legibility and the abstract over the figured. If we deemphasize voice, we acknowledge the ways in which voices can undo themselves in their production—which is the ethics of dream life that Mayer argues for and

illuminates within her poem. The outside within the voice is a frequency scatter that connects the dissipation of an emitted sound in space with all the other sounds that interfere or resonate with that sound. The strange whisper music that ends my audio project "flattens" the sonic space idealized by the division of figure and ground. By abstracting Bernadette Mayer's performance, I seek a synthesis that brings the noisy dream life of voice into relief.

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Featured Image: "Scream" by Flickr user Josh Otis CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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John Melillo *is an assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Arizona. His book project,* Outside In: The Poetics of Noise from Dada to Punk*, examines the ways in which poetry and performance make noise during the twentieth century. He has written and presented work on empathy in sound poetry, folk-song utopianism, the post-punk band DNA, and tape noise in Charles Olson. John performs music and sound art as Algae & Tentacles.*

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