

Sophie Seita A Laboratory of Sensations:
Listening for Texture

Sometimes peeling a pomegranate can sound like the crackling of a small fire. Or glass spinning. Or the universe exploding.

How do we listen for texture? Normally when we think of texture, we think of something we can touch—something haptic or visual, definitely something external to us, like a chenille or corduroy cushion, where we either sense or see how much the material might *give*. To *listen* for texture means to de-emphasise a dominant sensorial system over others. Can one sense gain some qualities of another and undo the senses' strict separation? How do we create frisky synaesthetic intermingling?¹ Suddenly texture is also inside us. It can't be seen or touched but felt. To listen for texture also qualifies what "hearing" might mean.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, I witnessed a digital performance and somatic video work by the Montréal-based choreographer Hanna Sybille Müller and the dancer and poet Erin Robinsong—one that indirectly digested these questions and provocations, or rather allowed *me* to digest them. First presented in various live performances as part of their research process, *Polymorphic Microbe Bodies* (Fig. 1) was reconceived as a "somatic video" with a small in-person audience for Tangente Danse in Montréal in April 2021. The video was then edited and screened online for a week with binaural sound; that is, sound that was recorded and edited spatially to create a three-dimensional feeling as if you were in the room. Digital audiences were encouraged to listen with headphones to immerse themselves in this ambient sonic scenery.

Often when we watch dance and performance, we sit up vertically, our eyes are directed straight ahead. This, Sybille and Erin tell me in conversation, is antithetical to the *experience* of dance. Video, too, is an intensely visual medium. So, they invited both their in-person and virtual audience to lie down and either view the piece from a horizontal position or to close their eyes and *feel* the dance through sound and sensation. The somatic video² consists largely of Erin "playing" various vegetables and fruits, peeling, cutting, scraping, juicing everything into one big bowl and Sybille guiding the audience vocally through a meditative experience. They are joined by four dancers who assist in setting up the space, respond to Sybille's vocal guidance, and eventually weave through the space, interacting with various objects and the audience. Later on, they are also joined by a drummer who adds to the botanical or bodily orchestra.³



The artists describe the piece as “a laboratory of sensations”, in which “the audience is choreographed by the experience”. The work sends us on a journey into the textures, fissures, and juices of matter and bodies, but also engages a broader theoretical discourse on microbial existence, thinking about the cohabitation of multiple species in our bodies, down to germs, bacteria, and viruses. Inspired by microbial research and the recognition that our bodies are in fact home to multispecies communities, *are* that community, are explicitly *not* an individual, Erin and Sybille became interested in exploring how we *feel* internal multiplicity. How can we translate this research while also having an embodied understanding of it? We have strangers living inside of us, Donna Haraway reminds us: “I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.”⁴

I asked myself, if I were to write the closed captions for this piece, what imaginative descriptive language can capture this sonic and embodied landscape that I experienced? Suddenly this inquiry into texture became a problem of translation. I began quite simply and methodically.

Sound of chewing, saliva, someone eating with an open mouth.

Sound of bare feet on the floor. Sound of shuffling and objects being dragged. The sound of things being readied.

Inaudible French. Then, someone says:

“Imagine sound as touch, sight as touch. Imagine that the room that you’re in right now is a body.”

Touch is not just haptic—we’re invited to think of “sound and sight as a form of touch.”

Erin squeezes a grapefruit into a big transparent glass jar. At first, it’s a lot of juice, like an avalanche, then we make out individual droplets.

Grapefruit sounds like pee.

Erin drops the two fruity halves onto the table, they make a thumping sound. (Fig. 2)

All of this is still relatively factual, an observation of what happens. But how do I do justice to this experience beyond descriptive clarity, especially as a writer and performer who also experiments with a material and sensorial poetics and who wants to unlearn some of her training in scholarly distance? How do I listen with my whole body as a chorus of multiple, interconnected resonating chambers? For example, I know I can feel vibration and rhythm with my fingers, which I can move—like a stethoscope—to other parts of my body, listening in. I experience sound through the soles of my feet, through the movement of my diaphragm, through the tightening or relaxing of my jaw. With this awareness, how do I listen now?

This type of work requires new forms of listening-writing on my part, perhaps similarly textured, similarly playful and in tune with the other resonant materials and bodies I encounter.

Some sounds in the polymorphic performative universe suggest a movement, an activity, others suggest a state, or a texture, or even a pattern:

Sound of fabric brushing against skin. Sound of roughness. Like clearing your throat. Sound of a criss-cross pattern.





1 Hanna Sybille Müller and Erin Robinsong,
Polymorphic Microbe Bodies,
Tangente, Montréal, April 2021.
Performer in photo: Hanako Hoshimi-Caines.
Photo by Véronique Soucy.
Courtesy of the artists.

A person is seen lying on the floor, on top of a purple blanket. They are lying on their back, with another blanket covering the lower part of their body, and yet another rolled up under their head. Their hands are turned up towards the ceiling. Around them are draped some beige rope and yellow tennis balls. In the background we can see another person lying on a blanket curled up and rolled onto one side.



2 Hanna Sybille Müller and Erin Robinsong,
Polymorphic Microbe Bodies,
Tangente, Montréal, April 2021.
Performer in photo: Erin Robinsong.
Photo by Véronique Soucy.
Courtesy of the artists.

Image description: Erin is kneeling down at a low table, that's half covered by a blanket. She's wearing a light pink face mask and earth-coloured and ombre clothes. Around her and on top of the table are jars, bowls, and bottles filled with liquids, empty orange peel, and many kinds of fruits. Two shotgun microphones are seen dangling above the table.



Do these sounds make me want to move my legs?

Sound of a spoon being dropped on a wooden table.

I become aware of my dry mouth.

Sound of grapes being slipped into a jar full of undefined liquids.

What do I pay attention to?

I realise that to some extent my experience of sound is tied to what I see. Without the video, it is actually quite hard for me to describe what I hear. Maybe I could draw the sound like a graphic score by Cornelius Cardew or György Ligeti or maybe something more humorously cartoonish by Cathy Berberian.⁵ Or I could make a Dada sound poem jumping from “bllloTTt-ouaaffffff” to ‘grrrrrlllllllOOOOUUUUp – p p p p.”

Would you know what that sounded like?

The approximation of a *like* at first seems a good guide. It sounds *like* someone’s tummy rumbling. It sounds *like* a door opening. But it’s just a short-hand; I call upon memories of sounds without actually capturing the complexity of sound.

Sound of a lump or thump I feel in my chest. Sound of a tin being opened. Sound of the crackling of a shell, not the thin sound of an egg shell but the pulpy hard shell of a granadilla. All sounds go pulpy. Or gooey. What’s a tart sound? A tangy texture?

The small group of in-person audience members are invited to create an ‘island’, a support structure, out of blankets. They lie down, get cosy, and close their eyes. How do you feel when you hear dancers moving around you but you can’t see them? Maybe—and here I’m switching my imaginary toolkit on—it’s like the anticipatory goosebumps before a massage, or the accidental brush against a stranger’s shoulder on a bus? Maybe I anticipate feeling tickled. Does the sensation reside in that in-between space between imagination and action? Or maybe it’s more like the rhythm travels vibrationally through floor and limbs, testing our orientation, our proprioception—where is this body of mine?

I notice Sybille’s hand gestures. Inviting, pointing, keeping an unheard beat, like an internal, private dance.

Sound of a bottle being opened, the screw clicks or clacks, something fizzes.

Sound of gastric juices.

Suddenly I’m inside my own body. Gargling or gurgling away to my own rhythm. I wonder if all organs have a pulse or the capacity to hear internal movement. I do not know what my organs sound like beyond sonic clichés of the squishy muted flow of blood whooshing through my arteries or the supposed crackling hiss of my brain. Can I hear my eyeballs moving? What does my sore back sound like? Everything is beginning to resonate, respond. I know how my body resonates when I sing. Not just the obvious cavities but the fascia (that soft tissue coating all our organs and muscles) also react to vibration. How do I know about this resonance? I know this because from the age of 15 I have been intermittently learning a somatic vocal technique that I may well describe as unlearning ‘singing’, by which I mean not forcing my voice to sound a particular way or not applying



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techniques to fix it or force it into shape. I know that my body resonates because when I listen to *it* (my body, but also the performance I experience), I notice small vibrations in my jawbone, my clavicle, travelling up and down into my skull or even all the way into my feet or because a part of my body simply comes into focus as if someone had pointed a little torch on it. Or maybe I notice that my jaw loosens, that my tongue relaxes, or I feel the variable density or permeability of my soft palate. I feel as if there's a whole beehive in my head, there's so much going on! Maybe I notice that I'm letting go of my habit of clenching or of pushing up breath or sound rather than letting it just arrive.

Using our senses is riddled with sensorial and perceptual habits, often unconscious ones. Not all of them are "bad" and it's not a matter of gaining *more* control over our senses but perhaps believing in or surrendering to their autonomous organisation. We can begin by asking ourselves what the brain does with all these stimuli and follow them around as if going on an internal walk or hike. Learning more about anatomical and physiological structures allows us to perceive, notice, and experience these bodily or sensorial realities or changes in response to a prompt or stimulus. We might notice changes in our blood pressure, warmth, vibration, the toning or relaxation of muscles, or learn to read vestibular feedback (posture, balance, navigation, gravity, gaze stability) or cutaneous feedback (pressure, itch).

How can I let go of my grip on the senses?

Sybille guides us through a meditation.

"What do you see when your eyes are open? What do you see when your eyes are closed?"

Sound of munching, something sticky.

Sound of a knife, the blade being moved across a surface, that holds its own, won't give in easily.

"We have the impulse to make things better," Sybille says, reading my mind. I notice that I am trying to make out what the materials are that produce these sounds.

"Don't improve".

When I listened to this piece for the first time, I sat in my garden chair, enjoying the sun. It was April, my dog lay next to me. I listened through headphones allowing myself to be swallowed up by sound, becoming intimate with the matter, immersing myself in this bodily journey.

"Notice the reverberations of movement and how this affects other regions".

Movement is sound. Sound is movement.

"Soften your tongue."

I am so familiar with these kinds of prompts to notice, experience, and associate, that my body reacts immediately but not necessarily how I expect it to.

If it's not clear by now, let me make it explicit: the piece investigates feelingly how acts of language can affect the body, direct, and disperse attention, create sensation. But it also asks us: what happens when





3 Hanna Sybille Müller and Erin Robinsong,
Polymorphic Microbe Bodies,
Tangente, Montréal, April 2021.
Performer in photo: Michel F. Côté.
Photo by Véronique Soucy.
Courtesy of the artists.

A musician is seated at a low-lying table covered in a yellow cloth. They're holding two drum sticks. On the table is a mixing board, some bowls and other not-clearly visible percussion instruments. The table is framed by two speakers on the floor.



4 Hanna Sybille Müller and Erin Robinsong,
Polymorphic Microbe Bodies,
Tangente, Montréal, April 2021.
Performers in photo: Emmanuel Jouthe
and Lara Oundjian.
Photo by Véronique Soucy.
Courtesy of the artists.

At the centre of the image is an audience member lying on their back covered in blankets. Above them is one of the dances who's draping a yellow rope over the audience member's arm. Another dancer is seen crouching to the right of the person slowly pulling another rope of their body. Both dancers are wearing facemasks and are wearing loose clothing in muted colours.



sensations interact? Language has the power to facilitate a bodily awakening or reckoning. For that it need not be voiced. Descriptions in the form of captions similarly shape the experience for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences, more specifically their emotional or embodied responses. Jessica A. Holmes describes deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie's technique of "touching the sound" as experiencing "different pitches and sounds resonating in her body—the chest, the stomach, the tip of the pinkie finger."⁶ Holmes reminds us that:

Deafness only deepens musicology's sense of what music is—its social, relational, and material contours. Music does not simply exceed the limits of aurality; it exceeds the acoustical parameters of sound itself. "Sound" can be a primarily visual-spatial experience as we watch objects and bodies vibrate and move as music passes through them.⁷

A deepening of our understanding of sound also ought to make us question the conventional distinction between active and passive listening, usually based on expertise and experience and rooted in a notion of mastery, as Holmes suggests, and to which I would add active and passive reading.⁸

The sound of scraping the flesh out of a coconut. Or rather, the sound of vulnerability for being seen for who we are. (Fig. 3)

Sound is gestural. It's a doing. And sometimes that doing is only imagined.

Scrubbing, scribbling, squeaking. Sound of things getting too much, we want them gone! We want to rub them off our bodies, get them out of our head!

Sound of feeling swayed, that suspension of gravity, as if you were sitting on a swing, sound of feeling the wind brush your ears, make your hair wild.

Sound of the condensation of all your doubts, all your frustrations, into a little ball of light, shimmering away, firing sparks.

Sybille tells us that our digestive tube is around 8 metres long, folds upon folds. Then she asks us to fill this tube with a hissing sound, which she demonstrates. At this point a musician joins the sonic scene, hissing into a microphone.

"Sense the others in the room. Seen and unseen".

I've often wondered how I can sense and make visible the others in the room, especially the unseen ones. All those voices that rise from the pages of books, from screens and stages, that are folded into my mnemonic knapsack. Citation and adaptation in both research and creative practice are ways of bringing others into the room, of creating a gathering. I'm inspired by Mindy Seu's use of the term "gathering" as sharing, not gathering as accumulation, acquisition, or extraction, but gathering for kinship, for establishing relationships, listening to forgotten voices: "Building relationships between things is a form of authorship too."⁹ Specifically, I've experimented with this gathering through using a form of "promiscuous citation" as my collaborator Naomi Woo and I call it; having texts hold hands on the page, becoming tender bedfellows. I've long had this fantasy, which I've not yet realised, of making a costume that contains all my research, all my google searches, all my notes and quotes, fitted into or onto one object. There are of course other ways of acknowledging that our work is embedded in the presence of others; and these others are not necessarily human.



In *Microbia*, science writer Eugenia Bone explains how microbes communicate: “bacteria use a kind of groupthink, a crowdsourcing mechanism invented many millennia before ours, called quorum sensing. It’s how they talk to each other” (p. 24). Bone describes how viruses “look like drums, crystals” (p. 25). At that moment, the musician uses the drum stick to hit the cymbals, and Sybille says: “Viruses are in everything. Bacteria have viruses living in them. Larger viruses have smaller viruses living in them [...]. “We are part virus. [...] Immune systems learn from exposure in a constant dialogue”.

Erin tosses seeds into a big tinny bowl. They sound like a rainmaker. It is frustrating to me how difficult it is to find a precise or poetically dense descriptive language for my sensory experiences. Oh the riches of experience, oh the poverty of this linguistic translation. But maybe translation *is* experience and not a product, as Sawako Nakayasu recently proposed in our joint panel on “Performing Textures” at Bard College. An audience member shared after my workshop that as someone on the autism spectrum they naturally experienced the senses as connected, not rigidly separate, and that language often had a material quality, a palpable texture and sound that was experienced by the other senses.¹⁰

The musician throws in percussive accents, adding a recognisably musical dimension to the guttural landscape, and yet simultaneously nudges us to recognise Erin’s fruity melange as very much *music* in and of itself.

Sound of plates being moved around. Sound of the yawn of a tree. Sound of sleepy-sloppy limbs relaxing into cacophonous cushions. Sound of serene alertness.

My critical mind pipes up again tugging on the serenity-strings. Can I really use this definitional language “sound of” with its apparent claim to universality? Should it be “My sound of” or “I hear” or “I sense”? And what are cacophonous cushions? I think it’s what my singing teacher meant when she said “step into a roaring silence”. Stepping into that paradox means becoming aware of that raucous orchestra inside you. Try it. It’s wild.

As the performance progresses, the dancers pick up the rope that’s placed across the performance space like a map of arteries, and drape it around themselves, and slowly snake it over the live audience’s bodies.

Erin swigs her hand in a liquid bowl. I am reminded of the sound my stomach makes when I’ve had too much coffee. Then:

Sound of palming, kneading, fingers poking into soft squishy material, prodding. Kids playing in wet sand. Sound of the stickiness of a realisation, an embarrassment, not leaving your fingers. Sound of hanging on, not-letting-go, an inquisitiveness, getting to the heart of it...

The most repulsive but also sneakily enticing sound is the sound of fingers patting a squishy material, which is somehow erotic or vulgar, vaginal or excremental.

One performer lets the snake-rope flop about, dance on the floor in wavy motions. I can hear it but I wouldn’t have pictured it as snaky. I probably would’ve thought of a whip. A performer places fruit on an audience member’s belly. Many of the sounds make me feel hungry or a bit frisky. (Fig. 4)

I’m reminded of Pauline Oliveros’s simple but perceptive question “When are you listening to what you are now hearing?”. It’s one of many prompts from her ground-breaking (sound-breaking?) project and book *Sonic Meditations* which develops her theory of deep listening. For me, this is not a (potentially able-bodied) distinction between physiological hearing and conceptual listening; it’s about the difference in what we pay attention to.¹¹



I'm also reminded of Jonathan Burrows's *A Chorographer's Handbook*, which Erin recommended to me in 2018 when we were working on a performance together:

"Are you doing what you want to do or are you following your habits? Maybe following your habits is the right thing to do?"¹²

For a while now I've been keeping a material diary, in writing and video, where I explore a particular material. I've also extended this haptic listening or visual and linguistic tactility into workshop settings. I always ask myself and the workshop participants similar questions that were also asked by Anni Albers, Roland Barthes, and more recently Dylan Robinson, namely, how language or material can create a translation of other non-linguistic sensory experiences.¹³

Barthes, as cited by Robinson, for example, says that we need a language that contains: "the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language." (Barthes 1975, 66– 67). Robinson similarly practises what he calls an "apposite methodology", that "convey[s] experience alongside subjectivity", and is a form of "writing with" music (Robinson, p. 81).

The performers drop dried beans onto the resting bodies of the audience. There's now a chorus, a polyphony of pulses, flopping about on flesh, on wood, on cotton, in glass and metal bowls, into and onto all kinds of resonant bodies.

Pulses *en masse* sound like rain.

My singing teacher sometimes used the rainstick (a percussive tube-like instrument containing beans or pebbles that sounds like rain when turned upside down) to invite me to hear similarly rustling frequencies to find the "noise" element in my voice. That invitation creates anything but what we conventionally understand by noise. Instead, it facilitates the indeterminate, boundaryless, unmusical sounds which allow the voice to become less sanitised and controlled, and more effortless and layered. If we can get the surfaces of our mucous membranes to vibrate, the eustachian tubes, the bronchial system, the sinuses, the bones, we might produce and hear a kind of harmonic layering, a mix of overtones that my singing teacher calls "Brillianz" in German.

"The rest is resonance." (Rike Scheffler)

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The lights change and we see bodies writhing like sea creatures. Sweeping and swishing the beans around with one of the blankets in one fell swoop again and again sounds like waves crashing. We're nearing the end.

I can no longer quite tell what's internal or external and whether something's just an auditory phantom.... Did I actually hear that? That's just some lettuce being waved in the air but it could also be a psychedelic experience of pigeons bursting out of your head, connecting you to deep memory or dreams.

What can description accomplish? In this example of what I call "literary live art", there is a poetic sensibility in the way Erin's and Sybille's performance is set up; I feel Erin's poetic ear (or eye?). This work of listening that the work prompts is also an acknowledgement that "poetry listens", records and exhibits attention, as Zoe Skoulding suggests.¹⁴



In my immediate response to the work, I wrote to Erin, that it “was the first video of a performance that I’ve seen during the pandemic that captured the intimacy of live performance”. With some critical distance I now understand why I said that—because the work broke with the supposed coldness or lack of embodied response in a digital space; showing us that it’s not the digital medium itself that has certain properties but what we do with it.

At the end of the performance, the island-creatures, the microbes in the communal body, are offered some nourishment: the juice Erin has prepared durationally throughout the performance. They drink the leftovers of sound. The rest. We rest. I suddenly read Rike’s poetic line differently—“The rest is resonance”—a dual meaning that doesn’t exist in German but which the English translation brings forth.

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Sounds are forms of rest and waiting. Forms of passing time. Non-linear time. Time that is different based on your individual needs and experience of embodiment. Time that explodes expectations and norms of pace and outcome, of what is supposed to happen with(in) or over time.¹⁵ There has long been a connection between time and sound; associations with capitalism abound, time’s acceleration and linear progress on the one hand and slowness and stasis/stagnation on the other; and “control over time is always connected to institutions, technologies, and power.”¹⁶

If *Polymorphic Microbe Bodies* asked us how we can represent sound as matter, then deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim asks us how we can measure time and visually represent sound anew. Music and performance are time-based media and Kim plays with what it means to experience time and sound in a durational way but then depicts this experience visually. In “The Sound of Passing Time”, “Sound of Inactivity”, and “Sound of Obsessing”, Kim makes a drawing out of musical symbols that represent loudness (such as *p* for piano and *f* for forte or *ff* for fortissimo). Time speeds up, builds, decreases. In Kim’s *All. Day*, the artist has drawn the arc her hand makes when she wants to express the duration “all day” in American Sign Language (ASL). It also contains the musical symbol for a semi-breve rest bar, which indicates silence or a pause in a musical notation.¹⁷

In Kim’s work (and, I would add, in *Polymorphic Microbe Bodies*), “listening with the eyes is a form of translation”, Zoe Skoulding observes, common to both musical score-reading and ASL, neither of which “can be fully captured in writing, since both are subject to interpretation, nuance and texture” (*Poetry & Listening*, p. 135). While Kim’s works are often read for their conceptual and political critique; to me they are also incredibly rich in *texture*. Charcoal or dry pastel on paper usually smudges. It leaves a trace. Accumulates. Shapes. Patterns.

In the series of works on paper *six types of waiting in berlin* (2017), Kim similarly draws “sitting in an immigration’s office waiting room”, “waiting for customer service at an art supplies shop”, and “waiting in line at the bank” by using a variation of *p*’s and free-floating notes to capture the rhythm, duration, and also emotional and physical effects of this type of waiting.

When we pass time, does it pass through the body? This reminds me of a time my mum visited me at university in England when, after having missed her Eurostar train, she told her fellow passengers on the next train that she had “passed” the train, thinking of “verpassen” (“to miss”) in German. A false friend, or, what Uljana Wolf (the multilingual German writer I often translate) would call etymological gossip, which might point to some forgotten truths and kinships between words. What passes through us when we pass time?



Time is gastric.

“Sound is, above all, energy; listening brings us back to matter, and the matter that we are.” (Skoulding, p. 158)

As practitioners or scholars of performance, we often speak of embodied knowledge, meaning that embodied forms of practice aren't just the source *of* or supplement *to* knowledge but create and constitute research themselves.¹⁸ It's a form of learning through doing rather than thinking about a subject from a distance. Sensory knowledge, these experimental sound works remind us, emerges through relation with other bodies and objects; it cannot be seen as apart from *this* body and its nerves, muscles, bones, and organs. Such knowledge, like all knowledge, is embroiled with our expressions and experience of identities and their intersections, all kinds of contingencies, circumstances, memory, and community.

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Sometimes I think the role of criticism is to gather what was already said by other people—let them sit side by side on the page, my dinner table, which I've laid for them. And I just have to be a good host and listen.

JJJJJerome Ellis's book and album *The Clearing* enacts a listening for texture by asking how stuttering can resist able-bodied and capitalist conceptualisations of composition, time-keeping, knowledge, and fluency.¹⁹ Taking his own stutter as a conceptual and sonic organising principle, Ellis sees it as a “clearing”, “[a] gathering of sound (from Greek συλλαμβάνω, *sullambánō*, ‘I gather’)? Can a (held) syllable facilitate gathering?” (p. iii)

“The enslaved gathered in the woods at night to plan escapes and revolts, to dance, sing, and pray.” (p. i)

How do we sit with(in) this “clearing”, hold the space inside this pause? Listening for texture in Ellis's work is a form of accountability. It engages us in a process of political and ethical relation: asking us what agency and allyship are possible and needed.²⁰

Ellis's ‘clearings’ are also represented on the page. The descriptive text frames the poetic script. While italics capture the sound, the Roman text describes the lyrics. Ellis's “stutters—my clearings—are rendered in real time on the page”. Ellis's stutter takes the form of glottal stops and long pauses often in anticipation of difficult words. Each page represents the duration of the music (60 seconds to be precise). Some consonants are repeated to visualise the approximate time it takes Ellis to arrive at a word, forming a *texture* that requires a new form of reading-listening. Claiming dysfluency as power, even the name JJJJerome enacts this resistance to conventionally efficient speech. (Fig. 5)

The descriptive text describes what we hear or *could* hear. For example: “the sound gradually gets distorted / like a rising hoarseness forcing the voice / to find another horse to hold its journey” (p. 96). In a turquoise blue font next to it, in the right-hand margin, a secondary poetic layer describes the atmosphere and sometimes keeps time:

“two sounds, /... two swollen / measures / of foam and / shard.”

“What is the / wound / reopening / during the / stutter?” (p. 96)

“Two / melismatic / dragonflies in / a cradle weave. A bracelet of / grace.” (p. 97) (Fig. 6)



Ellis describes the book in the preface as “an experiment in melismatic writing” (p. vi). Melismatic singing is often contrasted with syllabic singing where each syllable gets its own note. Melismatic singing moves across many notes while maintaining a single syllable. Ellis sees a connection to stuttering: “Why do many stutterers cease stuttering when they sing? Melisma is one of the ways music can distend, suspend, elongate, and dilate time.” (p. ii). Formally speaking, the project is generically hybrid, a lecture performance with musical accompaniment, a concrete poem or prose as open-field poetics, a creative transcription of or script *for* a live performance, and a translation of Ellis’s essay “the Clearing: Music, Dysfluency, Blackness, and Time”. The work leads a reader-listener to these questions:

“What if dysfluency were called parafluency, a parallel flow, an alternate flow, a flow that ends up going in a different direction, to another country, only accessible via babbling brook? Melisma is sonic investigation into what lies beyond, within, beside the syllable.” (p. ii)

This investigation also evokes sound as healing past and ancestral traumas:

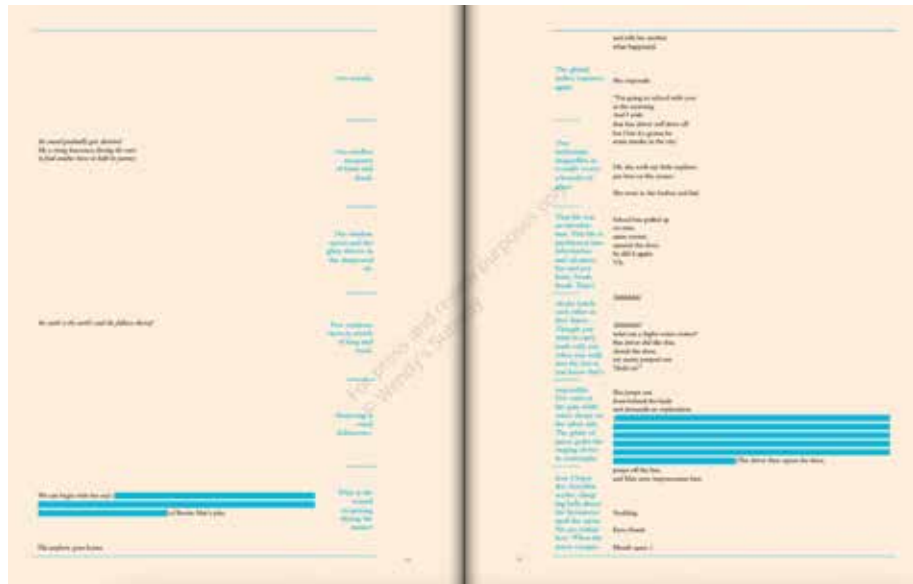
Why did slave owners often withhold clocks and watches from the enslaved, as well as knowledge of how to read these timepieces? [...] Can black song heal these traumas arising from time and sound? How can we create gentler, more humane clocks? How can we learn from the dandelion clock? How can we learn from the water clock? (p. iii)



5 JJJJerome Ellis, from “Dysfluent Waters,” in *The Clearing* (Brooklyn, NY: Wendy’s Subway, 2021). Courtesy of the artist and Wendy’s Subway.

A double-page spread, the left turquoise, the right beige. In the left-hand column of the beige page there’s turquoise text counting 0’25” to 0’55”, top to bottom. The central text in black ink is laid out in stanzas with several letters (such as d’s and b’s and t’s) breaking from the linearity of the column, splintering off, taking up space, scattering across the page.





6 JJJJerome Ellis, from
 “Punch Line,” in *The Clearing*
 (Brooklyn, NY: Wendy’s Subway, 2021).
 Courtesy of the artist and Wendy’s Subway.

A double-page spread. Black text in italics describes sounds that can be heard. Black roman font is used for the narrative prose text, which is twice disrupted by a turquoise blank erasure bar that’s deleted what lies underneath it, like an erased document. The centre fold of the page is framed by two columns of turquoise text uses meditative reflections and imagery, e.g. ‘The window / opens and the / glass shivers in / the sharpened / air’ or more declarative theoretical statements like ‘Stuttering is / vocal / dehicence.’ Both columns create a visual simultaneity that attempts to match the sonic polyphony in the recording.

When I think of sound as healing, I think (of course) of Pauline Oliveros, my unseen sonic companion over the last few years. Oliveros abandoned conventional composition and performance practices in favour of communal and participatory sonic mediations that undid the distinction between performer and audience, and whose explicit purpose was “healing”.²¹ (The late Caro Smart, a queer activist musician, once told me that all rituals begin with sound.)

Is *Polymorphic Microbe Bodies* also a type of healing ritual? Erin and Sybille evoke Lygia Clark’s therapeutic works which inspired them. “It’s like being in the ideal hospital” one audience member remarked after experiencing Erin and Sybille’s performance. This association seemed especially pertinent with a pandemic raging in the background, when we read daily about the limited capacity of intensive care units. I look up Lygia Clark again and in my tiredness I type Lyric Clark. Lyric as song as healing. I recently came across Clark’s work *Respire comigo* (Breathe with me), a piece of industrial rubber, from 1966. Clark described it like this: “When activated near the ear, this rubber hose provides a measure of the body’s breathing, revealing the living lung itself. When we become aware of the rhythm of the body we do not quickly forget it.”²²

When we become aware of the body, we do not quickly forget it.



In the late seventies and early eighties, Clark began to change her art practice towards offering therapeutic treatments to clients. She continued to use objects and materials originally created as sculptures, which were now activated through therapy. Clients were invited to lie down on a mattress filled with Styrofoam balls, sometimes also on cushions filled with other objects, Clark then placed her so-called relational objects—stones, veils, seashells, mirrors, and blankets—on different body parts, or used her sensory objects (like plastic bags filled with sand or water) or the industrial rubber from *Respire conmigo*—to awaken the audience's senses.

There's a question that has followed me around for a long time, which is: how can I make criticism more like art, more embodied? Eleni Stecopoulos writes in *Visceral Poetics*: "I look for a form of writing that might live how language viscerally alters us; how our 'vitals' fluctuate in the presence of language issuing from us or from another; how the body in its opaque poetry can be homeopathically treated by poetry—as aesthetic, not anaesthetic, therapy."²³

She continues: "A visceral criticism would require reading with one's entire proprioceptive repertoire, looking to the gut, to spinal distortions, neuralgic signing, as much as to the logistical faculties of close literary reading. This means a willingness to entertain readings of 'psychosomatic' locations as intertextual and interactive with literary texts." (p. 99)

This returns me to my earlier premise, inspired by Erin's and Sybille's project: that the acts and textures of language have real effects on the body, create new material realities.

What makes language material for me is when we treat it as if we didn't quite understand it logically or at least not immediately. Materials like clay and wool or lemon peel and metal sit well next to one another, they rub shoulders. We do not challenge or doubt how something so wrinkly and waxed can sit next to something so shiny and solid.

When we listen for texture, we don't listen for content, or if we do it is the contentment of content, the containment, the tent it pitches over us. When we listen for texture, we might see a work's ridges, contours, and arcs, how it passes our day. We learn about process, a story of making, but also an imaginary landscape freed from the strictures imposed on real bodies. When we listen for texture, we brush up against histories, find clearings in the forest that confront us with our complicity or our desire for community. There we find a gathering space, and are held.



- 1 I have not read up on the latest scientific studies on synaesthesia in either adults or children; my observations are rooted in my own embodied experience of what I know *is* sensorially possible or believe *could be possible*, which is that sweet spot between imagination and graspable thereness, which is also my definition of reading.
- 2 Trailer for Polymorphic Microbe Bodies: <https://vimeo.com/491337435>; trailer for the theatrical performance: <https://vimeo.com/604832681>.
- 3 There were 3 audience members, 1 musician, 4 dancers, plus Erin and Sybille. The other dancers were: Diego Gil, Hanako Hoshimi-Caines, Emmanuel Jouthe, Lara Oundjian, and the musician was Michel F. Côté.
- 4 DONNA HARAWAY, with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, 'Speaking Resurgence to Despair/ I'd Rather Stay With the Trouble', *Brooklyn Rail*, Dec 2017–Jan 2018; online at < <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/12/art/DONNA-HARAWAY-with-Thyrza-Nichols-Goodeve>>.
- 5 See for example, Stripsody: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dNLAhL46xM>.
- 6 Jessica A. Holmes, 'Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 70, number 1, pp. 171–220 (p. 172).
- 7 Holmes, p. 211.
- 8 See Holmes, p. 212.
- 9 <https://issue1.shiftspace.pub/on-gathering-mindy-seu>.
- 10 Mel Baggs, an expert in experimental touch-based experience, was an autistic non-verbal artist and activist whose video-essay *In My Language* (posted to YouTube in 2007) offers a choreographic, tactile, and sonic engagement with objects in their domestic space. Halfway through the video some text appears—"A Translation"—in the form of automated voiceover and subtitles: a powerful manifesto that pushes back against able-bodied conceptualisations of what constitutes a 'language', legibility, and the category of personhood.
- 11 See also Jessica A. Holmes, 'Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness'.
- 12 Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 7.
- 13 See Dylan Robinson's chapter WRITING ABOUT MUSICAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY in *Hungry Listening*, University of Minnesota Press. (2020), 77–111; Anni Albers's chapter 'Tactile Sensibility' in *On Weaving* (Middletown/CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965; repr., London: Studio Vista, 1974).
- 14 Zoe Skoulding, *Poetry & Listening: The Noise of Lyric* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 1.
- 15 See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 26–28.
- 16 Switching models of time, Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne suggest, does not necessarily in and of itself lead to better politics. See Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne, 'Second Rate', *Triple Canopy*, 1 October 2020 <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/issues/26/contents/second-rate>.
- 17 Christine Sun Kim. *All. Day*. 2012. Score, ink, pastel, and charcoal on paper, 38.5 x 50» (97.8 x 127 cm).
- 18 For a sophisticated summary of these debates and an argument for embodied techniques in the arts as sustained research, see Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 19 The album was released on NNA Tapes and the book was published by Wendy's Subway (edited by Rachel Valinsky and designed by Rissa Hochberger).
- 20 JJJJerome Ellis, "Loops of Retreat (Single Edit)": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLzwwRA3KSc>.
- 21 Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (Smith Publications, 1971), unpaginated. She mentions healing three times in her introduction to the meditations.
- 22 Lygia Clark as cited on MoMA's website: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/181/2412> for Lygia Clark: *The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988* (May 10–Aug 24, 2014).
- 23 Eleni Stecopoulos, *Visceral Poetics* (Oakland, CA: ON Contemporary Practice, 2016), p. 95.

