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The Feminist Poet Re-Creates the Soundscape: The Excessive Noise of Lisa Robertson and Rachel Zolf

JESSICA MACEachern

IN ORDER TO INTERVENE in the accustomed relationship between the reader and the printed page, Canadian poets Lisa Robertson and Rachel Zolf modify their rhythm and meter with accompanying sound recordings. Robertson reproduces the act of perceiving in order to inscribe the city of Paris on the pages of “Disquiet.” In *Janey’s Arcadia*, Zolf sonically tears apart documents of settler violence amidst musical strands of Indigenous survival. Inviting the pose of the listener, who leans forward to reread the text, these poets infuse the natural with the technological, projecting Donna Haraway’s cyborg and Nicole Brossard’s holograph into the flickering “now-time” (Heller 211) of the feminist past, present, and future. It is the contradictory task of the feminist poet to both dismantle and luxuriate in the material reality of the page. Robertson and Zolf invite disquiet into the pages of their books in order to reveal the bodies at the margins of capitalist and colonial accounts. The innovative, or inventive (to borrow a term from Charles Bernstein), writing of Robertson and Zolf follows this feminist impulse, which is roughly equal to transforming the writing process into a (re) reading process, one especially attentive to the gendered implications of the *codex* — that is, the bound book and its printed pages — as a tool of *noisy* discourse.

This rereading is necessitated by the errors in the text: Robertson’s speaker rarely achieves what she sets out to accomplish (or, like Virginia Woolf’s streetwalker setting out to purchase a pencil, she achieves much more; she accrues an excess), and Zolf’s speaker luxuriates in the repeated machine-made errors of the text. For these two twenty-first-century experimental poets, rereading attends not simply to the visual sense but, in particular, demands use of the auditory sense. Sound is key here. As Jonathan Sterne demonstrates in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, the auditory sense is “central to the cultural life

of modernity” (2). In both the historical period of modernity, wherein Robertson’s Paris flickers and Zolf’s settler-citizens stop their ears to Indigenous cultural life, and in the now-time of the feminist codex, “sound, hearing, and listening are foundational to modern modes of knowledge, culture, and social organization” (Sterne 2). Consider it this way: if reading is hearing, rereading is the concentrated act of listening. In the creative praxis of Robertson and Zolf, rereading, like listening, is “a directed, learned activity” (Sterne 19). The excessive and vibratory noise inherent in their texts is the result of a feminist citational practice (like Sara Ahmed’s *feminist memory*), one that requires a close engagement from their readers, who must lean in and extend not only their eyes but also their ears to the multi-sensory poetry and prose.

In the poetry and prose of Robertson and Zolf, feminism manifests itself in the text as a communal force capable of disrupting the singular, phallographic self so consistently celebrated in literary canons. In “Time in the Codex,” from her 2012 collection of philosophical essays, *Nilling*, Robertson proposes that “the codex is a figure for the material history of thinking. And the particular liveliness, the gesture, the codex brings to thinking is the turn, or the fold — the inflection whose agency never does complete itself” (11). I deploy the term *codex*, after Robertson, in order to demonstrate the material intervention enacted by the feminist poet within the printed page and, to a larger extent, within the delimited scope of literary studies. It is particularly its ability to *fold* — a word inflected by Deleuze’s baroque investigation into the term — that allows *codex* to remain a dynamic term in this contemporary moment, wherein the book is already an antiquated technology and the scroll has transfigured itself into the vertical and horizontal gesture of the digital page. The act of folding (multiplying one’s contact with the self and others, becoming pliable in an ungiven world) is a minoritarian behaviour of Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming subjects. The physical folds in the printed book, and the inventive folds in the sound recording, are the “seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations” (Deleuze and Guattari 106). These folds, these “lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification” (3), prepare the rupture in the codex from which the author’s “I” may escape into a multiplicity. Women entering the literature of past and future canons require the codex’s flexibility in order to appropriate for themselves the technologies of writing. Thus, the femin-

ist codex is never a static figure, but a figuring. It is not the inscription of history, but the pulsating re-visioning and dynamic embodiment of material history.

Reading and writing that creates space for women's literature in Canada is especially necessary, given the trajectory of national feminist culture since the early 1990s. In a 2002 essay, Barbara Godard identifies the previous two (now three) decades as a period "of retrenchment and declining public legitimation of feminist discourse and its emancipatory project" (209). Godard's catalogue of governmental cuts to women's programs and feminist periodicals in the 1990s is a depressing trend that the previous Conservative government enthusiastically reinstated. It is within this renewed precariousness of women's place in the literary arts, as further demonstrated (and combatted) by the work of the organization Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA), that a research project reading women's poetry through a resolutely feminist lens is necessary. Robertson's and Zolf's poetics and politics are a demonstration of the lasting and revolutionary gendered technology of the codex and its use in presenting the accented (Brossard) and ex-centric (Godard) voices of women. In their integration of digital noise into the printed page, they de-create the conventions of the codex and re-create the soundscape.

The Disorienting Soundscapes of Lisa Robertson's "Disquiet"

Like Virginia Woolf before her, in *A Room of One's Own*, Robertson envisions her place within the page as a feminist incursion. Woolf begins her lecture by cautioning, "I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (5). Robertson's "I" is similarly ambivalent: she sets out like a *flâneur* — despite the (linguistic and social) impossibility of a *flâneuse* — and becomes disoriented against a dismantling of the figure/ground binary in which *noise* overtakes the organizing principle of *sound* (i.e., sound thought, or organized thinking). Despite the questionable nature of the first-person pronoun for their purposes, both writers represent a first-person scene, "making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist" (Woolf 5) — though, in Robertson's case, the role here is rather that of the poet in the tradition of Canadian documentary poetics.¹ The feminist thrust of either *essai* (Woolf's incursion onto the grass of the

exclusively male campus, Robertson's incursion into the streets of Paris) begins with a kernel of writerly thought. Both writers are preoccupied with *reading* or *listening to* their surroundings; Woolf has been tugged down by a mysterious flash in the Oxbridge riverbank, and Robertson is being led by the disquieting ambience of a contemporary city. In Robertson's text, feminist poetic theorizing transforms the writing process into one of special attunement, implicating the traditionally passive reader of her text as an agency-possessing creator, a model of interactivity influenced by Lyn Hejinian's concept of the "open text" (43). Here, "all the elements of the work are maximally excited" so that they "exceed (without deserting) argument" (Hejinian 43). Just as Woolf's originary thought *exceeds* her subject, women and fiction, Robertson's being-subject *exceeds* the bounds of figure/ground and silence/sound.

In the penultimate essay of *Nilling*, "Disquiet," Robertson takes for her subject the act of perceiving in the city of Paris. Unlike the visual focus in the essay-poems collected in her earlier *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture* (2003), here the auditory sense is the most crucial factor. The text is accompanied by several ambient soundscapes, to be accessed on the publisher's website, that reinforce the vibrant noise in which women's reading and writing persists. An introductory note to the essay invites the reader to take leave of the book in order to access this website, just as Robertson takes leave of the visual medium that inspires her *essai* in order to immerse herself and her reader in the practice of listening. Robertson is walking through Paris and visiting the sites of Eugène Atget's documentary photographs, collecting sound-wave "specimens" ("Disquiet" 58) with an audio recorder. The thirty-second duration of the clips are modeled after the length of time for which Atget's photographic exposures were timed. In this way, Robertson writes, she was able to "make a constraint-based description of the present" (58). This present is a mixture of image and sound, with insistent ties to the changing scene of modernity as documented by Atget. Robertson is rereading Atget's photographs by complementing their visual focus with her aural one.

In pursuit of the material of the present, Robertson walks and writes: "I habitually ventured out in early afternoon, in the full economy of day, so I would never hear a clarity; the sound would not become an image. No figure would emerge. The city became random soundfield, and I was not a figure either, not separate from field" (59). This predilec-

tion for disorientation is the result of the historical and excessive desire for reflectiveness as a woman in public. From the present vantage of a woman in the city, the image can provide no satisfactory description of the self. Rather, at every point, the field is an ever-fluctuating acknowledgement and disavowal of many (gendered) selves. The multiplicity of the feminist subject (an ever-changing and nomadic self, in the sense of Rosi Braidotti's figurations of the ethical subject) is not possible in the traditional visual field wherein the looks and gazes find sexually determined danger and unease; thus the feminist poet de-creates the conventions of the codex and re-creates the soundscape. The prose that accompanies Robertson's ambient soundscapes does not serve a descriptive function, so that the resulting noise is *acousmatic*: "sounds that one hears without seeing their source" (Sterne 20). The poet does not re-create an image of the marketplace, nor the body that moves through its stalls. The poet provides her reader with a portrait, not of her present, nor of Atget's, but of the "now-time" of reading and listening.

Robertson's soundscapes unfold in the *agora*: a marketplace, a container of multitudes (and, for the purposes of chronicling the fluctuating present, multiple *times*). In "Disquiet," as well as in Robertson's many poetry collections, the commodity is a figure without which the being-citizen is incomplete; though capitalism is not a *celebrated force* in the feminist city, it is nevertheless an inescapable one. A population's purchasing habits and the commodious objects available to their senses determine much of their subjectification in present time. Unsurprisingly, then, the first soundscape is titled "Calls and Market Stalls." As accompaniment to the noise, Robertson writes, "I wanted the present to be an ideal library. Infinity, plenum, chaos, dust. I wanted it to be an agora — total availability of the entire thick history of linguistic conviviality and the potential to be completely lost in the strangeness of civic description" (57). In the sound clip, this ideal library is the desired marketplace of the title. One man shouts or sings rhythmically, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" while vendors and customers barter, exchange coins, and make small talk. Robertson's "ideal library" is nothing like the silent and sterile institutions one usually imagines, nor the highly regulated reading rooms into which Woolf intrudes in order to make her study of women and literature. In the marketplace's "linguistic conviviality" are the looping and insistent voices of buyers and sellers.

The thirty-second soundscape ends long before the reader can close

in on the essay's full page of dense philosophical prose. If, as Robertson writes, it is true that "Noise gives the listener duration as an artifact" (57), what is the nature of the gift her reader receives? What type of *duration* is possible in the doubled pose of reader and listener? Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of duration as that which "separates the brute perception from the reflective examination" (38), but Robertson's soundscapes and prose refuse such a total separation of the brute from the reflective. As a result, her reader has reason to doubt the value of measuring duration. As an *artifact*, it is not descriptive of the now-time in which the recording makes its reproduction, nor is it the now-time in which the recording plays and repeats. Robertson's soundscapes insist that the noise intrude on the sense-making readership's efforts to move through the physical page. They insist, as Merleau-Ponty does, that in the body of the individual reader is implicated the embodiedness of a multitude: "My access to a universal mind via reflection, far from finally discovering what I always was, is motivated by the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of the others, by the blending of my duration with the other durations" (49).

Robertson carves a space for her voice and her movement into the noise of such a multitude: "the multiply layered sonic indeterminacy that is the average, fluctuating milieu of dailiness" (57). The indeterminacy of the poet's daily experience is essential, for it is only in this "temporal indetermination" (57) that the self may escape the constraints of identity and ramble freely, as the poetics escape the constraints of the physical page in pursuit of real rather than imaginary sound waves. This metaphor for the writing and reading practice, of *rambling* or *walking*, is integral to Robertson's thinking. The peregrinating philosopher, such as a Jean-Jacques Rousseau, informs the poet-philosopher's method for writing and recording: "So I have, in my walks in Paris, deferred to Rousseau, taking his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* as Baedeker" (58). Robertson here, as elsewhere, revives debate about the impossibility of the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse*. As a figure forbidden by the linguistic and social organization of cities, the woman who walks must walk differently: invisibly, perhaps, but noisily. She causes *disquiet* in herself and in others. Her physical form is, ultimately, up for dispute. In a further rebuttal to the vaunted transparency of everyday life, the noise of this Rambler does not simply level difference but luxuriates in "the diffuse

perceiving of a multiplicity" (58). Noise is a "non-knowledge" (57): *de ce qu'on ne sait pas*.

In the soundscape titled "Transport," soft music plays in the background and is interrupted by a constant clanking. The title suggests the writer and reader might be situated by rails. But neither the recording nor the accompanying prose provides any confirmation for this speculative reading. These are not the finely captioned documentary photographs of Atget, but the sonic aftertaste of luxuriating in the present time of their reception. Robertson does not seek to gather "an archive" (59) of the present, as Atget had. Robertson, instead, dismantles these historic institutions of *silence* and *exclusion*, and so her captions, or titles, operate differently than Atget's. They do not reliably point the reader to the original photograph or contemporary site; nor do they satisfactorily describe the contents of the soundscape or its prose accompaniment. Since there is no faithful transfer from caption to recording, nor any attempt to evade the noise of the city in favour of a clean sample of a single sound, it is impossible to determine the *fidelity* of Robertson's sound recordings. The poet's role as mediator is foregrounded, and if the result is a "loss of fidelity" or a "loss of being" (Sterne 218), so much the better for the disquieting project. The feminist poet does not "desire to capture the world and reproduce it 'as it really is,'" but to discredit any "theory of correspondence between representation and that which is represented" (Sterne 218) in order to more vividly re-create the relations between the marketplace's objects and its enfleshed body of consumers. For Robertson, the recordings she sets out to make come about due not simply to the available technology but to "a social process" (Sterne 219) inherent in the lines of relation among the bodies-in-time at the moment of her creative invention. Robertson's soundscapes have the effect of "loosening self-identity" (60) and of loosening the pose of the artist who records.

Water running, birds chirping, children's play echoing, a motor vehicle rapidly approaching and then fading away: these are the sounds of "City Walls." In the prose's opening statement, Robertson is concerned with dismantling the binary understanding of urban and rural: "As the city is not the opposite of the country, noise is not the opposite of silence" (61). The water heard running in this soundscape seemingly belongs in an idyllic countryside rather than beside a major thoroughfare. The brick wall the reader can conjure up in imagining this

scene, separating the schoolchildren from the onslaught of traffic and protecting their young bodies from harm, does not prevent the *noise* of the city from seeping into this charade of careful outdoor play. What does it mean to align these concepts of urban/rural with noise/silence? If the binaries are dismantled, what is the effect of their intermingling? Quoting Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, Robertson traces the division of city and country to "the separation between mental and manual labour, between administration and operation, between politics and social life" (62). The ruling binary here is "figure/ground" — that which noise "interrupts or effaces" (61) by disquieting the perceiver's ability to distinguish between sound and field. Noise is the "confusion" of these two concepts: "It's not silence's opposite, but an outside, mutating term" (63). In setting out into the city with her recorder and writing the accompanying prose, Robertson seeks not to "preserve a pre-existing sonic event as it happens," but to re-create the textured sensory landscape "for the possibility of preservation and repetition" (Sterne 332).

Accompanying the mutation of the audible past into the pure "exteriority" (Sterne 333) of the recording is the chatter of the contemporary *agora*, as in the soundscape "Decorative Work" where men shout, women converse, babies gurgle, and footsteps echo in the arcades. It is in its disruptive function, in its excessive accrual of the marketplace's objects and subjects, that noise reveals its use for the feminist poet within the codex. Pulling the reader into the digital realm while courting the obsolescence of the present page, Robertson's poetics refuse the "institutional norms and practices that not only shape literary careers but also preside over the formation of obedient, well-disciplined neoliberal citizen-subjects" (Reed xii). In his exploration of twenty-first-century experimental poetics, Brian M. Reed characterizes these new, political texts, after the avant-garde mode described by Matei Calinescu, as *joyfully destructive* (xii). The feminist poet, such as Robertson or Zolf, gleefully destroys the page on which she writes and from the waste re-creates a disquieting new reality.

Resounding Human Error in Rachel Zolf's *Janey's Arcadia*

Zolf's *Human Resources* is, Reed observes, an intervention into twenty-first-century corporate culture through the printed codex. The obsolete medium is subversively utilized to preserve the ephemeral, and the result

is an avant-garde hybrid of lyrical and digital free verse. The *ephemeral*, in the case of this earlier poetry collection, is a sample dataset of word use and frequency. Accessed online, the figures fluctuate rapidly. Preserved in the print codex, the figures are frozen: stripped of their ability to change. Except this isn't exactly true, as Zolf's poetry demonstrates. Each word has the renewed ability to mutate — depending partly on its placement on the page by the author, its denotations as set by society, and its connotations as felt by the reader. It is, in particular, Zolf's repeated use of the labels "Jew" and "lesbian" that render the print codex a dynamic, if obsolete, artifact. Reed writes, "To call somebody (or to call oneself) a 'Jew' (or 'black' or 'queer' or 'disabled') is to evoke connotations and denotations, past and present. Such terms cannot be wholly neutralized. They contain residues of affect and bring to mind histories of inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy and dissent" (24).

Identity markers remain a charged index of Zolf's poetics and politics in her latest collection as well, where the labels cover far more than the author's alter ego: "c@nt," "father," and "indign" describe a complicated web of relations between settler, land, and Indigenous peoples. In *Janey's Arcadia*, Zolf critiques and disassembles Canada's colonial history in arch and parodic reproductions of documents transfigured by Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Whereas *Human Resources* mined digital texts and corporate speak, *Janey's Arcadia* employs the machine as an intermediary: it transposes original documents into digital text, which the poet then transposes into experimental verse. The volume is replete with the machine's errors, which appear on the page as scrambled text and incomprehensible symbols. Alongside this, in flagrant display, Zolf has preserved human error as well: in the colloquially intact survey responses to "The Indign Question" — "Never thiuk of them" (104) says Mrs. J.B. Cosgrove; "Han'ly ever seen" (105) says Mrs. Jas. Findlay — and in the racism that underlies the settler's attitude to the Indigenous population whose land she occupies.

Like Robertson's "Disquiet," Zolf's text is an anarchic and parodic take on the archive. The documents pertaining to Canada's "origin" are faithfully reproduced, though the poet's voice registers its guttural opposition to these mythic origin stories. Refusing nostalgia for the modernizing city in which women were not yet full citizens, Robertson's essay dismantles the neat categorization of Atget's archive in favour of a noisy poetics. Refusing nostalgia for an incomplete origin story,

Zolf's collection reconfigures portraits of the settlers as violent occupiers. Her reproductions of the national archives, in print and in sound, uproot the mistakenly perceived emptiness of the page in which white visitors planted themselves. Zolf obliquely declares her re-appropriative method in her epigraph: "Genealogy is grey, meticulous and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. — Michel F@lkOde" (5). Not content with mere parody, Zolf shifts her methodological approach from archaeology to genealogy. The one holds tight to the myth of origin, while the other recognizes its impossibility. The scrambled type of Michel Foucault's name announces that Zolf, as intermediary between the original documents, the OCR, and the reader, acts as a *faithful* translator; meaning, she preserves the computer's slippages and encourages further misreading. Zolf, now in the "perverse" role of the feminist translator (to borrow Sherry Simon's figuration), mediates a disquieting relationship between citizen and history, for the genealogy of settler relations with Indigenous populations is indeed grey, entangled, and confused. The harms enacted in the type are visual representations of the violence experienced by Indigenous bodies. These visual representations are yet more concretely introduced in the pages of handwritten names interwoven between the individual poems. Here, the intermediary of the machine has exited. A new figure, other than the author and the reader, emerges; in fact, many ghostly figures now occupy the page: the women who are missing or murdered, and the host of living survivors who search for and, simultaneously, mourn these women.

Furthering the parallel between computer error and human error, Zolf has indicated — during a reading of select poems, hosted by fellow writer Gail Scott, at the Université de Montréal on 14 November 2014 — that the most important poem of the book is one without the expected screeds of margin-blurring text or scrambled type. "Janey's Hospitality" reads as follows:

"Have you any Indigns round where you are?"
asked the realtor.
"No,"
replied the visitor.
"We have hardly any foreigners at all." (89)

The “visitor” is the settler of so many of these poems, while the word “Indign” represents the forceful displacement of an entire people, further emphasized here in the audacity of the “visitor” to declare the Indigenous peoples “foreigners.” The visitor has made her home on land not her own and, in the incidental slippage of language in her response, she erases the identity of the Indigenous peoples who lived on the land before her and who continue in their struggle to survive at the margins of their oppressors’ “civilization.” Zolf, in her difficult appropriation of racist documents from her nation’s history of settler harms, does not deny the lines that have been drawn on the colonized soil; she performs them on and off the page.

Zolf’s poetry extends outward into a myriad of material and immaterial ephemera, from her stuttering live performances of the radically de-configured language to her filmic appropriations of National Film Board (NFB) archives. These off-the-page companions reinforce both the untranslatability of the political relationship between a nation and its citizens and the urgent need to perform a translation of that citizenship. The film is yet another version of this, described by Zolf on the Vimeo page as a *video translation*. It transposes the poetic text into a collection of interspliced and stolen videos from the NFB. Zolf and her collaborators did not receive permission from the film board to use the historical footage, so the NFB logo is burned into every frame. This has the effect of *making strange* the collected videos. Zolf heightens the description of colonial violence by demonstrating the *canniness* of the *uncanny* stolen footage. The videos of wheat fields, beavers, riverbanks, and train platforms are the exclusive property of the government and, it is implied, so too are the placid smile of Miss Iroquois and the naked body of the Indigenous man riding a horse among false clouds. The distorted music and sound cues that accompany these disquieting performances reveal the otherworldly nature of the white immigrants who descend from boats and trains to claim this land as their own. The close-ups on their alien faces (a mouth chewing a white-bread sandwich, a severe housewife standing between a portrait of her husband and a crucifix) suggest something violent and perverse has taken place. This is the *estranging* effect of the video clips placed as they are: a spring landscape split open by a winter horizon, a beauty pageant interrupted by a cowboy chasing cattle over western plains.

The video begins with not a visual glitch but an audio one. Pressing

play, the reader is met with the uncanny sound of audio feedback. This is the aural translation of the rendered mistakes in Zolf's text — the unreadable symbols that the OCR has substituted for what once were recognizable human words. In the various transpositions from human hand to machine and back again, there is the potential for registering the original human error. Here, Zolf refuses the temptation of a mythic account, like that of earlier — that is, *original* — sound's aura:

Before the invention of sound-reproduction technologies, we are told, sound withered away. It existed only as it went out of existence. Once telephones, phonographs, and radios populated our world, sound had lost a little of its ephemeral character. The voice became a little more unmoored from the body, and people's ears could take them into the past or across vast distances. (Sterne 1)

In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne's project is to dispute this mythic account, as well as the very notion of *original*. Elaborating on Walter Benjamin's infamous explication of *aura*, he writes, "the very concept of aura is, by and large, retroactive, something that is an artefact of reproducibility, rather than a side effect or an inherent quality of self-presence" (Sterne 220). The sound-recording techniques in Zolf's video passionately resist notions of fidelity in order to reveal the struggle that has made the poem and, before that, the land against which the poem writes itself. The sounds in the video do not "hold faith," nor do they attempt to "be faithful" (Sterne 282). The task of *fidelity* — a charged word in the context of this poem, wherein one's god is alternately that of religion, capital, or sex — falls not only to the writer, but to the reader, to both the "listeners and performers" (Sterne 282).

Before the first NFB footage plays, a string instrument enters the composition, and the strange sound lodges itself in the listener's body. What's expected in the presence of this distortion is violence. Men walk across the deck of a ship. Two of these men are assisting a priest in carrying a wooden cross. They walk forward as Zolf begins to read the first of three poems included in the video. This is "Janey's Hospitality," and these men are the visitors who will deign to call the Indigenous peoples — onto whose land they bring their religious artifacts and civilizing notions — foreigners. In her performance of the text, Zolf prolongs her pronunciation of the word "Indigns" so that the mistake weighs heavily on the poet's tongue.

In a stutter, Zolf now prolongs the word “foreigners” beneath the video footage of a beauty pageant. Women are standing in several rows and grinning, wearing sashes that read “Miss Sweden,” “Miss China,” “Miss Greenland,” and “Miss Scotland.” Zolf begins to read “Janey’s Pastoral Oasis”: “It is true Canada is not exactly a Utopia, Ltd.” (17). The camera lands finally on “Miss Iroquois.” Her smile is more subdued than those of the others. A high-pitched tone begins to play. Zolf is reading, “I used to have a lot of idyl / fantasies inwrought with Indign traits” (17). In a new video clip, an Indigenous man is riding, nearly naked, on the bare back of a pale horse. The man and his horse appear to be standing on a cloud. The reader cannot determine what reality or fantasy this strange scene seeks to represent. As the video returns to black, Zolf finishes the poem’s first stanza: “Smacks not this one-acted poem of the great / national prosaic life of Arcady?” (17).

Zolf continues to read while on the screen a young Indigenous girl nuzzles her face into the face of a beaver. She kisses its snout from where she lies, stomach down, on the ground before it. As the child and the beaver play, Zolf reads: “His hand brought my mouth / to his mouth. Sweet thought, pure speech, go hind in / hind” (17). The video changes and now it is no longer a child and an animal dancing, but a white woman and a white man. The video begins to skip as Zolf’s smooth reading voice mutates into an alien stutter: “his mouth was f□cking my mouth” (17). The obscenity in this line becomes a guttural punch. The poet goes deep inside herself before completing the harsh sounds.

The video changes again and white men, naked from the waist up, are swinging their fists at punching bags that hang from the rafters of a barn. These sacks swing wildly as Zolf stutters “Indign tongues” (17). Nowhere else is the juxtaposition of video and poem quite so startling. As the recording of the poet’s stutter plays, the white men continue to batter these imitation torsos on Indigenous land. In a new video, a piece of farm equipment drills into unbroken soil. A white man in coveralls inserts his hoe into the tilled-up land as Zolf reads: “You’d. Verb. Me” (17). Following this insistent declaration, which has been slowed down in its pronunciation so that each word is a complete sentence of its own, is the further insistence, “It was a fountain” (17). This, too, presents an odd juxtaposition against the close-up of the fresh, dark soil.

Now, Zolf's voice encounters harsh consonant sounds. These retain the affect of words referring to male and female genitalia, and her guttural stutter translates for the listener the relationship between these sexual figures: "No / costly manures, the only image your cuck filled / with novocaine in my c@nt red ugh" (17). The relationship between the man and woman of these lines is intermittently violent and passionate, just as the music playing in the video is intermittently melodic and discordant. The errors in the text could be read as mere Freudian slippages: "cuck" suggesting the man is being deceived, and "c@nt" a suggestion of refusal on the woman's part. But in the poet's voice, these errors take on graver meaning. The "u" (or *you*) inside the phallic word comes from a deep and guttural place, as if emerging from the body with immense resistance. The locative symbol interrupting the woman's cunt prolongs this word, too, and the woman's body is suddenly unrecognizable. The final "ugh" at the end of the line is a short, barely audible shudder in reaction to this mutation.

Continuing to read, Zolf juxtaposes the poem's next sexually explicit lines against video footage of a monk shaving a fellow monk's head, a rabbi placing a kippah on the head of a young man, and young women with their heads bent over scripture: "not giving up my life for a one-night / f\$ck" (17). When the individuals on the screen do not react to the content of the poet's text or to her performative struggle to read it, the reader senses in this land a lurid integration of sex, capital, and religion. Zolf's vocal tick here is short, less pronounced than the others; this incestuous trinity (sex, capital, and religion) has long been dominant in this nation, and the inclusion of the dollar symbol inside the sexual thrust is no surprise. But the poet's ease is lost when it comes to a fourth bed partner: that unavoidable and shadowy onslaught, death. John Durham Peters prepares the reader for this difficulty, predicting that the twenty-first-century poet would find renewed reason for struggle here: "what sex was to the Victorians, death is to us: the ultimate but inescapable taboo" (qtd. in Sterne 291). Peters continues to indicate that, while the contemporary audience is "congratulating ourselves on our liberalism on topics sexual," it remains true that "nothing is so veiled to us as death, so cloaked in euphemisms — or as pervasive in popular culture" (qtd. in Sterne 291). Thus, as death makes itself known in the poem, there is an increase in vocal ticks and video distortion:

my father
 isdead my father is blue, this isnmy father. SEC. rmy body! my
 body is life. nmy body is hot. this is nnnny body. c■nt
 PUKE (J S H 0 H T house. (17)

The first revelation “my father / isdead” (17) is paired with video footage of a white hand passing over Hebrew script, as though someone is bent in study. The poet and the viewer are joined in this act of discovery, wrenching apart the verb and the state of being or non-being that fuse in the neologism “isdead” (17). The difficulty the poet faces in claiming this dead father, “isnmy father” (17), is paired with the difficulty the poet faces in claiming her own body: “rmy body!” (17). As video footage of neon-lit women in negligees flickers, audio feedback fills into an ominous rhythm. Something slices through the recording, as though knives are being sharpened or train wheels are grinding the rails. As the video goes to black, Zolf finishes the poem in imitation of an orgasmic spasm or grunt. The rhythmic feedback continues as the sound of sirens becomes decipherable.

As Zolf begins to read the final stanza of “Face to Face to Face,” yet another white woman turns and begins to implore the camera. We cannot hear what she is saying, but Zolf’s voice leaks out as a credible substitution. The video translation comes to an end as the footage changes to the horizon of a plain, against which horses are trotting and pulling covered wagons. A mechanically manipulated version of the poet is repeating “Verb. Me.” in an insistent stutter. For the first time in the video translation, a second voice enters. “So it doesn’t matter what time,” this man’s voice insists. The video shifts to the empty horizon and the mechanically manipulated poet’s voice re-enters. “It was a fountain,” she stutters. The credits begin to play and the man’s voice repeats, for a final time, “So it doesn’t matter what time.” In the moments before the video ends, the listener receives a final two lines of text: “Honour the treaties and territories. It doesn’t matter what time.” This final digital flash seeks to subvert the order of events, the totality of forgetting that our colonial nation has undertaken.

Zolf’s video translation “thrives on the forgotten, on a past that recedes and retreats” (Sterne 319) in order to re-create, through aesthetic experimentation, a social recognition of the historical and present conditions of being a settler on colonized lands. In anthropological accounts, Sterne writes, it is common to witness “the *marbling* or *bronz-*

ing of Native Americans — freezing a dynamic native culture at a single moment in time for future study” (319). In order to credibly deny that the new settler-citizens were stealing land, were committing genocide against the peoples of that land, ethnographers preferred to ignore that white and Native cultures “existed in the same space” and instead used time as “a measure of cultural difference” (Sterne 312). Zolf refuses this *marbling* or *bronzing* of Indigenous cultures. In fact, she inverts this process; instead, she freezes white culture, and she freezes it into the form of a violent settler-citizen. She refuses any nostalgia for this time of land theft and genocide. In this way, her poetry occupies a “temporal orientation” that is, as Reed writes, “prospective instead of retrospective” (20). The contaminated language (and land) refuses to birth the fantasy of any single peaceful origin.

Destabilizing the Codex with Feminist Noise

Responding to phallogentric history, literary and colonial, with the disruptive spatial dynamics and disquieting soundscapes of the public protest, Robertson and Zolf trouble the line between the somewhere and nowhere of the page. In order to explode the hierarchies of literary value, disrupting the traditional codex is both a necessary and a potentially destructive task. The feminist poet encounters a problem: to dismantle the page completely would be to become accomplice to the historical (and contemporary) silencing of women and others in letters; yet the page is a signifier of patriarchal and colonial rule and cannot be approached without hesitancy. The page, its partial objects of lines and margins, and its place in the book, the anthology, and the library must be radically transformed into the space of “the elsewhere” (Robertson, “Time in the Codex” 12). This elsewhere is not specific to any time or space, and it is this inherent alterity that allows it to become an accurate metaphor for the codex and its collection of printed pages — with its folds and turns, radical citationality, and plurality of voices.

Both Robertson’s and Zolf’s sound recordings are insistently moored to the body. Their soundscapes perform a reproduction of the perceiving act. Its time is doubled, between writer and reader, and its spatial lodgings are newly material. The city of Paris, as the feminist poet hears it, is inscribed in the physical page. The colonial violence of settler citizens, as the feminist poet pronounces it, cuts into the reader’s hands and rings

in the listener's ears. Both writers embrace the "obsolescence," as Reed calls it, of the print codex in order to preserve what might otherwise be mistaken for "flickering immaterial signifiers" (24). In reproducing the archival documents of modernity, a period wherein the auditory sense was central, a period wherein Atget photographed Paris and new settler-citizens had comfortably erased evidence of the Indigenous populations whose land they had stolen, Robertson and Zolf seek to re-create the pose of the listener. The readers who are willing to take book in hand and invite in digital noise to accompany the print moor their own bodies to the physical page, to the perceiving act of one who disassembles mythic accounts of "knowledge, culture, and social organization" (Sterne 2) in order to let in the lived accounts of women and Indigenous peoples at the margins. Those on the listening end incite the possibilities of *feminist noise* in order to reinforce the truism that aesthetic creation is equal to reality, that new (social, political, erotic) relationships are available within the print codex.

NOTES

¹ Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* provides a history of the nation's documentary poetics.

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