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Un-Sounding: A New Method for Processing Non-linguistic Poetry

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"Textuality, sounded, evokes orality," Charles Bernstein argues in *Pitch of Poetry*; the acclaimed poet and academic continues: "textuality is a palimpsest: when you scratch it, you find speech underneath. And when you sniff the speech, you find language under that. *The alphabet is frozen sound*" (33). Graphic markings may be "frozen sound" on the page or screen, but these graphemes animate and resound in the reader's mind. Considering the significance of sound in the reception and interpretation of poetry, my research examines the multifaceted presence/absence of sound in varieties of visually-oriented transnational poetry from the 1950s to the 2010s, interrogating the intersections of aesthetics, cognition, and ethics. This essay examines how the seeming absence of sound in non-linguistic poetry stalls traditional reading practices and critique, which challenges readers to re-evaluate their relationship to sound, poetry, and communication. Building upon my method to identify and examine sonic elements in page-based poetry, I assert that visually-oriented poems thwart traditional methods of literary analysis. After delineating linguistic systems (referencing Donald Shankweiler) and diverse writing systems (citing Ignace J. Gelb), I argue that accessibility and performativity increase if these difficult visual poems are treated outside traditional linguistic frameworks

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and methods by being recontextualized as *para-graphic devices*. Three works of non-linguistic poetry are examined in this essay: Mary Ellen Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet," Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*, and Eric Schmaltz's *Surfaces*. Each text demonstrates the importance of sound (and its absence) in the communication of meaning. These three works also demonstrate, to a small degree, the variety of non-linguistic poetry and the challenges that such poems generate. Instead of "reading" these poems as traditional literary texts or "viewing" such works as visual art, non-linguistic poems need to be processed through alternative means, such as the un-sounding method. The authors of these non-linguistic poems have forgone sound in their works, and this refusal to sound is encoded in the work. These authors are choosing to communicate outside of language in order to demonstrate the limits of language, to signal new systems of communication, and to challenge readers in their relationship to the written word/work. Un-sounding non-linguistic poems as para-graphic devices situates them as unique works that communicate outside of the conventional methods of reading and viewing; the primary encounter with these non-linguistic works is processing, taking in the materiality (sonic, or un-sonic) and working to understand its communication. When considered alongside graphic scores for their similarities, such non-linguistic poems are works to be performed by the reader/viewer/processor/sounder. Such un-sounding facilitates the poem's becoming.

Several theorists contribute to one's understanding of sound, its reception, its effects, and its presence in poetry. Jonathan Sterne and Brandon LaBelle explore the nature and definition of sound as well as the role of the human as a receiver and projector of such sounds.[1] *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, provides in-depth explorations of significant terms relevant to sound such as hearing, listening, and noise. Regarding the reception of sound, Don Ihde's *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* deals with cross-disciplinary considerations of sonic origins and reception, providing the first comprehensive phenomenology of sound. Also, Lisbeth Lipari's *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* illustrates the complexity and necessity of active and intentional listening in the act of communication. Another source,

1 Works by Jonathan Sterne include *Audible Past* and *The Sound Studies Reader*. Works by Brandon LaBelle include *Site Specific Sound, Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art, Acoustic Territories, Lexicon of the Mouth*, and *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance. Lexicon of the Mouth*, in particular, introduces the concept of "unvoice" which resonates with (though is different from) my term "unsound," which I will explain in greater depth in the following pages.

Kristen Smith is a doctoral candidate at York University. Smith's intermedial dissertation applies sound as an analytical tool in the examination of visually-oriented poetry from the 1950s to the 2010s. In both her academic and creative work, she is interested in how art is created in community, connection, and collaboration.

David Suisman and Susan Strasser's *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, effectively addresses the shift in the critical reception of sound in modernist and postmodernist texts and how sound can be the means to exert cultural, social, and political power. Regarding the effects of sound, Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* argues that noise, a particular subset of sound, is a harbinger of forthcoming social formations; emphasizing the relationship of culture to economy, Attali contends that noise is model of cultural historiography.[2] One particular source which shifts the primary site of critical analysis from the written text to sound/recordings is Jason Camlot's *Phonopoetics*, which emphasizes the significance of the phonograph and the first recorded performances of modernist works; Camlot transposes traditional methods of literary study by directing attention to convergences between audio recordings, media types, and generic forms. *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, a collection of essays edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, contains diverse perspectives on the emergence of sound studies within poetry and demonstrates the significance of the shift to sonic aspects of literature in critical inquiry.[3] Johanna Drucker's essay "Not Sound" (in the Perloff and Dworkin book) suggests that poems are primarily graphic markings—and silent ones—that provide a significant counterpoint to the claims that all graphemes produce sound. In fact, non-linguistic markings punctuate the absence of sound and evidence the importance of unsound (a created term) in communication without the burden of traditional syntax or predetermined signifieds.[4] Also, Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible* delves into the politics of a poem enacted in its structure and argues that poetry is a physical act. He examines linguistic texts that employ radical formalism, whereas this paper considers *non-linguistic* texts for their legibility, accessibility, and sound-ability.

Building upon this diverse, complex work in sound theory and reception, my project is concerned with praxis—with method. Initially, it may seem counterintuitive to examine sound in visually-oriented poetry, which

2 Other important studies exploring the use of sound for diverse application include David Toop's *Ocean of Sound*, Elizabeth A. Grosz's "Vibration: Animal, Sex, Music," in *Chaos, Territory, Art*, Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare*, Shelley Trower's *Senses of Vibration*, Angela Leighton's *Hearing Things*, and Anna Snaith's *Sound in Literature*.

3 Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice: Poetry On and Off the Page*, *Unoriginal Genius*, and *Poetics in a New Key* analyzes concrete poetry and other experimental poetry movements.

4 Critical works by Johanna Drucker that inform this essay include *The Visible Word*, *Figuring the Word*, "Not Sound," and *Graphesis*.

often backgrounds sound. Even in poetic discourse that foregrounds visuality, however, sound is a critical element. Visually-oriented poetry pushes language and, by extension, sound to their limits, which makes it an excellent type of poetry to investigate. Visual Poetry, a hypernym for works that foreground visuality and typography, distances itself from the oral origins of poetry. In "New Visual Poetry," Mary Ellen Solt explains this creative and critical turn: "The fact remains, though, that we have an increasing number of poems which are primarily, and in the case of non-semantic poems totally visual; and the tradition of poetry is believed to be oral" (60). Instead of being composed for the purpose of recording oral tales (such as *Beowulf* or other epics), visual poems are composed in such a way that the primary engagement with the work is through the eyes; the "reading" of these poems starts with "viewing them." Visual poems foreground typography, as Solt explains: "The visual poem is a word design in a designed world" (60). Why then have I chosen to investigate sound within visual poems if such texts turn away from orality and sounding? Delving into the complexities of visual poetry interrogates the processes of normative sounding and causes readers to question the parameters of sound, language, the page, and performance.

In an effort to provide a framework for readers to identify a challenging work, Bernstein poses a series of questions in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*:

1 Do you find the poem hard to appreciate?
2 Do you find the poem's vocabulary and syntax hard to understand?
3 Are you often struggling with the poem?
4 Does the poem make you feel inadequate or stupid as a reader?
5 Is your imagination being affected by the poem? (3–4)

Additional symptoms include "high syntactic, grammatical, or intellectual activity level," "initial withdrawal (poem not immediately available)," and "sensory overload" (4). Such complex and intricate works require unconventional methods of analysis because traditional modes of inquiry stall. As a point of entry for sonic considerations, I delineate three categories of sound: insound, outsound, and unsound. In the noun form, insound is the internalized phonemic material of language. Outsound is the externalized, audible content. Unsound is the "silenced" or "missing" elements of the literary work. These terms in verb form (in-sounding, out-sounding, and un-sounding) connote the action being taken, whether by "silently" reading (in-sounding), orally performing (out-sounding), or muting / enacting "silence" (un-sounding). When applied to traditional lyric poems, this

method yields significant compelling results; however, visually-oriented poems pose the greatest challenge in the identification of sonic elements.

Non-linguistic poems fundamentally shift modes of reading: a reader cannot in-sound or out-sound such texts as one would ordinarily by processing phonemic or alphabetic material; instead, poems comprised of non-linguistic content compel readers to discover new methods for "reading" that are beyond any traditional processes. For that reason, I turn to cognitive psychologists and linguistic specialists such as Donald Shankweiler and Ignace J. Gelb to suggest how human brains grapple with unfamiliar and complex content as well as to clarify the writing systems upon which these poems are built. Shankweiler's and Gelb's research delineates various writing systems and reader expectations. Because the structures in the selected poems are not recognizably linguistic ones, it is helpful to categorize and examine the systems at work to understand formal and generic expectations.

Language has been codified into writing in many different ways. Although there are diverse codification systems, most theorists agree that writing is derived from, emerges from, sound. To delineate the complexities of linguistic writing systems and explain the phonological mapping of language segments, Shankweiler explains that "numerous specific alphabets employing a variety of graphic shapes have been invented at different times and places, but the same general phonological principle of mapping the segments of the spoken word applies to all" (250). Each language attempts to codify sounds, the spoken word, into written form. Shankweiler identifies and discusses two different kinds of writing: alphabetic (of which syllabic is a subset) and semantically-based nonsegmental writing. The alphabetic principle is "the concept that written symbols correspond to consonant and vowel segments (phonemes) of spoken words" (249). This alphabetic system is one with which English-speaking people are most familiar. "Alphabetic writing," Shankweiler explains, "taps into the layer of meaningless particles at the base of the spoken language to create a visual surrogate for speech, one that mimics the productive potential of the phonological component of the spoken language" (250). Sound is central to the linguistic symbol and is therefore built into language. There is another significant type of writing, semantically based non-segmental writing, that offers insight into writing types that incorporate phonological information indirectly. Character writing, such as Chinese writing, is one example of non-segmental writing in which compounds (the visible symbol) are composed of both a semantic radical (connoting meaning) and a phonetic radical (demonstrating pronunciation).

What happens, though, when writing moves outside of linguistic systems? Ignace J. Gelb emphasizes the significance of understanding the foundation and structure of a language. Two main types of visual systems are highlighted: (a) momentary (such as a smile or gesture) and (b) stable systems. The latter are subdivided into three types: *semasiographic devices*, which include forerunners of writing such as pictorial art and identifying-mnemonic devices such as wampum belts, branding, heraldic signs; *phonographic systems* or full writing such as syllabic systems and alphabetic systems; and *para-graphic devices* or systems such as ledgers, charts, graphs, mathematical notation, and musical notation (Gelb 19–20). The alphabetic and semantically-based non-segmental writing to which Shankweiler refers would fit into the categorization of phonographic systems. Non-linguistic poems, however, are neither comprised of linguistic material nor do they follow the rules and expectations of phonographic systems. Instead, I suggest that visually-oriented poems can be read as *para-graphic devices*.

Some visual poems can be more easily grasped when considered as a graph, chart, or even a musical score than when considered solely as a textual piece working within a fixed alphabetic system. When poems are recontextualized as musical notation, the reader can recognize the shift in their role from a viewer to a performer of the work. Ultimately, the reader needs to modify their entire reading process to perform works such as Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet," Bergvall's *Drift,* and Schmaltz's *Surfaces* due to the breaking down of previously established methods for the examination of sound within poetry. The insound and outsound processes are initially stalled by non-linguistic poetry, but such poems effectively engage unsound in the absence of recognizable sonic content. Recognizing that the poem's unsound can be interpreted as a musical score, I argue, makes the "difficult" poem approachable, more resourceful, and more meaning-constitutive. Moreover, the person encountering the poem with this knowledge of their role as performer can understand their relationship to the poem in helping it communicate.

The first exemplar of a non-linguistic poem is Mary Ellen Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet" (see figure 1). Solt (1920 to 2007) was an American poet, professor, and essayist; she is most well-known for her concrete poetry. She curated and edited one of the most notable, comprehensive collections of international concrete poetry, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Solt's most famous concrete poems (like "Forsythia," "Geranium," and "Lilac") took on the shape of the titular flowers. In the context of this essay, Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet" immediately presents a challenge to reading

and sounding (see figure 1). First and foremost, the material is neither a recognizable linguistic code nor a recurring numerical pattern. The graphemes may even be completely unidentifiable to a reader. "Moonshot Sonnet" is comprised of "reformatted diagrammatic-codes initially used by NASA-engineers to plan and execute the moon landing" (Saper 1). (A reader's first response to that information might be, "And so?")

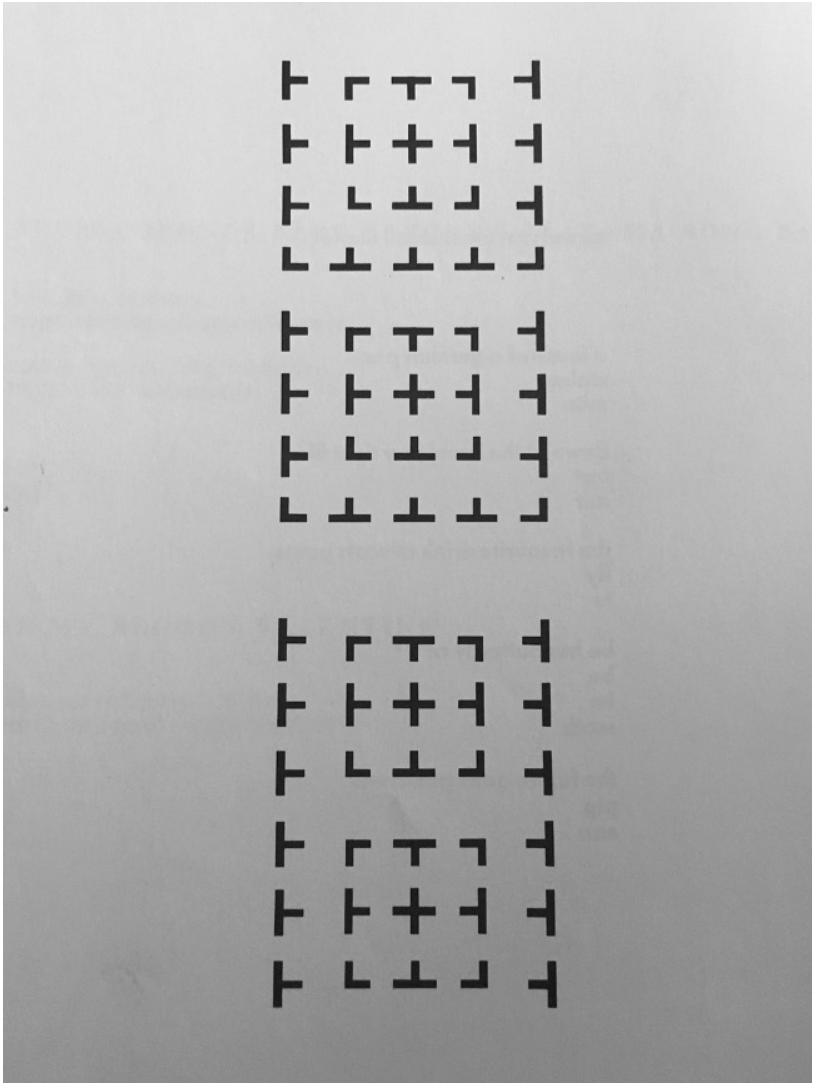

Figure 1. "Moonshot Sonnet" (1964) from Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana UP, 1968), 242.

The poem's title and structure give clues as to the effect of the arrangement of these markings. One could suggest that the poem is comprised of fourteen "lines" with five "accents" per line; this alternative Petrarchan sonnet has an octet with a turn/volta (demarcated by the visual space) before the sestet. The first octet is comprised of two quatrains that are exactly the same in composition, and the following sestet echoes the material of the octet with lines 4 and 8 removed. As often happens in Petrarchan sonnets, the material in the octet of Solt's sonnet is reimagined and transformed in the closing sestet. But beyond these observable qualities, how is this poem readable or interpretable? Craig Saper describes Solt's poem as "a distinctively American sonnet" in which "the literary poetics reduce language to an elegant semiotic code system and universal visual language" (2). He compares Solt's material to "a literal target" (2), arguing that the target is "for the more peaceful purpose of space exploration," yet one could argue that the dark history of American colonialism looms. All of these extrapolations are vivid but perhaps are only possible through knowledge of Solt's materials—certainly the linguistic content of the title guides the reader. Without this linguistic title or knowledge of the source of the diagrammatic codes, the poem would be much more difficult to decipher.

Unlike phonemes, Solt's material of diagrammatic codes does not directly translate to sounds (save perhaps for the click of a camera that produces such images). What is to be gained in an externalized performance of this poem—a playing of a series of clicks? Or, instead, does this poem's refusal to sound convey a more complex message than a performance could? These graphic marks function by creating a similar condition to unsound because it absences phonemic content. Considering the evocation of the moon, the reader can consider how the unsound of the poem reflects the "silence" of space. Aside from cosmic microwave background radiation,[5] celestial space is marked by its quietude. In her choice of materials, Solt emphasizes the absence of sound (unsound) and punctuates it with the stresses of the diagrammatic codes in pentameter. Through the

5 The cosmic microwave background (CMB) is believed to be leftover radiation from the Big Bang. Although inaudible to the human ear, there are physicists who have generated models for "hearing" the CMB. Mark Whittle explains that he has been able to recreate the different sounds of various "kinds of universe" across a megayear: "a descending scream, changing into a deepening roar, with subsequent growing hiss; matching the increase in wavelength caused by universal expansion, followed by the post recombination flow of gas into the small-scale potential wells created by dark matter. This final sound, of course, sets the stage for all subsequent growth of cosmic structure, from stars (hiss), through galaxies (mid-range tones), to large scale structure (bass notes)" (984).

resistance to sound, Solt's poem makes the scientific code poetic. Saper argues that Solt's sonnet is "a cold paean to the moon without romance," written from a global perspective that "responds to the supranational and supra-lingual world that moonshots created" (2). However, "Moonshot Sonnet" seems to recognize the power of science and even suggests hope for what technology offers in the potential for more space exploration. Contemplating this unsound in relation to the poem's content reveals the quiet magnitude of a moonshot—a long-shot, a seemingly unachievable goal. Whether literal (with the moon landing not yet achieved at the time of the poem's publication) or metaphorical (with the connotations of the theme of love, so common in sonnets), this seemingly impossible dream is inexpressible—ineffable—even as the effort (the code) is laid bare for the reader to contemplate its effects. The reader may not know precisely how this poem's unsound can translate to audible sound, but "Moonshot Sonnet" seems less concerned with a singular, prescribed reading and resultant interpretation. Arguably, the lack of closure in the poem's ending (although the octave ends with 𝅗𝅥, the sestet ends with 𝄽) encourages a similar openness of interpretation; instead of closed brackets/code markings as in line 8, the poem suggests a continuation (at least in its ideas if not its markings) beyond the observed codes of the fourteenth line. The poem does not close; it keeps unfolding in its cipher for the reader to translate. Ultimately, Solt uses unsound to foreground potentiality in terms of both the reader's interpretation and the possible applications of these ideas more widely. In un-sounding the poem, the reader performs the possible(s) and experiences the limits (and great opportunities) of non-linguistic communication.

Through the resistance to sound, Solt's poem makes the scientific code poetic.

Similar echoes to the night sky arise in Caroline Bergvall's *Drift* (see figure 2). Bergvall (b. 1962) is a French-Norwegian poet who is known for her multimedia performances, creating audio texts and sound art in collaboration with other artists. One of her works, *Say: "Parsley"*[6] is a sound and language installation which "all inform processes of mishearings, misrecognition, assumptions, and misattribution. *You hear what you want to hear. You hear what you think you hear*" ("Say: 'Parsley'"). With

6 "The background to [Say: 'Parsley'] is the biblical 'shibboleth,' a violent event where language itself is gatekeeper, and a pretext to massacre. The pronunciation of a given word exposes the identity of the speaker. *To speak becomes a give-away. Are you one of us, not one of us? How you speak will be used against you.* The most recent example of a large-scale shibboleth was the massacre of tens of thousands of Creole Haitians on the border of the Dominican Republic in 1937, when the criteria for execution was the failure to pronounce 'perejil' (parsley) in the accepted Spanish manner, with a rolling 'r'" ("Say 'Parsley'").

this installation and many other works, Bergvall demonstrates the power of sound in inciting action, whether sinister or otherwise. With a similar impetus to communicate the power of sound and its disappearance,

Bergvall's *Drift* was "inspired by the language and themes of the Seafarer, an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem from the tenth century as well as drawing directly from official material from a current sea migrants' tragedy" ("Drift—Performance for Spoken Voice, Electronic Text & Percussion").[7] There are linguistic poems in the collection as well as poems that function as lipograms by deleting specific letters, mourning the loss "of the thorn, the yogh, and Anglo-Saxon" language generally (Kaufmann). The poems highlighted in figure 2 are selections from the collection of "constellation" poems and the series of lines/cross-hatched figures. Constellations are maps, essentially sky-charting para-graphic devices. Etched in the sky, a constellation enables a journey across time and space.

Seafarers read them to ensure navigation over the sea, but even the light itself is historical. It takes 323 years for the light from Polaris (the

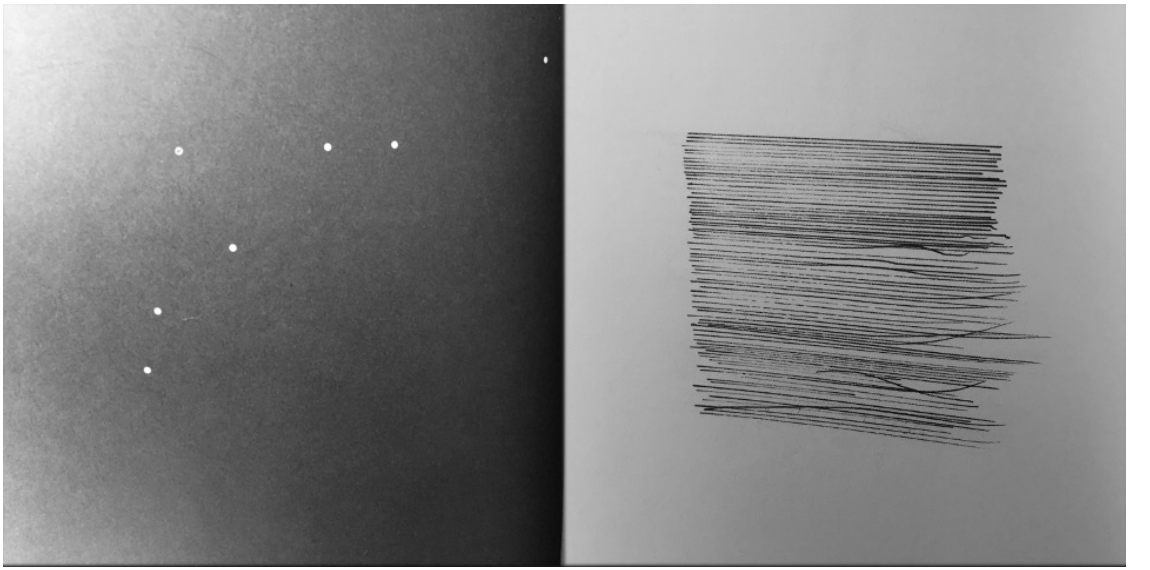

Figure 2. Close-ups of pages 84 and 14 from Caroline Bergvall, *Drift*.

7 In the logs of *Drift*, Bergvall addresses a 2012 report by Forensic Oceanography that examined the Migrant Boat Tragedy of 2011; the report was outlined in an article in *The Guardian*. The "Left-to-Die Boat case" concerned a shipping vessel with seventy-two migrants aboard; they were "left to perish on their way from Tripoli to Lampedusa in full view of a number of patrolling vessels" (132).

North Star) to reach the eye of the observer on Earth (Malik). When readers look to the sky constellations and to the poem constellations in *Drift*, there is a reminder of the passage of time. There are certain ways to read these sky images; although second-nature to a seafarer, the process of deciphering their meaning does not indicate specific sounds. These astronomical entities intersect with storytelling, as specific cultures carry on the oral traditions of telling the tales held in the patterns of stars. *Drift*'s unsound reminds the reader that the night sky at sea is marked by its silence; only the elements reacting to the travelers make sound, whether that be the night wind catching in the sails or the water lapping against the sides of the boat. With the visual reminders of the quiet (almost silent) environment, the reader is invited to feel the effects of the journey.

The linear/cross-hatched poems are seemingly flat-lined asemic texts, an open form of writing in which lines do not form specific letters; the script denies specific semantic content. In *The Last Vispo Anthology*, C. Mehrl Bennett explains its recent surge in publication:

> It is a sign of these digital, post-modern times that "asemic writing" is becoming more accepted and popular. Asemic writing doesn't attempt to relay a message of specific "meaning" though there might be a private system of symbols that mean something only to the poet / artist or to some ancient culture, or there might have been a readable text that has undergone "processing" and is no longer readable byway of an established language system. (199)

Like asemic writing, the lines/cross-hatchings do not convey distinct meaning(s). Instead, these lines are open to the reader's interpretation—not demanding specific renderings or particular significance(s). Also, the cross-hatchings/lines at the beginning of *Drift* connote a similar passage of the vessel of the pen across the page to that of the boat across the water. Aside from the scrapes of the pen in its path across the page, the line poems do not divulge the intent or purpose of their passage. In Bergvall's volume, the quietude of these pages is in stark contrast to the sounds in the nearby linguistic poems.

The unsounds throughout *Drift* stretch the boundaries of reading and celebrate the aesthetic opportunities within and beyond the page. Bergvall's processes of creating *Drift* are reflected in the form and further enacted by the reader in the (un)sounding: "this idea of getting lost and finding one's way through new means and materials became important to me through various histories, including forensic elements and tools pro-

vided by queer and literary thinkers and polemicists" (Fitch and Bergvall). The poems' reliance on unsound drives a queering of reading and interpretive processes and compels readers to invent new modes of engaging with texts. *Drift* "deals with very contemporary concerns regarding how can one use poetics as a process of witnessing catastrophes without becoming voyeuristic" (Fitch and Bergvall). Arguably, *Drift*'s challenge to reading/sounding practices and resultant call for intense reader involvement should render voyeurism impossible. Unsounds and unsounding requires intense readerly engagement. Bergvall also argues that *Drift* "addresses questions of personal desire and lovepaths, especially of how to use queer sexuality to make sense of the world" (Fitch and Bergvall). Although the queer sexuality that Bergvall notes may not be directly registered in the text as much as in the author's or critic's mind, the disruption of conventional reading practices and encouragement of innovative interpretations is a queering of the reader's relationship to language, to processing, and to sounding.

Drift highlights the reader's positionality and potential complicity in the fate of the migrants lost at sea. In the same way that so many other vessels at sea were complicit in the deaths of the migrants, contemporary readers are called to question their own roles in the fate of the murdered migrants. The deaths of the migrants may have occurred in 2011, but the narrative is a contemporary one.[8] Although at some times in processing the text the reader may feel they are along the fated journey, the readers are aware of another narrative—the "Left-to-Die" boat case—that is not their story but a horrific one of loss experienced in the past, memorialized in the stars, and revived in the readers' un-sounding of *Drift*. *Drift* contends that voyeurism and by-stander complacency are crimes; the act of un-sounding *Drift* forces readers to apply the same assessment of their positionality outside their reading of the text as they do within it. Un-sounding this text calls for application of the self-knowledge gained in encountering these challenging narratives. Furthermore, un-sounding *Drift* requires an embracing of uncertainty and, further, an openness for new ways of seeing, reading, and understanding. *Drift*'s unsounds cause readers to assess

8 On 12 April 2021, ten years after the "Left-to-Die boat" case, the UK-based organization Statewatch released an article reiterating the urgency for justice for the migrants lost at sea: "Today, non-assistance has become a policy. By refusing exiles access to European borders, and by shirking their obligations to provide assistance, European states are doubly responsible for the tragedies that plague the migration routes. The list of more than forty thousand people who have died at Europe's borders since the beginning of the 1990s continues to grow, day after day."

their positionality, to question the familiar, and to navigate uncertainty in order to understand their past (as well as a shared history). Further, *Drift* condemns complacency and voyeurism, and un-sounding the text compels readers to engage with the present in generating innovative sounds and dialogic communication—to learn new songs and reinvent the concepts of belonging and becoming.

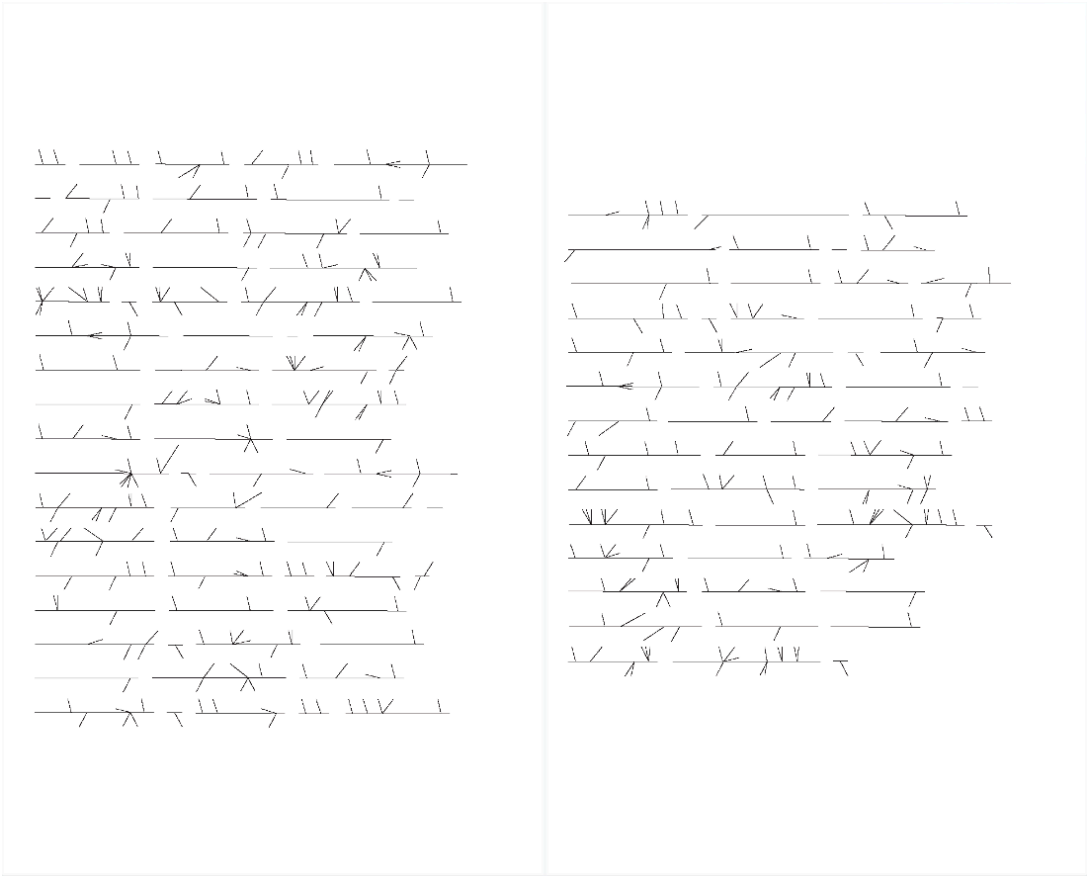

Figure 3. Selections from Eric Schmaltz, *Surfaces*, unpaginated.

The third example of non-linguistic poetry for this essay is Eric Schmaltz's *Surfaces*. Schmaltz is a Canadian "scholar, editor, and artist who works across text, image, and sound to explore the limits and affordances of multimedia and multimodal literary practices" (Schmaltz "Information"). His monograph, *The Language Revolution: Borderblur Poetics in Canada, 1963–1988*, an in-depth examination of Canadian avant-garde

poetics, is forthcoming with University of Calgary Press. Working across media even in the creation of *Surfaces*, Schmaltz explains that he "dismantled a keyboard and use[d] its parts and black paint to create a series of visual poems that simultaneously map and disrupt the materiality of the keyboard. These poems engage with ideas and questions regarding language's materiality, tactility, and the language devices we use to creatively communicate" (Schmaltz quoted in mclennan). Poems in this collection include the disassembly and reassembly of letters to create linguistic and simultaneously non-linguistic structures. Those poems, some even printed in 3D, function similarly to semantically-based non-segmental writing (like Chinese characters that contain both phonemic indicators and semantic information fused together into a symbol), but Schmaltz's poems (after reassembly) deny specific sounding and meaning. The images featured (see figure 3) are from a section (or "stimulation" in Schmaltz's term) entitled "Path Dependency." As the lines branch out, there is no guidance for sounding these poems. The elimination of linguistic content suggests that these markings could be read as unsounds—marks but not signifiers of specific sound. In the end notes of *Surfaces*, Schmaltz explains that these poems are a translation of an article that he wrote for rob mclennan's "On Writing" series; Schmaltz "translate[s] each word of the source text into a visual representation of finger movements across the keyboard away from the home row, as they produce letters on the digital page." These poems demonstrate a past body in movement, communicating, and typing—yet aside from the clicking of the keystrokes that sounded long ago, the page is left only with traces—pathways of routes once taken. A reader could attempt to translate those echoes back into linguistic content by following the maps; however, in the current state of un-sounding, these poems express a narrative about the connection of the body to technology, the traces of digital footprints, and the changing nature of communication in this Information Age. The reader is left to draw their conclusions as to the meaning(s) held in that message.

In the afterword to *Surfaces*, Joseph Mosconi expounds on the juxtapositions of surface and depth—of superficiality and profundity—throughout Schmaltz's collection. Citing Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best in their consideration of "surface reading," Mosconi highlights that "a surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through." Also, he emphasizes a key characteristic of *Surfaces*: "the book manages to engage both the shallows and the depths. It asks its reader not only to confront its textual experiments—its schematics, patterns, substrates, and structures—but to think through the social, political, and

cognitive contexts that lie beneath such surface encounters" (Mosconi). Arguably, Schmaltz's collection emphasizes the surfaces (the layer to which readers are trained to look past) precisely because it employs unsound and absences the sonic dimensions of text. When a reader in-sounds and then out-sounds a text, they view it on the page; their brain interpret those signs; they sound them internally; their vocal cords hum; they bring the words from their throat; they move their tongue in their mouth; they form letters with their lips; these actions are impelled by sound and embodied by the reader. By denying the sonic depth and embodied experience in-/out-sounding the poem, Schmaltz compels the reader to turn their attention to the surfaces. The unsound forces readers to interrogate the surfaces instead of looking past them—to look at the lines, branches, and markings and contemplate their meaning(s)—and to understand surfaces can have significance even when the reader cannot sound its depths.

The unsound forces readers to interrogate the surfaces instead of looking past them.

In the endnotes of *Surfaces*, Schmaltz explains that the "Path Dependency" stimulation "explores digital culture and embodiment or what N. Katherine Hayles refers to as the idea of a 'bodiless fluid' during the Information Age." In her book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Hayles grapples with how information has become "disembodied" through abstraction:

> My strategy is to complicate the leap from embodied reality to abstract information by pointing to moments when the assumptions involved in this move were contested by other researchers in the field and so became especially visible. The point of highlighting such moments is to make clear how much had to be erased to arrive at such abstractions as bodiless information. (12)

Abstraction is necessary in theorizing and fundamental to language-making. Although Hayles contends that "no theory can account for the infinite multiplicity of our interactions with the real" (12), she also warns of the potential effects of abstraction: "But when we make moves that erase the world's multiplicity, we risk losing sight of the variegated leaves, fractal branchings, and particular bark textures that make up the forest" (12). Schmaltz's "Path Dependency" traces these fractal branchings—the body's movement in the creation of these stimulations. As mentioned, with the click of the camera with Solt's diagrammatic codes and the pen scraping on the page in Bergvall's line poems, sound is a feature of Schmaltz's works as well, whether the breath of the body and sounds of it exerting energy or the resultant sounds of the key clicks and bodily interaction with technology

in the generation of new creative material. Although the sounds bound up in the creation of these poems is outside of the purview of this essay, there must at least be an acknowledgement of the presence of sound in the creation of these page-based poems that actively background sound. The unsounds of "Path Dependency" demonstrate the broader interconnectedness of the body with technology and also bear the distant echo of the sounds that enabled or were by-products of the act of creation.

Schmaltz's work resonates with Solt's and Bergvall's through its use of unsound as invitation for reader engagement and its un-sounding causing a rewiring of the reader's practices for processing information. In contrast to Solt and Bergvall, the unsounds in *Surfaces* challenge readers to interrogate how the physical body and technology are mapped on to one another—almost becoming inextricably linked—in the act of communication in the Information Age. Sound is a part of this communication, but the unsound reminds the reader that the codependency of the human physical body and technology is not a relationship that is so easily understood, translated, or even mediated. There is an ineffability to it. The unsounds in *Surfaces* ask readers to examine the connections between the analogue and the digital—the physical body and the disembodied data. In the un-sounding of this material, the readers are engaging with layers of physical action of the body (the created works on cardstock or the paths of fingers on a keyboard) mediated through technological devices (like computers, scanners, screens). However, the technological devices themselves were created by human labour as well as machines in factories. But just as Schmaltz's *Surfaces* echoes Hayles's critique of bodiless information, the unsounds in the work demonstrate the "bodiless fluid." As seen throughout *Surfaces*, Schmaltz draws attention to surfaces, to depths, to bodies in creation, to technology as a tool. But the unsound in the book is what demonstrates the simultaneity of these states: surfaces are layered in depth of meaning; bodies use technology for creation but are also changed physiologically through that relationship; sound is behind these actions and interactions even as it is seemingly absent from the page.

The insound and outsound processes stall when phonemic material is altogether absent: there is no identifiable linguistic system, so there are no predetermined sounds for the graphemes (those visual marks). The pages, it could be argued, are filled with unsound. Applying Gelb's concept of *para-graphic devices*, these non-linguistic poems *could* be read as a musical score. In their critical works, Marjorie Perloff (*Unoriginal Genius*) and Johanna Drucker ("Not Sound") make passing references to the poem as a score. In general terms, a score and a poem are similar in their use of

visual symbols and the structuring of sound and silences across time. Both anticipate and depend upon a performance. Considering the poem as a score fuses the symbols of a visual poem with the immediate sonic impact of performance. With this shift in perspective, readers are encouraged to recognize their roles as active listeners, interpreters, and performers of the text, while closely attending to its sonic dimensions. This analogy of "poem as score" also helps trouble any expectation that poems have a singular, discoverable meaning. Readers may seek definitive answers, believing that with the correct approach, supplementary text, or effort (however that effort could be quantified), they will arrive at The Meaning of a poem and master it. Although there are many poems that initially convey a singular meaning, difficult visually-oriented poems often challenge the way readers/viewers/performers come to understand meaning. Poetry with a musical score encourages a more open interpretation of written works while simultaneously understanding that those poems are to be interpreted and performed. A score with notes and rests and time signatures gives so many cues as to how that work is to be performed and also indicates that no single "hearing" or experience will yield all the depths and implications of the piece.

Temporal considerations (of tempo, rhythm, and beat) and qualitative considerations (pitch, volume, timbre, voice, accent(s)) of a poem guide the reader in performance. Although the comparison of a poem to a musical score is generative, there is a problem with this suggestion for shaping the reading process of a non-linguistic poem: non-linguistic poems do not have those same sonic indicators. In this absence, non-linguistic poems are akin to graphic scores. *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (ODM) defines graphic scores as "scores by 20th-cent. *avant-garde* composers that employ drawn visual analogues in order to convey the composer's intentions with regard to the required sounds and textures.… Some graphic scores indicate distinct music parameters…. Others deliberately omit any notational sign or music indication, seeking only to stimulate the performer's creativity." For an example of a graphic score, see figure 4, which is provided with the ODM's definition of a graphic score. In his explanation of graphic scores, Christoph Cox emphasizes the intermedial aspects of the form: "the experimental score serves as a nexus that links music with the other arts and acts as a kind of portable program for the endless production of new sounds, actions, forms, and communities" (311).

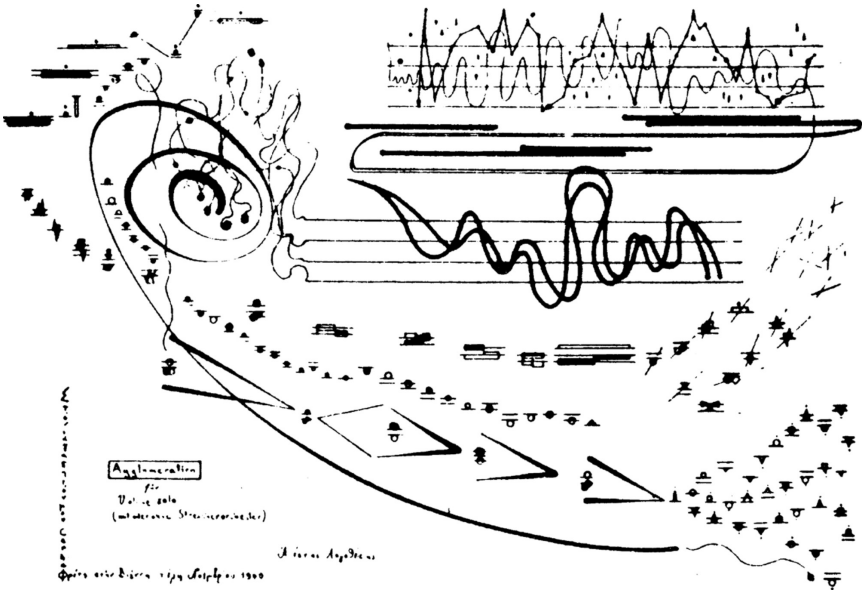

Figure 4. Anestis Logothetis, *Agglomeration* (1960), *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*.

The issue / opportunity of graphic scores is that these works (similar to non-linguistic poems) neither follow traditional expectations nor do they contain specific rules for performance (unless indicated by the composer in performance notes). Chiara Bertoglio explains that with graphic scores "neither pitch nor duration (and often not even the instrument or timbre) are specified in detail" (50). Furthermore, she adds, graphic scores usually reject normative musical notation; they "renounce the use of staves, clefs and the usual symbols of Western notion; they frequently lack a direct, causal correlation between a visual symbol or a sign and a determined aural result" (50). The latter description of graphic scores could be describing the material of a non-linguistic poem. With Schmaltz's *Surfaces*, especially the "Path Dependency" series, there is no direct connection between the symbols on the page and a sonic resonance. The branches are marks that have no specific sound attached to them. This allows for an open interpretation as to how those lines could be performed, even through the recreation of fingers typing on a computer keyboard. Despite a graphic score's rejection of established forms of notation, it is nevertheless reliant (to some degree) upon it:

> [W]hile they do not employ "traditional" musical notation, they nonetheless *exploit* it and the musicians' acquaintance

> with it. In other words, they suppose that the performing musician will be somehow "inspired" by the visual elements they display, and this "inspiration" will perforce consist in the (more or less conscious) interpretation of these signs in the similarity to traditional notation itself. (Bertoglio 50)

The benefit of the reader's knowledge of "traditional" or generic expectations is evident in a work like Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet." Even though Solt does not use words in her poem, the reading of it is (in some way) contingent upon the recognition of the sonnet structure of fourteen lines and the typical pentameter; her poem also relies upon a Westernized top-down, left-right reading to recognize the poem's structure as a Petrarchan sonnet. However, "Moonshot Sonnet" can also be accessed outside of that normative reading, and its meaning(s) is/are not fixed to the recognizable sonnet form. Like a graphic score, Solt's poem allows for wider audience beyond the eyes of literary critics, but the unique material and its arrangement demonstrate how acutely the reader's personal reception shapes their perceived meaning of the poem.

To interpret and play a graphic score, Bertoglio contends that "performers will normally tend to interpret the vertical dimension of signs as an indication of pitch, and the horizontal duration as a suggestion about duration" (50). Considering Bergvall's line poems in *Drift* as graphic scores with Beroglio's suggestions for performance, the ink streaks across the page could be temporal indications for the length of time a note ought to be sounded, and the set of lines could connote several notes being played at the same time. The waves in the lines might suggest shifts in pitch. Each line poem in the series would result in very different performances; arguably, each performance of any singular poem would never sound the same as any other iteration. The constellation poems could have each "star" a different pitch performed against the horizontal axis of time (passing left to right) on the page. These interpretations of performance are based on Bertoglio's suggestion of the axes of the page (top-down = pitch, left-right = time). But graphic scores can be performed impressionistically, with the performance reflecting the performer's personal interpretation of the piece.

Ultimately, graphic scores "affirm the aesthetic value of *metaphor* in its original sense—the joy in unpredictable leaps and translations, in this case between sight and sound. As such, these experimental notations draw attention to the musical score as a species of graphic art and affirm a future that, while conditioned by the past and present, nevertheless remains fundamentally open" (Cox 311). This comparison of a non-linguistic poem to a graphic score emphasizes the openness of the artform for the reader. The

poem as score also foregrounds the reader's roles as a performer and interpreter of the poem; however, the poem's material does not give any more guidance in the executing either of those roles. At every turn—with each suggested paradigm for assessment—non-linguistic poems resist. Non-linguistic poetry rejects a totalizing method for reading and (un)sounding. In *No Medium*, Craig Dworkin performs close readings of unfilled pages that are erased, blank, or seemingly "silent." In his analysis of Cage's *4'33"*, Dworkin asserts: "Silence is always ideal, and illusory. Silence is a thought experiment, provocative and unverifiable" (134). *Unsounds* are filled with possibilities for interpretation and semantic meaning. This essay has specifically examined works that are not blank, yet still eliminate linguistic material and prevent sounding; these texts are comprised of unsound. Dworkin presses further to suggest that in such works: "'medium' is as unrealizable as 'silence'" (137). Non-linguistic poems subvert expectations of medium or category. Moreover, such creative works comprised of unsound compel readers to new reading practices. Solt's "Moonshot Sonnet," Bergvall's *Drift*, and Schmaltz's *Surfaces* each require the reader to meet it at the page and actively work through on its own terms. In encountering a non-linguistic poem, the reader is required to question their relationship to reading, to sound, and to communication. Resisting any singular method for reading and interpretation, these non-linguistic poems demonstrate that both sounding and even the resistance to sound (unsound) can communicate multivalent (albeit oftentimes elusive) messages, yet these communications are incomplete without the reader processing (perhaps through un-sounding) the poetic material. The reader is essential to the visual poem's communication—the reader is integral to the poem's becoming.

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