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# SOUNDING THE MULTITRACK IMAGINATION

KEN CORMIER

There is some debate as to who, exactly, invented the first multitrack tape recorder, but it is well known that the concept for “sound-on-sound” recording originated with Les Paul’s studio experiments of the mid-1940s.<sup>1</sup> Paul, a popular radio host and hillbilly guitarist who had struck up a successful collaboration with Bing Crosby, among others, was generally disappointed with the sound quality elicited by the recording techniques of his day. Ensembles, large and small, were routinely recorded with a single microphone placed at a distance to capture the entire group, making it impossible to get a high-fidelity recording of the various parts that were played. Paul argued that greater fidelity could be achieved by making a crisp, close recording of each instrument and then combining those sounds into a synchronized and balanced whole. Bing Crosby encouraged Paul to work on his idea by helping to establish a personal recording studio, a kind of laboratory for sound. In the studio, Paul discovered that by using two acetate disc cutters, he could record a piece of music on one machine and then play along with it to create a kind of one-person ensemble:

That’s how it all started. You record on a disc, and you play the disc back and record on the second machine with what you laid down on the first recording. Play along with it, and you now have the two together on the second record. (Lawrence 2008, 20)

Since Paul could position the microphone close to both his instrument and the disc player, each part that he recorded sounded distinct and clear. Around this same time, the first magnetic tape recorders were captured by Allied troops in Germany during the latter stages of World War II, and Paul obtained one through a personal connection. He practiced his methodology with the newer magnetic tape technology, and he was able not only to make extremely high-fidelity recordings of the multiple parts he played, but also to perform audio tricks, such as varying the tape speeds to create higher and

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<sup>1</sup>See Snyder (2003) for Snyder’s claim and Landers (2005) for Paul’s claim.

lower pitches, or playing a fraction of a second behind a previously recorded part to create a delay or echo (Landers).

In 1949 Paul caught the attention of a wide listening audience with his recording of an eight-part guitar instrumental entitled "Lover." Paul played all of the parts himself. The song, with its artificially sped-up melody lines and deftly percussive strumming, is a virtuoso performance as well as a groundbreaking production. The varied pitches create a kind of disorienting delirium, while the clarity and closeness of each recorded part make for a focus and brilliance to which listeners were not yet accustomed. A year later, with the release of his album *The New Sound*, Les Paul's ability to multiply himself into a one-man ensemble earned him a reputation as a wizard of sound (Lawrence 2008,20-21). The album's cover depicts Paul with multiple arms, playing at least seven guitars while he smiles and dances; there is an undeniably Cubist aspect to the image, a comical nod to the layers and repetitions of Braque's "Woman with a Guitar" or Picasso's "Le guitarist." Through the unlikely medium of popular music, Paul had found a way to demonstrate the plurality of the individual, to refract himself into multiple pitches, to engage in marvelous musical repetitions with slight, almost imperceptible variations. In the popular press he became known as a "one-man gang," and an iconic photo collage of the time features a group of seven guitar-wielding Les Pauls, each playing his part in a crowded studio space.

Paul not only realized his original vision, but he also made a much more important discovery: how to multiply, refract, bend, and accelerate his audible self. His sound-on-sound technique not only changed the course of popular music, but it also pushed the ontological implications of sound recording to new heights. According to Katherine Hayles, human beings have been compelled periodically to redefine their conception of "presence" in the face of new technologies that challenge their most basic assumptions. The phonograph, says Hayles, was a special case because it separated a speaker's voice not only from presence but also from time. The voice that one heard on the telephone or over the airwaves (in radio's early years) did its speaking in the same present moment as the listener, whereas the voice emitting from a phonograph was uttered in the past and preserved over time (more like the written word or the photograph). The advent of magnetic tape in the mid-twentieth century further complicated the sense of a speaker's presence because unlike the phonograph whose discs, once recorded, were fixed and unalterable, tape "was a technology of inscription that...permitted erasure and rewriting" (Hayles 1997, 76). What this meant was that a voice on tape could be not only played back but also interrupted, recorded over, resulting in a kind of audio palimpsest in which original utterances are chopped up or even buried beneath new sounds inscribed at the surface. What Les Paul achieved in his sound-on-sound experiments with acetate discs and then audiotape went beyond simple mutability: he showed how these recording technologies could take discreet samples from different

moments in time performed in any number of spaces, and magically blend them all into a unified, harmonious present.

A multitrack recorder collects and stores an array of sounds which can be heard all together, in selected combinations, or one by one in isolation. A multitrack tape recorder looks just like a regular tape recorder, except that there are multiple volume meters, each coinciding with a separate track, in addition to the master volume. Cassette four-track machines became a standard for home recording by the nineteen-eighties. Since the cassette tape was designed to handle four separate tracks of audio – two stereo tracks, left and right, on each side of the tape – it was easily adapted to record four separate tracks across its entire surface, meaning that one could utilize only one “side” of the tape. (Flip the tape over, and you can listen to all four tracks backwards!) The volume of each track can be controlled separately, and the shape of each sound can be manipulated in any number of ways. Once you record a first track – say, an a capella vocal performance – you can then rewind the tape and listen to this recording as you record a harmony part along with it. In this way, a single person can act as a virtual ensemble, recording a number of separate performances that are synchronized together as one.

The mechanics of multitrack recording may seem complex, but the theoretical implications have a kind of intuitive appeal. For example, our five senses can be seen as a “multitrack” tool for perceiving the world around us: though they are separate and distinct, we use them in concert; and at times, we foreground one over another, “turning up” our sense of touch, for example, in a darkened room. Furthermore, there are multiple tracks of perception within each sense. As I write this I am surrounded by a plethora of visual images – a computer screen filled with text; a table, water bottle, headphones; fluorescent lights above; a large window framed by cement columns; trees, grass, asphalt, a brick building, a person strolling by – and I constantly manage the “levels” of these visual stimuli, creating a “mix” that allows me to experience my surroundings appropriately, based on whatever it is I am trying to accomplish. All of these sensory “tracks,” combined with the current of my conscious thought, can be said to constitute my reality. In describing my setting, it would be impossible to include every sensory detail, and so like a producer I foreground those aspects of my surroundings that are most relevant to create the most accurate picture. Alternatively, I could choose to emphasize those details which are irrelevant, incongruous, and misleading to create an entirely different kind of picture. Whether I am composing my thoughts, narrating a story, writing a poem, or recording a song, I am engaged in a kind of multitrack process. Like music, narrative and poetry are inherently multitrack phenomena.

Visually speaking, the written page implies a linguistic field set against a backdrop of silence. Garrett Stewart and Katherine Hayles both argue that literary texts are always vocalized, verbalized, and otherwise sounded inside the heads of silent readers (Stewart 1990, 2; Hayles 1997, 74-75). It makes sense to regard this internal sounding as simply one of the “audio tracks”

of narrative. The written text delivers one track (or two, if you consider the silence of the white page to be a track of silence—or is it white noise?), and the reader delivers and experiences the others. These other tracks are not limited, of course, to the internal soundings in the mind of the reader, which the reader actually generates. In fact, if we note John Cage's theory that there is no such thing as true silence, that what we call silence is actually only a shifting of our attention from the sounds we usually heed to those that always exist in the background, then we must acknowledge that the environmental sounds which trickle into a silent reader's ears necessarily become a part of the multitrack experience of the narrative being read (Cage 1961, 8). If this is true, we could well imagine a reader associating the story of *The Great Gatsby*, for example, with the sounds of New York City if he happened to have read that novel for the first time in a Manhattan apartment.

Once we acknowledge the richness and complexity of the soundscape in which we are constantly steeped, we can begin to appreciate the value of an open microphone, which, in addition to the spoken words that it records, tends to capture a variety of incidental noise: a passing automobile, the whirr of a fan, murmuring voices in the background, tape hiss, a gulp, a hiccup, or a cough. Whether these noises complement or contend with the recorded voice, upon playback they inevitably affect a listener's interpretation of the narrative. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, recalls sitting at a bar listening to "all the languages within earshot: music, conversations, the sounds of chairs, glasses," and he equates this blur of sound with the "'interior' speech" that a descriptive, written text can sometimes evoke in its reader:

This speech, at once very cultural and very savage, was above all lexical, sporadic; it set up in me, through its apparent flow, a definitive discontinuity: this *non-sentence* was in no way something that could not have acceded to the sentence, that might have been *before* the sentence; it was: what is eternally, splendidly, *outside the sentence*. (1975, 49)

The mind continually receives and generates both lingual and non-lingual information, but rather than filter out the non-lingual, it synthesizes these by formulating a broad syntax of the senses. The "sentence," whether written or spoken, is meaningful only to the extent that it works in juxtaposition with the larger "non-sentence" structure that encompasses it, a structure which includes, for example, something as subtle as the sounds of words as they are exhaled from the body. The writer/producer of multitrack sound texts understands that both the writer/speaker and the reader/listener are always awash in sound. By crafting a multitrack audio narrative, the sound writer simply expands his control over a larger number of those "tracks." A writer of sound fiction can insert illustrative ambient sound, mood-setting background music, and figurative and symbolic noise. A writer of sound memoir can interact with his own voice recorded years earlier. An oral historian can

make a sound documentary that captures the grain of a subject's voice as well as the noise of her work or home environment. A sound poet can represent a kind of subconscious polyphony that is impossible to convey on the page.

Les Paul's sound-on-sound innovation had an immediate and dramatic impact on the way music (especially popular music) was conceived and recorded; however, its potential for poetic and narrative expression remained untapped for more than a decade. As Michael Davidson has demonstrated, the "new oralism" of the 1950s and '60s, embraced by poets and writers as diverse as T.S. Eliot, Jack Kerouac, and Michal McClure, was due in no small part to the emergence of technologies like magnetic tape (1997, 98). At first, audiotape's primary value for literature was seen as its ability to preserve the voices of poets and writers and to distribute their oral recitations directly to listening audiences via radio broadcasts and long-playing records. Yet this mimetic use would evolve rapidly, and as recording equipment became more widely available, pockets of the literary avant garde began to see the process of audio recording as a fruitful way to compose new kinds of works that embraced a primitive oral tradition as well as a more modern, mechanized polyphony. At the beginning of the century, F.T. Marinetti had predicted in his manifesto "La Radia" that an aural medium like radio could help free language from its role as a mere "collaborator of mime and gesture," liberating words from time, linearity, and meaning-making, and valuing them instead for their pure sound sensation and their capacity to disrupt, rather than organize, the flow of thought (Marinetti 268).

In the early 1960s, Brion Gysin and William Burroughs made a series of "tape cut-ups" — texts recorded and randomly rearranged to create evocative audio juxtapositions — which represented a linguistic and audiophonic liberation along the lines of Marinetti's futurist vision. Burroughs saw the tape recorder as a key for overcoming the limitations of print:

Of course you can do all sorts of things on tape recorders which can't be done anywhere else — effects of simultaneity, echoes, speed-ups, slow-downs, playing three tracks at once, and so forth. There are all sorts of things you can do on a tape recorder that cannot possibly be indicated on the page. The concept of simultaneity cannot be indicated on a printed page except very crudely through the use of columns and even so the reader must follow one column down. We're used to reading from left to right and then back, and this conditioning is not easy to break down. (Burroughs 1974, 29)

With their repetitions, word fragments, and loud, glitchy edits, the cut-ups amount to a rejection of the linearity and seamlessness of traditional narrative and poetic forms, as well as mainstream audio productions. They seem to have nothing in common with the tightly synchronized, melodic recordings of Les Paul, but Gysin and Burroughs are certainly indebted to the "sound-on-sound" process that Paul pioneered. The short sound piece "Recalling All Active Agents," for example, features a single voice multiplied several

times over, at various speeds and with different amounts of reverberation, performing permutations of a simple phrase. One of the voices is presented at such high speed that the words are blurred into a high-pitched tone, a sound that signifies “machine” more than “language.” The voices overlap, spiraling within and around each other, creating a chaos of language that is at once comical and unsettling. The piece derives its power from the uncanny quality of a mechanically manipulated voice speaking over itself in multiple layers, and in that way it fits neatly into the aesthetic of Les Paul’s “New Sound.” But whereas Paul’s main concern is to create the illusion of ensemble from what is essentially a solo performance, Gysin and Burroughs have the opposite goal: to take what is essentially a solo performance and break it up into a confusing mass of competing utterances. Importantly, the cut-ups demonstrate that the audio recorder, more than being merely a preserver of spoken literary texts, can be a powerful tool for composition, and even for the invention of entirely novel linguistic and literary forms.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the innovations of a few adventurous artists, however, the multitrack revolution that followed Les Paul’s innovation has generally produced a seemingly endless string of projects which simply mimic Paul’s original act. Les Paul’s musical recordings are orderly affairs: the guitar parts are tightly synchronized, and the volume levels are controlled so that melody lines distinguish themselves neatly from background accompaniment. Yet, even Paul’s first sound-on-sound instrumentals, with their variations in recording speed, can sound adventurous compared with the majority of today’s multitrack musical recordings, which use the technology simply to perfect a kind of verisimilitude of real-time ensemble performance. The function of multitrack recording for narrative and poetry is less obvious, and so literary artists have been more experimental than musicians in using this technology. Two notable examples, John Giorno and Gregory Whitehead, have employed multitrack recording techniques to challenge listeners’ expectations about how a poem, a story, or a radio piece is supposed to behave. In the following pages, I will examine Giorno’s performance poem “Suicide Sutra” (1972) and Whitehead’s radio piece “What Words Want” (1984), both of which dissect and disrupt the monolithic and authoritative nature of *voice*, especially where it is valued solely for its capacity to convey meaning through language.

In 1964, John Giorno learned about the concept of tape recording in poetry from Burroughs and Gysin. Giorno was twenty-eight years old, had recently starred in Andy Warhol’s film *Sleep*, and was experimenting with found poetry when Gysin and Burroughs played their cut-ups for him. Giorno was instantly struck by the “possibility of layers of sound,” which he conceived as a way to liberate the poet from the limitations of solo performance (Zurbrugg 2004, 158). On stage, a solo performer can reasonably approximate effects like echoes, speed-ups, and slow-downs, but before the advent of audio

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<sup>2</sup>Gysin and Burroughs’s experiments from this period would have an influence on a number of avant garde and mainstream artists and performers in various disciplines, including John Giorno, Laurie Anderson, Kieth Haring, Patti Smith, and Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones.

recording, the only way to convey “simultaneity” was to work with an ensemble of voices. After hearing what Gysin and Burroughs had accomplished, Giorno began crafting multitrack recordings of his own voice that he could use to accompany himself during his live poetry performances.

One of Giorno’s earliest and most effective poems using layered voice is “Suicide Sutra.” Included on the 1972 LP release, *William S. Burroughs/John Giorno*, the recording features three separate voices, one of which is altered by an echo effect. At first, the overall accumulation of voices can tend to sound like a series of echoes reverberating from one primary recitation, but a close listening reveals subtle variations in each utterance, an effect which complicates the very idea of a “primary recitation.” By presenting multiple, simultaneous recitations, Giorno emphasizes the plurality of intention and meaning inherent in any text. Roland Barthes, writing two years after the release of “Suicide Sutra,” claims that every text is a “plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)” (1974, 10). Furthermore, an audience brings its own set of associations and codes to a text, all of which are brought to bear on what is heard, seen, and read. This infinite play of signifiers and signifieds results in a kind of textual tapestry which all composers and audiences take part in weaving. For Barthes, this phenomenon of intertextuality destabilizes the notion that an author creates works that are “original”:

Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard: they are the codes: in their interweaving these voices (whose origin is “lost” in the vast perspective of the *already written*) de-originate the utterance. (1974, 21)

Though Barthes is not writing about Giorno here, his description of interweaving voices and their power to “de-originate the utterance” captures something essential about the effect of Giorno’s multitrack voice poems.

Giorno’s performance of “Suicide Sutra” begins with an invitation to the listener – in a clear, solo voice – to “participate” in the poem by “following the instructions” that he provides. The poem, he explains, is about “locating your body in space and locating the space inside your body,” which can be accomplished by tightening “the muscles in your hands and your fingers and your...chest and your arms and your legs and your gut.... In other words, you should get uptight.” Next, the voice seems to split into three versions of itself, coaxing the listener into the exercise just laid out in the introduction:

Okay? “Suicide Sutra.”  
 Okay? “Suicide Sutra.”  
 Okay? “Suicide Sutra.” (Burroughs and Giorno 1975)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The special arrangement of the text of the poem is my own. I am attempting to approximate on the page the overlapping of the lines as well as their placement, to the left and right, on



Not only are the voices layered, but they also are also mixed at various spots along the stereo spectrum—left, right, and center—so that the listener perceives them coming from different locations. In contrast to the introductory voice, whose clear, centered, subdued tones fostered a kind of passive listening, the poem voices are frenetic, aggressive, crowded, and de-centered. The piece is clearly a guided exercise, instructing the listener to “tighten your wrists, tighten your forearms, tighten your elbows, tighten your upper arms, tighten your shoulders,” but it also requires a series of unexpected imaginative leaps: “You have forgotten who you are...you are in jail...it is dark and filthy and completely depressing...they are pulling your arms off your body!” The poem continues in this vein, alternating between muscle-tightening exhortations and descriptions of increasingly disturbing scenarios, until finally the two threads converge in a scene of suicidal ideation, hands and fingers tightening around the trigger of a revolver:

It blows your skull open!  
 It blows your skull open!  
     It blows your skull open!  
     And blood and brains and flesh and skin and hair fly into the air!  
             And blood and brains and flesh and skin and hair fly  
 into the air!  
             And blood and brains and flesh and skin and hair fly into  
 the air!  
                                     You are dying!  
 You are dying!  
                                     You are dying! (Burroughs and Giorno 1975)

The three voices all repeat each line of the poem up to four or five times, resulting in a multi-layered set of multiple permutations, moving frantically about the stereo spectrum. Because the multiple voices are mixed at roughly the same volume, it is impossible to distinguish which, if any, is primary, and since the voices project from various spots on the stereo spectrum, not one of them is central.

Although the poem presents itself as a something akin to guided meditation, the form that Giorno adopts actually undermines the sense of vocal authority that such recordings rely on for their effectiveness. Giorno subverts what Frances Dyson calls radio’s “voice of authority,” a voice which, stripped of all extra-bodily noise and removed from any distracting environmental sound, speaks without hesitation, repetition, or stuttering to communicate ideas with supreme confidence, in close proximity to the microphone (i.e., the listener’s ear). This highly constructed, idealized, disembodied voice, says Dyson, distinguishes itself from “the voice of the crowd,” which, “like the voice of the ill, the aged, the disturbed, signals the presence of a different and

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the stereo spectrum. Giorno often used two columns to represent the competing voices in his work, but this format does little to convey the complexity of his audio performance.

multiple body—the body politic—which, being potentially disruptive and eruptive, has to be kept at a distance...” (Dyson 1994, 181). In stark contrast to radio’s “voice of authority,” Giorno’s voice is absolutely defined by distance, chaotic motion, interruption, repetition, and eruption. Though he adopts the role of guide in “Suicide Sutra,” once the singularity of the introduction gives way to the multiplicity of the poem, he seems to self-consciously smash his own potential authority in favor of a vibrating exaltation of noise. For Dyson, one way to counter the kind of voice of authority we hear regularly across mainstream media, is to create work which mixes “voice and sound without discrimination, and in which sound rather than language attracts the listener” (1994, 183). As the poem’s title suggests, Giorno is interested in the short, aphoristic, oral, meditative qualities of the sutra. Although the subject matter of the “Suicide Sutra” is disturbing on a grand scale, his repetitious, interweaving, multi-vocal approach overwhelms the content of the poem and, in the end, astonishes the listener with the sound of his words more than with their meaning. Giorno’s multilayered voice pieces subvert the traditional poet’s singularity, linearity, and clarity. By crowding out his autonomous presence with a multitude of overlapping, electronic selves, he obscures his own articulation and turns his “message” into a “noise.” By bogging his lines down in repetition, he thwarts the traditional flow of language in time and engages instead in a kind of grand, poetic stutter.

The same year that “Suicide Sutra” was published, *Ginger Snaps* magazine coined a visual term for Giorno’s style, calling him a “strobe poet” (Giorno 2008, xiv). Giorno’s audience must engage in a new kind of listening, one which relinquishes both the notion that a poem makes meaning through the semantic force of its language, and that a poet’s voice is a singular sound which commands attention by rising above the murmur of lesser articulation and the din of inconsequential noise. Furthermore, by manipulating his voice in these ways with the tape recorder, Giorno creates a poetics that no poet is adequate to articulate on his own, either on the page or in performance. The tape recorder, which was traditionally regarded simply as a means for playing back the poet’s voice, has now become essential to the poem itself.

Giorno’s subversion of the traditional poetic master narrative could not have been possible without Les Paul’s sound-on-sound innovation of the late 1940s, but the notion that an audio recorder could not only represent but also extend, bend, and rearrange the human voice began to be articulated as soon as Edison introduced his phonograph in the 1870s. In an 1878 lecture entitled “The Poetry of the Phonograph: Its Marvelous Feats and Capabilities—Its Humors and Solemnities,” S.S. Cox highlighted the machine’s uncanny ability to bend and refashion the voices that it captured: “The faster you turn the cylinder the higher the voice is pitched, and if it is turned irregularly it will sing you a falsetto. By varying the velocity of the cylinder you make the voice a bass” (*Washington Post and Union*). The reversibility of the machine was also the cause of much excitement, inspiring one contributor to the *Literary Digest* in 1899 to remark that the phonograph “positively introduces

us into a new world, gives us a new language" ("Reversing the Phonograph" 1899, 136). Interestingly, this "new language" was achieved not by inventing new words or phrases but simply by altering the velocity and direction of the words that were already there, thus fostering a rediscovery of the *sound* of the human voice, independent of the language it incessantly delivers. Although this machine-generated "new language" seemed to mark a turn toward a post-lingual era, an uncharted territory in which meaningful speech could be reduced to noise, in some ways what the phonograph made possible was a return to a more primary, pre-lingual figuration of the voice—the voice of pure sound.

"The voice is sound, not speech," writes Adriana Cavarero in *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005), reminding us that language is not the only thing we hear when we listen to a speaking voice (2005, 12). Though we commonly think of the voice as being an instrument for the production of language, Cavarero insists that "the sphere of the voice is constitutively broader than that of speech: it exceeds it" (2005, 13). If this is true for the voice in general, it is perhaps even more the case where poetry is concerned. Poetry, of course, uses sound to convey meanings that are beyond the merely literal. As Julia Kristeva puts it, poetry derives its real power not from the symbolic order of language but from the "semiotic," that underlying system of speech sounds which has free-reign in infancy but which is soon forced to conform to the strictures of a semantically driven language (Cavarero 2005, 132-133). Inevitably, the semiotic recedes to the background as the child learns to master symbolic language, a system that values the meaning of words above all else and perceives any bodily transgressions in the sound of spoken language (e.g., stuttering, mispronunciation, repetition, mumbling) as a threat (Eagleton 1996, 163). Part of the early fascination with the phonograph was that it brought language's sound to the fore and invited the listener to manipulate and distort that sound. With the advent of multitrack recording, the singular voice could now become plural through a process of recording bits of speech and stacking them one on top of the other. The fact that recording technology could subvert the symbolic order of language in these ways made it an essential tool for poets and writers who were more interested in exploring the way a voice could make meaning at the semiotic, rather than the semantic, level.<sup>4</sup>

This uncanny ability of audio recording equipment to capture language and play it back in new, seemingly impossible constructions and combinations, is a subject that is central to the work of audio artist Gregory Whitehead. Like *Giorno*, Whitehead is interested not only in recording sounds but in discovering the ways that the recording apparatus can transform his sounds

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<sup>4</sup>According to Kristeva, this semiotic is repressed in adult speakers, though it "can still be discerned as a kind of pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language" (Eagleton 1996, 163). Kristeva sees the semiotic as the individual's most intimate and intuitive mode of communication, since it originates in the body and develops during the earliest stages of bonding with the mother.

into something new: "Once you make the shift from the material of sound to the material of the media, the possibilities open to infinity, and things start to get interesting again" (Whitehead 2001, 96). It is this shift from the material of sound to the material of the media that allows Whitehead to juxtapose, in Kristeva's terms, the symbolic and the semiotic, challenging his listeners' assumptions about what, exactly, can qualify as language.

In one of his early sound pieces, "What Words Want" (1984), Whitehead introduces a multilingual soundscape by presenting excerpts from a language-instruction audiotope. English phrases, uttered methodically by a too-friendly male voice ("how pretty," "how nice," "how beautiful," "how wonderful"), are juxtaposed with German phrases, spoken urgently in a strong female voice. In Whitehead's hands, the conceit of such language instruction is rendered absurd. He cuts phrases apart into illogical sequences and inserts uncomfortably long pauses: "Do you have...any money? I need...some paper." After about forty seconds, the piece changes direction. A new male voice, spoken as if through a cardboard tube, asks a question that will become a mantra: "Do you want to have a word like \_\_\_\_\_?" Each time the question is asked, a unique combination of mouth-generated noises fills the blank. These multitrack conglomerations usually include three distinct sounds at once, a combination of inhales, exhales, hisses, gasps, and undecipherable speech, mixed (like *Giorno's* voices) at distinct spots on the stereo spectrum. Each noise is cut abruptly in and out; the sound suddenly appears and disappears as if a switch has been flipped. At first, these noisy "words" register as nothing more than absurd, but the overall effect of the piece is to move a listener from skepticism to wonder. As the question is repeated, the initial sense of absurdity gives way to a larger, more profound observation: the very idea that one noise correlates with a specific object or concept and another does not is, in itself, absurd. Importantly, the piece does not ask whether these noises *are* words, but rather if we *want* to have words like these. Toward the end, a voice begins to whisper, "Of course I wanted to know if you liked it," in the space between each repeating question. Whitehead seems to coax us toward his foregone conclusion, that yes, whether we know it or not, we *do* want words like these. We are tired of the same old structures, of the limitations imposed by stale, ordered lexicons, or even our own vocal tracts.

No single body can produce the "words" that Whitehead constructs in "What Words Want," and yet they can by no means be described as disembodied. In fact, these mouth-sound collages effectively illustrate what sound artist Christof Migone suggests is the "paradox of having to speak through the very cavity that chews, spits, sucks, and slurps" (LaBelle 2006, 134). They contain what Barthes calls "the grain of the voice"; in them we hear "the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning" (1975, 66-7). One of the "chief vices of logocentrism," says Caverero, is that it "transforms the excess of the voice into a lack" (2005, 12). In "What Words

Want," Whitehead not only embraces the non-lingual excess of the voice, he extends and expands its aural possibilities by electronically multiplying the mouth from which it emits. Whitehead's garbled sounds should not be read as lack of meaning but as an illustration of a semiotic power other than mere meaning.

According to Whitehead, audio recording and editing devices have made it possible "to cut [the voice] out of our throats, put it on the autopsy table, isolate and savor the various quirks and pathologies, then stitch it back together and see what happens" (2001, 100). As a sound artist, Whitehead is not satisfied with simply "finding" a voice; he wants to "write" it. The tradition of such writing, I argue, stretches back to the earliest manipulations of the phonograph cylinder, works through the sound-on-sound innovation of Les Paul and the magnetic-tape cut-ups of Gysin and Burroughs, and extends into today's digital multitrack recording environment, where, according to Martin Spinelli, "individual pieces of sound can be cut as desired and layered in overlapping positions with virtually no effort; and visual representations of the waveforms which zoom in to the tiniest fraction of a second render simple previously impossible editing moves" (2008, 8). Because the space limitations imposed by the width of a magnetic tape spool have been obliterated in the digital realm, a producer can now work with an infinite number of tracks. Surface noise, tape hiss, and loud edits are no longer an issue; in fact, these noises are now often sampled and included in digital audio productions to evoke a sense of the past. With the advent of free, downloadable multitrack recording and editing software, even the costs of audio production have been mitigated. Today's sound artist works in a wide open field, the only real obstacles being a lack of venues for newer work, as well as what Douglas Kahn calls "the absence of anything remotely resembling a coherent tradition of audio art" (1994, ix). But over the last three decades, scholarly collections like Kahn and Whitehead's *Wireless Imagination*, Adalaide Morris's *Sound States*, Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander's *Radio Rethink*, Allan S. Weiss's *Experimental Radio*, and the ongoing series of sound-centered books from Errant Bodies Press, as well as annual meetings like the NAISA Deep Wireless Conference and Megapolis, and digital audio archives like those at Penn Sound and Ubu.com, have sparked new interest in the theory and practice of sound outside the discipline of music. Meanwhile, the prohibitive costs of print and the ubiquity of digital wireless devices are beginning to force literary and arts editors to discover the multi-media virtues of the online journal and the podcast, resulting in a blurring of the lines among English, Fine Arts, and Media Studies departments across the academy.

The multitrack sound layerings of Giorno and Whitehead compel a listener to understand the voice as something more than simply a vessel for language. The voice is, of course, rich with meaning even when it is devoid of words. Words, however, become practically unintelligible without the cadences and rhythms of voice (even the silent reader "voices" the text in her mind). Whether we read, listen, watch, or sleep, our minds decipher and

process multiple “tracks” of information at once. Les Paul’s sound-on-sound innovation sprung from his desire to achieve a particular musical arrangement he was already hearing in his head. His achievement opened the door for the expression of a new kind of plurality in sound. The phonograph marked a renewed interest in the orality/aurality of language, but the multi-track recorder made possible a new kind of poetics that is still in its infancy, still trying to find its voice.

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