Singing with Soot
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‘What we’ll always have is something we’ve lost’ (Vuong, 2022: 5)

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There is a kind of secretion that happens when I use my voice. There is, of course, the familiar secretion. A wave, a tone, an energy signal that vibrates the air around me so that another, a receiver, an ear perhaps, registers that vibration and translates the signal into something more, or less, meaningful. But there is something more too. From the bodily gestures of lungs, intercostal muscles, the diaphragm, teeth, lips, the tongues, the alveolar ridge, the wet wet vocal cords, comes not only wave, but heat, breath, spit, particulates, microbiomes, skin flakes. Voices are matter in the sense of a sound wave, and in the sense of a constellation of releases from one body, into the in-between of that body, and another who may be listening.

In a duet, two voices typically come together to perform harmonies, dissonance, or other forms of sonic togetherness that intentionally speak, connect, or build off the one and the other. In live performances, the proximity of bodies, of sonic resonance chambers, the one to the other allows for a greater capacity for listening, attuning, responding, and otherwise being in check, one body to another. Over the past year, I have become more and more interested in exploring what it feels like, as a secreting queer body, to sing with voices whose bodies are not present, but whose traces in embodied recordings are. Specifically, I have been singing with early recordings from phonautographs that produce visual traces of a voice in soot on paper, from the late 1850s and early 1860s by a French printer, bookseller and inventor. The work builds off of the queer feminist archival practices of Marika Cifor (2020) and Zeb Tortorici (2014) to explore what it means to encounter not only the stains or the viscera of the archives, but equally for the body in the archive to be affected, transformed and performed in a moment of liveness, and nowness. It is, in this way, about artistic methods for encountering the transversal now that is singing with a record of the past, and creating new recordings for future bodies.

The sonic records I am working with were visual records of voices (traces on soot paper), produced on machines that at the time could not play back the recordings. Through a digital stylus invented in the early 2000s, these voices can now be heard for the second time (the first time since the moment of the record). Not intending to be heard back, this time travelling digital innovation makes the voices unwilling, or unknowing participants in the now, and positions this embodied method of the duet as an uncomfortable, but hopefully tender one. I am a listener from another time, to a voice whose visual register is producing affects and physical effects in me, as I work, through song, to get closer to those (queer?) bodies in Paris some 150 years ago. And yet, it is not quite bodies I am getting close to, but to headphones, digital files, servers, paper, and soot. In singing with soot, my work also questions the

fetishisation of closeness as an archival and artistic imperative, that the 'closer' one gets, the 'more real' the relation. It also asks with which bodies am I singing – the recorder/inventor? The singer? The carbon bodies long since decomposed into oil for a lamp whose soot lines the paper within which the traced line of the voice/breath is found?

A personal record

Part of this project is vested in traces of voices, and specifically voices who, in the moment of sounding voice, are not expecting to be recorded, and yet, they are. I am currently thinking about this in relation to the Western queer concept of 'coming out,' a process regularly conceived as a universal before / after scenario of being in or out of the closet, but which when experienced, is localised in historic and geographic contexts, and is a process most queer people repeat day after day after day. And yet, there tends to be a re-historicisation to fit the 'universal' ideal, and so when asked, as one regularly is, about one's coming out, it is a story about telling, that I have told over and over again.

Specific to this project, however, I wonder about coming out as a record – or to put another way, I wonder what record there is of my coming out, beyond my telling and retelling of it. What imprint or trace did it leave on others – if any. Where are the traces and bumps set into matter by some stylus, the variations in line from the vibrations of that sound, sounding my coming out? As I thought of this, I realised that in my story, there is a record – albeit not in the sense of a phonautogram, or even a voice memo. At St Stephen's College at the University of Alberta, in the archive of printed Graduate Theses and Dissertations, lies my mother's Master of Theological Studies final project (Kaasa 2009). This thesis focused on my coming out – or rather my being found out, and the coming out my mother did to family, to friends, to herself, as a parent of someone who had come out. It is about unrequited grief, about loss being present in newness.

Over the past year, I have reread parts of it like the computer software that scanned the phonautogram from 1860, searching for the voice, my voice, any voice on record. What I found was deviation, a story familiar, but not my own. There were differences in the record of what happened, and when. The realisation my mother had found me, in her words 'dragged' me out. I was outed by my mother, but only to her, and without my knowledge of it. She did not 'come out' to me that she knew about my sexuality until sometime later. I wonder, then, if my voice was recognisable to my mother the moment of my coming out, the moment when I became unfamiliar? Was it more than a switch from mono to stereo? Was it a shift in the EQ? Or was it like, maybe, the sensation of hearing your own recorded voice for the first time and not recognising it at first, only to sit in the realisation that this is how the world hears you?

Speed of voice

On the 27 of March 2008, Jody Rosen at the New York Times broke a story about the newly discovered world's first voice recording:

> For more than a century, since he captured the spoken words "Mary had a little lamb" on a sheet of tinfoil, Thomas Edison has been considered the father of recorded sound. But researchers say they have unearthed a recording of the human voice, made by a little-known Frenchman, that predates Edison's invention of the phonograph by nearly two decades.

The 'little-known Frenchman' was Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville and the device was the phonautograph: A funnel with a vibrating diaphragm on one end with an attached stylus that moves over a cylinder covered with paper covered in lamp-black – the soot produced by an

oil lamp. The physical properties of the sound waves of the voice moving air, move the diaphragm which creates modulations in the trace of the line in the paper. As the cylinder turns, the stylus records the movement of air from the sound of a voice.

The phonautograph was invented to record, but not to be heard. Scott de Martinville was famously interested in 'daguerreotyping the voice' (Feaster 2017) At the time, the phonautograph was just that; a visual record of sound, and for over 150 years it was not possible to play them back. All of that changed when a collective of sound historians, recording engineers, and sound archivists in collaboration with scientists at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California brought this voice back to life (First Sounds 2008). If life, that is, is liveness or presence, and if indeed the sounding of a recording (of which contemporary life is flooded) from the past in the present connects somehow to a life – the life of the person whose voice is recorded.

The sound historian Patrick Feaster (2010: 43) suggests in the *Journal of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections* that it was the possibility of living on past death that proved one of the early motivators for Scott de Martinville. Between 1853 and 1854 Scott de Martinville began to work on the project called 'the problem of speech writing itself', with financial support from the *Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale* in France, and he writes:

> Will one be able to preserve for the future generation some features of the diction of one of those eminent actors, those grand artists who die without leaving behind them the faintest trace of their genius?

I wonder what the creature whose carbon the oil lamp burned to make the soot to make this trace thought about traces, about loss and transmission, about this strange carboniferous voice shot through machines of precious metals?

Au Clair de la Lune – recorded on the 9 April 1860 was played to the world at the annual conference of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections at Stanford University in Palo Alto on Friday 28 March 2008. Of the many things Rosen reported about this finding for the New York Times, a speculation of the gender of the voice was central:

> On a digital copy of the recording provided to The New York Times, the anonymous vocalist, probably female, can be heard against a hissing, crackling background din. The voice, muffled but audible, sings, "Au clair de la lune, Pierrot répondit" in a lilting 11-note melody, a ghostly tune, drifting out of the sonic murk.

Probably female.

The creators of the sound spent the next year concerned with the sound of the voice, and in many ways its interpreted gender. For some 150 years this voice lay in waiting, only to be (mis)gendered. The reason for this arises because the speed of the rotation of the cylinder at the time of recording will affect the speed at which to play back the sound in the present. However, knowing that speed is a difficult piece of decoding. A note scribbled in on the bottom of the phonautograph in question states that 'au clair de la lune sung; the tone is measured by the tuning fork of 500 simple vibrations per second which writes directly and simultaneously in interlinear space of the song' (First Sounds 2008).

Among the sound professionals working on the digital stylus to play back the recording, there was confusion as to whether '500 simple vibrations' meant 125Hz, 250Hz or 500Hz. As they relate, '[a]djusting the timecode to 500 Hz gave us what we took to be the natural-sounding

voice of a young girl singing at a convincing speed, and that was the version …unveiled' (Feaster 2010: 48). However, using that same timecode on other recordings proved too fast, and so 'adjusting the timecode to 250 Hz gave us a natural-sounding low male voice' (Feaster 2010: 48).

125Hz, 250Hz, 500Hz, and all the in-betweens. Gender as a time-shifting wave form, as an agreement, as standardised. In 1955 the frequency of all Western-based music was recommended for standardisation to the International Organization for Standardization, and in 1975 signed into ISO-16, where 'A' in the treble clef is agreed to be 440Hz and everything else tunes to that standard (ISO 1975). This becomes homogenised tone and timbre globally.

In November 2021 a sound engineer friend of mine posted a video on with the caption 'voice change update' on a social media platform, letting us who follow him witness a part of his FTM transition. In the twenty second video, my friend looks to camera in four second snippets edited together with fades and says: 'This is my voice one month on testosterone', 'this is my voice two months on testosterone', 'this is my voice three months on testosterone', 'this is my voice four months on testosterone', 'this is my voice five months on testosterone'. I wonder of bodies and voices operating on different frequencies, beyond the ISO's agreed wave form.

This same friend organises a WIP sharing for trans and non-binary folx in early 2022 at Ten87 Studios in Tottenham. We meet on a Saturday afternoon to talk and share work. One artist shares that since transitioning, they have stopped performing. All the music they wrote cannot be sung in the same way anymore – the chords, the progressions, the register. It is not as simple as simply changing the key, or trans-posing the notes up or down. It is about loss, they say. Loss in this being found, in this change to being an other. They talk about needing time to meet their voice.

In *An Apartment on Uranus* Paul Preciado (2020) reprints an article from 2015 originally published in the French journal *Libération* called 'An Other Voice.' In it, Preciado details the shifting relation of familiarity with the self: 'This voice emerges like a mask of air coming from within. I feel a vibration spreading in my throat as if it were a recording emerging from my mouth, transforming it into a strange megaphone' (132). Here the body as a playback machine, a recording from inside, the mouth a megaphone. But what is the record, what is the line, at what frequency is it tuned? 'I do not recognize myself,' Preciado continues, 'But what does "I" mean in this sentence?' (132)

I sit and listen to this voice from the phonautograph from another time, and from one or many bodies. I listen over and over and over until my listening shifts to a saying. I repeat the song with my own voice, trying to match the tone, the timbre, the speed, and realise I am also a virtual stylus, the waves of this sound vibrating my own drums and writing the speech out the phonemic shapes of my mouth. As I listen to the record, I shift from being a playback machine (a strange megaphopone), or another carbon copy (their soot to my carbon-bonded proteins and DNA – wait, another record?), no I shift to the relational. I want to hear this as an other voice, I want to duet.

A duet is an exercise in deep listening.

For Judith Becker (2004: 2),

> Deep Listening involves going below the surface of what is heard and also expanding to the whole field of sound whatever one's usual focus might be. Such forms of listening are essential to the process of unlocking layer after layer of imagination, meaning and memory down to the cellular level of human experience.

For Pauline Oliveros (2010: 78),

> Deep Listening includes all sounds expanding the boundaries of perception. In this concept is language and the nature of its sound as well as natural sound and technological sound. And too, Deep Listening includes the environmental and atmospheric context of sound.

In music a duet is not only about prepared harmonies, but about an intentional relationality requiring constant negotiation, adjustment, co-agency. I wonder just who is required to perform a deep listen of their own voice, whatever voice may conjure. As Preciado continues, 'In another episteme, my new voice would be that of a whale or the sound of a sledge; here it is simply a masculine voice' (2020: 134). I wonder what my coming out story might have been if it were a duet with my mother, with the other. I, like this recorded voice, not coming out, but found out, dragged out through the happenstance of software's functioning or not. How to think consent in these two records.

Writing to his own mother in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the poet Ocean Vuong (2019: 107) says 'They say a song can be a bridge, Ma. But I say it's also the ground we stand on. And maybe we sing to keep ourselves from falling. Maybe we sing to keep ourselves.'

DUET PERFORMANCE
Song repeats x 8 times
2 x no singing
2 x singing together in the same tone
2 x singing in harmony
2 x improvisation
End

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