DIVA-DOGS: Sounding Women Improvising

by

JULIE DAWN SMITH

B.A. Specialized Honours Music, York University, 1981
Diploma Jazz Studies, Humber College, 1990
M.A. Interdisciplinary Arts, Columbia College, 1992

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(INDIVIDUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES GRADUATE PROGRAM)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

June 2001

© Julie Dawn Smith, 2001
Abstract

As an exploration of sound and improvisation in relation to corporeality, subjectivity and culture, Diva-dogs: Sounding Women Improvising contests the visual bias of representation. This interdisciplinary investigation of women improvisers engages a somewhat unorthodox and improvisational methodology that approaches theory as a gathering together of disparate disciplinary fragments to create a kaleidoscopic and intertextual polyphony. Sound writes upon the exterior surfaces and interior substances of the body with an invisible ink that leaves its mark as it evaporates and disappears. The invisible presence of sound complicates the visual basis of intelligibility to underscore the corporeal as an improvisational process of sounding, audition, (re)writing and transformation. Sonic polyvalence defies singularity, unity and identity calling us to rethink matter, body, text, sexuality and subjectivity entirely. Sound problematizes representation by confounding the boundaries of interior and exterior space and as such becomes abject, an ambiguous disturbance of symbolic order and somatic signification. Woman is marked as sonic difference in the symbolic, a mark that positions her sexed, raced and classed body precariously in relation to language and meaning. In the practice of free improvisation women play with the sounds, linguistic excesses and abject noises of difference that hover at the border of representation, harmony, language and music to perform a sonic and corporeal voicing of women's subjectivity. To be “woman” is to be engaged in a constant state of improvisation.
Appendix 1 Interview Excerpts

1:1 Lindsay Cooper ........................................... 233
1:2 Joëlle Léandre ........................................... 238
1:3 Les Diaboliques .......................................... 243
1:4 Maggie Nicols ........................................... 251
1:5 Maggie Nicols (Telephone) ......................... 259
1:6 Annemarie Roelofs ................................... 263
1:7 Irène Schweizer ........................................ 270

Appendix 2 Selected Discography ......................... 275

Appendix 3 Audio and Video Excerpts

3:1 The Feminist Improvising Group Audiocassette

3:2 Les Diaboliques Videocassette
Acknowledgements

My interest in the lives, struggles and artistic practices of women musicians probably began *in utero* when my mother's passion for music was transmitted to me. Music has been the source of great pleasure and great pain in my life—but always an ever-present focus. This project bears traces of the sonic and rhythmic textures of my life's musical journey.

I was extremely fortunate to convince such a stellar group of scholars to be part of my doctoral committee at the University of British Columbia—Sneja Gunew (supervisor), Kevin McNeill, David Metzer and Becki Ross—who, with their generous support and expertise, propelled my academic explorations farther than I could have imagined. I also wish to thank the staff, faculty and students of IISGP headed by chair Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe, Wes Pue (acting chair 2000-2001) and administrator Leah Postman.

I cannot even begin to thank the women improvisers who were the inspiration for this project and who so willingly participated—Lindsay Cooper, Joëlle Léandre, Maggie Nicols, Annemarie Roelofs, Irène Schweizer—my respect for your artistry and my fondness for each of you is eternal. Thanks also to Eugene Chadbourne for consenting to be interviewed. Kudos to Ken Pickering artistic director, and Robert Kerr executive director, of Coastal Jazz and Blues Society for bringing Les Diaboliques to Vancouver, and for their willingness to support women players. Thanks to Ken for sharing his vast knowledge of music with all of us over the years. I am grateful to Chris Fedina, Jim Coverdale, Lynn Buhler, Nou Dadoun and Sarah Ballantyne for their enthusiasm for, and commitment to, improvised music and for making sure we “did” brunch. Thanks to
all the folks at the Jazz Festival, especially Rainbow Robert and Jennifer Wyss who provided technical support, and Greg Fruno, Thomas Jones and Matthijus van Daal for the laugh track. Ron Gaskin, Patrick Darby and Dolores Brach facilitated Les Diaboliques' Canadian tour. Thanks to videographer Marlene Madison for her good eye and willingness to help.

My extended family has supported me emotionally and financially throughout my transitory life, and this I know, has been no easy task. Hats off to Jannifer, Lexie & lan Smith-Rubenzahl, Don Smith & Jackie van Vugt, Clara Henderson, Les & Lila Kerr, and Jean Kerr for being there. To the friends I've met mostly through music: Bill Smith, Sheila Macpherson, Trimpin, Cheryl, Eddie Prévost, Jean Prévost, Val Wilmer, Danna Ephland, John Ephland, Philip Caldwell, Stephen Hudecki, Denise Oakie, Dan Ouellette, Murray Krantz, Pete Farrell, Cate Poynton, Tadahiko Imada, DB Boyko, Ed Oleksiuk. Thanks to Maggie's mum for tea. I am grateful to Dr. Larry Chan, Dawn Carpenter and Mary Trokenberg for keeping me together—body, mind and soul. To the "women of the new jazz"—Susan Gooding, Marguerite Horberg, Lauren Deutsch—I miss you all! Of course none of this would have been possible without my partner Robert Kerr, who helped in any and every way he could, and who continues to provide a solid backbeat. *Schwing with me Robert.*
To Stella, Alice, Jannifer and Lexie.

The past, present and future that sustains me.
Introduction
Woman in a Constant State of Improvisation

Unless she improvises, her own performance is always already scripted
—Richard Leppert

When I sat down to interview improvising bassist Joëlle Léandre, the conversation began as she posed the first question, tongue-in-cheek: “Did you prepare everything, all of your questions?” I replied with playful indignation: “Of course!” and she responded: “I don’t know, maybe it’s a pure improvisation!” Although Léandre’s comment was meant somewhat facetiously, her intuition was right—my methodology and my interview “style” were improvisational. In fact this entire project has been an improvisation. On the surface this statement seems like a confession, tantamount to an admission of incompetence. Isn’t improvisation merely a blind groping for something concrete to hang on to, a contingency plan that muddles through until something finally takes shape and becomes a text? How can I admit to this lack of preparation, knowledge and integrity, especially within the academy?

Indeed, western culture has positioned improvisation as lack—lack of form, lack of intention, lack of discipline, lack of authority—an inferior and deficient practice that should be viewed with skepticism. Derek Bailey agrees that the suspicion surrounding improvisation exists because it seems to be “something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method” (xii).

Improvisation is kaleidoscopic and unpredictable, and it is precisely these qualities that present several challenges to representation. To begin with, improvisation
disrupts our spatial, theoretical and methodological orientation because it questions the authority of notation, the parameters of specialized technique and the power invested in musical formalism. Similarly, any attempts to represent improvisation, whether through the development of a theory or a method of transcription, will always be a misrepresentation. As Derek Bailey explains, the academic impetus to define and confine improvisation to either theory or transcription is merely a distraction that “far from being an aid to understanding improvisation, deflects attention towards peripheral considerations” (xi). Working apart from the surveillance of the score means that improvisation acquires a certain fluidity, an ability to resonate with the vibrations of body, sound and gesture. Finally, improvising with sound raises deeper issues concerning western culture’s dependence on the visual and its assumption of wholeness, questioning the notion that the recognition of our intact image is the singular defining moment of subjectivity.

Improvising Theory

Can sonic improvisation resonate where theory and representation are concerned? This question cannot be addressed sufficiently without an examination of the historical, political and psychological ramifications of improvisation. Alan Durant provides some insight from all three perspectives when he suggests that improvisation questions the ways in which music making is produced, distributed and consumed. According to Durant improvisation looks beyond the finished product to consider the process played out from moment to moment, stretching past formal concerns and codified procedures. It highlights the process through which the text comes into being, challenging the notion that the text is fixed, static and unalterable. Improvisation
endlessly reinvents the text, marking textuality as an effect of process rather than as a finished product.²

With this in mind Durant briefly traces the history of improvisation in western music, suggesting that although it has been widely practiced for centuries improvisation has no official history (259). He further argues that these omissions are due in part to economic, political and aesthetic shifts, particularly in nineteenth-century music, that have codified the division between high and low art and changed the function of the artist in society to reflect the increasing isolation of the composer from earlier social rituals:

the participatory possibilities invited by earlier concert forms are displaced by individual compositions whose concern is less to act as a spring-board to creative performance by the musicians playing on any particular occasion than to record individual insights already achieved by the composer. (260)

The decline of improvisation in western art music coincided with increased commodification, evidenced in the large-scale orchestras of the nineteenth-century that performed in the institutionalized space of the concert hall, as well as in the rise of the composer to the status of “genius.”

Jacques Attali similarly suggests that the distancing of artistic activity from the everyday marks the moment when music entered representation through capitalism to become spectacle: “[t]he artist was born, at the same time his work went on sale” (47). In relation to improvisation this meant that extemporaneous music making had no use-value in the commodified climate Attali calls “exchange.” Marginalized and powerless, improvisation as a spontaneous social activity finds itself exiled from bourgeois society.
Exiled but not annihilated, as Durant suggests. Twentieth-century practices attest to the continuing pervasiveness of improvisation extant in both western and non-western music. Although the history of improvisation is scant, its current methods are varied, wide-ranging and ubiquitous. Improvisation is an integral component of such diverse practices as aleatory or chance music, graphic notation, vernacular forms of folk, rock and world music traditions, all permutations of jazz as well as the idiosyncratic practice of free improvisation that is the specific focus of this project.

For Durant as for Attali, improvisation’s location at the edge of representation and theory marks it as a political force. By challenging the authority of the text, improvisation disrupts the expectations of codified music which in turn disrupts established musical rhetorics. Embedded in the aesthetic disruption generated by improvisation are questions concerning how music functions in society, especially in relation to power. As Durant suggests, improvisation destabilizes the “dominant procedures through which music is made and consumed, especially in challenging established roles for composers, musicians and audiences” (276). Bailey proposes that improvisation is indeed the oldest form of music making and that all music is in fact propelled by the “drive to improvise” (ix-x).

**Improvising Free Association**

From a psychoanalytic perspective the “drive to improvise” points to the role of the unconscious in improvisational practices. Durant makes a connection between improvisation and the analysand’s discourse in psychoanalysis, alluding to the possibility that improvisation finds its alter ego in the psychoanalytic technique known as free association. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, Julia Kristeva explains that
free association is based upon the narration of a patient's stories, an extemporaneous telling that affects both thought and perception, body and mind. It is a "fantasmatic narrative," a mythic blending of conscious and unconscious elements that produces a third component, an ontology Kristeva calls *signifiance*. This is a space of psychic excess, a "process, dynamic and movement of meaning, not reduced to language but encompassing it" (37). It is the play of opposing drives, the struggle of life and death, the capacity of a speaking being to signify: "a horizon of being outside the psychical where human subjectivity is inscribed without being reduced, where psychical life is exceeded by *signifiance*" (59). In other words free association is a space of revolution.

Revolt, Kristeva explains, is "a constant calling into question of the psyche and the world," a process integral to the psychoanalytic and literary experience that arguably exists in the experience of free improvisation (19). We can think of improvisation as a sonic telling, a free association that sounds the dynamic unfolding of unconscious and conscious processes, an expression of *signifiance*. The creative text along with the analysand's narrative are, in Kristeva's words, "animated by a desire to overturn the world, oneself, the Other, love and death" (51). In this way the improviser, like the writer and the analysand, dwells in a strange and mobile space, inhabiting the liminality and paradox of the "prior future" that is the stuff of free association. Improvisation as a narrative process is not driven merely by exact repetition, a redundant reiteration of the same old story, but instead enacts a rupture: "a question, a sub-version, a re-volt in the etymological sense of the word (a return toward the invisible, a refusal and displacement)" (10). This "plural decentering" that Kristeva describes reconfigures the subject and the process of subjectivity, as well as the interrelation of self to other. It is a
space of risk and excess, a space of creativity. Free improvisation is nothing more and nothing less than a revolution of, in, and through, sound.

**Improvising Interpretation**

In respect to the interpreter of free association—that is, the analyst, the literary critic and the listener—Kristeva suggests that the reception of an improvised narrative must be approached with "a certain openness in one's own psychical apparatus, a flexibility that ultimately represents an aptitude for revolt" (51). The listener too is decentered and ceases to interpret from the position of "normative truth." Following Helen Deutsch, Kristeva proposes that the interpreter should position him/herself as an "eternal adolescent," a revolutionary listener: "This may sound odd, because we know that the eternal adolescent is immature and capriciously fragile, moving from depression to hysteria, from amorous infatuation to disappointment." Yet she observes that with this volatility comes "a certain suppleness of agencies, an adaptability, a capacity to modify oneself according to the environment and the other, as well as against them" (51).

A brief digression is in order here. It is important to note that revolutionary, decentered listening is especially pertinent to the music critic who approaches the improvised performance from the position of paternalism, a judgmental father figure who values the sound of his own diagnostic voice over that of the creative artist. In this scenario the improviser becomes the patient, the improvisation the symptom and the critic the one who prescribes the cure. Composer/improviser Anthony Braxton comments extensively in his *Tri-axium Writings* on the problems inherent in this kind of "deaf listening," arguing that a paternalistic attitude is part and parcel of the white critical response to jazz, a response based in a racist attitude toward African-American
musicians that primitivizes and exoticizes them (Lock 173-184). Analogous effects of sexism can be found in critical responses to women improvisers, an observation that is taken up and elucidated in Chapter three.

The image of the critic as eternal adolescent Kristeva is offering here is an alternative description of the listener/interpreter of improvised music who is willing to take the risk of displaced listening that (un)authorizes him/herself. I use the term risk because the decentered listener embarks on a journey for which s/he has no map or compass, pouring him/herself into the contours of the sounds and gestures of the performance, allowing for detours into unfamiliar territory and possible encounters with the unknown. This kind of revolutionary listening is the basis of a critical stance that locates itself strategically off-centre, an ability to hear beyond the ready-made judgement of fixed and immobile musical “truths.” This is a position of criticism and analysis that is fluid, receptive and wise. “Then and only then,” Kristeva writes,

> will texts appear not as fetishes or dead objects corresponding to definite states of history or rhetoric but as so many experiences of psychical survival on the part of those who have engaged in the struggle and on our part as well. (51)

In the course of performance the feedback, responses and interpretations of listeners are an integral part of the dynamic of free association, occurring as improvisations at the moment of improvisation (62). Unlike analysis or reading, however, the simultaneity of creation/interpretation that takes place in the improvisatory space constructs a polyphonic antiphony, as multiple listeners in a multiplicity of listening positions—on the stage as well as in the audience—engage with/in individual as well as collective levels of stratified listening. From moment to moment layers of listening are added to layers of
sounding to create intertextual journeys that run parallel to one other, circumnavigate each other, collide and disperse:

There is a piling up of otherness: the addressee is an other-being; "I" is an other-being; these others are altered by contemplating each other. Far from being absolutized as the summit of a pyramid from which the other gazes at me with an implacable and severe eye, the problematic of psychoanalytical alterity opens a space of interlocking alterities. Only this interlocking of alterities can give subjectivity an infinite dimension, a dimension of creativity. (Kristeva 67)

Improvisation generates this creative dimension through sound: a boundless engagement with our own revolutions and the revolutions of the other.

**Woman: From Noun to Verb**

Nathaniel Mackey describes this kind of creative reconfiguration of alterities in the term “artistic othering.” In *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing*, he explains that “[a]rtistic othering has to do with innovation, invention and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive.” Mackey distinguishes between the productive process of artistic othering and the stultifying effect of “social othering” which, in contrast, “has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a norm against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized” (265). He describes the difference by using the verb/noun distinction, citing the movement from verb to noun as a move away from agency toward stasis and noun to verb as a reversal of stasis toward active agency.
Mackey takes his cue from poet and cultural theorist Amiri Baraka, who employs the verb/noun distinction to describe the effects of white appropriation on the inventiveness of black culture. Positioning the other as noun immobilizes, erases and objectifies otherness in a move that, according to Mackey, hypostasizes change. Baraka identifies this sort of hypostasis in the appropriation of black swing music by white big bands in the 1920s and 1930s. Here white commodification becomes the noun that “observes or “disappears” the “verb” it rips off, black agency, black authority, black invention” (266). Mackey explains this disappearing act:

> From verb to noun means, on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-inflected music and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility, a containment of the economic and social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation. (266)

Artistically, politically, socially and philosophically, then, the noun paralyzes the verb, subjects it to stasis and regulates its sound.

Artistic othering, on the other hand, reverses the stasis of the noun to reconfigure agency in the rhythm of the verb. The strategy that reinvents the other by transforming other-ing into agency constructs an other that is active and marks othering as a critical reflection and a revolutionary practice: “[s]uch othering practices implicitly react against and reflect critically upon the different sort of other to which their practitioners, denied agency in a society by which they are designated other, have been subjected” (267). The process of transforming a thing, object or other into a verb requires the kind of “action, dynamism and kinetics” Mackey finds in black vernacular culture (267). This is an improvisational strategy embedded in the aesthetic mobility of black culture played
out in language, stories, song and laughter: the free association that transforms noun to verb “making a way out of no-way” (268).

Improvising on Mackey’s riff “from noun to verb,” I take up in this project the view that phallogocentrism performs a social othering of woman. Phallogocentrism is a static positioning that paralyzes the active agency of woman as verb, a network of power relations that endeavors to turn her into a social other and hypostasize her as noun. Implicated in the “nounization” of woman are the institutions of patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, the symbolic, the law of the father and language, expressions of the meta-pervasive power of phallogocentrism. These institutions, meta-languages and power centers create oppositional hierarchies of what could also be termed noun/verb pairings—masculine/feminine, mind/body, man/woman, normal/abnormal, form/content and so on—that negate the right side of the binary. Thus when Kristeva suggests that signifiance encompasses “narrative, drives, sensations, acts, the feminine in being” she is reactivating sound, the body, the unconscious, rhythmic motility and the feminine as verbs, infusing them back into the stasis of phallogocentrism in order to disrupt, decenter and displace it (Kristeva 64).

Diva-dogs: Sounding Women Improvising

Diva-dogs: Sounding Women Improvising is an attempt to articulate a feminist theory of sound and improvisation that recognizes the itinerant quality of these phenomena and imagines how this motility might alter the notions of methodology and research. This project draws from theoretical and practical implications of interviews conducted with women improvisers using improvisation as methodology and methodology as improvisation. As Janet Wolfe states, “[t]he idea of a detached,
impartial, controlling interviewer, whose own views and values are kept out of the
dialogue, is one which is unacceptable for feminist research” (75). With this standard in
mind, interviews were unscripted, in an effort to establish a non-hierarchical relationship
with the interviewees and to respect the experiences, beliefs and identifications of each
interview subject. As interviewer I was able to draw from my own experience as a
woman and as a performer, as well as from my musical training (for good and bad), my
expertise as a producer and my engagement with free improvisation.

Although this project was not an ethnography per se, the term “participant-
observer” took on a different meaning as I found myself “hanging out” with the women I
interviewed—in clubs, bars, restaurants, hotels, planes and airports—the all-too-familiar
spaces travelling musicians inhabit. The notion of “hanging out” adds a methodological
twist to this work, becoming another improvisational tactic for research. In reaction to
the stories the women shared with me, I responded with stories of my own, as well as
helping to carry luggage, negotiate schedules, attend to details of travel, meet family
members, walk, shop and laugh.

The tenor and direction of our conversations inspired me to revisit my own artistic
path, realizing that, while this “first generation” of pioneering women improvisers was
breaking new ground for women performers, I too was performing in early feminist work.
These multi-media performances that investigated women’s identity and spirituality
sparked my passion for the artistic explorations of women’s experience. Later I
abandoned conventional musical structures and began to explore my own instrumental
and vocal improvisations, a move that led me to an appreciation of and commitment to
jazz, and to the inevitable question that has plagued many women listeners and novice
improvisers: where are the women improvisers?4 When I began to experience intense
physical pain—due to overuse syndrome—that rendered me unable to continue playing wind instruments, I questioned authorized attitudes to and relationships between music and women’s bodies, eventually abandoning technique for anti-virtuosity and discarding authorized instruments for invented instruments of my own making. This artistic move opened up the possibilities of sound to me, provoking my interest in transgressing the boundaries of authorized sounding, and inspiring me to seek out the work of those who shared my irreverent attitude toward the ways in which musicians, improvisers and artists are expected to sound and behave. My experiences have inevitably influenced the interpretation of the stories these women told to me; thus my own voice is included in the multilayered resonance that echoed during the interview transcription process. The resulting work is a narrative informed by the polyphonic voices that construct my composite memories.

Although my intention was to promote women improvisers by interviewing them, writing about them, presenting them and encouraging others to present them, I could not, as Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson point out, expect to engage in this project as an ethnographer “proper.” Bryson and de Castell emphasize that it is crucial to disclose who the ethnographer is and what position s/he occupies in order to dispel “ethnography’s most troubling claims: the professional outsider’s access to reality: the ‘fly on the wall’ paradigm of neutrality in the observational field” (104). I could not automatically expect to move freely through the artistic and social spaces my interview subjects inhabited or have unlimited access to their resources. Yet neither were my interview subjects “proper” ethnographic informants. They are artists who speak self-consciously about the aesthetic process and about their work.
It is important to note at this juncture that for the past twelve years I have been involved in producing and presenting musical performances, generally through the auspices of non-profit organizations, alternative performance spaces, festivals and educational institutions. My former positions as executive director of the Jazz Institute of Chicago and co-producer of the Women of the New Jazz Festival and my current tenure as assistant producer of the du Maurier International Jazz Festival Vancouver have given me professional access to the music industry—albeit within its more marginal, often invisible and disavowed spaces—as well as to artists that I might not otherwise have had as an aficionado. Not only did this “inside” access enable me to make contact with the women I interviewed fairly easily, but it also generated a modicum of comfort on the part of the musicians due to my involvement in and familiarity with the “scene.” Since performing artists are frequently interviewed, the women generally seemed comfortable with the interview process. In fact a recurring theme that surfaced during a number of interviews was their frequent experience of being passed-over for both interviews and feature articles by male critics.

I was grateful for these inroads but concerned that the women not feel obligated to participate for fear of penalty to their careers—that is, that they might not be hired for gigs by the organizations I am/have been associated with. To counterbalance this possibility I included the following statement in the “informed consent” form signed by each participant: “I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to my participation in the international jazz community,” even though I thought it presumptuous of me to assume that my influence was so far-reaching. Did I really have the power to influence programming decisions? Perhaps not, but the perception
that I might was a definite possibility, and my success in persuading the folks at Coastal Jazz and Blues Society to bring Les Diaboliques to Vancouver suggests that I do have at least some influence.

This brief examination of my professional status in relation to women improvisers raises issues concerning the political economy of free improvisation that affects both improvisers and presenters. To put this discussion into perspective, it is important to recognize that free improvisation is an art form on the margins of the margins. Free improvisation, by design and by default, is not part of the money-making machine that characterizes the mainstream music industry. Statistics from the du Maurier International Jazz Festival in Vancouver—a festival that has an international reputation for presenting a greater percentage of “out” music than most other comparable jazz festivals in North America—demonstrates this assertion. In 1999 the festival presented 80 ticketed shows, 30 of which featured free improvisers, and although this constituted 37% of the total concerts presented it reflects only 4% of the revenue from ticket sales. Similarly in 2000 the festival presented 76 ticketed concerts, of which 34 featured free improvisers, reflecting 44% of ticketed concerts yet only 3.5% of ticket sales revenue. From a presenter’s point of view this discrepancy means that the profits from the performances of “name” artists are at times used to subsidize the less lucrative and more marginal performances of free improvisers. Furthermore, in respect to record sales, the Village Voice reports that throughout the 1990s jazz represented only 3% of all record sales in the United States:

The Recording Industry Association of America, which gauges the popularity of different categories of music, has classical and jazz running neck and neck at the back of the pack, each with about 3 percent of the
business, just ahead of oldies and New Age. In 1998 jazz fell to 1.9 percent, two-tenths ahead of soundtracks and far behind religious at 6.3 percent. (Woodward 50)

Tom Evered, general Manager of Blue Note records, confirms that these statistics mean "[a]ny jazz artist who looks at CDs as a way to make money is being unrealistic." CDs by younger, high profile jazz artists have a shelf life of approximately eighteen months and rarely sell more than 15,000 copies in the U.S. unless they are by cross-over artists:

It takes nerve for a media conglomerate to invest in new jazz today when rap and teenpop seem to offer much steeper upside potential. The cost-to-return ratio for living artists is one reason the music's dead heroes are so prominent. Why risk 25 grand touring a quintet who haven't a prayer of airing on MTV when you can mine your catalogue of Miles and Coltrane for nothing? (Woodward 50)

Although free improvisation is often included in the "jazz" category, it is unlikely that CDs by free improvisers are even represented in these statistics. Many free improvisers self-produce their work, for economic as well as artistic reasons, and either sell them independently or work with independent distributors who, judging from the statements above, face the impossible task of convincing the major record store chains to sell their product.

The economic reality of improvised music means, from a monetary, artistic, and practical standpoint, that the network of independent record labels, non-profit presenters and dedicated artists who share a passion for improvisation collectively subsidize the work in a number of ways that require the creative and strategic deployment of available
resources. Artists subsidize their passion for and involvement with free improvisation by playing different styles of music that are more financially lucrative, by supplementing their income with grants from government agencies and by handling their own business affairs without the help of a manager—including all the details necessary for touring, such as booking flights, hotels, ground transportation, negotiating contracts and fees, providing press material and so on. In the course of our conversation, Irène Schweizer described the difficulties of running her own business:

But it is exhausting, the whole thing beside the music, what is around it. Once you’re there and you play, it’s actually nothing. But everything that brings you to that point—just getting there and organizing. I mean, I don’t have a manager, I do everything myself. Except when we do a longer tour sometimes an agent asks me if they can organize [it], and then I say of course, because I can’t do that. But if it’s just a single concert then I just do it myself. You have to phone, you have to send stuff and you have to organize your travel and all that. I am my own office at home.

Maggie Nicols has documented the frustrating and often debilitating process of writing and negotiating government grants, in her article “Contradictions.” In this short and provocative piece, Nicols describes the experience of being trapped in and by government bureaucracy during the granting process. Despite the group “fulfilling all the requirements, answering all the queries, and meeting all the deadlines,” the inability of the granting agency to give Nicols’ group, Contradictions, any information concerning the status of their application caused emotional, physical and financial hardship for everyone involved. As a result they were forced to spend an inordinate amount of additional time and energy lobbying the agency, writing letters and following up:
Our application has been picked up and dropped, encouraged and stopped, started and blocked. Yet another example of bureaucracy with its Y-shaped fronts in a twist in the face of one of the most vicious attacks on our lives and communities ever attempted by a government in this country.

(7)

In the end the request for support was successful. Yet because it took so long to get a definitive answer, the recipients had to settle for a third of the money they were granted. The experience greatly effected the artists involved: “[t]he paradox is that the promise of a grant […] has done more damage to the integrity of the group than all our years of having to survive through sharing the resources we had” (Nicols 7).

Joëlle Léandre is similarly busy with the business side of music. Her eclectic style, while more financially flexible than most, makes it difficult to balance her performances with her administrative tasks. Like Schweizer and Nicols, she is painfully aware of the price she pays for her dedication to free improvisation, as writer Alex Varty notes: “the one thing that galls Léandre most is the economic price the improvising musician pays for slipping the yoke of the printed score.” Léandre herself has frequently commented on the marginalization of improvisation and the consequences this has on her financial situation and musical sensibility:

I know how much I am paid when I play recitals. When I push Sylvano Bussotti, Jacob Drukman, John Cage, Giancinto Scelsi and Karlheinz Stockhausen, I get ten times more than when I'm playing an improvising gig. And for me it's the same energy, maybe more, when I play my music. This is terrible. (Varty)
At times my professional status became an issue when the political economy of free improvisation surfaced as a topic during the course of the interviews. The women questioned me as to why they weren't interviewed more frequently by critics and/or featured in jazz publications. Why were so few women presented in jazz festivals? Why couldn't I secure enough sponsorship money to produce a women's jazz festival? Why didn't I interview men and make them aware of their gender biases? Why couldn't I create a forum for women and men to talk about gender issues in improvisation? Could I write a review of their latest CD? I found all of these questions provocative, knowing full well that they express the kind of frustrations that accompany years of marginalization. Providing answers and creative solutions to the problems, however, will require long-term strategies that I have only begun to formulate.

During the course of my interviews, the assumptions I made concerning the common ground I shared with the women—cultural, racial, aesthetic—shifted, especially in relation to sexuality. Looking back I realize that I had overlooked the direct and fundamental importance of lesbian sexuality—particularly in relation to the Feminist Improvising Group—to their improvisational practice. I was forced to look at my heteronormative assumptions about improvising and renegotiate listening, as an interviewer and as a sound theorist, from a queer perspective. The groundbreaking work of Suzanne Cusick and Philip Brett in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, an anthology that explores the relation of sexuality to music (classical and popular), was helpful in this respect. But while extremely informative, their commentary is offered largely from a musicological perspective that struggles with/in its own disciplinary limitations. Not only do the connections between sexuality and improvisation, especially in the "jazz" milieu, warrant further investigation, they are also
generally absent from any discussions of improvised music. Very little work has surfaced to date exploring the possibilities of queer listening and queer sounding.

The interdisciplinary nature of my work has enabled me to begin to address the deafening silences that exist in relation to women, sound and improvisation. Interdisciplinarity is, I believe, a constructive, transgressive amalgam of theory and practice that challenges disciplinary boundaries. What is considered taboo within disciplinary parameters is articulated in the interdisciplinary intersections of theoretical paradigms that seem disparate and/or contradictory. Interdisciplinarity explores the interrelatedness and inhabits the interstices of disciplinary concepts by dismantling and reconfiguring them in unusual and creative ways. It also combines the theories and practices of a multitude of disciplines with a certain irreverence for the economy of disciplinary theories and practices. The intermixing of disciplined and "undisciplined" elements has the potential to generate theoretical sparks that sometimes cause epistemological explosions. In other words, interdisciplinarity urges disciplinary ground to shift.

I see compelling similarities between interdisciplinarity and improvisation. Each process requires a great deal of openness, fluidity and skill to make connections that generate conceptual cross-pollination. In this sense interdisciplinarity is a process of theoretical free association that respects disciplinary knowledge claims and yet takes perverse pleasure in dismantling them. Rosi Braidotti argues that interdisciplinarity—or transdisciplinarity as she calls it—is a fluid theoretical option that not only causes shifts in academic discourse but generates alternative subjectivities as well (1, 35-37). As a move away from the monolingualism and singularity of phallogocentrism, interdisciplinarity considers theory a verb rather than a noun. The interdisciplinary
researcher becomes polyglot, speaking many languages—poetic as well as theoretical, subjective as well as objective, empirical as well as well scientific—perhaps not fluently but well enough to take on the risk of translation and accept the dangers of untranslatability. 

As an interdisciplinary project, *Diva-dogs: Sounding Women Improvising* is neither a straight-forward history of women improvisers nor an exhaustive documentation of their experiences, aesthetic approaches or political strategies. Rather, it seeks to situate women improvisers within a larger cultural milieu of sound and improvisation including, but not limited to, music, noise, silence, rhythm, language, hysteria, excess, non-linguistic sound, babble, cry and laughter. This project makes connections between theory and practice as it explores the micro-level experiences and artistic processes of women improvisers, in tandem with the macro-level interaction of women and sound within the frame of a phallogocentric culture. The observation that women improvisers consistently “break the sound barrier” with their transgressive sonic practices, coupled with the recognition that women who transgress sonic boundaries are labeled deviant, hysterical and abject in western society, raises questions concerning the meaning of this situation for women who perform their transgressions knowingly and publicly. Can women’s improvisational sounding be heard apart from, or differently than the expectations and representations of an economy that attempts to regulate the how, when, where, what and why of women’s sounding? The answer to such a question is, of course, multilayered and complex. The critiques, analyses and speculations that inform this narrative are drawn from both theory and the profound insights, aesthetic philosophies and expertise of women improvisers. My interdisciplinary approach to this project echoes that of Jacques Attali, whose
investigation of the political economy of noise and music “is not an attempt at a multidisciplinary study, but rather a call to theoretical indiscipline, with an ear to sound matter as the herald of society” (5).

In Chapter one “A Riant Spaciousness: Sound Matters,” I explore sound as a disruptive and generative force in the symbolic, using laughter as an illustrative metaphor. By combining Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic chora with theorist Vicky Kirby’s (re)investigation of matter as text, I propose that the materiality of sound problematizes representation by confounding the boundaries of interior and exterior space. The invisible presence of sound complicates the visual basis of intelligibility to underscore the corporeal as a process of audition, (re)writing and transformation. Sonic polyvalence defies singularity, unity and identity, calling us to rethink matter, body, text and subjectivity entirely. This chapter critically engages with theorists Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman by investigating the relation of sound to language, through possible reconfigurations of the semiotic chora, the role of the maternal and the (dis)embodied voice.

Chapter two, “Music is a Scrubwoman: The Sonic Abject,” continues to explore the parameters of sound—including music, harmony, noise and rhythm—in relation to notions of the abject and the feminine. Kristeva’s theory of abjection figures prominently here, tempered by Anne McClintock’s multifaceted configuration of abjection based on her notion of “situated psychoanalysis” and “psychoanalytically informed history.” The connection between sound, abjection and the feminine leads to discourses of the monstrous and the grotesque, which explore the status of female identity in the symbolic and the uncanny ambiguity conjured by representations of female corporeality. As Lorena Russell suggests, discourses of the monstrous and the grotesque are mobile
and fluid, creating a "queering field" that reconfigures female sexuality and disrupts the stasis of the symbolic (178). The negotiation of spatial and temporal dimensions generated by the uncanny mobility of the abject creates the paradox of sonic jouissance—a paradox illustrated in the response of the composer to the Siren call of his mistress, music.

Chapter three, "Playing Like a Girl: The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group," is an exploration of the pioneering efforts of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) in Europe in the late 1970s. Drawing from interviews with women who participated in FIG, this chapter traces the relevance of improvisation to socio-political issues of gender, race, class and sexuality. Unearthing the currency for women improvisers of notions embedded in the slogan "the personal is political," the relevance of consciousness raising groups and the significance of dialectical knowledge production in the antiphony of black music, I argue that improvisation (re)configures the aural individual as well as the sonic community. FIG improvised women's lives, so that playing became a reciprocal process, a call and response between improvisers and a community of listeners. Far from being a homogeneous collectivity, FIG improvised issues of personal politics, performance, lesbianism, and aesthetics, to create a "paradoxical community," an incommensurable community that practices "social virtuosity," solidarity, knowledge and experience in the face of difference and contradiction.

Chapter four, "Noise About Nothing: Hysteria and the Cry as Sonic Pathology and Protest," investigates the cultural representation of hysteria and of the cry. To this end, I trace the performative mutability of hysteria throughout western history, a history that situates the cause of hysteria in the wandering of a dissatisfied womb and that
marks the mutating effect this wandering womb has on language. Kaja Silverman’s psychoanalytic analysis of the cry conffates women’s non-linguistic sounding with the infantile cry and positions women’s sounds as pathological. Susan McClary’s discussion of the madwoman, represented in opera as musical excess, of the attempts by composers to “frame” this excess and of the rupture of these frames by women who represent themselves as excessive, raises the possibility of reconfiguring hysteria and the cry as protest. In Chapter five the notion of hysteria as self-representation is explored further.

In the final chapter, “Perverse Hysterics: The Strange Cri of Les Diaboliques,” I draw from interviews with the improvising trio Les Diaboliques, connecting the notion of improvisation as a cry (un cri) of protest and resistance, proposed by bassist Joëlle Léandre, with theories that similarly position the hysteric’s cry as remonstration. As manifestations of the wandering womb, wandering sound and language become performances of hysterical protest; I argue that this hysterical protest can be “perverted” and used in artistic practice. This proposal connects the trope of nomadism—as discussed by Rosi Braidotti in relation to feminism, and Angela Davis in relation to female African-American blues artists—with Kristeva’s concept of the wandering foreigner within each of us. Kristeva argues that the blurring of boundaries between self and other engenders an ethics of respect for irreconcilable differences: a productive tactic for sounding/woman/improvising. The conclusion, “Theory in a Constant State of Improvisation,” suggests directions for future study.

In addition to supporting the narrative, each appendix is included to provide resources for listening to and viewing the performances of women improvisers. Appendix one offers interview excerpts from each improviser, in an effort to further
contextualize the quotations cited within the project. Because it offers a primary source of information unavailable in any other form, I felt it important to include a wider range of interview material. The selected discography in Appendix two presents a starting point for those who wish to seek out recorded performances by women improvisers, but is by no means a comprehensive listing of recordings made by the women interviewed. The discography should not be used as a substitute for attending live performances, since interaction with the performative aspect of free improvisation is integral to understanding and appreciating the unique complexities of this music. Appendix three includes a short excerpt from the Stockholm Women's Music Festival mentioned at the end of Chapter three and a short videotape of Les Diaboliques recorded in Vancouver that is discussed in Chapter five.  

The figure of the diva-dog was created collectively by Irène Schweizer, Joëlle Léandre, Maggie Nicols and myself, while waiting for a flight in the transitory space of the Toronto airport, a “no (wo)man’s land,” as theorist Rosi Braidotti describes the disorienting quality of the generic airport. After a particularly frustrating encounter with an Air Canada employee who hassled us by threatening not to check the oversize hard case that protects Joëlle’s bass in transit, we began joking about the strange position of women musicians who are simultaneously treated like divas and dogs. This was our way of reclaiming that space of paradoxical identity, to reflect upon the situation of woman as noun and verb. The diva-dog is a dangerous hybrid, a mutt of sorts, a prima doga who barks and sings, an underdog who growls and laughs, bred from the conflicting caricatures that construct woman. She is part hysteric, part bitch, a queer figure that “violates community standards,” disturbs fixity and crosses the boundaries of female containment, categorization, calcified sexuality and identity.
Feminist theoretical paradigms that focus on language generally overlook the relationship of subjectivity to sound, so that excess and lack are framed in a critique of the visual that oddly reinforces silence. Diva-dogs, as figures of excess and lack, escape—and by escaping define—the parameters of representation, including language in the process of sounding, woman(ing), improvising. Adding the suffix “ing” to woman by inference changes the static noun to active verb, suggesting that being “woman” is a process, not a finite product. Blended together sound-ing, improvis-ing, woman-ing are multilayered, intertextual polyphonies that perform Kristeva’s “subject in process/on trial.” In other words, to be a woman is to be engaged in a constant state of improvisation.
Notes

1 Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound* 133.

2 This discussion of improvisation does not factor in the discourse surrounding the reproduction of the improvised text through recording technology, which I believe is a different discussion altogether.

3 *The Feminist Reader* provides a useful glossary that describes phallogocentrism as a term that “brings together the notions of phallocentrism and logocentrism. Both these terms have been associated, especially by French feminism, with the organization of sexual difference and language in Western patriarchal cultures.” Logocentrism is further described in the same text in relation to the theories of Jacques Derrida: “Logocentrism gives independent existence to concepts, which are no more than an effect of linguistic difference. Logocentrism makes ideas the origin of language, and finds the guarantee of truth outside language—in the mind of God or, more recently, in the subjectivity of the individual.” Phallocentrism is described as “the order of the masculine and the symbolic, where masculine sexuality is both privileged and reproduced by a belief in the phallus as primary signifier. Thus, the feminine is subordinated to a masculine order, and woman is placed on the side of negativity and lack (of the phallus).” *The Feminist Reader*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997). 255.

For more information on musician's injuries and related health problems the following websites may be helpful: 1) Canadian Network for Health in the Arts [http://web.idirect.com/~cnha/index.html](http://web.idirect.com/~cnha/index.html) with links to university websites and the International Arts Medicine Association; 2) Musicians and Injuries [http://www.engr.unl.edu/eeshop/music.html](http://www.engr.unl.edu/eeshop/music.html) with comprehensive links to on-line articles and bibliographies, lists of relevant books complete with abstracts, general tips for care of overuse injuries, performing arts clinics, doctors who specialize in musicians' injuries, relaxation methods and alternative techniques, and discussion groups. Throughout the writing of this project I have been constantly reminded of the severity of my own injury which has, at times, incapacitated me.

This comment does not suggest that "proper" ethnographic informants exist in any situation.

Thanks to Robert Kerr, executive director of the Vancouver festival, for providing these statistics.

The process of interdisciplinarity should not be mistaken for multidisciplinarity, which I believe requires a super-human ability to be all things to all disciplines in the academy. Multidisciplinarity perpetuates disciplinary authority by ensuring that the discreet boundaries of disciplines remain in tact. It is an additive approach to research that rarely questions the constructions of disciplines, engages with the peripheral spaces beyond disciplinary configurations, or explores their overlap.

This performance was part of the annual *Time Flies* festival of improvised music produced by Coastal Jazz and Blues Society at the Western Front, November 4-6,1999.

Heather Findlay describes the term queer in her comment that Dora's interest in Frau K. is queer because it "violates community standards." Findlay, "Queer Dora: Hysteria, Sexual Politics, and Lacan's Intervention on Transference" 332. Loren Russell describes the verb queering as the movement
“between positions of dominance and submission, misogyny and feminism, myth and materiality, with a dizzying mobility.” Russell, “The Queering Field of the Monstrous Woman” 179. In the same work Russell quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick suggesting that Sedgewick “describes how the queer project seeks to open possibilities around the sometimes calcified terms of gendered and sexual identities. Queer theory works within ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps. Overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’” 179.
Chapter 1
A Riant Spaciousness: Sound Matters

... the semiotic disposition makes its start as riant spaciousness
—Julia Kristeva¹

I laugh: therefore I am[... ] implicated. I laugh: therefore, I am responsible and accountable—Donna Haraway²

The more I laugh, ha ha ha ha, the more I fill with glee. And the more the glee, he he he he, the more I'm a merrier me—Uncle Albert³

A scene mid-way through the film *Mary Poppins* finds the magical nanny, Bert the chimney sweep, and the Banks children (Jane and Michael) in the curious company of Mary's eccentric Uncle Albert. It seems that Uncle Albert has a chronic condition, one that subjects him to uncontrollable fits of laughter for days on end. The problem with this condition is not the laughter per se, but the effect the laughter has on him. His laughter not only elevates his spirits, it lifts his body high into the air allowing him to defy gravity and float indefinitely in space. Mary's tactics to bring him down are of no use. She points out how ridiculous people look when they laugh. She parodies the sounds they make, calling them noisy and disgraceful. She says they are vulgar and bestial. Each attempt to impose proper bodily conduct and rational behaviour falls on deaf ears. Bert and the children eventually succumb to the infectiousness of Uncle Albert's laughter and they too rise toward the living room ceiling, somersaulting, flying through the air, telling jokes. In the end Mary can no longer resist and she abandons her proscribed role as governess to join them in their flight of fancy.
The laughter experienced by Uncle Albert, Bert, the children and Mary defies the laws of physics as well as the laws of logic. Highly contagious, it is transmitted from body to body, sucked inward and spat out in abrupt sonic outbursts. Laughter suspends the skepticism of the mind, supports the weight of the body and lifts it into space. This is the unique capacity of laughter: to jumble the parameters of interior and exterior space; to ridicule the boundaries that separate body from mind; to defy the gravitational pull of intelligibility.

The buoyancy of laughter belongs to an activity known as philobatism described by object relations theorist Michael Balient as “the field of activities and sensations organized around the thrills of seeing, feeling or imagining the self-supported human body in space” (Russo 34). Mary Russo discusses Balient’s theory of philobatism in The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity, tracing the trope to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the philobat was represented as “a lover and seeker of [thrills] in the external world and in the workings of the imagination” (35). Russo explains that the philobat seeks out both dangerous and friendly spaces that exist apart from his/her “home base and its familiar objects,” and in doing so experiences the risk offered by this free-floating activity with an ambiguous mix of pleasure and fear.

An attachment to the familiar, coupled with a desire to move away from home, is addressed in Balient’s psychoanalytic interpretation of philobatism as an urge to reenact the gestural and psychic activities originally experienced in the primal scene. Russo argues that Balient’s representation of the primal philobatic scene is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic chora:

Without observing a strict chronology [Balient] locates and describes, in general terms, a source in the recall of a free-floating, maternal
environment, similar to that theorized by Julia Kristeva as the semiotic chora, an unsignified free space, anterior to language and culture, but nonetheless powerfully remaindered within symbolization as an ambivalent (safe and dangerous) Otherness. (36)

Although the philobat uses the maternal body as a jumping-off point, philobatic activity is more than a linear journey that moves away from and returns to the maternal, and as Balient suggests it occurs “at different stages or layers of the experience of spatiality” (Russo 36). The experiences engendered by philobatic flights of imagination and their concomitant risks are linked to the unconscious processes that propel us toward the ambiguous and complex psychic and corporeal spaces of subjectivity.

In the case of *Mary Poppins*, philobatic activity is a sonic activity, a laughter that supports the body in space. The free floating laughter of Bert, Mary, Uncle Albert and the children suggests both a connection to the choric space of the maternal, and a disruption of paternal language and gestural propriety. This is a laughter that seeks experiences beyond the gravitational pull of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family. Bert as chimney sweep/itinerant musician and Mary Poppins as nanny are working-class figures who throw off the weight of conventions to disrupt the stifling middle-class constraints that anchor the children and repress their creativity. Uncle Albert’s fits of hysterical laughter suggest an eccentric space of difference, a liminal space beyond intelligibility that engages both conscious and unconscious processes. It is within this liminal space that the nonsensical, thrill-seeking sound of laughter strangely makes sense. For these philobats laughter becomes a complex expression of corporeal and sonic materiality: “a signifying voice before the advent of the word!”

31
Sound Beyond Vision

Sound theorist Douglas Kahn writes that “[v]isuality overwhelms aurality in the cultural balance of the senses” (Noise 158). Western culture’s fascination with vision revolves around tangibility, immediacy and presence, he argues, because “the light that sparks the presence of objects and environments seems to be instantaneously everywhere.” Sound on the other hand is intangible, ephemeral and invisible, a seemingly residual effect of events: “that take place within a larger state of being” (Noise 158). Yet the impress of sound is undeniable. We are ear, nerve, flesh and bone witnesses to sonic inscription. Sound writes upon the exterior surfaces and interior substances of the body with an invisible ink that leaves its mark as it evaporates and disappears. Although elusive, sound is shaped into language, molded into music, muted in public, released in private. The invisibility of sound disrupts our ability to identify in any definitive way the spatial and temporal limits of origin and absence. What existed before sound? Is it a present absence, an absent presence or something that confounds the very notions of presence and absence? As Victor Zuckerlandl writes in his music-centered critique of the western concept of reality, “because [sound] exists, the tangible and visible cannot be the whole of the given world. The intangible and the invisible is itself a part of this world, something we encounter, something to which we respond” (Mackey 233).

Our experience of and participation with sound is inseparable from our experience of and participation with our body and the bodies of others. The resonances of sound waves register in the very fibers of each and every body in ways that confound the assumed discreetness of exterior and interior space. Sonic polyvalence defies singularity, unity and identity and calls us to rethink the body entirely. If the body is
resonant with/in a polyphony of sonic vibrations, is corporeality a polyphony? Is the body indeed in a constant state of sonic flux? As sound theorist Frances Dyson observes, sound is able to question our corporeal boundaries by immersing us in its invisible fluidity:

The phenomenal characteristics of sound describe a flow or process rather than a thing, and a mode of being which comes into and goes out of existence in a constant state of flux. The body that listens to [and produces] this sound is necessarily immersed in this flux, making aural perception fluidic and polymorphous. (136)

Does sound challenge the sign? Tracing a specifically sonic trajectory, feeling my way along an unmarked path that traverses the pervasive yet illusory terrain of sound, I propose that the materiality of sound problematizes representation. The invisible and intangible presence of sound complicates the visual basis of intelligibility to form links with the corporeal in myriad complex ways that exceed specularity and underscore materiality as a mode of audition, (re)writing, rhythm and transformation.

**Sound Matters**

According to Vicky Kirby in *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, the investigation of "materiality"—that is, of "matter" or "substance"—challenges the notion of essence as the limit, a limit that she argues, is at times strategically denied in order to erase the complexities of materiality (54). Kirby questions the fixed identity of essence as boundary or threshold, and concomitantly constructs her argument upon the notion that "matter is constantly rewritten and transformed" (4). Her rewriting of matter as the substance of the corporeal draws attention to the fluid workings of blood, bone, breath,
flesh and tissue that are often essentialized as the mere mechanics or functions of the body. Assigned to the nature side of the nature/culture binary, the biological body is viewed as content or "raw material" that can only be given shape and meaning in and through cultural and linguistic contexts.

Kirby questions the notion of "betweenness," proposed by theorists as an attempt to close the gap produced by the symbolic construction of hierarchical binaries (such as nature/culture, matter/form and so on). For Kirby, betweenness is dependent upon "notions of discreetness and identity and upon the linear concepts of time and space" and fails to probe into the "essence" of essentialism with the same depth and commitment afforded the exploration of representation (52). She suggests that occupying the middle ground is a static positioning that may foreclose the identity of matter in favour of the identity of the sign. Thus Kirby encourages us to inhabit the limit of nature, matter, the feminine—the "other" or "negative" side of the binaries nature/culture, matter/form, feminine/masculine—in a way that "embraces and confounds both terms, destabilizes their division and refigures their meanings" (60).

Inhabiting "essence" as limit in order to rupture that limit is a move away from static positioning toward motile philobatic activity. This is an itinerant exploration, a mobile critique that refuses to get stuck mid-way between two opposing poles by moving in, around and through its own shifting axis. Kirby's project, then, suggests a heterogeneous and labyrinthine exploration of materiality that is articulated from strange trajectories.⁶

In addition, Kirby's title, *Telling Flesh*, suggests a sonic fluidity that relies upon the interrelationship of sound to materiality. Flesh—rife with coursing blood, pulsating muscles, nerve charges, intermingled with vibrating bones—engages the entire body in
the act of telling, a sonic and corporeal act. Flesh that tells gives utterance to matter, sounding an intelligibility that exceeds, extends and escapes language and representation. The notion that sound generates a corporeal cacophony that can be sensed and made sense of is provocative:

If the vibrations of skin and blood constitute a mode of listening, a mode of reading and rewriting sound, then sound itself is a text, a differential reflex. Here, touch impersonates sound because both modalities are underscored by the rhythm of a difference in which the body is never not musical. The body is the spacing of this game, the ma(r)king of an uncanny interlude. (63)

A body resonant with sounds plays with the substance and shape of sonic content. The (re)configuration of sound and the body as the textual (inter)play of content disrupts the morphology of the sign because it disrupts the very idea of morphology altogether (Kirby 70, 171). The separability of the linguistic from the non-linguistic is challenged by the body's ability to resonate both in conjunction with and apart from language.

The reluctance to open linguistic signifiers to sonic substances condemns the non-linguistic body to a muted meaninglessness. Kirby observes the tendency of linguists to separate, in the words of Saussure, “the material sound, a purely physical thing” from “the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses,” in order to deny the significance of language’s materiality altogether (Kirby 55). Sound is seen as nothing more than support for linguistic meaning, and Saussure suggests that “[i]t is impossible for sound alone, a material element, to belong to language. It is only a secondary thing, substance to be put to use” (Applebaum 47).

The separability of sound or phonic matter from the sound-image and the subsequent
erasure of phonology from language insures the stability of representation. An
irreconcilable wedge is created between sign and matter, sound-image and sound, to
silence the body's materiality (Kirby 55-56).

A similar observation is made by voice theorist David Applebaum when he
suggests that communication through signs—that is, speech and language—relies
precisely on the denial of the body in speech, a technology of concealment he identifies
as the mastery of phonemic sound production. For Applebaum, speech is not as
transparent as Saussure and other linguists propose, but is actually built upon the
secreting of the complexities of voice, when sound is "cultured" by language. The
cultured voice, he observes, requires a "cognitive revision" that erases the materiality of
speech through technologies of production and control. Sound, whether inside or
outside of language, demonstrates a pathology of the body that is covered over with the
taming of voice by proper speech. Within the parameters of symbolic language the fluid
exchange of saliva, the lumpiness of the tongue, the unhygienic oral cavity are
disavowed.

Voice as sonic pathology occupies a multiplicitous and unruly space of
transgression that disrupts the spoken territories of cognition and culture. Applebaum
describes the relationship of voice to body as "body voicing," a concept stretching
beyond the univocality and singularity of voice to engage the substantiveness of the
corporeal. When corporeality is denied, voice—as speech or writing—is a
demonstration of the phonemic control necessary for representation, a mastery of
sound that delimits the acoustical dimensions of body voicing. Applebaum points to the
"glottal tension and respiratory re-tension" necessary to control the unwanted noises
that accompany speech (47). As the messy "grain" of language the corporeal voice
utilizes unregulated and unpredictable sonic matter that carries the potential to disturb or dismantle the sign. This roughness is perhaps the sonic "grain" of the corporeal—a liberal extension of Barthes’ grain of the voice—an inclusion of the sonic materiality of the body in language, music and elsewhere.⁹

A Riant Spaciousness

Laughter is one such performance of the corporeal sonic grain. Although a profound and multi-dimensional sonic gesture, laughter summons an initial sense of weightlessness that, as with the philobatic laughter in Mary Poppins, excites the gravitation of exterior and interior, body and mind. For Julia Kristeva the first laugh is generated by the weightless space of the pre-oedipal environment she names the semiotic chora (Oliver 35). Laughter resonates with/in Kristeva’s chora, as an irruption of energy drives that sound the intrauterine experience: "[t]he imprint of an archaic moment, the threshold of space, the “chora” as primitive stability absorbing anaclitic facilitation, produces laughter" (Kristeva Desire 283).

Kristeva’s hypothesis of the semiotic chora is a complex evocation of a corporeal, kinesthetic and sonic materiality that marks the body as “all constancy and all variation.”¹⁰ The chora challenges the notion that the body is “brute fact” by disturbing the linearity of the spatial and temporal parameters that construct the symbolic notions of origin-as-limit and difference-as-absence. As Hélène Cixous suggests the search for origin is a “masculine myth” that erects the symbolic economy. A “female libidinal economy” on the other hand is “a regime, energies, a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture […] always endless, without ending; there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop.” This is an economy that reconfigures origin as beginning, a
continual process of beginning, “starting on all sides at once,” that creates an endless flow of possibility (“Decapitation” 354). The chora belongs to this kind of female libidinal economy. As a heterogeneous negotiation of body and psyche it is more than a disposable container with an expiry date; the chora constantly recycles and renews subjectivity on the margins of the symbolic space.

Kristeva appropriates and reconceptualizes Plato’s concept of the *chora*—“an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible” (Moi Sexual 161)—to develop a theoretical model that explains the complex corporeal constitution of the spatial and temporal beingness that underlies subjectivity. Described by Kristeva as the “instinctual semiotic” and an archaic, non-linguistic ecosystem, the chora establishes a space in which an “endless flow of pulsations” articulates a continuum between internal and external sounds, rhythms and gestures (Moi Kristeva 161). The pulsations that flow in and through the chora create this “musical” economy, one that is never static but engages libidinal drives in a heterogeneous process.

As a constantly renewable, motile and provisional articulation of energies and their transitory states, the chora precedes specularization, it exists prior to representation, prior to signification, and thus meaning (Kristeva Revolution 93). As Kristeva explains, the “future speaking being” dwells in a temporal and spatial equilibrium of libidinal drives that produce, incorporate and assimilate gesture, sound, articulation and intonation:

The pre-oedipal stage is defined by primary, oral, and anal satisfactions, by a lack of differentiation among need, and desire, and by a piecemeal body that is not yet identified as one’s own body because the identity of
the ego and the superego already depend on language and the father.

(Guberman 110)

Dependent neither wholly on language nor the paternal law per se, the chora exists prior to language and yet is paradoxically coextensive with it. The semiotic occupies a space adjacent to the symbolic regulation of the drives—the biological, socio-historical and familial constraints of the paternal law that order the drives by penetrating the semiotic; but this regulation is mediated by the mother who acts as a conduit for the regulation of the symbolic exterior, transmitting aspects of “the Law of the Father” to the future speaking being. More fluid than paternal law, the maternal regulation of drives mediated through the body and the psyche of the mother could well be considered the law that precedes the paternal law (Oliver 47).

Nevertheless, the symbolic objectively and concretely manages choric drives by stagnating the libidinal energies of the “unstructured soma.” To counteract this paralysis, libidinal energies resist the continual threat of stases by inducing, in Kristeva’s words, “waves of attack against stases.” The continuous to and fro between libidinal charges and their opposing stases does not cause them to cancel each other out, but instead makes the chora an active, generative and thus productive space, one which Kristeva characterizes as possessing an “affirmative negativity” (Desire 17). In relation to the continuous libidinal processes of the choric space, Kristeva stresses that it is the “place where the subject is both generated and negated” (Moi Kristeva 95).

For Kristeva the semiotic is integral to the workings of signification. The chora not only facilitates the interior release of libidinal drives (energy charges), but also exists as the limit—the place where the drives are subject to the exterior constraints that structure them. In Kristeva’s words, the semiotic chora articulates “a nonexpressive totality
formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (Revolution 25). The key aspect to the chora, then, is this unpredictable yet interactive movement of drives and their stases. As Kristeva suggests, the chora is more an intuitive articulation than a disposition dependent upon representation.

The Role of Negativity

In a materialist/psychoanalytic (re)reading of the Hegelian dialectic through Freudian drives, Kristeva identifies the motility of the drives and their stases as negativity. Negativity, she argues, is an affirmative and productive process that "figures as the indissoluble relation between an 'ineffable' mobility and its particular determination" (Revolution 109). In other words, within the economy of the chora negativity generates movement and encourages stagnation (the build-up and release of various forms of energy). Negativity is located in neither movement nor stagnation alone, but in a fluid choreography that intertwines two oppositional forces without destroying either force entirely. Glossing Lenin, Kristeva writes that negativity demonstrates both the "necessary connection" of all phenomena and the "struggle of differences," in such a way that the interplay of difference is integral to both material and spiritual existence (Revolution 110).

According to Kristeva, it is necessary to revisit and revise the theories of Hegel and Freud to distinguish her notion of negativity-as-process from negativity as it appears in traditional philosophy and/or psychoanalysis. She views Hegel's version of negativity as limiting, because it erases the possibility of a dynamic process by synthesizing the dialectic—a move that effectively unifies the subject. On the other hand, Freud's version of negativity, or "expulsion" as he refers to it, occurs purely at the
level of the unconscious, propels us toward the "death drive," and is thus contingent on the endless repetition of a degenerative linearity. In developing her own notion of negativity Kristeva opens the concept to the spatial and temporal possibilities of the signifying practice. Negativity, in Kristeva's terms, ensures the continuous and renewable process of subjectivity: "[t]he sole function of our use of the term 'negativity' is to designate the process that exceeds the signifying subject, binding him to the laws of objective struggles in nature and society" (Revolution 119).

To underscore clearly the links between negativity and the drive functions of the semiotic, and to distinguish negativity from negation—a term that indicates the judgement "no" that is a mark of the symbolic—Kristeva adopts the term "rejection," which she borrows from psychoanalysis. She explains that rejection is a more specific form of negativity that focuses on "the practice of the subject, in this case, the signifying practice which puts his (subjective and/or signifying) unity in process/on trial" (Revolution 119). As well, rejection relates to "concrete operations"—that is, to "forms of knowledge which modify the object to be known in order to bring about transformations and their results"—that hover on the border between the conscious and the unconscious (Revolution 123). In other words, rejection challenges the unitary subject by recognizing that the subject is "in process/on trial."

Kristeva reads Freud's fort-da game in this light. As an illustration of rejection, the fort-da game demonstrates a kinesthetic and spatial materiality that engages difference in its incorporation of and response to the corporeal and the social, matter and representation: "[t]he Freudian fort-da reveals that the return of instinctual rejection is already kinetic and gestural and constitutes a signifying space and/or space of practice" (Revolution 170). This reading of the fort-da game differs from Lacan's interpretation,
which is focused on a mastery of desire for the other that warrants the substitution of some kind of symbol to stand in for the missing object (Oliver 44). Lacan’s reading is based on the absence of the (m)other and the child’s recognition of and compensation for this lost object. Kristeva, on the other hand, translates this game as a performance of the corporeal workings of difference already established in the semiotic body in relation to the subject in process/on trial. Kelly Oliver clarifies this point: “[n]egativity moves through both the symbolic function and the symbolic order because it moves through the corporeal” (44).

For Kristeva this corporeal mediation begins with the drives operative in the body through the primary processes of the semiotic chora. The drives produce excess in all its forms (that is, oral, muscular, urethral and anal) as they accumulate matter to a point that requires an expulsion for release of the build-up (Revolution 151). Kristeva identifies anality as the most illustrative of the primary processes. The expulsion of matter produces not only pain and loss as substances are rejected from the body, but pleasure as energy surges move through the anal sphincters. Thus the heterogeneity of difference and the rhythm of separation are already operative in the future speaking being in the form of excess and rejection, processes that constitute a corporeal pleasure that is later repressed in the symbolic. Kristeva writes that anality “precedes the establishment of the symbolic and is both its precondition and its repressed element” (Revolution 149).

Rejection in the semiotic, then, is the impetus for the pleasurable and traumatic disruption of the symbolic function. Anality subverts the symbolic by agitating the subject’s body toward both pleasure and loss, and, because the semiotic process constitutes the subject’s fundamental experience of separation, it too is an experience
of both pleasure and loss (*Revolution* 151). Kristeva argues that the configuration of separation as lack, identified in Lacan’s mirror stage and illustrated in his interpretation of the fort-da game, represses the pleasure that accompanies separation in the semiotic, and as such cannot constitute the basis for entrance into subjectivity.

As an alternative to the mirror stage, Kristeva proposes that the thetic, which is “prefigured by instinctual stases,” breaches or ruptures the semiotic chora to advance—in unmeasured rhythmic waves—the subject’s entry into the symbolic. The “oscillation between rejection and stasis jolts the material being (the body) into the thetic and into the Symbolic, where the body is represented by a sign” (Oliver 45). At the boundary of the symbolic the thetic stands as the threshold of signification where the infant takes up a subject position. The processes of rejection that have already been established in the infant’s body by means of the semiotic chora provide the impetus toward a threshold that will propel the subject into the symbolic. The thetic thus serves as the precondition for signification:

The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second includes part of the first and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified. (*Revolution* 48)

The thetic is two-fold. The entry into subjectivity ruptures the choric economy in order to propel the infant toward subjectivity. Kristeva proposes that as a result of this thetic break the symbolic contains the “split unification” of signifier and signified. The rupture, however, is never complete, and, as Kristeva asserts (glossing Lacan), there will always remain “residues of first symbolizations [. . .] those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate” (*Revolution* 49). This observation leads Kristeva to propose a second-
degree thetic that reinstates "the functioning characteristic of the semiotic chora within the signifying device of language" (Revolution 50). Thus the thetic negotiation between the semiotic and the symbolic—a heterogeneous activity that generates subjectivity—introduces and prohibits jouissance (Revolution 80). This process is based upon the logic of renewal rather than on the repetition of the same identity: it is both an insidious demolition and incessant renovation of symbolic unity. The thetic, then, is a rhythmic rupture of the repetitions of the symbolic that introduces a quality of difference into symbolic stases. In other words, the thetic is the space of otherness, Kirby's "rhythm of a difference in which the body is never not musical" (63). (The rhythmic rupture of exact repetition and its relation to otherness in aesthetic practice is discussed further in Chapters two and three).

Both sacrifice and art are identified by Kristeva as second degree thetic processes, processes that channel the abrupt libidinal violence of the chora into a "positioned violence" in the symbolic (Oliver 40). For Kristeva art is a specific and "certain kind of practice" that has its origins in sacrifice—the channeling of libidinal drive charges—and as such art has the thetic ability to break through the symbolic in order to "dissolve the logical order, which is in short, the outer limit founding the human and the social" (Revolution 79). As a simulacrum of sacrifice, art stages a dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic: "to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it" (Revolution 81). This subversive function links art to the unconscious which, according to Kristeva, also seeks to move in and against the social order. Art is thus a signifying practice that must be considered "within the signifying chain instituted by the thetic," a rhythmic variability that recognizes and "includes the agency of the symbolic," the two components of signification (Revolution
81). For Kristeva, art is not based on symbolic representation alone, but is a process that reaches into the economy of the semiotic to utilize the movement of rejection to regenerate signification. Rejection, then, is located at the threshold of subjectivity, a liminal space that negotiates difference. This is a "split" subjectivity that resides in neither nature nor culture but is always in the process of becoming in/of both. Rejection ruptures the symbolic and its scopic basis in the mirror stage, "destroys the pairing of opposites," and replaces oppositional hierarchies with an "infinitesimal differentiation" (Revolution 125-126).

The processes that create the heterogeneous and dynamic economy of the chora operate within an "ethics"—or what Kristeva refers to as "heret(h)ics"—that negotiates this infinitesimal difference. As Kelly Oliver explains: "the mother's love for the child, which is love for herself but also the willingness to give herself up, [is] the basis of a new ethics, 'herethics'")(64). As the one who carries out the maternal function the mother becomes the site of a love that exists outside the law—a renegade or "outlaw" (heretic) love—that bridges nature and culture, semiotic and symbolic. This ethical love foreshadows the dynamic interaction that occurs between the individual and the social in the symbolic. It is the foundation for an "aesthetic" that acts as a guarantee of the continuous and shifting negotiation of the "subject in process/on trial" in the symbolic (Kristeva Revolution 111).

Kristeva's notion of the aesthetic, then, stands in sharp contrast to the classic aesthetic prevalent in the western literary tradition, described by Barbara Johnson in her essay "Muteness Envy." As Johnson suggests, the poetic gaze constructs the female body as a silent container, a perspective that enables the poet to map his desire for violence and pleasure onto the territory of the mute female form. Thus, as the repository
for aesthetic value, the female body represents the "aesthetics of silence" (136). Kristeva overturns this silent aesthetic by introducing the notion of an "outlaw" aesthetics: a creative process that breaks through the silence of form and the limitation of content in the rupture and renewal of the symbolic. The maternal body is, of course, the female container par excellence in western aesthetics. Yet Kristeva's configuration of the maternal as a subversive positioning challenges the symbolic and develops an ethics based on the complex negotiation of heterogeneous difference within self and other.

Mother Matters

One of the most controversial aspects of Kristeva's choric formulation centres on the role of the mother in relation to language and representation. Many theorists dismiss the chora as an essential confinement of the mother (and by extension of women in general) to spaces of non-linguistic silence or infantile incoherence. Within feminist theory the maternal body is certainly a multiplicitous, contested space. Yet, as Rosi Braidotti suggests,

[o]ne of the most accurate ways of measuring the progress accomplished by feminist thought on the female body is to take up this "mother" metaphor. Whereas in earlier feminist analyses the "mother" and the "maternal function" were seen as potentially conflicting with the interests of "woman" in so far as compulsory heterosexuality had made them the social destiny of all women, more recent feminist readings of the maternal function have stressed the double bind of the maternal issue. Motherhood
is seen as both one of the patriarchal domination of women and one of the strongholds of female identity. (181)

Do Kristeva's writings describe a mother confined to the choric space with limited access to the symbolic? As the site of constant struggle between the drives and their stases, the representation of and mediating force between the semiotic and symbolic economies, a site for a unique ethics and an uncanny embodied experience of the relationship between self and other that must be repressed, Kristeva's "mother" is certainly nuanced and complex, but I suspect that her confinement is suspect.

For Kristeva pregnancy and the semiotic rupture the linear time of the symbolic, and thus motherhood exemplifies the temporality Kristeva refers to as "woman's time." Rosi Braidotti notes that, although woman is inscribed in patriarchal culture as noun, she is also indicative of a different temporality: a deeper and more discontinuous sense of time that is the time of transformation, resistance, political genealogies, and becoming. Thus we have on the one hand teleological time and on the other the time of consciousness-raising: history and the unconscious. (162)

I suggest that the same can be said for motherhood, a concurrent existence of self and other in the linear time of the symbolic and the "teleological time" of the semiotic. This is the reconfiguration of the maternal function from static noun to active verb: a dynamic dialectic between the simultaneous temporality of the chora with the symbolic. This is a space that incorporates both mind and body, nature and culture, in the rhythmic flux of semiotic corporeal time. In Chapter two I explore Kristeva's notion of "women's time" in relation to the maternal and to abjection in more detail.
Maternal “authority,” ethics and an outlaw aesthetic are crucial to Kristeva's choric project. As the “law before the law”—more akin to a process that “orients” and “structures” than to a rule per se—the maternal body (and psyche) “mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora” (Revolution 27). The ordering principle—that is, the mother—is able to mediate between symbolic functions and the chora because she belongs to and understands both the symbolic law and semiotic impulses. The mother is in a unique position that allows her to recognize, experience and mediate the instability that underlies the symbolic, which has been repressed by her own entry into paternal law.

For Kristeva, then, the mother stands at the threshold of both the semiotic and the symbolic, but she is lost to and/or regulated by neither location. She is fully operative in language (otherwise she could not administer order) but is also connected to the physical and psychic processes of the future speaking being and to her own psyche/body that exceeds linguistic expression. In this sense the mother is simultaneously herself and someone else. Yet she does not dwell in a state of (con)fusion with the future speaking being, or in the myth of a maternal jouissance that—as pure bliss—confines her to a nonsensical existence. Kristeva underscores the difficulty of the maternal position:

Pregnancy is a dramatic ordeal: a splitting of the body, a division and coexistence of self and other, of nature and awareness, of physiology and speech. This fundamental challenge to identity is accompanied by a fantasy of wholeness of narcissistic self-containment. Pregnancy is a sort of institutionalized, socialized and natural psychosis. (Maladies 219)
This is a "psychosis" that is a product of the construction of motherhood as aberrant and abject in the symbolic and the uncanny experience of a body that is two bodies, a self that is other. Kristeva explains that, "in its mad truth, psychosis unveils the heterogeneity of the psychical apparatus sustained and activated by an outside transmuted into other as well as language and constantly threatened by this same outside" (Sense 59).

To speak of pregnancy as a psychosis, then, is not to say that pregnant women, mothers, or women in general are psychotic. The conflation of women, womb, non-linguistic sound and psychosis as hysteria in the medical discourses of a millennium often erases attempts to distance women from the confinement of a sexed body, and/or negates the subversive strategic stance that embraces "insanity" in order to dismantle it as an oppressive discourse for women. Chapter five explores the perverse and subversive deployment of hysteria, used to rupture static notions of sanity and normalcy in the symbolic.

Kristeva acknowledges the ambiguity of maternity as a simultaneous experience of the fusion of a speaking being (mother) and a future speaking being (child) within the recognition of the inevitability of abjection. In other words, the speaking being (mother) must lead the future speaking being into language and subjectivity and give up a part of herself. Kristeva's discourse describes the dependence of the symbolic upon the abjection of the mother, yet paradoxically (re)inscribes the maternal with an authority that stands next to and effects paternal law. Kristeva avows what prevailing discourses on motherhood omit—the pain and jouissance of a mother's split subjectivity, the radically ethical negotiation of heterogeneous difference that is not based entirely in ego. Paradoxically, the doubleness of the maternal guarantees a degree of cooperation
with symbolic law and a simultaneous challenge to the authority and autonomy of the symbolic through the operations of the semiotic (Oliver 49).

Kristeva writes of a mother's duality: of her existence inside and outside language. She recognizes that motherhood is an uncanny journey, one that will at times position her on the edge of sanity but that will also provide her with a unique opportunity for creative subjectivity:

If maternity is to be guilt-free, this journey needs to be undertaken without masochism and without annihilating one's affective, intellectual, and professional personality, either. In this way maternity becomes a true creative act, something that we have not yet been able to imagine.

(Guberman 220)

Kristeva makes it clear that the semiotic—although an invisible process that connects womb to psyche—must not be repressed. She stresses that when evidenced in the symbolic through signifying processes the semiotic is not a regression to the maternal body. Rather, she suggests that

we must endow it with its own expression and articulation while not holding it back from the sort of "symbolic" and more intellectual manifestation that can bring it into our awareness. In fact, all creative activity, if you want to use the word "creative," presupposes the immanence of libido and the symbolic process along with their dialectilization and harmonization, if you will. (Guberman 109)

Thus if motherhood is indeed a creative activity it does not produce a clone, but rather a (re)new(ed) life:
Innovation is never the repetition of the paternal discourse or a regression to an archaic mother. It presumes that the subject, let’s say a woman, is able to take charge of her entire archaic libidinal apparatus (which is unconscious and egoistic) and to invest it in a symbolic articulation.

(Guberman109)

Far from existing in linguistic obscurity and nonsensical confinement, Kristeva’s semiotic, if it is not repressed, is a position from which marginalized people—those on the “edge” of sanity and normalcy—can articulate themselves in the symbolic. When the semiotic is manifest in the symbolic as a “source of practices”—for example as an aesthetic practice such as art, poetic language and the maternal—signification will lead to renewal and innovation, and away from the regressive fantasy of muted bliss between mother and child.

The Acoustic Mother

Kaja Silverman’s reading of Kristeva in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* reduplicates the notion of the chora is a regressive silencing of women. Her criticism of Kristeva pivots on the concept of the “maternal voice,” a concept that problematizes her reading in its literal application and rigid interpretation. In Silverman there is a conflation of the “maternal voice” and “sonorous envelope” that she and other theorists use to describe the sonic environment and overall economy of the womb. Silverman recounts how the child’s envelopment in intrauterine sounds has become a fantasy that confines women to linguistic incompetence and interiority (often forming the basis from which the female voice is presented in classic cinema). The conflation of the sonorous envelope with the maternal
voice, however, relies on the mixing of a metaphor of sonic interiority—that is, being inside a sonorous envelope—with an actual exterior voice related to an infant's identification of/with the sound of the mother. The equation of sonorous envelope and maternal voice reduces complex sonic/acoustic conditions in utero to a single voice that is unproblematically identifiable both inside and outside the womb.

As sound theorist Douglas Kahn explains, identifying the singularity of the maternal voice in utero is unlikely:

Intrauterine sound itself, of course, would relate to the vaunted maternal voice proffered in certain psychoanalytic scenarios. The sound would be a hydrologically filtered mother's voice promising the bliss of undifferentiation. However, the mother's voice in these internal matters are inexplicably privileged (fetal reading would allow recourse to textuality). There is clear evidence that external voices, music, and sounds are heard in the womb after a certain point of development and the newborn can develop memory of these sounds. Moreover, all these voices and sounds would be heard on the constant backdrop of a full array of internal fluid sounds, although the constancy of the sound could not be equated with the sustained tones and drones, or mellifluousness associated with women and water. (Noise 257)

The identification of a singular maternal voice in the chora is a fantasy of Silverman's own making. This fantasy claims that the voice of the mother is distinct and distinguishable in the womb. A bath of sounds, however, is not equivalent to a single voice. Silverman essentializes and limits the chora and the maternal voice by marking
the sounds heard in the choric economy as a singular voice and an identifiable intrauterine sonority.

As well, Silverman reinforces the interpretation of the maternal voice in the symbolic as “noise” or “babble” by equating it with the intrauterine sonic environment. Her confinement of a distinct and literal female voice in the womb underscores the very notion of female discursive impotence she wants to overthrow. If the maternal voice were indeed distinguishable in the womb by the fetus, it might very well provide the unconscious conditions necessary for the emancipation of the female voice from her specular image—for Silverman’s vaunted “disembodied voice”—proposed as the liberating alternative to the confinement of women’s voice to women’s body in representation. Thus Silverman recounts a suffocating (con)fusión between mother and child, a claustrophobic reading of Kristeva’s chora. She concludes that, because the child is enclosed in the interiority of the chora as a future speaking being that has no access to language, so the mother also resides with/in interiority. However, an infant’s incapacity with respect to language does not automatically confine the mother to the same infantile or pre-linguistic state.

Silverman’s evocation of the disembodied female voice as a response to the cloistered space of the chora does nothing more than mark the embodied voice with the stamp of nature, essentializing a direct relationship of voice to the (female) body. Although she presents her notion of the disembodied voice as the mark of culture and the possibility of subjectivity, the division of the voice into embodied and disembodied states not only repeats and reinforces the dualism between nature and culture, but also artificially separates sound from the corporeal.
An alternative reading of the maternal voice, as something that is neither wholly embodied nor as straightforwardly identifiable as Silverman supposes, challenges this dualism. The concept of voice, whether maternal, embodied, disembodied or otherwise, is in no way a transparent concept (Applebaum 48). The female body, for Silverman, is an empty form, a container, a prison that must be escaped from in order to gain voice. Her notion of the disembodied voice depends upon the soundless echoes of an essential, embodied voice that must be extracted from its cavernous corporeal confines in order to make a sonic impact in culture.¹⁴

Almost as an afterthought, Silverman concedes that the relationship of child to mother within the “enclosure” of the chorä “provides the child with its first, inchoate impressions of space, and with its initial glimmerings of otherness, thereby paving the way for the mirror stage and the entry into language” (102). The term “enclosure” is misleading since, as Kristeva recognizes, part of the function of the maternal is to lead the child toward subjectivity, a function that underscores her connection with/in the symbolic during pregnancy and after the child is born. In fact, it would be impossible for the mother to occupy a position of complete exteriority to paternal law. The mother’s operationality within the symbolic is essential for her mediation between family and social structures on the one hand and the drives on the other, on behalf of the future speaking being. To reiterate an earlier point, the mother is both the ordering principle of the chorä’s drives and an agent of a renegade law through her maternal authority and ethics. She therefore occupies a dual position, integral to the heterogeneous processes of signification, that does not condemn her to silence.

Adria Schwartz suggests that “notions of dyads and triads have to be substituted for the structures of mother-child, mother/father-child, that seem so fundamental to the
heterosexual family," in order to address the possibility of alternative families (129). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti notes that the “mother-daughter” dyad has emerged in recent feminist theory, particularly in the work of Luce Irigaray, as a reconfiguration of female subjectivity. What the mother-daughter dyad suggests, Braidotti explains, is a dynamic dyadic relationship of female self to female other, “and consequently the structures of female homosexuality as well as the possibility of a woman-identified redefinition of the subject” (181). This, she notes, is the construction of a “female intersubjectivity” that provides a politics for the negotiation of differences related to other as well as self:

In a phallocentric system where the Name-of-the Father provides the operative metaphor for the constitution of the subject, the idea of “a feminine symbolic function” amounts to the revindication of the structuring function for the mother. It attempts to invest the maternal site with affirmative, positive force. (181)

The question that this configuration of female intersubjectivity brings to mind is whether the “sex” of the future speaking being is a determining factor in the dyadic relationship between mother and child before entry into the symbolic. If the future speaking being exists in an economy that is not yet determined by visuality is sex a factor? Is the dyadic relationship Braidotti describes operative between mother and child of either sex until the symbolic determination of lack shifts the focus? I am proposing, here, the view that the maternal relationship to the future speaking being need not be interpreted as a claustrophobic one, but can be read as the phenomenon of “a feminine symbolic function” and an intersubjectivity based on heterogeneous difference rather than the opposition male/female.\textsuperscript{15}
Sound Trouble

In her provocative work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler reads the body politics of Kristeva's chora from a vantage point similar to Silverman's, echoing the criticism of the semiotic as an essentialist portrait of the maternal body and as an unverifiable, self-defeating theory that limits the maternal to a non-differentiated, pre-cultural, pre-linguistic and hence meaningless interiority. Butler asks if the primary relationship to the maternal body is a viable construct or a knowable experience: Can the semiotic as pre-discursive libidinal economy possess an ontological status outside of language? Can this pre-discursive economy subvert culture? If so, can any "real" meaning be derived from subversive semiotic unintelligibility?

All of these questions are rhetorical for Butler. Her critique of the semiotic pivots on the position of the chora "outside" of language and representation. For Butler, Kristeva's theory of drives is suspect, because the drives operate "prior" to language within the libidinal economy of the maternal body and "disobey" language in the symbolic through poetic language, glossalalia, psychotic discourse, multiple sounds, a whirl of words, mere sound, semantic nonclosure, assonance, intonation, sound play, libidinal chaos.16 She argues that the kinds of tropes that hover on the edge of linguistic intelligibility reinforce the repressiveness of the non-linguistic libidinal economy because this economy is in actuality generated by paternal law and circulated in the symbolic as part of a discourse that imposes linguistic "incoherence" on "difference." For Butler the association of linguistic excess with marginalized subjects condemns them to a meaningless exile outside of culture. While I do not disagree with Butler's argument that paternal law conflates incoherence with difference as a strategy of power, I do contest
her notion that sounds excessive to language cannot be used otherwise. I propose throughout this project that linguistic “excess” can be utilized as a critical method—a tactic if you will—for the dismantling of hegemonic language and meaning to generate the counterproduction of knowledge. Thus I do not agree that the chora reinforces infantile and incoherent powerlessness because of its association with the non-linguistic. The reconfiguration of sound and corporeality as heterogeneous, transformational and motile subscribes to the notion that indeed sound does matter.¹⁷

Butler asserts that a “paternal causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality” underlies Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora, and that therefore her theory is ineffectual, merely posing as a subversive alternative (91). Kristeva is somehow duped by the law into replicating the paternal prohibition she intends to disrupt, because she fails to realize that the law is not only prohibitive but also capable of generating bodies, desires, genders and sexes, all of which seem natural but are in fact strategically constructed as lack to ensure the “lack lack” of the self-amplified subject (90-93).¹⁸

Each one of the issues raised by Butler regarding Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic pivots on the materiality of sound, the relationship of sound to the body, and the cultural meanings ascribed to sound and the body separately and in combination with one another. For Butler anything associated with the outside of language—outlaw sound, non- or pre-linguistic states—exists with/in an anti-linguistic illusion of essentialism. Thus all expressions associated with an extra-linguistic outside by Kristeva—lesbianism, non-western cultural expressions, poetic language and maternity—are foreclosed upon and meaningless, according to Butler.
Instead she proposes that the sign must be expanded to include the linguistic outside of materiality. Butler relocates the abjected outside of culture to the inside of language, a move that incorporates excess into representation. Although this repositioning is an attempt to disrupt the linearity that defines a “before” or an “after” and works to rearticulate the sign as all-inclusive, she misinterprets the positioning of the chora as simply “before” or “prior” to language. Butler focuses on Kristeva’s use of the terms “before,” “prior” and “after” in relationship to extra-linguistic moments, reading the chora within a linearity that Kristeva does not intend.

This linear reading of the semiotic leads to Butler’s notion that the semiotic exists in opposition to the symbolic in a way that mimes the nature/culture, matter/representation, feminine/masculine dualisms, suggesting that these dualisms are built in to Kristeva’s theory. It is Butler, however, who writes out the processes and practices that engage with and negotiate heterogeneous difference with/in the non-linear spatial and temporal economy of the semiotic and its interaction with the symbolic: a negotiation that in relation to the maternal body and poetic language, for example, effectively blurs the boundaries between the semiotic and symbolic in an ongoing process of transformation and renewal.

For Kristeva, the rupture of an equilibrium (such as the paternal law) creates what she describes as a “crisis,” a productive state that generates transformation. Modernity is in a state of permanent crisis in Kristeva’s analysis, so that the boundaries of before/prior and after dissolve into a constant state of functioning or flux. Kristeva questions the configuration of crisis as catastrophe, and instead articulates its duality: “is crisis a suffering, is it a pathology? Or is it a creation, a renewal?” (Guberman 37). Butler would seem to affirm the former, while Kristeva affirms the latter.
For Kristeva, then, the channeling of semiotic energy into an expression of the subject in process/on trial does not result in the subject's regression into a preverbal state of bliss, but instead provides an access to the unconscious store of semiotic material that will engage the subject in a heterogeneous process that challenges the limits of representation. Although, as a theoretical supposition, the semiotic chora is unknowable, it is a compelling theory that describes the (inter)connectedness of sound, body and psyche to the construction of knowledge, experience and meaning. Kristeva articulates this interconnectedness in her description of the heterogeneous processes of the drives and their stases in the chora: "[d]rive facilitation, temporarily arrested, marks discontinuities in what may be called various material supports susceptible to semiotization: voice, gesture, colors" (28).  

Sound is one such material support, a support that becomes evidence of the drives and their heterogeneous processes in the symbolic. Embedded in the unconscious as well as the conscious, sound possesses a non-visual materiality that inhabits, witnesses and exceeds both the semiotic and the symbolic. Sound precedes language in the infant's echolalias; it is part of language in phonemic content, and exceeds "normal" language in poetry, music and noise. If sound inscribes the drives in and through the corporeal, is this evidence of its own ontology? If sound permeates the interior spaces and exterior surfaces of the human body, is this a materiality that sounds its own intelligibility? Do sonic articulations that encompass the drives and their stases tell of the phenomenological continuity connecting semiotic/symbolic, nature/culture, matter/sign?  

Butler erases sound and its potential threat to linguistic coherence, a move that dismisses the substantive workings of the sonic in, through, around and outside
language. With this dismissal of sound’s materiality as “mere sound,” she misses an opportunity to consider sound as a profound and uncanny vehicle that both enables and subverts language. It is the repression of the drives and their sonic evidence in the privileging of vision and the construction of language (even an expanded construction) that silences sound and covers over the instability of the symbolic. Eventually, and at unpredictable moments, sounds that do not make “sense” surface, as evidence of an invisible yet tangible (non)sense denied in language and representation. Butler has difficulty reconciling Kristeva’s complex notion of sound—a notion that recognizes the simultaneous possibilities of a sonic outside—and thus she dismisses this outlaw sound as meaningless. She quotes Kristeva:

In Kristeva’s words, “a phoneme, as distinctive element of meaning, belongs to language as Symbolic. But this same phoneme is involved in rhythmic, intonational repetitions; it thereby tends toward autonomy from meaning so as to maintain itself in a semiotic disposition near the instinctual drive’s body.” (82)

The phoneme cannot be multiplicitous or heterogeneous for Butler; it is singular, linear and static. Dismissing the polyphony of the phoneme, as Butler does, reduces its sonic substance to the silence of the sign—a dismissal that refuses to hear the materiality of sound and the variability of matter—and embraces the visible and the tangible. With this gesture Butler echoes Saussure’s erasure of sound and denial of its relationship to the body, when he writes that the linguistic signifier “is not phonic but incorporeal—constituted not by its material substance but by the differences that separate its sound-image from all others” (Kirby 54).²¹
The notion that language, indeed all sound, "must be made soundless" is an effort to gain control of corporeal materiality, denying the vulnerability of speech and the relationship of speech to the body that the sign disavows. This move forecloses the possibility of a sounding materiality in excess of language and representation. The mastery and conscious control of the vocal musculature and nerves in speech may indeed demonstrate the subject's temporary control over the body, but it also hides the precariousness and instability of that control (Applebaum xi; 47). The physicality of speech—engaging muscles, lips, glottis, palette—dismissed by Butler as the "mere" mechanics of "mere" sound is the denial and erasure of a very real threat to authorized intelligibility:

Sanity lives or dies with the fragile control exerted cognitively over the organs of speech. The brutishly misshapen phoneme—the grotesquery of sound—is ever ready to vanquish the noble spirit of the spoken word in the heat of passion, the nightmare, physical illness and torture, and acute sufferings. (Applebaum 46)

For Butler, the grotesquery of sound exists in the economy of the chora, in the non-linguistic communication between mother and child, in the strategic embracing of hysteria, in the rumblings of marginalized people. Her equation of sonic excess with essentialism and meaninglessness silences the creative cacophony of an intelligibility that exists beyond language. Her critique of Kristeva encases matter, body and sound in language, disavowing the fragility of linguistic coherence and the rigidity of the symbolic. How can the sign be expanded to include matter when it disavows sound? Is it impossible to conceive of an invisible, polyvalent, sounding materiality that exists in the excesses of language?
Matter Matters

Vicki Kirby takes up the issue of matter and its excess in a comprehensive and provocative analysis of Butler’s *Bodies that Matter*. As an extension of her work in *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s more focused attempt to rearticulate the sign to include matter—“to return to matter requires that we return to matter as a sign” (49)—is, from Kirby’s perspective, an attempt to rearticulate a difference that is not based on absence. In the more recent text Butler reconfigures difference as a powerful force that dismantles the notion of the coherent or “normal” subject.

Kirby’s reading proposes, however, that Butler’s ability to stretch the sign to include matter is problematized by its own limitations. Butler argues that matter as sign is matter that exists only in relation to linguistics, so that matter is “materialized” in and through language, a reiteration of the discussion above. The strengths and limitations of Butler’s argument are outlined in great detail in Kirby’s book and, rather than repeat them here, I will discuss aspects of Kirby’s observations that have a particular relevance to the exploration of the materiality of sound, the body as fluid substance, and the implications of the inseparability of sound and the corporeal.

According to Kirby’s analysis, Butler’s attempt to eliminate the limit—that is, the gap between body/language—is only partially successful. The limit is not entirely expelled from Butler’s configuration, but repositioned in a way that substitutes the non-linguistic body for the limit, a move that could be perhaps visualized as /bodylanguage. For Butler, that which remains outside of language and representation is the biological body. In her configuration the body as biology can still only be activated through language in a performative sense. Kirby suggests that the possibility of the existence of the body prior to language becomes a stumbling block for Butler:
arguments that address the limits of representation [...] locate themselves within the hermeneutic maze of language and representation that is regarded as separable from 'something' that preexists humanness, 'something' that lacks language. (Kirby 110)

In other words, the point at which language and matter are separable produces the threshold of intelligibility. Anything located (by language) beyond this threshold is assumed to be unintelligible, meaningless and mute. This model of language relies on a linear temporality that reads the proto-linguistic as absence and denies the spatial and temporal flux of heterogeneous difference that ruptures language. Kirby concludes that Butler's attempt to eliminate a difference that relies on absence is unsuccessful. As "brute fact" the biological body is not viewed as an intelligible body. Corporeal sounds and gestures assume a facticity that is viewed as inconsequential to being, a space in which the body occupies a mute and spastic existence outside of language. Still and silent, we are left to ask what might be the place of the sounding, gesturing body?

Kirby begins to address this question in her reconceptualization of matter-as-passive to substance-as-generative force. She explains that "the physical world is not excluded from the conundrum of identity that Butler attributes only to language" and raises the possibility that matter "materializes" itself (113). Kirby's argument relies on a quantum rather than an atomic configuration of matter, space and time, configurations which echo Kristeva's theories of materiality and textuality. Kirby's thesis that matter has its own heterogeneous "identity" presents an interesting twist that turns the sign upside down by proposing that representation is "a material expression through and through":

Our attempt to rethink corporeality in a way that wrests it from the role of dumb and passive container will need to grant that the body is already a
field of information, a tissue of scriptural and representational complexity
where deceptions, misrecognitions, and ambiguities constitute the virtual
logic of bio-logy. [. . .] There never was an unmediated integrity before
difference. Instead of mind and body, the conjunction that assumes that
difference happens at one interface, between entities, we might think the
body as myriad interfacings, infinite partitionings—as a field of
transformational, regenerative splittings, and differings that are never not
pensive. (148)

Kirby demonstrates Butler’s important intervention in exposing the limit of the sign and
her equally important expansion of the sign to include matter, but she convincingly
argues that this move is unable to recuperate the substance that exceeds language for
the sign.

The Laughter of the Text

Although the de facto interpretation of the chora—as an essentialist theory of the
primordial state of bliss between mother and child that precedes difference and
language—circulates within certain feminist theoretical enterprises, a careful reading of
Kristeva disputes the notion that the economy of the chora is one of profound passivity
and sameness. Heterogeneous difference is foundational to the chora and is evidenced
in the dynamic interaction of the semiotic and the symbolic: an interplay which neither
acts upon nor rests in any one place, but continually oscillates in, through, and around
both. Kristeva’s notion of materiality presumes the motility of difference, or as she
describes it, “the discontinuity of real objects,” such that “[m]aterial discontinuity is in
fact both continuous and discontinuous, but quantum rather than atomic, because
drives pass through the body as well as the surrounding natural and social configuration" (*Revolution* 100; 99). This (dis)continuity is a generative force, one that renders matter and the unconscious capable of exceeding the sign. Although the symbolic attempts to pacify and contain the activity of material discontinuity through the imposition of form in language and representation, matter cannot be entirely contained, tranquilized and/or silenced. Within the symbolic economy, repressed drives (re)surface to rupture the temporal and spatial coherence of meaning, (re)constituting meaning within the fluidity of an active materiality that references repressed unconscious drives. Matter, according to Kristeva, regenerates and exceeds the sign.

The human body implicated in this polyvalent process is also viewed by Kristeva as “a plural totality” (*Revolution* 101). She describes the body itself as being in process/on trial, so that it is articulated in the heterogeneity of the signifying practice. As the interplay of both culture and materiality the body is engaged in an instinctual, material and social non-linear practice-process. And although the body is coextensive with language in one form/substance or another, it is neither defined nor confined by linguistic limits. This reading of Kristeva’s semiotic activates the body as a generative field of difference, a biology that “is volatile, a mutable intertexture, the stuff that informs our interventions” (Kirby 78).

For Kristeva the economy of motile difference defines “text.” She tells us that the workings of the text rely on difference—an “instinctual binomial consist[ing] of two opposing terms that alternate in an endless rhythm”—created by energies that are never static but always implicated in one another in the endless flux of the semiotic. “The entire gamut of partial drives is triggered within the *chora* underlying the text, endlessly "swallowing"/rejecting, appropriating/expelling, inside/outside” (*Revolution* 99).
The chora confounds origins in its active engagement of material discontinuities, an engagement that interweaves chora and text in a non-linear rhythmic and intonational (re)presentation in/of space and time. Thus the text is, in Kristeva's words, simultaneously posited and passed through by a rhythm that affirms and exceeds its own limits. The text in process/on trial exists within the rhythm of the changing same.  

For Kristeva text/body/sound/matter is a musical process and a practice: a complex intertext of form and content that is subject to endless transformations. In an interview with Margaret Waller, initially published in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, Kristeva describes her notion of intertextuality as the performance of a “plurality of phonic, syntactic, and semantic participation,” one that works formally as well as intrapsychically (Guberman 189). Kristeva observes that the text must not only “reconcile representation, the imposition of content, with the play of form,” but utilize strategies of intertextuality to generate “an interplay of contents and not form alone” (Guberman 191). This is the practice of the text:

In this way such a practice takes on meanings that come under laws and subjects capable of thinking them; but it does not stop there or hypostasize them; it passes beyond, questioning, transforming them. The subject and meaning are only phases of such a practice, which does not reject narrative, metalanguage or theory. It adopts them but then pushes them aside as the mere scaffolds of the process, exposing their productive eruption within the heterogeneous field of social practices. (*Revolution* 101)

For Kristeva, laughter is located precisely at the juncture where the semiotic and symbolic jostle one another to produce the text. When laughter defies ego’s gravity, it
must also be invested with ego, to ensure the simultaneous release and binding of energies. This paradoxical duality of laughter makes it more than the mere effluvium of sound, the capricious utterance of bliss, the mindless expression of nothingness. Laughter unleashes the violence of the drives to shatter the coherence of the symbolic and the subject who laughs. In this way, laughter attests to the power of the maternal, the unconscious, the text and the artistic process: philobatic activities that engage the paradox of “being oneself and someone else at one and the same time” (*Revolution* 223-225). Born of pleasure and trauma, the “musical” release of drive in the intonation and rhythm of laughter is a creative force:

The practice of the text is a kind of laughter whose explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice which produces something new (a new device) is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter’s logic and provides the subject with laughter’s advantages.

(*Revolution* 225)

In the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries, the laughter of the chora—and the text for that “matter”—confounds the notions of discrete corporeal interior/exterior boundaries, as well as the simplistic one-to-one relationship assumed to exist between bodies. If the material body is always/already a complex interweave of semiotic energies and symbolic stases, there can be no straightforward separation of bodily substances within the body and/or from body to body. Do we speak to each other invisibly, in the substantive laughter of energies? Do we flow with/in each other’s substances? Do we resonate with each other’s sonic flux? If laughter is, as dis-ease,
contagious, but also advocated as the best medicine, it is perhaps a discomfort and a remedy that, if unable to cure us, might at least offer a sigh of relief.
Notes

1 Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language 283.

2 Donna Haraway, Modest_Witness @ Second_Millenium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse 182.


5 This observation is reminiscent of the workings of the noun/verb distinction discussed in the introduction.

6 In Chapter five the philobat appears as the perverse hysteric, a nomadic wanderer, a female improviser.


9 The “grain of the voice” can be described succinctly as the materiality of the encounter of language and music. Roland Barthes, “The grain of the voice.” Image, Music, Text 179-189.

10 I have borrowed this idea from Kirby, a term she in turn borrows from Paul Valery to introduce the “paradoxical nature of embodiment.” Kirby, Telling Flesh 65.

11 “Unstructred soma” is Elizabeth Bronfen’s term. The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents 190.
Kristeva explains the subject in process/on trial: “We shall see that when the speaking subject is no longer considered a phenomenological transcendental ego nor the Cartesian ego but rather a subject in process/on trial, as is the case in the practice of the text, deep structure or at least transformational rules are disturbed and, with them, the possibility of semantic and/or grammatical categorical interpretation.” Revolution in Poetic Language 37.


Thanks to Cate Poynton for questioning the viability of the disembodied voice.

In Chapter four I contest Silverman’s notions of the acoustic mirror and the exchangeability of voice between mother/child in an effort to reclaim the embodied voice and the sounds that exceed language, such as babble and the cry, as expressive modalities.

Judith Butler scatters these sonic tropes through her text Gender Trouble 81-89.

See Chapter five for a more detailed exploration of the use of sounds of hysteria and otherness as viable strategies for articulating political change.

“Lack lack” is a term coined by Hélène Cixous. “The Laugh of the Medusa” 245-64.

Kristeva may be referring here to a kind of synesthesia which is described as “a phenomenon in which sensations of two or more modalities accompany one another, as when a visual sensation is experienced when a particular sound is heard. Also called secondary sensation.” Mosby’s Medical, Nursing, & Allied Health Dictionary. (Edition 5,1998): 87 E8. Online, www.ubcilib.ca, April 20, 2001.

I am not claiming here that sound is the only evidence of the drives.

22 The notions of the “changing same” and “repetition with a quality of difference” will be addressed in Chapter two.
Chapter 2
Music is a Scrubwoman: The Sonic Abject

Sound is regarded as a means of purification as well as pollution
—Anne Carson

Music is a scrubwoman, clearing away the dirt and grime
—Duke Ellington

Sound is abject. Possessing uncanny materiality, uncontrollable fluidity, the capacity to disrupt and confound, the ability to transgress the limits of inside/outside, sound is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva Powers 4). Sound, like the abject, signals the instability of subjectivity. It creates a disturbance within the symbolic subject that produces an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside. (Guberman 118)

Akin to dirt or pollution, sound resonates at the threshold of meaning threatening to contaminate any and all proximate substances. Sound menaces the symbolic, interrupts stasis and disrupts equilibrium; as the intrusive abject it is “matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed.”
The Abject

In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva explores the construction of the body within the limits of social and cultural expectations by probing into the abject side of language and existence. As she consistently indicates in her work, the construction of rigid symbolic boundaries and the constitution of the clean and proper body must attend to the heterogeneity of the abject in an effort to monitor vigilantly the potential dangers it poses to the symbolic order. I argue in this chapter that abject sound poses a similar kind of threat.

For Kristeva the choric economy is foundational to the abject. Although abjection does not exist in the chora *per se*, it is prefigured in its archaic economy through the workings of rejection, separation and repetition of the drives. When the subject enters into the symbolic the abject surfaces as a remnant of archaic functions, functions associated with the non-linguistic body and the maternal economy. The identification of the abject with the chora names the substances associated with the semiotic and the arbiter of that economy as abject. The maternal authority that maps the self’s clean and proper body is considered an integral part of the abject. As “neither sign nor matter” but “the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body,” the abject maternal is a sign of the corruption and defilement of the corporeal (73).

The dangers of the maternal and of the defilement with which it is associated are markers of the uncanny ability of semiotic matter to call all symbolic boundaries into question. Defilement jettisoned from the body reminds us that a maternal authority presided over the semiotic and has led us, awkwardly stammering, toward language.⁵ This dirt, this sonic instability, whispers of a time that precedes linguistic and corporeal
control, before the defining moments of symbolic subjectivity were instituted. Abject defilement underscores the fragility of the symbolic in relation to the body and the limits of language.

Thus the one who carries out the maternal function—who reminds us of our uneasy journey toward language—must be repressed and rejected, to guarantee and solidify the subject's linguistic and corporeal mastery. The maternal is named as "other" and connections to the semiotic body and its choric functions are severed to facilitate entry into the paternal law. In order for the future speaking being to become a speaking being in the symbolic, the maternal must be abjected (5).

Throughout the course of the subject's life, abjection arises when the boundaries defined by the expulsion of the maternal become confused, dislocated, unspeakable. The borderline, inaugurated by a surreptitious resurfacing of the abject confronts the subject again and again with aspects of the semiotic. While language allows the subject to articulate the difference that constructs the symbolic (that is, mother) as well as to pronounce the clean and proper corporeal boundaries inscribed by the symbolic, the subject is left speechless when faced with an abject that defies this difference and disturbs established boundaries. The subject's limits—"[d]etermined by the phonological and semantic differences that articulate the syntax of language"—become confused when the abject sounds across or apart from the linguistic parameters of the symbolic (69).

The abject does not simply vanish upon entry into the symbolic once language is acquired, but continually resurfaces in different guises to confront and disrupt the clean and proper with its unpredictable, heterogeneous inscriptions of libidinal drives. As Kristeva suggests, the abject initiates a spatial disruption that is indicative of the fluidity
of being, causing the subject to ask the disconcerting spatial question, "Where am I?" in lieu of the more common question of identity, "Who am I?" (8). What was once believed to be the solid, mappable ground of identity becomes the heterogeneous, ambiguous and shifting territory of the body's terrain, inside and out. Abjection brings the subject back to the "unstructured soma" confronting subjectivity with residuals of the libidinal drives that have been stored in the unconscious and repressed. These drives consist of both trauma and pleasure that defy language and symbolic difference, and as such they exist at the threshold of subjectivity, the place where the breakdown of the signifier occurs "to the point of desemantization, to the point of reverberating only as notes, music, "pure signifier" to be reparcelled out and resemanticized anew" (49).

Thus abjection (re)sounds sonic borderline states in the symbolic: ambiguous soundings situated at the threshold of conscious/unconscious, inside/outside dualities. Because the sonic space that exists anterior to language does not differentiate between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, the border remains unnamable until language is introduced and difference is identified in the figure of the abject maternal. At the borderline the abject disturbs symbolic speech and opens language to sound that recalls the drives of the non-linguistic chora. As residual reverberation, abject sound is heard as something disgusting, an unnamable contagion, an unspeakable remainder and a threat to identity that generates an uncanny disorientation. Glossing anthropologist Mary Douglas, Kristeva writes:

filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin. (69)
It is the symbolic prohibition placed on the abject, then, that designates it as a powerful and potentially dangerous force (69).

**Woman, Abjection, Sound**

A slippage occurs between the abjection of the maternal function, necessary to facilitate the subject’s entry into the symbolic, and the subsequent abjection of the woman who is mother on the basis of her sexual difference or “lack.” This slippage is further compounded by the elision of abject female sexual difference with the gendered difference identified in the symbolic as the feminine, a difference that must also be abjected because of its association with the mother and the maternal function. Ideologically filtered through paternal law, the designations maternal/mother/woman/feminine become synonymous with one another in the symbolic, a multiplicity that is distilled into a singular and monolithic identity—the noun “Woman.” Rosi Braidotti argues, following Teresa de Lauretis, that “all women are implicated in the confrontation with a certain image of ‘Woman’ that is the culturally dominant model for female identity.” It is thus crucial to recognize “an ‘essential difference’ between woman as representation (‘Woman’ as cultural imago) and woman as experience (real women as agents of change),” in order to disrupt the singularity of this universal Woman and to ensure that She does not remain “the culturally dominant and prescriptive model for female subjectivity” (Braidotti 164). As discussed in the introduction, Woman as noun is static, while woman as verb is an active agent of change and transformation.

Patriarchal culture, however, identifies the abject and its capacity for danger as the “universal” noun Woman. She represents all of the nefarious characteristics
associated with the abject such as dirt, pollution and contagion. The correlation in patriarchal cultures between defilement and Woman is constructed within an oppositional hierarchy that genders purity and power as masculine on the basis of sexual difference. Woman becomes a sign for an evil, uncontrollable abject virus that threatens the health of Man, an affliction against which he must be immunized in order for the disease to be suppressed.

This observation resonates in Anne Carson's essay, "Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire." Carson suggests that societies founded on a rigid sense of order and authority generally fear anything or anyone that threatens to transgress established boundaries, exercising rigorous controls on individuals or situations that confound prescribed social limits (135). She observes that in ancient societies—as in current western patriarchy—Woman posed this threat. Existing outside the realm of propriety, the body of Woman menaces the hygienic, moral and physical standards defined by the “normal” body of Man. Fear of her serous nature and her ability to contaminate finds its origins in the association of the female body with a wet permeability that is seen in opposition to the dry, and by implication hard, male body: “[p]artly by virtue of her innate wetness, woman is more subject than man to liquefying assaults upon body and mind, especially those of emotion” (138). The representation of Woman as the essence of moral corruption and emotional instability underscores her connection to chaos and explains her apparently uncontrollable impulses.

By implication, then, Woman's fluid quotient ties her to the fecundity and chaos of nature: “[u]nited by a vital liquidity with the elemental world, woman is able to tap the inexhaustible reservoirs of nature's procreative power” (143). Carson reminds us that Plato, (in Timeus), ascribed to the notion of the formlessness of Woman by identifying
her liquescent quality with the maternal receptacle. Set apart from the creative mind of Man, Woman's creativity is completely corporeal, residing in the fluid depths of the passive, formless, choric container. As I argued in Chapter one, Kristeva productively reclaims the fluidity and the active creativity of the maternal, in her reconfiguration of the chora as a fundamental component of the signifying process in the symbolic. Kristeva argues that the constant resurfacing of the chora in the symbolic is integral to the process of subjectivity, an active resurfacing of the semiotic that does not cause the subject to retreat into a state of pre-objectival bliss.

Sound shares many of these liquid qualities associated with abject Woman. Analogous to the polluting aspects of bodily fluids—"[b]ody fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed"—sound flows uncontrollably within, between, over and through bodies (Grosz 194). Sound declares the body's permeability in its defiance of the boundaries that separate inside from outside. In its "refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity," the insidious, seductive and insurgent qualities of sound coincide with the abject, fluid qualities attributed to Woman (Grosz 195). The invisibility of sound adds a particularly sinister dimension to its abject status, as it dissipates more quickly than liquid and disperses without a trace. Sound has neither viscosity nor a visible flow that we can point to and name as impure. Yet sound seeps, flows, vibrates, resonates, offends, threatens, and paradoxically (as with all abject substances) it also brings fascination and pleasure.

Carson points out that the uncontrollable, liquid essence of abject Woman is elided with sound in patriarchal culture, rendering the actual sounds that emanate from the sexed female body as abject:
Woman is that creature who puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females expose or expend what should be kept in. Females blurt out a direct translation of what should be formulated indirectly. ("Sound" 71)

In other words, a sounding woman is like a leaky container. Her boundaries are porous and penetrable. She emits a disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound that is generally associated with non-linguistic, meaningless "noise." The sound Woman makes has a sonic fluidity that contains a licentious sexuality and a hint of hysteria; she cries out of control of her corporeal and sonic impulses. When she sounds she is unsound, each inflection a sonic toxin. As the ineffable Woman, sound is the noisy, inarticulate, abject.

Abject Sacrifice

As Carson suggests, the noise Woman makes is linked to an entire history of female ritualized banter: the cries of pleasure and pain, the jokes, insults and obscenities, indecent language, blasphemies, shrieking and laughter sounded during women's ritual practices and festivals in ancient Greece ("Sound" 67; Olender 94). These rituals are associated with a host of unseemly women, such as witches and lesbians, who were believed to cast evil spells, indulge in vulgar physicality, flaunt their unruly behaviour, and in general incite anarchy. Through these rituals, women orchestrated a vociferous female soundscape that challenged the patriarchal order and denounced the symbolic. To prevent these dangerous public soundings from disrupting the status quo, women's ritual practices were quickly banished to the outskirts of town, away from the normal range of hearing. Exiled to the margins of rational discourse,
women were ostracized for breaking the silence with their indulgent and anarchic racket (Carson "Sound" 67-68). Ironically, women's cathartic soundings also served a purpose in patriarchy; their noisy catharsis was a purification rite that purged the abject from the community.

Mary Russo suggests that purification rites occur in the symbolic at the levels of the social body and the individual psyche (8-9). Anthropologists propose that culturation is dependent upon the identification and observance of differences—however defined—that mark the borders of the social body, so that the loss of difference through mixing provokes violence and chaos. They suggest that the mixing of pure and impure substances presents a danger and a threat to the social order. The maintenance of the community therefore requires a ritual that will cleanse and eliminate the threat of social pollution. At the most fundamental level, this is the ritual of sacrifice. According to René Girard sacrifice deflects violence away from the community and directs it onto a surrogate victim or "scapegoat." Sacrifice fulfills a cathartic function; when performed in a structured setting it mimics the original violence upon which society is founded. Ritual channels and releases excess violence in an effort to restore harmony to the community and reinforce the social fabric.

Kristeva's theory of the abject builds on the ritual of sacrifice at the level of the social, and suggests that sacrifice must also be enacted at the level of the individual psyche in order for the subject to become part of society. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the need for psychic sacrifice is similarly generated by difference. This difference separates the self from the other and is based upon the subject's entry into the symbolic and the consequent separation from its (con)fusion with the maternal. Because the maternal body is the ordering principle of the libidinal energies that propel
us toward the death-drive, both the maternal body and the unstructured soma associated with it must be renounced, in order for the subject to enter the realm of the social. Thus the violent renunciation of the mother during the subject’s entry into the symbolic is the violence upon which society is founded. It could be said, then, that the social body is founded not only on the sacrifice of woman’s body, but on the sacrifice of woman’s psyche as well. Elizabeth Bronfen argues that the first sacrifice is the sacrifice of the mother:

the culturation of the subject as well as the preservation of a given social system involves sacrifice, as a violent elimination of a norm-disruptive violence, and this is given a privileged figure in the first ‘sacrifice’ culture requires—the renunciation of the mother as desired object, as this is also a figure for the sacrifice of the unstructured soma. (Dead 190)

The maternal body bridges the psychic and the social, the unconscious and the conscious, enacting a strange duality that positions the subject at the threshold of the symbolic (the “thetic break” in Kristeva’s schema discussed in Chapter one) in order to facilitate the initiation rite that requires her renunciation and secures the subjectivity of the future speaking being. Kristeva identifies the moment of sacrifice as a linguistic moment, the moment where language arrests the drives, regulates rhythmic flux, transforms the body into a sign, fixes differences, silences sound, abjacts. This libidinal “murder” exchanges the maternal function for the abject mother, represses the drives, and facilitates the subject’s ability to distinguish between the material and the external world (Bronfen Dead 24).

Discourses that designate the maternal body as abhorrent generally focus on the abject nature of the womb. Because woman’s body is mutable in pregnancy and
childbirth, it is literally the body of horror that gives birth to the monstrous. As Mary Russo suggests, the “fat” maternal body is itself a sign of the grotesque and the monstrous in a society that links prosperity to a slim (masculine) physique. Culturally the monster represents, in Rosi Braidotti’s words, “the in between, the mixed, the ambivalent as implied in the ancient Greek root of the word monsters, teras, which means both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration” (77). The monster is the quintessential sign of difference, especially in relation to gender, sexuality and race. If we envision the symbolic as the “zero-degree of monstrosity,” the monster is located to the left or to the right of the zero-degree. It is an object of difference that, when weighted against the phallogocentric model of the normal human being, can never measure up. The monster is the sign of a lesser form of humanity and a manifestation of abjection.

According to psychoanalysis, any deviant figure inspires both dread and desire, and this ambiguous desire—a strange logic of attraction mixed with repulsion—threatens the status quo. The maternal body is a representation of abject deviance—a female body that is devalued, envied, desired and despised:

If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror. (Braidotti 81)

As the “threshold of existence” the maternal body is simultaneously the site of the origin of life and of the subject’s insertion into mortality and death (Braidotti 81-82). The womb threatens to destroy the clear boundaries erected in the symbolic, instituting a loss of direction that obscures any distinctions between the inside and the outside. In Chapter
four this disorientation is discussed in relation to hysteria and the theory of the wandering womb, both aspects of the uncanny that facilitated the birth of psychoanalysis.

Freud quite literally associated the womb with female sexuality, marking it as uncanny: “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud Uncanny 220). In his treatise “The Uncanny” Freud connects the unheimlich nature of female anatomy with a kind of representational vertigo brought about by the loss of sight. He explains that the fear of the loss of the eyes is the most striking instance of the uncanny, because it is linked to the fear of castration—a horror that is ultimately displaced onto the “lack” displayed by the female genitals. The displacement of castration anxiety onto the sexed body of the female constructs a precarious relationship to her supposedly castrated female form and consequently to sight in general.

Beyond the paradigm of castration anxiety, however, the inability to see conjures the general fear of boundary dissolution and loss of control. The uncanny is a strange embodiment of the merging of self and other. The aesthetic of the uncanny is thus linked to the notions of originary space, the female body and symbolic (dis)orientation. The disorientation, desire and dread triggered by the uncanny generates the necessity for sacrifice, so that the subject's boundaries can be reinstated and solidified.

The ritual of sacrifice provides only a temporary arrestation of the uncanny, however, and thus the reenactment of the first sacrifice must be repeated at various junctures in order to safeguard the social. Eventually, and without warning, the libidinal unconscious connected to the semiotic reemerges to disrupt the stasis of boundary construction enacted in the sacrifice. Thus the subject continually struggles with the
semiotic violence of the drives that, although repressed, manage to break through the symbolic border to dissolve the logic of order, challenge the identity of the individual and question the construction of the social body. Simultaneously violent and regulating, sacrifice confines violence to a specific place, displacing the annihilation of identity by the drives onto a surrogate signifier. The restaging of sacrifice ensures that the representation of violence is not limitless chaos (libidinal content only) but a release and a structuring of violence into form. Sacrifice is both the imposition of social coherence and its outer limit, the play of form and content discussed in Chapter one.

As a transitional state between order and disorder, form and content, sacrifice mixes the unconscious with the conscious. Kristeva stresses that sacrifice generates a liminal state enacting a "double violence"—that is, a ritual dying and a ritual rebirth—that carries jouissance into the symbolic as it simultaneously assigns a productive limit to that jouissance. This is why it is important to reclaim and reconfigure the semiotic as integral to the symbolic, otherwise sacrifice loses its liminality and the subject moves unhindered toward the death drive.

Abjection Beyond the Maternal

Anne McClintock expands the parameters of the psychoanalytic approach to abjection proposed by Kristeva in her argument that it is important to unpack abjection in the context of modern imperialism, a system that renders certain individuals, groups, libidos, actions and territories as abject. She contends that these abject spaces are, in actuality, constitutive of this system by the very fact of their abject status. In other words, the need to abject certain individuals, groups, libidos, actions and territories from a given society indicates the dependence that society has on these spaces of abjection.
for its definition, even though the "inside" disavows its dependency on the abjected
"outside," as Diana Fuss suggests:

any outside is formulated as a consequence of a lack internal to the
system it supplements. The greater the lack on the inside, the greater the
need for an outside to contain and to defuse it, for without that outside, the
lack on the inside would become all too visible. (Fuss 3)

McClintock observes that the elements that constitute the outside of both history and
psychoanalysis—female sexuality, homosexuality, hysteria, fetishism, as well as
cultural, political and economic difference—are the very elements that define
psychoanalysis and construct history (72). Her critical analysis exposes and reclaims
the repressed elements of both, by meshing material history with an embodied
psychoanalysis in an effort to reconfigure psychoanalysis as "situated," and history as
"psychoanalytically informed" (72). Thus McClintock unpacks abjection historically as
well as psychoanalytically, distinguishing between various forms of abjection in social,
historical and psychological circumstances.

She argues that there are several dimensions or layers of abjection in modern
society and that these dimensions of abjection are coextensive but nonidentical. To
paraphrase her in-depth description, "abject objects" (such as dirt and vomit) are
differentiated from the "abject states" (such as hysteria or bulimia) that often produce
abject objects. Similarly, abject objects and abject states are different from "abject
zones" (such as ghettos, prisons or mental institutions) in which these abject objects or
states may dwell. Socially sanctioned "agents of abjection"—those who work in abject
circumstances (such as domestics and nurses)—are different from the "abject groups,"
(such as prostitutes and the terminally ill) that these agents may find themselves
working with. Finally, McClintock argues that “psychic processes of
abjection”—fetishism, disavowal and the uncanny—are not the same as “political
processes of abjection” carried out in actions such as ethnic cleansings, genocide or
forced removals (72).

To illustrate the layered complexity of abjection that exists in modern society
McClintock cites an example of the difference between the disavowal of a black nurse
by a white South African man and the forced exile of black women to the “barren
bantustans”: “Surely the processes are enmeshed,” she argues, “since a connection
can be made between the oppression of black women by black men, the exile of black
women from a self-fashioned white nation and the “masculine fears of the archaic
mother.” She stresses that these divergent manifestations of abjection are suggestive of
one another but ultimately nonidentical: “The notion of an archetypal male fear of the
mother is inadequate for fully understanding the expulsion of women, for it cannot
explain the historical torsions of race: why it is black women and not white women who
are territorially expelled” (73). To unpack abjection in this way is to account for the
complexity of the abject in relation to gender, race, class and sexuality, within the
pervasiveness of power networks in modernity.

How do these dimensions of abjection apply to sound? I propose that it is
possible to apply McClintock’s layered model of abjection to sound, as a template for
the purposes of understanding the complexity of sonic abjection. This sonic
“aestheticization” has not been undertaken to dilute the political importance of
McClintock’s work, but to point to the political implications of the treatment and the
representation of sound in western society.
As argued in Chapter one, sound possesses an invisible materiality. With respect to McClintock's model, I now propose that *abject (sonic) objects* are simply sounds themselves. These sonic objects are different from, although often produced by, *abject (sonic) states* related to the body such as childbirth, hysteria and orgasm. *Abject (sonic) zones* are the territories or spaces allotted to sound, such as music (in the generic sense) and noise. *Agents of (sonic) abjection* are the composers, improvisers, musicians, noisicians and others who work with the objects of sound; while *abject (sonic) groups* are those whose sound is deemed abject such as women and marginalized peoples. Sound is manifest in the *psychic processes of (sonic) abjection*—that is, in the sound of the drives and the non-linguistic or "grotesque" sounds of the semiotic chora and the unconscious. Sound is also subjected to *political processes of (sonic) abjection* that seek to cleanse or purify sound, such as language and music-as-representation carried out in the west through functional tonality, musicology, music theory and music criticism. Thus sound in the symbolic is connected to the semiotic (the "archaic mother" in McClintock's terms) but not wholly determined by it.

The reader may have noticed that music appears in two places in this scheme: as an *abject sonic zone* and as a *political process of sonic abjection*. This duality speaks to the ambiguity of music in western culture. As Lawrence Kramer explains, music contains both an internal and external logic of alterity (35-36). Music-as-representation demonstrates an internal alterity that cleanses and disciplines sound, in accordance with the parameters of the *political processes of sonic abjection* (theory, functional tonality, form) that contour the way music becomes representation in the cultural milieu. Alternatively, music as an *abject sonic zone* is the manifestation of sonic
difference in society—music in its more generic sense—the “other” of language as well as the “other” of music-as-representation. Music bears the weight of this doubleness, standing at the threshold of a liminal space where sonic objects, libidos, actions and territories “push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assailable, thinkable: Abject” (Kristeva Powers 18). Music works through this struggle in both gestural and spatial terms, performing the ambiguity and liminality of sonic libidos, individuals, groups, actions and territories in the symbolic.

**Music is a Scrubwoman: Political Processes of Sonic Abjection**

Arguably the most widespread *political process of sonic abjection* is the cleansing carried out through the mechanism of a rigidly constructed logos that separates the unpredictability of the sounding body from the rational construction and deployment of language. Kristeva writes that the paternal function forecloses “the ability of the sound-trace to maintain and go beyond [...] the signified” (Powers 50). As the aural/oral *abject object* that confuses the border between nature and culture, feminine and masculine, order and disorder, sound is subjected to various rules and regulations imposed as measures of social control and purification. In the symbolic, language is separated from the sounding body, less an expression of/from the corporeal than a sounding of the law. Logos becomes the marker of self-control, a “disassociation of the inside and outside” that defines humanity (Carson “Sound” 77).

Logos endeavors to sanitize sound through the filter of linguistic reason, a tactical move used to diffuse the danger corporeal sonic fluidity poses to the body/mind boundary created in the repression of the *psychic processes of abjection*. To mitigate
any unforeseen danger, the sound that bypasses language must be channeled into other *political processes of abjection* constructed to detoxify and contain sound. These “other” political processes attempt to render the invisible visible, utilizing strategies cleverly devised to shape and control the *abject sonic object*.

As a means of confronting and regulating the impurity of *abject sonic objects*, music becomes one of the primary *political processes of abjection*, given the task of cleansing the sounds that have escaped linguistic sanitization. This is music-as-representation, a simulacrum of ritual sacrifice at the level of sound, that provides an alternate, non-linguistic environment in which sonic catharsis can take place. The process is an aesthetic cleansing, a purification rite that shifts sonic borders and determines the conditions under which *abject sonic objects* sound. Music-as-representation stages a dialectic between ordered and disordered sounds, performing the sonorous transformation of non-sense into sense, noise into harmony.

Jacques Attali writes that music is the vanguard of western society, describing music as an uncanny harbinger of meaning, pleasure, desire, crisis and freedom. He encourages us to listen to the sounds created and affirmed by particular socio-historical settings as markers of an imminent political economy. Music is not simply the sonic rendering of various meanings and functions ascribed to sound, but is also indicative of the tolerance for the clean and proper—order and disorder, consonance and dissonance—in a given society at a given time. Music is a map of the political processes of sonic abjection: “Music, like cartography, records the simultaneity of conflicting orders, from which a fluid structure arises, never resolved, never pure” (45).

Thus the structuring of the acoustical landscape into the oppositional territories of harmony and noise constitutes a political act in western aesthetics. Although definitions
of harmony and noise are culturally constructed, shifting and unstable, representational processes of music depend upon the strategic articulation, regulation and purification of the *abject sonic objects* that inhabit the *abject sonic zone* called noise and music. Echoing Attali, John Corbett explains that the noise/music boundary “exposes deep hidden aspects of a given society's political subconscious, its structure, and its means of producing meaning” (“Ephemera” 220). The extent to which noise is tolerated in music is thus indicative of a society's tolerance for dissonant and disorderly elements.

Corbett observes that the regulation of the dissonant elements in western music is accomplished through the construction of a comprehensive metalanguage—the convergence of theory, history and notation—that dictates and monitors music's *political processes of abjection*. Music in this sense becomes a kind of language that is part of symbolic representation, a coded system that regulates the range of sonic meaning in culture from an external vantage point assumed to be objective and/or universal. In this system music means because it is written down—that is, represented—despite the doctrine of traditional musicology that declares exactly the opposite, that music is written down because it means. The belief in music's logic—the naturalness of its consonance—is, as Corbett points out, based on a complex system of denial (“Ephemera” 217-220). Music-as-representation is a self-regulatory ritual cleansing that actively disavows, controls and represses its own noise.

In *A History of Consonance and Dissonance*, composer James Tenney traces the historical paradigms that have generated concepts of music and noise in western culture throughout the practice of western art music. He suggests five paradigms of consonance and dissonance and discusses how each has provided a conceptual framework for musical practice during a given historical period. Unlike other music
theorists, however, Tenney refuses to present these paradigms in a linear progression that moves easily through music history. Instead, he proposes that one or more of these paradigms has been operative throughout the history of western music, and suggests that all paradigms are operative in current musical practice.

For the purposes of this argument the most significant aspect of Tenney's analysis is that it spatializes the concept of music, recognizing that designations of consonance and dissonance are neither essential, fixed nor absolute, on either a vertical or horizontal plane, even though each is presented as such and/or appears to be stable at any given time. The codification of consonance and dissonance in music is a result of the political processes of abjection that forcibly eliminate certain abject sonic objects from the spaces of music-as-representation. Tenney's observation that the border separating consonance from dissonance is multiple and continuously shifting suggests that (although generally disavowed) an incommensurable plurality of consonant/dissonant positions are simultaneously operable. Music is neither vertical hierarchy nor horizontal succession, but spatial, able to occupy several trajectories at once. Speaking as an agent of sonic abjection—that is, as a composer who works with abject sonic objects—Tenney suggests that the spatialization of music is a way for the composer to get beyond that type of intentionality that is note-by-note intentionality—you know: the aesthetic assumption that's behind the boast of the analyst when he thinks that he has explained every note in the piece and shown why that note has to be just what it is. I'm amazed that they're not even embarrassed to say it [laughs]. What kind of mechanistic
universe is implied by that—that somehow, every note has to be exactly the way it was? (*Different* 26)

Amiri Baraka makes a similar point, when he emphasizes the “total area” of a musical work, a spatial determination of structure through “musical considerations of rhythm, pitch, timbre and melody,” as opposed to the linearity of the bar line and note-to-note accountability (Mackey 31).

If the political boundaries of music constantly shift and are reflected in the attitude toward music and noise at any given time, the construction of sonic abjection is a result of disciplinary and cultural factors that shape the relative positions of consonance and dissonance in aesthetic discourse. If at the musical level consonance and dissonance are always implicated in one another, perhaps the same can be said for music and noise at both the musical and the political level. The musical confrontation between consonance and dissonance that reflects the political confrontation between music and noise is thus an encounter between sonic laws and sonic outlaws. The relative danger afforded to dissonance and the need for consonance and resolution at any given time depends upon many factors in the larger socio-political, historical and aesthetic sonic context.

**Abject Rhythm**

Rhythm is of course an integral component of sound, inhabiting all of the dimensions of the sonic spaces of abjection. James Snead discusses the parameters of rhythmic abjection in his investigation of repetition in music. In his comparison of the different attitudes toward repetition that exist in European and black music, he argues that the concept of “black culture” was created by European culture for the express
purpose of highlighting and abjecting the former’s “difference.” This move, according to Snead, negativizes black culture’s difference in order to reinforce the dominant culture: “In certain cases, culture, in projecting an image for others, claims a radical difference from others, often further defined qualitatively as superiority” (215). This is an example of the disavowed dependence of the inside on the outside discussed above. Snead traces the abject outside of black culture in/as rhythm.

As Snead suggests, European culture separates itself from “other” cultures “in its treatment of physical and natural cycles” (218). Although cyclical models of history were prevalent in Europe before the development of what he calls scientific progressivism, by the nineteenth-century the linear model of history was solidified. Snead suggests that “[t]he now suppressed (but still to be found) recognition of cycles in European culture has always resembled the beliefs that underlie the religious conceptions of black culture, observing periodic regeneration of biological and agricultural systems” (218). Although repetition does exist in the dominant culture, it does so in the guise of recurring celebrations. As Snead points out, in a capitalist framework the spectacle of these celebrations must be bigger and more spectacular than the previous years. Snead links the phenomenon of “bigger and better” directly to commodification and capitalist culture, an aesthetic based on the disavowal of backward mobility:

Economics and business in their term “cyclicality,” admit the existence and even the necessity of repetition of decline but continually overlay this rupture in the illusion of continuous growth with a rhetoric of “incremental” or “staged” development, which asserts that the repetition of decline in a cycle may occur, but occurs only within an overall upward or spiral tendency. (219)
The conception of repetition as linear and progressive sharply contrasts the black notion of repetition as a non-goal oriented space of rupture and surprise that produces, in Snead’s words, “a quality of difference compared to what has gone before” (213).

What the quality of difference in the black approach to repetition suggests to Snead is the potential that arises from “a revised metaphysics of rupture and opening” (217). At times referred to as “repetition with a difference” or “the changing same,” this black approach to aesthetics is based on the polyrhythms of African music where the rhythm “is there for you to pick up when you come back to get it.” Snead argues that if there is a “goal” contained in this aesthetic framework, “it is always deferred; it continually “cuts” back to the start, in the musical meaning of “cut” as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series” (220).

Snead reframes Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion, in reference to this black cultural aesthetic: as a repetition with a difference and an example of the “cut.” As he suggests, the compulsion to repeat is based on a “seemingly fortuitous” (but actually motivated) repetition that appears in explicit contradiction to societal constraints and standards of behaviour” (220). In other words, repetition compulsion allows for the repetitive (re)surfacing of repressed unconscious drives, especially those marked as taboo by the social contract. Glossing Freud, Kristeva confirms that the compulsion to repeat proceeds “from the drive impulses and [is] probably inherent in the very nature of the drives—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle” (Strangers 184). For Snead, the compulsion to repeat is a rhythmic break instituted by “the cycle of desire and repression that underlies repetition compulsion,” and this, he contends,
“belongs together with the notion of the ‘cut.’” (220). The cut of unconscious repetition ruptures the coherence of symbolic consciousness.

Nathaniel Mackey describes the rhythmic rupture instituted by the cut as a limp. He summons the figure of Legba—the lame trickster portrayed in black folkloric narratives, who “walks with a limp because his legs are of unequal lengths, one of them anchored in the world of humans and the other in that of the gods”: an allegorical figure who gestures toward the immanence and the transcendence of rupture (243). As a master dancer and musician, Legba is able to use his limp to bridge the distance between lameness and dancing. The limp creates an intersection, a heterogeneity that cuts with a relativizing edge to unveil impairment’s power, as though the syncopated accent were an unexpected blessing offering anomalous, unpredictable support. Impairment taken to a higher ground, remediated, translates damage and disarray into a dance. (244)

Mackey suggests that Legba’s limp operates like a phantom limb, by transforming a visible deficiency or lack into an “invisible supplement” and a “transparent presence” (244). The psychoanalytic concept of the phantom limb is based in the “mirror stage,” that is, on the recognition of the subject’s image reflected in a mirror that institutes entry into the symbolic. Moira Gatens contends that the subject has an “emotional and libidinal investment” in the reflected image that causes him/her to interpret the image as complete and whole (11). Yet the recognition of the image as coherent in the mirror is in actuality a misrecognition—in other words the image we see reflected back to us is an imaginary one—and thus the assumption of wholeness is nothing more than a fantasy.

As an imaginary reconstruction of a limb that has been severed or cut, the phantom limbs haunts us with our loss and our fragmentation. Yet is also articulates an
unexpected, albeit invisible, regeneration. As an interruption of the coherence of the image the phantom limb negotiates the space between the “real and the unreal,” causing us to question our concept of reality by transforming deformity into a sign of “multiformity” (244). For Mackey music is analogous to the phantom limb:

let me simply say that the phantom limb is a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality, that it is a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond as it calls into question what is. Music as phantom limb arises from a capacity for feeling that holds itself apart from numb contingency. The phantom limb haunts or critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off. (235)

Resembling the cut of Legba’s limp, music as phantom limb interrupts the coherence and linearity of music-as-representation to create a hesitation and a pause that “arises from and reflects critically upon an experience of isolation or exclusion” (242). This is an articulation of the outsider’s ordeal, a “telling inarticulacy” that speaks of a “traumatic survival” (Mackey 244). Music is the uncanny sounding of a heterogeneous wholeness; the strange intonalational and rhythmic (*jouissance*) of the abject.

**Music is a Mistress**

Duke Ellington tells the story of his relationship to music and sonic abjection in the declaration *Music is My Mistress*. Ellington’s poem “Music” is a narrative that wrestles with the uncanny heterogeneity of music through myriad clichés that connect it to Woman-as-noun as well as woman-as-verb. Here music-as-woman is representative of the changing same, the ambiguous cut that articulates sound, while music-as-Woman
is indicative of the hypostasized silence generated by the social othering that sound
encounters in dominant culture. Music-as-woman/Woman is the ambiguous space
Ellington's music occupies both psychically and socially in culture; it is the other that
engages his own otherness. His poem can be read at this level as a reflection of the
outsider's ordeal, "an introspective gesture that arises from and reflects critically upon
an experience of isolation or exclusion" (Mackey 252). Ellington employs the abject
ambiguity of woman/Woman to stand in for the abject ambiguity of music, perhaps as a
critical reflection upon the abjection of his own compositions in the critical spaces of the
dominant culture. As Graham Lock suggests, Ellington's compositions were often seen
as deformities of both jazz and classical music, and like woman/Woman they were
consistently misrepresented and misread (158). Ellington's otherness occurs on
several levels: he is an agent of sonic abjection (composer) and a member of an abject
sonic group (black composer); he utilizes abject sonic objects (the "weird" sounds of
plungers and mutes); and he is subject to the political processes of sonic abjection
(critical responses). These layers of abjection intersect at the axis "Music."

Yet there are other levels upon which Ellington is able to disavow his otherness by
projecting it onto music-as-woman/Woman. The poem "Music" is a misrepresentation
at the level of gender that works both socially and psychically in its characterization of
music as the sonic maternal/mother/woman/feminine: the enigmatic other that is
monstrous in her excess and grotesque in her lack (Braidotti 83). Music is the other the
composer both desires and dreads:

Music is a beautiful woman in her prime,
Music is a scrubwoman, clearing away dirt and grime,
Music is a girl child
Simple, sweet and beaming,
A thousand years old,
Cold as sleet, and scheming.

Wise and patient,
Unfathomably kind,
Music is the woman you always wanted to find.

As fragile as a flower,
A single petal of a rose,
And what you think you think,
She already knows she knows.

A system of ribbons,
A multiplicity of ramifications,
Sparkling from her brain down through her core,
A million facets of gossamer sensations.

And you could be
A most inadequate bore.

Music is a gorgeous bitch, ...
A volcano of desire
Makes your blood boil
As you get higher and higher.

Music is like the woman
Who is like mathematics:
Music is a woman who's true.

No matter how well you know her,
There's always more to learn;
An endless adventure, every day she's brand new.
Music is that woman, who
You'll hope will say,
"There's very few who do a new-do like you do."
But alas, you're the victim of her coup,
'Cause she can always satisfy you.

Music is the woman
You follow day after day;
Music is the woman
Who always has her way.

The topless chick—
You like to see shake it—
No matter how hard you try,
You never quite make it.
When you don’t hear her,
You desperately miss her,
And when you embrace her,
You wish you could kiss her.  

Ellington’s poem recounts the passion of a composer for whom the seductiveness of music is the seductiveness of the abject. A bitchy temptress, music is both enticing and unpredictable, dangerous yet alluring. The struggle of the composer to organize, shape and contain music is a fantasy of masculine control exercised on the sonic feminine. At times music defies this control, choosing her own trajectory, pushing the composer past his limits across the threshold of the symbolic, beyond the bounds of representation.

Although Ellington dreams that he is the subject of music’s desire, he also imagines he is the victim of her nonchalance and disinterest: “And you could be / A most inadequate bore.” The power of her seduction makes him anxious, unsure, unfulfilled, flaccid: “No matter how hard you try, / You never quite make it.” Ellington’s anxiety stems from his inability to control the source of music’s fickle nature, the sonic feminine. Can his flirtations satisfy her? Ellington writes of his obsession for music as a craving for her sound, the unfulfilled desire of a composer who embraces music but fails to leave his mark—the imprint of his kiss—as an artist.

Reminiscent of the encounter between the mariner Odysseus and the Sirens, the half-human, bird-like creatures who lured sailors to their death on rocky shores with their mellifluous singing, the composer is in constant danger of crashing into silence on his journey through the rocky shores of sound. Just as the Sirens’ song proved deadly to its listeners, music that defies representation is not only dangerous but beyond the
symbolic range of hearing. Evoking the pain and anxiety of ambiguous desire in his affair with the enigmatic feminine, Ellington is lured by the abject nature of music's Siren song.\textsuperscript{11}

Although music is said to be inspired by the Muses, the divine beings whose sonic representations are constructed to help the listener forget the traumas of the past, it is also produced in the monstrousness of the Sirens' song.\textsuperscript{12} The sonic abject arouses “an unsymbolized past that is traumatic for the listener, since it evokes something primordial, something that is between nature and culture that the subject does not want to remember” (Salecl 18). Music defies the boundaries of past and present; it exists inside and outside of symbolization, conjuring a primordial semiotic remembrance of the sounds, rhythms and intonations of the drives, structuring these textures for the symbolic ear. The desire for music is a flirtation with a death drive that has its origins in the semiotic and is intoned in the symbolic. Music is thus neither inspiration, nor memory, nor sonic drive alone. As symbolic representation music is dependent upon the ability of the sign to forget the death drive, and its origins. As the Sirens' song that escapes the sign, music is the sonic abject that reinstates semiotic noise.

Music embodies the surplus sound of the symbolic. As Salecl points out, surplus is something that eludes signification: it is an excessive \textit{jouissance} that makes sound both fascinating and deadly (20). If the \textit{jouissance} related to female sexuality and the libidinal economy of the chora are connected, it follows that there is also a connection between sound and feminine \textit{jouissance}, the cries of pleasure and the cries of pain. A deaf culture that relies on visual cues alone cannot hear or understand the sound of feminine \textit{jouissance}. The inability to listen is the inability to interpret what sound is being heard and the significance of that sound. If music is the ambiguous sounding of
pleasure and pain, harmony and noise, can it be heard in the symbolic? If music refuses to give up its *jouissance* does it exist in a paradox of silence?

Just as language is a guarantee of the symbolic, silence is a protection from the sound of the drive, a muted *jouissance*. In relation to Ellington's desire for music, it is ultimately inscribed in "her" silence—a silence created by his inability to hear. This silence produces a great deal of anxiety for Ellington as a composer. Can he confront her silence, her sounds? Can he hear her *jouissance*? Can he compose at all? Located at the border of sound and silence, music is a rocky shore to which the composer sails at his peril. Music is harmony laced with death, a beautiful song that contains a deadly silence.\(^\text{13}\)

**Music in “Women’s Time”**

Julia Kristeva uses the term “music” as a sonic trope for the workings of the instinctual drives. A functionary of rhythm, music sounds the regenerative pulse of the dialectical process between the drives and the symbolic. Music is a gesture of the semiotic, one that offers intonation, rhythm, texture, and meaning to language. It is an “active, insurgent practice,” one that blurs the boundaries between the signifier and the signified (*Desire* 168). Music is the “cut” of the semiotic in the symbolic.

Music, rhythm and polyphony are used interchangeably by Kristeva to describe the dynamic intervention brought by the semiotic to the symbolic. Music is akin to *signifiance*, a dynamic of meaning that utilizes sound to intervene in the static codes that construct subjectivity in the symbolic. Music interrupts the static subject with a rhythmic and intonational "cut" that exposes the multiple and heterogeneous subject.\(^\text{14}\)
Music itself is a derivative. It is simply the sonorous indicator of a break, of a deaf, mute, mortal, and regenerative rhythm. It takes place where the body is gashed by the blows of biology and the shock of the sexual, social, and historical contradiction, breaking through to the quick, piercing through the shield of the vocal and symbolic cover. (Desire 179)

For Kristeva music occurs in the rhythmic rupture of this spatial interval, between sound and silence, the dissolution and the return of the subject. The infinity of the “subject in process/on trial” exists in the destabilization of a static subject position, a confrontation with the polyphony of the semiotic and the ultimate return of the subject transformed.

Although this rhythm is cyclical, its repetitions are disjunct and varied. Semiotic rhythms are multiform, fusing and dissolving in a state of flux. The rhythm of the drives brings the subject into confrontation with the jouissance that exists on the threshold of fusion/rejection: a jouissance that repeats the subject with a quality of difference. Rhythm weaves texture into subjectivity by turning each thread: “into a broken path with multiple edges, an infinity of forks, returns to the same furrows, and departures into other dimensions” (Desire 201). It is a “de-signating and dissolving gesture” that destabilizes but does not annihilate the subject in the moment of transformation (Desire 191).

Comparable to the rhythmic aesthetic in black culture described by Snead and Mackey, Kristeva’s notion of rhythm stands in stark contrast to the conventional western notion of rhythm as a linear pulse that offers consistency, location and predictability. Semiotic musical time is a flexible concept, consistent in its inconsistency, a dialectical encounter between rhythm and duration, a texture that is “one and heterogeneous.” In other words “women’s time” is the time of the changing same (Desire 184).
For Kristeva, the time of music is the time of the semiotic, an assault on the
death-drive and silence. The time of non-cyclical, non-linear repetition is dynamic, a
heterogeneous process that never ceases. To conceive of time as a dynamic and motile
force requires the combination of historical and linear, cyclical and repetitive
representations of movement through space. Time is more than a chronology, it
involves a dialectic between “rhythmic agency” and “evolutive duration,” so that
corporeal rhythms are marked in, around and through historical time (Desire 205). As a
dialectic of spatial intervals that generates rhythm, music and intonation, time is both a
topology and a geometry that is “polyphonic” and “stratified” (Desire 201). Music is the
rhythmic unfolding of corporeal and mythic time.

When music performs its sonic sacrifice, cutting the symbolic with the semiotic, it
is a signifying practice that marks “women’s time.” Kristeva writes that women’s time is
both repetition and rupture, a rhythm that surfaces to “break the code, to shatter
language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the
unnamable repressed by the social contract” (Women’s 25). Music transforms the
symbolic economy through the disruption of static social codes: a “semiotization of the
symbolic” that introduces prohibited jouissance into the liminal moment. Engaged in the
signifying process, the musician enters the “matrix space,” a space incorporating mind
and body, masculine and feminine, harmony and noise, abjection and purification, to
create the irreducible difference of sonic jouissance.
Notes

1 Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound" 69.


3 Kristeva is describing the abject in general terms in this passage.

4 Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire" 158.

5 The significance of stammering and the stutter is discussed in Chapter three in relation to women improvisers.

6 Russo also suggests that the representation of the maternal body as fat and grotesque links it to non-white, working-class bodies that are disavowed in prosperity. *The Female Grotesque* 24.

7 The paradigms are: monophonic/melodic; diaphonic; polyphonic/contrapuntal; triadic/functional; and timbral.

8 For a comprehensive discussion of Ellington's music and its reception see Graham Lock, *Blutopia* 77-119.

9 Thanks to David Metzer for pointing out the transgressive qualities of Ellington's "jungle" or "primitive" sounds and his suggestion that Ellington was aware of the ability of these sounds to evoke the abject.

10 Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* 39-40. Ellington includes the poem "What is Music?" in this volume, which gives a different description of music that is more concrete, visual, masculine and universal.
For a comprehensive and insightful analysis of desire, drive, feminine subjectivity and jouissance in relation to Odysseus and the Sirens see Renata Salecl, "The Sirens and Feminine Jouissance" 14-35.

Renata Salecl discusses the difference between the voices of the Muses and the Sirens. The Muses voice a memory of the past that is linked to a forgetfulness of past trauma, while the Sirens sing with knowledge of the trauma and the death-drive. "The Sirens and Feminine Jouissance" 17-18.

The description alludes to the earlier discussion of music as the phantom limb.

See the introduction for a more complete definition of signification.

By using Kristeva’s trope “matrix space” in relation to artistic creativity I do not wish to essentialize either creativity or procreativity, or unproblematically elide the two. As Hilde Hein points out: “Ironically, the language of procreation, commonly used to describe the activity of the artist, has been used in a manner that excludes women from that activity. Insemination, fertilization, conception, gestation, incubation, pregnancy, parturition—all parts of the birth process—are invoked to denote an activity that is also theologized as the paradigmatic male act of will, the imposition of form upon inchoate matter. Yet women, whose experience provides the source for all this linguistic speculation, have historically been found unfit for the creative act.” “The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory” 458.
Chapter 3
Playing Like a Girl:
The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group

Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen.

—Hélène Cixous

In Greek mythology there is a story of an old woman named Baubo who, in an effort to help Demeter momentarily forget her grief over the loss of her daughter Persephone, pulled her dress up over her head, exposed her genitals and shouted obscene remarks and dirty jokes. Apparently the distraction worked since, as accounts of the incident indicate, Baubo's indecent gestures and lewd comments caused Demeter to laugh.

Scholars speculate that this obscene spectacle is replicated in a number of terracotta statues dated roughly from the fourth century B.C.E. Depicting a collapsed female body that consists of virtually nothing but two orifices, the statues reflect the Greek belief that women possess not one, but two mouths (Carson "Sound" 72). One mouth is, of course, the opening to the oral cavity; the other leads to the cavernous depths of the female sex. The anatomical deformity is strangely accentuated by the reversal of the mouths on the figures; that is, the "upper" mouth is situated in the statue's abdomen, the "lower" positioned on the top of her head. As poet and scholar
Anne Carson suggests, the representation of Baubo's aural and visual gesture reflects the general confusion surrounding the representation of the female body in a masculinist culture:

This Baubo presents us with one simple chaotic diagram of an outrageously manipulable female identity. The doubling and interchangeability of mouth engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex. ("Sound" 76)

According to the legend, however, Baubo is in control of the erasure. She uses the mutability of female identity and the noise it makes to disrupt the expectations associated with the passivity of the visible female spectacle. Baubo's gesture obscures her upper mouth to make it appear as though her lower mouth is doing all the talking, enacting a strange ventriloquism that throws the voice produced by her vocal folds into the folds of her labia. The shock of Baubo's aural/visual play ruptures the moment of viewing with an unexpected interval—a stutter—that creates a "zone of disruption and destabilization" and the same kind of "revised metaphysics of rupture and opening" discussed in Chapter two in relation to the "cut," the "limp" and "women's time" (Buckley 60; Snead 217). The noise of the stutter shatters the silent repetition of the female body by rupturing the expectations and predictability of its representation. The stutter resists fetishization, penetrates the ear with the noise of the resistance while it utters profanities that pollute patriarchal space. Perhaps this is why public soundings by women produce a great deal of anxiety: the sexed female body breaks the silence of representation with its abject noise.

As I argued in Chapter one, the rupture of predictability is similarly enacted in the philobatic activity of laughter. Julia Kristeva writes that the lifting of inhibition is a
practice of laughter, a sonic borderline state that destabilizes the boundaries separating the conscious from the unconscious, inside from outside (*Revolution* 225). Laughter and the stutter are sonic twins in this respect, uneven rhythms that linger at the threshold of sense and nonsense. Baubo's stutter is a laugh that engenders a sonic and somatic outpouring, an invisible reversal that turns the body inside out. Her actions exceed specularity; her sounds confound vision and defy anatomical expectations. When Baubo laughs sound becomes flesh, corporeal play becomes aural display, and sexuality is intoned. Baubo's laughter challenges the threshold of intelligibility and normality; she utters the limit, the place where the subject is both articulated and annihilated —inside/womb/life merges with outside/abjection/death. Perhaps this is why Demeter doubled-over in laughter: she got the joke.

Some might interpret this allegory as a warning: women who sound in public are in danger of surrendering to the visibility of their sexual difference by making a spectacle of themselves. Was it appropriate for Demeter to laugh given the circumstances? This is a rhetorical question, of course, since there is always a risk involved any time a woman opens her mouth(s). Baubo's action suggests—as does Demeter's reaction—that if the female body is always already spectacle by virtue of her difference, then making a spectacle of oneself by sounding that difference is a crucial performance of agency. As a critical reflection on the social order and a pleasurable "interval of potentiality," "the endless tempo of the stutter, refusing closure, [is a] persistent reminder of what isn't yet but totters, virtual, on the edge of its own becoming" (Buckley 61).

In his discussion of Baubo, Maurice Olender identifies three aspects associated with spectacle: gesture, desire and gaze (89). Where and with whom desire is located is
key to interpreting the spectacle, since desire mediates the network of power relations that circulate across the positions of spectacle and spectator. It is Baubo's desire to make herself a spectacle that disrupts the one-way gaze of the spectator, a refusal to mirror the "specular logic of the same" that defines the heterosexual voyeur (Moi Sexual 133). In turn, Baubo's distraction attracts Demeter; it reminds her of a knowledge that exists in excess of death, forgotten in her moment of grief, and her desire to respond is aroused.

Thus the sonic exchange of desire between Baubo and Demeter underscores the possibility of an insurgent, noisy, and improvisational female dialectic. It points to the pleasure and the power of transgressive sounding, challenges the silent repetition of the female body, and questions the anxiety associated with female noise. The mutuality of desire opens up the possibility of a visual and sonic exchange that "disturb any attempt to fix sexualities and identities, and, therefore, operates as a kind of queering" (Russell 179). The sounds made by each woman draw attention to and defy the conventions of the female body, enacting a "perverse corporeality" (Russell 178) that is linked to discourses of the monstrous and grotesque discussed in Chapter two. Baubo's unlocatable voice and Demeter's laughter are simultaneously embodied and disembodied, sonic markers of an "active vanishing" which is, according to Mary Russo, "a conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility" (48). As one woman exposes her flesh/voice to the other, a flesh/voice is echoed back. The laughter quells the pain of death and the ache of abjection while it celebrates the sharp tongue, the promise of mutability, the flux of sound. This is an antiphonal exchange—an excessive gesture, a queer laughter—that breaks Demeter's silence, reciprocates Baubo's laugh and resonates with/in both women. The story of Baubo is a sounding of body politics that, as
Russo suggests, transforms the spectacle of the female body into active “multivalent, oppositional play” (62).

Fast forward to the 1970s: the legacy of Baubo and Demeter resonates with/in women improvisers, women who choose to make spectacles of themselves by sounding body, sexuality, knowledge, difference, freedom and experience: “to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (Cixous “Decapitation” 258). Beginning in 1977 this disruption was sounded in the queer laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG).

Improvising a Free Space

Within the European music community interest in improvisational experimentation had developed more than a decade earlier in the 1960s, piqued by the presence of American expatriate free jazz musicians, the desire of local improvisers to stretch beyond the structures of idiomatic improvisation toward greater aesthetic freedom, and the disillusionment of improvisers with the growing commodification of music (Bailey xi-xii; Prévost 10). Percussionist Eddie Prévost suggests that although for some European improvisers jazz was viewed as a “major artistic and ideological force within the development of a wider-ranging creative improvised music” that continually struggled to “escape the confinement of a white-dominated capitalist culture,” it too had begun to solidify “into conventions that became as hard to escape as the unfreedoms of classical or popular musics” (10).

The appeal of freedom in improvisational practices reflected the emerging political climate of the 1960s, as improvisers began to discard codified procedures, including those found in jazz improvisation, in favour of experimental practices. These
practices were concerned not only with aesthetics but also with political, economic and social matters. Irène Schweizer recounts that this politically charged time influenced her decision to stop playing "the changes" and to leave improvisational structures and systems behind: "For me, it was a natural development. We had always played the music of the time. In 1968 a lot of things were happening in Europe. There were student revolutions. Barriers were falling. It seemed natural to want to free yourself" (Hale 15).

Nathaniel Mackey observes a similar impulse in black music, particularly free jazz, that challenged the dominant culture while striving toward aesthetic, individual and collective freedom:

During the sixties, assertions were often made to the effect that jazz groups provided glimpses into the future. What was meant by this was that black music—especially that of the sixties, with its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context—proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands. (34)

The parallel development of free jazz in the United States and free improvisation in Europe speaks of the ability of freely improvised music to cut across aesthetic boundaries of containment and categorization. James Snead describes this common aesthetic impulse:

The extension of "free jazz," starting in the 1960s, into the technical practice of using the "material" qualities of sound—on the horns, for instance, using overtones, harmonics and subtones—became almost mandatory for the serious jazz musician and paralleled a similar
movement on the part of European musicians branching out of the classical tradition. (222)

Although the simultaneous development of a congruent sonic aesthetic linked the practices of free jazz and free improvisation together, it has sometimes obscured the fact that the two were distinct—albeit interrelated—practices grounded in different traditions and communities. Joëlle Léandre explains the differences from a European perspective:

We received free jazz in Europe at the time when Ornette Coleman and all the other players were creating, but free jazz is not free music, free jazz is a Black music too. Free music is, I think, definitely a European music. We have a long history of the music, we have Monteverdi, we have Bartok, we have Stockhausen, it's a long line [...] I think that this kind of music, free music, is very much a European music, and where different people come from they bring their own ways to it. You know, we have very wonderful jazz musicians in France, but they play the American music, they don't play the European music (laughs) but what I like is all this mixture.

(Vickery 18)

The suggestion here is that neither free jazz nor free improvisation existed in a vacuum but neither were they completely interchangeable. It is important to recognize that the hybridity and mixing of the practices did not obscure the differences, especially in regard to the intersection of aesthetic freedom with race and class.

In free improvisation—exercised within a predominately white, male improvising community existing on the margins of avant-garde and mainstream music—the movement toward freedom often contained a critique of class structures and power
networks embedded in European music and society. Alan Durant writes that free improvisation "is a point of counter-identification against systems of control, hierarchy and subordination" (270). African-American explorations of freedom in free jazz, on the other hand, actively critiqued and resisted racial and class oppression within a historical continuum that connected black music to the resistance of slavery and traced its musical roots to Africa:

The music itself describes the political position of Blacks in America just as their position dictates their day-to-day life, the instruments they play and the places where their music can be heard. In the case of African-American music, the fact that the creators are the colonised in a colonialist society, has a vital bearing on the way the music has evolved, how it is regarded by the world at large, and the way in which the artists are treated. (Wilmer, Serious 14)

Neither practice, however, extended their critiques to include the aesthetic, economic or political liberation of women. For the most part a practice of freedom that resisted gender oppression and oppression on the basis of sexual difference was excluded from the liberatory impulses of male-dominated improvising communities. The opportunity for freedom in relation to sexual difference, gender and sexuality for women improvisers was strangely absent from the discourses and practices of both free jazz and free improvisation.

Thus, it is difficult to describe accurately just how integral women's contributions to the development of free improvisation and free jazz were in the early days, since women's participation was limited and remains underdocumented. Irène Schweizer often acknowledges that, although she was the only female instrumentalist on the
European scene throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, her contributions are conspicuously absent from historical accounts:

I had been taking part in the FMP festival during its development in the ‘60s and ‘70s, being the only woman on every festival. [. . . ] There was a photo exhibition about all the jazz musicians from FMP festivals from 1968 to 1978, and not one single photo of me even though I took part every second year. (Les Diaboliques)

The particular challenges encountered by women improvisers due to the effects of gender and sex oppression, including the gendering of women’s performances and audiences as feminine and/or lacking, are rarely acknowledged. In Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s, Sherrie Tucker discusses how “stories of devaluation and absence are woven into the familiar rhythms of the popular history books about the Swing Era” (3). As with the majority of women musicians in a variety of genres throughout history, all-women swing bands were either omitted from historical accounts, treated as novelties, or considered inauthentic because they were assumed to lack ability by virtue of their sexual difference. Angela Davis also notes a masculinist bias in the historical and critical accounts of the blues, that fails “to take seriously the efforts of women blues musicians and the female reception of their work. As a consequence, the central part played by women both in the blues and in the history of African-American cultural consciousness is often ignored” (44-45).

Similarly, chronicles of free improvisation and free jazz from a variety of sources—including Derek Bailey’s Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music,4 John Litweiler’s classic book on free jazz, The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958; the more recent work of Kevin Whitehead in New Dutch Swing, documenting the scene in
Holland; as well as John Corbett's provocative article "Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation"—pay little or no attention to the music's female constituents. Perhaps because improvisationally-based music struggled from the beginning for recognition, its practices and documents have not always been liberatory, often reduplicating the marginalization and exclusion women face(d) in more mainstream musical structures and in patriarchal society at large.

By contrast, Val Wilmer's classic book *As Serious as Your Life* documents the experiences of women in and around the "new jazz" in African-American communities. Wilmer's approach is twofold: she writes of women's experiences as support systems for their male musician partners and of their struggles as players trying to cope with a male dominated scene. She pays particular attention to the intersections of race and class with gender and sexual difference, unearthing differences in the experiences and attitudes of both white and black women. Although the focus on women is not the core of Wilmer's project, it is extensive enough to paint an accurate, yet somewhat bleak, portrait of women's position in and relation to men and improvisation. Wilmer reports that many women gave up their own artistic ambitions to support their men. When they did venture out to play in clubs the reception was often luke-warm, and as Wilmer points out, the skepticism that scrutinized and devalued women's playing is summed up in the comment: "You sound good—for a woman!" (204).

By raising the issue of sexual politics in free jazz, Wilmer also unearthed the sexual politics of music criticism. She recounts that after writing these passages on women in her book, male critics criticized her for being insufficiently "feminist." She describes her dilemma:
It was true that I had dwelt on women's supportive role rather than participatory contribution, but as someone pointed out, jazz wasn't exactly a feminist area of endeavor. Many's the time I have wished that I could rewrite that particular part of the book with a more thorough analysis of women's position. It was an intervention, though, and by and large, the response to *As Serious* was positive. (*Mama* 287-288)

This reflection appears in Wilmer's subsequent book, *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This: My Life In the Jazz World*, a personal history centering on a young girl's passion for jazz that develops into a life-long commitment to the music. Writing from her own perspective as a white, lesbian, working-class woman photographer and writer, Wilmer details the complex negotiations required to navigate the world of jazz. The result is a superb descriptive journey that moves the reader through a number of seemingly incommensurable communities simultaneously. The exploration of her complex, shifting selves consistently questions white, heterosexual, middle-class notions of identity, community and music and demonstrates alternative possibilities of community and care. The narrative brings to mind Minnie Bruce Pratt's "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," inasmuch as Wilmer rewrites herself "in relation to shifting interpersonal and political contexts" that enable her to construct "a notion of community as inherently unstable and contextual, not based on sameness or essential connections, but offering agency instead of passivity; a community that is 'the product of work, of struggle [...] of interpretation'" (de Lauretis "Eccentric" 12-13). This is the vision and possibility of community when the struggle toward freedom includes the intersections of sex, gender, and sexuality, in addition to race and class.
Playing the Personal is Political

The impetus to gather a group of women improvisers together into a collective was galvanized by the glaring absence of women improvisers en masse in performance situations. At a musician's union meeting in London, vocalist Maggie Nicols expressed her desire to explore improvisation with other women to multi-instrumentalist/composer Lindsay Cooper (Nicols). Even with the emergence of a burgeoning "women's music" scene, Cooper and Nicols recognized the glaring absence of women improvisers: "We got talking and we agreed that improvisation had become very important and no women were doing it. And suddenly we thought, well let's do it! Let's get women together and do it ourselves!" (Cooper)

Involvement in the feminist movement, coupled with a strong commitment to class politics and lesbian activism, encouraged Nicols and Cooper to commingle the personal and the political within an improvisational context. Although both women performed extensively with men, their experience playing with other women was very limited. Nicols wondered out loud what the experience of playing with women would be like:

We recognized that women were being excluded and we wanted to just experience what it was like to play with other women. One of the strongest things for me that came out of the Women's Liberation Movement was the recognition of the connection between the personal and the political. So to say for me that it was a personal thing was also political. I wanted to feel the intimacy musically that I felt with women. You know when you hang out with women, that quality of shared experience. How would that translate artistically? (Nicols Personal Interview)
It was Nicols’ approach to improvisation—an openness to inclusivity inspired by the philosophy and practice of her mentor and friend, drummer John Stevens—that initially shaped the group. Nicols envisioned an open and changing pool of women musicians that would bring a wide range of approaches to improvisation, varied experience to technical facility, and stylistic diversity to spontaneous performances. The initial pool of musicians consisted of Cooper, Nicols, Corine Liensol, Georgie Born and Cathy Williams. Irène Schweizer and Sally Potter joined the Feminist Improvising Group in the spring of 1978, and Annemarie Roelofs, Frankie Armstrong, Angele Veltmeijer and Francoise Dupety participated intermittently to form a variety of combinations of up to eight women improvising together in any given performance.  

Nicols arranged the first public performance of an entirely female group of improvisers during a Music for Socialism concert at the Almost Free in London (Wilmer Mama 284). When the leaflet advertising the concert appeared, the name of the group was listed as the Feminist Improvising Group, a name neither Nicols nor Cooper had chosen:  

We didn’t call ourselves the Feminist Improvising Group. We were going to call ourselves the Women’s Improvising Group but the promoters of the Music for Socialism event gave us that name! So we grew into it. We actually took it on board. It was very strange that men gave us the name.  

(Nicols Les Diaboliques)  

Nicols’ suspicion of the feminist label was well founded, since in the early days of the movement feminism was, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, “anchored to the single axis of gender as sexual difference” (10). Indeed, feminism had presented a singular, unified view of woman that was problematic in the face of differences between women
on the basis of sexuality, race and class. Nicols puts it this way: “I was skeptical in regard to the feminist label. Not that I don’t consider myself a feminist, but more because of the association with dogmas” (Meier and Landolt 17).

The feminist label could also potentially polarize the sexual politics already embedded in improvisation and stigmatize women improvisers even further. Yet, on the other hand, the term “feminist” had its charm. It was a subversive and powerful moniker that was eventually adopted by the group, as Nicols slyly recounts: “We took on the challenge and we thought okay, so be it. You want feminism, we’ll give you feminism. And we certainly did, scissors and all!” (Les Diaboliques)

**Improvising Consciousness**

The first performance of FIG was preceded by a sort of consciousness raising workshop in which the players discussed their feelings and experiences as women. The discussion was a catalyst for the pastiche of sounds and images that found their way into the improvisation:

I spoke about being a mother, Corine spoke about being treated like a child because of her disability, so already we had a mother-child scenario which we started the gig with. The others spoke of their particular personal/political issues as women—appearance, image, etc. We brought kitchen props. It was a sort of prepared spontaneity that was a very powerful, anarchic, humorous beginning. (Nicols)⁶

On stage the women appeared in drag, engaged in role-playing, performed domestic chores, peeled onions and sprayed perfume. It was a performance Nicols describes as “absolute anarchy”:  

120
The people were shocked, because they felt the power that was emerging from the women. We did not do that on purpose. We didn't even realize ourselves what was happening. We improvised, but we improvised our own lives and our biographies. We parodied our situation, perverted our dependencies and threw everything high into the air. (Meier and Landolt 17-18)

Throwing everything high into the air was, for the Feminist Improvising Group, the improvisation of a “critical method.” To use a common cliché of the early feminist movement, it was a way they could make their voices heard. On this level FIG approached improvisation as a philobatic activity, a practice of self-discovery and a process of collective negotiation, practices linked to the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s. Although now debunked as ineffectual and essentialist—a marker of white, middle-class radical feminism—early consciousness raising groups created a space for women to unearth knowledge that was subjugated as a result of oppression on the basis of gender and sexual difference. It enabled women to experiment with a variety of power-sharing arrangements, to negotiate leadership and reimagine political practice. However, as Angela Davis observes, the prioritizing of gender issues in feminist consciousness raising groups often obscured equally important issues of sexuality, race and class:

Consciousness-raising groups affirmed the most dramatic insight of the early women's liberation movement: the personal is political. Individual women shared personal experiences with the aim of rendering explicit the underlying politics shaping women's lives. Because of the complicated racial politics of the 1960s, which defined the women's movement as
white, and because of its emphasis on personal micropolitics (often seen as a retreat from the macropolitics of race), black women generally found it difficult to identify with the strategy of consciousness-raising. (55)

Teresa de Lauretis points to the substantive contributions of women of colour and lesbians to consciousness raising that shifted the emphasis away from the narrowness of "personal micropolitics" toward a transformation of feminism as a "pursuit of consciousness and political practice" ("Eccentric" 5). This kind of consciousness raising required a reconfiguration of consciousness on the part of a subject who moves beyond the notion of "writing the self" toward "a process of struggle and interpretation, a rewriting of the self [..] in relation to a new understanding of community, of history, of culture" ("Eccentric" 18).

Although its members were predominantly white, they were also lesbian and working class, thus the intersections of gender with race, class and sexuality were important aspects of FIG improvisations. Issues faced by black women improvisers in relation to socio-cultural struggles were recognized by white lesbians like Nicols, who faced similar struggles in relation to sexuality:

There are many black female musicians here in Europe. We can research the history of black women in literature and it is a shame for us white women that it took so long to realize the experience of black women is different. Black women have to get along with a very difficult contradiction. They are fighting the sexism of black men but they want to show solidarity with them because they are also suppressed by racism. I believe the fight of black women is still a powerful, explosive fact. And it will not take long
until you will find black women bands in improvised music. (Meier and Landolt 18)

As well the straight members of FIG, if uninitiated in the politics of lesbian sexuality, were politicized by their lesbian comrades, as Annemarie Roelofs attests:

I was not so politically involved in Holland—besides making modern music—but I wasn’t lesbian and I think that makes a difference. [. . . ]

Talking to Lindsay and Maggie [. . .] helped me a lot in forming my thinking at that time. And of course that is what was happening when we were touring and doing concerts, they were telling me what was happening, or they were talking over things in London. In that case it was much more political than any men’s group who were just interested in playing music.

For Nicols a comprehensive knowledge of these intersections informed her improvisations:

I see my music in connection to my political attitude. I am a woman and I identify myself with the workers movement. That is my social background. In addition I have learned about social privileges and recognize I have privileges as a white woman in our society. I think I wanted to cross boundaries in many ways: social, emotional and in music. That is difficult to convey openly to an audience. That’s why you have to be committed to the social environment you are a part of. I mean the political environment as well. You need to know what’s going on around you, which political discussions are taking place. (Meier and Landolt 18)

FIG performances staged numerous parodies that dealt with the intersections of gender, race and class. The scenario staged between Nicols (a white woman) and
Liensol (a black woman) described above can be read not only as a parody of the infantilization of a woman with a disability, but as an indictment of the racial politics of the early feminist movement illustrated by the infantilization of a black woman by an authoritative white woman. FIG also offered a critique of whiteness in parodies of middle-class domesticity. The incorporation of everyday domestic "found" objects such as vacuum-cleaners, brooms, dustpans and egg slicers—in Lindsay Cooper's words transforming "the sound's of women's work into a work of women's sounds"—highlighted women's work in the private sphere as well as the subordination of working class women as domestics (Wilmer Mama 285). FIG used drag to critique and parody the institution of compulsory heterosexuality that existed not only in society but in various forms of music as well: "To concentrate while singing [Nicols] usually puts her hands over her broken fly. [. . .] Sally is "sweet" and "demure" in a well-known hetero love song" (Jankowski). This set the stage for role-playing and interactions between members of the group that challenged heteronormative roles, causing one reviewer to comment: "On stage, they often touch each other. A lot of 'acts,' 'fights' and hugs ended up on the stage floor tonight" (Jankowski). By violating taboos of musical propriety and masculinist competition that prohibited musicians from touching one another, FIG more than hinted at the possibility of sensuous and sexual relationships between women. The integration of lesbian sexuality into the improvisational text enabled the Feminist Improvising Group to ask, "what gets lost when [a woman] and her music are studied in the 'company of men,' and what is recuperated when [a woman] joins 'the company of women?'" (Mockus 52).

Following this trajectory Irène Schweizer questioned the assumptions that constructed the world of jazz and improvised music as heterosexual:
Why are so few jazz musicians gay? This question has never been asked. The jazz musician has a totally different image. He has to act macho: to read the notes with one eye and to peek around in the audience for nice women. With improvised music the consciousness of musicians has changed a little bit. There are some emancipated men: George Lewis, Maarten Altena, Lol Coxhill. But gay musicians? Even if they were gay, they wouldn't be showing it. There are some exceptions like Cecil Taylor, but there are not many. (Meier and Landolt 17)

The decentering of heterosexual interactions that are assumed to exist in and around musical performances opened possibilities for lesbian interactions. In effect FIG queered the space of improvisational practice. If, as Mary Russo suggests, freedom is the ability to occupy space, the Feminist Improvising Group was able to claim a space for lesbian sexuality in improvisation, as Nicols explains: "We are not lesbians [on the music scene] by chance. That has something to do with autonomy. [. . .] The lesbians were pioneers and had to be lesbian." (Meier and Landolt 18)

FIG performances enacted a rewriting of self and community by improvising a feminist consciousness "attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses" (de Lauretis "Eccentric" 18). In other words the performances of the Feminist Improvising Group were improvisational stutters, a polyphony of ruptures, a queer laughter that (re)sounded gender, sexual difference, race, class and sexuality.
Echoes and Stutters

FIG's performative stuttering is informed by the stutters of the women musicians who preceded them, particularly black women improvisers in blues and jazz. Patricia Hill Collins notes that historically African-American women have used music, literature, dialogue and everyday experiences to construct a black feminist consciousness, in response to the suppression of their knowledge (252, 267). Angela Davis finds a particularly strong example of this black feminist consciousness in the performances of African-American blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s. For Davis it is important “to understand women’s blues as a working-class form that anticipates the politicization of the “personal” through the dynamic of “consciousness raising,” a phenomenon associated with the women’s movement of the last three decades” (42).

Blues women challenged dominant cultural norms as they sang songs that articulated and contested the oppressive structures that pervaded their lives. Women’s blues themes dealt extensively with issues of race, class and sexuality in a feminist reconfiguration of an African-American aesthetic, as Davis explains:

A process similar to the consciousness-raising strategies associated with the 1960s women’s liberation movement unfolds in [blues] songs, which are conversations among women about male behaviour in which the traditional call-and-response structure of West African-based music takes on a new feminist meaning. [. . .] it is possible to detect ways in which the sharing of personal relationships in blues culture prefigured consciousness raising and its insights about the social construction of individual experience. Seen in this light, the blues women can be
understood as being responsible for the dissemination of attitudes toward male supremacy that had decidedly feminist implications. (55)

The notion of consciousness raising through the technique of call and response points to the general importance of dialogue in the African-American community, a dialogue that Collins suggests is a crucial component in the development of a connected knowing that affirms each person's individuality (261). Call and response is an "interpretive framework" that demonstrates an awareness of the dynamic connection of the individual to the community, evidenced from an aesthetic standpoint in the intricacy of African-based polyrhythms. These multiplicitous, intersecting rhythms enable "people [to] distinguish themselves from each other while they remain dynamically related," exemplifying "personal expressiveness and individuality without sacrificing a communal connection" (Chernoff 125; Collins 236). In other words, as Paul Gilroy elaborates, there is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolizes and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete racial self and others. (79)

Collins analyzes the creative rearticulation of knowledge production developed by marginalized black subjects in response to the call of a dominant culture that subjugates their knowledge. Exploring epistemology from the standpoint of African-American feminism, she identifies four interrelated frameworks or "dimensions" that construct a black feminist epistemology through call and response: "the use of dialogue," discussed above; "lived experience as a criterion of meaning"; "the ethic of caring"; and "the ethic
of personal accountability.” These can be effectively used to develop similar paradigms for other marginalized groups (266).

Collins suggests that the evocation of lived experience as a criterion of meaning signals the integral part wisdom plays in defining knowledge for African-American women. She notes that the distinction between knowledge and wisdom is mediated through experience such that the intersection of oppressive structures, as they pertain to both individuals and communities, can be assessed more effectively: “[k]nowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (257). Thus the merits of knowledge are verified through lived experience in a continuum that informs and transforms both, creating fresh perspectives that lead to further inquiry (258). Far from an essentialist notion, experience used as a criterion of meaning ensures that the intersections of knowledge, wisdom and experience create spatial configurations that encompass body and mind, a connected knowing that moves beyond the one-dimensional assumptions of hegemonic knowledge.

Collins affirms that black women are generally supported as individuals within their families and communities, who make room for women’s knowledge, experience and wisdom to be articulated in various contexts. She explains that white women may be disadvantaged in this regard:

While White women may value lived experience, it is questionable whether comparable support comes from White families—particularly middle-class families where privatization is so highly valued—and other social institutions controlled by Whites that advance similar values. (260)
This point illustrates the fact that complex networks of power/knowledge are pervasive in women's lives, although they manifest themselves differently in relation to gender, class, race and sexuality. Collins notes the similarities as well as the differences, to conclude that "similarity suggests that the actual contours of intersecting oppressions can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies used by subordinate groups" (269). She describes these alternate epistemologies as markers of a "transversal politics" that "pivots the center" by acknowledging that no one group—or individual for that matter—has complete and infallible knowledge: "partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard" (270). Dialogical and partial alternative epistemologies ensure the affirmation of a community without sacrificing the individual, a point that Davis identifies as one of the most compelling aspects of women's blues.

Davis maintains that women's blues reflect the contradictory realities of community and subjectivity. She applies Collins' interpretive frameworks outlined above, arguing that the blues are embedded in an ethic of caring and an ethic of personal accountability, informed by lived experience and expressed in call and response. Women's blues articulate the complexities of self-reflexivity alongside the dynamics of relationships that are negotiated communally—woman to woman, woman to man. From social, political, economic and sexual standpoints, blues singers leave no stone unturned, singing of everything from antagonism, friendship, rivalry, money, solidarity and travel to hetero- and homosexual love. According to Davis, the complexity of topics discussed in the blues underscores the "historical construction of black working-class individuality" that was forged in the contradictions presented by the possibility of individual freedom alongside commitments to the community after emancipation from slavery (45-46). Thus Davis suggests that the dialectic between performer and audience...
in women's blues "created a discourse that represented freedom in [. . .] immediate and accessible terms" (7).

**Improvising Call and Response**

Free improvisation offered a similar kind of immediate and accessible freedom to the Feminist Improvising Group. Improvisation served as an "interpretive framework," a site for the negotiation of individuality and community through the multiplicitous interactions of improviser to improviser, improviser to audience, as well as audience to one another. Part of the collective's political and aesthetic program was to institute antiphonal exchange between performers and audiences by consciously dismantling the divisions that separated them, a power-sharing tactic that extended well beyond the stage. For FIG member Sally Potter, breaking down the division between the audience and the performer was a political strategy that emerged from an awareness of feminist and class politics:

Both the specialness ascribed to individual performers and the performer/audience divide itself are seen as unhealthy symptoms of a class divided society, the performer taking an honorary position of power. The strategy then becomes to break down the divide and emphasize participation as a way of saying anyone can do it. (291)

The idea that "anyone can do it" was often unpalatable to improvisers and audience members who valued the display of technical virtuosity as the marker of improvisational competence above all else. Improvising percussionist Eddie Prévost cautions against the tendency he calls "technological elitism," insisting that improvisation requires
"dexterity of all kinds (social as well as technical)" (5). For Nicols the ability to integrate dexterity of all kinds into improvisation requires a skill she calls "social virtuosity":

For me social virtuosity—social skills really—is part of [what it takes] to communicate with an audience and with other musicians. It also involves the social skills used to live your life. How you are in the community and those sorts of things. Being able to have that kind of creative spontaneity in every aspect of your life. (Telephone Interview)

For Irène Schweizer reading technical virtuosity through social virtuosity provided an opportunity to redefine improvisation and invent new standards:

It is very important that we all got the chance to play together. But there are also problems: Which musicians are you going to invite? Which are the standards you demand? Technical brilliance? Professionalism? Enthusiasm? Invention? Imagination? I would prefer a mixture of all. That’s an important gain of FIG. It defined new standards. Until then these were defined by men. (Meier and Landolt 18)

Playing with social virtuosity and challenging the parameters of technical virtuosity were ways in which the Feminist Improvising Group could break down the barriers between audience and performer and transgress the threshold of music with women's noise.

However, by improvising the social, technical and sonic aspects of their performances in public FIG opened themselves up to criticism. Their explorations were often questioned by various communities and/or individuals that intersected with their performances. The choice to explore and develop new standards on stage was at times misunderstood as elitism or rejected as incompetence:
The critics were never medium, it was always high calling our work very interesting stuff or it was absolutely low, the deepest saying, how can a festival have these women? [...] I think Lindsay and Maggie would certainly agree that the feeling we sometimes felt when the critics were criticizing us was very denigrating. They would say, these women, not these musicians, these women, argh, eight women on stage, oh god what's happening, get some men out there! (Roelofs)

Nicols, Schweizer and Roelofs agree that the criticism received from men had a divisive effect on the group. Nicols remembers that the FIG challenge to “technological elitism” and fixed notions of “musical competency” was often dismissed by male musicians: “Whether it was the jazz community that said to Irene and I, ‘you and Irene are really great but everybody else is crap’ or the more progressive rock ‘Henry Cow’ people who would like what Lindsay and Georgie were doing and all that. So, divide and rule.”

Schweizer came up against similar sentiments:

Some people asked me: “Why do you play with those women? They can’t play and they’re no good and you don’t have to do that. Why do you play with those women?” It was always difficult for me to explain why, because for me it was just important to play like this in a group of women and to support them.

For Roelofs the lack of support from men was disheartening but also suspect:

We were eight people, some of whom were good players and some of whom weren’t so experienced but were politically very right and in terms of improvising picked up nice things. [FIG] was more like a sort of workshop where people of all different kinds of levels attended. That could certainly
be heard but, I don’t know, maybe we could have hoped for more support from the men’s side. [They could have said] well just keep on going. But mostly the men said it’s no good. I definitely think it’s not only the musical level they were talking about. I think it was felt as a threat for a lot of men to just see so many women on stage.

One incident that stands out in the minds of all of the FIG members I interviewed was their performance at the Total Music Meeting in Berlin in 1979 and the response of the well-known avant-garde musician Alexander von Schlippenbach. Nicols describes what happened as she remembers it:

He came up to us before the gig and he was kissing our hands. Now, we did a phenomenal gig there. I mean it was phenomenal. It was mad, it was anarchic. It was a mixture of grace and clumsiness [. . .] the audience loved it. Then we found out from [the organizer’s partner] that Alex had gone to him and complained about us being there saying that he could have found loads of men that would have played a lot better, that we couldn’t play our instruments. I mean this included Irene and Annemarie and Lindsay and myself! And it was the hypocrisy of that. So Lindsay and I went to a women’s festival in the same place and we went into the gents toilets and wrote graffiti all over the gents toilets: “Watch out Alex von Schlippenbach, we’ve got our scissors ready.” You know, we graffitied the gents toilets [laughs]. And it was only just recently that I started speaking to him again because I thought I’ve got to let it go. He probably doesn’t even realize this.
The extent to which readings of FIG performances were effected by gender and sexual difference is difficult to assess or dissect. Was there a masculinist musical gaze/ear operative here? Did the disavowed gender anxiety—related to the spectacle of so many unsupervised and unpredictable women on the stage—resurface in the accusations of technical incompetence, lack of speed and fluency? Guitarist Eugene Chadbourne, who also played at the 1979 Total Music Meeting, speculates that gendered style as well as sexual difference factored into the critical assessment of FIG's performances, although these were not the sole criteria:

My impression at the time was that the cool, in-crowd clique at the Total Music Meeting in Berlin wasn't into anything that was outside of what they were doing. [. . .] This was my main experience with FIG because the festival went on over four nights and I think each group played three or four times. I was playing with the Japanese trumpeter Toshinori Kondo and our music was not well liked by either this in-crowd of older players or the audience. The lack of support for FIG must obviously extend beyond the boundaries of that group into the entire area of women musicians. [. . .] I am sure the lack of men on stage made some men feel excluded. Then I guess the next step is they listen to the music or watch what is going on with an attitude, like let's see them prove themselves.¹⁰

At the most fundamental level male improvisers regularly excluded women from their groups, and, even if the exclusion was inadvertent, it was also blatant. This meant that the mere presence of FIG as an exclusively female group stirred controversy in the improvising community. The extreme reactions to FIG performances raised questions about the level of anxiety attached to the “exclusion” of men from FIG, the general lack
of support for women improvisers and the severity of critical response. The spectacle of women improvising without men tended to overshadow the improvisations themselves and to obscure how the performances were received:

It's amazing the number of men that were saying, "Why are there no men?" And yet nobody had ever dreamed to think of asking why there were men only [in groups]. They'd say well there are just no women around. There's a kind of weird, twisted logic whereby men think it's not deliberate, we haven't deliberately excluded women. And that's even more insidious because they just haven't thought about it. At least we thought about it. (Nicols Personal Interview)

FIG demonstrated that free improvisation was not free of masculinist tendencies or immune to gender anxieties. Although not all practices in improvisation reinforced gender and sex difference, it is clear that the position and participation of women in the development and deployment of improvisational practices and codes was, and to a great extent still is, tentative at best.

Unfortunately, FIG was not immune to criticisms from feminist audiences who were purportedly into "women's music." The dogmatic feminist gaze that criticized FIG for being too virtuosic and abstract—interpreted as macho posturing and elitism—at times plagued them. Val Wilmer recalls one of several frustrating incidents, when the collective was performing at Drill Hall in London as part of a newly organized Women's Festival:

The Drill Hall concert left many women at a loss. It was a freewheeling, improvised piece, played by forthright musicians who obviously knew their instruments. But the "free music" idiom was unknown to most of the
audience, and the unease and uncertainty were expressed about whether, being so "inaccessible," theirs was an elitist concept. It was bitterly frustrating for the musicians involved to be rejected in this way. Most of them had a history of struggle against male refusal to allow them a place on the bandstand. Now, having shown that not only could they play their instruments but were equipped to handle the most demanding of concepts, they were under attack from the quarter where they most needed friends. (Mama 285)

There were, of course, many favourable reactions to FIG improvisations by both women and men who attended the concerts. FIG was able to introduce feminist politics to a largely uninitiated group of men, as well as introduce free improvisation to a largely uninitiated group of women. Nicols cites FIG as an influence on the improvisational group "Alterations" while Cooper recalls reactions from a woman artist working in another medium: "I remember one gig FIG did, and a friend of mine that I was working on a film with said: 'I don't know what on earth you're doing but I like it.' And I thought well, that really is all you need to say."

Overall, the Feminist Improvising Group did play a number of women's festivals, and to a majority of all-women audiences. In these performances they applied their skills of social and technical virtuosity, improvising issues particular to women from complex socio-political, economic and aesthetic perspectives:

Women, who did come because we were women, trusted us because we were women, and through that started listening to the music. I know that because of that experience a lot of women went on to listen to the whole spectrum of improvised music, not just women's music. So in a way we
were ambassadors for the music as well. And I love the way—I'm being ironic here—women are not seen as an important audience. (Nicols Personal Interview)

The opportunity to play for women audiences became an opportunity to reconfigure the relationship between spectacle and spectator apart from the typical scenario of masculine desire. It was a chance for women to foreground their bodies and their sounds for the pleasure of other women. If women in the audience were not particularly fluent in deciphering the codes of free improvisation, their fluency with the all too familiar tropes of the female body and women's relationship to sound was proficient. FIG's improvisations were attuned to the facility of the audience to play with and against the codes of race, gender, sexuality, class and politics, as well as their facility to play with the aesthetic codes of improvisation. Playing became a reciprocal process, a spatial reconfiguration of sonic multiplicity and somatic polyphony, a call and response between the individual improvisers and a community of listeners. This is a solidarity that creates what Julia Kristeva refers to as a "paradoxical community," a community that recognizes and respects difference: "We try to help one another, all. But not a community that unifies and banalizes. We recognize one another as [...] strangers" (Guberman 41). In Chapter five I discuss the implications of this recognition further.

FIG was instrumental in encouraging listeners/interpreters to negotiate the work from a queer perspective. The revolutionary listener described by Kristeva as the "eternal adolescent" and discussed in the introduction to this project is a listener who responds to the antiphonal stutter of the performers with her own stuttering alterity. The spectacle of the Feminist Improvising Group was a queer sounding that demanded queer listening, an antiphonal and erotic playing by ear that heard pleasure and desire.
in the strange resonances and sonic exchanges of woman's embodied, lived experience. There is a moment during a FIG performance recorded live at the Stockholm Women's Music Festival, in which the audience spontaneously responds to the screams, wails and instrumental flurries of the players on stage with their own shrieks and ululations.\textsuperscript{10} The players pay attention to this response and reciprocate with/in a cacophony of sound: the flesh/voice of Baubo echoed in Demeter's laugh. The pleasure and pain heard in the disruptive stutters of Baubo and Demeter are heard again in the performances of the Feminist Improvising Group. The insurgent, noisy, female spectacle performed in ancient Greece is (re)played in the queer laughter of women improvisers, the improvised laughter of queer women.
Notes


2 Hélène Cixous, *Castration or Decapitation?* 356.

3 For a comprehensive discussion of Baubo that includes the dating and significance of the statues attributed to this story see Olender, “Aspects of Baubo” and accompanying plates.

4 A number of women I interviewed were bewildered by Bailey's omission of women improvisers from this project.

5 Instrumentation was as follows: Lindsay Cooper bassoon, oboe, soprano sax; Maggie Nicols voice, piano; Corine Liensol trumpet; Georgie Born bass, cello; Cathy Williams voice; Irène Schweizer piano; Sally Potter voice, alto sax; Annemarie Roelofs trombone, violin; Frankie Armstrong voice; Angele Veltmeijer flute, tenor, soprano and alto sax; Francoise Dupety guitar.

6 The source of this excerpt is an informal written correspondence with Nicols that was not part of the formal interviews. Nicols recounts a more detailed description of the same scenario in her interview with Meier and Landolt.

7 Thanks to Becki Ross for this insight and for providing a perspective on the heterosexism and racism that pervaded many consciousness raising groups of the time.

139
Henry Cow was a progressive rock band based in the UK during the 1970s whose personnel included Georgie Born and Lindsay Cooper. The name of the band is a pun on the name of the American composer Henry Cowell.

Elsewhere in the interview Chadbourne refers to the prevailing FMP style as “old-school macho.”

See Appendix 3:1.
You see how the hysterics cry. One could say this is much noise about nothing.
—Jean-Martin Charcot

I have argued throughout this project that phallogocentric culture marks women as pathological not only by virtue of their visible difference, but also because of the sounds they make. Female sonic pathology—that is, her cry, linguistic excess, improvisations, laughter and noise—is generally interpreted as and/or associated with abjection, abnormality and insanity. The hysteric is, by definition, a female who is in turn defined as hysterical: “[m]adwomen strain the semiotic codes from which they emerge, thereby throwing into high relief the assumption concerning musical normality and reason from which they must—by definition—deviate” (McClary Endings 86).

Musicologist Susan McClary demonstrates that historically composers have represented the madwoman in opera with excessive chromaticism, florid ornamentation and “extravagant virtuosity,” compositional devices that deviate from and provide a stark contrast to the prevailing “diatonic narrative” of the work as a whole (Endings 92, 100). Chromatic, ornamental and virtuosic excesses are the sonic corollaries of the abject feminine, and are subject to the *political processes of sonic abjection*—or “frames” as McClary refers to them—devised by the male composer. Her analysis of the musical representation of several key “madwomen” in operas from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries traces the various devices used by composers to frame the sonic
excesses associated with the feminine. McClary observes that the control of chromaticism within the score was accomplished with a variety of techniques including the elimination of improvisation in the *bel canto* style and the appropriation of chromaticism as a feature of masculine virtuosity in instrumental styles of music (*Endings* 96, 82). She notes that the figure of the madwoman also provided an opportunity for the composer to musically misbehave (*Endings* 102).

As discussed in Chapters one and two, the need to control feminine excess in/of music finds its precedent in the need to control the excessive qualities of any sound that escapes the frame of logos. Transgressive sounding beyond the normalizing scrutiny of paternal language, symbolic representation, and rationality is a sign of difference that in turn signals the feminine and the pathological. The key to dismantling the frames that define, confine, and eventually silence sonic excess requires a historical understanding of the relation between gender, sound, representation and the most notorious “feminine” pathology of all—hysteria.

**In the Beginning was Hysteria**

Cumulative research on hysteria has uncovered innumerable meanings that have been written, read, rewritten and reread for over a millennium, producing an “interpretive overload” according to Elizabeth Bronfen in *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (101). Hysteria has proven to be a mutable affliction and a constantly evolving phenomenon, she argues, because the discursive function of hysteria in medical and aesthetic texts is as important and complex as its nosology.

On an individual level the hysteric is reported to adapt her symptoms in accordance with changes in her immediate psycho-social situation, a constant mutation
that complicates the diagnosis and treatment of her affliction. On a cultural level hysteria adapts itself to the moral climate of the specific time it appears in history. As Bronfen suggests, hysteria is performative: it performs the representational symptoms of the cultural epoch by pointing to the lack or deficiency in the interpretive system itself. There are no consistent or universal symptoms of hysteria on either an individual or cultural level. Hysteria is a constructed category that reflects the cultural climate in symptoms of the psyche, the body, sound and society. Although hysteria has a medical history, it also has a social history that is embedded within popular culture such that scientific and cultural diagnoses and treatments are inextricably linked to one another. Thus hysteria is as much an illness of representation as it is an illness of the psyche that reflects the social and cultural context in which it appears (Bronfen 102-104). It is important to note that the social history of hysteria includes issues related to sound—that is, hysteria is often identified with/as an illness of sonic representation and an inability toward language and meaning.

The story of the identification and naming of hysteria has traditionally been traced back to Hippocrates (Bronfen 105). Yet, as Helen King claims, recent scholarship reveals that in actuality the “Genuine Works of Hippocrates” are a collection of texts written by multiple authors (3). King also writes that recent reexaminations of Hippocratic traditions and texts reveal that the actual diagnosis of hysteria attributed to Hippocrates is questionable (5-7). Roy Porter picks up this thread to suggest that the nineteenth-century chronicles of hysteria written under the tutelage of Charcot have greatly influenced the ensuing discourses on hysteria:

Such works have assumed that the annals of medical history, down the centuries and across the cultures, point to outcrops of a disorder now
identifiable as hysteria, and that the medical mission of understanding, classifying and treating it can be recounted as a progression from superstition to science, ignorance to expertise, prejudice to psychoanalysis. (232)

King argues that it is thus only by reclaiming and rethinking all texts associated with hysteria that we can begin to formulate alternative questions, as well as understandings of its meanings over the centuries.

Medical accounts of an affliction now commonly called hysteria are not merely documents of "a fixed disease entity calling across the centuries," but rather a series of texts in dialogue with each other that repeat one particular story over and over:

Deaf to pleas from anatomy and experience, the texts continue to tell one another the traditional stories. The language may shift—the womb travels, vapors rise, sympathy transmits symptoms through the body—but the message remains the same: women are sick, and men write their bodies. (64)

Thus, as the story goes, women in patriarchal culture have always been considered pathological, a pathology traced to the pathological female body and its mysterious interiority.

The symptoms traditionally attributed to Hippocrates' diagnosis of hysteria have been traced retrospectively, as King and Porter write, to a pathological motility of the female reproductive organs. This "wandering womb" was interpreted as a sign of the dissatisfaction and restlessness of a certain and specific kind of female—the unmarried woman (King 8). The dissatisfied womb—considered to be a "small, voracious animal, a foreign body that had dried up, lost weight, and come unhooked"—was believed to roam
through the body of a sexually frustrated or dissatisfied woman, such as a widow or "spinster," in search of sustenance (Bronfen 105). The uncertainty left a woman vulnerable to the demonic possession of animals and animal spirits, producing a symptomatology that ranged from shortness of breath to vomiting, loss of voice, constricted throat and paralysis of the extremities. From the beginning the cure for these symptoms—perhaps the most consistent aspect of the discourse on hysteria throughout history—was prescribed with unequivocal fervor: the hysterical woman needed the sobering influence of an authoritative and rational male figure, preferably a husband (Bronfen 105).

Bronfen reports that in the Middle Ages hysteria became associated entirely with demonic possession. This meant that women's hysterical hallucinations were attributed to the internalization of the diabolical influences of evil spirits. Thus female pathology was extended beyond the physical manifestations of social deviance; it became an illness with a moral dimension, the hysteric believed to be a deceitful witch who lacked a soul. The prescription for this "daughter of the devil" was severe: she was interrogated, forced to confess, subject to exorcism and other forms of punishment (106-107).

By the seventeenth century another shift in the medical discourse on hysteria occurred, as physicians once again turned their "scientific" gaze on female anatomy, attributing a multitude of symptoms to the interaction of vapours emitted by a troubled uterus with other organs. Diagnosis often identified the brain as the organ most directly affected by a miasmatic uterus, causing everything from loss of sight to mutism, paralysis, convulsions, fainting spells, and motor impairment, as well as melancholy, anxiety and discontent (Bronfen 108). Thus, the mental capacity of the female was questioned, her weak intellect a product of her pathological biology. Although there are some reports
that not all physicians sexually encoded hysteria, to the majority it remained a female affliction, the infirmity of female anatomy and feminine sensibility.

In the eighteenth century hysteria began to reflect bourgeois culture in Europe, becoming the definitive illness of young, sensitive women. These nubile hysterics were subject to uncontrollable sexual impulses, fits of crying and laughter, nervous coughing, and various other symptoms associated with the soft, fluid, penetrability of the internal space of the female body as well as with inarticulate, non-linguistic sound. As Bronfen observes, the leap from the emptiness of the female corporeal space to the emptiness of female moral character—“the spatial density of the body readily converts into moral density”—was well established (113). The general consensus that hysteria was, for the eighteenth century female, an illness “owing to an abundance of feeling, an excessive sympathy with her environment, an uncurbed empathy for all that would move her body and soul—but a flow of organic and psychic energy that formed a closed circuit” continued to be traced, by association, to the infirmity of the female body (114). This is the point at which the ideal of femininity became the female malady, making hysteria and femininity coterminous. The hysteric inhabited the feminine just as the feminine inhabited the hysteric.

The “Impossibility” of the Male Hysteric

Since the origins of hysteria were consistently associated with the female body, and with women’s lack of moral fiber, impaired intellectual ability, and inferior place in society, the diagnosis of male hysteria was very difficult—if not impossible—to make. Elaine Showalter observes that the cultural resistance to the idea of the male hysteric
from one century to the next is so strong that the same symptoms in men consistently
generate an entirely different diagnosis than in women (288).

Framing the study of hysteria through the lens of gender not only helps us to
understand the interplay of the feminine roles patients were expected to play and the
paternal roles adapted by physicians; it also traces the ways in which masculinity and
hysteria were gendered. As Showalter demonstrates, in her study "Hysteria, Feminism
and Gender," the virility of male hysteric was continually questioned—they were often
characterized as effeminate, passive and homosexual (289). Accounts of male hysteric
were repressed either by denying the existence of male hysteria or by renaming the
manifestations of hysteria in men differently. These strategies effectively masked male
hysteria by opposing its feminine etiology to more masculine disorders. Male hysteria
was diagnosed as everything from melancholy and hypochondria (prevalent in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); neurasthenia (predominant in the late eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries); shell-shock or war neurosis (common to the period
surrounding World War I); to obsessional neurosis (diagnosed by Freud) (293).
Showalter explains that a diagnosis such as melancholia was "a prestigious disorder of
upper middle-class and intellectual men." Similarly, in the nineteenth-century,
neurasthenia "was a source of pride and a badge of national distinction and racial
superiority," because it was linked with overwork in the new, urban industrialized society
and highlighted the cultivated sensitivity of the middle-class. Neurasthenia was linked to
money, capitalism, power and masculinity, often acting as a screen for the anxiety
overworked men developed in relation to sexual disfunction (293-296).

Resistance to the diagnosis of hysteria in men continued long after hysteria
ceased to be specifically related to a pathological womb. On the odd occasion when it
was diagnosed in men it was still seen as a “female affliction” (293). Similarly, if women were diagnosed with neurasthenia it was often distinguished from the male version of the affliction, and the symptoms were traced to child-rearing and/or higher education. Showalter tells us that in England neurasthenia eventually became a female affliction, a nervous disorder that manifested itself in women who abandoned their maternal role and entered the public sphere to compete with men in society. The “cure” for neurasthenia in women—as well as for its twin disease, hysteria—underscores the difference in relation to gender not only in diagnosis but in treatment. The most common prescription for these afflictions in women became the “rest cure,” a cure that confined a woman to her bed for lengthy periods of time, prohibiting activity of any sort. Since men, even effeminate men, could not be expected to remain idle for any length of time, their treatment was entirely different and did not include prolonged inactivity (298). The “impossibility” of male hysteria then, was the “impossibility” of inarticulate, irrational and faint-hearted men.

The Silent Art of Hysteria

The discourses surrounding the diagnosis and cure of hysteria culminated in the nineteenth-century. As Roy Porter observes: “Its investigation and treatment made the fame and fortunes of towering medical figures—Charcot, Breuer, Janet and Freud” (227). Certainly Jean-Martin Charcot built his reputation by staging spectacles of hysteria in his theatrical lectures at the Salpêtrière—a “museum of living pathology”—that regularly featured live hysterics performing their peculiar symptoms (Bronfen 174). Many theorists, including Showalter, Bronfen and Sander Gilman, emphasize Charcot’s particularly scopophilic approach to hysteria, his diagnosis being
highly dependent upon the white, masculine aesthetic gaze that was prevalent in
theatre and visual art at the time:

Charcot emphasized the visual manifestation of hysteria and the hysterical
body as an art object. His representations of gender were allied to
aesthetic conventions about the female body, whether in painting,
photography or drama. (Showalter 310)

Although Charcot did not limit hysteria to females—his accounts of male hysterics were
suppressed after his death—the silent, pathological female body was, for Charcot, the
quintessential hysteric. Sander Gilman suggests that hysterics at Charcot's clinic were
able to replicate the image of hysteria by viewing representations of other hysterics in
the paintings, performances and photographs commissioned by Charcot:

For the patient knows how to be a patient [. . .] only from the
representation of the way the physician wishes to see (and therefore to
know) the patient as the vessel of a disease, not any disease, but the
disease of images and imagining, hysteria. (Hysteria 353)

Gilman stresses the importance of the image to the patient's symptoms and to the
physician's recognition of hysteria, an observation suggesting that in the nineteenth-
century hysteria was no longer viewed as a disease of the uterus, but was "the classic
disease of the imagination" (359). The gaze of the physician who transmitted his
expectations of pathology onto his patient, coupled with the compliant mirroring of
symptoms by the hysteric for the benefit of the physician, were central to the
demonstrations of hysteria at the Salpêtrière.

Gilman also observes continuity in the representations of the hysteric within the
wider cultural arena of nineteenth-century society. Indeed, many images of the
hysteria's contorted body bore a similarity to representations of ecstatic religious postures, or depictions of witches and deviants, as well as to the provocative poses of women captured in oil paintings. For Charcot, hysteria was firmly embedded in artistic discourse, a discourse that enabled him to commodity hysteria as a "work of art" that was sold through scientific texts in which photographs of hysterical poses were reproduced (383).

Representations of the hysterical in art coincided with a shift in representation in general, at a time when art became fascinated with visual illustrations of difference. The face became an important sign of deviance and the depiction of "pathological" images of distorted and asymmetrical features developed a hierarchical taxonomy of expressions that were connected to the anthropological debate on beauty and race. Hysterical symptoms were represented quite literally as symptoms "written on the body." Patients were thoroughly scrutinized for the slightest abnormality that could be read as hysteria—abnormal posture and carriage, skin ulcerations and rashes, even the symptoms of syphilis, all put the patient at risk of being diagnosed as hysterical. As Gilman documents, hysteria was very much a disease constructed from nineteenth-century anxieties related to the representations of gender, race and class (379-402).

The shift in the etiology of hysteria from the pathological womb to the pathological imagination did nothing to separate hysteria from its association with the feminine and its conflation with women and the feminine in general. The feminine nature was considered the most vulnerable to the deviant wanderings of the imagination. This vulnerability was also thought to extend from gender to race, as Gilman documents, specifically in relation to the "effeminacy" of the Jews. Gilman explains that in the discourses surrounding race, beauty, and intelligence, Jewish men were feminized. He
contends that this was the masked subtext of the visual representation of the female
hysteric, that the scientific gaze also turned often on Jewish men who were highly
"visible" in Europe during this time: "The face of the Jew became as much as sign of the
pathological as was the face of the hysteric. But even more so, the face of the Jew
became the face of the hysteric" (405).

Charcot's analysis of male hysteric's perpetuated this anti-Semitic view. Gilman
cites an example of the diagnosis of a male hysteric in which Charcot attributed the
patient's pathology directly to the Jewish Diaspora, that is, the Jewish patient's hysteria
was engendered in the ceaseless wandering of the Jews. As Gilman describes the
situation, the wandering Jews are "out of their minds because they are out of their
natural place" (416). This pathology was also perceived in the language of the Jews, "a
language that is corrupted by as well as corrupting the world in which the Jew in the
Diaspora lives" (409). The language of the Jew is suspect because it is the corrupt and
potentially corrupting sign of difference that could not be contained in the silent image of
difference and pathology (425).

The suspicion of the hidden meaning contained in the Jewish language
resurfaces, Gilman contends, in Freud's identification of lying as the central symptom of
the hysteric, a symptom often read as and attributed to racialization (425). Gilman
explains that the Jews were racialized as black in the nineteenth-century, a visual
diagnosis that illustrated the ways in which pathology was read quite literally as an
inscription on the surface of the other (434). It is also important to note that pathology
was also heard in the sounds of the other. The degenerate mixing of Jews and blacks
was identified as the reason for the "infantile" nature of their languages and discourses
(435). In general, the classification of "other" languages as degenerate and infantile
followed the gendered and raced subtext of hysteria as the failure to communicate properly.

**Hysteria and Psychoanalysis**

Sigmund Freud first encountered the performance of hysteria in Charcot's "museum of pathology" at Salpêtrière. As Elizabeth Bronfen notes, Freud's studies with Charcot eventually "lead him to that other scene, the unconscious, and with it to the birth of psychoanalysis" (116). Initially Freud accepted Charcot's scopophilic method of diagnosing hysteria which, as explained above, interpreted visual signs as evidence of pathology. Yet his subsequent work with hysterics led him toward the development of the psychoanalytic method, a method based on the interpretation of stories told to him by his female patients.

Thus there was a shift in emphasis in Freud's work with hysterics from visual representation to representation in language. Through the narratives of hysterics, Freud eventually linked their symptoms with repressed trauma: "The symptoms of hysteria, Freud noted, were created through a process of symbolization and expressed in emotional states" (Showalter 315). Considered to be of a sexual nature, trauma in Freud's estimation, was traceable to sexual abuse or a seduction fantasy and was manifested in the fragmentation of language and the breakdown of meaning.

Since most of Freud's patients were middle-class Jewish women who were often defying traditional female roles, his dilemma in the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria was the cultural conflation of hysteria, gender and race. Gilman insists that Freud recognized himself as the Jewish, feminized other, a recognition he sought to repress by shifting his diagnostic focus away from the gaze toward verbal signs of hysteria,
"from the crudity of seeing to the subtlety of hearing" (415). This attempt to repress the visual connection between gender and race was unsuccessful since, as indicated above, gender and race are also represented sonically as linguistic pathology.

Still, Charcot's approach to hysteria followed Freud into his practice. He had trouble dismissing the visual aspects of hysteria altogether, yet neither could he fully accept a purely visual diagnosis as definitive, because of its relation to race. As compensation, Freud began to emphasize the "usual" in the identification of hysteria rather than the "unusual" (415). That is, in order for Freud to distance himself from identification with the hysterical male other, he deferred to the language of science, a masculine language of neutrality that erased his own racial difference and the possibility of his effeminacy (436). Freud's refusal to acknowledge male hysteria, coupled with his focus on the female version of the illness, shifted the emphasis away from himself and onto the most convenient other—woman.

The Case of Dora

One of the most talked about hysterics documented by Freud in his case studies is Dora, whose real name was Ida Bauer. In "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," Freud narrates Dora's complaint: her father was encouraging her seduction by his friend Herr K., in exchange for Herr K.'s complicit silence concerning the ongoing affair between Dora's father and Herr K.'s wife, Frau K. Dora told Freud that she was particularly disturbed by an incident in which Herr K. made advances toward her when she was only fourteen years old. To complicate matters, at least from her father's point of view, Dora developed her own disturbing relationship with his mistress, Frau K., with whom she spent a great deal of time reading erotic literature. Eventually, her father sent
her to Freud for psychoanalysis, to make sure she would never betray their complex web of sexual secrets by coming to terms with and finally accepting the advances of Herr K. (Showalter 317).

Although Dora's symptoms were comparatively mild, Freud was determined to apply the codified system of diagnosis he had developed in order to classify Dora as hysterical. He focused his energy on Dora's "inability" to create a coherent narrative in their sessions, an observation consistent with his notion that all hysterics were unable to construct a convincing chronicle to the satisfaction of the therapist (Showalter 318). The fragmentation of the relationship between patient and analyst was attributed to Dora's hysteria, not to Freud's inability to understand what she was telling him.

According to Showalter, although for Freud psychoanalysis was based on narrative, it was in his estimation the task of the therapist to construct that narrative for the patient. The constructed narrative must in turn be accepted by the patient in order for her to be cured. Dora, however, rejected Freud's narrative:

She flatly denied Freud's narrative embellishments of her story, would not accept his version of her activities and feelings, and either contradicted him or fell into stubborn silence. Finally she walked out on Freud by refusing to continue with therapy at all. (319)

Showalter observes that Dora's voice is completely suppressed in Freud's text, an indication that she was merely the object of his observation. Freud's inability to treat Dora as a subject results in his perception of her story as fragmented and incoherent, which, according to Toril Moi, "has less to do with the nature of hysteria or with the nature of woman than with the social powerlessness of women's narratives" (Showalter 333).
Dora's refusal of Freud's version of her story, as well as her rejection of his treatment, is interpreted by feminists in one of two ways: she was either complicit with patriarchy and pathologically unable to break free from the bourgeois family, or she was refusing her role in patriarchy and her heterosexuality. The question of Dora's collusion with the patriarchal exchange of women or rebellion against it is simply stated: is the hysteric a feminist heroine or a patriarchal conspirator? (Findlay 328).

This question is addressed, most notably perhaps, in the exchange between Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*. The section of the book entitled "The Untenable" is a discussion between Cixous and Clément of the political effectiveness of the hysteric in the symbolic. Each woman draws different conclusions from Freud's case study of Dora. Cixous finds merit in excess, in the position of the hysteric at the threshold of the symbolic and language, while Clément holds little hope for the political power of the hysteric in her attempts to dismantle the system. For both women, the case of the hysteric pivots on the issue of language, on whether the hysteric must embrace symbolic language in order to break her imaginary identifications or whether she is proof of the notion that imaginary identifications are entrenched in the symbolic.

Clément argues that the hysteric is not only firmly embedded in, but also anticipated and thus is easily silenced by, the symbolic. She insists that the hysteric does nothing more than reinforce the structure of the symbolic, especially in relation to its most powerful institution, the bourgeois family. The hysteric's marginal position is created by the system and anticipated by it, effectively dismantling any possibility of hysterical subversion: "it mimics, it metaphorizes its destruction, but the family
reconstitutes itself around it" (155). The hysterical complains of her powerlessness within kinship structures but her hysterical symptoms do nothing to dismantle that powerlessness. Thus she is unable to transform her situation through her extra-linguistic protest because it lacks the coherence and political capacity of language. For Clément the hysterical is unable to argue her case successfully.

Cixous, on the other hand, sees hysteria as an effective protest. The hysterical resists her place in the symbolic as a pawn in the patriarchal exchange of women, and in so doing explodes the symbolic structure, creating viable alternatives for political change apart from language. For Cixous hysterical identification exists at the threshold of the symbolic, suggesting that "there is something hysterical about every putting-into-words" (Findlay 330).

The dialogue between Cixous and Clément pivots on the relationship of difference to power and whether this relationship can be (dis)articulated in language. Clément sees the symbolic as being structured by difference in a way that contains it, such that working from within becomes the only possibility for transformation. Symbolic inscription is the only way to bring change to the symbolic.

For Cixous, however, difference exceeds the symbolic, and it is precisely the excess and motility of difference that disturbs and transforms symbolic structures:

There are structures characteristic of hysteria that are not neuroses, that work with very strong capacities of identification with the other, that are scouring, that make mirrors fly, that put disturbing images back into circulation. (Newly 155)

By "making mirrors fly" the hysterical challenges the basic premise of the mirror stage, in which the subject's entry into the symbolic depends upon the abjection of the mother
and the repudiation of the semiotic (the imaginary in Cixous' terminology). The hysteric cannot see herself as abject; it is the system which is based on "blindness, on denial."

Thus the hysteric makes sure it is known that she has no place in the symbolic:

Hysteria is necessarily an element that disturbs arrangements; wherever it is, it shakes up all those who want to install themselves, who want to install something that is going to work, to repeat. It is very difficult to block out this type of person who doesn't leave you in peace, who wages permanent war against you. (Cixous 156)

Cixous' argument bears a striking resemblance to Kristeva's notion that the semiotic resurfaces in the symbolic in order to disrupt its fixity, an argument outlined in chapter one.

Dora and the Margins

Cixous contends that the most important characters in Freud's account of Dora's case are those whose disavowed presence haunts the narrative—the mother and the nurse. According to Anne McClintock, the bourgeois family structure was dependent upon the splitting of female sexuality along class lines so that excess could be identified with the working-class nurse and purity could be identified with the middle-class mother (86). Although the nurse was a paid labourer, class hierarchy allowed the unpaid mother to rise above the nurse in social status. It is important to note, however, that the relative position held by each woman in relation to the family structure were mediated by the husband's authority over both.

McClintock points out that the nurse often wielded power over the children in a variety of ways to compensate for the powerlessness she experienced as the hired
help. Because her power extended to the sexual realm, it was common for children to be sexually initiated in one way or another by the nurse. In several of Freud's correspondences McClintock observes that the analyst reluctantly admits to the profound influence his nurse had upon his psychosexual development, something he tried desperately to repress. Thus, in his Oedipal theory, Freud erases the nurse by displacing the power she possesses in relation to the child's formative years, eliminates the child's identification with the nurse's power and shifts it onto the father (94). He completes the repudiation by replacing the nurse with the mother, making her the object of desire at the centre of the family romance. "By erasing the nurse's agency," McClintock states, "Freud safeguards the male's historical role as sexual agent" (88).

Thus, women's subjectivity is doubly denied, both the mother and the nurse must be abjected. As McClintock explains, Freudian theory places women "in the realm of object choice rather than the realm of social identification. Indeed, identification with the mother figure is seen as pathological, perverse, the source of fixation, arrest and hysteria" (91). Identification with the nurse would be equally as paralyzing—if not impossible—since her presence is completely denied and her silence mandatory.

McClintock argues, however, that unlike the mother who is an object located within the family structure, the nurse is a threshold figure who exists inside and outside the family, belonging to both public and private spheres, to sexuality and domesticity (93-94). Locating the nurse at the borderline of the family demonstrates the complex intersection of gender and class: "the historical double bind of class is thereby split and displaced onto the father and mother as a universal function of gender" (90). Cixous recognizes this double bind and disrupts it by concentrating on the figures that haunt Dora's story, placing them squarely into the centre of the narrative.
Similarly the hysteric, registering the patriarchal disavowal of both mother and nurse as subjects in her hysterical symptoms, exposes the fragility and uncertainty of the law and disrupts the myth of symbolic stability. The hysteric’s protest brings the “hystericization of the speaking subject in general” to our attention (Findlay 330). Thus, when Cixous states, “Dora seemed to me to be the one who resists the system, the one who cannot tolerate that the family and society are founded on the body of women, on bodies despised, rejected, bodies that are humiliating once they have been used,” she recognizes that Dora’s hysterical protest has the power to break apart the symbolic (154). The fragmented language she speaks is the fragmented language spoken by all of us—a sounding that is silenced by the law.

The Hysterical Protest and the Shrieking Sisterhood

The suffrage movement in Europe and the United States is often cited as the reason for the decline of female hysteria in the early twentieth century (Showalter 326). Yet as Lisa Tickner writes in *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffragist Campaign 1907-14*, a direct correlation can also be drawn between the rise of feminism and the rise of the clinical focus on hysteria (195). According to Tickner the re-emphasis on “women’s essentially biological destiny in the face of their increasingly mobile and transgressive roles” acted as social surveillance on women (196). She also observes that, although the etiology of hysteria was no longer linked to a dysfunctional uterus, the connection between hysteria, femininity and sexuality was not abandoned but reconfigured: “Hysteria was sexual in the sense that the energies of the sexual drive and those originally used to repress it were condensed into the hysterical symptom” (197).
Feminists at this time were characterized by mainstream society as sexually ambivalent, hybrid, socially degenerate and hysterical (194). The intersection of femininity, sexuality, and hysteria became popularized in the print media and specialized throughout the medical profession and psychiatry, each view reinforcing the other (194). Feminists were caricatured as masculine women or effeminate men crossed-dressed in women's clothing:

For half a century of more, feminism and hysteria were readily mapped on to each other as forms of irregularity, disorder and excess, and the claim that the women's movement was made up of hysterical females was one of the principal means by which it was popularly discredited. (194)

The feminine was split into two, as positive images of normal women and negative images of degenerate women were placed side by side as a warning to women who were not content with their proper place. The association of feminists with degeneracy linked gender deviance to the discourse of race in the early twentieth century, playing on the anxieties of the white middle-class, specifically on their fear of domination by the racial other (204).

Feminists were often referred to as the “shrieking sisterhood,” women who publicly made a noisy spectacle of themselves, disturbed the peace and threatened violence (194). As Tickner observes, these suffragists adopted this characterization, mapping feminism and hysteria onto each other to effectively deploy the discourse of hysteria as a resistance to traditional roles (197). In other words, feminists often embraced the connection between feminist politics and hysteria in order to give voice to their protests. Similarly, the link between the noise of feminist hysteria and the “pathological” sexuality practiced by feminists (apart from reproduction) kept the
connection between woman's womb and woman's voice intact, challenging the narrative parameters of symbolic expression. Mary Russo suggests that the connection between the shrieking sisterhood and the "bra-burners and harridans of the second wave" links the "grotesque" noise of feminism with the "grotesque" body of women (14).

Feminists sometimes referred to their noisy protests (the sound of female oppression and dissatisfaction) as "articulate hysteria," the communication of a message that violated the narrative rules of symbolic communication (Showalter 333). Showalter suggests that in order for hysterical protest to be effective language must be transgressed:

Language has played a major role in the history of hysteria; to pry apart the bond between hysteria and women, to free hysteria from its feminine attributes, and to liberate femininity from its bondage to hysteria, means going against the grain of language itself. (Showalter 290)

Articulate hysteria is contingent on the ability of sound to freely violate the borders of body and mind, interiority and exteriority, to communicate beyond language, to commingle the unconscious and the conscious, to break the symbolic with the semiotic. Heather Findlay's suggestion that "feminism may very well be an unconsciousness raising, an experience of the role of the unconscious in every symbolic act" illustrates the power of the semiotic disruption of the symbolic that brings psychic depth to the surface (330). In contradistinction to Charcot's silencing of the hysteric—"You see how the hysterics cry. One could say this is much noise about nothing" —the hysteric's cry is (re)sounded as a noisy performance that speaks volumes.
The Cry

Yet for theorists such as Kaja Silverman, the cry—that is, the non-linguistic sounds of noise, babble and involuntary sound—sonically encodes woman with/as the abject female body. In the symbolic, non-linguistic sound is negatively charged, she insists, because it confines woman to an interiority that is linked with pre-linguistic space—the space identified by Julia Kristeva as the semiotic chora—and is associated with the male fantasy of the pre-Oedipal sonorous envelope. Semiotic sound belongs to a stifling interiority; according to Silverman, its unrepresentable articulations are so far removed from the site of enunciation as to be rendered ineffectual in their excess.

Silverman observes a tendency in both classic film and theory that imposes linguistic containment on the female voice. She suggests that each medium has conspired to confine the female voice to the female body. Film and theory take great pains to do so by extracting involuntary sound from its female characters. For Silverman the sound most often associated with the female voice is an involuntary sound that is so unintelligible it escapes all understanding:

There is, of course, only one group of sounds capable of conforming precisely to these requirements—those emitted by a newborn baby. This, then is the vocal position which the female subject is called upon to occupy whenever (in film or theory) she is identified with noise, babble, or the cry. (78)

Silverman argues that theorists often confuse the infant’s cry with the maternal voice because of the “aural undecidability” of voice. Yet she, too, locates these sounds entirely within the interiority of the pre-linguistic pre-subject and concomitantly associates them with discursive impotence. She explains that when one person is
speaking and another is listening, audition and utterance are performed simultaneously, demonstrating the "double organization of the vocal/auditory system" (79). The simultaneous circuit of voice/ear creates an aural undecidability that obscures the boundary between interiority and exteriority, making it difficult to situate the utterance in relation to a subject or a proto-subject, mother or child.

The simultaneity of utterance and audition sanctions the slippage between the sound of the mother and the sound of the infantile cry, projecting the discursive inability of the pre-subject onto the mother. Silverman argues that the cry is abject, a vocal and auditory "afterbirth" that cannot be recuperated by the symbolic. For Silverman the location of the cry outside of language, coupled with its status as abject, signals an ineffectual interiority and lack of intention that accompanies non-linguistic utterances even when sounded by a female subject in the symbolic. The one-way reversibility of sound from infant to mother grafts lack onto the maternal voice and onto all women by association. The cry becomes the abject noise of the perpetually infantile feminine.

The male subject, on the other hand, deflects his own abjection with the aid of the acoustic mirror. As Silverman suggests, theorists describe the acoustic mirror in relation to the maternal voice and then conflate it with the female voice in general, forever burdening the female voice with the ambiguity of aural undecidability in the symbolic. She explains that the voice reflected in the acoustic mirror is an ambiguous sounding—albeit only in retrospect—of male linguistic competence and female linguistic incompetence. For the male subject the female voice is strangely pre- or non-linguistic, an incoherent babble that only he can translate and transform into linguistic mastery, even before he has entered the symbolic.
Silverman observes that the aural undecidability of the female voice triggers introjection and projection in relation to male subjectivity (80). Introjection of the mother's voice aids in the discovery of the emerging subject's own voice and identity, which moves him toward discursive competence; while projection disavows the subject's discursive instability—a reflection of the instability of language in the symbolic—by locating linguistic incompetence in his recollections of maternal sound. Thus the misrecognition that occurs visually in the mirror phase is mirrored (so to speak) in the concept of the acoustic mirror, in such a way that the child misrecognizes the mother's linguistic “wholeness” as his own.

In “Acoustic Sculpture, Deboned Voices,” Douglas Kahn suggests that the concept of the acoustic mirror is based on a visual model rather than an acoustic one. Kahn shifts the focus from the visual model, the circuit of utterance and audition between two people (mother and child, object and subject) that creates aural undecidability, to an acoustic model, the circuit of utterance and audition that coordinates the voice/ear of each individual. Kahn suggests that the coordination between vocalizing and listening to one's own voice begins in early childhood and is rehearsed daily (26). He refers to this coordination as “selfsame speech,” the phenomenon of hearing one's own voice at the moment of speaking. The voice that sounds and the ears that hear unite utterance and audition in a seeming simultaneity Kahn describes as “hearing one's own speech” and “speaking one's own hearing” (27). But unlike the eyes—organs that receive light but do not project it—the ears and the voice form a unified “sense organ” that is attuned to itself. This organ edits and coordinates the external information it receives with the information generated from inside the body, processing all edited material into speech (28). This process implicates
the myriad interior workings of body and mind, including the role of the unconscious, in the activity of speech; it points to the significance of sound that does not belong to language *per se*.

Kahn suggests that the presence or absence of resonance within the head is a factor that distinguishes one's own voice from the voice of another. Although both voices are heard in the head, Kahn reminds us that the quality of the voice of another speaker resonating in our head is different from the head resonance we experience with our own speaking. The voice of another is effectively "debones" while the voice of selfsame speech resonates deeply in our bones:

When speaking to other people the head resonance you hear is not heard by other people. Your voice leaves your lips without its skull; it is a deboned voice. When you hear your own speaking voice the bones are in place. The bones in question are those involved in the conduit channeling the voice up from the throat through the mandible and skull, vibrating the basilar membrane in the same way as air-conducted hearing. (32)

The relative absence of "bone conductivity" gives the voice of the other a viscosity that is less apparent in the resonance of one's own voice. Thus we are able to identify the difference between our own voice and the voice of the other. In a sense we are more attuned to the inner voice than to external sounds:

Air-conducted hearing is not without bone conduction, but the conduction of the hammer, anvil and stirrup is not of the order of hearing one's own speech. In fact, during speech vibrations, the path of the tiny bones is attenuated by the stapedius muscle, just as when it reacts to high intensity sounds from the environment, thus deploying the audition of one's own
voice more completely to the route of other bones. When you speak you become a little deaf to the world. (32)

Being a little deaf to the world means that our embodied voice is indicative of our subjectivity, a position that is untenable for women in Silverman's analysis. She is unable to accept the interconnection of voice to body and the ability of sound to transgress interior and exterior boundaries of the corporeal—the power and the difference of the embodied voice.

Selfsame speech, then, is akin to the body voicing described by David Applebaum and discussed in Chapter one as the grainy voice of the corporeal that underscores the materiality of sound and sonic difference. Selfsame speech complicates the notion of aural undecidability, a notion that values utterance over audition by omitting audition at the individual level, and underestimates our ability to hear and distinguish our own voice from the voice of another. Kahn's suggestion that the ear/voice be unified as a single sense organ gives audition equal weight. Selfsame speech accounts for our ability to perceive the sonic transgression of the boundaries of interior and exterior, as well as for the perception of sonic difference that results from the distinction between interiority and exteriority. Selfsame speech problematizes the automatic reversibility and confusion of infant cry/maternal voice.

Silverman argues that the cry is "a mechanism for disavowing the male subject's early history, and for displacing onto woman all traces of corporeal excess and discursive impotence." Positioning the female subject as the maternal acoustic mirror forever confines the mother to the discursive incompetence associated with the infantile cry, because it equates embodiment and interiority with meaninglessness. Since the acoustic mirror creates a hallucinatory effect in which the mother speaks a nonsensical
language that is echoed back to the subject as sense, Silverman urges the unequivocal disassociation of the female voice from the cry (79-81). The cry sounded from inside a sexed female body has no agency. The conflation of the cry with the female body and female interiority implies that it is only when a woman's voice is released from its essentialist association with her sexed body that her discursive power is realized. The exteriority of the disembodied female voice can then speak coherently—against the unintelligible "feminine" grain as it were—in the symbolic.

Silverman suggests that the impetus to align the female voice with interiority, the unconscious and semiotic sound, and the male voice with exteriority, control and symbolic language "must be understood as a defensive reaction against the migratory potential of the voice—as an attempt to restrain it within established boundaries, and so prevent its uncontrolled circulation" (84). The migratory potential of the voice conjures images of the migratory womb and the hysteric, yet Silverman stops short of locating issues surrounding sound and sonic control within the discourse of hysteria. Perhaps this is because hysteria speaks in an embodied voice that relies at least as much on interiority as exteriority. Instead, Silverman's discussion of the status of the female voice pivots on the cry and the problems it presents for women. We are left to ask: must the cry always be read as infantile? Can women recuperate noise, babble and the cry as viable means of expression?

Silverman's solution to the problem of female vocal/linguistic agency is to subvert female incoherence by extracting the female voice from the interiority of the maternal/female body. She argues that the extraction of the voice from the sexed female body gives voice an exteriority that allows women to speak with enunciative authority. For Silverman the female voice must always be deboned.
Silverman suggests that the “discursive body” shapes the material body, so that the female body is entirely contingent upon and molded by discourse and representation. There is no possibility of an “outside” to discourse, and thus the sexed body cannot exist apart from representation. For Silverman, then, rewriting the body is a process of transforming “the discursive conditions under which women live their corporeality rather than the liberation of a prediscursive sexuality” (146). Interestingly here interiority as prediscursive sexuality is positioned exterior to discourse, yet Silverman does not acknowledge the reversal. She maintains that since there is no place for sonic expression or intelligibility apart from discourse, the cry (as well as noise and babble) belongs to a prediscursive sexuality that cannot effect the “transformation of discursive conditions” that shape women’s lives or bodies.

Silverman stresses that her project does not dismiss femininity entirely, but attempts to recuperate the feminine from the confines of interiority and to rearticulate it from a non-essentialist (read disembodied) vantage point. She explains that femininity is defined by three factors in the symbolic: lack, specularity and discursive interiority (149). These conditions are part of every subject’s entry into the symbolic, and as such they must neither be dismissed nor disavowed but rather applied to male subjectivity as well as female subjectivity.

In order for this to be accomplished, her strategy emphasizes the “negative Oedipus complex”—an intermediary phase occurring before the Oedipal phase that propels the presubject toward subjectivity—in which a child recognizes him/herself with the help of the visual and auditory cues of the mother, aided by the acoustic mirror. Identification in this stage is feminine for both boys and girls and Silverman proposes that this makes the little boy “feminine,” at least until his full entry into the symbolic is
accomplished. The possibility of the feminine identification of the boy provides a companion theory to Freud's assertion that the little girl is a "little man" prior to castration.

There are other advantages to this theory according to Silverman; it suggests that the identification of the female child with the phallic mother in the negative Oedipal phase positions female homosexuality as an identification with the mother, rather than with the father as is the case with traditional Freudian theory (151). It accounts for female activity rather than passivity, and for a feminine relationship to language that is neither prediscursive nor symbolic but located somewhere between the two. These notions pivot on the reversibility of mother/daughter positions, presumably carried out sonically in the acoustic mirror during the negative Oedipal complex, in which the little girl hears the maternal voice as her own, as she incorporates the maternal imago (154). Because this phase of the child's development occurs before the positive Oedipal complex but after the initial mirror stage, it accounts for the possibility of a partial assimilation of language prior to full-blown subjectivity. For Silverman, this is the space where "feminism's libidinal struggle against the phallus" should take place. As the stage that precedes the positive Oedipal complex, the negative Oedipal phase enables the girl to identify with the mother and develop a modicum of female narcissism. The girl then moves through the positive Oedipal phase in which she must abject the mother. In this scenario the girl's relation to the mother remains ambiguous, because their discursive positions (or lack thereof) are always potentially reversible. The girl's abjection of the mother is never entirely accomplished, then, because she is conflicted in her identification with the mother and unable to abject that part of herself.
Although this space of feminine identification could be interpreted as a space of possibility for female narcissism, as Silverman argues, it begs the question of where the female and the feminine are actually positioned in relation to language. Silverman locates the girl at the threshold of language, as neither subject nor object, inside nor outside, but it is unclear whether this is a space of access to both cry and word, or a disabling inability to use either. Since the linguistic threshold must be crossed upon entry into the symbolic, does this repress the proto-, non- or semi-linguistic? Does this ambiguous positioning render female narcissism silent? Where does this leave female homosexuality from a discursive standpoint? Does the girl remain discursively conflicted? If so, how is a rewriting of the body through the rewriting of women's discursive conditions possible?

Reclaiming the Cry

It is important to challenge the notion that non-linguistic sound uttered from a female body only reinforces the cultural disavowal of the mother's discursive role in the symbolic, and as such is always inadequate and confining. Beyond the reading of noise and non-linguistic sound as failed language and a sign of discursive inadequacy, it is argueable that a multiplicity of sonic utterances (both linguistic and non-linguistic) can be enlisted to express a multitude of subject positions. This is a move toward hearing and interpreting noise, babble and the cry as something other than a representation of the inarticulate feminine. Is it possible to communicate through sound that is not recognized as language?

Silverman's dismissal of the cry as only reflective of prediscursive sexuality maintains an opposition between sound and language. This opposition creates a
slippage between feminine language and female sexuality, and in fact consolidates the
finite relationship between sound and the female body that she wants to dismantle.
Silverman does not consider the possibility that these utterances may be employed to
achieve her goal of transforming women's discursive and corporeal conditions.

By advocating for a reclamation of noise, babble and non-linguistic sounds, I am
not arguing for any kind of direct relationship between the female body and some
version of a female or feminine language, but for an engagement of/with the sounds and
rhythms that are culturally associated with female interiority and incoherence in order to
dismantle those very associations and disrupt linguistic codes. It is worth revisiting the
quotation from Kristeva's "Women's Time" cited in Chapter two, in which she describes
sounds and rhythms that exceed language as a signifying practice that ruptures the
symbolic: "to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to
the body and emotions, to the unnamable repressed by the social contract (25). This is
not an outright rejection of language, but an attempt to disarticulate the reductionism
that collapses everything into language and linguistic structures. Kristeva's notion of the
semiotic chora and its function in the symbolic can be radically interpreted as a space
where the sexual encoding of sound is broken, hierarchical difference is dismantled and
the multiplicity of sonic difference is realized.

When noise disrupts the symbolic, it challenges the myth of the coherent, closed
system of the phallus and serves as a reminder of the libidinal difference that exists at
the edge of language and representation. This is a space of difference that blurs the
boundaries between interior and exterior, existing at the threshold of language where
"sound" transgresses the closed system of the symbolic and stimulates the negotiation
and transformation of representation.
If critical focus is shifted from the sexual encoding of the chora as the non-linguistic interiority of the feminine to the recognition of the semiotic as a motility of difference that disturbs symbolic structures, then the traumas and pleasures that construct our subjectivity become the pivot point of hysteria. It would be productive here to enlist Elizabeth Bronfen’s critical focus on the navel as a category for cultural analysis, to explore and elaborate upon this concept. Arguing that the trauma of castration is more accurately explained as the knowledge and disavowal of mortality and the awareness of the vulnerability that is attached to this knowledge than as the trauma of genital castration, Bronfen suggests a shift from the “sexual encoding of castration” to the “recognition of the traumatic knowledge that grounds our existence” (15). Bronfen identifies the navel (instead of the female genitals) as the embodied sign of the site of a non-phallic “castration”—a visual reminder of the original attachment to and separation from the womb. This is a provocative move since, although the navel refers back to the maternal, it is not gender specific—that is, everyone has one. In reference to the maternal womb, the navel evokes a double meaning for the human subject: the threshold, the site of beginnings and plenitude, as well as the site of separation and death. In contrast to Freud, who displaces the knowledge of our “original” castration—separation from the mother's womb—onto the phallic “lack” of the female body, Bronfen rewrites symbolic castration as “denavelment.”

Thus, the navel acts as a sign of the intangible and indeterminate attachment to the maternal bond and to the separation that marks individuality. Circumscribing a literal “knot” (navel) as well as a symbolic “naught” (omphalos), Bronfen fashions the notion of the “knotted subject”:
The metaphor of the knotted subject yields an image for the condition of being culturally determined, with identity resulting from the inscription of cultural representations. At the same time this metaphor calls into question the specificity, particularity, or uniqueness of each cultural determination, ultimately favouring a notion of an individual who integrates fantasies of coherence with a knowledge of fallibility. (9)

In Bronfen's scheme the move away from the gendered phallocentric determination of subjectivity in the symbolic is a move toward the nongendered omphalos as the mark of the original traumatic wound and as the reminder of the maternal bond. This move points to the multiplicity of the subject and releases the female body from having to bear the burden of difference based on lack and abjection. Bronfen proposes as part of her scheme that a negotiation between the phallus and the omphalos can and does take place. She envisions this as recognition of the fallibility of the symbolic and of the subject in which both are understood as incomplete. This incompleteness marks representation as always a misrepresentation.

Bronfen appropriates the trope of hysteria to describe a means by which this misrepresentation—or as she describes it the "malady of representation"—can be culturally performed. Signifying the limits of representation, hysteria traces the oscillation between the subject's "fatal attraction" to and "protective fiction" against traumatic knowledge. Again, moving away from Freudian sexology, rather than encoding hysteria as a sexual modality Bronfen suggests an exploration of the "traumatic etiology" of hysteria. Because the origin of trauma can never be entirely integrated into consciousness, it resurfaces as a memory trace and occupies, as
Bronfen describes it, a latent presence that is (uncannily) embodied both psychically and corporeally (384-385). Thus hysterical symptoms do not broadcast a message harking back to a discrete primal scene, which a narrative encoding would resolve and distinguish. Rather, the message at stake addresses the lack of plentitude and completion as a structural phenomenon, be this the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of paternal law and social bonds), of identity (the insecurity of gender, ethnic, and class designations), or of the body (its mutability). Hysteric symptoms reproduce [...] traumatic impressions. (34)

Bronfen thus describes trauma as a "psychic instability" that wanders through the body, using this image to conjure associations with the wandering womb. The disruptive displacement of the womb not only dismantles fixed categories, it firmly defies closure: "In this resilient defiance hysteria radically questions all totalizing interpretations that feed off the promise of solution" (408). Although not a physical reality, the wandering womb is effectively used as a cultural trope for the instability of subjectivity and the trauma of marginalization. Hysteria, then, can be interpreted as a culturally induced performance of the subject in process/on trial.

The evocation of the womb as the site of the uncanny negotiation of (hysterical) representation in/of the corporeal brings us back to the relationship of the semiotic to sound, noise, and music discussed in Chapters one and two. Represented as a mutable, ambiguous blurring of interior and exterior, the semiotic resonates in the symbolic as a negotiation of subjectivity and difference. To revisit Kristeva's argument, it is the chora that generates precisely this kind of articulation, juxtaposing the "chaotic" semiotic with/in the "coherent" symbolic. The pulsational pressure placed by the chora
on the symbolic disrupts and contradicts the closure of its aesthetic, pointing to the inherent instability of the paternal law through the (re)production of culture (Powers 45). These are the disruptive articulations of the “language of discontent” that Bronfen attributes to the hysterical subject: “In the end, the woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance” (Cixous “Decapitation” 352).

Arguably, free improvisation is one such language of discontent. For women improvisers who “play” with hysteria, the disturbance created with/in improvised music is, as Joëlle Léandre suggests, a protest predicated on the cry:

for me jazz is a vision of the world you have. And for me jazz is also a scream ... un cri. When you cri—scream yeah? It means a lot of things for me. Politically, philosophically, a part of what, who, a vision of your life, creation, contestation—against [protest]. [There are] a lot of things included in cri: the resistance, to resist. And that interests me a lot.

Excess and Protest

McClary argues that the “language of discontent” for musical “madwomen” was a complex issue in the twentieth-century. As tonality gave way to atonality, diatonic framing mechanisms no longer provided the means of rationally controlling sonic pathology. New frames were invented and a new kind of disciplinary expertise was required to guarantee that the masculine surveillance of feminine excess would continue to provide stability in musical forms. These musical frames were patterned after cultural frames devised for similar purposes:

Women in the real world who were diagnosed as mad at the end of the nineteenth-century were turned over to a new group of professionals
called analysts, whose business it was to detect the logic hidden behind aberrant behaviours. The extreme transgressions of early twentieth-century music similarly called forth a new breed of music professional, also known as analysts. (McClary *Endings* 104)

Although music criticism was practiced before this time, McClary observes that “the new analysts were interested [...] in demonstrating that moments of apparent madness are, in fact, ultrarational. Indeed analysts tend to flock precisely to those passages that most flaunt their excessiveness” (*Endings* 104). As a result, chromaticism became the measure of masculine abstractness and scientific precision for composers. For example, Schoenberg’s development of the twelve tone technique guaranteed that “dissonant ravings” would be underwritten “with supreme rational control” (McClary *Endings* 108). From this point on, McClary suggests that

the rational frame guaranteeing social order comes to permeate the dissonant discourse of the madwoman, and the chromaticism of feminine sexual excess no longer poses a threat: henceforth it is appropriated—even generated—by the highest achievement of intellectual discipline. One can now experience that frenzy, that illicit desire, without either the panic that attends chaos or the traditional demand for narrative closure, because the composer and analyst can prove that every pitch is always already contained. (*Endings* 109)

The continuing surveillance exerted on musical representation by theorists, critics and musicologists has made it difficult for women to reappropriate sonic excesses associated with madness and femininity for their own purposes, apart from masculine scrutiny. Unlike the “female novelists [who] seized the power of self-representation that
had traditionally been denied them” in the early nineteenth-century, women musicians and composers were unable to reappropriate “the image of the madwoman for expressly political purposes,” until well into the twentieth-century (McClary Endings 110). Because McClary's argument focuses on western art music, it overlooks the sonic protests and excesses of early feminists that existed outside of music—that is, the “shrieking sisterhood”—as well as the strategic self-expression found in the songs of black female blues artists. As discussed in Chapter three in relation to improvisation, prototypes for “second wave” feminists surfaced in the 1970s, laying the groundwork for contemporary improvisational practices that continue to utilize both sonic excess and sonic protest.
Notes

1 Quoted in Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject* 175.

2 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* describes *bel canto* style as: "a term covering the remarkable qualities of the great eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Italian singers, and suggesting rather performance in the lyrical style, in which tone is made to tell, than in the declamatory style. Beauty of tone and legato phrasing, with faultless technique, were the principle ingredients" 62. Interestingly this definition also eliminates the possibility that at one time improvisation was part of the *bel canto* style. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*. (London: Oxford UP, 1980): 62.


4 For a complete discussion of the links between the disease of syphilis, hysteria, race and the Jewish male in the case of Dora, see Gilman, *Hysteria Beyond Freud* 419-436.

5 Whether or not she used that power is a contentious issue.

6 Although, as Juliet Mitchell argues, feminists should not necessarily take credit for “curing” hysteria, since “the historical decline of hysteria has more to do with psychology's effort as an institution to break up the diagnostic category of hysteria into other afflictions (anorexia, bulimia, depression, post traumatic stress disorder) mainly because these disorders can be treated—or so we are lead to believe—by less expensive behaviourist therapies.” Quoted in Findlay “Queer Dora” 300.
Chapter 5
Perverse Hysterics: The Strange Cri of Les Diaboliques

In the end, the woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance.
—Hélène Cixous¹

Although the Feminist Improvising Group gradually dissolved in the early 1980s, Schweizer, Nicols, Cooper and Roelofs continued to play together, eventually renaming their improvisational collaboration EWIG, the European Women’s Improvising Group. The extraordinary bassist, Joëlle Léandre, who had an extensive classical background as well as experience in new music and avant-garde technique, soon joined them. As Roelofs points out, the acronym EWIG is a German word that means eternal: “I thought that was great, women go on for eternity.”

In 1986 Roelofs organized the Canaille festival in Frankfurt (with Christiane Spieler and Kathi Goth) to showcase women improvisers, inviting members of FIG and EWIG (the “first” generation), as well as several women from a new generation of improvisers emerging on the European scene (the “second” generation).² The festival was produced in various European cities with local artists and arts groups taking on the responsibility of organizing the event in their respective areas—in Zurich Irène Schweizer and the group Fabrikjazz (October 1986); in Vienna Flora St. Loup (November 1987); and in Amsterdam, Maartje ten Hoorn (December 1987). An improvising collective called Canaille comprised of the pool of women who participated in the various festivals also began touring. As Rosmarie Meier writes in the liner notes to the only available recording of Canaille in Zurich, the proactive involvement in
organizing their own festivals and tours was born of necessity for women musicians; it was literally the only way they could make themselves heard: “These musicians have taken their affairs into their own hands, for in these times it is not a matter of course that the[y] get invited to the important festivals of free improvised music.” Irène Schweizer translates canaille as “something like “rascal” or “rabble,” and that sort of captures the mischievous nature of our group” (Chenard).

Schweizer traces a line from FIG to EWIG to Canaille, a line that conceivably extends to the current trio Les Diaboliques, formed in 1990 by Léandre, Schweizer and Nicols—“a very strong trio, ohh, la, la,” as Léandre describes it. Nicols not only sees Les Diaboliques as an outgrowth of previous collectives, she also derives pleasure from playing in this all-woman trio: “I think that the character of this group, obviously the fact that we are women, influences the nature of the music and the particular intimacy and the particular types of relationships between us” (Les Diaboliques).

As with earlier groups of women improvisers, Les Diaboliques continues to struggle with the identity “woman.” It is a continuous struggle of/for representation underscored by the names chosen to identify each of the groups. In this sense marking each successive group with words that draw attention to their differences as women—feminist, eternal, rabble, diabolical—sounds the noise of the sexed female body and the cry of the improvised woman. She is always at risk of being (labeled) hysterical.

The Strange Cri of Les Diaboliques

Maggie Nicols begins by singing a low pitched, pulsating, yet relaxed drone.
Irène Schweizer’s piano lines engage with this sound instantaneously, contributing detached phrases that provide stark contrasts to the continuous vocal line. Schweizer’s passages move up and down the length of the keyboard, disjunct groupings interspersed with melodic twists and turns that create variable contours of rhythmic fluidity. Joelle Léandre’s sounds oscillate between the high pitched harmonics and the low tones she coaxes from her bass, as she periodically returns to match the pitch of the vocal drone with a delicate vibrato. At times she adds elegant pizzicato lines to complement the sonic texture.

This is the first time Les Diaboliques has played as a trio in this venue, although they have performed in various configurations with other improvisers throughout their three nights of performances in Vancouver. Their introductory sonic gestures allow a luxurious amount of space for them to listen to each other, to attune themselves to their acoustic environment, and to initiate interaction with listeners located throughout the room.

There is a lyrical, song-like quality to the texture as the sounds weave in and out of counterpoint with one another. Individual voices surface—Schweizer’s right-hand offers the hint of a melody, Léandre conjures harmonic cries as she combines the light touch of finger with bow—and rise above the texture as moments of singular clarity. Nicols’ vocalizations unfold into a rhythmical chant fusing with the instrumental timbres creating moments of incantation. She sings fragments of an indistinguishable language that causes Schweizer—attuned to the shift in direction Nicols is making—to increase the intensity of her movement. Schweizer reworks fragments of phrases previously introduced, altering and reshaping their contour to create a pianistic flourish of
kaleidoscopic, virtuosic passages. Léandre adds flourishes of her own, demonstrating her brilliant arcato technique.

The intensity quickly transitions into sparse, rhythmic and repetitive gestures. Nicols returns to the chant, varying it with the delicate and airy high-pitched head-tones she skillfully shapes. These shrill yet subtle pitches are matched with Léandre’s expressive but equally delicate harmonics and Schweizer’s muted plucking of the strings inside the piano. The sparse sonic threads are woven around one another into an economical interface.

Nicols intersperses pseudo-linguistic phrases and punctuates them with her swinging arms and swaying body: visual layers added to the already complex sonic layers created by the trio. The movements are accentuated further by the rhythmic tapping of her feet, amplified by tap shoes. The easy tapping and loose gestures are reminiscent of a puppet whose strings are gradually tightened, as the rhythms become more defined and precise. Schweizer and Léandre provide rhythmic counterpoint to the “foot-percussion”—Léandre stretches and slaps the bass strings and occasionally taps the body of her bass with her bow, while Schweizer plucks the strings inside the piano to add sporadic chordal accents.

As the rhythms intensify Léandre abruptly interrupts—or “cuts”—the rhythmic flow with pronounced vocal outbursts that are punctuated with aggressive strikes on the strings and body of her bass. Nicols reacts as if she is taken aback by Léandre’s abrupt, dramatic turn. She stops vocalizing and stands with an embarrassed smile on her face, as if to apologize for her colleague’s demonstrative behaviour. Léandre stammers and gags with the grotesque sounds and gestures of the abject. Schweizer accents the dramatic moment with clanging hand cymbals which she then slides across the strings.
inside the piano. The modulating pitch adds an eerie quality that intensifies Léandre’s apoplectic vocalizations. Her vocal and corporeal gestures are more and more pronounced, exaggerated rhythmic and gestural stutters that produce a complex polyrhythm of movement, voice and instrument. The audience is engaged and their bursts of laughter add to the rhythmic counterpoint.

The prolonged and unabashed acting-out is the perfect antithesis to Nicols’ silent, apologetic discomfort, which in turn furnishes a contrasting backdrop to Léandre’s pathological behaviour. The disparity between proper “feminine” demeanor—silent, smiling, repressed, interior, compensating—and abject spectacle—demonstrative, noisy, unruly, purging—graphically parodies the reality and paradox of the feminine at a visual and sonic level. The interaction provides a split screen for the listener/viewer from which to interpret the duality of female spectacle.4

Léandre mimes escape from her affliction by swimming through the thick atmosphere of abjection and despair. Schweizer continues to distort the strings with syncopated, discontinuous sounds. Nicols’ embarrassed silence finally gives way to a parody of the song “Zippity do-da.” She begins demurely—

Zippity do-da
Zippity-ay
My-o-my what a wonderful day

... Mr. Bluebird on my shoulder
It’s the truth
It’s “act-chll”
Everything is satisfactual

183
—but moves toward a progressively more sinister subtext, complete with Shirley
Temple-esque determination and choreography reminiscent of a Hollywood musical
chorus line. As she demonstratively approaches the ending—

Zippity do-da
Zippity-ay
Wonderful feeling ...

—she bursts into the frenzied, nonsensical and angry ranting of a hysteric.

At this point, Léandre's vocals transform into operatic parody while Schweizer
expresses her own dramatic flair by generating an extravagant vibrato inside the piano
and then striking the lid with mallets for effect. Repetitive rhythms create disjunct vocal
lines, as Nicols transitions from hysterical ranting to nonsensical linguistic fragments.
These fragments are indistinguishable enough to discourage possible translation: is this
a real language or an invented one? She purposefully obscures the phrases to keep the
listener slightly off-balance. Adopting a strident tone, Nicols lectures the audience, trying
to make a point that cannot be fully understood.

The intensity gives way to a sparser texture comprised of hesitations and sighs,
and, with a fluid gesture toward the audience, Nicols gasps, “smelling salts please.” Her
demeanor conjures images of fainting and fragile women: infirm hysterics who succumb
to their melancholy. Léandre adds her own anguished vocalizations that accentuate and
empathize with Nicols' traumatic turn. As she continues her halting moans, Nicols gives
voice to the distress, asking: “Is there a husband in the house?” She mocks the
nineteenth-century “marriage” cure for discontented women that continues to resonate
in capitalist, heteronormative, middle-class society. Léandre moans with empathy and
understanding as Nicols continues her lament: “It's time I settled down. I can't go on like
this, wild and abandoned”—a play on the cliché “wild abandon” and women’s “wildness.” She then skillfully shifts the meaning of abandon to abandoned, moving from agency to victimization. She cries, “abandoned! abandoned! abaaandoned!” with her arms raised high in the air to punctuate her despair.

Léandre accentuates the melodrama with melancholic vocals in tandem with Schweizer’s disjointed manipulation of the piano strings. Nicols pauses, looks toward Léandre, considers her misery, and, with a surprising cut that instantaneously shifts the focus, turns to Schweizer and asks: “Irene, will you marry me?” This effectively “queers” the moment of her desperation, an “eccentric” request that offers the possibility of an unorthodox resolution. Ever the perfect foil to Nicols’ antics, Schweizer ironically responds, “no!” Léandre contradicts with a definitive, “yes!” and she and Nicols embark on a vocal lament of unfulfilled desire that draws from both opera and the blues. Schweizer accompanies them with full-textured orchestral chord-voicings that gradually fade into silence, as the wailing gives way to faint sounds, breaths and silences. This is the strange _cri_ of _Les Diaboliques_.

**The Wandering of Perverse Hysterics**

The hysteric's ability to defy linguistic conventions, to communicate in incomplete sentences, to oscillate between numerous tongues, to speak through the body, to gesture with silence and with sound, have all been strong and consistent markers of pathology in the discourses of hysteria. The sounds of wandering wombs, wandering foreigners, wandering domestics and wandering tongues move in and out of language with a disturbing unpredictability. The cry, laughter, fragmented language, autism, foreign accents, silences, shrieks, stutters and noises; poetic language, glossalalia,
psychotic discourse, multiple sounds, a whirl of words, mere sound, semantic nonclosure, assonance, intonation, sound play and libidinal chaos, articulate the hysteric at the threshold of language. As I argued in Chapters one and two, the materiality of sound that confuses the boundaries of inside and outside conjures the chora, the sonic abject, the monstrous feminine, the grotesquery of sound, and as such threatens to rupture the myth of symbolic equilibrium. These are the sonic and gestural wanderings that communicate the hysteric's movement beyond the confines of language and the symbolic.

Anne Carson reminds us that linguistic marginality is the strength of hysteria precisely because it is an articulation "which does not pass through the control point of logos, a meaning which is not subject to the mechanism of dissociation [. . .] called [. . .] self-control" ("Sound" 70). She recounts how Freud and Breuer used hypnosis to treat hysterical patients by encouraging them to "speak unspeakable things" in order to transform this symptomatic nonsense "into narrative and rational exegesis of their hysteric symptoms" ("Sound" 75). Sound that is "out of control" can conceivably bypass the censorship and conformity imposed by symbolic language and thus is arguably accessible as a useful means of alternate expression for the marginalized subject.

The question is this: if the marginalized subject is clinically or culturally pathologized, can the aestheticization of pathology challenge the very constructedness of that pathology? The mutability of hysteria can be viewed as an opportunity to create a mutable subjectivity—that is, an improvisational subjectivity—able to speak to and speak of the specificity of difference. Sounding the multiplicity and polyphony of individual and collective voices is an aesthetic (re)configuration of hysteria, an outlaw aesthetic that challenges the law from which contemporary hysteric—improvisers,
feminists, disenfranchised groups, artists, writers, gay and lesbian activists—can challenge power relations through sonic spectacle.

Elaine Showalter cautions that constructing hysteria in aesthetic terms runs the risk of romanticizing the protest of otherness and diluting the political effectiveness of the performance as well as the very real trauma from which it is derived. She stresses the importance of keeping in mind the anger, pain and desperation that often accompany hysterical “acting out” (335). The danger of staging hysteria under conventional aesthetic conditions—Charcot’s theatre of pathology for example—is the danger of over-aestheticizing and romanticizing pathology, oppression and marginalization. Similarly, when aesthetics and hysteria are positioned as coterminous the potential for pathologizing art also exists.

It is indeed very different to identify oneself as a hysteric for political, artistic and acoustic purposes, than it is to be identified as a hysteric from a clinical perspective. However, the tactic of appropriating hysteria in order to dismantle it has been repeated throughout history, as the previous Chapter has shown. To approach art as an appropriation of hysteria and hysteria as performative are not only powerful tropes for theoretical effect but powerful creative practices as well. The stigmatization of the other as hysteric can be embraced and transformed into an outlaw aesthetics that dismantles the very oppressive structures that seek to enforce self-control. As Heather Findlay suggests, the “politicized ranting” of feminist, anti-racist and queer activists has proved, over the last few decades, to be effective in dissecting and dismantling unequal power relations (345).

The ambiguous territory of subjectivity resonates in hysterical sounds, silences and noises made in political and artistic practices. These disruptive articulations
oscillate unpredictably, a sonic difference that finds its basis in the semiotic chora and its expression in the hysterical improvising subject. This is the space where the subject is tactically (re)hystericized, where hysteria is perverted, as Kristeva suggests:

We can play our hysterias without necessarily making a psychodrama and exposing ourselves to being the victims of the male order, but with great lucidity, knowing what we do, and with great mastery and measure. That is, perverse hysterics. Very wise.

(Guberman 46)

The perverse playing of our hysterias is an improvisational practice-process of outlaw aesthetics that accounts for the wandering mutability of hysteria. No longer is the hysteric an aesthetic object liable to indiscriminate scrutiny, but an active subject paradoxically in control of her hysteria—the subject in process/on trial. This is the multivalent oppositional play heard in the queer laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group, the non-linear temporality of EWIG, the mischievous rabble of Canaille and the diabolical cri of Les Diaboliques. It is found in Maggie Nicols’ descriptions of improvisation as “inspired lunacy” and “creative insanity.”

**Sonic Nomads**

In *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti appropriates the trope of the nomad to describe the subject (specifically although not exclusively the feminist female subject) who wanders through territories and crosses borderlines (23). As Braidotti suggests these border crossings occur on linguistic as well as non-linguistic levels and often traverse unknown sonic terrain. The nomad is necessarily a “polyglot,” a multilingual wanderer who produces “strange sounds, phonetic connections, vocal combinations,
and rhythmical junctions" fluidly moving between linguistic structures, "stealing acoustic traces" (13). Braidotti notes that the mobility of the nomad is closely connected to the wandering hysteric, who is constantly "[i]n transit, moving, dis-placing—this is the grain of hysteria without which there is no theorization at all" (Braidotti 93). Such theoretical and linguistic wandering is part of the ontological mobility at the basis of subjectivity. In other words: "a wandering life produces a wandering aesthetics" (Gabriel 406).

This wandering aesthetic is apparent in African-American musical traditions, traditions that make "the connection between madness and cultural production, exploration and innovation," as John Corbett observes. Integral to aesthetic exploration in genres such as jazz, funk and blues is an appropriation of, and engagement with, the trope of alien-ness, a reconfiguration of the dislocation experienced by African Americans in sonic terms, used to challenge and subvert the dominant ideology (8). As Corbett suggests, the questioning of sanity, prominent in the music of performers such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, is a strategic talking back to the dominant culture in linguistic and musical styles that confuse the boundary between sanity and insanity and contest the very notion of (in)sanity altogether. This fluid notion of insanity is often demonstrated in the language that surrounds jazz and improvised music, as well as in scat and other forms of "nonsense" singing. Corbett argues that this challenge to sanity is often accomplished in tandem with the challenge to language and fixed meaning:

In African-American slang there is a longstanding constellation of terms that revolves around the interrogation of sanity. Subtle and supple, this group of words relies on a set of interrelated connotations—a certain fluidity of meaning—that links madness with excellence and innovation. For example: "crazy," "wild," "out of control," "nutty," "insane," "out." These
terms have been most fully developed and deployed in relation to music, especially jazz and blues. (Play 13)

Graham Lock concurs with this observation in his monograph *Blutopia*, in which he recounts the ambivalence of African-American musicians toward the misrepresentation of black history as it is spoken in the language of white culture, “often decrying [language] as a powerful weapon that was employed to the detriment of black people and black creativity” (6). Lock similarly identifies the strategic use of the tropes of insanity and alien-ness by African-American musicians to “initiate a discourse on otherness,” but cautions against the automatic conflation of the tropes. Although both madness and alien-ness are cultural strategies that can facilitate a purposeful “display of difference,” the trope of madness is especially tricky since it has been literally applied as a “glib ascription of insanity to African Americans,” in relation to their desire for freedom from slavery and oppression as well as to their perceived difference from the dominant white culture (56-64).

The travelling themes expressed in African-American spirituals during the era of slavery were indeed a powerful form of resistance to white oppression, a resistance rearticulated in the blues music that followed emancipation (Davis 70). Tracing the connection of travel, freedom, gender and the blues musician, Angela Davis suggests that the travelling musician became a symbol of freedom in African-American culture after slavery. For those who had been enslaved freedom was synonymous with mobility, the ability to wander with little restraint. This mobile freedom was expressed in the music of the itinerant musician, especially, as Davis notes, in the improvisational forms of country blues created by musicians wandering through the southern United States (69).
Indeed, African-American men took to the road for many reasons: out of necessity in order to find work, or to engage in an autonomous lifestyle. Davis notes that travelling, after slavery, generated physical and “psychological repositionings,” journeys that often reflected the “road within” as much as the geographical route taken. Thus, the blues solidified the road as a metaphor for the spiritual, psychological and physical mobility previously denied African-Americans. As Davis remarks, life on the road tested the possibility of freedom itself (76).

Since black men were able to travel more easily than black women—who continued to be confined (for the most part) to domestic situations in their own homes or in the homes of white families—Davis explains that the relation of African-American women to travel was realized primarily on an aesthetic level. Blues music often gave women the opportunity to engage with experiences not generally accessible to them: “blues representations of traveling women constructed a cultural site where masses of black women could associate themselves aesthetically with travel as a mode of freedom” (67).

Despite the restrictions women faced, however, a number of women blues musicians, such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, did indeed take to the road. These women defied their place as domestics or passive observers of male adventures, assuming a life of travel and performance that took responsibility for their own emancipation at the level of gender, race and sexuality. Such defiance was a challenge to black women’s place in white society, as well as to a woman’s place within her own community: “the interminable journeys around which they constructed their lives fundamentally challenged the normal social expectations surrounding female experience” (74, 72). Perhaps women, even more than men, experienced the profound ambiguity of the road,
the uncertainty, difficulty and risk that existed alongside the possibilities of sexual freedom and self-exploration (78). In taking to the road women became active agents in charge of their own destiny, while at the same time their dislocation became a painful reminder of the sexist and racist alienation they continued to experience en route.

The enigma of the road was attractive to many musicians and as Davis suggests, the uncertainty faced by both female and male blues musicians attests to the "nonteleological character of blues consciousness" itself:

The experience of freedom is sought in the journey itself—its mobility, autonomously constructed activity that brings with it a taste of liberation.
There is no guarantee that the traveler will reach a satisfactory destination or that the process itself will not be painful. (77)

This kind of nonteleological aesthetic (also found in black independent cinema) is, according to Teshome Gabriel, a "nomadic aesthetic" in which the temporal and spatial aspects of nomadic wandering are multiplicitous and complex. The nomadic aesthetic transgresses the expanse of temporality by combining linear, historical time with the simultaneity of timeless wandering across spatial expanses. This is a wandering aesthetic accomplished through a non-linear simultaneity: "[i]n nomadism, time is not abstracted; it is an outcome of experience—it arises from life itself" (398).

The nomad recognizes the interrelatedness of time and space along with the play of the senses in shifting temporal and spatial configurations. Gabriel notes that notions of the abstract and the absolute and their definitive endurance throughout the history of western culture are sharply contrasted by nomadic twists and turns. She argues that a nomadic aesthetics traces this crooked pathway in the immediacy of experience: "[t]here is nothing timeless or enduring about beauty or aesthetics. It is, therefore, best
to characterize the notion of aesthetics as transient or travelling" (399). The shifting mobility of a wandering aesthetic is differentiated from the fixed notion of an aesthetic that does not change over time. As noted above, the heterogeneous interruption of, and challenge to, linear time is discussed by Kristeva in relation to "Women’s Time." Kristeva equates the fixed aesthetic found in symbolic language and representation with linearity and death, or as she calls it "obsessional time" (17). In contrast, women’s time, as discussed in Chapter two, is the time of corporeality, music and rhythms, a dialectic of cyclical and monumental temporalities which Kristeva suggests are traditionally indicative of female subjectivity and of hysteria (17). Thus, women’s time is spatial as well as temporal, an unfolding that is polyphonic and stratified and, as Gabriel suggests: “[t]he nomadic epic, at its best is thus truly a woman’s epic” (406).

The female improviser—in the case of Les Diaboliques, three different white women who speak three different languages and originate from three different European countries—is a sonic wanderer, en route to an unknown destination, in a state of flux, in transit. This is not an attempt to conquer sonic territory or mimic masculinist adventurers in search of, and eager to dominate, the feminine sonic wilderness. Women improvisers are "odd boundary creatures" who constantly refigure themselves through gesture and sound and are themselves reconfigured through the very gestures and sounds they create. So too are they reconfigured by the experiences they encounter on the road. The nomadic life is a reality for the female improviser, as it is for any performer who wants to share sonic exploration with different audiences and performers. It is a layering of experience: physically, mentally and spiritually exhausting while simultaneously exhilarating and transformative. And although her transient existence frees her from social constraints her journey is always ambiguous and

193
double-edged. For Maggie Nicols, it was difficult as a single mother to raise a child and travel, but necessary to advance her career:

It is difficult. If you have a child you have to be organized. Effectively my daughter showed me how to take myself and my music seriously. [...] Thanks to her I began to work seriously. She gave me unbelievable energy to work. For sure she suffered because of my job. But I did not tour until she was eight. (Meier and Landolt 18)

Many women recount stories of sexual harassment and discrimination, the difficulty of travelling with heavy and cumbersome instruments, the inability to establish long-term relationships. Irène Schweizer expresses the reality of her experience as a single lesbian woman who arrives home to an empty house:

Sometimes I long for a housewife who does everything for me, who does the laundry and fills the fridge with food and so on. But I made my decision and I could not imagine to live beside a man. Of course, I know many male musicians who are greeted at home by their wives when they return home from a tour. (Meier and Landolt 18)

Despite the difficulties that arise from life on the road, however, Joëlle Léandre stresses that jazz and improvisation “is supposed to be on the road. To play, to be very, very open. And slowly through all experiences you understand the life. It's a part of your life, the road.”

Buzzing

Léandre similarly describes free improvisation as a journey: “Beauty, risk, love, story, life!” To be open to change, to learn from the road, to engage interactively with
other artists, to listen to experience, to work extremely hard to make your mark in history as a woman, are components that combine to make, in Léandre's words, a *creatrice*. A classically trained musician, she has purposely chosen to dislocate herself from the mainstream classical and avant-garde musical worlds, while effectively and creatively maintaining her virtuosity on all fronts. Léandre wanders in and out of musical territories, shifting their ground, combining fragments of sonic, tactile, gestural and acoustic elements to shape her journey through the compositional and improvisational soundscape. At times Léandre admits that certain people do not understand her work, especially those who confine themselves to singular genres or adhere to accepted styles, especially within the borders of her home country, France. She has described her alienation from the French "scene," and comments that her musical excursions are literally born of necessity as she searches for creative collaborators: "What I am doing, the people do not always understand. It is jazz, it's not jazz, it is new, you see there is composition, there is improvisation. It is many things [...] They look at it like it was maybe E.T." (Vickery16-17). She describes the improvisational process as a creative amalgamation of sonic fragments and compares this process to the creative process of being human: "I work deeply from fragmentation, this concept. We are more like a kaleidoscope" (Les Diaboliques). In Léandre's improvisations, sound and gesture shift, break apart, take on different shapes and reemerge to create a mixture of textures and polyphonies. Improvisation thus becomes a space of immediacy and displacement, an echo of the "fragmentary, deferring status of knowledge itself" (Moi 187). The whole is dependent upon the fragments and vice versa, a spatial and temporal relationship that disrupts the linearity that constructs beginning, middle and end.
Léandre’s fragmentary and complex combinations of sonorous bodies—her bass, her voice, her gestures, her improvisations in various combinations—are layered to produce solo, duet, trio or quartet textures, her own intertextual improvisations: “fragments whose constitutive aspects always include other objects, other subjects other sediments” (de Lauretis “Eccentric” 14). In the liner notes to Léandre’s solo CD No Comment composer Sharon Kanach comments that Léandre is a “one-woman-quartet (Joëlle plus her bass plus her voice plus her composition/improvisation),” an observation Léandre (with a little prodding) confirms:

[The bass] is like a body for me, another body. And some days I talk with the instrument. It’s what you need to express. It’s an object. First I have to talk in this box in order to talk to the audience. To go in to go out. Sometimes I’m one with the bass. Sometimes I’m two. Interesting. I know in some pieces, in some moments it’s like this. (Personal Interview)

Similarly, Léandre’s relationship to sound and music is mediated by the amalgamation of her body and the body of her bass with the resonances of her improvisations:

I have an intense relation with the music. I can make a joke, or drama or funny stuff, that’s not the point. But the moment the first sound happens with any instrument or configuration, band or group, I think I’m quite intense and I play the bass with intensity. My bass, the bass. I have quite an intense relation not only with the bass but with the music, because the bass is the music.

Léandre constantly (re)invents frameworks for bass playing as well as for improvisation in general, by combining these multiple and shifting sonic selves. Not only are her sounds improvised, but her subjectivity is also improvisational, her experience fluid, her
knowledge fragmentary yet profound. Indeed, Léandre's playing illustrates Kristeva's subject in process/on trial eloquently, as she works equally with form and content, structure and fluidity in the moment:

I'm sure a musician can learn [different languages] for your garden. And you don't know when the garden is ready or not. Maybe it's unconscious but all the pictures, the movement, the street—you could say the outside—not only the intellectual. No, no, no. Life, life, life, life, life. But to be open like a bee. Bzzzz. Because the bee has its antennae up all the time and the bee works a lot. And I work a lot. I love the bee, oh they are nice! They work and they never stop.

Buzzing, working, playing, improvising are all a part of Léandre's nomadic aesthetic, an aesthetic that finds expression in her mobility:

For years and years, it's been my main feeling that the support of my life has been travel. I travel a lot and I've met so many great and wonderful people, not just musicians, many others in poetry and dance, or anything, and for me it is so natural to work with different people, explore different emotions. I don't want to be just like that [moves hand through the air indicating a straight line]. Music is *insaisissable* [elusive, hard to catch] it is abstract, you can take the music just like that. (Vickery 17)

**Babbling**

Maggie Nicols uses the power of voice to transgress boundaries in a performance situation, to connect audience and performer, to heighten intimacy, to underscore the power of women's sound, to inhabit hysteria. To inhabit hysteria, a
seemingly contradictory notion, is temporarily to dwell on the edge of sanity, a tactic of fluidity, of wandering. At times Nicols uses the discourse of the hysteric as a means of expression, playing with broken language, non-linguistic utterances and the multilingualism of the hysteric's speech. Inhabiting hysteria in this way questions the constructedness of hysteria and the pathologizing of woman's sounds. The hysterical female body that sounds, points to the limits of language and the impossibility of representing both sound and the sexed female body in the symbolic. Indeed Nicols' non-scripted narrations, fragmented languages, interrupted monologues and free associations bypass linguistic and musical conventions. In this sense Nicols' vocalizations are accomplished with "the belle indifférence of a hysteric" (Breuer and Freud 135).

Nicols' treatment of jazz standards, for example, often embarks on the deconstruction of both lyric and sentiment, perverting the expectations of sound and language to create a subversive transformation. Her perverse rendering of the song /Love You For Sentimental Reasons/ is a case in point:  

I love you  
Ahhhhhh  
For sentimental reasons  
Treasons ss  
Ohhhhhh  
Ah ah  
Through  
the  
changing
Here Nicols parodies the sentimentality of heterosexual romantic love that is often found in the standard jazz lyric, particularly in the songs that cross-over into the realm of the "popular." She intones the words "I love you" in an effort to convince the listener of her sincerity. Yet she immediately interjects a "witchy" cry—"ahhhhh"—that rises and falls in an arc before the delivery of the song's *raison d'être*; the motivation of love is "for sentimental reasons." The repetition of the same descending pitch on the words "reason" and "treason" inextricably links them together. Similarly, the insertion of "treasons" suggests that the reason for sentimentality is far from endearing and may prove to be dangerous. "Treasons" is delivered with a snaky "ss" closely following its slow annunciation, conjuring a sinister phallic scene that alludes to the conversation between Eve and the snake in the Garden of Eden, or to a deal with the devil.

Nicols' voice emits monstrous, eerie sounds that convey a double meaning—she is speaking as both the lover and the beloved, unwilling victim and expectant victor. She underscores the difference by using the onomatopoeia of "mushiness" to betray the subtext of power contained in the lyric. As the transcription above suggests, there are frequent collapses into and reliance upon non-linguistic utterances. At first the sighs and contoured pitches are used to resist the song's sentiments, but they eventually soften
into surrender, resigning to the tyranny of romantic love. Nicols avoids complete acquiescence, however, as she utters the words “silly boy” in a whispered, mocking tone. She speaks as a woman who recognizes the immaturity and childishness of heteronormative romance.

Nicols’ improvisations continually demonstrate her facility with sonic free association, swirling narratives that fluidly commingle linguistic and nonlinguistic sounds. She transgresses and reinvents the “talking cure,” a psychoanalytic method designed, in the course of Freud’s work with hysters, to purge hysterical utterances by channeling random thoughts into rational speech. Unable to speak her language of origin, Freud’s patient Anna O. similarly used fragments of various languages to communicate during her hysterical seizures. Her inability and/or refusal to demonstrate linguistic coherence has been interpreted by feminists as a protest against the language of the father, “signifying both through the body and through nonverbal language the protest that could not be put into words” (Showalter 316). Anna’s linguistic difficulty suggests an ambivalence toward language that is often taken as a sign of women’s untenable position in the symbolic, an indication of “the repression of women’s language or its impossibility within patriarchal discourse” (Showalter 316). Nicols reverses the way we hear the hysteric’s multilingualism—challenging the inability to speak an authorized language as pathological—and claims it as a facility with language, non-language and sound, a paradoxical communication of the unrepresentable.

Nicols perverts the so-called rational linearity of speech, often interrupting a sentence with a soaring succession of sounds—babble/gibberish/scat—that imitate language but have no linguistic meaning per se. The listener follows the sounds that weave in and out of language, understanding the contours and the gestures of her
articulations. Fluent in several languages, Nicols utters fragments in rapid succession, often shifting from one language to the next in mid-sentence. Her multilingual narratives are punctuated, at times even hijacked, by invented words and languages, soundplay, harmonic splitting, rhythmic repetitions, stutters, moans and shrieks. She gestures, dances, taps out rhythms with her feet, throws body into voice and voice into body.

As listeners we are challenged to engage actively with these sounds in order to develop new means of translation, interpretation and understanding, inventing our own ways of listening and sounding that wander away from linguistic conventions. This is a journey that traverses the distances between sensation and the surrounding environment, suggesting immediacy, freeplay, body awareness, directness, spontaneity and self-sufficiency: “Babble supplies us with the phenomenon of voice in process of creation” (Applebaum 79, 86).

Nicols’ improvisational journeys are aesthetic wanderings that take the listener on a bumpy ride:

I didn’t necessarily set out to narrate but it was a way for people into the music. And then you could take them along on a journey that was completely your own and bring them along. Because I don’t know where I’m going on that journey myself.

Opening

Recounting a conversation with Irène Schweizer in Coda magazine, writer James Hale embraces the metaphor of mobility and change embedded in the title of her solo CD Many and One Direction, to sum up her nomadic career as an improvising pianist:

Change and evolution seem to have passed largely out of fashion in jazz, as artists increasingly choose the stasis of musical styles that feel
comfortable. Swiss pianist Irène Schweizer rejects what’s expected of her and damns convention. Her career has been ruled by movement. She cannot, will not, stand still. (14)

Hale traces Schweizer’s journey from hard bop and other forms of “legitimate” jazz into free improvisation in the 1960s, noting that, as the only woman to emerge in the scene at this time, her performances with some of Europe’s leading male improvisers found her in “somewhat alien territory.” It was not that Schweizer’s playing was any less innovative or virtuosic than her male counterparts; rather, it was her feeling of isolation when she played with a different sensibility and approach to free improvisation, a difference of which she was profoundly aware: “I was always the only woman around. Sometimes there was tension. Men want to show how fast they can play and how much technique they have. So I would have to struggle and also play as fast as possible. I found it too aggressive and competitive at times” (Hale 15). Schweizer found a form of refuge in the women’s improvising collectives of the 1970s and early 1980s, communities of women improvisers who encouraged and supported her eclecticism and experimentation, and who provided a space in which her difference could be nurtured.

The struggle of the female pianist can perhaps be understood as a struggle with the constructions of gender and sexuality as they relate to the white, European woman and the instrument she plays. According to Richard Leppert, the piano was an important signifier of domesticity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European middle-class life. As one of the central objects owned by the family, it represented the economic and erotic economy of domesticity. The piano was a feminine instrument, a designation that paralleled the conflation of woman with the feminine in the economy of masculine, heterosexual desire. Indeed, the piano was an aesthetic, feminized object, and, as
Leppert suggests, "the visual fascination with the piano connects to the scopophilic fascination with women's bodies in art" (155). As was the case with the female body, the body of the instrument represented the contradiction of the feminine in bourgeois society. The materiality of the feminine was fetishized through undue emphasis on the body of the instrument, on its placement within the home, and on its elaborate decoration and stylization, while at the same time the sound of the piano fetishized music as immaterial, its harmonies indicative of the illusive and ethereal feminine. The piano was an ambiguous marker situated somewhere between public and private life, an echo of the ambiguity of the woman it had come to represent (153).

As a passive yet beautiful object that sounds, the piano carried the same kind of danger associated with chaotic feminine sexuality. As Leppert reminds us, the taming of sound through the mechanisms of harmony, unity and music mimed the confinement of women's sexual agency in the heterosexual family. Indeed, for domesticity to be upheld the sensuality and the femininity of piano music was confined to a controlled spectacle that effectively covered-over sonic feminine danger.

The tension between pianistic propriety—concentration, discipline, respectability, purity, intellect—and impropriety—the spectacle of a sensuousness that was taboo, erotic, illicit and embodied—produced gestural tensions that reflected the conflict between masculine rationality and feminine irrationality (156). Women players were forever caught in this double bind, required to execute proper performances yet often unable to express their own creativity. The mapping of gender onto music, instruments, women and their performances was the result of an erotic economy heard in and grafted on to music, "concerned with the arousing and channeling of desire, with mapping patterns through the medium of sound that resemble those of sexuality"
(McClary *Endings* 8). For women, this was and continues to be difficult territory to negotiate, especially for those who improvise. Both women and improvisation share an unscripted fluidity, occupying a socially dangerous space that violates the boundaries of masculine and feminine and threatens to disturb representation (Leppert 143).

A perverse reading of the piano as feminine presents interesting possibilities for the female player, marked as feminine in the symbolic. The feminine/feminine duet disrupts a heterosexual economy that questions the commingling of vibrating feminine bodies. What does it mean when a woman lifts the lid of a piano and plays inside? To open the lid of the piano is to engage in an erotic opening of feminine recesses, an invitation to the experience of pleasure and pathology. If the piano is opened wide and sounded, the very boundaries of life and death are crossed, feminine sexuality is awakened and its sounds become “the root cause of hysteria, the psychological analogue to social anarchy” (Leppert 171).

Hélène Cixous argues that crossing the threshold of inside and outside in this manner is indicative of a bisexual female imaginary: “it’s this being ‘neither out nor in,’ being ‘beyond the outside/inside opposition’ that permits the play of bisexuality.” This is a libidinal bisexuality that is determined not by sexual partnering with both men and women, but by the female unconscious: “the possibility of extending into the other, of being in such a relation with the other that I move into the other without destroying the other: that I will look for the other where s/he is without trying to bring everything back to myself” (Cixous “Decapitation” 356).

I am not suggesting here that Schweizer has changed her sexual orientation from lesbian to bisexual, but that the bisexual female imaginary Cixous describes above is evident in Schweizer’s playing. As she wanders freely across the boundaries of inside
and outside in her improvisations, Schweizer performs a sonic nomadism that blurs instruments, styles, bodies, resonances:

I consider the piano as an extension of my body and I also consider my piano playing as physical, especially when I play as a soloist. Of course, it's just an instrument that I love embracing with my arms and hands, or banging on it hard, according to my actual feelings. The piano has indeed an inside (strings) and an outside (keys) and sometimes I really love to go deep inside it when I play a complete piece on the strings. But all this is happening very spontaneously with me, I do not really think in these terms before I start playing."

Schweizer's configuration of the instrument as an extension of her body conjures images of instrument-as-prosthesis. Blurring the boundaries between instrument and body, technology and embodiment, in this way effectively breaks down the boundaries between nature and culture to create what Donna Haraway calls the cyborg in "A Cyborg Manifesto." The cyborg is a hybrid figure who embodies the qualities of both human and machine. It is a notion of the subject that transforms the notion of subjectivity, as Rosi Braidotti explains: "[a]s a hybrid, or body-machine, the cyborg is a connection-making entity, it is a figure of interrelationality, receptivity, and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions (human/machine; nature/culture; male/female; oedipal/nonoedipal)" (105). The implications of improviser-as-cyborg and instrument-as-prosthesis are far-reaching and beyond the immediate scope of my argument; however, some of the issues raised by this configuration are addressed in the concluding section of this project.
Sonic Strangers

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva identifies the wanderer as the stranger, the foreigner, the other. This is a foreign presence that cannot be reconciled simply by the acceptance of "otherness" or "the other" into the social fabric. Kristeva argues that otherness is the space of strange or foreign aspects within ourselves that each of us must come to terms with. The foreigner, as other, confronts us with our own otherness and thus with the abjection that lingers in our own psyche: "the other is my ("own and proper") unconscious" (183). Abjection (as I argued in Chapter two) is an encounter with the ambiguity of our boundaries, throwing us slightly off balance, revealing the fragility of our identity, the other within, the hysteria of a subjectivity that is never fully decided but fluid, constantly in motion.

Kristeva associates the fluidity of the wanderer with difference and the uncanny: "[u]ncanny foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided" (181). The uncanny, as explained briefly in Chapter two, is linked to the resurfacing of repressed semiotic drives in the symbolic (including the death drive and the libidinous feminine) and marks the "weakness of language" and the "fragility of representation." Kristeva suggests that the uncanny signals an overall "weakening of the value of signs as such and of their specific logic" (186). The uncanny or strange encounter with the abject other within us triggers a loss of boundaries of self, a sense that the line separating imagination from reality has been erased (188). Thus, the fear of the other we experience when confronted with the strangeness of the foreigner is ultimately a fear of our own repressed otherness, of the stranger within ourselves:

To discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that "demon," that threat, that apprehension generated by the
projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid “us.” By recognizing our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners. (192)

For Kristeva, the commitment to an ongoing encounter with the foreigner must be coterminous with the commitment to the ongoing encounter with the other within, a journey “toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable” which she believes is the goal of psychoanalysis (181-182). This psychoanalytic ethics also contains a politics that reaches beyond “brotherhood, paternal law and divine authority” to cut across economic, ethnic, political and national borders. To reconcile the irreconcilable is to create a paradoxical community based on a respect for difference that is “founded on the consciousness of its unconscious—desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible.” In other words, for Kristeva difference must be negotiated consciously on an unconscious level: “On the basis of an erotic, death-bearing unconscious, the uncanny strangeness [...] sets the difference within us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being with others” (192).

It is arguable that an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable is prefigured in the libidinal negotiation of semiotic and symbolic difference, in the maternal deployment of a love outside the paternal law, which would seem to suggest that Kristeva’s notion of “herethics” (discussed in Chapter one) is a precursor to the ethics of respect. This reading is a more radical interpretation of herethics than the version offered by Teresa de Lauretis in her critique of Kristeva’s discussion of motherhood (via the Virgin Mary in “Stabat Mater”), summed up in the comment: “the heresy in her ethics is very tame
indeed" (*Love* 177). It is not tame to suggest that the notion of otherness as based in the libidinal dynamic of difference connects the strange wandering of the other to the strangeness of the abject: "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers* 4).

Joëlle Léandre suggests that improvisation offers an opportunity to develop a dialogue with your own otherness: "You can one day decide, I close my door, I want to learn: ‘Hey who am I? What do I have to do? What do I want to do?’ It's hard to do and difficult to continue to believe. It's not like Ave Maria but Zen maybe,” as well as a way to connect with the other outside of yourself:

You learn to go to the other one and say: “Hey, I'm here for you, touch me.” The music is communication, that's all. An expression. [...] We learn a lot to meet, to go to the other and say: ‘Hey, who are you?’ And this happens in improvisation and this is so deep.

**Wandering Theory/Sounding Theory**

Feminist theory offers many contradictory theoretical trajectories that lead to parallel (re)configurations of identity as fluid, mobile and wandering. For example, framing the notion of identity in relation to Kristeva’s ethics of respect for the irreconcilable is to recognize that the contradictions plaguing our journey toward identity can never fully be reconciled. Thus, our identity is always shifting and amorphous, and, although we can choose our identifications, they can never truly define us. An ethics of respect for the irreconcilable, then, envisions a coalition between seemingly disparate identifications created across the boundaries of our difference.
Teresa de Lauretis frames her notion of identity as mobile and shifting in the figure of the “eccentric subject,” using nomadic tropes of dis-placement and dis-identification. De Lauretis describes the eccentric subject as a space of critical consciousness and experiential contradiction “attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses (“Eccentric”18). This is an identity that articulates an ambiguous “rewriting of self” in relation to history, culture and community, by “affirming ‘I am like you’ while pointing insistently to the difference [. . .] and reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (18).

When asked to explore the possibility of a “feminist aesthetic,” Maggie Nicols identifies a respect for difference and an ability to embrace contradictions as primary imperatives when performing with other women. A feminist aesthetic is predicated on dis-identification and has a respect for the irreconcilable:

Maybe [a feminist aesthetic can be found] in connection to getting along with each other. Respect [. . .] is very important. It is a difficult matter especially now, when the feminist movement is confronted with many contradictions. Not all women are wonderful. There are differences among women: between colour and class. But there is something special in the communication between feminist women. (Meier and Landolt)

Returning to Braidotti’s nomadic epistemology, the mobility of difference finds its foundation in sexual difference—“a powerful factor of dissymmetry” in which women’s embodiment provides “positive foundational grounds for the redefinition of female subjectivity in all its complexity” (151, 149). For Braidotti the nomadic condition reconfigures identity as a complex layering of spatial and temporal factors that allows
for intersecting subjectivities and moments of what she refers to as the "becoming-subject" of nomadism (158).

Braidotti underscores the link between identity and unconscious processes to reconfigure the notion of identity as neither static nor fixed:

Identity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the "other"; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process, Last, but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images that escape rational control. (166)

Braidotti suggests that nomadic identity is "an art of existence," an apt description of the subject in process/on trial, the female improviser who plays the temporal and spatial layering of sonic identity that does not stand still. For Hélène Cixous nomadism is also the marker of the hysteric, who generates a radical transformation of history and identity by sounding her difference, pleasure, libido. Cixous asserts that it is the role of woman to affirm difference "to the point of strangeness." When the issue of sexual difference is broached, she suggests that the symbolic economy based on death is broken and the regeneration and revitalization of the other and otherness is accomplished: "[i]f women were to set themselves to transform History, it can safely be said that every aspect of history would be completely altered" ("Decapitation" 352).

Women's sounding, then, must alter the metalanguages, institutions and codes that silence her. For Cixous this requires the deconstruction of current notions of knowledge and power that censor and confine otherness to the paternal law enacted through opposition and hierarchy. What this means for woman is that she must write/sound according to her desire, must perform a "feminine" writing/sounding that
resists closure ("Decapitation" 353). The feminine text is thus the nomadic text, its axis a constant point of departure that becomes a "metaphorical form of wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable: no reckoning, a feminine text can't be predicted, isn't predictable, isn't knowable and is therefore very disturbing" ("Decapitation" 354-355). Cixous utilizes the foreignness of the feminine in the symbolic to conjure a fluid notion of female identity, to restore the body to writing, to create a femininity that functions beyond representation and stasis.

Since foreignness, strangeness and the other are tropes linked to the abject, they are also related to the marginal spaces occupied by the grotesque. Described by Mary Russo as an "else-where," the female grotesque is "produced by and in representational practices and by what they leave out or cannot represent" (40). As Russo suggests, the notion of an else-where requires the surrender of visibility in favour of the potential of the invisible, a politics of invisibility that accounts for excess, the unrepresentable, what is left out or assumed missing.

Russo also suggests that the "politics of invisibility" is linked to hysteria. What she refers to as the "hysterical leap" produces an ontological destabilization that performs an "active vanishing" of the subject as opposed to the passive acceptance of exclusion from representation. This is a philobatic female hysteria that allows one to improvise her own destiny: "the assumption of death, risk, and invisibility may be the price of moving beyond a narrow politics of identity and place" (48). Russo notes that hysteria is the space where the politics of invisibility stand alongside the politics of the spectacle, a performance that plays with excess beyond the limits of language, the phallic economy and static identity.
Sound belongs to the politics of the invisible, a defiance of the visual basis of lack that confuses the opposition between the tangible and the intangible, subject and object, instrument and performer. As discussed in Chapter one, sound is in a constant state of flux, an invisible ink that leaves its mark as it evaporates and disappears. Sonic excess signals the hysterical loss of boundaries, the spectacle of the strange, the other, the grotesque, the wandering subject. Cixous argues that “[t]he hysteric is a divine spirit that is always at the edge, the turning point, of making” (“Decapitation” 349). The tactic of perverting hysteria has been used throughout history: it is a repetition that is never quite the same; a dancer’s limp; a cogent stutter; a queer laughter; a strange wandering; an improvisation. The diabolical cri of the perverse hysteric sounds the nomadic multiplicity of difference—woman in a constant state of improvisation.
Notes

1 Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation” 352.

2 A recording of the Canaille festival in Zurich was produced by Intakt Records and is out of print.

The women who participated in the Zurich installation of Canaille from the first generation were: Irène Schweizer piano (Switzerland); Annemarie Roelofs trombone (Holland, Germany); Maggie Nicols vocals (UK); Joëlle Léandre bass (France); Lindsay Cooper bassoon (UK); and the second generation, Co Streiff saxophone (Switzerland); Marilyn Mazur piano and drums (Denmark); Elvira Plenir piano (Graz); Flora St. Loup vocals (France); Maartje ten Hoorn violin (Holland); Maud Sauer oboe (Holland); Mariette Rouppe van der Voort flute and saxophone (Holland); Petra Ilyes bass guitar (Germany).

3 The performance described was part of the Time Flies festival of improvised music produced by the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society, November 4-6, 1999. Eleven internationally respected improvisers were invited to play in different configurations during the course of the event.

4 Videographer Marlene Madison responded to this interaction by zooming-in on the duo during this section of the performance. Even if she had not, I recall being drawn toward this focus during the live performance. Madison, like many other listeners, was also surprised by Nicols’ sudden shift of focus toward Irène. See Appendix 3:2.

5 Butler scatters these sonic tropes throughout her text Gender Trouble 81-89. See Chapter one for an expanded discussion of these tropes in relation to sound.

6 The phrase “odd boundary creatures” is used by Mary Russo in The Female Grotesque 15.
7 Léandre made this point during a networking session entitled: "Where are the Women Improvisers?" This session was a component of "V.I.E.W. from the Front," a festival of women improvisers that took place at the Western Front, February 20-23, 1997, in Vancouver.

8 This kind of "critical engagement" with the text has a number of limitations. The written transcription is unable to capture the sonic fragmentation, convey the potency of the sounds, or recreate the experience of listening.

9 This is an excerpt from the improvisation "Silly Boy" found on Les Diaboliqes' second CD Splitting Image (Intakt CD 048, 1997).

10 Sneja Gunew has pointed out to me that this insight is applicable to the reading of Jane Campion's film "The Piano."

11 This quote is taken from a personal email correspondence with Schweizer, used with permission.


13 For a discussion of Kristeva's view of motherhood and herethics see Chapter one.
Conclusion

Theory in a Constant State of Improvisation

Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside.

—Anne Carson

As I stated in the introduction, this project is an improvisation, and so there are still many layers to peel back and examine, many connections to be made, many fragments to be shifted and rearranged. Throughout the text I have summoned a number of female icons—Mother, Nanny, Baubo, Demeter, Siren, Hysteric, Diva-dog—as figures who rupture, resist, contradict, shift, transform and improvise the spaces in, around, and through phallogocentric culture. I have attempted to read each figure in relation to sound, to develop a female “sonography” that attests to the sonic realities of our everyday lives and the improvisational differences that compose our subjectivities.

Each female icon mentioned above is endlessly resonant, able to be resounded and repeated differently time and time again. The figures of the nanny, mother, hysterical and Diva-dog in particular warrant further exploration. Upon finishing the final Chapter I realized that the nanny haunts this narrative throughout—in the guise of Mary Poppins, Baubo and Dora’s nurse—with her marginal soundings. The linguistic incoherence associated with gender, class, race and sexuality converge in this abject figure, as she defies language with her philobatic, queer laughter, hysterical cries and monstrous noise. Of special interest is her relationship to the mother, a relationship consistently
implied in this narrative but only partially explored since I came late to the recognition of her pervasiveness. The relative absence of the mother in *Mary Poppins*, the further implications of the antiphonal exchange between Baubo (nanny) and Demeter (mother), as well as Freud's exclusion of the dyad nanny-mother from his narrative account of Dora's case are areas of immediate interest. Beyond this project I intend to explore the idea that the mother/nanny dyad can be radically reread and reconfigured as a difference that demonstrates Rosi Braidotti's notion of "female intersubjectivity" discussed in Chapter one. Can the mother-nanny dyad be read as a subversion of the oedipal triangle mother/child/father? Is the configuration mother/child/nanny a queer configuration that allows for two mothers and the disruption of the heterosexual family? Can Kristeva's notion of the semiotic accommodate this radical rereading?

The exploration of the female improviser as hysteric, based on the relation of sound to the trope of the wandering womb that leads back to the semiotic chora, does not, at this point in the project, account for the possibilities engendered by the configuration of the male improviser as hysteric. As Elaine Showalter asserts, "[i]n order to understand the gender issues in hysterical narrative, we need to have case studies of male hysterics by women analysts" (333). If improvisation is viewed as a hysterical free association articulated by women, as I have argued in this study, then a study of men's improvisation as hysterical free association might also be undertaken. This trajectory for research could lead to alternative readings of a male relationship to sound that ruptures linguistic constraints, could challenge claims of coherence generated by the "outlaw" sounds of men, and could develop a broader understanding of hysteria as a gendered narrative. Showalter notes that when studies of male hysterics "are published, we will be able to ask whether the body, language, speech, and narrative of the hysteric is a
discourse of femininity or a narrative imposed by the man who tells the story" (333). Other questions that surface in relation to male improviser-as-hysteric include investigations of how abjection and the semiotic chora come in to play in a study of male improvisers. Furthermore, what is offered by a queer reading of antiphonal exchanges between men? How does improvisation reconfigure the codes of masculinity and male sexuality?

An expansion of the Diva-dog as a "sonographic" figure presents interesting possibilities that transgress the borders of both body and technology as discussed briefly in Chapter five. The configurations of woman improviser-as-cyborg and musical instrument-as-prosthesis generate a number of possible theoretical trajectories. As a reconceptualization of materiality that questions the construction of nature and the concomitant categories that divide artifice from reality and instrument from body, the improvising cyborg violates corporeal boundaries so that instrument-as-mechanism becomes sound-as-appendage. In this way, the cyborg implies a vision of the body that is neither physical nor mechanical, nor just textual. The cyborg functions rather as a counterparadigm for the bodily intersection with external reality; it is an adequate reading not only of the body, not only of machines but rather of what goes on between them. (Braidotti 108)

The interface between instrument and improviser to which Braidotti refers is reminiscent of the intertextual interplay of sound and body that creates a sonic corporeal grain. This notion brings us back to Vicky Kirby's observation that the "uncanny interlude" of difference is rhythmically inscribed upon the corporeal by sound, discussed in Chapter
one. Echoing Braidotti echoing Haraway, the question then becomes whether the improviser-as-cyborg can create a “new flux of the self,” and if so, how (104)?

My involvement with this project has yielded an ongoing respect for the women improvisers with whom I interacted, and I am fortunate to be able to stay in contact with them both personally and professionally. I continue to catch glimpses of the range and depth of their “social virtuosity,” along with their technical and aesthetic virtuosity as improvisers. I have witnessed the complexity of each woman as a créatrice, the jouissance that accompanies their deep commitment to art and their individual and collective willingness to take enormous risks. Although I have written them into this text by transcribing them into the text(ure) of my writing, it is clear that they were writing themselves long before I began my intervention. They have no need for a theoretical rendering from me. Along with Hélène Cixous, I note that by writing the lives of women improvisers I am also writing myself:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (“Medusa” 245)

In feminist research, then, theory and experience are intertwined on many levels, each informing the other in an improvisational flux. This is theory that is “corporeal, bodily, literal, figurative, not metaphorical” (Braidotti 109). Women in a constant state of improvisation have no real need for theory, and so it is up to theory to begin to creatively improvise itself.
Notes

1 Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound" 71.

Works Cited


Chadbourne, Eugene. Email Interview. 1 November 1999.


Cooper, Lindsay. Personal Interview. 5 August 1999.


227


Nicols Maggie. Telephone Interview. 4 March 2000.

———. Personal Interview. 4 November 1999.


Roelofs, Annemarie. Personal Interview. 11 August 1999.


Appendix 1:1
Interview Excerpts: Lindsay Cooper
August 5, 1999 London

JS: I understand that you started FIG with Maggie, is that correct?
LC: Yes, that's true.
JS: How did that come about?
LC: It was after a musicians' union meeting. We got talking and we agreed that improvisation had become very important and no women were doing it. And suddenly we thought, well let's do it. Let's get women together and do it ourselves.
JS: Why did you want it to be all women? Was it because women were not able to participate in the existing improvisational groups?
LC: Yes, yes.
JS: Was that situation something that was spoken of or were women not accepted because men didn't think women were good enough to participate or...
LC: I think it was probably the former.
JS: That must have been a bit frustrating.
LC: It certainly was.
JS: Well I guess that is one of the reasons for Maggie's focus on inclusivity. She wanted to include women of all different [technical] levels.
LC: Yes she did.
JS: How did you feel about that?
LC: Well actually there was a slight disagreement between us because I wanted to make it much better and limit it to very good people. And I realize that that was a slightly erroneous position.
JS: Why do you say that?

LC: Because I think it is very judgmental. Even now I'm still rather judgmental, but I realize that Maggie's way is probably the better.

JS: What do you mean by judgmental? Is there a particular criterion for judgment?

LC: Well you think this is a good musician and this is a rather weak musician, so let's go for the good ones.

JS: So where does that criterion come from? Does it come from classical training?

LC: Yes, I'm sure it does.

JS: Do you have a classical background in both composition and bassoon?

LC: Yes.

JS: Did you go to music college?

LC: Yes, I went to the Royal Academy of Music in London.

JS: Did you struggle with moving away from those ideas? That approach?

LC: Well straightaway I wanted to have nothing more to do with classical music. That's why I took up the saxophone.

JS: Why did you decide to not be involved in classical music?

LC: Because it's actually very rigid and nobody was interested in what I wanted to do.

JS: How did you become interested in avant-garde ideas and improvisation?

LC: It started in the college I went to before the Academy. And that was the first time I did improvisation. For her final year dance project, a student asked me to play for her performance and I said: "Well what do I play?" And she said: "I don't know, just make it up." And I thought, that's ridiculous, but I suddenly found that I was doing it and I was really good, so it turned me on to improvisation.

......
JS: Maybe I should back up a little and ask about the feminist label that was attached to the group—I know you didn’t give yourselves that name, it was given to you.

LC: And it’s the most banal title you can think of.

JS: But there is so much meaning attached to the feminist part of the name Feminist Improvising Group. Was a lot of that meaning superimposed onto the group?

LC: Yes.

JS: Did the members of the group have varying relationships with feminism at the time? Did everyone identify themselves as feminists?

LC: Well, certainly Maggie and I had a very strong relationship to feminism—and also Sally. But I don’t think the rest of the group had such a strong relationship to feminism. Although on second thought, I think Irène did although it wasn’t very obvious. Her career has been basically playing with men, but I do think she is very committed to feminism.

JS: How did you deal with playing with women of varying technical abilities? Especially as a classically trained musician and someone who was already quite advanced as an improviser?

LC: I think it’s like everything else, I didn’t actually realize how advanced I was. I didn’t take what I was doing very seriously.

JS: Is that because you were participating because you wanted to play with women improvisers regardless?

LC: Yes.

JS: As improvisers were you placed into the jazz category?

LC: I think many people looked at FIG and had a hard time trying to categorize us, because nobody knew where to put us.
JS: Was that because there was a mix of jazz elements, spontaneously improvised elements and theatrical or performative elements that took it to a whole other place? It seems to me that FIG was very ahead of its time.

LC: I think it was, much more than any of us realized.

JS: I was surprised to hear you and Annemarie playing egg slicers on one of the FIG tapes I have. It sounded really good. If it had been years later people would have thought it was genius, but I guess that didn't happen.

LC: No it didn't.

....

JS: Another question related to FIG and the members' identification with feminism is their identification with a political direction for the group. Was that an important element?

LC: Yes, it was.

JS: In which direction was it focused would you say?

LC: I just think in making it clear to everybody that women could play too. That was the politics of it.

JS: What were the various ways people responded to women improvising together?

LC: Audiences were very good, very supportive. Maybe Maggie has told you this, but we did the Total Music Meeting in Berlin and the man who was organizing it was furious and said, "Why on earth did you get these stupid women? I could have given you the names of lots of men—why have they been invited?" Maggie and I disagreed and made a big fuss.

JS: I find his attitude really hard to understand because the tapes that I have listened to so far—although I don't have a tape of that particular performance—have been
surprisingly good. I wasn’t expecting the playing to be very good because I had heard harsh criticism of FIG. Do you think that there was something about women playing together at that time that threatened people?

LC: I think there was.

JS: Why?

LC: I think the men realized that they were left out.

JS: But didn’t they understand that was part of the point? That women had been left out?

LC: A few of them understand now, but they didn’t understand then.

---

JS: There also seemed to be some discussion at the time about whether or not audiences unfamiliar with improvisation could find their way into understanding spontaneous creation. Do you think that was a problem for FIG audiences?

LC: Actually I don’t think it was. I remember one gig FIG did and a friend of mine that I was working on a film with said, “I don’t know what on earth you’re doing but I like it.” And I thought well, that really is all you need to say.
Appendix 1:2
Interview Excerpts: Joëlle Léandre
November 4, 1999 Vancouver

JL: Did you prepare everything, all your questions?
JS: Of course!
JL: I don't know, maybe it's a pure improvisation!
JS: Do you want to talk about jazz?
JL: Not especially. I can speak a little bit about jazz in terms of the people who make the jazz. The people who have made the history of jazz music, this is fantastic. But not anymore because now jazz has become totally commercial. For me jazz is a vision of the world you have. And for me jazz is also a scream.
JS: A scream?
JL: Un cri. When you cri—scream yeah? It means a lot of things for me. Politically, philosophically, a part of what, who, a vision of your life, creation, contestation —against [protest]. [There are] a lot of things included in cri: the resistance, to resist. And that interests me a lot. It is deep, the people who make the jazz. Not this kind of clean jazz. It's called jazz by tradition, they go to school and okay they play well, and they are young old people already 'cause they know everything. But jazz is supposed to be on the road. To play, to be very, very open. And slowly through all experiences you understand the life. It's a part of your life, the road.
JS: Is that the approach you take to improvisation?
JL: Yes, because [with] classic school and training you have all the time this hierarchy with the maestro and this music stand. To be a servant, to play this music as performers, but it's contextual not creative. Just good musicians that repeat—giving the
best you can of course because you have amazing classic performers, wonderful musicians. But it's not in my cards, I'm too much an anarchist. Never could I imagine to stay [in that situation]. I can speak like that because I was in this kind of orchestra, this kind of square, not jail but I mean very precise. But I could never do that for [more than] a few years. I studied all my life and played here and there, in the concert hall—like in the big band, I couldn't play in the jazz big band for example—I'm too much an anarchist.

I've made a lot of CDs. I don't know why. I've been on the road a lot and the young generation will still call me. It's good, you have to change always, not stay the same. I can also talk about the free scene. You learn to go to the other one and say: "Hey, I'm here for you: touch me." The music is communication, that's all. An expression. Not good—you have good and bad music—that's all. After that, sure if you like bossa nova, you like bossa nova. If you like Cuban music you like Cuban music. This is aesthetic. You prefer to dance, bebop, or you prefer to listen. But jazz for me is like a scream. *Un cri.* You understand? It's more beautiful in French.

JL: But I just wanted to say how alone, by myself, I remember maybe I was sixteen or seventeen, I arrived in Paris after my classical studies in the town where I was born. For three years I was in a conservatory. By chance I am so curious, you cannot imagine, not only about music. I read a lot. I paint. Music is not only from sounds, I am interested in form. We could talk a long time about what improvisation is because for me it is also composition, spontaneous composition. I'm interested about form because in each moment everything has a form and balance.

JS: Even if it's spontaneous.
JL: Of course. And I think we also have to discuss sensibility. I think improvisation is not just [vocalizes to demonstrate]. No. The first sound you [play], the first gesture of sounds, [the first] colour, it's already the piece. It's already the character of the piece, the physiology, the body, the breath, la tete comment dit? The mind. Solo or a duo. You think about yourself, the instruments playing and you build. Like this table. If this table doesn't have a good fit you cannot drink because you would have to drink like this [demonstrates]. Chaos, even that has a function. Maybe because we need this chaos, and a flower and earth, and you learn. No, I really believe in terms of form and structure. JS: It's there because you're intending it?

JL: Yes. And some musicians don't care to speak like that. I know Derek Bailey he doesn't care to talk about form etc. He pretends it's already the fact of the meeting and the sounds and the happening, in the moment it's already the form. It's true in a certain way but I'm a little more perfectionist because I have a long, long training. I've read a lot of music, new music, played with a lot of composers, I've read a lot of compositions. This gives me food for my walk. I don't know where I'm going but I go. I like this process [of composing], it's different but not in competition with the improvisation. I dream that all musicians would understand how improvisation is so important. First for you, for the process of intelligence even.

In terms of music I learned balance even more when I worked with dancers. When you improvise [with dancers] you work with another language. You understand when this dancer does a repetitive movement and then you have two other dancers arrive with another tempo, you can understand the polyrhythms, you can understand the space, you can learn a lot with another language. You can learn to see a painting or read a book. I'm like that.
JS: So gesture and sound and... 

JL: Different languages. I'm sure that a musician can learn [different languages] for your garden. And you don't know when the garden is ready or not. Maybe it's unconscious but all the pictures, the movement, the street—you could say outside—not only intellectual. No, no, no. Life, life, life, life, life. But to be open like a bee. Buzzzz. Because the bee has antennae, all the time and the bee works a lot. And I work a lot. I love the bee, oh they are nice! They work and they never stop.

JS: So you're a bee.

JL: Yes, I'm a bee. I'm a b-bass.

JS: That goes with the buzzing too, your buzzing bass.

JL: We learn a lot to meet, to go to the other and say: “Hey who are you?” And this happens in improvisation and this is so deep. I include jazz because jazz is mainly improvisation. Jazz is just a theme that develops and each musician just improvises. That's why I'm closer to jazz people for a number of years than to the classic musicians. I talk too much. Do you have other questions?

JS: Well, I was just thinking about your gestures when you play bass. To me there's a space around you and your bass and you treat your bass in a very interesting way.

JL: You think? Oh this I don't know.

JS: Yeah, sometimes you look at it and you have certain gestures that suggest it's another person.

JL: It's like a body for me, another body. And some days I talk with the instrument. It's what you need to express. It's an object. First I have to talk in this box in order to talk to the audience. To go in to go out. Sometimes no, I'm with the bass one. Sometimes I'm two. Interesting. I know in some pieces, in some moments it's like this.
JS: And I can see that. Sometimes it seems like two, sometimes like one.

JL: And probably physically when I play—sometimes people tell me and I have one or two videos—I have an intense relation with the music. I can make a joke, or drama or funny stuff, that's not the point. But the moment the first sound happens with any instrument or configuration, band or group I think I'm quite intense and I play with the bass with intensity. My bass, the bass. I have quite an intense relation not only with the bass but with the music, because the bass is the music.

... ... ...

JS: Do you think there are more obstacles in that respect for women, and that's why there are less women [doing these things]? If we are in a patriarchal culture that makes it more difficult and presents more obstacles for women?

JL: Sure. Yes, definitely. But in the moment freedom is for everybody. No limits. You can one day decide to close the door in order to learn: "Hey, who am I, what do I have to do, what do I want to do?" It's difficult and it's difficult to continue to believe. It's not like Ave Maria but Zen maybe. Take the day—okay so today I was not so good—and say okay tomorrow. Passions, passion. People don't have passion. And woman less than man. Woman doesn't have the passion, la passionné. I think it's not a quality of woman. I think men, by l'histoire and by fraternité you know, and they are allowed, they give [each other] strong support. Not us.

JS: Well, that's what feminism was supposed to be about.

JL: Yeah and they gave a lot. They gave some very good things for woman but ... I was, in this kind of group [during] the 1970's, but deeply if you want to do something else you must do it by yourself. It's a big work. I think it's also a big work for men. The only thing I will dream, I could dream about, to have more sisters.
Appendix 1:3
Interview Excerpts: Les Diaboliques
Irène Schweizer, Maggie Nicols, Joëlle Léandre
November 5, 1999 Vancouver

JS: What is the status of women in improvising now? Do you still feel that women are still not included as much as men in the scene or has that changed over the last 20 years?

MN: It’s changed a bit, but there’s still a lot more to be done.

IS: It’s changed a little bit.

MN: There are still festivals where you won’t see a single woman. This is what’s nice about this one [Time Flies festival of Improvised Music in Vancouver] and I have to say it’s not an accident that the music’s so strong because it’s equal. Women and men. And I think that makes a difference to the music, it’s more inclusive.

IS: In Europe there are still a lot of festivals [with few or no women]. I think in the FMP festival this year there was only one women, Jin Hi Kim and that’s all. Out of forty musicians over five days and one female musician, it’s crazy yeah?

MN: That happens a lot.

JL: It hasn’t changed too much.

MN: There are people who consciously work with it like Taktlos [festival].

JL: But all the time it is an exception. To be an exception, we are not exceptional, we are just human beings...

MN: Exactly.

JL: And by chance we are women or men, that’s all. You see it’s like when you go to the zoo and you say to a child: “Look the Gorilla!” No? Red ass exception. I’m not in the zoo. Do you know what I mean? And all the time it is an exception.
MN: Yes even though there are a lot of women [players]. I remember once talking to a musician, a male musician in London and him saying: “Well the problem is there aren’t the women.” So I sat down with some other women musicians and we wrote a list. And we got this huge list of women.

IS: In Europe or internationally?

MN: International. And we thought this is crazy, of course there are women. It just requires not being lazy. It’s laziness. I don’t think it’s deliberate sexism or anything it’s just laziness.

IS: They’re not looking for them, they don’t care.

JL: We have to be strong, strong, strong.

MN: Especially for the younger generation because the younger generation needs role models. If all they see is men, like what I saw when I was younger, I assumed that women sang and men played instruments. I honestly thought that when I was young. I thought that biologically—I honestly did—for some reason women just didn’t play instruments.

JL: The function of a woman is to make a baby. It’s quite antique.

MN: It has to be in the schools too. You have to have women going into the schools and running workshops so the young women also feel encouraged. Or you have to have men running workshops that are aware and encourage [young women].

JL: Women instrumentalists play piano. But only me out of 1000 bass players, this is very heavy on the back. You breathe, you have more singers, but instrumentalists? Pianist yes. I don’t know [about] drums, saxophone...
IS: Yes, there are quite a few pianists but this is also a female instrument. Pianists and singers and flutists and violinists in the classical [world]. I was playing drums when I was 14 and I was the only woman for a long time.

JL: I can imagine...

IS: For a long time always the only woman.

JL: The image: flute, singer, a fixed picture...

MN: Stereotype.

JS: Does this situation then, have something to do with why you play together or is it just because you are a group of people who like to play with each other?

MN: Well yes and no for me. I mean it's not self-consciously that but there's no doubt that I take pleasure in us being three women. I also work with men...

IS: We all work with men...

MN: But the fact that we are three women? I think that the character of this group, obviously the fact that we are women influences the nature of the music and the particular intimacy and the particular types of relationships between us. Yes.

IS: It should be natural. If there was a men's trio you would never ask “Why do you play together, three men?” Three women. It should be natural and as long as it isn’t yet we have to do it!

MN: Yes, exactly. And in a way that's the contradiction. It should be natural but of course as Irene says it isn’t, we obviously are aware of this.

IS: It’s like the feminist movement or the Feminist Improvising Group, there was a need to play with these 5 or 6 women for the many years we did. It was very necessary.
MN: It was necessary to do it, to discover ourselves in a situation where we could experience some solidarity between us and not be so isolated from each other. Because there were no opportunities, or at least only a few opportunities...

JL: I came from a different background.

IS: Me too, I was playing ten, fifteen years before the Feminist Improvising Group...

JL: I was not talking about playing. I didn't come to this way of man/woman. I just came by the sense of what the creative human being is. I don't make any difference between men and women. I was called by creative music.

MN: I think we all came in that way. Especially with FIG. As I was saying to Julie yesterday, we didn't call ourselves the Feminist Improvising Group it was the organizers of the festival, they gave us that name. It was just that there were no women on the festival whatsoever and I wanted there to be some women. I asked for a gig and I said look I know some women, because people were saying there were no women. We had just started getting together. We were going to call ourselves the Women's Improvising Group but they wrote the leaflet and it said the Feminist Improvising Group. It wasn't our name. But we took on the challenge and we thought okay, so be it. You want feminism, we'll give you feminism. And we certainly did, scissors and all!

But before that I'd been singing with men, since 1963. It wasn't until the 70s that I started playing with women. The Women's Liberation Movement had an influence on me, being a lesbian had an influence on me...

IS: Me too...

MN: I couldn't separate that part, because I play who I am. My socialist politics affect me.
JL: Yeah but the musical way for me was different because I was in politics—feminist group politics—and I went to meetings. But it wasn't included in my music or my way as a musician or why I became a musician...

MN: It was separate.

JL: It was separate. And it was by the music, by the smell, feeling, [that] I understood a lot. Why, woman in symphony orchestra, woman composer woman improviser, creatrice. I could use [this knowledge] step by step and include slowly in the music a reflection of the social-political situation. Where are the women? Nobody pushed me, nobody informed me.

JS: Like an evolution...

JL: Yes.

MN: Like an evolution of understanding.

JS: You all had that similar experience?

IS: I had a rather similar experience to Maggie. I had been taking part in the FMP festival during its development in the 60s and 70s, being the only woman on every festival. Except when you [Maggie] were there once. I was the only instrumentalist all the time. In the 60s and 70s playing with Rüdiger Carl, Brotzman, Louis Moholo, all those people.

JS: And you still don't get credit for your groundwork in FMP.

IS: No.

MN: No you certainly don't. And Derek Bailey's book is an outrage. In his book he doesn't mention me...

JL: He doesn't mention me! You know his movie?

MN: Oh yes, the television series.
JL: No women! And Derek is an open, nice guy...

MN: It wasn’t conscious.

JL: One day I will ask him.

IS: The book is quite old, more than 10 years.

MN: But he did an update and he still didn’t include any women.

JL: He didn’t talk about any names, be careful.


JS: But you three women?

Trio: No.

IS: There was a photo exhibition about all the jazz musicians from FMP festivals from 1968 to 1978 and not one single photo of me even though I took part every second year.

MN: And what makes it even worse is that it’s not conscious.

JL: Even the photographers...

MN: It’s not out of hostility, they just don’t acknowledge that women can be pioneers. We are followers; we follow the men pure and simple. That we can be innovatrice...

JL: That’s because creation in modernity is for the men. The woman has to be back, that’s all.

MN: We are the muses, we inspire the men. And yet we know that the Feminist Improvising Group influenced a lot of men. Like “Alterations” and several other groups. The very first gig they came to they were totally revolutionized. And some of them went overboard and thought we were the most amazing thing that had ever happened and put us on a pedestal and others were very threatened and tried to completely destroy us. I mean, it was very hard to get a balanced reaction from men. But we had that kind
of impact when we improvised. We were the divine mother [to some] and [to] the other men we were invisible.

IS: Or they went to speak to Jost [Gebers] and said: “Why did you invite these women? What kind of group did you invite? It’s a pity about the money you spend for a group like that. You should hire some real musicians, some good ones.”

JS: I was wondering about the title of your second CD Splitting Image. Where did that come from?

IS: It was my idea. I took it from a television show called “Spitting Image.” Have you ever seen this?

JS: No.

MN: It’s an English show. It’s very funny.

IS: A very funny TV show. Hilariously funny.

MN: They do caricatures and make puppets of politicians, the Royal Family, sports figures.

IS: It is very strong. I thought since we are also sometimes satirical and we have a kind of humour and we are politically engaged that it would be good to use this. We have a splitting image.

MN: And I’ve just thought of this now, it’s sort of nice the way [painter] Rosina [Kuhn] has done this volcano [for the cover of the CD]. It’s almost the earth splitting or the splitting of the atom. I’ve not thought about that before. Things split and come together again.

JS: I also was thinking of it in terms of looking in a mirror and you think you are seeing your exact reflection, but it’s not a whole image...
MN: Yes...

JL: Fragment.

JS: I like that also in terms of women.

MN: Yes, because we are split off from ourselves.

JL: Fragment. I work deeply from fragmentation, this concept. We are more like a kaleidoscope.

JS: Yes, Maggie and I were talking about how in improvisation things are always shifting.
Appendix 1:4
Interview Excerpts: Maggie Nicols
November 4, 1999 Vancouver

JS: In relation to feminism, is inclusiveness something you saw as a feminist idea?
MN: Well I think it came more from a class politics in a strange way, although feminism was supposed to be that, but I was very disturbed by the fact that so few feminists seemed to—in practice—take this on, which was probably an insecurity. I would have expected that to be embraced more, but it wasn’t.
JS: And it is a different aesthetic. It goes against conventional aesthetic approaches.
MN: I think that a lot of women artists attempted to do that and then fell by the wayside as they internalized the parental, the patriarchal, judge that made them feel that what they did wasn’t actually [of value]. And once you do that of course that aesthetic falls by the wayside, it’s totally disempowered. It has to have an in-your-face kind of unapologetic quality to it and then it’s very powerful. But as soon as you start doubting it, it sort of goes—. And as I say, for me it wasn’t about trying not to be technical at all it was just recognizing that diversity of technique was very strong. It’s a bit like education, you know, how there was this thing about streaming, you know the bright kids in one class and then you have that whole thing of comprehensive education which was about mixing abilities and recognizing different weaknesses and strengths. Of course if it doesn’t get funded—because it’s isolated in a sea of hierarchical structures—it is very easy for it to be discredited. The powers that be can say well see it doesn’t work, it’s just mediocre.
JS: Well that’s the whole myth around performance. Performance has to be a particular thing and you can’t allow other stuff to come into it. It’s judged.
MN: That's right. And the thing is when it's unapologetic then it's so powerful. As I said
some of the workshop performances I've seen are the strongest things I've
experienced. I've been to see community-based performances that I've had nothing to
do with and I've come away blown away, blown away from the power. It's like the film-
maker, [ . . . ] who uses a mixture of professional actors and people that are not [actors].
And sometimes you can't tell whose who. If you've got a director or you know how to
facilitate something like that sometimes it's that mix that gives it the edge, gives it a
freshness, gives it a real power. Sometimes a lot of very competent actors, dancers,
musicians, whatever, if they don't have that passion it can be very competently
executed but not necessarily exciting. I don't want to fetishize it either way, I don't really
want to make a fetish out of inclusiveness, to me it's just a principle. It's just how I am,
it's what I like. I believe passionately that everybody is creative in some way. I believe
that you can put any group of people together and if you actually have faith and trust,
and people can truly find their own level of skill or their own level of communication, if
they can communicate something of themselves in community with other people, you're
going to get something phenomenal. Whatever level. And it's not even a belief, I've
tested it out in practice for thirty years, so it's not even a belief it's something I know.
JS: You didn't really talk about this [inclusiveness] in FIG did you? Everyone I've talked
to—Lindsay and Annemarie for example—has said: "Well it wasn't really talked about
and there was friction but we never sat down and discussed it." Which I'm sort of
surprised about really.
MN: I know. Corine tried to, but then I suppose at that point I was very afraid. I had a lot
of fear—I mean I still do—but the older I get the less fearful I become.
JS: What were you afraid of?
MN: I was afraid of the very thing that happened. I was afraid of the group falling apart. I was afraid of losing the family that FIG had become. I didn't trust my own vision. Every time Corine and I tried to talk about it I always felt that we were seen as being over-emotional. There was a point where I just lost heart and from that's when FIG began to die in a way, because we just became an act. A parody of ourselves. I think we talked a lot more in the beginning, and we were very aware that what we were doing was challenging a conventional attachment to a particular kind of musical competency or style. And I think we were all involved in that until male musicians started to criticize us. Whether it was the jazz community that said to Irène and I: “Oh you and Irène are really great but everybody else is crap,” or the more progressive rock Henry Cow people who would like what Lindsay and Georgie were doing and all that. So divide and rule.

JS: In relation to that Lindsay told me to ask you about the FMP festival. She said: “This is Maggie's favourite story” about how a man connected with FMP freaked out when you played.

MN: Absolutely! Alexander von Schlippenbach. He came up to us before the gig and he was kissing our hands. Now, we did a phenomenal gig there. I mean it was phenomenal. It was mad, it was anarchic. It was a mixture of grace and clumsiness. I remember that Eugene Chadbourne was there and he loved it. It was a good connection with Eugene. And the audience loved it. Then we found out from [the organizer's partner] that Alex had gone to him and complained about us being there saying that he could have found loads of men that would have played a lot better, that we couldn't play our instruments. I mean this included Irène and Annemarie and Lindsay and myself. And it was the hypocrisy of that. So Lindsay and I went to a women's festival in the same place and we went into the gents toilets and wrote graffiti all over
the gents toilets: “Watch out Alex von Schlippenbach, we’ve got our scissors ready.”
You know, we graffitied the gents toilets [laughs]. And it was only just recently that I
started speaking to him again because I thought I’ve got to let it go. He probably doesn’t
even realize this. I never made a big thing about it. I was so angry because of the
hypocrisy. You know that’s what I didn’t like, he was nice to our faces and then tried to
sabotage us behind our backs.
JS: Yes, before I listened to the tapes I expected the music to be “bad” in the sense that
there were lots of problems with the playing and people weren’t cooking and that sort of
thing. So I was surprised—
MN: There was some amazing music. It just shows that we were ahead of our time.
JS: Absolutely.
MN: We were ahead of our time. Now there’s all sorts of what is called post-modernism
or eclecticism or whatever you want to call it. I don’t like those terms in particular but I
mean yes, we were ahead of our time. And we’ve not been given the credit for it.
JS: This brings up the issue of whether or not a group of women on stage is
threatening—
MN: —definitely—
JS: especially to a male audience. Is it threatening to have that many women on stage
with no men.
MN: I think so. It's amazing the number of men that were saying: “Why are there no
men?” And yet nobody had ever dreamed to think of asking why there were men only [in
groups]. They’d say well there are just no women around. There’s a kind of weird,
twisted logic whereby men think it’s not deliberate, we haven’t deliberately excluded
women. And that’s even more insidious because they just haven’t thought about it. At
least we thought about it. We recognized that women were being excluded, and we wanted to just experience what it was like to play with other women. One of the strongest things for me that came out of the Women's Liberation Movement was the recognition of the connection between the personal and the political. So to say for me that it was a personal thing was also political. I wanted to feel the intimacy musically that I felt with women. You know when you hang out with women, that quality of shared experience. How would that translate artistically?

All my intimate musical experiences were with men apart from working with Julie Tippets, another singer. And that was profoundly intimate. But I had never really worked with women instrumentalists. I'd never really worked in that context, I wanted to know how that felt. And then of course from that it became a statement—none of us intended it to be quite as powerful as it became. It was more like, well what would it be like to work with other women? It was more like a spirit of adventure. Rather than: "We're going to make a feminist statement!" In fact as I told you we didn't call ourselves the Feminist Improvising Group we were going to call ourselves the Women's Improvising Group and the promoters of the Music for Socialism event gave us that name!. So we grew into that name. We actually took it on board. It was very strange that men gave us the name.

JS: Were the beginnings of FIG also connected to lesbian activism?

MN: What happened for me was Lindsay was already out as a lesbian but it was just new for me—I'm bisexual. In the early 70s I fell in love with a woman, and when I bumped into Lindsay at a musician's union meeting I couldn't wait to tell her that I was a "new" lesbian. I didn't even stop at bisexual I plunged into lesbianism. I suppose in those days it was considered militant, there wasn't really a place for bisexuals. Now I've
found a place much more as a bisexual and that’s what I am. But I don’t regret fifteen years of quite strong lesbian identification, it was quite important to me.

So yes, but again it was quite innocent, it was sort of: “I’m a lesbian, yeah!” In that sense there was a tremendous liberation for me from not worrying about male approval. And I don’t think it was an accident that the women who were much closer to male approval started the doubts going [in FIG]. Maybe the straight women were more affected by what men thought. For me the fact of being so newly and so deeply committed to women because I had so much abuse from men. I had good things from men too but I also had a lot of abuse from men so for me there was a tremendous freedom. All of a sudden it didn’t matter to me what men thought. I didn’t give a shit whether they liked the music or not. And it was part of FIG’s strength. So, yes, in that sense yes.

JS: Did that affect the group in a negative way, in the sense that people dismissed you as a “lesbian” band?

MN: I’m sure that came into play.

JS: It’s also an easy way to dismiss a group of women. Implying that they’re not normal, they’re just lesbians.

MN: Absolutely. As if lesbians don’t have an aesthetic and they don’t have any creativity. As if they don’t have anything to say.

JS: And along with that the assumption that if one woman is a lesbian everyone is a lesbian.

MN: Right and we were not all lesbians. FIG was not a lesbian band. It had a strong lesbian component no doubt, but it was not exclusively lesbian and it never was intended to be. It was open to all women. That was the whole point of it. What FIG did
was play a lot of women's festivals and played to a lot of [all]-women audiences. This introduced women to improvisation. Women who did come because we were women, trusted us because we were women, and through that started listening to the music. I know through that because of that experience a lot of women went on to listen to the whole spectrum of improvised music, not just women's music. So in a way we were ambassadors for the music as well. And I love the way (I'm being ironic here) women are not seen as an important audience. So when we would say we played for women somehow that was not an audience. They're not real people they're just women.

JS: That's a very good point.

MN: We brought in a huge audience. All these women started listening to the music. So we were ambassadors for our music as well, for improvisation. And I think that's important. I won't have anyone say oh they're just women. What a put down. As if to say males are the only legitimate audience.

JS: Can you talk about the performance art or theatrical elements used by the group as well as your monologues and narration?

MN: In the beginning I suppose I felt passionately as a woman about that, but it also arose from class politics. I thought if I'm going to go into the Ritz it's maybe the stockbrokers I want to shock. If I'm going to do a direct action I might want to scare the shit out of somebody to make them think. But if I'm going to an audience I want to feel solidarity with them. Now obviously I've found other ways of doing that which I may be not so reliant on. But I still do it in some ways, and I think I'm just better at it because I've been doing it longer. Yes. I didn't necessarily set out to narrate but it was a way for people into the music. And then you could take them on a journey that was completely
your own and bring them along. Because I don't even know where I'm going on that journey myself. So you go with a set of tools that you trust.
Appendix 1:5
Telephone Interview Excerpts: Maggie Nicols
March 4, 2000 London

JS: In music there is an emphasis on technique and technical virtuosity. You have come up with a concept that addresses aspects important to musicians that exist apart from/alongside the emphasis on technique. Can you talk a little bit about your concept of “social virtuosity”?

MN: For me social virtuosity—social skills really—is part of [what it takes] to communicate with an audience and with other musicians. It also includes the social skills used to live your life. How you are in the community and those sorts of things. Being able to have that kind of creative spontaneity in every aspect of your life. And of course that is quite a challenge and some people are incredibly skilled in that.

I would say my friend Shirley—what she has survived—is an example of this. Being put in mental hospitals and how she has survived having the diagnosis of a personality disorder, she has actually ducked and dived ever since in a way that is incredibly skillful so that she’s able to do what she actually wants to do. She doesn’t earn a lot of money, but her life is there to be creative, rather than being in some boring job. She sort of said: “Oh well, if you’re going to give me a diagnosis like that you’ll pay me for it!” I think often people who have very little money have it [social virtuosity] as well having to improvise life.

JS: How do “life skills” translate into music and improvisation?

MN: I think with Shirley it means that she takes incredible risks. I thought I took risks, but when Shirley is on stage she really speaks her life—really improvises her life. That’s something I do to a certain point but because I have technical skills—which I’m glad of,
I'm not saying that they're not worth developing—when Shirley and I improvise together she has that ability to translate her life and the knife-edged stuff into a performance. That for me makes up for her maybe not having as many musical skills. But of course the musical skills will come. I believe that you can always develop a technique, but the ability to communicate with the audience—she's someone who has a really commanding presence on stage because she's so real. There's something about who she is that comes across.

JS: Do you think it's harder to develop the skills associated with "the social" than those of "the technical?"

MN: Exactly. I think that if you fall in love with the music and fall in love with the performance and you really have a commitment to it you can always do the technical [aspect] of it.

Here's another way of looking at it. Shirley has this amazing breath control. She learned breath control from one of those open sort of anarchist communities where there was no electricity. For years they had to make everything over a fire and now Shirley has this incredible breath control from blowing on all those fires. It is incredible, she has this breath control that you would kill for on the bass clarinet.

Shirley makes friends with all these different instruments, but she still probably doesn't know what any of the notes are. Her playing is getting deeper and deeper and stronger and stronger. You can see how she came up against her technical limits and wanted to develop them, I think that will often happen. But if you were to shut somebody out because they didn't have technical skills and not recognize their other skills—it's not to denigrate technical skills because I think they're important—but let's not value them
above other skills, let's look at how we can develop on as many fronts as possible and integrate all those different skills to make a coherent whole when we're performing. JS: It seems the idea of bringing social virtuosity on stage challenges the idea of what a performance is? MN: It does in a way. A lot of people are brilliant technically but maybe their lives haven't caught up with that. This is a little anecdote: I remember once I was at the Total Music Meeting and I'd been asked to do a solo performance. It was supposed to be [an event that] represented British musicians. They were all there and I was quite nervous (this was ten or fifteen years ago). I remember thinking: "Oh my god am I going to have to prove myself technically in front of all these musicians I've known since I was very young?" All the men I know, you know all the really great players. And at that time I was reading Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology*—well it's a full-on radical feminist book—and I loved some of the poetry, etc.

At the same time [as our performance] Lindsay Cooper was going to be doing a solo gig in France. And we were both the only women on these festivals. So we decided at an agreed time (8:00 p.m. or so) we would both do a piece in our performance about token women. [Before the gig] I was walking along the street practicing and of course there were these blokes that started to chat me up you see. And all these [other] things happened to me in the day. I was sitting in the lobby of the hotels we were all staying at and these two young women came into the hotel and they looked incredibly nervous and all the lads there—you know all the revolutionary improvisers of the time—they were all saying: "Woah, you can come in with me love!" And these women—you know if they had been sassy women who could give as good as they got—were really kind of intimidated. And so I can just remember thinking: "Oh god." And one of them turned to
me and said: “Well Maggie what do you expect, you should have known.” And I remember saying: “Yeah, that’s what it’s all about isn’t it.” These are the representatives of a so-called “new music” and attitudes.

So all of that came into my performance. I was almost telling my life—saying things like: “I’ve graduated from being a groupie to being one of the boys, but when I was out on the street today those guys didn’t know I was one of the boys.” I really took a risk because I could have gone down the road of proving that I deserved to be there technically, but for some reason—well that’s what I’ve done in my life—I chose to bring the politics, the social aspect into that performance. And I was besieged in the ladies toilet, I’ve never experienced anything like it, all these women coming up to me wanting to talk. Wonderful. Because I took a real risk—I stuck my neck out. I had all sorts of reactions from men that were really supportive, to men who were quite threatened and challenged me about it saying: “Why did you have to do that?” And then the sweetest one was from Keith Tippett, bless him, who is my dear friend, who obviously missed the point, but he meant it in the most loving way. He said: “Maggie my love, you are one of the boys!”
Appendix 1:6
Interview Excerpts: Annemarie Roelofs
August 11, 1999 Frankfurt

JS: What kind of dynamic did you have [in FIG]?  
AR: I don’t know. The question has been put to all of us many times. It varied [depending on who was participating]. Of course it is quite easy if you have all women; you can talk about natural things like, well I got my period today or something. You could never speak like that to a male drummer—you couldn’t say: “I got my period today.” He could say anything, but that thought would never come up. Especially about this period. When FIG got bigger later on—there were eight of us at some point—we had one gig in either Holland or in Switzerland and through some kind of funny thing we discovered that all eight of us had our period at the same time.  
JS: Had you been travelling together?  
AR: Yes.  
JS: I think that happens when women are in close contact for a while, their periods start coinciding. It happens in work situations.  
AR: What would be the reason for that?  
JS: I’m not sure—it might have something to do with hormones. But that’s what I’ve heard.  
AR: Well that’s very interesting. You have to mention this to Maggie when Les Diaboliques come. I don’t know if Joëlle is in for this kind of stuff, but Maggie will remember this. I don’t know if she or Lindsay has mentioned it yet.  
JS: No, no one has talked about their periods yet, you’re the first.
AR: That's not the most important thing about FIG, but I came to that because it's one of those things...

I didn't have problems talking about weaknesses and things like that. The groups I was playing with in Holland were not the sort of macho type of men—playing solos twenty minutes long, being strong—they were not like that so the difference for me was not so pronounced. But I think for people like Maggie and Lindsay, there seems to more of that in the British jazz scene [although] I've also met a number of very nice British improvising musicians. I think there is also a difference between the improvised music scene and the jazz scene.

I think it [comes down to] a question of feeling. I think we all felt more solidarity in some kind of way. I think [this was] because of our history, because we'd always played with men.

JS: Was it similar in music school?

AR: In music school I specialized in modern music. It was the first year you could do that. Usually you have theory and analysis of every kind—you know Bach, Mozart—and they had just started a course for improvised music and modern composition. There were only a few [students] and of course out of that group I was the only woman. This was new so we were all sort of eyed suspiciously by all the other students who were doing the normal type of courses. And so we felt a little barrier-like, and I was the only woman so it was double-edged. But no one said anything to me about being the only woman. You noticed it but you didn't know what the difference might be.

And that's what happened when FIG came together, we saw that there is a possibility to play with women. I had never thought about it before. I was not so politically involved in Holland—besides making modern music—but I wasn't lesbian and...
I think (for example) that makes a difference. When you’re lesbian you have to come out
and you have to find your people anyway. And I was going along fine and did whatever I
did, but I was not so conscious of these things. I was in the usual leftish political scene
because it was the end of the ’70s so of course that was there. But I was not so
politically involved that I thought I am a woman I must find other women in Holland to
play with. With FIG that was the first experience for me. Talking to Lindsay and
Maggie—Lindsay was very much involved as was her girlfriend at the time, I think she
was working with “Time Out” the British periodical, and they were very politically active
writing good stuff —helped me a lot in forming my thinking at that time. And of course
that is what was happening when we were touring and doing concerts, they were telling
me what was happening, or they were talking over things in London. In that case it was
much more political than any men’s group who were just interested in playing music. I
don’t [even] know if we talked about it [the music we played]. Sometimes we made a
list, how should we start out? Should we all start out [together] and then two or maybe
three? But then we just went out and played.

JS: At the time did you feel pressure from the outside—that is, from other improvisers in
a positive or negative way—about your performances? I guess I am thinking about the
"rumors" I have heard about the criticism leveled at FIG.

AR: There have been concerts where you could hear quite a difference between us. We
were eight people, some of who were good players and some of who weren’t so
experienced, but were politically very right and in terms of improvising picked up nice
things. But it was more like a sort of workshop where people of all different kinds of
levels attend. That could certainly be heard but, I don’t know, maybe we could have
hoped for more support from the men's side. [They could have said] well just keep on going. But mostly the men said it's no good. But I definitely think it's not only the musical level they were talking about. I think it was felt as a threat for a lot of men to just see so many women on stage. Maybe even if we were not all very good—I didn't think of myself as so good all of the time—to be sure on stage all the time and be sure there is something happening. Showing this sort of security to the public—this is our way to play and we think this is an important group.

Women audiences were supportive. In mixed festivals the reaction was quite mixed. The critics' views were never medium. [The response from the critics] was either high, calling our work very interesting stuff, or it was absolutely low, the deepest, saying: “How can a festival have these women?” For instance, in one festival Dave Holland came right after us. I remember it—it was Jazz Festival Ulmer Zelt, located down south—and he was playing there with his quartet after us. One critic said [about FIG]: “Well this is finally a group where something interesting is happening (and) what an interactive way of playing these women have, etc. etc. [And then he wrote]: “It was disillusioning to hear Dave Holland's group afterward.” And the other review was: “And then you had these women on stage and nobody knew what they were doing there”—I don't know what exactly was said—“and then it was fantastic to hear Dave Holland afterward.” He did play fantastically, we were there and heard him and it was a great band, but of course it was jazz. Everything was perfect but it was totally different from what we were playing.

JS: That's very interesting. It obviously didn't have a lot to do with the music. If you get two such disparate reviews of the same concert [I suspect] there is something else going on besides that.
AR: Well it also has to do of course with musical taste. [Take for example] the group I was playing with in Holland, the Guus Janssen Quintet. He is a drummer that does a very particular type of Dutch improvising and a lot of people in the international community don't like what he does. They complain: “Well how can a drummer sit there for five minutes and not drum?” But he can sit down and listen for five minutes and not do anything and people say a drummer has to drum all the time!

And I think Lindsay and Maggie would certainly agree that the feeling we sometimes felt when the critics were criticizing us was very denigrating. They would say, these women, not these musicians, these women, argh, eight women on stage, oh god what’s happening, get some men out there. Even though there were men all over the place. And that’s the reaction I still hear from people—if I give them a CD of a women’s band like the United Women’s Orchestra—of course that is in the more straight-ahead jazz area, people think oh yuk all women. Whereas the level is absolutely even.

JS: And if that’s the case then a lot of people will say, well why do you have a band with all women? Why are you excluding men? Because automatically if you have an all-woman band you’re excluding men. Even though there are so many all-male bands and nobody says anything about it.

AR: Yes, yes. As soon as you tell them: “Well, there have been so many all male bands why hasn't there ever been all women bands?” they never know what to say.

....

JS: The whole feminist label is worth talking about—I’m sure it was positive and negative as well.
AR: And that was not so much in EWIG. Irène and I felt—and as I said decisions were never officially taken—that European Women's Improvising Group was a very good definition for what it was. And I thought—I had already been living in Germany for a year—that EWIG was funny, because it means eternal. I thought that's great, women go on for eternity.

JS: What kind of reaction did you get to EWIG? Was it different from FIG?

AR: Surely it was different—the music was a little bit denser—people could not really criticize us technically. They started to see it more and more as if it was Irène Schweizer's group, like it was her band.

JS: That's interesting that there had to be a leader's name attached to it.

AR: And we didn't feel like that. Especially Joëlle because that was the group from which Les Diaboliques came out of. We might have been—I don't remember this very well—criticized for the fact that we were women. I think that the most spectacular women and music thing was FIG not EWIG. At the time that EWIG was going people had known us from FIG and musically there were a lot of good things happening but it was not so political.

JS: It was more about the music?

AR: It was more about the music and I liked it very much. I liked all the [EWIG] concerts and most of the FIG concerts but musically with FIG I sometimes didn't know where it was going. I felt the theatrical part was very good and I could participate in it but sometimes I felt that I would prefer more music.

JS: When was EWIG active? In the '80s?

AR: Right '83, '84 because Canaille came in '86. I founded that festival.

JS: You founded it, with Irène?
AR: No, with Kathi Goth a woman who had been playing in theatre clubs and jazz clubs and Christiane Spieler. And then I thought finally I can invite back all the women I've been playing with and that's when I invited Maggie and Lindsay (although I don't think Lindsay was there for the first one) and Irène and all the people I could remember from the Dutch scene. Then the name was taken over. Irène asked if she should organize a Canaille festival in Zurich and I said sure. Then “Canaille” was also used as a group's name, it was not only the festival but used when Irène, Maggie, Lindsay, Joëlle and I were playing: it was suddenly “Canaille.” We made an LP at the festival in Zurich. But then the people in Zurich said maybe you should use the name “Canaille” for the group so when you are on tour you can promote the records etc. And I thought it was a fine idea, but the people in Frankfurt thought it was not such a good idea because we came up with that name [for the festival]. But I think that's the best thing to do to have something promoted over and over. If people are interested in improvised music everyone knows what Canaille was. So that was the end of EWIG.
Appendix 1:7
Interview Excerpts: Irène Schweizer
November 5, 1999 Vancouver

J: I was reading an interview with Marc Chenard you did at a Montreal women's festival about 12 years ago.

I: Oh really?

J: He asked you a question about whether or not you thought women's festivals were important, whether you thought they served a purpose and that sort of thing. And you were saying at the time that you thought it was important for the time being to have all-women festivals because we needed that representation for women artists.

I: Yes.

J: And I was wondering—it's many years later—do you think the situation has changed at all?

I: Well, it may have changed a little bit only since the last ten years but I think it's still important to have women's festivals because the women are still under-represented at festivals. And as long as this is the case I think there need to be women's festivals.

J: Are you still involved in women's festivals in Europe?

I: A little less now, but we used to have this festival called Canaille. The first one was in Frankfurt (in Germany) in '86 and then we did one the same year in Zurich and from then on in almost all European cities—in Amsterdam, in Vienna, in Paris, in Lisbon. Until (maybe) the beginning of the '90s, we had this festival in all the cities and there were always more or less the same musicians playing. I thought it was very important for that time to present this festival.

J: So you're doing that less now?
I: Well, everybody has gone different ways and is busy with other things and we just haven't had the chance to organize one. When I look at the programs of jazz festivals I always look at how many women there are and it's always not enough for me. The men are always dominating.

J: Are there a lot of women improvising in Europe?

I: There are more and more—ten or twelve years ago there weren't so many but there are more up and coming.

J: So it seems that there are more women playing but they are not well represented in the festivals or in the forefront of improvising.

I: Yeah, yeah. That's true

J: And it's the same here in North America. Is the trio Les Diaboliques playing much?

I: Yes the trio has been playing, let's see, more than ten years.

J: Do you play several times a year together?

I: Yes. But not enough unfortunately.

J: I know that playing with different people is always different because of their idiosyncrasies and their approach to improvising but in general do you find it different playing with women?

I: This is the question. It's very difficult to answer this question. It is different, sure it is different. [In the beginning] I was used to playing only with men. Until I was thirty-five I played for fifteen years exclusively with men.

J: Really.

I: There weren't any women whatsoever around, except maybe a singer or so. But [women] instrumentalists didn't exist. I'm very used to playing in an all men's group and also in a mixed group. We once had this group Taktlos with George Lewis [trombone],
Günter Sommer [drums], Maggie, Joëlle and me. This was our trio plus George Lewis and Günter Sommer. And other people—sometimes when George couldn't come we'd ask Trevor Watts or some other musicians. And for me this quintet was one of the nicest things—to actually play with this mixed group. But we [women] were still in the majority, three women and two men! So it was very nice. And I've also played in all-women groups. As you know the first all-women group started at the end of the seventies and was [influenced by] the women's movement. It was with Maggie and Lindsay Cooper and called the FIG: the Feminist Improvising Group. That's where it all started, at end of seventies. We played a lot of festivals in that time and this group was very important. It was the first time an all-women improvising group existed. We played real improvised music—I mean, that was very strange for the time. You know, the men were very upset with us.

J: Really?

I: They couldn't believe what we did. A very anarchic group—we were crazy! Maggie was crazy—in this band really everybody was. But it was really good feeling we had. It could never happen with men, this feeling we had between each other. It could never happen in the men's group.

J: Do you know what that is?

I: Well because we had no pressure—we didn't have to prove anything. [With men] you have to show off how fast you can play and how good you are. We just let each other be and we just played. We learned what we could, and it was really a very, very nice feeling.

J: So when you play with men did you feel that pressure a lot?
I: Sometimes I feel it but I must say I've been lucky because I've chosen the musicians I wanted to play with. Sometimes when other musicians have asked me to play in their group and I didn't like them as human beings—even if they were good musicians—I couldn't do it. I said "No I don't want to play with you." So I was very lucky because I could choose the men that I felt comfortable with.

J: You must of had a lot of courage to be the only woman launching out into this unknown.

I: And I must say I've always been accepted as a musician.

J: And I think women say that in general: "I've always had men who have nurtured and helped me and have been mentors." And I've had that experience too. As far as taking lessons with men and being supported. But still, there's a gap despite that support.

I: Yeah, yeah.

J: When it comes to the performing side

I: Yes. It is interesting that there is this kind of barrier. I mean, men are different than women. It can't be the same when we play. But one thing for sure is that as a woman you have to be better than them.

J: You've found that with the musicians as well?

I: Yes, yes.

J: So there was a real proving ground.

I: You have to compete, yes.

J: I think it takes a certain type of personality in general to be able to be a pioneer, but for women it really takes some stamina.

I: And when we started with FIG it was Maggie [Nicols] and Lindsay [Cooper] and Annemarie Roelofs and me. I was the oldest one and had the most experience already.
Maggie was a bit younger than me but she started very young. There was a difference in experience and technical abilities. Maggie and I were the ones who had the most experience playing. Some people asked me: "Why do you play with those women? They can't play and they're no good and you don't have to do that. Why do you play with those women?" It was always difficult for me to explain why, because for me it was just important to play like this in a group with women and to support them.

J: Did you feel like you were being a mentor in that sense or a participant?
I: A participant.

J: Although I'm sure other people, other women, have looked up to you as a role model.
I: Yes, I guess so.
Selected Discography

Les Diaboliques


Joëlle Léandre


*No Try No Fail.* With Urs Leimgruber and Fritz Hauser. HatOLOGY 509, 1997.


*Live @ Banlieues Bleues.* With François Houle and Georg Graewe. Red Toucan Records RT 9306-2, 1996.


Maggie Nicols

*Three Pieces for Orchestra featuring Maggie Nicols and Marilyn Crispell.* With the London Jazz Composers’ Orchestra. Intakt CD 029.


Vario II. With Maarten Altena, Günter Christmann, Paul Lovens and John Russell. LP Moers Music 01084, 1980.

Irène Schweizer


Many and One Direction. Intakt CD 044, 1996.


Lindsay Cooper


Sahara Dust. With Phil Minton, Elvira Plenar, Dean Brodrick, Paul Jayasinha, Robyn Schulkowsky. Intakt CD 029.


Rags. With Sally Potter, Georgie Born, Phil Minton, Fred Frith and Chris Cutler. LP. Arc Records ARC 1, 1980.

Annemarie Roelofs

