

On Being Porous

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Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Catskill Creek*, 1850, oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum. License: Public Domain.

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On Magical, Worldly Language

My book *Teeter* is composed of three long poems. The book opens with a poem on Catskill Creek, a branch of the Hudson River, as it appeared to me when I arrived as a new transplant to New York State. The book closes with a declarative statement: “This is how I am at the river.” Between the first moment of surrealistic sensory encounter and the second moment of speech is a meditation on languages and listening. The first long poem, entitled “Hearing,” is an ekphrastic engagement with sound/performance poems—by N. H. Pritchard, Lily Greenham, Susan Howe with David Grubbs, Henri Chopin—and experimental music—by Maryanne Amacher, claire rousay, Lea Bertucci, Amirtha Kidambi, Danishta Rivero, and Las Sucias. The middle poem, “Ambient Mom,” meditates on my echoic and episodic memories of Philippine languages—Pangasinan and Tagalog—that are semantically foreign to me but inherent in my body, my ear, and my (writing) voice. “Histories,” the concluding sequence, is what I call an auto-historiography: a series of performative, incantatory, voice-over prose poems on how the fictions of my historicity—my origins and position in historical time—are made.¹

I wrote *Teeter* as a poet engaged in a sustained practice of writing-while-listening to experimental music, sound art, and sound poetry, and also to speech in the two Philippine languages I grew up with but which I’ve never spoken, read, or written. I wrote *Teeter* while dwelling on diasporic people, particularly those who form multilingual immigrant households that flourish within, rather than in spite of, intermittent breaks in the flows of communication. During such disfluent events, people use all

their senses, perceptual skills, phatic and paralinguistic tactics, and paratactical, associational thinking-feeling capacities. These are *Teeter's* vernacular poetics.

I approach the autonomous, magical, worldly power of language's sonic, voiced, and prosodic multidimensionality in many ways. Southeast Asian Studies scholar Vicente L. Rafael proposes that translation has been at the heart of Filipino survival across centuries of Spanish, US, Japanese, and neocolonial-autocratic regimes.² In a historical landscape of approximately 180 Indigenous languages and several languages of religious conversion and political occupation, Filipinos have critically read, interpreted, and recast colonial logics in the course of their everyday lives. In these political contexts, disfluencies are part of everyday life, and the sensory experiences of speech and text are as critical as cognitive comprehension in figuring out how to live. I was once a young historian employed to help build the nascent field of Filipino Studies, and during this academic work, Rafael was to me a senior scholar with whom I distantly engaged in terms of career protocol. I'm glad now to credit his scholarship as one influence on my poetics. I'm glad to be a bit freer from observing territorial markers of academic fields and methods.

To translate is not just to bear meanings from one language to another but to engage languages beyond territories. Whereas Rafael theorizes that language is an "agent" of Filipino history that "exceeds human control," I've proposed in a series of poetics essays that the embodied experience of language-noise and language-music is a resource beyond extractive identity politics.³ I turned these essays into a series of poems in *Teeter*, and consequently took the liberty of removing quotation marks. At least one commenter attributes to me a phrase uttered by musician Craig Taborn: "In my own work, I try to leave some noise."⁴ In the same poem, there are lines (which were once a sentence) that I did write: "A property relation between speaker &/ word softens." I say the line is my own to point out a tension between authorship and ownership of language.

I stumbled on a technique of writing "poetic voice" transcriptions/scores as a result of dwelling over the course of a year or two on the genealogical relationship between how I use language and the heritage languages I've been passively absorbing all my life. I've been interested in whether culturally indigenous Philippine languages leave formal traces in my colonial American English. My query took the form of a poetic contemplation on my quotidian, domestic, and maternal intimacies in the immigrant diaspora. In other words, I chose to write translingual, sonically informed poems rather than learn how to speak and write Tagalog and Pangasinan. I chose to make a transcription-score for a "poetic voice" starting with a query about the traces of non-colonial and anti-colonial knowledge in the affective prosodies that come out of my embodied writing. In the Western literary canon, a "poetic voice" is a poet's pure expression of their innermost self, but I am hoping to deflect attention away from my particular social persona and towards the sonic, sounded voice in the worlds of a poem.

It occurs to me now that the historical, anthropological, and cultural research I once conducted on the Filipino postcolonial diaspora was never going to amount to anything other than preparation for a life of writing poems and poetic essays. I can say with more conviction as a poet than I did as an academic historian that the practice of doing "translational work" across institutionalized disciplines—which includes sustaining patterns of disfluency—has been a definitive, vernacular resource for Filipino vitality across three centuries of colonialism into the postcolonial present. Vicente Rafael has tracked the linguistic registers inflecting Filipino life during the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Spanish colonial-religious regime, the republican nationalist and peasant revolutions, US colonial rule, the anti-dictatorship movements, and twenty-first-century global labor migrations.⁵

The translingual and interdisciplinary arts of the Filipino postcolonial diaspora are the material "worldliness," as Edward Said theorized it, of *Teeter*. In "Theory as Stone," an essay published in late January 2024 on the *Social Text* website, Stephen Sheehi wrote about Said's 2001 disinvitation from the Freud Society of Vienna on account of a famous photograph of Said throwing a stone at an Israeli Occupation Force guard tower at the Lebanese border. Sheehi recasts Said's theory of worldliness so that it might resonate for a reader accessing these words on day 111 of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the January 25, 2024 publication date of his essay: "For Said, texts, images, and objects are of their moment and place—but the fullness of their latent meaning only comes to the surface at any subsequent political moment."⁶

In the northern Philippines during the early 1900s, my maternal great-grandfather was the principal of a school built by the United States Bureau of Insular Affairs. Not long after the US colonial occupation and a genocidal war against nationalists, Indigenous communities, Muslims, and the rural majority, a new public school system opened with English as the language of instruction. My grandmother, daughter of the Filipino principal and student in his US colonial primary school, was part of the first generation which, at an early age, entered a totalizing institution that subjected her to the English language through immersion. She spoke Pangasinan and Tagalog only outside the school grounds. The compulsory limit that disciplined my

grandmother would signal to her the logics of languages operating “otherwise,” beyond themselves. Still, the “otherwise” is signaled only partially by a legible or visible “other” to colonial logics, such as folklore. Literary scholar Edgar Garcia theorizes the unabsorbed, unbothered, autonomous presences of sign systems and tools of knowing that have existed and continue to exist fractally, invisibly, materially, and immaterially alongside, amidst, and contemporaneously with, and despite, the world visible to the neoliberal, colonial eye.⁷ Can a person sense these presences? In my case, is my US-American English a product of not only my private-school education but my parents’ and my grandparents’ Philippine English? Can a translingual poem make “otherwise” sign systems sonically and visually felt?



Botong Francisco, *Filipino Struggles Through History*, 1964. National Museum of Fine Arts, Manila. License: Fair Use.

I’m thinking about a tenure-track scholar’s brief autobiographical confession of a North American childhood spent not understanding her parents’ spoken Tagalog. I’m genuinely sad that her subsequent sentences are a pastiche of academic concepts, and I just want to splice and loop the vivid scene to stretch out the inevitable, dull turns in prose. It occurs to me that she is sampling phrases into a Sound-Studies-cum-Queer-Diasporic-Studies-cum-Autoethnography insider text. I get provocatively stuck on her forcefully magical trust in Academic English. The sentimental, grief-stricken, avenging uncanniness is what makes me queasy. The will to conjure something from colonial language is the “otherwise” haunting the algorithm. Beneath the heavy academic-art-world terms of essay writing is my affective, interdisciplinary sensing of her affective, interdisciplinary composition.

Said asked: “Is there no way of dealing with a text and its worldly circumstances fairly? No way to grapple with the problems of literary language except by cutting them off from the more plainly urgent ones of everyday, worldly language?”⁸ Said asked this of the academic practice of literary criticism, which prompted Sheehi’s reminder that Édouard Glissant called academia a “dimensionless place” that monopolizes intellectual thought and writing for its own ideas of what should be abstracted and what is material about the world.⁹

Teeter reflects the cultural practice of being in and of the world, which requires modulating what is concrete and what is theoretical, what is material and what is abstraction. The theme I want to pick up on here is that the historical translation practices forming Filipino postcolonial worlds provide me the grounding to write poems with nonliterary material, including music. *Teeter* collaborates with recordings and video documentation of sound art, musical performances, and speech—what composer David Grubbs calls “collaboration-after-the-fact.” These poems accompany digital sound collages, video-capture spectrograms of Pangasinan- and Tagalog-language speech, and a video documenting what composer Cassandra Miller might call my “transformative mimicry” of Pangasinan speech captured from YouTube video blogs.¹⁰

Still, *Teeter* isn’t interdisciplinary in terms of literary genre but interdisciplinary in its composition. I would be happy for the book to be experienced as an experimental documentary text or a textual transcription (a transformative mimicry) of heritage language, sound art, and music, but, only if somewhere along the way, it’s read as a book of poems and nothing else. A poem becomes an inclusive, generative field of worldliness. I consider the languages of my heritage and histories as the sonic, graphic, quotative, textual, digital, perceptual, and vibrational material for more material—for poetry in many forms. Languages, in the plural, are the material of poems, and the material of their worldliness. They are the sign systems, sonic signals, and techne of living presences that many forces—including colonialism and Western literary/art canons—are trying to disappear. I remain interested in language practices of mimicry, tactical diversity, and disfluent, everyday living within and

against colonial occupation—but without reactivity, which largely replicates the separation of self from the world that our “worldliness” refuses. I’m interested in art-making that isn’t severed from the creative experimentation of surviving, that aligns and affiliates with autonomous movements resisting fascisms in our time.

On Droning

Music is a kind of sound, and poetry is a kind of language. Sounds are arranged into music, as language is arranged into poetry. But what’s considered “musical” or “poetic” moves us beyond formal arrangement, beyond even their respective media, into the realms of discourse. The sense of what’s “musical” and what’s “poetic” can differ and can definitely vary, but generally one looks to be moved, or even transported, into realms of feeling, spirit, and memory. This is the lyrical mode: the ancient lyre shaped words—lyrics—into rhythmic and tonal patterns to give us poem forms—elegies, odes, sonnets—carrying song through language’s musically inflected prosodies.

Synonyms for the modifier “lyric” in the phrase “lyric poetry” include: “melodic,” “songlike,” “musical,” “rhapsodic,” “deeply felt,” “expressive,” “personal,” and “subjective.” (Google’s Oxford Languages also includes the synonym “poetic,” which would mean that “lyric poetry” can also be called “poetic poetry.”) This conventional meeting of music and poetry reinforces certain assumptions about language and the world. The first premise is that language’s natural function is to order things into logical relationships for rational communication in a kind of prescriptive grammar of the world. Consequently, music’s and poetry’s aesthetic logics *speaks* an interior self naturally at odds with that very external world. Lyric poetry’s readers and writers might lament language as structurally inadequate to “capture” deeply felt moments of human experience, and what is considered “musical” or “poetic” is considered to be “beyond words.” Tasked with creating a more or less harmonious resonance between interiority and society and between sensation and cognition, the lyric poem “spells it out” by “sounding it out.”

Right now, I’m listening to Phill Niblock’s “Hurdu Hurdu,” a song released in 2000, and thinking about his recent passing, while remembering that an art critic’s social media tribute prompted me to listen to this piece. I can’t find this tribute on the critic’s social media account, which reminds me that a textual inscription, and particularly a digital one, may form an impression that is not reliably retrievable. A lost text may still write, so to speak. I’ve heard it said that the ear is a repertoire.

Just now, I remember that last night I watched John Cale’s talking head in Todd Haynes’s 2021 documentary *The Velvet Underground*. Influenced by composer and performer La Monte Young, Cale introduced drone music—the minimalist genre of drawn-out, sustained sounds—to the band. Cale and Young both approached drone music as a meditative discipline. But let’s break up this white, avant-garde, cis-boy band a little with some Alex Quicho:

Here, the drone’s double-meaning comes into its own as entrancing noise and wartime weapon. Prolonged exposure to a droning sound can be psychologically affecting. This capacity to alter mental states is what links the absorbing experience of [La Monte] Young’s *Dream House* to that of residents of military “drone zones,” where the sound of the drone, which can’t be seen from the ground, minces a day into thousands of threatening moments.¹¹

The apocalyptic vibe is invoked by the militarized air of the everyday soundscape as well as by the deep trance state created by the medieval dirge. Grief, remote-control warfare, otherworldly transport, avant-garde art, US-Israeli airstrikes, and the dilation of time and space are all in homophonic textures of sustained, repeating notes: “The ouroboric roundedness of droning sound contains the quantum ohm and om of nirvana.”¹²

The two meanings of the drone—minimalist music and unmanned aerial vehicle—can’t be reduced to a logical fallacy (for instance: John Cale’s twentieth-century ambient minimalism is the soundtrack of US empire). But at the same time, there is something desperately antiseptic, even self-righteously pedantic, about how we use language to sense and think about ambient and avant-garde territories of musical sound. The same could be said of how we sense and think about poetry. I myself rely on music, or composed sound, to be a refuge from what Lauren Berlant calls “life-building.”¹³ I’ve tracked my auditory “sense door” on yearly silent meditation retreats, and at times fantasize about the sound baths at the Integratron in the Mojave Desert. I myself am drawn to the transcendent promises of spiritual as well as bodily practices that are at once metaphysical and capitalist. I can’t tell the difference between a transcendent experience that’s promised, expected, extracted, projected, ret-conned, or latent.

I'm uninterested in removing experience, whether quotidian or transcendent, from discourse, by which I mean the way experience is talked about. I'm curious about how an art practice of working with materials of daily life over time in the durative present generates knowledge in the body and in the brain as well as in resonant spaces of relation. I'm curious about the generative recasting of a political concept such as "internalized colonialism" into a compositional method of poetry. To an extent, I wrote *Teeter* to sense, up close and in real time, over time, the ways in which colonialism maps out one's insides and outsides. To track the "poetics" of colonialism, past and present, is to know that creative practices and intelligence come in many forms, towards many ends. Poetry and music are not the refuges from violence and genocide that people often rely on them to be. If they are refuges, they are refuges that bring us right back into the things we're trying to escape. But hopefully with a difference.

On Being Porous

Are the most immediate and intimate realms of our lives truly beyond words? Can feeling, sensation, affect, somatic epistemes, or temporal states of dailiness be adequately represented in language? According to Sound Studies scholars David Samuels and Thomas Porcello, Western philosophers since the Enlightenment have argued that language's "sonic enactments" (onomatopoeia, for example) are symbolically immature relative to its "cognitive properties," such as its "conceptual system of reference."¹⁴ Philosophers splitting language's rational-communicative functions from its sensory and sonorous properties reinforce the boundary between the inner self from the outer world, "a binary separation of internal cognition from external vibration."¹⁵

While writing *Teeter*, I listened to recordings of sound poetry performances, looked at visual-concrete poems, and researched sound art installations. In homage to experimental and avant-garde poets, I compiled eight epigraphs by Barbara Guest, Mónica de la Torre, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Jennifer Moxley, Kamau Brathwaite, Gertrude Stein, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and Etel Adnan (I added a ninth epigraph by Antonio Gramsci). Artists who do not make conventional music or poetry are a significant influence on *Teeter*. Still, I was left wondering how to write a translingual text with the worldliness of language that has never been split between cognitive function and sonorous, embodied dimensions. While sound, as Brandon LaBelle theorizes, "moves between inside and outside," how do the sonic properties of language do the same?¹⁶ Perhaps a porous body receives music and sound, and perhaps a porous body writes in vibratory conversation with energetic forms.



Roberto Chabet, *Untitled (Drum & Shell)*.

I open Dodie Bellamy's essay collection *Bee Reaved*—a book on loss and grief—looking to reconstruct a vague memory of the way she speaks movingly about how writing and self-making are porous, permeable tactics. I read: "These communities of symbiotic bacteria and viruses and fungi that live on and inside my body are known as my microbiome, though I'm not sure 'my' is appropriate here."¹⁷ But this is not quite what I'm looking for, so I open a browser tab to type a few keywords into a search engine. I glean from the internet that "porous" is often used in reference to New Narrative, a literary movement associated with Bellamy. A few minutes of scrolling, then back to *Bee Reaved*, where I read: "Online information, like avant-garde poetry or music, is a process, an onrush you experience moment by moment by moment, with no catchy tune, no overarching meaning, to pull it together."¹⁸ I wonder whether my desire to concretize my memory of Bellamy *saying* something that has stayed with me is mediating this "onrush" of information, and that this moment-by-moment process is composing a poem without writing.

I open another tab to search my cloud-based file storage system, where I keep years' worth of reading and listening notes. Then: another tab to search for an episode of a podcast I listen to now and again. Bingo, but no provided transcript. I press the PLAY button on the podcast website and find what I'm looking for at 00:06:33. I move the dot-slider back and forth to transcribe Bellamy's vivid inquiry:

I think an ongoing theme in my writing from the very beginning is like where do I end and where does the world begin and this kind of like fear of boundary invasion and the desire to be invaded so this whole like the fact that the most the bulk of us are like microbes and beings that aren't us like what's us and what isn't us I think is really kind of terrifying, right? And the stability of the self that you know deep down we all know is a lie but we try to maintain anyway it becomes really threatened.¹⁹

I start inserting into my transcript orthographic marks, such as commas, periods, and capitalization, to do what is called “light editing for clarity,” but then I stop and start pressing Command-Z to undo the edits. Orthography has the grammatical function of setting boundaries around units of written text, so it is quite beautiful that Bellamy speaks here in a run-on sentence about the ambiguities of physiological and psychosocial boundaries. I love the liveness of Bellamy’s vocal timbre, melodies, accent, and flow, what Catherine Rudent would call Bellamy’s “palette of signifying sounds.”²⁰ I love how the two uses of the quotative “like” pose big questions (“Where do I end and where does the world begin?” and “What’s us and what isn’t us?”) as internal monologues reenacted conversationally with the interviewer. The conversation engages speech within a speech, much like a film inside a film, or recalled material inside the ongoingness of time.

I believe the sonic (what might be called “paralinguistic”) and relational (or “phatic”) energies of Bellamy’s spoken language allow me to return to a point in time and space where I thought about porosity in a certain way. Over two years ago, I was walking down the hallway of my house toward my bathroom listening to Bellamy’s podcast interview when I heard her speak on the ambiguity of self and community. The acoustic qualities of remembered language bring forth the architectural and kinesthetic experiences of making and hearing sounds. Episodic memory, once retrieved, can be intensely associative. Visualizing that moment of walking down my hallway, I remember reading the other day Christine Smallwood quoting Chantal Akerman as saying, “Those doors and hallways help me frame things, and they also help me work with time.”²¹

The sonic and musical qualities of language open a world as a film opens. A good deal of *Teeter* is a listening text, evoking childhood memories not from the perspective of the adult present (the time of writing) but rather through immersion in an ongoing world that could become more known, more sensorily evoked, through writing. If my poems are a processing of my literary and linguistic influences, they must also be a processed form of patterned and looped impulses and signals, including the melodic contours and prosodic textures of the languages of my childhood. Evoking the noisiness and musicality of familial soundscapes brings me to particular speakers in my diasporic childhood rather than to a symbolic “mother tongue.” A certain tonal utterance has trained me to understand specific commands beyond lexical communication.

Research on infant cry melodies shows that they take on the intonation patterns of “motherese.” This follows a developmental narrative of musicality preceding speech, and suggests that speech intonations are not as instinctively driven by sensations of pain, pleasure, hunger, or fear as they are of imitation and learning. I have a line in “poem as abstraction of my voice” and another in “Ambient Mom” in which consonants clip the vowel cry. Still, I insist that as an adult there is musicality in my relationship to language—perhaps more so in everyday speech than in the organized language of poetry.

On Composing

After-the-fact collaboration grows from a practice of active dialogue across fluencies. A poet told me after a reading of *Teeter* that listening to me read poems was both listening to me read and then listening for what I was describing, transcribing, and recording in my *own* listening. Time lapse and re-situating make a work continually dynamic upon rereading, reviewing, and relistening. What if a work is continuously alive, and one opens the book or presses the PLAY button to catch it midstream?

This past week, I’ve been listening to recordings made by David Grubbs and poet Susan Howe. While writing *Teeter*’s first long poem, I watched video performances of some of their work. Grubbs has written that their sound recordings and their live performances are two distinct forms of collaboration because the performances are an extension of the recordings’ scores.²² The listening session that is generating this essay on *Teeter* is different from the one that generated *Teeter*. The composing continues as a loose, asynchronous ensemble in the infrastructural loops of labor: the many ears, eyes, cognition, embodiment, tools, time, channels, and architectures.

Notes

1 *Teeter* (Nightboat Books, 2023).

2 Rafael, “Translation in Wartime,” talk at the University of Washington, January 31, 2008 →.

3 Rafael quoted in Peter Kelley, “Vicente Rafael Explores Link between Translation, Historical Imagination in Book ‘Motherless Tongues,’” *UW News*, May 9, 2016 →. My series of essays was published on the Poetry Foundation website →.

4 “Craig Taborn by Camille Norment,” *BOMB*, no. 152 (September 2020) →.

5 Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism* (Cornell University Press, 1993), and *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* (Duke University Press, 2016).

6 See →.

7 Garcia, *Emergency: Reading the Popol Vuh in a Time of Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

8 Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 35.

9 Sheehi, “Theory as Stone.”

10 Miller, “Transformative Mimicry: Composition as Embodied Practice in Recent Works” (PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, UK, 2018).

11 Quicho, *Small Gods: Perspectives on the Drone* (Zero Books, 2021), 7.

12 Quicho, *Small Gods*, 4.

- 13 Berlant, interviewed by Maria Dimitrova, *Tank*, 2019 →.
- 14 Samuels and Porcello, "Listening," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 87.
- 15 Samuels and Porcello, "Listening," 88.
- 16 LaBelle, "Room Tone," SFMOMA website, October 2017 →.
- 17 *Bee Reaved* (Semiotext(e), 2021), 19.
- 18 105.
- 19 "Dodie Bellamy's 'Bee Reaved' and Mia Hansen-Love's 'Bergman Island,'" October 14, 2021, in *LARB Radio Hour* →.
- 20 Rudent, "Against the 'Grain of the Voice': Studying the Voice in Songs," trans. Jack Sims, *Books and Ideas*, July 6, 2020 →.
- 21 Smallwood, *La Captive* (Fireflies Press, 2024), 16.
- 22 "David Grubbs on Collaboration with Susan Howe," ISSUE Project Room website, October 2013 →.

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