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Uncertain Revelations:

Noise from the Old Regular Baptists
to Susan Howe, Clark Coolidge
and Morton Feldman

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Abstract

The question this essay turns upon is how noise functions in the American scene not only as an image of excess and degeneracy within a narrative of futurity but also as a performance of different kinds of vocality, temporality, and personality. To this effect, this essay analyzes four very different projects in contemporary American literary and musical history – the heterophonic lined-out singing of the Old Regular Baptists, the “mute” music of Morton Feldman, the associative poetics of Clark Coolidge, and the archival cut-ups of Susan Howe. In this discussion, the concept of noise functions not as an organizing principle but rather as a kind of horizon of listening that shadows and resists meaning and progress while remaining material and temporal – felt or sensed – in its circulation. Neither images of “the city upon the hill” nor the frontier (those two classic sites of American narrative), these works refuse prophecy in favor of a moment-to-moment movement. The intensity of uncertainty – in music, signification, theology, politics and eschatology – overwhelms the prescriptive and proscriptive charge of American narratives about reason, religion, order, and nation.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Essay untersucht die Funktion des Geräusches (noise) in Amerika nicht nur als Bild des Überschusses und der Degeneration innerhalb eines Narrativs der Zukünftigkeit, sondern als Performance verschiedener Arten von Stimmlichkeit, Temporalität und Persönlichkeit. Hierfür werden vier verschiedene literarische und musikalische Projekte untersucht – das heterophone „lined-out singing“ der Old Regular Baptists, die „stumme“ Musik Morton Feldmans, die assoziative Poetik Clark Coolidges und die archivaren Cut-ups von Susan Howe. Konzeptionell fungiert Noise dabei nicht als Organisationsprinzip, sondern als eine Art Horizont des Hörens, der Bedeutung und Fortschritt verschattet und gleichzeitig in seiner Zirkulation materiell und temporal bleibt. Ihre Werke sind weder Bilder der „city upon a hill“ noch der frontier (klassische Schauplätze amerikanischer kultureller Narrative) und ziehen eine Bewegung von Moment zu Moment prophetischen Äußerungen vor. Die Intensität der Unsicherheit – in Musik, Signifikation, Theologie, Politik und Eschatologie – überwältigt die prä- und proskriptive Ladung amerikanischer Erzählungen von Rationalität, Religion, Ordnung und Nation.

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Uncertain Revelations: Noise from the Old Regular Baptists to Susan Howe, Clark Coolidge and Morton Feldman

In 1720, the Puritan luminary Cotton Mather, along with a variety of other ministers, inaugurated a period of intense reform in the singing style of American Puritan congregations. For Mather and the other singing reformists, “singing ha[d] degenerated into an Odd Noise that has more of what we want a name for than Regular Singing in it.”¹ What Mather identifies as “Odd Noise” musicologists now call lined-out heterophony, and it is still practiced in churches in the Appalachian South and the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Heterophony denotes a musical style in which there is a simultaneous performance of many slightly different variations on a single melody. The effect of these incremental changes is to “blur” the tonality and linearity of musical sound and to create, instead, a confusion or congeries of voices. To be sure, the sonic effect of heterophony – particularly when combined with a forceful and energetic singing style – is quite strange, but the question this essay turns upon is how this “more of what we want a name for” functions in the American scene not only as an image of excess and degeneracy within a discourse of “Regularity” but also as a performance of different forms of vocality, temporality, and personality that reimagine the location of self within American narratives of historical and religious progress.

Noise explicitly resists figuration, personification, and – as Mather references it – “naming” by singers, composers, and poets, but I will take up four very different projects in contemporary American literary and musical history – the heterophonic lined-out singing of the Old Regular Baptists (a contemporary church that still sings in the “Old Way” disparaged by Mather), the “mute” music of Morton Feldman, the associative poetics of Clark Coolidge, and the archival play of Susan Howe – in order to delineate ways of making noise that explicitly disfigure the expected narratives and rhythms in language, song, and musical sound. In seeking out the disfiguring power of noise – and the affects associated with such disfiguration – I want to show, through discontinuities, breaks, and fragmented affinities, a certain recalcitrance in American aesthetics. I argue that noise – in resisting articulation – remains simultaneously beyond and within earshot; it functions not as an organizing principle but rather as a kind of horizon of listening that shadows and resists meaning and progress while remaining material and temporal in its circulation. While American narratives of the future – perhaps even America’s futurity itself – are often based upon forms of religious separatism, utopian communalism and liberal individualism, the intricate and yet resistant processes of noise-making that exist in the marginal spaces of American culture shadow these self- and nation-forming narratives.

Noise threatened the Puritan experiment from without and within. Every contact point, whether of conflict or confusion, whether at the boundary between civilization and the “howling wilderness” or in interpretive controversies over aesthetics and

¹ Cotton Mather, *The Accomplished Singer*, Boston: B. Green, 1721, p. 22.

doctrine, created a grid of listening that divided voice from noise, rational speech from meaningless emissions. For Mather and the other singing reformers, the old heterophonic singing created “a confused noise of a wilderness” inside the circle of the Puritan communities.² It threatened internal sonic degeneracy and malignancy. Like other controversies over noise – like that between the Puritans and the religious sect known as the Ranters at the end of the 17th century, or the diabolical noises of the accused during the Salem witchcraft trials – the regulation of congregational singing policed the relationship between representation, aesthetics, and politics.³ The vocal current of what came to be known variously as “old way,” “country” or “common” singing, like those other disciplined vocal currents, threatened a fixed system of representation with the inarticulate, anonymous, and invisible cries of a largely unknown and unaccounted for class.⁴ As the names for this singing suggest, the “common” in common singing referenced a kind of collectivity always outside of the centers of economic and religious power.⁵ Ever-vigilant about the collective workings of the throat, mouth, and nose, educated preachers like Mather heard noise wherever the sensual and temporal traces of a powerful feeling of grace did not cohere with the expected social and theological determinants of religious feeling. A quatrain in Mather’s text summarizes his sense of what “God’s ear” approves:

Tis not the voice but the desire
Not noise but hearty love
Not loud cries but a soul on fire
That God’s ear will approve.⁶

These invisible and inaudible determinants – “desire,” “love,” “a soul on fire” – immediately traveled to God’s ear within the invisible and inaudible spiritual realm, while the manifest mediation of grace by “voice,” “loud cries,” and “noise” remained available not only to God’s ears but also the unpleased ears of listeners attuned to a new kind of orderly and pre-ordained aesthetics.

This aesthetic conundrum – form as the expression of immanent forces of repetition and change versus form as a transcendent model that predicates and predicts a specific morphology – and the attendant “noise” that arose from it, presents an early moment in American history in which an institutionalized sense of progressive modernity (in this case, authorized by Puritan exceptionalism and exemplarity) not only transformed aesthetic thought and actual organizations of sound but also created the conditions for a temporal resistance to the abiding historical and religious narratives about America. For those who followed the techniques of the “Old Way,” a collective vibrational energy orally passed down and intensely expressed mediated

² Mather, *The Accomplished Singer* (see nt. 1), p. 23.

³ Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, Ithaca, NY 2003, p. 125–150.

⁴ Nancy Ruttenberg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship*, Stanford, CA 1998, p. 9.

⁵ Nicholas Temperley, “Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34 (1981), no. 3, p. 513.

⁶ Temperley, “Old Ways of Singing” (see nt. 5), p. 11.

not only a common tradition but also a personalized attestation that refused the regularized and unified measure of post-1720s mainstream Puritan psalmody. The swelling sounds of lined-out hymnody reimagined futurity as instantaneous call and transformative grace: not in terms of a triumphant and utopian unity but rather in terms of resistance, failure, and multiplicity.

Noise

The “outside-in” quality of this noisy singing – a wilderness within the heart of Puritan and American exceptionalism – and its powerful (if marginal) resistance to institutional change provide a point of departure for this essay. Within the theater of religious listening, uncontained voice becomes noise when it seems to show too much of itself. That is, when it seems to provide too much mediation, too much throat, lung, and body as it removes itself from the rationalized procedures of spoken meaning and into a hazardous performance of personality and grace. These singers produced a version of vocal personality – etymologically, a thing “with sound” – through vocal grain, volume, and individual variation. As such, each performance had a certain accidental and chance-based quality that did not fit into the narrative of vocal performance imagined by the church fathers.

This violation of narrative filters and acoustic orders defines one of the powers of noise.⁷ Noise simultaneously interpenetrates and remains outside of scripted temporalities. It remains in excess of a “technical apparatus” that would “store, order, and retrieve units of information” – that is, what Jean-Francois Lyotard would call narrative:

There are many ways of telling a story, but the narrative as such can be considered to be a technical apparatus giving a people the means to store, order and retrieve units of information, i.e. events. More precisely, narratives are like temporal filters whose function is to transform the emotive charge linked to the event into sequences of units of information capable of giving rise to something like meaning.⁸

These “temporal filters” also function as sonic filters: i.e. as systems that define and suggest a division between voice and noise, or between meaningful units of sonic information and meaningless, ignored surrounding sounds. Through the work of filtration and sequence, “something like meaning” emerges. But the almost-extinct acoustic world of lined-out hymnody and the acoustic worlds of Feldman, Coolidge, and Howe, posit forms of time, sense, and sensibility that resist “temporal filters” and disciplining sequences. In these works, sound overflows the eventual arrival of meaning. In attempting to disarticulate sound from the systems of mediation or “sequencers” of narrative, these artists not only reimagine the distinctions between

⁷ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, tr. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, MN 1985, p. 6.

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Oxford 1991, p. 63.

voice and noise that ground these sonic filters but also challenge the rationalized shape of time that such sequencers and filters imagine.

It is this challenge to certain kinds of temporality that produces “noise” in these works. Rather than the constant deferral of utopian futurity through the generalizing and shaping power of emotion through narration, these works seem to suspend time and understanding. And so they aspire to the condition of noise:

Noise suspends itself: a thick and tactile curtain, a temporal fabric composed of tiny sub-cognitive movements that function below the spectrum of recognition and outside the range of rational signification, but not outside of time. Noise is the historicity of non-meaning.⁹

The poet Lisa Robertson here draws out the central paradox of noise: it exists simultaneously inside the movement of everyday temporality and “outside the range of rational signification.” It remains “subcognitive” and below “recognition” but not beyond time. Noise fills up and gives history to the blank passage of meaningless temporality, entropic energy. As such, it is the obverse of the filtering work of narrative.

The compositions, texts, and performances I take up here access new forms of affect, community, and (a combination of both of these) grace by suspending and yet remaining within time: by suspending the various temporalities of filtration and sequence in favor of a time defined by the scattered temporality of noise. As traces or crystallizations of noise, these works – whether a clanging weave of voices, a quiet slab of piano sound, a six-hundred page book of anti-prose, or a cut-up and rearranged pile of decaying historical records – thrive in an interstitial space defined by multiplicity, potentiality, tentativeness, accident, and haphazardness. Neither “the city upon the hill” nor the frontier (those two classic sites of American narrative sequencing), these works refuse prophecy in favor of a moment-to-moment movement. That is to say, the intensity of a moment-by-moment uncertainty – in music, semantics, theology, politics and eschatology – overwhelms the prescriptive and proscriptive charge of American narratives about reason, religion, order, and nation. By linking these disparate works across time and media, I want to highlight the ways in which this particular sound of the future “is now” even as its frequency, morphology, tempo, timbre, etc. changes. Rather than clean sequences we have aggregative heaps of vibration and wavering oscillations. Inside of the chaos of these heaps, however, lies the possibility for new forms of order, new shapes to emerge: the catastrophe of noise ultimately holds new revelations, new regimes of thought and feeling.

⁹ Lisa Robertson, *Nilling*, Toronto 2012, p. 63.

“I have no promise of tomorrow”

Certain fundamentalist Christian congregations like the Old Regular Baptists of Indian Bottom, Kentucky, continue to sing the heterophonic, lined-out form of hymnody that Mather and other Puritan reformers criticized as noise. In this performance practice, a leader or “moderator” sings a line from a hymn and the congregation follows. Made popular in the mid-seventeenth century in England, lined-out hymnody is an oral and aural cultural form in two ways: it was invented to allow the entire congregation to sing – a requirement of many early Protestant sects – even if its members lacked books or the ability to read, and its tunes continue to be passed down through oral-aural repetition and memory. Such an oral/aural tradition becomes a collective negotiation as ears and mouths mediate melodies in discrete performances over many generations. “Old Way” singing maps the sonic effects of both a mass of bodies making sound in the actual instant of its production and a mass of emitter-receivers listening to and re-transmitting sounds over time. This double distortion – by bodily sensation and temporal transformation – resulted in the sound that so jarred, confused, and frightened the Puritan fathers. It was, often, the oral tradition itself that was blamed, as in this critique by Reverend Thomas Symmes:

Singing books being laid aside, there was no Way to learn; but only by hearing of Tunes Sung, or by taking the Run of the Tune (as it is phrased). The Rules of Singing not being taught or learnt, every one sang as best pleased himself, and every Leading Singer would take the Liberty of raising any Note of the Tune, or lowering of it, as best pleas'd his Ear, and add such Turns and Flourishes as were grateful to him; and this was done so gradually that but few if any took Notice of it.¹⁰

As an antidote to such distortions, the proponents of “Regular singing” argued for a print tradition – supported by new “shape note” singing hymnals, new singing schools, and (most importantly) new biblical exegeses – that allowed a singer to read, perform, and properly interpret the exact rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic intervals for orderly praise. Through a contradictory temporal structure common to many arguments for modernization, the expanded use of print and the institutionalization of musical reading and performance in the early eighteenth century could simultaneously fix and record melodies with new technical apparatuses and return them to their original shape and original beauty.¹¹ The culture could move backward by moving forward.

The sonic disarticulation of lined-hymnody resists such fixedness in both aesthetic and hermeneutic terms. As a sounded folkway, it presents a doubled temporality in exactly the opposite terms of Puritan reform: its distortions and lack of fixity create

¹⁰ Thomas Symmes, *The Reasonableness of Regular Singing, or Singing by Note*, Boston: B. Green 1720, p. 8.

¹¹ Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History*, New York, NY 2005, p. 28.

innovation even as its performers imagine themselves adhering closely to a tradition. The sound (accidentally and inevitably) changes via its resistance to change. Each performance presents a kind of collective listening that gathers a variety of different song lines. As individuals listen and repeat with a difference, a sense of timbre based on bodily projection and a sense of time based upon wave period or swell becomes the norm. As the number of individual vocal techniques, melodic ornamentations, and rhythmic recalibrations increase, the tunes inevitably morph and slow down. Eventually, melody becomes a virtual mnemonic rather than an ideal for performance, and tempo works outside of the constraints of meter.

In a tune like “I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow,” as performed by the Old Regular Baptists of Indian Bottom, the array of voices creates a sense of repetitive immobility:

Moderator: I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow,
Congregation: Cast out in this wide world to roam;
Moderator: I have no promise of tomorrow,
Congregation: I have no promise of tomorrow,
Moderator: I’ve started to make heaven my home.
Congregation: I’ve started to make heaven my home.¹²

The mutual projection – one might say “piling” – of the many slightly different voices and melodies increases the depth and density of the sound. These voices do not meld into a coherent and harmonized chorus; instead, they exist as a plurality of separate vocal emissions. Quavers, slides, and additional ornaments “fill in” the spaces between melody notes. The voices amass. Like the roar of the ocean that aggregates an infinite number of “small perceptions” to form the conscious perception of a “roar,” the many and multiple voices here form a coagulated entity based not on harmonic organization but rather on an enfolding “body without organs.”¹³

The intensity of this thickened sonic space between notes, gamuts, and patterns produces and is produced by an impassioned, moved, shouting, yelling body. This sensation of movement and dispossession culminates in the feeling of the body itself as a medium, as overtaken by a powerful feeling of grace.¹⁴ The strident voices of these singers mark what the linguist Roman Jakobson defines as the “phatic” in communication: a call that confirms the presence of the medium and a connection made apparent.¹⁵ Here, this connection feeds back into each listener, as each elemental emitter-receiver listens, follows and adds to an ever more encompassing vortex of sound. In the midst of this ambience, to listen – to hear, heed, and respond

¹² *Songs of the Old Regular Baptists: Lined-Out Hymnody from Southeastern Kentucky*, track 10, “I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow,” CD, Smithsonian Folkways, SF 40106, 1997.

¹³ *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson, trans. Mary Morris and G.H.R. Parkinson, London 1973, p. 43. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, MN 1983.

¹⁴ Track 13, “The meaning of singing,” in: *Songs of the Old Regular Baptists* (see nt. 12).

¹⁵ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in: *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Albert Sebeok, Cambridge, MA 1968, p. 355–356.

– becomes the primary work of the singer. If there is “an inexhaustible network linking listening to belonging, to the sense of obligation, a passivity ... as possibility,”¹⁶ then noise becomes a potentiality – for a belonging founded on an anarchic dissolution rather than upon understanding.

This belonging has a temporal reach that moves in a time structured by repetition, not the presumed fixity and return to origins of Puritan representation. This collective “swell” or “surge” of sound instantiates a periodicity not based upon meter or beat but rather upon rhythmic imitation. Like a group of birds, the music moves by a series of minutely differentiated responses rather than an exact movement in structured time. The singers fall or sway into the music; they do not count into it. Paul Zumthor, in his book *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, suggests that every oral performance “is doubly temporalized – by its own length, and by virtue of the moment of the social duration in which it is inserted.”¹⁷ As an ephemeral presentation of the movement of sound in time, as well as a representation of social time, “I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow” guarantees not edification – the grammatical movement from ignorance to understanding – but rather a profound ritualistic repetition. The poetics of “swell” calls attention to a time that has “no promise of tomorrow,” that is “roaming” and has already “started to make heaven [a] home.” That is to say, it evokes a wandering and circular time that refuses the prefabricated temporalities of a Puritan order. Tradition is imagined as a sense of contemporaneity with the past rather than, merely, its allegorical reproduction. A marginalized form of worship, this singing depends not upon a form of revelation in which experience is the temporal shadow of Biblical narrative, but rather upon a kind of everyday and uncertain revealing, a sudden and yet repeatable grace: as if the apocalypse were here and now, but only in the constant unavailability of that here and now.

Perhaps this accounts for the unnamable affect that Mather heard in the “Odd Noises” of 18th-century lined-out hymnody. This “triumph of the phatic” in which “listening as much as vocalizing overflows speech” allows for a contiguity and contact to overwhelm hermeneutic discipline and enforced metaphor.¹⁸ Rather than a meaning-making narrative, in which voice, word, and grammar allows each singer to “sing with the spirit, and sing also with understanding,” this kind of heterophonic singing creates only “uncouth noise.”¹⁹ Such noise disrupts narrative. It positions a shaking body in the midst of clear, immediate ideas and an organized time-flow. A 19th-century commentator relates the different sensual basis for common singing in positive terms:

They commenced a note in a cautious and proper manner, carefully swelling it, and with the swell, shaking note and word to atoms; and so on from note to note, or word to word. It was no

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (see nt. 8), p. 182.

¹⁷ Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. Kathy Murphy-Judy, Minneapolis, MN 1990, p. 119.

¹⁸ Zumthor, *Oral Poetry* (see nt. 17), p. 127.

¹⁹ Mather, *The Accomplished Singer* (see nt. 1), p. 12.

insignificant, tremulous voice, but grand, majestic and heart-stirring; and, when applied to such tunes as Old Hundred, Mear and Canterbury, everything around seemed to tremble.²⁰

This elemental singing, then, creates an expanding, “swelling” heterophony that “[shakes] note and word to atoms,” as if the particular words, meanings, and melodies matter less than a powerful, “heart-stirring,” “grand” and “trembl[ing]” multiplicity. Vibrational ecstasy overwhelms the understanding, “note to note, or word to word.”

In listening to performances by the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, one can begin to hear a rough dialectic. The singer is at once a particular being and part of a wave of mutable and mutating voices around her. The singing at once conducts praise through a transcendence and dispossession that disregards bodily imperfections and limitations and at the same time emphasizes those same bodily imperfections and limitations via a sound loudly projected through throat, nose, and head – the “grainy” elements of the embodied voice. The singer is at once mediating spirit and sound, and each performance sutures each singer not into the narrative of God’s understanding but rather into the hazard and chance of God’s grace. Simultaneously amalgamated and individual, each singer has “the freedom to decorate the melody so that each member of the congregation makes an individual act of worship out of his or her own singing [and] fulfills the highest ideals of the Reformation by processes the reformers probably never envisaged.”²¹ It is in this way that this singing – pervaded by the individualistic theology of ever more fundamentalist versions of Protestantism – emphasizes, at the heart of American religious self-definition, a faltering, shaking, atomized body, pulverized into a grand but multivalent mass, a disorganized body that desires forms of communal life beyond the regulated systems of word, text, and song.

“The last artists”

The atomization of sound and the body, the disfiguration of narrative into different periodicities does not produce “noise” in any final sense. To atomize sound and, by extension, the body – to lift the powers of sensation out of regulated systems of listening and understanding – is not to produce noise but rather to aspire to a condition of noise: a condition that negates forms, filters, and systems that strive to carve and figure sound and time. The philosopher Michel Serres describes noise precisely in these negative, even anti-phenomenal terms:

Noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog, as every message, every cry, every call, every signal must be

²⁰ Nathaniel Duren Gould, *Church Music in America, Comprising Its History and Its Peculiarities at Different Periods, with Cursory Remarks on Its Legitimate Use and Its Abuse*, New York: A.N. Johnson 1853, quoted in Crawford, *America’s Musical Life* (see nt. 11), p. 27.

²¹ John Purser, *Scotland’s Music: A History of the Traditional and Classical Music of Scotland from Early Times to the Present Day*, Edinburgh 1992, p. 147.

separated from the hubbub that occupies silence, in order to be perceived, to be known, to be exchanged.²²

In aspiring to the condition of noise, the atomized densities of sound assume a metonymic relation to the constant subcognitive movements of sound that compose Serres's "hubbub" or Robertson's "historicity of non-meaning." In this way, heterophonic lined-out hymnody manifests the historicity of sonic contact from mouth to ear of a whole series of separated individuals within a collective and semi-continuous periodicity of sound-making. Existing on a scale beyond the single idealized performance, this music not only relies upon, but also self-reflexively embodies the long, semi-continuous duration of its own aural/oral making. A kind of horizontal or temporal study arises from a state of grace outside of human understanding.

It is in this way that these works are continuous with an aesthetic sphere far removed from specific questions of doctrine and locale. The twentieth-century radicalization of music as an art of "pure sound" ultimately resists pre-given grammars and temporalities that assume a certain kind of utopian futurity. Mid-century composers like John Cage and Morton Feldman perhaps most aggressively expressed an orientation toward a decentered, chance-based sonic flux that would act in resistance to a post-war America defined by prosperity, consumption, and repression. Cage perhaps most succinctly states the principle: the composer should let "sounds be themselves."²³ But Feldman summarized the idea in slightly different terms: "only by 'unfixing' the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves – not as symbols, or memories which were memories of other music to begin with."²⁴ This sense of sound unburdened by memory – unburdened by language and order – articulates a model of music based upon the sounds of an inhuman and ever-flowing nature. We might define this sonic space as the deanthropomorphized sound world of noise: a vibrational continuity without memory, without voice, and yet in time – the "historicity of non-meaning."

These artists also imagined their desire to "unfix" sound and memory in terms of an aesthetic eschatology. Feldman, along with John Cage and the painter Philip Guston, often played a game in which they would imagine themselves as "the last artists."²⁵ For Feldman, this fantasy was not one of darkness and nadir but one of light and revelation. By reworking Alexander Pope's famous line "Art after art goes out, and all is night" into "art after art goes out, and all is light," Feldman figures apocalypse as possibility.²⁶ In a post-holocaust world defined by the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, deinstrumentalized sound – sound without memory or use or edification – provided the basis for new forms of pleasure and sensation while also

²² Michel Serres, *Genesis*, tr. Genevieve James, Ann Arbor, MI 1997, p. 94.

²³ John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown, CT 1961, p. 14.

²⁴ Morton Feldman, "Predeterminate/Indeterminate," in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B.H. Friedman, Cambridge, MA 2000, p. 35.

²⁵ Feldman, "Predeterminate/Indeterminate" (see nt. 24), p. 37.

²⁶ Feldman, "Predeterminate/Indeterminate" (see nt. 24), p. 37.

enacting a kind of “mute” resistance to a history of violence, control, and destruction. An irrational, non-linguistic, intuitional, and non-expressive approach denied the conceptual devices that undergirded such a history.

Two pieces, one from early in his career and one from a later stage – and both dedicated to Philip Guston – can give us a sense of the range of Feldman’s employment of these approaches. *Piano Piece (To Philip Guston)* from 1963 and the later *For Philip Guston* (1984), for flute, percussion, and piano, represent two extremes in Feldman’s work, from very short, haiku-like meditations to works of far longer duration. The earlier piano piece usually takes around four minutes to perform while the later ensemble piece usually takes about four hours to perform, and yet both pieces activate a poetics of the “last music,” a poetics of destruction and rebirth.

In *Piano Piece (To Philip Guston)* Feldman’s unmetered score asks the performer to play very quietly and slowly. Feldman marks the tempo at 66 to 88 beats per minute, around the pace of a resting heartbeat.²⁷ The tonal combinations seem disordered, random. They do not work through succession and development but rather through constant suspension. Because “any disposition of material can be eliminated without transition and taken up again without transition” every sound seems a surprise, “formed in the flow of its spontaneous generation.”²⁸ The arrays of timbre and density strike the listener, only to continually change and dissolve. The human body – abstracted as tempo and sound – becomes a filter for sounds and textures outside of music but not outside of listening. The poet Frank O’Hara suggested that the “unpredictability” of these musical remnants “involves the performer and the audience much in the same way it does the composer, inviting an increase of sensitivity and intensity.”²⁹ This increase in sensitivity and intensity opens the listening ear to sudden captures and releases, the flow of the continuously new and disconnected. These short four minutes could seemingly go on forever, “as if you’re not listening but looking at something in nature.”³⁰

The four-hour long *For Philip Guston* (1984) prolonged and rarefied this “looking” listening. By extending the duration of this piece beyond the ordinary limits of a listener’s patience and a performer’s endurance, Feldman maps out new possibilities for sensing – if not fully understanding or processing – patterns through the play of asymmetry, order, and erasure. As figures repeat and slowly dissolve, we can understand the slightly flabbergasted assessment of Feldman’s teacher, the composer Stephan Wolpe: “[Morton Feldman is] interested in the remnants of shapes that can barely be heard at a distance. Can I express this more precisely? No! He is interested

²⁷ Morton Feldman, “Piano Piece (to Philip Guston),” in: *Morton Feldman: Solo Piano Works*, New York, NY: C.F. Peters 1998, p. 30.

²⁸ Stephan Wolpe, “On New (and Not-So-New) Music in America” (1956), tr. Austin Clarkson, *Journal of Music Theory* 28 (1984), No. 1, p. 25–26.

²⁹ Frank O’Hara “Afterward: New Directions in Music: Morton Feldman,” in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* (see nt. 24), p. 216.

³⁰ Morton Feldman, quoted in O’Hara, “Afterward,” (see nt. 29), p. 213.

in the remnants of shapes that can barely be heard at a distance.”³¹ These “remnants of shapes” remain continually at the edge of disappearance. They are “just shy of definite signals.”³²

Such a long duration avoids teleological finality while also creating another version of the “last” music, a music with a syntax in which the possibility emerges that one can hear a pattern as if for the first time – without memory or projection. Music emerges from its disappearance, its “shapes that can barely be heard at a distance.” Here, the sheer scale of sound as aggregative material breaks through its rhetorical or linear orderings, and instead we hear, anew, something like “an interval as timeless as a Mondrian” through this “constant press of large tendencies.”³³ Even the simplest musical idea – the interval – renews and elaborates itself through its slow, almost imperceptible transformation over time. The “involvement” that O’Hara describes emerges again, as the sounds constantly play with and against our expectations and wavering attentions. Feldman pushes against the limits of attention, attraction and repulsion. Against the everyday forms of temporality that bind people together – in speech, song, writing, advertising, politics, etc. – the transposition and transportation of this music lies in an overwhelming surge that remaps human striving against an inhuman revelation of continuity and inevitable futurity.

Perhaps this is what O’Hara means when he writes that Feldman “sets in motion a spiritual life.” Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Inhuman* echoes and intensifies this analysis. For him, the passivity and possibility inscribed in such organizations of sound connect composers and listeners to a certain experience of grace:

All music, I think, aspires to this grace. All genuine music. Aspires to exemption from syntheses, forms, becomings, intentions and retentions, from repetition, in a word. Aspires to that unique pinch or that ‘pinch’ of the unique in which the differentiation of the one and the multiple would not have place or time.³⁴

Rather than the human and public scales of progressivist instrumentalism, this music slips into a private, bodily, and barely visible contingency in order to imagine vast time scales of entropy, transformation, and release from “syntheses, forms, becomings.” Even in the shortest pieces, a metonymic logic of association refuses narrative as an organizing principle and instead binds listeners and players to a duration beyond individual will.

In this refusal is both a melancholic recognition of humanity’s failed futurity – its untenable narratives of progress, conquest, and security – and the potentiality for a new light to emanate from catastrophe. Feldman welcomes the end of musical control: “As controls are given up, one finds that ... indeterminate music can lead only to

³¹ Wolpe, “On New (and Not So New) Music in America,” (see nt. 28), p. 25.

³² Serres, *Genesis* (see nt. 22), 94.

³³ Clark Coolidge, “Regarding Morton Feldman’s Music and Wherever It All Now Goes,” *Sulfur* 22 (1988), p. 125

³⁴ Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (see nt. 8), p. 163.

catastrophe. This catastrophe we allowed to take place.”³⁵ But this catastrophe opens up a new relation to “use,” a new form of sensation. For the poet Clark Coolidge, Feldman’s work does “what writing has never quite been able to get away with: Lost in that field purely of nouns that verb and stretch and edge, a radiance which comes when things are not used, not used with other things.”³⁶ This “field” of “radiance which comes when things are not used” describes the effulgent “light” of Feldman’s eschatological game. Music’s future begins in its destruction.

“Time ends in the middle”

Of course, Coolidge’s description of Feldman’s work defines a certain horizon of expectation for his own writing. A prolific contemporary poet who has published more than forty books of poetry, Coolidge’s work fluctuates, like Feldman’s, between the extreme minimalism of collections like *Space* (1971) and long prose book-length projects, like his recently published *Book Beginning What and Ending Away* (2013). Coolidge’s work does not simply present an analogous relationship between language and music; he collapses and complicates the space between the two. To imagine Feldman’s sounds as “nouns that verb and stretch and edge” is to think of sound as a kind of writing that refuses sentence-based referentiality and gives up explicit semantic or narrative content for complex “verbing nouns” that do not do things or effect meanings so much as suspend themselves in the air. These stretching and edging sounds-as-nouns or nouns-as-sounds have qualities that exist outside of reference or use-value. Coolidge argues that language has “a universe of qualities other than those of descriptive relation: Hardness, Density, Sound-Shape, Vector-Force, & Degrees of Transparency/Opacity.”³⁷ By imagining music as language (“nouns”) and language in musical terms like “sound-shape,” “vector-force,” and “density,” Coolidge transforms Cagean organizations of sound into rich sites for framing and reframing the process by which both speech and song arise from and harken back to the sub-cognitive or sub-phenomenal sphere of noise.

For Coolidge, the poem is “not the recording of a reality outside the poem but the reality of the experience in it – or perhaps – during it,”³⁸ and that experience “during” the poem is, itself, one that redistributes time in language. As with the singers of the “Old Way” and the work of Feldman, atomization presents a means of creating new periodicities in sound that avoid the metrically, grammatically or figuratively predetermined. Phonemes and morphemes seem intransitive and fixed, even within the matrix of other words: “All particles in the pile soon to reach / *nounal state*.”³⁹

³⁵ Feldman, “Predeterminate/Indeterminate” (see nt. 24), p. 35.

³⁶ Clark Coolidge, “Regarding Morton Feldman’s Music” (see nt. 33), p. 125.

³⁷ Clark Coolidge, “From Notebooks (1976–1982),” in: *Code of Signals*, ed. Michael Palmer, Berkeley, CA 1983, p. 172.

³⁸ Bernstein, Charles, “Maintaining Space: Clark Coolidge’s Early Work,” in *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975–1984*, Los Angeles, CA 1986, p. 260.

³⁹ Clark Coolidge, “Larry Eigner Notes,” in: *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book (Poetics of the New)*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Carbondale, IL 1984, p. 224.

And yet that seeming fixity is the image of a state in which “momentum becomes undertow.”⁴⁰ Time moves not by grammatical projection but rather as the wave-like layering of specific sonic particularities – an energized “pile” of words and atoms of words – into a cacophonous, multitudinous whole.

The momentum of these heaps of language (to borrow a title from the artist Robert Smithson) works on a variety of different scales – from the minute particulars of sound similarity to vast masses of language layered like geological strata. From

larva crisis star wage
claps cap trap snap
of ouds⁴¹

to

Starts, could say, then shone. Stress leans, an opera as day is long, without the arches of the chair, a number of stones. It works in weight there is a noun to wait against, numbers the air has cost the hat. Outside of alone there is no stress that forms the rest, empty in stages fall apart. All that far a certain way out of a hat, without tends to an extent it has been the mind. Others frame.⁴²

The stuttering ripple of “claps cap trap snap” articulates not the predictive pattern or ambiguous layering of rhyme but rather the machinic effect of a loop. Meanwhile in the prose work, the surrounding auditory-linguistic environment – “opera as day is long” – comes into perception as bits of information, filtered by linguistic networks and sounded conventions, that dematerialize before our ears and eyes. Periods no longer work as markers of complete sentences or full grammatical stops but rather as rhythmic blocks: periodicity overtakes grammar.

Lost in the midst of a buzzing mass of information, Coolidge traces surges of sound beyond the words given in language. As Jed Rasula has pointed out in relation to Coolidge’s work, noise manifests as a specific resistance to signal. Borrowing from information theory, Rasula shows how the functioning of the medium of communication itself – its static – circumscribes and inhibits the smooth flow of communication.⁴³ In the poetry of Coolidge, the fictional “immediacy” of semiosis gets lost in this static of mediation, the twittering machine of language. This resistance and static, however, also suggests a plurality of “vector-forces” in a field, a series of possible linguistic short circuits in the “plethoran mode:” “One might say we live intruded by a world of absolute plurals. The plethoran mode. Varying like and dissimilarity. The heavy every, the noted nothing.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jed Rasula, *Syncopations: The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary Poetry*, Tuscaloosa, AL 2004, p. 93.

⁴¹ Clark Coolidge, *Space*, New York, NY 1971, p. 34.

⁴² Clark Coolidge, *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away*, Albany, NY 2013, p. 141.

⁴³ Rasula, *Syncopations* (see nt. 40), p. 94

⁴⁴ Clark Coolidge, “Words,” in: *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover, New York, NY 1994, p. 652.

This “plethoran mode” complicates the social duration of chant theorized by Zumthor and instanced by the Indian Bottom singers. Rather than a cacophonous contact that inscribes grace in the sonic continuum that unites oral memory, religious rite, and social entanglement, Coolidge creates a sonic potentiality. Language, as with Michel Serres’s definition of noise, remains “just shy of definite signals”; foreground and background disappear in favor of an anamorphic and anachronous space. In Coolidge’s early minimalist work, blank space, repetition, and sound play foreground the simultaneous weightiness and airiness of the “heavy every” and the “noted nothing”:

backed hole, the night rip, the stand sags
so you? hedge & lance, the right rip
so bound & leaf lance, hedge
hedge the right stand, rip it & sags
smacks lands, cart backed & the hole
right stand so you? sooner? melds
the night stander rips & so you sags
echo glancer type & rips? stands so.⁴⁵

The morphemic and phonemic twists and turns almost break into complete sentences and dialogue, and yet the words intrude upon and violate their own possible semiotic ranges. “Backed holes,” “night rips,” “stand sags” all take on the seeming quality and solidity of objects, but this solidity is, simply, the thickness of language, what Christopher Dewdney calls Coolidge’s “personal chromatic scale.”⁴⁶ This “chromaticism” of language depends upon a density of frequency – in terms of words and sound. Individual words return again and again – “So,” “the,” “stand” – while stretched out sound clusters slowly articulate variations – “stand / land / lance / stander / glancer.” As opposed to the traditional hermeneutic position, stated by Alexander Pope, that “sound must seem an echo to the sense,” here sound precedes and forecloses “sense” in order to create new formations and interactions that cut across grammatical order and narrative intent. We circle again and again in a vortex of words and sounds, as if we were learning language anew, or as if the language machine were feeding back on itself, overloaded by its own chromatic density. We enter a space in which everything is possible: “The poem could be big or long.”⁴⁷ “The understrata are brightening in words that rise.”⁴⁸ “Time ends in the middle” for this “literature of humming.”⁴⁹ Here are ways of remaining unfinished.

⁴⁵ Coolidge, *Space* (see nt. 41), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Christopher Dewdney, “Coolidge: *Own Face*,” in: *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (see nt. 39), p. 216.

⁴⁷ Coolidge, *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away* (see nt. 42), p. 267.

⁴⁸ Coolidge, *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away* (see nt. 42), p. 268.

⁴⁹ Coolidge, *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away* (see nt. 42), p. 42, 12.

“Philology heaped in ruins”

While Coolidge or Feldman suggest noisy “understrata” that enter inside, outside and through the sound worlds of music and poetry, another contemporary poet, Susan Howe, creates cascades of language sound that reimagine the function of voice in the midst of noise. While the religious work of lined-out hymnody presents a kind of immanent critique of Puritan theology and exceptionalism, Susan Howe’s return to the archival traces of early American history values a different kind of inarticulate voice that emerges from the noisy “historicity of non-meaning.” The sense of an unfinished remainder or a recalcitrant excess that allows language to multiply the possible “brightening” or “chromatic” effects in Coolidge’s organizations of sound becomes in Howe the possibility of unheard voices to arise from an “American aesthetic of uncertainty.”⁵⁰ The forces of selection, arrangement and improvisation at work in Coolidge and Feldman are turned against archived texts in order to release hidden sonic affinities, strange polarities, and, even, new voices. Howe’s particular version of a “literature of humming” seeks out and finds the “hum” in the human scale of language, grammar and syntax.

Howe’s form of moment-to-moment, uncertain revelation emerges in a multivalent reappraisal of the historical record as a concrete text. A kind of rogue archivist, Howe’s poetics is one of cuts and reframings. Concrete in both a visual and sonic sense, her work posits a radical attention to a hesitant and alternative dysprosody inside of the mediating, transmitting, translating, relating and moving voices recorded by texts. Howe bursts apart texts in order to listen again to the remains of the meaningless, inarticulate, and lost – a kind of retroactive reconstruction of static: if noise is the “historicity of non-meaning,” Howe attempts not only to affirm the profound reality of noise’s duration but also to mark that historicity with fragments from the ceaseless murmur and threat of noise. Howe’s linguistically-bound frequency spectrums work radically outside of and yet deeply within the traditions she works in. Howe’s work, as an expression of “an American aesthetic of uncertainty,”⁵¹ an aesthetic that connects her to those anonymous and faltering common singers as well as composers and authors like Feldman and Coolidge, reintroduces a different sound and sense of time to American history: “to reintroduce uncertainty is to reintroduce time; with its rhythm, its orientation and its reversibility.”⁵² It is this radical enforcement of the temporality of sound – a temporality that resists and multiplies abstraction and narration – that connects works as diverse as Howe’s critical essays on early American history in *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (1993) and her recent compositions that use archival materials from Puritan subjects, like *That This* (2011). Rather than linear development, rhe-

⁵⁰ Susan Howe, “Writing *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*,” in: *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, Chicago, IL 2009, p. 201.

⁵¹ Howe, “Writing *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*” (see nt. 50), p. 201.

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (1980), trans. R. Nice, Stanford, CA 1990, p. 99.

torical persuasion, or self-understanding, a plenitude of atomized sounds subtends a future of grace as surprise and radical transformation – as sudden, contingent, and chaotic metamorphosis into another state.

Howe often grounds this possible future in strangely agglutinuous concatenations of alphabetic sounds found by reading and cutting texts like Puritan captivity narratives or the letters of Sarah Edwards and her brother Jonathan Edwards. The “traces” of voice – or, more simply, sentience – exist in the interstices and relationships of word to word and phoneme to phoneme: the same “densities” and “vector-forces” Coolidge finds in language. Sound and syntax simultaneously reinstate and uncover an encoded violence within American history and language. In *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987), the narrative of the preacher Hope Atherton’s escape from the wilderness after an expedition fighting Native Americans becomes the occasion for new associations of sound and rhythm:

Prest try to set after grandmother
revived by and laid down left ly
little distant each other and fro
Saw digression hobbling driftwood
forage two rotted beans & etc.
Redy to faint slaughter story so
Gone and signal through deep water
Mr. Atherton’s story Hope Atherton⁵³

In the midst of a pre-given narrative, Howe discovers and constructs block-like and yet radically disorienting lines of poetry. This first stanza calls attention to the fragmentary narrative and yet foregrounds language as a kind of doubled blockage: lineation produces not only a visual block or rectangle of text but also a rhythm that blocks and clogs the communication of narrative. Howe’s process of selection seems to transform words into sonic and visual accidents. The lines, words, and phonemes do not move from one to the other syntactically but simply aggregate: they articulate sound forms in time.

By attending to – and making her readers aware of – these articulations, Howe asks us to perform what she calls a certain “telepathy” via her rather hard-edged and difficult mediation. In the “sleeping wilderness” of libraries – the archived remains of an American past built around narratives that silence and distort others – Howe imagines herself an interloper, heeding “the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms ... [that] lie in this forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities.”⁵⁴ In this sense, Howe’s sonic articulations simultaneously attend to the immediate present of sound while also exploring its multi-layered past and future. This particular production of sound assembles a vast collection of other mouths as well as other

⁵³ Susan Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, Windsor, VT 1987, unpaginated.

⁵⁴ Howe, “Writing *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*” (see nt. 50), p. 200.

productions of these same sounds in a network of memory and desire, retention and protention. So speech sound emanates from a multimedia archive of mouths, texts, and narratives all chaotically “sounding” in a collection of languages, libraries, poems, and people:

Philology heaped in thin
hearing⁵⁵

This “philology” is the textual embodiment (and thereby disembodiment) of the oral poetics of “Old Way” singing. It is not the discovery of origins but rather the product of literally wandering in and out of the material of history. Howe comes into contact with that material through the sensory world of transmission and reception evoked by “thin / hearing” and a “common mouth”:

If I were to read aloud a passage from a poem of your choice, to an audience of judges in sympathy with surrounding library nature, and they were to experience its lexical inscape as an offshoot of Anglo-American modernism in typographical format, it might be possible to release our great-great-grandparents, beginning at the greatest distance from a common mouth, eternally belated, some coming home through dark ages, others nearer to early modern, multitudes of them meeting first to constitute certain main branches of etymologies, so all along there are new sources, some running directly contrary to others, and yet all meet at last, clothed in robes of glory, offering maps of languages, some with shining tones.⁵⁶

This long passage reveals Howe’s “philological” method – the way that her “offshoot of Anglo-American modernism in typographical format” creates a “map of language” that begins at the “greatest distance from a common mouth.” This “common mouth” acts as both emitter and receiver in a vast conglomeration of repetition and distortion. The flow of the “branches of etymologies” and “new sources” remains caught inside of the distorted and distorting – or, low fidelity – audio-recording mechanisms of listening, speaking, and writing.

Howe’s manipulation of preservation and change recalibrates the movements of language to longer transformations over time. Howe places words and word-sounds on a vast historical scale in which the workings of the common mouth necessarily dissipate in the entropic vibrations of noise. But in doing this, she also creates arrhythmic or aperiodic linguistic effects in which noise – seeping into the spacing of violent cuts and repetitive stutters – dwells in language as both a critical intervention and a potentiality for new voices and new forms of life. Howe sees this as a project of resuscitation: “I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent. I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (see nt. 53), unpaginated.

⁵⁶ Howe, “Writing *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time*” (see nt. 50), p. 204.

⁵⁷ Susan Howe, “There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover,” in: *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover, New York, NY 1994, p. 649.

And yet this dream of “tenderly lift[ing]” voices from these fugitive and inarticulate sounds reveals, ultimately, a noise emanating from the transition, repetition, and multiplication of the sounds of common mouths. This remembering is necessarily a dismembering. It literally evokes noise – gives paradoxical voice to noise. In drawing attention to the noise of “other voices” that exist in the static-ridden space between sense and nonsense, meaning and non-meaning, Howe imagines poetry as the revelation of a sonic and textual unconscious within the narratives of salvation, progress and futurity that define the American utopian tradition, from the Puritans to the present.⁵⁸ Though certainly not politically prescriptive, this revelation connects the resistance and ubiquity of noise to the power of inarticulate and anonymous voice that structures the possibilities of what Nancy Ruttenberg calls “democratic personality” – a personality defined by unfettered voice that negotiates and defines the uncertain boundary between visibility and invisibility, speech and noise.⁵⁹ In the blasted bits of totalizing truth left after Howe’s defacing work, we not only recognize violence, defeat, and destruction but also test that recognition against affects and forms of social response that can arise from a language of noise.

Waves

The atomized and distorting sound forms that I have connected in this essay imagine communal life in terms of sensation. The incongruous or the catastrophic reshapes time as hazard and accident. If, as Lyotard claims, there is “an inexhaustible network linking listening to belonging, to the sense of obligation,” these works do not imagine specific forms of communal life but rather a state of “passivity ... as possibility.”⁶⁰ In approaching this network of listening as messy, aggregated, multi-linear, heterophonic, I have sought to emphasize forms of attention – ways of singing, speaking, writing, listening, and making – that imagine sound not as an object of or for future understanding, action, or use but rather as a process of surprise, revelation, and “grace.” Rather than triumphantly singing the future of an American utopia, these works metonymize a melancholic and yet democratic noise: the continuous murmuring that possesses us and yet remains outside our knowledge and recognition. Grace emanates from this never-ending duration of noise that seems to refute human agency and temporality, to create pain and impotence:

The impotence of holding to a material instant, the pain of an impossible sainthood. We are a long way from the god, the god has exploded, galaxies of resonances flee the *templum sanctum* (where the initial sound sounds) at high speed. No doubt they sing, linking such diverse frequencies, pitches and durations. But what cannot be equaled or repeated does not reside in linkings. It hides and offers itself in every atom of sound, perhaps.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Susan Howe, *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Middletown, CT 1993, p. 47.

⁵⁹ Nancy Ruttenberg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship*, Stanford, CA 1998, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (see nt. 8), 178.

⁶¹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (see nt. 8), 164.

But these sound forms aspire to a noise that not only subjects the human to the “pain” of “holding onto a material instant” but also imagines a kind of grace that is both “hidden” and “offered” in “every atom of sound.” Lyotard further defines this grace as “the belonging of the spirit to the temporal blowing-up involved in the ‘being-now’ of the heard sound.”⁶²

The “what [that] cannot be explained or repeated” – unnamable from at least Cotton Mather on – remains a kind of belonging, a kind of shared sensation in the “commonality” of “common mouths” and the “common way” of singing. Noise resists systematizing narratives not only through its unpatterned exteriority – its cuts, short-circuits, disruptions – but also through its relation to a pluralized life of sensation: bodies moving, resounding, and listening together. The etymology of the word “surprise” lies in the Old French “surprendre,” which meant both “overtake” (“sur-“: over and “prehend-“ take, have) and listen, attend to. To be surprised – overtaken – by sound is to recognize the self as a common element or democratic personality beyond the boundaries of social duration, political decorum, and technological apparatuses. It is to be thrust into a vast, collective expanse and a decentralized position in the world: a wave in the midst of a great sea.

⁶² Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (see nt. 8), 179.