



# MONASH University

**Shrill, Needy, Incomplete: Listening to melancholic feminist  
voices in contemporary sound practices**

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Master of Fine Art

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Art at  
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## **Abstract**

Voice, as both a vehicle for language and as a sonic, extralinguistic material is something I continually utilise in my practice. Taking a number of different forms; written and spoken, scripted and incidental, heard and imagined, the project identifies voice as a material at the nexus of sound and meaning, which is closely entwined with ideas of agency. The research explores both the authorial and political voice through fragmented, first-person narrative texts. These ideas and methodologies are investigated through both my own creative studio work and the discussion of other artists including Janet Cardiff, Alberta Whittle and Sue Tompkins. To further contextualise and support my ideas I draw on theory and critical writing in sound and feminism, most notably the work of Robin James and Sianne Ngai.

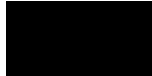
By locating my work in a context of feminist practices, the assumed equation of voice and agency has emerged as a particularly pertinent area of research. Specifically, how (white, liberal) feminist discourse that prioritises confessional narratives, may fetishize non-male and non-white voices and consequently hold speakers to a limited scope of legibility.

Identifying a neoliberal feedback loop in which insurrectionary noise is converted into white supremacist, patriarchal signal, my research project grapples with some of the ways my own feminist voice may speak to and be complicit in this context. Through first-person writing in my art practice, I have developed a purposefully contradictory and obfuscating mode of voice that amplifies my complicity through an aesthetics of distraction, disengagement and critical melancholia.

## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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## Introduction

Voice, as both a vehicle for language and as a sonic, extralinguistic material, is something I continually utilise in my practice. In my work, voice takes a number of different forms; it is communication, material, sound, and text. It is written and spoken, scripted and incidental, heard and imagined. My voice, the voice of others and my internal dialogue, is something I always have on hand, speaking, listening, reading, thinking, I am constantly enveloped by voice. It is so familiar, so fundamental to day-to-day communication that it can be difficult to articulate and isolate exactly what it is, its point of difference from language, and how it operates extralinguistically. I take the idea of voice as extralinguistic from Mladen Dolar's text *A Voice and Nothing More*. Here, he suggests that while the voice, in its most quotidian presence is a 'bearer of an utterance', the material support to linguistic expression, if we speak in order to say something, to make sense, then the voice is precisely what cannot be said.<sup>1</sup> It is an 'opening toward meaning' which, unlike other sounds, appears to be endowed with an inner intentionality.<sup>2</sup> It is this intimate and elliptical relationship between voice and meaning that makes it an interesting and generative material for me to work with in my studio practice, and is one of the key reasons I have chosen it as a lens through which to form this research project.

Isla Leaver-Yap's performance and screening project *The Voice is a Language*, which orbits the legacy of Meredith Monk, has been an important resource in developing my specific interest in voice as a site where language, body, gender, sound and agency exist synchronously. Leaver-Yap describes the project as mapping a central heartbeat through a

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<sup>1</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, (Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2006) 14

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

range of female identifying practitioners working with voice. While I will not be addressing Monk's work specifically in the exegesis, the significance of Leaver-Yap's project to my research is how it identifies voice as a material at the nexus of sound and meaning. Specifically, how this space offers the female-identifying artists mentioned in this project, Janet Cardiff, Alberta Whittle, Rihanna, Sue Tompkins and myself, with a rich and pluralistic site to explore ideas of language, body and gender. Leaver-Yap uses Giorgio Agamben's discussion of gesture to illustrate the shared approach between these artists, in which I would also locate my own work:

*The gesture has nothing to say, because what it shows is the sense that we are beings in language, but because beings in language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is always essentially a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language.*<sup>3</sup>

This idea of 'beings in language' resonates acutely with my approach and motivation to work with both written and spoken voices. It is this idea of being stuck in the sticky mass of language that drives much of my studio research. Consequently, voice, as an intersection of sound, meaning and body, offers a medium to work through these ideas in a way that is always open ended and deeply embodied. *The Voice is a Language* has provided a productive example for me to map a shared approach between female-identifying artists using their voices to confront the limitations of spoken language. While there is nothing inherently gendered in this concern, I am focusing my research on female and non-binary artists as there is a history of sexism that colours the mediation and reception of non-male voices. With this

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<sup>3</sup> Electra, "Isla Leaver-Yap on The Voice is a Language" (online video), accessed December 27, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/43260876>

considered, voice may offer a rich site for thinking through, and sounding out ideas of language, while attending to the nuances and complexities of gender, race and identity.

Introducing *Vocal Folds*, a later iteration of *The Voice is a Language*, which ran as part of the *Her Noise* symposium at Tate Modern, sociologist and broadcaster Anne Karpf states that ‘if the voice is a language, women speak a particularly dangerous dialect.’<sup>4</sup> Women’s voices and mouths, according to Karpf, have long been a subject of derision for Western scholars.<sup>5</sup> Tracing a history of attributably female voice, from mute Greek nymphs to the advent of recording technology and contemporary broadcasting, Karpf draws on what she calls a ‘thesaurus of contempt’ used to describe women’s voices. This is fleshed out further in her book *The Human Voice: A History of a Remarkable Talent*. Of particular interest to me, is her research into the gendered implications of early broadcasting, where women’s voices were considered incompatible with recording technologies. This sentiment is neatly summed up in the following Adorno quote: ‘*The female voice easily sounds shrill, in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it*’<sup>6</sup>

This Adorno quote is particularly pertinent to my research as it highlights a muting and entombing of the voice to the visual body, which I discuss further in chapter one through a case study of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s audio walk methodology. Citing Michel Chion’s implication that to embody a voice is to feminise it, I use Cardiff as an example of an artist utilising vocalic recording to reflect on the gendered subjectivity of recording technologies. By focusing on the creative methodologies Cardiff employs in *The Missing Voice (Case*

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Karpf, “Introduction to Panel 3 Vocal Folds”, presented at Her Noise Symposium, Tate Modern, London (online audio), published May 5 2012, accessed December 21 2017 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/her-noise-symposium-audio-recordings>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

*Study B*), I unpack the conceptual and material potential of audio recording devices.

Specifically, exploring the use of the portable audio recorder in Cardiff's as well as my own practice, as a means to conceive of a fragmentary self with the potential to harbour multiple, contradictory voices.

A study of Cardiff's methodologies has enabled me to observe a feminist politics of voice in my own practice, which I extend and expand upon through Chapters Two and Three. While the first chapter is primarily concerned with sound, unpacking the materiality of recorded voice, I have realised through this study that my interest in voice always functions in relation to the cultural and communicative properties of speech. This is evident in my studio work, where I use my voice to explore the textures and rhythms of spoken word to both heighten and disrupt their communicative function. As my research developed, I became increasingly drawn towards the idea of voice as an imprint of culture, politics and perspective.

Specifically, I was drawn to addressing what might constitute contemporary, critical feminist voices, how these voices sound and what can be gained from a methodology of listening.

In Chapter Two ideas of agency are closely entwined with my discussions of voice. Locating my work in a context of feminist practices, the assumed equation of voice and agency has emerged as a particularly pertinent area of research. To flesh this idea out, Chapters Two and Three will pick up discursive threads initiated through my discussion of Cardiff and expand the ideas in a more explicitly feminist context. In the Second Chapter, *Resisting Resilience*, I will consider how we might listen and attend to feminist voices in a context of neoliberal, white supremacist post-feminism. First, I will look to the assumed dichotomy of speech and silence in order to question the potential pitfalls of voice-as-agency. From here I will map the proliferation of what I call post-feminist voice and, calling on Robin James' theory of

resilience discourse, consider the complexities and implications of the trend for outwardly spoken (white, liberal) feminism. I will then reflect on how Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle maintains criticality and avoids the neoliberal feedback loop in her performance *A Recipe for Planters Punch*.

One of Robin James' key propositions in *Resilience and Melancholy*, is that in order to resist resilience discourse, feminist voices must 'amplify our noisy complicity with white supremacist patriarchy.'<sup>7</sup> James describes this 'noisy complicity' as a type of melancholia which may offer a productive space to think through the complexities and nuances of contemporary feminism. In the third chapter, *Sad Reacts Only*, I will focus in on this idea of a melancholic feminist voice, and how it operates in my studio practice.. To further contextualise and flesh out this idea, I will look to a gendered politics of aesthetic failure and boredom, and the loss of agency outlined in Sianne Ngai's text *Ugly Feelings*. Specifically, I will explore her idea of stuplimity, a contemporary update of Kant's sublime where shock and boredom occur simultaneously, and how it operates in both my own work and the spoken word performances of British artist Sue Tompkins. Looking to the specific mode of authorial voice I cultivate in my practice, one of distraction, boredom and nonsense, I will consider how my work contributes to this discourse. While it is not my intention to present this as an unproblematic alternative to resilience discourse, I will dedicate some time to its potential as a site of refusal and resistance.

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<sup>7</sup> Robin James. *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015), 164



## 1. Mediat(is)ed and (dis)embodied Voice in Janet Cardiff's Audiowalks

In this chapter I will focus on the use of recorded, mediated and disembodied voice in Canadian artist Janet Cardiff's audiowalk format. Through a close study of the 1999 artwork *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* I will consider how the recording medium magnifies the extralinguistic properties of voice. That is, how the voice exists as a sonic, material phenomena, which extends beyond its most quotidian purpose as a carrier of speech. I am particularly interested in how the artificial processing implicit in the recording medium may amplify ideas of embodiment, synchronicity and gendered subjectivity in how voices are heard and understood.

Cardiff's audiowalks may seem like a peculiar choice for a materially orientated study of voice, given their use of speech based communication and narrative. As I have articulated in the introduction, my interest in voice relates to its unique position between sound and language. Following theorist Mladen Dolar's description in his text *A Voice and Nothing More*, voice can be understood as an opening toward meaning.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Cardiff's unique treatment of her voice provides a rich and complex way of thinking through these ideas. I will suggest that through the use of mediated and mediatised voice, Cardiff produces a specific mode of voice that is simultaneously more human and more mechanical than live speech. This is because the recording device captures the breath sounding in the physical body of the speaker and the mechanical body of the recording device.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mladen Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. (Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2006) 14

<sup>9</sup> Steven Connor, 'Incidents of the Breath in Pneumatic and Electric Ventriloquisms' in *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture and Performance* edited by Aura Satz and Jon Wood 63 –80. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009)

To develop my ideas, I begin the chapter with a personal account of participating in *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* at Whitechapel Gallery in London, over a decade after it was made. The length of time between the production of the work and my participation meant that there were many elements of the work that no longer aligned, most notably the absence of the Whitechapel library, in London, the building where the walk originally commenced. I will consider how this experience of the work shaped my response, and underscored ideas of temporal and technological remove already implicit in the work. I will then break my analysis into three further subsections; *Embodied Absence*, *The Portable Audio Recorder* and *I-Voice*. Each of these subsections follow lines of enquiry that have emerged from my analysis of Cardiff's work, and provide a lens through which to address my own studio research.



1. Janet Cardiff. *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* 1999, Audio tour, Artangel, Whitechapel Library, London

Accessed 17 January 2018 [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing\\_voice.html](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html)

## 1.2 The Missing Voice

Janet Cardiff has been developing her unique mode of working, which I will refer to as the ‘audio walk’ since the mid 1990s. Referencing the familiar museum audio-tour, this method involves guiding participants on a specific route through the use of personal listening devices. Extending beyond the institution and into public space, the works invite audiences to explore various geographical, historical and psychical spaces. In a subversion of the typical role of the audio tour, Cardiff positions the audio as the central component of the work. That is, rather than supplementing the images, the audio orders and shapes the visual space. Meticulously constructed through multiple tracks of location specific sounds, the soundtracks depict a hyper-realistic sonic space that simultaneously mirrors and disrupts the geographical site.

*The Missing Voice* was developed in partnership with Artangel<sup>10</sup> for Whitechapel Library, London. It formed part of *Inner City*, a project that invited a range of practitioners from various disciplines to create new work responding to the changing environment of the city. The work is comprised of a 45-minute audio recording, accessed via headphones, and a personal listening device loanable from the library building. Central to the recording is a woman’s voice, ‘Janet’, a fictionalised version of the artist, who guides participants outside of the building on a solo walk through East London’s historic streets. There are no maps or visual aids; participants must rely solely on the narration to guide them through the city. Whitechapel Library closed in 2005, but the work is still accessible, beginning instead from

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<sup>10</sup> Artangel is a London based organisation that commissions artists to produce works for public or otherwise non-traditional and unexpected spaces. <https://www.artangel.org.uk/>

Whitechapel Gallery, with the audio content available to stream or download on to your own device through Artangel's website.

I first participated in *The Missing Voice* in 2011, 12 years after the work was made. As is to be expected in a city of constant development such as London, many aspects of the narrative no longer align. Particularly the opening scene, which begins in the crime section of the now absent library. *'I'm standing in the library with you'*, the narrator's voice is soft, her pace evenly measured. *'You can hear the turning of newspaper pages.'* Despite the obvious spatial dislocation, the three dimensional soundscape of hushed tones and shuffling footsteps rendered the absent space tangible. The disconnect of sonic and visual space marked my experience with an acute sense of displacement. The audio, which has been meticulously constructed through location specific recordings of the library, has been torn from its originating location. This is at odds with Cardiff's intended experience of the work, but rather than seeing this as a failure of site-specificity, I want to suggest that the disjuncture reveals a sense of 'embodied absence' that is already implicit in the work.



2. Janet Cardiff. *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* 1999, Audio tour, Artangel, Whitechapel Library, London  
Accessed 17 January 2018 [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing\\_voice.html](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html)

### 1.3. Embodied Absence

As the physicality of the absent library is made present through its sonic mediation, I want to suggest a similar ‘embodied absence’ occurs through the mediation of Janet’s voice. I take the term ‘embodied absence’ from Theatre critic and academic Eirini Nedelkopoulou’s reading of Cardiff’s audio walks. In her essay ‘Walking Out on Our Bodies: Participation as Ecstasis in Janet Cardiff’s Walks’, Nedelkopoulou suggests that the mediation and mediatisation of the performing body creates an ‘embodied absence’ that the participating body must stand in for.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, while the narrator’s body is physically absent, its mediation, especially of the breath and voice, signals and even heightens the presence of the

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<sup>11</sup> Eirini Nedelkopoulou. "Walking Out on Our Bodies Participation as Ecstasis in Janet Cardiff's Walks." *Performance Research* 16, no. 4 (2011) 117-23.

narrators body.<sup>12</sup> When I participated in *The Missing Voice*, my body acted as a temporary site for the narrator's 'disembodied' voice to sound from. Wearing headphones and listening to a pre-recorded artificial version of the space I inhabited, the narrator's voice became my sole companion in a highly insular activity. With no visual directions, knowledge of the route of destination, I must trust the narrator's voice to guide me as I navigate the live, physical space and its sonic mediation. This voice interfered with and at times seemed to mimic the voice inside my own head, enmeshing Janet's narration with my own inner speech, establishing a reciprocity between us and complicating the performer / participant relationship.

Nedelkopoulou's use of the term ecstasis provides me with a means of thinking around how the recorded voice may be heard by the listener, and the potential reciprocity it may signal. Derived from Greek, ecstasis refers to the 'standing out' of the body; the body's outward projection from its place of standing.<sup>13</sup> Nedelkopoulou takes this idea from Drew Leder's text *The Absent Body*, which theorizes that the body projects outwards when it finds interest in something beyond itself, signalling its connection to the outside world. For example, the corporeal absence that occurs when reading a book or watching a performance.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, this forgetting of one's own body does not signal a void but a different kind of presence, where the body 'stands out' from itself in empathy with another body.<sup>15</sup>

Nedelkopoulou suggest that Leder's theory of ecstatic participation facilitates an immersion in the mixed media worlds constructed through Cardiff's walks by bridging the gap between the live and mediated performance.<sup>16</sup> This means that when participating in the walk my body

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<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> ibid

‘stands out’ from itself to connect with the performing body, which is present only in its mediation. At a sonic remove, I am immersed in an artificial, pre-recorded environment where Janet’s breath and footsteps interfere with and at times replace my own.



3. Janet Cardiff. *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B) 1999, Audio tour, Artangel, Whitechapel Library, London  
Accessed 17 January 2018 [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing\\_voice.html](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html)

#### **1.4. The Portable Audio Recorder**

The embodied absence established in *The Missing Voice* is shaped and disrupted by Cardiff’s nuanced and multifaceted approach to recording equipment. Through detailed attention to her specific use of portable audio recorders, I will demonstrate how the audio recording equipment is not a passive means of transmission, but an active material component in the work. In *The Missing Voice* the tape recorder plays a critical role in establishing the quasi-



detective narrative, as Janet sets out on a meandering quest to uncover the story of a missing woman. While the final vocal takes are likely recorded in a studio, the narration is scripted as if she were speaking directly into a small tape recorder while out walking. At times the sound of tape rewinding can be heard, and Janet's noticeably compressed voice is replayed to repeat certain speech fragments, inferring that the audience is listening to the tape as it is being recorded, rewound and replayed. Discussing her process of working, Cardiff frequently refers to the significance of collecting research material while out on location, and the centrality of the tape recorder in her creative methodology.<sup>17</sup>

In her essay on Cardiff's audio walks, Rebecca Duclos explores the artist's manipulation of the personal listening device to simultaneously locate and disrupt the listener's sense of place and time. Her argument is mounted on a comparison between the audio walk method and the Situationist International (SI). Founded in late 1950s, the SI staged urban interventions including group *dérives* around European cities that were intended to facilitate moments of cartographic reconnaissance.<sup>18</sup> That is, the recognition of the body in a geographic place. The intention behind this was to shake people from a complacent relationship to their surroundings and inspire social and political action.<sup>19</sup> Duclos suggests that Cardiff builds upon the SI's use of aural/oral technologies such as two-way radios, to construct moments of meconnaissance, the mis-recognition of the self in space.<sup>20</sup> According to Duclos, the use of headphones and the personal listening device is central to the way in which Cardiff employs meconnaissance, by signaling the psychical, interior space of the listening subject. This idea

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<sup>17</sup> Scott Watson, 'Tel des fantômes: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller' in Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: The Paradise Institute. (Winnipeg ; Plug In Editions 2001) 27

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Duclos, "Reconnaissance / Meconnaissance: The work of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller" in *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture and Performance*, ed. Aura Satz and Jon Wood (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) 221 - 246

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*



is reinforced by Cardiff's pop-philosophy musings on dreams and memory, which occasionally wander into melancholia and melodrama as she asks, for example, '*have you ever had the urge to disappear? To escape from your own life for just a little while?*'<sup>21</sup>

Duclos suggests that the inclusion of these meandering introspective moments of inner-speech shifts the listeners' focus from the physical to psychical space of the work.

The psychical potential of the tape recorder is a fundamental tool in Cardiff's creative methodology. When speaking of her process, the artist frequently refers to one serendipitous moment that has shaped her method of working. While recording on location, she fumbled and hit the wrong button. To find her place on the tape, it was necessary to rewind and replay the recordings back through her headphones. Hearing her voice and footsteps in the same location describing the scene back to herself at a temporal and technological remove, caused her to experience herself 'as another'.<sup>22</sup> This experience had a profound impact on her method of working by inspiring the audio walk mode she still frequently employs. This is referenced explicitly in *The Missing Voice* when the narrator states that her recorded voice '*became someone else, a separate person hovering in front of me like a ghost.*'<sup>23</sup>

The duality of the recording device as playback device is mirrored in the physiology of the voice. In the catalogue essay for the exhibition *Voice and Void*, which features work by Cardiff, curator Thomas Trummer describes the voice as a 'medium of transmission that combines the dispatcher and receiver'.<sup>24</sup> While in speech these two processes happen simultaneously, and necessarily interfere with one another, the microphone and speaker

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<sup>21</sup> Janet Cardiff, *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B) Artangel; Whitechapel Library 1999

<sup>22</sup> Scott Watson 'Tel des fantômes: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller' in *Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: The Paradise Institute*. (Winnipeg ; Plug In Editions 2001) 27

<sup>23</sup> Janet Cardiff, *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B) Artangel, Whitechapel Library. 1999

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Trummer, *Voice & Void*. (Ridgefield: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. 2007) 10

function separately. Unlike natural speech, the technological media used to mediate it is completely divided.<sup>25</sup> That is, while human vocalisations are at once voiced and heard by the speaking and hearing body, the microphone is technically incapable of such simultaneity; the sound is either emitted or received. While the *Voice and Void* exhibition featured an installation and not an audio walk, the ideas Trummer raises in the catalogue are pertinent to my thinking around Cardiff's use of mediated voice and the materiality of the recording process. I am particularly struck by what Trummer calls the 'deceit of presence' maintained in the recorded voice, the illusion that what is captured through the recording device emerges unaffected; for the voice to appear as if it has been produced without a technological medium.<sup>26</sup> This idea is relevant to my use of recorded voice, as I attempt to foreground the medium to disrupt the assumption of immediacy and highlight the constant mechanical and cognitive processing of speech.

Through analysis of Cardiff's use of audio technology, I have located the portable recording device as a key methodological tool in my research. While the outcomes differ, Cardiff's process of recording while out walking in public spaces is closely aligned with my own methods, in which I record and re-listen to myself and other people interacting in public and semi-public spaces. This method of working was initially informed by a self-generative approach to practice in which I use what is on-hand and available. While this remains a key motivator, closer examination of this method enables me to further unpack how the use of on-hand consumer technology shapes the work, and impacts how it may be experienced by an audience. Specifically, I have become interested in the unique materiality of the sound produced by these devices.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 20 - 22

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

The inbuilt microphone in my Iphone, the device I use most frequently, produces highly compressed, low fidelity audio that foregrounds the recording medium. Inclusion of technical flaws such as distortion, hum and limited dynamic range, produces a sound that is markedly different from the live sound being recorded. These qualities are typically an undesirable outcome of subpar equipment; however, I am interested in their potential to speak to the hidden processing implicit in all recording. Foregrounding the qualities that differentiate the recording from the sound it seeks to reproduce, adds a level of reflexivity that I also identify in Cardiff's work. While Cardiff produces high fidelity soundscapes that closely mimic live sound, she also exploits the reflexive potential of low fidelity audio. At multiple points in *The Missing Voice*, Janet pauses, rewinds and replays sections of noticeably compressed speech, mimicking the previously outlined experience in which she accidentally replayed her recordings on site. These sections infer that the audience is not listening to the sound live, nor the tape in the recorder, but to someone listening to the tape and replaying sections for their own personal use, distancing the listening from the narrative and actively working to undo the reciprocity otherwise signalled through the use of disembodied voice.



4. Hayley Brandon, *Chatter*, 2012, Three channel audio installation, headphones, single channel video, acrylic paint (installation detail) Metro Arts, Brisbane, August 2012

### 1.5 I-Voice

To unpack how mediated and mediatised voice operates in my current studio research, I will first refer to the mixed media installation *Chatter* (2012). The installation was comprised of three audio tracks played through headphones, a video collage of text messages and screenshots of my internet usage, and text lifted from journal and painted large scale on to the wall. Each individual sound component lasts between 30 to 60 minutes, and moves between heavily distorted barely comprehensible audio (the inside of my bag as I am walking, environmental white noise) and moments of unscripted spoken dialogue.

My choice to use headphones in the installation extends beyond the need to isolate the audio and minimise bleed between the multiple sound sources. Listening with headphones is an insular experience, which signals the interiority of the listening subject. While it could be said that this insularity puts the listener at a remove from the live environment, I understand it as opening up a parallel imaginative space; a private auditory space that unfolds within the public. The duration of the work is crucial for it helps to facilitate this imaginative space. By this I mean that I do not anticipate for audiences to maintain undivided attention to half an hour of muffled, difficult to decipher audio. While the vocalic centrality of human listening likely leads audiences to pay closer attention to sections of speech, even then I anticipate that minds will wander. I do not see this as a failing, but another layer to the multiplicitous physical, sonic, imaginative spaces already present in the work.



5. Hayley Brandon, *Studio Visit*, 2015, Single channel audio, headphones, two channel audio installation, pencil on paper (Installation detail) Bus Projects, Melbourne, March 2015

In more recent works I have begun using my own voice to perform scripted texts. While I do sometimes employ actors, I most frequently use my own voice. For works such as *Studio Visit* (2015) the identification of the voice as my own is important conceptually. In this work I compressed a conversation between multiple people into an hour long, nonsensical monologue, which I then re-performed. Here, I was interested in how I might incorporate the tone and timbre of other people's voices into my own, while maintaining my own accent and speech patterns, resulting in a voice that simultaneously is and isn't my own.

Whether I am using my own voice or appropriating another's, the majority of my recent works adopt a first-person narrative. While works such as *Parler* (2016) and *Slow Flow* (2017) vary greatly in terms of narrative and structure, one constant between them is the treatment of my voice. As well as each using a first person perspective, both works utilise the same recording methods. While in *Chatter* voices were recorded spatially, as one aspect of the sonic environment, in these later works the voice is isolated. Recorded using a microphone close to the mouth, and with no referents to spatial context, the voice no longer sounds as an object in space. This idea follows sound theorist Michel Chion's conception of the 'I-voice', one example of what he calls the acousmetre, a mode of recorded voice where the sound source is not visible.<sup>27</sup> 'Dry, precise and immediate', the I-voice acts as a 'pivot of identification, resonating in us as if it were our own voice.'<sup>28</sup> That is, it is recorded within 3 to 12 inches of the sound source to convey a proximity to the listener. This recording method produces a dry, non-reverberated voice with no referents to spatial context. As the listener is unable to locate this voice as an object, Chion suggests that it elicits a greater identification

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. (New York, Columbia University Press. 1999) 17 - 29

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

by the listening subject; the voice is internalised by the listener and incorporated into their own inner speech.<sup>29</sup>

In both Cardiff's audiowalks and my own works, the I-voice is used to prompt identification and give a sense of cohesion in a highly fragmented narrative. In *The Missing Voice*, Cardiff's character Janet continually shifts perspective. While the tone and timbre of Cardiff's voice remains constant throughout the narrative, never straying from the soft, evenly paced whispering, the position from which she speaks is constantly shifting. The same voice is heard seemingly speaking as the missing woman, as Janet, the fictionalised version of the artist, and as an omnipresent narrator. The dialogue is cyclical, and it is purposefully unclear from where and to whom the voice speaks, as the narrative threads loop back in on themselves and intertwine various split subjects within a single voice.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

Today... I want to talk about... ease...or perhaps... *unease*.  
The teacher's voice is soft but firm. Silken tofu. I inhale slowly through the nose and try to let the thoughts come and go. Passing traffic.  
Perhaps... you're feeling... a little... off balance... today? a little... shaky?  
Her intonation is higher than what I imagine her usual speaking voice to be, as though she is talking to a shop assistant.  
Yeah, fine thanks. Oh, just looking. Will do. Thank you.  
Dusty laser beams divide the room and I can smell coffee over the organic smokeless incense. Pink lotus to purify, \$32 at reception. I don't know what surrendering to gravity looks like, so I crane my neck to watch from my position on mat 17. A spot reserved for that morning's Groupon student; a revolving door of Ebayed Lululemon in previous seasons colour palettes.  
Haaaaaaaaaaaaah.  
She exhales dramatically into her headset microphone. I wonder whether mine was placed back on charge properly yesterday afternoon, or whether I'll have to cradle the receiver with my shoulder again.  
And... perhaps... you start to.... witness... that feeling... each little... wobble.. each little... shake.  
She speaks like in the spoken part of a pop song. The meaningful verse spoke-sung by the one who can't sing-sing.  
And... perhaps... instead of... *judging* that feeling... instead of... trying to *change* it, you... *breathe* into it.  
On the inhale she arches her back and her thick ponytail reaches down toward the tight Lycra curves of her ass. My shoulder blades crack. I gaze forward into the figure of eight expanding and retracting in front of me; two red orbs, beaming brightly.  
  
I pull a tangled ball of headphones out of my bag. There's a smear of Iced Coffee UP&GO Energize on my lilac leggings. I know that meal replacements aren't generally a good idea for those able to consume solids, but these have twice the protein of the regular variety. Exercising on a full stomach gives you a stitch, but if there's no fuel in the tank you'll never reach your full potential.  
So far, that doesn't seem like such strange behaviour...  
No, I mean, all teenagers are alone in their bedrooms right?  
Right, and if googling serial killers can be used against you in court..  
... you better hope you never stab a stranger over a hundred times?  
Cheek sized planes of grease dot the window. I know it's fucked up, but I'm always disappointed when the victim's male. I scroll until I see a woman's name. I can't help what I find interesting.  
She'd only been in the country for 6 weeks...  
Really? and in the middle of day?  
Yeah she was on her way home from a lecture...  
Yeah I'd imagine they don't finish that late?  
I'm pretty sure it was daylight.



The I-voice conventions are employed to similar effect in *Slow Flow*, a 5-minute audio recording comprised of a short narrative text read aloud by a single voice. The narrative incorporates multiple speakers, who are each framed through the first-person perspective of the narrator. The work references the audio book format in its production and its use of a central, clearly spoken and performative voice. As with the audio book, all focus is on the voice, which is recorded using ‘I-voice’ conventions to elicit identification from the listener. When writing the text, my initial motivation was to record some of the different experiences of voice I encounter day-to-day. In *Slow Flow* this includes the voice of a yoga teacher, podcast presenters and my own internal monologue. While I do incorporate varying vocal characteristics to indicate multiple speakers, as typically heard in audio books, the distinction between these speakers is blurred. This is partially due to the narrative structure, which is purposefully disjointed, and partially due to the dialogue emanating from a single voice. It was my intention that the use of a consistent I-voice and the single-take recording would conflate these voices into a continuous first-person perspective.

The overtly and conventionally femme references in the narrative are interwoven in my thinking around recorded and disembodied voice. As well as the attributably female voice heard in the recording, the narrator’s references; bourgeois yoga studios, designer active wear, pop music and the historically female role of telephone operator; paint a cliché image of white, urban and middle class femininity. I’ll attend to this particular identity and its significance in my work in the following chapters, but first I will consider the more pervasive gendering implicit in the recorded and disembodied voice.

## 1.6. (Dis)embodied Female Voice

As previously addressed, the mediation of the voice can seem to magnify some of its material qualities. Sound theorist Steven Connor explores the electronic mediation of speech by referring to early accounts of the telephone. He refers to the telephone as a ‘moist medium’ that offered a heightened awareness of the voice.<sup>30</sup> In bringing the lips directly to the ear, the telephone amplified the coughs, splutters and breath that formed a natural part of human utterance.<sup>31</sup> While women’s voices were historically deemed incompatible with professional broadcasting equipment, as outlined in Anne Karpf’s research, the telephone, particularly the switchboard operator, has been typically gendered as female. This is undoubtedly related to the gendering of the service industry more broadly; however, I also want to suggest that its legibility is informed by the heightened presence of the body in the telephonic voice.

Feminist film critic Kaja Silverman studies the synchronization of the female voice and the representation of its visual body in her 1988 text *The Acoustic Mirror*.<sup>32</sup> Here, she unpicks the gendered assumptions implicit in Chion’s account of the acousmetre; a cinematic mode of voice that sounds from off-screen. Free from the limitations of the physical body, the acousmatic voice speaks from a position of omnipresent power and knowledge.<sup>33</sup> To illustrate how the localising and re-synchronising of the voice to the body, deacousmatization, strips the voice of this power, Chion uses the metaphor of a striptease. In this example, the revelation of the speaking mouth is equated with the exposure of female genitals.<sup>34</sup> While this could be viewed simply as a clumsy analogy, Silverman digs deeper into the underlying assumptions that permeate Hollywood’s depiction of female cinematic voices. Specifically,

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<sup>30</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Incidents of the Breath in Pneumatic and Electric Ventriloquisms’ in *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture and Performance*, ed. Aura Satz and Jon Woods (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) 76 - 79

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

<sup>32</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1988) 50

<sup>33</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. (New York, Columbia University Press. 1999) 17 - 29

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

Silverman argues that contained within Chion's acousmatic voice is the assumption that to embody a voice is to feminize it, thereby situating the female subject 'firmly on the side of spectacle, castration and synchronization.'<sup>35</sup>

While I do not have the scope to fully address the psychoanalytic principles of Silverman's argument, her reading of Chion is useful to my research as it reveals the apparent need for synchronization between the aural and visual female body. According to Silverman, this need for synchronisation results in a female voice that is unable to speak beyond its body and as a result is entombed and muted by it. Anne Karpf further demonstrates this idea in her research into broadcasting, drawing on a breadth of references from philosophers to technology incorporations, including the following quote from Adorno:

*The female voice easily sounds shrill – but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying high tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete.*<sup>36</sup>

This statement suggests that it is specifically the femaleness of the voice, rather than a problem of acoustics that hinders its reproduction. Karpf takes a Beauvoirian approach in analysing the subtext of this claim, arguing that it infers the woman is supposedly restricted to the physical body while the man's transcendence is guaranteed by the disembodied phallic

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<sup>35</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1988) 50

<sup>36</sup> Theodor Adorno and Thomas Levin. "The Curves of the Needle." *October*, vol. 55, 1990, 49–55. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/778935](http://www.jstor.org/stable/778935)

voice of God and State.<sup>37</sup> That is, female voices are seen to require the physical grounding of the body as their voices are not legible in the supposed masculine domain of language.

Cardiff manipulates this mode of disembodied phallic voice in her work by intertwining multiple, fragmentary perspectives into her voice over.<sup>38</sup>

Through this study of Cardiff's methodology as employed in her audiowalks, I have been made increasingly aware of the formal and conceptual significance of audio recording technology. By attending to the specifics of my use of portable audio recorders and playback devices, I have gained important insight into its impact on how my work is made and received. It is imperative to me that any political and theoretical content in my writing stem from a method of listening to the work and exploring ideas as they emerge, rather than arriving at the work with predetermined ideas. Through this process of listening I have gained a heightened sensitivity to the gendering implicit in the recorded voice. Consequently, the following chapters will extend and expand on a feminist mode of voice more explicitly. The next chapter will reframe my thinking around voice in a cultural and linguistic context, focusing in on how contemporary feminist voices might sound, both sonically and politically.

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<sup>37</sup> Barbara Engh, 'Adorno and the Sirens: Tele-phono-graphic Bodies', in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. Dunn, Leslie C. and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120-135: 124

<sup>38</sup> Enmeshing this voice over with the inner speech of the participant, the work is suggestive of Luce Irigaray's provocation that women 'speak from everywhere.' Luce Irigaray and Carolyn Burke. "When Our Lips Speak Together." *Signs* 6, no. 1 (1980): 69-79.

## 2. Resisting Resilience: voice and agency in neoliberal post-feminism

Mladen Dolar describes the function of the voice, in its most quotidian presence, as ‘a bearer of an utterance’, the material support of linguistic expression.<sup>39</sup> He suggests that if we speak in order to say something, to ‘make sense’ or signify, then voice is precisely what cannot be said.<sup>40</sup> That is to say, voice can be understood as something that functions in service of, but also outside of language; it is extralinguistic. Dolar positions the voice as an ‘opening toward meaning’ that, unlike other sounds, appears to be endowed with an inner intentionality.<sup>41</sup> It is this intimate and elliptical relationship between voice and meaning that makes it an interesting and generative material to work with in my studio practice, and is one of the key reasons I have taken it as a lens through which to form my research project.

Discussing Janet Cardiff in the previous chapter, I chose to focus quite specifically on the extralinguistic use of voice in her audio walk methodology. That is, the various ways her audiowalks employ recorded voice as a sonic material that may either support or disrupt the linguistic meaning. As an artist who engages with her voice as a narrative tool, Cardiff may appear an unusual choice for a discussion centered on sonic materiality. There are many and varied examples of artists using voice as sound, yet I specifically sought out an artist who engages with voice primarily as speech-based communication.<sup>42</sup> My reasoning behind this is that my interest in voice as material always functions in relation to the communicative and cultural properties of speech. Implicit in my discussion of Cardiff is a feminist politics of

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<sup>39</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2006) 13 - 15

<sup>40</sup> *ibid* 14

<sup>41</sup> *ibid* 14

<sup>42</sup> For example, American experimental composer Meredith Monk pioneered what is known as extended vocal techniques, employing voice as an instrument to create giddy, nonsensical compositions that fall between sound poetry and experimental music. More recently, Australian artist Kusum Normoyle amplifies her voice to create abrasive, feedback-heavy soundscapes.

voice. Specifically, I address how Cardiff utilises recorded, acousmatic voice to conceive of a fragmented feminine subject, and reflect on ideas of (dis)embodiment and gendered subjectivity.

While I will not re-address Cardiff here, I revisit this briefly as an introduction to the chapter as it is through this analysis that I began to refocus my research away from a purely sonic approach to voice and toward a more cultural understanding. This chapter will expand on the feminist subtext of the first chapter, asking what constitutes a critical feminist voice, and reflecting on how these voices might sound. This chapter aims to function as a parallel to my creative practice. The ideas I discuss here may not be explicit in my studio practice, but as so much of my studio work begins from the incidental, I feel it is important to attend to the context from which the work originates. Many of my explorations of voice and language have a feminist subtext, and one of my key motivations for researching voice is to unpack its gendering, and how this gendering manifests both sonically and culturally.

When I think of voice, I immediately think of agency. I think of what it means to have a voice, and the political and cultural freedom it offers. In this chapter, I will consider some of the possible reasons why this understanding of voice has developed, and the potential problems of this assumed equation. To support my ideas, I will draw on Wendy Brown's writing on speech and freedom and her re-thinking of the relationship between speech and silence. From here, I will address what I refer to as post-feminist voice, a mode of feminist-appearing speech popularised by mainstream media in the last 5 years. I will focus my discussion largely in the context of popular music, as my studio work often contains reference to this, and to paraphrase Robin James, I am interested in attending to pop music

and the lifeworlds of its performers and fans, as a rich site for philosophy and criticism.<sup>43</sup> My use of the term post-feminism aligns with Angela McRobbie's application of the term in her 2008 book *The Aftermath of Feminism*. Here, she describes post-feminism as a 'sophisticated anti-feminism' where illusions to gender equality are woven into patriarchal ideology as to create an image of a falsely progressive society.<sup>44</sup> I will look at how this trend exists in popular culture and how these ideals manifest sonically.

To support my ideas of post-feminist voice, I will draw on Robin James' theory of resilience discourse as discussed in her book *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*, as well as in several articles published on her website *It's Her Factory*. I will expand on this idea through the text but to summarise, resilience discourse refers to the incorporation of a specific stream of feminism into the requirements of the ideal feminine performance. That is, in white supremacist neoliberal patriarchy, women are expected to acknowledge, perform and then triumphantly overcome their patriarchal damage. Through my writing, as well as in my creative practice, I grapple with the question of how feminist art practices might resist resilience discourse. If by its nature, neoliberalism recycles subversive noise into capitalist signal, I ask how can artists such as myself who are deeply complicit in this culture, work to circumvent the feedback loop? Through a discussion of Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle's 2016 performance *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, I will further develop James' assertion that to break this loop, critical feminist practice must no longer seek an outside, but must make work that sounds in noisy complicity with white, neoliberal patriarchy.

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<sup>43</sup> Robin James, *Leaning into the red: on Beyonce, Nicki, Missy & Rihanna's sonic responses to post-feminism* 2017 <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2017/04/leaning-into-the-red-on-beyonce-nicki-missy-rihannas-sonic-responses-to-post-feminism/>

<sup>44</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications, 2008) 35

## 2.2 Freedom of Speech?

As a cultural material, voice is synonymous with the idea of social and political agency. It is commonly understood that to have a voice is to be free, while to be silenced is to be oppressed. In white, liberal feminism a lack of verbal expression, as well as inaccurate visual representation, are seen as some of the main impediments to women's political equality.<sup>45</sup> While I am not refuting that there is social and political power to be gained from vocal and visual expression, I am curious as to the continued equation of speech and freedom, specifically in the context of white liberal feminism.

I am interested in how the equation of speech and freedom contributes to confessional practice, a term employed by Brown to describe the enduring popularity of first-person experience based narrative in contemporary media.<sup>46</sup> In challenging the equation of speech and agency, I hope to call into question the authenticity of confessional voice. That is, the assumption that when a silence is broken, what emerges is 'truth born by the vessel of authenticity or experience'.<sup>47</sup> My motivation here is not to argue that there is no longer power or potential from women speaking to their experiences, but to reflect on how the privileging of this mode of speech may establish and enforce new silences and, as Brown suggests, 'ensnare us in the folds of our own discourse'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Robin James, "Leaning into the red: on Beyonce, Nicki, Missy & Rihanna's sonic responses to post-feminism" It's Her Factory accessed June 8 2017 <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2017/04/leaning-into-the-red-on-beyonce-nicki-missy-rihannas-sonic-responses-to-post-feminism/>

<sup>46</sup> Wendy James, "Freedom's Silences" in *Edgework: critical essays on knowledge and politics*. (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2005.) 83 - 97

<sup>47</sup> ibid 83

<sup>48</sup> ibid 92



In her book chapter *Freedom's Silences*, Wendy Brown interrogates the assumption of voice as agency by rethinking the relationship between speech and silence. Rather than thinking of them as opposites, Brown positions speech and silence as modalities of one another, as 'different kinds of articulation that produce and negate each other'.<sup>49</sup> Silence is organised and broken by speech, while speech produces and enforces new silences. Both modes of articulation harbour meaning, and neither is inherently more truthful than the other.<sup>50</sup> This distinction is important, as equating freedom with voice and visibility assumes recognition to be unproblematic when we tell our own story. Expression is cast as what makes us free by telling our truth or oppresses us by featuring 'their' truth.<sup>51</sup> For those historically marginalised representation is important, but as Brown notes, there is the potential for the 'breaking of silences' to become fetishized. That is, the confessional voice, speaking out from an enforced oppressive silence, becomes a fetishized narrative, and consequently holds the speaker to a specific and limiting scope of legibility. Rather than freeing the speaker, this narrative works to serve the dominant discourse. According to Brown, the emphasis on individual voice and personal experience acts as a means of alluding to equality while distracting attention from larger political issues.

While so much has been written about challenging the authorial voice, I feel that there is still a common tendency, at least in popular media, to accept stories born of experience as truth. One problem with this, as Brown suggests, is the potential to fetishize the confessional narrative and form new regulatory norms.<sup>52</sup> Rather than granting freedom, holding speakers to ideas of truth and authenticity works as a neoliberal upgrade of historical silencing, as it holds the individual speaker to a predetermined narrative of first performing, and then

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<sup>49</sup> ibid 83

<sup>50</sup> ibid

<sup>51</sup> ibid 85

<sup>52</sup> ibid

spectacularly overcoming their oppression. Speaking from ones' personal experience has historically been an important tactic for women, people of colour and queer communities, as those experiences were outside of the dominant narrative. If, as Robin James suggests, a central tactic of neoliberalism is to incorporate the outside into the dominant narrative, recycling noise into signal, this may no longer serve as a subversive strategy. My question then, is how might critical feminist practice break with this neoliberal feedback loop? To attempt to answer this question I will first address some of the ways in which post-feminist voices both sound, and are heard.

### **2.3 Post-feminist voice**

Following Brown's problematizing of voice as agency, I consider how this assumption manifests in neoliberal post-feminism to hold women's voices to a narrow narrative of resilience and empowerment, and the impact this has for how female voices sound and are heard. 'Post-feminism' has been employed to signal a range of political positions and collective reactions to feminist theory and practices. In this chapter my use of the term refers to a cultural climate where a renewed interest in vocal and visible feminism has been co-opted by white supremacist, neoliberal patriarchy to uphold rather than subvert its racist and sexist values.<sup>53</sup>

The term post-feminism aligns with Angela McRobbie's definition in her essay *Beyond Post-feminism*. This essay charts a reaction to feminism developing from the 1990s to present day. She suggests that in an effort to heed some of criticisms of the left, conservative and capitalist

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<sup>53</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015.)

society has strategically and visibly incorporated progressive values as to establish a superficial sense of equality.<sup>54</sup> Building on ideas from her 2008 book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie outlines how her notion of the ‘new sexual contract’ positions young women as potential subjects of capacity, afforded sexual and financial freedom at the expense of their active political participation.<sup>55</sup> That is, post-feminism promotes women’s equality only in so far as their capacity for cultural and financial capital. This brand of corporate feminism refocuses criticism onto the individual woman’s personal potential, and away from political and societal responsibility. For McRobbie, this shift in focus towards individualism and self-reliance promotes the illusion of equality, while allowing patriarchal values to tick away unchecked beneath the surface.<sup>56</sup>



7. Beyoncé performing at the MTV *Video Music Awards*, 2014, accessed 10 June 2017 <http://thepolitic.org/we-can-all-be-feminists-adichie-versus-beyonce/>

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<sup>54</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Beyond post-feminism” *Public Policy Research*, 18, no. 3 (2011): 179.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

Initially, my response to *The Aftermath of Feminism* was that the popular image and mainstream reception of feminism has shifted dramatically in the few years since the text was published. In the text, McRobbie states that feminism is acknowledged only to demonstrate that it is no longer needed. This idea is evident in popular culture, as illustrated in popstar Katy Perry's response to receiving the *Billboard Women of the Year* award in 2012. While accepting the award she said 'I am not a feminist, but I do believe in the power of women.'<sup>57</sup> This statement perfectly aligns with McRobbie's ideas that women seemingly no longer need to identify with feminism as the principles of equality have already been attained. While Perry's statement echoed the popular rhetoric of the time, this seemed to change quickly in 2013, with explicit references to feminism beginning to surface in mainstream media. A notable and often referenced example is Beyoncé's sampling of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay 'We Should all be Feminists' in the 2013 song *Flawless*. Along with her performance at the 2014 MTV VMA's in which she performed before a screen emblazoned with the word feminist.<sup>58</sup>

In 2015 music critic Emma Garland wrote in *Noisey*: 'whether a music video by a female artist is feminist or not has since become the primary yardstick we use to determine its value.'<sup>59</sup> On the surface, this seems like a dramatic shift from the culture McRobbie describes, but I argue that the mainstream media's visible support of feminism does not mark

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<sup>57</sup> Madeleine Davies, "Katy Perry, *Billboard*'s Woman of the Year, Is 'Not a Feminist'" Jezebel accessed June 8 2017 <http://jezebel.com/5964727/katy-perry-billboards-woman-of-the-year-is-not-a-feminist>

<sup>59</sup> Emma Garland, "Do songs by female pop stars always need to have a feminist message?" Noisey accessed 8 June 2017 [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_au/article/why-do-songs-by-female-pop-stars-always-need-to-have-a-feminist-message](https://noisey.vice.com/en_au/article/why-do-songs-by-female-pop-stars-always-need-to-have-a-feminist-message)

a shift, but an upgrade of the same ‘sophisticated anti-feminist’ tactics outlined in McRobbie’s post-feminism.<sup>60</sup>

## 2.4 Resilience Discourse

Philosopher Robin James looks to popular music to demonstrate how post-feminist voice plays out both sonically and culturally. Her theory of resilience discourse, expanding on McRobbie’s ideas, refers to a specific gender performance which women must perform in order to be legible as ‘good’ feminine subjects under neoliberal white supremacist patriarchy.<sup>61</sup> James describes this performance as a two-step process, women are first required to perform their feminine damage, which they must then be seen to triumphantly overcome through their own strength and determination.<sup>62</sup> Following McRobbie’s ideas, this demand for women to visibly overcome racism and sexism is a neoliberal strategy which places the burden of societal racism and sexism on to the individual woman, diminishing societal and political responsibility. Consequently, white supremacist patriarchy is normalised and naturalised as ‘the way things are’. It is no longer the problem, it is the individual woman’s ability to overcome it that is the problem.

As Brown suggests the breaking of silences has become a fetishized trope, James proposes a similar fetishizing of the resilient female subject. While modernism found pleasure in viewing damaged women, as seen in Laura Mulvey’s depiction of the cinematic male gaze, neoliberalism finds pleasure in seeing women overcome this damage.<sup>63</sup> Resilience discourse

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<sup>60</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications, 2008.)

<sup>61</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015.) 26 - 48

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Robin James. "Incandescence, Melancholy, and Feminist Bad Vibes: A Response to Ziarek’s Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism." *Differences* 25, no. 2 (2014): 116.

is a particularly sophisticated form of anti-feminist rhetoric as it simultaneously bolsters one group of women, invariably white and middle class, while actively diminishing others.

Through this process the apparent lack of agency to overcome it works to further marginalise the poor, non-white, non-bourgeoisie women who do not have the social privilege, or desire, to ‘lean in’ to this corporate feminist discourse.<sup>64</sup>

Robin James argues that the question of ‘is it feminist?’ is unhelpful, as it is too narrow to address the complexities, nuances and inconsistencies of race and gender politics.<sup>65</sup> The question relies on “clear-cut distinctions between agency and objectification, and uses respectability politics to make that distinction.”<sup>66</sup> In regards to popular music, James suggests that the music video becomes the central focus of the debate, which is inattentive to the song itself. This is due to post-feminisms reliance on a narrow understanding of the relationship between artistic and political expression. As I have previously addressed, the equation of speech and freedom assumes vocal expression to be of the highest political value. Through this understanding, sound is viewed as apolitical and is consequently mostly ignored in post-feminist discourse. James suggests that this inattention to sound has given black female musicians the opportunity to develop sonic explorations that subvert the post-feminist gender normativity and respectability politics.

## **2.5 Resisting resilience in contemporary feminist art practice**

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<sup>64</sup> The phrase ‘lean in’ references Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg’s text of the same name, in which she encourages corporate women to strive for leadership roles. I use it here not as a direct reference to her writing but to signal the corporate, capitalist brand of mainstream feminism the term has come to represent.

<sup>65</sup> Robin James, “Leaning into the red: on Beyoncé, Nicki, Missy & Rihanna’s sonic responses to post-feminism” It’s Her Factory accessed June 8 2017 <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2017/04/leaning-into-the-red-on-beyonce-nicki-missy-rihannas-sonic-responses-to-post-feminism/>

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

In her 2016 performance work *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, Alberta Whittle manipulates an historical recipe for Barbadian rum punch and Rihanna's 2015 song *Bitch Better Have My Money* into a call for reparations. Singing aloud the recipe, a well-known rhyme "one of sour, two of sweet, three of strong, four of weak", Whittle prepares each punch ingredient before her audience. The recipe is intercepted with lyrics lifted from the hook of Rihanna's *Bitch Better Have My Money*: "I call out the shots", "Don't act like you forgot" and "Bitch better have my money", which she sings to the audience as "part lament, part demand."<sup>67</sup> After each ingredient is prepared and added to the punch bowl, Whittle submerges her head beneath the liquid and attempts to continue to sing underwater until her breath gives out.



8. Alberta Whittle, *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, 2016, Performance documentation, The Tobacco Warehouse, Greenock, Scotland, 15 – 30 October 2016, Accessed 8 June 2017 <http://www.albertawhittle.com/a-recipe-for-planters-punch.html>

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<sup>67</sup> Alberta Whittle, *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, Accessed June 8 2017 <http://www.albertawhittle.com/a-recipe-for-planters-punch.html>





9. Alberta Whittle, *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, 2016, Performance documentation, The Tobacco Warehouse, Greenock, Scotland, 15 – 30 October 2016, Accessed 8 June 2017 <http://www.albertawhittle.com/a-recipe-for-planters-punch.html>

The performance was developed specifically for The Rum Retort, a site specific exhibition at Greenock, Scotland in the towns former tobacco warehouse. Curated by Tiffany Boyle and Natalia Palombo for research-led curatorial project Mother Tongue, The Rum Retort sought to address historical ties and trade between the Scottish port and the Caribbean.<sup>68</sup> For Whittle, the work is “a meditation on slavery and memory, specifically the ability to forget and deny unpalatable histories”, a condition she has termed “the luxury of amnesia, because it describes the ability to forget colonial histories shared between Scotland and the Caribbean, as a position of privilege, a luxury.”<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *The Rum Retort*, The Tobacco Warehouse, Greenock, Scotland. 15 – 30 October, 2016. Curated by Tiffany Boyle and Natalia Palombo

<sup>69</sup> Alberta Whittle, *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, Accessed June 8 2017 <http://www.albertawhittle.com/a-recipe-for-planters-punch.html>



Approaching *A Recipe for Planter's Punch* through Robin James' theory of resilience, I am interested in how the performance is able to circumvent the neoliberal feedback loop of converting noise into signal. Laboriously preparing each ingredient for her audience, Whittle performs the racist damage of the colonial history of the site, and her personal history as a Barbadian artist in Scotland, however what is important is that she does not overcome it. What she does is set up tension but refuses to break it, rejecting the image upheld by post-feminist and post-racist discourse of a progressive society where this damage has been overcome. Submerging her head in the punch bowl, she calls forth her history, but it comes back to drown her. As she sings underwater, Whittle physically enacts Brown's ideas about speech and silence. While her speech enables her to momentarily break an enforced silence, the space to vocalise and visualise her oppression, it does not free her from it. Placing her head into the punch bowl, the same words that offered freedom now return to enforce new silences.



10. Rihanna in *Bitch Better Have My Money* music video, 2015, accessed 8 June 2017 <http://www.rap-up.com/app/uploads/2015/07/ri7.jpg>

Whittle's choice to appropriate Rihanna's lyrics is significant and has further implication beyond the singer's Barbadian nationality. In her book *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*, James uses Rihanna as a key example of a female identifying performer who has faced criticism for her apparent lack of post-feminist agency.<sup>70</sup> Citing critical response to the 2012 album *Unapologetic*, James argues that the criticisms levelled at her sonic and lyrical meanderings, the albums lack of sonic and metaphoric soars, were due to the lack of resilience in the face of her very public abuse.<sup>71</sup> According to James, Rihanna's refusal to publicly denounce ex-partner and fellow performer Chris Brown and release an album of triumphant post-feminist anthems, detailing that she has learned from and triumphed over her abuser, makes us, as a consuming audience, uncomfortable.<sup>72</sup> As in Whittle's *A Recipe for Planters Punch*, the refusal to overcome denies the image of equality that post-feminism demands. James describes this refusal to overcome as a kind of critical melancholy. Unlike the common application of the term, this conception of melancholy refers to the failure to turn noise into signal.<sup>73</sup> James' conception of melancholy, and it's potential as a critical feminist site in response to post-feminist agency, will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

Through this chapter I have offered an insight into the cultural context from which my own voice, as artist and feminist, sounds. Existing as a parallel to my creative practice, this writing serves as one significant point in the framework through which my research interest in voice

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<sup>70</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015.) 142 - 145

<sup>71</sup> In 2009 Rihanna cancelled her appearance at the Grammy Awards after being assaulted by her then partner and fellow performer Chris Brown. The assault was widely publicised in the media.

<sup>72</sup> In her *Pitchfork* review of *Unapologetic* Jessica Hopper acknowledges that Rihanna is 'quite a distance from the tidy narrative we'd like, the one where she's learned from her pain and is back to doing diva triumph club stomp.' Accessed 16 January 2018 <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17369-unapologetic/>

<sup>73</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015.) 142 - 145

has developed. In choosing to focus on the idea of post-feminist voice, and the problems of the current trend for feminist-appearing popular media, I hope to offer a critical lens through which to view contemporary feminist practice and my place in it.

Although I do not make explicit reference to my studio work, this chapter has been significant in helping to identify the motivation and ambition for my creative practice. I understand the practice and theory-led research to work dialogically in the project, and the further I get into the project the less distinct the lines between these two modes of research become. While this can be difficult to navigate, the realisation that exegetical writing may open up a space for studio work has been significant and generative in the production of new work.

Through the identification of neoliberal post-feminism and resilience discourse, I have become aware of why I have previously been hesitant to unpack the feminist content of my work, for fear of contributing to a discourse that ultimately serves rather than subverts racism and sexism. Through the writings of Angela McRobbie, Wendy Brown and Robin James, and their depictions of post-feminist discourse, I have come to realise that rather than attempt to ignore or overcome my complicity in this culture, I can work from, with and within that space. In doing this I aim to follow Robin James' provocation to address my participation by making work that sounds in noisy complicity with white, neoliberal patriarchy.

### 3. Sad Reacts Only: Gendered Boredom and Melancholia

I've discussed throughout the exegesis that voice as a cultural material, voice is synonymous with the idea of social and political agency. In white, liberal feminism a lack of verbal expression, as well as inaccurate visual representation, are seen as some of the main impediments to women's political equality.<sup>74</sup> In the previous chapter, I interrogated the continued equation of speech and freedom, specifically the assumption that when an historically or socially enforced silence is broken what emerges is 'truth born by the vessel of authenticity or experience.'<sup>75</sup> One of my main concerns with this narrative is that it assumes speech as unproblematic so long as we tell our own story.

As American theorist Wendy Brown argues, such thinking is dangerous in its potential fetishizing of the confessional voice, which enforces new silences and 'ensnares us in the folds of our own discourse'.<sup>76</sup> Robin James refers to this as 'resilience discourse', a two-step process wherein subjects must first perform their racialized and gendered damage, before visibly and spectacularly overcoming it. Resilience serves as a neoliberal upgrade of racist and sexist rhetoric as it pays lip service to progressive politics, while producing non-whiteness, specifically non-bourgeois black masculinity, as pathology.<sup>77</sup> As a white woman it is critical that I address this recycling of feminist noise into white supremacist, patriarchal signal as to interrogate the racism that underscores my apparent liberation. In response to this

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<sup>74</sup> Robin James, "Leaning into the red: on Beyonce, Nicki, Missy & Rihanna's sonic responses to post-feminism" It's Her Factory accessed November 30 2017 <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2017/04/leaning-into-the-red-on-beyonce-nicki-missy-rihannas-sonic-responses-to-post-feminism/>

<sup>75</sup> Wendy Brown, "Freedom's Silences" in *Edgework: critical essays on knowledge and politics*. (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2005) 83

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*

<sup>77</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015.) 160 - 164

sophisticated co-optation, James concludes that ‘in contexts where feminism is evidence of one’s resilience, critical feminist practice must be melancholic’.<sup>78</sup>

In this chapter, I will consider what a melancholic feminist practice might look and sound like, and how these ideas operate in my own studio work. In liberal models of subjectivity, melancholia refers to one’s failure to progress towards wholeness. However, according to James, the adaptability at the centre of neoliberalism means that healthy, successful subjects are now expected to exhibit features of melancholic pathology, which they perform and then overcome.<sup>79</sup> In this context, melancholia as James employs it, refers to failed self-capitalisation, specifically the refusal to undertake the affective cultural labour required of potentially resilient subjects.<sup>80</sup> That is, an inability to recycle noise into signal. To consider how my own practice operates in this context, I will trace a contemporary aesthetics of boredom and failure. Looking to British contemporary artist Sue Tompkins’ use of repetitive, nonsensical language and American theorist Sianne Ngai’s theory of stuplimity, I will create a framework through which to consider the specific mode of melancholic voice I construct in my practice.

To be clear, I will not arrive at any determination as to the feminist successes or failures of my work. This is primarily because I feel ‘is it feminist?’ is too narrow a question to accurately address the complexities, nuance and inconsistencies of race and gender politics.<sup>81</sup> Instead, my aim here is to delve further into Robin James’ conception of a critical feminist melancholia as it plays out in my studio practice and reflect on whether this may offer a space

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid* 164

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

<sup>81</sup> Robin James, “Leaning into the red: on Beyoncé, Nicki, Missy & Rihanna’s sonic responses to post-feminism” *It’s Her Factory* accessed June 8 2017 <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2017/04/leaning-into-the-red-on-beyonce-nicki-missy-rihannas-sonic-responses-to-post-feminism/>

of noise and refusal for female-identifying voices to circumvent the post-feminist feedback loop.

### **3.2. Boredom**

There's a long history of boredom in visual art that I will barely scratch the surface of in this chapter. Instead, I will look specifically to a gendered politics of aesthetic boredom and failure, and consider how and why this offers a productive space for some contemporary feminist voices. First, to give some context as to how contemporary boredom differs from historical models, I will touch on a few key distinctions. In 1982 composer and Fluxus artist Dick Higgins conceived of boredom as a 'station on the way to other experiences'.<sup>82</sup> That is, boredom as a temporary state which opens out to new ways of seeing, or hearing the world. It is this mode of boredom at play in John Cage's iconic 1952 composition *4'33"*, which asks the audience to find intrigue in everyday sounds by paying a set period of silence the same attention one would afford a musical composition.

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<sup>82</sup> Dick Higgins, *Boredom and Danger in Breaking the Sound Barrier: a critical anthology of the new music*, ed Gregory Battcock (New York, Dutton, 1982) 22



11. Sue Tompkins, *My Feet on a Rug*, 2014, typewritten text on newsprint, 29.5cm x 21 cm, accessed 17 January 2018 <https://www.themoderninstitute.com/shop/other/my-feet-ona-rug/113/>

I want to suggest that a contemporary aesthetics of boredom is less productive than its Cageian counterpart. Through his discussion of experimental music, Eldritch Priest proposes that contemporary tedium can be seen as a response to 'our cultures fixation on nothing in



particular.’<sup>83</sup> Like Cage, Sue Tompkins takes the quotidian as her primary inspiration, creating nonsensical manuscripts of words and phrases collected from everyday sources. Cycling through seemingly arbitrary lists of words and phrases, the strange, lyrical language that Tompkins performs doesn’t attempt to direct our focus to anything in particular, nor offer any promise of insight in exchange for our attention. Instead, the texts unfurl with the kind of oblique internal logic befitting of a childlike game invented to pass the time.



12. Sue Tompkins, *Come to Ozark*, 2014, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, Accessed 15 January 2018

<https://www.themoderninstitute.com/artists/sue-tompkins/>

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<sup>83</sup> Eldritch Priest, “Boring Formless Nonsense (or, On The Aesthetics of Failure in Recent Experimental Composition)” (PhD thesis, Carleton University, 2011) ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 55



Typically performed in gallery or makeshift performance spaces with a microphone and journal, Tompkins' stretches her repetitive texts to an average length of around 20 minutes. While not exactly acts of endurance, Tompkins' notes that she's interested in testing the limits of her audiences' patience, stating *'I suppose I'm interested in boundary. How long can you expect people to stand there?'*<sup>84</sup> While the texts undoubtedly offer moments of sonic pleasure in their rhythmic absurdity, tedium is a central component of their performance. Audience members stand slumped against walls or crouch awkwardly staring into space as the language, stripped of the functionality of its original context, accumulates and thickens into a purposefully tedious mass of words.

Discussing Gertrude Stein's manipulation of normative syntax in *The Making of America*, Sianne Ngai outlines what she calls a 'thick' or 'grammatically moody' language.<sup>85</sup> Blurring the distinctions between the building blocks of written communication, Stein writes in long strings of words that, like Tompkins, distort the readers sense of time. Words, ideas and temporalities overlap, stacking on top of one another rather than progressing linearly. Through this temporal distortion, or delay, Stein constructs a 'continuous present' that challenges the reader's capacity for response.<sup>86</sup> Ngai describes this as a process of stupefaction, wherein a lack of normative syntax and sense-making threaten the limits of the self by immobilizing their ability to respond, as in cases of extreme shock or boredom. Importantly, this interpretative paralysis is not a passive position but a way of 'feeling difference rather than qualifying it.'<sup>87</sup>

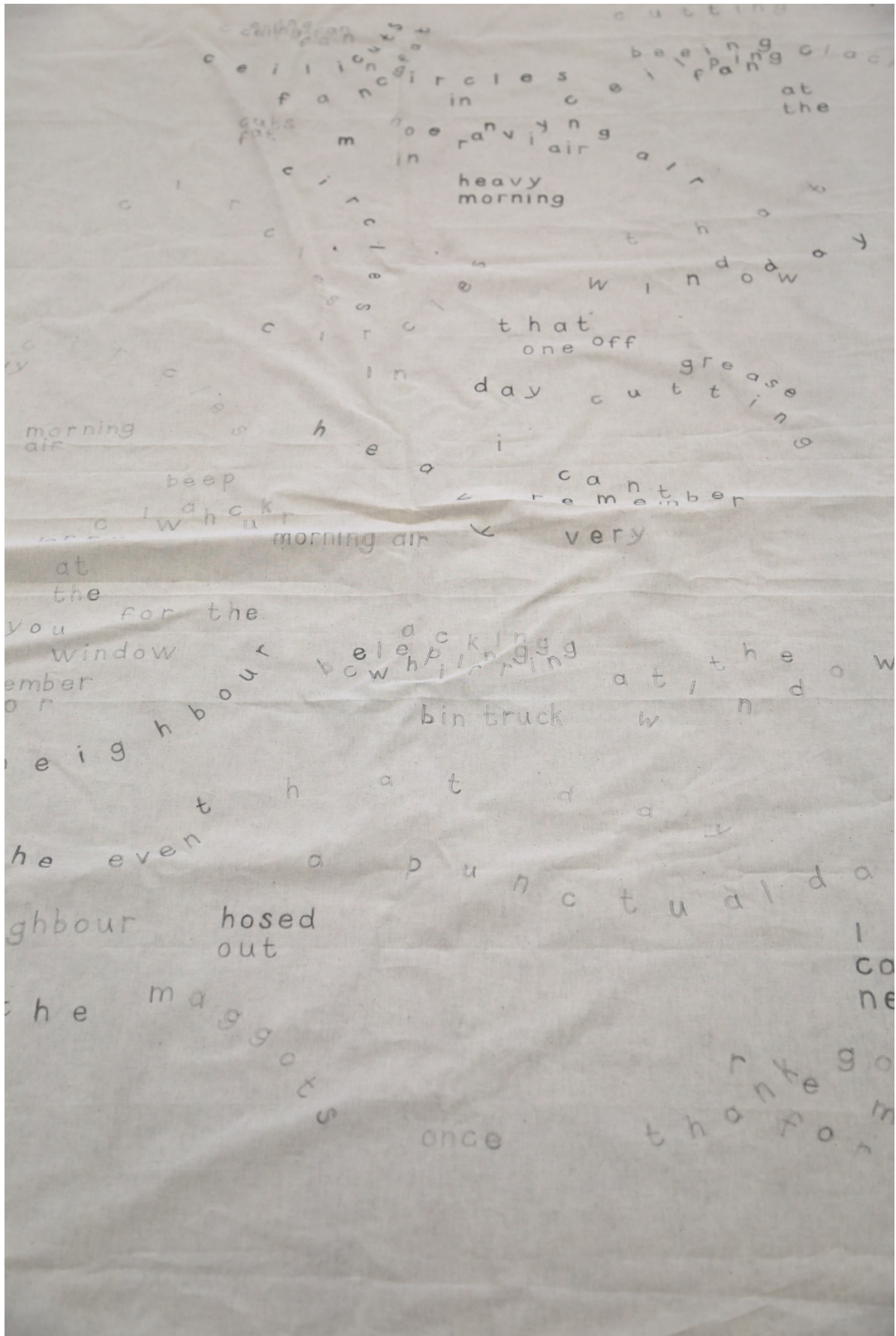
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<sup>84</sup> Emily McDermot, "Notes on Sue Tompkins", Interview Magazine, accessed 4 January 2018 <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sue-tompkins-lisa-cooley>

<sup>85</sup> Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics." *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (2000): U1-U30.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*



13. Hayley Brandon, *Parler*, 2016, pencil on calico

This idea of feeling, or sounding out difference resonates with my own use of language in recent works such as *Parler* (2016). The work begins with a short written text which I then duplicate by translating into French and back into English using an online translation generator. The result is a repetitious text that gradually mutates with each iteration. For the audio, I recorded an English and French version of the texts spoken aloud, and layered them over one another. There is no specific semantic meaning that I wished to communicate here, instead I was trying to work from within an indeterminate space that encouraged the listener to be submerged in a sensuous, stupefying language, without feeling the need to assign formal values.

In another component of this work the English text is inscribed onto a lightweight calico using grey pencil. Working without an overall plan and relying primarily on my intuition, I drew out the letters using varied pressure and in different formations. In some instances, the words encircle and overlap to the point of incoherence, while other phrases remain intact. Looking back on this work through Ngai's ideas, I understand it as a visual and sonic exploration of a thickening rhetoric; as an attempt to draw the viewer into the common muck of language and its iterability.

### **3.3 Stuplimity**

In her 2005 publication *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai articulates a specific mode of contemporary tedium through her term 'stuplimity'. A reframing of the Kantian sublime for a contemporary, technologized society, stuplimity occurs when astonishment and boredom happen simultaneously. It is an aestheticized tedium that confronts us with the 'limitations of our capacity to respond' and points to the means of response that our culture makes

available.<sup>88</sup> Unlike the sublime, in which the subject transcends their subjectivity through an encounter with the unknowable and infinite, stuplimity ‘draws us down into the agglutinative domain of language and it’s dulling iterability’.<sup>89</sup> It is a series of small fatigues rather than a single blow.

Experienced over a duration, these small fatigues point to the ‘limits of our representational capabilities not through the limitlessness or infinity of concepts but through a no less exhaustive confrontation with the discrete and finite in repetition’.<sup>90</sup> That is, the stuplime occurs when minute materials are seen to repeat in, not endless, but tiresomely large constellations of possibilities. The finite in repetition is a central concern in several of my recent studio works. Lifting fragments of text and speech from various quotidian sources, I accumulate language to form dense and repetitive manuscripts. Like Tompkins, my work deals in the ‘bits and scraps’ of language, favouring the ordinary or unspectacular in both my chosen content and delivery.

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<sup>88</sup> Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics." *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (2000): U1-U30.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*

just a bad worst I hate going there like I went to high school  
didn't maybe like notice it that much but I hate it there it's  
t makes me feel like not like um really sad about being a  
wow what's so what's so bad about it? well um it's just yeah  
his um it's this really kinda robotic like clean it's a city but  
thing is kind of um suburban and there is no natural social  
all kind of corporate planned development like what you mean  
m everybody drives really big cars and everything just feels  
aximised for like comfort so like you never really have to  
your car and there's a lot of really big parking lots and like  
really big kind of like upscale chain stores and like yeah shopping  
i like fountains y'know like with light doesn't sound good it's  
ou never like it's basically all commerce and you're alone do  
what I mean? there is no like and I'm sure there is a scene  
I'm sure people who actually live there have a life that feels  
it when I go there it's like I'm at either my parents house or  
m just there cause otherwise you have to like drive y'know  
like I am I going to do? hahaha I know that's yeah so I yeah and I  
yeah they're just they're I guess we've had um some specific  
but more than that I just like I don't know it doesn't ha I  
ought it was like important to be connected to your family  
is thing that's like necessarily good but like it always makes  
bad to like like talk to Mary Anne a lot or like see her a  
ust like in some ways like you I don't know I just don't want  
Charlotte I just don't like it there it makes me feel bad when  
so I just don't want to go there and I just don't want to be there  
how like in some ways our relationship is where I'm like I  
el bad when I talk to her and like not always it's not so it's  
m we're just not particularly close so I don't know I don't  
not that sad about it I don't think y'know like sometimes I  
I should be more upset than I am but I think too like my  
and my family like didn't ever feel it was always like stress  
e I don't know I never felt like oh this is this is like this  
uh sort of like a safe thing or something it just was always  
ore that like when I was young was different but then like  
st totally changed and um I don't think my dad I don't think  
a very good marriage and so my dad just like works a lot  
s and I just doesn't it's not like a life that's not interesting

14. Hayley Brandon, *not bad you yeah right*, 2017, digitally typed text, dimensions variable (detail)

*not bad you yeah right* (2017) is a 45 minute speech based audio work that explores the denseness and iterability of language. The work extends *Studio Visit* (2015), in which I transcribed hours of conversations recorded during a studio residency and edited them into a single, nonsensical script. In each of these works, snippets of multiple conversations are fragmented and flattened into a dense elliptical dialogue. Sentences are cut short into incomplete, stunted groups of words that encircle or overlap each other but never quite align to form a cohesive dialogue. The audio is recorded in a single take and using only my voice, conflating multiple temporalities into a breathless, continuous present. As Ngai suggests, this erosion of grammatical structure has a stupefying effect on the listener, slowing and dulling their capacity for response. As the listener attempts to piece together the fragmentary narrative, they are disrupted by my endless ‘um’s and ‘ah’s and ‘I think’s, resulting in an inability to follow any narrative progression. Listening becomes a purposefully tedious exercise, through which I aim to shift focus away from the specifics of the information and toward a feeling of being engulfed in the mass of mundane everyday language.

Where a Cageian aesthetics conceived of boredom as an opening toward other experiences, contemporary boredom offers no promise of relief. Like Robin James’ description of melancholia, the stuplime boredom I cultivate in my work is a state of perpetual diminished capacity. Like the horizonless vista of Rihanna’s *Unapologetic* I discuss in the previous chapter, my works are purposefully directionless, undulating in an aimless drift. According to James, this melancholia becomes a means of resisting the noise – signal feedback loop, as apathy is the one thing that resilience discourse cannot assimilate.<sup>91</sup> This idea is further supported by Christine Ross in her text *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, in which she

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<sup>91</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015)

positions depression as a response to the neoliberal demand for individual self-sufficiency. In the following section I will further unpack my own work through these ideas of gendered melancholia and consider how other female identifying artists have explored a depressive paradigm as a potential site of resistance.

### **3.4. Sad Girls**

*in to you* (2017) consists of a single channel audio recording of my voice and a written text work appropriated from Ariana Grande's 2016 pop song *Into You*. The work repeats the first line of the song, 'I'm so into you I can barely breathe' and with each iteration of the original lyric the language shifts slightly. Initially, this shift is minimal and has little impact on its interpretation, 'barely' is replaced with 'hardly', for example. At other times, the changes are more explicit until gradually the original text is obscured and replaced with something seemingly nonsensical and unrelated. While the text shifts there is no measurable progression or cohesive narrative to follow. Instead, the narrator addresses an anonymous and abstract 'you' through increasingly nonsensical statements, which eventually return to the start and repeat over.

I'm so into you I can barely breathe  
I have little breathing on you  
I did not breathe you  
I will not breathe you  
I do not breathe you  
I can breathe a lot in you  
I can breathe a lot of you  
I am so much in you that I can barely breathe  
I love you so much and do not breathe very much  
I love you so much, do not breathe a lot  
I love you so much, how not to breathe  
I love you so much how you do not breathe  
I love how you do not breathe  
I love how not to breathe  
I like not to breathe  
I do not like to breathe  
I am so many in you that I can barely breathe  
I am so much in you, almost no breathing  
I am so in you, almost no breathing  
I am in your body, almost no breathing  
I am in your body, almost no breath  
I am so many to you that I can barely breathe  
I am so many for you that I can barely breathe  
I'm so much for you that I can hardly breathe  
I'm hard to breathe for you



The abstracted pop song lyrics twists through the typical hyperbolic gestures of romantic infatuation expected of this genre, charting an expressly femme aesthetic tedium. To be clear, I am not attempting to categorize a specifically female engagement here, but draw attention to the aesthetically gendered boredom that I reference, and that is mostly missing from the existing research. The narratives I construct in my work often reference an aesthetics of superficially femme, millennial depression and boredom. For example, the narrator of *Slow Flow* (2017) speaks of diets and boutique yoga studios, markers of cultural privilege, with a droll and disengaged tone. While the narrative voice of *in to you* is distorted and obfuscated through computer generated translations, the self-aware sentimentality of the original content remains intact.

My self-conscious use of normative femininity could be seen to reference the trope of ‘sad girls on the internet’ art made popular by Insta-famous artists such as Audrey Wollen and Petra Collins. Reaching peak popularity in the early 2010’s, the instagram sad girl seems to offer, at least on the surface, an antidote to the doing-it-for-themselves pop divas Robin James’ describes as the figureheads for post-feminist resilience. Sad Girl Theory, as imagined by Audrey Wollen, offered a space to consider the radical potential of women’s sadness.<sup>92</sup> For the self-proclaimed Tragic Queen, unapologetic sadness was a way of making visible the sexist damage she experienced as a young woman under neoliberal patriarchy.<sup>93</sup> Like James’ melancholia, Sad Girl Theory was never intended as a celebration or as pathos, but was instead conceptualized as a refusal to meet the neoliberal demand for resilient female subjects. I’m using the past tense purposefully, because Sad Girl Theory has been largely abandoned, both by Wollen herself and the public imagination. Frustrated by the reductive

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<sup>92</sup> Naomi Skwarna, "COME CLOSE, GO AWAY." *Canadian Art* 33, no. 4 (2017): 112-15,16.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*

interpretation of her ideas, and their co-optation and marketability, Wollen stopped posting to Instagram in 2016.

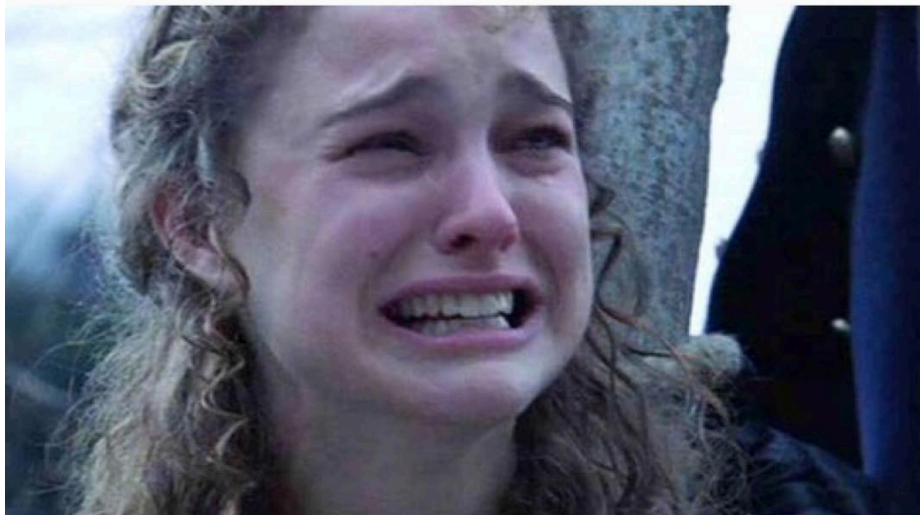


16. Audrey Wollen, accessed 5 January 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/9eXyEfMzcf/?hl=en&taken-by=audreywollen>

While Wollen specifically chose to use Instagram as a platform to further tease out complicated ideas of objectification and self-representation, the profitability of her image as a middle-class, young, thin, and white woman on this platform meant that The Sad Girl came to be consumed by the dominant discourse it aimed to subvert. That is, through her success and visibility, Wollen's insurrectionary noise is converted into capitalist signal: The Sad Girl upgrades The Resilient Girl. My intention here is not to undermine Wollen's work but to demonstrate how the cataloguing of art and feminism into discrete, marketable terms is a patriarchal tactic used to diminish and profit from women's work. As James' acknowledges

in *Resilience and Melancholy*, it isn't the act of resilience that is the problem, but the specific "Look, I overcame" narrative that produces non-bourgeois, non-white masculinity as the pathology women must overcome. Similarly, it isn't her explicit sadness that problematizes The Sad Girl, but the cultural capital required to make the trope legible. As Hannah Williams writes in *The Establishment* 'As always, it's only those who are privileged in society who can capitalize off it. Nobody wants to like your crying selfie if it's about how you literally can't afford to buy food.'<sup>94</sup>

when you're an upper middle class 16-26 year old white woman making selfie art about your hot pale skinny body and someone dares to suggest that what you're doing might not be the most groundbreaking and earth shattering feminist masterpiece of all time



17. Scariest Bug Ever, accessed 4 January 2018 [https://www.instagram.com/p/BK3iVwejZLR/?hl=en&taken-by=scariest\\_bug\\_ever](https://www.instagram.com/p/BK3iVwejZLR/?hl=en&taken-by=scariest_bug_ever)

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<sup>94</sup> Hannah Williams, "The Reign of the Internet Sad Girl Is Over— And That's a Good Thing", *The Establishment*, accessed 4 January 2018 <https://theestablishment.co/the-reign-of-the-internet-sad-girl-is-over-and-thats-a-good-thing-eb6316f590d9>

My choice to reference such tropes in my work is part of my larger interest in working with and from a space of complicity. I recognise this as part of a broader trend in popular media, particularly visible in internet culture. Instagram accounts such as *scariest\_bug\_ever*, also known as Binny Debbie, share droll self-aware content about race, gender and mental health. Framed through her acutely millennial voice of anxiety, uncertainty and depression, her memes offer social commentary that never attempts to overcome the culture it criticizes. In this sense the work is left to ‘hang in the dark space’<sup>95</sup> of gendered melancholia. Such a space, where issues of complicity such as ‘problematic favs’ are addressed with both humour and sincerity, is important for feminist voices as it draws attention to the larger societal complexities of race and gender politics.



18. Ada Wrong, accessed 5 January 2018 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSaPFeWB3ht/?taken-by=ada.wrong>

Like Ngai’s theory of stuplimity, melancholic feminist voices confront a simultaneous feeling of shock and boredom with white supremacist patriarchy. Feminist meme accounts like *Scariest Bug Ever* and *Ada Wrong* use their platform to engage in dialogues around identity, race and gender which are equal parts earnest and absurd. As Ngai outlines in her discussion of Stein’s ‘grammatically moody’ texts, the political voice these women cultivate is

<sup>95</sup> Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015)153

purposefully contradictory as to avoid easy classification and subsequent co-optation. While employed to vastly different effect, as Sue Tompkins does, I aim to approach language in a similarly obfuscating way, engaging the stiplime to address the potential and the limitations of language in a visual art context, as can be seen in my works *Parler, not bad you yeah right* and *in to you*. Identifying this space has been significant for my research as it has allowed me to consider how I may continue to make work that avoids tidy and limiting narratives about what constitutes feminist art practices, and instead to make work that is unafraid of speaking in a noisy, contradictory voice and testing these ideas and ways of practicing.

## Conclusion

Voice is many things. And it is precisely this multiplicity, the struggle to articulate and isolate exactly what voice is, which leads me to continue working with it in my interdisciplinary studio practice. In my work, I frequently use my voice in its most quotidian capacity as speech, and to manipulate the sounds, shapes and rhythms that either support or disrupt its linguistic meaning. Beyond this, I have also come to understand how my work manipulates ideas of authorial and political voice, as well as the interrelationship between these cultural and sonic applications.

Through my studio and exegetical research, I have developed a case for a purposefully contradictory and obfuscating mode of voice that speaks in noisy complicity with post-feminist patriarchy. As a material at the nexus of sound and meaning, voice offers me a space to explore ideas of language, body and gender in an emergent and open-ended way. Through the study of other female-identifying artists working with their own voices, I have located my work within a contextual framework of practices navigating what it might mean to have a voice, and to explore the various ways that these voices sound, and are heard.

Over the course of this research project I have begun several new studio projects including *Parler* (2016), *Slow Flow* (2017) and *in to you* (2017), as well as continued to rethink and reconfigure ideas I have been working with over the past several years as seen in *not bad you yeah right* (2017). Primarily, I have continued to work with written and spoken language, using both my own original writing and appropriated texts. *Parler*, which I began in the second semester of my first year, marks the beginning of a process of writing and

accumulating text, that I continue to work with. The work began with a short poem that I was unsure what to do with. However, when I was invited to contribute work to a group show in France, I decided to attempt to translate the poem into French. From here, I became interested in the translation process, and I went on to create several versions of the text by translating it back and forth between multiple languages by using an online automated translation tool. I then inscribed the text on to fabric, drawing out the letters using varied pressure and in different formations. In some instances, the words encircled and overlapped to the point of incoherence, while other phrases remained intact. Looking back on this work through Sianne Ngai's theory of stuplimity, that I discuss in chapter 3, I understand it as a visual and sonic exploration of a thickening rhetoric, an attempt to draw the audience into the iterability of language.

Alongside this ongoing body of work, during the research project I have written short fictive texts which I have then recorded using my own voice. *Slow Flow* is a 5-minute audio recording where I recount experiences of voice. While this work is closer to a straight forward narrative than *Parler*, it is still purposefully disjointed as to create a similarly stupefying effect on the listener. The formal qualities of spoken language, the rhythms, tones and textures of speech, is another primary concern in this work, as well as my use of recorded voice more broadly.

Throughout the project it has been important to me to allow myself the time and space to work freely and intuitively in the studio. I have been consistently working on various iterations of the works I mention, and allowing myself the time to focus on the details rather than feeling the pressure to produce a large quantity of work. I have come to understand that I am not a particularly prolific artist, and I accept that I tend to work slowly, allowing myself

to zoom in on each specific word choice in my short texts, and the particular intonation with which I voice it.

At the beginning of my research, I was primarily focused on voice as a sonic phenomenon; a material I manipulated to varying effect in my studio practice. Working primarily with sound, it feels crucial to me that sound art writing centres listening, and allows ideas to unfold alongside this process. For this reason, I began my research by listening closely to voice based works and allowing my reading, writing and making to emerge from my listening. Consequently, the first chapter focuses on a case study of Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice* (*Case Study B*) that begins from my experience of participating in the work. Focusing specifically on her use of recorded voice, I was able to recognise how the recording device is not a passive means of transmission, but an active material component in the work. Unpacking the 'deceit of presence'<sup>96</sup> maintained in the recorded voice, I demonstrate how Cardiff manipulates the assumed immediacy and intimacy of this medium to produce intersubjective first person narratives.

Implicit in my reading of Cardiff is a feminist politics of voice that I develop through my subsequent research and in chapters 2 and 3. As my interest in voice as a sonic material always functions in relation to the cultural and communicative properties of speech, I became increasingly drawn to voice as an imprint of culture, politics and perspective. In the second chapter, I establish the cultural context that my work speaks from, focusing specifically on what might constitute critical feminist voice and the varying ways it may sound. Drawing on Wendy Brown's re-thinking of the relationship between speech and silence, I argue that white, liberal feminisms continued privileging of verbal expression may establish and enforce

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas Trummer, *Voice & Void*. (Ridgefield: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. 2007) 10



new silences. From here, I consider how this conflation of voice and agency contributes to Robin James' theory of resilience discourse, a post-feminist narrative that requires women to first perform, and then visibly overcome their feminine and racial damage.

While this chapter does not directly discuss my own studio engagements, I understand it as a parallel to my creative practice. I see this as a crucial exploration of the context from which much of my making and thinking originates. While my interest in voice and language are motivated by an underlying feminist politics, I have been hesitant to explicitly address this in my work and writing. Through this research project, I have come to realise that rather than attempt to ignore or overcome my complicity in white, neoliberal and patriarchal culture for fear of being a 'bad' feminist, I can work from and with the complexities of this space.

My question then, becomes one of grappling with how feminist voices can work to circumvent this neoliberal feedback loop, where insurrectionary noise is converted into capitalist signal. In an attempt to provide a possible solution to this problem, James' suggests that 'in contexts where feminism is evidence of one's resilience, critical feminist practice must be melancholic'.<sup>97</sup> In chapter 3 I extend this idea of a melancholic feminism by tracing a gendered politics of aesthetic boredom and failure. Through this study, I consider how female identifying artists, including myself, engage Sianne Ngai's idea of stuplimity in their work to 'amplify our noisy complicity with white supremacist patriarchy'.<sup>98</sup> While I do not propose this as a definitive answer, through this study I demonstrate the potential of this knowingly contradictory and ambivalent mode of voice. For example, in *Slow Flow* (2017) I draw on potentially problematic experiences of participating in bourgeois yoga classes and listening to true crime podcasts that depict violence, largely against women, as entertainment.

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid*

<sup>98</sup> James, Robin. *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2015), 164

By channelling these interests and experiences into purposefully fragmented narratives such as *Slow Flow*, I am able to reflect on them and convey my ambivalence without arriving at any specific judgement or single perspective.

Going into this research project I wanted to allow myself the time and space to extensively explore one central component in my practice; my use of recorded voice. While the research has shifted slightly, I feel as though I have been successful in this aim as I have gained a deeper understanding not only of the role of the audio recorder in my practice, but also the cultural and gendered implications that shape my motivation to work with voice. While my initial intention was to study voice from a sound art context, I quickly found that my research was moving toward a more cultural and linguistic application. In retrospect I could have predicted such a shift, as the feminist politics I unpack in the exegesis underpins my approach to my art practice, as well as media more broadly. Through the exegetical component of this project I have become increasingly aware of the importance of writing in my practice, and have consequently begun to incorporate more of my own original writing into my work.

While I continue to work with found texts and recorded conversations, incorporating my own voice through my writing deepens and complicates ideas of agency and subjectivity explored in this research project. Beyond the scope of this project and moving forward in my practice, I will continue to cultivate the ‘grammatically moody’ melancholic mode of voice I outline in Chapter Three and find new ways of translating this voice, as both written and spoken language, through my future studio projects.

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