Giving the Microphone to the Other

Naomi Waltham-Smith

This response to Pooja Rangan's bold provocation in Immediations *reflects, from a Derridean standpoint, on the impossible responsibility of speaking* for *the other. In particular, it examines the role played by the microphone as technological prosthesis for the voice in activist practices of audio documentary, analyzing the actions of performance artist Sharon Hayes and sound art collective Ultra-red.*

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Speaking for the other is a huge responsibility. To write a response to Pooja Rangan's thoughtful and brilliant *Immediations* is not just to speak *to* this text and its ideas but also to speak *for* it in the double sense first, of representing it for readers, giving it a voice, and thus substituting for it, and second, of speaking in favor of it, advocating for it, taking its side, allying and alloying my voice with hers. Inasmuch as I am *for* Rangan's astute analysis, my response is always already supplementing, displacing, and replacing hers—a prosthesis. But it is also a provocation in the sense that Derrida sets out in the foreword to *Without Alibi*.

> Before all other senses of the word, a pro*vocation* proffers; it is the act of a speaking. A speech act, so to speak. Perhaps every speech act acts *like* a provocation. To provoke, is that not to cause (in French, *causer* means "to speak with the other," but also "to produce effects," "to give rise" to what takes place, to what is called, in a word, the event)? Is to *provoke* not to let resonate a vocal appeal, a vocative, a "vocable," as we say in French, in other words, a word? Is it not to turn the initiative over to the word, which, like a foreword and in a thousand ways, *goes out ahead, to the front of the stage*: to expose itself or to dare, to face up to, here and now, right away, without delay and *without alibi*? A pro*vocation* is always somewhat "vocal," as one might say in English, resolved to make itself heard, sonorous and noisy. The most inventive provocations should not be vocal, but this is difficult to avoid.[1]

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1   Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xv.

This provocation in which the voice goes out in front is thus "without alibi," which is to say that it is without an elsewhere—without the other place or the other time that exempts the accused. Derrida argues that this being without alibi goes to the heart of the ethical question of responsibility, but he is careful to distinguish the disarming unconditionality of the without alibi from the sovereignty of the subject in possession of their capacity to respond, thus displacing the conventional notion of response-ability:

> This responsibility—here's another *provocatio*—will never be able to avoid appealing to someone who would dare to say, "Here I am, without alibi, and here is the first decision that I sign." Well, it would be necessary that this "Here I am, I sign" designate neither the presence of a sole, unified subject, present and present to itself, identifiable, sovereign, without difference, nor a decision that is already a decision, nor yet the predicate of this subject, its possible or its "I can."

Far from a capacity to respond that I have at my disposal and that I can or cannot exercise (as a more Agambenian account of impotentiality would have it), the responsibility demanded by a provocation strikes me like a passive decision—and this is why responsibility is infinite. As Derrida puts it in a response to a talk by Jean-Luc Nancy on the question of the imperative, "This voice is recognised as coming from the other to the extent that one cannot respond to it."[2] For him, the "sole imperative" is the *impossibility* of responding. When Derrida and Nancy took up these themes again more than twenty years later during a conversation at the Collège International de Philosophie in January 2002, both embraced the dispersive, pervertible character of the call, which is always at risk of not reaching its addressee or of otherwise disseminating itself into oblivions. Nancy, though, much to Derrida's frustration, moved to pin down what makes this impossibility possible: "I cannot be responsible, in the sense of a programmatic, calculated, and calculating appropriation . . . I am at least responsible for the capacity, for the condition of possibility, of the response that is found within the resonance."[3] The difficulty here is that responsibility, while still impossible, is nonetheless something of which one is capable, which defeats everything that Derrida seeks to achieve with the idea of a self-destructive responsibility. What is problematic is the possibilization of impossibility, for it removes the chance—the imperative even—that it be possible I not respond. For Derrida, there would, of necessity, be no adequate response to an infinite call, and hence it would always already have ceased to call for an answer and ceased to be answerable, precisely because there is no end to the multiple disseminated calls, responses, and so forth.

This is the kind of infinite responsibility that Rangan's text provokes inasmuch as it is woven from multiple voices, her responsibility to the performed by allowing authorship to be disseminated among and interlaced with the voices of those whom she does not so much speak *for* as *with*. Her writing thus tells us something about the political

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2   Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Free Voice of Man," in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (New York: Routledge, 1997), 49.
3   Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, "Responsibility—Of the Sense to Come," in *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 63.

appeal or demand more generally: that it is not something that we have in our power to voice. Its fragility and infinite force derive from the fact that it is always from the start fragmented and compromised by a multiplicity of competing, entangled injunctions. If there is any *for* in this speaking, it is in the infinite replaceability of one voice *for* another, the possibility of generating a chain of interconnected speakers, a prosthetic relay of voices. At first blush this might look as if I were trampling all over the unrepeatable singularity of any given unheard voice, and in this way repeating the age-old logic of silencing the oppressed by translating their speech into words of the White, educated, able-bodied, privileged subject. The point, though, is that this unique voice will always remain marginalized *without* this equalizing and leveling indifference that allows one to be substituted *for* the other. Without listening imposing an equality of moral, juridical, and political dignity, there would be no such thing as politics.

These are the questions that Rangan's study confronts head on with estimable courage of conviction and intellectual sophistication. Yet it would be not be a response worthy of the name if I were to constrain myself to the echo of acclaim or some extension that would remain completely predictable within the terms of Rangan's problematic. A more thorough engagement with Derrida's thinking allows for the chance that a response might come, quite unexpected and quite inappropriable, from the other. If Rangan inverts the idea that participatory democracy's vocation is to give voice to the voiceless to show instead how it relies, in exploitative and colonizing fashion, on the existence, labor, affect, suffering, and so forth of the disenfranchised to supply its raison d'être, deconstruction's vocation, if there is such a thing, has been to move from invertibility to something like a generalized pervertibility. Like deconstruction, Rangan's notion of an autistic counter-discourse that would liberate the voice from its ensnaring by the lures of logocentrism disrupts the dialectic between what she calls dominant and resistant voices, which maps roughly onto the schemas of norm and exception, and of passive and active. If the resistant voice appropriates for its own ends the techniques of legitimation of the dominant voice, emulating the workings of neoliberal power without troubling the fundamental logic of hierarchization, the autistic voice is "attentive to the gridlock existing between the first two voices, in which the resistant voice is thought to represent the ever-elusive content abjected and excluded by the dominant voice" (148). It does so by recourse to a potentially infinite field of perceptual registers and relational configurations that go beyond the norms of signifying, articulate, rational speech.

One might think that Derrida is getting at a similar destruction of oppositionality through proliferation with his appeal to the multiple voices provoking infinite responsibility, but his notion of dissemination ought to be distinguished from both asignifying sound and from mere multiplicity or polysemy. In his study of language's imbrication in French colonialism from a quasi-deconstructive perspective, Laurent Dubreuil argues that the position of being "one *and* the other," "speaker and outsider," is part of colonialism without being unique to it.[4] On the contrary, he points out that "so-called Western thought was *never* confined to an exclusively rational logic," with the result that

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4   Laurent Dubreuil, *Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post)colonial Expression*, trans. David Fieni (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 109–10. On Derrida and the colonial character of linguistic exappropriation, also see Rey Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 217–31.

the cry or the scream, as much as they are "powerful signs of refusal,"[5] in themselves do not disrupt logocentrism. No doubt Rangan would agree, and in many ways she alights on a position that has much in common with Dubreuil's. Dubreuil, though, more forcefully takes issue with pluralization as an exit from colonialism—specifically in the guise of purportedly (post)colonial multidisciplinary and hybridization.

What separates dissemination from plurality, as Derrida explains in the recently published *Geschlecht III*, is that this "irreducible polytonality"[6] resists any drive to be gathered into a unity insofar as it re-marks itself. That is, it is an example of itself, so that instead of a displacement from one singularity to another in the series, dissemination displaces seriality by referring "to the absolute outside of the opposition" without being "a simply exit out of the series."[7] This would mean that the violent, exclusive logic of representation would be destroyed not merely by multiplying representations or democratizing representation to broaden the field of what is heard but, moreover, by destroying representation itself through a piling up of representations. To explore this possibility more concretely, I take two case studies of what might be considered kinds of activist audio documentary, although none of the practitioners would identify with that label. With different effects, both practices involve giving the microphone to the other and both probe the responsibility of listening at stake.

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Artist Sharon Hayes continues to be fascinated by Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore*, a documentary for which the director from August to November 1963 traveled the length of Italy from the industrial north to the rural south, microphone in hand ready to ask a wide range of people about their attitudes to sexuality. It was Pasolini's simultaneous interpellation and destabilization of a confessional subject that attracted Foucault's attention, but Hayes mines Pasolini's documentary for more radical disruptions. Known for working at the intersection of performance art and sociopolitical engagement, Hayes constantly puts the performative in question in her street actions and installations, specifically by showing up the failure and inefficacy of political speech acts. One of Hayes's video works entitled *Ricerche: three*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013, explicitly models itself as a palimpsest over Pasolini's exercise in *cinema verité*, taking its title from the four "ricerche" into which the film is divided. (Hayes also has plans for further works in the near future that will develop this engagement with Pasolini.) Emulating Pasolini's interviewing style in *Ricerche: three*, she asks a group of thirty-five students at Mount Holyoke, an all-women's college in Massachusetts, about their views and experiences of sexual expression and gender identity. *Ricerche* can be read from many different angles, not least the way in which it interrogates group dynamics and collective agency, but what is especially intriguing is the way in which it uses the microphone to mediate between speech and listening. This focus on the instrument of listening emphasizes how this relay takes place via a technological prosthesis of the ears,

5 Dubreuil, "Notes Towards a Poetics of *Banlieue*," *parallax* 18.3 (1998): 102.
6 Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, eds. Geoffrey Bennington, Katie Chenoweth, and Rodrigo Therezo (Paris: Seuil, 2018), 99.
7 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 25, 104.

suggesting that listening no less than speech has always already been supplemented and breached by the other.

Hayes's earlier work *Parole*, shown at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, puts the microphone as auricular prosthesis under even greater focus, evoking the opening voiceover from Chris Marker's 1962 documentary, *Le Joli Mai*, cited by Hayes in another context: "This, the most beautiful city in the world. . . . One would like to track it like a detective with a telescope and a microphone."[8] Projected onto the wooden walls of a makeshift structure, Hayes's four-channel video installation features as its protagonist a sound technician played by actor and performer Becca Blackwell—although "protagonist" and "played" are not quite the right terms here because *Parole* challenges traditional constructions of narrative and subjectivity. Writing about Katya Sander's *What Is Capitalism?* (2003), Hayes reveals her interest in a listening that destabilizes the position of the interviewer and the authority typically afforded by the microphone:

> When Sander takes the hand-held microphone . . . she does not assume the authentic identity of the interviewing subject and take the microphone as a tool of her trade but neither does she act the part of a character who interviews, carrying the microphone as a prop. By taking the microphone . . . Sander activates a position, a form and a set of codes that lie beyond her—of any individual's—embodiment.[9]

Something similar seems to be at work in Hayes's *Parole*, except that the identity and character displaced are not that of an interviewer but of a sound technician who listens while remaining silent, her microphone trained on its subjects in often disconcertingly close proximity, such as when it tracks the movement of dancer almost to the point of obstructing her movement. *Parole* is an exercise in field recording rather than street interviewing, the microphone trained on a far greater variety of sounds. If there is a recurring theme in Hayes's work, it is the speech act as a site for the production of political agency, and yet here she displaces the focus onto ambient noise, such as the footsteps and breaths of the dancer, the whistling of a kettle, and the whirs and clicks of a cassette player as the technician listens to archive recordings, including commentary about the National Voice Library at the University of Michigan and Watergate testimonies about the sonic surveillance of the White House. In *Parole* we are listening to listening listening, the listening subject position always already unraveling on account of this infinite regression of overhearing that complicates the opposition between overhearer and overheard, thus leading to a generalization of overhearing.[10]

Speech also plays a decisive part in *Parole*. There is a lecture on sentimentality by Lauren Berlant, a theatrical reading by a trans man of a manifesto by radical feminist Anna Rühling, a speech by James Baldwin, and Hayes's performance in Trafalgar Square of a "love address," a genre that she has cultivated in a number of other works. The

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8   Cited in Sharon Hayes, "An Ear for an Eye and Vice Versa," in *Catalogue for Katya Sander: The Most Complicated Machines Are Made of Words* (Vienna: Revolver, 2006), 77. On both *Parole* and *Richerche*, see also Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Sharon Hayes Sounds Off," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 38 (2015): 16–27.
9   Bryan-Wilson, "Sharon Hayes Sounds Off," 79–80.
10   On the generalization of fetishism, see also Peter Szendy, "All the Marxes at the Big Store; or, General Fetishism," *boundary 2* 42.1 (2016): 215–16n7.

microphone also captures members of the queer community in Istanbul reading translations of Hayes's address drawn from a site-specific collaborative action entitled *I didn't know I loved you* for the 2009 Biennial. The speeches frequently overlap, producing a cacophony of voices, but the radical destabilization of speech and listening and of the mouth-ear circuit that takes place here cannot be fully grasped without understanding the ways in which Hayes challenges the supposed authority, transparency, and efficacy of the speech act in her body of work more broadly by embracing a practice of "respeaking."

In respeaking the historical political speeches of others and also in inciting others to repeat them or her own love addresses, Hayes shows that the singularity of the voice that she wants to uphold as the locus of political agency is thinkable only because of the iterability thematized so prominently in her practice. Hayes observes a provisional distinction between an actor whose character can be played by multiple others of whom no one is an original and the performer who is "singularly attached to the performance they enact."[11] Performance, she goes on to propose, is "a singular moment in time" that is "both irreducible and can also be understood iteratively" as "a coalescing of things," of two moments "stuttering against one another." For Hayes, it is always possible that what appears to be repeatable turns out to be unrepeatable, and yet Hayes's actions seem to suggest that the opposite is equally true, thus maintaining an undecidability between singularity and repetition. Even or especially when she is reciting the love addresses that she composed, using a genre that strongly implies the production of authentic subjectivity, there is the sense, insofar as she is trying to recall from memory a precomposed text, as if reciting someone else's words. Even her "own" words come from the other.

This has significant consequences for how we think about the politics of the voice and of listening. The rhetoric of "speaking up," "making one's voice heard," and "listening to the people" plays into the hands of the ruling capitalist class, neocolonialists, and neofascists because it puts naive faith in the efficacy of the speech act and in the voice as the transparent, self-sufficient support of the political agent. It presupposes an unbroken circuit between mouth and ear and promotes the fiction that any disruption to this sovereignty is a belated accident: a failure to seize one's voice or to listen to the other. But it is a mistake, I am suggesting, to imagine that going unheard is the falling short of an ideal of an unconditional audibility. Rather, what Hayes's practice demonstrates is that the voice, no less than the ear, is pervertible from the outset.

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Hayes's deployment of the microphone may be compared with the militant sound investigations of sound art collective Ultra-red, which start from the question "What did you/we hear?" as a way to displace the demand from its central position in activism. Ultra-red's praxis has evolved over two decades into its current form with a focus on conducting soundwalks and listening workshops for local community groups. Founded by two AIDs activists in Los Angeles in 1994, the collective had its roots in the intersection of music and social engagement, specifically the overlap between the ambient

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11   Sharon Hayes, "Again, in Another Time and Space: A Conversation on Restaging, Reconstruction, and Reenactment," with Patricia Lent and Richard Schechner, moderated by Shannon Jackson. FringeArts, Philadelphia, October 5, 2013.

music scene and local struggles around public health, housing, and education. With members on both coasts of the United States, in the United Kingdom, and in Germany, their approach has gradually shifted away from compositional practices that take recordings as raw material to focus instead on the act of listening as a site of collective intervention and popular pedagogy. Field recording has been a mainstay of their work throughout, as have the influences of a theoretical cocktail drawn from the Situationists, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy of the oppressed, the Italian autonomist journal *Quaderni Rossi*, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, placing listening in a nexus of power, space, and encounter with the other. Whereas some of their earlier work is closer to the soundscape composition end of the spectrum, running the gamut from ambient techno to unedited field recordings of protests, Ultra-red became increasingly frustrated with the political imbrications of aesthetic production and consumption. Against the commodification of culture, audio verité, as they put it, aims to listen for the sound of life and spaces produced in antagonism to this control and alienation: the soundscapes of struggle, survival, trespass, informal economies, and so on, rather than the ambience of the market.[12]

Ultra-red's skepticism of the aesthetic extends to activism as it is conventionally conceived and practiced. One of the most significant shifts in Ultra-red's focus on listening is to undo the teleological status of the demand. Organizing is not about coming together to formulate a demand or a matter of making audible a predetermined demand. Rather, listening is a process of inquiry through which a field of tension of needs, desires, and demands are organized. What demand will emerge is unknown, but its organization will constitute a "sonorous refusal" of activism in his conventional guise in this reconfiguration of organizing practices. Describing how the militant sound investigation works in the context of a protest, Ultra-red explains:

> The Militant Sound Investigation team will enter into this situation under cover of the public address system. The team will move through the crowd calling those around them to gather together. Questions will be asked: questions developed within the space and processes of their own engagements with communities in struggle. The questions in the score will resemble a composition founded on problematics enunciated in the course of investigations undertaken in another space and an earlier time. With microphones in hand, the team members will diligently record the group's every reaction to the questions. Those reactions that analyze the questions as either prelude to or refusal of an answer will acquire significance. While the grand sound-system amplifies one speech after another, these groups will work through the score, teasing out the themes contained within the echoes.[13]

Ultra-red thus reappropriates the technology of the PA system to other ends, specifically inclining it toward listening, rather than vociferating, and toward a set of potentially contradictory, intertwined themes—in short, the negotiation of struggle where it is not simply a matter of making a voice heard and of amplification, but of teasing out the various threads and knots among the multiple voices. The form adopted to begin with is not the demand but the question (even though the inspiration for Ultra-

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12 Ultra-red, "Constitutive Utopias: Sound, Public Space and Urban Ambience," 2000.
13 Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation* (New York: Printed Matter, Inc., 2008).

red's notion of demand is clearly Lacanian, I want to hear this alongside the shift in Derrida's lexicon from question to call or *appel*).[14] What is striking is that this question is not a starting point but is already the effect of multiple sound investigations, multiple listenings now folded into new acts of listening. The voice, far from being the origin, is always already an echo of other voices, or, even more precisely, the echo of other listenings—the ear of the other in every sense. If activism presupposes preexisting voices, demands, positions, and subjects awaiting amplification, Ultra-red's practice of listening aims to "enter a state of crisis at the loosening of coordinates provided by pre-inscribed demands."[15] They argue that turning the apparatus on to record brings with it a responsibility that necessarily precedes any demand. Indeed, it would be a failure of listening and a betrayal of this responsibility only to record once a demand is formulated.

This also means that the microphone does not occupy a disinterested or objective position any more than it produces a dispassionate representation. Rather, it is a part of the field that it organizes. Not simply amplifying what is already sounded, it can return to silence any demands that are already audible and instead start from a "soundscape of struggle" in which participants experience being together in solidarity, friendship, and shared curiosity, before the unifying, identity-bestowing effects of a demand. In fact, the microphone does not serve to fix or unify what is heard, but rather fragments the sonic field into need, the demand remaining beyond need, and beyond that, desire. Furthermore, their reuse of previous listenings to shape new stages of investigation has the effect of producing a chain of prosthetic ears. What constitutes an ear or a listening technology is broadly conceived, and this relay of ears extends and passes through other human ears to inanimate sound recording technologies: microphones, of course, but also flip-charts, paper, and marker pens—listening as writing in the generalized sense.

Ultra-red's distinctive approach to the microphone and its representational possibilities is inseparable from their trenchant critique of what they call activism's "value form of participation" in which participation itself becomes the site for the extraction of surplus value. It presupposes a preorganized field with predetermined analyses and a fixed "object/subject division: those who act as ideological patrons and those in need of patronage."[16] Situating the value form of participation within a (post)colonial logic in which there is a "ritual solicitation" of oppressed subjects into "compliance with systems of administration and control" and in which capital extracts surplus value from the "rituals of participation by which subjects identify with the will of the state, the non-profit development corporation, the non-governmental organization, or the institution charged with administering crisis," they argue:

> The echo confirms that the ideological patron has invested the other with an analysis composed prior to their encounter. The echo of the patron's voice affirms the other as

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14   Responding to Nancy's substitution of "order" for "question," Derrida ventures: "Why wouldn't I write like I had in 1964? Basically it is the word question which I would have changed there. I would displace the accent of the question towards something which would be a call. Rather than it being necessary to maintain a question, it is necessary to have understood a call (or an order, desire or demand)" (Nancy, "The Free Voice of Man," 49).
15   Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*.
16   Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*.

lacking and requiring the intervention of a patron. In this social relation, the mallet-like microphone simply amplifies established terms of analysis, delivers demands without listening, and insists on only one form of intervention—the endless repetition of a sealed demand.[17]

Whereas in the value form of participation the microphone serves only "to amplify oneself" and to gather the differential character of multiple listenings into a preformed unity, Ultra-red's practice embraces a prosthetic relay and negotiation of entangled listenings.

Rangan's thoughtful and provocative book demands nothing less of the responses in this colloquy and of other readers, for it is in these necessarily ruined attempts to speak for her that the singularity of her voice will be heard.

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17   Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation.*