

Chapter 3: !ictic! Vocalities

say a body¹

say a body

fingerbirds

mosskin

sneck

pours

knoes

meat

fleet

and a gyre

centrifugal

more than eleven orifices

more than one oh!

more than one i

ackac

more than one—

fattongue

phantomlimbs

torturemouth

shimmerbody

¹ Virginia Barratt, "say a body," ed. Stuart Barnes and Quinn Eades, *Transqueer* (Cordite Poetry Review, 2018), <http://cordite.org.au/poetry/transqueer/say-a-body/>.

offwithher
stutterheart
everytthingontheoutside

swan'sneck floating backward, unhinge the jawbeak
throat at capacity
all thrumming air stretched

say a body

just say

with the mouth?

say a body with the mouth?

what is mouth, is no saying, falling out of language?

the mouth that cannot speak
ends the world

the mouth is not made for speaking everything
is not made for birthing the body
in toxic saliva pools
from the river to the

worlds end if not said by a mouth saying a body saying the world using words in order
building a body with hands connected to arms that are not birds or even the thought of
birds that cannot fly without the saying of flying riding on the thrumming breath through a
flailing neck and no throat architecture even imagined no arcs no naves no flesh folds
closing no plosives meaning something harsh or soft 25 vertebrae cannot say a body
exists and the world ends with unspeaking breath going back in all the stars unshining the
earthbody a platter a hole a dream all the darkness alive and dense unspeakable

it shimmers, the unsaying end,

it shimmer-shimmers

Exiting Language: !ictic! Vocalities and the Remainder.

The poem that opens this chapter was published in 2018 in the *Transqueer* edition of *Cordite Poetry Review*. While I am queer and trans, there is nothing inherently queer or trans about this poem—except everything of course. As a queerly (em)bodied and gendered being, texts that I produce are queered by default. These words bloom in a queer heartbrain, mobilise queer limbs and exit through a queer orifice.

The poem itself is a linguistic provocation. To say the body in panic, I have had to create syntagmatic monsters, smash unlikely phonemes together and enter into a space of neologistic fabulation to approximate the phenomenological panic body. The poem is an exercise in !ictic! poetics capturing the amplification of affective intensities as a panic attack follows its trajectory through the body and out into the world. The neologistic and syntagmatic monsters (fattongue, sneck, jawbeak, knoes) are containers for the body becoming strange and other.

In May 2022 I performed this poem as part of a performance program entitled *Orifice Oriented Ontologies* (OOO) at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne. OOO was situated within the existing red-lit installation *Meatus*, an immersive 32-channel sound installation at ACCA. Inside a nonsense-shaped and inscrutable black-coloured box of strange planes and protuberances, and with my legs extending from the back of the box in a single “leg sleeve”—like a worm’s body—I inched my way along the floor. From inside the box I performed a stuttering text that decomposed on expression, live-mixed by Lauren Abineri. Part of the script was this poem.



Figure 1: V Barratt, *my body belongs to the hole*, Orifice Oriented Ontologies, ACCA 2022

Listen to/Look at my body belongs to the hole documentation here [\[LINK\]](#)

What does a vibration do?

A vibration describes some edges

Makes me know ribs, throat, sinuses, lips, hands,
and the air that wraps around the skin, humming.

This is all I need to pin down a body

For the time that it takes

To cross a bridge

Ictus:

Prosody

a rhythmical or metrical stress.

Medicine

a stroke or seizure; a fit.

!!! bangs of fright !!! each mark a thrill, a heartstop, a stab, sharp. Each fright an intake of breath, and sound born of a body seized.

As I have noted already, the ictus of panic—that all-of-a-sudden seizure that imparts involuntary jerks, leaps and flights of frights to the body—also takes over the voice, creeping into the throat, mouth, and jaw, inciting coughs, barks, cries, and other unusual vocal tics, and sometimes muteness. The !ictic!, embraced by its bangs of fright, is a prosody of panic, interrupting the smooth running of language to produce a non-semantic and non-discursive vocality of affective prosody, which is easily dismissed as meaningless and worthless if interpreted via Western systems of language. Semiotician and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure, often called the “father of linguistics”, introduced the terms “*langue*” and “*parole*” as ways of systematising language. “*Langue*,” he wrote, “...is the system of norms accepted and used by members of a speech community (what would ordinarily be referred to as ‘a language’). *Parole*...is the act of linguistic expression as performed by an individual trained in (some version of) those norms”.² Saussure prioritised this abstract system over all other aspects of language scholarship, including cultural context, affective resonance, sociolinguistics, history, psychology, philosophy and all other “extra-linguistic” aspects of language research. Saussure argues that anything that “changes the system in any way is internal”,³ thereby relegating these other contexts in which language and speech arise as external.

His other contribution to linguistics was Semiotics a system of signs and the formation of meaning within the complex web of relations between things, their naming and their meaning. Prior to Saussure’s work, philosopher, logician and scientist Charles S. Peirce⁴ initially began working with language and the science of signs but it differed in its interpretation too Saussure’s semiotic analysis. Saussure’s work contends that the relationship between the signifier (the “sound image”, or linguistic sign given to a thing) and the signified (concept, mental image, thing, association) is arbitrary,⁵ learned and

² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, xxiii.

³ Ibid., 22-23.

⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce, “On the Nature of Signs,” in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67.

fixed, and unmoved by the forces of politics, institutions and cultural contexts. Peirce and others⁶ contend that there is a specificity as well as a fluidity to this system; that there can be multiple associations for the same concept. That “a rose is a rose is not a rose”⁷ (which rose is the real rose, is there a real rose, is it a flower or a person? Or not? Do we need to hear it three times?), or that snow has different qualities and relations for a person who relies on its falls to hunt compared to a person who lives on desert lands. The affective registers of anxiety and wonder are part of an interpretive equation in this case. Peirce’s semiotic relies on the idea of an interpretant “producing and interpreting” the sign, and makes it possible to understand how “thinking, language, and culture are real historical forces”.⁸

Deleuze and Guattari use the term “order-words” to critique what they see as a language which is made “not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience”.⁹ Here, “order” brings to mind both a system opposed to chaos and also a top-down command; in this framework, “order” reduces to sameness and homogeneity, and “chaos” to difference. Deleuze and Guattari postulate that all language is predicated on this notion, that its primary function is not communication or the passing on of information, but to order the world. They refer to the syntax, grammar and language given to children in a classroom as “shovels and pickaxes”,¹⁰ tools for organising unruly environments into, for example, ordered formal beds. containing codes for social conduct and imposing “semiotic coordinates possessing all of the dual foundations of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular-plural, noun-verb, subject of the statement-subject of enunciation, etc.)”.¹¹ In other words, grammar is a power structure and contains a binary system for ordering the world. Deleuze and Guattari contend that a “rule of grammar is a power marker before it

⁶ In 1982 Deleuze stated, with reference to Saussure, “that Peirce definitely cannot be part of this, of a similar lineage.” Many contemporary semioticians and linguists deviate from Saussure’s dyadic and monadic system of signs. Among them are Kristeva, Guattari, Barthes, Eco, Deleuze. In recent times developing theories of “biosemiotics” and “ecosemiotics”, clearly a result of geopolitical influences, also bring in extrinsic factors to semiotics.

⁷ This is a riff on Gertrude Stein’s “a rose is a rose is a rose” from her poem *Sacred Emily*. The line has found its way into common usage, and is used by semioticians to discuss tautology, excess, repetition, redundancy and other linguistic quirks.

⁸ Peirce, “On the Nature of Signs,” 12.

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 76.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

is a syntactical marker".¹² They suggest that "[f]orming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions".¹³ Linguist, activist and political philosopher Noam Chomsky goes further to say that grammar reflects competence and cognition, and the individual's innate knowledge of a native language is that which distinguishes us from other lifeforms. He points out that humans have an innate capacity not shared with "rocks, bees, cats and chimpanzees".¹⁴ The social contract is concretised in language.

Philosopher Nicola Maciandaro, meanwhile, critiques the notion of language as the limit which describes human exceptionalism and thus the animal/human boundary as "simply the speciesization, our speciesization, of an omnipresent boundary that has a linguistic structure".¹⁵ He contends that a "purely human discourse, a language for us by us in the narrow sense, is intolerable, maybe impossible, a dark, suffocating house of being".¹⁶ In opposing this distinction between human and animal and other beings (rocks, bees, chimpanzees), Maciandaro instead suggests that "language is the we, a community to which animal, human, and all we see belongs".¹⁷ To find our way out of the dark, suffocating house of being we need to fall into our animality—out of grammatisation and towards the plenitude of speaking in community from all bodies, from the stars to the rocks to the bees to the meat and bones of the self.

The linguistic tendency towards constancy and concretisation of grammar and rules are hallmarks of what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "major language".¹⁸ Alongside, underneath, or inside major language is always the tendency towards change. Interruptions to grammaticality, syntax and semantics cause language to veer away from constancy and towards variability, away from the major science and towards the minor. A hiccup, a cough, a stutter—these non-semantic vocalities are examples of variants that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 101.

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky, *The Architecture of Language*, ed. Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik Nirmalangshu Mukherji, Rama Kant Agnihotri (India: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50-51.

¹⁵ Nicola Maciandaro, "Falling out of Language, Animally," *Whiskey and Fox* 4, no. 1 (2010): 23.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Brent Adkins, *A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 80.

interrupt the ordering of the world. These stutterances aren't external to speech but are simply unheard or suppressed in favour of the maintenance of order. Poet, critic and editor Craig Dworkin—referring to stutters, sounds of breathing, clicks, swallows and so on—reminds us that “a range of corporeal opacities...are...necessary accompaniments to the normal operation of the gross physiological components of speech production”.¹⁹ Like a pebble hitting an object and then careening off on a new trajectory, so too an interruption or a series of interruptions can spawn a multiplicity of vocal trajectories. Deleuze and Guattari would call this a rhizomatic proliferation, rushing out in many directions, like the crazy shattering of glass hit by a rock, as opposed to an arboreal trajectory. The arboreal equates to the tendency towards stasis and the rhizomatic, towards change.

Order-words order the world. Syntax makes the man not a beast. A growl knows no grammar, a moan knows no order, a stutter knows no competence, and panic knows no stability. A purr soothes, a growl stiffens, a nonsense tickles. Affective communication doesn't rely on grammar, it is the kind of communication you listen to with something other than ears. The entire body and its atmospheres are attuned to the vibrations of an affective listening. !Ictic! vocalising, in all its animality (the swan's neck lengthening a vowel, the worms' body composting grammaticality) is a container to make unspeakable noise and communicates more in the language of affect than noun-verb can ever say of panic. !Ictic! vocalities are interruptions, stripped back for survival, saying the most with the least, falling out of grammaticality. It is the disemvowelled, the choking glottal stops, the plosive stutters, the moans that are more breath than speech that I have found carry all the meanings of panic.

Deleuze and Guattari refer to the philosopher of language J.L. Austin in their work on order-words, positing that his notion of “speech acts”²⁰ supports their theory of language as a system of command and control within a social order. J.L Austin uses the term “illocutionary” to refer to the notion that speech and action are inseparable, that certain statements are “performative”. They do something. The “illocutionary” statement contains its action. To promise is not just to say “I promise”, it is to also enact a promise. Just this morning, for example, I had to go to a Justice of the Peace to get a Statutory Declaration

¹⁹ Craig Dworkin, “The Stutter of Form,” in *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 176.

²⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: University Press, 1962), 149.

signed. The entire process was purely performative, from the waiting, to the uttering of the statement, "I declare". This speech act, performed within the confines of the Law Court, was sufficient unto itself within a system of linguistic equilibrium, within an arboreal trajectory. There was nothing further required from me, no separate act, in order to declare. The act was contained within the statement.

The utterance "I AM HAVING A PANIC ATTACK!" is not a panic, but it is a something. It contains illocutionary force, or intention. It is a futile intention. The utterance is a cry for help, with the knowing that there is no help. It also asks others to see what I see, knowing also the impossibility of that.

"I AM HAVING A PANIC ATTACK!" can never be sufficient unto itself, can never "do" anything, can never act upon me or another. The panic attack exists outside of the declaration, "I AM HAVING A PANIC ATTACK!". In order to perform or "do" or "be" PANIC, I need to "make the language system stutter",²¹ by stretching it to its limit, causing language to "quiver in all its limbs"²² and "[tremble] from head to toe".²³

Language needs its vehicle. The voice enters. The voice rides on the breath, in the cathedral of the mouth, with its vaulted roof. The breath trembles as the diaphragm struggles to control inhale and exhale. The tongue becomes a stranger in my mouth, struggling to find purchase, to form shapes, to flow. Panic expels grammar and catches a wild line of vocal flight that vibrates with each ragged exhalation, each spike of excitation that leaps into the heartthroat. As I exit "I", subjectivity evacuated by extreme affect, I also exit the house of language and enter a vocality in excess of language. Elaine Scarry, philosopher of aesthetics, researcher of pain, and author of *The Body in Pain*, notes that pain "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned".²⁴

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Olkowski Boundas, Dorothea (Milton, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), 24-25.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gilles Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

²⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

Philosopher, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Mladen Dolar discusses this excess, or “surplus” through his discussion of “sonorous substance”,²⁵ which embraces the phonological²⁶ features of “prosody, the intonation and the accent, the melody, the redundant elements, the variations”, the “reverberations, the contagion of sounds, co-sonances”.²⁷ Dolar notes these aspects that make up the “bones, flesh, and blood of the voice” are “diluted without remainder into a web of structural traits, a checklist of presences and absences.”²⁸ In other words, the diversity of sounds made by diverse bodies under widely varied conditions are reduced through structural phonology to distinct and fixed categories, and there is apparently nothing that exceeds these categories.

Let’s face it: the voice is a problem for language, for linguistics, for semiotics. Amid this, Dolar proposes that all manner of sounding, voicing, and speaking that interrupts the symbolic order has meaning. He uses the term “non-voice” to speak about the sonorous surplus. This, as critical theorists and rhetoric researchers Joshua Gunn and Jenny Rice put it, is “the meeting place of the symbolic and affect”.²⁹ Dolar proposes that a cough is polyvalent, and so too are hiccups, stammers, repetitions and other noises, and that laughter, screams and singing all have value in the creation of meaning. He explains the problem or paradox thus:

If there is no linguistics of the voice, only the linguistics of the signifier, then the very notion of a linguistics of the non-voice would seem preposterous. Obviously all the non-voices, from coughing and hiccups to babbling, screaming, laughing, and singing, are not linguistic voices; they are not phonemes, yet they are not simply outside the linguistic structure...So the paradoxical fact would be that there may be no linguistics of

²⁵ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

²⁶ The International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences defines phonology as the structural system which “deals with sound structure in individual languages: the way distinctions in sound are used to differentiate linguistic items, and the ways in which the sound structure of the ‘same’ element varies as a function of the other sounds in its context.” Structural phonology includes the study of phonemes as distinct units of sound that together create words.

²⁷ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Joshua Gunn and Jenny Rice, “About Face/Stuttering Discipline,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009): 215.

the voice, yet the non-voice which represents the voice untamed by structure is not external to linguistics.³⁰

Certainly, I have found that all these non-semantic noises bubble up and fall over one another as the tongue struggles to keep up with the flights of thought that panic generates. Suddenly one “no” is not enough, the urgency of the conditions incites repetition and no becomes nonono, running on and on. Nonono becomes nonon o noh oh nohhh ohhhhnnnn, moving further away from the original word and its meaning and towards an intensity of overstatement that is akin to flight, or to running and stumbling, often back and forwards across the same territory. Language begins to stutter, stammer, quiver. In the case of repetition, as audio producer and documentary maker Kelly Hardcastle Jones states, “[t]he constants of language stutter because they are ‘out of place’ in the sense of occupying too many places, over and over. Repetition ‘de-territorializes’, quite literally, by multiplying acceptable numbers of places (territories)³¹”. We see this in the excess of Os that are grammatically impossible, that cannot be written (how many Os are in a moan?), and that cancel each other out, being swallowed by a cough, a hiccup or a stutterstammer.

*the slippery mess of language should never be spokenwritten
or if spokenwritten should be always incomprehensible—
a poetry of affects
that the dramatic open cave of the mouth tries to shape itself around
that the claw of the hand tries to scratch in stone
with a stick in the craw
tensile folds close
in a chokehold around a kh*

ekhsess

*the glottis is buffeted by a plosive ppp ttt
followed soon by the beginning of
no, which becomes*

³⁰ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 32.

³¹ Kelly Hardcastle Jones, "Deleuze's "Stuttering"" (Philosophy Masters, University of Guelph, 2014).

nononon o n oh nohnohh n ooo

*between muteness and excess an ai stops itself short of eeeeeee
and halted by the repetitive gh
an !ictic! prosody is
always proceeding towards a charged silence*

is always veering towards the impossible

To use the linguistic symbolic to communicate an extreme affect such as panic puts one in the awkward and doubly anxious position of contriving utterances that can only ever approximate the affective state. It leaves one grasping for certainty and ending up instead with a vague approximation. An ordered kind of speech is not congruent with the highs of hope and the plunges of hopelessness, the unpredictable speeds, intensities and relationships that are a panic attack. Scarry writes about the failure of language in relationship to pain, and I find it equally relevant to trying to re-present panic states. Scarry calls it the “unshareability” of pain, and says that “[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unshareability, and it ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language.”³² This reminded me of a passage from Barthes, who, when writing on photography and its affects, addresses the problem of using language to describe what moves him. He writes, “[w]hat I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance...The effect is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name; it is sharp and yet lands in a vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence”.³³

It cries out in silence. This feels familiar to me. The crying out in silence. The landing of an affect with no sign.

I can't speak. Muteness falls over me like a darker shadow at the end of a dark day. The words gather at my neck, piling up in a choking bottleneck. One order-word after another piling into chaos, stopped by the impossibility of speaking panic, silenced already, done

³² Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida : reflections on photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 51.

before beginning, without a whisper under the pen's beak. My word-crop is engorged, and, like a bird's pouch of grain, the contents of the crop undergo a breaking down, a fermentation, a maceration before disgorging or evacuating through a short digestive tract—the throat—as sighs or moans, low growls, high notes, breathy ahhhhhhhhhhhhhs

If, in the grip of panic, I call my neighbour and say merely:
I'm anxious.

This is a punctum, it is sedentary, it goes no further, it does not fly to their ear on a wild trajectory to prick the listener, to move them. It does not contain the unruly rollercoaster becoming of anxiety-panic-anxiety. If I can still speak in ways that move forward with coherence, then I am still in the existential plane of the order-word, bordered by skin, knowing my edges. If I tip over into panic-terror, then language is no longer of any matter. No longer made to matter. Is no longer matter.

*today i die without a whisper under the pen's beak
without a stutter, an utter, a mutter
escaping from the vaulted architecture of the throat*

If I break down utterly, become unhinged in the grip of a subjective evacuation, this could incite a response of attunement in my neighbour, it could prick my neighbour, it could land in a vague zone and move them, and our relationship might be changed forever. My neighbour might find a resonance in their own heart and be moved to empathise and comfort. Or it might trigger a meltdown of their own integrity and create an impossible chasm between us.

I'm sorry I can't support you, it's triggering for me, you know, my mother was...mad...

Whatever the response, it throws a spanner in the works of our intersubjective social contract.

What does an evacuation of subjectivity as previously discussed, such as is triggered by a panic attack, mean for language or for speech? To speak about panic I have to determine that there is an "I" that (who) speaks. I could just say right here right now that to speak panic is impossible, because there is no "I" in the grip of the extreme affect of panic to

speak it. I am not my body, but the !ictic! dance of the hands, the feet, and the head is a gestural effort towards *saying the body* that goes on without me.

There is meat (doing its best without me), there is definitely meat, and then there is something else.

I am at a queer conference listening to author and trans-feminist theorist Quinn Eades' discuss trans texts and trauma texts. Afterwards we talk about how to write and speak trauma. We discuss possibilities for writing the trauma body, through what Quinn calls *Écriture Matière*—how to write not *on* the body, not *through* the body but maybe *with* the body? This writing the material (a complicating of Cixous' *Écriture féminine*) and Quinn's riff on the feminist praxis “imagines a vast root system...that spawns all bodies, writing”.³⁴ I am uncertain that it is possible, but Quinn insists that it *must* be possible, it needs to be possible, or we are lost. I wonder, then, how to write without a body, to write from the shimmer. Writer Clarice Lispector contemplates losing the human form, equating it to madness and chaos. For her the experience she had of losing her form for several hours was “an anomaly in the uninterrupted continuity of my civilization, [that] made me experience for an instant vitalizing death”.³⁵ Lispector speaks about the struggle to accept the freedom that comes with disintegration, and the desire to press subjectivity through form back into a frightening amorphous shape she calls “an infinite piece of meat”³⁶ by cutting it up into mouth-sized pieces. Her “terror of remaining undelimited”³⁷ forces her to attempt to find form and make meaning, while also accepting that in order to remain undelimited she would need to “re-die”.³⁸

Can the meat speak?

There is meat and there is breath.

³⁴ Francesca Rendle-Short, Quinn Eades, Barrie Jean Borich, Peta Murray, and Lawrence Lacambra Ypil, "Nonfiction as Queer Aesthetic: Score for Five Speakers in Two Acts.," *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 20, no. 2 (2018). muse.jhu.edu/article/704323.

³⁵ Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Idra Novey, ed. Benjamin Moser (New York: New Directions, 2012), 7.

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 8.

The meat moves the mouth

The breath carries the voice

The breath brightens the blood and makes the meat blue

I die and I die and I die.

I watch myself now from the moment of my own death, and live in its presence/presents always and forever



THURSDAY, 6 OCTOBER 2016 FROM 19:30-21:30 UTC+10:30

Virginia Barratt: *the expanse of a dead open mouth*

Griffith QLD College of Art 226 Grey Street, South Bank, Building S.07 Room 2.17

Event by Queensland School of Continental Philosophy

Duration: 2 hr

Public . Anyone on or off Facebook

45 people attended

Transcript of video excerpt

There is no careful destratification, there is only a blow, a seizure, and line of flight set free without careful consideration on a bright day, on a blue day, on a day when the sun is in your eyes, on a day when you walked from here to there, in the mundane way we walk from here to there, in the middle of a sentence.

begin with some paper

that speaks in folds
speak back to it doubletalk
which is no talk at all
the pages are
voiceless opposites
wormholes to panic
come back, though.
come back when the sun presses against the moon.

this presentation is not a panic attack.
or this presentation is a panic attack.
methodology: all the crying in the academy.
tw: poetry

Virginia paces, fiddles, rustles in their paper suit at the front of a seminar room.

*Ok! Today I am having a panic attack
No no, Today I am speaking to panic and it is speaking back to me
ahhh, or panic is doing me, or...I am doing panic
anyway, today I am performing panic*

Bear with me. Our relationship may become strained. There is an expectation that exists here, in this room, that I will observe time and linearity in coherent ways, that I will reinforce the integrity of this space, of the subjectivity I am wearing in order to separate myself from you. I am here to tell you something. You are here to listen.

You expect me to know what I am talking about, yes?

Clearly, that isn't going to happen.

This stuttering rupture of the natural order-words is humiliating for me and uncomfortable for an audience of listeners. I really hope you can be embarrassed for me. I am embarrassed. I hope I fuck this up so that the stickiness of my execrable, excessive panic sticks to you.

My panic is abundant.

My shit is abundant.

You might notice that I am clearing my throat, stuttering, taking uncomfortable pauses, searching for words, my hands might gesture strange mudra, or will fly to my throat to try and ease the passage of air. There might be lachrymal overflow and a tightness in my vocalising, or tremor. Other things are happening which you can't see but are a language of their own, the drip and flow of noradrenaline and serotonin, the electrical shocks, the adrenal bath which I can discharge by flicking my hands and fingers.

All this is deterritorialised speech at the limit, becoming-gesture.



Figure 2: V Barratt, *the expanse of a dead open mouth*, Queensland School of Continental Philosophy, Griffith University, 2016

Watch the expanse of a dead open mouth here [\[LINK\]](#)

Part of my practice across years now has been the creation of paper pelts made of crumpled paper. The pelts take all and any forms, can look ghostly, creature-like, skinned, or like a cloud or the sky itself hanging. They can look like grubs. They are made of crumpled paper sewn onto a skin of cloth, and the paper is brittle and translucent. Sometimes there is writing on the crumpled paper and sometimes the paper is blank. The pelts are black or white and drip with strings that are knotted and stretchy and connective and slime-like. I was wearing one in the *expanse...* presentation at the QSCP. I've worn the pelts in other places and at other times they have been hanging around, like lowering clouds, or the roof of a cave. I was never quite sure what they were *for*, but I know now they are *for* many things. In process, the crumpling is anxiolytic. The single task to fold and fold hundreds of pieces of paper is a portal to flow for me, no distractions. I dive into

repetition and therein lies calm. The task is apparently unproductive, in terms of use and value, but generative and emergent. The paper itself rustles. A single crumpled ball moves restlessly, shifts this way and that, anxiously. The paper speaks, whispers, holds its secrets. It is fold upon fold. I first smooth out the paper, pressing it flat with both palms, from the centre outward. It is blank. All is immanent. The smooth space of the white page mirrors my blank face, my blank screen. In the crumpled paper are all possible writings, all possible meanings. The practice becomes one of following the fold, in which each fold "becomes always the fold of another in a series that knows no point of rest."³⁹ To create works which eschew a one-to-one relationship between writing and speech in favour of unreadable/unspeakable pockets of meaning and perpetual becoming/differentiation. The crumpling/sewing process is discontinuous, secretive, redactive and productive of multiplicity of texts. The fold of the fold of the fold creates more faces from which possibility, form and thought can emerge.

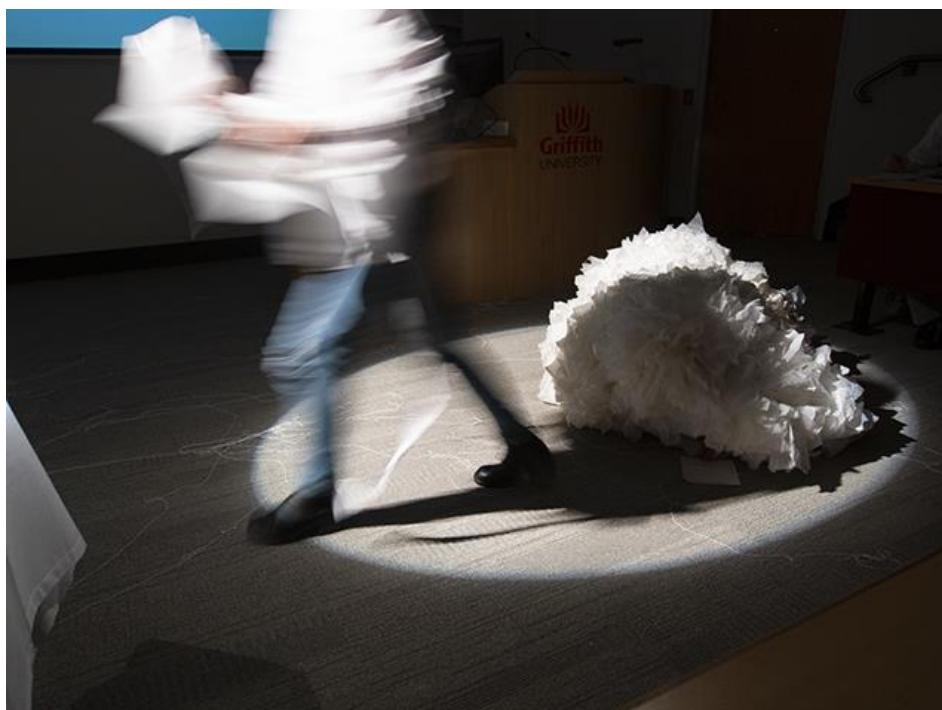


Figure 3: V Barratt, paper pile costume, *the exquisite fold, the immanent word* (with J Barratt), Artist Book Brisbane Event, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2017

³⁹ Stephen Heath, "Ambivalences: Notes for reading Joyce," in *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French* ed. Derek Attridge & Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge University Press, 1984).



Figure 4: V Barratt, *paper sculpture*, 2016



Figure 5: V Barratt, detail, *paper costume*, 2019

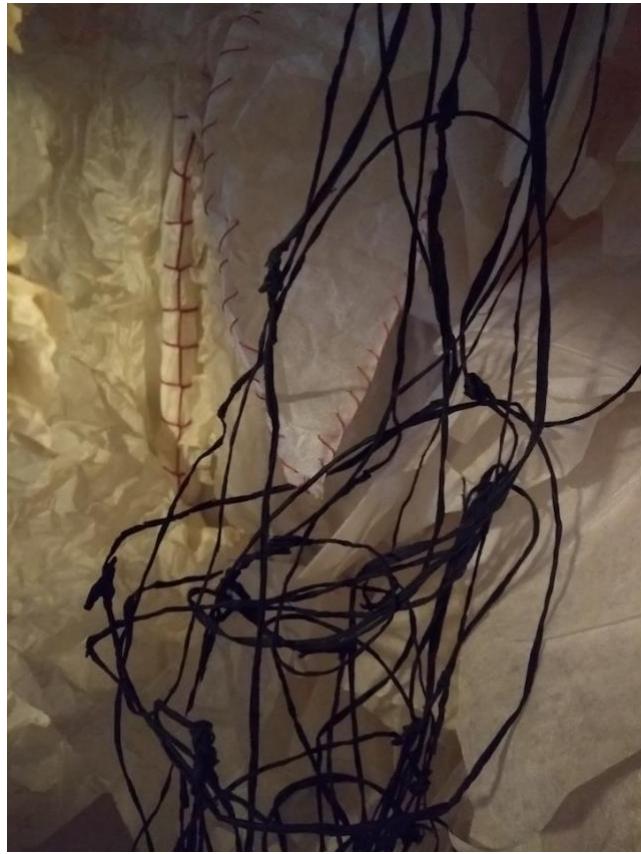


Figure 6: V Barratt, *paper costume and shifu* (paper string), 2018–19

The possibilities that I seek are the impossibilities. The impossibility of making a panic leap into my body, into the body of the text, and leap off the page into the bodies of others. For once I want to entertain panic, to invite panic in, to not avoid crossing paths with panic in this domicile we share. Panic, the creep living in my crawlspace, the co-dependent companion you never see, keeping strange hours. The absence that is always a palpable presence. The darkened corridors, the clinging ghosts of night. In Paris, when I was asked by a member of the audience why I would want to put myself through the pain and potential danger of calling on panic in the service of performance, I explained, haltingly, that my body was the laboratory, and that the performance, which entailed calling panic in, was the affective experiment. There is no other way to do it. The affect is carried on the voice, the voice which falls out of the symbolic order and into the linguistic space of the remainder, the non-semantic vocality, or the non-voice in order, as writer and affect theorist Anna Gibbs puts it, “to operate directly on the body of the reader via the transmission of a state which exceeds the cognitive communication of meaning...to think beyond performativity to interactivity”.⁴⁰ This interactivity that Gibbs speaks of is also the

⁴⁰ Anna Gibbs, "Writing and Danger: The Intercorporeality of Affect," in *Creative Writing: theory beyond practice*, ed. Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady (Teneriffe: Post Pressed, 2006).

interactivity I was referring to, one in which there is a feedback loop between the text (and in this case the performance is a text) and the audience.

Of course, I cannot stand in all my academic integrity and give a lecture on panic, since this “necessarily entails the alienation of the very thing [I am] trying to describe” and that “any attempt to point at affect and describe it systematically will necessarily end in failure.”⁴¹ I need to enter the place of loss, however painful, and let affect do its work to fly me away from the integrity of my subjectivity, my body, away from the linearity of storying, away from coherence; I need to do this in order to unlock an affective kind of listening in the audience. In order to do this in performance, I reach out via the voice, but it is not the voice anybody is expecting to hear, especially not in the context of a prescribed institutional space, or a place that the public might gather to be entertained. That voice, the voice which lectures, prioritises an ordered kind of meaning, and that is not in play here. That voice disappears in favour of the stutterance and the mutterance. In other words, as Dolar says, listeners in an institutional context favour the meaning conveyed by speaking over such non-linguistic elements as pace, tonality, pitch and accent. These nuances are quickly assimilated in order to understand the phonemic and semiotic meaning.⁴² The voice that stutters, carrying affect on the breath, instead holds its meaning in the nuanced and non-semiotic elements. It arrives at the listener from a particular body, bringing all its “bodyness” with it. It is dense and meaty; it meets other bodies and moves them.

Literary and cultural theorist Steven Connor taps into this concept of bodied vocality when he writes that “[t]he voice goes out from the body as the body’s twin—as a body double...there is no disembodied voice—no voice that does not have somebody, something of somebody’s body, in it...voice is the body’s second life, something between a substance and a force—a fluency that is yet a form.”⁴³ It is this capacity of the voice leaving the body with something of the body in it that gives the voice, with all its nuance, the power to wrap around the ear, and move into the gut, to vibrate the body of another on its affective trajectory. The breath, carrying the voice, travels. Endlessly.

⁴¹ Jenna Tiitsman, "A Question on Affect," *The Immanent Frame* (August 15th, 2011).

<https://tif.ssrc.org/2011/08/15/a-question-on-affect/>.

⁴² Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 15.

⁴³ Steven Connor, *Beyond Words* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 17.

A very particular kind of embodied voice is addressed by philosopher and feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero when thinking about song, singing and embodiment, and its affective power. She invokes the figure of The Siren—these once “omniscient narrators”, in a Homeric tradition, who became speechless in the contemporary Western imagination, falling into a non-semantic animality. It is a shift from being powerful orators to inarticulate and yet seductive creatures whose utterances are dangerous, fascinating and profoundly corporeal. These sonorous emissions of hybrid creatureness are “unhinged from the symbolic order”, unfettered by reason, and have no need of linguistics, since they are singing directly to and from a prelinguistic embodiment.⁴⁴

The exit from language, speech and the symbolic order is familiar in those other vocal virtuosi, operatic singers or Divas. Cavarero writes that the “pure, sonorous material” of the opera singer “expands to the point of dissolving the significance of the words.”⁴⁵ Dolar contends, similarly, that all singing “brings the voice energetically to the forefront, on purpose, at the expense of meaning.”⁴⁶ He goes on to say that by blurring the words of the lyric to incomprehensibility, singing is “bad communication”. Anybody who has been to the opera knows this. Yet this blurring of the word, this incomprehensibility, does not inhibit understanding at a cellular level, at the level of affect. Operatic singing takes “the distraction of the voice seriously, and turns the tables on the signifier; it reverses the hierarchy—let the voice take the upper hand, let the voice be the bearer of what cannot be expressed by words”⁴⁷

Vocal Womb: Panic Opera

If it is true of human beings that language enables us to be where we are not and prevents us from ever being anywhere but beside ourselves, then it is the voice which stretches us out between here and elsewhere.

—Steven Connor, *The Strains of the Voice*⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Adriana Cavarero, "The Vocal Body: Extract from A Philosophical Encyclopedia of the Body," *Qui Parle* 21, no. 1 (2012): 76. <https://www.humanities.uci.edu/sites/default/files/document/Cavarero.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁶ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Steven Connor, "The Strains of the Voice," Steven Connor ed. *Steven Connor*, 2004,

In 2018, opera singer and classical and electronic composer Eve Klein made an aria of my poem *mMouth hHouse pPanic cCathedral* and performed it at the arts festival MonaFoma in Hobart, Tasmania—quite spectacularly—with a video laryngoscope inserted down her nostril and into her larynx, so the private part of her singing was projected, in massive larger-than-life video, behind her as she sang.

mMouth hHouse pPanic cCathedral⁴⁹

in the panic cathedral
of the divine ratio in Laon
where uncanny angels
sing mall music for the devout

i leave my body behind

the
umbra
of me
—a
dark
ghost
rising—
ascending
in perfect
spirals of
slowfast

intensities
into her
ribbed
arches

outside the cows peer over the parapets
the patient cows
carrying the weight of church and state
in the service of

man god man

interior: day. there is enough room here
—buttressed, soaring, arced and naved—
to leave myself behind
this is an architecture abject enough to hold
the porous poetry of affects
i vomit out of the million million holes that i call a body

for the *nth* time today i die with a mouthful of incoherence and

while waiting for beckett

the dirt from your cobblestreeted shoes
and if writing be speaking
and listening and reading, then
today i die without a whisper under the pen's beak
without a stutter, an utter, a mutter
escaping from the vaulted architecture of the throat

you know i am indebted to language but feel sick with it

st therese, creamy, in her mercy asks me:
how long can you keep this lead on your tongue?
how many stones in your mouth?

how much the taste of iron, tongue clamped by molar and canine?
how tolerable
the
shape
of a triangle
ringing at 12700 Hz

impossible

i grapple with my unbodied jaw to release !ictic! plosives
they skitter across the floor
they fall all the way down the stairs
they leap out of chairs in fright
they rattle like 2 pastel pills in a cup
they crawl under the blankets
they are loosed like frightened birds upon the air

they repeat, uselessly, more than once but never enough:

there's nothing to be done
 there's nothing to be done
 there's nothing to be done
 there's nothing to be done

but
all those contortions without which
 no speech possible

i will fail trying

Klein had also arranged a poem written by Quinn Eades' and we both became part of the performance, writing on our laptops to the side of the stage synchronous to the singing.

The resulting text was published in Axon Journal
Please find a link to the performance documentation here
Artists and Credits

Under the cold Tasmanian earth in a wine-smelling barrel room, I sit alongside Quinn Eades as one part of a two-hearted synch-breathed ekphrasis assemblage. We are performing writing in-situ as Klein, a music technologist and popular music scholar, an operatic mezzo soprano and composer, renders our poetry as operatic voice—or post-opera, to use a term proposed by Jelena Novak. Post-opera is employed by Novak to speak about theorising a body-voice relationship in contemporary, post-dramatic and media-augmented operatic works, “where interventions upon the body-voice relation open possibilities not only for expanding the borders of the opera world further, but also for what is considered body and voice in opera.”⁵⁰

For the duration of the performance, Klein sings—if such extreme vocalising can be called singing—with a laryngoscope camera inserted into her nasal cavity. Turning the inside out, the camera captures and projects the labour of “the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucus membranes, the nose”⁵¹ onto the walls of the barrel room. This real-time video emphasises the “grain” of the voice—“the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language”.⁵² The voice thus mediated and dislocated from any point of origin creates a second body of Klein, “...for voice is not simply an emission of the body; it is also the imaginary production of a secondary body, a body double: a voice-body”.⁵³

*sound emerges from the panic cathedral
the pigeons roost on the buttressed architectures
she
is a cathedral
her throat
an ornate confabulation that echoes those other lips
sonance bounces around the vaulted roof of her palate raised high*

⁵⁰ Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Re-Inventing the Voice-Body* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2015), 8.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 183.

⁵² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 66.

⁵³ Connor The Strains of the Voice.

*spiralling up and out
falling on the ears of the rapt
noise emerges from all the holes*

from the million million holes we call a body.

The projected image, “the body’s twin”,⁵⁴ so wetly rendered in shades of red—a complex architecture of quavering muscular contractions, saliva and membrane—betrays the apparent ease with which the Diva body appears to be producing sound. Eve’s performance of Diva is perfected and ironic, a doll (un)dressed in eighteenth-century underwear, formal yet altogether improper, the underwear revealing and concealing the singing body, the movement of lungs and diaphragm barely evident under her corsetry.

This disjunct between the extremity of the vocal performance and the stillness of the performer’s body creates an incredulous and wondrous gap. The audience is rapt. It seems impossible that the flight and fall, the hovering and quavering, the depth and power, the violence and poignancy of the voice could issue from the body on stage. This gap is amplified as Klein’s assistant reaches under the bodice of her underclothing (seemingly *into* the performer’s body) to place contact mics on her skin, creating an uncanny image of Klein as ventriloquist dummy, throwing and stretching the voice between here and elsewhere, dislodging it from the on-stage spectacle. This is a voice without a home, without a lodging, shimmering without skin in and around the air, wrapping bodies up in shivers and crawling into organs. This wandering voice creates an acousmatic tension in the work. Pierre Schaeffer, audio engineer and music theorist, contended that the acousmatic listening experience was one that enabled sound to be a “sonorous object”, independent of its source⁵⁵. In this case the source body is the body of Klein. Her voice is not amplified, there is no “veil” of speakers through which the sound emerges. Instead, her voice is thrown against the walls and bounces around, creating a surround sound experience with no single point of origin. The barrel room, the site of the performance, creates an acoustic environment which seems to produce sound from its very walls. We see Klein moving her mouth, we see a singer onstage, we see the voice

⁵⁴ Connor, *Beyond Words*, 17.

⁵⁵ Pierre Schaeffer, “Acousmatics,” in *Audio culture : readings in modern music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 79.

box on the wall but “[t]he fact that we can see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma”⁵⁶.

The mouth is not made for speaking everything

Behind the audience are five additional hanging screens—delicate, porous, just enough to capture light in the weave—one behind the other, holding the projection of her muscular throat contractions in an iterative degenerating analogue of a hologram, like photocopying a photocopy. Each screen catches the leaking light of the screen in front—a remainder—and then catches the remainder of the remainder and so on, the body becoming less coherent and more imperceptible to our ordinary vision in an infinite regression. The body becoming less form and more shimmer, falling out of its skin, losing its boundaries as the voice renders language less form and more shimmer, the sign falling away from the signifier, voice to the front, language behind. The remainder of the body and the remainder of language together becoming atomic particles that are senseless on their own, carried on the breath, carried on light, a thrilling decomposition.

While the galvanising image is the spectacular projection of the glistening red wet cavern of a throat, from whence the sound apparently issues—albeit removed from Klein, almost surgically—it is this assemblage of bodies in excess of the body, projected, multiplied, de/generating and feeding back, that highlights the emancipation of the voice from its origin, and prompts the audience to wonder from *which* body does the sound arise.

Incoherence. I leave my body behind. I leave my body behind.

Klein removes the laryngoscope, her assistant cleans it and reinserts it. Quinn and I write this moment, too, from “offstage”. There is a hush. And then. Breath, piano, ghosting, bell tolling, triangle ting, cawing, cooing, footsteps.

Klein begins to sing the panic I poemed as an aria. From all around the room a panic body, a pack of panics, a shimmer of panics emerges in breathy, breathless startles, making pack sounds deep in its throat, throwing mouth shapes at the abyss,

⁵⁶ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70.

deteritorialising and reterritorialising in a rapid cycle between high notes and low, between hope and hopelessness, between integrity and dissolution.

The performance of writing/back to the poem that I wrote, and that Klein rendered operatic is a strange act of listening/not listening, looking/not looking, of attuning the body to attend to the sounds rather than trying to identify parts of speech. This act of straining to decipher familiarity is hard to overcome, but the body eventually locks into the frequency of the work like fine-tuning to a radio station and can then experience, rather than listen to, these excessive flights and falls of a vocality at the limit of the body's capacities. My attentioning body began to respond to vocal intensities which are not-speech, or are "postlinguistic". This, Dolar proposes, is "most spectacularly illustrated by singing" in that singing "turns the tables on the signifier", allowing "the voice be the upper hand".⁵⁷ By eschewing the primacy of intelligibility, grammaticality and narrative in favour of profundity, as Dolar calls it, the voice becomes the "bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning which, supposedly, got lost with language."⁵⁸

Lecercle calls that which cannot be expressed by words "emotional meaning" in which a certain "quantity of affect" can be conveyed.⁵⁹ Lecercle here is speaking of "nonsense", as can be found in the works of Edward Lear, for example, and argues that a certain "sense" can be derived from non-sense⁶⁰. The non-sense of redundancy, the non-sense of that which falls out of speech and is recuperated in "poetic texts, in the illuminations of mystics and the delirium of logophiliacs or mental patients".⁶¹ Operatic singing, with its amplification of flows and intensities, makes itself functionally redundant in a linguistic sense.

The poem was/is a work already made from scraps, already upreaped from the trash heap of language. Through the operatic rendering, the original poem is assigned the condition of substratum. The aria hangs off certain words, soars or falls, touches them

⁵⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁹ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 4-5.

⁶⁰ I grew up with the nonsense alphabet rhymes of Edward Lear, and found the affective prosody, the rhythm and rhyme to be soothing and pleasurable. I wonder now if there is something about this repetitive rhyming that is soothing in the same way that chanting promotes a downregulation of the nervous system.

⁶¹ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 6.

lightly or breaks them up into morphemes and phonemes, creating new units of meaning from the material, building atop the poem an affective soundscape. This next-remove operatic iteration of a poemed approximation of panic reaches further into the heart of that darkness and turns away again from what Deleuze and Guattari would call the “regime of signs”⁶² and its order-words. The first turn away was when the poem was written, away from the constancy of relations between parts of language towards a minoritarian language of constant variation, of degradation and rejection, of excess and redundancy, of recuperation and repurposing. A confounding and affective languaging. This second turn, the operatic turn, comes even closer to voicing panic than the poetic turn, producing, as it does, a second body, a voice-body, a multiplicity of bodies, a shimmer of bodies: a *shimmer body* through the dissolution of the fixed subjectivity of a voice-producing-body.

Say a body

Bodies are made by the saying of the body.

Bodies only exist because we language them into existence. They are part of a linguistic structure. The arm is connected to the hand. The body is part of a regime of signs, a concrete structure that is coherent and universal. To disconnect the hand from the arm we must dismantle language.

Say a body

Say a panic body, say a shimmer body. Why do I want to disconnect the hand from the arm? Because the shimmer body knows no arm, no hand, and no relationship between the two. Panic is the kind of shimmer body I am familiar with. It has capacities that my body in the world with its subjectivity intact, does not. It speaks its own mind, and sees what I, wearing my body, cannot. The shimmer body is a constant companion, the absence that is always a palpable presence.

⁶² Deleuze and Guattari are referring in general to semiotics when they refer to a “regime of signs”, but they contend this is only one signifying regime among many, in particular due to the fact that they don’t believe in the universalisation of language, or pre-existing form, and are highly critical of an endless system of signs all referring endlessly to one another.

i depart from myself, i glitch and shimmer, i no longer belong to my self, and if that self had a face, arms, a head, a voice, then i no longer have a face, arms, a head, a voice. I am no longer I.

Connor proposes that it is the voice that stretches us out between here and elsewhere,⁶³ on a thread, an undersea cable, a telephonic wire, a datastream. The voice riding on the breath that stretches infinitely carries us away from our selves into a second body, birthed on the breath, the body beside itself. The shimmer body expresses the excesses of language which the body-in-the-world, constrained as it is by the symbolic order, can't mouth. The excess which no body in its right mind can speak.

Subjectivity trying to escape the body looks like a dance. It wriggles its way out of the skin, escaping through the million million holes we call a body in an !ictic! dance of head, hands, feet. The dance is set in motion by shocks, frights, noise on the inside. The fingers flick, extruding sticky strings of adrenal excess, streaming out through the fingertips, filling the space around with a web of dripping fear. Hands dart rhythmically up to the face as if checking the contours, like a blind person coming to know the face of a stranger. The knees bend and flex, walking nowhere, or trying to run away from their body. The chin dips towards the chest to counteract a head that tries to fall back on the neck of a swan and open wide its mouth to let out the swarm inside. Sitting and standing are unsatisfactory, only flight will suffice.

This !ictic! choreography is gesturally noisy, generating a whole voice-body, as Connor would call it, in which “the work of gesture is being taken over into sound, and voice has migrated into the fingers.”⁶⁴ The noisy voice-body is a “fundamentally deterritorializing phenomenon”, “destabilizing[...]communicative norms and hierarchies”,⁶⁵ and the ordered march of language. This kind of !ictic! body noise eliminates what Barthes calls the grain of the voice and facilitates the production of a language articulated not with the tongue and the glottis but with handless arms and other phantom limbs, the flying fingers, the extensible neck, the ghastly restless legs, running running away.

⁶³ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 11.

⁶⁴ Connor The Strains of the Voice. PAGE

⁶⁵ Aaron Cassidy, "Noise and the Voice: Exploring the Thresholds of Vocal Transgression," in *Noise in and as Music*, ed. Aaron Cassidy and Aaron Einbond (Huddersfield, United Kingdom: University of Huddersfield Press, 2013), 43.

Deleuze and Guattari say that “It is by headlong flight that things progress and proliferate. Panic is creation”.⁶⁶ I understand this, as I depart. Panic is one of many ways to experience becoming, that perpetually productive state which never ends, but flies on, loops back, emerges, becomes precarious, thin, barely perceptible, then strong again. Panic is a particularly unwieldy flight of becoming, and a risky one, given its proximity to annihilation, the body at its limit, subjectivity evacuated, always already dead, annihilation a condition of life.

A departure, with the threat or promise of an arrival. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987)

The shimmer body—as sonorous object, spectral energy, linguistic hauntology, subjective evacuation, affective vibration—is an arrival of sorts. An arrival elsewhere, driven by a continual departure, or perhaps headlong flight, not in order to disappear but in order to find connection, and to be heard by those who lend ears to the sounding of the residua. This being heard is more an apprehension of the shimmer than an audible order of voice. The shimmer body does not “say a body”, it resists, says a panic, says a dissolution, remembers us to the in-between.

In her panic cathedral. Her latex-covered fingers clasped. Uncanny angels sing.

⁶⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.