

Christof Migone

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slippery threads

(an amplified concert critique)¹

BABYLON NO.1: LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S POSSESSION

My first anxiety attack occurred during a Louis Armstrong concert. I was nineteen or twenty... the atmosphere warmed up fast... my heart began to accelerate, becoming more important than the music, shaking the bars of my rib cage, compressing my lungs so the air could no longer enter them. Gripped by panic at the idea of dying there in the middle of spasms, stomping feet, and the crowd howling, I ran into the street like someone possessed... "I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to die" (Cardinal in Stallybrass & White, *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression* 181).

Marie Cardinal is facing death by contamination, death by Artaud's plague. Not the death of performance, but death by performance. She is running, she is going, fast forwarding the future, sprinting to her death. What engenders Marie Cardinal's phobic phonics performance? Is her asphyxiation caused by Satchmo's "quixotic leaps or ellipses (quantum lump in one's throat)" (Mackey, *Djbot Baghostus's Run* 19)? The sonic and linguistic channels are saturated with soma. The stage and what it emanates slips inside skin and impacts the core. She is out of wind. As a speaker, she is blown, ruptured by frequencies beyond her capacity. She is running and the wind is blowing against her, she is advancing backwards, her fast forward is rewinding.

Is her panic a somatic manifestation of feeling the stage throb in all its "common differentness" (Leiris in Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* 192n3)? Michel Leiris used this formulation in relation to the absurdity of speaking of African sculpture as a single category, here I am speculating that Cardinal is possessed by a similar undifferentiated and undifferentiable fear. Playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo talks of "La importancia infinita del caso singular [the infinite importance of the singular case]" (Buero Vallejo, *El Tragaluz* 67). Cardinal's asphyxiation is such a case, particular as well as infinitely common.

There is something akin to birth in this near-death experience. Cardinal joins Armstrong on stage and voices the desperate lyric "I'm going to die." The performance *on* stage is about running *off* stage. One assumes from her account that her aphonia is temporary, another voice will emerge out of the loss. "I'm going to be born." A voice like your own but distilled, as in extracted, your own

but multiplied by its exposure to the outside. It is the singular amidst the plural, the inside amidst the everywhere of the outside, the interior decorated as exterior.

This moment is one where birth is no longer tied to genealogy. "What do I have to throw away? Everything by God everything. I am stark naked. I've thrown everything away. My genealogy" (Césaire, *At the Locks of the Void* 203). Aimé Césaire is also within close range of the void. Hélène Cixous provides the multiplication table for this death-birth moment: "I am the son, the daughter, my father, his father and my own son, never ceasing to remember myself, I am heir to myself, never forgetting that I am me" (Cixous, *Inside* 78).

The moment ends as soon as it begins, even though it seems to last forever. It is the race which begins by the end, the birth which comes at the end, as with Edouard Glissant's "prophetic vision of the past" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 64). It must end in order to last forever, it is that speed up which slows everything down. *She is advancing backwards*. Moment which is out of time, outof time as soon as it occurs. *Her fast forward is rewinding*. Césaire clamors: "The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the world of course" (Césaire, *Notebook of a return to the Native Land* 55).

STRETCHES INFINITE

The stage is a speed up. It is where the start and the end coincide. A place where the world can start from the end. From the stage, the first strains emitted by a group of musicians into a space invade all bodies occupying the space and reverberate on all surfaces in its path. Architecture is stretched to contain time signatures. Eventually each sound fades and is replaced by the next one, its only lasting effect is in the memory of the ears within range. This moment when a room is filled for the first time by the speed of sound is always tentative, it acquaints all involved to each other - the sounds with the players with everyone's ears and with the room. What is this multiplied and multiplying coincidence? A convergence establishing an inordinariness, or, by its sheer ubiquity, simply yet another set of individuals inhabiting a stage and amplifying themselves? For now, the stage is revving up, the first emissions have marked an aural amplitude shift, the entrance of the sonic attack which is resonating throughout our architectures.

In light of Cardinal's flight what are our expectations or fears of the stage, the staged, and the staging? Whether on or off, what happens when a stage does not split a space in two but collapses time and multiplies singularities? Gilles Deleuze speaks of being constantly on the lookout, in this case, on the listenout (*être aux aguets*) for the encounter: the collision between oneself and a painting, a film, a music, a person, another, an other (Deleuze, *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze avec*

Claire Parnet 1997). The wait can sometimes take forever. Often, the stage is ossified, a mere structure elevating or focusing attention as opposed to a context with the force necessary for the speed up. The stage and its emissions are standardized, we go through the motions, the motions go through us.

Sometimes, however, the motions move us beyond where our feet can take us. Sarah Vaughan's rendition of "Misty" at the Tivoli Garden in 1963 contains the speed up. Errol Garner and Johnny Burke's composition opens with the phrase "Look at me...," Vaughan voices this phrase taking the standard within her and digesting its parameters. She pilots the standard according to her currents. The standard marks the thread of history, the thread can either be taut and rigid or pliable and flexible. Vaughan imposes the latter. And she takes the audience in tow. In this rendition, Henri Michaux joins the cast as a mescalinated audience member and the musician on stage responds in tow: "Cette réponse que fait au monde le musicien [...] réponse par le fluide, par l'aérien, par le sensible. J'étais dedans, englouti ["The response which the musician gives to the world [...] a response via the fluid, the air, the sensate. I was inside, engulfed]" (Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* 80). He envisions music as a conjunction of laces suspending him from the drug induced *glissement* overtaking him:

Horreur!
Je glisse
Tout glisse
Il n'y a plus que ce qui glisse
Rien n'arrête plus, et cela continue et glisse
autour de moi glisse, et en moi glisse
il faudrait

il faudrait...
.....
Musique qui me laisse suspendu
ses lacets
ses lacets
qui me tient dans ses lacets.

[Horror!
I slip
Everything slips
There is nothing but that which slips
Nothing ever stops, and that continues and slips
around me slips, inside me slips
there should be

there should be...
.....
Music which leaves me suspended
its laces
its laces
which holds me in its laces (Michaux, 77)].

The second line of "Misty": "I am as helpless as a kitten up a tree" expresses a vulnerability, even a fear not unlike Cardinal's or Michaux's. Towards the end of the song, the vulnerability speeds us, one of her sidemen (Kirk Stuart on piano) joins in the vocal and the song unravels. They moan, groan, gasp the standard off its moorings.

"The point is to make language itself cry, to make it stutter, mumble or whisper" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 25). For Deleuze, what makes sense is nonsense. The point is to make the thread itself twirl, to make it vibrate, tangle or break. For Nathaniel Mackey, it is a collective stutter (Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* 29). Coincidentally, Deleuze is then found impersonating Stuart, and duets with Sarah Vaughan as they unravel "Misty," disintegrate it for a moment. They become "the intersection of two lines of articulation - doubling the voice, splitting the voice, breaking the voice, tearing it" (Mackey, *Cante Moro* 205). They are one voice in two bodies. Time is no longer kept, no finger snapping, time is stretched, time is explicit, sexualized. Even the "Excuse me" ending the unraveling is lascivious, mischievous. It is not an apology, it is "excuse" as in "free from a charge," the charge of the standard, of the genre, of history (Glissant's vertigo of history) (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 161). Yet it is within the standard, within the charge, in fact, the charge is necessary to its own unloading. As when one speaks of lifting a weight off of one's shoulders, one should not neglect to think that that is also the precise moment of the weightlifter's final exertion. It is the culminating moment when the weight is lifted above the head and is at its most weighted. When you are finally free of the weight, you are carrying the most weight. You are a ligament, bound to be unbound. You are stretched infinite.

REPROGRAMMED NOTES

In early December of 1998, Henry Threadgill did a series of concerts at the Knitting Factory, a long standing haven for experimental musics in New York City. His statement included in the program notes performs the infinite stretch. *I do music period.* ² Music does him, comma. *Jazz, European orchestral music. American religious music, white and black. Parades.* The Babelian performance, the Very Very Circus. Repeat repetition. *All types of functional music, period.* Functional? Mechanical? All of it, engine forward. *Whatever you don't use just goes out the gills.* Goes out the Threadgill. Can one adjust the filtering capacity of one's gills? *I hear a sound inside and don't know what it is.* Where is the interior "I" in relation to the ensemble? Exteriorized on the sheet music sitting on the music stands? *It's just a big glob of sound, a murky thing with no defined edges.* Derrida's invagination. Though, its undefinableness is not to be mistaken for an indefensibleness –see Sukie's "vagina dentata" (Hartman 41). *I'm interested in sound.* Sound invaginates music. It is the eloped envelope. *I don't care how you generate it - electronically, non-electronically.* All trans- will do, transformation, transpiration, transmission, transfinitude. *I don't care if it's an ice cube in a*

bucket. Silence is a sound, John Cage is audienced; Bataille also: "the word silence is still a sound" (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 13). *Here's an equation: sound equals vehicle equals band*. Substitute "equals" by "multiply." *The band is the sound*. The sound is disbanded. *It's a multipurpose, multifaceted octopus*. Slippery, slimy. *If I'm lucky, this is the vehicle that will let me create hundreds of pieces*. Generative and generational. *Imagine writing a story in English and French, going back and forth*. Beckett's autotranslations and his practice of rewriting translations by hand in order to hear the voice of the text via his hand (Janvier in Armel, *Ludovic Janvier: Beckett était obsédé par la voix* 34); Louis Wolfson's schizotranslations. *That's the real reality of what I do*. Double real, hyperreal, the necessary emphasis of the obscured. "The right to a shared obscurity" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 161), Glissant's call to thicken the layers, to accumulate levels, to repeat stubbornly, echoes Threadgill's "real reality" in full polyphony.

GLISSANT SLIPS IN

Edouard Glissant is slippery. Glissant, slippery, *il glisse*. Given Threadgill's octopus, it seems opportune to reconsider the slippery character, the "slimy" character, even the "shady" character. After all, aren't those characters cast out, booted out and kept out precisely because they slide off the mouth of the voracious hegemonious? A dry hegemonic mouth, whose appetite is not driven by hunger but by power. A desert mouth which embodies the cannibal. The cannibalism of mimesis; it can only consume its mirror. It is the homogeneous machine. Glissant is the slipperyslope through which the Hegelian steel framed house of cards slips, trips, and crumbles. He voices other ways to conceive the epistemological: "To declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 169). Derrida's reading of the events at the twirly threaded tower of Babel examine such an attempt. Babel is where we attempted to make a name for ourselves but God responded by imposing his name: "[h]e scatters genealogical filiation. He breaks the lineage. He *at the same time* imposes and forbids translation" (Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* 170). The recording studio is all set up to master the record, but the master DAT (digital audio tape) recorder is having problems reading the sync. Without sync, the translation will either not work at all or glitches will disrupt the information throughout. It is the Babel master, a simultaneous translator where simultaneity has dropped its prefix.

Derrida later delineates the full consequences of this archetypal and allegorical example: "[H]e interrupts the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism. He destines them to translation; in a stroke he delivers a universal reason but he simultaneously limits its very universality: forbidden transparency, impossible univocity" (Derrida 174). Hence the octopus's multipartite phonics. "Translation becomes law, duty, debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge" (Derrida 174). As with the weightlifter stretched infinite. "Such would be the Babelian performance" (Derrida 175).

Thus, Glissant's call for genesis is problematized by this debt, an unpayable debt. The debt is owned as much as it is owed. It constantly transfers from one account to the next, but it can never be withdrawn.

RECORDING THE CODE

Glenn Gould retired from live performances in 1964; his departure from the live was his rejection of the Babelian performance and it also reverberates with Marie Cardinal's phobia upon seeing Armstrong. Gould's move was not only a reaction to the fetish of the live, "one was forced to compete with oneself" (Gould in Kostelanetz, *Glenn Gould: Bach in the Electronic Age* 126), but the constant impossibility of the live, its inherent failure to produce the perfect moment, the perfect translation: "I resent the one-timeness, or the non-take-twoness, of the live concert experience" (Gould in Kostelanetz 132). *Monsieur Gould, je vous présente Monsieur Schechner*. While one-timeness does not equate with first-behaved (twice-behaved for the first time - the weight of the score), Glenn Gould and Richard Schechner would surely have something to discuss.³ Pity Gould did not take the live as an occasion to perform to the *n*th degree of behaved behavior. His fastidiousness would surely have made explicit the difference in repetition by the repetitive playing of difference.

Gould's retreat did not eradicate his audience, even in that very moment of playing. He is his own audience, his infamous humming testifies to this. He is the audience and the performer. His humming follows and anticipates, it is the piano's sideman. Barthes could have added the piano playing hands to the following list: "The 'grain' is the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the restoring limb" (Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms* 276). Gould buzzes like a bee, "he buzzes like a fridge, he's like a detuned radio" (Radiohead, *OK Computer* 1997). He is an honorary member of Rahaan Roland Kirk's "vibration society" (Mackey, *Cante Moro* 209). Gould seemed perplexed by his own buzzing grain: "It's a terrible distraction that I don't like either. I wish I could get rid of it, and I would if I could, believe me; but I can't" (Gould in Kostelanetz 130). The key is in the "but I can't." What I hear is "but I won't," it turns around to a view of humming as a necessary accompaniment, in other words, "but I must, but I want, but I have to."

BABYLON NO. 2: LEE "SCRATCH" PERRY & MICHAEL SMITH

Lee "Scratch" Perry buzzes out loud, he buzzes in bursts. His infamous idiosyncrasies parallel Gould's. Both are aptly described by Paul Klee's dictum "Le génie, c'est l'erreur dans le système [genius is the error in the system]" (Klee in Percec, *La chose* 58). Perry's political savvy is embedded in the bass track of his Jamaican dub music as it throbs. "I am the government and I cannot be governed" (Perry, *From the Secret Laboratory* 1990). The power is in his hands and he

doesn't want it. He rhymes what Samuel Beckett stated in more subdued manner: "The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system" (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 292). Perry, also often dubbed "the Upsetter," feels free to invite himself on stage causing yet another interruption to our series of imaginary duets, themselves interruptions. "I govern myself and I rule myself" (Perry, 1990). He is generative. "I create myself and I make myself" (Perry, 1990). And generational. "I am the Upsetter. I am what I am, and I am he that I am" (Perry's cameo in Ted Haimes' documentary *History of Rock & Roll* 1995). This is the I & I, the stutter, the "I am the Word Processor" (Perry, 1990), which oscillates between the individual and the collective, this "enabling confusion concerning the singular and the plural" (Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* 33). This double "I," this solo duet, is also one of presence and absence, of here and beyond, of life and death. Baudrillard explains it: "Universality is in fact based exclusively on tautology and doubling. This is because the 'Human' is from the outset the institution of its structural double, the 'Inhuman'" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 125). Cixous again provides the multiplying tool with "plusje," term translatable as "more I" ("plus" as in "plusieurs" thus "I & I & I &...") and as "plus" in its negative form "nolonger I" or "nomore I." The "Plusje" is murderous, "il faut qu'il viole les lois de la parenté, de la gravité et de la simpluralité pour commencer à voler de ses propres ailes en plein milieu de son actualité [it must violate the laws of lineage, of gravity, and of simplurality in order to take flight by its own wings in the middle of its actuality]" (Cixous, *L'essor de plusje* 48).

In the song "R-ooTs" Jamaican dub poet Michael Smith invokes an ever long, longer, longitudinal "Lawwwwwwwwwwd," ever painfully meditating the urgency. Towards the beginning of the song, Smith stretches, but not yet infinitely:

Youtman dem search in de
 Crevices an corners
 Fi dem roots
 Lawwwwwwwd
 An dem a roots...
 An dem a roots...
 (Smith, *Mi C-YaaN beLièVe iT* 1982)

He is in that trough of the inhuman amidst the human. That "Misty" which is flooded. That basest of places in constant contradiction and irremediable collocation with its counter: the transcendent. A sublime constantly reminded of its sublimation. The elongation is not virtuosic it is desperate, barely gasping for air, out of breath. By the end, Smith is no longer finite:

Roots
 Name
 Nuh roots cause dat nuh belong to I&I
 Some a curse
 Dem roots
 Shoutin name
 Like
 Wild

Barbarian
 Savage
 Inhuman
 What appenfi dem roots
 Nuh humanitarian?
 Lawwwwwwwwwwwd
 An dem a roots...
 Lawwwwwd
 An dem a roots...
 Lawwwwwd
 (Smith 1982)

The syllable is stretched infinite and beyond. In 1982, Michael Smith released the album *Mi C - Yaa N beLièVe iT* which contains "R-ooTs," shortly thereafter he was stoned to death by a mob who mistakes him for one of the people involved in Peter Tosh's murder. I cannot help but listen to that "Lawwwwwwwwwwwd" through the volley of stones coming straight ahead. In finding the roots of a murder, we often become murderers (of) ourselves.

How did the stage get so bloody? It is a treacherous enterprise, the Babelian performance, misinterpretations can happen in all directions, like ricochets. Misinterpretations happen, in all directions ricochets. Commas double. Threadgill's *I do music period*. Comma, music does me. Period, I do music. Coma. Pause. Comas double. Oblique angles equal scratches equal punctuations.

ACCENT: TASTE THE RECIPE

Threadgill is a blurring of genres which remains blurred. Intentionally so. This marks the necessary beginning to my favourite recipe for musics unleashed. Critics augment the recipe: a spoonful of - Greg Sandow: "[...] nobody kept time, and everyone played melody. Musical space - normally organized by rhythm and harmony - is instead shaped by movement. Threadgill's music transcends common sense. The tubas don't blend. They each dance in a separate circus ring" (Sandow, *Fried Grapefruit: The Life of Henry Threadgill* 1994). The harmonium that evening at the Knitting Factory was in a circus of its own. A pinch of - Nicky Baxter: "There are at least three layers operating here" (Baxter, *untitled* 1996). And a dash of - Mark Stryker: "it obliterates distinctions between foreground and background" (Stryker, *untitled* 1997). The recipe performed on Thursday, December 3rd, 1998 at the Knitting Factory, did not satiate my appetite. It frustrated it; with such fine ingredients it always amazes me how every time the unleashing unravels a different savor. Perhaps the concoction had been stirred too adroitly, never letting abandon loose. Maybe time could not be stretched and unkernelled that evening. Had the set list included "Misty" flooding Cardinal's footsteps, maybe...

Or maybe my ears, inner and outer, were contaminated by the stuttered polyphonies, asphyxiated by the debt of translation, overloaded by the phantom voices flooding me throughout. With solos,

duets, trios, quartets... the all star band: Armstrong, Cardinal, Deleuze, Vaughan, Glissant, Césaire, Gould, Perry, Smith, ... threaded me in a slipstream that is rarely untangled. My ears had been birthed and under the grip of the acceleration could no longer wait. The speed up of the stage is a blurring of tenses, a mix-up of entrances and exits. Speed manipulations often have the ability to cause leaks:

A documentary film about the formation of the French Mulatto bourgeoisie, if speeded up to a sufficiently frantic pace, would reveal the bent backs of black slaves *becoming* the groveling spine of a refined coloured bourgeoisie bowing to anyone able, in the imperceptible space between two images, to sprout a lounge suit and a bowler hat (Monnerot, *Note Bearing on the Coloured French Bourgeoisie* 44).

A critique can bore holes through any hull, nothing is watertight, it is a performance which perforates. It is the punctuating process by which we can run into the street possessed by the desire to birth ourselves into tenses that are plural and present.

A present forward and back again.

I was born (Douglass in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3).

I was born, I was born, I was born tomorrow (Hille, *Spine* 1996).

The past does not influence me; I influence it (de Kooning in Cage, *Silence* 67).

... let's not go back that far (Ellington in Mackey, *Djbot Baghostus's Run* 198).⁴

NOTES

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted in the bibliography. In instances where I have done the translation the original precedes the translation.

Fred Moten's lectures are like buoys in a marasmic sea. My ears swam to those buoys, and their inner canals are still host to the resulting abundant mutations. This text, this slippy thread, is one their reports.

¹ This is an amplified concert critique; *amplified* in the sense that its stage is splintered and multiplied with a relish for anachronistic ensembles; *concert*, in the sense of "concord" as well as "event featuring music"; *critique*, in the sense of genre bending the whole enough to produce a performed text.

² The rest of the paragraph combines Henry Threadgill's program notes (in italics in this paragraph and throughout) from the Knitting Factory Knots Program Guide (Nov/Dec 1998, 21) with my interventions. Here's the original text:

I do music period. Jazz, European orchestral music. American religious music, white and black. Parades. All types of functional music, period. All of it. Whatever you don't use just goes out the gills. I hear a sound inside and don't know what it is. It's just a big glob of sound, a murky thing with no defined edges. I'm interested in sound. I don't care how you generate it - electronically, non-electronically. I don't care if it's an ice cube in a bucket. Here's an equation: sound equals vehicle equals band. The band is the sound. It's a multipurpose, multifaceted octopus. If I'm lucky, this is the vehicle that will let me create hundreds of pieces. Imagine writing a story in English and French, going back and forth. That's the real reality of what I do.

³ For an extended discussion on "twice-behaved behavior" consult Chapter 2 "Restoration of Behavior" in Richard Schechner's *Beyond Theater and Anthropology*.

⁴ Duke Ellington cited in Nathaniel Mackey, *Djbot Baghostus's Run 198*. Here's the context: "The Program notes quoted Ellington's reply to [Charles] Mingus' proposal that the two of them make a 'real avant-garde record' together: 'Charles, let's not go back *that far*.'"

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