Public Poetics

Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics

Bart Vautour, Erin Wunker, Travis V. Mason,
and Christl Verduyn, Editors

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Contents

14

We Are the Amp: A Poetics of the Human Microphone

Michael Nardone

Poetic forms emerge out of public contexts of language, as response, as confrontation. The emergent contexts of forms more traditionally situated within poetic practice have been explored and described widely—for example, the metrical devices of Ancient Greek verse as mnemonic aids for the oral circulation of information across space, and the sestina's repetitive structure that allowed one to showcase both craft and improvisation during feasts or gatherings. Yet the fetishization of these forms—their replication as static modes emptied of histories—is all too often executed to produce works that fit safely within an untroubled concept of a genre called "poetry." It is in this context, Charles Bernstein argues, that poetry, a poetics, is absent. "*Poetry is aversion to conformity* in the pursuit of new forms, or can be," he writes at the beginning of *A Poetics.* He continues: "When poetry averts conformity it enters into the contemporary: speaking to the pressures and conflicts of the moment with the means just then at hand."[1] Formal innovation and deviation can energize and innervate language—creating new possibilities for content, alternative circulations—and thus act as a transfigurative and transfigurating element of public life.

This chapter focuses on a poetics of the human microphone, the method of sound amplification and multivocalic mode of collective composition, communication, and intervention utilized at Occupy protests. As described by Richard Kim, the basic method of the human microphone is simple:

"Mic check?" someone implores.
"MIC CHECK!" the crowd shouts back, more or less in unison. [...]
After the mic check, the meeting proceeds:
with every few words/
WITH EVERY FEW WORDS!
repeated and amplified out loud/
REPEATED AND AMPLIFIED OUT LOUD!
by what has been dubbed/
BY WHAT HAS BEEN DUBBED!
the human microphone/
THE HUMAN MICROPHONE![2]

From texts, videos, and images compiled from social media sites, digital repositories, and other online sources, I contextualize the emergence of the human microphone at Occupy protests, locating specific moments of formal variation in its practice during the period 17 September to 19 November 2011, from the start of the protests at Zuccotti Park to the days immediately following the park's forced closure. In this historical sketch, I focus on five distinct modes: (1) the specific context in which the human microphone as a form and method emerged; (2) the human microphone's various tunings as a technique to relay communications; (3) its application as an interventionist form that draws attention to and disrupts specific transmissions; (4) the human microphone as a form in which collective bodies can speak to and against brutalities carried out by state-sponsored forces; and, finally, (5) the human microphone as a device to frame silence with new semantic affect. Finally, I begin to outline a concept of sonic disobedience, a mode of phonemic composition that interrupts particular transmissions while at the same time encoding alternative transmissions in a mesh of noise.

To situate this essay for a book concerned with literary practices and publics, I want to offer a theoretical framework by which I approach a poetics of the human microphone. As opposed to the public event of the poetry reading—one, say, in which a text written by an individual in a private writing space serves as a score for a public performance—I concern myself with the language event: the temporal site(s) of vocalic space and transitive language. Here, I look to the work of Steven Connor, who develops a concept of *vocalic space*:

> I mean to signal with this term the ways in which differing conceptions of the body's form, measure, and susceptibility, along with its articulations with its physical and social environments. In the idea of vocalic space, the voice may be grasped as the mediation between

> the phenomenological body and its social and cultural contexts. Vocalic space signifies the ways in which the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time, and divinity. What space means, in short, is very largely a function of the perceived powers of the body to occupy and extend itself through its environment.[3]

Then, to consider elements of verbal composition within this vocalic space, I look to the writings of Lyn Hejinian, who develops an idea of transitive language. Following from, and/or counter to, Charles Olson's projectivist poetics, where the poet attempts to transfer the energy of breath, language, and pace of a privately scripted poem to a public audience or readership,[4] a transitive poetics privileges a live public moment of multivocalic composition, the phonemic moment for which any graphemic poem emergent from that moment might function as a documentative or archival text. Through the experiment of the multivocalic production of a language event and that event's (possible) poem-text(s), the poem functions not as "an isolated autonomous rarefied aesthetic object"; instead, as Hejinian writes, it moves towards a production in which "aesthetic discovery is congruent with social discovery" and "new ways of thinking (new relationships among the components of thought) make new ways of being possible."[5] I connect these compositional elements to two concerns I read as being central to performance writing. As Caroline Bergvall asks: "What is the process of live performance in its relation to writing. Is it writing's role, in that context, to function as a guiding background, as the blueprint of a live piece?"[6] More recently, David Buuck has asked: "How might the performance writing form of 'action' expand beyond the recognizable activist performance model (scripts for street theater, etc.) and/or the much more militant and confrontational modes of direct action which are generally discussed in terms of efficacy (symbolic &/or material) rather than 'as performance' (as if the latter threatens to turn the political into the "merely" aesthetic)?"[7]

Within this poetical framework, a space is opened up to address the formal qualities of the human microphone and its components: the speaker and speakers, their utterances, the locality of their utterances, what and how they convey, the embodied distribution, of voiced language across space, the media and platforms that make this language mobile, the repetition and difference of the language in its movement across networks of communications, and, finally, what sounded language becomes audible and what remains mute. Through an "intertwining of the semantic and the

pragmatic"—"what we say and what we accomplish in that saying"[8]—the human microphone exemplifies Bernstein's concept of "poetry as dissent, including formal dissent; poetry that makes sounds possible to be heard that are not otherwise articulated."[9]

Of Amplitude

20 September 2011. Occupy Wall Street, day 4: On the Broadway side of Zuccotti Park—then three days away from being renamed Liberty Plaza—an individual addressed a few dozen demonstrators with regard to the pending execution of Troy Davis in Georgia. "Sisters and brothers, it is ridiculous that I cannot address you with a sound system. I just want you to think about it, how petty and stupid and insulting it is that on such a serious occasion, trying to stop a racist murder—"…then the sound of his words faded out.

The man continued to speak and gesture with his hands opened up before him, but the sound of city traffic and murmur of talk filled the public space, drowning out his words. Only occasional bursts of accented speech became audible. After several seconds, these words could be be heard: "Thank you very much for nothing." He uttered this sentence at a sustained volume above his previous words. Then, again, his voice faded out. Various phrases continued to rise above the ambient din: "who spent half of his life in prison"…"is going to be murdered"…"racist murder"…"that we're talking about here at Wall Street"…"where you've been camping"…"three nights." Over the next minute and a half, again, occasional phrases could be heard: "Wall Street responsible"…"profits instead of needs"…"motives behind wars"…"death penalty"…"very powerful thing"…"very necessary thing"…"occupying Wall Street"…"stop the execution of this innocent man"…"march united."[10]

Earlier that morning, members of the New York Police Department had informed the occupiers of Zuccotti Park that if they wanted to use amplified sound in a public space, they would need a permit from the NYPD. This meant that microphones and loudspeakers—used throughout the previous three days' events and demonstrations—would from that point on be banned at Zuccotti. And as Kim reported a few days later on *The Nation*'s blog, "the NYPD has also been interpreting the law to include battery-powered bullhorns. Violators can be sentenced for up to thirty days in prison."[11] Thus, on the evening of 20 September, the only spoken words to reach an amplitude loud enough to cross the space of Zuccotti Park were ones spoken in a call-and-answer unison. Two voices shouted: "They say death row!" A crowd voice responded: "We say hell no!" Two voices: "Death Row!" Crowd voice: "Hell No." Following this

repetition, an individual voice called out: "We Are," and a crowd voice replied: "Troy Davis." In this collective articulation of a single voice—in the figurative embodiment of a We in the individual Troy Davis, and the literal embodiment of individuated, multivocal speech voiced in collective unison—we have one of the first annunciations of a vocalic body in the Occupy movement.

On 21 September, the general assembly at Zuccotti convened at one o'clock in the afternoon. There were several items on the agenda: the still-pending execution of Troy Davis, assembly procedures, arrest procedures, and methods for sharing documentary footage, specifically, footage capturing the previous day's arrests. This was followed by reports from the various subgroups forming peripherally to the general assembly. The two facilitators, "Katchup" and "Emery," announced to all assembled that "it's going to be hard to hear people with different ability to vocalize what they're saying" and that people "need to be patient with the process and each other."[12] Twice, they called for everyone involved to move closer together. Before continuing to the first items, the facilitators asked for two people to step forward "to act as human mics," one on each end of the assembly. As the agenda moved on to announcements, the initial two human mics grew to several dozen people repeating each speaker's phrases, whose voices carried across the assembly space information regarding child care, news of occupations planned in other American cities and abroad, a proposal to found a Zuccotti Park cleanup crew, and a message from Noam Chomksy in solidarity with the movement's cause. Then a man who called himself Radio Raheem, self-described as "one of the pioneers of the conscious hip-hop movement," stood before the assembly and, with the most enthusiastic support yet from the human microphone, declared:

> We don't need
> an amplifier.
> We are
> the amp![13]

(For excerpts transcribed from documented uses of the human microphone, I have enjambed the lines at the moment in which the primary speaker's words are repeated by those involved in the human microphone.) From this moment forward, those gathered at Zuccotti Park began to utilize this new form of communicative exchange.

At this point, it is useful to recall the nearly complete mainstream media blackout on the subject of Occupy Wall Street in its first days. "After five straight days of sit-ins, marches and shouting and some arrests, actual

Figure 1 ***The apologetic tweet from @YahooCare after Yahoo blocked occupywallst.org***

North American coverage of [Occupy Wall Street]—even by those who have thought it farce or failure—has been limited to one blurb in a free newspaper in Manhattan and a column in the *Toronto Star*," Keith Olbermann broadcast on his 21 September show. Olbermann then makes note of one media venue that acknowledged the uprising: Yahoo, "which blocked any email containing the group's website with the message, 'Suspicious activity has been detected on your account.'"[14] To situate the first utilizations of the human microphone within a more broadly defined network context, mainstream media were refusing to acknowledge the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations as an event—indeed, various regulators of user-driven social media sites were blocking users from disseminating information about the event. It is also worth noting that over this specific span of time—from the afternoon of 20 September to the evening of 21 September—in the hours of heightening media attention and speculation concerning whether Troy Davis would receive a last-minute stay of execution, a controversy with regard to Twitter allegedly blocking "#TroyDavis" from trending was rising across social media and blogs, and would continue to do so until after Davis's execution at 11:08 (EST), when, in minutes, "#RIPTroyDavis" went to the top of worldwide trending topics.[15] So, it was within this extended blackout moment when—

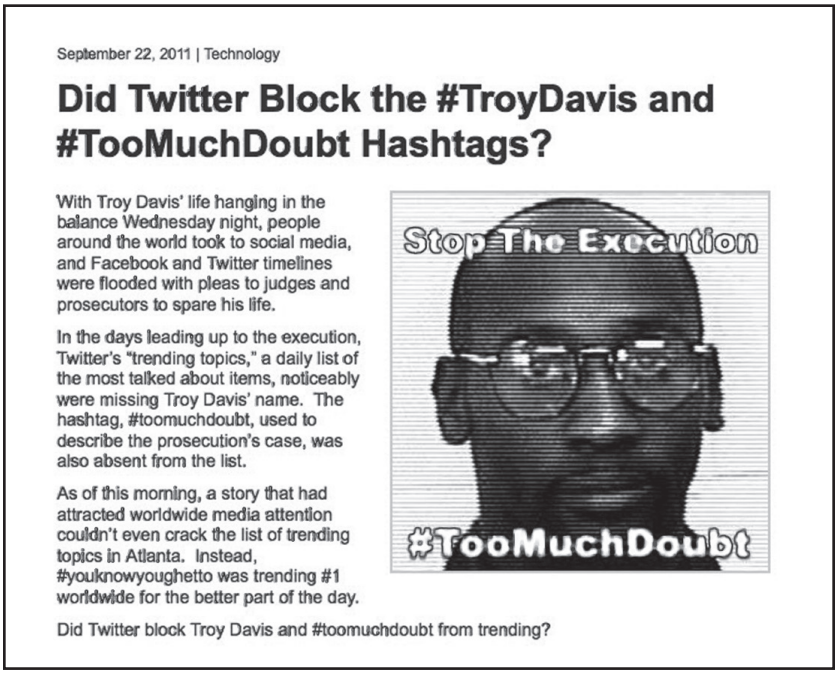

Figure 2 *Screen capture from politics365.com*

(1) police banned Occupy Wall Street demonstrators from using electric sound systems;
(2) North American major news media services, applying news censorship comparable to media suppression at the start of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, for five days refused to acknowledge the thousands of organized protesters demonstrating amidst the central hub of global capital in Lower Manhattan;
(3) social media networks such as Yahoo and Twitter, major venues of information exchange for revolutionary undertakings during the Arab Spring, intentionally blacked out various politically volatile subjects from being relayed and thus from building some kind of public consensus, otherwise known as "digital repression;" and, finally,
(4) an African American man charged with killing a police officer in Georgia, after nearly two decades of appeals and petitions and three stays of execution, despite testaments of racial prejudice and questions about the validity of evidence in the trial, and despite

> the accused's ongoing protestations of innocence and nearly a million people voicing their objections in petition and in protest to his capital punishment, was executed—

that the occupiers of Zuccotti Park had to seek out some new mode of communication, a new amplitude.

Mic Check

During the first days of the human microphone at Occupy Wall Street, many of those who participated in it did so with audible frustration and impatience. Breaking up the uttered language into phrasable units that carried from one to three times in repetition throughout a collective body made for a slow process. If a speaker included too long a phrase or fell out of rhythm with the phrasal repetitions, the human microphone was prone to being jammed, requiring the speaker to begin all over again.

One can hear moments of both hesitation and satisfaction in a video documenting the General Assembly on 25 September. The assembly went in and out of using the human microphone. In some moments, speakers became impatient to communicate their message and abandoned it, raising their voices to shout their words to the assembly. Then one member of a subgroup finished her report with the statement, "We still call for questions and concerns." This is a simple sentence divided into two phrasal units, the first involving sentence subject and preposition, the second the two mutual objects of the preposition. The statement was tuned to the microphone in that it was carried across in full register. Then the facilitator asked: "How do you feel about that?" He called for a vote from all of those in attendance, yet oddly, the call was not carried across the human microphone. After the vote, a member made a suggestion on the point of concern. None of her words, as she spoke them, got carried across the human microphone. Members of the assembly, even those near her, began to shout: "We can't hear!" So the facilitator spoke:

> What she said
> was that
> the proposal
> be written in paper
> so we can see it
> when we discuss
> whether or not
> to approve it.[16]

This delivery was tuned to the human microphone, and the speaker's emphasized pauses after the only a few syllables per each uttered unit allowed the words to move across it with ease.

The facilitator then introduced an additional speaker in regard to the point under discussion. This new speaker began: "Hello, I am very glad to see you all. Here are many good people gathered together."[17] In the second of these two eleven-syllable phrasal units, the speaker lost half the human microphone. People began to relay "Here are many good people" as the primary speaker continued to speak "gathered here together." One portion of the human microphone finished on the word "people" as the other portion of the human microphone began "Here's many good people gathered here together." The speaker continued: "We need more people." As the human microphone began to relay, the primary speaker attempted to continue his sentence. The process then collapsed into disassembled noise. Someone interrupted the primary speaker by shouting "Mic check." This reorganized the vocalic body, and the crowd voice responded: "Mic check!" The primary speaker then attempted to begin again, and to reground his own speaking, he called again: "Mic check," which, too, the human microphone repeated. The primary speaker then began to organize his utterances into four or five syllables each, but a change of a different order took place. Much of the vocalic body of the human microphone seemed to have lost patience with this speaker, and with each utterance, the volume of those responding decreased until only a few voices echoed his words.[18] This exemplifies well Kim Wanenchack's point that the human microphone "cannot be co-opted by one person with one specific interest, because the components of the microphone must consent to their own participation. In that sense it helps to build and maintain a feeling of consensus in an environment that many have framed as ideologically fractured and unclear."[19] The human microphone may create some kind of cohesion at the level of language among those participating, yet one aspect of this technique is that those participating can intentionally alter the volume, making it higher in some kind of concordance or lower in some form of disagreement.

Over the following days, protesters at Zuccotti Park tested and developed the human microphone during general assemblies and with the growing number of visitors who came each day to address the occupiers, from Judith Butler to Joseph Stiglitz to Slavoj Žižek. The human microphone resounded for the first time across mainstream media after Michael Moore's visit to the encampment on the night of 26 September.[20] Moore was uncertain at first about what he might be getting himself into, pausing for a several moments after saying "Mic check" as though he were a new user of a personal recording machine, rewinding and playing back his first

recorded utterances. "Does this thing work?" he seemed to be pondering. "Can you hear me now?" His impromptu speech, delivered through the human microphone to an audience of several hundred in the plaza, tuned in with the human microphone even as he uttered phrasal units of ten to fifteen syllables per unit. Although occasionally clunky, and often textured with subclausal phrases within a single phrasal unit, his off-the-cuff directness translated surprisingly well through the crowd voice.

Cornel West, professor and civil rights activist, began his words to the General Assembly on 27 September in a language mixture at once homily, jazz, and rhetoric, a style harking back to an earlier period of American civic declamation.[21] As the primary speaker in the human microphone, West's phrasal units followed an iambic pattern with variations into spondees, dactyls, and anapests. More often than not these rhythmic variations were the final syllables of each phrasal unit and functioned as kind of sending off of the phrase, an envois. West's language moved from a kind of civil rights affirmation of community and good feeling—

There is a sweet spirit in this place.

—to a jargonized political activism—

We oppose
the greed of Wall Street oligarchs
and corporate plutocrats
who squeeze the democratic juices.

—to humble playfulness—

I am so blessed to be here.
You got me spiritually break dancing all the way here.

—and ended in the longest phrasal unit of his speech, a Baptist-styled benediction—

This is the general assembly consecrated from your witness
and your body and your mind.

West's rhythmic language and fluctuation of tones harnessed the energy of the human microphone to an exceptional degree. In doing so, it seemed more than fitting that at the end of the human microphone's sixth day at

Occupy Wall Street, the first phrases spoken by the vocalic body after West's speech were:

We the people
have found our voice.[22]

Interventionist Form

Within two weeks the Occupy movement had expanded from Zuccotti Park to a number of other North American cities. There were encampments and rallies in cities from Edmonton to Boston, Vancouver to Tallahassee, Los Angeles to Halifax. Within a month, Occupy-related protests had spread to 951 cities in 82 countries. In many of these manifestations, these events and encampments adopted various practices from the camp at Zuccotti Park, while also developing practices specific to the site and its particular concerns. In many locations where there was no ban on electric amplifiers, demonstrators took up the human microphone as though it were the *de facto* rhetorical mode for how collective communications ought to be carried out. I have no interest in discussing those sites that simply repeated the form of the human microphone so as to experience or express some form of solidarity with those at Zuccotti Park. Instead, I focus on those moments where the use of the human microphone, to echo Bernstein again, averted conformity and entered into the contemporary, "speaking to the pressures and conflicts of the moment with the means just then at hand."

One such instance took place on 3 November, when protesters utilized the human microphone's ability to relay communications as a means to *interrupt* transmissions, as a direct protest. When Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, proponent of the union-breaking Budget Repair Bill, came to speak at a breakfast at Chicago's Union League Club, he was welcomed with a "mic check!"[23] Here is a transcription of that event, with some notation. After the "mic check" on Governor Walker, the primary speaker shouted across the room:

It's an outrage and a shame
that we sit here at this fancy breakfast
to listen to someone

The human microphone delivered these phrases with precision and great amplitude. Walker, attempting to interrupt and speak over the human microphone, could be heard commenting: "Their voices are a little bit different than others out there."

who has wreaked havoc

Then, as the primary speaker in the human microphone gets confronted by several people, possibly security, the role of primary speak shifted to another person:

on the lives of working families.
Governor Walker has vilified unions
and insulted the 99%,

Then, again, the primary speaker in the human microphone shifted:

who depend on living wages
and adequate benefits to support their families,

At this point, a speaker from the ULCC, who was quite upset, took the microphone from Walker and attempted to drown out the human microphone with his electrically amplified voice or perhaps to lure it into quietude with the utterances: "Hey hey hey hey hey woh woh woh woh woh woh woh." Yet the human microphone continued:

while on the payroll
of the right-wing billionaire Koch brothers.
It is not so different from our state

A man from a nearby table, possibly a security guard, then came over to where the video was being made and asked, "How's it going, guys?" He was attempting to get the camera to stop recording. When this failed to work, he tried to pull the camera out of the cameraman's hands, saying "Put the camera down." This did not work, and the filming continued:

where corporations and bought-off politicians
clamor to find ways to grant
a $100 million tax break

The speaker from the ULCC then said, "Can we have a round of applause here?" This was another attempt to drown out the human microphone:

to the Mercantile Exchange,

The applause worked much better than the prior attempts to hush out the human microphone. In response, the primary speaker in the human microphone shifted again, this time to a speaker with a more resonant voice:

one of the most profitable companies in the state,
while social services are being slashed,
while workers' pensions are being threatened

When clapping failed to drown out the words of the human microphone, the crowd began to boo loudly while continuing to applaud:

and homelessness, poverty, and joblessness
continue to rise.[24]

As the applause and boos faded, the primary speaker's voice rose to its greatest amplitude.

The CME has already taken
$15 million in our TIF dollars.[25]
That's our tax money that would have gone
to help the students in the Chicago Public Schools.

So far, every attempt to counter the human microphone had failed. The human microphone had full control of the sonic space:

It is ironic that we give Governor Walker
free rein to say what he wants
while the Mayor has ordered the arrest
of over 300 people in Occupy Chicago
who have simply tried to express
their rights to freedom of assembly.

The ULCC speaker, over the electrically amplified microphone, tried one more time to interrupt, shouting, "Ladies and Gentlemen, hey hey hey hey." It had little effect:

and working people will not honour
anyone seeking to undermine our lives
for the benefit of the 1%.

The protesters had used the human microphone to deliver their entire message. As a conclusion, in unison, they shouted in repetition: "Union busting is disgusting!" Throughout the event, Walker had stood at the podium with his arms behind his back. The ULCC spokesman stood beside him, speaking, gesturing with his hands, as if he were trying to convey to Walker an important fact.[26]

This first instance of the human microphone used as an interventionist form clearly caught every person in the banquet hall off guard. The people in attendance—the ones there to actually hear Walker—had no idea how to respond to such a seizure of vocalic space. Walker's initial attempt to undercut the intrusion—"Their voices are a little bit different than others out there"—did nothing to invoke his possible support, nor did it do anything to quell the human microphone. Attempts to physically preside over the primary speaker, to intimidate, silence, or disrupt that first speaker, were easily overcome by a nomadic shifting of the role of primary speaker. This occurred twice in the first seconds of the intervention. When a security guard confronted the primary speaker or a person from the audience tried to intervene, the role of primary speaker was simply taken up by a different body, another voice. This rhizomatic shifting of the primary speaker's role meant that the one central to the many could be any and all ones within the many.

The use of applause by those attempting to drown out the human microphone was quite efficient within the space of the banquet hall. Other countervocalic bodies would resort to this technique against future utilizations of the human microphone as an interventionist form—for example, with Senator Ron Paul,[27] Karl Rove (who responded to the human microphone disruption by stating that "if you believe in free speech then you demonstrate it by shutting up and waiting until the Q&A."),[28] and President Obama.[29] Again, however, in the Chicago manifestation, the strength of the counterapplause did not have the organizational force behind it that the human microphone had. So, in seconds, it dissolved.

In this event, the human microphone occupied a space of officially recognized power by means of its organized vocal amplitude. This established a technique that would continue to disrupt spaces of power during political campaigns (for example, the mic check on GOP presidential candidate Michelle Bachmann).[30] Student groups would utilize it to disrupt campus recruitment drives by banks (Princeton University students disrupted a J.P. Morgan Treasury Services info session)[31] and energy companies (Ohio State University students disrupted a gas industry panel intending to promote hydro-fracking practices).[32] The technique would also be used by protesters to disrupt the COP17 climate talks in Durban on behalf of

nations and peoples who lacked representation at the conference.[33] Yet, if the human microphone used as an organized interventionist technique were to continue to be a stratagem of impact, it would—like the rhizomatic primary speaker in a public intervention full of contingencies and impromptu adaptations—have to shift in form and practice depending on the specific contexts in which it was utilized.

"You Use Weapons. We Use Our Voice."

On 18 November, at the University of California, Davis, in the moments leading up to and immediately after Lieutenant John Pike pepper-sprayed students protesting tuition increases in solidarity with the Occupy movement, the initial chaos of verbal reactions did little to halt the ongoing police brutality.[34] In the lead-up to the spraying, bodies were scattered across the quad and demonstrators' voices could be heard from all directions. At times, vocalic bodies formed momentarily, one group repeating several times: "Don't shoot students!" Various individuals shouted to their friends or fellow protesters or at the police: "Keep your eyes closed!" "Protect yourselves!" "They're going to come through." "Don't do this." "Move!" "Stand your ground!" "The whole world is watching." The protesters and onlookers on the quad all spoke to similar concerns: for their friends to protest and for the police not to brutalize their friends. In these tense moments, the crowd failed achieve any kind of response in language, one that might have collectively engaged the police to deter their mobilization.

In the wake of the pepper spraying, the situation changed. After Pike's eighteen-second spraying, it took about fifteen seconds for a chorus of those not sprayed to begin shouting "Shame on you!" This phrasal unit lasted another fifteen seconds, until it dispersed into individual utterances, one of the loudest being a person shouting out the name of the pepper-spraying cop: "I want his name! What's his name? Pike! Pike! J. Pike!" At the moment he was identified, Pike had been kneeling on the back of a young man—whose face was covered in pepper spray—as if he were attempting an arrest. When, from the periphery, a speaker began to shout Pike's name, Pike stood up and disappeared into a group of police clad in riot gear. As the police began to forcefully arrest the seated individuals who had just been pepper-sprayed, calls and shouts continued among those present: "Why?" in repetition, "He's not resisting!" "Why are you doing this?" "These are children!" "This is America!" "This will be seen around the world!" One person began to yell out a list of media—"YouTube! Ugo! Facebook! Twitter! ABC! CNN!"—as if simply shouting these names might make the violent scene appear on those sites. The cacophony of individuated utterings from the crowd continued for more than two minutes. Then the "Shame on you"

repetition began again, gathering amplitude. As this phrasal unit escalated in volume, the police, at Pike's direction, began to back out. The crowd then amassed in a discharge both physical and verbal that overwhelmed the police, who, although well armed with batons, shields, pepper spray, and rubber bullets, began to retreat. As the police backpedalled en masse, the crowd's voice shifted to a call-and-response: "Who's university?" "Our university!" This continued for another minute. Then, with the police at one edge of the quad, a voice yelled out "mic check!" three times to summon the human microphone. Once it had assembled, he was able to deliver a message:

> We are willing
> to give you a brief moment
> of peace
> so that you can take your weapons
> and our friends
> and go.
> Please do not return.
> We are giving you a moment of peace.
> You can go.
> We will not follow you.

The crowd voice again returned, in full amplitude: "You can go!" They repeated it, again and again—"You can go! You can go!"—with force. The police dispersed.

It is in contrast to this instance of a vocalic body that I want to position a second example of a vocalic body at UC Davis, but one of an entirely different amplitude. The day after the campus police used force to halt the demonstrations, UC Davis chancellor Linda Katehi faced criticism from both the university and the public. Videos of the previous day's protest and the police response had gone viral. The UC Davis Faculty Association, the Department of English, and a majority in the Department of Physics held her responsible for the excessive force that had been be used against a peaceful assembly of university students. All called for her immediate resignation. Katehi's delay in offering any reply or disciplinary action further angered the university community. In the late afternoon, she held a press conference in a campus building in which she did not respond to the calls for her resignation and stated that she would be dealing with the situation by creating a task force to investigate the previous day's events. Afterwards, upon leaving the building, she was greeted by several hundred protesters lining the paths leading from the building to her car and to the

street. They sat in absolute silence.[35] The video of Katehi's confrontation with the crowd is wonderfully eerie. The only audible sounds are the thick clunk of her heels on the cement sidewalk as she moves amid the bodies that crowd around her exit path. After the previous day's attempts to use state-sponsored police forces to silence a public, to evict a vocalic body, the protesters' assembled silence came across louder than ever.

On Sonic Disobedience

In *On the Outskirts of Form: Practicing Cultural Poetics*, Michael Davidson asks what poetics might look like "when it is based not around individual [literary] movements, manifestos and school, but around geopolitical policies that impact not only the production of culture but the definition of what it means to be cosmopolitan, a 'citizen of the world.'"[36] In this pursuit, Davidson revises his earlier explorations of poetics and community—ones he had situated in aesthetic tendencies rooted in a specific locale and framed within the construct of the nation-state in the Cold War era—to speak to an age of multinational corporations, labor outsourcing, and free trade agreements.[37] He argues for a poetics that factors in subjective positions and relations shaped by neoliberal trade policies, transnational capital flows, and the spread of digital information. Alliances exist, certainly, at the level of the nation-state, yet they assemble outside this imaginary, across numerous locales, languages, and cultural perspectives at any site where individuals and collectives confront global capital.

It's with Davidson's provocation in mind that I offer the present research for a collection of writings that frame poetics and conceptions of publics within a construct of the nation-state of Canada. I do so not simply because the human microphone was a technique utilized at Occupy encampments throughout Canada. (There were, of course, many compositional tactics utilized at Occupy-related sites in Canada on which I could have focused this research. One example could have been the bilinguality of the human microphone at Occupons Montréal. Also of interest was how, through the human microphone, certain locations were able to articulate the interrelation of Occupy-related protests with coexisting struggles—for example, anti–Tar Sands organization at Occupy Edmonton, and the mobilizations against the excessive urban development or "condofication" of First Nations lands at Occupy Vancouver.) The intervention, however slight, that I want to assert here is that these compositional modes, these attempts to confront and disrupt, are all vital for individuals and collectives everywhere, not just in Canada. The same can be said of the capacity to establish ad hoc vocalic bodies. As the current governing regime in Canada systematically privatizes the country's nationalized entities—

from natural resources to media, from health care to heritage—while at the same time offering strong political support and financial incentives to the large-scale environmental and social violences that multinational corporations are executing within and outside the country's borders, the frame for which Davidson argues seems especially apt.

In the immediate space of primary speaker and directly addressed audience acting extemporaneously in tandem; in the formation of new and urgent assemblies, however temporary, through a process of active listening and the embodied revocalization of another person's language; in the rhizomatic shifting and tuning of voices; in effectively disseminating communications while asserting a collective agency in vocalic space, the human microphone is an important mode of composition for this moment. As poetic, the human microphone realizes a number of tactics theorized and partly advanced in practice in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ones aimed at countering the poetics of an individual's privately scripted and privately consumed text: the improvisation and direct address of a David Antin talk poem; the attention to the phonemic that one might expect in a performance by N.H. Pritchard, The Four Horsemen, Maggie O'Sullivan, Bob Cobbing, or Fred Moten; the momentary sonic dissonance of a Jackson Mac Low performance; the polemics of an Amiri Baraka reading; an emphasis on discourse in one of Bob Perelman's poet talks; and, finally, the collective and collaborative compositional practices developed in a number of Language writings such as *Leningrad* and *The Grand Piano*. As politic, the human microphone provides a powerful example of a way to form and address and form vocalic bodies in particular spaces, as well as a means to collectively articulate dissent either in address or in the interruption of transmissions.

To this extent there is a formal affinity between the human microphone and the casserole marches that began at the height of the 2012 Quebec student uprising. Echoing the *cacerolazo*—used in Chile in 1971 during Salvador Allende's rule in Chile, and then against Pinochet little more than a decade later—thousands of people armed with pots and pans would emerge from their homes each evening to bang and clang and make as much noise as possible. This racket was a signal for people to come out on the streets and make audible their support for the student movement. It also provided an opportunity for those unable physically to join those gathered on the streets to instead show their support from their window or balcony. In Quebec these gatherings were declared illegal under Law 78, the provincial government's emergency measure to quell the student uprising by limiting the protesters' right to assemble. But they would often morph

into hours-long demonstrations and ad hoc neighbourhood assemblies where citizens voiced their concerns and listened in return. Throughout the student strike, an ongoing battle for control over sonic space persisted. Because the provincial government refused to listen to what the student leaders had to say about the tuition hikes, those same leaders called on students to make themselves heard on the streets. Once the amplitude of the protests reached a decibel level deemed dangerous by the government, legions of riot cops would be sent in to force those assembled to be silent. The frequent police brutality and the provincial politicians' continued disregard for it only inspired greater numbers to gather in defiance. Thwarted by the escalating demonstrations, the Quebec legislature adopted Law 78, the anti-democratic law that repressed the freedom of assembly, the freedom of expression, and the right to protest. During the nightly student marches, riot cops would beat their shields with their batons, in unison, before violently charging the assembled protesters. The police used this well-known intimidation tactic to magnify their presence. Montreal's casserole protests were effective because they were able to seize that aural space from the police. The state-sponsored weaponry of baton and shield was defused by otherwise innocuous domestic cookware.

These tactics of communication and intervention are of increasing importance in a moment defined by austerity measures, rampant privatizations of previously socialized initiatives, and the wholesaling of nonrenewable resources. From the Idle No More round dance protests to the general strikes and street battles in Greece, from the anti-development demonstrations surrounding Gezi Park in Istanbul to the many fronts organizing against the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline in British Columbia, an array of public poetics and practices will need to be developed so as to form momentary vocalic bodies, for communication and confrontation. The human microphone opens up a space to consider collective modes of composition—using the voice, sounding objects, the body, printed materials, architectural spaces—to imagine and to experiment with what might be achieved at other sites, in other struggles. Various constraints particular to other sites and other struggles will, of course, play a determining role in each situation, as was the case with the human microphone and the deamplification of Zuccotti Park. So, too, will the specific sets of protest tactics previously utilized by those engaged in the particular site—from songs and chants to banner drops, black bloc to occupations. Sonic composition in these spaces will be a crucial tactic for these emergent publics to form, to accumulate amplitude, and to make their demands resound.

Notes

1 Bernstein, *A Poetics,* 1–2.
2 Kim, "We Are All the Human Microphone Now."
3 Connor, *Dumbstruck,* 12.
4 Olson, *Collected Prose*, 240.
5 Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry,* 323.
6 Bergvall, "What Do We Mean by Performance Writing."
7 Buuck, "Unsettling Scores."
8 Protevi, "Semantic, Pragmatic, and Affective."
9 Bernstein, *A Poetics*, 2.
10 "Occupy Wall Street, Justice for Troy Davis," YouTube.
11 Kim, "We Are All."
12 NYC General Assembly Minutes.
13 "Radio Raheem," YouTube.
14 Since Current TV terminated its relationship with Olbermann in March 2012, the broadcast from this show is no longer available on the Internet.
15 There are numerous reports documenting the "#TroyDavis" blackout. For examples, see these articles: "Did Twitter stop #troydavis from trending," *Clutch Magazine;* "Did @Twitter Kill #TroyDavis," *Flaimahmy*, "Troy Davis Tweets Spark Trending Topic Controversy," *BET;* "Troy Davis and the Twitter Black Out Conspiracy," *Single Black Male;* "Did Twitter Block the #TroyDavis and #TooMuchDoubt Hashtags?" *Politic 365.*
16 "How it works at Occupy Wall Street 9/25/11," YouTube.
17 Kim, "We Are All."
18 Kim, "We Are All."
19 Wanenchak, "Mic check!"
20 "Michael Moore @ Occupy Wall Street," YouTube.
21 "Dr. Cornell West," YouTube.
22 "Dr. Cornell West," YouTube.
23 "Gov. Scott Walker get checked," YouTube.
24 "Gov. Scott Walker get checked," YouTube.
25 Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is "a special funding tool used by the City of Chicago to promote public and private investment across the city. Funds are used to build and repair roads and infrastructure, clean polluted land and put vacant properties back to productive use, usually in conjunction with private development projects." See the City of Chicago's official site on the tax increment financing program: http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/tax_increment_financingprogram.html.
26 "Gov. Scott Walker get checked," YouTube.
27 "Ron Paul Town Hall Gets Occupied," YouTube.
28 "Karl Rove #MIC #CHECK in Baltimore," YouTube.
29 "Video: OWS protesters," YouTube.

30 "Michele Bachmann Gets Mic Checked," and "Back Angle of Michele Bachmann getting Mic-Checked by Occupy Charleston," YouTube.
31 "Mic Check! Ohio Students," YouTube.
32 "JP Morgan-Chase Mic-Checked," YouTube.
33 "Flashmob Protest on last day of COP17," YouTube.
34 For better coverage prior to the pepper-spraying, see "Police PEPPER SPRAY," YouTube. For better coverage after the spraying, see "Police pepper spraying," YouTube.
35 "UC Davis Chancellor Katehi," YouTube.
36 Davidson, *On the Outskirts of Form*, 15.
37 For Michael Davidson's chartings of community poetics during the Cold War, see his *The San Francisco Renaissance;* and *Guys Like Us.*

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