COUNTERFLOWS
ON PAPER

2025

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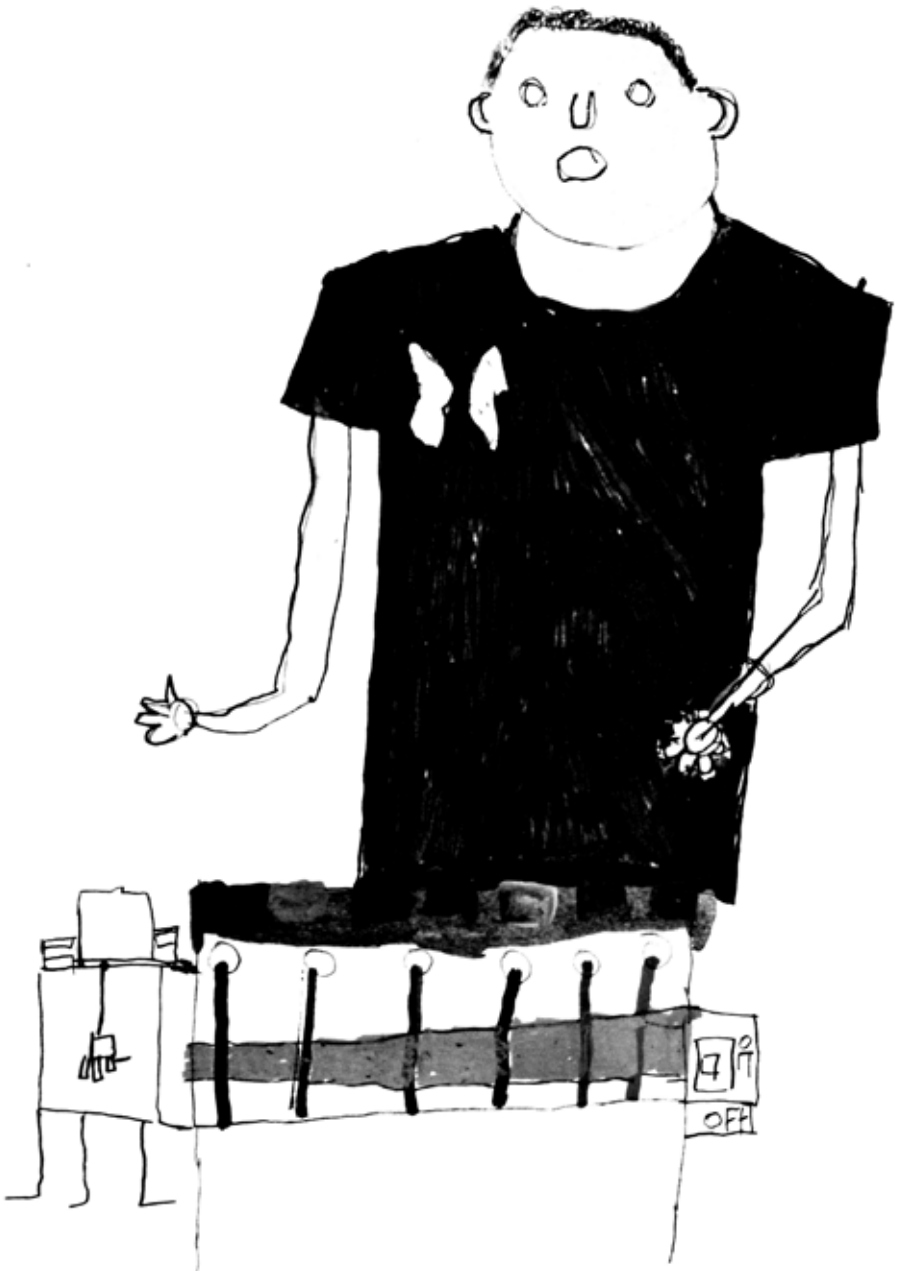

COUNTERFLOWS ON PAPER 2025

Even after 13 years of trying we still struggle to put into words what Counterflows is and does. If there's any way of doing that - be it engaging with artists' work, capturing the spirit of the festival and its political and cultural concerns, or just simply reminiscing on the joy of making and sharing art and culture - then whatever that is bleeds onto paper in this zine.

Started in 2021, Counterflows on Paper offers a space for new voices to enter the fray outside of our annual communal gathering, allowing them to reflect and respond to the festival and bring their own perspective. The zine maps routes and relations between music, culture, politics and more, but like the festival and DIY self-publishing culture it takes its inspiration from, we think it offers up its own sort of form of strange joy as well. Our colleagues Joel White and Helen Charman have done an amazing job of bringing together an exciting range of writers, poets, illustrators, artists and thinkers, and this year they are joined in editing duties by Emmie McLuskey, an artist herself, and our colleague over a number of years.

If Counterflows can't be described with words, we're pleased that there's so many voices coming together that can maybe do just that. Counterflows of Paper is its own beautiful, weird, tilted thing, and sings in an epic, awkward harmony with the festival itself.

We are grateful to Henry Ivry from The School of Critical Studies at Glasgow University for his support as part of the Futures Infrastructure Group.

- Alasdair Campbell & Fielding Hope

Illustrations

Dotted throughout the publication are illustrations of Counterflows Festival 2025 artists. These were done by artists at Project Ability and are credited at the end of the publication.

An exhibition of the original works, plus lots more can be seen at Mono 12, Kings Court, King St, Glasgow G1 5RB between 2-29th April 2025.

INTRODUCTION

When writing this collective introduction—just as when we've been putting *Counterflows on Paper* together—all three of us have been preoccupied with a question: what does it mean to listen together? Sending voice notes, messages and emails from various locations as we try to work collaboratively while not physically in the same place, we've heard each other in snatches and bursts: on trains, on car journeys, and in various kitchens, hallways, and bedrooms. It's a strange experience, in some ways, to talk and listen disjointedly like this, but it also offers forms of connection that snake out from our specific positions, our daily routines, and our individual subjectivities: tendrils of language that link us together. This is what we hope this zine will do, too: make a chorus of ink and paper.

One thing that became clear very quickly from our initial editorial conversations was that one answer to the question of listening collectively is a political one: paying attention to who or what often gets drowned out. (A line from Sara Ahmed that puts this in a more positive light: 'We are louder not only when we are heard together but when we hear together'). There are moments when this is clearer than others. What can listening add in the face of so much pressure to look, to witness, to project and to perform? Can it attune us to the way 'we' and 'I' are mutually constituted, always in motion?

I (1)

Eating tomato risotto in the upstairs of McNeil's Bar, laughing with 'Network Music Glasgow' about their self-proclaimed 'terrible name'. I (Joel) am here with a group of friends on another cold Sunday night, organising another fundraising gig for groups taking action against Scottish arms companies that are complicit in the ongoing genocide in Gaza. When the Network Music Glasgow play later the audience don't really know how to respond: the group sit in four different corners of the room, triggering various interconnected sine waves and electronic sounds on laptops connected to portable speakers, cranked up to full volume. The noises are disconcerting, hard to place in the space and in general. New arrivals scrunch up their faces as they donate on entry, opening the door to a staccato of feedback and dog whistle pitched flurries, creaking metallic insects, darting around the space. People try to talk over the noise, the air becomes hard with voices, some go out for a smoke.

It's hard to be difficult, and playful, let alone both at once. Many of us just want a release, a relief that doesn't request our attention and discomfort first, particularly when facing up to the truncheons and court dates of violent state repression. Yet, when we push through, the demand to not only listen, but to reconsider what we mean by the act of listening, can open us out in all kinds of ways.

I (2)

I (Helen) have spent a lot of time recently reading poems aloud with my students. I love doing this. It feels like listening twice: in the room in that moment, with those voices, and looking back to the historical moment when the poem was written. Recently, we spent a long time talking about a poem by W. S. Graham called 'The Constructed Space'. It begins like this: 'Meanwhile surely there / must be something to say, / Maybe not suitable but at least happy / In a sense here between us two whoever / We are'. It goes on to imagine an 'abstract scene' that stretches between these two speakers and listeners, before making a declaration that always moves me: 'This is a public place / Achieved against subjective odds'. Graham, who was born in Greenock, studied at what was then Stow College in Glasgow–now part of the Glasgow School of Art–before moving to Cornwall, at the very farthest end of the country, in 1944. He quite literally, then, knew something about spaces, and how hard it can be to stretch between them. The public place he imagines, achieved against subjective odds, though, is not a physical one, or at least not only: it's inside the text, inside the blank space of you, the writers, speaking against all the odds to me, the reader. Reading is a kind of listening too. In the final verse of the poem, Graham describes his intention:

> I say this silence or, better, construct this space
> So that somehow something may move across
> The caught habits of language to you and me.

It sounds mawkish, maybe, or overly sentimental, to suggest that this constructed space–for is that not what a festival is, what a performance is, what a publication is?–is one that we hope might facilitate something moving across the caught habits of language. But I like Graham for the way he preserves something emotional (not sentimental) in the midst of prickly ambivalence, all the material structures that might get in the way of us listening to and with each other.

I (3)

Community always comes from a need, whether explicit or not. Space, physical or otherwise, is vital, and it's people who create it. Be it for an hour or for fifty years, it exists and makes room for itself despite all the forces against it. I (Emmie) am not so good at beginnings and endings, they feel too charged and transactional, there's a pressure of promised coherence, to be neat when we are all beautifully messy. I long for the bit in between, where we can just hang out, share food, dance, text, just be with each other, intertwined in each other's lives for a while without agenda or futurity. Work can often provide this kind of space for me, and over the past few weeks putting together this zine I have been thinking about the horrific systems that attempt to tell us when we can start and stop, whether we can speak or not, when and what we are allowed to be. In these pages you'll find examples of people who are hanging out, striving to be, listening attentively. For me, it's compelling to see the contributions alongside each other and the many different ways there are to be part of a community. The composer Pauline Oliveros once said that *how a community of people listen is what creates their culture.* We hope you get a glimpse of ours whilst reading and being a part of the festival.

The zine offers a chance to listen and read together this weekend, letting the different perspectives fray and blur, shaking those 'I's (never as solid as they seem) into new ground too.

Thanks to everyone who contributed towards this year's *Counterflows on Paper* : Emilia, Ray, Rosie, Meera, the Variant Editorial Collective, Adèle, Duc, Sunik, Sholto, and the incredible artists at Project Ability. Huge thanks to Henry Ivry for editorial and financial support, Oliver Pitt for the beautiful design (and DOGE pranks) and to Alasdair, Fielding and the rest of the Counterflows team. We're taking donations for the magazine this year that will be split between Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society who organize community arts and cultural projects in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine, and our friends at Haven for Artists, a cultural feminist organisation based in Beirut, Lebanon.

Thanks,
Helen, Joel & Emmie.

FIVE SOUNDS

Emilia Weber

- One -

As babies, we gain consciousness through sensorial experiences of sound that flow from and into us. Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu writes that before we can distinguish between tactile and auditory sensations, as infants it is the sounds that emanate from us - our respiratory sensations - that give us a sense of our existence as bodies, as voluminous entities that empty and fill. And then it is also through our auditory experience of (ideally) being enveloped in what Anzieu calls a 'sound-bath' formed by the contours of our caregivers' voices that we are supported to constitute ourselves and orient ourselves in relation to our environments. Before a baby can register their caregivers' gaze reacting to them it is the parental 'bath of melody' that soothes them, the sound of which — as Anzieu beautifully puts it — 'wraps the Self in harmony'. In turn, this sonic space paves the way for imitative dialogues in which the infant hears their caregivers' echoes of themselves and begins to babble. The vocal games the infant shares with their caregiver can be thought, then, to form the basis for social life, or, as the source of what Maya Gratier and Colwyn Trevarthen term, 'the musicality of moving in company'.

- Two -

Walter Benjamin, who wrote a lot of radio shows for children, writes that through radio 'the listener receives the programming in his home, where the voice is like a guest'. But when I was very young, I thought that technologies of communication that reached into domestic space — such as the radio — were not benevolent guests. Nor were they channels through which we communicated with others, or that constituted us as part of an acoustic commons, but conduits through which my family and I were issued with instructions. Perhaps this conviction developed because the constant auditory radio presence in the flat and the car meant that radio weaved its way into everything I was hearing and trying to make sense of. Or perhaps it was because of the authority I inferred from the voiced adverts, or from the newsreaders' tones. Or maybe it was because when my dad heard about events on the news he was often inspired to act on the broadcast, bundling us kids into the car to go and check things out. Like when we learned of Windsor Castle burning down and promptly drove to stand at the side of a road and watch.

Carolyn Steedman charts the historical construction of the child as incorporating a 'visceral sense of insideness, of an interiorised selfhood'. I remember early childhood consisting of something similar, of selfhood set at a spatial remove from the world, and perhaps because of this I couldn't share my fears - a sense that the radio was speaking to a broader community than my family, sure, but also that it held great sway over us specifically. The authority I endowed the radio with was so huge I was convinced that events such as selling our car were going ahead against our wishes. So, when my dad told *us* that the buyer was on his way and we should all begin cleaning the car in preparation, I was silently filled with fear, but I was ultimately resigned, knowing we had no choice but to give the Fiat Panda up, as the radio decreed.

- Three -

In 1994, aged six, I travelled from the UK to live with my mother's parents in Moscow for a year. My time was spent mainly with my beloved younger cousin Danya, often lying on the floor of our grandparents' house with the curtains

closed watching *Tom and Jerry* while Danya's father Alexei, or Alyosha as we knew him, who was 25 at the time, sat nearby at another TV monitor preparing voice-over translations for American and European films. Unlike in studio dubbing — where dialogue is professionally translated for further delivery by a dubbing actor whose voice completely replaces that of the original — in voice-over translation the translator both translates and revoices without synchronising their voice with the actor's lips and both new and original audio tracks remain.

My uncle was part of a lineage of voice-over translators who, in the first instance, worked to meet the demand for translation of unauthorised VHS tapes that had begun to cross Soviet borders via transport workers and tourists in the late 1970s and 1980s. As Iuliia Glushevna traces, this network of VHS distribution was understood as an informal economy that emerged to compensate for the lack of state video industry. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the advent of formal licensing of films, there nonetheless remained a shortage of distribution interest from foreign media companies. Alongside the historical irrelevance of copyright regulations in former socialist states and the fact that people were looking for ways to accumulate capital from below during the transition to a free market, this meant that a shadow pirate economy of video circulation — like that exemplified by the Gorbushka Market in Moscow — flourished. And in this shadow economy, the practice of voice-over translation remained fundamental.

VHS translators like Alexei worked without a script. Using the first viewing of each film to translate and become acquainted with the film's plot and rhythm, my memory is of him totally focused, chewing on a toothpick, taking notes, crossing them out and trying out phrases. I kept half an ear on the films he watched, and, as such, the unpredictable nature of what was in circulation in Russia at the time tracks onto the fact Tarantino is forever fused for me with documentaries about religion and souls condemned to circle the earth for eternity; content which only served to intensify my six-year-old existential anxieties. On the second viewing, Alexei recorded a take, either banishing my cousin and I to the garden to do so or waiting till after we'd gone to bed.

Voice-overs are both derided and celebrated for their monotonous oral delivery and their distortions, intended or otherwise, of the original content. But in the 1980s, the voice of the translator was also the voice of an underground culture that linked audiences to the rest of the world. And, as Glushevna and others suggest, the continued use of this aesthetic hybrid into the 1990s and beyond represents the tension between a post-socialist desire to belong to the global 'now' and the comfort to be found in the continuity of recognisable shared practices when collapses in government had disrupted sociality so severely. Alexei was a cinephile who went on to curate film festivals. Although he was brilliant at selecting films and convincing you why they were worth watching, he loved film festivals' internationalism, and hated Russia's growing noxious nationalism, much like the social form the voice-over draws attention to, decentring the assumption that image governs spectatorship. Alexei died in 2023. In writing this I find clips of his voice on forums celebrating VHS translators, and I listen and listen again.

- Four -

Before going to sleep each evening, I sat on the edge of my grandmother's bed and watched the Soviet children's TV program *Good Night, Little Ones!* which ends with a clay animation, accompanied by the 1960s 'light music' lullaby 'Tired Toys are Sleeping'. Then I turned my face to the tapestry that hung on the wall next to the bed as, in turn, my grandmother perched beside me to watch the American soap opera *Santa Barbara*, the first to be aired on Russian television, appearing in January 1992 just a week after the Soviet Union formally dissolved. Looking back there was probably not a more 'wild nineties' soundtrack I could have fallen asleep to. The dubbed voices of *Santa Barbara's* powerful oil family The Capwells and their dramatic affairs were regularly interrupted by ad-breaks which exclusively featured the voices of MMM — the extraordinarily aggressively marketed 1990s Ponzi scheme company — on repeat. Making use of the soap opera format in their adverts, MMM's campaign worked akin to Soviet propaganda, as Borenstein (1999) shows, by infiltrating the private sphere to speak to the public at a mass scale. But unlike propaganda's directives to the public to move as one body, MMM sought to create the illusion of a personal relationship between its product and a nation of individual consumers, thereby going on to defraud millions of their savings.

Some mornings I awoke homesick for my parents' voices. Lying still, straining my ears, I was able to convince myself English was being spoken by my father and brothers downstairs. Listening is always a spatial practice, because you can't help but seek the source of a sound. Listening in, too, is connected to the built environment, as the term *eaves*dropping attests. On those mornings I crept down the creaky stairs before hanging my body over the bannister trying to extend my senses into the rest of the house to identify the voices. Once I was confident that, yes, it was them! I flung the door open, only to find my uncle or a tradesperson chatting to my grandmother, at which point I shrank away, mortified, furiously daring my ears to fool me again.

In the same year, my grandmother and I visited her friend Seva in St. Petersburg. Seva's apartment had a Soviet standardised 1960s wooden interior and a study with a USSR worldwide receiver radio. When we returned to his flat after a walk one day, Seva suggested we sit and listen to the BBC Russian Service for a while in case we might hear my mother who was then working as a journalist for the service. In 1992 the BBC World Service established a trust called 'The Marshall Plan of the Mind' with a specific remit to make educational programmes — including explainers on market economics and setting up small businesses — to support post-Soviet countries' transition into a free-market economy. The features my mother was commissioned to make, reviews of films like *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective,* sat within the broader BBC remit to construct an imaginary of life in the free-market world for post-Soviet listeners. As I recall, it was purely by chance that we did in fact hear one of her broadcasts that day, although it's more likely we were listening to a tape pre-recorded by Seva wishing to surprise me. At first, my mother's voice shocked me, here and not here, unfamiliar, and full of laughter; she was interviewing people I didn't know. But sitting in that study, occasionally swivelling on the desk chair, I came to feel settled in the space of attention that listening produces.

- Five -

Anzieu writes that 'at three months the baby's hand reaches for the bottle but it also reaches towards the mother's voice'. One of the many things to surprise me about my own baby was her discerning reaction to noises, the coffee grinder, rattling tube carriages and hand dryers, all caused her face to crumple and go red before she let out screams of horror. Now, aged four, if my tone alters when reprimanding her, she covers her ears and cries out, 'your voice is hurting me!' When she first learnt to talk, whenever she heard the bells ringing from the church next to our flat, she asked to go out on the balcony to listen. One evening she and I followed the sounds and climbed the steps of the narrow bell tower and emerged into the ringing chamber where we watched the circle of ringers pull the sallies towards the floor to upset the bells' balance. I love the language

around bells, they swing on their bearings till the clappers strike the sound bows, thereby making the bells sound. Because of bells' acoustic spatial reach, they have historically been used to summon people for prayer, to signal the end of work shifts and were rung for festivals and of course baptisms, weddings and funerals. Presumably the community to which you belonged was also at one point delineated by whether or not you were within audible reach of the bells. I read also that the earliest warning systems were drums and then bells, and I think about my daughter listening and wonder what to warn her of, and what voices she will remember.

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Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*, edited by Lecia Rosenthal, translated by Jonathan Lutes with Lisa Harries Schumann and Diana K. Reese. (Verso, 2014).

Eliot Borenstein, 'Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama'. *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, edited by Adele Marie Barker. (Duke University Press, 1999), 49-75.

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DECOLONISING FOLK MUSIC

Ray Aggs

I can't remember a time when I didn't play music. I grew up playing fiddle with my dad and his friends. I'd stay up way past my bedtime to play Celtic, English and American tunes and add shaky solos on Gram Parsons songs at their long, loud parties. My mum learned the double bass so she could join us at folk festivals too. I've always known music to be about community and family. Getting lost in a song, crammed into the corner of a pub, or feeling part of a big messy machine huddled round a fire.

Being mixed race, white British and African American, I am also very used to being the only Brown face at the folk session. The weird looks that say 'what are you doing here?' and 'why are you playing this music?' I've learned over time that in the folk world no one really cares as long as you can carry a tune but it can still feel unwelcoming. People struggle to make sense of a Black person playing the fiddle. Blackness is considered urban, not pastoral, not folk. As a mixed-race person who grew up on a farm, I often feel a little lost. I've felt like an imposter in trad folk spaces and I've struggled to square my folkie past with a growing awareness and pride in my own blackness as an adult.

Growing up Brown and queer in an overwhelmingly white area was isolating and lonely. Music was a lifeline, an escape hatch to a world full of possibility. As a teenager it wasn't folk but the queer punk scene that called to me. I started a band before I knew how to write a song or play guitar, I learnt to do it all on stage. The wild, fun mess we made bonded me with new friends stronger than anything. The liberating, delusional confidence of punk was everything I needed to find my place in a disorientating world.
Punk and folk share a spirit in my eyes - it is music that has a practical use that goes far beyond entertainment. It can be raw, messy and loud. But it is also for sharing with small audiences, families, maybe even just you playing at home on your own. It is full of real people's stories and pain. It is music that preserves aural histories and builds genuine community. It is music that heals.

Despite a defiant start, I was pretty isolated in the UK punk scene in the 2010s where audiences were astonishingly white. It wasn't till I went to an early organising meeting for Decolonise Fest, a festival by and for punks of colour in London that a change started to feel possible. We spoke about how punk rock is and has always been Black music. We learnt about how our stories have been whitewashed and genres segregated to keep us in our place. To stop us accessing the nourishment of collective joy - to keep us from the powerful, confrontational spark that gets lit when we're on stage together, screaming.

For the first Decolonise Fest in London, I ran a workshop called "Decolonise Your Guitar" and it got me thinking about what decolonisation means to me. I've always spread the punk gospel of no such thing as a 'right way to play' - I tell new players to question everything, make a mess and do things your own way. Instead of learning chords, try just putting your hands on the strings until it sounds good - invent your own shapes. What is a time signature? Who invented this language? Does it feel natural to you? If not, do you need to use it?

It felt radical to strip away the standard language of music education and get back to a relationship between humans and music that is essential and ancient. For so many Black and Brown people, colonialism has meant being stripped of culture and knowledge and the language and values of the coloniser being imposed upon us. As someone who struggled with music at school but felt this deep, soulful connection to folk and punk, it was liberating to question the rules and interrogate the narratives I'd been taught.

I taught myself guitar in my early 20s and from the start, people would say the melodies and rhythms I came up with reminded them of African roots music. I wasn't consciously learning any style at all - it just naturally came out that way. Being African American means my ancestral roots are pretty much unknowable, I come from a displaced people, a cultural and musical story that is constantly being made and remade. I wondered, did I feel a connection to African music because I have some deep ancestral link to it? Have I finally found my musical voice by accessing some cultural heritage I didn't even know I had? It felt like a bit of a stretch but still, it sent me down a rabbit hole of learning about music from all over Africa- Highlife, Soweto pop, Western Saharan rock - and thinking about sonic identity, musical heritage:would I ever really be able to 'claim' any type of music as my own?

On a family reunion many years ago we took my grandma Lucile (who turns 100 next year) to the Country Music Hall of fame in Nashville. She refused to get out of the car to go celebrate what she called 'white people music'. I found her stubbornness hilarious at the time but knew that it came from a place of pain. She grew up in a segregated Alabama where fiddles and banjos were inseparable from minstrel shows and redneck whiteness. It's understandable that she gave that music a wide berth. What I've learned since then, from American scholars and musicians like Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons and Jake Blount, is that country music and old time is, just like punk rock, absolutely Black music.

The banjo is a descendant of African instruments made from gourds. Enslaved people brought their knowledge of instrument making with them to North America when they were forced across the Atlantic. Early banjos were heard on plantations and 'old time' music, the fiddle and banjo tunes I've played with my parents since I can remember, is a mixture of Celtic and European tunes played by white settlers and African rhythms and sounds remembered by enslaved people. It is the most quintessentially African American music there is.

Blackface minstrel shows solidified string band music as a symbol of blackness that was rooted in a plantation caricature, so it's understandable that many Black musicians wanted to leave this music well in the past. These minstrel bands were hugely popular in the UK so a strong echo of that racism permeates British culture too. Blackface even found its way into English Morris dance traditions and there was not a reckoning with this painful, destructive symbolism there until recently. The literal segregation of recording studios also played a hand in creating the genres that now feel so set in stone. White musicians were invited to record on 'country' day and Black artists on 'blues' day. Whiteness was packaged as pastoral and idyllic, whilst Black rural music, slave music, was hastily and shamefully forgotten.

I had been playing American traditional old time music with my family for years but never thought about it this way. It was a revelation that not only could there be possible echoes of my ancestry peeking out at me when I played guitar, the fiddle could actually hold so much of my confusing heritage in its very fabric. I could play it proudly now, I felt like it was mine.

These days I still turn to music to make sense of my identity. Coming full circle back to playing folk in recent years has helped me with a type of questing I think we all do at some point. This longing for something that is just out of reach as we search for belonging and community. Just like me and my friends made space for ourselves in punk, I believe there's an abundance of space for people of colour in the folk scene too.

Moving to Glasgow coincided with my grandma Lucile researching our ancestry and discovering we have Scottish blood. The slave owners who named our ancestors came from Perthshire. Scottish tunes don't roll off my fingers like the American ones do and being from England I have felt intimidated, like it isn't my place to join in. But I do smile when I think of my grandma's delight when she told me I had 'been Scottish this whole time'. It flipped my thinking about heritage on its head to recognise how many of us have the violence of slavery and forced breeding in our DNA. Our heritage holds this trauma, this messy narrative, but there is surely defiant healing potential here. Despite all that mess, I long to hear Black Scots, descended from slaves, proudly singing and playing the ancient music of the land that we're standing on today.

In 2023 I started running a trad music session at Glasgow's Woodlands Community in Glasgow, exclusively for people of colour. The session is still growing and when we get together we talk about the challenges of engaging with folk music as people who belong to various, often multiple diasporas. Those of us from the UK discus how to access national pride when the nation we were raised in holds such a violent legacy of empire and colonialism. We speak about how 'folk' is still largely associated with whiteness and how terms like 'world music' perpetuate these othering genre segregations. We also laugh, sing and make a messy noise together. We learn by ear, or by passing around lyrics on phones, we teach each other songs that mean something to us. I've learned Scottish waulking songs, English ballads and Irish jigs as well as Taiwanese folk songs and traditional Chinese tunes. It feels like a small start, but a start at integrating what I learnt from punk, the importance of decolonising our hearts minds, and something folky, something soulful that's been with me since I was a kid. I keep returning to a belief in the healing power of music, the knowledge that music builds community and that community holds such genuine power to affect change.

If you still have unanswered questions about how to decolonise folk music - good! I hope this sends you on your own journey. Racist narratives around purity and ownership have kept non-white people on the margins for far too long. We've been discouraged from playing music for ourselves, for each other, when we may be the people who need this catharsis the most. White supremacy and colonialism constantly seeks to dehumanise us. When we access and emotionally connect with our expansive lineage it is dangerous to that reductive and limiting project. When we engage and connect with the past we can move forward with spirit and pride and when we share a simple song together we can access so much transformative joy.

Things to check out:

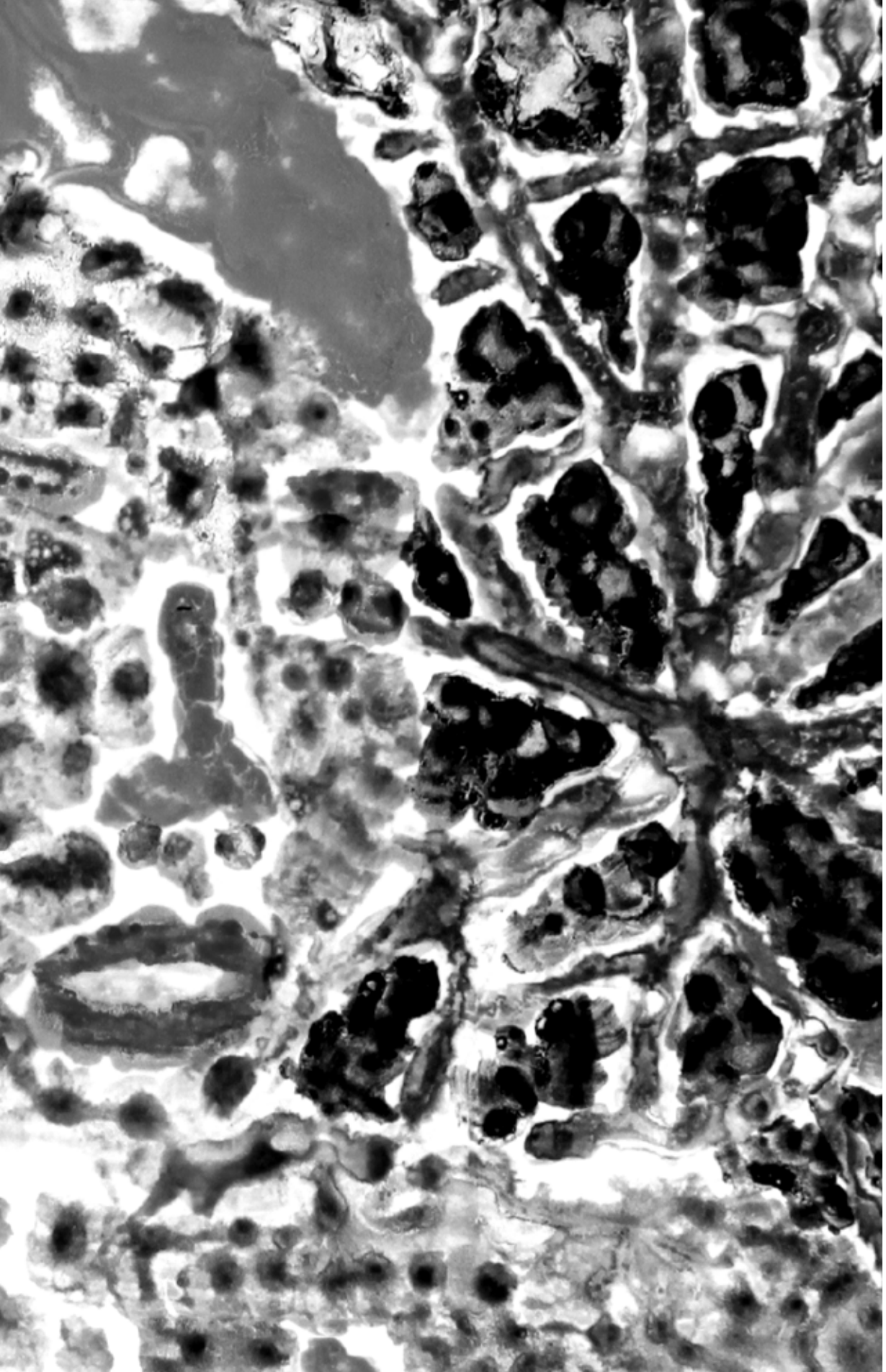
Zakia Sewell - *My Albion*, BBC sounds podcast

Afropop Worldwide podcast- *The Black History of the Banjo*

Angeline Morrison - *Sorrow Songs: Folk Songs of Black British Experience*

Cohen Braithwaite Kilcoyne - *Black Singers and Folk Ballads* EFDSS online resource

Cass Ezeji - *Trusadh: Afro Gaidhell.* Documentary on BBC Alba



MAKING SPACE: ORAL HISTORIES OF POLITICAL ORGANISING

Rosie Hampton

In January 2022, I attended an in-person Living Rent Partick branch meeting at the Partick Free Church on Thornwood Terrace, Glasgow. It was the first meeting I'd been to in the new venue, one that we were hoping would become our regular meeting location. The branch originally launched on December 8th, 2020 on Zoom, as most of Scotland was in Tier 4 of lockdown. A group of us had been out for months in pairs at Partick station, handing out flyers in masks, cautiously but excitedly seeking to build our local branch. After the launch, we continued to meet online once-a-month before moving outdoors, gifted with a rare few sunny branch meetings in Mansfield Park in June and July. The close of the year brought us our new meeting space, where we have been ever since.

In that same January,, I finished a set of oral history interviews I had slowly been conducting since May 2021. I had set out to speak to anyone involved in left-wing organising in 1980s Scotland, focussing on where this organising had taken place. I hoped to talk to those involved in unemployed workers' centres, women's centres, radical bookshops, social clubs, and any other venue that they might mention. I was interested in how having somewhere consistent to gather and organise might shape acts and relationships of solidarity. Would it make things easier, to know there was always somewhere to meet, to plan, to seek refuge? Even to hear about the challenges felt exciting: the absence of contemporary experience to draw from in my own political organising, meant that hearing about previous histories provided tense, but generative ways to craft political space.

This interplay between past and present organising was a constant presence throughout all of the interviews I conducted. Oral history theorists have written extensively about the role of subjectivity and intersubjectivity throughout the process of conducting interviews, as the experiences and positionality of interviewer and interviewee come to meet. Alessandro Portelli, a key thinker and practitioner in oral histories, proposed that the subjectivity of oral history as a historical source is what makes it different – and so rich. The ways in which this is enveloped in the recording, marked in the transcript, and present during the preparation for the interview, shapes the creation of the source itself.

In many of the interviews I conducted, this dynamic was made explicit. As we sat down to discuss the Edinburgh unemployed workers' centre one of the interviewees, Bob, asked me directly if I was political myself. I said yes, that I was involved in my trade union and also with my local Living Rent branch. He told me he was very supportive of the work that Living Rent was doing and linked their work to previous political groups he'd be involved with in Edinburgh. I told him that because of my own involvement in left-wing organising that I was very grateful to be doing this research – from both a theoretical and practical perspective. He then said, "That's partially why I'm interested in being interviewed, Rosie, so I can pass on some experiences good and bad."

Bob gently set out the terms on which he wanted to be interviewed. The idea that his reflections might be useful to contem-

porary organising was an important part of why he had chosen to participate in an oral history project. We mutually recognised that the intergenerational transfer of oral histories is crucial and politically generative: I was an adueince who would be able to implement what they had learnt in the previous decades. During the interviews, many of the participants shared to me what it meant to them to have a physical location to organise from. They spoke in terms of what it enabled them to do, rather than as an end in and of itself (important as that could be). The emotionality of this work was palpable throughout the interview process. The work of building and sustaining political space through the broader repression of left-wing organising was felt at the every day level. When spaces were forced to close, or even as individual people felt they had to leave, this was inseparable from the emotional experience(s) of defeat across the left in the 1980s.

Making time to reflect, to engage with what has come before, is time that is not often afforded in the day-to-day acts of political struggle. There is always something else that needs attention, fires that need to be put out. Across the trade and tenant union branch meetings I attend alongside friends and comrades, we often say to each other that we should be less defensive, allow ourselves the space to plan beyond the immediacy of the crisis in front of us. From carrying out those oral history interviews, I wonder if one solution is to look back to be able to look forward.

I don't intend to naively romanticise what was once had, or to insinuate that more conversations are all that's needed. From those interviews, there were plenty of cautionary tales of what opening and running spaces like unemployed workers' centres, women's centres, and radical bookshops might involve. At our branch meetings in Partick, the running costs, aesthetics, opening times, and broader function of the venue don't sit with us. It's a set of decisions that have already been made and we turn up to focus on the work of the local branch. The work of space-making is just that – work. It's another set of negotiations and tensions to navigate, with the space itself and those others who occupy it.

Yet the interviews are also where I found, and continue to find, the hopeful ways in which these tensions can be worked through. Carol was another person I interviewed who had been involved in Glasgow Women's Centre, which was ostensibly a women-only space much like other women's centres across the rest of Britain. Carol told me that as the Scottish Abortion Campaign (SAC) was set up, they needed somewhere to meet and plan. The obvious choice for them was the Women's Centre. A number of men were actively involved in the SAC and they didn't think that they would be allowed within the space. Yet Carol remembered that after some long discussions with other women involved in the centre, they accepted that the men involved in SAC could be in the space too – which Carol emphasised was "a huge thing that they did that for us."

Carol's story of negotiating and working through the different ways in which groups would use the women's centre speaks to how the crafting of political space is an ongoing process, generative of new political opportunities and coalitions. The work, made (re)visible through the oral history interview, was hard but it created something new and durable in the pursuit of solidarity across different groups. To create and capture this spirit in our contemporary political organising, engaging with the stories and experiences of past struggles firsthand, is a crucial part of generating new sites and moments of coalition. In a time where the places we meet politically can feel increasingly fleeting or temporary, where intersectional solidarity is inseparable from the liberatory future we all deserve – making space for oral histories and/of organising is an integral part of our work.

ABOUT THE GROUND

Trần Uy Đức

Trăng quyết bôi nhọ thành ra trăng
1 (1st translation) Moon decides to smear, turning into moon
2 (2st translation) Moon insists to humiliate turning out, still moon

Đếm tiếng của càng điệu ra trăn
1 Count the sounds of the claws, tune into python
2 Counting sounds from the chic-looking claws an anaconda grooving

Trăn huống cầm đi tặng hạ trần
1 Python moreover carries to gift the lower world
2 The anaconda nevertheless holds the groove to gift the man's world

Tiếng nói sựng trân tựa hà trần
1 Speech stumbles, startled like river dust
2 Then a cringey voice like river of reality

Yêu lá và hoa và cỏ cây
1 Loves leaves and flowers and grass, trees
2 That is forgotten into leaves, flowers, and greeneries

Tiếng nói ai hứa tặng cho bây
1 Speech someone promised to gift to you
2 Who gifted the voice to the men

Bấy đã giờ quá thì giờ quá
1 That has passed time, then time has passed
2 That time was a time over exaggerated time

Tiếng quá đã sang mùa thu bay
1 The sound has crossed into autumn's flight
2 The loud voice gone fully into flying fall

Mê đắm một sai hai ba quả
1 Infatuated, one wrong, two three fruits
2 Deep down it's countable of the mistakes

Phát rắm cô ca ta ba già
1 Farting, Coca, three old women
2 A slash of fart, three cocoa old fates

Lắm lá và cây và cỏ hoa
1 So many leaves and trees and grass, flowers
2 This is too much of a tender utopia

Tiếng nói hoa kia lạy tôi ra
1 Speech of flowers there begs me out
2 So talky is thy floweric pleasing me

Xứk
[Sassy expression (vocal)]

Hơ
[Numb because of shock expression (vocal)]

Muống và
1 Water spinach and
2 Vegetable of the situationists and

Chìm nhắm như mưa nhắm nhắm như mưa nhắm tựa mưa
1 Sink, taste like rain, taste taste like rain, taste as rain
2 Involuntarily sinking, eyes shutting, in the rain shutting like

Hiệu diền tại ai mắng qua qua
1 The sign at the field, who scolds over, over
2 Soft tempers iconical of a careless preach-over

Như là một loài bọ ugh trá
1 Like a kind of bug, ugh deceitful
2 Like a sort of bug, ugh-'ceitful'

Và ta dối là ta tại ta
1 And I lie, it's me, because of me
2 And I 'de-' me all's on me

PICKLED BEETROOT

Sholto Dobie

4 - 6 beetroot
(go for firm ones, fresh is good)

1 cup sugar
1 cup malt vinegar
1 cup water

1-2 Tsp salt (or to taste)
Tsp fennel seeds
Tsp peppercorns
Few star anise
Few cloves

Optional:
Coriander seeds
Couple of bay leafs (fresh or dried)
Chilli (fresh or dried)
Garlic clove or two

Essential all year round pickle that'll keep in the fridge for a few weeks. Use in sandwiches, salads and as a side dish for pretty much any meal. This 1:1:1 marinade was taught to me at Delta Mityba, a restaurant in Vilnius that I used to work in from time to time. It's on the sweeter side, you can adjust to your tastes by adding more water and vinegar. Substitute other vegetables - radish, daikon, kohlrabi, red onions, carrots. The spices/aromatics are endlessly variable, enjoy - Sholto

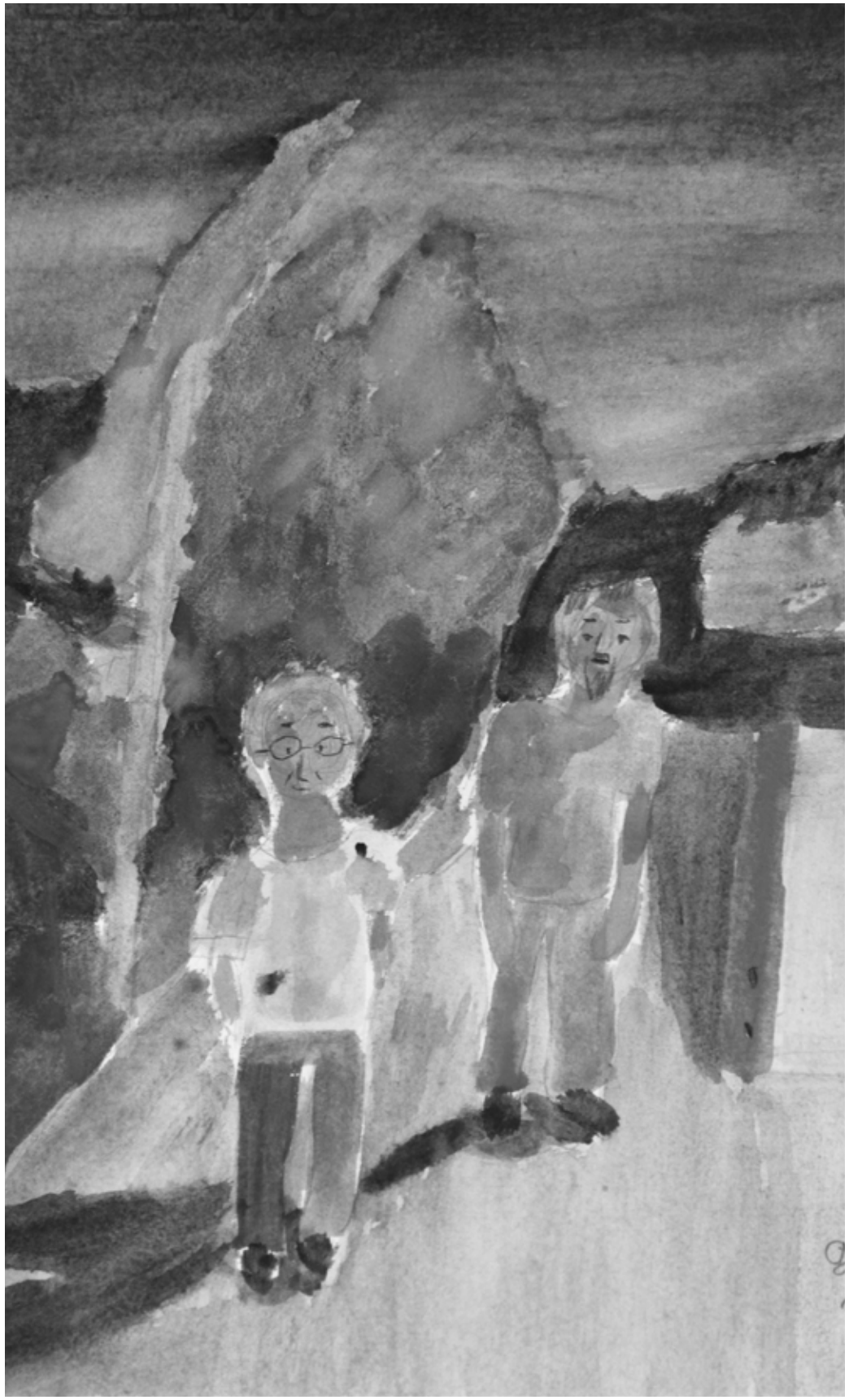
* * *

Wash beetroot (don't peel) and place in a pot. Cover with lightly salted water. Boil until tender but not soft or breaking apart (to test stick a fork into one and it should slide easily off), usually around 45mins - 1 hour. Don't worry if you overdo it, they'll just be a little softer, still nice. Set aside to cool.

Make the marinade, this is a 3-part marinade, 1 part sugar, 1 part water and 1 part vinegar. I just use whatever cup or mug is at hand to measure. Mix them in a saucepan, with salt, fennel seeds, peppercorns, star anise, cloves and any other spices and bring to a simmer for 5 minutes or so until the sugar is dissolved.

When beetroots are cool enough to handle. You should be able to rub the skins off under a tap. If they are tricky you can use a peeler.

Slice them how you like, I tend to do half moons, but you can do wedges, circles...and then pack them kind of tightly in a container or jar you can seal well. Pour over the marinade and refrigerate. I would eat this almost immediately but it gets better after a day or two.



‘WE ONLY PERCEIVE WHAT WE KNOW’: FRAGMENTS FROM A CONVERSATION

Sunik Kim & Rashad Becker

To convert and condense a ninety-minute conversation into text surfaces the act of editing. The originating conversation was itself a real-time act of editing, one of total artifice, a dialogue as terse performance constructed from the sprawling scraps, traces, of hours of manic chatter between Rashad, myself, and many others in the liminal zones—cafe, van, pub—of *Arika Episode 11*. To excise a single slice of a dialogue is to collapse it; to hack away at it with abandon, as I’ve done below, is to reconstruct it from the rubble. If the original dialogue involved us formally speaking *to* each other, but really speaking to the *audience*, or to *ourselves*—this versioned dialogue has us formally speaking past each other, lobbing questions without receiving answers, gesturing vaguely off-stage to characters whose expressions remain obscured, while really speaking to—whom? Following director Jacques Rivette: *‘One sole and selfsame reality with two faces, confused and fused in the created work. Everything else is spectacle.*
—Sunik Kim

Sunik Kim—Mao, 1942: ‘Since many writers and artists stand aloof from the masses and lead empty lives, naturally, they are unfamiliar with the language of the people. Accordingly, their works are not only insipid in language, but often contain nondescript expressions of their own coining which run counter to popular usage.’

I’m curious what the distinction would be between your conception of art in service of society and art in service of an idea.

Rashad Becker—That’s pretty much the same thing. It’s just to set it apart from art as a means to express yourself, which is something which I take no interest in.
S.—Why?

R.—It seems like a waste of time. If it’s just about yourself, it seems like an opportunity lost. To me, it’s always about revolution. Everything is about ending the world as we know it. That’s how I like my everything. That’s the only way I can conceive of a life not wasted. These are very big words, but it’s difficult for me to respond to that in any other way.

S.—It’s very easy to say that your music does certain things, or that your art does certain things, to claim certain things about it—that it somehow touches society, or changes society. That’s very different from the art actually doing that.

R.—The way music is received is quite narrow. There’s the three big-mouthed, loud-mouthed sentiments of sad, happy, angry, and I see that people have the tendency to force whatever they encounter into one of these gestures or emotions or sentiments. And I’m frustrated with that, because it reflects how poorly we are looking for causality principles in auditive phenomena around us, and how little effort we put into construing reality through auditive phenomena in everyday life. Our brains are generally lazy and entertain our consciousness. Most of what we hear, we fill in from a catalog, from memory, the same way we deal with spoons and horses. I’ve seen a spoon before. I’m not going to make the effort to study its ontology when it’s presented to me. But because the auditive sense is so capable of being time-based and 360-degree, we’re using it really poorly. We’re using it like bad eyes, and I see a

massive subversive potential in that too. When I say subversive, I mean subversive of sentiment.

S.—This idea of art touching society has to touch on questions of 'popular' or 'mass' or 'scale,' all these things. Yet, generally, with this type of music and art, we're operating on the "fringes."

R.—'Popular' is a beast to tackle. One of the cruxes of music is that it's very often moving into elitist terrain, almost aggressively hermetic about its strategy, method or content, and conceives of society as the Other and treats it with either indifference or disgust. I would like my music, of course, to be popular music. But it's certainly not.

I like to look at music as a model between exposure and experience. Generally, that's how perception works. We hold concepts to the world, big ones and then smaller ones. And from these concepts, we generate models. And these models shape our perception in a very active way. If you look at Detroit once having been the richest city on planet Earth… ow. And then the downfall. Then consider the same exact lyrics, but one is expressed as an American hardcore piece, one is expressed as a salt of the earth country kind of piece, or a funk piece—you will carry the same notion. You will tell the same story, but with an entirely different model. So you will generate a different experience from that. To infuse that model with strategy and method, you need to expand your repertoire of gestures. That was my goal—to see how these gestures translate beyond me, if people would hear a sound and say: that sounds very altruistic to me.

We only perceive what we know. If we go on a walk with a soil scientist, they will see health and decay and we'll just see puddles and dirt. This is the crux of perception. We only perceive what we know—with my name, or, I'm sure, with your name, too. So I'm not surprised Western ears can't hear the difference between a scale from Iran as opposed to a scale from Syria. But, of course, the notion that the scale is sad is because of its proximity to the minor scale. That just eats the phenomena. There is potential in that too.

S.—You've hinted at working in a theater environment for a while before doing music. It's also very evident that there's a use of theatrical ideas in your work. In fact, in conversations outside of this, you've even used the word 'musical.'

R.—I did theater scores from 1994, then I turned my back on the theater, because it's a structure that is entirely built around enabling sociopaths.

S.—The first thing I hear in your piece is the struggle of a text trying to emerge from a type of material. That reminds me of probably my favorite filmmakers, Straub-Huillet, who made these intense films that split in two directions. On the one hand, they did a lot of 'landscape' films. They would do very slow pans around the countryside, reading text—never original text—over that. They would also stage things like *Antigone*, but in very sparse and anachronistic environments. So you would see people in ancient garb, and then you'd see modern Rome behind them, with all the cars. In this particular film, *Too Early, Too Late*, from 1981, they're reading a text from Engels for the first half, and a text from an Egyptian Marxist on a peasant revolt in the 1950s for the second half. The really interesting inversion that happens there is that because what you're being presented with as the image is the landscape, that actually becomes the text. You're reading the landscape. You're given the time and space to analyze and perceive all the hidden activity on the screen before you. And then the text becomes the setting. Whereas, normally, in a film context, or in general, we think of the landscape as the place where everything happens, the setting.

I'm also very interested in this idea of bringing theatrical strategies into the musical realm and drawing out the specific perceptual faculties that music calls upon in all of us. In staging the Stammheim trials, or the SPK text, why use music? Why limit it to that realm?

R.—There is generally a higher subversive potential to me in working with sound and music than in working with a stage, or with images, because of the different form of decoding and perceiving it. Falsification is a deep part of the ontology of any image at this point. But falsification is a very abstract idea when it comes to audio.

S.—Brecht: 'If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions but by changing them in such a way that if the audience took its representations as a practical guide to insights and impulses it would go astray in real life.'

R.—Yes. This is very much of its time, because it doesn't acknowledge the hyperreal, because hyperreality wasn't theorized upon at that point. This absolutely works for the 1920s, but it doesn't work after the '70s simulacrum conception of the hyperreal where the subversive aspect is rather in the artifact and reality being indistinguishable. It's the opposite of the alienation effect that epic theater is based on. So I think it's valid in its own right. It's just at a different point in the history of philosophy. The funny thing is that Brecht's theater is already hyperrealism in the sense that it is a reality that cannot be experienced, but it's real. It's not a phantasmagoria, but it is modeled after reality in a way that can't ever be experienced, and then just deals with this condition of artificiality with a very specific strategy, through the alienation effect.

Information is defined by a component that is added to any system that allows statements about that system that have not been immanent or that couldn't emerge from that system before that component was added. So, growing information would mean a bigger variety of statements that can be derived for any system. I'd say we have left the information age, and have entered an age of mutual corroboration and witnessing, and witnessing each other witnessing. In the process, we are actively diminishing the variety of statements that we can derive about our societies.

S.—Thank you.

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This text is transcribed and compiled by Sunik Kim from a conversation between Kim and Becker as part of Arika Festival's Episode 11: To End the World As We Know It, 13-17 November 2024. Our huge thanks to Barry and the team at Arika for hosting this and providing the transcript to work from.

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Top. 'Let's Resist Social Cleansing' reads a banner on Thurlow Street 28th April 2019

Below.
Escalator up to Palace Bingo and Bowling 2021

PARSING PASSAGES

Meera Shakti Osborne

for the changing city I once knew and the one I love still - Hanif Abdurraqib

Here, I write about what I know with my feet, places I have loved and places that have changed me. I lived in Glasgow on and off for 6 years and when the editors of this Zine first approached me to write this text I thought about situating it here in Glasgow. But when I began writing it felt more honest to speak about my city and allow the echoes between gentrifications here and there to exist as they do.

This is a record of places and people that have been and are disappearing. It's about how intergenerational histories are passed down and how the demolition of buildings disrupts these passages of information. I think about memory and loss in relation to homes and social spaces. I am thinking about the impossibility for so many people to build a simple life for themselves.

I hope you will be able to layer your own memory-spaces on to the ones I share here. Living through gentrification and social cleansing over a whole lifetime is a shared state of being for many of us.

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother

I love my city and I am heartbroken by it in some ways most days. Like most Londoners, I have grown up with stories about how things are different to what they used to be. I've always been moving through the city with the knowledge that change is round the corner and will happen in ways that are unexpected. Here, I take you from Green Lanes in North London down to South East London, specifically Aylesbury Estate and Elephant and Castle. Maybe you will feel resonances in North East and South East Glasgow; Castlemilk and Sighthill.

Some of my earliest memories of the city are walking through the passage, a narrow alleyway that connects the ladder away from the traffic of Green Lanes. The passage is long, dangerous and transformative. I was told two of my uncles had been attacked in the passage in one of the 'Paki-bashing' incidents that clouded the 1980s. I was warned to not walk down the passage at night and I remember walking quickly as the sun was setting. I remember playing with my shadow and trying to name each street. Fairfax, Falkland, Frobisher. Something, something, Hampton, Raleigh, something and then finally down the smallest alley, I'm spat out onto steamy Turnpike Lane.

When my family moved to the area in 1970, Green Lanes was majority Greek Cypriot. Over the years this community moved out to places like Palmers Green and Southgate for a more suburban lifestyle. Between the 1970s and 1990s Green Lanes became majority Turkish and Kurdish. This was in part due to the military coup in Turkey in the 1980s and the widespread persecution in Turkey, Iraq and Syria of Kurdish people during the same period.

The make-up of the city reflects a much wider global history. How and why most of us are here is inextricably tied to stories of war and colonisation. Ambalavaner Sivanandan said, 'We are here because you were there'. Now our hostile environment is reaching new heights, we can see our city transforming again, but rather than movement of people we see a movement of assets from offshore tax havens arriving in silence.

As the house prices in the area have skyrocketed over the last 10 years, instead of being priced out, the local businesses have dug their heels in and built empires from what used to be humble restaurants like Antepliler. Green Lanes is still the place me and my friends go for shish and late night knafeh.

However the restaurant empires will not save us. The sharp decline in secondary school pupils shows us that families have been priced out of the area. Gentrification across London means that this year there is an anticipated drop of 6.7% enrollment in inner city secondary schools - a shift that is impacting the fragile threads that hold this city together. Culture needs teenagers like sound needs silence or like the passage needs us all.

You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today.

Passages from north to south east. What are the different types of changes we experience in a city?

AYLESBURY ESTATE

Constructed: 1963–1977
Demolished: 2015 - ongoing

In its original form, Aylesbury Estate in Walworth contained approximately 2,700 dwellings and was designed to house 10,000 residents. Stretching over 285,000 square metres, it's one of the largest public housing projects in Europe.

Tony Blair gave his first speech as prime minister on 2nd June 1997 at Aylesbury estate 'For the past 18 years, often the poorest people in our country have been forgotten by government, and I want that to change.'

In 2001 Aylesbury residents were asked to vote on whether to transfer the ownership and management of the estate and redevelopment to a housing association in which 70% of the residents voted no. (In the same year, the Glasgow council housing stock transfer process began with promises of debt write-offs and investments - in 2003 this resulted in the largest stock transfer in the UK, involving approximately 81,000 homes.)

In 2002 Southwark Council said that fixing up the current blocks would cost £200m and they did not have 'this kind of money'. In 2005 the council decided on a strategy for the demolition and redevelopment of the area called manifesto for change. Demolition began 10 years later in 2015.

Housing stock transfer began under the Conservative government in the 1980s and the New Labour government under Blair's leadership embraced the policy, often stating the transfers would ensure debt write-offs and investment in housing as the argument for transferring ownership.

Oh, you know we've got to find a way to bring some understanding here today.

I moved into Wendover, one of the original blocks in Aylesbury in 2013. The flat had wooden floors and was a brutalist design with beautiful windows that stretched across the full length of the rooms. The flat was warm as the heating was centralised across the whole building so it was included in the rent. I loved sitting at my desk looking out over the trees of Thurlow Street, checking the lower blocks across the road often with kids playing ball games and hanging out on the walkways that gave them privacy from the road. Speaking with my neighbours there was a feeling that these well-designed blocks were getting neglected by the council. I remember that the rubbish was hardly ever collected, which brought a parade of rats and smells of rotting trash around the bins. The enclosed glass passages with views of the city skyline had broken windows that remained open to the elements; mould and damp had begun to cover the surfaces.

In 2015, the year after I left, parts of the empty estate were squatted by Autonomous Nation of Anarchist Libertarians (ANAL) "Squatting was criminalised at the same time as estates were being destroyed all over London. We aren't here to fight on anyone's behalf but to fight in solidarity with the residents of Aylesbury." The council responded violently with dogs, private security and eviction notices. The squatters responded by moving to another empty block. The council responded by smashing up the blocks making them unlivable. The squatters responded by fixing the windows.

Mother, mother
Everybody thinks we're wrong
Oh, but who are they to judge us

La Bodeguita 2021

I went back to Wendover in 2020. I was leafleting the blocks in the area inviting residents to join a noise protest that my friends were organising during lockdown - to draw attention to the racism in our health service, reflected starkly in death rates during the pandemic. Walking through the corridors, most of the doorways had been blocked off with heavy steel sheets, some of the sheets had been bent open and people were living inside without electricity. It felt so quiet. At the time of writing, In early 2025, there are now only 15 residents left in Wendover. They are all being forced out and rehoused and then the block will go too. This violence bears heavy on this whole city.

To date, the redevelopment of Aylesbury has cost £433.8m of public funds, completing only the first of four phases. In 2005 Southwark council rejected the proposal to restore the estate due to lack of funds.

What's going on?

HEYGATE

Constructed: 1971–1974
Demolished: 2011–14

Heygate Estate, like many brutalist blocks, had elevated walkways intended to separate pedestrians from road traffic. The Evening Standard in 2012 wrote that the estate's 'stairwells and alleys had become dark spaces which encouraged crime and antisocial behaviour' New Statesman in 2013, describes Heygate as a 'mugger's paradise'. The actual data from the Heygate Estate had a crime rate of around half of the borough average when it was still occupied. This ongoing narrative about the dangerous design ensures the only solution can be demolition.

In Downtown Cairo's architectural design, there is a network of passageways, back alleys, and side streets that have been utilised during periods of social uprisings in the country. The interconnected spaces, often situated between buildings and away from main traffic routes, have historically provided refuge. Their narrow and winding nature makes it challenging to control or disperse gatherings. Moreover, these alleys provide escape routes and hiding spots. Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's government sees this architecture as uncontrollable and is in the process of trying to dislocate the centre of the city into the desert where there are no passageways. Who is and

who is not allowed to hide is something I think about a lot.

Over the last 15 years Elephant and Castle has changed so much it is hard to remember what it used to look like. Whole streets have disappeared and the routes I used to take no longer exist. It is disorientating. When I first started spending time in the area the evictions and forced sales had already begun. By 2010 only 20 flats out of 1,200 remained occupied. Adrian Glasspool was the last resident who was forcefully evicted by the police in 2013. Glasspool's resistance was up against the £1.5 billion regeneration of the area.

How can I make you with new eyes understand that the city you see is built on so much loss?

Residents were promised new homes as part of the regeneration. However the council's 'right to return' agreements for tenants lasted for seven years, expiring at the end of October 2015. This timing meant that many of the replacement homes had not even begun construction before the majority of tenants were forced to re-house themselves. Ongoing 'regeneration' of the Sighthill area, in North Glasgow mirrors this simultaneous demolition and dispersal. The violence bears heavy on the whole city.

A BBC News report from 2013 highlights that residents forced off the Heygate Estate under the regeneration scheme claimed they were not offered enough money to afford homes locally, resulting in relocations outside the city to places like St Albans, Slough and Sidcup. I remember meeting a single mum at a Focus E15 protest in 2013 who told me she had been offered a flat in South End and was told if she didn't take it, she would be taken off the housing waiting list.

Come on talk to me so you can see.

Blair's 1997 initiation speech sounded a warning alarm that across the UK, councils will be uprooting and displacing working class communities under the guise of investment for a distorted future.

How will I show my new nibling past passages of life when the passages are gone now? Can memory live beyond place?

I moved back to the area in 2018. It felt like a return to somewhere I had never fully left. So much had changed already, but there were still squats, raves in the closed underpass and places to have long conversations without feeling like you were about to be moved on. In 2018, Elephant Park, where Heygate used to be, was in the middle of construction. The air was thick with dust and I watched with disbelief as the glass towers started going up, so close to each other it felt like a metaphor for Narcissus. Many of the new highrises going up around the city share this view. The wealthy are staring at themselves, unable to see anything else, by design. The Coronet had closed earlier in the same year and the campaign to save the shopping centre was still alive and kicking.

ELEPHANT AND CASTLE SHOPPING CENTRE

Constructed: 1965
Closed: 2020
Demolished: 2021

Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre was the first shopping centre built in Europe. It was a passage that cut the corner, we could dodge the rain or have a quick interlude in our day. In 2009 I first started visiting the Shopping Centre for the bowling alley and Palace Bingo upstairs. Over my late teens and 20s I got to know the shops and cafes. I tried soursop with milk for the first time at La Bodeguita. I used to buy party outfits at 'mk one'. I tried the new vegan sausage roll at the Greggs downstairs. My memories of the Shopping Centre are mainly of hanging around with my friends when we had time to kill, no money and no solid plans.

On July 3rd 2018, England played Colombia in the World Cup quarterfinals, we flocked to the shopping centre to be somewhere we could support Colombia with our chests. England won in penalties and on the same day Southwark Council's planning committee approved the demolition of the Shopping Centre. How could England have beaten Colombia? How could this space, used by so many people, be demolished? Even though we have seen so much change in the city the demolition of the shopping centre felt unimaginable.

Tell me what's going on?

How we spend time in our area has a profound effect on our relationship to that place. Elephant now has these weird 'public' spaces that are privately owned. In these spaces you are watched by security cameras and security guards. It's a trend I have experienced across the whole city: you are allowed to be here, but on their terms. How we spend our time has been seized.

How can I make sure you, little one, know about the ghosts?

There was a period of my life where most of my friends lived near Green Lanes. It was cheap, lively, late night, on Piccadilly line, by Finsbury Park, great buses, by the reservoir, full of flavour - it was our centre. Change isn't sudden, I remember when my older sister lived on the N16 side of the road as it was cheaper than the N4/N8 side. The gentrifiers didn't like the Tottenham postcode back in the 00s. Slowly and then a bit less slowly, nearly everyone I know has left the area or died. For now, the streets are the same and for this I am grateful. My multi-generational memories can stay intact a little while longer, long enough to pass on to a few others.

How can so much change in one generation?

It is disorientating being from a city and being determined to stay. The future is unpredictable, but Octavia Butler said our tomorrow is the child of our today, that we all have some responsibility to care for it. It feels like there is a plan for my city, I'm not sure what it is, but I am sure it doesn't include me.

I'll stay in the passages while they remain. For the one I love still. The passages belong to the ghosts, they hold our tender memories just out of sight.

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Come on talk to me
So you can see
What's going on

CITED

London Council's report on 'Managing falling school rolls in London' and declining secondary school number, available at: https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/london_councils_-_managing_falling_schools_rolls_2024_0.pdf

'Some occupiers' writing for squat.net, 'London: Squat the lot (Aylesbury Estate) - February 23rd, 2015', available at:https://en.squat.net/2015/02/23/london-squat-the-lot-aylesbury-estate/)

2015 Government Report on 'Extending the Heygate tenants Right to Return'
Policy, available at: https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s56029/Report%20Extending%20the%20Heygate%20Tenants%20Right%20to%20Return%20Policy.pdf

Omar Nagatti & Beth Stryker / CLUSTER , 2015, 'Cairo Downtown Passageways Walking Tour' via passageways.clustermappinginitiative.org, available at: https://clustercairo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CDP_EG.pdf

BBC News, 'Heygate Estate residents move from London' 2nd August 2013, avaialble at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-london-23546450

Song Lyrics from Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On', pictures by the author.

LEIGH FRENCH & VARIANT MAGAZINE: ‘FUTURE IMPERFECT / V.III’

Variant Editorial Collective

The death of Leigh French in May 2023 was a significant loss to critical culture in Scotland and beyond. French was an editor of *Variant*, an influential and beloved Glasgow-based magazine that focused (among other things), on the critique of society and its institutions, critical social and cultural practice, and independent media and critical artistic interventions. *Variant* existed in two incarnations: *Volume I*, from 1984 to 1994, and then *Volume II*, spanning 1996–2012. Leigh acted as editor for the duration of *Volume II*, initially with Billy Clark, then Daniel Jewesbury, and later alongside a wider editorial collective.

The magazine was driven by a positive emancipatory understanding of critique and the belief that art and culture are always political. It explored the broadest ramifications of cultural policy in an uncompromising and fearless manner. *Variant* was defunded by Creative Scotland in 2012, likely at least in part due to the forensic eye the magazine trained on its stealth imposition of competitive and market-based structures within the arts.

In the years preceding Leigh’s death, the wider editorial group met intermittently with the intention of re-establishing *Variant* in a new form that would respond to the contemporary marketised cultural and economic tendencies it had so accurately prophesied in numerous articles in *Volume II*. To this end, Leigh undertook a short residency in 2021 at Peacock Visual Arts in Aberdeen, coinciding with their exhibition ‘Another world is possible: Aberdeen People’s Press and radical media in the 1970s’. Ahead of this residency Leigh wrote a 5,000-word document bringing together his critique of the retrogressive state of cultural administration in Scotland (and beyond) and his reflections on how a possible *Volume III* of *Variant* might address these conditions.

The draft text was unpublished and un-proofed. Nevertheless we think it provokes important discussions for critical cultural practice today. In what follows, we reprint one full section from the text (leaving intact Leigh’s idiosyncratic punctuation) before selecting suggestive themes to pose some hopefully productive questions arising from Leigh’s restless critical inquiries into cultural production.

*

FUTURE IMPERFECT V.III

At this moment of enormous turbulence in the neo-liberal social climate of most ‘advanced’ democracies, humanistic studies are being downgraded, this has generated a general anxiety over artistic freedom and social struggles around cuts in public funding — campaigns grouped around ‘anti-cuts’ messages which uphold cultural/knowledge production as a public good, and generally construe it as an essential function of the welfare state.

This in the institutional context of long grappling with conducting arts-orientated learning and research where the amount of financial and institutional support the arts receive has been signif-

icantly reduced : successive funding cuts (ongoing climate of 'austerity'), financing regimes intended to bring private funding into the sector which itself generates a myriad of new competitors, indebted and financially insecure practitioners, etc.

The way governing institutions engage with the process of sectoral enlargement / expansion (in principle, oriented towards the global horizon, new opportunities and markets, as well as the national competitive benchmarking), and the manner in which they handle some of the profound contradictions inherent to it, was and still is posed as presenting the greatest opportunities yet also presents some of the greatest threats -- who will still be able to afford to conduct arts research?

It should now be incontestable that we are experiencing a period of intensified disruptive change, one that requires the development of a renewed critique of political economy that is capable of responding to an epistemic environment of contemporary crises — which comprise a number of distinct but interrelated phases, some aspects occur at specific times, other elements are present throughout the entire historical process of accumulation.

The observable neoliberal frameworks and initiatives that shape / dominate debate are more than a mere composition of tendencies / phenomena — it concerns the organisation of post-industrial society and the constitution of knowledge, an emphasis on the future that diverts us from new ways of organising and rethinking our relation to knowledge; what it is and how it is generated, communicated and shared.

As regards the specific or immersive context, and associated 'frictions' : The arts are a site where the interests of diverse constituencies come together yet exist in states of tension and conflict — whose needs are often incommensurate and operating on disparate timescales. Because the field is suffused with aspirations and necessarily depends on co-operation, it lends itself to speculative discourses that draw attention from what is to what could be — often in a less than radical way. This is to emphasise the complex, multi-perspectival field in which activity takes place: not as a singular ideal for the public good but, rather, as an assemblage of aspects and tendencies that may seem more or less relevant and appealing, or not, to the various actors and constituencies to whom it is presented as an opportunity.

The Variant editorial collective produced a free newsprint publication, mirrored and catalogued online at the point of publication. <www.variant.org.uk>

Variant's editorial approach evolved gradually out of a longer historical project of critical thought, and retained many of the shared aims alongside developing a proactive open access stance, one also engaging with creative archiving and digitisation in culture (Variant vol.1 & 2 are catalogued here) as well as the open access forms of learning it enabled — i.e. providing free-at-the-point-of-access to networks and communities of subject specialists, professional practitioners, mentors and wider learning communities. These are areas bearing direct and immediate relevance to an argument for renewal of the project — it remains important to experiment, critically and creatively, particularly at this moment, given the somewhat gloomy vision of the future and the urgent need to identify how it might be averted (where possible).

We were always alert to the fact that attacking 'public' institutions poses a danger of lending force to neoliberalism's practice of bolstering emphasis on production, privatisation, and the interests of the market while simultaneously undermining nearly all other futures. There is a case to be made for supporting and defending artistic and educational fields as providing some of the few remaining public spaces where difficult, challenging, and avowedly non-commercial ideas can still be developed, explored, and disseminated (to a certain extent at least).

And in doing so, it is possible, if not now an imperative, to take impetus and inspiration from the emergence from within and across activist, artistic, and educational fields of autonomous and self-organised learning communities — an understanding of learning as an inherently social, discursive and relational activity, that has the capacity to build 'communities of learning' that stretch across time and space, and institutions.

The question remains, are there ways we can refuse to simply submit to 'existing political discourses and the formulation of political needs those discourses articulate'? A disruptive technology to counter the continued imposition of a neoliberal political rationality that however often it may appear dead on its feet it manages to stumble on, zombie-like, either mutating / regressing to illiberal modes.

Does the struggle against the 'becoming business' of artistic and educational fields, that Variant previously detailed, not require us, too, to have the courage to experiment with new systems and models for the production, publication, sharing, and discussion of teaching, learning, and research; and thus to open ourselves to transforming radically the material practices and social relations of our institutional labour?

Thereby understanding the conditions people face in twenty-first-century society, so as to be prepared for those areas, if conflicts are to be resolved democratically — as the philosopher Brian Holmes argues, 'a very large number of professional educators [...] artists and thinkers' who can help people with 'learning to live otherwise'. By this Holmes means 'learning to imagine, desire and put into effect another kind of collective existence'.

In some ways, Variant's earlier, pre-emptive approaches to what were then more emergent crises was but a small part of the attempted production of a different network of values, to inform so disrupt attempts at establishing dominant institutional neoliberal value networks — this was attempted through what could, at least in part, be described as an institutional 'becoming them':

"...the goal is not to frontally oppose the adversaries, but to trick them by 'becoming them', embodying disruptive and ironic camouflages. Bypassing the classic power/ contra-power strategy, which often results in aggressive interventions that replicate competitiveness and the violence of capitalism itself, to apply disruption as an art form means to imagine alternative routes based on the art of staging paradoxes and juxtapositions. Disruption becomes a means for a new form of criticism" (Tatania Bazzichelli).

Was it truly possible to do so? Arguably something approaching this, through actions to understand developing immanent forms of critique, as inventive means of preparation rather than as outright negative refusal.

So how might a re-imagined Variant respond?

*

FRAGMENTS FOR THE FUTURE? / V.III

It is deeply unfortunate that Leigh is no longer here to answer how *Variant* and other 'disruptive' cultural efforts might respond to our current context, but he did leave some clues as to potential paths forward for critical knowledge production. One is the critical defence and use of existing cultural institutions. A position that takes on increasing relevance with cut-backs leading to the permanent or temporary closure of significant arts institutions and cultural venues including The Arches and the CCA (Glasgow) and the Filmhouse Cinema and Summerhall

(Edinburgh). This is not to mention the widespread closure of venues such as libraries, swimming pools and community centres across Glasgow, via Glasgow Life, an arms-length external organisation (ALEO) responsible for managing the City Council's cultural and leisure services.

"We were always alert to the fact that attacking 'public' institutions poses a danger of lending force to neoliberalism's practice of bolstering emphasis on production, privatisation, and the interests of the market while simultaneously undermining nearly all other futures. There is a case to be made for supporting and defending artistic and educational fields as providing some of the few remaining public spaces where difficult, challenging, and avowedly non-commercial ideas can still be developed, explored, and disseminated (to a certain extent at least)."

But *Variant* was never at ease with a mere defence of existing public cultural institutions despite the necessity of (critically) defending them. Posing the question of broader 'spaces of critical engagement', he asked, is it not now an imperative in the context of deepening austerity and the foreclosure of public institutional space,

"...to take impetus and inspiration from the emergence from within and across activist, artistic, and educational fields of autonomous and self-organised learning communities — an understanding of learning as an inherently social, discursive and relational activity, that has the capacity to build 'communities of learning' that stretch across time and space, and institutions."

"The question remains," he continues, *"are there ways we can refuse to simply submit to 'existing political discourses and the formulation of political needs those discourses articulate'? A disruptive technology to counter the continued imposition of a neoliberal political rationality that however often it may appear dead on its feet it manages to stumble on, zombie-like, either mutating / regressing to illiberal modes.*

What this 'disruptive technology' means remains open to interpretation but it rests partially on immanent institutional critique, critically addressing *"observable neoliberal frameworks"* that dominate debate and place an emphasis on a fictitious future *"that diverts us from new ways of organising and rethinking our relation to knowledge; what it is and how it is generated, communicated and shared."*

The specific context of the arts field is contradictory in this regard, as Leigh observes. On the one hand, speculative discourses within the arts can *"draw attention from what is to what could be."* On the other hand, *"because the field is suffused with aspirations [not least those concerned with career advance] it lends itself to speculative discourses that draw attention from what is to what could be––often in a less radical way."* What is self-evident is that no progressive collective future is feasible without a critical examination of present constraints. Leigh's presence is sorely missed in this regard.

*

*The remainder of the editorial collective are currently working on a one-off issue of *Variant* to be launched in May 2025 in print and online. We do this both to commemorate our friend and collaborator Leigh French, but also to help situate ourselves critically in a context of proliferating economic, social and cultural crises.

LISTENING WELL: A TRIPTYCH ON AMINA CLAUDINE MYERS

Adèle Oliver

CIRCLE OF TIME (1983)

Amina Claudine Myers – piano, organ, harmonica, vocals
Don Pate – bass, electric bass
Thurman Barker – percussion

I just know that we both sat, decades and oceans apart,
in the middle of a pew, at the foot of a record player, from the edge of a dream,
listening to Andraé Crouch,
And understanding there is nothing more alive than the promise of heaven
Sounded out by Black hands.

This is what I thought as I listened to 'Do You Wanna Be Saved' on the 16:04 train back home. There was something in the push
Of her piano into the spiritual – sensual – hell is hot – but not as hot as these keys.
This, I said, to the lady whose elbow claimed the space in-between our seats,
is gospel.
That makes feet stomp and noses wrinkle.
Right on time.
So, to listen well, I must go back,
And take Ms Myers with me
To the front room of my childhood home,
Where I would sit against the stereo system,
With Andraé and Walter and Twinkie
Speakers turned down low low low
And stacked around me like a fortress
The cables could stretch all the way to the Plowed Fields of Louisville.
Where souls were tied to bare feet

"But times have changed"
This is what my dad says
As I gaze into the hollow where my sonic oasis used to be
Commiserations —
Something leaks from the headphones
Snaked around my neck
Ms Myers are you mocking me?
"time moves by slowly, time moves by quickly"
A mantra in free stride
That continues as each breath awaits the convenience of breathing

JUMPING IN THE SUGAR BOWL (1984)

Amina Claudine Myers - piano, organ, voice
Thomas Palmer - bass, electric bass
Reggie Nicholson - percussion, voice

Before I left, I took my guitar and picked out solitary notes
I bent the strings under the spell of Mind Chambers fury
I battled its snare drum with a flick of my wrist
And in the final crescendo
Just as I needed to leave
I realised that to listen well to is open the
Lid of the piano and slip between the steel
To rise above and suspend
Like the oo-ay-yah of Guten Morgen
That flits over billows of plucks and bangs
Each chord teaches me how
To listen ascended
To really listen well
Unmoored from nostalgia
With feet flat against the floor
Eyes squeezed
Ready for the infinite space that was mine to take
Between the before and the dawn of Another Day.

//

She sings:

"Call it sweet surrender
Call it yesterday
What seems good can seem bad
When you don't know who to turn to
Was it love that we had
Or just a way to have us make it through another day"

//

And I am weightless
In the mosaics of unbounded sound
Of the blues
Which, if you listen well,
Teaches exactly how surrender sweetly
To the circle of time
How to listen inside and outside.

CENTRAL PARK'S MOSAICS OF RESERVOIR, LAKE, PATHS AND GARDENS (2024)

Wadada Leo Smith – trumpet
Amina Claudine Myers - Piano, Hammond B3

I landed in lowlands of Eswatini
Early in the morning with the tranquil, the playful, the glacial, the elegies
Of free of jazz of trumpet, organ, keys
Playing in my ear
But before I hear Conservatory Gardens, I hear
Blackwell, Conway County, Arkansas
An extended composition, improvised hamlet of rural melodies spread out
Across staves of Southern heat
The score of normal everyday life:
"the crickets at night
the birds
lilac that attracted the bees, so there was that humming sound
whistle blowing … the train at 9:00 every night
the bells of the cows when they were coming
the patter of chicken feet
the rooster; he would come to the back door and crow
grandmother would say, I knew you were coming,
the rooster crowed."

The density of the history of these sounds
Rendered now in the vibration of each note
Played bt fingers roaming freely in When Was
In the break between, in small silences
Crickets respond to her call
The present falling into focus
Because here is Blackwell, is Central Park, is Mpumalanga, is my living room, is home
And Amina Claudine Myers, if you listen well, plays from the locus

All extracts taken from Amina Claudine Myers' interview with George Lewis for BOMB: https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2006/10/01/amina-claudine-myers/

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