Poetry and Performance: Listening to a Multi-Vocal Canada

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of English,
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Performances of poetry constitute significant cultural and literary events that challenge the representational limits and possibilities of transposing written words into live and recorded media. However, there has not been a comprehensive study of Canadian poetry that focuses specifically on performance. This dissertation undertakes a theorizing of performance that foregrounds mediation, audience, and presence (both readerly and writerly). The complex methodology combines theoretical approaches to reading (Linda Hutcheon on adaptation, Wolfgang Iser on the reader, and Roland Barthes on the materiality of writing) with poetics as theorized by Canadian poets (namely bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Jan Zwicky, Robert Bringhurst) in order to argue that performances of poetry are responsive exchanges between performers and audiences. Importantly, the dissertation argues that performances of poetry call for a re-evaluation of reading as listening, thereby altering the interaction between audience and performance from passive to participatory.

Arranged in four chapters, the dissertation examines a range of Canadian poets and performances: The Four Horsemen (Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, and bpNichol), dance adaptations of Michael Ondaatje’s poems, George Elliott Clarke’s poetic libretti, and Robert Bringhurst’s polyphonic poetry. Following the Introduction’s
outlining of the term *performance*, Chapter One examines processes of recording and adapting avant-garde sound poetry, specifically in the sound and written poetry of Nichol and McCaffery. Chapter Two theorizes adaptation as a responsive reading practice in the context of dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing (Bruce McDonald’s *Elimination Dance* and Veronica Tennant’s *Shadow Pleasures*). In Chapter Three, Clarke’s jazz opera *Québécité*, with libretto by Clarke and music composed by D.D. Jackson, foregrounds a central argument of this dissertation: that multi-vocal poetics can, in fact, reconfigure multicultural politics. Chapter Four turns to polyphony as a textual representation of multi-vocality in the poetry of Robert Bringhurst. Through a close-listening to a musical poem by Jan Zwicky, the Conclusion points towards new critical directions in listening to Canadian poetry. Only in understanding how cultural and political performances are recorded, enacted and received both on and off the page can we listen, critically and actively, to our multi-voiced Canadian soundscapes.
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Listen: this music

is all about water

— Robert Bringhurst “The Blue Roofs of Japan” (Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music)
Introduction

This dissertation begins not here on this page, but during a reading at the Vancouver International Writers Festival (2001) when Michael Ondaatje closed *The Cinnamon Peeler*, looked out into the audience, and said that he would respond to questions. Although Q&A sessions are common postludes to performances, there was one question that made this exchange particularly memorable: what career would you have chosen if you were not a writer? Ondaatje replied that he would have been a jazz musician. It was, in this moment, that another audience member, myself, heard an elaborate map of intersections that would lead to the argument of this dissertation: that performances of poetry require a critical approach that takes into account their multiple layers of performance and the ways in which these layers challenge our conceptions of the writing/listening/performing body as live or recorded. A reader reading a poem aloud exemplifies the extent to which multiple layers of performance co-exist because there is performance in both the textual rendering of the poem and in the reader’s utterance of it. The act of reading has engaged many critics across disciplines, but this dissertation takes on a new approach to reading by framing it within a postmodern soundscape of Canadian poetry and performance. Within this context, the dissertation asks how we are to critically understand the reading out loud of a poem when it is read by a spoken-word artist, a dancer, a musician, or a singer — a crucial problematizing of adaptation that has not yet been addressed in Canadian poetry. The wider implications of re-evaluating poetry in performance concern how we read poetry and how we engage with interdisciplinary works. In the case of Canadian poetry, this leads to the question of how we *hear* poetic voices as
performing textual or embodied identifications as Canadian. By investigating these issues in relation to specific Canadian poets (The Four Horsemen, Michael Ondaatje, George Elliott Clarke and Robert Bringhurst) and performances of their poems in a range of media (spoken-word, film, dance, and music), I argue for a re-conceptualizing of the interaction between and among reader/performer and listener/audience as one of active participation. The impact of this argument bears not only upon literary and cultural studies (within which performance must be theorized as an analytical tool through which to approach both the textual poem and a performance of it), but also upon the practices through which we listen and respond to the multi-voiced soundscapes of Canada.

This argument can be traced back to Ondaatje’s public reading because the event constituted a reading and a listening, or what Charles Bernstein calls a “public tuning” (3). Our presence as audience members enabled this tuning to be public and, in the case of a Q&A session, our presence was audible. What does it mean for presence to be audible? This question informs each chapter’s attention to sound and audibility while reminding us of the audience as a political body. In Ashok Mathur and Smaro Kamboureli’s conversation in Open Letter (in a special-issue that revisits the poetry reading as “public tuning”), Kamboureli focuses on the economics of readings (for writers, publishers, and readers) and their ability to construct the reading public vis-à-vis the nation-state. For Kamboureli, the questions of who is reading and why are essential for understanding the politics of a poetry reading as “public tuning.” In a Q&A session, the monolithic “public”
breaks apart into individuals asking questions and voicing their responses. We can ask questions, such as the one asked of Ondaatje that elicited a response of jazz musician, which leads me to another reason why this dissertation’s argument can be traced back to Ondaatje’s reading. The call-and-response dynamics of a Q&A session model the dialogic interplay that I argue must be taken into account when analyzing any performance of a writer’s work, whether a reading of a poem or an adaptation of a poem. Although the Q&A session exemplifies a call-and-response exchange between performer and audience, this sort of exchange happens all the time in critical responses and adaptive responses. Whether or not both interlocutors are listening to each other is another matter altogether. Nevertheless, when listening does listen both ways therein lies the potential for writer and listener to practise an attentive, participatory criticism. I base this practice on what jazz theorist John Corbett calls “a different kind of listening, in which the listener is active, a participant of sorts” (233). Influenced by Roland Barthes’s phrase “writing aloud” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 66), Corbett explains this listening in terms of improvised music; comparatively, I ask how this participatory mode of listening applies to Canadian poetry and how “writing aloud” is practiced in a poetics of performance. Performances of poetry are an exemplary site through which to explore this listening practice because these are adaptations that can be thought of as interrogatory call-and-responses between poems and adapters and between performers and audiences. In putting forward this model of active, engaged listening, I ask how writers, specifically writers of poetry, are attuned to this act of
Poets write for an audience in the same way that musicians play for an audience. (When Buddy Bolden plays the cornet in Ondaatje’s jazz-prose-poem *Coming Through Slaughter*, the audience becomes a desire-infused dream of an imagined audience, a concept to be discussed later in this Introduction. Bolden’s playing enacts a form of call-and-response as he responds to each movement of a woman’s dancing body in the crowd). The observation that writers write for audiences may seem basic and, yet, it leads to more intricate balancing of roles when writing as both a musician and a writer. Particularly since, in the case of *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje writes about music and through music. Whether we need to separate the musician from the writer is rooted in the interdisciplinary question of whether one art form can employ the tools of another. In other words, what is at stake, critically, in positing a writing that *is* singing? A music that *is* dancing? A dancing that *is* writing? Poet Robert Bringhurst defines poetic knowledge in a metaphor of dance: “what poetry knows, or what it strives to know, is the dancing at the heart of being” (52), which conflates poetry, knowledge, dancing, and being in order to suggest that these ways of knowing the world are integrated rather than separate (a conversation among epistemologies reflected in his collection of essays, *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* [2007]). How these inter-mediations are reified in performances of Canadian poetry is precisely the question that I take up in this dissertation and, in doing so, I argue that they need to be placed in dialogue with how the written poem
already conveys a desire to write what it cannot express in language: a writing that is performing — a being that is dancing.

* 

The philosopher of music
says to the musician of ideas
that what has been
can never not have been.
What-is will be what has been
soon enough, and then
its having been will sing
its silent song as long
as no one listens.

Robert Bringhurst, “For the Geologist’s Daughter”

In Marjorie Perloff’s introductory comments to *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (2009), a collection of essays on North American sound poetry, she articulates the importance of asking how translations of poetic sound “are further complicated by new conjunctions of verbal and visual, verbal and sonic, the poet’s ‘voice’ and its representations in different media” (9); and these are the very issues that I place at the forefront of this study of Canadian poetry and performance because these issues have not yet been examined in a sustained way across a variety of performance media. What makes this dissertation a significant contribution to scholarly work on Canadian literary and cultural studies is that I ask how performances of poetry provide a highly complex medium
through which to re-evaluate critical listening practices. In response to the absence of a comprehensive scholarly examination of performances of poetry in Canada, this dissertation challenges our understandings of mediation, audience, recording, and reading as listening by examining specific case studies: Chapter One on the sound poetry of The Four Horsemen, Chapter Two on dance adaptations of Michael Ondaatje’s poetry, Chapter Three on George Elliott Clarke’s poetic libretti in performance, and Chapter Four on Robert Bringhurst’s poetics of polyphony.

**Critical Contexts**

Given the vast range of performances of poetry in Canada (spoken-word, dub poetry, oral narratives and myths, musical settings of poems, visual renderings of poems, slam poetry and poetry readings, among others), this dissertation examines a cross-section of approaches to transposing written performance into another medium. Critical work has been done on individual poets and their performances (Roy Miki on bpNichol and Stephen Scobie on Leonard Cohen are prime examples), but this work does not offer a comprehensive engagement with performances of poetry. Attention to poetic voice, as a defining quality of poetry itself, recurs throughout Canadian poetry and criticism, ranging from anthologies (Geddes; Lee) to theorizing Canadian dialects in literature (Pacey; Dudek); from voice in the long-poem (Mandel; Davey; Miki; Kamboureli) to philosophical work on polyphony (Lee; Bringhurst; Zwicky); but, despite this attention to poetic voice, there is an absence of a sustained inquiry into the vast range of performance styles within
Canadian poetry. Dennis Cooley’s *The Vernacular Muse: The Eye and Ear in Contemporary Literature* (1987) moves towards such a study of sound and yet his analysis does not situate his focus of Prairie poetry within a broader performative framework of textual and acoustic experimentation. The listening and recording difficulties presented by performance as a medium are reasons why there has not been a comprehensive study; however, this dissertation contests the notion that a verbal medium is an obstacle. In listening to works that have not been given critical attention, I perform a practice of engaging with recordings that are difficult to access and to convey to the reader. Rather than letting this difficulty become an obstacle, I position the challenge of reading performance as a central theoretical and practical concern.

In assessing the critical context of sound poetry, along with critical works on individual poets who perform, there are studies on poetic movements within Canadian poetry that relate to issues of performance: Susan Rudy and Pauline Butling situate poetic experimentation within literary movements across Canada in *Writing in our Time: Canada’s Radical Poetry in English (1957-2003)* and Kit Dobson’s book *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization* (2009) places poetic experimentation within the economics of globalization. Yet, while these studies engage various issues of audience, writer/reader, poetic voice, language and the avant-garde, they do not foreground performance in the sustained way in which this dissertation does through its examination of a cross-section of performances. Recent issues of literary journals show
a critical response to the need for further theorizing of sound poetry: in 2009, there were two special issues on sound published by *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* and a special issue of *English Studies in Canada* devoted to sound that included an audio CD of excerpts to accompany each article. (This inclusion of audio has been demonstrated as useful in the internationally focused collection of essays on sound edited by Adelaide Morris, *Sound States: Innovative Sound States and Acoustical Technologies* [1998]). Yet, even though these collections highlight many critical issues in relation to sound poetry and its medium, especially in relation to the critical practices of engaging with sound poetry as a medium, much more could be said about sound and Canadian poetry specifically. Nevertheless, another publication that provides an overview of cross-cultural spoken performance is *Canadian Theatre Review’s* Spring 2007 issue “Spoken Word Performance” (edited by T.L. Cowan and Ric Knowles), containing articles on bill bissett, Adeena Karasick, bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, and Sheri-D Wilson, along with discussions of two major genres of spoken-word poetry: slam poetry and dub poetry. A unique inclusion in this collection is a review section that focuses on recent recordings made by spoken word artists in Canada: Catherine Kidd, Swifty Lazarus, Clive Holden, along with multi-artist compilations such as *Word Up*, featuring key spoken word artists in the 1990s (Lillian Allen, Clifton Joseph, Jeanette Armstrong and Jill Batson) and *Coastal Tongue: Anthology of Women in Spoken Word in Vancouver*. Interestingly, this issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* turns the journal’s attention towards poetry away from its usual
concern with theatre, and this signals a broader movement in Canadian Drama itself to consider drama as within the field of performance studies. (For examples of this move towards performance studies see the Canadian Theatre Review’s issues on “Site-Specific Performance” [126: Spring 2006] “Liveness and Mediatized Performance” [127: Summer 2006], “Sound Design: Notes Toward a Practice” [129: Winter 2007], “Science, Technology and Theatre” [131: Summer 2007], and “Performance Art” [137: Winter 2009].) While this dissertation is grounded in poetry in its approach to performance, the shift towards performance studies in Canadian drama is what this dissertation pushes towards in Canadian poetic criticism, not because Canadian poetry itself needs to change but rather because the critical approaches through which we listen to this poetry need to adapt to the multi-layered modes and spaces of performance.

Textual recordings of performance poetry include anthologies of performance poetry, ranging from radio poems collected in Robert Weaver’s The Anthology Anthology (1984) to the lyrics, poems and verses collected in John Robert Colombo’s The Penguin Treasury of Popular Canadian Poems and Songs (2002); from a collection of poems published after a poetry event, Carnival: Scream in High Park (1996) to a collection of Canadian jazz and blues poems compiled by Jan Zwicky and Brad Cran in Why I Sing the Blues (2001), accompanied by an audio disc of musical performances. In African Canadian literature, there are anthologies that foreground the process of recording oral poetry and performance, notably Wayde Compton’s Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature
and Orature (2001) and Karen Richardson’s T-Dot Griots: An Anthology of Toronto’s Black Storytellers (2004). Writing down oral poetry raises a number of critical issues that must be dealt with because of their impact on the politics of recording oral literatures. In an issue of Essays in Canadian Writing (Fall 2004) devoted to orality, Susan Gingell calls oral literature that has been written down “textualized orality” (4), a phrase that I find tremendously useful because its attention to both the textual and the oral ensures that neither is lost. Recognizing a text as textualized orality is crucial when it occurs in the historical context of Canadian First Nation’s oral literature. In Robert Bringhurst’s translations of Haida myths in A Story as Sharp as a Knife (1999), he suggests that, when writing down an oral myth, one must trace the patterns of spoken images and ideas: “This is noetic prosody. Words and phrases are repeated; so therefore are their syntax and their sounds — and the sounds exhibit order, as sounds always do in meaningful speech. But the pattern in the foreground, and the pattern in control, is a pattern made of thought” (italics in original, 168). Even though Bringhurst’s translations are acutely aware of the politics of mapping sound, they are not without their own controversy, as documented in Dorothy Bartoszewski’s documentary for CBC Ideas: “Land to Stand On” (2001) and Nicholas Bradley’s critical assessment of the controversy in “Remembering Offence: Robert Bringhurst and the Ethical Challenges of Cultural Appropriation” in University of Toronto Quarterly 76.3 (2007). Although Bringhurst is only one of many critics who consider the translation process in relation to First Nation’s oral culture (Ong; Chamberlin; Hoy), I
mention Bringhurst here because Chapter Four returns to his poetry, specifically his poem, *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* (2003) written in polyphonic overlapping lines of English, Cree, Latin, and Greek, which gestures towards the manifold directions through which the politics of orality could be further pursued through the lens of performance.

As the merging of poetry and song in the origins of the western lyric tradition reveal, interdisciplinarity has always constituted a necessary methodological approach to literary studies. Yet, music is only one path through which to examine a poem’s relation to performance, as poetry is often linked to visual as well as musical arts. (Examples could range from P.K. Page’s glosas to the visual play in Lisa Robertson’s *Debbie: An Epic*.) In fact, within the examples in this dissertation, there are many cases of visual experimentation within a written text, although this is often not considered to be *performance* by critics of poetry, a tendency that I would argue is rooted in the complex making of writing vis-à-vis the body. Chapter One places this complexity at the forefront through my analysis of The Four Horsemen’s scores for sound poetry. The poem as performance takes another form in Chapter Three when the poem in question is a libretto for a jazz opera: *Québécite* by George Elliott Clarke. Similarly, Chapter Four focuses on the polyphonic poetry of Robert Bringhurst, particularly his poem, *Ursa Major*, which is poetry that was performed in a live performance and poetry that performs on the page through visually overlapping lines, in an illustration of polyphony that challenges the
reader to engage with the textual page as acoustic. Of course, poetry that performs on the page exists within a poetic history of avant-garde, concrete, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and postmodern poetics, not to mention experimentations in the visual elements of language throughout literary history. (See Marjorie Perloff’s reading of the visual in Steve McCaffery’s poetry in Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions [1998].) This dissertation undertakes a theorizing of performances of poetry that includes textual performance, thereby examining poems that perform both on the page and off. For performances that take place off the page, I read these performances as adaptations in order to highlight the dialogues between the poem and its performance and between the adapters and the audience. As stated earlier, a performance of poetry is inseparable from how a poem itself performs. Why? Can performances of poetry include poetry as performance or performances of poetry? The simple answer is, yes, we can include both. More complex is the explanation of why both hold true to this dissertation’s argument. One reason for this complexity is their interdependency and, in analyzing performances of poetry, I intend to reveal the elements of performance taking place within a poem — poetry as performance — that, then, call for an adaptive engagement with the poem in another medium — a performance of poetry.

But what do I mean by a performance of poetry? A performance of poetry, as I argue, is inseparable from the question of how poetry performs. A performance of poetry could be thought of as an adaptation, particularly in the context of Linda Hutcheon’s
framing of an adaptation as a dialogic process. Yet, what I want to suggest is that we reconsider this interaction between the poem and its performance through a definition that refers to a *performance of poetry* as an engagement that responds to that which the poem cannot hold. In reaching outwards beyond the poem, a performance of a poem is a response to what eludes the poem and what the poem desires to perform. Thus, a performance of poetry is a recognition of lack, but it is not so much lack as it is a recognition of the limits of poiesis — what a poem cannot do, which adaptation theorists phrase as media specificity: what one medium can do that another cannot. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Hutcheon summarizes the issue of media-specificity concisely when she notes that a change of media during an adaptive process “inevitably invokes the long history of debate about the formal specificity of the arts — and thus of media” (34). Hutcheon looks from Lessing’s *Laocoon* to twentieth century reconsiderations of Lessing’s argument (Greenburg; Groensteen) in order to explore how new media since Lessing complicate the division of space and time that he assigns to painting and poetry respectively: “Lessing had argued that literature was an art of time, whereas painting was an art of space, but performance on stage or screen manages to be both” (35). However, even though this transfer from one medium to another is a response to lack, I would like to phrase this transfer in terms of what is brought to the forefront, embodied and amplified, when a poem is transposed into another medium. A comparative approach to this notion of transposition would be Pamela Banting’s reading of Canadian poetry through what she calls “intersemiotic translation”: “Intersemiotic
translation refers to various forms of translation between different media, between, for example, words and images (paintings, photographs, drawings)” (Body Inc.: A Theory of Translation, xvi). For Banting, the body becomes one of these media that interact with language in the process of recognizing the limits of speakability. My dissertation engages with a similar translation across media and interrogation into the representational potential of these media; however, I argue for the importance of situating performances of poetry within the critical discourses of adaptation and reading practices. Significantly, the dissertation re-evaluates the distinction between “live” performance and recorded performance in relation to textual and embodied performances, a point taken up in the next section that addresses the temporality of performance.

Performance: Live/Recorded

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. (Phelan, 146)

[…] the common assumption is that the live event is “real” and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real. (Auslander, 3)

The above quotations articulate an ongoing debate in performance studies over retaining the category of “live” as live. While Phelan’s statement functions as a reminder of what is at stake in losing the category of “live,” Auslander’s problematizing of aligning “live” with “real” (which he positions in Liveness as a response to Phelan) attempts to
recognize the layers of performance taking place within a “live” performance. Where I see this debate as most useful to the dissertation is that the debate points towards issues that must be raised when discussing a recorded performance. A recorded performance could be an audio recording of, for instance, a jazz performance, which raises the question of whether the immediacy of the performative moment is lost in an audio recording (like the loss of what Walter Benjamin calls the “aura” in relation to what is lost in photographic reproduction). But, before moving into the various recording technologies in each of the chapters, I want to start with a practice that we often take for granted as a recording technology: writing.

Writing is performance, but the experience of this performance differs from that of a visual, musical or dance performance. In *Limited Inc*, Derrida describes writing as performing for an absent audience: “A written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver” (7); furthermore, writing exists beyond the presence of its writer, a distinction that Derrida uses to differentiate between spoken and written communication:

> A written sign, in the current meaning of the word, is a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it. (9)

The connection between writing and presence complicates any attempt to align performances off the page as live and performances on the page as recorded; written performances are recordings but this does not mean that they are not performances. The terminology of ‘live’ will be called into question throughout this dissertation because a
performance off the page could be a recording, such as when listening to a “live” recording of Canadian poet Leonard Cohen singing his poem “Suzanne Takes You Down” (*Parasites of Heaven*). As Steve Wurtzler suggests in assessing the debate over terminologies of live and recorded media, “[a]s socially and historically produced, the categories of the live and the recorded are defined in a mutually exclusive relationship, in that the notion of the live is premised on the absence of recording and the defining fact of the recorded is the absence of the live” (89). With this debate in mind, I will be placing each chapter’s examination of poetry in and as performance in dialogue with Philip Auslander’s concept of what he calls “liveness,” which challenges the assumption that “the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real” (3). By “mediatized events,” Auslander means performances that circulate “on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction” (5). Within a performance of poetry, I want to pursue the complex status of presence as both immediate and deferred as it pertains to the writer/performer and audience. While the recording technologies differ from chapter to chapter — vocal score, poem, film, libretto, audio recording, and voice map — all of these technologies attempt to capture voice. A study of poetry read aloud on the radio, as on Robert Weaver’s *CBC Anthology*, would be a fascinating comparison because the radio transmits voice and yet constructs the effect of hearing it live. (Of course, recordings of radio broadcasts are, indeed, audio recordings.) Moreover, an in-depth consideration of poetry and radio in Canada would further be able to
align the liveness of reading poetry on the radio with Glenn Gould’s argument for leaving the concert hall and entering the recording studio where he could be, as he argued, more connected to the listening public (“The Prospects of Recording”). But, to return to the topic at hand, in terms of writers and audiences of poetry, how is the body positioned in relation to the words intended to be read, silently or out loud?

Acoustic space is a concept that Marshall McLuhan proposes as a way to reconnect the eye and ear, which parallels the reconnection of the body with writing. In *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan states that “the book is an extension of the eye” (35-37), reminding us that each form of media corresponds to a mode of bodily perception. For McLuhan, although writing has taken us away from the acoustic, writing also holds the possibility of a return to it: “Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition” (48). A return to acoustic space can only be achieved through a writing that embodies what McLuhan calls “allatonceness,” a defining quality of acoustic space that McLuhan argues is possible through new media: “‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village…a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space” (63). Acoustic space is “spherical and resonant” which he contrasts with visual space as “static, abstract figure minus a ground; acoustic space is a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other” (*Laws of Media* 33). (For a more extensive discussion of acoustic space in the context of postmodernism see Richard
Cavell’s *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* [2002].) One might assume that it would be simple to classify poetry and performance into categories of visual and acoustic respectively, but this dissertation problematizes these categorizes by revealing the manifold ways in which acoustic space applies both to textual poetry and to embodied performances of it. Significantly, this dissertation asks what the critical challenges and implications are for blurring these categories (a category that brings to mind another division to be deconstructed between “live” and recorded.”) Acoustic space influences the direction of this dissertation and the performances of poetry considered because acoustic space calls for a new way of reading. As critics we are presented with the challenge of how to *read* acoustic space. Readers today are more immersed in new media than McLuhan could have imagined and reading practices continue to change in response to multi-directional and all-encompassing means of communication. But has this necessarily enabled us to effectively attend to the multi-layered complexity in performances of poetry? Even though McLuhan does not specifically refer to performance, he does speak of media as an extension of the body and this extension performs, although this interpretation raises the question of what I mean by performing and how it differs from performativity. Writing is performance whereas performativity is a reiterative act; and, although performance and performativity are discursive and embodied, the theoretical history of performativity reveals the complexity of applying this term to poetry. Rather than attempting to offer a full critical history of performance, I will trace its theoretical trajectory in relation to language
as performative: first, how does language perform? And, second, how do theories of performative language inform critical approaches to performances of and in poetry? Through these questions, I trace the term performance through theorists J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler in order to understand what is meant by performative language before asking how language performs in Canadian poetry and how this poetry has been performed.

**Speech Acts: Austin**

Language that performs through its utterance is referred to as a speech act. A theory of speech acts is articulated in J.L. Austin’s series of lectures, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962). It is worth noting from Austin’s title that it indicates the extent to which the words do something and that someone must move these words into action. There is both an absence and presence of the speaker, even if the language acts for itself. This absence of the subject is where contemporary theorists from Derrida to Butler (and, in relation to the scope of this dissertation, contemporary poets) question how speakers and listeners determine the conditions in which a speech act can function. Poets are implicated in this debate of what language can do either on its own or with a speaker because poets are sculptors of language who constantly grapple with their own agency and the agency of the poem itself, left standing on the page after it has been written. Speech acts are examples of how language has been theorized as acting on its own, therefore providing a useful place to
begin when understanding how language performs. Austin explains why the word
*performative* is appropriate for the linguistic phenomenon it describes: “The name is
derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that
the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (6). When Austin refers to
speech acts as performative utterances, his explanation of the term has a certain irony when
read today amid the popularity of performativity as a critical tool. In defining the term,
Austin does not imply that the performative has not hitherto existed, but rather that it has
not been theorized in such a manner that distinguishes its capabilities as active language.
Citing examples such as “I do” (as in a marriage ceremony), Austin argues that “if a person
makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely
*saying* something” (7). For Austin, the utterance itself performs an action, as opposed to
simply stating a description. But Austin does not go so far as to suggest that this declaration
exists completely independent of the speaker since he claims that the speaker must have
“some inward spiritual act” (10) corresponding to the speech act. Even more important
than this inward act is how the utterance is received by its listeners. In other words, the
utterance relies upon context. But, rather than saying that a performative utterance is either
true or false, Austin classifies the utterance as “unsatisfactory” when “an infelicity arises
— that is to say, the utterance is unhappy — if certain rules, transparently simple rules, are
broken” (14).¹ In addition to the breaching of rules, a performative utterance can ‘go
wrong’ due to a misunderstanding: “You may not hear what I say, or you may understand
me to refer to something different from what I intended to refer to” (14). Misunderstanding allows Austin to consider the disjunction among the words themselves, a speaker’s intention, and a listener’s perception. Even though Austin maintains that language itself cannot perform without a proper context, he returns to this notion of infelicity that reminds us that this sort of misnaming and misunderstanding unsettles those who notice the so-called inaction of the performative utterance. (More will be said later about this impact upon the reader in relation to what Wolfgang Iser calls “aesthetic response.”) The notion that occasionally performative utterances do not work raises the question of in what sense do or don’t they work. To return to my primary point regarding Austin’s title, his theory appears to rely on a speaking subject who does these things with words. For Austin, the words do not act by themselves — or do they? The position of agency becomes complicated when Austin describes utterances in terms of emotionality, such as when “the utterance is unhappy” (14). One cannot help but notice that, in making such an almost whimsical claim as “the utterance is unhappy,” Austin positions the utterance as the subject that is experiencing unhappiness. We hear echoes of this suggestion that language itself performs independently of the speaker in Heidegger’s meditation upon language that results in the statement: “Language speaks” (207). (And, can we ignore the fact that he arrives at this statement through an analysis of a poem that concludes the essay as though speaking for itself? Yet, can we disassociate this poem from the voice of its writer, George Trakl?) Heidegger does not disregard the interaction between language and speaker and
he, in fact, acknowledges its complexity in his summation of how language speaks and bespeaks us: “Man speaks only as he responds to language. Language speaks. Its speaking speaks for us in what has been spoken” (207). One way of reading these lines that precede the poem at the end of his essay, is that language inhabits the space between the “he” who is speaking and the “us” who are listening. This same space, in-between speaker and listener, will be the mediated space between poem and performer, or between libretto and singer, theorized in this dissertation.

**Writing/Speaking: Derrida**

In Heidegger’s iteration of language as speaking, he anticipates Derrida’s response to Austin’s work on performative utterances: namely, that all language is performative. Many of Derrida’s discussions of written and spoken language in *Of Grammatology* could be referred to in relation to performativity but, for the purposes of this dissertation, I turn to *Limited Inc* because it is composed of Derrida’s essay-responses to Austin and Searle on speech act theory; furthermore, these essay-responses include Derrida’s broader contemplation on what language is or is not that extends beyond verbal utterance and includes written language. Similarly, performances of poetry challenge the assumptions about what written language can *do* on the page and how performances of this written language seek to extend or respond to what language cannot do. In one of the response-essays, “Signature Event Context,” Derrida interrogates the signature as an
example of a written performative utterance. (Comparatively, in *Signature, Event, Cantext*, Stephen Scobie reads Canadian poetry through Derrida’s theories of subject formation and reiterative practices such as the signature.) Although the signature does not appear until the end of a written work, Derrida contends that the effect of the signature is already there in the first paragraph, thereby raising the question: “Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable?” (1). We read, backwards through the signature and the act of backwards reading coincides with Derrida’s own description of deconstruction at the end of the essay: “Deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated” (21). The argument resists its inevitable conclusion, yet when this conclusion comes in a signing of “J. Derrida” we are suspicious of this script, just as the writer’s own notation concedes in the margin:

> Remark: the—written—text of this—oral—communication was to be delivered to the Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française before the meeting. That dispatch should thus have been signed. Which I do, and counterfeit, here. Where? There. J.D. (21)

The signature (not reproduced here) depends upon an accepted standard of reproducibility; in other words, a signature needs to be perceived both as original (in order to signify an individual’s identity) and as repeatable (in order to be read as legitimate). I reproduce the
writing in which Derrida explains the signature, but I do not reproduce the signature itself; even if I did, it would be recognized as a reproduction. In Chapter One, I discuss the role of the reader in the poem *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78*, written by one of the Four Horsemen poets, Steve McCaffery, because this poem questions the extent to which reading depends upon recognition. The poem centres upon a quotation by Wittgenstein: "You are reading when you *derive* the reproduction from the original" (24). Read alongside Derrida, this statement suggests that you are reading when you recognize performance happening on the page.

When Derrida suggests that one reads backwards through the signature, he reminds us that it takes time to read, whether forwards or backwards, and the performance as event must negotiate its singularity with its potential for repetition. The temporality of performance can become an obstacle when attempting to speak about a performance that has already happened, as Peter Sanger suggests in his title, “Late at the Feast: An Afterword” to Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major.*” In the same way that we arrive at text of *Ursa Major* without having seen its one performance in Regina (2002), we arrive late to the signature in *Limited Inc* — we did not watch the signature being written — but this late arrival does allow us to encounter the effect of the event and our need to reconstruct it. A performance *in* language that exemplifies this reconstruction is a poem by Margaret Atwood that I would argue can be read as a signature (a signature after-the-fact in the sense that we must reconstruct the writer through the language). Opening Atwood’s first book of
poetry *The Circle Game* (1967), composed of poems that first appeared alongside Charles Pachter’s artwork, the reader finds oneself looking at “This is a Photograph of Me.” The language of the poem *is* the photograph. The visual space of the poem depicts the speaker’s submersion — the drowned speaker held between the parentheses — and the final lines promise the reader that “if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me” (11). This last word asserts the presence of the speaker, as though signing one’s name onto the Tom Thomson landscape of this poem, a poem that can and cannot be read as a biographical poem for Thomson himself. Language is the medium through which Atwood registers the ambiguity of the poem as both something and nothing: it is and is not a photograph of *me*. The poem performs as a photograph yet it is a poem not a photograph. Anticipating the media specificity debate that will be discussed later in relation to adaptation, I mention this poem here because it makes the reader aware of the limits of a medium: the poem performs as a photograph and yet it cannot show you the image of *me* any more than an observer on the lakeshore can see a drowned body beneath the surface. The photograph as poem appears in the opening of Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which I discuss in the second chapter as a dissonant reflection of word and image. This photograph as empty-frame resists reflecting an image of Billy the Kid just as Atwood’s poem resists providing a clear photograph of the embodied speaking voice for the reader.
Atwood’s poem declares itself as a self-portrait in the same way that a signature declares itself as representing the person who wrote it. In recognizing this mimetic code, the reader of the signature acknowledges that the etched marks on a page stand for a person and yet these marks are not to be confused with the person. Comparatively, in Ondaatje’s poem “Signature” (*The Cinnamon Peeler*), the title announces the poem as signature and yet the personal signature is not written by the poem’s speaker but rather on the speaker’s body: the speaker anticipates the scar that will be left after the removal of his appendix. The removed appendix will also be a signature as it leaves a trace of a disassembling body: “O world, I shall be buried all over Ontario” (11). Scars as signatures, for Ondaatje, recur as ways of reading the history of one’s body, as in the scene of Almásy and Katharine: “I love this, I said. This pale aureole on her arm. I see the instrument scratch and then punch the serum within her and then release itself, free of her skin, years ago, when she was nine years old, in a school gymnasium” (*The English Patient* 158). This intimate act of writing on and through the body will be important for Chapter Two’s analysis of the body in Ondaatje’s writing, but, to return to the signature, a scar written on the body complicates the notion of the signature as something separate from oneself because, whether or not one wants that scar on the body, it is there and part of a person’s presence.

In explaining the split that takes place within a written signature, Derrida notes that “it is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal [sceau]” (20). This splitting of singularity and citationality raises the question of how to
distinguish the “relative purity” (qtd. in Derrida 18), which Austin ascribes to performatives. Importantly, this leads Derrida away from a division between performative and non-performative and toward an argument that “this relative purity does not emerge in opposition to citationality or iterability, but in opposition to other kinds of iteration within a general iterability which constitutes a violation to the allegedly rigorous purity of every event or discourse or every speech act” (italics in original, 18). Arguing against any exclusion of “‘non-serious” (19) utterances from the performative, Derrida suggest that all language is performative. But what are the consequences of interpreting Derrida’s dissolution of the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary language? And, to bring Derrida’s often-quoted phrase il n’y a pas d’hors-texte (Of Grammatology) into this discussion, what are the consequences of suggesting that all language is performative? Another way of phrasing this question would be to ask whether the embodied sound, movement, and gestures of a performance are always tied to language. Need sound always be rooted in language, or can sound be “free” of meaning? If we return to Heidegger’s refrain that “language speaks” and then place this alongside Derrida’s suggestion that everything is language, what happens when language falls apart? Is there anything left once we pull language apart? Are we left over — the bodies of the readers or performers? Or are our bodies rooted in language pulled apart? Where these questions take us is the meeting of phenomenology and performativity in the work of Judith Butler. Another theoretical direction this line of thought could take is to the semiotic/symbolic division and
its relation to the body in the writings of Julia Kristeva (Revolution in Poetic Language), which I will pursue in the third chapter’s discussion of improvised scat singing. I will be focusing on Butler here, however, because her work sets up the terms through which to understand the material and linguistic body in performance. This convergence is directly relevant to the dissertation because performances of poetry rely upon the body to transfer words from one medium to another.

**Performativity: Butler**

Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an “act” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” itself carries the double-meaning of “dramatic” and “non-referential.”

(“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler, 404)

In Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (1993), the seminal work that defined how the term performativity has come to be used in literary and performance studies, Butler complicates the binary of the constructivist versus essentialist debate by focusing on the “constitutive constraints” that regulate constructions of sexual identity (94). Recalling the regulative structures that Austin outlines in his study of performatives and considering the impact of “constitutive constraints” on our use of language in an everyday sense, we see how these constraints are both what enable language to function and what limit these functions. Moreover, Butler argues against language as being referential in relation to a space of alterity: “To posit a materiality outside of language, where that materiality is considered ontologically distinct from language, is to undermine
the possibility that language might be able to indicate or correspond to that domain of radical alterity” (68). By aligning constitutive constraints with alterity, I am not suggesting that they are somehow outside; in fact, constitutive constraints exemplify Butler’s point that alterity itself is mediated through language because the constraints themselves are embedded in language: “language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified” (68). Language is both embodied and referential and, thus, provides one model for thinking through poetry as embodied and referential. This conflation raises the question of how a reader can simultaneously be in a text and out of a text. Can reading and writing take place at the same time? What about reading and listening?

I posit a reading of Butler as offering a theory of readers as inside language even as they speak it in order to problematize the limits of language. Adaptations across media, whether from text to dance or libretto to song, involve a stepping outside of one’s medium and yet still implicating oneself in the language of both the medium stepped out of and the medium stepped into. Locating the performer’s body within this interstitial space of transition from one medium to another will be central to the dissertation and, thus, calls for a consideration of how Butler theorizes the body’s materiality in relation to language. Although I have mentioned the impact of Bodies that Matter, I would like to turn to one of the first articles in which Butler puts forward her theory of performativity, “Performative
Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1997) because it emphasizes how performativity implicates both the body and language.

Moreover, Butler clarifies that, even though she combines theories of speech acts and phenomenological approaches to bodily actions (Husserl; Merleau-Ponty; Mead), what she means by act is distinct from theatrical acting: “The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (409). In Bodies that Matter, Butler further clarifies that performativity must be differentiated from any sort of voluntarism that posits the subject as self-consciously acting a role:

'[P]erformativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95)

To say that “‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ (95)” employs a theatrical vocabulary in the word act, and yet it is here that Butler most emphatically distances her theory from any misinterpretation that performativity can somehow be equated with acting. Acting implies that a role or costume can be entered into or taken off at the end of a performance, but, for Butler, the performance is always present in our self-construction as subjects through
language. It is this important blurring of performance spaces that I want to highlight in relation to this dissertation due to the layers of intermediation that take place in a performance of poetry, particularly as performers employ techniques intended to disorient the audience’s expectations of the limits of performance. Examples of innovative techniques in contemporary Canadian performance poetry abound, for instance, when Gerry Shikatani performs sound-singing that blurs into a video and audio recording of himself performing sound poems or when spoken-word artist d’bi young uses her voice and gestures to bring audiences into a communal storytelling experience. When spoken-word poet Catherine Kidd dances her rhyming narratives, we watch her, a body moving and speaking in front of us, and it is difficult not to hear the I of her poems as herself. The I could be her, but it could also belong just as much to the performance as are the choreographed movements that accompany the words. Thus, we return to the complex question of how to read a performance of poetry that transfers written words into another medium. These examples of avant-garde, dub, and spoken-word artists remind us that Canadian poetry holds such a wealth of poetry as performance and performances of poetry that this dissertation can only gesture towards and, hopefully, provide the critical language necessary for opening up this direction of inquiry.

**Adaptation**

A performance of poetry, whether on the stage, in music, in dance, or in visual art,
is an adaptation. But, the critical history of adaptation and adaptation studies includes many genres other than poetry. In Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), she not only assesses adaptation studies as a field, but also sets out to theorize adaptation across genres in order to propose a critical model that recognizes what she calls “adaptations as adaptations” (italics in original, xiv). For Hutcheon, the defining characteristics of an adaptation are its engagement with a previous work (as “a creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” [8]) and yet the adaptation stands on its own as an artistic entity to be received. In order to move away from fidelity criticism that becomes caught up in measuring an adaptation against a so-called ‘original,’ Hutcheon offers the term “adapted text” to describe the work that is adapted. Often an adaptation employs multiple adapted texts and, similarly, there are many adapters at work in this process. One might think of the director of a film adaptation as the main adapter and yet there are often many adapters, as in the case of the film of Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* in which film editor Walter Murch played a major role in the adaptation process (as documented in *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing* (2002). As in this case, the film editor becomes an integral part of the conversation about the adapted text as the adaptation comes into being, a multi-voiced conversation that I want to align with intertextuality.

Central to Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation is intertextuality. I want to emphasize this point because intertextuality relies upon an audience’s ability to practice intertextual reading: to read both the text performed and its references to the adapted text or texts. This
must be anticipated by the adapters (a version of a reader’s expectations that I will mention in the next section) and, of course, the adapters are reading as well. As Hutcheon notes, “as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (italics in original, 8). Subsequently, intertextuality underscores what Hutcheon calls the “process of reception”: “we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (italics in original, 8). Hutcheon identifies recurring issues and critical debates in adaptation studies by asking pivotal questions of who adapts, what is adapted, and why and how adaptations are made. Rather than focusing on case studies, Hutcheon chooses to theorize adaptation across genres, forms, styles, and approaches (including film, video games, opera, literature, visual art and music in her many examples). This broad approach is useful for this dissertation because it allows for the movement across media and forms that will take place in each chapter. Yet, the underlying focus of this dissertation is poetry, Canadian poetry in particular, and this is, in part, because Hutcheon’s book reveals what immense work there is to be done in bringing theories of adaptation into dialogue with Canadian poetry.

Hutcheon refers to adaptations of poetry as a general category, including musical settings of poetry (a tradition that holds a wealth of examples throughout literary history) such as in the Lieder tradition. One example of Canadian poetry that she does mention is the work of Leonard Cohen, a classic illustration of a poet who performs his poetry.
Discussing Cohen within a broader discussion of showing versus telling, Hutcheon suggests that the language of his poetry is turned into visual imagery that shows the poem rather than allowing for the language of the poem to speak for itself, with the adaptive examples being the photographs in Josef Reeve’s *Poen* (1967) and the animation of Cohen’s song “I’m Your Man” in Roselyn Schwartz’s short film *I’m Your Man* (1996). But, if we think of adaptation as a response, might there be ways of reading these adaptations as more than *showings* of language? Yet, this question invokes an age-old debate of how one medium is transposed into another, as articulated by Keats in the opening lines to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” or by Gotthold Lessing in *Laocoon: or, The limits of Poetry and Painting*. Nevertheless, I think that there is more to be said about the potential for an adaptation of poetry to engage with the language itself to the extent that it queries the opposition of showing versus telling. For example, Ondaatje’s film, *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970) performs a complex adaptation of poet bpNichol and his poetry: the film mixes readings, visual montages, and interviews, all of which position the audience as reader/viewer/listener to Nichol’s poetry and to Ondaatje’s reading of Nichol through the camera lens. As in the case of this film, the adaptation of poetry deserves its own critical approach because it is a textual medium already highly infused with performance even before transposition into another medium or multiple media.

While pursing the specificity of poetry as it relates to adaptation, I want to build upon Hutcheon’s emphasis on the dialogic relationship between reader and text, which, in
turn, draws upon Iser’s reader-response theory. Adaptation relies upon an audience’s familiarity with the adapted text which models the dialogic relationship between reader and text to be examined in performances of poetry. Importantly, this dialogic relationship is not solely among texts and their references to other texts but rather is between texts and their audiences. Audiences play an active role in the reading of an adaptation. When Hutcheon sets out to theorize adaptations she phrases this active role of the audience in terms of their participation as intertextuality: “Works in any medium are both created and received by people, and it is this human, experiential context that allows for the study of the politics of intertextuality” (xii). Working from this place of reception, I want to propose that adaptation is reading. Then, are we always adapting as readers? Are readers reading out loud adapting? These are the questions that inform this opening discussion and the dissertation itself as I re-evaluate this terminology of our engagement with not only texts but also with the world as a soundscape that requires our attention.

**Reading Audience**

Who reads her while she reads?

— Robert Bringhurst “The Reader” (*Selected Poems*).

To speak of a reading audience connotes both an audience that is reading and a critical eye who reads this audience reading. Frank Davey’s title *Reading Canadian* *Reading* articulates this duality. In a different medium, the *Canada Reads* series on CBC
Radio proposes a reading list for the nation while, simultaneously, staging a national reading of a single book (an event discussed by Danielle Fuller in her article “Listening to the Readers of ‘Canada Reads.’”) As in these examples, writing about reading is a complex task that involves at least two or more layers of self-reflexiveness in recognizing the layers of reading and writing taking place within any analysis of writing and reading. Yet, these layers are necessary for the process to be dialogic, or rather for the process of reading and writing to respond to and perpetuate audiences for one another. To return to the first phrase, *reading audiences*, and to focus on the act of reading itself, I ask *how* this act is performed. What is reading? This question needs to be asked before we attempt to posit an engaged, active mode of reading as listening and performing. Thus, I turn to Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading* (1978) because it provides a useful terminology for critically assessing reading as a practice, a practice that will be complicated by bringing in audience participation and the politics of active listening; moreover, I refer to Iser because I will argue that his theory of reading needs to placed alongside Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation in order to understand the dialogic interactions within each of the performances of poetry discussed. As Iser explains, “Reading is not a direct ‘internalization,’ because it is not a one-way process and our concern will be to find means of describing the reading process as a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader” (italics in original, Iser 107). While Iser’s theory very much informs Hutcheon’s book, I would like to push the overlap between reading and adaptation even further in terms of interaction as a response that leads to
participation. In doing so, I ask of performances of poetry what Susan Bennett in Theatre Audiences (1990) asks of theatre: what is the productive role of the audience? For instance, when Iser states that “[C]entral to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient” (20), I ask how this interaction unfolds in the case of a performance of poetry (as in Clarke’s jazz opera discussed in Chapter Three).

Furthermore, if the adapter is a reader of the text, how does this impact on our theorizing of the interaction between, to use Iser’s terms, the structure and its recipient? And what if this recipient is a public audience?

Performances of poetry complicate Iser’s discussion of the implied reader because this term must split into multiple implied readers, or rather what I will call the imagined audience, which combines Iser’s implied reader as constructed through the text with an awareness of the community of readers similar to what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities” (Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism [1983]). Thus, within this imagined audience there is an implied audience for the poem and an implied audience for the performance of the poem. A writer writes knowing that her words will be read since the reader is already present even in an imagined form. Yet, this imagined reader, the ideal reader or the implied reader (a reader who can almost be interchangeable with the writer in that she responds to the text as the writer intends), sets up a fallacious notion of there being only one reader. Of course, there will be multiple readers of a text, even if the writer imagines only one ideal reader for his/her
work. If we switch the terminology from reader to audience then we not only take into account that the text will have multiple readers but also we can consider how the writer anticipates this audience, both in an interpretive sense and in that the text will be marketed to a broad and varied audience. Returning to Iser’s terminology, we see that *implied* is preferred over *imagined*. Why? I would suggest that Iser chooses the former because it calls for a consideration of how the reader is implied within a text — it calls for a consideration of how the language itself imagines, assumes, and even anticipates a specific type of reader, whether historically, socio-politically or culturally. Even though both *implied* and *imagined* are similar in their suggestion that the writer is an agent in conjuring the reader, the term *implied reader* focuses our attention on the text itself and what it implies: “the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader” (34). The “implied reader” is produced through the text whereas the “real reader” encounters the text with a physicality that cannot be confused with the imagined reader. Despite Iser’s admission that imagined and ideal are terms that overlap with *implied*, he prefers implied because it holds the complexities of the imagined and ideal together and shifts our focus from writer to text. The implied reader is a category in which the ‘fictional’ intersects with the ‘real’ and, therefore, I want to apply this category to the question of what the implications are for considering the reader as embodied (a question at the forefront of the performance poetry discussed in Chapter One). The implied reader presents a compelling
site through which to re-think responsiveness since the writer anticipates a *response* and that response precedes any adaptation that might be performed.

In many ways, even though this returns us to the word *imagined* rather than *implied*, what Iser is describing is not unlike Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (49). The community is imagined because, as Anderson explains, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (49). This collective imagining translates into the construction of audience and performers because neither necessarily knows the other and yet the image of each is what enables the other to exist; moreover, when the audience and performer construct these images of each other through the rhetoric of the nation (of a category such as, for instance, Canadian poetry) then it becomes more pressing to examine how these categories are constructed. Critical understandings of performing cultural identity will be discussed in the third chapter’s listening to Clarke’s jazz-opera *Québécité*, a piece that I argue challenges critical understandings of cultural performance by performing identity through sound. A recent performance of *Québécité* in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, provides a comparison through which to investigate how the politics of listening shift when a piece deeply invested in Canadian multiculturalism is performed south of the border (a discussion that I pursue in more detail in “Canadian Jazz Opera in America,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 142). This
very issue of how national politics shape a listening audience is taken up by editors Sherrill Grace and Albert Reiner Glaap in their Introduction to Performing National Identities: International Perspectives on Contemporary Canadian Theatre. As Grace and Glaap observe in theatrical performances, “those contributors who discuss the production or study of Canadian plays outside Canada question the host country’s assumptions about their own national identities as much as they question what it might mean to call a play Canadian” (15). I would argue that these very same questions need to be re-phrased in terms of performances of Canadian poetry. The adaptation of the Four Horsemen’s poetry, “The Four Horsemen Project,” discussed in Chapter One provides an exemplary site through which to consider this question because it has been performed internationally in Dublin (2008) and Berlin (2009). As Grace and Glaap suggest, the performance of identity becomes further complicated when the performance takes place both on stage and in the audience. In turning its attention to the audiences of poetry, this dissertation will open up critical directions considering these types of comparative and inter-cultural studies. Moreover, when performances of national identity are included in the broader term performance, the reading audience then takes on further political import as it constitutes a merging of the private and public spheres.

Whether in the form of applause or criticism, what incites audiences to respond? How does the response relate to their expectations? To return to performative utterances as a model, when performative utterances do not work, Austin describes this inaction as the
utterance not agreeing with its audience. There is a discord, a word that I use to emphasize
the sonic resonances of this interaction and to look towards Heble’s theory of productive
dissonance that I discuss in Chapter Three. Disagreement happens when an utterance does
not meet a certain set of expectations, which resembles what Iser refers to when he speaks
of the expectations of the reading audience. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on
affect points towards a theory of how witnessing a mistaken performative utterance affects
the listener to the point that he or she cannot remove the touch of such language, even if the
language is “hollow” (22) as Austin calls it. (Timothy Gould’s essay, “The Unhappy
Performative” is one of the many essays that deconstructs the function of the speech-act in
Sedgwick and Parker’s edited collection, *Performativity and Performance* [1995].) I
mention audience expectations here because this dissertation’s theorizing of adaptation in
terms of audience response revolves around the notion of an audience being “moved” by a
performance. Central questions for each of the chapters will be: What is a productive way
of talking about the dissonance between a poem and its performance? What if a performed
poem does or does not “work” the same way as it does on the page for the reader’s eye?

* 

Poetry is made of words, yet it is exactly as articulate as music, and as
distinct from ordinary speech. Spoken in a near monotone, the motion of
thought is its real melody. Poor poetry, I want to say — fluteless, impoverished.
But it is still beautifully cantabile.

— Roo Borson, “Poetry as Knowing” (12)
Listening Audiences

Audience is a highly theorized term in relation to dramatic performance. Specifically, Susan Bennett’s influential book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990) examines the expectations of an audience at a theatre-event; I want to keep these expectations in mind when analyzing the marketing of an avant-garde poetry performance in Chapter One. In terms of reading audiences, audience has been theorized by a range of poets and critics, many of whose works inform this dissertation, as in McCaffery’s essays in *North of Intention* (1986) that problematize the role of the reader in producing the “meaning” of experimental texts; however, it is the distinction between an audience of poetry in general and an audience of poetry in performance that I want to reiterate as the main focus of this dissertation and what sets it apart from other work in Canadian poetry. A reader of poetry constitutes a different audience than does a listener to poetry at a poetry reading. How do these two models of audience differ in terms of practice? In other words, do we listen to poetry on the page or off? When one writes about performances of poetry, the concept of the audience becomes complex when the reading audience of poetry is expanded to include watching, listening, and reading audiences of a live performance, or even of a recorded performance, and their engagement with the performed material. Reading audiences of poetry on the page have much to learn from the attention strategies employed during a live or recorded “performance” of poetry. I use the word *attention* with a specific purpose: to emphasize that reading poetry on the page
necessarily involves a degree of engagement on behalf of the audience even if this engagement could not be witnessed by someone watching the reader read. It is an opening out on behalf of the reader that builds upon what poet Don McKay’s *Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness* describes as the connection between consciousness and ecology; for McKay, poetic attention is a state of mind: “a readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about” [26].

Attention can register itself in affect, in a reader’s facial expression or in a comment, but attention can also be silent, registering itself only in the mind of the reader. In Canadian composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer’s work on soundscapes, he re-defines noise pollution as a lack of attention (*Soundscapes: Tuning of the World*), which I would suggest applies directly to poetic attention. What I mean is that if we apply Schafer’s understanding of noise pollution as lack of attention to poetry, then the sound of a poem depends very much upon the reader’s ability to attend to its sound.³ Like listening to the silences in a piece by John Cage, the reader must attend to a poem’s silence just as much as its sound, or even to hear its silence as sound.

Critical attention can be given to otherwise unheard aspects of poetry as in Kamboureli’s reading of the Canadian long poem: “The long poem, then, makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act” (*On the Edge of Genre*). In Kamboureli’s approach, we see a model of reading that takes into account a reader’s response to fullness and to lack, which
can then move towards an approach to poetic adaptation. Here, Kamboureli bases this act on the Canadian long poem (Nichol, Kroestch, Bowering, Wah, Marlatt, Ondaatje), but how does this process of reading the interstitial spaces of a text change when this textual work is translated into performance in another medium? I read Kamboureli’s argument as directly pointing us towards this very question because she reads the long poem as a performative act: “narrative is replaced by discourse — enunciation itself. The linearity of the narrative now takes the form of a dialogue between different levels of discourse and genres that tend to privilege an awareness of the writing act, while speech still maintains its significance through the voice’s textuality” (103). Arguing that the locality of the poem becomes “the field of writing” (50), Kamboureli reminds us of the active role of the reader in navigating this space of writing; building upon Jonathan Culler’s point that “writing can itself be viewed as an act of critical reading” (50), she suggests that “[t]he long poem, then, is a rereading of writings, a rewriting of readings” (99). Hearing the intertextuality then becomes imperative in the hearing of the poem as “a rewriting of readings” and this is what I want to bring to the forefront of my discussion of the intertextual listening that takes place among readers, performers, and adapters in performances of poetry.

When listening becomes a critical practice it holds the potential to fundamentally alter the interaction between audience and text, enabling this interaction to shift from passive to participatory. This does not mean that reading is passive — reading is far from passive — but, rather, this suggestion of listening as enabling reading to be participatory is
a move towards a conception of reading that is attentive, engaged, and active. In contrast to
the active reading that takes place through what Iser calls “the wandering viewpoint” (in
which the reader must re-construct a text through multiple views of it), Iser critiques
Husserl’s term, passive synthesis, in which the reader is passive because he/she perceives a
reality in which the reader is not present: “The photograph not only reproduces an existing
object, but it also excludes me from a world which I have not helped create” (139). While
I would argue against Iser’s claim that film and photography do not facilitate participatory
viewing practices (the medium constitutes a different reading experience but, as Barthes’s
“Rhetoric of the Image” has revealed, reading still takes place), I want to highlight Iser’s
focus on the presence of the reader. Presence is central to this dissertation’s examination of
performances of poetry because presence can be registered in a text, often through absence,
but it can also be registered by the body’s physical presence in a music, dance, or
multi-media performance. In these cases, the degree of what Iser calls presentness in the
audience must also adapt to the new medium. In contrast to Auslander’s liveness, which
calls attention to the mediatization of performance, presentness offers a different version of
mediatization through a splitting of the reading self and the multiple viewpoints offered in
a text. However, there is a discord between the affective quality of presentness (registering
a response in the reader) and Iser’s construction of presentness as a transformative moment
that takes place outside of the text: “Presentness means being lifted out of time—the past is
without influence, and the future unimaginable” (156). Nevertheless, the affective
response within presentness not only applies to adaptation but also is described by Iser in a way that, I would suggest, closely resembles the multi-directional attention required by readers of polyphonic poetry: “The split between the subject and himself, which results in a contrapuntally structured personality in reading, not only enables the subject to make himself present to the text, it also brings about tension, which indicates to what extent the subject has been affected by the text” (156-157). A contrapuntal relationship is what allows for both the reader to make oneself present to the text and for the affect of the text to register itself upon the reader. Similarly, readers of polyphonic poetry attend contrapuntally to the all-at-onceness of its acoustic space. Also, the contrapuntal quality of presentness is not unlike what Ajay Heble describes in his argument for a post-modern contrapuntal listening, as exemplified in Gould’s CBC radio documentary “The Idea of North” (“New Contexts for Canadian Criticism: Democracy, Counterpoint, Responsibility”). Importantly, the contrapuntal quality of both Iser’s presentness and Heble’s post-modern listening fundamentally re-orient the reader to the point that reading practices become listening practices.

Poetry calls for listening, and the collection of essays Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy (2002) articulates the need for critical attention to listening. In these essays, the poets are listening to each other’s words while writing their own, thereby enacting what I would call a listening while writing. This simultaneity has a McLuhanesque quality that hints at the body’s ability to practice synaesthetic forms of
attention: listening while dancing, dancing while writing, or writing while singing. Of course, these all-at-once modes of attention have a degree of idealism in them, as one often needs to be focused on a single task; yet, what the idealism gestures towards is that the body is always performing multiple tasks at once and, rather than adhering to a notion of a singular vision, these all-at-once modes of attention push us to consider how the body is always performing with the all-at-onceness of McLuhan’s acoustic space. Listening to CBC radio while writing these words, I hear announcer Tom Allen speaking of a recent scientific study that discovered a connection between listening and senses other than hearing: the body responded to a puff of air blown across one’s skin as though hearing a sound that would produce such a sensation (CBC Radio 2 “Shift,” 16 December 2009). Bringing to mind the title of McKay’s poem “Listen at the edge,” this research study reminds us that we listen in ways that we do not always understand and, indeed, the findings could be interpreted as inviting you, the reader, to listen with your eyes, with your skin.

Listening Out Loud - Case Studies

Each chapter of the dissertation addresses a different method through which performers negotiate the space between the poem and its performance, taking into account the many layers of performance occurring within and around this space. In fact, it is not so much a visual space as an acoustic space of conversation. I continually challenge the notion
that the performer is somehow outside the text. Since the performer can be the writer reading her text out loud, this enables my analysis to pursue the double focus on poetry as performance and performances of poetry.

Chapter One begins with bpNichol, whose engagement with issues of embodiment, performance, textuality, and presence could easily fill a book-length study on its own; yet, here, I devote a chapter to Nichol and his fellow poets of The Four Horsemen because I want to put their work in dialogue with other performances of poetry in Canada. In this first chapter, I argue that Nichol’s embodied poetics provide a necessary critical framework through which to read the Four Horsemen’s written scores and live/recorded performances. Then I examine the role of the reader in a close-reading of McCaffery’s *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78*, a long poem that challenges critics to consider the ethics of what it means to read language as *living*. For McCaffery, Nichol, and the Four Horsemen as a group, the reader as listener is central to their sound poetry. As Nichol asks of the reader, “Look at these words. Look around them. What do you see?” (Nichol 429) and, as I argue in this chapter, what the reader sees is sound. The chapter concludes by asking how embodied poetics translates onto the stage in the multi-media adaptation “The Four Horsemen Project” (2007), which I argue re-stages the historical moment of the Four Horsemen’s sound poetry while, simultaneously, looking forward to what might be called a re-making of the avant-garde as new *now*.

Chapter Two continues to focus on the body by critically examining dance, a
medium often overlooked in literary criticism yet one that exemplifies a fusing of embodiment and interpretation. Dance places crucial questions of embodied representation and readability at the forefront because it is a medium in which semiotic codes are expressed through the body itself, which poses a difficult yet productive challenge for adapting the semiotics of poetry into a dance adaptation. In this chapter, I examine dance adaptations of Michael Ondaatje’s poetry: ranging from a film of Ondaatje’s dance poem in Bruce McDonald’s short film Elimination Dance to Veronica Tennant’s Shadow Pleasures, four dance films based on Ondaatje’s writing. Thus, this chapter allows for a re-consideration of theories of reading in dance criticism, particularly Susan Leigh Foster’s influential book Reading Dancing, by asking what the implications are for positing a ‘code’ for reading the body (later re-read through post-structuralism and post-colonialism by critics such as Anne Cooper Albright, Helen Thomas, and Jane Desmond). Dance is a provocative medium through which to contest the ways in which we theorize language as either outside or inside the body because, in dance, the body is highly implicated in a semiotic system and yet often the dancing itself is an attempt to move away from meaning, as in Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi’s Butoh piece entitled, “( )” a duet that contests the viability of a choreographic space outside of meaning. The chapter on dance is followed by a chapter on jazz (specifically, Clarke’s jazz-opera Québécité) because both of these art forms can be read as simultaneously outside and inside a representational system; as Heble writes in a discussion of jazz and semiotics in Landing on the Wrong Note, “[t]he
tendency to think of jazz as a spontaneous expression of the performer’s emotions clouds our awareness of the fact that jazz, like language, is a system of signs” (3). Moreover, dance provides an important contribution to the dissertation’s enactment of reading practices by allowing for a critical analysis of Ondaatje’s attention to the body and to choreography as a metaphor throughout his poetry, which, in turn, raises the question of how the reading body is already implicated. I conceptualize this intersection of reader and text through a word used by Ondaatje, antiphonal, a call and response that I apply to the process of adaptation. In asking how this antiphonal conversation functions as a model for theorizing adaptation, I further contend that the interaction itself is infused with a combination of desire in writing as articulated by Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* with the desire to step outside of written words and into another medium.

Building upon Chapter Two’s investigation of adaptation as a reader’s response, Chapter Three turns to another embodied medium — music — but, here, although there is a more general discussion of music and writing, the main focus is on a hybrid form of musical performance: jazz opera. George Elliott Clarke’s jazz opera *Québécité* premiered at the Guelph Jazz Festival in 2003, with music composed by D.D. Jackson and poetic libretto published by Gaspereau Press, *Québécité: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos* (2003). As audience members reading/listening to Clarke’s love story of two multicultural couples, we are presented with a unique challenge when asked to consider the piece as a written performance, as libretto, and as embodied vocal performance, as a live or recorded
production. In this chapter, I argue that both the libretto and the sung jazz opera can be 
heard as performances that constitute significant challenges to the way in which audiences
engage with Canadian voices on the page and on the stage. Through close-listenings to the
female characters in particular, I suggest that their linguistic and musical scripts offer the
opportunity for challenging cultural signification through sound, thereby bringing cultural
performance (Bannerji, Gunew, Kamboureli) into dialogue with cultural signification
through sound (Heble, Gates).

The poet as a writer of libretti is not a new phenomenon. Twentieth century
examples include Ezra Pound’s *Cavalcanti* and Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*;
Canadian poets who have written libretti include James Reaney (*Night Blooming Cerus,
The Shivaree*, and *Crazy to Kill* with composer John Beckwith and *Serinette* with
composer Harry Somers), Robin Blaser (*The Last Supper*), P.K. Page’s (*What Time is it
Now?*), Anne Carson’s libretto and oratorio in *Decreation*, and Margaret Atwood’s
forthcoming libretto for an opera about Pauline Johnson with score by Christos Hatzis.
(This list of examples of libretti, of course, does not include the many non-operatic musical
settings of Canadian poetry.) However, it is more common for a librettist to transfer the
work of another writer into song than for the librettist to write an ‘original’ story for the
opera (one that can then published as a libretto). Yet, the libretti of *Québécité* and *Trudeau*
are published as books of poetry. Thus, the libretto is meant to be read as well as sung. It is
with this in mind that I read the jazz opera as offering a response to what jazz writing, or a
jazz libretto in this case, *is*. When the character of Malcolm is called upon to define jazz, “Signify, Malcolm, your sizzling aesthetic of jazz” (36), I read this call for signification as a foregrounding of the difficulty of writing jazz itself. Jazz writing as a genre of music writing has been in collections such as Yosef Komunyakaa’s *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991) and, as a Canadian example, there is the collection of blues poems edited by Jan Zwicky and Brad Cran, *Why I Sing the Blues* (2001), an intriguing mix of poets writing either in a blues style or *about* the blues. Jazz writing becomes further complicated by the fact that it can listened to both on and off the page. To return to the call for Malcolm to signify jazz, we must listen to this signification off the page in order to hear a version of Henry Louis Gates’s notion of “signifyin’”; yet, in singing his response to this challenge, Malcolm both defers and defines its meaning, thereby *signifying jazz* takes place in the semantic meaning of the words and in the singer’s performance of it.

The dissertation’s close attention to the representational limits of recording poetic sound culminates in Chapter Four, which turns to polyphonic representations of voice in Robert Bringhurst’s poetry. Polyphony, multiple voices speaking at once, is a poetic technique that calls for the audience to change its listening practice. It unsettles the listener and calls for an attention to everything at once. In the case of Bringhurst’s poetry, this polyphony takes place both in the textual and acoustic forms of “The Blue Roofs of Japan” (*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*) and *Ursa Major: A Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. Polyphony allows the poet to write in multiple voices and to gesture towards what this
overlapping of voices might sound like; furthermore, in the case of Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major*, polyphony enables him to recognize the plurality of cultures out of which a poem emerges. As Dennis Lee proposes in “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” poetic sound is deeply political. For Lee, one must re-attune one’s listening practice to hear the place where one lives, or rather to hear cadence: “a raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains towards words [...] That cadence is home” (21). Reading Bringhurst through Lee’s theories of polyphony, which include written language, I foreground the politics of poetic listening. In the essay, “New Contexts of Canadian Criticism: Democracy, Counterpoint, Responsibility” (1997), Ajay Heble proposes reading practice through polyphony and I turn to this argument in this chapter’s discussion of the politics of polyphony as listening practice. With reference to Glenn Gould’s “The Idea of North,” Heble argues for a practice of contrapuntal listening, which, when combined with the attention to listening in this dissertation, foregrounds the political import of re-assessing our critical practices. As M. Nourbese Philip suggests in her essay “Who’s Listening? Artists, Audiences, and Language,” we must constantly re-assess our listening practices in the same way that we must revise our critical terminology, which is the imperative behind the collection in which her essay and Heble’s appear: *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. While Philip discusses the impact of community, market economies, and the publishing industry on constructing audiences for poetry and poetry readings, her poem that precedes the essay asks perhaps the most poignant question in
relation to the practice of listening: “If no one listens and cries / is it still poetry […] or does the sea always roar / in the shell of the ear?” Responding to the urgency of these lines, Chapter Four’s discussion of polyphony reminds us of what is at stake in listening, especially when polyphony is read through the democratizing effect that Heble posits as informing contrapuntal listening. When this listening is then applied to Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*, I argue that this practice enables a listening across and among cultural ecologies. Listening is central to Bringhurst’s poetics and the poetry itself is perhaps the best place to understand what he means by listening, as in the poem “Sunday Morning”:

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What is is not speech  
What is is the line  
between the unspeakable  
and the already spoken. (69)
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In this poem, an invisible line is drawn between sound and silence and yet this line is ambiguous; it cannot be visibly drawn just as the lines between libretto and jazz-opera, between poem and dance, and between vocal score and sound poem cannot be drawn. The line can be seen only as a blur of sound. Listening to this sound *between the unspeakable / and the already spoken* involves listening to what is unstable, movable and unseen; it is the space that emerges between the *is* and the *is* — where you, the reader, inhabit and fill it, an interstitial space that opens out into performance.
Endnotes

1. As an example of an infelicitous situation, Austin imagines the naming of a ship during which someone “snatches the bottle out of your hand, breaks it on the stern, shouts out ‘I name this ship Generalissimo Stalin,’ and then for good measure kicks away the chocks” (23). This example exposes the fact that Austin’s “rules” are based largely on cultural conventions since this one uses politically referential rhetoric. Thus, when Austin discusses what exactly goes “wrong” in this example and comes to the conclusion that it is “a bit arbitrary” (23), paralleling the situation to ones in which lawyers must make “numerous rules about different kinds of cases” (31), the disruptive speaker who misnames the ship becomes a figure who does not subscribe to the value system shared by the community involved in the linguistic procedure. The performative limits are revealed and these ruptures are what theorists from Derrida to Butler explore in their own assessment of the critical usefulness of performative language.

2. Butler’s example of drag as performative in Gender Trouble became popularized to the point that Bodies that Matter attempts to clarify the complexity of this example:
   If drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as drag. [...] The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining [...] Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language. (230-231)
   This clarification is, in many ways, a response to a reading of performativity as overly theatrical. The body is performing, but the body’s performance takes place within the language that constructs it.

3. David New’s 2009 short film on R. Murray Schafer begins with a quotation read aloud by Schafer while the sounds of him putting on gloves, shoes, and a hat intermingle with his voice: “A soundscape is any collection of sounds, almost like a painting is a collection of visual attractions. When you listen carefully to the soundscape it becomes quite miraculous.” We can hear the interdisciplinary and intertextual qualities of a soundscape in this definition, as though the soundscape gestures towards what can be experienced in sight or sound when attention is given carefully.

4. In terms of creative dance writing, a site for further inquiry into the representational limits of writing about dance would be the Winter 2009 issue of Descant composed of essays, poems, interviews and artwork, such as Cylla von Tiedmann’s photographs, “Caught in Motion” that offer visual renderings of a temporal art form.
Chapter One

Dance the Poem Out Loud: Re-Reading The Four Horsemen

What is a pome is inside of your body, body, body, body
—— bpNichol

The water in this space
disappears
a reader enters.
—— Steve McCaffery

Poetry originates from the body. Out of the body sound is born. Even after this sound has been etched onto the page, its embodied form cannot be forgotten. No more evident is this remembering of the body than in the poetry and criticism of bpNichol. Nichol was intensely aware of the interdependence of poetry and life: “Poetry being at a dead end poetry is dead. Having accepted this fact we are free to live the poem […] We must put the poem in our lives by freeing it from the necessity to be” (‘ABC: the aleph beth book” 34). As Nichol writes in these meta-poetic lines, the poem is reborn when it is taken off the page and into the reader’s life.¹ However, this raises the question of what happens to this vitality once the poem is transferred from writer to reader. In other words, must we agree with Barthes’s assertion that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Image, Music, Text 148)? The conceptual ‘death’ of the author does ‘free’ the reader to enter into the limitlessness of a text, but does one need to die in order to be replaced by the other? This chapter addresses this question by examining how poetry and poetic notation mediate reader and text, thereby enabling a representational awareness of
both presence and absence. In Ron Mann’s film devoted to poetry readings as performances, poet Ted Berrigan invokes such a mediatory space in explaining how “I put my poems in the space between me and other people. When I’m reading them, I’m not the poet I’m the reader” (transcribed from *Poetry in Motion*). In exploring the poetry reading as performance, this chapter refuses to let the theoretical death of the author foreclose the possibility of positing an embodied poetics. The first section discusses Nichol’s poetry and criticism in order to understand how the writing process inscribes the body; the next section turns to the body of the reader by focusing on Steve McCaffery’s long-poem *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78*; and the final section turns to a multi-media adaptation of the Four Horsemen poets, “The Four Horsemen Project” (co-directed by Ross Manson and Kate Alton and premiered in Toronto 2007). The chapter’s discussion of poetic notation, recordings, and criticism culminates in a theatrical adaptation; yet, at the same time, I argue that this performance can still be called a poetry reading — a dancing of the poem out loud.

A poignant line repeated throughout “The Four Horsemen Project” is Nichol’s chant-like phrase, reminding us that poetry is located in the physicality of audience and reader alike: “What is a pome is inside of your body, body, body, body” (transcribed from a recording of “Pome Poem” on *Ear Rational*). Building upon Charles Bernstein’s notion of the poetry reading as “public tuning” (3), I suggest that a poetry reading as event includes an active participation on the part of the listener. In the Introduction, I outline the poetic and critical theories informing the performative aspect of the reader as an active listener. Tracing the theoretical trajectory of this re-thinking through Austin, Derrida, and Butler, the Introduction places performative language in dialogue with reception theory,
specifically Iser’s notion of an implied-reader. In the case of Nichol’s collaboration with Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton and Rafael Barreto-Rivera in the sound poetry group, The Four Horsemen, the multiplicity of performers complicates theories of audience reception, as does the fact that these performers are readers too. One of the initial audience responses to the Four Horsemen, as retold by Nichol, was confusion about collaborative authorship: “People don’t want to think of writers as groups. They’re fixed on writers as the single consciousness” (qtd. in Miki 148). Exploding singularity and insisting upon plurality is one way that this chapter foregrounds the theorizing of multi-vocality in subsequent chapters; as further noted in the Introduction, multi-directional arrows of influences among performers, readers and texts are what underscore my approach to all performances of poetry examined in this dissertation. Amongness, or togetherness-in-difference as proposed in Chapter Three’s discussion of Québecité, is what informs the democratic, collective voice of the Four Horsemen (as a group and as individual poets). The plurality of voices fundamentally changes the audience’s reception. Thus, the Four Horsemen’s poetry readings provide compelling sites for re-evaluating what it means to read because their voices collide and overlap in performances, notations and recordings, occasionally escaping documentation altogether and registering acoustic presence only in the listening ear.

Poetry lives in the body and poetry lives as an extension of the body, an assertion that aligns itself with performative language (see Introduction), with echoes of presence re-presented in adaptations (see Chapter Two), with acoustic significations of identity (Chapter Three), and with poetry as transcribing ecologies of voices (see Chapter Four). All of these chapters engage with the question of what performance brings to a text that is
already highly conscious of its embodied textuality. Therefore, we can begin to ask this question through the echoing lines of Nichol’s “Pome Poem” because these lines locate poetry within the body. In addition, “Pome Poem” refers to a broader poetic movement focused on breath and associated with the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan, among others). Writing breath into poetry reminds the reader that poetry is not solely a textual object, a point that requires a change in what Nichol calls “ascendancy of the eye over the ear” (“Sound and the Lung Wage” 107).

In order to address this problematic “gap between the eye and the ear” (107), Nichol asks what medium can possibly connect them, as if articulating a need for the acoustic space that McLuhan proposes as a way to understand the eye as an extension of the ear (*The Medium is the Massage*). Similarly, in *McLuhan in Space* (2003), Richard Cavell examines the overlapping discourses of visible speech through the term “verbivocovisual” (143), which, as he explains, is a Joycean word (from *Finnegans Wake*) appropriated by concrete poets. In tracing the overlapping interests of Canadian concrete poets (mainly the *TISH* poets) and McLuhan, Cavell notes that “one of the great paradoxes associated with the ‘culture of orality’ — especially as it emerged in Canada — was that this emphasis on the vocal was to produce a generation of poets who were to make their name in concrete poetry” (136). In investigating this paradox, this chapter examines what Nichol calls the interface of word and sound, thereby allowing poems to be read as scores for performance and scores of performance. As in the sensorial blurring in “verbivocovisual,” a poem, for Nichol, exemplifies McLuhan’s concept of acoustic space in its spatial performance of all-at-once-ness on the page; in addition, the reconnection of eye to ear is also influenced by Olson’s concept of projective verse that informed the Black Mountain approach to
writing breath. Thus, when “Pome Poem” concludes with the lines, “What is a pome is inside of your breathing, breathing, breathing,” Nichol invokes Olson’s attention to breathing and extends this attention to the reader’s breathing body as well. In my close-listening to Nichol’s work, I argue that his embodied poetics call for a re-thinking of reading itself — a reading that remembers the line, “What is a pome is inside of your body, body, body, body” and asks, through this line, what it means to listen to a dancing out loud.

I. Notation: Nichol and “a writer-reader”

try to write the poem i breathe in

- Nichol (The Martyrology, Book I)

I begin — in as much as one can begin, as Nichol himself begins the audio cassette bp Nichol (1971) with “Love Poem for Gertrude Stein” in which the words beginning and ending blur together — in medias res amid Nichol’s poetry and criticism in order to pursue a notion of embodied poetics. Nichol’s long poem The Martyrology has often been referred to as a life-poem, a category that contains the implication that, while the text might stay alive in readings and re-readings, the author’s life is tied to the poem. As those living in a world without Nichol know all too well, this life-poem does come to an end. Yet, a text only ends to the extent that words cease to be written because readers have the capacity not only to re-read but also to re-write its meaning. Importantly, The Martyrology, Book 9 (1986-1987) concludes with two versions of the written words: one of which is a dramatic poem and the other is a musical score entitled, Ad Sanctos: a Choral Work, written by Nichol and set to music by Howard Gerhard. A careful reader of Nichol’s poems cannot help but notice that this musical score poignantly responds to a phrase that begins The
Martyrology Book 1, “a future music moves now to be written” (unpaginated). This future music is now written, but when it will be sung is another matter altogether and pertains to the discussion of recording technologies later in this section. Nevertheless, we are moved toward a future music, thereby reminding us of the temporality of performance itself. Concepts of presence and temporality raise pivotal questions for this section on Nichol: Who is performing? Who is singing? Or, to rephrase these questions in terms of direct readerly engagement: Who is reading? These questions concerning the poetics of reading are what McCaffery responds to in Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78 and what informs Manson and Alton’s adaptation, “The Four Horsemen Project.” I look ahead to these sections because they will build upon this section’s discussion of reading poetic notation. As Nichol writes in the introductory notes for The Prose Tattoo: Selected Performance, “we insist that the texts are simply scores, simply the tracking of an oral intention, not, in their intention or most basic form, visual poems” (2). Yet, what this chapter proposes is that these tracks of oral intention are necessary reminders of our distance from the performing voice. Like McLuhan’s image of a rear-view mirror that looks backwards into the future, these tracks simultaneously look backwards and forwards. They show remnants of orality and yet contain the potential to be spoken out loud again.

Poetry, for Nichol, sounds itself out in voice, breath, and body, all of which complicate any attempt to read poetry as only visual. Yet, Nichol’s poetry simultaneously explores what language can do on the page since many of Nichol’s poems are visual, concrete poems, and much of his sound poetry inhabits both textual and recorded forms. For instance, “Cycle #22” (Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer) is one poem that appears in multiple formats: poem, notation, audio recording and then in dance adaptation,
as discussed in the final section on “The Four Horsemen Project.” As Chapter Three discusses in relation to George Elliott Clarke’s poetic libretti, the reader becomes an active participant in mediating text and performance and, as a further complication to this interaction, the text itself offers its own performance on the page. As McCaffery observes in the case of The Martyrology, the reader exists within a written space: “the impossibility to be anywhere (as a reader) but in the writing” (“In Ten(s/t)ion: Dialoguing with bp” 432). To rephrase McCaffery, the critic is one version of the reader who is always located in the writing, but one of the difficulties in writing a space for the reader is to re-present the presence of the reader. Thus, I start with Nichol’s introductory comments to The Prose Tattoo because these scores negotiate among reader, writer, and text in order to construct what I am calling a readerly and writerly presence — a presence that builds upon the concept of “writing aloud” that concludes Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text (1975). In this argument, I suggest that this readerly and writerly presence constitutes a recognition of the complexity of text as text: text as speaking text, body in the text, and body gesturing to the absent bodies of writer and reader, holding them together, here.

The first poetry reading that we see and hear in Michael Ondaatje’s film on Nichol The Sons of Captain Poetry consists of Nichol, standing in a bare room with a maroon rug and holding a book, open, with his left hand and right hand lifted in the air. He begins reading with the word “Oompah” and with this sound we witness a performer reading, a writer reading, and a body reading out loud. Film mediates this performance to us, an unknown audience, who cannot see what he is reading from but whatever is on the pages in front of him appears to inspire the performance. In The Prose Tattoo: Selected Performance Scores of The Four Horsemen, Nichol writes a commentary to these
collaboratively written scores and explains how they conceptualize the poetic scoring that guides their performances. Nichol refers to the influential work of Raoul Hausmann on “optophoneticism,” defined as “sound reading/interpretation of spatially organized text” (313). In an issue of Open Letter specifically devoted to notation, Nichol refers to the title of Hausmann’s essay in which he explains optophoneticism, “The Optophonetic Dawn,” which, for Nichol, conveys the “the conceptual breakthrough inherent in the notion of notation: i am making the invisible visible; i am bringing into light was [sic] has been in darkness; i am seeing sound” (“The ”Pata of Letter Feet, or, The English Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” 83). This synaesthetic experience of seeing sound is precisely what is needed in order to link the reader and text, or to reconnect the eye and the ear as in McLuhan’s acoustic space. Clarifying the pun in his essay’s title, Nichol conveys the significance of the seeing of sound as a mediating experience: “it’s at the interface between the eye, the ear, and the mouth, that we suddenly see/hear the real ”pata of poetic feet. now the term for that interface is ‘notation,’ not just writing” (79). In explaining notation in this essay, Nichol includes annotated examples of his own poems. Many of these poems appear on the pages of Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer, a book often thought of as concrete (not sound) poetry and, yet, the fact that Nichol refers to these poems as notations stresses their proximity to the interface of eye, ear and mouth. One such poem, “Cycle #22” (which appears in the “The Four Horsemen Project” and will be discussed later as an example of what I am calling a dancing out loud), contains the following marginal note written by Nichol in his analysis of it: “so here a purely visual idea led me into sound – from the eye to the ear” (86). And, if we consider how this transition plays out for the reader (who, as Nichol exemplifies, can also be the writer), then perhaps the reader of the
poem will also be moved from sight into sound.

The Four Horsemen’s optophonetic scores attempt to represent all four voices. Therefore, even more so than notation for one of Nichol’s poems, these scores need to be read as maps of improvisatory sound: “This is partly why we insist that the texts are simply scores, simply the tracking of an oral intention, not, in their intention or most basic form, visual poems” (315). In response to the question of why these scores are published in The Prose Tattoo, Nichol writes, "many of our grids & optophonetic scores can be read as secondary visual poems, visual poems that are by-products of group performance, much in the same way that many visual poems, originally intended for the eye, have generated secondary oral readings" (315-316). In the case of “The Four Horsemen Project,” the reading of these scores produces not only sonic interpretations but also embodied ones, which shows how these scores have the potential to be read as choreographic notation. For instance, the following reproduction displays the Four Horsemen’s score for “Coffee Break”:

“Coffee Break” by the Four Horsemen (Prose Tattoo).
After hearing and watching the dancers perform this poem in “The Four Horsemen Project,” I can see how some points in the choreography have a mimetic correspondence to the score. For instance, dancers Dahl and Nann emerge from stage right in slow sideways steps, as if peeking around the edge of the page towards Murakoshi, just as the word sugar speaks from various positions as it makes a tentative entrance in the poem. Even though this score was used in the choreographic process, directors Ross Manson and Kate Alton often had to draw their own notation for the sounds and movements of various poems. This need to formulate their own textual cues highlights the fact that scores for performance can often be written with very specific readers in the mind. In the case of the scores in The Prose Tattoo, they were written for Nichol, McCaffery, Dutton, and Barreto-Rivera as readers; intriguingly, these scores were also written by their intended readers. Writing and reading are inseparable, even though the so-called ‘end result’ of this process is an improvised performance of sound that reaches not necessarily beyond writing or reading but rather towards the ekstasis of the score.

Even though voice performs off the textual page, the voices of the Four Horsemen are rooted in a textual notation that blurs reading and writing, just as musicians are reading music at the same time as playing it. As their collaborations progress, however, the Four Horsemen experiment with various forms of notation and occasionally abandon it altogether. While there is always an improvisatory element, their performances in the early 1980s resemble the creative chaos of free improvisatory jazz. In going beyond notation, any attempt to represent their sound visually would resemble a text that interrogates its own readability, as does McCaffery’s Carnival. Even Nichol’s reading of his own notational systems evolved; for example, in a 1971 essay, he explains how the poem
“HIROSHIMA (mon amour)” is composed only of the textual words “carnage ikawa” and yet it “lasts anywhere from 3 to 6 minutes and was, in fact, first performed as an audience involvement piece that has audience chanting at the base phrase while Lionel Kearns & I did variations over top of that” (qtd. in Meanwhile, 31). (It should be noted that this poem performs its own variation upon the classic new wave film, Hiroshima Mon Amour [1959] screenplay by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais.)

Earlier in his writing, Nichol theorized an elaborate system of notation based on a five level scale, as if representing a musical staff (and, indeed, some of his poems do include a musical staff, such as “Ocean Song: 3rd movement” in Art Facts: a book of contexts). His comments on how this notational system might be interpreted includes acts of writing and reading: “it is read sequentially from left to right as is traditional in the English language / where a breath sound is intended it is indicated in the following matter [here Nichol represents these breath marks with symbols on a line like these: ____)_)____ and clicking sounds like these: ___/____ ]” (“A System of Notation for a Poetry of Sound” 19). What Nichol calls “sound units” and “breath units” convey an attentiveness to voice and breath, an attentiveness that continues to resonate throughout Nichol’s sound and concrete poetry. Yet, as noted in his comments on “HIROSHIMA (mon amour),” Nichol’s notational system becomes less concerned with mapping sound on the page and more so with conjuring up sound in one’s mind, as if we have reached the head in the blazon-like riffs “Pome Poem” employs as it names various parts of the body: “what is a pome is inside of your head, inside your head, inside your head” (transcribed from Ear Rational). These changes in notational strategies reveal how formal constraints, otherwise thought of as imposing order upon sound, are not static; notation itself needs to be constantly adapted by
both the writer and the reader (a fluidity within the mapping of sound that will underscore
the connection between geography and music in Chapter Two). Further contributions to
these changes are notations by writers such as bill bissett and John Cage. As Nichol writes
in a review of Cage’s *Notations*, the book itself is an exercise in intertextual listening to a
plurality of notational practices: “the book has hundreds of notations by hundreds of names
and beings. i wanted to trap the almost and the maybe and edges of the feelings the book
brings forth thru describing visually acoustic space. reminds us we do not know the edges
of our own head’s spaces or even begin to understand or know all the sounds we have
found from time to time sharing the same moment as our hearing” (37). In writing this
desire “to trap the almost and the maybe and edges of the feelings the book brings forth,”
Nichol approximates the complexity within notation itself: the pull towards notating sound
and yet wanting to let it resound in the moment of its utterance.

Audio recordings and film documentation resemble notation in their ability to
document traces of orality, or “oral intention” to reiterate Nichol’s phrase. However, audio
recordings are distinct in their ability to reproduce the sound of the voice, thereby
constructing a spectral representation of the body through sound. As if holding up an
acoustic photograph, a listener can be convinced that she has access to a live voice. An
acoustic illusion of presence can be created through recordings to the extent that one can
evoke what Walter Benjamin describes as the ability of the mechanical age to reproduce a
copy of the ‘original.’ Benjamin implies that in making a reproduction, whether a
photograph or audio recording, the “quality of its presence is always depreciated” (219); he
calls this lost presence in a work of art the loss of “aura” (219). In an article on the impact
of the phonograph on literary modernism, Angela Frattarola notes that, even though the
phonograph displaces sound from its event of production (resulting in a loss of aura), the recording capability of the phonograph “allows the artist to manipulate sounds in new and possibility more intimate ways” (154). In addition to the relevance of Benjamin on the question of what is reproduced in a recording, this notion of reproduction will recur in the section on McCaffery and in discourses of adaptation, particularly due to Hutcheon’s redefining of the source text as what she calls the “adapted text” (xiii). Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation speaks through the discourse of a post-structuralist critique of ‘origin’ and, therefore, the adapted text is not an original source but rather a source of citation.

Reproductions are, therefore, layers of citations. In an adaptation such as “The Four Horsemen Project,” audiences see representations of The Four Horsemen as poets in a range of audio and visual media, which attempts to re-present them while foregrounding the absence of their presence. This mediated experience becomes personal when, as recounted by Ross Manson (co-director of “The Four Horsemen Project”), Nichol’s relatives and friends attended the performance and heard his voice, producing a highly affecting experience that can only be described by the sense that it was as if he were there.⁴ Visually, audiences of “The Four Horsemen Project” see Nichol’s poems projected on the backdrop, with many of these poems including motion through graphics, such as the letters of “Blues” gathering on the screen. Audiences also see the Four Horsemen themselves in excerpts from Ondaatje’s film, *The Sons of Captain Poetry*. Scenes of the Four Horsemen performing, at times screaming in unison and at times singing in an orchestrated improvisation, are interspersed throughout the performance. These layers of live performer and recorded performances combine to produce what performance studies theorist Philip Auslander calls “liveness” (2). As discussed in the Introduction, theorizing what
constitutes “live theatre” began, for Auslander, as an attempt to dispel myths and clichés of “the magic of live theatre,” [and] the ‘energy’ that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event” (2); however, upon recognizing the value in such a concept for performers and audiences, Auslander uses the term liveness in order to explode the opposition between live and mediatized performances. I refer to this term because the multi-media collages that constitute “The Four Horsemen Project” remind audiences of the mediated nature of performance itself.

Liveness can be rephrased in terms of access to material, which becomes a crucial factor in theorizing performance since live performances can often be difficult to see and recordings may or may not be made. For instance, in discussing Steve McCaffery’s improvised performances, Paul Dutton must speak about unrecorded events: “To encounter McCaffery as improviser, at of the time of writing (February 1987), requires attendance” (18). This attendance conflates an attention to the performance with the physical act of being present for it. Otherwise, the lack of recordings of McCaffery’s improvisations makes it difficult to discuss them other than in the present. Recently, many of Nichol’s writings and sound poems have been made accessible on an online archive: http://bpnichol.ca. Online archives of sound poetry make previously unavailable recordings accessible to the public. Even in the last ten years this influx in recorded material has made a difference, as shown by the fact that, in 2001, it was difficult for directors Ross Manson and Kate Alton to access recorded materials of the Four Horsemen when starting work on the production. The republication of Nichol’s writing by Coach House Press, particularly The Alphabet Game: A bpNichol Reader (2007) and books one through nine of The Martyrology (1998) and a revised publication of Konfessions of an
Elizabethan Fan Dancer in 2004 (which combines the 1967 and 1973 versions of this publication) constitute re-readings of these works that can be placed alongside the ongoing re-readings of his poetry in mediatized, acoustic spaces.

Recordings separate performers from their embodied performances. Yet, as many theorists argue, we can redefine the relationship between the recording and the performing body; for instance, through the theories of Deleuze and Haraway, one could argue that, in a post-body realm of the cyborg, the recording becomes an extension of the human body (a cyborg version of McLuhan’s argument that all media are extensions of the body [Laws of Media]). What is distinct about Nichol’s recordings is that they underscore the absence of a writer whose presence was often what was most compelling for critics discussing his work. In introducing Open Letter: bpNichol +10, Frank Davey emphasizes this very point when addressing what happens when an author so closely associated with his texts can no longer speak about them:

Much like Robert Duncan, he tended to present himself in workshops and reading tours as a curious reader of his own writing, and as more informed about that writing than about anyone else’s. The audiotape record of such moments shows him discussing other writers’ work in terms of his use of it, or discussing literary history in terms of his relationship to it. Thus, one of the questions the ten-year anniversary of his death brings us is what is happening to ‘bpNichol’, the body of texts, now that Barrie, the person, is no longer able to publish pamphlets and broadsides, to create new collaborations, to place poems in periodicals, or to travel across the country to answer questions about his work — or as Miki phrases the question, how do we read his writing after ‘the removal of its prime mover’?

Placing Davey’s question of how to “read his writing after ‘the removal of its prime mover’” in the context of recordings that show him discussing his work, I would suggest that the critic subsequently becomes aligned with recording processes to the extent that he/she attempts to continue these conversations. Yet, many conversations about Nichol’s work have provoked debate over whether criticism should attempt to mimic Nichol’s
poetics. Much of the criticism on Nichol appears in the journal, *Open Letter*, to which both Nichol and McCaffery were frequent contributors and editors (notably, they co-edited a special issue on Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer). Along with numerous articles written by and on Nichol, *Open Letter* has published issues devoted to Nichol: *Read the Way He Writes: A Festschrift for bpNichol* (eds. Paul Dutton and Steven Smith, 1986), *bpNichol +10* (ed. Frank Davey, 1998), *bpNichol +20* (ed. Lori Emerson, 2008), *bpNichol +21* (ed. Lori Emerson), and *The Martyrology: Survivors and Retrospective* (ed. David Rosenberg, forthcoming). The choice of title for the *Open Letter* issue called *Read the Way He Writes: A Festschrift for bpNichol* calls for critics to engage with both the readerly and writerly aspects of Nichol’s writing. The epigraph to this issue explains this title as an allusion to Gertrude Stein, who greatly influenced Nichol’s own writing:

Journalist: Why don’t you write the way you talk?

Gertrude Stein: Why don’t you read the way I write? \(1\)

If we read the way that Nichol wrote, then the writerly and readerly aspects of the text cannot be separated. Moreover, as readers, we respond actively to the text as a guide for our reading practices, but do our written responses about Nichol’s work have to perform through the same poetics?

In the 1998 issue of *Open Letter*, Christian Bök’s article, “Nickel Linoleum” provides a useful assessment of critical approaches because he assesses the viability of blurring poetic and critical writing. In other words, he foregrounds the issue of whether miming Nichol’s writing style works as a critical practice. Although Bök’s assessment is, at times, unjustly harsh with respect to certain critics (with the exception of McCaffery) whose essays appear in Miki’s collection *Tracing the Paths*, I would like to build upon his
attention to what critics do with Nichol’s language. Bök contends that many critics fail to do what they profess Nichol’s language does; in other words, he suggests that many critics do not distinguish between “the mortal issue of the writer's life and the formal value of the writer’s work” (62). Rather than agreeing with those (Barbour, Kamboureli, Kroetsch) who read The Martyrology as postmodern, Bök argues that the text still strives towards a modernist coherence despite his disparate voices:

Critic after critic belabours the lexicon of Derrida in order to imply that such a poetic memoir is “pomo” because its open-ended, many-sided form problematizes every category of aesthetic certitude. Only a small cabal of poets has so far hesitated to rubberstamp this prevailing assessment, implying that, despite the hyperbole, such an epic opus about the loss of the epic is, alas, more humanistic, more modernized, than postmodern, since bpNichol, despite knowing better, still seeks ontological reassurance.

The Martyrology is, sadly, not pomo because, despite all of its alleged efforts to subvert humanist ontology, the text nevertheless reiterates the spiritual anxieties of modernism, substituting a poetic gain for a mythic loss, replacing an old ideology with what bpNichol might call “a new humanism.” (64)

A precursor to this critique is McCaffery’s reading of proper names in The Martyrology as excluding the reader by creating “a semiotic impasse, a cul de sac within the rhetoric of transaction between writer and reader” (“In Ten(s/t)ion: Dialoguing with bp” 433). The interview in which this comment appears was first published in Miki’s collection of essays and included a preamble by McCaffery in which he states that “The Martyrology is a vast resource of literary limits” (72). For McCaffery, the proper names are one place in which these limits exercise their effect on the reader; and, although the way in which McCaffery links these limits to spatiality will be discussed in the next section, I mention this argument here because limitations are what inform Bök’s shift away from unquestionably reading the text as “open-ended.” Even though the postmodern qualities of The Martyrology are debatable, what Bök emphasizes is the critical attention to The Martyrology. This attention
continues in a forthcoming issue of *Open Letter* in 2010 on re-assessing the critical history of *The Martyrology*. However, as Bök asks, why select *The Martyrology* as a definitive performance of Nichol’s poetics? Bök attempts to reorient readers towards what he calls Nichol’s more radical texts: “Critics, however, forget that bpNichol has written yet another poetic series, one coincident with his ‘masterpiece,’ but nevertheless, more experimental, more ’pataphysical, and thus more recalcitrant to such a scholastic enterprise: *Love (a book of remembrances)* and *Zygal (a book of translations)*; not to mention, *Art facts (a book of contexts)* and *Truth (a book of fictions)*” (66). I would add that Nichol’s first book of concrete poems, *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* could also be grouped with these books because of their experimentation with visual and sonic textual spaces. For Bök, these books form a quartet that “put into practice the kind of research imagined by bpNichol and McCaffery during their acts of collaborative investigation for the Toronto Research Group” (66). Poetry as practice is one way of thinking of language as performative because one does something with language, bringing to mind the title of J.L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words*, which I discuss in the Introduction and want to put into practice here in an analysis of how a poem performs.

Keeping in mind Bök’s argument that other poems of Nichol’s must be considered as examples of experimenting with performative limits of language, I turn to a poem, “Evening Ritual,” from *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* as an example of how Nichol foregrounds language as moving, as speaking, and as performing on the page:

```
sat down to write you this pome
down to write you this pome sat
to write you this pome sat down
```
write you this pome sat down to
you this pome sat down to write
this pome sat down to write you
pome sat down to write you this (20)

In “Evening Ritual,” the poem sits down to write you, the reader. By the end of the poem, the first line “sat down to write you this pome” becomes “pome sat down to write you this” (20). The writer, the I, is absent in this poem, which corresponds to the final line implication that the “pome sat down to write you this.” Who is you? And what is this? The implied reader, the you, is someone who has taken the time to read this evening ritual of writing. What is further significant about “Evening Ritual” is that the writer does not produce the reader; instead, the poem produces the reader. You are written, specifically in the second-to-last line, “this pome sat down to write you” (20). In this moment of production, we can recall Barthes’s statement that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Image, Music, Text 148); but “Evening Ritual” produces the reader not by violently erasing the author but by a simple action of sitting down to write. In a 1976 interview with Caroline Bayard and Jack David, Nichol is asked a question on Barthes and the production of an imagined reader.6 When Nichol mentions the role of personal taste, Bayard makes the statement “[i]f they don’t like it, then there is no production” (175); Nichol responds with an acknowledgment of different tastes among readers:

bp: Yes. They’re not going to produce, because they’re not going to interact with it. The production demands an interaction. […] when we worked on the TRG essay — I mean, we’re talking about readers, we’re talking about a very specific type of reader — that is to say, a writer-reader who is obsessed with issues of writing. Right? (175)
In this point about the Toronto Research Group publications (written with McCaffery), Nichol theorizes "a writer-reader," one who could be thought of as the imagined, though not imaginary, reader of Nichol’s writing. Recalling McCaffery’s comment that, in The Martyrology, it is impossible “to be anywhere (as a reader) but in the writing” (432), it seems fitting that Nichol imagines a specific reader: a reader who is writing. When we consider this point in relation to the reader “Evening Ritual,” we can see how the poem itself foregrounds this interaction between the reader and poem that produces this line of writing: “pome sat down to write you this.”

In Love: a Book of Remembrances, Nichol’s poem “Frame 4” employs textual space that demonstrates the inextricability of reading and writing. In this poem, the “outside” is still inside the poem (see Appendix 1). As if illustrating a succinct version of Derrida’s seminal phrase il n’y a pas de hors-texte (Of Grammatology), Nichol intimates that there is no place for the reader to stand “outside” the poem. Yet, the poem still engages with notions of spatial relations that require the reader to reflect upon one’s location in relation to the text: a point demonstrated by the fact that the reader stands outside the poem in order to read it. Spatial metaphors underscore Miki’s editorial work in Meanwhile: The Critical Writing of bpNichol when he uses the subheadings “The Entrance” and “The Exit” to frame his commentary about the centrality of process in Nichol’s writing (495). As though implying a circularity of entering and exiting, Miki’s titles echo Nichol’s positing of these words, entrance and exit, as ways through which to communicate between self and other: “i place myself there, with them, whoever they are, wherever they are, who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances are possible” (qtd. in Miki 18). When placing this statement beside his statement regarding the ideal
reader as “a writer-reader who is obsessed with issues of writing” (175), we can see how Nichol’s writing focuses in on a more specific notion of what Miki calls “a writer who reads” (495). Furthermore, I would suggest that this blurring of writing and reading in Nichol’s work offers the critic a dual function as well: to be a reader who writes. Barthes gestures towards this simultaneity in his concept of “writing aloud” that he defines as “the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language” (The Pleasure of the Text 66-67); but Nichol’s poetry and criticism, anticipating a “writer-reader,” show what this writing aloud might sound like when practiced. This does not mean that writer and reader do the same thing, but that they both participate in making a text meaningful. Even in a silent reading, this participatory process of writing while reading (while listening) takes place in the open-ended space between reader and text. It is open-ended because, as Nichol writes in “A System of Notation for a Poetry of Sound” (1966), the reader can step outside of notation: “If it’s a dead end for you seek your own exit” (qtd. in Miki 21).

II. Enter the Reader — Steve McCaffery

Nichol and McCaffery were collaborators in practices of writing and reading. They co-wrote In England Now That Spring (1978), edited and wrote for the journal Open Letter, published the Toronto Research Group reports, performed together and as part of The Four Horsemen, and were engaged in dialogues on poetics as colleagues and friends. One such critical dialogue concerns the acts of entrance and exit that recur throughout Nichol’s writing (“In Ten(s/t)ion: Dialoguing with bp”). Here, McCaffery posits a poetics of space through which the reader moves: “The Martyrology suggests writing as a spatial practice” (438). Even though McCaffery formulates this argument by applying Michel de
Certeau’s spatial poetics of walking to Nichol’s long-poem *The Martyrology*, I would like to examine McCaffery’s own long-poem, *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78* through a poetics of space because it also pursues this notion of “writing as a spatial practice.” In doing so, the poem asks readers to re-negotiate their ways of entering and exiting the text. Additionally, I suggest that this poem is *about* a poetics of reading and what happens when this is placed in dialogue with McCaffery’s notion of a reader as inhabiting a theoretical position. In other words, although the poem claims that “the water in this space / disappears / a reader enters” (11), I argue that the reader enters the poem through writing.

The first word of Steve McCaffery’s title, *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78*, immediately foregrounds the interaction between writer and reader. The word *above* is spelled backwards and, according to the back cover of the poem’s publication, we should pronounce these letters as *vubba*. Furthermore, the title announces itself as an adaptation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (or, rather, that Wittgenstein’s text is the adapted text to use Hutcheon’s phrase). In section 160 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks how a man in an altered state of consciousness would read the word *above* spelled backwards, *evoba*:

> Suppose that a man who is under the influence of a certain drug is presented with a series of characters (which need not belong to any existing alphabet). He utters words corresponding to the number of characters, as if they were letters, and does so with all the outward signs, and with the sensations, of reading.... In such a case some people would be inclined to say the man was *reading* those marks. Others, that he was not.-- Suppose he has in this way read (or interpreted) a set of five marks as *A B O V E*– and now we show him the same marks in the reverse order and he reads *E V O B A* ; and in further texts he always retains the same interpretation of the marks: here we should certainly be inclined to say he was making up an alphabet for himself *ad hoc* and then reading accordingly. (64)
In setting up this scenario of reading, Wittgenstein not only dramatizes a misreading but he also includes audiences who witness this act of reading. As a result of these layers of reading, there is confusion over whether “the man was reading those marks.” Similarly, in the case of the poem, we must ask how we are reading its marks on the page. In asking this question, I echo the ending of McCaffery’s “(Immanent) (Critique)”: “Th / -en what mar ksar e thes e?” (North of Intention, 165). In Marjorie Perloff’s reading of McCaffery, she refers to these words as attempting to free language from “grammatical rule” (Radical Artifice 294) and claims that these words make the reader aware of what rules of reading are being applied. Rather than searching for a clear meaning, the reader of McCaffery’s poetry inhabits a space of indeterminacy. Thus, the question of “what mar ksar e thes e?” not only uses text to push the reader towards freedom from “grammatical rule,” but also calls for a reading aloud to make sense of these marks, which resonates with McCaffery’s description of indeterminacy through an acoustic term: “the polyphony of indecision” (North of Intention, 87). For McCaffery, and for Perloff as a reader of McCaffery, the polyphony of indecision is what frees the reader.

McCaffery’s writing often appears as concrete poetry that gives the reader textual and acoustic spaces to navigate as though reading complex musical notations. In the series “Sound Texts and Musical Scores,” the poem “Concerto for Two Adverbs” consists of textual markings written on empty bars of music, accompanied by McCaffery's editorial note that “the score was originally designed to be detached, pierced through its centre, played on a turntable, and performed during the rotations” (368). Like this score that must be pierced in order to be played, Evoba calls for a destructive reading in the sense that it proposes a death through language, as in the poem’s phrase “an order / orders its own
execution” (68). But the lines that follow speak of an opening: “the door / in the room in / language / exit” (68). One way in which the door opens in the poem is through a non-linear, multi-directional reading, which enacts McLuhan’s notion of allatonceness: “Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space” (63). In this acoustic space — an acoustic space that Nichol wrote of in relation to Cage’s notation: “this notation lives by creating visual acoustical space for the mind to move in” (36) — I ask whether McCaffery’s poem calls for a reader who listens. A reader who listens is one who engages with a text’s all-at-onceness, as Nichol suggests when he frames The Prose Tattoo as remnants of “oral intention” (2). Paradoxically, Evoba proposes what might be thought of as the end of print culture while, at the same time, proposing such an end through print itself. This confusion can be heard in the chaotic final scenes in “The Four Horsemen Project,” which were added as a direct result of McCaffery’s suggestion to the directors that they needed to convey the Four Horsemen’s shift away from notation and towards freer, extended improvisations.5

Published by Coach House Press in 1987, with poet Christopher Dewdney as editor, Evoba: The Investigations Meditations 1976-78 opens with the writer wearing a sign that says in capitalized letters, “TAKE YOURSELF SERIOUSLY” and confronts “a blank space where / the faces of the audience should be” (11). The writer writes in this space and, subsequently, “a reader enters.” But the entrance of the reader does not indicate what role he/she plays in the construction of this text. Nonetheless, what I will suggest is that McCaffery’s Evoba interrogates a poem's dependence upon the imagined and ‘real’ reading audience. McCaffery outlines this concept of “the model reader” in the essay,
“Diminished Reference and the Model Reader” (first published in *Open Letter* 1977 as “The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing”). According to McCaffery, open texts depend upon a closed model of readership (28). I ask what this argument contributes to McCaffery’s own work, *Evoba*, in order to understand how the writer-reader dynamics are either opened or closed in this textual economy. Even if both texts and readers participate in an open-ended construction of meaning, the readers are alive, not the text itself, thereby constituting an asymmetry that upsets the balance of this economy. Speaking in terms of presence is particularly relevant given the last page of the poem, where the word “alive” appears with the “i” missing and the word “dead” whispering from the bottom left corner of the page. I foreshadow this image because it reminds us of what is at stake in asking whether a text is alive and what happens when the reader enters and the author exits.

*Evoba* itself contains the recurring image of the door opening or closing and I would argue that this image directly relates to this issue of open or closed readership: “I hear a door / shut. / you say / they both are sad / i say / it has exactly / this expression” (italics in original, 18). The hearing of the door signals the reader as listener to this text; moreover, this sound articulates the separation implicit in the notion of the referent as structuring a relationship between inside and outside. As McCaffery writes, “what emerges through reference is the fabrication of an exterior that structures material language as the relationship of an ‘inside’ to an ‘outside’” ("Diminished Reference and the Model Reader"). As if negating the model of the door as part of a referential technology, the poem does not position the reader as entering through a door but rather as what emerges when water disappears:
The water in this space disappears a reader enters. (Italics in original, 11)

There is an implied link between the water’s disappearance and the reader’s entrance, as if subtly hinting toward a cause-and-effect relationship (a relationship reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s stanza, “The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying” in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”). Water evaporates to provide a physical space for the reader to enter and, yet, McCaffery discerns that, in the case of Language Writing, we must “avoid a humanization of the reader who is not to be anthropologized as a ‘person’ but seen structurally as a theoretical location in a textual activity” (27). The reader in *Evoba* takes this theoretical location in a textual activity; but does this denial of humanization limit the extent to which the reader can be imagined as embodied? If we follow Perloff’s attention to McCaffery’s own question of “what marks are these”, we might re-phrase this question of reading in terms of what happens to the body: what is at stake in theorizing the reader as location as opposed to person? Where is the body in this text? I contend that these questions lead towards a recognition of the discrepancy between real and imagined audiences. When the water disappears, a spatial position is created for the reader to enter and yet the reader has already entered through the writing.

What I see as informing this disjunction between the ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ audiences is McCaffery’s critique of Language Writing’s need for the reader to produce. He understands this demand for production as responding to a lack within the text: “Implicit in this demand is a closed model of the reader whose functional capabilities are rigidly prescribed” (27). He suggests that what he calls the “Model Reader” for Language Writing is one who is compelled to produce meaning. This critique responds, in part, to the
dismissal of some meanings as aberrant decodings of the text. Thus, it could be said that
*Evoba* provides a contemporaneous poetic version of this essay by asking what reading is
— it is a work that he calls “dialogic and equally parasitic, reversing the normal poles of
primary and secondary discourse in which philosophy engages poetry” (*Seven Pages
Missing*, 453), or what we might think of as a text that attempts to remain continually open,
without presupposing a need for production. I would argue that such a reading is possible
because McCaffery proposes ways in which texts can negotiate this desire to remain open.
He suggests that this can be achieved through a consideration of how the libido exceeds
production. As McCaffery argues in his essay, “Language Writing” (which was written
slightly later than *Evoba* in 1980), “[l]ibido is not utilitarian; it is not a producer but flows
and spills and breaks in an unmediated outlay of blind power” (*North of Intention* 155).
Libido, therefore, offers an alternative approach to the rules of semantic production.
Moreover, McCaffery proposes a notion of double disposition that “simultaneously
petitions active productive engagement and a negative refusal to engage” (157). This leads
to what McCaffery refers to as “a relation of sovereignty” (157) insofar as this double
disposition allows for the reader’s freedom to posit meaning in an opaque text.

*Evoba* certainly fits into the category of an opaque text. It consists of quotations
from Wittgenstein, drawings, words, and cartoons, or what the notes on the back cover call
“a contrapuntal series of fugue-like flights of logic.” In a review of *Evoba*, Stephen Scobie
defends its opaqueness, even though he goes so far as to say that the poem is nearly
unreadable: “[it] moves around themes and ideas from Wittgenstein without ever settling
into anything that could be called a conventional argument, or even a coherent
intelligibility. Or, to put it simply, one would be hard-pressed to say what any given page
of *Evoba* actually means” (italics in original 163). Scobie goes on to say that, despite this confusion on the page, “the poetry flows: words and lines and pages move rhythmically along, and a mental music is set up by the repetition of words and ideas (such as the reference of ‘red’) as recurrent motifs” (163). Scobie further defends the poem’s value in its resistance to signification: “the language moves gracefully over a surface which resists the usual penetration of reading. So meaning and reference do, in a way, take place in this text but their place is subliminal, below or beyond discursive articulation” (163).

Furthermore, reference as taking place at a sublimal level resonates with McCaffery’s reading of American poets, Ray DiPalma, Clark Coolidge, and Bruce Andrew as being able to “command a textual space as a lettered surface resisting idealist transformation. Their purpose is to restore writing and reading to a re-politicized condition as *work*” (“Diminished Reference and the Model Reader” 17). In *Evoba*, work is registered through the economy of what is left over when the reader exits, or at least when the reader closes the book — an excess that, I would argue, represents the performative interface between reader and text.

*Evoba* re-writes Wittgenstein and, in doing so, produces what Scobie aptly identifies as pages that are hard to paraphrase in term of meaning, or what Perloff calls “an oppositional text” (283). It is oppositional in its relation to Wittgenstein and oppositional in relation to its performance of a philosophical seeing-otherwise. As the epigraph to the poem states:

If the aim of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein claims, to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, then the aim of poetry is to convince the bottle that there is no fly. (9)
In this mode of concurrently following Wittgenstein and departing from him, McCaffery follows the poem’s opening scene with a cartoon that sets to images the words of Augustine with which Wittgenstein begins the *Philosophical Investigations*. The quotation describes learning to read by matching words to objects. McCaffery’s cartoon adaptation of Augustine juxtaposes pop-culture images with the unfamiliar and historically displaced Latin of Augustine’s *Confessions*. This adaptation performs a version of Wittgenstein's language-games in the sense that it foregrounds the strangeness in this juxtaposition, thereby raising the question of how this differs from the strangeness of everyday language. Perloff reads this cartoon as the first step towards getting rid of the Augustinian mimetic system in which “the individual words in language name objects” (qtd. in Perloff 283). For instance, she observes how the first frame plays on the caption (translated as “[w]hen they [my elders] named some object, and accordingly moved toward something, I saw this” [283]) by interpreting “the mov[ing] toward something quite literally as the cliché image of a passionate lovers’ kiss” (283). I would add that the cartoon also takes quite literally the past part of that phrase — “I saw this” — because, indeed, the medium itself is visual. The voice-over in the comic claims to see *this*, but we as readers are the ones to see this and not the participants in this comic. They are merely figures to-be-seen, despite their voice captions that speak about *this* seeing. Importantly, the cartoon is, simultaneously, in dialogue with two quotations from Wittgenstein that appear later in the text: “You are reading when you derive the reproduction from the original” (24) and “Can there be a collision between picture and application?” (45). Although we might not know it when we engage with the cartoon early in the poem, we are reading and, as a reader, the poem’s central objective is to make us aware of this act: to become aware of this very moment of
Wittgenstein asks the reader to think of the 12 numbers on a watch: “What did you do to make it into reading?” (65). It is through this example that he arrives at the statement, “You are reading when you derive the reproduction from the original” and proceeds to asks: “But why do we say that he has derived the spoken from the printed words? Do we know anything more than that we taught him how each letter should be pronounced, and that he then read the words out loud?” (65). Yet, if, for example, we read the title of Evoba out loud, what does this tell us about the poem? Collisions, anti-texts within McCaffery’s own anti-text, confuse the reader about what he/she is reading and yet, as McCaffery states mid-way through the poem: “you decide what i am” (59). The challenge of reading culminates in the concluding page, with the word alive written without the i — but the i is still there on the page, thinking of the word as if in a cartoon. (See Appendix 2 for an image of this page.) Meanwhile, the word dead is written on the bottom of the page, thereby forcing us to grapple with indeterminacy. I would argue that this final statement questions whether we see language as alive or dead with this word as performing the pivotal function. At this point, I would like to bring this question into dialogue with a point that opened this chapter: namely, that Nichol asserts that poetry is not only located in the body but poetry itself lives. As Perloff observes, our reading of the poem depends upon whether one reads the page sequentially or spatially. Sequentially, the page tells us that language moves from alive to dead; but, read spatially, Perloff argues that “what dominates is the oval containing AL VE, dropping its i’s. Poetry, the text tells us, needn't focus on individual sensibility. When the ‘i’ drops out, emphasis shifts from the author to the reader” (288-289). Thus, to build upon Perloff’s argument that this process reconstructs the
page as what McCaffery and Nichol call an “active space” (*Rational Geomancy* 65), the shift from author to reader allows for agency within this active space. Furthermore, since McCaffery’s poem invokes Wittgenstein’s phrase of *seeing-as*, the letter *i* that is absent is perhaps not a seeing *i-eye* but rather an eye that hears — a seeing of sound that reiterates Nichol’s point that the eye and ear must be reconnected.

Building upon Perloff’s reading of the final image of *Evoba*, I would add that this concept of seeing-as places the image in dialogue with Nichol’s concrete poetry and visual improvisations. The final image is a drawing that looks like one of Nichol’s poems from the collections of what Bök refers to as the quartet of radical poetic experiments: for instance, *Truth: a Book of Fictions* concludes with two pages that ask: “if this is a page / is this a page?” with the second line written on an unpaginated page added to the book, thereby gesturing towards the dissembling of the book as object in *Evoba*. Also, the visual format of the word “al ve” resembles two other poems of Nichols: “Frame 2” (*Love: A Book of Remembrances*) in which a bird contemplates the word *lonely* and *Still Water* in which the word *empty* misses the letter *p*. Given these intertexts within *Evoba*, I think that it is not accidental that McCaffery echoes one of Nichol’s poem sequences that includes “Frame 4,” a poem that I referred to earlier as an example of a poem that directly addresses the acts of entering and exiting text. In this poem, the “outside” is in the poem itself. Therefore, *Evoba* can be read as intertextually engaging with Nichol’s frame in order to convey an awareness of entering and exiting as concepts to be constantly re-negotiated even if the reader is already present.

In McCaffery’s assertion that the reader occupies “a theoretical location in a textual activity” (27), the very acts of entering and exiting the text are no longer exchanges of
presence or absence. Fittingly, *Evoba* does not end with the closing of the door through which the reader had entered; instead, it leaves us with an excess that can be understood as this mediated interaction between reader and text. Another way of phrasing this excess is to apply McCaffery’s concept of a textual economy; thus, excess is that which exceeds textual economy, a double disposition, or an excess in terms of what Scobie observes in the poem as locating meaning in this text in “the subliminal, below or beyond discursive articulation” (163). It is this excess that extends beyond the textual word *dead*. It is what the reader is left holding: fragments of the book, which “exploded in his hand / Slowly, at first” (99) and the photograph of what appears to be the remains of a dismantled library (103). These scraps of mediated distance between reader and text, between performer and notation, are what remain when a reader exits.

**III. Adapting the Avant-Garde**

Through a close-listening to the adaptation “The Four Horsemen Project,” this final section pursues the question of what critical pathways open up to the reader when *re-reading* the Four Horsemen. Given the necessity for the reader to enter into the text as argued for in the previous section, I ask how this transference invites, and even anticipates, the process of adaptation. Adapting poetry from the textual page and into embodied performance is a practice that occurs whenever poetry is read aloud. However, in the case of the “Four Horsemen Project,” the extensive research for the performance and program notes explicitly frame it as an adaptation. Yet, as I will argue, there are multiple levels of this adaptation, all of which offer modes of re-reading the Four Horsemen as a reader who writes, or, rather as a reader who performs.
In February 2007, “The Four Horsemen Project” premiered at Factory Theatre, Toronto. Billed as “a multi-disciplinary extravaganza,” the collaborative performance was directed by Kate Alton (Crooked Figures Dance) and Ross Manson (Volcano Theatre) and performed by Jennifer Dahl, Graham McKelvie, Naoko Murakoshi, and Andrea Nann, whose task involved adapting the Four Horsemen and their poetry into spoken word, song, and dance. I read the “The Four Horsemen Project” as providing a multi-directional lens through which to see the relationship between reader and text due to its many layers of adaptation: first, how the performers adapt the poetry and personas of the Four Horsemen and, second, how the poems are adapted, or rather danced aloud. An additional layer relates to how the performance adapts the radical experimentalism that informs the Four Horsemen’s poetry. As the press-release for “The Four Horsemen Project” claims, “there is a unique and compelling nature to the material which, 30 years later, still feels avant-garde.” The press release for the Dublin performance goes even further to promise audiences “a stylistic collision of theatre, dance, sound and animation in tribute to Toronto’s legendary 1970s sound poets, The Four Horsemen. So far out...it's back in” (italics added). Thus, in as much as "The Four Horsemen Project" foregrounds adaptive translations among media (from text to speech and from speech to dance), the performance simultaneously functions as an adaptation of a specific poetry-event — a re-playing of a cultural moment in Canadian sound poetry yet a re-framing of it as new now.
The performance begins with a blurred TV screen projected onto the stage and out of this fuzziness, denoting our chaotic media age, appears footage of Richard Kostelanetz from the CBS television program “Poetry To See & Poetry To Hear” (1974). His close-up image proceeds to be deconstructed literally and figuratively over the course of “The Four Horsemen Project.” After this initial footage, his image freezes and then spirals down onto the stage and dancer Naoko Murakoshi stamps it out with her foot. This stamp is, literally, the first step of the choreography — a step that speaks to the very intersections of choreographic language and poetic language. Stamp. Arm stretched up to the ceiling, arching to her side. Hands encompass air that could be a belly. And fluttering fingertips. Stamp. Drum — a word appears, and the cycle of movements repeats along with the words, drum and a wheel, projected in the background. It is at this point that some of us recognize the dance as Nichol’s poem, “Cycle #22.”

Murakoshi’s gestures perform a silent reading of the poem before she accompanies these gestures with spoken words; but can we as audience members read the dance as poem
before she adds language to it? In her influential book on dance semiotics, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster explains that dance achieves signification by the audience learning codes (59). In further work that has been done on dance semiotics since Foster, Philip Auslander has called for a redefining of Foster’s categories of representation in order to avoid positing dance as an outlet for intuitive or unconscious feeling beyond verbal expression (“Embodiment: The Politics of Postmodern Dance”). Auslander suggests that there should also be a category that takes into account the embodiment of postmodern reflexivity in dance. In the case of “The Four Horsemen Project,” postmodern reflexivity pertains to the question of whether the dancers’ movements break apart boundaries of dance as much as the language ruptures preconceived notions of poetry. There are choreographic moments in “The Four Horsemen Project” that offer examples of dance as reflexive, specifically in the adaptation of "Allegro 108." In this sequence, the dancers suddenly join hands and break into steps that signify the four cygnets of Swan Lake — a moment of mimesis that objectifies dance as textual signification and recognizes the bricolage of steps, styles and historical contexts that compose the choreographic writing. But are audiences trained to read dance, let alone read the dance as an adaptation of a poem? Perhaps the point is not to recognize or read anything at first but, instead, to confront the structures that the body makes — a making that constitutes a form of poiesis. The choreography of this piece enacts this *making* because the arc drawn by Murakoshi’s arm resembles the sound of the word “wheel” and, thereby, anticipates the codes of language and movement that will unfold in the dancing of the poem. The audience becomes attuned to the chaotic space in which voice and body collapse into each other, just as the words of the poem collide and re-combine to form the
phrase, “drum anda wheel.”

It is important that we see “Cycle #22” visually projected onto the stage as part of Murakoshi’s dancing because this poem was one of Nichol’s concrete poems, even though he later performed it out loud. (See Appendix 3.) The poem appeared in his 1967 collection, Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer, which was a groundbreaking work of Canadian concrete poetry. The visual layering in “The Four Horsemen Project” emphasizes the extent to which the Four Horsemen were interested in collisions of sound and image and, therefore, it is important that the dancers are also speakers and singers of poetry. The visual also plays a role in identifying one of the dancers as representing Nichol: Murakoshi wears a sweater with an $H$ on it which signifies her as Nichol (as he often mentioned that this was his favourite letter), along with the fact that she is the one who performs many of his poems, such as the opening poem, “Cycle #22.”

The interweaving of documentary footage of the Four Horsemen resonates with co-director Alton’s admission that “I don’t know that anyone other than the poets themselves could truly do justice to this work” (program notes). Nevertheless, she claims that her “choreographic interpretations are all in the spirit of play, admiration and tribute.” Indeed, the playfulness of sound can be heard in “Allegro 108,” which was the poem that began the project, thus functioning as what Hutcheon calls the “adapted text” (xiii). As Alton and Manson explain in the program notes, when they first heard “Allegro 108” broadcast on CBC, they sat in silence, listening:

This was one of the most arresting, musical, and innovative arrangements of text for the human voice that we had ever heard: percussive, pitched speaking ingeniously arranged. The piece was so good, so radically different from anything we knew, that we both assumed it was: A) brand new; and B) created elsewhere. We waited to hear who these cutting edge artists were, and what country they were from. Stuart McLean came on at the end, “Well, that’s one you won’t find
“He’d been playing a thirty-year-old vinyl recording made by a group of Canadian experimental poets called the Four Horsemen. We’d never heard of them. We’re guessing that many of you haven’t either. So we’ve taken some steps.

(Program notes)

The assumptions that the recording was “brand new” and “created elsewhere” inform the educational element of “The Four Horsemen Project”: to educate the present-day generation about Canadian avant-garde sound poetry. Today, by clicking on a link for “Allegro 108” (http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/4-Horsemen/4-Horsemen_Allegro-108_Canadada.mp3), one can hear the percussive rhythms of poetry that moved Alton and Manson towards the medium of dance, but no such access existed at the time that they heard the piece on the radio. McLean’s comment about the unavailability of the recording offers another persuasive reason to create an adaptation of this poetry in order to bring it back into public soundscapes.

Both the promotion and performance of the piece stress the relevance of the poetry for contemporary audiences. Part of this involves educating audiences about the Four Horsemen as poets, but part of this also involves what we might call making it new, again — a task that raises the question of whether or not it is possible. In the chapter “Avant-Garde or Endgame?” Perloff explains how the “arrière-avant garde” (9) intersects with postmodern pastiche. She cites Frederic Jameson in terms of the applicability of pastiche to what he calls “a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible [and] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (qtd. in Perloff 9). Is this what “The Four Horsemen Project” constitutes: an audio-visual pastiche in which the dancers imitate "dead styles"? Yet, adaptation is where the project becomes new again — a repetition without imitation, or rather the “repetition with difference” (116) that Hutcheon categorizes as one of the
pleasures of adaptation. The audio and visual technology of “The Four Horsemen Project” responds to Perloff’s refashioning of the post-avant-garde debate in terms of not whether the avant-garde is still new in today’s digital age, but rather, as she explains, “how poetic or art discourse positions itself vis-à-vis these powerful new environments” (15). Working within this environment of digital media, Robert Stam offers a version of Perloff’s argument that phrases the question in terms of adaptive procedures: namely, “how, then, might the new technologies facilitate new approaches to adaptation and adaptation studies?” (13). As a result of being in dialogue with technological innovations in visual projections, film, and sound, “The Four Horsemen Project” enables its historically specific radical poetics to look ahead through new media. This relation to new media aptly reflects Nichol’s own experimentations with computer poems First Screening (1983-84).

Aside from pleasure or the technologies of adaptation, if the political aim of avant-garde art is to subvert art as an institution, then we must ask what this particular adaptation of the avant-garde seeks to subvert. Or does the performance only function within a contained space of the theatre? Costumes are worth noting in terms of the artistic packaging of the performance. Vibrantly signifying 1970s style, the costumes contribute to our viewing of the piece as an adaptation not only of the poetry but also of the Four Horsemen as poetic performers. However, packaging the 1970s for audience consumption speaks directly to the debate over the relationship between the post-avant-garde and art institutions. As Perloff notes, this process of adapting can mean adapting to market constraints, which she draws our attention to by referring to Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde that argues, “once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its
opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not
denounce the art market but adapts to it” (qtd. in Perloff 9). This adaptation need not
become nostalgia in terms of its participation in a market economy, although it does run the
risk of becoming nostalgic in its cultural capital as noted in the reviewers’ comments upon
the costuming. Nevertheless, this risk of nostalgia is not particular to our present-day
existence because, as Bürger states, “art has long since entered a post avant-gardiste phase
[and] we characterize that phase by saying that it revived the category of work and that the
procedures invented by the avant-garde with antiartistic intent are being used for artistic
ends” (57). Even though adaptation to the artistic marketplace is not the same as the
adaptation from poetry to performance, it does highlight the economic conditions through
which a performance such as “The Four Horsemen Project” is produced and whether the
avant-garde impetus of the adapted text translates into the terms of contemporary cultural
exchange. For “The Four Horsemen Project,” the process of making it new (again) depends
less upon the politics of the avant-garde than in the educating of audience about the
historical moment out of which the Four Horsemen emerged. The promotional material of
Volcano Theatre promises a degree of accessibility to this history: “Live, on-stage,
swirling animation and sonic hi-jinx make the poetry of Canada's 1970s avant-garde scene
leap off the page and onto the stage.” But when “the poetry of Canada’s 1970s
avant-garde” does leap off the page, we must remember these are particular bodies leaping
and that we are a present-day urban, multicultural Toronto audience watching and listening
to this leap.
IV. Writer = Reader = Performer

To me the implication, of course, is the fact that print is the frozen record of sound. That finally print is notation. So that when you have the notion of the book going out beyond you, by the mere fact that there’s a multiple, you have an echo effect going on, that it replicates itself and goes on in waves and waves and waves. You have the way it’s distributed, which is initially through friends, through bookstores, and through second-hand bookstores. Then it’s passed on and on and on — so that you have a continuous kind of echoing effect that goes on from the work and from the implications of the work. So that literally the book becomes your voice in another medium just travelling on in time.


The title of Miki’s essay collection “Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The *Martyrology*” implies that reading does not equal writing in the case of *The Martyrology*; however, as this chapter has argued, a return to the Four Horsemen’s poetry, particularly in light of the individual poems of Nichol and McCaffery, can reveal the acts of reading and writing happening at the same time. Moreover, they call for a third practice that occurs where they intersect: performing. What performance signifies is a medium off the page and yet in dialogue with it; thus, a performer can be anyone from a reader to an attentive listener to an adapter. Directors Alton and Manson were active listeners when they first heard “Allegro 108.” In fact, the project itself grew out of this disbelief that one could not hear — that this material could not be accessed, that these performers were not documented and re-read out loud. Thus, when “The Four Horsemen Project” concludes with the sound of Nichol’s voice reciting the words, “What is a pome is inside of your breathing, breathing, breathing, breathing,” it is important that Nichol’s recorded voice surrounds the bodies of the dancers, breathing, onstage.

Audiences signal their presence at the end of a performance with applause. When a
poet finishes reading, or when “The Four Horsemen Project” concludes, the audience applauds — one of these readings might be more theatrical than the other but they are both poetry readings nonetheless. In fact, performance and embodiment are what need to be brought into dialogue with current discussions of poetry readings. One such discussion appears in a recent issue of *Open Letter* based upon Charles Bernstein’s statement that “the poetry reading is a public tuning” (3). Editors Lily Cho and Melina Baum respond to Bernstein’s statement by engaging poets and critics in conversations about “their thoughts and questions on the role of poetry in public culture, the relationship between the performance of poetry to the written text, and the politics and poetics of the poetry reading as a public sphere” (7). (One of these conversations is with poet George Elliott Clarke whose poetic performances will be discussed in Chapter Three.) A public tuning depends upon poetics of community, which rephrases audience in terms of social praxis. To push the embodied politics of this community further, this chapter has argued that public readings engage with the embodied presence of both performers and audiences. One direction where this analysis could be taken is to consider how audience functions in Ron Mann’s *Poetry in Motion* (1982) and how the film performs a public tuning. In addition to footage of the Four Horsemen, Mann’s film features a number of poets reading out loud: Helen Adam, Miguel Algarin, Amiri Baraka, Ted Berrigan, Charles Bukowski, William Burroughs, John Cage, Jim Carroll, Jayne Cortez, Robert Creeley, Christopher Dewdney, Diane Di Prima, Kenward Elmslie, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, John Giordano, Michael McClure, Ted Milton, Michael Ondaatje, Ed Sanders, Gary Snyder, Tom Waits, and Anne Waldman. The film begins with Charles Bukowski speaking about reading poetry and poetry readings: “You see poetry itself contains as much energy as a Hollywood
industry, as much energy as stage play on Broadway. All it needs is practitioners who are alive to bring it alive […] The reason it’s not appreciated is that it hasn’t shown any guts, hasn’t shown any dance, hasn’t shown any moxie” (transcribed from *Poetry in Motion*).

In many ways, “The Four Horsemen Project” rises to Bukowski’s challenge to project energy into poetry readings. Watching this film alongside Mann’s documentary on Coach House Press shows how the artistry of book publication can enhance poetic performance. When Nichol says that “the book becomes your voice in another medium just travelling on in time” (transcribed from *Echoes Without Saying*), he articulates the transference of presence that this chapter seeks to uncover and, in doing so, reiterates the function of the book as a recording of sound.

For Nichol, the poetry reading as event functions as a formative moment in his development as a poet. He writes of hearing bissett perform in Vancouver in 1963 and what effect this reading had on his writing: “i had been ‘reading’ about sound poetry but i’d never had a chance to hear any and when *Blew Ointment* appeared with bill’s marvellously innovative texts, texts that violated everything i had been told was a ‘rule’ of poetry, i figured that his reading of these texts had to be something to hear” (qtd. in Miki 417). This public reading began as a silent, personal reading of bissett’s works when reading the first issue of *Blew Ointment* (particularly the poem “now they found th wagon cat / in human body”) and encountering language that “could speak for itself, had its own qualities separate from whatever the meaning i might wish to will into it” (qtd. in Miki 417). Nichol also responds to bissett’s poetry with the realization that “this was a Canadian i was excited about” (418). The Canadian nationalism in his reaction is not unlike Manson and Alton’s reaction to hearing the Four Horsemen played on CBC radio. After re-telling the story of
first hearing “Allegro 108” to interviewer Richard Ouzounian, Manson admits, “I'm embarrassed to tell you that we were convinced it couldn't have been Canadian. We thought it had to be the work of some totally cool contemporary Europeans.” As if echoing Nichol’s emphasis on the newness and Canadianness of bissett’s 1963 reading, Manson’s reaction suggests that the act of rediscovering a sound clip of Canadian avant-garde can make the listener believe, for a moment, that it is avant-garde again (again?).

Significantly, all of these moments of listening led to actions — to writings and readings that are performances. Like the interfaces among eye, ear, and mouth that Nichol finds in poetic notation, these moments of listening produce meaning out of the interaction between performer and audience, thereby enacting the political import of the public tuning that Bernstein calls for. It is this interaction that underlines co-director Manson’s thoughts on the Four Horsemen as poets and why their works need to be re-read and re-performed: “they were so profoundly irreverent, which was part of that era, but it also handed poetry back to the masses, to the people […] I think that’s a tremendous gift, and one that we sort of lost sight of” (34). Handing poetry back to the masses is an ideal that depends upon the very individual acts of performance: climbing inside the poem, standing outside the poem, make the poem move, speak, throw, and sweat while, simultaneously, handing it over to the audience. As Nichol reminds us, “What is a pome is inside of your breathing, breathing, breathing, breathing,” the poem is in your breathing — poet, dancer, and listener — as we all are performing in this act of adaptation.
Endnotes

1. The metaphor of birth coincides with Barthes’s phraseology of birth and death, but also I refer to poetry being born from the body because of the ways in which this metaphor is deployed in critical discussions about Nichol’s poetry, as in the following exchange between Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel:

Kroetsch: Isn’t the death of the long poem the fictive moment when we were permitted to write the poem?

Mandel: Yeah. That’s another matter that I didn’t discuss which I would have liked to, obviously, and that’s the moment of ‘election’ or ‘call,’ which I think occurs at that ‘fictive moment’ when we are permitted to write the long poem. That obviously is the birth of the poet — the death of the long poem is the birth of the poet. He will continue to write.

Kroetsch: Nothing is as extreme as the Martyrology since he has to work out of that. And continue the moment.

Mandel: That’s right. Somewhere there was a marvellous moment when bpNichol was born and began to write immediately. [Laughter.]

Kroetsch: Began writing and was born. [Laughter.]

Mandel: That’s right. (“The Death of the Long Poem” 24)

This exchange followed Mandel’s keynote address entitled “The Death of the Long Poem” at the Long-liners Conference (York University Toronto, May 29- June 1 1984). I want to highlight the slippage between “born and began to write” and “[b]egan writing and was born” because it parallels the simultaneous coming-into-being of a poem and the body writing it.

2. When spoken aloud, pome sounds like poem, but the spelling indicates its difference. Furthermore, Nichol's recitation of "Pome Poem" provides an evocative audio performance of this necessity for the poem to resonate in the breath: http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/bpNichol/Ear-Rational-1982/bpNichol_02_Pome-Poem_1972.mp3

3. It is significant that Nichol employs the doubled quotation mark in the spelling of ”pata which differentiates it from 'pata. As Christian Bök explains in 'Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science (2002), “[Alfred] Jarry suggests through ’pataphysics that reality does not exist, except as the interpretive projection of a phenomenal perspective—which is to say reality is never as it is, but rather as if it is” (8); Bök summarizes Jarry to suggest that ’pataphysics is “the science of imaginary solutions and arbitrary exceptions” (8). Bök traces ’pataphysics through the Italian Futurists, French Oulipians, and to McCaffery and Nichol, who he calls “the Canadian Jarryites” (45), revealing the importance of the open quotation mark: “Canadian ”Pataphysics add another vestigial apostrophe to its name in order to mark not only the excess silence imposed upon Canadians by a European avant-garde but also the ironic speech proposed by Canadians against a European avant-garde” (83).

5. Recounted in conversation with Ross Manson (30 March 2009).


7. In the interview with Bayard, Nichol utters another line that becomes a defining phrase in his poetics: “syntax equals body structure” (176), which becomes the title of a later interview with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering. We can place this phrase alongside “Evening Ritual” because at first glance this poem appears to lack a speaking I of a body and, yet, the body of the poem sits on the page with the word “pome” balancing it in the centre. Even though the final line claims to have dissociated itself from the writer altogether — “pome sat down to write you this” — which reveals a writer who has carefully arranged these words on the page, almost as an acrostic, anticipating a reader.

8. A further possibility is to see this page as a response to Wittgenstein's proposition 284: “And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain” — a proposition that asks us what it means to be alive as much as it asks how language engages with this lived experience, this pain. However, I would like to place this notion of the i-eye in dialogue with a concept that Wittgenstein proposes in the *Philosophical Investigations* themselves: and that is the concept of seeing-as. Seeing-as is the phenomenon of recognizing something as a representation; Wittgenstein's example of a "picture-face" highlights how we do not only recognize the image as a face, but also that we see it as a picture of a face. Another interpretation of the absent i is to hear it echoing Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in which he makes the claims that there is no unique I: "[t]he thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing" [T #5.63]).

9. Since its premiere in Toronto, “The Four Horsemen Project” has travelled to Ottawa (2007), Victoria (2008), Vancouver at PuSh International Performing Arts Festival (2008), the Dublin Fringe Festival (2008), and Berlin’s Poesiefestival (2009), winning many awards along the way including four Dora Mavor Moore Awards. Interestingly, the press release for the Vancouver show defines the performance in terms of its site-specific relevance: “Its appearance at PuSh marks its debut in bp Nichol’s hometown.”

10. Dancer Andrea Nann has collaborated with Michael Ondaatje in the 2003 performances of “Cato and Alice,” a dance adaptation of *In the Skin of a Lion*, and “Meditation #5 – On Loss and Desire,” a dance adaptation inspired by the first scene of *Anil’s Ghost*. See Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of these adaptations.
Chapter Two

A Poem and its Echo:
Dance Adaptations of Michael Ondaatje’s Writing

The curve of the bridge
against her foot

her thin shadow falling
through slats
into water movement

A woman and her echo

The kessara blossom she kicks
in passing that flowers

You stare into the mirror
that held her painted eye

— From “The Nine Sentiments (Historical Illustrations on Rock and Book and Leaf)”

On an episode of “The Signal” (CBC Radio), Laurie Brown interviews Michael Ondaatje about the influence of music on his writing and plays a selection of songs chosen by Ondaatje, one of which is the song that inspired the writing of Divisadero: “Um Favor.” Brown plays a recording of this song as sung by Gal Costa, which allows listeners to hear what would otherwise only be heard in the narrative of the novel and, since the recording is of a live performance, listeners hear whistles from the audience in response. In this interview with Brown, Ondaatje notes that he intentionally did not translate the words, leaving it up to the narrative to translate its sound. In the “Acknowledgements” to Divisadero, Ondaatje refers to the specific moment in the text in which this song is described: “‘Um favor’ (partially described on page 73) by Lupicinio Rodrigues in essence
began this book” (276). The fact that this song began the creative process of writing the novel exemplifies the very call-and-response exchange between text and music that I argue informs both Ondaatje’s depiction of the body as performing and adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing. In many ways, the telling of how the novel unfolds from this song parallels the scene in which Rafael describes “Um Favor” to Anna, which I quote at length here because many of the phrases in this writing of music inform my argument in this chapter:

He told her there was a song he no longer performed that had to do with all of that. It was about a woman who had risen from their bed in the middle of the night and left him. He would hear evidence of her in villages in the north, but she would be gone by the time the rumour of her presence reached him. A song of endless searching, sung by this man who until then had seldom revealed himself. His tough fingers would tug the heart out of his guitar. He’d sing this song to those who had grown up with his music over the years, who were familiar with his skill at avoiding the limelight. He knew his reputation for shyness and guile, but now he conceded his scarred self to his friends. ‘*If any of you on your journey see her — shout to me, whistle. . .’* he sang, and it became a habit for audiences to shout and whistle in response to those lines. There was nowhere for him to hide in such a song that had all of its doors and windows open, so that he could walk out of it artlessly, the antiphonal responses blending with him as though he were no longer on the stage. (Italics in original, 73)

This paragraph articulates what this song *sounds like* along with what it means to stand next to its sound, to listen and respond to it — and, finally, for its singer to walk away from its sound with “antiphonal responses” of the audience echoing in him. Longing for his beloved, the singer must console himself with “the rumour of her presence.” The memory is a discursive trace, a phrasing which resonates with the practices of documentation and recording as re-presentation discussed in Chapter One. As Barthes declares, “the image is re-presentation” and, therefore, “the image is in a certain manner the limit of meaning” (“Rhetoric of the Image” italics in original, 32). With this present-ness in mind, “antiphonal responses” and “rumour of her presence” are two phrases that inform my approach to adaptation in this chapter. Given that *Divisadero* is one among many examples
of Ondaatje’s writings that speaks through music, it is no coincidence that many have been adapted to music, dance, film, and theatre.¹ In this chapter, I argue that the performative nature of his writing presents a unique challenge to adapters because it calls for them to take into account this hybrid state of writing as music, writing as dance, when adapting words into another medium.

As discussed in the Introduction, adaptation is a re-telling that, at the same time, offers itself as a new work of art. Given that there are multiple dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing, how do these pieces compare in terms of their approaches and how do we recognize these pieces as adaptations? What these questions gesture towards are more general interdisciplinary questions of how to write dance and how to dance writing. Returning to these two questions throughout this chapter, I pursue my analysis of Ondaatje and adaptations of his poetry through a consideration of specific texts and adaptive media: firstly, I outline theoretical issues pertaining to dance adaptations (which builds upon notions of mediation in live performance as discussed in Chapter One); secondly, I turn to Elimination Dance as a poem that thematizes dance and provides a lens through which to discuss textual adaptation, as well as a filmic adaptation that includes dance; thirdly, I undertake close-readings of four specific dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing and situate them within embodied semiotics of dance criticism. These four films are part of the series Shadow Pleasures directed by former National Ballet principal dancer Veronica Tennant. Pleasure, found in the title of these films, will be important to the chapter’s attention to translating embodiment among media. I situate this translation in the context of Barthes’s The Pleasure of The Text because it supplies a language of unspeakable and speakable textual eros that underlines Ondaatje’s writing as well as the adaptations of it.
Shadow Pleasures then becomes an aptly titled piece through which to consider the limits of representing the body, whether in a text or an adaptation of it. Either as shadows of inscription or inscriptions as shadows of the body, this interaction between adapted text and adaptation asks the reader to imagine the production of these shadows, as if they were spectral traces left behind after a performance has ended, leaving only a rumour of her presence.

I. Writing Dance

Dance is language, but what does it mean to speak through dance? This section addresses this question by outlining critical debates among dance and literary theorists in regards to what makes dance recognizable as dance, or rather how it speaks differently from written languages. Dance theorist Anne Cooper-Albright argues that dance speaks by noting that “contrary to popular opinion, dance is not a ‘silent’ art form” (167). (Albright refers to Canadian choreographer and dancer Marie Chouinard as an example of a dancer self-reflexively integrating embodied sound into dance.) Yet, in addition to the question of how dance differs from or resembles spoken or written languages, how does dance differ from everyday embodied actions? These questions are central to this chapter because they problematize the metaphors of music and dance that often appear in poetic language. Poet Robert Bringhurst defines poetry as “the musical density of being” (Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music, 10), but how does the musical qualifier shape this definition? Moving from music to dance, another essay of Bringhurst’s makes a similar ontological statement that replaces “musical density” with dance: “what poetry knows, or what it strives to know, is the dancing at the heart of being” (52). Here, dancing is what compels poetry to continue
knowing. In other words, a desire to know this “dancing at the heart of being” is what defines this poetic epistemology, but can we as readers know what “dancing at the heart of being” refers to? (See Chapter Four for a discussion of dance in Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*.) Is it a metaphor for the body and, if so, does dancing itself stand for unknowable yet compelling motions of the body in daily life? What this chapter seeks to uncover is how dance as metaphor provides a useful poetic tool and how dance itself moves beyond metaphor in a performance of a literary work. Dance reviews can describe dance performances just as dance can be described in a literary text. (The genre of the dance review has been formalized by Canadian dance critic Kaija Pepper in her workshops on reviewing dance [“Writing Dance” at The Dance Centre, Vancouver, 2005].) In the introductory comments to a section on reviewing dance in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, Alexandra Carter outlines key issues in dance criticism regarding the writing of dance reviews: namely, how to discuss cultural difference as a dance spectator and how to balance descriptive and theoretical discourses (Siegel; Copeland). But dance reviews are only one way of writing about dance, just as a literary review is only one way of writing about text.³ Although a lack of documentation on performances can force critics to rely on reviews — which function as textual modes of rumour, recalling a *rumour of her presence* — the blurring of writing and dancing that I engage with in this chapter exists outside the genre of reviewing. In this move from the mimetic to diegetic, I ask: what is a writing that is dancing? As a question implicated in arguments for writing as a performance, whether in terms of performative language or a textuality of the body, the analyses in this chapter will be informed by this question of what it means to posit a dancing that is writing.
A mimetic relationship is suggested when we think of a performance that dances a poem, narrative or event. Yet, throughout twentieth century theory, both critics and dancers have re-adjusted their approach to this relationship in order to take into account deconstructive dance techniques that refuse to simply mirror the written word. Dance theorist Mark Franko deconstructs what dance does when it performs written word. Using the example of Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, he posits a rethinking of how mimesis functions by suggesting that it is “a doing, a physical participation” (210), which re-positions the relation between dance and language “not as reproduction (copy) but as the capacity to perform anew” (211). When we put this notion of newness in dialogue with adaptation theory, we can envision a dance performance that does what Hutcheon argues as characterizing adaptation: “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7). In dance, there are cues that gesture back to what Hutcheon calls the “adapted text” (a term that refers to the text that is adapted without falling into a rhetoric of origin); yet, as Franko suggests, the adaptation itself is a new work with its own semiotic codes. When we read this dance, it is different than the reading of the “adapted text”; nevertheless, as Hutcheon notes in terms of the role of audiences, they must attend to the multi-layered voices, or rather *rumours* to apply a word that Ondaatje uses, in order to recognize what is being adapted: “To interpret an adaptation as an adaptation is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a ‘work,’ but a ‘text,’ a plural ‘stereophony of echoes, citations, references […] Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double or multilaminated works that they can be theorized as adaptations” (6). Building upon Hutcheon’s focus on audience, this chapter proposes that the discussed examples of reading dance challenge audiences to engage with the adapted text and
adaptation at the same time; this simultaneity results in a set of reading practices that call for multi-directional attention. (Listening to this multi-directionality recalls the Introduction’s discussion of experimentations in radio and other media; see Gould and McLuhan.) We read a dance adaptation through the adapted text and vice versa; thus, reciprocal reading practices emerge as audiences watch and listen to multiple and endless adaptations. But first, there is the question of the adaptation itself: specifically, dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing that have not yet received scholarly attention as critical re-interpretations of his work. A film adaptation of Ondaatje’s novel, *The English Patient*, is perhaps one of the best-known adaptations of a literary work; yet, there are many adaptations of Ondaatje’s poetry, many of which combine film, music, and dance. As a poem that writes about dance and as an adaptation that illustrates it, *Elimination Dance* provides an appropriate starting point for this chapter. Dance is the means through which the poem unfolds and the mechanism through which the event functions is elimination, bringing to mind elimination dance events in popular culture. But, if we think of how Ondaatje constructs this event so that it is both a dance event and a poetry event, then we must ask the question of whether the dancers are readers. And, if so, are readers eliminated? (The implications of aligning readers with dancers are discussed later in this section in terms of interpellation.) In starting with this poem, I want to ask how the language of dance enters into poetic language and, conversely, how poetic language enters into dance.

In 1978, Ondaatje published *Elimination Dance* as a pamphlet, prefaced with an epigraph by John Newlove: “Nothing I’d read prepared me for a body this unfair” (paired with a quotation from Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Breathless* that corresponds to Newlove’s in
its intent to prepare an audience for the poem: “squealers squeal, burglars burgle, killers kill, lovers love”). Elimination Dance re-appears halfway through The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems (1989) with the added bracketed subtitle “an intermission.” In a note on the text, Ondaatje explains how this “rogue-troubadour poem” is constantly in a state of being edited: “a few lines get dropped and a few get added every year” (196). Lines have been eliminated, such as “Those who feel like their lives have been — like bread — put through the toaster twice” and “All those in the front row,” which appear only in the first edition. (The latter example implies that the poem’s imagined setting shifts from a poetry reading to a less-defined event in later editions because of the editing out of this mention of an audience sitting in rows.) In commenting on the poem, Ondaatje further reveals how he imagines the caller who presides over the event: “[the poem] is based on those horrendous dances where a caller decides, seemingly randomly, who should not be allowed to continue dancing. So the piece (I still hesitate to call it a poem) is in the voice of a mad, and totally beyond-the-pale, announcer” (The Cinnamon Peeler 196). Ondaatje’s hesitation “to call it a poem” speaks to the blurring of genre, not to mention the blurring of poem and event. The poem also reads as a screenplay due to its film adaptation; thus, despite its placement amid a collection of poems, “Elimination Dance” could be read as a poetic counterpart to Ondaatje’s screenplay, “The William Dawe Badlands Expedition 1916.” (Ondaatje wrote this adaptation of Robert Kroetsch’s novel, Badlands in 1977 and the screenplay was published in Descant’s 1983 issue devoted to Ondaatje’s work).4 Whereas the latter is written in a form that resembles a dramatic screenplay (with characters and dialogue), “Elimination Dance” does not appear to be a screenplay in its textual form; however, I draw this comparison because it reveals the extent to which the performative quality of
“Elimination Dance” is in the poem itself and, therefore, makes it a textual work that desires to perform off the page, just as a libretto desires to be sung.

In 1991, Brick Books published an illustrated and bilingual edition of *Elimination Dance / La danse éliminatoire* complete with four maps, study questions and pages upon which readers can inscribe their own “Further Eliminations” (51). Each line of the poem is translated into French, which brings to mind the multi-lingual translations performed by various readers reading the poem recorded on *Previous Canoes* (Coach House, 1989). On this audio recording, Ondaatje is accompanied by Tang Chao, Rafael Goldchain, Kathy Lowinger, Lola Lemire Tostevin, and Enrico Vicentini, whose voices intersperse multi-lingual translations of various lines. (The soundscape of this recording also includes tango music and concludes with a howling dog, perhaps the dog for whom, as in the poem, someone has testified as a character witness in court.) Even though the Brick bilingual publication does not have the same effect as this multi-vocal and multi-lingual recording, it retains the practice of translation as an integral component. The choice for a bilingual edition might be a playful nod to the Canadian-ness of the text, similar to Ondaatje’s covert mention of The Four Horsemen amid *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*; nevertheless, translation performs a more serious political statement in appearing within a text that includes, as one of the maps, a map of places where “Brian Mulroney has been burned in effigy or pissed on from a great height during a motorcade” (46). On the back cover, the political side of a seemingly playful text becomes further apparent in a comment that is written only in French, without translation even though framed in English: “‘Quintessence éphémère,’ said John Shannon, two editions ago, ‘Ces épigrames rares et pleines d’esprit sont du même ordre que les commentaires de Pierre Trudeau sur le mariage ou les paroles
d’Idi Amin sur la justice” (back cover). Instead of offering a translation or explanation of this claim, the back cover concludes by offering the book to “those crossing the globe in search of pleasure or political upheaval.” The disjunction between pleasure and political upheaval defines not only the text but also the way in which it is then visually translated into film since editing allows for visual juxtapositions of mass marriage and mass revolution.

In the “handy traveller’s edition” (back cover), illustrations are interspersed within the poem. Although they mimic a correspondence to the eliminations, they pre-date the poem since, as Ondaatje notes, they are found illustrations. In “Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes begins his analysis of a Panzani advertisement by stating that “[t]he image immediately yields a first message whose substance is linguistic; its supports are the caption, which is marginal, and the labels, these being inserted into the natural disposition of the scene, ‘en abyme’” (33). Like the captions in this advertisement, the lines in Elimination Dance appear to correspond to the images; yet, this naturalness is constructed. Thus, the (mis)matched illustrations show how marginalia can perform an adaptive function. Marginalia in other texts of Ondaatje’s reveal a continued interest in dialogues as palimpsests: for instance, in The English Patient, the drawings and writings inserted into Almásy’s copy of Herodotus’s The Histories tell of the multiple narratives written alongside this ancient text that intersect with a reader’s reading of it. Although these examples of marginalia are described and not shown, we do see marginalia in the illustration of a dove-cot drawn by Hana in a letter to Clara; she draws the dove-cot in order to explain the significance of the place where Patrick died: “The horizontal line one-third of the way down was called the rat ledge — to stop rats running up the brick, so the doves
would be safe. Safe as a dove-cot. A sacred place [...] Patrick died in a comforting place” (293), an explanation of the word itself accompanied by a drawing. And, although we know that Hana’s hand drew neither the re-printed image we look at in the text nor the original drawing sketched by the author, there is an effect of authenticity in this visual image. Covers of Ondaatje’s collections of poems perform a similar interaction between the visual and textual. As Sam Solecki notes, “Ondaatje’s long association with Coach House Press put him in touch with poets at the cutting edge of contemporary poetics as well as with book designers such as Stan Bevington who made him attentive to every aspect of book production” (55). In the production stages of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, writers involved with Coach House Press helped with the visual design of the book, with bp Nichol suggesting that Ondaatje leave the first photograph blank (Afterword). In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, photographs are adapted in various contexts that render them en abyme, as if they were always already part of the story. Like Carol Shields’s placement of what appear to be Daisy’s family photos midway through *The Stone Diaries*, Ondaatje creates an effect of the photos as corresponding to the events described, or as what Barthes labels as a having-been-there effect conveyed by the photograph (*Rhetoric of the Image*). Yet the effectiveness of visual images in Ondaatje’s postmodern pastiches relies upon the reader recognizing that these photos are not natural. In the case of *Running in the Family*, Hutcheon phrases this textual construction in terms of the reader’s recognition of how the author has arranged his materials:

Ondaatje is not only the recorder, collector, organizer, and narrator of the past, but also the subject of it, both as an Ondaatje whose tale will be told and as the writer who will tell it [...] We are always being made aware of his physical presence as he writes: “The air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face, and this paper” (306). He reads and copies information about his family from stone inscriptions, church ledgers, old news clippings. As he soon realizes: “I witnessed
As the writer realizes that he has “witnessed everything,” we as readers realize that we have witnessed his re-construction of this everything. For Hutcheon, this self-reflexive rendering of history is what makes the book postmodern; moreover, I want to emphasize that Hutcheon’s observations lead to her claim that *Running in the Family* is a textual performance: “Performance is very much a part of the content of this book” (306). Indeed, we watch the performance of this book unfolding, but part of this performance is the recognition that one of the performers, the writer, leaves only a trace of his presence, as shown through Hutcheon’s phrase “always being made aware of his physical presence as he writes.” The fact that we are made aware of this presence as he writes depicts a complex scene of the author distancing himself from his audience even while materializing in another form on the page. Thus, part of the role of the audience is to recognize that what they read is this trace of presence. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon phrases this presence in a language of haunting when she calls adaptations “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6). In the opening to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje foregrounds this disagreement between word and image by placing these words beneath a blank frame: “I send you a picture of Billy” (1). In noticing this discord between image and description, the reader differentiates in an extreme version of what Barthes calls the “having-been-there” and the “being-there” (45) of the object viewed; in this case, the photograph is an empty frame that signifies a not-being-there at all. A photograph on the front cover of the 2008 Vintage edition of the poem contains the vague descriptor: “Mexican actors portraying Pat Garrett and William Bonney, c. 1930.” This cover shows a visual rendering of Garrett and Billy and yet we are
still confronted with the empty frame on the first page of the text. Also, the photograph captures an early moment in theatrical adaptations of the Billy the Kid myth. Three years after Ondaatje’s poem, Sam Peckinpah directed the film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, featuring Bob Dylan in both the film and the soundtrack. Contributing to the palimpsest of the poem itself, Ondaatje includes the tale “Billy the Kid and the Princess” at the end of the poem, which tells the story of the Princesa de Guelva choosing Billy the Kid to reign with her against the wishes of Toro Cuneo. Like linguistic translation, cultural translation is another way in which literature is adapted. (See Chapter Three on cultural translation in music and Chapter Four on cultural translation in myth.) In addition to the cover photograph reifying a cultural translation of the myth, the book itself represents a translation of an American myth of Billy the Kid into Canadian culture. Both Ondaatje and Nichol chose to adapt this myth, following a history of numerous artistic adaptations such as the poem by Jack Spicer, the ballet choreographed to Aaron Copeland’s score, the 1930 film *Billy the Kid*, and the 1958 film *The Left Handed Gun* among others. In the Afterword to the 2008 Vintage edition, Ondaatje tells how the book “began as a small flurry of poems supposedly by the outlaw Billy the Kid. I’d had an obsession with westerns since I was eight or nine—for even in Sri Lanka the myth of the American West had filtered down furtively among children in Colombo” (113). Citing sources such as Walter Noble Burns’s *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje explains that the book developed as much out of historical sources as from the desire to channel a range of voices in a new style of writing: “What if I tried to write a book that allowed all these angles and subjects and emotions, but they all came from one person?” (114). The person in mind is Billy the Kid, but this one person could also be construed as the writer. Aligned with this notion of Billy the Kid as
involving a re-invention on behalf of mythic figure and writer, George Elliott Clarke’s article, “Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth” reads the blank photograph through the creation and dissolution of mythology: “Although Garrett has managed to box the Kid in a grave (a photographic frame), he is still free to enter and leave history as he wishes because of his protean immortality as a mythic character: ‘His legend a jungle sleep’” — a reading that combines notions of adapting myths with ones of re-presenting them.

Like the blank photograph of Billy, the discord between the image and the text in the Tostevin edition of Elimination Dance visualizes what Canadian director Bruce McDonald brings to the forefront in his film adaptation, a point that I will explain momentarily in the context of audience reaction. In conversation with David O’Meara, Ondaatje admits that “Elimination Dance, which was more like a joke than anything else — actually taught me a lot about humour and pacing and timing” (qtd. in Solecki 192). As well as being a humour exercise, the poem has the capacity to shock, as suggested by the “Study Questions” in the Tostevin edition: “Does the author’s fuck-you tone contribute to the theme of the poem as a whole?” (49). The idea of inciting emotions in the reader brings to mind another poem of Ondaatje’s, “The Nine Sentiments” (Handwriting), which I would suggest can be read alongside “Elimination Dance” because this poem investigates the interplay between writer and audience implicit in the notion of rasas. In Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje (2003), Solecki refers to Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyakara’s ‘Treasury’ by Daniel H.H. Ingalls for an explanation of how this poem functions through a conjuring of emotions in the audience through specific moods or tastes. Like the audience of real and imagined readers in “The Nine Sentiments” who are intended
to respond to the mood invoked, readers of “Elimination Dance” hear the eliminations read aloud. When listening to the audio recording of this poem on Previous Canoes (1989), we need not turn off the recording even if we are eliminated. There is a pleasure in the listening that holds our attention. Thus, when the speaker calls out to an imagined reader, we can assume that the reader is not supposed to identify with the interpellative call. As opposed to Louis Althusser’s example of the passer-by hailed on the street by a policeman that interpellates him/her into the ideological state apparatus, we as readers are not meant to be hailed into the apparatus of this poem. (While the politics of this example do not provide a direct parallel, there are political overtones, accentuated in the film, that do suggest a revolutionary impulse to the poem amid its frivolity.) The eliminations are written with an element of fantasy suggesting that, at least for the most part, we are not meant to identify with a person who has entered “a spa town disguised as Ford Madox Ford” (38). Yet, there are eliminations that are more likely to apply to some readers (“All actors and poets who spit into the first row while they perform” [14]), or readers who might recognize themselves as the source of the elimination since each elimination reads as a story of a specific person or an imagined person: “Any university professor who has danced with a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Jean Genet” (23). For certain readers, there is a degree of interpellation as one might recognize an idea from “real life”; yet, this process occurs every time an author writes a work that bridges the “real” and the “fictional” and, in fact, the blurring of these “realities” in this poem highlights the degree to which audiences strive to find recognition, a mirroring of the real in the fictional, in whatever work they read.⁵ Appropriately, Althusser summarizes his propositions that ideology has a material existence and interpellates subjects into its apparatus by using a specular analogy: “i.e. a
mirror-structure and *doubly* speculary: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology, and ensures its functioning” (italics in original, 322). Mirroring, in terms of the “real” and the “imagined,” could be examined through Lacan’s famous treatment of this reflection; similarly, the “real” could be critiqued to the extent that it produces what Beaudrillard calls “simulacra” — the real as hyper-real, which is the case in the hyper-real scenario of an elimination dance event. While a reading of desire in this chapter could be reframed through this Lacanian lens of desire or through Beaudrillard’s simulacra, I only allude to these theoretical directions here because I want to emphasize the underlying commonalities: visual recognition of subject formation and the *real* as a performative event. The visual will recur later in the chapter in terms of how performances can construct desire as a pleasurable act of looking on the part of the reader and/or audience.

In reading *Elimination Dance* through the question of whether or not the reader is intended to be eliminated, I suggest that the poem plays with our expectations not only for the reasons already mentioned but also because recognition involves *elimination*, not inclusion. As demonstrated in McDonald’s 1998 short film of the poem, those who are eliminated are relegated to the sidelines, often with an expression of embarrassment as they are forced to leave the social space of action and become a passive audience. When we read the poem, we do not have to stop dancing; we continue reading, waiting to be eliminated yet knowing that, even if we are, we are not forced to stop reading. Nobody will know if we keep on dancing — but the final elimination raises the question of whether anyone can escape elimination from this dance: “Anyone with pain.” In confronting this final elimination, we as readers must identify with it; yet, despite this statement prompting identification on behalf of the entire audience, not everyone is necessarily eliminated.
Thus, what I want to pursue are the implications of *not* identifying or resisting identification with this final elimination, which is what happens in the film version of the poem when the main characters continue dancing. I want to suggest that this resistance highlights the role of responsiveness in audiences as part of the adaptive process. As Hutcheon claims, “adaptation as adaptation is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*” (italics in original 21); yet, what if the receiver is not acquainted with the adapted text? What we might call a failure of adaptation occurs here, not because the adaptation is unsuccessful but rather because the audience fails to recognize it as such. I mention this point here because it underlines the importance of audience attention, (mis)recognition, and responsiveness gestured towards in the Ondaatje poem; as Hutcheon notes, “we need memory in order to experience difference as well as similarity” (22) and recalling this memory, perhaps even of pain, can then lead to a response.

In the film, we see the identity of this otherwise anonymous caller, Michael Turner, who audiences might recognize as the author of *Hard Core Logo* which was adapted into film by McDonald. Turner authoritatively reads eliminations from cards that flip over with a punctuating snap, reigning over the dancers gathered in a hall and accompanied by a gramophone (later a full band) playing “String of Pearls,” “Moonlight Serenade,” and “Georgia on My Mind.” This scene is interspersed with footage of political upheaval, mass marriages and world-wide dance marathons, along with critical remarks by two men credited only with their last names as “Marchand & Metcalfe” (most likely a reference to Philip Marchand and John Metcalfe). During the final credits, these commentators offer an explanatory dénouement that, like the Billy the Kid empty-frame photograph, does not
exactly correspond to the events shown in the film:

“Bob, this is remarkable. I-I-I cannot believe this standoff.”
“A conclusion that is reminiscent of the ’42 Helsinki Elimination, which, of course, was the precursor to many riots in the streets.”
“Yes, well, I don’t think that this particular caller has any reference, I mean, I don’t think he shares anything with that, that event […] clearly you can see that perhaps this was an off-night for him.”
“No, no, no on the contrary. I think this showed a tact of diplomacy”
“Oh tact”
“…of diplomacy. I mean he was underpinned by a menacing, he…”
[Dialogue fades out to the sound of a photograph flash.]

(Transcribed from the film)

These remarks are spoken over stock footage of crowds overturning a bus and a mass marriage ceremony, which widen the scope of the event as well as implying that, although this event seems subdued, it has the potential to be one of hysteria. Interestingly, the notion of the event itself as inciting revolution relates to the point that I would like to make in terms of the portrayal of audience response. In the film, we watch the dancers react as they recognize themselves in an announced elimination. When the caller arrives at the final elimination, there are only a few couples left. One couple, actors Don McKellar and Tracy Wright, dance as if unaware of the final call: “Anyone with pain.” Wright glances at the caller briefly but then returns her attention to McKellar. Other couples fall to the sidelines and eventually everyone watches McKellar and Wright, who continue dancing without a response to the call, “Anyone with pain.” In disbelief, the caller repeats in a questioning tone, “Anyone with pain, anyone with pain?” (transcribed from the film), but McKellar and Wright refuse to be eliminated. What does it mean to not respond to pain? Or to be non-responsive to pain, or at least unable to recognize themselves as suffering even if they are?

In this scene, I would suggest that their lack of responsiveness is precisely what has
caused them to be immune to pain, therefore being unable to identify as the interpellative
call, “Anyone with pain.” The lack of response creates an obstacle to all dancers being
eliminated; furthermore, I would contend that this makes a greater point about the
challenge that a non-responsive audience poses for an adaptation to realize its goal. An
adaptation relies upon an audience recognizing it as such (recognizing “adaptation as
adaptation” to use Hutcheon’s words) and the dialogue between adapted text and
adaptation depends upon audience participation. But, this dialogue is silenced when the
audience becomes non-responsive, not recognizing the words spoken to it. In the case of
Elimination Dance as film, a lack of responsiveness results in the end of the poem, the
caller is silenced, and the dancers continue dancing while the sounds of sirens mix with the
“Georgia on My Mind” as a spotlight lingers on these two dancers without pain. Thus,
while the written poem Elimination Dance offers a final elimination that speaks to all
readers: “Anyone with pain” the film asks what might happen if two people are immune to
pain— a theoretical question that resonates with questions of to what extent either pleasure
or pain are re-presentable in words (Adorno; Scarry). In The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes
writes that, while textual pleasure can be represented, textual bliss cannot; as a result, the
untenable text of bliss is also one of “a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the
point of certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural psychological
assumptions […] brings to a crisis his relation with language” (14). When we consider this
opposition of pleasure and pain on either edge of a text, or as Barthes would say “the place
where the death of language is glimpsed” (6), then we can interpret Ondaatje’s poem as
redefining pain in terms of a lack of textual responsiveness.

In Elimination Dance, the poem performs through dance; moreover, aside from
dance being the mechanism for this performance, there are adaptations of this dance in text and in film, both of which attempt to re-present the poem as event. Thus, this poem offers a model for analysis for the subsequent examples of performance discussed in this chapter. What I have proposed here is that the interaction among texts can be thought of as a dialogue, and, therefore, I apply a word of Ondaatje’s that perhaps best describes this call and response among texts: antiphonal. In *The English Patient*, the word *antiphonal* appears during a scene in which Hana’s playing of the piano coincides with Kip’s arrival at the Villa:

[…]

the music antiphonal, the press of chords, *When I take my sugar to tea* …
Do you know the words?
There was no movement from them. She broke free of the chords and released her fingers into intricacy, tumbling into what she held back, the jazz detail that split open notes and angles from the chestnut melody. (64)

Important, this musical scene is framed through the question of whether there will be a response from the unknown men illuminated only by lightning; as long as there is no response, she does not need to end this meditation in song: “She did not want this to end. To give up words from an old song” as her hands skip over the keys while her mind struggles “to remember her mother’s hand ripping newspaper and wetting it under a kitchen tap and using it to wipe the table free of the shaded notes, the hopscotch of keys. After which she went for her weekly lesson at the community hall […]” (64). Hana can stay in this memory conjured through a combination of sound and touch of the piano keys until she recognizes the presence of her audience: “she looked up and nodded towards them, an acknowledgement that she would stop now” (65). An interaction between performer and audience, one that is silent during the performance but then leads to a mutual recognition afterwards, implies that an acknowledgement of presence precludes
conversation. Like the prayers heard in a Cairo marketplace by Almásy and Katharine—
“beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if
passing on a rumour of the two of them” (154)—antiphony as a call-and-response can be
thought of as a model for listening. As articulated in the Introduction, listening is a practice
that implicates both performer and audience. Arrows of sound pass through and among
listeners and speakers, and this model of listening is what I propose as a model through
which to theorize the adaptations of Ondaatje’s poetry because it calls for a high level of
poetic attention on behalf of both interlocutors.

Interlocutors are listeners, even while performing, a feat that I want to pursue
particularly in terms of dance because this suggestion of dancer as interlocutor within this
two-way adaptation process positions the dancer as speaker. Significantly, this
presupposes the ability for dance to speak and I suggest that the critical implications of this
presupposition are anticipated within Ondaatje’s poetry in the ways in which it strives to
represent the limitations not only of writing but of writing’s attempt to write the body,
whether in Buddy Bolden’s trumpet playing or in the memory of a woman’s eye reflected
in a mirror in “The Nine Sentiments.” An antiphonal exchange is also one that resembles
the phrase, “a woman and her echo” from “Nine Sentiments” that, as I will argue, points
towards the nuances of reflection conveyed in a dance adaptation of a poem. In the case of
Elimination Dance, we can begin to see the complexity of representing dance as medium:
dance is announced in the title of the poem, dance is what enables the poem to perform its
eliminations, dance is depicted in Tostevin’s illustrations, and dance is enacted in
McDonald’s film (in the main action and in brief clips of global scenes of dance suggesting
that the elimination dance is a “worldwide phenomenon” as the caller states). Yet, when we
consider all of these ways in which dance functions, we can begin to see the complexity of *writing dance*, a phrase that I italicize in order to emphasize the capacity both to write dance and for dance to write. By situating this dual capacity within dance theory, the next section argues that Ondaatje’s poetry and adaptations of it strive to investigate the possibilities of representing dancing in writing and writing in dance — an argument that not only brings a new perspective to adaptation studies (due to its dialogue between poetry and dance theory) but also allows for the performative elements of Ondaatje’s writing to be further examined and questioned in terms of their gestures beyond the textual page.

**II. Choreographies**

the there are those burned out stars who implode into silence after parading in the sky after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway

— Ondaatje “White Dwarfs” (*Rat Jelly*)

The final lines of Ondaatje’s poem, “White Dwarfs” could be paraphrased to ask the question of what else needs to be said after the body has spoken. For bodies “who implode into silence / after parading in the sky,” what else could be uttered that is not uttered in this death of sound following a celebration of movement? Is speech even possible after such an act? This question will resurface in a discussion of Andrea Nann’s dancing of the Prologue to *Anil’s Ghost* that includes these lines: “*There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers*” (italics in original, 6). Both the text and Nann’s dance adaptation of it grapple with the limits of language in registering an embodied response to pain. (See Hillger’s book *Not Needing All the Words: Michael*
Ondaatje’s Literature of Silence in which she discusses the representation of the un-representable and contextualizes this issue within the poem “White Dwarfs.”) In “White Dwarfs,” these questions of what eludes articulation are directly relevant not only to the meaning of this poem but also to adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing: on one hand, what more could be said than what the poems themselves say? On the other hand, what could writing say that the body cannot? It is this debate that informs the embodied textuality in Ondaatje’s writing and it is this debate that I want to bring to adaptations of his writing, such as the dance adaptations filmed by Tennant (Shadow Pleasures). But before turning to these pieces, I want to situate Ondaatje’s choreography within dance theory and its intersections with literary theory in terms of how the body is written. Ranging from what escapes a writing of the body through language (Cixous, Kristeva) to how this written body is then interpreted by audiences (Barthes, Foster), I ask not only how a body is written but also how it is read. A comparison appears in Ondaatje’s poem because we could ask how to read, or even hear, these parading stars that implode into silence. Preoccupied with a fear of an unreadable silence, the poem consists of images of silencing (“cut out tongues of mules / silent beasts of burden”) and acts of “mouthing the silence,” as if asking how writing can produce a “birth of sound.” What choreography can take place after the poem has spoken? A body (chorea) writing (graphae) and re-writing the poem is one way in which adaptation provides a rebirth for these burnt out stars left silent on the page.

In conversation with Christie MacD onald, Jacques Derrida uses the phrase “incalculable choreographies” (154) as a concluding comment to “dreaming of the innumerable” (154) in regard to sexual difference. Dance theorist Anne Cooper Albright notes that, even though Derrida has spoken of the dance (la danse) in terms of the feminine,
his final discussion of choreography widens out to a vision of the masses, which he describes as “this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of nonidentified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each ‘individual,’ whether he be classified as ‘man’ or as ‘woman’ according to the criteria of usage” (154). It is in the context of the innumerable that Derrida speaks of “incalculable choreographies” — a phrase that has sparked much controversy in dance studies because, even though it makes an important link between deconstructive theory and dance theory, the phrase is problematic because it invokes a rhetoric of dance without taking into account how such an idea could take a physical shape. As dance theorist Janet Wolff asks, “Why is it that the concepts of ‘dance’ (which recurs throughout the interview with Derrida) and ‘choreographies’ are employed to do the work of radical destabilization?” (243). Wolff seeks to uncover the assumptions that lie beneath cultural understandings of the work performed through dance. Similarly, in analyzing this conversation between MacDonald and Derrida, Albright asks whether this notion of “incalculable choreographies” invokes a notion of dance that is theoretically seductive yet unable to have practical application in its metaphorizing of dance. Albright’s reading of this debate reminds us that, before considering how we read dancing, we must consider what is read. Dance can be a metaphor, but it is also a physical body dancing. These materials are read differently, yet they are read nonetheless.

Susan Leigh Foster’s book *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* revolutionized dance studies with its semiotic approach to both dance and dance culture. Arguing that audiences learn to read dance just as the dancers learn to speak through the grammar of dance, Foster seeks to undo the myth that
dancing is somehow outside of language — a point that then poses the challenge of how to perform subversively within and against language, which Foster herself raises as an editor of *Decomposition: Post-Disciplinary Performance*. In the preface to *Reading Dancing*, Foster outlines her aim: “to take dance out of a model that presupposes a relation between the dance and some intuitive/primal, libidinal expression and into a space in which we can talk about the discursive” (xv). Thus, Foster defines the process of *reading dancing* as “this active and interactive interpretation of dance as a system of meaning” (xvii).

Considering that dance is primarily a visual medium for the audience member who attempts to *read* it, we see that Foster’s work on dance semiotics intersects with Barthes’s “The Rhetoric of the Image.” With this close-watching in mind, Foster speaks of “literacy in dance,” implying Barthes’s semiotic approach, but, as she acknowledges, there is more to reading dance than simply watching it: “Only the viewer who retains visual, aural, and kinaesthetic impressions of the dance as it unfolds in time can compare succeeding moments of the dance, noticing similarities, variations, and contrasts and comprehending larger patterns — phrases of movement and sections of the dance — and finally the dance as a whole” (58). But does this type of unfolding and refolding analysis remain productive when the process of codification itself is being challenged, or when the dance refuses to be comprehended as the “whole” that Foster speaks of as the objective? Foster herself raises this question with regard to Merce Cunningham’s rejection of conventional choreographic models: when a dance means nothing, we are left with an empty grammar — a grammar that, after watching the dance, she claims, is not empty at all (34). We read even this empty grammar through a recognition of codes that Foster notes as being informed by Barthes and Foucault in its combination of semiotics with representational systems of power (xix);
although these codified structures can limit the discourse of dance with their imposition of intended meaning, the layering of codes asks us to perform an analysis that not only watches the dance but also listens to it, closely.

In “Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes selects an advertisement through which to argue that the photographed image produces the illusion of an objective gaze. Although staged and mechanically reproduced, the photographed scene looks as if it were en abyme. Thus, a photograph can appear to be “a message without a code” (39) even when it is not, a point that informs Foster’s decoding of dance. In revealing the levels of framing in dance, Foster summarizes what is read by the audience:

The following discussion offers a blueprint for choreographic meaning, assimilating many choreographic conventions into five broad categories: (1) the frame—the way the dance sets itself apart as a unique event; (2) the mode of representation—the way the dance refers to the world; (3) the style—the way the dance achieves an individual identity in the world and in its genre; (4) the vocabulary—the basic units or “moves” from which the dance is made; and (5) the syntax—the rules governing the selection and combination of moves. (59)

Foster begins this decoding with a mention of choreography, which explains her structural focus on the grammar of dance. Thus, although Foster acknowledges that this blueprint applies “only to Western concert dance tradition” (59), her theory can be described as one of reading choreography that attempts to read the denoted and connoted messages, as Barthes does with images in advertisements, thereby revealing the mechanisms through which these visual images are constructed.

Foster’s approach focuses on the codifications learned by both performers and audiences. She argues that, by focusing on “the art of choreography” (xv), we can speak of meaning that emerges not out of intuition but rather out of a deciphering of codes and structures. One of the most persuasive aspects of this approach is what Foster calls “writing
dance,” which she bases upon Barthes, Foucault, and White and defines as a practice of “self-critical interaction between viewer and dancer” (6). (In addition to these theorists, dance theory reveals the influences of theorists such as Cixous (écriture féminine) and Kristeva (gynotext and phenotext) whose work has informed twentieth century notions of embodied subjectivity.) It is this interaction composed of “self-critical interaction between viewer and dancer” that I would like to use to apply dance theory to adaptation theory. In doing so, it is important to remember that dance is not always narrative based. For example, dance theorist Elizabeth Dempster offers a productive way of understanding postmodern dance in explaining that it is “not about interpreting or illustrating but about its own material reality” (31). For instance, a dance could be about the dancing itself, such as in the choreography of Merce Cunningham. (See Cunningham’s essay, “Space, Time and Dance” (1952) in Richard Kostelanetz’s edited collections of writings on Cunningham’s works, Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time). As Foster observes, Cunningham’s choreography produces “an articulation of the body that calls for attentiveness in its audience” (43), an attentiveness that differs from watching how a body reflects a textual narrative. Building upon this notion of the body as articulate, I argue that not all dance adaptations are about illustrating an adapted text; rather, a dance adaptation can be about the material reality of the adapted text and its interaction with the adaptive medium. This interaction is what I examine in the subsequent analyses of dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing because it is through this interaction that audiences become participants.
III. Shadow Pleasures

In 2004, Veronica Tennant directed a series of short films that documented four dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing. Entitled Shadow Pleasures, the series is composed of “Tropical Rumours,” “The Nine Sentiments,” “The Cinnamon Peeler,” and “Power.” The films premiered on CBC Television and have played on Bravo!FACT Shorts and continue to be accessible for viewing on the Bravo!FACT Shorts website. The films offer visions of Ondaatje’s poetry composed through the collaborative work of acclaimed Canadian dancers: Margie Gillis and Paola Styron in “Tropical Rumours,” Caroline Richardson, Gail Skrela, Mary Paterson, Robert Glumbek, and Roberto Campanella in “The Nine Sentiments,” Gail Skrela and Sean Ling in “The Cinnamon Peeler,” and Andrea Nann and Gerald Michaud in “Power.” Although the films are presented as a series, I will examine them separately because each addresses not only different written works but also different approaches to the adaptive process. For instance, two of the films are excerpts from longer dance pieces that were performed on their own as adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing (Robert Campanella’s The Nine Sentiments and Andrea Nann’s Cato and Alice). Nevertheless, as a series, the films remind audiences that dance is a medium through which one can perform multiple readings of written words. Two of the films perform writings of Ondaatje’s that are not poetry; but, even though the focus of this dissertation is the performance of poetry, I will discuss all of these films because they engage with the writing as if engaging with the imagery of poetry and because Ondaatje’s writing often defies generic classification, such as in Running in the Family which performs as memoir, novel and lyric poetry.
i. “Tropical Rumours”

behind them
carved an alphabet
whose motive was perfect desire

wanting these portraits of women
to speak
to caress

“Women Like You” (*Running in the Family*)

“Tropical Rumours” begins with sound, or what sounds like a faint radio or gramophone playing what will be the musical theme of the piece. The radio fades into slow strings of John Gzowski’s tango composed for the film as we see a lushly decorated set, a map of “Ceylon” projected onto a dancer’s back, and then the two dancers sitting on an empty bed frame, one dancer in a white dress and one in red. The map that begins “Tropical Rumours” parallels the map preceding the text in *Running in the Family*. Walking behind an arras, the dancers as silhouettes reach for each other’s hands, enacting the longing and concealment conveyed in a phrase like *shadow pleasures*. Standing in front of the arras, dancers Styron and Gillis slowly lean in opposing directions as the tango stretches into a ritardando — we imagine them falling away from each other as the camera cuts to another scene altogether. Importantly, there are no words read aloud in this film. The credits call it an adaptation of *Running in the Family*, but this is the only textual hint given. Comparatively, in the other films in *Shadow Pleasures*, Ondaatje reads an accompanying poem aloud as part of the score; yet, in this wordless piece, Gillis and Styron evoke aspects of Ondaatje’s writing in ways that become perhaps more effective than if he were reading the text out loud. I claim this presence of words even without words because the piece gestures towards aspects of the text without directly referring to them, or rather their choreography extends beyond a simple mimetic illustration of the
adapted text. Indeed, the piece does echo the text, offering poignant reflections of it, but it does so in ways that transform the text for readers who return to it afterwards. For instance, although the relationship between the two dancers is undefined, their dancing points to possible connections: firstly, they are shadows of Doris Gratiaen and Dorothy Clementi-Smith, two young women who “perform radical dances in private, practising daily” (25). When they perform in public, their piece “Dancing Brass Figures” catches the eye of Rex Daniel who documents a performance in his journal: “They wore swimsuits and had covered themselves in gold metallic paint. It was a very beautiful dance but the gold paint had an allergic effect on the girls and the next day they were covered in a terrible red rash” (25-26). Along with making an impression on Daniel, they captured the attention of Ondaatje’s father and his friend Noel. There are also intertextual shadows of dancers from outside Ondaatje’s text: for instance, Gillis, an influential figure in Canadian modern dance, is well-known for her techniques of incorporating long-flowing fabric into her choreography. While Gillis has adapted this use of fabric into her own style, it echoes Isadora Duncan’s iconic long scarf, and, as Ondaatje writes in Running in the Family, Doris and Dorothy were “greatly influenced by rumours of the dancing of Isadora Duncan” (25). Here, the word rumour is particularly apt since a rumour is a discursive echo. Yet, even though we see Gillis and Styron as reflections or rumours of Ondaatje’s mother and her friend, we see them through other textual shadows as well.

In the section entitled “Asian Rumours,” Ondaatje describes entering a bedroom in a Jaffna house where his aunt traces stories of their ancestry. Across the hall is another bedroom, supposedly haunted, that resembles the stage decorations for “Tropical Rumours”: “Walking into that room’s dampness I saw the mosquito nets stranded in the air
like the dresses of hanged brides, the skeletons of beds without their mattresses, and retreated from the room without ever turning my back on it” (18). The conclusion of the piece involves Gillis being encircled by the mosquito netting while wearing a white dress, perhaps a wedding dress of the “hanged brides,” and stepping across the “skeleton” of a bed-frame. This staging suggests that within the piece there are rumours of the family ancestry — shadows of former desires just as there are shadows of the text. The long fabrics incorporated into Gillis’s dance technique evoke an image of Isadora Duncan and we can recall that Ondaatje compares his grandmother Lalla to Duncan as she gazes down at the flower beds moving in the flood: “Lalla gazed down at them with wonder, moving as lazily as that long dark scarf which trailed off her neck brushing the branches and never catching” (107). Comparisons with Lalla are also implied when Gillis and Styron play cards, languorously — tossing cards imprinted with images of naked female torsos in an imitation of a game that brings to mind Lalla’s insistence, “Never, never, play cards for love” (102). In hindsight, we can now read this scene after listening to the CBC Radio interview with Ondaatje in which he selects a number of songs and, along with “Um Favor,” one of them was Gavin Bryars’s song, “A Man in a Room Gambling,” anticipating the character of Coop in *Divisadero*.

Traces of *Running in the Family* in the dance adaptation assume the shapes of rumours, shadows and echoes, each of which is a different mode of adaptation. Traces can be found in the music as well. At one point, the music surges in accelerando, accompanying a scene with Gillis swirling in the clothes that an aristocratic figure in *Running in the Family* might have worn; then bursting into a fiery tango, the music prompts Gillis to run into a salon-like room where Styron awaits to, indeed, parody a
dancing of the tango. Why the tango? What rumour of the text is referenced through this music? The seductive quality of the sound contributes to the eroticism underlying the choreography; more directly, the tango was danced by Ondaatje’s parents and their friends at extravagant parties in Gasanawa: “it was the tango that was perfected on the rock at Gasanawa. Casually dressed couples, coated in a thin film of sweat, swirled under the moon to ‘Rio Rita’ by John Bowles on the gramophone, wound up time and again by the drunk Francis. Francis could only dance the tango solo so that he wouldn’t do damage to women’s feet, for which he had too much respect” (36). The fact that Gillis and Styron parody the tango brings to mind Francis’s parody of the tango: “He would put on ‘I kiss your little hand, Madame’ and mime great passion for an invisible partner, kissing the mythical hand, pleading to the stars and jungle around him to console him in an unrequited abstract love” (Running in the Family 36). Like Francis’s mimicry of the tango, Gillis and Styron’s parodic performance mimics the sentiment of extravagance evident in the pre-Depression-era dancing described in the text as “purposeless” (36).

Along with these shadows of other characters, “Tropical Rumours” includes what I would call a shadow of the author. In a montage of images, we briefly see one of the dancers walking across the room with a red shoe balanced upon her head. I would argue that this action mimics what Ondaatje describes himself doing in the opening chapter:

Once a friend had told me that it was only when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted. And so two months later, in the midst of a farewell party in my growing wildness - dancing, balancing a wine glass on my forehead and falling to the floor twisting round and getting up without letting the glass tip, a trick which seemed only possible when drunk and relaxed — I knew I was already running. (Running in the Family, 15-16)

Importantly, Ondaatje frames this balancing act as one that occurs in a moment of knowing “exactly what I wanted” — a clarity of desire, which was already in motion towards its
desired object and this momentum could be construed as running towards or away. He also frames this balancing in terms of dancing. Although the scene in “Tropical Rumours” replaces the wineglass with a red shoe and no writhing on the floor takes place, the image of a dancer walking with graceful intentionality, balancing a red shoe upon her head, echoes Ondaatje’s mid-winter performance. Ondaatje conveys a pleasure not only in balancing on this Barthesian edge but also in narrating it. Yet, part of this balancing is careening towards chaos, with the act of careening bringing to mind the danger in this motion as evoked in a poem by Gwendolyn MacEwen published five years after Ondaatje’s memoir: “words, these words / Careening into the beautiful darkness” (144). These lines appear in the poem titled “The Grand Dance” (resurfacing as the final lines to the poem, “The Tao of Physics”) and it is a poem that not only includes the word ‘dance’ in its title but also expresses the same concern as Ondaatje does with the ability of words to re-present presence: “I promised I would never turn you into poetry; but / Allow this liar these wilful, wicked lines” (95). Writing as if careening is one way to negotiate one’s freedom from and within representation. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will return to this poetic of balancing on the edge of chaos because it is a choreographic trick that underscores Ondaatje’s writing the body.

ii. “The Nine Sentiments”

The second film in Shadow Pleasures, choreographed by ProArteDanza director Roberto Campanella, depicts an evocative rendering of Ondaatje’s collection of poems Handwriting. Even though the piece is called “The Nine Sentiments,” there are lines from various poems in the collection; for instance, the piece begins with the lines, “We lived on
the medieval coast / south of warrior kingdoms/ during the ancient age of the winds / as they drove all things before them” (“The Distance of a Shout”). One of the issues that I will address in analyzing the adaptation is why there is this discord between the title and the adapted poems. I suggest that, despite this dissonance in the title, it brings the audience’s focus on the nine sentiments as rasas (tastes or emotions); moreover, Ondaatje becomes an adapter as he re-writes and re-orders the lines, attuned to the change in medium when, rather than saying “our theatres,” he substitutes the word dances: “In our dances human beings / wondrously became other human beings” (transcribed from Tennant’s film).

Meanwhile, Campanella’s choreography combines beautifully executed contemporary ballet with theatrical staging and effects — at one point, rain falls onstage, soaking the dancers and surpassing the limitations of a live performance in which rain would not be able to be used onstage. (When performed live as part of a longer work entitled “The Nine Sentiments and Other Works,” rain was not used even though the press release for the piece showed a photograph of the rain scene from the film.) I foreground this difference between stage and film performances of “The Nine Sentiments” because what I pursue regarding Ondaatje’s poetry and Campanella’s adaptation is how a work of art can exceed its medium.

Before the emergence of this dance adaptation, there have been other adaptations (visual art and music) of Handwriting, which indicates that there is something about this collection of poems that invites a re-imagining of the language as outside the text. For instance, CBC Radio broadcast an orchestral adaptation of Ondaatje’s poem “The Nine Sentiments” called “Sentiment Number 3,” which was composed by Neal Currie and performed by the Windsor Symphony Orchestra.8 Furthermore, Anansi has published the
poem “The Story” juxtaposed with illustrations by David Bolduc. Beneath the typed words of the poem are the words written in Ondaatje’s handwriting, an indirect reference to the title of the collection out of which this poem is from, *Handwriting*. In this publication, with text design and typesetting by Stan Bevington, a visual conversation takes place between the two typographical versions of the poem and the illustrations. The poem itself converses with other mediums as it speaks of dancers: “They are dancers who tumble / with lightness as they move, / their long hair wild in the air […] They are charming with desire in them. / It is the dancing they are known for.” Desire and dance are textually fused in these lines, spilling over from one medium into another, as if across the edges where, as Barthes claims, “the place where the death of language is glimpsed” (6). I describe the poem in this way because Ondaatje’s poetry in *Handwriting* is, from its title, constantly aware of the material of its writing. From “wild cursive scripts” of the first poem to the parenthetical subtitle of “The Nine Sentiments (Historical Illustrations on Rock and Book and Leaf),” the poems attend to forms of human inscription upon the earth. Writing in nature is political especially when documenting what cannot be written elsewhere: “Handwriting occurred on waves, / on leaves, the scripts of smoke, / a sign on a bridge along the Mahaweli River. / A gradual acceptance of this new language” (“The Distance of a Shout”). In Campanella’s “The Nine Sentiments,” dancers are silent and yet, through the choreographic interactions among dancers, sand, and rain, their bodies signify as part of nature, thereby aligning them with these writings upon leaf or wave.

In contrast to the absence of words in “Tropical Rumours,” Campanella choreographs to an instrumental score that includes excerpts of poems from *Handwriting* read aloud by Ondaatje. The accompanying music is dissonant, with percussive drums
emphasizing the combative movements of the dancers. During a segment with two
dancers, Robert Glumbek lets Caroline Richardson swing to the floor and she stops
abruptly with her cheek nearly touching the ground. This duet had begun with suggestions
of desire between the dancers but aggression in their movements intensifies, culminating in
this swing to the floor. Percussion continues and Glumbek and Richardson continue their
embodied argument until a transition takes place, rain begins to fall and music turns more
melodic with a soft tabla drum marking the rhythm. Richardson steps into falling rain and
dancers Mary Paterson and Gail Skrela join her for a dance that, visually, conveys what can
only be imagined when reading *Handwriting*: “her thin shadow falling / through slats / into
water movement” (37). (These lines can only be imagined as well by an audience of a stage
adaptation due to the difficulty of using rain onstage.) During this transition in tone, a line
not included in the piece that we might think of in this scene is from “The Brother Thief”
(*Handwriting*): “nine small sounds / a distant coolness / Dark peace, / like a cave of water”
(16). We have entered this cave as the rain pools on the ground. During this scene,
Ondaatje’s voice re-enters the soundscape with the words, *what we lost* (an excerpt from
“Buried 2”) and these words of loss, juxtaposed with the pouring water, suggest the
blurring of pleasure and pain as portrayed in Nann’s modern dance adaptation of *Anil’s
Ghost* in “Meditation #5: On Loss and Desire.” It is in “Buried 2” that we hear the words,
“Nine finger and eye gestures / to signal key emotions” (24). We can hear the poem’s
conversation with “The Nine Sentiments,” and these echoes suggest that the decision to
mix the various lines from *Handwriting* in this dance adaptation gestures to how there are
echoes among the poems already. As Solecki writes in his analysis of “The Nine
Sentiments,” there is a performance occurring in the poem that takes places through a
collection of images and results in creating an effect on the audience:

The approach in the poem, as throughout, is imagistic, though there is usually a gently implied narrative; the diction and syntax are simple and direct; whatever music there is – “from the mouth / of that moon” – is unemphatic. The work of poetry is also done by the enjambment, by the lack of connectives, and by the way the lack of punctuation creates a space for silence to seep in and expose the individual image, the silent white acting as a setting rather than a frame. (*Ragas of Longing* 175)

When Solecki refers to “the work of the poetry” he implies that there are actions taking place in and through the writing and its silence; moreover, when he attends to the spaces left “for silence to seep in” he accentuates the possibility within the poem itself for an antiphonal listening. A listening that hears this silence but also responds to and within this setting, an opening for dance.

iii. “The Cinnamon Peeler”

The film, “The Cinnamon Peeler” is the most textually mimetic film in *Shadow Pleasures*. Whereas “Tropical Rumours” uses no words and “The Nine Sentiments” intersperses words amid music, “The Cinnamon Peeler” places Ondaatje’s reading of the poem alongside the pas-de-deux. Following the blazon-like choreography directed by the poem itself, the dance focuses upon various parts of the body — “the crease / that cuts your back. This ankle” (156). The camera’s attention takes its cues from these words as well, focusing its lens wherever the poem touches the body. In addition to this direct reflection between poem and dance through actions, the dancers wear neutral bodysuits and are lit in warm tones. Lighting is one of the most effective layers in this adaptation because the lighting invokes *cinnamon* without needing the word to be read. Yet, this lighting produces a Barthesian *en-abyme* setting as though these dancers are always clad in such
light. It is a manufactured effect, one that adapts the smell of the poem into sight. Thus, I would argue that this constitutes a synaesthetic adaptation that attests to the synaesthesia already present within the poem: “you could hold me and be blind of smell” (157).

Considering adaptation more generally, we might ask whether adaptation is, in part, synaesthetic in its blurring of, not senses, but media. Why, then, is this blurring pleasurable to the audience? In the case of this poem’s blurring, is this a text of bliss? (In asking this question one recalls that this poem also includes the phrase, “wounded without the pleasure of a scar” [157].) As Barthes writes of bliss, a text cannot write about it – one must be in it. Not only does this point resonate with ideas of presence discussed in this chapter, but this distinction between what one can and cannot iterate is a point that relates to the performance of “The Cinnamon Peeler” because it is a self-referential performance. It is a performance that is in the poem. The choreography consists of two dancers, male and female, who act out the desire of the poem through dance: “my fingers / floating over you” (156). Without travelling to the places imagined in the poem (“When we swam once / I touched you in water / and our bodies remained free” (157), the dancers remain in the present, a world consisting only of touch, the reading out loud of the poem, and an illuminating golden light. A comparison to this all-consuming world of present desire is the depiction of Almásy’s love for Katharine infusing his book on Libyan deserts: “I was unable to remove her body from the page. I wished to dedicate the monograph to her, to her voice, to her body that I imagined rose white out of a bed like a long bow” (The English Patient 235). He speaks of having “translated her strangely into my text of the desert” (236), another version of metaphoric synaesthesia mentioned earlier in relation to “The Cinnamon Peeler”; furthermore, Almásy’s comment gestures to the act of adaptation as
one of documenting presence, phrased in the lyrical words excerpted from “Arrival at the Waldorf” by Wallace Stevens that appear after this scene in *The English Patient*:

> The wild poem is a substitute
> For the woman one loves or ought to love,
> One wild rhapsody a fake for another. (236)

In as much as a dance adaptation of “The Cinnamon Peeler” is a substitute for the poem, the accompaniment of Ondaatje’s voice reading the poem out loud in the adaptation seems to suggest that the dance needs the poem, or rather that one cannot be a substitute for the other. The self-reflexive *fake*-ness of this substitute becomes apparent in its difference from the “real” or rather from the adapted text.

As a comparison, I will briefly discuss a ballet adaptation of Anne Michael’s poems “Skin Divers” and “Last Night’s Moon” because it provides a counterpoint to these dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing. The National Ballet’s *Skin Divers* explores how the visual nuances of language can be accentuated when a poet reads her poems during the dancing of them. Coincidently, Michaels echoes what Stevens articulates in the rest of “Arrival at the Waldorf” (following the lines quoted above): “You touch the hotel the way you touch moonlight / Or sunlight and you hum and the orchestra / Hums and you say ‘The world in a verse [...]’.” In “Skin Divers,” she writes, “Like the moon, I want to touch places / just by looking,” endowing the *you* with the power to look upon as a shining light and, yet, like Stevens, this looking takes place through touch.

Michaels is a poet often compared to Ondaatje in both her style and content by critics such as Pico Iyer who argues that *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces* both depict characters with what he calls “global souls” (28). Moreover, both *Fugitive Pieces* and *The English Patient* are novels written through music, and musical references figure
prominently in each novel’s depiction of transnationalism, whether in jazz filtering through the desert and into the discursive space of the Italian villa, or in Jakob’s memory of Bella’s music that travels with him from Biskupin to Greece to Toronto. Instead of discussing these adaptations here, I want to consider the 2009 ballet adaptation _Skin Divers_ (National Ballet, Toronto) based on Michaels’s poems “Skin Divers” and “Last Night’s Moon.” What I want to consider is the question of how the performance foregrounds interactions between adapted text and adaptation. I contend that this takes place through a framing of the adaptation as adaptation; furthermore, this framing necessitates a reading backwards that invites the reader to return to the poem itself. In the case of Michaels’s poems, I would suggest that what is discovered upon this re-reading are words that speak of the body, images then accompanied by visual images of what these words might look like when danced: “Like the moon, I want to touch places / just by looking” (“Skin Divers”). The final section of the piece is danced in front of a projected blinking eye, staring out at the audience. The eye looks at an audience who are looking at a dance through a critical lens of attempting to reconcile its similarity to a poem. We want it to look like something else, a textual form. The eye, projecting a gaze of desire, looks at us.

Dominique Dumais’s choreography for _Skin Divers_ was originally staged at the Berlin Ballett-Komische Oper by Ballett Mannheim on October 18, 2003. Visuals from this original production were used by the National Ballet in their staging of the piece (double-billed with the North American premiere of Davide Bombana’s “Carmen” as part of Toronto’s Luminato Festival, June 2009). Images from the Berlin production provide potential audiences with images of what the production will look like before seeing it. Male dancers holding a female dancer standing, balanced upon their hands, are shown in
the program wearing costumes that look as if they have been drenched in water, thereby
connoting a literal interpretation of “night swimming” in the darkness of the theatre. The
costumes for the National Ballet production do not suggest the same connotations of
swimming, yet they are made of free-flowing fabrics with neutral colours that accentuate
the ecological relevance. It is significant that we see these images because they shape
expectation of the piece, just as the re-printing of Michaels’s poems in the program
prepares us for the textual content. Along the lines of matching words, images and
audience expectations, Dumais speaks of finding music that suited the poem by reading the
poem to music: “Dumais read Michaels’s text aloud while playing various pieces of music,
looking for a fit partner for the words and movement” (program notes). She selected Gavin
Bryars’s “String Quartet No.2,” which, as dance scholar Penelope Reed Doob observes,
explores unusual pairings of instrumental partners that augment “Dumais’s parallel
exploration of unusual combinations of dancers, in which a pas de deux may appear
simultaneously with a seemingly unrelated solo or trio” (program notes). Selecting the
music parallels the process of selection that takes place when an adapter reads a poem and
chooses what will be adapted; an audience watching an adaptation can read backwards into
this adaptive process by looking for places where, in this case, the poem and the dance
touch.

In “Skin Divers,” light touches places “just by looking” and “touches everything / into meaning, under her blind fingers.” Although these fingers are “blind,” the poem is
guided by moonlight, as inspired by the epigraph by Tu Fu: “When will we walk next
together / under last night’s moon?” And, through this question, Michaels sets up a tension
between past and present; yet, as opposed to the present tense verbs that underscore the
actions of “night swimmers, skin divers” in the final stanza, the poem concentrates on memory. Memory is in the body and in the landscape: “All the history of the bone-embedded hills / of your body. Everything your mouth / remembers” (19). All the while, the moon shines on but takes on a reflective quality: “But if, like starlings, we continue to navigate / by the rear-view mirror / of the moon […] we will know ourselves / nowhere” (22). The body wants more than a painted line “around an apple or along a thigh” that cannot touch “its skin” – a lie that, for Michaels, constructs a painting like time constructs a day (“Time is like the painter’s lie” almost echoes the opening sentence in *Fugitive Pieces*: “Time is a blind guide” [5]). In this awareness of the body within the poem, we can think of how the poem expresses a desire to be danced. The line between the poem and the dance can be thought of in terms of the image of a “sweet edge” in “Last Night’s Moon.” Similar to the semiotic edges that, for Barthes, are pleasurable in their closeness to the edges of meaning, edges in this poem are drawn on a desired body:

Invisible line
closest to touch. Line of wet grass
on my arm, your tongue’s
wet line across my back. (19)

These wet lines compose writings in nature and on the body (recalling the illustrations on rock and leaf in Ondaatje’s “The Nine Sentiments). Furthermore, we can read these lines as lines waiting to be danced. In Chapter Three, I argue that Clarke’s libretto for the jazz opera *Québécité* consists of words waiting to be sung; likewise, in Michaels’s poems, there are words waiting to be danced. As in “The Cinnamon Peeler,” we can see what a dance interpretation might look like through the poem itself; I use the word see quite intentionally because the pleasure of looking recurs throughout the poem (bringing to mind film theorist Laura Mulvey’s notion of to-be-looked-at-ness). It is a pleasure that exceeds, a desire to be
more than one medium at once. As Barthes writes of bliss, one cannot write about it but one must be in it. Aptly, Tennant’s films of dance adaptations of Ondaatje’s writing are entitled *Shadow Pleasures*, a title that combines pleasure with the spectral. (Here, we can recall Barthes’s suggestion in “Rhetoric of the Image” to submit “the image to a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain” [32-33]). A dance adaptation can convey the pleasure in a text and yet, depending upon the adaptation, it is often in the position of being a shadow of the text, or, to use Ondaatje’s words of antiphonal relation, “a woman and her echo” (The Nine Sentiments”). Nevertheless, a text can express its own desire to be the dance and, thus, the longing looks both ways.

iv. “Power” and “Meditation #5: On Loss and Desire”

The last film in Tennant’s *Shadow Pleasures* is titled “Power” but it is part of a larger work, “Cato and Alice” based on Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of a Lion* and choreographed by Andrea Nann. In the full piece, the word “power” is one of the words displayed on a screen behind the stage before each episode or vignette begins; text, therefore, becomes part of the visual cues in the choreography. “Alice and Cato” premiered at a performance called “Evocative Language, Dance Imagery” (Vancouver, 2003), which, along with “Alice and Cato,” featured a performed Nann’s solo piece, “Meditation #5: On Loss and Desire” (2002) based on the prologue to *Anil’s Ghost*. Although the dances themselves could be called poetry readings, the event also included Ondaatje reading selections from *The Cinnamon Peeler* and the prologue to *Anil’s Ghost* before Nann’s solo piece. Rather than focusing on “Power” (a piece that deserves a careful reading in the context of the entire series of dances based on *In the Skin of a Lion*), this section examines
Nann’s repertoire of works that pursue the interactions between dance and text, with a detailed analysis of “Meditation #5: On Loss and Desire.” I have selected this piece because it performs an embodied engagement with textuality and with the limitations of expressing pain, thereby relating to earlier discussions of pain, responsiveness, and re-presentation.

In collaboration with visual artist Wayne Ngan, Nann created INK, a modern dance piece for two dancers in which the bodies sculpt themselves into poses that resemble Chinese calligraphy. Accompanied by a score by John Gzowski, dancers Nann and Kate Holden perform what one might think of as an embodied translation of poetry, or as dance doing poetic work similar to that of Ezra Pound’s works on imagistic scripts. Here, recalling a point raised earlier pertaining to Merce Cunningham’s dance as being about dance (comparable to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets experimenting with poetry about language), Nann’s INK could be read as a dance about language. At the same time, however, she combines this language-focused approach with translation and, in doing so, poses the question of how translation takes place in embodiment as well. Given that her work frequently adapts writing into dance, the significance of INK becomes further relevant in its argument for a textuality of the body. Notably, Nann is also one of the dancers in “The Four Horsemen Project,” the multi-media dance adaptation of the Four Horsemen’s poetry discussed in Chapter One; thus, her continued work in dance-text collaborations is a model through which to examine the adaptive process of Canadian artists seeking to dance writing out loud.

As Nann explains in a post-performance discussion at the Young Centre, Toronto (July 26 2009), “Meditation #5: On Loss and Desire” was inspired by reading the prologue
to Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*. She tells of needing to dance in order to work through these words of the prologue before continuing to read the novel. Thus, although framed as an adaptation of a novel, her piece is more of an adaptation of a prologue or, as I would argue, of a poem. Nann treats the prologue as though it were a poem by close-reading the movement of the language. A recording of Ondaatje reading the prologue fills a darkened stage to begin the performance. Rather than quoting the prologue in full, I include Ondaatje’s words printed in the program for Nann’s performance of the piece at the Young Centre, Toronto (July 2009): “There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers.” These words provide the audience with a point through which to channel their antiphonal response to the dance adaptation — and, poignantly, they are words that attest to the inadequacy of words. The words, “the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget,” convey the impression of grief upon Anil, a transference that then becomes Nann’s response to these words in her performance. These words also remind the audience of the body as a medium of memory. As Elaine Scarry writes in her work on the articulation of pain, “When one speaks of ‘one’s physical pain’ and about ‘another person’s physical pain,’ one might appear to be talking about two wholly distinct orders of events […] for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it, that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty,’ while for the other person, it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model for what it is ‘to have doubt’” (4). Even though Scarry writes of physical pain not grief, she conveys the difficulty in transferring experience from one person to another — a transference that is precisely what Ondaatje seeks to examine in its complexity,
particularly since grief, in the case of the woman Anil watches, is transferred through violence and, thereby, directly related to the physical pain inflicted on the deceased. Moreover, even when words fail, Anil will remember how grief can register itself in the slope of a shoulder and, similarly, Nann articulates grief and a response to grief through her own body. On a theoretical level, “Meditation #5” and the prologue to Ondaatje’s novel both grapple with what Adorno called the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, or rather the impossibility of art to ‘make sense’ of a world of catastrophic loss. Language becomes mute in the presence of grief. The phrase “There are no words […]” is aware of its inadequacy and yet continues to speak nonetheless in the same manner as Anil proceeds unearthing the bodies of a history that she already knows is devastating.

Placing “Meditation #5” within Nann’s work on the limits of linguistic expression, such as in INK, we can see how she investigates the edges of meaning. A literal edge appears in the choreography of “Meditation #5” in the shape of a white, rectangular silk sheet lying upon the stage. During the dance, the sheet represents the rectangle space of work where Anil and her team dig in Guatemala: “The woman rose to her feet when she heard them approach and moved back, offering them room to work” (6). These words are the last words spoken by Ondaatje before Nann’s dance piece begins; thus, the dance also becomes part of the work that will be done here at this site. Yet this space comes to represent the space through which one confronts inexplicable pain, as shown through Nann’s movements when she tentatively approaches the sheet, stretching one arm to the sky and the other to the ground. In a musical crescendo, Nann tosses the silk sheet in the air and moves into it, creating a ghostly appearance with her mouth wide open pressing into the sheet and running towards the audience. As if besieged by the pain expressed in this
running, she collapses in the front corner of the stage, arms in front of her, breathing. The music transitions into the sounds of water lapping on the edge of a pond as Nann returns to the centre of the stage and concludes the piece by letting her hair sweep around her shoulders. By miming the washing of hair in an imagined pool, Nann creates a subtle yet powerful conclusion to a choreography deeply connected to everyday work, the disruption of it through loss, and a tactile recovery through engaging with this space of loss. The tactile investigation of this space takes place through the silk sheet and, as a reader of this dance, I notice that the sheet looks like a page. But this page flutters with the breath of the dancer (a gesture illuminated by side lighting only on the sheet in stage performances); this page transfers pain with the touch of a foot or hand. And this page presses into the skin as the body runs into it — a movement that, in the post-performance discussion, Nann noted was the movement that Ondaatje responded to first while watching early improvisations in rehearsal. It is this movement that conveys the inadequacy of words: “There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers” (6), and so the body remembers this grief of love in a dance that cautiously steps into a textual space yet remains immersed in the spoken language of the body.

IV – “Its click of applause”: Other Performances in Ondaatje’s Writing

When we read the lines “I am the cinnamon peeler’s wife / smell me,” we read a desire within language to lift off the page. Among the many senses in the poem, smell escapes textual representation; furthermore, the desire within language to be more than writing constitutes a textual eros that is at once embodied and disembodied — embodied in
the sense that the text is obsessed with sensuality yet disembodied in that it cannot touch
the skin that it desires with its ink. This final section of the chapter situates this paradox
within Ondaatje’s oeuvre in order to examine how his novels and poems are preoccupied
with a desire to write the body while, at the same time, marking the limits of such
representation. It is this awareness that I argue makes his novels and poetry accessible to
adapters.10 As a result, the antiphonal conversation between adaptation and adapted text
becomes further enriched by the writing’s already present preoccupation with adapting the
body into text.

Numerous scenes of dance surface throughout Ondaatje’s writings. As mentioned
in the section on “Tropical Rumours,” dance is described in Running in the Family both in
Ondaatje’s own writing and in the historical excerpt from Daniel’s journal. Other scenes of
bodily performance that might be called dances occur in The Skin of a Lion when Patrick
moves blindfolded through a room:

He positions Clara on the bed and tells her not to move. Then he takes off into the
room—first using his hands for security then ignoring them, just throwing his body
within an inch of the window swooping his head down parallel to shelves while he
rushes across the room in straight lines, in curves, as if he has the mechanisms of a
bat in his human blood. He leaps across the bed delighted at her shriek. He is
magnificent. He is perfect, she thinks. (80)

Patrick’s performance is a perfect choreography that reveals his intimate knowledge of a
room’s geography; yet the performance concludes with him crashing into Clara, the one
piece, “the human element” (81), of the room told not to move but did—a unfixed map.
A more formal performance takes place in this novel when Patrick attends the gathering at
the waterworks in which Alice, a masked, human puppet, pounds her fist into the stage
amid an assault by the surrounding puppets and mad applause: “The figure knelt, one hand
banging down on the wooden floor as if pleading for help—a terrible loudness entering
the silent performance. The audience began to clap in unison with the banging hand” (117). Here, there is the formality of a distinction between audience and performers, and yet the scene is chaotic in its violence combined with a hypnotic rhythm of applause. Importantly, Patrick breaks the audience-performer separation by walking up to the stage and up to the masked figure: “This close he could recognize nothing of the figure he had seen perform. It seemed washed out, exhausted statuary […] He had forgotten where he was” (118). Backstage Patrick discovers that this woman is Alice Gull, or rather, as he helps her remove her makeup, “it was not Alice Gull but something more intimate — an eye muscle having to trust a fingertip to remove that quarter-inch of bright yellow around her sight” (121). Out of this interaction emerges the performer’s humanity to the audience; furthermore, for Patrick, this particular performer becomes “something more intimate” and this intimacy is rooted in a trust that resembles the trust implicit in the blindfolded choreography. In this case, the choreography is performed by a fingertip tracing a watchful eye.

In the Afterword to The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (2008), Ondaatje writes of composing “every gesture and the choreography of every gunfight” (115). Choreographing violence is a practical concern for the fight scenes, but this notion of choreographing violence offers another way of phrasing the textualizing of a body veering out of control. I would argue that Ondaatje’s writing of the body conveys precision while careening on the edge of chaos. When we recall that Ondaatje uses the word choreography to refer to the stars in “White Dwarfs,” this argument can be expanded to a grander scale as the choreography pertains to celestial bodies careening on the edge of a universal chaos. It is this complexity that can be further explored in a dance adaptation of his writing while it
also calls for critical analysis of the body’s performance in the text itself. Two scenes, one in *Anil’s Ghost* and one in *Coming Through Slaughter*, that exemplify this simultaneous balancing of control and chaos are worth discussing in detail as a conclusion to this chapter because they function as textual performance and as descriptions of performance. Even though these scenes appear in novels and not poetry (although *Coming Through Slaughter* has been critically read as poetry) these scenes, like the Prologue to *Anil’s Ghost* that Nann dances, offer themselves to the reader as framed scenes of written performance attending to linguistic sound and rhythmic pacing, or what we might otherwise call a poem.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Anil moves “half-dancing into the courtyard” to the sound of Steve Earle’s song “Fearless Heart” on her earphones: “There was a thump, a sexual hip in her movement, whenever she heard his furious songs of loss” (169). This scene prepares the reader for a later one in which Anil’s dancing is fully described and, as in this one, desire informs the imagery. Anil is construed as an arrow of desire: “It feels like she could eject herself out of her body like an arrow (181).” The arrow holds traces of other instances of arrows as a medium among listeners and audiences: in *The English Patient* when “beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them as they walk through the cold morning air” [154] and in these lines from “Rock Bottom”: “you and your arrow / taking just / what you fled through.” In the writing of Anil’s dance, the image of her as an arrow segues into the response from her audience, Sarath, thereby supporting a reading of antiphonal arrows of desire as underlining the interactions between audience and performer. But, to return to the textual writing of this dance, it is significant that this scene constitutes the most extensive description of dance in Ondaatje’s writing; I quote from this scene at length because it not
only describes a performance but also constitutes a textual performance:

Anil moves in silence, the energy held her back. Her body taut as an arm, the music brutal and loud in her head, while she waits for the rhythm to angle off so she can open her arms and leap. Which she does now, throwing her head back, her hair a black plume, back almost to the level of her waist. Throws her arms too, to hold the ground in her back flip, her loose skirt having no time to discover gravity and drop before she is on her feet again.

It is wondrous music to dance alongside — she has danced to it with others on occasions of joy and gregariousness, carousing through a party with, it seemed, all her energy on her skin, but this now is not a dance, does not contain even a remnant of the courtesy or sharing that is part of a dance. She is waking every muscle in herself, blindfolding every rule she lives by, giving every mental skill she has to her movement of her body. Only this will lift her backward into the air and pivot her hip to send her feet over her.

A scarf tied tight around her head hold the earphones to her. She needs music to push her into extremities and grace. She wants grace, and it happens here only on these mornings or after a late-afternoon downpour — when the air is light and cool, when there is also the danger of skidding on the wet leaves. It feels as if she could eject herself out of her body like an arrow. (181)

In this dancing to Bob Marley’s “Coming In from the Cold” and in the previous scene of “half-dancing” to Steve Earle’s song, the music is described as “furious”; yet, in this scene, the narrative perspective then moves from dancer to audience as we hear what Sarath sees as he looks at Anil through a window: “He watches a person he has never seen. A girl insane. A druid in moonlight, a thief in oil. This is not the Anil he knows. Just as she, in this state, is invisible to herself, though it is the state she longs for” (182). Like the statement of Bolden’s desire — “What I wanted” — the narrative suggests that this state of motion, of dance, is what Anil desires. Although it is spoken in a narrative voice written from Sarath’s perspective (therefore causing us to question whether she too would declare a longing for this state), we as audiences both to the dancing and to the viewing of it are given this statement of desire and asked to evaluate it as such; thus, we watch Anil’s dancing in the text through this lens of desire, knowing too that the writing itself longs to keep Anil in this state:
She stops when she is exhausted and can hardly move. She will crouch and lean there, lie on the stone. A leaf will come down. Its click of applause. The music continues furious like blood moving for a few more minutes in a dead man. She lies under the sound and witnesses her brain coming back, lighting its candle in the dark. And breathes in and breathes out and breathes in and breathes out. (182)

Savouring the ending of this scene with “its click of applause,” the narrative continues to dance even after Anil lies still. Her final pose on the stone becomes an echo of the writings referenced in “The Nine Sentiments: Historical Illustrations on Rock and Book and Leaf”; here, body takes the place of text, lying where poems are written.

Despite language that frames this scene as a dance — “now it is herself dancing to a furious love song that can drum out loss, ‘Coming In from the Cold,’ dancing the rhetoric of a lover’s parting with all of herself” (182) — the narrative distinguishes this performance as “not a dance, does not contain even a remnant of the courtesy or sharing that is part of a dance” (181). I would reconcile this apparent contradiction by observing that Anil’s dance is not a carefully choreographed piece; instead, her dancing bursts with spontaneity, physical energy and chaotic abandonment. Her dancing has more in common with Patrick’s blindfolded leaps around a room than with the steps of the tango danced in Running in the Family. Still, it is worth noting that there are instances when the tango verges upon recklessness: “Francis would only dance the tango solo so that he wouldn’t do damage to the woman’s feet, for which he had too much respect […] He would put on ‘I kiss your little hand, Madame’ and mime great passion for an invisible partner, kissing the mythical hand, pleading to the stars and jungle around him to console him in an unrequited abstract love” (Running in the Family 36). This miming of the tango resembles another subversion of social dancing conventions when Almásy proposes his invented dance, the Bosphorous hug, described as “a maniac’s tango” (244). Propelled with combative desire,
the dancers, Almásy and Katharine, veer into the chaotic as they dance with expressions of attack which transfers into Almásy’s swearing of the lyrics: “His mouth muttering at her when he bent his face down, swearing the lyrics of ‘Honeysuckle Rose’ perhaps” (244).

Importantly, the energy of Anil’s dancing stems from the music — Bob Marley’s “Coming in From the Cold” — and the narrative closely attends to moments when her movements respond to the music: “she waits for the rhythm to angle off so she can open her arms and leap. Which she does now, throwing her head back, her hair a black plume, back almost to the level of her waist” (181). Like Bolden’s embodied musical conversation with the dancer in the parade, Anil’s body responds to the music with a similar intense recklessness as “she needs music to push her into extremities and grace” (181). Nevertheless, what becomes apparent in reading the passage that describes Anil’s dancing is that the writing itself betrays a high degree of forethought. Although she attempts to transgress any limits of control — dancing a dance that is not a dance and not stopping for “a cut foot she earns during the dance” (182) — written words choreograph her body’s movements. To claim that Ondaatje choreographs through words is an intricate statement because, in as much as he does attend to choreography in his writing, he couches this choreography in terms of a constant recognition of the failure of choreographic mapping to accurately control or describe the world in which bodies move. As the narrative in The English Patient articulates (voiced by Katharine Clifton in the film), “We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (261). Choreography is a practice of mapping that writes of the body and with the body. This latter practice of mapping ensures that the map is still being written, like the shape a body makes while lying
on stone, silhouetted by moonlight, or careening towards a desire to write while knowing that words cannot capture that desire: “I write about you / as if I own you / which I do not” (Secular Love 72).

In Coming Through Slaughter, we read one of the most compelling scenes of embodied performance as Buddy Bolden improvises a cornet solo on the edge of madness. It is a performance that eludes choreographic control, musical notation, or audio recording and yet it is textually rendered. In what I would argue is an embodied version of antiphonal response, Buddy’s solo responds to the body of a dancer: “She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what to do through her” (130). Sensuality underscores this surreal scene in which the narrative not only conveys the hallucinatory state of Bolden’s stream-of-consciousness thoughts but also the intimacy of his music and her dancing despite being surrounded by a crowd: “the girl is alone now mirroring my throat in her lonely tired dance, the street silent but for us her tired breath I can hear for she’s near me as I go round and round in the centre of the Liberty-Iberville connect. Then silent” (130). The language of falling silent and the fact that this scene takes place during a parade brings to mind the choreography of stars in “White Dwarfs” in which Ondaatje writes, “there are those burned out stars / who implode into silence / after parading in the sky / after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway” (Rat Jelly). Like one of “those burned out stars” Bolden implodes into silence, but only after performing this richly visceral and chaotic choreography — one that is improvised through responding to an erotic, dancing body. Desire is fulfilled: “What I wanted” (italics in original, 132), which provides a climax to the portrayal of desire as performance throughout the text. The body is often placed in front of an audience, not necessarily a formal audience but even a close
intimate audience like Bolden and Robin during their last night together: “We give each other a performance, the wound of ice. We imagine audiences and the audiences are each other again and again in the future” (84). Bolden and Robin are performers and audiences in this sexual moment, which foreshadows the audience-performance relationship with the unknown girl in the parade as she “hits” each note with her body even before Bolden sounds them. Critics have discussed the violence in this text (see Bök), but here I want to emphasize how it physicalizes the call-and-response among performers. Ondaatje writes the body with an awareness of the very limitations of such an act — what we might call writing with an awareness of the walls in the room. Part of this awareness is transgressing these limits, such as in the choreography of a scene specifically described in terms of a repetitive memory of movement: “Bolden’s hand going up into the air in agony. His brain driving it up into the path of the circling fan. This last movement happens forever and ever in his memory” (138). This is a writing of the body that longs to disassemble. It speaks through a ruptured, cut, and fragmented poetics implying that any attempt to capture the body will be shattered perhaps even by the body itself. As Bolden insists, “Come with me Webb I want to show you something, no come with me I want to show you something. You come too. Put your hand through this window” (89). Bolden insists upon showing, but what shows is an action of the body, one that can only be partially represented in the narrative by the description of its violent shattering of the window. As in this fragmented shattering, Bolden’s performance in the parade concludes with an utterance of desire that is cut off: “What I wanted.” The desired object is left unsaid, but we can project that what was wanted was the performance itself.

Bolden’s performance is one that speaks to the issues of writing music and writing
dance, a writing of the body that must recognize its representative limitations. In this chapter, I have discussed dance adaptations in order to build towards this final section’s argument that representational limits underscore Ondaatje’s writings of embodied performance. Chapter Three will continue this focus on performance by discussing the theoretical and practical issues of writing music in the case of George Elliott Clarke’s poetic libretti (*Beatrice Chancy*, *Québécité* and *Trudeau*). Writing music and writing dance each deal with the blurring of metaphorical language into the embodied practice.

Thus, I conclude this chapter with a return to writing music in *Divisadero*, a novel that began this chapter and, indeed, began with a song. It is in this novel that Ondaatje both approximates a writing of music and recognizes the limits of each medium. As the narrative observes of Raphael, “Now he brushed the strings of his guitar into life with the calluses of his palm, and listened to what it was. What was adjacent to music was music” (79). In the Art of Time Ensemble premiere of Robert Carli’s instrumental composition based on *Divisadero*, Ondaatje read these words before the piece was played, as though reminding listeners that each form remains singular despite their conversations. *What was adjacent to music was music*. The musical composition becomes another antiphonal response, returning us to the phrase from “The Nine Sentiments” as we hear a call-and-response: “A woman and her echo.” Throughout the dance adaptations discussed in this chapter, we have seen embodied versions of the subsequent lines in this poem: “You stare into the mirror / that held her painted eye.” As an audience of readers, we stare into that mirror, or, rather, as I have argued in terms of adaptations as antiphonal responses, we see a poem dancing and, simultaneously, listen to its echoes.
Endnotes

1. For a theatre production of *Divisadero*, singer-songwriter Justin Rutledge has been commissioned by Ondaatje to write songs for the character of Coop.

2. Anne Cooper Albright defends her argument that dance speaks through the example of Canadian dancer and choreographer Marie Chouinard. Cooper-Albright focuses on how Chouinard’s performance uses the voice to express “the sound of her body in motion” (167). A passage from Cixous’s “Sorties,” one that Cooper-Albright quotes in her essay in order to highlight how Cixous’s description of writing is analogous to Chouinard’s dancing, redefines the notion of ‘speaking’ and posits the voice as a place where this unspeaking is able to be spoken: “She doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body into the air, she lets herself go, she flies, *she goes completely into her voice*, she vitally defends the ‘logic’ of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true” (italics added, qtd. in Albright 166). Albright notes how “for both Cixous and Chouinard, the voice is a meeting of body and discourse” (166) — it is this intersection that occurs whether this voice is described as *writing* or *speaking* since the voice is able to not be restrained by the limits of either one.

3. Laban Movement Analysis is another technique for writing dance based on notation, although film is often relied upon in combination with this documentation. Here, I examine the writing of dance in spoken and written language rather than in this notational system, just as in Chapter Three I speak of the writing of music in poetic language rather than in musical notation.

4. In an interview with Solecki, Ondaatje speaks of writing a screenplay for *Coming Through Slaughter* as well (329). Along with these screenplays, Ondaatje’s work in film consists of *The Clinton Special, Sons of Captain Poetry* (discussed in Chapter One as an adaptation of bp Nichol’s poetry) and *Carry on Crime and Punishment*. The script for *The Farm Show* was a collaborative improvisation by the actors but it does have a textual form as *The Farm Show* published by Coach House.

5. A critique of “the real” in “Elimination Dance” might refer to the comparisons of how the term itself is deployed in titles such as in Robert Kroestch’s *Excerpts from the Real Worlds: A Prose Poem in Ten Parts* (1986) and Alice Munro’s short story “A Real Life” (*Open Secrets*, 1994).

6. An indirect reference to the tango appears in a reference to another literary figure:
   Two miles away from Buller Road lived another foreigner. Pablo Neruda. For two years during the thirties, he lived in Wellawatte while working for the Chilean Embassy. He had just escaped from Burma and Josie Bliss of “The widower’s tango” and in his *Memoirs* writes mostly of his pet mongoose. An aunt of mine remembers his coming to dinner and continually breaking into song, but many of his dark claustrophobic pieces in *Residence on Earth* were written here, poems that saw this landscape governed by a crowded surrealism — full of vegetable oppressiveness. (66)
This tango that Ondaatje writes of is Neruda’s poem “Tango del Viudo (Widow’s Tango)” from *Residence on Earth*. It is also notable that he refers to Neruda’s memoir amid writing his own memoir.

7. On the memorial statue for Gwendolyn MacEwen on Walmer Road in Toronto, the inscription is a quotation from her poem “Late Song” in which dance, a recurring word in many of her poems, provides the continuing action beyond death: “But it is never over; nothing ends until we want it to. / Look, in shattered midnights, / On black ice under silver trees, we are still dancing, dancing” (97).

8. In discussing this dance adaptation, I want to keep in mind that there are other adaptations (visual art and music) of *Handwriting* in order to pursue the question of how this collection of poems invites a re-imagining of the language as outside the text. For instance, Anansi has published the poem “The Story” juxtaposed with illustrations by David Bolduc. Beneath the typed words of the poem are the words written in Ondaatje’s handwriting, which also recalls his story of learning how to handwrite in *Running in the Family*. In 2004, CBC Radio broadcasted an orchestral adaptation of Ondaatje’s poem “The Nine Sentiments”; written by Neal Currie, “Sentiment #3” was performed by the Windsor Symphony Orchestra. In this broadcast, the Windsor Symphony Orchestra premiers a number of pieces that were inspired by Ondaatje’s writing. Another piece, *Swerve* composed by Juliet Palmer, was inspired by Ondaatje’s poem “The Story.” Preceding the piece is an interview with Palmer and I transcribe her comments here because they contain valuable insight into the composer’s vision of the interaction between adapted text and acoustic adaptation:

> The starting point was Michael Ondaatje’s poem, “The Story.” The third part begins with the line, “With all the swerves of history, / I cannot imagine your future” and the very last line, “But I know a story about maps for you.” And I thought of the way we navigate time and history; and the way, in particular, how we navigate a poem that we’re reading for the first time. The piece is an attempt to convey that process of reading a poem, re-reading it, coming back to words that leap out of the page and, by the end, gaining some kind of understanding. The very first thing that I did was to look at the way the poem presents itself on the page — not the content of the words, not their semantic meaning, but just the proportions, the shapes of the words, the spaces between them, the lengths of the lines — and that helped me create musical material that was very linear and irregular in its rhythms and irregular in the intervals between pitches. So that’s the first stage of writing the piece […] It’s full of metrical changes. The idea is that you have this very basic material that is the poem and it keeps repeating, just in the way that you re-read a poem, each time you’ll notice a particular word — it might be *swerve, history, future* — and, at those moments, we start to hear more details in the musical material. Until the final section where musically all the materials are stacked on top of each other; the idea of a sort of synthesis of our understanding. (Transcribed from the radio broadcast of *Swerve*.)

In these comments on *Swerve*, the resonance of the written poem within the orchestral music brings to mind Hutcheon’s notion of adaptation as palimpsest. Palmer’s comments further explain how textual and musical overlapping takes place even though the
composition is orchestral without any part of the poem read aloud. Palmer has also composed a piece for soprano and chamber orchestra entitled So Long that is based on text by Leonard Cohen (performed by Patricia O'Callaghan and the Canadian Chamber Ensemble, conductor Dan Warren. Open Ears Festival, Kitchener, April 29, 2005).

9. In terms of comparative adaptations of “The Cinnamon Peeler,” we might think of the reading of this poem in the film Away from Her (an adaptation of Alice Munro’s short story “The Bear Who Came Over the Mountain”). As an adaptation within an adaptation, the poem functions as a reference to Canadian literature and suggests that this poem would very much be recognizable to its audiences.

10. The Introduction explains in more detail why poetry has been selected as the subject of this study. Yet, in the case of an author such as Ondaatje, the writing often blurs generic distinctions. Thus, this chapter includes dance adaptations of Anil’s Ghost and In the Skin of the Lion because these adaptations engage with short excerpts and perform close-readings of these texts as though attending to them as poems.

11. See Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall’s history of the Sony Walkman in Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman, which proposes a collision of individualized and public spaces in Walkman culture. Also, see David William’s article on Kip and the radio in The English Patient.
Chapter Three

“Oui, let’s scat”: Singing the Poetic Libretti of George Elliott Clarke

But Trudeau — ours — opposed, through verse, 
Posed versions of our universe.  
— “Au Lecteur” (Trudeau 17).

This Canada may pass away, 
But snow will still fall, rain still spray, 
His name be sung when dreamers sing.  
— Trio of Cixous, Robertson, and Castro (Trudeau 114)

The opening scene of George Elliott Clarke’s opera, Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path situates the audience amid the battle of Nanjing, China, 1949, where we encounter Mao Zedong, poetess Yu Xuanji, and young Pierre Elliott Trudeau. While offering a multi-vocal political account of Mao and Trudeau, this scene, simultaneously, situates these characters within a meta-theatrical commentary on the opera’s aesthetics through the words of poetess Xuanji: “Poetry begins where lying ends” (38). Written as a dramatic poem, the libretto of Trudeau can be read as a sequel to Québécité: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos (published under this title and performed as a jazz opera with the single-word title of Québécité in 2003). While Trudeau is an opera and Québécité is a jazz opera, these works bear a musical resemblance because of their shared composer, D.D. Jackson. There are musical hints in the libretto of Trudeau towards what the opera should sound like, as when the stage directions indicate that “Yu sits beside Trudeau and plays her flute, releasing, unexpectedly, piano music into the air” (41). Jackson’s music echoes these suggestions with adept subtlety; Act II, for instance, begins with a bossa nova, signalling that this act will bear witness to Trudeau meeting with Castro in Havana, Cuba, 1960. I highlight these points of musical inflection in Trudeau in order to foreground a critical
question that informs this chapter: namely, how does Clarke write a libretto that effectively conveys an argument through sound? Or, to re-phrase this question more specifically, how does the libretto provide a unique medium through which an argument for a certain kind of Canadian sound can be made both on the page and in performance?

As I explain in the Introduction, any attempt to theorize Canadian sound continues to be an ongoing process, often taking place through sound itself rather than in written words. Yet, it is important to discuss this process within a critical context because it allows for a space in which to examine how cultural dialogue functions within this sound, or rather through these sounds. Canadian soundscapes, notably in the plural, are what I define as acoustic resonances that respond to, represent, and challenge what can be defined as Canadian sound. (See Chapter Two for a discussion of R. Murray Schafer’s term “soundscape” in relation to what Ondaatje calls the soundscape of a film.) Here, I refer to soundscapes because this chapter examines the extent to which Clarke creates very specific and self-reflexive versions of Canadian soundscapes through his libretti, particularly in the case of Québecité. (In referring to the title Québecité, I conflate the performance and publication, but further discussions in this chapter will differentiate between these two forms in more detail.) As Clarke states in an interview that precedes the CBC Radio broadcast of Québecité, the political motivations for the piece stem from a determination to have “people from different cultural, linguistic, religious and racial backgrounds being able to collectively identify, without any irony, themselves as Canadian.” I suggest that, upon listening to a recording or performance of Québecité, this point can be re-phrased in terms of Canadian soundscapes: namely that Clarke presents a soundscape that strives to be representative for all. Yet, how can one sound represent all Canadians? Does not this
inclusivity return to the monolithic logic that multiculturalism seeks to disrupt? Nevertheless, I would clarify that, while attempting to represent an inclusive Canadian sound for all Canadians, Clarke simultaneously gestures towards the multiplicity of soundscapes that exist, often unheard, within Canada. Thus, the impulse towards inclusivity maintains an awareness that this is but one soundscape among many; moreover, what is perhaps most significant is that, as Clarke articulates in his CBC Radio comments, this particular soundscape is one that has long been unheard as Canadian.

Before moving into this chapter’s main argument in relation to Quèbécité, I return to Trudeau because it is in this recent libretto that we hear Clarke translate his political intentions into overtly political arguments that can be traced back to Quèbécité, which begins, after all, with a dedication to Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Adrienne Clarkson: “Two Visionaries of Liberty” (v). The stage description for the jazz opera’s final scene offers another image that anticipates the setting of Clarke’s next opera: “This scene recalls May 68: Trudeaumania in Canada, Pre-Raphaelite Marxism in Czechoslovakia, and classy, sexy revolt in France” (91). In Trudeau, Clarke not only tackles the phenomenon of Trudeaumania but also contextualizes this mania within specific aspects of its populism. In introducing the libretto of Trudeau, Clarke notes how Trudeau became “a cult figure for many Canadians de couleur” (20). The press-release for the premiere of Trudeau at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto emphasizes this worldly portrayal of Trudeau by promising its audience “a meditation on the multicultural Trudeau, the man who declared himself a ‘citoyen du monde,’ who broke bread with Mao Zedong, who shouted ‘Viva Castro!’ and lived out the multicultural dream he loved in the hotbed that was Montreal.” In Act III Scene iii of the opera, Clarke provides a focal point for drawing our attention to
this internationally-minded leader by evoking Trudeau’s speech in which, as Clarke explains in the introductory comments to the opera, Trudeau was the only candidate in the Liberal leadership debate to speak of the assassination of Martin Luther King:

> Our Canada glows rouge and white  
> (Maple leaves red on snow delight) —  
> But earth shudders and shakes with hate  
> This is April 1968.  
> Two days past, Martin Luther King  
> Was shot through the throat, just for dreaming  
> Of a truly just society —  
> Exactly what Canada must be. (72)

Trudeau’s global attention to these world events directly connects to a vision of what Canada could, and must, be. Building upon the notion of Trudeau as a “citoyen du monde” (20), Clarke sets scenes of the opera in Nanjing, Fredericton, Havana, Beijing, Mooréa, Paris, Ottawa, Monte Carlo, New York City, Soweto, and Montréal. But is this political tourism enough to convince us of Trudeau’s awareness of Canada’s own diverse population? Clarke admits that “this libretto crafts no elegy” (21) and that the opera stands open to Trudeau’s faults, most notably the position that his government took on First Nations policies. But do the reflections upon humility in Trudeau’s soliloquies, his grief for a lost father and a lost son, and Margaret Trudeau’s critique offer perspectives that prove to be critical enough? Or do we walk away from the performance singing the refrain, “Trudeau, Trudeau, Trudeaumania!” (83)? Perhaps due to our historical distance from the mania itself, we can hear this refrain as ironic combination of critical and celebratory, which brings an added dimension of audience reception into this opera’s signification through music.

Published by Gaspereau Press in April 2007, the opera premiered at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre on April 14th 2007. Directed by Graham Cozzubbo, this was a
non-dramatic staging; the four singers stood in front of microphones, accompanied by an onstage band led by composer D.D. Jackson on piano. Surtitles, projected above the performers, contributed to an opera-like quality and filled in details of stage-directions. (In their interview on opera in Canada, Hutcheon and Clarke agree on the importance of accessibility; Hutcheon notes the importance of surtitles and Clarke expands on this point to reiterate that the words themselves are an integral part of opera [Verduyn 189].) Yet, in the case of Trudeau, the stage of directions included in the surtitles raised the question of what this performance would look like if these directions were enacted rather than imagined. For instance, following reporter Cixous’s aside, “He’s live theatre […] His go-go girls all go gaga: / They cue a frou-frou brouhaha!” (73), the stage directions indicate that “With flowers and stem between his teeth, Trudeau pirouettes offstage. Cheers.” (73). Examples such as this one (and more lavish examples such as the stage directions for the opening scene to Act II [see Appendix 4]) foreground the question of whether the stage directions are intended to be imagined or enacted. Moreover, even though non-dramatic staging prevented the enactment of Clarke’s detailed stage directions in the Harbourfront Centre performance, the singers still managed to captivate the audience with their technical command of the score. Interestingly, the operatic quality of the piece was emphasized through the impressive vocal range of the singers, particularly tenor John Lindsay-Botten’s final soliloquy, “I have merely been a traveller,” a reflection on Trudeau’s life as a politician and father; furthermore, Zorana Sadiq sang a moving portrayal of Margaret Trudeau, a character whose songs range from the forlorn lament in “The snow falling over Ottawa is falling stars” (99) to the rebellious opening song to Act V (riffing upon the Margaret Trudeau and Rolling Stones tabloids): “See, I could get no satisfaction. / I had to
get my satisfaction” (101). Not only does the score call for a range of vocal styles, but also the libretto varies stylistically in its language. At one point, as an answer to Mao’s question of whether he is a Capitalist or Communist, Trudeau playfully replies, “Truthfully, I’m just a canoeist” (35). Yet, Trudeau’s voice becomes more serious as the opera progresses, conveying the challenges of balancing personal and public expectations, such as his soliloquy upon the eve of his election (Act III, Scene iv) or later defying his critics as he rages against them, repeating the historically provocative phrase, “Just watch me! Just watch me!” (98).

*Trudeau’s* portrayal of Trudeau as global statesman and the opening scene of Trudeau’s meeting with Mao contrasts another political opera based on a world leader’s visit to China: *Nixon in China* (1987) with music composed by John Adams and libretto by Alice Goodman. Based on Nixon’s historic 1972 meeting with Mao in China, *Nixon in China* critiques all political figures involved in the media-hyped event and its context of the Cultural Revolution (including meta-theatrical dance elaborately choreographed by Mark Morris in the premiere and choreographed by Wen Wei Wang in a recent Vancouver production). I would argue that we are meant to keep *Nixon in China* in mind during the first scene of Clarke’s *Trudeau*, along with the international focus of Trudeau’s book written with Jacques Hebert, *Two Innocents in Red China* (1968). Clarke’s opera opens with Trudeau meeting Mao in China, with its pompous chorus of “Political Power” paralleling the grandiose spectacle that welcomes Mr. and Mrs. Nixon to China in Adams’s opera. Later in the opera, Clarke explicitly refers to *Nixon in China* as a comparison during a scene in which the reporter Cixous interviews Robertson about an opera he plans to write about Trudeau:
Robertson: I remember Pierre Elliott Trudeau,
That photogenic intellectual
[...] Now, despite Multiculturalism
And the deft Charter of Rights and Freedoms,
I fear he’s a dandy, natty failure…

Cixous: But few failures earn an opera…

Robertson: See Goodman: *Nixon in China*. (107)

Although the reference may seem anachronistic since the scene takes place in 1984, Goodman did, in fact, begin writing her libretto that very same year. Along with providing the comparison to *Nixon in China*, this scene provides an important rationale for writing the opera, especially if we read Clarke and/or Jackson as writer/composer mirrored in Robertson. In the introductory comments to the published libretto, Clarke explains how, even though “this libretto crafts no elegy” (21), it is inspired by admiration: “I admired solitary Romantics. Thus, as a tyro poet, I chose as my models, dashing, difficult artists and politicians: *avant-garde* reactionary poet Ezra Pound; dictator-philosopher Mao Zedong; free-speech poet Irving Layton; jazz trumpeter Miles Davis; pop bard Bob Dylan; orator Malcolm X; and The Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau [...] My idols were, perhaps mainly dastards. But they were also, for me, inescapable” (19). Returning to the opera’s scene in which Cixous asks Robertson why he is writing an opera about Trudeau, we can read Clarke’s own admiration through Robertson. Clarke’s admiration is mixed with a resistance to canonical figures and this tension is conveyed in Cixous’s apt question: “Now that Trudeau’s retired, / Roscoe Robertson feels inspired / To draft the man an opera: / Is he a hero or horror?” (106).

Clarke’s opera depicts the world of politics as a world of spectacle. The grandiosity of spectacle works well given that Trudeau played up performance in “real” life as a political who was, as Clarke describes, “an ‘iron man,’ but one with a flower in his lapel
and a girl on each arm” (23). Not only does Trudeau’s characterization call for a multitude of vocal styles but also we hear a multitude of arguments presented through various characters’ voices on the question of his success as a national and world leader. A prime example of a musical argument occurs when we hear the repeated phrase, “He’s the J.F.K. of Montreal” (53) sung by Robertson in a swaggering jazzy-swing as his voice slides downwards along the scale in tandem with Jackson’s accompanying chords. In this experience of listening that vastly differs from reading the written words, I would argue that Trudeau demonstrates a broader phenomenon of how one can posit an argument through music. In this particular example, the argument is a comparison between Trudeau and Kennedy, and the very fact that the melody of this argument echoes in our minds long after the performance reveals the power within this strategy. This effect, or perhaps even affect since it is a sound that we ‘take with us’ on a visceral level, raises an issue that resonates with discourses of media specificity in adaptation theory. Adaptation theory focuses on medium-specificity precisely because it reflects upon how medium itself affects the message. Building upon discussions in the Introduction and Chapter One on media-specificity in relation to Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), I mention medium-specificity here because it is an issue that can be pursued throughout Clarke’s experimentation with poetic form. In tracing how performance has shaped Clarke’s oeuvre, this chapter considers the libretto as a form that can hover between text and stage, an in-between space that becomes crucial for the representation of multicultural sound in *Québécité*. But before moving on to this particular case, we must ask how a libretto translates into performance within the context of another pressing question: what are the implications of a libretto being written as poetry?
Whether in written or sung words, sound is a medium that simultaneously reifies and un-fixes meaning. In this chapter, I ask how Québécité explores the ways in which cultural meaning, in particular, becomes re-defined through sound. Secondly, I ask how jazz opera functions as a hybrid genre that allows us to reconsider what it means to write and sing from an in-between space. What can be improvised in this space and can improvisation be an effective strategy for sounding difference? Finally, sound originates in the body and yet the sound produced need not be fixed in one place, either in its live or recorded forms. As Hutcheon emphasizes in Bodily Charm, Living Opera (2000), opera is an embodied art and, therefore, we must remember that the visual body is the source of sound. (See Levine and Treadwell in The Cambridge Opera Journal for a debate on the “reading” of the mediated body in opera.) Mediation in new methods of operatic recording and broadcasting complicate the audience’s relation to the body as source of sound. In a live broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera, for instance, we watch the singers up-close as if they were on film, but we know that we are seeing a performance happening, live, even though we are seeing only what the camera chooses to show us and sitting far removed from the site of performance in a movie theatre. As argued by Owen Lee (a well-known commentator on the Met Opera Broadcasts on the radio), the television and film close-ups greatly differ from watching a singer from the back row of an opera house. (See David Schroeder Cinema's Illusions, Opera's Allure: The Operatic Impulse In Film for an overview of techniques used in this medium.) However, both films of operas and Live at the Met broadcasts integrate the close-up into the so-called live watching and listening experience, thereby making the source of sound even more visible to the audience even though the process is more mediated. Even in its textual form, Québécité is aware of the
inextricability of the visual and the acoustic and I will later return to the point that sound is unfixed yet rooted in the body, thereby suggesting that sound can critique formations of cultural identity in ways that undermine the visual. Thus, as the chapter progresses, I move towards an argument that Clarke’s jazz opera calls for a critical consideration of the cultural and multicultural implications of embodied sound. Intriguingly, *Québécité*’s female characters — Laxmi Bharati as sung by Kiran Ahluwalia and Colette Chan as sung by Yoon Choi — sparked the most debate among critics regarding issues of dissonance; therefore, listening to *Québécité* through these two characters, I ask how their performances enact, challenge, and re-define our understanding of dissonance as a productive mode for interrogating identity politics.

**I. Libretto**

Libretto, a little book, is the Italian word for the scoring of words to be sung. Usually referring to the words of an opera, a libretto often functions as an in-between space that mediates among such media as performers and performance, composer and writer, or story and song. Although there is a history of the libretto as literary object, its status as a mediatory text suggests that a libretto is often already considered to be an adaptation; furthermore, given the libretto’s reliance upon stories from other literary forms, “there are remarkably few libretti, at least until recent times, that are not adaptations” (*Grove Online Music*). However, as I have alluded to in the discussion of poetic form in the Introduction, both *Québécité* and *Trudeau* are written as poetic libretti. (*Beatrice Chancy* completes Clarke’s trio of operas, but the poetic text itself is not specifically titled as a libretto.) In these poetic libretti, the forms of a libretto and a poem are combined to produce a poiesis, one which foregrounds the making of a song through written text. Also, these operas are
Canadian operas, a designation that situates them within a growing interest in Canadian opera, particularly since the centennial celebrations in 1967. In an interview with Christl Verduyn, Linda Hutcheon and George Elliott Clarke discuss the state of opera in Canada. Noting that opera appeals to young audiences who have been raised in a culture of the spectacle, Hutcheon points out that many smaller productions have been successful both economically and in their ability to create an immediate, accessible listening environment for their audiences:

Much new opera in Canada has been what I would call “chamber opera” — that is to say smaller-scale opera productions. Big productions with a 120-piece orchestra and large sets are very costly. It’s rare that a Canadian work will get the kind of premiere that, say, Robertson Davies's and Randolph Peters’s The Golden Ass had at the Canadian Opera Company in 1999. Most operas today are being written with smaller resources and for a more intimate audience. Beatrice Chancy […] is a good example. Productions like Beatrice Chancy could well be performed in grand spectacle, but their appeal is in bringing the spectacle into a more intimate space to a new audience. (185)

As Verduyn states in her introduction to the interview, this new audience is one of the many reasons why Canadian opera is a cultural medium that demands critical inquiry: “even a modest research foray into the area reveals opera to be an active and rapidly developing domain on the Canadian cultural scene.” As Verduyn further explains, “[I]n the early 1980s, CBC’s Saturday Afternoon at the Opera drew some 4,000 listeners; now it commands a listening audience of more than 200,000. Observers in the field also note a proliferation of opera houses and opera companies, as well as growing international recognition of Canadian performers and companies” (184). Since the publication of this interview, opera’s popularity has continued to grow in Canada and Clarke’s operas (one of which is an even more complex form: a jazz opera) continue to challenge audiences both in Canada and abroad to re-think what subjects and forms hold the potential for operatic
Clarke’s medium of a poetic libretto continues the traditions of Pound and Stein in the sense that the poem itself functions in its own right as a libretto, not simply as a poem to be adapted into a libretto. In the cases of Québecité and Trudeau, although there were occasional changes to the libretto as part of the collaborative process, the performance still followed the text quite closely and the published text retains the status as a libretto in the publication notes. By focusing on Clarke’s use of the poetic libretto, I argue that this form allows us to hear Clarke’s poetry as words waiting to be sung, and perhaps as singing already on the page. Yet, I situate these words within Clarke’s own critique of the tendency of critics to read African-American and African-Canadian writers as inherently musical. As he observes in his article, “Frederick Ward: Writing as Jazz” (2005), in as much as music informs much of the writing by African-Canadian and African-American writing, it is a mistake to reduce commentary on such writing to what Clarke calls “drab platitudes […] that the black author is a would-be or used-‘ta’-be musician or singer” (4). Yet, Clarke’s article seeks to hear the music in Ward’s poetry — a feat that seems, at first, to counter his initial stance against resorting to musical criticism. However, Clarke does not discredit the importance of music to black writers; rather, his aim is to expose the assumption that only white writers can balance the textual and the musical, with Leonard Cohen as his example of this wide-spread misconception among Canadian audiences. Thus, he approaches Ward’s writing through the practical issues of audience reception: namely, that “they (we) do not know how to read Ward” (8). Thus, hearing Ward’s performance on the page depends upon enacting a specific practice of listening. What this practice of listening entails is a question that concerns this chapter because, as I argue, it is
a re-attunement that must also be enacted by listeners to Clarke’s poetic libretti.

The poetry of George Elliott Clarke calls for a reading aloud. All poetry can be heard as rhythmic, but Clarke’s poetry specifically attends to its musical sound, which can be heard in his own poetry reading performances as well as the performances of his poetry. In addition to their rhythmic sound, Clarke’s poems are infused with musical references and elaborate visual descriptions that situate the words within the realm of performance. What I mean is that even Clarke’s poems that do not specifically imagine their onstage performance still speak through the language of performance whether in the poems themselves or in the paratextual accompaniments. In *Illuminated Verses*, poems are given musical titles: “Daughter of Music,” “Calypso,” “Soul,” “Blues & Jazz,” “Reggae,” and “Daughter of Music Redux,” all of which invoke various musical styles; yet, if we apply Clarke’s reading of Ward’s poetry to his own, we must not simply conclude from these titles that the poems will be musical; rather, we must also learn to listen to what sounds the poems themselves play. In the case of these poems with musical titles, they must also be heard in dialogue with the visual images of Richard Scipio’s photographs. Clarke explains that including these photographs is an attempt to make a political statement through their ekphrastic illumination: “Why? Maybe the idea of the unclothed black feminine seems too brazen, or just too dark a concept for a society addicted to the depictions of elect whiteness. Whatever curses my verses may merit, I think no allegation — political or aesthetic — may be legitimately posited against their ‘illuminations’” (viii). Clarke’s earlier poems anticipate this focus on illumination such as “Accumulated Wonder” in which the body is implicated in the process: “Desire illuminates the dark manuscript / of our skin with beetles and butterflies” (*Whylah Falls*, 64). Likewise, Scipio’s images appear in many of Clarke’s
publications (*Lush Dreams, Blue Exile, Beatrice Chancy, Blue, and Black*) and, thus, can be read as an ongoing dialogue between the photographed images and the writer’s words. Moreover, readers of this dialogue in, for instance, *Illuminated Verses* must keep their eyes moving from complex word to image, both of which demand attention. Clarke’s collaboration with Scipio might be compared to his collaboration with film director Clement Virgo on the film, *One Heart Broken into Song* (1999), for which Clarke wrote both the screenplay and the lyrics for many of the film’s songs (“Walk In Some More,” “Brown Skin Man,” “Latin Dove,” and “Sunflower County Blues”). The final scene of the film aligns the audience’s experience as witnesses to thwarted love with a crossing-over that Lyla Cromwell conveys with words that simultaneously reveal the poet behind the screenplay: “From innocence to martyrdom is love’s odyssey. From peril’s edge to pain the heart of poetry” (transcribed from the film). Thus, Clarke’s collaboration with Virgo produces a filmic soundtrack of words and music that interacts with and informs the visual plane; I specifically use the word *inform* here because I would suggest that the plot itself relies and testifies to the medium of poetry as capable of breaking one’s heart into song.

A collection of Clarke’s early poems, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems 1978-1993*, concludes with a discography for the poems that functions as a dialogue similar to the sound-visual dialogue in *Illuminated Verses*. In offering what I would call an acoustic variation upon the visually-focused ekphrastic tradition, the discography implies that these poems are inspired, given breath, through sound. (See Appendix 5.) This list of albums provides a counterpart to the poems themselves, thereby offering a link to the soundscape invoked by lines such as those in “Five Psalms of Paris”: “*Dans le café, students drink slow, / Dreaming of Miles Davis and Juliette Greco*” (18), which gestures
even further outside of itself in echoing T.S. Eliot’s lines, “In the room the women come
and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”). Musicians
replace a painter as the subject of conversation in Clarke’s poem, just as I am suggesting
that his poems move towards an acoustic version of ekphrasis. One way of explaining this
further through the notion of discography is by comparing the discography to the concepts
presented in the poem “Marginalia” (Blue), in which the title itself refers to the images and
sounds surrounding the text. Discographies fall into the paratextual category of
marginalia, but I would argue that the marginalia functions as a performative commentary
upon the text, especially since “Marginalia” asks the question, “What is the use of writing
so many books, / when poetry is song?” (153). Raising the critical question of how a text
interacts with the multiple forms of its performances, Clarke’s poem gestures towards how
the marginalia reminds us that poetry is song in as much as the song or image that exists
alongside it. Whylah Falls is one such poem that has multiple forms, both as a book of
poetry and as a published play, along with the various performances that constitute
marginalia that engage directly with the text itself. Similarly, Beatrice Chancy exists in
textual, performative, and acoustic forms and I discuss this piece briefly here before
moving into the main discussion of the jazz opera Québécité because Beatrice Chancy
provides crucial meta-textual commentary on how to write song, how to sing writing, and
what is at stake in listening.

Characters speak of Beatrice before she speaks for herself. Her beloved Lead
defines her appearance in terms that will underline the portrayal of her as a beauty too
enlightened for her socio-cultural reality: “She is too beautiful for ugly things” (22).
When she finally appears onstage, her presence is framed in the language of music:
“Beatrice is pure song” (italics in original, 30). Stage directions written into the poem itself indicate that Dumas sings from offstage words that frame the entrance of Beatrice as the entrance of a song that calls for a change in how listeners speak about it:

Beatrice is pure song,
So elegantly spoken,
A philosophy shaken
Into a new language,
Demanding new lips
And a new heart,
To speak for who she is. (30)

From this moment, even before her entrance, Beatrice’s tragic fate can be traced to the inability of her listeners, or rather the listeners who wield the power over her life, to understand this “new language.” The poetry itself, then, is left to demand these “new lips” and “a new heart” of those who listen. With this attention to the bodies of those who listen, whether those who surround Beatrice in the poem or those who are listening to and reading the text, we hear echoes of the poignant conclusion of Clarke’s article on Ward’s poetry: “To ‘get’ Ward, the reader must combine the sensitivities of the musicologist, performer and poet. Will you hear him?” (25). To listen to Beatrice Chancy involves a similar combination of sensitivities, thereby turning this culminating question to the audience.

Will we, as listeners, be able to hear Beatrice?

While this question can only be answered by individual listeners, the performance history of Beatrice Chancy suggests that the adaptation process can assist in such a hearing. Even though it is fitting that the poem has the characters describe Beatrice’s voice before we hear it ourselves, the recording of excerpts from the opera begins with Beatrice’s own voice, or rather the voice of acclaimed Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman singing of how Lead’s language touched her: “My love you wrote me such letters” (Toronto,
2001). These lines are adapted from a dialogue between Beatrice and Lead in the poem in which the process of writing is more literal and yet the act is displaced onto another writer: “Lead, you had Moses quill me such letters” (40). Nevertheless, in both the poem and the opera, her love for Lead unfolds through language, just as our attention to the play depends upon hearing Beatrice herself. Beatrice Chancy asks us to hear Beauty. In this sense, the task of the audience is reminiscent of Shelley’s words that frame a poem to X in Whylah Falls: “X, we are responsible / for Beauty” (150). In fact, we are offered a hopeful glimpse into the possibility of hearing Beauty during an earlier poem in Whylah Falls, “A Poem with the Single Title of ‘Desire,’” in which X writes to Shelley that her beauty will be heard because “[t]hem that have ears, they will hear” (201). But the conclusion of Beatrice Chancy reveals that this hearing is difficult, which, given Beatrice’s alignment with Beauty, reminds us of Pound’s phrase, “Beauty is difficult” (Cantos LXXIV), a line that appears as one of the epigraphs to the libretto of Trudeau. Beatrice had once devoted herself to the performance of Beauty: “I’ll play Beatrice. I’ll play her beautifully” (62); however, after the rape by her father, torment of her mother’s death, violence inflicted upon her beloved and her powerlessness to see him, she can no longer play her beautifully. I would extend this failure to play Beauty to include the medium of music through which Beatrice crafts her poetic making or poiesis. Her death is the death of song. Beatrice had once sung to her beloved, “I want to be the song you insist upon / Unable to breathe without it. / I’m restless for you, singing for you, and alone” (43). Longing is phrased in terms of wanting to hear someone and breath is enabled by that someone as well. Thus, her death and the death of her song affect both singers and listeners.

As I have discussed, Beatrice Chancy foregrounds the importance of listening and,
therefore, the death of sound only heightens the tragic loss of Beatrice herself. In the article “Word Jazz 2,” Kevin McNeilly observes, “Beatrice’s last words in the play, as she is hanged for murdering Chancy, are metrically broken […] Perhaps she’s cut off as she’s executed, her voice cinched by the same legal system that allows for slavery, but her final sentence fuses vernacular common-sense with poetic paradox. Its interruption signals at once a wounded speech, slashed through by the vicious and violent strictures of a racist society” (177). McNeilly’s close-listening to Beatrice’s final words reveals an almost musical scoring of breath within the language itself in which we can hear an injured society that needs to heal. Part of this healing is to re-evaluate the constructions of lightness and darkness as reified through discourses of race and one way that audiences are challenged to undertake this re-evaluation is through the characterizing of Beatrice as parallel to Dante’s muse of enlightenment whose appearance brings silence, light, and sound. Furthermore, the murder of her language coincides with the important musical accompaniment to Beatrice’s death as described by Clarke in the poem’s stage directions. In this scene, we might ask how can any sound accompany this death of language, song and beauty and, yet, Beatrice’s own voice anticipates this silence: “Io venni in luogo d’ogni luce muto” (140). (In this line, she articulates the profound loss in her death through this synaesthetic metaphor of light becoming silent, but she also echoes the use of this line by Pound in Canto XIV in which we return to an infernal world of “betrayers of language.”) When the moment of her execution does take place, Clarke writes detailed directions on what sound should accompany this act: “Mind the steady 6/4 chord in which Beatrice hangs, the dissonant second G, subtly cohering with the first F-sharp, a hymn of death. The globe goes dark as crucifixion time light garbed in sackcloth and black ash. Ita n’è Beatrice in
l’alto cielo” (148, italics in original). Significantly, we hear her death. Thus, I would suggest that this description is not only a direction to performers of this work but also a direction to readers as listeners. Through attending to these words describing music, they hear “the dissonant second G, subtly cohering with the first F-sharp” and know that light has fallen silent.

As discussed in relation to Ondaatje’s writing of music in Chapter Two and discussed here in relation to this final scene in Beatrice Chancy, the writing of music balances the acts of describing and enacting (or what might be phrased in terms of mimesis and diegesis). In Beatrice’s death, we are left with a mimetic imitation of music after the death of she who makes Beauty — music can no longer be heard since she was music. This ontological argument leads into the underlying question of how can someone or something be music. Thus, what is writing as music? What is jazz poetry? In his introductory comments to Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present, Sascha Feinstein offers a starting point for considering this issue with his statement: “[a] jazz poem is any poem that has been informed by jazz music” (2). But, if we translate this to a jazz libretto, then does that mean that a jazz libretto is any libretto that has been informed by jazz music? As Clarke suggests in his article on Ward’s poetry (and as I would suggest about Clarke’s), we need to further modify this question in order to ask: what is a poetic libretto? Or, rather, what are the possibilities and implications when we consider not only a poetic libretto but a poetic libretto performed as a jazz opera?

II. Québécité

Set on the apple-blossomed streets of Quebec City with the iconic Chateau Frontenac in the backdrop, Québécité is a jazz opera that sings the story of two
multicultural couples — Laxmi Bharati and Ovide Rimbaud, and Malcolm States and Colette Chan — whose loves are thwarted and recovered as they negotiate familial, personal and cultural prejudices. Colette, a University of Laval law student, must decide whether to abide by her Chinese parents’ disapproval of her love for Malcolm, an Africadian saxophonist. Laxmi, a Hindu architecture student from Montreal, questions the fidelity of her lover, Haitian-Quebecois architect Ovide, and refuses to allow him to cast her as, what she calls, “une lascivité proprement asiatique” (80). Through Clarke’s libretto and Jackson’s score, these characters negotiate their cultural identifications within visual and acoustic spaces that simultaneously reify and unfix differences. While difference need not necessarily connote dissonance, the reception of Québécité frames the cultural differences between characters in terms of whether or not they sound alike. The female characters — Laxmi Bharati as sung by Kiran Ahluwalia and Colette Chan as sung by Yoon Choi — sparked the most debate among critics regarding issues of dissonance and, therefore, I ask how these characters, in particular, embody political action through sound. Situating this question amid current debates on performing multiculturalism (Bannerji, Kamboureli, Gunew), I argue that Québécité exemplifies how sound offers a medium through which to redefine understandings of multicultural and multi-vocal improvisations. Premiered at the Guelph Jazz Festival in 2003, Québécité performs a combination of texts: Clarke’s libretto, published as Québécité: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos and the musical score composed by D.D. Jackson, whose collaboration with Clarke continues with the scoring of Clarke’s subsequent libretto, Trudeau (2007). A second production of Québécité took place in Vancouver alongside the conference “Transcultural Improvisations: Performing Hybridity,” organized by Sneja Gunew and held at the
University of British Columbia in October 2003. From this performance history, a dialogue has already begun between the terminology of “transcultural improvisations” (Gunew 125) and Québécité itself, a dialogue that I continue in this paper by asking how sound offers a particular medium through which to theorize the cultural crossings of these improvisations.

The work of jazz and literary critic Ajay Heble (artistic director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, who commissioned the production of Québécité for the festival’s tenth anniversary) outlines the theoretical background to the approach to listening that I apply to Québécité in this paper. Although his writing on jazz provides the most relevant connection, I would argue that this writing needs to be contextualized by his essay, “New Contexts for Canadian Criticism: Democracy, Counterpoint, Responsibility” (1997). Here, Heble makes the compelling claim that Glenn Gould’s radio documentary “The Idea of North” (1967) necessitates a responsible, contrapuntal listening. Since Gould’s editing techniques allow for all voices to speak simultaneously, Heble contends that this simultaneity not only democratizes the voice but also implicates audiences in the production of meaning out of this dissonance, a participation exemplified during the opening scene of Québécité when Laxmi sings to Ovide, “You’ve invited me to savour jazz” (19). Furthermore, Gould’s technique of polyphonic counterpoint highlights the interstitial space of what Heble calls, “cultural listening” (86), which permits cross-cultural listening to take place along the lines of Edward Said's notion of “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and that of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (qtd. in Heble, 87). In this argument, Heble suggests that, if we learn to practise new modes of cultural listening, then there exists the potential to unsettle processes of identity formation: “if
identity, as Gould's contrapuntal method invites us to see, is multiple, dialogic, and ever-evolving, then what is at issue is, in large part, an attack on forms and structures of authority, on constructions and representations which authoritatively claim to be able to have access to some pure, definitive, or whole truth about, say, the identity of Canada” (90). While Clarke’s libretto is not written in contrapuntal verse, both the visual and acoustic signifiers of Québecité produce a multi-vocal effect that enables a version of this ongoing, reciprocal cultural listening.

D.D. Jackson’s score for Québecité is composed of lush, scintillating jazz. As heard in the Guelph and Vancouver performances, his music balances melodic love scenes with dissonant wails of characters’ voices fighting against the politics and prejudices that prevent them from musically fulfilling their desires. For instance, Colette and Malcolm fall in love amid the soft sound of their duet, in which their words sing for exquisite accompaniment:

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Lushly, a dewed light falls,
blushing branches.
It clears what doubts had pressed down leaves
and lets kissed lips —
lilacs, lilies, tulips —
flourish,
lushly flourish. (28)
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As if the libretto can already imagine how the piano keys press down softly like this image of pressed leaves, the characters utter the words, “it’s your music that resembles / beautiful, fragrant, apple blossoms” (29). Yet, the music of this couple changes dramatically at the end of Act II, when Colette tells Malcolm of her parents’ disapproval. The music rages with his anger, culminating in his leaving of the jazz café, La Revolution Tranquille, with the statement: “We’ll put our silver instruments / And our sable music away. Away! / This
ain’t no time for innocence” (71). Thus, while the music is often harmonious jazz, there are moments of dissonance that respond to cultural dissonances among characters themselves.³ It is in this sense that I hear Québecité through Heble’s book, *Landing on the Wrong Note* (2000) in which he aims “to postulate a theory of musical dissonance as social practice” (170). While Heble’s study includes musicological elements, it focuses on the discursive community that constructs our perception of sound as wrong, or rather on “sounds (and, more generally, cultural practices) that are ‘out of tune’ with orthodox habits of coherence and judgment” (9). He explains how this playing “out of tune” allows for a re-imagining of the self, which results in his examination of what role “dissonant jazz played for subordinated social groups struggling to achieve control over the ways in which their identities have been constructed, framed, and interpreted” (9). It is this discursive element of dissonance that I apply to Québecité because it provides a model for understanding how identities — such as Laxmi’s and Colette’s — are politicized as improvisatory and continually in flux. Heble’s “Postlude” to the libretto supports this reading of Laxmi’s and Colette’s identities because he hears the spaces for these improvised identities as opening up from within the hybrid form of jazz opera: “Offering an alternative to the doggedly Eurological operatic tradition, Québecité marks an unprecedented opportunity on the Canadian operatic stage to generate bold new stagings of identity” (100). Given Heble’s commissioning of Québecité, the performance itself offers what could be called an enacted version of his theoretical writing, or rather an example through which to test the applicability of “musical dissonance as social practice” (170) that underlines the theoretical arguments in *Landing on the Wrong Note.*

Immersed in a mimicking of the operatic tradition, the amorous language of the
lovers, which strives to be sincere (Laxmi articulates that jazz itself fears “cadences of
decadence” [19]), reveals the extent to which *eros* needs to be taken into account in any
definition of dissonance. What I mean is that *Québécité* shows that dissonance need not be
heard as jarring collisions; it can be heard, instead, as disparate arcs of longing. The stage
directions to Canto III Scene v speak to how the voices meet, “Their songs interlock” (80),
as if depicting these arcs as overlapping sound waves in their mutual expressions of the
characters’ desires. Yet, if we consider that these voices are depicted as multicultural
voices, we realize that the performance calls for a critique of the listening audience and of
whether these interlocking voices are heard as distinct or assimilated. Such a critique is
necessary in order to avoid what Smaro Kamboureli calls “sedative politics,” a
re-organization of ethnic differences in order to control them (82). In *Scandalous Bodies:*
*Diasporic Literature in Canada* (2000), Kamboureli locates this debate in modes of
legitimating ethnic diversity; namely, she points to a failure in confronting multicultural
issues *through bodies* — it is here that *Québécité* provides a site for examining these issues
because it embodies them in both sight and sound.4 Furthermore, given that the reviews of
*Québécité* participate in this phenomenon of documenting multiculturalism through the
media, I mention Kamboureli because she selects the *Globe & Mail* newspaper as a
particular site through which to analyze how representations of multiculturalism are
constructed in public discourse (89). Using Kamboureli’s problematizing of
representations of cultural difference in media as a starting point, I propose a listening to
*Québécité* that emphasizes how *sound* foregrounds the complexity of its embodiment of
multiculturalism and I suggest that the sound itself is what enables a critical path outside
discourses of control.
Earlier in my discussion of opera as medium, I mentioned the importance of the visual in operatic mediation; I return to this point in order to suggest that there are scenes in *Québécité* that I read as allowing sound to challenge visual reifications of cultural identity. Not only does this challenge take place through sound itself (in song) but it also happens through an acoustic term, dissonance. When dissonance translates into visual terms it could be understood as misrecognition, a failure to recognize that brings to mind the Althusserian hailing of the other into being, or rather into subjectivity. For Kamboureli, the power of the hail can be subverted through a misrecognition, which, thereby enacts a version of what Judith Butler describes as “a community in which the recognition of the Other is always also the failure to know that Other” (qtd. in Kamboureli, 130). Such a misrecognition occurs in Canto II Scene v, in which Clarke’s stage directions describe Colette, who is Chinese, as wearing “a Nova Scotian tartan sari” (62) when meeting Laxmi, who is wearing “a blazing pink sarong—and a turquoise necklace—and white pumps” (62). With expectations of appearances already subverted through clothing, the conversation between these two characters further complicates any attempt to classify them based on appearance: for instance, in this same encounter, Laxmi says to Colette, “I see saris are in vogue, and you’re in love” (62), observing the playful capacity of visual signifiers to determine how characters are seen. Moreover, as Kamboureli comments in relation to Butler’s notion of misrecognition, “failure to know the Other means failure to accommodate existing stereotypes and failure to produce new ones” (130) and I would argue that the music of *Québécité* works with and against the visual in order to resist and challenge what it means to hear identity as fixed or known.

*Québécité*, as libretto and as jazz opera, calls attention to itself as a performance
and to the performance of cultural identities. Magda Wojtyra’s visuals, such as the one for
the jazz café La Revolution Tranquille translate this attention to performance from words
into images (see Appendix 6). This image echoes Clarke’s stage description of how the
scene could be decorated with posters of iconic figures of both jazz and politics, as though
reminding the reader that politics and music cannot be separated:

On the walls appear early 1960s-era posters of (your choice among) Martin Luther
King, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Ho Chi Minh, René Lévesque, Fidel Castro, Oscar
Peterson, Lili St.-Cyr, John Coltrane, Golda Meir, Miles Davis, James Brown,
Indira Gandhi, Ella Fitzgerald, Jean Lesage, Buffy Saint-Marie, Portia White
(photographed by Karsh), Josephine Baker, Adrienne Clarkson, Malcolm X,
Gamal Abdel Nasser, Oliver Jones, Leonard Cohen, Bruce Lee, Ravi Shankar,
Astrud Gilberto, Genevieve Bujold, Nancy Kwan, and Jawaharlal Nehru. The bar
is Warhol retro, with chrome and brass fixtures, and marble frills, soft-lit. (23)

Although these images are imagined as posters, they simultaneously evoke the acoustic by
providing a discography for the reader in order to imagine what La Revolution Tranquille
would sound like; thus, as shown in this example, the libretto overflows with visual images
and yet these images very much engage with the acoustic space of the text and its
performance. Just as the language oscillates between subverting and reifying
embodiments of culture, the sound too performs this oscillation. This oscillation is not
necessarily problematic but most certainly becomes complicated when reviews,
particularly with reference to Laxmi’s character, read cultural signification through sound.
Thus, beginning with Laxmi, I listen to how the acoustic challenges what takes place
visually in the text and on the stage in order to unsettle how this character fits into
discourses of performing multiculturalism.

III. “Laxmi, when apple blossoms blaze”: Performing Hybridity

In Québécité, visual signifiers occur within the larger signifying realm of sound, a
medium in which various kinds of expectations can be subverted. The libretto portrays identities that border upon being essentialized, as when Ovide sings, “Laxmi mirrors belle époque India, / Exquisite, sepia-toned, lavish, precise” (81). These words hint at a performative element through mirroring but also, more significantly, align Laxmi with a physical exoticized Indian-ness. Although the medium of jazz opera makes an overarching gesture towards identity as performative, the recognition of this performativity in sound has proven to be difficult for reviewers to employ in their reviews of Kiran Ahluwalia as Laxmi, whose performance of culture has been often misread as naturalized. Ahluwalia refers to this troublesome point during a conversation cited in Vish Khanna’s online review of Québecité: “I am Indian, but I’m Canadian as well so, when I’m improvising, is that Indian music or Canadian music? Well, you know what? It’s a bit of both; I’m doing Canadian music even if it sounds foreign to you.”

Improvisation provides Ahluwalia with a space for transcultural crossing through which she subverts expectations. In the above quotation, her statement, “I’m doing Canadian music even if it sounds foreign to you,” speaks back to critics who insist upon labelling her music as other. As Ahluwalia herself recognizes, blending jazz with Indian styles of music is a significant performative statement, and when the complexities of such a statement are dismissed with an insistence upon hearing her music as “Indian,” it seems to say more about the listener than about her performance. Nevertheless, to not hear the Indian influence in her singing would also be overlooking an integral quality to her singing of the role; thus, the balance of “a bit of both” applies to the critical reception of her singing as well in order to recognize the full complexity of its hybrid sound.

Khanna’s review focuses on Ahluwalia’s participation in creating a cross-cultural
sound through mixing jazz and Indian music. In her conversation with Khanna, Ahluwalia explains, “Ajay had an idea where he said, ‘Let me bring this actual composer who does this kind of western music and let me bring all of these singers together with him.’ He actually had this idea of bringing it out, and I think it’s definitely something that’s never been done before. I think it’s really quite a pioneering effort in defining Canadian music.”

Her comment draws attention to the ways in which the acoustics of Québécité exist in a larger context of redefining what constitutes a Canadian soundscape. In the specific space of the performance, the intersection of jazz and Indian music can be heard when she sings the words to Canto III, Scene iv: “Laxmi sur le quai.” She begins the song with a citational gesture of singing what *sounds like* a classical Indian ghazal before moving into the scored lyrics. Her citing of the ghazal performs a version of what Henry Louis Gates calls “signifyin’” (46). As Gates explains in *The Signifying Monkey*, “[t]he bracketed or aurally erased *g*, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)Naming ritual graphically in evidence here” (46). For both Laxmi and Colette, the concept of “signifyin’” allows us to understand how they sing riffs upon cultural difference, such as Laxmi’s referencing of the ghazal in Canto III Scene iv: *Laxmi sur le quai* [a scene in which the language of the libretto performs its own invocation of difference in a powerful description of Laxmi as a Quebecois Hindu Goddess: “a diva devi—de souche” (79)], or such as when Colette’s scat solo mimics the intonations of English and Chinese dialogue, as if arguing with her father (an argument discussed at length in the next section).

“Signifyin’” as a culturally infused citation of codes further highlights the degree to which Ahluwalia’s singing of Laxmi is a performance, which is important to keep in mind when
reading reviews such as Geoff Chapman’s for the *Toronto Star* in which he describes Ahluwalia’s Laxmi as relying upon her Indian-ness: “Kiran Ahluwalia was the least effective, except when she could employ her classical Indian style” (online). This comment disregards the crossing of borders that is at the centre of both Ahluwalia’s musical projects and *Québécité* itself. On Ahluwalia’s Juno Award-winning CD *Border Crossings*, the ghazals are written in Punjabi and Urdu by Toronto-based poets and set to music by Ahluwalia, thereby creating what the liner notes refer to as “Canadian ghazals.”

Ahluwalia’s singing of Laxmi in *Québécité* performs another version of these Canadian ghazals. Just as the ghazals on her CD are poetry set to music, the poetry of Clarke’s libretto becomes the text for the ghazals of *Québécité*, resulting in the linguistic shift to mark the crossing of borders, as the poetry is no longer written in Punjabi or Urdu but rather in heteroglossic English that remains aware of its historical context.

Hearing is not a passive act, and yet the politics of music can often be unheard, or rather confused with notions of taste. This conflation has important implications for *Québécité*, which refuses to separate the aesthetic from the political. Throughout the jazz opera, politics and aesthetics are fused; for example, in Canto I Scene iv, saxophone player Malcolm riffs upon the meaning of jazz: “Jazz is saxes stroked like violins, pianos beat like drums [...] Jazz is multiculti-Aboriginal-Semitic-Afro-Asian-Caucasian” (36). Malcolm’s metaphors exemplify ways in which language fluidly slips between the aesthetic and political. There is no clearer example of this slippage than in Clarke’s dedication of the libretto to his mother and D.D. Jackson’s mother, “Two Dreamers of Beauty” (5), which appears alongside the names of Adrienne Clarkson and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, “Two Visionaries of Liberty” (5). At once the jazz opera becomes intensely personal and overtly
political, a slippery status that permeates the libretto until the end, where we find the statement: “Without Love, it is impossible to live” (90) juxtaposed with “Love is a tyrannical democracy” (92). Which is it? Are we to hear Québécité as a dream of Beauty, or as a vision of Liberty? The complicated answer is yes and yes because, through jazz theory, we can understand jazz as always already implicated within politics and yet still functioning within the discourse of aesthetics, as gestured towards in Clarke’s use of the capitalization of ideals such as ‘Beauty’ throughout his libretto. Another way of phrasing this complexity would be to situate it within a pressing need to locate the ideal within the real, or within what M. Nourbese Philip recognizes as the failure of multiculturalism to operate within this space of the real: “The mechanism of multiculturalism is […] based on a presumption of equality, a presumption which is not necessarily borne out in reality” (181). Recognizing this presumption looks ahead to what I hear in the final scene as a self-reflexive dissonance between the “ideal” and “real” audiences of the jazz opera.

The political and the aesthetic, the real and the ideal, continue to blur throughout the jazz opera right up to the last line, “Vive notre québécité” (92), which sings of a political unity and of marital unities among the lovers. But what has been overcome in order for this word Notre to be sung freely? Earlier in the jazz opera, for instance, Malcolm argues against Colette’s concerns about mixed-race parentage when angrily asking her, “Do you think our kids’d be striped like zebras? / Or look like Neapolitan ice-cream? Or amoebas?” (71); yet, in the final chorus, Malcolm and Colette happily sing in unison, “Our children will be / every colour eyes can know / and free” (92). The image of their children as “coloured” appears in both scenes, but by the end this colouring takes on a positive connotation, as if reflected in the multi-coloured Quebec flag that emerges on the screen.
(see Appendix 6). While the inclusivity of this image makes an integral contribution to the political message of the pieces, the hyper-celebratory style of both the music and the image draws attention to the performance as performance. Support for such a reading exists in how Clarke introduces his jazz opera in the Prelude as “an Absinthe-Amarula-Brandy-Champagne-Chartreuse-Chicoutai-Cognac-Grappa-Palm-Port -Pastis-Rum-Saki-Sangria-Scotch-Tequila-Vodka opera, one coloured spicily with notes of ebony-dark-cherry, India indigo ink, and bronze-beige the shade of papyrus or bamboo” (12). His superlatively hyphenated definition, when taken in the context of his political message, becomes a serious kind of playfulness. For jazz theorist John Corbett, improvisation functions through sessions of “playing” with an intended pun on both the playing of an instrument and a playing with the semiotics of sound that he understands as forming the components through which jazz signifies itself (233). Perhaps the word ‘play’ with its double-meaning as a trickster flirtation and a musical performance, best describes the poiesis, or linguistic making, of this jazz opera. Including the scientific word for nylon, “polyhexamethyleneudiapide” (53) signals a playfulness on the part of the librettist, especially when Keith Garebian’s review of the libretto asks, “How is a performer to cope with such hypertrophic phrases as the following: ‘Polyhexamethyleneudiapide, simmering’ or ‘Flaunt a florilegium of dazzling perfume’?” When Haydain Neale as Ovide sang this word in the Guelph and Vancouver performances, his voice not only glided over a word that depicts his character’s obsession with lavish love and luxurious language but his voice also surpassed the boundary of what is or is not considered to be speakable, or rather singable.

As if commenting upon Clarke’s playfulness in exploding the boundaries of what is
singable, the female characters express wariness towards the male characters’ words, as Laxmi says to Ovide, “Ovide, I prefer Puccini with cappuccino […] to vain talk that bleeds like a vein” (22) and as Colette says to Malcolm, “Words have an annoying tendency / to turn into lies” (40). Yet the sincerity of Clarke’s project emerges from this linguistic play to the degree that, even though the final scene seems self-reflexive of its over-the-top-ness, there is a serious message in the image of the multi-coloured flag that needs to be spoken.7 It is the political message that I referred to at the start of this chapter: namely, that Clarke sees this performance as allowing for the possibility “of having people from different cultural, linguistic, religious and racial backgrounds being able to collectively identify, without any irony, themselves as Canadian. To seize that label for everybody and not just a select group” (CBC Radio). Heble’s “Postlude” to Québécité elaborates on this inclusivity when he speaks of the necessity for “an inclusive vision of community-building and intellectual stock-taking for the new millennium” (101), a vision that informs the text and music of Clarke and Jackson's jazz opera. It is the sound of this performance that both enables and challenges this vision of inclusivity.

IV. “Bars of ripped up music”: Signifying Jazz

“Oui, let's scat” not only ends the first scene of George Elliott Clarke's jazz-opera, Québécité, but also offers the audience a method of participatory listening through which to hear Clarke's libretto and D.D. Jackson's music. For audiences listening to the first two performances of Québécité (Guelph Jazz Festival in September 2003 and Vancouver in October 2003) one of the most poignant moments was Yoon Choi’s evocative scat solo — a solo that was expanded in the Vancouver production into an elaborate improvisatory
session, or rather an acoustic battle within Choi's character between dismissing or embracing familial ties to Chinese tradition and history. Choi's solo enacts what might be called a talking back to colonialist discourse through scatting, a musical practice that is non-semantic yet enables her to speak that which is otherwise unspeakable. Yoon Choi’s evocative scat solo in the Vancouver production of *Québécité* pushes the boundaries of what is speakable and unspeakable, blurring them together as her character, Colette Chan, wages an acoustic battle over rejecting or embracing her Chinese heritage and history. In this version of talking back, her scat solo foregrounds the limits of language itself and the extent to which these limits can be performed.

In the performance of Colette’s solo “Colette au bar” (76), Yoon Choi performs an elaborate scat solo with the accompaniment of bassist Mark Dresser. In the Vancouver production, Yoon Choi extended her solo into what Kevin McNeilly calls a ‘duo’ between Choi and Dresser: “Their five minute exchange — which occurred in a musical space on the verge of score or script — was one of the highpoints of an exceptional evening” (122). Even though Dresser’s contribution to this duo was non-linguistic, McNeilly’s comment highlights the extent to which Dresser’s instrumental medium provided a dialogic form of call-and-response through which Choi could interrogate the very borders of semiotic intelligibility. Within this unwritten musical space, Choi sings an emotionally rough, visceral interrogation into the *sound* of cultural identity. Fluctuating between deep moans, staccato phonemes, tearful murmurs and high-pitched wails, Choi scats in sounds that foreground their relation to language — sounds that are outside of signification yet still gesture towards signification by mimicking culturally signifying tones and vocal patterns that imitate dialogue. Even though embedded in this semiotic process, her scatting
interrogates the boundary between the semiotic and symbolic. The self-reflexiveness of this interrogatory process can be read as thetic in the Kristevan sense that Colette’s singing “posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between language and rhythm, [and] between the symbolic and the semiotic” (Desire in Language, 103). As though angrily testing how long her sound can hover between the limits of signification, Choi foregrounds the process of attaching meaning to sound, a process that she argues as to be a product of hegemony in the lyrics that follow her scatting: “Finally I’m called to the bar — the bar of prosecution, the bar of ripped up bars of music” (italics in original, 76-77). These lyrics create their own rupture not with scatting but with language since they begin with a word that functions as a speech act, signalling the end to scat’s hovering between the semiotic and symbolic: “Finally” (53). As Choi’s voice sings this last word, finally, the word sings its utterance as sound but also breaks apart to perform its own linguistic actions: signalling its own conclusion (fin), a conclusion of everything (all), an inclusion of everyone (all), and performing this conclusion here/there (y).

The lyrics that follow Choi’s scat solo invite the audience to consider the ‘nonsense’ that they just heard in the context of speaking the unspeakable; although her lyrics impose a linguistic explanation of her scatting, they also continue to challenge authoritative discourses through her repetition of a phrase that becomes a memorable refrain amid her solo: "Finally I'm called to the bar of prosecution, bars of ripped up music, bars of persecution" (Québécité, Vancouver), which differs both in phrasing and in the number of times it repeats from the libretto’s version of this scene. In addition to the scene taking place in a bar and Colette being a law student, the repetition of the word ‘bar’ within the context of speaking the unspeakable strongly aligns itself with Judith Butler’s concept
of the ‘bar’ as imposing foreclosure upon language. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler discusses political speech acts in relation to a ‘bar’ that functions both as a bar that impedes access and as a judicial foreclosure. In reading censorship as a form of foreclosure, Butler argues that censorship “produces discursive regimes through the production of the unspeakable” (139). Since foreclosure takes place not because of a single action but because of “the reiterated effect of a structure” (138), Butler states that one cannot speak against the ‘bar’; instead, one must use the “force,” consisting of both speech and body, of the performatives in re-structuring social utterance (141). In the case of Colette, the anger in her singing “the bar of prosecution, / the bars of ripped up Music” (phrased differently in the libretto than in the performance) conveys a bodily force already undermining the ‘bar’ that she stands before. In addition to the deconstruction of the various ‘bars’ in her song, the fervent repetition of the previously quoted line throughout her solo enacts what Butler proposes as “a repetition in language that forces change” (163). The change necessary in Colette's solo is connected to a history of what lies ‘unspeakable’ in jazz music itself. In discussing early recording practices, Jed Rasula offers the valuable differentiation between what is un-record able and what is unspeakable. For Rasula, the ‘unspoken’ in jazz is not the ‘live’ immediacy of the performance but rather the unrecorded oral history: “the things that will never be known, people that will forever go unheard, words that will remain unsaid” (152). Both Butler’s and Rasula’s theories underline Edwards’s reading of how scat has been constructed as ‘nonsense’ (622). Edwards draws upon theories of Nathaniel Mackey in order to further suggest that scat testifies to an “unspeakable history” (624). Although Mackey speaks of a link between scat and “a common predilection in black musical expression for the edges of the voice” (qtd. in Edwards 625) that does not apply directly to
the Asian cultural context of the scat in *Québécité*, Mackey’s focus on alterity allows us to hear the scatting voice tracing the edges of a ‘bar’ such as the one theorized by Butler. I would argue that this draws our attention to its structure and, therefore, the possible dismantling of it, as in Colette’s phrase, “the bar of ripped up bars of Music” (published libretto, 77) which even dismantles itself as words transfer from libretto into improvised song.

Once Colette bursts out of the semiotic and into the symbolic, she critiques authoritative discourses and phrases some of these critiques in terms of censorship of jazz: “Mao declared jazz seditious contraband” (77). (Censorship of jazz music is central to Josef Škvorecký’s *Bass Saxophone* [1967] which also provides a comparison for writing through jazz music.) But can scatting itself ‘talk back’? One way in which she does perform a subversive talking back is through a playful yet poignant exploration of cultural inflected sound, producing a version of Henry Louis Gates’s notion of “signifyin’” with the absent $g$ as a “a figure for the Signifyin(g) Black difference” (46). Similar to Laxmi’s citation of cultural codes through music, Colette signifies cultural sounds by shifting her improvisations between sounds that verge upon *sounding like* a dialogue between English and Chinese. Furthermore, I apply this term of signifyin’ to Colette in the same way that jazz theorist Robert Walser applies it to Miles Davis in order to explore signification through “performance and dialogic engagement” (168). Korean born and Toronto raised singer Yoon Choi succeeds in revealing the complexity of the character of Colette through this notion of “performance and dialogic engagement” that signifies cultural tension outside of the semantic realm. She mimes conversational ‘norms’ to the extent that we can almost hear the offstage argument with her parents over her choice of loving an Africadian
man of African-American and Mi’kmaq heritage rather than a Chinese man with whom she could fulfill, what she calls, her parents’ “dream of Golden Chinese grandchildren” (70). For Walser, jazz signifyin’ strives to produce a contested, unfixed meaning — meaning that, as in the case of Colette, defies boundaries of semantic knowledge and remains unstable, kinetic, and alive.

Refrains of a desire to speak meaningfully echo throughout Québécité. As Ovide insinuates in his opening duet with Laxmi, to be meaningful already lies in the realm of eros: “Will you fulfill my meaning / Am I meaningful?” (19). When Laxmi responds, “You invited me to savour jazz […] Why taint it with saccharine hints, / Such sick cadence of decadence?” (19), she reveals her attitude towards Ovide’s seemingly meaningless words while foreshadowing a possible reaction to the meaning of the performance itself. As if in reaction to Laxmi’s scepticism, the language of Québécité expresses a pre-occupation with being meaningful. When Colette protests to Malcolm, “We can still love. Don’t be so mean!” (69), he responds by reiterating the importance of meaning, “I want to love meaningfully / not meanly” (69). Although performing in a medium that often resists meaning, or at least ‘meaning’ in a definitive sense, the characters reiterate the desire to be meaningful, which brings to mind Corbett’s description of jazz improvisation as fluctuating among “meaning nothing, meaning something, and being interpreted as meaning something” (221, emph Corbett’s). Both in scripted language and in improvised scat, Québécité foregrounds the suspiciousness of meaning as an abstract concept yet still asserts the importance of meaning, with the characters’ desire to be meaningful intertwined with their desire to love — “If you were to die right now, you’d regret / Not having loved, not having been fit,” says Ovide to Laxmi who responds, “Why would I
regret not being lied to?” (68). If we read the plot of the love story as revolving around the
characters’ attempts to sing and hear meaning as performative and unfixed in its acoustic
space, then the union of the couples at the end suggests that, at least momentarily, they
understand what informs Malcolm’s wish “to love meaningfully” (69).

V. Towards Polyphony

Wandering in the fog (“Dans le brouillard” [80]), searching for each other and for
meaning, the four characters’ voices cohere in the line, “I miss you as a kite misses the
wind” (81). Here, their voices remain distant and distinct, even while voicing a collective
sentiment of desire that also applies to language itself. Desiring to be meaningful, even
when challenging the boundaries of signification, the language of Québécité performs its
own longing for performance, missing the breath “as a kite misses the wind.” I propose
that this scene exemplifies polyphony in this jazz opera. Clarke had imagined this
polyphonic music in an interview with Linda Hutcheon in which he describes a future
project (one that we can recognize in hindsight as Québécité itself) as enacting a
postmodern multiplicity:

One of the projects I'd like to do, if there's an interested composer and producer,
would be a Canadian version of The Umbrellas of Cherbourg. The film itself is a
sort of tragicomedy, not a pure comedy. But I'd love to do something that
examines relationships, most likely set in Quebec City. Following up on what
Linda was just saying about the postmodernity of opera, it really is an avant-
garde form, because it demands polyphony. This is something that we've been
demanding and applauding in writing, in criticism and all the arts. (190)

Clarke’s jazz opera simultaneously enacts and aspires towards this state of multivocality;
yet, is this longing, on behalf of the jazz opera itself, discordant or harmonious? Or does
the form of the jazz opera strive to linger in a dialectic tension between these two states? A
dismissal of this dialectic overlooks the fact that sound performs the tension between and among cultural systems of sound, therein producing a cultural hybridity in the sense that cultural theorist Ien Ang speaks of when she suggests that “rather than seeing hybridity as a synonym for an easy multicultural harmony, or as an instrument for the achievement thereof, I want to suggest that the concept of hybridity should be mobilized to address and analyze the fundamental uneasiness inherent in our global condition of togetherness-in-difference” (200). Critics who try to hear “an easy multicultural harmony” will not find such an answer in Querbécité; however, they will find an articulation of the “uneasiness” that Ang refers to and this is what, I think, complicates any reading of the jazz opera as a resolved form. The hybrid form of jazz opera, or what Clarke calls a “gumbo concoction” (11) offers one way to speak about this uneasiness. In the “Postlude” to the jazz opera’s libretto, Heble pairs this state of “uneasiness” with one of hope: “in an era when demands for tighter controls on immigration and border-crossing threaten the dreams of the aggrieved, the structures of hope, possibility, and momentum embodied in Clarke’s rainbow quartet of lovers seem particularly pertinent” (101). I suggest that “Scene v: Dans le brouillard” (80) characterizes this rainbow quartet of lovers due to the desire underlining their words, longing for what we might call togetherness. It is a scene in which all four characters are “lost in the fog, each oblivious to the others” (80). Yet, as they sing, Clarke’s stage directions imagine how “[t]heir songs interlock” (80) and, in the performance of this interlocking, their songs produce polyphonic music.

Importantly, the scene of interlocking voices combines a desire for togetherness with a state of unease. As McNeilly observes in his review of the performance, “[Querbécité] is not a work about easy resolutions, but an attempt to embody, and to
extemporize upon, difference” (123). Just as the voices remain distinct in their cultural associations as the jazz opera comes to a close, the distinctiveness of their voices in this scene overlap forming a collective sentiment of desire — a desire for togetherness that coincides with Clarke’s defining of the term québécité for all and not only a select group. But does the voicing of this togetherness successfully navigate a path outside the “sedative politics” of control that Kamboureli warns us of in *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in Canada*? In answering this question, we must keep in mind that, both in Kamboureli’s reading of the Multiculturalism Act and in the moment of this final scene, there is “a striving to an ‘ideal’ community” (112), not unlike the notion of an implied reader or audience. The difficulty in locating this “ideal” in the “real” does not mean that we should abandon multiculturalism discourses; alternatively, we need to see the value in applying multiculturalism as a framework that allows for a thinking, not of centres and margins, but rather, as Kamboureli suggests, in terms of “relational knowledge” (161). In this way, Kamboureli draws upon Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s compelling assertion that “the word multiculturalism has no essence; it points to a debate” (qtd. in Kamboureli 161). Thus, in our critical responses to Québécité, we must grapple with its call for an awareness of how the textual and embodied performances of this piece point towards a debate larger than what we see and hear; moreover, it points towards a space of dialogue that extends out and among performers and audience. Yet, can this space of dialogue also involve productive listening? Exemplifying this concern is McNeill’s apt question of whether Laxmi represents “a critical scepticism about the ease with which ethnically distinct interlocutors can actually listen to one another” (123). Nevertheless, the relationality that McNeill calls for in terms of the performers’ own voices offers a model for the audience
to follow as well. It is here that the piece calls for a critical *polyphony* on behalf of the listener to hear it from within and *among* multiple voices: a polyphonic listening that listens across languages, musical genres, and cultures, and, then, listens back upon itself. As gestured towards by this chapter and as will be pursued in the next chapter on Robert Bringhurst’s polyphonic poetry, this action of multi-directional listening requires a rethinking of what is asked of a critical audience. Thus, *if* the debate that multiculturalism points towards is one that can be, as Kamboureli notes, cacophonous and discordant while demanding “that both interlocutors change” (161), then a polyphonic listening provides a valid and viable approach to enacting this change. As a performance that combines both the textual page and embodied sound, *Québécité* moves us towards this change through its words — words, waiting to be sung.
Endnotes

1. Particularly through the portrayal of Margaret Trudeau, I see provocative comparisons between Clarke’s *Trudeau* and Linda Griffiths’s *Maggie & Pierre*, a play (in which all characters are performed by Griffiths herself) that offers an early critical reappraisal of both the personal and political lives of these national celebrities. In future work, I plan to pursue a comparison of these two dramatic pieces.

2. *Nixon in China* has recently been performed in Vancouver (March 2010) and will be performed in Toronto (2011) and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (2011). The Vancouver performance featured press that framed the opera as culturally relevant to the city itself:

   It’s fitting that Vancouverites, who live in Canada's most Asia-centric city, will be the first in the country to see this $1.4-million production, the biggest ever staged by Opera Vancouver. While *Nixon in China* may focus on the United States and a famous moment of political rapprochement, it's a reminder that China’s opening also changed Vancouver’s economic and cultural life deeply, making us Canada’s gateway to the Pacific. “I think this opera is hitting a sweet spot with people. Our ticket sales are ahead of projections,” says Wright. “Nixon in China is about internationalism, about people and countries looking at each other face to face, and working things out. With all the new immigration statistics about what Vancouver is going to look like in the future, it's really a perfect opera for Vancouver.” (Cernetig, online)

   Importantly, Cernetig’s article also draws a comparison between Trudeau and Nixon: “It wasn't Nixon who was the first North American to thaw relations with Chairman Mao, it was Trudeau. He opened up full diplomatic relations with the Middle Kingdom in 1971, beating the Americans by a full eight years. But that’s another opera, still waiting to be made.” However, the opera has already been written and that opera is Clarke’s *Trudeau*. In fact, *Trudeau* will be performed as a full opera in Halifax in June 2010.


4. In Julia C. Obert's article, “The Cultural Capital of Sound: Quèbécité’s Acoustic Hybridity,” she frames the transcultural sound of this jazz opera in terms of its acoustic space that “exceeds the bilingual, and approximates the multicultural” (2). As Obert
further notes, “while Clarke often celebrates creolization and cross-cultural exchange, he also sounds the difficulties of such exchange” (10), which foregrounds the by-products of cultural exchange and speaks to the issue of what creates productive dissonance.

5. It is this embodiment of difference that cultural theorist Sarah Ahmed hears in the discourse of Australian multiculturalism, which offers a comparative framework to the Canadian context. Ahmed critiques this formation of a national identity through the claiming of difference because this allows the nation “to imagine itself as heterogeneous (to claim their differences as ‘our differences’)” (italics in original, 96). Ahmed posits the “stranger stranger” as the re-doubled figure who cannot be “taken in” by the nation and, thus, enables its imagined heterogeneity (97). However, I suggest that the acoustics challenges the very process of assimilation in remaining unfixed in its signification.

6. Cultural theorist Rey Chow reads the Canadian Multiculturalism Act as exemplifying how what she calls the “difference revolution” has been deployed across both high theory and national politics (128). Chow describes the Act as “an attempt to be inclusive and celebratory [that] serves, in the end, to mask and perpetuate the persistent problems of social inequality” (133). The words “inclusive and celebratory” are particularly relevant to Québéctité because they encapsulate the jouissance expressed by the characters as they sing the final chorus, “Vive notre québéctité” (92).

7. In the libretto, Clarke’s stage directions describe how the jazz opera should conclude with a polyphony of multicultural sounds and a multi-coloured Québécois flag: “The lovers exit as couples — riding Vespa scooters. Then church bells, horns, sitar, Chinese violin (p’i-p’a), harmonium, harp, tabla, and thumb piano commix. The Quebec flag descends from the rafters, but its four panels are, here, beige, pink, gold, and indigo, and its fleurs-de-lys are, correspondingly, violet, orange, black, and crimson, and its cruciform segmentation is green” (92). Wojtyra’s visual image for this final scene includes elements of this description, yet it depicts the rainbow as rays of light shining through the flag, rather than re-colouring the flag itself. While it could be argued that this adaptation of the stage directions does not convey the full effect of re-defining a Québécois icon, the rainbow of light still evokes the multicultural message of the opera’s politics and gestures towards a hopeful future for these characters, which, for myself as a reader of the libretto, brings to mind the words that Clarke uses to conclude his introductory comments to the libretto: “And—look!—light gilds the sky” (12).
Chapter 4

This Water Is Music: Polyphony in the Poetry of Robert Bringhurst

Listen, said the man with the guitar,
and I will show you what I mean
— Robert Bringhurst (“Bone Flute Breathing,” 126)

The September 1996 event, “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony” marked the increasing prominence of polyphony in Canadian poetics. Bringing together poets such as Robert Bringhurst, Jan Zwicky, and Dennis Lee, the event sparked conversations that continue to resonate in each poet’s own work and in collective works such as Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews (1995) and Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Philosophy of Knowing (2002), both edited by poet Tim Lilburn. These collections approximate polyphony because, although written with the singular pen of each author, the essays form a conversation about poetry in which the participants listen while speaking. Listening while speaking is what I want to emphasize in this context because it is what I see as most revolutionary in its contribution to new Canadian poetics. In the Introduction to Thinking and Singing, Brian Bartlett speaks of “listening to the thinking and singing of five poets, who’ve listened to each other while listening to whatever floats in, literally audible or inaudible, through the windows of their houses” (14). Not only does he situate these practices within a larger ecology of sound, but he also invokes a simultaneity of listening, one that I would argue invites a listening while — listening while speaking, singing, dancing, all of which underline an ontological practice of listening while being, or rather listening as being. Thus, when Bartlett extends
this practice to the reader, “All over the place, things are being said with or without words. Listen. One of the countless places to start is with the welcome voices of this book” (14-15), I hear this directive as integral when applying the philosophic conversations among these poets to our understandings of polyphonic poetry.

Lilburn’s collections include two of Lee’s essays on polyphony, “Poetry and Unknowing” and “Body Music,” which are reprinted from the sound-focused book, *Body Music: Essays* (1998). In “Body Music,” an essay that stemmed from Lee's work towards the polyphony colloquium, Lee begins with two crucial questions for poetics: “What makes a poem cohere? How does it mean what it means?” (197). These questions are particularly relevant to the study of polyphony because they lead toward the question of how a poem of divergent voices manages to cohere. In other words, what holds together these voices and could this cohesion parallel what holds together a nation? For Lee, what holds together a polyphonic poem is “polyrhythmic body music,” an embodied polyphony, often making itself heard through shifts in vocal energies such that “[t]he poem will then register their [energies from the voice] presence as a series of shifting phonic disturbances. And the trajectory of the poem will be naturally polyphonic” (223). In this chapter, I ask how Lee’s choice of the term polyphony, along with his definition of it as an embodied act, has influenced poets such as Bringhurst and Zwicky in their theorizing of polyphony, of what holds a polyphonic poem together, and, to use Lee’s phrase, how it means what it means. For Zwicky, coherence becomes a defining feature of the lyric impulse whereas, for Bringhurst, the coherence lies in the poem’s awareness of its multiplicity and of its place in a polyphonic world. While pursuing these lines of
thought, I want to maintain an awareness of how these theories inform a performance of poetry that requires the reader to listen and respond: to speak written words as they step off the page, towards and across each other.

In exploring the convergences among Lee’s and Bringhurst’s theories of polyphony, I argue that these poets advocate what I would call polyphonic listening — a listening that speaks, sings, reads, and dances all at once. After an overview of musical and literary polyphony and how these inform the critical writings of Lee and Bringhurst, this chapter examines specific polyphonic performances in poems by Bringhurst: “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” “New World Suite No. 3” and *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* (2003). In reading the two former poems as precursors to the latter, I ask how polyphonic technique becomes necessary to the poems themselves and how they reveal the poet as honing his craft of polyphonic techné — a craft that is, as I argue, performative in the sense of the poem performing what it speaks. I situate this argument not in performative language (as traced through J.L. Austin to Judith Butler in the Introduction), but rather in terms of the poem as performance in its call for the reader to engage in polyphonic listening. What I mean by this is perhaps best articulated in “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” a two-voiced poem of Robert Bringhurst’s in which this performance takes place in the phrase, “This music is water — this water / is music” (87). In this reflection of water, broken only by the poetic line, there is a reflection of music (and of mimesis itself), which illustrates the performative quality of Bringhurst’s poetry that is integral to a polyphonic listening. Textually balanced, the phrase presents us with an ecology that comes to represent more than the elements of which it speaks. *This is*
both water and music; moreover, the phrase is spoken while the poem’s second voice
simultaneously speaks the line, “This music is all about water,” followed by the quotative
“she said” lingering into the next line to overlap with the words, “is music” (86). The
poem speaks of music while creating it. I would further argue that this performative
reading extends beyond the scope of this poem because it is a practice dependent upon
one's close attention to the creation of meaning within an ecology of sound.

I. Polyphony

Polyphonic poetry, as Dennis Lee explains, moves “through consecutive voices”
(54). In "Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation" (an essay that aptly includes many
definitions of polyphony), Lee begins with these voices in order to provide one definition
to riff upon: "Polyphony. Many sounds: many voices" (54). He fleshes out this
definition to distinguish between the shifting voices of poetry and music: "Polyphonic
music traces out two or more melodic lines at the same time, using several instruments,
or several human voices. Polyphonic poetry is different. It moves from one tonality to
another, and on through consecutive voices" (54). And where is the reader in this
meditation? How must the audience of a text re-think its own practices in order to read
polyphonically? The reader must attend to the motion of the text through these
consecutive voices, through these tonalities. But what does Lee mean by tonalities and
how does he combine this musicological discourse with what Mikhail Bakhtin meant
when he spoke of the polyphonic novel? What I intend to highlight through these
questions are the musical and literary traditions from which Lee’s writing both draws
upon and departs. Previous chapters have explored various versions of this re-writing and
re-theorizing polyphony: the Introduction mentioned Gould's *The Idea of North* as enacting a polyphonic Canadian soundscape; Chapter One placed this notion of a polyphonic soundscape in dialogue with the sound poetry and sound scores of bpNichol and The Four Horsemen; and Chapter Three pursued the politics of aligning polyphonic multi-vocality with multiculturalism. Here, in this chapter, I consider what informs Lee’s and Bringhurst’s theories of polyphony and how these theories translate into polyphonic poems. In the cases of both Lee and Bringhurst, musical polyphony underlines their poetic compositions; yet their definitions of polyphony extend beyond a general notion of multi-part sound while still distinguishing polyphonic writing as something apart from music and as taking place in language. However, despite using similar terminology, they further remove themselves from the linguistic polyphony of Bakhtin, largely due to their genre of poetry. For both Lee and Bringhurst, polyphony takes place in the voice, and it is the challenge for the poet to transcribe this event on the page while still enabling the reader to hear its sound.

References to polyphony appear in manuscripts dating from the 8th and 9th centuries. It began as “an unwritten accompaniment of plainchant” (188) and revolutionized this latter musical form in allowing for more than one melody to be sung at once. Simultaneity of more than one voice and more than one melody is what first distinguished this form. Thus, polyphony has been attributed the general definition of “music in more than one part, music in many parts, and the style in which all or several of the musical parts move to some extent independently” (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, online). The word itself, *polyphônos*, means many-voiced; and while voice is
implicit within its etymology, it is possible for the word to be devoid of specifically musical connotations, as polyphônos and polyphonia functioned in ancient Greek. Yet, as described in *The New Grove*, “after classical antiquity, forms of the adjective came into use in modern languages, designating both non-musical phenomena such as birdcalls, human speech and multiple echoes, and musical phenomena such as instrumental range and tonal variety, as well as the various tunes playable on an automatic musical device” (online).³ The history of Western music includes many approaches to polyphony that inform what we consider polyphonic sound today.⁴ Choral music of the 20th century, as the choral works by Canadian composer Healey Willan, is a form through which polyphony continues to be thought of as traditional; what I mean to suggest in this point is that there are places in which polyphony is not considered to be a medium of rupture — while ruptures may occur, the music does not intend to unsettle the listener, unlike, for instance, what McCaffery describes as “the polyphony of indecision” (*North of Intention* 87). While McCaffery's avant-garde polyphonic techniques are pursued in Chapter One, I mention this concept here in order to stress that there are many forms of polyphony. Nevertheless, even in a choral piece that adheres to musical tradition and may not be heard as challenging formal boundaries, the listener is challenged to hear all-at-once. In writing of the importance of polyphony in early Western music, Bringhurst states that “[t]he churches of Europe overflowed with music of this kind in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It did not change the course of history, but it preserved an essential perception of the plurality of being” (*The Tree of Meaning*, 41). And this “plurality of being” is what, I would argue, Lee wants us to bring to literary polyphony
and, indeed, it is what Bringhurst’s poetry requires.

In literary criticism, the most influential use of the term polyphony takes place in the writing of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, Bakhtin argues for the social importance and possibility in articulating multiple voices within the novel, which he places in opposition to the monophony of poetry, a single-voiced lyric that had no room for the carnivalesque heteroglossia. Polyphony, then, refers to the orchestration of these multiple social, public voices. (This perspective aligns polyphony with the discourse of mimesis that Bringhurst pursues in his notions of the writer’s attempts to reflect, but not fully replay, sonic realities. However, as will be discussed later, this mimesis of multiplicity can take place within a poem and not only in the form of a novel.) Significantly, Bakhtin refers to these multiple social voices as performing sequentially: they do not overlap nor do they speak simultaneously.

Polyphony in the novel takes place when the writing articulates what Bakhtin describes as “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 6). Although written as a monophonic argument, Bakhtin’s essay centres upon musical metaphors, thereby foregrounding the auditory aspect of this plurality. As Emerson and Holquist note in their translation of Bakhtin's Discourse in the Novel, Bakhtin’s critique of Saussurian linguistics centers upon the oral and audible sound of language:

Music is the metaphor for moving from seeing to hearing [...] For Bakhtin, this is a crucial shift. In oral/aural arts, the “overtones” of a communication act individualize it. Within a novel perceived as a musical score, a single “horizontal” message (melody) can be harmonized vertically in a number of ways, and each of these scores with its fixed pitches can be further altered by giving the notes to
different instruments. The possibilities of orchestration make any segment of text almost infinitely variable. (430-431)

By invoking indefinable nuances of sound, Bakhtin’s musical terminology contributes to his broader critique of the Saussurian adherence of the sign to the signifier. These nuances of sound are also metaphors for the more complex ‘nuances’ that complicate the hearing of speech: “Who speaks and under what conditions he speaks: that is what determines the word’s actual meaning” (Bakhtin 401). Although he argues against poetry as polyphonic due to the single-voiced formalism that does not politically allow for social voices to be heard, Bakhtin's work on polyphony highlights the importance of hearing vocality even through the medium of written words.

Even though Lee re-writes polyphony in a vastly different paradigm than Bakhtin’s, I cannot help but notice certain resonances in their work pertaining to theories of the voice itself since, as a critic, I am able to place these two figures in a hypothetical dialogue. Bakhtin resists the fixity of a “complete speech act,” which he defines as “a phrase associated with the unitary style of verse-based poetic genres that “presupposes on one hand a unity of language […] and on the other hand the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language” (264). In contrast to this unified notion of Saussurian utterance (vyskazivanie), Bakhtin refers to voice (golos, -glas) as the “speaking personality, the speaking consciousness. A voice always has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones” (434).5 The last phrase in this quotation has resonances of Lee's work, specifically with the references to “timbre and overtones”; however, the degree to which Bakhtin understands this fluidity as impossible within poetry reveals the
different literary histories and contexts from which he and Lee write. Multi-voiced poetry did not seem possible to Bakhtin and, as Bringhurst notes, this is partly due to his historical moment prior to Eliot, Pound, and, of course, Lee (“Singing with the Frogs,” 122). Nevertheless, if we locate the body behind the will and desire referred to in Bakhtin’s phrase, “a voice always has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones” (434), then we infer how the timbre and overtones are the projections of a body's sound — an embodied origin implicit in textual voices as social voices and yet also forgotten once these voices are disembodied as written text.

While these connections between Bakhtin and Lee offer further insight for critical audiences, it is important to note that Lee does not situate his argument in a Bakhtinian framework, which in and of itself suggests that his argument is pursuing a very different purpose despite using the same term. Of course, this distance from Bakhtin is critically necessary in order to re-position polyphony as a poetic tool rather than as a novelistic one; yet, although he does not engage in a direct debate with Bakhtin, we might hear Lee as responding to Bakhtin with a defence of poetry as polyphonic. In “Singing with the Frogs,” Bringhurst makes the even more explicit claim that Lee’s argument is independent from Bakhtin’s: “Lee’s writings on polyphony owe nothing to Bakhtin. One may ask how they could if Canada is really a free country, not a Stalinist regime. But polyphony for Lee, as for Bakhtin, is a matter of huge political import” (123). Yet, Bringhurst traces the history of polyphony through Bakhtin in order to arrive at Lee and, in this critical manoeuvre, he opens up the issue of how these histories speak to each other. For instance, it is important to ask how Lee’s theory of polyphony differs from
Bakhtin’s, whether in relation to form (speaking of poetry and not of the novel) or social context (the heteroglossic space for levels of language to interact sequentially on the page) because Lee’s re-defining of polyphony responds directly to the literary and social contexts out of which he writes.

Polyphony becomes political, for Lee, when heard and applied as a strategy for voicing a Canadian soundscape. In the essay, “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” Lee builds upon the political arguments of George Grant, whose work such as the influential *Lament for a Nation* (1965) prophesizes the cultural annexing of Canada by America, the country that has replaced Britain as the colonial power. By calling upon Canada to not let its voice be subsumed by America, Lee encounters the problem of what Canada's voice is, and argues that only by understanding this voice can we attempt to speak it. In considering what-Canada-is-not as a way of defining its voice, Lee proposes that “perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to speak the words of our spacelessness. Perhaps that was home” (italics in original, 18). Speaking for Canadians who are not First Nations, Lee suggests that there is a desire for home that becomes displaced due to the effects of colonialism and resulting in an inability to articulate one’s native space. The possibility of speaking “the words of our spacelessness,” then, becomes part of an access to language that was otherwise colonized: “Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language perhaps we should come to writing with that grain [...] it meant assuming that what is for real can be claimed by a Canadian in the language of his own time and place. If he can learn to speak that language” (italics in original, 18). For Lee, learning to speak the
language of one's home depends upon re-attuning: “the first mark of words, as you began to re-hear them in this empty civil space, was a blur of unachieved meaning” (19). What can be attained in this process of re-hearing is an empowerment over the silencing effects of colonial power and, through this process, one begins to hear what Lee calls cadence: “a raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains towards words [...] That cadence is home” (21). In some ways, cadence resembles the thetic state in which sound has not yet been shaped by signification (Kristeva) and, in other ways, cadence resembles the more articulate tune that Bringhurst posits as the worldly sound to which poetry sings (“Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known”). But the integral connection to the nation is what sets Lee’s notion of cadence apart from these two comparisons of pre-linguistic sound. Cadence calls for a listening that attends to the poem as a political being. Yet, it is a being that is in flux, as Lee explains in this description of the cadential space that a poetic meditation moves through:

I speak of a ‘space’ of cadence, and that may imply that a poem is a static map which describes it. But it's not like that at all. A meditation is the act of moving through textured space. It's wholly kinetic. And the words on the page are the track of its going. A meditation doesn't describe a space; it enacts one. It is a finding-the-grain-of-cadential-space, and a letting-it-breathe-in-voice. (“Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation,” 62)

Since the words on the page are merely marks along this path through “textured space,” they must be able to reflect a pathway through a multi-textured space. Importantly, Lee hears polyphony as inhabiting written language as well as speech: “I'm stymied when people have difficulty hearing polyphony on the page. Often they don't perceive how many shifts there are, how many tonalities are interlaced, till they hear it out loud. They
never entered that cadential space; for them the real live poem, which is a multi-voiced embodiment and a wooing, never began at all” (63). When we consider how cadence relies upon the connection between poetry and politics, then we realize what is lost in this difficulty to hear polyphony on the page. In other words, Lee reminds us of what is at stake in not listening to the cadential space of our nation. For many present-day listeners, this cadential space is postmodern and, for many, this space is post-national. Yet, the political impetus from which Lee’s concept of cadence emerged remains unchanged: a closely attuned listening that enables a speaking from one’s place in the world, articulating and integrating an ecological, political, and cultural being, here.

II. Towards Polyphonic Writing

I have been listening to the world for barely half a century. I do not have the wisdom even of a young tree of an ordinary kind. Nevertheless, I have been listening – with eyes, ears, mind, feet, fingertips – and what I hear is poetry.

What does this poetry say? It says that what-is is: that the real is real, and that it is alive. It speaks the grammar of being. It sings the polyphonic structure of meaning itself.

— Robert Bringhurst, from “The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World” (The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks, 43)

The essay “Singing with the Frogs,” in which Bringhurst responds to the colloquium, “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony,” offers a comprehensive starting point to his definition of polyphony that continues to develop in his critical writing as compiled in the collection, The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks (2006). Focusing on multiple lines of song, story, or text speaking at once, Bringhurst’s first
definition emphasizes how they create a space out of the time that they occupy:

Polyphony, in short, is singing more than one song, playing more than one tune, telling more than one story, at once. It is music that insists on multiplicity — instead of uniformity on the one side and chaos on the other.

(“Singing with the Frogs” 114).

Importantly, homophony differs from polyphony because it "does not create the perceptual space and the sense of multiplicity that the real polyphony does” (116). In contrast, homophonic music would be a single melody, or even the ecological example that Bringhurst gives of a forest with only one type of tree, fish, or frog (115). Despite these homophonic components of the world, Bringhurst insists that “the world is a polyphonic place” (117). To write polyphonic poetry, for Bringhurst, necessarily involves the poet being attuned to nature and to the ecology of sound within it. For Bringhurst, polyphonic poetry is “a poem that is kin in some substantial way to polyphonic music. It is a cohabitation of voices.” As Bringhurst explains, polyphony occurs beyond the realm of Western music: “Polyphony is not a distinctively European phenomenon, either in literature of in music” (Thirteen Talks, 33). Yet, in highlighting the cohesion within polyphony, does this ecology strive towards a united whole that might risk upsetting the notion of polyphony as disparate parts? Does the desire for cohesion become problematic when proposing polyphony as a model for political and cultural multiplicity?

While Chapter Three explores these questions in the multicultural sound of Clarke’s jazz opera Quèbecité, these questions could also be raised in terms of a poetics of desire, cohesion, and harmony. These concepts resonate throughout the poetic
philosophies of Bringhurst and Zwicky, poets whose dialogue about these concepts produces a compelling framework through which to understand how polyphony can be both multi-vocal and lyrical simultaneously. However, rather than attempting to answer these questions here, I will save them for the Conclusion because, indeed, that is the place for speculation upon coherence. Nevertheless, I intend for these questions to echo throughout each chapter, as if this desire for coherence amid cacophony is what holds together not only the poems but also the poetics of writers listening to polyphonic sound as an ecology.

Before turning toward the ecologies of sound in *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*, I want to examine the representation of voice in Bringhurst’s poetry. In this process, I contend that he maintains an awareness of polyphonic listening even in poems that are not structurally polyphonic. If we think of poetry as one way to reflect and record voice, then poetry becomes a medium through which to rethink mimesis. The poem is a space through which to *enact* a meditation such as that described by Lee:

That is: an authentic meditation must *enact* [...] For it to be a meditation at all, a poem must embody in voice the way its experience of the world is initially focused — and then proceed to envoice *another* focusing; and then *another*. To live its way to deeper and more complete knowing, which is what meditation does, it must move from one vocal embodiment to another. (54)

Here, Lee reflects upon the process of reflection taking place within the essay “Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation” as he writes it; and, yet, this process also takes place in Bringhurst’s poetry and infuses both the imagery of and philosophy behind his words. Whether in “Death By Water” in which Narcissus’s gaze reflects nothing (a meditation
upon sight that finds voice elsewhere), or in “Bone Flute Breathing” in which music reflects and mediates otherness, there is a sense of the poem performing that of which it speaks and this is how I read Bringhurst’s poetry as performing. Performance culminates in the poem, “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” in which the line, “This music is water — this water / is music” (87) speaks what the poem is about in a reflective line, followed by the reiteration: “This music is all about water” (86). I would argue that a descriptive phrase, once used by composer George Frideric Handel, becomes necessary for understanding how Bringhurst’s poetry performs: water music.

The collection of poems, “Bone Flute Breathing” provides an important place in which to begin examining Bringhurst's representation of voice because these poems concern both the poet and reader as looking towards sound. Music, dance, and speech figure prominently in conveying not only the poems’ meanings but also their relation to the act of poetry itself and to our reading of it. In the poem “Death By Water,” Bringhurst conflates and contests the acts of hearing and seeing in order to investigate how a mythical figure of sight, Narcissus, can be rethought through sound. In undertaking this sensorial experiment, Bringhurst performs multiple acts of translation that offer not only new ways of understanding myth but also of poetry itself. The reader becomes implicated in this poem’s approach to the world as modelled in the phrase, “we speak while we listen and look” (111). Anticipating the polyphonic thinking of Ursa Major, this speaking while seeing and looking is situated across and among cultures. Li Po’s name enters the poem as a comparative listener who listens alongside Narcissus for “the low / whisper of light along the water, not / the racket among the stones” (89). By introducing
this name, Bringhurst draws upon the literary history of Pound’s translations of Po that then become a further counterpart to this poem. In contrast to the “The Lyell Island Variations” (*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*) composed of Bringhurst's translations of phrases from the poetry of Paul Celan, René Char, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jules Supervielle, and Pablo Neruda, the translations throughout “Death By Water” are broader gestures to the multiple processes of translation taking place in and around a look into the water. In this look, there is not simply a reflection – rather, mimesis itself is contested and reflection itself fragments into what it is mediated through.

Bringhurst presents the possibility that this reflection, a translation of self through glassy water, can produce an absence of the visual. The collection of poems, “Bone Flute Breathing” in which “Death By Water” appears, foregrounds this absence through the fragmented epigraph: “...that mirrors nothing” (110). If we read this epigraph alongside “Hachadura” (*The Beauty of the Weapons*), we find this phrase completed in a quotation from Wallace Stevens in Bringhurst’s introductory notes to this poem:

> Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze, 
> that reflects neither my face nor any inner part 
> of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing. (73)

Bringhurst quotes this poem after explaining how “Hachadura” is an attempt to speak in the face of death, of speechlessness, and how this can be analogous to the search in music not for an argument but for a theme. In the case of this poem, it is a theme of nothingness: “of a man too long away: a man who cannot go home any more than a circle can touch its centre, and who is nonetheless determined to return” (72). It is an attention
to the poem as music — “a chaconne for solo intelligence in twelve fragments” (73) — that prompts Bringhurst to refer to Stevens as a precedent for this form of singing. With this in mind, I return to the phrase “...that mirrors nothing” and our confrontation of this nothing alongside Narcissus: “It was not his face nor any / other face Narcissus saw / in the water. It was the absence there / of faces” (“Death By Water” 89). Otherness and subjectivity are both displaced to the extent that neither can be used to construct what he looks for; instead, he returns to the water itself as a medium through which to look: “It was the deep clear / of the blue pool he kept on coming / back to” (89). In this pool he sees the colour of his eye, or rather “the resonance of its colour” and, as if following the sound inflected by this word *resonance*, the poem moves into sound: “Better yet, say it was what / he listened for - the low / whisper of light along the water, not the racket among the stones” (89). Thus, in response to the epigraph that invites us to consider what it means to mirror nothing, the poem provides one answer in suggesting that a “low / whisper of light along the water” might reflect in the eyes of Narcissus, and perhaps in the eyes of the reader.

The final stanza of the poem continues this gesture towards the reader, following the comparison to Li Po, a proximity indicating how we too are implicated in translation:

```
Li Po too. As we do – though
for the love of hearing
our voices, and for the fear of hearing
our speech in the voices of others come back
from the earth, we speak while we listen and look
down the long pools of air that come toward us and say
they make no sound, they have no
faces, they have one another’s eyes. (111)
```
Translation, here, is a process of transferring sound. It is a process infused with emotion: the love of our voices and the fear of hearing others. This transference is mimicked in the environment as air becomes pools and speaks to us in a language we cannot hear. Further layers of translation exist in Bringhurst’s choice of a poet translated by Ezra Pound and the mere mention of his name, Li Po, conjures up this literary moment of high modernism and the politics of translation. (George Elliott Clarke performs a similar manoeuvre in the libretto of Québécité: “This seascape is purloined from Li Po — / Just mist, mist, and water everywhere” (80), which translates Li Po into a Canadian urban landscape and yet these words as sung by Colette of Chinese ancestry.) Furthermore, Bringhurst’s reference to Po could be compared to books that offer not direct translations but rather poetic responses to Japanese haiku-poet Matsuo Basho (1644-1694): Roo Borson’s A Short Journey Upriver toward Oishida (2005) and Steve McCaffery’s experimental translations, The Basho Variations (2007). The appearance of the word face amid a poem about translation brings to mind Don McKay’s Levinasian concept of facing as recognizing an other (Vis à Vis), which resembles Bringhurst’s equating of not having a face with silence: “they make no sound, they have no / faces.” And, yet, within this space of lacking sound, the process of translation can still take place with the exchange of perception: “they have one another's eyes.”

The poem, “Bone Flute Breathing” (The Beauty of the Weapons) performs a similar interrogation into alterity, but this time the exchange, or translation, of perception takes place through music. The poem tells the story of travelling from one's country, translating oneself across music, the tragic decomposition of body into the instrument of
that music, and, finally, this musician’s longing to return home. Yet, even though this return signals the musician’s defeat, the poem configures this crossing over as still taking place through sound, or rather in the possibility of hearing the stranger’s music within the oral history that this story has become:

Love, the stranger stood there motionless
for years — but they say that the music you almost hear in the level blue light of morning
and evening, now, is the sound of the stranger moving, walking back toward his own country,
painfully, one step at a time. (128)

The fact that the sound is of the stranger moving translates what was otherwise music into movement. One might say that this too is music, a phrase that I write as an echo of these lines from “The Blue Roofs of Japan”: “this music too” (91) and “[t]his too is the logos” (94). The recognition of the music within this movement of walking resonates with the hearing of music within the movement of water in “The Blue Roofs of Japan”: “Listen: this music / is all about water” (90). Also, the notion of hearing “in the level blue light of morning” draws upon the conflation of sight and sound in “Death By Water” — now, we listen for light. The stranger’s motionless state made kinetic through our hearing of his return then becomes the music of “Bone Flute Breathing.” The acoustic ecology is composed not only of the natural world but also of the eco in the sense of the stranger’s return home phrased as a process to be heard: “the sound of the stranger / moving.” And in each step we hear, or rather “you almost / hear” the sound of translation, a moving across. And this too is music.

Printed by Barbarian Press and recorded by CBC radio in 1986, “The Blue Roofs
of Japan” has informed much of this chapter’s discussion as it both articulates and enacts a poetics of being in tune with the world that underscores Bringhurst’s poetry. In the introductory notes to the poem, Bringhurst writes that “[T]his is a score for jazz duet, which I hope will function also as a reading text” (81). The duet structure of the poem is integrated into the typography, which places each voice on an opposing page and layers the other voice's words in underneath. The effect of this layering is to produce a cutting across of voice: "The male voice sets the timing, as it is the more verbose [...] The female voice cuts lyrically across. Sweetly, I suppose, but deeply enough to draw the necessary blood" (81). The notion of this cutting as tactile and visceral emerges in the sound of the poem being read aloud; for the readers, Bringhurst imagines a process that enables them to listen while speaking: “By looking through his or her own lines, each may see the other's voice lurking in blue ink underneath” (81). In this seeing of “the other’s voice,” the poem offers a typographic version of the translation in “Death By Water” in which “they have one another’s eyes”; but, here, they have one another’s voices. Yet, the blue ink becomes more lucid than the exchange that takes place in “Death By Water” because the ink can be read as part of the prominent water imagery of the poem, such as when the male voice articulates, “This music is all about water, / she said. How the hollowed wood / redistributes the air: / ruffled or clear, how the breath / descends: how it pools and pours” (86). Blue ink, signifying the water music that constitutes the meaning of this poem, enables the poem to call for a performance both on behalf of its speakers and audience that is intensely rooted in listening.

Water pools into the silences of the poem and into the spaces between the lines.
Water not only enacts mimesis — “the talking mirror / of water” (83) — but renders mimetic knowledge as ecologically material through depicting it as “the broken panes / of water, laid in the earth like leaded glass” (82). In the opening stanza, the speakers’ voices converge in the words “of water.” Both voices speak these words at the same time, thereby mirroring the mimetic reflection of water that their voices describe. Moreover, just as the water ripples into “broken panes,” their voices rupture mimetic speech and return to positions of difference until converging once again with the phrase, “to the boundless” (82). These moments of speaking in unison arise amid dissonant harmonies of voice. In “Singing with the Frogs,” Bringhurst refers to “The Blue Roofs of Japan” as homophonic rather than polyphonic, and it is through moments of harmonic convergence that we can hear the poem as homophonic. The formal qualities of the poem further suggest the structural constraints of homophonic sound by its instruction for the voices to be gendered male and female. These instructions reveal the poet’s construction of implied readers, or, rather, of what we might call implied readers-as-speakers. Yet, readers could subvert these instructions in order to play with this intended gendering of sound. We might take this subversion further to suggest that a reading aloud of the poem could never mimic the precise vocal intersections on the page. And, perhaps, Bringhurst’s subtitle of the poem reminds us of this very fact since the poem is a score — a blueprint for the voice that guides performance rather than limiting it. A reading aloud can, then, depart from the textual page, without needing the voices to interpenetrate exactly where indicated in the text.

Out of these rhythmic structures emerge spaces for the voice to pour through:
“how the breath / descends: how it pools and pours” (86). Spatially, rhythm creates a space for the voice to move through while, temporally, the voices interpenetrate at a specific moment. The poem’s rhythms are ones of disruption and dissonance as much as they are of convergence and harmony. In a reading aloud of the poem, these meetings of voices would emerge at slightly different points than on the page. Described as interpenetrations, these meetings of voices are eroticized, along with their translations from one medium to another as the voices carry text into the air where the voices meet again. As the poem progresses there are fewer instances of speaking in unison, culminating in the deconstruction of unified speech by superimposing the capitalized word "THIS" over the word "logos" (91) — both words are spoken at the same time, rendering logos nearly meaningless in terms of its exertion of rhetorical control. Thus, the rhythm of these overlapping voices foregrounds the boundaries between semiotic and symbolic, even if particular rhythms complicate the rupturing of these boundaries. What I mean is that rhythm opens up spaces for multiple layers of linguistic and extra-linguistic meaning to occur in the pauses and intersections of voice. As if performing the meaning of the phrase, “this music is all about water” (86), this poem is about voice moving through poetic structures, opening up spaces in between, places for the watery voice to pool. Voices pour through the poem in waves that cannot be rendered textual, except for the rhythmic markings of interpenetration on the page that attempt to materialize these “nodes of nonbeing” (86); however, both speakers portray the voice as material through the imagery of water: “the unbroken muscle of water, / the wholeness of the bone, / is the sudden … completeness / of being, / the singing” (87). Although these lines are
interrupted by the male voice as they are spoken, they theorize the poem’s music as materially embodied in the “muscle of water.” While the female voice speaks these lines, the male voice sings the counterpart to her melody. He rephrases her metaphor of water but still cites her as the source — “This music is all about water, / she said” — and further riffs upon the concept of water. While the female voice interjects with syncopated thoughts on the materiality of water, the male voice sings of structures as material. Among these structures emerge catachrestic spaces: “through the holes in the voice, / through the joints in the body, the stem of bamboo” (86). From within these openings emerge rhythms between the rhythms, ones that are “not breath but the silences / between breathing.” (86), a phrase reminiscent of Bringhurst’s poem “Sunday Morning” in which he speaks of “the line / between the unspeakable / and the already spoken” (69). In “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” the interpenetrating voices blur the line of what is already spoken and, moreover, the rhythmic pulses from such interpenetration push the line of what is unspeakable to the extent that the unspeakable erupts through rhythmic impulses.

The final stanza of the poem begins with an ontological directive situated within a reflection off the water: “Facing the water, be music” (italics in original, 94). But, meanwhile, this facing is accompanied by another act of facing, or rather of counterpoint, as the female voice counts to five — a facing that reflects the rhythm of the poem's language. Counting also reminds the listener of the poem’s subheading “A Jazz Score for Interpenetrating Voices.” As she counts, as if counting the rhythm of the poem, her voice becomes bare structure around which the language “pools and pours” (86). Listening to the last stanza in the context of Dennis Lee’s Un (2003), one hears how the rhythm would
sound if counted backwards, or how counting itself can be a knowing or an unknowing: “4, 3, 2, 1, un” (54). This unknowing through reversal foregrounds Hera’s speaking backwards in *Ursa Major*, or the circling “back to the pool / of alkaline silence / to listen” (229-230) that concludes “New World Suite No. 3.” I mention these un-countings in relation to “The Blue Roofs of Japan” because they raise the issue of how rhythm, implicit within counting, informs the meaning of a poem, or as Lee states, “a poem thinks by the way it moves” (197). Thus, Bringhurst’s poem *thinks* through its interpenetrative rhythms. Another way of phrasing this point would be to say that thinking takes place where voices spill across the page and where they listen to each other. They listen in this act of facing, thereby performing what Bringhurst calls for in his introduction to the poem: “Facing pages should not be read in sequence but together” (81). Listening across at each other, these voices culminate in turning their attention to a facing of the earth: the male voice speaks the closing words, “facing the sky, be quiet, wide and blue” (94) immediately after the female voice falls silent with the last count, *five*.

As a counterpart to “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” Bringhurst’s “New World Suite No. 3: Four Movements for Three Voices” (1995) is written as a three-part vocal score. In the introductory notes to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995*, Bringhurst speaks about his first attempt to create polyphonic music through a poem and how this culminates in the writing of “The New World Suite No. 3” As in “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” Bringhurst begins “The New World Suite No. 3” with an explanation of the voices; in this case, he uses the method of typography employed throughout the piece to explain how each voice performs:
Multivocality is essential to Bringhurst’s poetics both due to the plurality of the world itself and the necessity for what he refers to as “second-guessing and contradicting myself without delay” (12). Moreover, not only do polyphonic poems free the poem from silence, as Bringhurst notes, “poems live in the voice, not in the eye” (12), but they also accentuate the plurality of cultures out of which its multiple-voices speak. In the case of "New World Suite No. 3," the collision of mythologies that takes place amid the collision of voices foreshadows how this process will take place in *Ursa Major* with the inclusion of multiple languages as well. Thus, I read the "New World Suite No.3" as textual space in which Bringhurst begins to experiment with cultural polyphony that will lead to *Ursa Major*; thus, in many ways, the poem explores an *idea* of the world constructed through a plurality of voices and of myths. In allowing Bringhurst to engage in the processes of “second-guessing and contradicting myself without delay,” the structure of the poem enables this *idea* of the world to be proposed in a manner in which it constantly questions its creation while calling for us to listen to it. Bringhurst’s choice to title the poem, “New World Suite No.3,” further gestures to its musical quality as it
echoes Antonín Dvořák’s *New World Symphony* (1893), which also follows a four-part structure and, intriguingly, performs a similar attention to ecology in its conjuring of Dvořák’s acoustic experience of the “new world” of North America.

Musically annotated with tempo markings, Bringhurst’s poem opens with the first movement, “I. All the Desanctified Places *moderato,*” locating of this poem within historical time and geographical specificity while, at the same time, not letting any one period or place claim the poem as its own. Listing place names ranging from “Cuzco, Tenochtitlan, Acoma” to “Denver, Los Angeles, Vancouver” and stating claims ranging from “What is is what has happened, says Hegel” (183) to “This is not history” (192), the poem tumbles towards moments of cohesion amid chaos, such as in this fragment:

> the real is frequently speechless.
> the real, in our presence, is speechless

While the first and third voices overlap in an utterance about silence — “the real, in our presence, is speechless” — the second voice is, literally, speechless, as signified by the empty line. Stylistically, with each voice flowing into the next and each philosophical position undercut or nuanced by the next, the poem becomes confused, caught up in its own making. Yet, it continues to circle around certain phrases or ideas, pausing at such the very notion of an idea itself: “What is is an idea” (193). Thus, it seems fitting that this first section ends with the poem circling around itself in a retreat into nature: as the first voices describes, "it sings itself farther back into the hills / And the hills dance, / but only when no one / is looking" (208). I read the *it* as the poem because it refers to “a
song I thought you should hear” that the speakers of the poem reiterate as a song that needs to be heard. The ambiguity of this song continues into the next movement, entitled “II. Who is the Fluteplayer? andante” and yet, there is cohesion in how we find ourselves in the natural landscape that the poem had retreated into at the end of the first movement. Moreover, we are asked to consider thought within nature: “The eye of the earth is open [...] The darkness is thinking” (214) and it is here that we are called into being by the sound of the unknown flute player: “Because he is there, playing / his flute, we are here, dancing” (219).

Locating sound within the specificity of place becomes important in the third and fourth movements as each one articulates cultural crossings. The title of the third movement, “III. The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River adagio” (220) foregrounds this space of translation, which becomes articulated between the speaker and his grandfather as a translation across generations. Translation anticipates the encounters of Cree, Greek, and Latin languages and mythologies in *Ursa Major* and the location of Regina, Saskatchewan, where the first performance takes place. The fourth movement anticipates the translation from worldly to celestial that is essential in *Ursa Major*’s recounting of how these stars came to be fixed in the sky. In fact, this fourth movement, “IV. Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains lento” begins with an image of the night's sky and even mentions Arcturus: “Arcturus, spearing the Great Bear of heaven, sees / in her eyes, now and always, the eyes of his mother” (226). Within this continuous moment of seeing, we witness a translation of sight, of violence, and of love — and, through the myth of Arcturus, Bringhurst explores these translations further in
Ursa Major. Importantly, it is this “alkaline silence” (230) that the poem speaks of returning to in its conclusion:

26 circle back to the pool of alkaline silence to listen.

of alkaline silence to listen.

The alkaline pool does not represent an unmoving or still silence because we circle back to this place in order to actively listen. As if looking ahead to the “sacred pool” of Ursa Major, or back to “the talking pool of water” in “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” the voices of “New World Suite No. 3” speak of how they “circle back to the pool of alkaline silence to listen” (230), an ending that invites a listening to the resonances among these poems in as much as it invites a listening to how the voices softly and sometimes silently pour through the poem’s polyphonic shape. What gathers in this alkaline pool? One answer lies in the multiplicity that composes both the world and the poem. As noted in the beginning of this chapter’s discussion, Bringhurst contends that “the world is a polyphonic place” — polyphonic in its sound but also in its histories, languages and cultures and it is through this framework that I suggest we listen to Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers (2003).

III. Staging Polyphony

Given Bringhurst’s attention to performance in the writing of poetry, such as in his polyphonic poems “Blue Roofs of Japan” and “New World Suite No. 3,” it seems fitting to turn our attention to a polyphonic poem that performs not only on the page but also off the page in a collaboration of speech, dance, music, and visual art. Premiered in Regina, Saskatchewan, in March 2002, Ursa Major was directed by Robin Poitras and
performed by the dancers of New Horizon Dance Company, with music by Chiyoko Szlavnics and art installation by John Noesthedaen. The stage directions indicate that the poem should be spoken in sustained polyphony. Any reading of *Ursa Major* (Gaspereau Press 2003) cannot ignore this polyphonic form because the published poem includes notes, as though musically scoring the polyphony. Moreover, it is printed once in linear form and then reprinted as what Bringhurst calls a *voice map*, with languages colour-coded and overlapping lines of speech. Languages of English, Greek, and Cree intersect on the printed page and in the sound of the performance, thereby producing what I call a polyphonic ecology. Yet, what happens to cultural sound in this ecology in which the mechanics involves a simultaneous listening and speaking on the part of the performers? And what of the audience: how are we to hear this collision of voices, myths, media and languages? Thus, what I propose as an answer to these questions is that the experience of *Ursa Major* as text and performance calls for a re-thinking of polyphony as a reciprocal listening.

The voice map enacts its own textual performance while conveying an awareness of itself as a score to be improvised upon. Similar to how Clarke’s libretto for *Québecité* functions as a poetic score (one that, as Chapter Three suggests, is reshaped through improvisations), Bringhurst’s voice map functions as a score for the speakers and dancers who performed *Ursa Major* in its Regina production. However, unlike Clarke’s libretto, Bringhurst’s voice map repeats all five acts of *Ursa Major* again — as though enacting the final words of the text: “all over and over and over again” (48). In this repetition, the text is reconfigured as a typographical mapping of polyphony. Each language is coloured
in varied shades of blue ink and the words overlap on the page in order to give a visual interpretation of what the performance might sound like. The languages and mythological traditions come into contact with each other as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* interweaves with Leonard Bloomfield’s *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*. An example of the voice map’s vocal overlap occurs when the Translator’s voice intersects with the voice of Kâ-kisikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son:

\[
\text{Arcadiae tamen est inpensior illi}
\]

\[
\text{Arcadia, bear country: that… (51)}
\]

The stage directions indicate that the Translator’s words should be slightly delayed, creating a syncopated delay as the Translator’s voice interrupts midway through the utterance of Kâ-kisikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son. Reading the interruption in *Ursa Major* through a jazz term such as syncopation does not seem as far-fetched when one recalls how Brighurst describes “The Blue Roofs of Japan”: “This is a score for jazz duet, which I hope will function also as a reading text” (81). Thus, given that Brighurst refers to a poem written in a similar typographic style as *Ursa Major* as a “jazz duet,” such notions as syncopation resonate with his call for a “slight delay” in the reading of his voice map. In fact, the “slight delay” (12) sets the rhythm for the translations of myth, language, and body that take place throughout the performance. This typography results in affecting the reader, whose eyes, unable to focus as they scan back and forth between lines, and ears, slipping back and forth between languages, slowly recognize sounds only in their rhythmic repetition. Since translation itself is a *crossing over* that takes place in a period of time, it is fitting that the “slight delay” draws attention to this passage of time that
results in a *slight incoherence*; but rather than this causing frustration among audience members, this acoustic confusion is meant to represent the polylingual state of the world. As Bringhurst explains in the Preface, this polylingual aspect of the performance “is not, I think, a problem, despite the fact that theatre-goers and readers equally fluent in English, Latin, Greek, and Cree appear to be in short supply. This is a masque, not an exam. What it asks of its audience, either in text or in performance, is merely a willingness to watch and think and listen” (7). Along with this request, Bringhurst further observes how “[a]ll of us are practised, after all, at living in a multivocal, multilingual world” and it is this world, our world, that is reflected in his polyphonic piece.

Characters in this masque are corporeal and celestial, as illustrated through the apt description that Arcturus gives to his mother: “My mother is a woman of both worlds, / with no escape from feeling or from thinking” (26). Never losing sight of both worlds, the masque ends with the Celestial Janitor reminding us of the repetitive rhythm of translation:

```
The wounded mother
clambers up the spear shaft,
shinnies up the tree,
transforming earth and water, fire and air,
to fire and air and earth and water:
air transforming into air and earth to earth
and fire to fire and water to water
and blood to water and blood to snow
and hunter to hunted and breath to air
all over and over and over again. (74)
```

The Celestial Janitor was played by Bringhurst himself in the Regina production, which
would have given the role a degree of authorial presence as though promising to ‘clean-up’ the cosmos as Celestial Janitor and as poet. The Celestial Janitor speaks of celestial translation (from earth to stars) and linguistic translation. In describing how one element transforms into another and sometimes into itself, he posits translation as functioning through the acts of misnaming and renaming, an “unsettling of language” (Barthes); but, in this case, the unsettling of language becomes acoustic. Ending the poem with the repetitive phrase, “all over and over and over again” (74), the rhythm of translation centres upon the word and — the word that carries language across and, thus, performs the very meaning of translation.

Considering the attention to the materiality of language in Ursa Major's typography, can we grasp what it is that we are listening to in the text's production of polyphonic sound? What rhythm does a reader listen to? The typography of Ursa Major accentuates the rhythmic ruptures within the text that they can be both seen and heard on the page, or at least as gestures towards their fullness in actual performance. These sounds have tactile forms in the method of their production: syncopation — as the Translator cuts into the Latin, with a lyrical cutting that resembles the vocal knife in “Blue Roofs of Japan” that cuts “sweetly […] but deep enough to draw the necessary blood” (82). As one context to this linguistic act of cutting, we might turn to Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture, in which Catherine Clément traces the root of the word syncope to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's definition: “Syncope is from sun (with), and kopto (I cut)” (qtd in Clément 4). Musically, syncope refers to the accentuation of an offbeat; Clément explores the implications of hearing this offbeat accentuation in terms of a
‘cutting off’ of oneself. She theorizes bodily syncopation as a sudden gasp of breath, a sneeze, a scream, or bodily experiences like ‘falling’ in love — these ruptures in the body’s ‘usual’ rhythm are what Clément calls *jouissance*, a ‘losing of one’s head’ in a moment of ecstasy (15). Syncope, as a rhythmic rupture, resonates with Kristeva’s notion of the *thetic* as a break — a cut (*kopto*) — in-between the semiotic and symbolic. When the materiality of Kristeva’s *thetic* combines with Clément’s *syncope*, the resulting rhythm becomes one of a full-bodied stutter; moreover, the return of the maternal *thetic* combines with the bodily experience of *syncope* in Clément’s description of the birth of rhythm: “The queen of rhythm, syncope is also the mother of *dissonance*; it is the source, in short, of a harmonious and productive discord […] Attack, haven, collision; a fragment of the beat disappears and of this disappearance, rhythm is born” (5). In *Ursa Major*, collisions of multiple languages and voices give birth to rhythm; Clément rightly predicts that this rhythm will be dissonant and I would add that through this dissonance comes both unknowing and knowing. As Clément further explains, syncope accelerates language, thereby contributing to the *kinesis* of the text as well as its performance (5).

The voices in Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major* not only embody these rhythms of rupture, but they also repeat an image that describes such a ‘break’ with language:

\[
...posse loqui eriptur: uox iracunda minaxque
\]

…lost her grip on language. What erupted from her throat

\[
plenaque terroris rauco de gutture fertur;
\]

was just a rough noise, a storm wind whipped in the pit of her belly. (52)

Her throat gives birth to the *thetic* — “a rough noise” — erupting from an in-between
space, similar to how Arcturus later describes his mother as “a woman of both worlds, / with no escape from feeling or from thinking” (59). The transformation of woman into bear — a translation — is one that is punctuated by the sudden growl, a speech act that signals the end of her transformation into a bear. The ultimate moment of being outside of herself — cut off (kopto) — occurs with a syncopated growl.

IV. Dancing the Voice Map

The pivotal role of the human body in various transformations that occur in *Ursa Major* contrasts with the limited information in the text as to what the performing body is doing. And perhaps this is, indeed, the point: that the dancing takes place in the words themselves. The choreography is written through a human’s transformation into a bear or into a constellation of stars. Yet, in “Everywhere Being is Dancing,” Bringhurst speaks metaphorically about poetry as dance: “poetry’s flesh are the bones of the dance” (61); but although dance provides a helpful metaphor through which to convey the kinesis of poetry, Bringhurst remains vague as to what he means by dance. Since dancers are specifically referred to in the full title, *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*, I turn to the performance of this piece for an answer to what material shape the dancing takes; however, except for the small group of about sixty people in the Regina audience of *Ursa Major*, the lack of recordings or documentation of the performance complicates this answer. As Peter Sanger writes in his “Afterword” to the published text of *Ursa Major*:

*The best commentary upon Bringhurst’s Ursa Major can only be its performance.*
Of the seven choreographies out of which it is made, only one can be offered by a printed text with some accuracy – the choreography of its words [...] The other six choreographies at work in the masque, those of dance, costume, scenery, instrumental music, song, and audience, can be registered only glancingly, if at all, on the page. (77)

In the same position as Sanger, I too have only the words to work with and what Sanger calls “what those words have prompted me to remember or find out or gather by gift of hearsay” (77). We are given one “gift of hearsay” from Bringhurst himself in his Preface to the text; while referring to Hera’s speaking backwards, he mentions Davida Monk as employing this technique “superbly in the first performance” (7). Interestingly, this example is one in which the body is already implicated in the text itself as her words are written forwards and then backwards, as if asking the body to perform through this retrospective action. And yet the passage itself that is repeated backwards speaks of “the star that never moves” — a stillness juxtaposed with fluid, ever-moving speech, described by the stage directions as “continuing without interruption” (45).

While audiences and critics can be frustrated by the lack of documentation about *Ursa Major*’s performance, it seems fitting that there is this aporia since the poet himself is often elusive in his metaphors of dance. In Bringhurst’s poetry and essays, dance becomes a metaphor for poetry itself: “what poetry knows, or what it strives to know, is the dancing at the heart of being” (52). The closeness, for Bringhurst, between poetry and dance might explain why he resists defining it. Bringhurst implies that the shape of dance equals the material of poetry: “poetry’s flesh are the bones of the dance” (“Everywhere Being is Dancing,” 61); but what does he mean by *dance*? The vagueness of the term allows Bringhurst to romanticize the possibilities within this chorography as “bones”
where structures of both the poem and the body converge. Considering that he often returns to dance to explain his poetics, or poetics in general — “what poetry knows, or what it strives to know, is the dancing at the heart of being” (52) — dance needs to be clarified in order to function as a critically useful term. In fact, Bringhurst’s invocation of dance raises the provocative question as articulated by dance theorist Anne Cooper Albright in her interrogation into how to comprehend the tangible form of Derrida's theoretical notion of “incalculable choreographies”: “What do the ‘incalculable choreographies” actually look like? Whose body is dancing, and what is it dancing about?” (159). Since the form and content of Bringhurst’s work reveals intense consideration of the material shape of written and spoken language, an inclusion of the corporeal element would make his voice maps more of a multi-sensory experience. A review of the poem *Ursa Major* (*Canadian Literature* 186) by Brian Henderson makes a worthwhile suggestion that the text could be accompanied by a DVD of the recording; however, his title of his review, “Poet on Point” is precisely the type of generalization about dance that results from the lack of information about the dancing itself in the poem. The general category of “dance” does not mean that the dancing will include the pointe shoes of classical ballet and, in fact, the photographs that provide hints at what the performance of *Ursa Major* might have looked like show a barefoot dancer (see Appendix 7). Even without looking at these photographs, looking into the dance techniques employed by New Dance Horizons would reveal that the company mostly performs contemporary and modern dance. Moreover, Robin Poitras, artistic director of New Dance Horizons and choreographer of *Ursa Major*, is a contemporary dancer and
performance artist, which, I would argue, needs to be taken into account if one, as Henderson does, attempts to imagine what the dancing might look like. (In addition, Henderson claims that, in comparison to the performance, the poem becomes “the trace, a kind of Labanotation, for the voices of its performance. But it’s lonely without the music and the movement that would have accompanied it. There should really be a DVD to bring it to life” [117] — a point that could be critiqued through Auslander’s concept of “liveness” discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One). To assume, as Henderson’s review does, that “dance” means one form of dance, one overlooks the complexity of movement that could accompany the poem. Nevertheless, Bringhurst himself is vague in his references to dance — *everywhere being is dancing* — and, yet, this generality points towards a bodily movement that could inhabit a range of possibility, without limiting it to one form of dance. Also, when I speak in the previous chapters about adaptation as responding to a lack (registering the limits of one medium) I see this lack registering itself here in Bringhurst’s references to dance: what is un-writable in the voice map is dancing, thereby prompting the text itself to look out towards the reader in order to see the dancing. In our participation, we read backwards as we piece together the imagined performance.

V. “Knowing not owning” — Mapping Voice

I would rather say that knowing freed from the agenda of possession and control – knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, and hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being – that is what we mean by poetry.
Attention to the specificity of place, or rather to the geographic specificity of *Ursa Major*'s performance, is one way of attending to the body even on the pages of the voice map. Performed under the skies of Regina, Saskatchewan, beneath the stars of Ursa Major itself, the site of this first performance gives a site-specific grounding to the piece. In addition, the text’s acute awareness of geography functions largely through language and myth. As Sanger notes, the Western mythology of *Ursa Major* draws not only from the Graeco-Roman source of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but also from the history of how this myth was disseminated across a newly discovered Canada. For instance, Sanger notes how on November 14, 1606, a masque with Ovidian properties took place for an audience that included a Mi'kmaq chief and his people (82); as though citing this event, Bringhurst mixes the Great Bear myths of Western tradition with the bear narratives of Cree mythology. Thus, the translation across cultures in *Ursa* re-defines the cultural ecology of a place. As Bringhurst describes in a linguistic re-mapping of Canada, “[a] literary map of this country would be first of all a map of languages, several layers deep. On the base layer, there would be no sign at all of English and French. At least sixty-five, perhaps as many as eighty, different languages, of at least ten different major families, were spoken in this country when Jacques Cartier arrived. Each and every one of them had a history and a literature” (“The Polyhistorical Mind” 24). Although *Ursa Major* does not attempt to re-map the histories and literatures of Saskatchewan, it does place the existence of these histories and literatures at the forefront of the performance and asks the audience to listen to this otherwise unheard ecology.

(Bringhurst “Everywhere Being is Dancing,” 52-53)
As a counterpart to the mythic translations in *Ursa Major*, Bringhurst’s translations of Haida oral storytelling in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* provide further instances of cultural listening that takes place across and among cultures. In the critical writing that surrounds the Haida myths, Bringhurst elaborates on his approach to these recordings: “I confess that all translation seems to me at best approximation – but translation also seems to me a necessary part of what Ngugi wa Thiongó calls decolonizing the mind, and what Plato calls *ποικίλη*.* That is, approximately, thinking” (*A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, 19). Since *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* addresses the complex politics of recording cultural voices, it provides insight into Bringhurst's naming of the printed score for *Ursa Major* as a voice map. It is not a colonial map that holds the voice in its place, but rather it lets the voices collide, unfixed, on the page. The mapped voices listen to each other, while speaking, because they must hear where to speak as if following a musical score. This listening creates a reciprocal flow of energy that evokes Don McKay’s essay, “Otherwise than place” — an essay that posits a “reverse flow” in the listening to the natural world — a flow going both ways in what he calls “the hinge of translation between place and its otherwise” (31). In *Ursa Major*, the voice map invites what we might call a *listening otherwise*. One of the ways in which it does this is by performing its own type of *mapping otherwise* that reverses a colonialist mapping. I would argue that Bringhurst performs this unmapping primarily by rewriting the entire five acts again as a voice map, a repetition that undermines its previous form. Unmapping and un-listening are conflated in a scene in which Hera speaks backwards, as if un-telling her story. This linguistic repetition through reversal becomes part of the voice map’s
overall practice of unravelling its knowledge through repetition.

A precedent to decolonizing impulse in *Ursa Major* occurs in one of Bringhurst’s earlier poems called, “Thirty Words” in which Bringhurst circles around the phrase, “knowing, not owning” (*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 66). Bringhurst positions his writing, or mapping, as knowing and “not owning.” In performing this unmapping, the voice map takes on the theoretical meaning of deterritorialization that Deleuze and Guattari propose in their notion of rhizomatic mapping (*A Thousand Plateaus*). Rather than a map referring to the territory, Deleuze and Guattari theorize maps that are the territories, thereby challenging semiotic referentiality. In this sense, Bringhurst’s voice map does not refer to something but, in fact, is something, thereby refusing to adhere to a logic that renders a map obsolete once written. In rewriting the entire five acts again as a voice map, Bringhurst enacts one version of an endless series of repetitions in performing and re-performing the piece. The rewriting of the voice map enacts what Deleuze and Guattari describe as an unfinished, open map: “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (21). Moreover, as the voices interrupt each other, Bringhurst’s voice map continues its aspiration towards knowing without owning through transference, thereby disowning itself as words transfer from voice to voice.

*Ursa Major* provides us with an open listening, with its mapped and unmapped voices, slightly delayed translations, overlapping each other just as the mythology overlaps itself and its geography. This provides us with one example of how polyphonic listening could unfold on the stage and in the audience. One of the most important
features of this model is its awareness of itself as an ecology of sound, producing interdependent spaces through which to listen among and between. It is this sense of relationality that underlines the “eros of coherence” that Zwicky speaks of as informing both polyphonic and lyric structures (“Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst” 181). For Zwicky, polyphonic structures are propelled by a desire for divergent lines of thought to intersect, like the interpenetrating voices in “The Blue Roofs of Japan.” Before turning toward Zwicky’s thoughts on polyphony in the Conclusion, I ask again how the multiple voices of this chapter call for a recognition of our critical role within this enactment and embodiment of a spatial and temporal plurality; moreover, how does this recognition allow for a re-tuning of the ear to both the human and non-human? If we listen, once again, to “The Blue Roofs of Japan” we find a model of this re-tuning being enacted in the line, “This music is water — this water / is music” (87). As I have argued, this is a poetics of performance in which the poem enacts that which it speaks, but what I would reiterate is that we too are implicated in this performance. It is a reflection that hears outside of its own mirroring; thus, this reflective process as performative enables the poem to be a creative process and, indeed, Brighurst’s own writing on mimesis supports this claim. With the statement, “Mimesis is not repetition” (“Poetry and Thinking”163), Brighurst recognizes poetry’s attempt not to mimic the world but rather to respond to it:

Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world’s ability to manage and to understand itself. It is the language of the world: something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention, and something that the world will teach us to speak if we allow the world to do so. It is the wén of dào: a music that we learn to see, to feel, to hear, to smell, and then to think, and then to answer. (162-163)
Answering this music is an act that returns us to the call and response that, as I argue, underlines the process of adaptation — a performative response that I phrase in Chapter Two as *a poem and its echo* (which is my own echo of Ondaatje’s phrase “a woman and her echo” from his poem “The Nine Sentiments”). Poetry, song, and storytelling constitute compelling ways of answering, as do the echoes of sound itself. Importantly, the answer responds but does not repeat. The response is its own music, one that is in tune with the music heard and knowing of its place amid a world of sound. “[T]his music is water, this water is music” (87) — a model for listening that listens both ways. If we then follow this model, we hear the music in both the water and the music. *This is.* A poetics that performs itself on the page and we strive to hear it out loud and carry it forward into the world. Listening over and over again.
Endnotes

1. In the preface to this collection, Lilburn situates the conversations within *Thinking and Singing* as emerging from speech and from writing: “It seemed to me that I was engaged in a five-pointed conversation even though some of the participants spoke chiefly from the page” (i).

2. As discussed in Chapter Three with reference to *Québécité*, Heble's theory of dissonance provides a medium for negotiating what Robert Kroetsch calls “disunity as unity” in a Canadian context. Yet, while Kroetsch does not mean acoustic cultural disunity, Heble re-defines it as such and asks the question of what it means to re-write the national narrative as culturally dissonant. In this re-writing, I hear Heble as positing the idea that transcultural listening needs to be polyphonic; but does it matter that he oscillates between terms such as polyphonic, contrapuntal and postmodern? Nonetheless, what we can immediately draw out of Heble's argument is that he seeks to propose a reciprocal listening, one that bursts open reciprocity into the multiple — a listening, all ways.

3. In referring to polyphony in non-Western traditions, the terminology varies among terms such as "polivocal’, ‘polyphonic parallelism’, ‘plurivocal’, ‘multi-phonie’, ‘multi-sonance’ and ‘diaphony.” As *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* explains, "this is partly due to a pervasive feeling among early scholars who looked at non-Western music within an evolutionary framework (in which learned European contrapuntal and harmonic traditions stood at the apex and ‘polyphonic’ had acquired a rather specialized meaning) that orally transmitted folk and ‘primitive’ traditions could not possibly share the same terminology. Some ethnomusicologists have nevertheless used ‘polyphony’ to cover all kinds of multi-part singing.” When considering this history in the context of Canadian polyphonic poetry, we must ask ourselves the question of what musical traditions sing this discourse of polyphony into being.

4. Polyphony has been defined as a historical period in medieval music during which no single harmony prevails over another. As the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* explains, the meaning of polyphony can be traced from an anonymous treatise of mid-14th century, offering polyphony as an alternative to dyaphonia, toward the rhythmic and vocal multiplicity that continues to influence modern polyphonies. In articulating how polyphony has been theorized by musicologists in the 20th century, *The New Grove*
explains how musicologists understand "pure 'harmony' as created by the parallel movement of parts at a constant interval, and pure 'polyphony' as created by the melodic differences between the parts (as in the drone, ostinato and heterophony); medieval discant and the kinds of polyphony that succeeded it were regarded as 'harmonic-polyphonic forms' [...] Similarly, though staying closer to Helmholtz, Stumpf (Die Anfänge der Musik, 1911) distinguished strictly between 'polyphony' as 'the simultaneous performance of several different melodies, coming together only now and then in consonant intervals or in unison' and 'harmonic music' as 'finding aesthetic pleasure or the opposite in the simultaneous sounding of several different notes and the succession of such tonal complexes'. In contrast to this perspective, there are musicians such as Anton Webern who place the "sequence of notes" contained in polyphony above the individual voices in terms of importance (New Grove). Amid all of these varying theories of polyphony, there are the underlying impulses toward polyphonic sound that, too, must be considered. The desire to write polyphonically varies for each composer and each piece and, yet, there are connections among them that point towards recurring issues in polyphonic writing. In discussing his approach to polyphony, Gustav Mahler spoke of how the multiple parts must be differentiated: the pieces must “[come] in from quite different sides" and how "themes must be completely distinct in their rhythmic and melodic character (anything else is merely something written in many parts, disguised homophony)” (qtd in Bauer-Lechner, 147). Other terms have come to connote polyphonic sound: for instance, for Arnold Schoenberg polyphony took the form of free atonality. Nonetheless, while these musical representations of polyphony explore the multi-voiced possibilities within sound, how are these same possibilities explored through written language?

5. Bakhtin further alludes to voice as defying boundaries of codification when he refers to the notion of transmission, theorizing the speaker “not as a subject of artistic representation” (339) but rather as a subject of artistic representation engaged in the process of transmission. After a discussion of direct and indirect means of reporting speech, Bakhtin builds his theory of transmission on the notion that all words uttered have once belonged to someone else, whether or not we choose to mark their ‘otherness’ by placing them in quotation marks. Ownership of words resembles a desperate attempt to claim something that is always and already communally elusive when placed in the context of transmission; yet the ownership of words is what informs the codification of language. Bakhtin’s assertion that written speech calls for greater formal attention to “otherness and purity” (339) than does everyday verbal discourse suggests that the latter offers greater potential for resisting an ideology of language obsessed with ownership.

6. In the essay collection Is Canada Post-Colonial?, George Elliott Clarke returns to George Grant in order to re-evaluate the importance of understanding what has historically differentiated Canada from the United States and how this difference must be upheld despite the pressure of Canada’s colonial relationship to its southern neighbour. In lamenting Canada’s submission to this pressure, Clarke observes, “Grant foresaw our
“demise” as a state. He was able to predict our destiny because he knew what Canada was” ("What Was Canada?” 36). 27-39.

7. Kevin McNeilly began his graduate poetry seminar at UBC in 2004 by reading aloud this poem of Bringhurst’s. I credit McNeilly’s close-listening to these lines as leading towards my reading of Bringhurst’s poetry as engaged with a politics of unmapping. Furthermore, McNeilly’s supervision of my MA thesis (UBC) on Clarke and Bringhurst was influential in bringing many of these approaches to translating and listening into being.

8. In this sense, the voice map longs to be performed as does Clarke’s libretto for Quévécité; in this longing, they both resist the very notion of ‘ending’ because the next performance always lies somewhere outside of the text’s reach. And even if the act of reaching constitutes a desire for completion — a desire for return that poet Tim Lilburn describes with the Greek term, “apokotatostasis” (99), a desire for togetherness that overwhelms the characters of Quévécité despite their dissonances — this desire is what keeps the poetry in motion, as each performance continues to dance the words off the map. Thus, the potential within polyphony for an unmapping of a single colonizing voice is central to dissonance in Bringhurst’s Ursa Major.
Conclusion

We decided music is memory,  
the way a word is the memory of its meaning.  

— Anne Michaels, “Words for the Body”  
_(The Weight of Oranges 47)._  

Reading as listening is the critical argument that underscores this dissertation. In putting this argument into practice, I have listened to poems both on and off the page in order to illustrate their writing of music, singing of poetry and dancing of language. I have theorized performances of poetry as a genre that must be understood as an intermediary conversation among text, performer and audience. On a broader level, I have argued that critical attention to this interaction leads to an active and participatory reading practice.  

Studying performances of poetry reminds us that the body is always implicated in writing, reading and listening. Although words as disembodied voices etched onto the page may appear unmoving and unchanging, written words are still *doing* something, but this depends upon the recognition of action in a written language. Readers, therefore, initiate the interpretive and responsive acts that enable a text to perform. McLuhan illustrates this interdependence by accompanying the phrase “the book is an extension of the eye” (34-35) with a photograph of an imagined reader’s hands holding the book. I referred to this phrase in the Introduction as one model of reading, a model that I mention now as an echo of McCaffery’s phrase “model reader” (Chapter Two) that brings a layer of mimicry to Iser’s “implied reader.” Importantly, not all readers will hold the book precisely as McLuhan’s photograph demonstrates and reading can take place without
holding a book at all. This latter point is one that I have made in terms of multi-media adaptations as readings, but this point also takes on greater significance given current debates over the fate of the book as a material object. As research into digital readers continues to drive technological innovation (Siemens, Vandendorpe), the question of how we read will inform future designs of digital methods for receiving information; moreover, the answer to this question will drastically change as literary cultures continue to adapt to these methods. Thus, the question of how we read in this present moment becomes urgent for us readers as we choose our methods of adaptation.

This dissertation re-evaluates the act of reading as an act of performing and, in doing so, re-asserts the embodied qualities of reading that must not be lost in mediated, digital reading. Reading requires the hearing of a dialogue between the adapted poem and its new site of performance. Thus, embodiment inhabits both sides of the adaptive conversation. In engaging these issues of mediation, adaptation, and reading, the dissertation speaks to a range of critical directions that can be further explored, three of which I will discuss briefly here: comparative studies of performances of Canadian poetry that build upon the concerns of recording practices raised in each chapter; a subsequent project that will focus specifically on radio performances of poetry; and concluding thoughts towards theorizing musically ekphrastic poetry.

Canada’s diverse soundscapes offer many comparative case studies in sound poetry, spoken-word, dub poetry and oral storytelling through which to examine the interaction between a written poem and its performed counterpart. In pursuing these comparisons, I would posit the acoustic archive as a conceptual and practical challenge to critical understandings of the archive as a recording technology (Derrida, Banting);
moreover, I would ask how a theorizing of the acoustic archive would allow for an
innovative exploration of each of these diverse genres of oral performance. Compiling a
history of dub poetry recordings in Canada, for example, would provide an acoustic
archive through which one could assess the cultural, political and economic factors that
impact the performance and recording practices. (This would provide an acoustic archive
in which to contextualize, for instance, Susan Gingell’s and Maria Casas’s analyses of
Lillian Allen’s recording, Revolutionary Tea Party [1986].) Similarly, a study of poets
who have integrated textual and acoustic approaches in the publication of poetry (Wayde
Compton’s Performance Bond [2004]) would further reveal the material, technological
and editorial conditions out of which multi-media performances of poetry are produced.
In terms of the first chapter’s question of how to adapt avant-garde sound poetry to
present-day audiences, I would suggest that avant-garde poetry must be constantly re-
situated in contemporary poetic contexts. Pedagogically, this re-situating takes on greater
significance when considering how to re-present avant-garde poetry for listeners who
have not heard it before but who are well versed in other forms of oral literary
performances such as slam poetry. Within this context, I would examine the work of
sound poets who emerged alongside The Four Horsemen, particularly Gerry Shikatani
and Nubuo Kubota whose work re-situates avant-garde poetry within new media. Both
artists use video art to accompany live sound-singing (Kubota in Loop Holes [2001] and
Shikatani in Kokoro Is for Heart [1999]). Shikatani’s work, in particular, foregrounds
cultural mediation through experimentations in linguistic sounds of English, Japanese,
and Spanish, thereby adapting the avant-garde in ways that challenge critics to engage
with the cultural politics of the avant-garde itself.
As mentioned in Chapter Two, orchestral adaptations of Ondaatje’s poetry and prose would offer additional sites of comparison to dance adaptations in terms of both adaptive practices and how music responds to musical references in the text itself. This writing of music resonates with Chapter Three’s question of how the cultural politics of sound will be performed in future stagings of Clarke’s operas. (A production of *Trudeau* is scheduled for Halifax in June 2010 and *Québecité* was performed in February 2009 in Bethlehem, PA, which I discuss as a re-staging of Canadian sound in “Canadian Jazz Opera in America” [*Canadian Theatre Review* 142].) Similarly, Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major* has not been performed since its 2002 premiere and a crucial critical question will be how the soundscape of this piece will be influenced by the context of its next staging. In the cases of Clarke’s operas and Bringhurst’s polyphonic poem, the reader’s distance from the “live” performed pieces emphasizes the need for them to be performed again. In the meantime, interviews with performers and collaborators would provide important documentation of the processes of staging these performances. Building upon the concern with recording practices throughout the dissertation, I envision a book-version of this project as including a series of interviews with composers, visual artists, and choreographers involved with each of the performances discussed. These interviews would not necessarily be with the authors of the adapted texts but rather with the adapters whose viewpoints are not as often heard in critical discussions: for instance, Ross Manson and Kate Alton as directors of “The Four Horsemen Project,” Andrea Nann as a dancer of Ondaatje’s writing, D.D. Jackson as a composer of Clarke’s jazz-opera, and Robin Poitras as a choreographer of Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major*. Hearing from these
performers as adapters would allow for the analyses of the performances to be situated within the practical issues of staging poetry; additionally, the interviews would provide a dialogic archive of performances not able to be recorded otherwise, as in the case of Brighurst’s *Ursa Major*, which was not recorded and, therefore, a conversation about the choreography of the piece would greatly benefit our critical understanding of how the dancing spoke amid the polyphony of voices.

Finally, along with these projects that supplement the work in this dissertation, my research has revealed a pressing need to document the recordings of poetry broadcast on CBC radio. All of the major poets discussed in this dissertation have read on CBC radio and yet these readings are not only difficult to cite as recordings but also they have not been critically discussed as performances of poetry that were heard by a national listening audience. As Robert Weaver notes in *The Anthology Anthology*, the poems broadcast on “Anthology” (1954-1985) received listening audiences that outnumbered any readership of literary journals, thus making the program "by far the largest of Canadian 'little magazines" (iv). Although studies have been conducted on American radio (Keith; Hilmes; Douglas; Sterling) and on the history of Canadian radio (Weir; Ellis; Hall; Neilson; Peers; Cole), there have not been studies that combine Canadian radio, its listening audience, and performances of poetry.¹ Radio has been central to international modernisms (not only in Ezra Pound's radio broadcasts but also in the work of modernist poets such as Gertrude Stein [Wilson]); but radio has not been brought to the forefront in modernist Canadian poetics. Articles such as Jody Berland’s “Nationalism and the Modernist Legacy” (2000), which situates CBC radio policies within the communication theories of Innis, and Pauline Butling's “Phyllis Webb as
Public Intellectual” (2009), which focuses on Webb as producer of the CBC radio program Ideas, exemplify the rich source of material and critical directions to be pursued regarding the intersection of Canadian modernisms and CBC radio. Marshall McLuhan recognized this intersection at the same time as “Anthology” began, and his work on radio will inform this project’s theoretical contextualizing of modernism and radio in Canada (Cavell; Willmott). Stemming from the dissertation’s pursuit of the renegotiations of multiculturalism through multi-vocal sound, the next step would be to situate the representations of national sound in the broadcasts of “Anthology” within a theoretical framework of the radio as acoustic, public, and national medium.

* 

Hearing each chapter of this dissertation as a close-listening reminds us that we are dealing with recorded materials that problematize recording practices themselves. As I propose in the Introduction, rather than letting the challenges of “live” and “recorded” media become an obstacle for this listening, I have integrated these challenges into my attention to the contested presence of reader/performer and mediation among audience, performer and text. Listening to poetry is listening to sound, whether written on the page or spoken aloud. As Brinthurst suggests, writing condenses breath into a pool of water: “Writing is the solid form of language, the precipitate” (The Solid Form of Language 9). But, whereas this metaphor of condensation emphasizes the ecological quality of the process, what happens to sound when it is recorded and what happens to its connection with the body? Acoustic space is where the eye and ear reconnect and this very premise of reconnection underlines the poetic scores by bpNichol discussed in Chapter One.
Writing is a form of performance in which one can forget the body that wrote the words and the body that reads the words. In the long poem *Evoba*, McCaffery interrogates the conflicted state of embodiment in textuality by concluding the poem with the word “alve” without the *i* — lacking the presence of a human subject who brings the text ‘to life.’

But can the book itself be alive? This question could be re-phrased in terms of recordings: are recordings alive or are listeners the ones who bring the “liveness” to the moment of listening? These questions speak directly to Glenn Gould’s decision to leave the concert hall for the recording studio where the microphone represented what he thought of as the future of classical performance; as Gould explains on the subject of the future of “live” performance, “[t]he influence of recordings upon that future will affect not only the performer and concert impresario but composer and technical engineer, critic and historian as well. Most important, it will affect the listener to whom all of this activity is ultimately directed” (“Prospects for Recording” 332-333). Keeping in mind Gould’s attention to the listener in the statement, I want to conclude with a poem concerning Glenn Gould and the writing of music in poetry. While Gould’s own opinions on recording could be pursued in relation to the “liveness” of radio as medium or to his editing of the multi-voiced radio documentary “The Idea of North,” I will focus on one of the many works of art (poems, novels, plays, films) that constitutes a musically ekphrastic response to Gould as performer and theorist. The poem selected for this analysis is one that informs and enacts this dissertation’s argument that reading is listening: Jan Zwicky’s poem “Glenn Gould: Bach’s ‘Italian’ Concerto, BWV 971” from *Robinson’s Crossing* (2004).
Many poems are written in response to music, but this process of transposing
music into words has not been given the same attention as poems that translate the visual
into words.\textsuperscript{4} Thus, as a conclusion to this dissertation, I would like to place ekphrasis in
dialogue with the art of adapting poetry. Ekphrasis performs its own adaptation as it
translates visual art into language; likewise, musical ekphrasis takes place when the poet
translates music into language. Often this translation is placed at the forefront of a poem
by referring to the musical composition in the title, as in Thomas Hardy’s “Lines to a
Movement in Mozart’s E-flat Symphony” (1898). Many of Jan Zwicky’s poems have
musical titles: in \textit{Songs for Relinquishing the Earth} (2002) there are titles that range from
in B Minor, Op. 115” “Bill Evans: ‘Here’s that Rainy Day,’” and “Bill Evans: \textit{Alone}”
(referring to an entire album in its title). In analyzing Zwicky’s use of musical titles,
Nicholas Bradley has pursued the lyric as an articulation of Zwicky’s ecological thinking:
“For Zwicky, lyric thought, music, and the rapturous beauty of nature permit humans
pure, transformative experience” (191). Bradley considers the musical titles of Zwicky’s
poetry primarily in terms of eco-poetics and, within this context, makes an argument that
music is the medium through which Zwicky attempts to understand the world. For
Bradley, Zwicky’s decision to write poems with musical titles is rooted, therefore, in an
ethical imperative in that music “asks us to listen and to attend to something outside
ourselves” (204). In contending that the titles of Zwicky’s poem function as aporia (titles
as not mimetically corresponding to the poems themselves), Bradley suggests that the
musicality of a poem asks us to attend to something outside of ourselves; yet, I would
further suggest that this looking outward is an impulse that can be applied to a reading of
the musically ekphrastic poem through performance. A poem with a musical title asks us to search for where the performance is happening — and, therefore, to be attuned to where performance evades representation on the written page. Furthermore, recalling that the dialogic relationship between audience and text is central to adaptation, I would argue that we hear the musically ekphrastic poem as a response to music. Therefore, the words translate one person’s listening into writing. The poem is listening.

North of Superior, November,
bad weather behind, more
coming in from the west, the car windows furred
with salt, the genius of his fingers
bright, incongruous, cresting a ridge
and without warning the sky
has been swept clear.

— Glenn Gould: Bach’s ‘Italian’ Concerto, BWV 971”
(84)

In these opening lines, Zwicky guides the reader into the acoustic space of the car and of the poem, but these spaces are immediately shown as changing as she connects the music with a sudden change in the surrounding environment: “the genius of his fingers / bright, incongruous, cresting a ridge / and without warning the sky / has been swept clear.” From the title, we know whose fingers play this concerto, Glenn Gould, and we imagine that the music is played through a radio or an audio recording. As the music enters the car, the poem brings music into language, but how does this transposition happen? I propose a series of questions that not only explain how this transposition takes place in Zwicky’s poem but that also provide an interrogative model for examining how performance takes place in any poem:
**Performance:** How does the poem construct and respond to performance?

**Audience:** How does the poem convey an awareness of an audience either within the poem or outside of it? And how does the poem, or performance of it, challenge practices of reading?

In the case of Zwicky’s poem, the answers to these questions produce an analysis of the poem itself that takes into account the performance of the poem and the level of performance that extends off the written page.

Zwicky constructs performance as taking place through simultaneity: music playing on the radio, knowing who plays this music, the speaker-listener riding in the car hearing this music, and the reader-listener hearing this scene as it unfolds. This simultaneity exemplifies what Zwicky writes as the capacity for the lyric to be plural (an argument that she makes in *Lyric Philosophy* as an attempt to re-define the otherwise single-voiced conception of the lyric). For Zwicky, the lyric does not mean a single-voiced poem; rather, the lyric has much in common with polyphony in what she calls a lyric ecology, a phrase that extends from *Lyric Philosophy* and is developed in a close-listening to Bringhurst’s poem “Herakleitos” in the essay, “Bringhurst’s Presocratics: Lyric and Ecology” (*Poetry and Knowing* [1995]). In this essay, Zwicky explains that “lyric is driven by intuitions of coherence” (77) but that this coherence is ecological rather than single-voiced. (The phrase *lyric ecology* is the title for a forthcoming collection of essays on her poetry, *Lyric Ecology: Essays in Honour of Jan Zwicky* [2010].) In another essay-response to Bringhurst’s articulation of polyphony in “Singing with the Frogs,” Zwicky offers a version of this argument in which she further explains why the lyric can be polyphonic; she suggests that “[t]he difference between a
polyphonic structure and cacophony is, precisely, that a polyphonic structure is informed by the eros of coherence while cacophony is not” [“Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst,” 181].) The lyric need not hold the connotation of a singular voice; in fact, she suggests that, while not all lyric is polyphonic, polyphony is lyric (181). She makes this argument by placing lyric and polyphony in the context of an ecological structure held together by the “eros of coherence” that informs polyphonic sound.

In “Glenn Gould: Bach’s ‘Italian’ Concerto,” the first-person speaker (the otherwise singular lyric I) is made plural by Zwicky’s expanding of the listening space to include multiple frames of reference: the pianist Glenn Gould, the friend whose attachment to this music is central to the poem, the reader as listener who hears the music described and imagines these different listeners and performers, and the division of selves in the speaker herself as she experiences a gestalt moment of stepping “into my real life.” Interestingly, this “real life” is positioned as a counterpart to one’s supposedly unreal life in a way that resembles the constructed division between a performance and a script: “as though for just a moment / I’d stepped into my real life, / the one / that’s always here, right here, / but outside history.” As I have argued, a performance and its script are always in dialogue and, therefore, the separation is not clearly defined; likewise, the speaker’s “real life” is, in fact, the one that is “always here,” despite the fact that it becomes differentiated in this almost hyper-real moment of listening. Furthermore, the act of listening to music while driving through a landscape involves a simultaneity that I have proposed in this dissertation as taking place in the practices of listening while writing and of listening while reading. The simultaneity of actions reflects the activity
taking place in the poem as performance, thereby illustrating a state of motion in written language that I read through a metaphor of Zwicky’s: “Grace is stillness in motion” (*Lyric Philosophy* 390). For readers who listen, *stillness in motion* resonates with the concept of writing as not holding voices still on the page; in other words, writing is the medium through which a poem performs.

I conclude with a close-listening to Zwicky’s poem because it exemplifies a performance in poetry that also gestures to a performance space off the page. In undertaking this latter gesture, the poem performs what Zwicky describes as polyphony’s ability to “aurally create the impression of three dimensional space” (“Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst,” 182). Furthermore, the poem offers a profound negotiation of performer and audience presence through writing. We hear the listener recall another listener, “the friend / I had once who hoped he might die / listening to this music” — and the presence of this removed listener, outside the speaker’s space of the moving car but very much inside the imaginative space of the poem, is narrated through his anticipation of absence in death. It is a lyric moment in Zwicky’s definition of the word: “It moves by association of images. It has been described as an attempt to make the space 'around' actual sounds, words, or lines resonant. As an evocation of presence […] Lyric is an attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture” (*Lyric Philosophy* 134). Presence and absence are articulated by the listener in the poem and comprehended by the listener to this poem in this single gesture of explaining the affecting significance of the music.

The transition to the present-state of listening coincides with an awareness of the surrounding space within which this listening occurs:
[...] I’ve known very little,  
but what I have known  
feels like this: compassion without mercy,  
the distances still distances  
but effortless, as though for just a moment  
I’d stepped into my real life, the one  
that’s always here, right here,  
but outside history: joy  
precise and nameless as that river  
scattering itself among  
the frost and rocks. (84)

This transition turns the poem’s attention to its surroundings, but, in attending to this external space, the poem does not say what it sounds like; instead, the sound of the river is evoked through the sound of the word “scattering.” Only the reader hears this word, a subtle suggestion that the poem moves through models of listening in order to arrive at the model of the reader listening to the poem itself. Thus, Zwicky’s “Glenn Gould: Bach’s ‘Italian’ Concerto” calls not only for a critical listening to poetry on the page and off but also for a serious consideration of what it means to posit the reader as listener. As readers of the poem, we are participants who listen beside the speaker-listener, travelling with her in the moving car — stillness in motion — a small acoustic space plummeting through vast geographical soundscapes as music tumbles across radio waves and onto the written page.
Endnotes

1. In a book-length postdoctoral project to follow this dissertation, I will examine Robert Weaver’s “Anthology” [1954-1985], a CBC radio program devoted to the broadcasting and commissioning of new works of literature by, among others, Alden Nowlan, A.J.M Smith, Irving Layton, D.G. Jones, Earle Birney, James Reaney, Anne Wilkinson, Phyllis Gotlieb, Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Gwendolyn MacEwen. Despite their cultural importance, the CBC radio archives have not been evaluated as literary archives, nor have they been evaluated as acoustic archives of poetry. My research on Weaver’s “Anthology” will argue that the CBC radio archives are literary archives that provide an acoustic record of the formation of a national literature.

2. Bringhurst’s ecological metaphor connects this dissertation’s broader interest in poetic attention to eco-poetry, where attention to poetry parallels attention to the natural world. Poetic attention is part of the poet’s work to the extent that, as John Hollander describes, “the poet’s attention to words is such that he always hears the melody” (8). In Canadian eco-poetry, Don McKay’s poem “Song for the Song of the White Throated Sparrow” is as much about listening to birdsong as it is about taking the time to listen to the poem itself. With this potential to change one’s practice of engaging with the world, poetic attention holds tremendous cultural and political import in all soundscapes of life, whether standing in an open field or walking down a busy city street.

3. In Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould, Kevin Bazzana lists the vast number of compositions inspired by Gould and his music; in addition to the many musical compositions, there are works that could be called ekphrastic in the sense that they adapt Gould into visual and textual forms: “He has inspired new works by painters and sculptors, including a whole exhibition, The Idea of North, in New York in 1987. Choreographers have made dances inspired by his image and recordings (usually the Goldberg Variations). Poets all over the world have sung of Gould; a whole book, Northern Music: Poems About and Inspired by Glenn Gould, appeared in 2001. He has been featured in short stories by writers including Joy Williams, Lydia Davis, and Joyce Carol Oates, and in novels: Thomas Bernhard’s Der Untergeher (published in English as The Loser), Richard Powers’s The Gold Bug Variations, Joe Fiorito’s The Song Beneath the Ice […] David Young’s play Glenn, which had its premiere in Toronto in 1992 and played at the Stratford Festival in 1999, features four actors portraying different eras in Gould’s life and different aspects of his psyche” (6-7). Since Bazzana collected this list of literary works based on Gould, there has also been the publication of Kate Braid’s A Well-Mannered Storm: The Glenn Gould Poems (2008).

4. Jean Kreiling’s article, “Creative Listening: Poetic Approaches to Music” (Mosaic 2009) notes that Calvin Brown’s Tones into Words (1953) is the only book-length study of ekphrastic poems about classical music. From Robert Browning to Amy Clampitt, Kreiling summarizes critical approaches to writing music whether in poetry or fiction.
Appendix

1.

“Frame 4” (Love: a Book of Remembrances) by bpNichol.
2.

And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain.

P.t. 98e 284

dead

Final pages of *Evoba*: (100-101).
3.

Photo by John Lauener of Murakoshi dancing “Cycle #22” (“The Four Horsemen Project,” photo online: http://www.volcano.ca/Photos/Horsemen/horsemen.html#).

4. Opening scene of Trudeau’s Act II:

Scene i: Havana, Cuba, April 1960.
A rainbow fiesta of tropical pastels warms the set. Trudeau, now 40, appears in Bermuda shorts, dark sunglasses, sandals, and a mandarin-collar shirt. He sips rum and smokes Freudian cigars with Fidel Castro, 34, bearded and dressed in Cuban army fatigues, with a pistol at his side. His aide is Lt. Neruda, Afro-Cuban, 34, who also packs a gun. Trudeau’s canoe sits in the background. (47)

5. Discography for Clarke’s Lush Dreams, Blue Exile:

Gil Scott-Heron, Secrets, Arista, 1978.
Miles Davis, The Man with the Horn, CBS, 1980.
Narciso Yepes, Jeux interdits, Musicdisc, 1981.
Anthony Braxton, Four Compositions, Black Saint, 1983.

7. Image from the Program Notes for New Dance Horizon’s performance of *Ursa Major*:

Performers Robin Poitras and art installation by John Noestheden. Photograph by Don Hall.
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