Sonic Signage: [murmur], the Refrain, and Territoriality

Darren S. Wershler
Wilfrid Laurier University

Abstract: [murmur] is an archival audio project that collects and curates stories set in cities around the globe. At each location, a distinctive [murmur] sign with a telephone number and location code marks where stories are available. While [murmur]'s signs evoke the tradition of neo-Situationist and neo-Lettrist signage, it is the sonic supplement to these signs that is of particular interest. This article contextualizes the relationships that [murmur] establishes between physical signage, recorded sound, and specific geographic locales in both historical and theoretical terms. Thomas Edison originally only permitted demonstrations of the phonograph according to a strict system of territorial licensing, suggesting that there has always been a link between visible language, recorded audio, and territoriality. The article's argument contextualizes and expands on this historical relationship via Deleuze and Guattari's essay "1837: Of the Refrain."

Keywords: Wireless mobility; Theory of communication; Neo-Situationism

Résumé : [murmur] est un projet d'archives audio qui consiste à collectionner et à répertorier des histoires relatives à plusieurs villes autour du monde. À chaque endroit, un panneau [murmur] distinctif comportant un numéro de téléphone et un code d'emplacement indique là où les histoires sont disponibles. Les panneaux de [murmur] évoquent les affiches néo-situationnistes et néo-lettristes, mais c'est leur supplément sonore qui est particulièrement marquant. Cet article replace dans leur contexte historique et théorique les rapports que [murmur] établit entre l'affiche physique, le son enregistré et des emplacements géographiques précis. À l'origine, Thomas Edison ne permettait des démonstrations du phonographe que selon un système strict de permis territoriaux. Son approche indique qu'il existe depuis le début un lien entre langage visible, enregistrement et territoire. Cet article établit le contexte pour cette relation historique et la décrit en détail en se rapportant à l'article « 1837–De la ritournelle » de Deleuze et Guattari.

Mots clés : Mobilité sans fil; Théorie de la communication; Néo-situationnisme

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that "territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species" (1980/1987, p. 319). It

Darren S. Wershler is Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5. Email: dwershlerhenry@wlu.ca.

therefore seems appropriate to begin an article about [murmur], a multi-city art installation project that consists of a series of street signs and accompanying audio recordings, with a difference between two critical positions, and two ways of modelling communication. What's at stake is the need for a philosophy and accompanying theoretical practice that is sensitive enough to trace the operations of hybrid media forms such as [murmur] without occluding them. Remember: every time you hit a sign that says one way ends, another begins.

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Media theorist Michael Bull posits that the increased use of portable audio communication electronics is linked to a rise in "aural solipsism" (2004, p. 278). He bases his theory on both an historical continuum and a recent shift: the ongoing search for public privacy and discounting of the value of public space on the one hand, and the increasing ability and desire to make the city's public spaces conform to our notion of the intimate on the other. For Bull, as public space becomes increasingly media-saturated, our urge to use technology to compensate also increases, which ironically increases the erosion of the remains of the meaning we still associate with public space.

The theoretical underpinnings of Bull's work are in the writing of Theodor Adorno (1973) and Claude Lefort (1998), specifically in the notion of a mass media–produced "we-ness" as a kind of hallucinatory camaraderie that abolishes the alienation and distance of city life. For Bull, mobile communications media are the equivalent of cultural Poly-Filla, smoothing over gaps in space and time between our activities and chores. Carrying an active cellphone, writes Bull, transforms the indifferent world into a space replete with possible messages, and renders the consumption of media into an activity that is perceived as solitary, pleasurable, and controllable. However, he counters, the actual *use* of cellphones constitutes an erosion of the sense of public space. Speakers absent themselves from the places they physically occupy into a "private" discussion, and simultaneously compromise personal space by exposing private conversations to a world of potential eavesdroppers.

Implicit in Bull's neat dialectic of mobile urban communication is the belief that communication could ever be something other than a game of broken telephone. John Durham Peters (1999) argues convincingly in *Speaking into the Air*, however, that communication models influenced by Adorno and Marx, which posit authentic communication as something that can only occur when one subject encounters another, are insufficient not only for a theorization of contemporary digital communications, but also for the theorizing of communications in general. Peters argues that for Marx and Adorno, any form of mediated communication can only be insincere because of the generality of its address. But what, asks Peters, if the address is always disseminative, an elliptical sending where each partner enacts the response of the other, rather than a circular reciprocity? What if communication is always the touch of otherness rather than a conjunction of consciousnesses? For that matter, what if repeated acts of hybrid digital

communication are defining new spaces (albeit spaces full of uneasy contestations) rather than simply eroding old ones?

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[murmur] is an archival audio project that collects and curates stories set in specific urban locations in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. At each location, a distinctive green ear-shaped [murmur] sign with a telephone number and location code marks where stories are available. While [murmur]'s high-quality silkscreened metal signs, surreptitiously mounted on city property with professional tools, evoke the long and well-developed tradition of neo-Situationist and neo-Lettrist signage (such as the work of Bob Zoell in the mid-1980s), it is the sonic supplement to these signs that is of particular interest. Dialing the number on the sign (or, alternatively, clicking on the location of the sign on one of the street maps in [murmur]'s Web interface at http://murmur-toronto.ca) allows the curious to listen to stories associated with that place while, in the words of the [murmur] website, "engaging in the physical experience of being there." These stories are all told by local residents; some stories provide the listener with instructions for movement, while others suggest that the listener focus their attention on particular objects.

The project was conceived by Gabe Sawhney and Shawn Micallef during their July to December 2002 residency at the Canadian Film Centre's CFC New Media Lab (then known as H@bitat). [murmur]'s working prototype went live in December 2002 at the Film Centre itself, and the original proof-of-concept sign still hangs on the lab's bulletin board. The official public launch of the project was in July 2003, when 10 signs were installed in Toronto's Kensington Market. In October of the same year, 10 more signs appeared in Montréal; another dozen appeared in Vancouver in September 2003. Subsequent additions to the original Toronto network include signs in the Annex neighbourhood (added August 2004), lower Spadina Avenue (October 2005), and Hart House at the University of Toronto (March 2006). In June 2007, [murmur] launched a project developed with Fort York, a historic site and museum owned and operated by the City of Toronto. The most recent Toronto appearance of new green ears as of this writing was in Little India on Gerrard Street (August 2007). New [murmur] networks have also been installed outside Canada, in Leith (Edinburgh) (February 2006), San Jose (August 2006), and Dublin (May 2007). The most recent permanent international [murmur] installation as of this writing was in São Paulo, Brazil (December 2007), where one sign, at the SESC building on Paulista Avenue, connects to a series of stories in Portuguese.[1]

[murmur]'s inception was informed by a wide range of existing communication practices and technologies that combine site-specific work and the technologies of wireless mobility. Its creators specifically cite [murmur]'s relative beginnings in the works of audio artist Janet Cardiff, Canadian and U.S. public radio (many CBC programs and NPR's *This American Life*), plus their interest in the practice of riding around the city on a bicycle while navigating with a GPS unit.

There are no guiding criteria for selecting a [murmur] storyteller. Some are anonymous; some choose to use their full names. Some names are recognizable from the local political, artistic, or cultural spheres; others are not. Some locations have multiple stories; other designated locations have yet to be assigned stories, in which case the website elicits suggestions from anyone interested in contributing. During the planning stages for [murmur], Sawhney and Micallef had envisioned a more formal approach to the storytelling itself. They conducted research in the CBC archives, wrote scripts about historically significant places, and had these scripts recorded by a voice actor. The collaborators abandoned this approach because it was too much, they said, "like an historic plaque read aloud." In an attempt to escape the monumental aspect of city life, their approach became documentary and heterogeneous.[2]

Though its beginnings are in the realm of independent art, [murmur] has also deliberately developed a degree of institutional legitimacy. [murmur] incorporated as a for-profit entity in 2003 as part of a bid to receive a Telefilm grant (which they did not receive in part because of their lack of a revenue model). Gabe Sawhney describes [murmur]'s current structure as follows: "'True' [murmur] projects (which follow our 'rules') are handled by [murmur]-the-artists-collective. Projects which people ask us to do which are deviations from that are handled by us, in the form of a for-profit business."

Most of [murmur]'s recent expansions have involved some sort of collaboration with other organizations, which in turn receive support from a mix of direct revenue sources, government funding, and private foundations. [murmur] Leith was produced in partnership with New Media Scotland, an organization that receives its core funding from the Scottish Arts Council; this project is also supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. In December 2006/January 2007, [murmur] staged a short-term collaborative project with the Art Gallery of Ontario, marking the first use of cellphones as part of an exhibition in the AGO. Three works in The Future Now exhibition each had their own phone number, featuring three different perspectives on each work narrated by three different people. In fall 2007 two [murmur] projects were also launched relating to walking, public space, and the *inside* of historical buildings: the Walking Life exhibit at the Gladstone Hotel, in September, and Walk This Way, at the Design Exchange, in October. [murmur] also appeared at Campus Party 2008, at the Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion at Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo, Brazil (February 2008). Like all [murmur] stories, access to these narratives is also available through the project website.

Further development plans have already been announced. Between 2007 and 2009, [murmur] will be partnering with the Playwrights Guild of Canada on the Uth Ink project. This project will involve 900 youth aged 12 to 20, from twenty Canadian communities, who will work with professional playwrights on the development of plays with "community" as their theme. These plays will be recorded, posted online via [murmur] technology, and developed into site-specific theatre installations in home communities of the participating young playwrights.

In terms of its material infrastructure, [murmur] succeeds because of its relative simplicity. The core system consists of the users' cellphones, the [murmur]

street signs, and professional sign-mounting tools; a server running Asterisk—an open-source IP PBX (private branch exchange) server package; and MP3s of the individual stories. A series of database-driven websites provides a second method of accessing the recordings. The basic diagram of [murmur], though—an exemplary instance of what Peter Morville refers to as the "ambient findable" (2005, p. 4)—requires no specific technological commitments. During its conceptual stage, Sawhney and Micallef considered creating [murmur] as a series of kiosks, or as stories on CDs left in particular locations; the use of cellphones came later.

A typical [murmur] encounter has many characteristics that elude Bull's model precisely because it *does not* result in anything like a direct encounter. Beginning with the text on a green sign whose shape is already an open ellipse suggesting an incomplete circuit, [murmur] insistently connects people back to where they stand by connecting with something somewhere else: "HEAR YOU ARE." Rather than adding the details of their private lives to the noise of the street, rather than withdrawing into a bubble of private conversation, the person dialing a [murmur] number listens silently with *both* ears, straining to hear the phone message *and* locate its context in the ambient noise of their surroundings.

Yet dialing a [murmur] number is not an instrumental or utilitarian act, like dialing the number on a sign at a bus stop to determine the next arrival time. It is more perverse—the initiation of an impossible conversation with an absent (possibly even dead) other. The use-value of a [murmur] message is always in doubt; it could be in a language the dialer does not understand (English, French, or Cantonese to date); it could be informative, insightful, or funny, but it could also be boring, scandalous, offensive, or simply irrelevant. In any event, it is a voluntarily selected, non-official message to which there is no direct response. In such a context, as Peters suggests, any attempts at communication are perhaps best interpreted as "desperate and daring acts of dignity" (1999, p. 152).

This is as good a point as any to observe that as novel as [murmur] might seem, we have heard all of this before. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write in "1837: Of the Refrain," "Everything we attribute to an age was already present in the preceding age" (1980/1987, p. 346).

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From the very beginning, telephony has been about dissemination as well as communication. As Carolyn Marvin argues in her groundbreaking study *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, the first uses of the telephone include the networked propagation of "public occasions" of music, theatre, politics, and religion, as well as the instances of synchronous point-to-point communication that would eventually become the normative use of the device (1988, p. 209). Michèle Martin (1991) dates the first cultural activities conducted over the telephone to 1879, when readings of literary works and recitations occurred on the exchanges between Brantford, Hamilton, and Toronto. In most instances, these early "telephone occasions" were live, as if to emphasize the medium's simultaneity rather than its ability to convey the sounds of events (whether live or recorded) over a

distance. In Canada, at least, their scope was limited; the Bell Telephone Company discouraged such practices as "an abuse of the lines" because it required the dedication of the lines in question for long periods (p. 137).

Marvin (1988) does mention, however, at least two early instances of telephone occasions involving the playing of phonograph recordings over the lines. In 1887, W. J. Hammer recorded a live concert in Philadelphia and had it transmitted via long-distance lines to New York, where it was played over a loud-speaking telephone, re-recorded by a second phonograph, then transmitted by phone back to Philadelphia. In 1912, the perception that there might be a demand for such services was still significant enough that "the New York Magnaphone and Music Company installed motor-driven phonographs that sent recorded music to local subscribers over a hundred transmitters" (Marvin, 1988, p. 212).

Several formal factors differentiate such early telephonic practices from projects like [murmur]. First, Marvin argues that telephone occasions were almost always "derived transmissions of independently occurring events" rather than programming developed specifically for transmission over the telephone network, which she identifies as "a distinctive social feature of electronic mass media" (1988, p. 222). Second, unless the staging of the event included special equipment such as loudspeaker telephones or banks of phones, as at an exhibition or lecture, the reception of early telephone occasions often occurred in the private homes of the middle and upper classes, not in the public sphere. Such events were out of reach of the working classes, who could afford neither the cost of a telephone in their home nor the nickel that a public phone call cost in 1892 (Martin, 1991). Third, the reception of early telephone occasions was not linked to a particular geographic space by signage.

Nevertheless, the process of imagining possible associations between visible language, recorded audio technologies, telephony, and territoriality extends back to the relative beginnings of the inventions themselves. Friedrich Kittler (1999) asserts that the phonograph was itself "a by-product of the attempt to optimize telephony and telegraphy by saving expensive copper cables" (p. 27)—a kind of compression of spatial communications media at the behest of economics. Regardless of Kittler's narrative of the phonograph's origins, though, in 1878, the same year that Edison received his patent for the phonograph, the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company came into being to control not only the manufacture of the invention, but also the right to exhibit it. As Lisa Gitelman (2003) observes in "Souvenir Foils: On the Status of Print at the Origin of Recorded Sound," entrepreneurs wishing to profit from the new technology "purchased the right to exhibit a phonograph within a protected territory" (p. 160). Those first public exhibitions, run by Edison's close acquaintances and business associates in January 1878, frequently paired demonstrations of the telephone with the phonograph (Gitelman, 2003). An article Edison wrote for the *North American Review* in June 1878 documenting potential uses for the phonograph includes "Connection with the telephone, so as to make that instrument an auxiliary in the transmission of permanent and invaluable records, instead of being the recipient of momentary and fleeting communication" (quoted in Gelatt, 1954/1977, p. 29). What led people to those demonstrations—and the

only real testament to their existence—were printed texts, chief among them printed posters and handbills.

[murmur]'s signs and the phonograph demonstrators' posters and handbills are all signatures that code urban space in a particular way: we left this here; pay attention to this. For Deleuze and Guattari, a signature is "not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode" (1980/1987, p. 316). This is because in the act of repeating itself, the signature acquires temporal constancy and spatial range; it becomes expressive (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). The licensed demonstrators of Edison's Phonograph make the machine "Talk, Sing, Laugh, Crow, Whistle, Repeat Cornet Solos, Imitating the Human Voice, enunciating and pronouncing every word perfectly" (quoted in Gelatt, 1954/1977, p. 65). The green ears appear over and over in different locations, telling the same stories when someone calls their phone numbers (each different enough to point to a unique address on a particular server, adjacent blocks on a spinning magnetic disk: variations on a theme). The name for this aggregate of matters (signs, proprietary tools, telephones, recording and playback devices, humans, contracts, professional associations and regulatory bodies, networks, and later, routers, servers, VoIP software, and MP3s) that draws a territory and develops into expressive motifs is *refrain* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987).

The refrain is more than graphic marks or repeated sounds. Its motifs and counterpoints "express the relation of the territory to interior impulses or to exterior circumstances, whether or not they are given" (1980/1987, p. 318). There are always two simultaneous aspects to the territories produced by these expressions: a regulatory one, which ensures that people can co-exist by channelling them in different directions, and a conciliatory one, which groups like-minded individuals together (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Gitelman notes this double aspect in the social function of the phonograph from the moment of its historical appearance. On the one hand, it was "immediately an instrument of Anglo-American cultural hierarchy," documenting the languages of First Nations perceived to be "dying out," drawing distinctions between "us" and "them." On the other, the phonograph was also "suggestive of a strictly (because mechanically) nonhierarchical vox populi" (2003, p. 160). It brought the high culture of opera and the symphony to the masses; it let the blind read and the dead speak.

[murmur] too has a double aspect of expression; on the one hand, there are its aestheticized, neo-Situationist impulses, inserting idiosyncratic narratives into the realm of officially sanctioned civic communication. (After a series of fruitless meetings with various Toronto functionaries about the procedure for receiving official approval for mounting their signs, Sawhney and Micallef were quietly told that if they simply put them up, in all likelihood, no one would mind.) But like the phonograph demonstrations, there is also a professional, legally incorporated side to [murmur], marking a zone within which the same activity cannot really be performed by another party because it is part of some sort of contractual agreement involving the exchange of cash in exchange for exclusive rights.

This ambivalent quality of territoriality is not a discounting of the possibility or significance of art. No matter how instrumental or professional the territory, an artistic gesture (the posting of the mark) remains the precondition for its emer-

gence (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Once the territory has been established, there is a final movement when it creates a passage to some other assemblage: "One opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 311). Such movements are rarely without incident and often result in the staging of what Bruno Latour calls "controversies." The job of the scholar becomes the tracing of the connections between controversies rather than trying to settle them. This move does not abandon the search for order, rigor, and pattern, but it relocates it in such a way that "actors are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear" (Latour, 2005, p. 23).

The history of the [murmur] network has not been without its own controversies, and its practices connect it to other controversies as well. A [murmur] story from Stewart Scriver, one of the owners of Courage My Love, a hippie clothing and jewellery store in Toronto's Kensington Market, described how the building's original basement tenants included members of a militant Buddhist sect who shook down neighbourhood restaurants for free meals. This story resulted in Scriver being stalked by another Toronto Buddhist for a brief period. [murmur] signs are rarely defaced or vandalized to the point of illegibility, perhaps because of the signs' authoritative material presence. In any event, the question of the durability—or its obverse, ephemerality—of the signage in locative media projects raises the question of how other projects that take different approaches to their signage have fared.

Yellow Arrow, a project that officially operated between May 2004 and October 2006, bears many similarities to [murmur] (see Shapins, Allen, House, & Counts Media, 2004-2006). The project's website provides a concise explanation:

> Participants place uniquely-coded Yellow Arrow stickers to draw attention to different locations and objects—a favorite view of the city, an odd fire hydrant, the local bar. By sending an SMS from a mobile phone to the Yellow Arrow number beginning with the arrow's unique code, Yellow Arrow authors essentially save a thought on the spot where they place their sticker. Messages range from short poetic fragments to personal stories to game-like prompts to action. When another person encounters the Yellow Arrow, he or she sends its code to the Yellow Arrow number and immediately receives the message on their mobile phone. The website yellowarrow.net extends this location-based exchange, by allowing participants to annotate their arrows with photos and maps in the online gallery of Yellow Arrows placed throughout the world. (Shapins, 2006a)

The use of printed stickers rather than metal signs and SMS texts rather than phone numbers linked to digital audio recordings afforded Yellow Arrow a rapidity and degree of propagation that far exceeds [murmur]: in a 2006 interview with *BigShinyThing*, Shapins stated that Yellow Arrow had expanded at that point from Manhattan's Lower East Side to over 35 countries and 380 cities around the world (Townsend, 2006).

As with [murmur], the rhetoric around Yellow Arrow exhibits a blurring of neo-Situationism and the enthusiasms of contemporary marketing. Via a

Baudrillard quotation, Shapins' website (2006a) invokes a direct comparison of Yellow Arrow to the graffiti and silkscreen posters produced by French students to adorn the streets in May 1968, while he states in the *BigShinyThing* interview that "our brand *is* commercial, in that we aim to make money to further our goal of enabling a new form of travel and publishing that enriches people's relationship to the world around them" (Townsend, 2006). The two strains find their uneasy resolution in the direct marketing *of* revolution via a subsequent Counts Media project: Capitol of Punk, an "interactive documentary" on the history of D.C. hardcore ("harDCore"), utilizing the Yellow Arrow infrastructure, plus a PDF map and a series of 10 QuickTime videos available online and for download, to tell the story of punk icons Minor Threat, Bad Brains, and Henry Rollins, among others (Shapins, 2006b).

Other locative media projects have fared less well. Ontario College of Art & Design graphic design student Mark Daye's fourth-year thesis work was one such project. Daye "re-coded official signage and affixed 30 of them to poles in the [Toronto] downtown core with messages pertaining to an obvious but ignored urban sub culture"—the homeless (quoted in Micallef, 2007). One of the first people to report favourably on the signs, in Toronto urban magazine *Spacing*'s blog, was [murmur]'s Shawn Micallef. Yet unlike [murmur's] equally illegal signs, many of Daye's signs had been removed by the City of Toronto within 24 hours. "You can't do that," chided city spokesperson Brad Ross in the pages of the *Toronto Star*. "We have an encroachment bylaw, so we've been removing them as we come across them" (Cotroneo, 2007).

The following day, one of the surviving signs, near the corner of Queen Street West and John, was tagged with an extensive reactionary critique. This tag, photographed by Toronto artist and long-time documenter of graffiti, David Owen (author of several self-published artist's books collecting and mapping the early 1990s "p. cob" graffiti in Toronto and Montréal), was posted on another urban blog, the *Torontoist*, by Sharon Harris (visual poet and documenter of early-twenty-first-century "I love you" graffiti in Toronto). Harris' post (2007) was linked to an earlier *Torontoist* posting about the same signs, which in turn led to a Flickr pool of images of the signs. Both Harris' post and Micallef's earlier story sparked extensive flame wars in their respective comments sections regarding the artistic merits of Daye's signs. User Tim Das' comments typify the reactionary response:

> I hate this. All it does is makes us all feel guilty for something we as citizens have nothing to apologize for. We pay an exorbitant amount in taxes—I should never have to see any homeless on the streets of our city. You really want to help them? Circumvent their civil rights and force them into treatment—get them alcohol & drug free. How about workfare to instill some pride & money earned for work done? Oh yeah—that idea for a homeless/addiction house on the corner of Richmond & Peter? That's just about the stupidest idea I've ever heard.
>
> —Tim Das, April 2, 2007 @ 3:32 pm (Micallef, 2007)

Most interesting is that Das' comment centres around the question of visibility; Das implies that for many people, seeing Daye's signs and seeing the homeless

produce equal degrees of disgust. Equally interesting is Micallef's response, mag-nanimously asserting the right to dissent: "No no, it's fine. Art can provoke a wide range or reactions. Tim proves this art works." Micallef argues in favour of polyphonic dialogue around such issues, but his ultimate rhetorical gesture is to implicitly assert the integrity of his own artistic practice as well as Daye's. Controversial, perhaps, but that's my point. [murmur] has contributed greatly to the growth of a sprawling, hybrid media network that is anything but solipsistic.

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It's time to close the circuit by returning to the questions that I posed near the beginning of this article regarding the sorts of spaces that hybrid digital commu-nication forms like [murmur] are defining. In particular, I want to address the retrofitting that our theoretical models of communication might require as a result of the need to discuss entities like [murmur]. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy's (2004) theorizing around the notion of "MediaSpace" in the introduction to their collection of the same name presents some possibilities.

For Couldry & McCarthy (2004), MediaSpace "at once defines the artefac-tual existence of media forms within social space, the links that media objects forge *between* spaces, and the (no less real) cultural visions of a physical space transcended by technology and the emergent virtual pathways of communication" (p. 2). What interests me is not so much their nomenclature as the manner in which they describe this assemblage as a condensation of "the historical tension through which modernity comes to terms with the material conditions of its own possibility" (p. 2). Couldry and McCarthy define this tension in terms of two binaries: belonging/alienation and self/system. They write that "Space, particu-larly in the traditional concept of place, contains both the possibility of interior-ity, of wholeness, boundedness and plenitude, and the possibility of remoteness, alienation"; likewise, they argue that media forms, as material social relations, include the possibilities of imagining community in the present and forging links with the past through memory, but also the creation of distance and distraction (p. 2). Though the authors contend that this tension is dialectical, their argument suggests that it is properly *antinomic*—not because the shift between the various terms it describes is not yet complete, but because it will not *be* completed (p.2).

As Slavoj Žižek has not ceased to point out, identity and alienation are strictly correlative (1989); which term we choose to emphasize in the discussion of a particular assemblage is always a matter of perspective. Mapping belonging and self to the pre-modern, and alienation and system to the postmodern, gets us nowhere, especially if we are waiting around for the former to fully transform into the latter. Rather, if the tension between these terms is constitutive of moder-nity itself, and if contemporary media assemblages give body to that tension, then we need to develop ways of writing about media that are capable of describing this very incommensurability without succumbing to either narratives of delirious triumph or grumpy accusations of decline.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the refrain is a useful tool in this respect because its description of how something new appears is homologous to the

antinomy that defines MediaSpace. *Organs without Bodies* (2004), Žižek's book on Deleuze, argues not only that the emergence of the New is Deleuze's central concern, but that for Deleuze, the New *only* emerges through repetition. In the particular case of MediaSpace, the question is how a new sense of "place" emerges out of a chaotic, heavily mediated metropolis. In their description of the structure of the refrain, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) write that an "activity of selection, elimination and abstraction" (p. 311) involving repeated sonic components, and contemporary media forms like radios and televisions (and we should update this list with cellphones, iPods, and car stereos) defines a zone, creates an inside and an outside (p. 311). The tension between these two zones, the thing that holds them apart—but also puts them into communication with each other—is a gap or channel cut into the new space itself: "One opens the circle a crack" (p. 311) . . . makes a call. This channel, which Žižek dubs the "minimal difference," is the element that cannot be reduced to either term, a "new dimension" (Žižek, 2006, p. 21) or "another region . . . [as] though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future" (p. 311). To address the aspects of belonging *and* alienation, self *and* system in the relations between modernity's mediated social spaces and the cultural imaginary's versions of them, we need to pay attention to exactly this channel, without attempting to reduce one term to the other or to resolve them via synthesis (Žižek, 2006). The goal of this process is a shift in perspective that will provide some insight into a specific historical situation: the emergence of locative media.

It should come as no surprise, then, that at the point of greatest abstraction in this argument, the specific relevance of [murmur] as a work of art reasserts itself. Žižek argues that from a Deleuzian perspective, "art manifests what *resists* the grasp of knowledge" (2004, p. 150). [murmur] presents a specific instance where existing media theories, even those as recent as Bull's (2004), do not adequately describe the situation of calling somewhere else to reconnect with where you are. Bull's conclusion that consumers use mobile sound media "often to discount [the spaces they inhabit] altogether into the spaces of speech, as in mobile phone use, or use sound to blank out or manage their space of habitation, as in personal stereo use" (p. 289) forecloses too quickly on the ambiguities that result from themselves using mobile sound media to take spaces *into* account, or to reposition themselves in relation to their space of habitation. The problem seems to be a general unwillingness to recognize the rich theoretical possibilities of a distracted, ambivalent, or otherwise divided subject. When Bull's personal stereo users aestheticize a space, they do so by "drawing it into themselves, making it conform to their wishes" (p. 284). Conversely, for his cellphone users, "the space of reception becomes re-inscribed and colonized by the voice of the other" (p. 286).

A [murmur] experience, however, does not resolve so easily into sonic domination or sonic submission, because it opens a line between my experience and someone else's very different, obdurate, recorded experience of the same place, without really providing any suggestions about what I should do with that information. No matter how many times I call back, it will be there, insisting on the same things; it does not care what I think. However, neither does it require me to

believe it, or even to listen to it. Further, what the other privileges in their recorded story—the thing that fascinated them about the space where I encounter a [murmur] sign, and the thing that indicates their inclusion in that place—is not necessarily the thing that captures my interest in the same place. But regardless of whether what I hear when I call a [murmur] number bores or enthralls me, listening to the recorded stories shifts my perspective and allows me to see the world differently as a result, because my sense of that place has been affected.

Another insight from Žižek's (2004) reading of Deleuze is that it is not the historical context which enables the understanding of a given work of art, but "rather, the work of art itself . . . provides a context enabling us to understand properly a given historical situation" (p. 15). This is because what is of interest is not the (often banal) content of the stories in the [murmur] system, but because properly describing its form requires a shift in perspective that simultaneously forces a reconsideration of media history. The emergence of new media forms is itself a kind of refrain. What is being repeated, though, "is not the way the past 'effectively was' but the *virtuality* inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization" (p. 12).

The emergence of the computer actualized possibilities that were only virtual in Charles Babbage's Difference Engine; in another sense, the computer mouse actualized the virtualities of the Ouija board's planchette. [murmur] effects a re-organization of historical objects and events that would otherwise remain disparate into a network: telephone occasions, Edison's territorial licensing of phonograph demonstrations, postering in the promotion of those demonstrations, neo-Situationist signage, soundscape art, plus various chunks of philosophical, theoretical, and aesthetic discourse. Every time such a new media form appears, history shift into a new configuration, marshalling items that had previously been consigned to footnotes and forgotten volumes into new genealogies, and sometimes even pushing objects and discourses of considerable prominence out of the limelight and into the shadows. Ongoing attempts to come to grips with the full implications of [murmur] and subsequent locative media projects like Yellow Arrow seriously will benefit from an engagement with the tools and concepts emerging from the subfield of "media archaeology": untimely media, conceptual media, and impossible media can potentially be of as much use as fully realized technologies in this respect (Zielinski, 2006).

§   §   §

Dialing a [murmur] number is tantamount to accepting communication as a chance encounter with otherness rather than as a meeting of minds. The storyteller is chimerical in form (human voice and/or digital file), dispersed across space (the physical location of the sign/a website/the server in Gabe's closet), dispersed across time (the earliest recordings being five years old), and possibly even dead. The value of such a gesture lies in the risks that both the storyteller and the dialer take: What if no one likes my message? What if no one calls?

Adequately describing phenomena like [murmur] requires a model of communication that does not presume a technologically mediated decline from a

hypothetical, unmediated state of clarity. Scholars like Deleuze & Guattari, Bruno Latour, Manuel De Landa, and John Durham Peters all argue that the world we are making consists of an ever-expanding roster of humans and non-humans, all clamouring for attention. John Durham Peters' fundamental insight is that communication "is an adaptation to or symptom of this crisis, a concept that allows for contact without presence, contact that is indifferent to the bodily form of the communicators (animals, people, machines), and even to biology itself (as phonographs capture the voice of the dead or computers have 'memory')" (1999, p. 243). Deleuze & Guattari concur, noting that art does not wait for human beings to begin (1980/1987). Imbricated in a world of emerging and adapting networks, the role of the human is to make things happen by continually connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting with humans and non-humans alike. Direct contact with another soul is unlikely at best, but, as Peters (1999) observes, "the tokens of friendship should be enough" (p. 245).

Notes

1. All dates are from murmur.com or from an interview with Gabe Sawhney and Shawn Micallef conducted by the author on May 4, 2006. Subsequent information and quotes about the beginnings of [murmur] are also from this interview.

2. For the moment at least, I'm not interested in doing an interpretation of the contents of the stories. I will note that there is a degree of sameness to the stories—anecdotal, personal, populist histories with a slight dash of humour. There are some exceptions to this, which are most significant across cultural boundaries. Sawhney and Micallef themselves note that the Montréal stories are "more performed than told"; they attribute this difference to curatorial perspective, based on the instructions that the people collecting the stories gave to the participants.

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