

THE NEXT THING, THE LAST THING, BIRDSONG



JAZ PAPADOPOULOS

The days hum awake. Between curved granite, polished brown wood, and shining red, blue, pink stained glass, a sacred harp sounds. *We are the harp*, the conductor says of our bodies, arranged into a square, encasing them. Each singer holds a page, and the lyrics are written all over in an unfamiliar way, melody lines accordioning themselves away from their respective notes. It requires a great deal of memory, but the writer's brain is palimpsest; it keeps getting lost in the folds. They cannot remember where the song is.

What is concerning the writer right now? Socio-acoustics. The path from interarticulation to poeisis. The intentional transfer of knowledge, in the way only birds can do.

All that to say: the concept of melody.

Melody: A pleasing succession of sounds.

Pleasing, in the European tradition, to be sure. But, let's persevere. There is a line in a book currently concerning the writer. The book's cover is splotted colours against a black backdrop. The line reads, "[W]e could not hear a melody as melody if our immediate appreciation of the note before our ears was not accompanied by our 'memory' of the note just before and an expectation of the note to follow."¹

Acoustemology: sound as capacity to know; sound as a habit of knowing.

We live in the things that have happened to us. An arrangement of repeated and corresponding parts. "A whole is formed in which past, present, and future are smudged," the book's author writes.²

*How do I experience time? How can I remember?
How can I be in two places at once?*

The writer consults other sources. A music anthropologist. A grandiose dictionary, inherited from a shot abortion doctor. The author of the splotted book herself.

At the same time, there is a gathering of artists. The artists ask questions, like: How do I experience time? How can I remember? How can I be in two places at once?

The writer wonders, how many times do you hear a sequence of notes before they've grown into your body, plucking your ligaments like strings?

In the Craft Council stairwell, one zine cover sings, *Dyke Dyke Dyke Dyke Dyke Dyke Dyke Dyke*. Consonance. On Tinder, another writer has messaged, *Hey, you're that writer!* Consonance again.

¹ Eva Hoffman, *Time* (New York: Picador, 2009), 65. Quoted in *Critical Fictions*, 79.

² Hannah Godfrey, *Critical Fictions* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2023), 79.

The author of the book directs the writer to another book, which criticizes the trope of queers looking for other queers in text. In other words, she suggests...check your queer romantic impulse. All the notes come slamming down at once.

Melody is like scent, in how it tickles the cilia and jogs the memory.

The auditory system is wrapped around the vestibular system, which is wrapped around the vagal system. The writer is not a specialist at this so they consider simple sentences like, “our perception of sound impacts our balance” or “sound smooths and jolts the nervous system.”

Memory: the sum of everything retained by the mind. A particular recollection of an event, person, etc. An echo

in a parking lot, all flat walls and straight lines, a film loops. It is audible across downtown: the old song, from the walled city. From her ancestors, Niya Abdullahi receives the melody—relationship honoured in sound.

“Sound mediates between our individuation and collectivity, blurring but also delineating where my body ends and yours begins, charging empty space with a suggestion of empathy and agency.”³



Niya Abdullahi, in the whiteness. Photo: Elijah Martel.

³Andrea Oliver Roberts, *Yes You Can't*, MFA thesis, California College of Arts, April 2014, 8. Quoted in *Critical Fictions*, 163.



Daze Jefferies, you + yore. Photo: Shireen Merchant.

Daze Jefferies escapes into the archives, looking for relationships. She escapes into the archives, hoping to catch a melody, an epistle, a call.

When mermaids appear in history, they are simultaneously sexualized and assaulted.

What is the true meaning of a siren?
Is it closer to "warning," or "help"?

"[S]ound mediates our experience of loss."⁴

A fish net: one way to be held
by time.
in settler-colonial history.

In a tapestry, each thread only makes sense with the context of the last line. Ale Monreal weaves together memories, entwining the perfect green chaos of childhood with the crimson orange right now.

In a very technical sense, the music anthropologist agrees, melody is just organized sound, and time is the way that it's organized. But I don't like the idea, or the obsession, with fixity to time.

The music anthropologist is part of the Idlefield Collective, a team making exquisite corpse musical loops in the surrealist tradition. Each song contains four-plus tracks, each track laid by a

⁴ Andrea Oliver Roberts, "Sound, the Voice, and Loss," Artist talk at MAWA, Winnipeg, 5 May 2017. <https://vimeo.com/217031799>. Quoted in *Critical Fictions*, 162.



Ale Monreal, Entre Líneas. Photo: Ethel Brown.

different soundmaker who can only hear the one previous track. It's like a parallel universe, the writer thinks, folded over onto itself. (The writer has been watching *The OA*.) *Exactly, it is a parallel universe!* the music anthropologist exclaims.

In the suffering artist paradigm, the suffering is not inherent to the artist. It comes from a world that devalues art. The devaluation of art is inherent to the system of capitalism.

We live in the patterns that have happened in us.

Health: the ability of the body to respond. The choice to respond. Georgia Webber marks black shapes in a series of silhouettes. The

marks swirl, patterning the silhouettes' insides.

"To understand and organise living within the Industrial Revolution," the book says, "Europeans developed theories of time and space that involved rigid structuring. [...] They are a grid upon which activity becomes standardized and regulated, and power apportioned."⁵

Melody, outside of time: a response to what just happened.

Tapestries exist beyond clock time. Each thread makes sense within the context of the last line.

Memory: a collection of threads being woven together.



Georgia Webber, *World Within a World*. Photo: Ethel Brown.

⁵ *Critical Fictions*, 80.



Idlefield Collective, The Phonoautomat. Photo: Shireen Merchant.

Show me a queer who can remember happily singing, sitting anywhere in a church. Even without the writer's ability to shape their mouth around the sounds of the words, it is a rapturous experience to stand in the middle of the square of singers and be pelted by emotion on all sides. At this moment in time, they are whole.

Pattern: a habituated way of moving.

Together: at the same time.

History: all that is preserved or remembered of the past.

Memory: the time over which recollection extends.

Pattern: a plan or diagram used as a guide in making.

History: an event in the past, especially one that has been forgotten.

The writer asks the music anthropologist if there are melody-making practices that exist outside of Industrial time. All the lights turn on.

Consider: melodies outside of time. Simply, the next thing, in response to the last thing. Consider: making music only in response to bird song, the new stories you might tell.

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St. John's YWCA, Smash the Patriarchy! Photo: Maria Gentle.