

# "A Very Soft or Long Attack and Release" or Heyyyyy: Queer Extensities

Amalle Dublon

In his 2008 essay "*DISSS-CO* (A Fragment)," excerpted from his memoir in progress, Douglas Crimp revisits a sheaf of papers he finds in an old folder filed away in the 1970s. Scattered among his notes toward critical and art historical projects are a few pages of disjointed writing that chronicle his experience of disco dancing in New York. One passage finds Crimp leaving the club Flamingo on a Sunday morning in 1976:

As we walked down Houston Street toward the Village, our bodies still gyrated, slowing our walk to a rhythmic amble. Moving at all was slightly painful and yet felt inevitable, as if the music had been absorbed by our muscles, especially the obliques, and would go on propelling that uncontrollable back-and-forth hip-swaying forever. On the way up Bedford Street to Seventh Avenue, two guys overtook and passed us. When one was right next to him, Steven drew out under his breath in a reverent whisper, "*Disss-co*." He gave it the same whooshing, electronic sound as the feedback drone that lingered in our ears, muting the sounds of the early Sunday morning. The two men smiled knowingly. There was no question where all of us were coming from.<sup>[1]</sup>

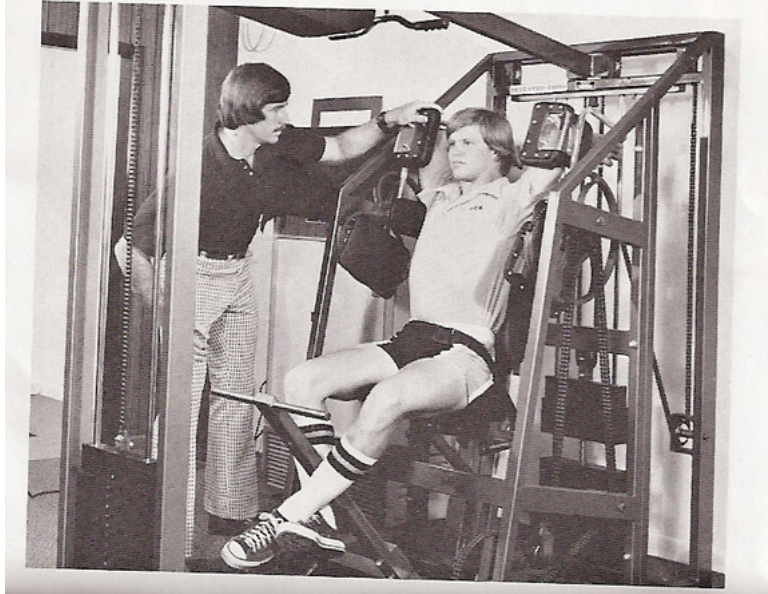
I want to note, first, Crimp's attention to disco's propulsive lingering, and the designation of "our muscles" as a site of that sound reproduction. I am especially interested in Crimp's recording of a casual and ambiguous elongation, somewhere between rhythm and tone, of the word "*disss-co*" itself, whispered to one queer cohort by another. What he calls the "lingering, echoic feedback drone" that this whisper reproduces and prolongs gestures towards a historically coemergent form, though one not often associated with gay popular dance: formalist sound art of the 1970s, which is sometimes caricatured as an endless electronic drone. I would like to attend carefully to this feedback drone, imagining its different forms as variations in queer attunement.

Sonic art practices of the late 1960s and 1970s were among the primary aesthetic sites in which embodied and speculative forms of duration, endurance, and temporal extensity were actively being thought, yet the sexual politics of sonic art, and the preoccupations it shared with contemporaneous practices like disco, remain under-thought, in part because the history of sonic art has been understood as a turning away from the repetitious metrical division of musical rhythm and toward the durational sound of the sustained electronic drone, tone, or frequency.<sup>[2]</sup> My aim is not to elide the historical and formal differences between the contexts of early gay disco and 1970s sonic art, but rather to explore their shared preoccupation with the temporalities of extended play, duration, and endurance, and the sexual politics of those temporalities. This paper thus attempts to situate sonic art and its durational drones and tones in relation to both disco as musical sociality and "*disss-co*" as queer vocal transmission.

In his notes, Crimp links disco rhythms to "reps" conducted on newly invented Nautilus machines, both forms of repetition and duration congealing into newly recognizable and reproducible gay gym bodies imagined as "dancing machines." Of the dance floor at 5:30 a.m., the notes in his file record:

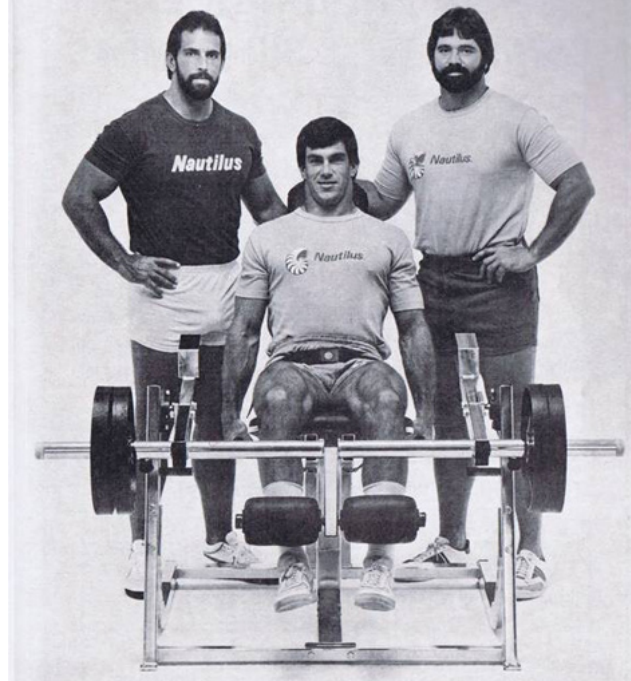
At that point the music is always good, there's plenty of room on the dance floor, and only serious discoers are left. But best of all your body has quit resisting. It has unstoppable momentum. That is the one thing about disco comparable to any other experience. It's like what happens in distance running or swimming. You pass a point where you're beyond tired, beyond pain, beyond even thinking about stopping, thinking only that this could go on forever and you'd love it.<sup>[3]</sup>

## For the athlete.



Amalle Dublon, 2014, "For the Athlete." Screenshot of Nautilus Print Ad, 1970s.

**Leverage is involved in all exercises, with any tool — with a barbell you are unavoidably limited by the random leverage factors involved in all barbell exercises. That limitation has now been removed — by Nautilus.**



Amalle Dublon, 2014, "Leverage Is Involved in All Exercises." Screenshot of Nautilus print ad, 1980s.

This passage joins the rhythmic repetition of athletic discipline with a nearly Cagean durational panaurality in which this sound "could go on forever." Dance music historian Tim Lawrence notes that in the 1970s, disco tracks were lengthened until they filled 12-inch records to meet the needs of DJs who would otherwise have to buy two copies of the same record in order to prolong certain passages.<sup>[41]</sup> I would like to open this question of extended play in the context of 1970s sonic art, and in particular the work of the feminist composer Pauline Oliveros.

A hugely important figure in the development of electronic art music since the 1950s, Oliveros did not work in an electronic dance music context, and her work is not known for its athleticism or rhythmic intensity. But her work was nonetheless preoccupied with endurance-based performance and audition. A major shift in the emphasis and direction of Oliveros's work is often attributed to her 1974 composition *Sonic Meditations*, a set of scores which emphasize listening,

practiced through extreme extensities — durational, spatialized, and affective — from drawn-out tones and drones, to forms of long-distance and telepathic musical conduction. For example, Section III of *Sonic Meditations* includes instructions for telepathic conduction and attunement, and Section IV for telepathic communication with extraterrestrials, while another section disperses performers in rowboats across a lake.

#### Pacific Tell

*Find your place in a darkened indoor space or a deserted out-of-doors area. Mentally form a sound image. Assume that the magnitude of your concentration on, or the vividness of this sound image will cause one or more of the group to receive this sound image by telepathic transmission. Visualize the person to whom you are sending. Rest after your attempted telepathic transmission by becoming mentally blank. When or if a sound image different from your own forms in your mind, assume that you are receiving from some one else, then make that sound image audible. Rest again by becoming mentally blank or return to your own mental sound image. Continue as long as possible or until all others are quiet.*

#### Telepathic Improvisation

*To the musicians with varied or like instruments:  
Tuning — each musician in turn sits or stands in front of the audience for a few minutes. The audience is asked to observe the musician carefully and try to imagine the sound of his or her instrument. The audience is instructed to close eyes and attempt to visualize the musician, then send a sound to the musician by hearing it mentally. The musician waits until he or she receives an impression of a sound mentally, then he or she produces the sound. Members of the audience who have successfully "hit the target" raise their hands as feedback to the musician.*

—IV—

*Divide into two or more groups. Each group must have a tape recorder and be sound isolated from the other groups. The distance might be small or great, i.e., thousands of miles or light years. Each group then performs Pacific Tell or Telepathic Improvisation, attempting inter group or interstellar telepathic transmission. A specific time period may be pre-arranged. Each group tape records its own sounds during the telepathic transmission period for later comparison.  
Variation: Instead of working in groups each participant works as an isolated soloist.*

### Pauline Oliveros, III- Pacific Tell with Telepathic Improvisation, and IV from *Sonic Meditations*, 1974

Amalle Dublon, 2014, Screenshot of scores from Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* (III-Pacific Tell with Telepathic Improvisation, and IV) Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1974.

All of these extreme extensities — forms of extended play which I would argue echo (at least retrospectively) both the seriousness and the silliness of new age and lesbian feminist aesthetics <sup>[5]</sup>— are nonetheless governed by the more limited tempo and capacities of the breath, an enduring rhythm which Oliveros instructs performers to establish at the outset of each section.

In 1970, Oliveros published the score for *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation* - - - , which calls for performers to select five tones that they will sustain and repeat over the entire course of the performance, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. In interviews, Oliveros has said, somewhat enigmatically, that she derived her formal directives as a composer — not only for this work, but also for subsequent major works, including *Sonic Meditations* — from Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (<http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/shivers/rants/scum.html>). What to make of a forty-year formalist practice derived from SCUM protocols? And what does a practice of endurance and extensity have to do with this dedication to Solanas and Monroe?

**To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe  
In Recognition of Their Desperation - - - -**

by Pauline Oliveros

**INSTRUMENTATION:** Any group or groups of instrumentalists, from small chamber ensemble to large orchestra, may be utilized. Singers who have perfect pitch (or a pitch pipe) may be included. Pipe organ, electrophonic instruments and electronic music systems may be used.

**ORCHESTRAL VERSION:** Divide into three or more groups, each with approximately equal strings, winds, brass and pitched percussion. Pipe organ or electronic music system is classed as a group. The groups are placed **antiphonally** in the space. Each group except the pipe organ or electronic music system must have a conductor.

**CHAMBER VERSION:** For each group of like instruments, one performer acts as the leader, i.e. string leader, brass leader, wind leader, etc. All performers occupy one area in the space.

**DURATION:** 30 minutes (3, 10 minute sections)  
45 minutes (3, 15 minute sections)  
60 minutes (3, 20 minute sections)

The duration of the three sections is controlled by a lighting system. Section 1 is all red light, Section 2 is all yellow light, and Section 3 is all blue light. The system capability must allow the operator to cross fade the different lights very gradually. The color changes act as cues for the performers. (These cues will be described under the performance directions.)

In addition to the three color changes, two high intensity (strobe or photo flash) white flashes are necessary. The first one happens after 2/3 of the time of Section 1. The second flash happens after 1/3 the time of Section 3.

Ideally, the color changes should cover the entire auditorium, audience as well as performers. If this is impractical, then all of the performers must be covered by the light or at least aware of the color changes and the two flashes.

Amalle Dublon, 2014, Screenshot of excerpts Pauline Oliveros, *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation - - - -* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1977).

**PERFORMANCE DIRECTIONS:**

The basis of this composition is the performance, by all players, of very long tones and any possible modulation or variation of any part of the tone which does not change the fundamental frequency of the tone. Variations of the long tones may be affected by independent or simultaneous modulations of amplitude (volume), articulation, formant or partials (timbre), or any other means within the capability of the performers. Vibrato or regular tonal fluctuations through the pitch center is permissible.

All players select five different pitches without consulting each other. At least two of the pitches must be in a non-diatonic or dissonant relationship to the other three pitches. Pitch choice should be influenced also by registers which are comfortable and afford the greatest variety of modulation.

An unmodulated long tone has a very soft or long attack and release and is sustained at one dynamic level.

September 28, 1970  
Holland, Michigan

Amalle Dublon, 2014, Screenshot of excerpts from Pauline Oliveros, *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation - - - -* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1977).

If Solanas's text, aimed from and for a Society for Cutting Up Men, gestures toward any formal operation, it would seem to be that of the cut, a historically rich operation for many sound practitioners from hip hop to Yoko Ono to Pierre Schaeffer. Yet Oliveros's formal program after 1970 derives not from explicitly from the gesture of the cut, but rather from the first initial of SCUM — the *Society* for Cutting Up Men — and its implicit reference, for her, to a kind of feminist sociality:

Well Valerie Solanas was a street kid, a street feminist. The structure of community was detailed in that manifesto. What I articulated out of the SCUM Manifesto was the deep structure of the piece. [6]

In the context of Oliveros's work, this structure is one of an ensemble or study group for the internal exploration of the extended tone and its variations, achieved in part through the antiphone, an echoic, circular musical structure and bodily arrangement in space.

The antiphone functions as an armature for the movement of performance and audition, sound and listening, described by the title-as-dedication. The title's formal address — to Solanas and Monroe in recognition of their desperation — holds in tension the almost comically overburdened names of Solanas and Monroe with the nameless continuous sound that both

“recognizes” and dissolves those figures. The figural (Solanas, Monroe) escapes into that extended sound, which nonetheless also functions as the substance of a careful attention to precisely the exhaustion, desperation, and dissolution of those overburdened figures. In an eerie performance of *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe* (<http://vimeo.com/43169124>) at the 2012 Her Noise Symposium in London, what becomes audible in the extreme extension of the performers’ tones is the movement of their auto-approximation — the inevitable variations internal to each tone, which form a wavering halo around the pitch center that they seek. What we hear is less a sonic emission than a receptive environment, a seeking, tuning in, or listening. Suspended between broadcast and reception, like a séance or a study group, it’s as if it is the performed sound itself that is listening for a transmission.<sup>[7]</sup>

The question of study — study of form, and study as aesthetic form — is central to Oliveros’s work from 1970 forward, driven by her reading of SCUM. In her introduction to the 2004 reissue of the *SCUM Manifesto*, Avital Ronell writes of the “quasi-linguistic” sound worlds of Solanas’s speech:

If you are pegged as a woman, your scream might be noted as part of an ensemble of subaltern feints — the complaint, the nagging, the picking, the chatter, the nonsense by which women’s speech has been largely depreciated or historically tagged. Other quasi-linguistic worlds open up in this space, springing from the noncanonized tropes of moaning and bitching.<sup>[8]</sup>

What would the antiphonal study of such quasi-linguistic forms entail? The dedication that Oliveros offers in place of a title for *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe* prefigures another dedication to precisely such a study group, the ♀ Ensemble, for whom *Sonic Meditations* was written. An all-woman improvisation group, the ♀ Ensemble was convened by Oliveros specifically to produce and study long sustained tones, through which developed the concept of “sonic awareness” key to Oliveros’s ongoing practice.

Made up of musicians as well as unprofessional performers, the ♀ Ensemble undertook a kind of consciousness-raising on the level of what I would like to think of as feminist formalism. Indeed, the consciousness-raising group, like the ♀ Ensemble, historically drew for its procedures of study and discovery on what we might call untrained vocal extensity (or long-windedness), on non-heteronormative forms of social and vocal reproduction, on affects of endurance and boredom, and even on the drone attributed to women talking with each other. *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe* and the ♀ Ensemble both implicitly cite the consciousness-raising group as an antiphonic, echoic vocal form.

## SONIC MEDITATIONS

### INTRODUCTION I

Sonic Meditations are intended for group work over a long period of time with regular meetings. No special skills are necessary. Any persons who are willing to commit themselves can participate. The ♀ Ensemble to whom these meditations are dedicated has found that non-verbal meetings intensify the results of these meditations and help provide an atmosphere which is conducive to such activity. With continuous work some of the following becomes possible with Sonic Meditations: Heightened states of awareness or expanded consciousness, changes in physiology and psychology from known and unknown tensions to relaxations which gradually become permanent. These changes may represent a tuning of mind and body. The group may develop positive energy which can influence others who are less experienced. Members of the Group may achieve greater awareness and sensitivity to each other. Music is a welcome by-product of this activity.



The ♀ Ensemble performing *Teach Yourself to Fly* from *Sonic Meditations*, 1970, Rancho Santa Fe, CA. Clockwise from foreground: Lin Barron, cello; Chris Voigt; Betty Wong; Joan George, bass clarinet; Bonnie Barnett; Oliveros, accordion; Shirley Wong; and Lynn Lonidier, cello. Pauline Oliveros Papers. MSS 102. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

The ♀ Ensemble performing *Teach Yourself to Fly* from *Sonic Meditations*, 1970, Rancho Santa Fe, CA. Clockwise from foreground: Lin Barron, cello; Chris Voigt; Betty Wong; Joan George, bass clarinet; Bonnie Barnett; Oliveros, accordion; Shirley Wong; and Lynn Lonidier, cello. Pauline Oliveros Papers. MSS 102. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

This echoic voice is taken up by Gayatri Spivak in her 1993 essay “Echo,” in which Spivak considers the nymph Echo, admirer of Narcissus, as a figuration of the voice left out of the persistent psychoanalytic association of Narcissus (and narcissism) with women and the image. In place of the fixity of the narcissistic image, Spivak takes up the reproductive displacement of the voice invoked by Echo. Jilted by Narcissus, Echo is, of course, condemned to sound reproduction in perpetuity, beyond death: “For Echo is obliged to echo everyone who speaks. ... [She] is obliged to be imperfectly and interceptively responsive to another’s desire. ... It is the catachresis of response as such.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Spivak’s theorization of Echo in terms of a gendered submission to chance (or, more precisely, to both formal constraint and insistent misprision), describes one of the most commonly cited features of Cagean and post-Cagean aesthetics, including Oliveros’s work. And in its lingering transmission and reproduction of another’s sound, Echo’s voice recalls the whispered “*disss-co.*”

Echo’s extensity — her extension of the voice beyond the living body and her ambiguous reproduction of speech — links her, as respondent and reproducer, back to the queerly echoic, ambiguous phonic elongation of “*disss-co.*” In a blog post for *The Atlantic Wire* aptly titled “Why Drag It Out,” Jen Doll [describes](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/dragging-it-out/309220/) (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/dragging-it-out/309220/>) the vocal and written phenomenon of “word extension” among young women, in which extra letters are added to words to mimic the affect of phonic elongation — a vocal habit also associated with queer and feminine people more broadly.<sup>[10]</sup>



WORDPLAY MARCH 2013

# Why Drag It Out?

An investigation into what inspires soooo many people to toss extra letters into their text messages

JEN DOLL | FEB 20 2013, 9:09 PM ET

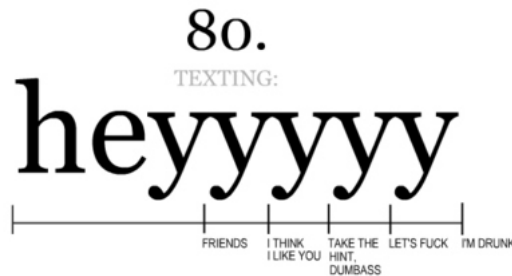


Nishant Choksi

"Hiiiiii," HE TEXTED. "Hiiiiii," I responded. "How are youuuuuu?"

Rest assured: I am an adult. I even write for a living—often about grammar,

Amalle Dublon, 2014. Screenshot of Doll, Jen. "Why Drag It Out? An investigation into what inspires soooo many people to toss extra letters into their text messages." *The Atlantic Wire*. February 20, 2013. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/dragging-it-out/309220/>> <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/dragging-it-out/309220/>>



maleminded.tumblr

Heyyyyyy. <<http://maleminded.tumblr.com/post/8352519487>> <<http://maleminded.tumblr.com/post/8352519487>> Accessed March 10, 2013.

The subject of a computational sociolinguistics study (<http://arxiv.org/abs/1210.4567>) released in October 2012, word elongation triggered a flurry of commentary (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/katieheaney/how-men-and-women-tweet>) on sites from Buzzfeed to *Bust Magazine* to the *New York Times*, nearly all of it cross-linked with similar posts on the equally feminine and queer habit (<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/27/girls-add-a-growl-to-teen-lexicon>) of vocal fry (<http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2011/12/vocal-fry-creeping-into-us-speec.html>) or “creaky voice.”<sup>[11]</sup>

First recognized within music pedagogy in the 1970s, and later taken up much more broadly within phonetics, where it has remained on the edge of categorization as a speech pathology, vocal fry is a kind of gravelly glottal dragging sound that happens in the lower vocal registers.<sup>[12]</sup> “Creaky voice” is widely figured as a queer and feminine habit, a kind of vocal decadence or laziness marked as much by slowing and deepening as by a rhythmic internal differentiation (that gravelly sound) designated by speech pathologists as “jitter” and “shimmer,” or variations in pitch and volume.<sup>[13]</sup>

In many of the recent accounts, letter repetition and word extensity, like vocal fry, are made to represent a feminized futurity — their practitioners being “like, way ahead of the linguistic currrrrrve” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/science/young-women-often-trendsetters-in-vocal-patterns.html>) as a *New York Times*

headline had it.

But this extensity is also a linguistic

([http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon\\_valley/2013/01/lexicon\\_valley\\_on\\_creaky\\_voice\\_or\\_vocal\\_fry\\_in\\_young\\_american\\_women.htm](http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2013/01/lexicon_valley_on_creaky_voice_or_vocal_fry_in_young_american_women.htm)) (<http://shine.yahoo.com/healthy-living/8220-annoying-8221-girl-voice-164900387.html>), a kind of leisurely, wasteful hesitation.<sup>[14]</sup> The queer and feminine voice inserts itself, in the form of extralinguistic, echoic, repetitious marks, into the written word, distending and inflating it.



Amalle Dublon, 2013, Screenshot from Stoeffel, Kat. "How to Tweet Like a Girl." The Cut blog. *New York Magazine*. February 19, 2013. <<http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/02/how-to-tweet-like-a-girl.html>> (<http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/02/how-to-tweet-like-a-girl.html>)>

Drawing on the computational linguistics study, a *New York Magazine* blog post on "[How to Tweet Like a Girl](http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/02/how-to-tweet-like-a-girl.html)" (<http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/02/how-to-tweet-like-a-girl.html>) is pointedly illustrated with a screen cap from a Dr. Phil interview with Ronaiah Tuiasosopo, best known for "tricking" an NFL player into a long-distance relationship by "impersonating" a woman's voice.<sup>[15]</sup> Included in the list of examples of feminine phonics, alongside "tweeting your feelings" and "emoting with punctuation," is trying to "transcribe the sounds you're making." It's as if the key symptom of transfeminine sound — here linked to a certain Dr. Phil epidemiology — is the oddly formal aesthetic protocol of scoring and transcribing an unwieldy phonic duration.

A *Bust Magazine* blog post on word extension relates it to a kind of affective labor: "elongated words are a sign of politeness and added care ... 'extra letters soften the blow.'"<sup>[16]</sup> As in the whispered word "*disss-co*," this softening or ambiguous rendering functions as a kind of out of phase feedback drone, preemptively echoing and evading the imagined expectations of the addressee, as if an anticipatory penumbra halos and holds the unstable coordination of mutuality.

To apply what I want to call feminist formalism to this feminine and queer vocal habit, the blur around a word might be referred to as a spectral envelope, or, as Oliveros's score would put it, "fluctuations through the pitch center," or "a very soft or long attack and release." A queer feminine speech impediment here answers to and evades the regulative demands of communication even as it extends and reproduces the voice as anticomunicative communal substance. It's this reproductive extensity — a feminine labor of maintenance, an anti-heteronormative generativity — that a queer feminist formalism must attend to.

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