

**Sonic Wandering in New Landscapes:**

**Gertrude Stein and sonic performativity in Eglė Budvytė's *Songs from the Compost: mutating bodies, exploding stars***

**Jane Frances Dunlop**

i.

Two voices, stretched and pulled out of shape, technologically modified, atone 'we have never been clean, we have never been pure' over a gentle electronic melody (Budvytė, 2020). Maybe it is the same voice, reverberating. Maybe it is the same voice, digitally replicated and laid out beside itself in differently augmented versions. The voice, voices, have a husky quality to them: something earthy and organic within, alongside, both part of and counter to their deeply technological quality.

There is a long sound like a sigh, like gentle feedback, a deep breath, and the voice, voices, start to sing again: 'Hello, I am a cyborg, a symbiosis, a non-binary alien, after gender abolition...'

The video piece that this voice, these voices, accompany opens with a troop of young performers in clothes that are gently decomposing (clothes the artist buried in her backyard during the pandemic), moving through the landscape of a forest. These bodies appear in various landscapes throughout the piece: on the beach, scuttling along the shoreline, rolling down the sand dunes, wandering back and forth through the forest. The visual world, like the sonic one, built in this piece is a landscape of entanglements both symbiotic and parasitic. Fungus grows on a body that sleeps in the woods, an umbilical cord trails beyond a body on the beach, it is often unclear where one body stops and another starts, often unclear whether these bodies are human, something else, some after or before. The spectres of Lynn Margulis and her life's work on symbiosis and Octavia Butler's speculative explorations of the world's built through moral complex relations between humans and non-humans, hum through the piece. Eglė Budvytė's *Songs from the Compost* is – in the words of the artist – 'a compact translation of some of the very dense concepts, and landscapes and ideas from Octavia's books' (*Lithuanian Visual Arts*, 2021).

But I am not interested in these visual landscapes and how they are navigated, at least not here.

Here, I am interested in the voice, or voices, that accompany these images and how they become their own landscape. How they wander, how they construct a landscape that we can wander through. I am interested in this sense of wandering, of wandering through, where it allows us to go and what it allows us to navigate: bodies, technologies, temporalities, fictional worlds made real, real worlds made fictional. I am interested in the voice, in voice, voices: what the voice does and can

do, the particular theatricality that attends to a voice, any voice, but also the voice as it gets pulled, stretched and shaped by machines.

Theatricality names the ways in which a performance - artistic, social, cultural or political - shows the terms and means of its construction (Burns, 1972; Carlson, 2002; Davis, 2003; Dunlop, 2024; Féral, 2013). It is used to describe what happens – what is gained, lost, implied – by the transformation of a text into a performance, and by the attending audience's awareness of, and participation in, that process. Like theatricality's kin term performativity, when the concept travels outside a theatre it provides a powerful lens for understanding both knowledge and world-building as ongoing and collective endeavours.

Vocality is implicated in theatricality: a voice participates in its own unique, embodied, and relational performance that is also always already entangled with meaning and discourse. A voice is, as Cavarero says, a 'contingent, contextual, sonorous articulation' (Cavarero, 2005, p. 14); it is, as Barthes says, an 'articulation of the body and of discourse' (Barthes, 1991, p. 155). Vocality is a means for thinking about how this embodiment and relationality manifest in speech. In *Songs from the Compost*, Budvytytė plays with how worlds are reflected and created through voice, through voices and their attendant possibilities, how voices name relations and enact, how a voice, voices, move through and make worlds, how voices wander in the landscapes they create (Butler, 2015; Cavarero, 2005; Dolar, 2006; Dunn and Jones, 1994; Meizel, 2020).

ii.

And I want to think this movement, this shaping of voices, changing of voices, through the idea of the landscape, specifically the idea of landscape that the writer Gertrude Stein articulates in her essay 'Plays'.

An aside, on Gertrude Stein, who is herself an interesting and useful figure, I think, because the complexity of her personal and political history force us to contend with the ways that feminist and queer history are not as clean, clear or persistently utopian as we might like them to be. Remembering Stein's history – her privileged and conservative politics, her cooperation with the Nazis, her seeming disinterest in feminism and other women in general – is a way of adding friction to the kinds of relation we might imagine to be operating between and within the ideas at play. We can start to think beyond the generosity of collaboration into more complexity and moral fraught modes of interaction and interrelation: collision, complicity, coercion. The inter and intra relations get a little dirty, we get a little nervous.

Nervousness is, in 'Plays', the problem with theatre. Or rather, the problem with theatre is that one's emotional times are syncopated and *that* is what makes one nervous.

Nervousness is, for Stein, a quality of having to experience those things that are not oneself. & I've been thinking about this nervousness for years: have written on it, made art with it. But this is about landscapes.

Stein proposes the landscape as the way to solve this problem, and it is this idea that I want to consider here. Stein writes, 'all these things that might have been a story [...] as a landscape they are just there' (Stein, 1988, p. 131).

The landscape, as Stein intends it, creates a kind of bending of both time and possibility that actively reshapes what the world is and what the world does. It is not about new possibility but rather something less oriented in a linear logic of progression and more about the inevitable persistence of what was always already there.

She writes:

**A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there.**

**Magpies are in the landscape that is they are in the sky of a landscape, they are black and white and they are in the sky of the landscape [...] When they are in the sky they do something that I have never seen other bird do they hold themselves up and down and look flat against the sky.**

**A very famous French inventor of things that have to do with stabilisation in aviation told me that what I told him magpies did could not be done by any bird but anyways the magpies [...] do do it or do not at least they look as if they do do it. They look exactly like the birds in the Annunciation pictures the bird which is the Holy Ghost and rests flat against the side sky very high. (Stein, 1988, p. 129).**

And so, to solve the problem caused by telling stories, by the unfolding of events that are both real and unreal – this is the central remit of the theatre: the really real that is also fiction, also unreal – Stein makes a new fiction, a visual mode of relation that aims to take away time and with it any feeling of emotional syncopation, which is to say relation or at least unease. It is easy to read Stein's landscape as a theory against emotional turmoil, against difference and friction, but I think it isn't just that. There is also something of an all at once in what she proposes: rather than move through things with time, take them as they are, all at once, catch them in all their overlapping relations, wander in the landscapes they create.

And what happens to things that might have been a story: in a landscape, they are just there.

As Stein's explanation via magpies makes clear, the landscape doesn't escape the story, it instead invites a new fiction which, slide as we follow her line of thought into the Annunciation, is also an old fiction.

Stein's landscapes play with, and against, the temporality of the theatre: instead, Stein stops time so that things are 'just here', hanging in the air beside each other. In a landscape, we see time as theatrical, as something constructed and then brought into being by its performance.

This landscape, Stein's landscape, is a space made of and for bodies, for voices: it is the performing, the making of a suspended space with things that are inherently entangled with time, that makes these landscapes interesting, useful for thinking with. It is the theatricality of them, the ways the landscape not only does something but also enters into a kind of conversation with its own construction.

Theatricality allows us to witness and participate in the process by which discourse shapes, reflects, refracts knowledge, the world, a shared reality: as Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests, a particular performance '...turns out to be a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for, and the possibilities of constructing reality.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 104). And I will not take up all the ways that performance can and does extend off the stage, into images, into storytelling, into public theatre and private acts. Suffice to state that when I say performance, when Fischer-Lichte says performance, we are talking about an artform but also we are talking about all the other ways a world can be, is made real, temporarily or permanently. Fischer-Lichte argues that this theatricality focuses the audience's – and this is the "we" who can test our capacity – attention on 'the very process of construction and the conditions underlining it' (Ibid.).

Thinking this process into time, thinking through the ways performance interrupts time, temporality, Rebecca Schneider writes: 'To trouble linear temporality – to suggest that time may be touched, crossed, visited or revisited, that time is transitive and flexible, that time may occur in time, that time is not one – never only one – is to court the ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality. The threat of theatricality is still the threat of the imposter status of the copy, the double, the mimetic, the second, the surrogate, the feminine, or the queer.' (Schneider, 2011, p. 30) And this is, I argue, what Stein's landscapes help us conceive of, they help us court this 'ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality' and play instead with the "the threat of the imposter status of the copy".

It is this kind of landscape Budvytyté's *Songs from the Compost* offers as it moves ideas of biological evolution and earthly interdependence through the scientific and speculative visions from the 20<sup>th</sup> century into real technological and climatological collapse of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A voice, voices, enact a multitude, troubling time, origin, crossing, visiting and revisiting the same lyrical fragments, the same vocal motifs.

Letting them sit beside each other, just there, so that the symbiosis, the mutually implicated and entangled is heard, felt, seen, encounter, perhaps not understood.

The magpies hang in the sky. The voice pulls, layers, reverberates, wanders.

iii.

This presentation is a fragment of a longer project, a developing series of thoughts about voices and theatricality, about what happens when voices come together in different ways: as a crowd, as a chorus, as a composite. I have been thinking about how theatricality provides a means for parsing what might be constructed in, inferred from, deconstructed out of these amalgams. This consideration is part of a broader project, a broader interest, in knowledge representation in machine learning and how the question of how data is turned into structured representations of knowledge for computation, about what to make of this process of representing knowledge at this moment, a cultural and historical moment marked by epistemological fracture: post-truth, alternate facts, a failure to create a shared reality.

I think about Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's writing on 'Soil Time' in *Matters of Care*: her 'invitation to rearrange and rebalance relations between a diversity of coexisting temporalities that inhabit the worlds of soil and other interdependent ecologies' (Bellacasa, 2017, pp. 214–5). Bellacasa's consideration of soil as a matter of care brings us back to the fraught webs of relations that characterise inter and intra connection, action, the qualities of being and relate between human, non-human, more than human entities. It brings us back to the dirt, the compost as composite of collaboration yes, but also collision, complicity, coercion. Bellacasa's book is an invitation to think through care times and the spaces that might be made, found, wallowed in. Bellacasa never explicitly claims that 'care time' does anything, instead suggesting that through care time we might get to 'relevant questions for disrupting technofuturity' (Bellacasa, 2017, p. 215). Bellacasa thinks from the soil into the world, catching the care that can be come in with the friction.

Despite Stein's apparent disavowal of emotion and particularly the emotions of others, the concept of the landscape lets us spend time with something like this care time, this theatrical time outside linear time where we might find, as Fischer-Lichte's suggests '...a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for, and the possibilities of constructing reality.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 104).

In this landscape, we might also hear Rebecca Schneider, the 'reality effect of faux upon faux that gives us, so promisingly, the transitivity of the real, which is to say its mutability, its availability for and as change.' (Schneider, 2011, p. 177). Hear Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and "the historical particularity of global connections, domination and discipline come into their own, but not always in the forms laid out by their proponents." (Tsing, 2011, p. 5). Hear Sara Ahmed and emotions, which "may be

crucial to showing us why transformations are so difficult (we remain invested in what we critique), but also how they are possible (our investments move as we move)” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 172).

The voice, voices of *Song from the compost* loop, they layer, they atone, they wander through their landscape, they sing:

‘she’ll pick you up, she’ll digest you, she’ll hold you and hold onto you’...

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