Listening to/at/with Marilyn Lerner’s They’re All in Families

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They’re All in Families (1998) occupies a particular place in the career of Canadian pianist, improviser and composer Marilyn Lerner (http://www.marilynlerner.com); it acts up at a crossroads of the aesthetic and the declarative, where art and politics might be said uncomfortably, troublingly and compellingly to collide. While she is probably best known for her jazz performances and recordings, and as a member of the improvising duo, and then trio, Queen Mab (with clarinetist Lori Freedman and violist Ig Henneman), Marilyn Lerner has also over the last decade fashioned a number of striking works of audio-art, ranging from radio documentaries (including Vessel, 2004 (http://www.cbc.ca/outfront/listen/2005/05-06-02.html) and Hands, 2005 (http://www.cbc.ca/outfront/listen/2005/05-06-15.html) to more abstract interventions “between sound and music” (such as Sew a Straight Seam, 2001) (http://www.improbablemusic.com/phil/html/CD/inbetween.html). Much of this sound work has focused more or less on the autobiographical, as Lerner tries (as she puts it in the narrative voiceover for Vessel) “to create a space in myself” for her subject matter, which has ranged from her Jewish heritage to the physiology of hands. But the matter of They’re All in Families is much more recalcitrant and dehumanizing; that it cannot easily find “a space” within Lerner’s—or any listener’s—sense of self is very much to the point, in fact.

Lerner shaped They’re All in Families from a brief snippet of found audio—ten seconds of a taped message left on an answering machine. (The machine’s location is never specified in the piece, but it appears to be—and I’m only conjecturing—a crisis help-line.) The fragment records the moment when the caller’s tone shifts dramatically from banal rambling to virulent hate speech, as he begins to spew a series of violent homophobic curses: an intense initial surge into verbal gay-bashing. This text hardly seems to have any aesthetic or even communicative merit; it’s a crude, sloppy speech-act: “. . . y’know and whether or not they’re all in families or not you MOTHERFUCKERS SHOULD ALL DIE a AIDS you FUCKING COCKSUCKING FAGGOTS . . .” Reading it through now on the page, I still find it hard to hear this short tirade as viable poetic or musical source material. But by sampling, clipping, editing, and looping the various morphemes and phonemes in this text, Lerner not only creates what might be called a détournement from this stuff, turning hatred and violence verbally back against themselves, but also in my view concocts from the least likely of sources a kind of voice music, music informed by a humane if ugly beauty.

In an August 2008 e-mail to Julie Dawn Smith, Lerner succinctly describes how she made They’re All in Families: “Using Sound Designer, I constructed a play-list out of a hate message left on an answering machine. I wanted to expose the rhythm of hatred, and to deal with the sense of violation and fear the caller seeks to create.” The need to expose this rhythm, to make the diachronic form that hatred takes as explicit as the manifest content of the rant, requires that Lerner pay acute attention, by intervening in the text with sound technology, to its enunciative textures, engaging the “sense” of the caller’s words, sense understood not so much as meaning but rather as how those phonemes feel as they impact the membranes of the ear: their tangible pulse. How is hatred inflicted on listeners as sound, as beat? How too, as listeners, can we respond to the physical force of these words, to their fear-mongering, by recognizing their intended effect? Can they be counteracted, and can we even be invited, through Lerner’s re-made rhythms, to push back? I want to suggest, though only briefly, some of the ways in which I hear this push in Lerner’s work.

I should start, despite what I’ve just said, with thematics, with the meaningful content that Lerner’s version emphasizes. Her title, clipped from the tirade, points to a pervasive anxiety in contemporary homophobia, a deeply seated fear within what the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls heteronormativity, which centres on maintaining the socially basic structure of the nuclear family. Queer studies, as Sedgwick often points out, has focused primarily on thinking about what constitutes a family in this world: what families allow, and what they exclude. The claim that “they’re all in families” appears to want to normalize queer sexualities, to assert that “they” (and the distancing effect of the third person is notable here, since it quickly morphs in the tirade into a direct second-person address, “you”) are among “us,” that they’re here; the speaker’s imprecations seem to be set off by this claim, as a suddenly violent abjecting of queer sexualities from what he wants to preserve, at all costs, as the normal family unit, wholly and unflinching heterosexual. One of the tactics Lerner uses in the piece to reinscribe the queer into the family is to sample (and repeat) a clip from the first curse in the text: “motherfuckers” becomes “motherf” (though not quite “mother”), pointing up a trace of matriarchal nurture still coded within the most caustic language. The f-sound still tacked to the tail end of
The piece does not begin with declaratives, however, and we only hear the complete text of the “message” in the final seconds. It starts with what seems to me to be a collation of two sounds: iron-oxide tape-noise from the cassette and the breathy labial hiss of an attenuated “fffff.” This composite sound, if I’m hearing it accurately, performs a pair of important tasks. First of all, it sets up, before we hear the words in full, the sonic texture that connects the key antithesis in the piece: comfort and curse, “family” and “fuck.” Second, it also draws our attention to the rough textures of the medium itself; Lerner’s piece is a digital revision of an analogue artifact, and the traces of its machinic materiality point up its mediated essence, as a technologically archaic, bounded and made thing. If we can recognize the medium within the message, its fabricatedness, then we are immediately also presented with the possibility of actively reconstructing that thing for ourselves. Unlike the invisibility of digital media, which seem to present clarity and noiselessness, tape—in its hisses and in the wobbles and flutters, the distortions of the natural cadences of the human voices it inevitably produces—also sounds the contingencies of time, place and craft. It’s remarkable, too, how Lerner’s piece emphasizes the datedness and specificity of the medium used here for hate-speech while at the same time de-contextualizing the act from the time and place of its utterance: we cannot ever decode from the piece itself how this recording happened. By digitally manipulating analogue material, Lerner in one sense universalizes the scope of the speaker’s hatred, implicating us all as listeners, no matter where or when or who we might be, as victims of his attack: the digital file can propagate and pervade in ways tape simply could not, so that we are all able, however uncomfortably or even unwillingly, to hear it.

They’re All in Families is a monody, and remains single-voiced throughout: Lerner does not add simultaneous lines, or deploy any kind of polyphonic layering. The answering-machine message, as the generic form of the piece, remains largely intact. Nonetheless, her editing does create various instances of serial counterpoint, as alternative tones or antithetical claims cut through one another. Rhythm is generated through incremental repetition and contrast; however small, each shift in register or tempo created by re-arranging the parts of the text (as opposed to the stress patterns in the recorded speech, which are largely disrupted by cutting and pasting) marks a moment of thesis, of emphasis. The rhythm emerges from the breaks between bits of text, rather than from the text itself. There is no regularity of metre or of tempo, but rather a series of tensile disruptions, akin, I would suggest, to what Julia Kristeva (in Revolution in Poetic Language) refers to as the semiotic, moments at which the energetic, chaotic work of sense-making—of the struggle towards articulation—bursts through the veneer of syntactical or semantic sense. The semiotic is described by Kristeva in female, maternal terms—something like a woman’s voice wanting to make expressive space for itself both within and against the closed symbolic realms of patriarchal language—terms that resonate with the unruly and partial recuperation of the “mother” in They’re All in Families. The semiotic might also be heard to intercede at the beginning, when the –ck phoneme cuts through the hissing fs, producing a vestigial curse (“f-ck”) even as its even phonic texture is sliced by the palatal click, defamiliarizing us momentarily, refusing to let us accept these sounds as given, either familiar or familial. The rhythms of They’re All in Families, I would say, inhere in the unacceptable and the radical, in such momentary estrangements.

Although it clocks in under a minute and forty seconds, there is also time here for Lerner to discover traces of nascent song in the message. While her description of the piece emphasizes its work of confrontation and exposure, rather than any sort of artistic recuperation or rehabilitation, there are points when a vocal music starts to appear, moments to which Lerner’s ear is clearly drawn. For example, she takes up a three-word fragment from the latter part of the text—“die a AIDS”—in which the speaker modulates the verbal tonality. (Each syllable sounds a different tone in a scale, starting on a third, descending to the sixth, and then returning to the tonic.) While Lerner assiduously avoids converting any of the speaker’s rant into musical sweetness—a move that would risk bathos by toying with what Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay on mechanical reproduction, cautioned against as the “aestheticizing of politics”—she also seems to me (and she never makes this claim herself; this is my reading) still to assay fleeting instants of sing-song, not I think to prettify the atrocious, but rather to put the question, implicitly and formally, of how to recover beauty in the face of hatred, of where to go once the vile work of fear-mongering has been exposed for what it is. Marilyn Lerner asks us, I want to believe, to ask ourselves this very question: what can we make—poetically, musically—from, and against, horror? They’re All in Families, as an intervention in listening, as an engagement of the active ear, wants us to consider how we might listen to, listen with, listen at the often embittered, violent and unwelcome voices in our many-voiced world.
Works Cited

