

## Performing the Voice in *Coerced Confessions*

Erin Anderson

*One loses control of the voice because it no longer disappears. From bone to air to writing, permanence outside the subject invites greater mutability, where the primacy and purity of the voice are subjected to the machinations and imaginations of culture and politics.*

— Douglas Kahn

### I. Preface

Five years ago, when I was first conceiving of the *Coerced Confessions* project, I found myself in an informal critique with a studio arts undergrad named Ashley, who politely informed me that my work is (and I quote) “very Little Mermaid.” At first, I’ll admit, I was a little put off by the comparison, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized: She was right. And the more intrigued I became by the implications.

While I don’t remember the exact details of my conversation with Ashley, I’m pretty sure the trigger point for the mermaid revelation was when I boiled down my work to something like this: “Basically,” I told her, “I’m interested in what happens when we extract the voice from the body, and in what we can *do* with it once we do.” Looking back, it is hard not to cringe at everything that’s wrong with this statement, ontologically speaking, as if the voice weren’t always already beyond the body from the moment it is heard *as* voice, as if the voice were free to do something *other than* to leave the body behind—or, as voice scholar Steven Connor so cleverly puts it, “What I Say Goes.” At the same time,

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it is also easy to see how Ashley's mind would have gone straight to that classic scene in Ursula's lair.<sup>1</sup>

So bring yourself back to that fateful moment when Ariel gives her voice over to the sea witch. (Or, better yet, search for it on YouTube).<sup>2</sup> As Ariel sings—that inane melody I loved so much as a child—and Ursula cheers her on, an enormous pair of green hands floats across the salty ether, penetrates Ariel's convulsing body, and extracts from it the glowing orb that is her voice. We watch in horror as Ariel clutches her throat and the golden voice-orb floats away, carrying with it the sound of a song now beyond her control, to be locked away in a seashell for safe keeping. And future redeployment.<sup>3</sup>

This probably won't come as a surprise, but this is not how the scene unfolds in the Hans Christian Andersen original, where the sea witch simply cuts to the chase and slices out the poor mermaid's tongue. It's easy to see why this wasn't a viable plot-point for Disney screenwriters; all I have to do is picture myself in a darkened theater at age six, sipping a Capri Sun and watching the carnage ensue. But, if you think about it, there is actually much more going on here than a cheap trick for a G-rating. Because, in the roughly 150-year time span between Andersen's fairytale and Disney's summer blockbuster, a pretty massive historical event took place that would change the way we relate to and imagine the human voice forever: the invention of sound reproduction technology.

Certainly, back in 1837, the logical way to "steal" a person's voice would have been to go straight for the tongue. But with the invention of the phonograph, it became suddenly possible to imagine a voice beyond the time and place of its initial utterance; to abstract its vibrations from the living, breathing body that produced it; and to capture and re-present them in material form as media. And if we watch this scene carefully—the glowing orb, the sound waves, the seashell—it doesn't take much to map onto it a technological narrative of sound transmission, reproduction, and capture. On its own, I find this parallel fascinat-

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<sup>1</sup> As it will become clear, I am referring to Disney's 1989 film adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale and, specifically, to the character of the sea witch, who, in the original story, remains nameless.

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, perhaps, copyright protections do not permit me to embed a clip of the scene directly in the text, despite the ubiquity of such media artifacts in our everyday lives. However, at least at the time of this writing, it is widely available for streaming on YouTube. The widespread availability of this particular clip, presumably posted on YouTube by avid fans, speaks to the scene's iconic role in Disney's adaptation. And, even if you have already seen it, it is worth returning to.

<sup>3</sup> In Disney's film adaptation, Ursula, the sea witch, transforms herself into human form, as a beautiful woman named Vanessa and uses Ariel's voice (which she keeps in a seashell around her neck) to seduce the prince into proposing marriage in an attempt to coerce Ariel's father, King Triton, into abdicating his throne to Ursula in order to save his daughter.

ing, but I am ultimately less interested in the analogy itself than in the possibilities and problematics it opens up.

For Andersen's "Little Mermaid," there is ultimately very little that can happen with the voice plotline after the sea witch has done her deed. The mermaid's voice is gone, or at least rendered inarticulate, but, in the end, it has not been stolen; it simply no longer works. In this story, the mermaid's voice does nothing for the sea witch beyond its lack, and the narrative has no choice but to sow its conflict elsewhere. But this is *not* the case in the Disney adaptation. For Ariel, her voice is not simply a capacity, it is a commodity—something she owns and is therefore at risk of losing. Crucially, when her voice is stolen, it is not destroyed; it *continues to exist* with the terrifying potential to speak beyond her intention and sound beyond her control. And it is precisely this resonant potential—the erotic charge of the stolen voice object—that the sea witch arms herself with as she sets out to woo the prince and destroy the world. Or whatever it is she sets out to do. For our purposes, it doesn't really matter. All that matters is that it is evil.

As I see it, this story is a striking example of the kinds of stories we tell ourselves, as a culture, about the human voice. It is a reflection of the power that we ascribe to the voice—as one of our most precious possessions, even as a piece of ourselves that we cannot fully be ourselves without. It is also a powerful reminder that, while our voices might be produced by our bodies, they are not self-identical with our bodies; that, in fact, our voices have the capacity to circulate as vibrational bodies in themselves, the potential to act and affect beyond the life we breathe into them. But, more than anything, I think this story is an expression of the messy politics of voice in the age of digital reproducibility. Because, whether we like it or not, the figure of the stolen voice is no longer the stuff of fairytales. It is a very real affordance of our present technological culture, made *imaginable* with the invention of sound reproduction, which first decoupled voice and body in the late nineteenth century; made *achievable* with the novelty of magnetic tape, which rendered the voice spliceable and rewritable in the middle of the twentieth; and made radically *accessible*, today, with the rise of digital audio, which so readily transforms the voice into an object of mass circulation, manipulation, and play. And, ultimately, it was precisely this possibility—and the deep-seated cultural anxiety that surrounds it—that inspired my work on the project I will discuss here.

## II. Project<sup>4</sup>

*Coerced Confessions* is a performance-based video series in which I invent a method of *reverse remix* to digitally "coerce" confessional performances from the bod-

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<sup>4</sup> The three pairs of videos for this project can be viewed at <http://liminalities.net/13-2/coerced.html>

ies of unwitting actors. The videos are produced by, first, rearranging source material from real-life public confessions (letters, political speeches, YouTube videos) into scripted fictional monologues; then, filming actors performing the monologues in live dramatic readings, with no knowledge of the original confession from which they were produced; and, finally, reverse-engineering the resulting performances—word-by-word and syllable-by-syllable—back into the original confessions. What emerges out of this process is a set of two distinct performances: A traditional dramatic performance driven by speakerly intention and a digital rearticulation of that performance driven by technological manipulation. Together, these performances form a two-channel video designed for looped playback on adjacent monitors in an installation environment. This configuration is designed to encourage viewers to experience the two channels both individually and in relation, elucidating the method of their production and ruminating on the startling relationships between word and voice, meaning and material, intention and intonation that their juxtaposition provokes.

The left channel of each video features the actor's voice and body in synchronous audio and visual tracks, manipulated with rapid and precise edits at the level of the word and in many cases the syllable,<sup>5</sup> such that he or she appears to be performing the confessional text. However, because of the radical nature of the editing—with cuts ranging from a few seconds for breaths and pauses, down to only a few frames—the performance appears anything but “natural.” The visual track is framed as a close-up of the actor's face and torso, shot from just below the eyes, seeking to focus the viewer's attention on the movements and expressions of the face—and, in particular, the mouth—while partially (though not completely) obscuring the actor's identity. In combination with the awkward spurts and mumbles of the vocal delivery, the jarring visual effect of the body's twitches and contortions works to exaggerate the disjointed nature of the performance and thus draws attention to the manipulative or “coercive” nature of its production. Finally, deliberately timed breaths and pauses function to steady the pace of the delivery and match the timing of the second video channel, while also contributing to the affective charge and dramatic emphasis of the confessional performance.

Conversely, the right channel of each video features the unedited audio track of the actor's original performance of the fictional monologue, overlaid with a visual track that reflects the form and medium of the confessional source

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<sup>5</sup> The concept for this project (and its radical, word-level editing) was inspired, early on, by examples of experimental video art, such as Omer Fast's *CNN Concatenated* (2002), which compiles discrete words spoken by different CNN newscasters into a cohesive 18-minute “monologue” posing questions about media authenticity, and Lenka Clayton's *Qaeda, Quality, Question, Quickly, Quiet* (2001), which rearranges all of the words in George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address (the “Axis of Evil” speech) into alphabetical order.

material. For example, in the case of a written document, fragments of alphabetic text gradually appear on the screen, one-by-one, as each word is spoken in the fictional monologue, such that, at the end of the performance, they reveal the complete text of the original confession. And in the case of a televised speech, the visual footage of the original confession is manipulated with the same process of precise editing, such that the confessor appears to be mouthing or lip synching—again, in a manifestly unnatural performance—along with the actor’s monologue. When juxtaposed against the left video channel, the audio track in the right channel presents itself as a strikingly fluid performance, drawing attention to the jarring intonation of the “coerced confession,” while creating moments of resonance that reveal their common source in a singular performance. The visual track, for its part, further supports the point of connection between the two channels, dramatizing the process through which the source materials have been remixed.

One of the crucial components of the project was the voluntary but ultimately unwitting participation of the actors involved. In recruiting actors, I opted to inform them of the project’s general aims and methods—namely that I would be appropriating their performances toward alternative ends—while requiring that they remain ignorant of the precise ends toward which their performances will be re-orchestrated until after the filming was complete. They were provided only with the script for their performance of the fictional monologue, made up almost exclusively of the words and syllables found in the original confessional text but radically rearranged to disguise its identity, context, and meaning. In preparation for the filming, I asked that the actors’ performances be guided by the script alone and provided them with no additional coaching on the emotional context or conflict in which their character was embedded. I invited them to select their own wardrobe and to direct their performance based solely on their empathic reading of the character and the situation that the script suggested, and asked only that they speak slowly and enunciate each word to enable greater flexibility in the editing process. In the end, I revealed the final “coerced confession” to the actors, either by providing them with a copy of the original confessional text following the filming or by showing them the video of their “coerced confession” after the editing was complete. This element of mystery—and the surrender of control that it entailed—was an integral part of the work.

The source materials behind each of the three videos in the *Coerced Confessions* series reflect a variety of confessional sub-genres, figures, contexts, and media.<sup>6</sup> In selecting these materials, I sought to create opportunities for experimentation with a wide range of affective states, viewer identifications, and ethi-

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<sup>6</sup> In determining what source texts constitute confessions, this project follows Dave Tell’s broad, reception-based definition of the confession as “any text that has been called a confession” (5), keeping in mind that, as Tell argues, “to call a text a confession or to deny the same is always a political act” (2).

cal stakes, such that each video would offer a vastly different expression or enactment of a common method.

The first video, “Susan” (6:25), is based on Susan Smith’s 1994 letter confessing to drowning her two young children. In this letter, Smith describes in detail both her actions and her emotional state on the day she murdered her sons, situating her behavior as, in part, a desperate response to unrequited love. As the confession of a private citizen thrust into the public eye by the severity of her crime, Smith’s letter resonates with the raw and contradictory emotions—grief and guilt, tenderness and callousness, self-loathing and self-justification—of a young mother struggling to make sense of her own senseless act, perhaps for herself as much as anyone else. At the heart of Smith’s confession is an almost unbearable vulnerability: the physical vulnerability of two sleeping children strapped into the backseat of a car as it rolls into a lake and the emotional vulnerability that drove their mother to push it in.

The second video, “Bill” (5:30), works with President Bill Clinton’s 1998 speech confessing to his affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, immediately following his testimony before the Office of Independent Council and the grand jury. In this live network television broadcast, known as “The Map Room Speech,” Clinton expresses regret and takes responsibility for his actions, while emphasizing the legal accuracy of his previous statements on the matter and calling for an end to the “spectacle” that has surrounded it. As a highly public figure driven by his position (and by the controversial Kenneth Starr investigation) to divulge the details of his private life, Clinton offers a vastly divergent emotional and rhetorical context for the confessional act. Stiff, pragmatic, and coldly defiant, in this speech, he appears less invested in the confession itself than he is in protesting the conditions that called for it. His is a resentful, bureaucratic performance that owns itself as such. Defensiveness—not vulnerability—is its prevailing affect.

The third video, “Chris” (4:15), takes as its source material a 2009 YouTube confession by R&B artist Chris Brown, in which he publicly admits to and apologizes for beating his then-girlfriend, pop star Rihanna. In this video, following a long public silence about the incident, Brown makes an intimate address to his viewers as disappointed fans. Speaking directly into the camera, he implores viewers to “forgive me, please” and expresses hope that others learn from his mistakes. As an artifact of celebrity confession in the age of social media, Brown’s video was originally circulated through his MySpace page and his personal website, but it has since been reproduced and reposted across the Web, accompanied by running commentary from viewers expressing their approval or disdain. In this confession, Brown accepts personal responsibility for his actions, while at the same time framing them within a social context of domestic violence as a learned behavior. Here, the lines between perpetrator and victim become blurred through a narrative of regret and redemption.

### III. Method

Each of these three confessions formed the basis for an alphabetic remix, resulting in the production of an original fictional monologue. In setting the parameters for scripting these monologues, I decided that I would aim to remix the confession such that the resulting text would be comprised exclusively of the words and syllables of the original, and, with few exceptions,<sup>7</sup> I was able to hold myself to this rule. While, in theory, I had complete authorial control over both the order in which the language was rearranged and the extent to which individual words were split and recombined, in practice, I was forced to share my agency in the compositional process with the text itself. Because of my desire to create a rigid one-to-one relationship between the two texts (as well as the added requirement that the resulting remix form a coherent monologue for an imaginable character without giving away the identity or context of the original confessor), the available options for recombination were, in actual fact, highly limited, and the process of arriving at those options became a part of the discovery.

When faced with the task of making a given utterance of several hundred words reinvent itself as a meaningful, but unrecognizable re-composition of *every one* of those words and syllables and, as much as possible, *only* those words and syllables, I found it necessary to first determine a starting point—a hook out of which the remainder of the text could emerge. In other words, the biggest obstacle to the process at the outset was the sense of seemingly endless possibilities for recombination, with no clear idea of where to begin. To address this challenge, I determined that the most difficult words to transfer from one text to another without giving away their origin would be the proper nouns—the names of the people and places involved. It was in this way that “John D. Long” (the name of the lake where Susan Smith drowned her children) became “Dear John”; “Lewinsky” (the surname of Clinton’s former intern) became “in lieu of”; and “Chris” (singer Chris Brown’s first name) became “Christians” when combined with the second syllable of the word “questions.”

In producing the remix, I had to keep in mind that the ultimate destination of these words would be in vocal performance, as opposed to the printed page. In this sense, it was the *sounds* of the words and not their meaning that needed to translate. In some cases, this element of the compositional process afforded increased flexibility—for example, when an instance of the word “there” could

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<sup>7</sup> Beyond a few small modifications of the existing words (e.g. one instance of the two instances of “ramp” in the Susan Smith confession became “tramp” in the remix), the only deliberate departure from this rule was made to compensate for the absence of sufficient pronouns necessary for the grammatically and semantically sound reconstruction of the text. In “Susan,” additional instances of the pronoun “you” were included in the alphabetic remix; in “Bill,” there were additional instances of “your”; and, in “Chris,” there were additional instances of “they.”

become “their” or “they’re” at will. In other cases, however, it presented a challenge, wherein unanticipated variations in pronunciation could easily thwart decontextualized reuses of the linguistic material—for example, an instance of the word “live,” as in “the concert was live” could not stand in for the word “live,” as in “I live there.” Thus, in setting out to produce a textual remix for vocal re-performance, I was forced to encounter language as a fundamentally material phenomenon, to recognize the bias inherent to my primarily visualist approach to language-as-text, and to imagine its multiple possibilities as voice and sound. Because my method for managing the remix process—which involved online text analysis tools, custom spreadsheets, and a lot of patience—was, by necessity, based in visual representations of language, I sometimes learned the hard way how easy it was to forget the specificity of language-as-sound.

Ultimately, after days of trial-and-error experimentation and meticulous play, what emerged out of this process of recomposition was a set of three distinct utterances: Susan Smith’s confession to drowning her children became a bitter if nostalgic “Dear John” letter reflecting on the end of a relationship with a former lover (“Susan”); Bill Clinton’s recalcitrant public address on his relationship with a White House intern became a smugly resentful legal notice from an insurance executive denying someone’s claim (“Bill”); and Chris Brown’s pleading apology for the violent physical assault on his celebrity girlfriend became a frustrated minister’s prayer for the ability to forgive those who perpetrate domestic abuse (“Chris”). While the content of these fictional monologues departs markedly from the original confessions (which is, of course, the objective of the remix process), in the end, each of these utterances is situated in a recognizable genre of everyday speech that somehow seems to evoke the emotions and intentions driving the original piece. In other words, despite the fact that the intonation of individual words and phrases is noticeably aberrant, there is an extent to which the underlying affect of the original confession is translated from (con)text to (con)text, genre to genre, performance to performance.

#### IV. Concept

The initial concept for the *Coerced Confessions* series emerged out of my fascination with media artist and theorist Norie Neumark’s work on digital voice and performativity. Neumark’s work speaks back to a fundamental paradox of digital voice recordings: namely the relationship between the heightened “fidelity” (or perceived “authenticity”) of the voice, on one hand, and its heightened “flexibility” (or “manipulability”) on the other (95). As Neumark points out, at the same time as digital audio affords higher sound quality, suggesting a more faithful representation of the “authentic” voice of the speaker, it also enables a radical departure from the identity and intentionality of that speaker through the affordances of digital editing. In other words, the more we, as listeners, experience

a recorded voice as “sounding like” the person who spoke it, the less it must actually conform to the constraints of the speaker’s intentionality and agency. Taking this paradox as my point of departure, in the *Coerced Confessions* videos, I experiment with this performative potential, playing with digital voice at the limits of its material manipulability and using the practice as a means to think through its implications.

At the same time, unlike some early examples of vocal remix—for instance, William S. Burroughs’s tape recorder experiments and magnetic tape cut-ups of the late-1950s to late-1970s<sup>8</sup>—this project is concerned not only with voice, but also with language. As I have noted, in scripting the videos, I was committed to remixing the confessional source text not simply into intelligible words and sentences, but also into a believable monologue for an imaginable character that might be enacted and performed. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, you might say that what I was aiming for in the alphabetic remix process was the production of a “concrete utterance” (“Speech Genres” 63) structured by a recognizable “speech genre” (72)—in this case, a Dear John letter, a formal business address, and a prayer of petition—as opposed to simply a string of linguistically or grammatically sound sentences. As Bakhtin argues, “[t]he sentence as a unit of language, like the word, has no author. Like the word, it belongs to nobody, and only by functioning as a whole utterance does it become an expression of the position of someone speaking individually in a concrete situation of speech communication” (83-84). What the utterance provides, then, is a socially imaginable configuration of speaker, listener, and topic or “hero,” which forms the basis for the actor’s dramatic interpretation. Because, as Bakhtin puts it, “[e]xpressive intonation is a constitutive marker of the utterance” (85), each of the resulting scripts necessarily suggests an overall tone. What is interesting—and perplexing—is the fact that this tone, while produced in the context of one speech genre in the fictional monologue, appears so appropriate to the vastly divergent genre of the correlating “coerced confession” when it is transferred to this new context in the remix.

Going one step further, we might also consider how tone functions at the level of individual words and syllables. Central to Bakhtin’s work is an emphasis on the fundamentally appropriative nature of language as it is actually used, such that, “[t]he word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive inten-

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<sup>8</sup> Building upon and extending the print-based “cut-up” method that he took from poet Brion Gysin, Burroughs’s experiments with magnetic tape included, on one hand, techniques of layered or interrupted recording, which used the tape recorder to overdub new sounds over existing voice recordings at random intervals, and, on the other hand, literal “cut-ups,” which employed the systematic slicing and reassembling of a strip of magnetic tape (Hayles 90).

tion" ("Discourse" 293). In many ways, the *Coerced Confessions* project—as an appropriation of another person's recorded voice for alternative intentions and ends—stands as an ethically charged dramatization of the same kind of appropriation, which Bakhtin suggests happens as a matter of course in everyday communication contexts. There is, however, one key difference: Unlike the appropriative "revoicing" that occurs in everyday speech—which necessarily implies a shift in the "expressive intonation" (85)—in the context of the *digital* appropriation that I am carrying out here, the precise intonation of every word and syllable remains stubbornly intact as it is trafficked from one context to another. In this sense, despite the radical manipulability of digital voice that Neumark points to, there is an extent to which "the unsaid" always speaks itself beyond our control. In this sense, what we see and hear in the confessional remix is the disjunction of a voice acting beyond its allegiance to the rational speaking subject, but at the same time in full allegiance to speech itself. Consequently, we might argue that what is being dramatized in this project is simultaneously the material vulnerability of voice to the digital "coercion" we have been promised and its fundamentally social, intonational resistance.<sup>9</sup>

This surrender to intonational disruption is one of the key elements that sets the *Coerced Confessions* project apart from many prominent works of vocal remix—for example, Douglas Kahn's 1980 experimental audio collage, "Reagan Speaks for Himself." Working with the reel-to-reel audio from a Bill Moyers interview with Ronald Reagan when he was a candidate for president, Kahn used a razor blade to slice up and rearrange Reagan's voice into an entirely new utterance composed entirely of words and phrases from the interview. As a work of "media ventriloquism" (Nelson), the resulting audio presents Reagan's voice stuttering out a series of awkward and absurd proclamations, punctuated by a flood of nonverbal utterances—uhhs and oohs and guffaws—which become more pronounced in their repetition. Opening with: "For the first time in Man's history, I uhhhh, I'm president!"<sup>10</sup> (Kahn), the piece goes on to feature humorous musings about "cans of poisoned meat" and a taskforce that works to break men's arms—and "the backbone of America"—over a car window. While these

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<sup>9</sup> In his book *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith suggests that "emphasizing [language's] materiality disrupts normative flows of communication" (35). I would suggest that this project demonstrates that the reverse is perhaps equally true: That precisely by performing a disruption in our "normative flows of communication"—in this case, through the intonational dissonance produced by the *reverse remix* process—we might also emphasize the materiality of language.

<sup>10</sup> The first version of the piece, which was released before Reagan won the presidency, opened with the phrase, "I want to say I'm President. I want to live in the White House!" The opening was revised in a second version of the piece, which was released after the election (Nelson).

statements were, of course, never actually made by the former President, at least not in the contexts and configurations in which they appear, in Kahn's remix, they sound as if they feasibly *could have been*. The success of this piece might rest upon the particularities of Reagan's speaking style, which, as Brian Massumi points out, brings together the highly recognizable and affectively charged "timbre of his voice, that beautiful vibratory voice" (41) with a general tendency toward "verbal fumbling," "incoherence," (40) and "discontinuities" (41). In this sense, a certain degree of verbal and tonal disjunction might actually *add* to the illusion that Reagan is, in fact, "Speak[ing] for Himself"—which is, of course, the punchline at the heart of the piece.

In a similar vein, Dan Warren's 2011 vocal remix *Son of Strelka, Son of God* goes even further to create the illusion of natural speech—in this case, taking the audiobook version of President Barack Obama's memoir *Dreams From My Father* and reworking it into an epic, 32-minute "audio fable" (Weigel). The story opens with Obama's smooth, measured voice, ruminating on a creation story: "I'm left mostly with images that appear and die off in my mind like distant sounds. Sacred stories. Stories of genesis and the tree where man was born. Starting with my father..." (Warren). In the nine chapters that follow, Obama's voice—acting as "Stanley," the dog-like son of a human woman and a "demigod [...] born from a fruit tree"—goes on to narrate a mythical journey through "armies of singing children" and "apocalypses of falling buildings and burnings skies" (Weigel). Against a richly layered soundtrack of music and effects, he describes encounters with such mythical beings as "the tortoise of Hindu legend that floated in space" and "the great bronze Buddha at Kamakura,"<sup>11</sup> which, when extracted from their original context in storybooks and vacations in Japan, become sentient, speaking creatures that provide philosophical and spiritual guidance for Stanley on his journey.<sup>12</sup> But while the content of *Son of Strelka* may be fantastical and absurd, the delivery is just as fluid and rhythmic and unbroken as even the most well rehearsed presidential address. Even more than in Kahn's work with Reagan, we hear the illusion of Obama—apparently but at the same time obviously not—"speaking for himself" through an imaginable (if ultimately unbelievable) illusion of conscious, willing speech.

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<sup>11</sup> Whereas, in Obama's memoir, the trip to see the "great bronze Buddha" was followed by green tea ice cream and a ferry ride, in *Son of Strelka*, the story proceeds very differently: "He was very gracious. He wore a blue, double-breasted suit and a large gold cross against his scarlet tie..."

<sup>12</sup> In describing his process to *Slate Magazine*, Warren locates the inspiration for the project in the language of Obama's memoir: "Obama had this habit of doing very grandiose, epic language, for day-to-day struggles or minor things that happened in his childhood [...] And I realized: This is the language of an epic story, even though it's not an epic story. There really is enough of that language to tell another story altogether" (Weigel).

Like Kahn and Warren, in the *Coerced Confessions* project I was interested in capitalizing upon the manipulability of recorded audio in order to appropriate the voices of others and to make them speak in ways that disrupt their original intentions. However, as I've pointed out, both Kahn and Warren (and particularly Warren) appear to be invested in disguising—to whatever extent possible given the materials at hand—their intervention in the vocal recordings that form the material basis for their work. Taking as their starting point the sound and rhythm and intonation of the voice, these artists work to disassemble and recombine linguistic fragments of that recording in such a way as to mimic (if also exaggerate) the speaking style of each president. Conversely, in the *Coerced Confessions* project, you might say that I start not from the sound of the voice but from an act of speech. Driven by the requirement that I construct a precise, pre-defined configuration of words, as determined by the confessional source text, my editing process functions to force the vocal materials into that configuration, regardless of their intonational realism—and, as I have noted, with jarring and disruptive results. In some ways, then, the “reverse remix” method might be considered less a technique of *vocal* remix than it is a technique of *linguistic* remix, wherein the voice simply performs its material excess—what Mladen Dolar calls “an excess of sounds over sense” (146)—as a consequence or a corollary, playing out beyond my control.

In *Background Noise*, sound artist and scholar Brandon LaBelle makes a useful distinction between works that “[use] the voice in performance, as in traditional theater or spoken-word poetry” and works that actually “perform the voice” (134). While we might say that the former *delivers* language *in* voice, the latter, in LaBelle's words, “plunders language to reinvent the voice” (134). I find this notion of “performing the voice” to be a productive framework for articulating the larger aims behind my experiment in the *Coerced Confessions* series. Indeed, one of the key objectives behind the method I developed is to make a space for voice to perform *itself*, both its excessive relationship to language and its malleable potential as a digital material. At the same time, it is also the case that this project could not “perform the voice” without also “using the voice in performance”; in other words, in the method I have developed, the two are deeply intertwined. Unlike traditional works of vocal remix, which take as their materials existing vocal recordings already circulating in the public sphere, in the *Coerced Confessions* project, I chose to create the materials that I would later remix, by recruiting actors to perform scripted monologues. Because these monologues are alphabetic remixes of real-life confessional texts—texts, which I then work to re-enact through the “coercive” capacities of digital editing—there is a way in which the method simply requires this element of performance in order to function. At the same time, there is nothing intrinsic to the method that requires the original performance to survive the remix process and to sit next to

the so-called “coerced confession” in the final installation. So how, then, do we understand the role that it plays?

Here, I find it useful to turn to philosopher Don Ihde’s discussion of “dramaturgical voice”—the heightened voice of drama, ritual, and recited poetry. As Ihde argues, dramaturgical voice is distinctive to that extent that it “amplifies the musical ‘effect’ of speech” (167). In other words, in contrast to everyday conversation, which “gives way to a trivial transparency that hides its sounded significance,” the voice of dramatic performance draws a certain degree of attention to itself *as* voice, while at the same time refusing to lose itself in the pure “enchantment” of song (167). If we understand the role of the dramatic monologues in the *Coerced Confessions* project under this framework, then we might argue that the dramaturgical character of the actors’ voices gives extra emphasis, or heightened accentuation, to the language being delivered—crucially, an accentuation which cannot help but “stick” to the words and syllables as they are trafficked into a new context in the confessional remix. In this sense, the use of dramaturgical voice might only add to the jarring sense of dissonance in the “coerced confession” by exaggerating the intonational variation of the utterance.

What is distinctive about the performances that I have orchestrated in the *Coerced Confessions* project is the extent to which they require the speaker to imagine, empathize with, and inhabit the experience—and perhaps the “voice”—of another. Furthermore, the voices I am appropriating are those of actors speaking not simply as others, but as *imagined* others, whose characters emerge out of the utterance produced in the alphabetic remix process. As Ihde describes it, the actor’s voice, as a unique subcategory of dramaturgical voice, posits a dialectical relationship between self and other, wherein “[t]he actor speaks in a role, and the voice he speaks may in some sense be the voice of another” (171).<sup>15</sup> If we follow Ihde, it could be argued that the ethical stakes of the vocal appropriation I am practicing might be dampened by this turn toward drama, toward fiction, toward the other—and thus a muddying of the dilemma around vocal ownership. (In other words: Whose voice is it to steal?) At the same time, however, Ihde reminds us that “[t]he actor’s voice does not obliterate the self.” Instead, he argues, “There is a style to his voice which remains his own even while the other emerges into the foreground” (171). This notion of voice as a flexible multiplicity goes great lengths to unsettle the very basis for the ethical claim to vocal owner-

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<sup>15</sup> Spalding Gray, of the experimental theater company The Wooster Group, suggests that, in the end, “everyone is playing themselves” (Savran 63). Rather than look outside themselves for a sense of how to portray “those crazy characters,” Gray suggests that “they simply look in, or they don’t look in and they just do it. It’s just an intuitive thing—this is the right voice, this is what comes—like a child playing. It’s no different from a child playing” (63). This understanding of the relationship between acting and identity goes even further to support the notion that it is, in fact, the voice of the actor—both physical and metaphorical—that I am appropriating in the *Confessions* project.

ship in the first place, suggesting that, in fact, the “authentic” or singular voice of metaphysics is always already a myth.

This sense of connection and continuity between the voice-as-material and the actor-as-person may be only further reinforced by the physical, visible presence of the actor’s body on the screen. Ultimately, the decision to record and edit these performances as audio-visual works (as opposed to audio-only) was by no means an arbitrary one—and neither was the decision to frame the shot of the actor’s body just below the eyes, serving to emphasize the movements of the speaking mouth.<sup>14</sup> In his article, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism,” film sound theorist Rick Altman argues for the central role played by the visible body—and, more specifically, the synchronously moving mouth—in “divert[ing] attention from the sound’s true source” in the theater’s loudspeaker and locating it, instead, in the world of the film’s diegesis (75). As both Altman and fellow film theorist Michel Chion have argued, sounds, by their very nature, urge people to actively seek out their source. It is because of this that we are more than happy to suspend disbelief and imagine that the sound is coming from the person (in actual fact, a rapid succession of light-as-images) who appears to be producing it.<sup>15</sup> While we tend to imagine audio-only voice recordings as stand-ins for the whole body (and thus being) of the person behind the voice, Chion suggests that “[r]eal embodiment comes only with the simultaneous presentation of the visible body with the audible voice, a way for the body to swear ‘this is my voice’ and for the voice to swear ‘this is my body’” (144).

This evidentiary function of the visible body is particularly relevant in the context of the confessional genre. In “Videotaped Confessions and the Genre of Documentary,” Jessica M. Silbey discusses a trend in the American criminal justice system to require the filming of custodial interrogations—a phenomenon grounded in “the belief that filmed confessions uncontroversially demonstrate the circumstances of the confession and therefore the truth of the guilt or innocence of the accused” (791). Tying this trend to a parallel rise in the popularity

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett’s dramatic monologue *Not I* (1972) stands as a notable precursor to my visual emphasis on the mouth. Beckett’s monologue is staged in a darkened theater, with the actress’s body entirely obscured save a spotlight illuminating her mouth as she enacts what Herbert Blau describes as a “tormented susurrus or superfetation of words, that ‘sudden urge...to tell,’ get it all out, if not a confessional, ‘nearest lavatory...start pouring it out...steady stream...mad stuff...half the vowels wrong...no one could follow’ (*Not I* 222)” (187). The connection between the bubbling “urge” to confess and the mouth-as-threshold between inside and outside, private and public, presents a provocative point of entry to consider the role of the visual in this project.

<sup>15</sup> As Chion explains it, while we can’t see the deeper, more visceral mechanisms of vocal production, which take place between lungs and larynx, “[w]e take this temporal coincidence of words and lips as a sort of guarantee that we’re in the real world, where hearing a sound usually coincides with seeing its source” (129).

of documentary film, Silbey suggests that this evidentiary approach to the filmed confession is based on “a basic heuristic of the relationship between knowing and seeing” (797). In this sense, we might consider how my project speaks back to these broader social questions around the truth-value of the visible, speaking body by creating the illusion that it is, in fact, a *person*—as opposed to simply a voice—that is being “coerced” to speak beyond their conscious intention and control.

At the same time, if it is true, as Altman argues, that “pointing the camera at the speaker [...] dissembl[es] the work of production and technology” (69), then what happens when we then radically fragment and re-edit the footage of that speaker’s body, as I have done here? It seems reasonable to suggest that the reverse might be true—that, in fact, by presenting to the viewer the jerking, contorted body of an impossible speaker in this project, I am ultimately exposing, even *flaunting* “the work of production and technology,” which brought it into being. Whereas audio-only works of vocal remix are able to accomplish a certain illusion of realism precisely because of the body’s visible absence from the scene, in contrast, the *Coerced Confessions* videos—*as* videos—present an illusion that announces itself as such. In other words, far from committing an act of trickery, what I am seeking to accomplish here is precisely the opposite: Namely, to draw attention to the very real potential for the sounds that we imagine to be “our voices”—when recorded and transduced into digital data—to speak beyond us, in spite of us, and against our conscious intentions.

But then the question arises: *Who—or what—is it that is being coerced?* By drawing attention to the technological artifice behind the so-called “coerced confession,” this project is working to complicate our preconceived notions of vocal authenticity,<sup>16</sup> to dramatize the radical manipulability of voice as a digital material, and, ultimately, to reimagine the ethics of this manipulation itself, framing it not simply as a destructive means of deception or “coercion,” but also as a constructive means of performance and invention. Norie Neumark has proposed that we might productively approach digital vocality as something that, while perhaps evocative of a certain feeling of personhood and presence, is ultimately capable of operating independently from the body and intentionality of the speaker that produced it, as a relational, vibrational performance of “intimacy and intensity” that we, as listeners, can’t help but feel (95). Following from this notion of voice’s “authenticity effect” (95), perhaps we might consider my work here as an effort to imagine the implications of this conceptual move, to make a space for voice to be taken up not only as an embodied means of live perfor-

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the confession itself, as a highly-charged speech genre, is also inextricably intertwined with the cultural politics of authenticity in much the same way as the human voice. As Dave Tell argues, “the simple act of labeling a text as a confession can either endow a text with an aura of authenticity or divest a text of authenticity” (13).

mance but also as an independently vibrational medium or material that in some sense performs itself.

Central to this shift is an effort to complicate commonplace understandings of performance. As Neumark points out, “Theoretical approaches to performativity have focused not on voice but more on the spoken word and its effects: they have thought about how to do things with words” (96).<sup>17</sup> Here, Neumark is implicitly mobilizing J. L. Austin’s speech act theory<sup>18</sup>—in particular, his notion of “the performative,” in which an act of speaking is also already an act of *doing*. Taken up under this framework, the confession, as an everyday speech genre, emerges as a prime example of Austin’s “performative”—and, indeed, it is perhaps for this reason that the “coerced confession” strikes us as such a frightening possibility.<sup>19</sup> After all, to coerce a confession is to force a person not simply to speak words, but to actually commit an *act* against their will. That being said, what I am seeking to emphasize through this project is precisely the distance between the *actual* coerced confession, which involves the psychological manipulation of a rational speaking subject, and the *performative* “coerced confession” that I am practicing in these videos, which involves only the manipulation of the digital recording. By disrupting the easy relationship between voice and the body, on one hand, and voice and subjectivity, on the other, the *Coerced Confessions* project points to the complexity of performance in the digital age.

## V: Openings

When I first developed the concept for the *Coerced Confessions* series, I imagined my work as a kind of performative enactment of the dangers of digital deception—a playful acting-out of our deepest fears that our voices might, once committed to media, be made to speak against our will in troubling and terrifying ways. (Think back the *Little Mermaid* allegory.) In screening these videos for outside audiences, I have often been asked to discuss what I had hoped to accomplish with the project, and I have never come up with a satisfying response. In the end, I always come back to the idea that I simply wanted to see (and

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<sup>17</sup> Reflecting upon this oversight in her article “Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity,” Annette Schlichter argues that, in fact, “[s]peech act theory used within a discourse that theorizes matter seems to demand attention to forms of vocalization” (41).

<sup>18</sup> Austin’s seminal work on the topic is titled, not incidentally, *How To Do Things With Words*.

<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, more so than many other genres of everyday speech, the confession evokes expectations of “authenticity,” for a deeply felt expression of responsibility—and thus agency—wherein the voice moves from interior to exterior as a making-public of the often painfully personal. In this sense, it offers the project heightened ethical stakes, which provide the conceptual provocation of the project.

hear) *what would happen if?* And, in many ways, what actually “happened” when I carried out this experiment was exactly what I had expected: I succeeded in “coercing” a false confession from the body of an unwitting actor using only the tools of digital editing and a bit of ingenuity. But if all I set out to do was to demonstrate or enact something we all already know—namely, that digital voice is a highly manipulable material—then why undertake an experiment like this in the first place? What can such an experiment accomplish but to confirm our fears or reinforce our suspicions, both of technology and of one another?

I pose these questions, at least in part, in the spirit of the devil’s advocate. As I have noted, I believe this project has the potential to spark promising conversation around the act of interfering with the voices of others. Notably, while the videos certainly perform the material manipulability of digital voice, they also perform the fundamentally social *limits* of this potential—the extent to which, in its allegiance to language, the intonation (and thus intention<sup>20</sup>) of the voice always *speaks itself* beyond our aspirations for control. And, to this same end, my decision to draw on the politically charged, ethically loaded speech genre of the “coerced confession” was part of a calculated effort to incite in the audience a knee-jerk response of moral outrage—a response which might then become complicated or even assuaged by reflection on the ethical distance between an *actual* coerced confession and the playful (if problematic) approximation that I have carried out in this project. However, I am also interested in considering how this work might encourage forms of engagement that move beyond the analytical *a-ha!* moment of solving the puzzle behind the videos’ construction—and beyond the equally cerebral reflection on the ethics of editing, which I expect to follow. Indeed, if we imagine this project’s effects in more immediate, visceral terms, we might consider its potential to disrupt not only the way we *think* about the voice as an abstract concept, but also the way we inhabit our relationship to the voices of others and the voices we have come to call “our own.”

For the actors participating in the project, the experience of watching these videos—of witnessing themselves “confess” against their will to these infamous crimes and indiscretions—was a profoundly uncanny one. In informal comments following their initial exposure to the videos, the actors expressed a wide array of emotions, ranging from amusement to awe to alarm (often in the same sentence)<sup>21</sup>—but always with an undercurrent of surprise. Despite being informed

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<sup>20</sup> For Bakhtin, intonation is expressive of speakerly intention. As his collaborator, Valentin Volosinov has suggested, intonation expresses a “*double social orientation*” toward both the listener and the topic or “hero” at hand, suggesting the speaker’s original attitudes and intentions in ways that stretch beyond the language itself (105).

<sup>21</sup> For example, actor Ken Bolden, who unwittingly reenacted Bill Clinton’s Monica Lewinsky confession in the “Map Room Speech,” wrote in an informal email responding to his initial viewing, “This is totally cool, disturbing and scary!! [...] Amazing. Love it. The ramifications are really mind boggling.”

of the project's methods and intentions prior to their participation (they knew everything except the precise confession they would be "coerced" to perform), it is noteworthy that the actors still expressed a certain degree of shock at seeing their "coerced confession" unfold in front of them. On one hand, we might read this surprise as a rational, critical response to the project's conceptual intervention: a realization of just how readily their voices could open themselves to such radical forms of appropriation, manipulation, and reanimation—and not simply in theory, but in practice. On the other hand, this surprise might be rooted in something more immediate: the jarring perceptual experience of witnessing one's voice and one's body sounding and moving and acting in ways that are fundamentally foreign—not simply at the level of language, but at a more visceral level of gesture, tone, and inflection.

As the artist behind the *Coerced Confessions* project, I obviously had a very different point of entry to the project, one that left me feeling, at times, not unlike a puppetmaster pulling the strings behind the scenes. Notably, unlike the actors, I had full access to all of the inside information that made the project tick, including detailed knowledge of the source texts from which the scripts had been composed and into which the recorded performances would be reverse engineered—knowledge which was deliberately withheld from the actors themselves until after the editing was completed. Furthermore, I also had the added benefit of first-hand, experiential access to the apparent "magic" behind project's method—which is, of course, not magic at all, but simply a meticulous process of scripting, editing, and rearrangement. Given this position, then, it would be reasonable to assume that my response to the videos might be significantly more distant and measured. However, as I began to watch the "confessions" emerge from the actors' bodies in the editing process, I can remember feeling a similar sense of shock wash over me. And it wasn't the simple fact that my plan had worked that shocked me; the method was so tight that there was no reason to believe that it shouldn't. Instead, it was something in my embodied encounter with the jarring, disjointed, sputtering voice-bodies produced by this method, which affected me the most.

As I have noted, the radical nature of the "reverse remix" method that I invented for this project produces a disruptive digital performance of *a voice performing itself*<sup>22</sup>—not simply beyond its individual speakers' intentions, but beyond our deeply habituated sensory conventions of intentional speech. It is incredibly difficult, in everyday speech contexts, to attune oneself to the sound of a voice without hearing first and foremost the language that it carries. As Don Ihde explains it, "In ordinary speech the sounding of words remains in the background

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<sup>22</sup> Again, I am implicitly mobilizing Brandon LaBelle's distinction between works, which "perform the voice"—"plunder[ing] language to reinvent the voice"—versus those that simply "[use] the voice in performance, as in traditional theater or spoken-word poetry" (134).

[...] as the context and setting in which *what is said* emerges as foreground” (157). This is not to say that we are still somehow being *affected* by the sound of that voice—as Brian Massumi puts it, “the skin is faster than the word” (86). However, I wonder if we might not be so well trained to listen to the voice as rational communication, that we may need to find ways of disrupting this “natural” flow of communication (which is, of course, anything but natural) through such disorienting aesthetic experiences, in order to begin to reattune ourselves to the voice’s vibratory effects, enabling us to begin to *hear ourselves hearing or feel ourselves listening* to the voices of others in ways that we might not otherwise have access.

At the same time, the project also works to muddy these very boundaries between self and other by disrupting the customary relationships between voice, body, and intentional speech. Returning to the question *Who—or what—is it that is being coerced?*, we might just as easily ask *Who—or what—is it that is acting or performing?* In traditional theatrical works, we might tend to imagine a vocal performance as the work of an individual actor, who owns, trains, produces, and controls the voice that is emitted by their body. In this project, however, what we experience is something quite different: a multilayered, distributed performance, which draws together the capacities of the actors, the artist/editor, the technology, and the voice itself, into a complex material assemblage; a performance, which cannot be broken down and attributed to the agency of individual “actors,” in any sense of the term; a performance, perhaps, which enacts the material relationality of voice, as it actually functions in our contemporary technoculture.

Thus, one of the key interventions of this work might be found in its call to rethink the potential agents of performance. While J. L. Austin is adamant that “[a]ctions can only be performed by persons, and obviously in our cases the utterer must be the performer” (60), the *Coerced Confessions* project challenges this assumption, moving away from frameworks of human exceptionalism and imagining the performative agency of digital voice. Rather than hearing in the manipulated performance of the “coerced confession” simply the performance of “some pre-given essential body”—or, for that matter, identity—of the actor involved in the original monologue, this project invites us to listen for a new form of embodiment altogether: “an embodiment that the voice brings forth in the making” (Neumark 114). In this sense, rather than approaching digital voice as neatly “disembodied,” making a hard-and-fast distinction between the human body and the technology that mediates its vibration, this move to imagine digital voice as a performative agent in itself suggests the possibility for an alternative, emergent form of embodiment that takes place in the space where the human and nonhuman intertwine.

This possibility lies at the core of art historian Anna Munster’s work in *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*. Here, Munster argues

that our current configurations of new media technologies—with their binary divisions of mind vs. body and natural vs. artificial—do not exhaust the full potentialities of digital media. She suggests that we should consider, instead, the possibilities for alternative, hybrid forms of “digital embodiment,” wherein human bodies and technical materialities interact in mutually constitutive ways. As Munster explains it:

Digital embodiment entails the capacity for us to conceive of and experience bodies as something other than inert, weighty masses distended in space and out of sync with the absolute speed of an unremitting technological tempo. Digital bodies engage incorporeally with the informatic universe precisely because digital machines can replicate, amplify and split us from the immediacy of our sensory capacities (18).

By distancing us from the “immediacy” of the voice as a direct route to human agency, perhaps the disruptive performance of the *Coerced Confessions* project might give us a point of entry into this so-called “digital embodiment” at the level of sensory experience.

Imagined slightly differently, however, it is also reasonable to suggest that what we are hearing here, in the performativity of digital voice, is not, in fact, an “embodiment” at all, but rather, something closer to what media artist Frances Dyson refers to as “resonance”—a framework which privileges neither the body nor technology as the anchor for our experience of audio and new media phenomena, but instead situates them in a groundless “atmosphere” (179). For Dyson:

[T]he atmospheric suggests a relationship not only with the body in its immediate space but with a permeable body integrated within, and subject to, a global system: one that combines the air we breathe, the weather we feel, the pulses and waves of the electromagnetic spectrum that subtends and enables technologies, old and new, and circulates [...] in the excitable tissues of the heart (16).

Thus, rather than persist in our binary thinking, which places the body on one end of the spectrum and technology on the other, we might imagine a more porous, “permeable” sense of what it is to be human, taking seriously the interpenetration between human bodies and other materialities—including digital technologies—as a necessary condition of performance. Regardless of what we decide to call this liminal space, and whether or not we insist on departing from the body entirely, the implications are notable. Rather than approach media technologies in instrumental terms, as simply the latest “tools” we can use to carry out our creative visions, this project suggests how artists might forge new relationships with our media and materials, even going so far as to imagine them as mutual participants in our practice.

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