

“We do not understand the weather. That astonishes me.” Gertrude Stein.

1.

For me, writing an essay in a book concerned with ‘Aural Diversity’ requires writing about my hearing. In this regard I’d like to begin with an apology, particularly to those who live with tinnitus, as I’ll be mentioning it throughout. This last year I’ve been undergoing research as part of a funded AHRC project, with Dr. Marie Thompson, concerned with ‘Tinnitus, Auditory Knowledge and the Arts’¹, and as such, when I need to write the word tinnitus, I have started to replace it with the symbol of a wave (~~)², representing what I tentatively call ‘wave signification’. This is concerned with phenomena, such as tinnitus, that once you hear and/or think about them, seem to shift in perception, whether in terms of signification, location, volume, intensity, or otherwise...

¹ <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/tinnitus/> - ongoing access.

² This is an attempt to acknowledge the different experiences and definitions of tinnitus, incorporating them into the life of this essay in a way that is neither loud nor quiet. It’s my hope that the nature of this symbol, as a mode of unsaying or even pointing, will be beneficial to readers as they attempt to navigate the vagaries of tinnitus in ways particular to them. I’m not saying that replacing the term with the symbol is a guarantee of avoiding aggravation, but it is nevertheless an attempt at an ethics, a linguistic equivalent we might say, of thinking about alternatives before using a sinetone to audibly represent tinnitus.

My experience of ~ rarely understands or keeps to boundaries, and as such, this essay takes place in-between fields and subjects, concerning itself with the scholar Lisa Blackman's call for the humanities to take the sciences more seriously, and of course for a reciprocal response. Separate subjects are seen as, to quote Blackman, "critical friends"³, rather than opponents or antagonistic partners.

It follows that this essay is also concerned with the difficulty of directly and indirectly writing and communicating the diversity of ~ experience. Where possible, ~ will 'write' for itself, acting as its own duration, a method of co-existence often made apparent by its referential absence. I will attempt to enfold these positions by drawing on my own experiences of living with ~⁴ and by following Blackman's call, emphasising the "complex, processual, indeterminate, contingent, non-linear, relation nature of phenomena constantly open to effects from contiguous processes."⁵

³ Blackman, L. *Haunted Data, Affect, Transmedia, Weird Science*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pg. xvii.

⁴ I hope the reader will forgive my insistently writing about myself in this regard. As difficult as I find doing so, it is preferable to generalising about ~, an experience so diverse that to try and claim it 'is' something is to do the people who live with it a great disservice. Writing about my own experiences at the same time enables me to be a little more specific about the ways in which ~ can transversally dissolve into a singular experience before resuming its nebulous diversity. Personal experience in this sense is not synonymous with uniqueness. Shared experience radiates spectrally from the personal in having to constantly relearn and react to the multiplicitous facets and churning contingencies of ~.

⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. xviii.

I draw on my own experiences of ~~, in the wake of its highly individual and fluctuating nature, to avoid treating it as an object and to foster a dynamic space of empathy and interdependence. This has led me to realise that I can't write about ~ without writing about other hearing 'conditions' of mine; about my 'deaf' right ear that is nevertheless possessed of as much sound as my left (which I've been told by various audiologists is in 'perfect working order'), about autophony and superior semicircular canal dehiscence.

These mixed up natures become particularly apparent when I have written about walking. ~ can make ordering my thoughts while writing so difficult that walking often serves as something of an antidote, allowing me, among other things, to dictate thoughts into my phone. However, as with so many antidotes there is often an obverse, as both autophony and superior semicircular canal dehiscence can make walking as difficult as ~ makes writing. Walking, then, is a practice in unto itself that in this essay I write about primarily in relation to ~ and the above mentioned hearing 'conditions', but also Gertrude Stein and Leo Solomons' experiments with automatic writing, what scholar Barbara Will has called Stein's "attentive inattentiveness"⁶, and the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of 'disturbance based ecologies'⁷.

⁶ Will, B. *Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing and the Mechanics of Genius*. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 1 April 2001. Pg. 173.

⁷ Tsing, A.L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Pg. 5.

Gertrude Stein and Leo Solomons' experiments with automatic writing were in part an attempt to abstract states of reflection from what Stein called "the sound-hum of the human motor"⁸, and such an approach has helped me to think about the both implications of ~ bereft of association, and the phenomenological ways in which this might be possible. Thinking with Stein's theory of the human motor and the subsequent practise of attentive inattentiveness, I have also considered if thinking with ~ as a model might in turn be beneficial for its communication. Ultimately I believe it is. ~ is that which requires clarity and specificity of expression, but also, in its potential to block and obfuscate, can create a semblance of communicative possibility among the difficulties. ~ teaches me about both the permeable and specious natures of separation through the heightened sense of isolation that is so common among those who live with ~.

It is this line, specious and otherwise, that I think with through the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, a line that, like the wave symbol, quavers unpredictably between states, between what Tsing classifies as "harmony and conflict"⁹, never fully settling on either side for long, or indeed, not recognising them as polar and unreconcilable opposites. Tsing's disturbance based ecology is a model upon which I base my relationship with ~, interpreting the notion of disturbance in relation to ~ as a method of communicative collaboration, full of potential contradictions.

⁸ Will, B. *Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing and the Mechanics of Genius*. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 1 April 2001. Pg. 170.

⁹ Tsing, A.L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Pg. 5.

2.

I consider \sim to be akin to both a rock in the bed of a river and the river itself, a phenomenon, for example, in which matter and meaning both interpenetrate and live apart. Trying to ‘learn’ from \sim necessitates a cultivation of models that can help me think about it in ways that trying to simply ignore it cannot. In this light I have adopted what quantum physicist David Bohm imagines as the “transitory subsistence of a flowing stream”¹⁰, the ever fluctuating states of matter whose substance is never quite the same. Thinking with Bohm, I imagine that such a body of water subsists among ever-changing cymatic patterns, vortices, ripples and waves, which have no independent existence as such, abstracted as they are from the rising and falling of the flow.

In my reading of Bohm the noise of a river is largely dependent on the material and consistency of its bed, and this helps me think about \sim as that which overflows from self and environment, as both the separation and confluence of a river and its vibrating rocks, where what ‘is’ is the process of becoming itself, a kind of ‘non-Newtonian’ nature, which is to say, a ‘flow’ that both quavers and solidifies under pressure. Such inevitability, as if \sim were in multiplicitous dimensions that can only be avoided for so long before having to go through and in them, rings true to a corollary that for many, myself included, is comparable to its coming and going, its rising and falling. Even if \sim is constant, there can still be moments of bittersweet and indeterminate reprieve.

¹⁰ Bohm, D. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Routledge, 2006. Pg. 62.

I have often been unsuccessful in my attempts to write about ~ indirectly, however, such an endeavour continues to remind me to pay attention inattentively, to attempt when possible to remove or soften association from the experience. Thinking about ~ during unspecified moments of its absence can inevitably ‘call it back again’, and yet for me such moments are some of the times when I can think about it ‘clearly’.

To write indirectly is to try and hold ~ back, though I know of no sure-fire way that this can be done, ~ is such a part of me that I can change with it as it changes with me. If I try to think or write about ~ whilst I am, quite literally, in the mist of it, my ability to compose, to even hear myself, is greatly reduced, and as such, each section of this essay represents a time in which I was somehow able to think and write about ~ without being overly affected by it.

Approached through a myriad of fields, ~ is the loud among the quiet, the signal among the noise, the audible among the inaudible, it is that which both softens and hardens. Such an entangled, indeterminate and processual basis of relation requires a number of different experiences, fields and environments to open to one another, to allow each other in and to let each other out, fostering a place where lines of knowledge and experience can crumple and fold. As they fall together, the convergence of fields can create

what Blackman calls ‘threshold experiences’, revealing the “indeterminacy of the human”¹¹, or in this case, the variability of ~.

3.

My ~ can be an immense distraction, fatiguing, painful, a well of anxiety that often stops me sleeping, particularly when new sinusoidal (chemical?) rhythms ‘appear’ in my left ear—in my right ear I live with four different tones that are like standing waves made of the skull, an intensity both solid and fluid. And yet, the experiences I’ve had of living with ~ have taught me so much and led me to so many places that I can’t say with any degree of certainty that I would have found otherwise. I don’t wish for this to come across as some kind of neo-liberal dogma however, I’m very aware of how problematic it can be to impress your own methods of coping, of living with, a ‘condition’, onto another, and yet I can think of no other way of living with ~ other than trying to learn from it.

Sometimes I have a lot to say about ~, and sometimes absolutely nothing (not through disinterest, but rather inability). Like so many, I can get very tired of the rigid segregation of dichotomies, such as internal/external – loud/quiet – subjective/objective – phantom/real (this last one in particular, being as I grew up with a father who heard voices), that can often be found among ~ discourse¹².

¹¹ Blackman, L. Keynote Presentation, CARPA, 01/09/2017.
<https://nivel.teak.fi/carpa5/lisa-blackman-speculative-science-threshold-experiences-and-transsubjectivities/> Accessed 01.04.21

¹² The loud /quiet dichotomy is something that each person who experiences ~ need make their own by necessity. This is an immanent

4.

I speak and think about ~ with the most clarity whilst I'm walking. When I'm sat down I often feel blocked, as if it were an intervening screen, this is something I've found particularly difficult this year of prolonged lockdowns. Of course walking isn't a guarantee of emptying, just as being sat down isn't always a still road to vacuity, but generally speaking, walking acts as a kind kinetic mediation, almost vaporising ~ and its effects.

I can't write about ~ and its relationship to walking without mentioning vertigo, a state of destabilisation that rises and falls due to, in my case, what's called superior semicircular canal dehiscence. This is a hole or opening in the bone that overlies the superior layer of said canal, which is part of the vestibular labyrinth of the inner ear. It is a hole, the size of the tip of a

kind of making, the cautious yet often unavoidable splitting and remaking of one thing from and with another. With regard to my ~ during the lockdowns of 2020, it has been frustratingly obvious how dependant my tacit coping was on motion and movement (by which I mean my somewhat egoistical belief that due to an earlier career in music I was able to adjust to the presence of several sine tones in my right ear primarily because those sounds were so familiar to me anyway), where now, in spite of my efforts, I have slowly lost or misplaced this ability and have delved from sensation into psychology where I can't often tell if I am making it worse than it actually is... I can't help but picture patterns of labyrinthine movement twinned with stasis, a blurring mixture of the inability to do anything other than obliterate differences and a sort of urgency to become what the poet Fanny Howe calls a 'spiral-walker', which is to say, learning how to make useful distinctions amidst the twists and turn-agains of bewilderment. See Howe, F. *The Wedding Dress, Meditations on Word and Life*. University of California Press, 2003. Pg. 9. For an interesting perspective on the various dichotomies surrounding ~ discourse see: Hagood, M. *Hush; Media and Sonic Self-Control*. Duke University Press, 2019.

ballpoint pen, between the inner ear and the brain cavity that make such things as a moving my head, walking, or even standing up, decidedly difficult.

As I walk, in part to try and mitigate the intensity of ~~, it often feels like my body is being mixed up and displaced. I can feel the environment that would otherwise pass through my body unnoticed, or inaudibly, as my feet touch the ground they rattle my right ear, I can hear my eyes moving in their sockets, my tongue in my mouth. At times it can feel like I no longer ‘actually’ hear. I imagine my voice, I remember walking. My voice breaks open and falls out of itself. If I look up whilst walking I have to stop, and right myself, my vision swims and my heartbeat rises into my right ear. Such things are those which enmesh self with environment. Even if my ~~ is the product of an over-active auditory cortex, its resonant precarity with environment, sonic and otherwise, is evidence as to their interrelated and overlapping nature.

Instead of spiralling through the cochlea, some of the vibration that passes into the inner ear is ejected out of (and indeed into) this hole in the canal. This means that when subsequent fluid moves in the balance organs, the brain receives signals that the head is moving when it’s not. Vibration spins the senses, like walking in a straight line whilst turning around, both still and relentlessly vertiginous.

But sound is in my bones, it’s not as if vibration only enters through the ear. My body is in so many ways the sound of its own participation. Pulse, heart, feet, the hiss and static of muscles, billions upon billions of biochemical

responses... These things can all get into the balance organ of the inner ear through the hole, and cause havoc.

At the life of this hole, vibration is, in essence, bifurcating, peeling apart in much the same way as the brain can pull apart and remake a hydrogen atom. If I think of my voice as it travels out of my mouth and around to the ear, it also travels through the jaw bone and passes into the hole, disturbing the balance organs, aggravating my voice as if a number people were speaking instead of one.

During such moments, the sounds I experience are an internal echo of the body, as I don't think they pass along the cochlea nerve, but rather reflect and ricochet around the bone of the canal and the brain cavity. What I hear during such moments feels like the sound of vibration itself.

5.

The poet Gertrude Stein began a series of experiments in automatic writing in the late 1890s whilst still a psychology student at Harvard University. She, along with her colleague Leo Solomons, hoped to discover the limits of 'motor automatism', and in the process, to show such limits to be equal to the explanation of the 'second personality'¹³, or in other words, "to study as

¹³ Stein writes that "it is well known that many 'hysterical' subjects exhibit a remarkable development of the subconscious life... It has often been argued that the performances of these 'second personalities' are essentially different from the merely automatic movements of people..." Stein hoped to close the gap between these states of being in her experiments. See Solomons, L. Stein, G. *Normal Motor Automatism*, (1896). *Psychological Review*, 3(5).Pg. 492.

carefully as possible the process by which a reaction becomes automatic”. Is it possible that the subjective can be ejected from the subject?

Scholar Barbara Will writes that “unlike the Surrealists, Stein saw automaticity not as a ‘vehicle [...] of revelation’, but as the ground-zero murmur of the psyche, the sound-hum of the human motor”¹⁴. Stein and Solomons explored motor-reactions ‘unaccompanied by consciousness’ in the exploratory hope that they could be divorced from such actions as reflection, judgement, and will. They moved among what twenty years later would become the prototypical Surrealist lacunae of murmurs, seeking to directly inscribe the rumble of affect in a navigation and negation of intentionality.

By testing their ability to ‘become automatic’ Stein and Solomons constructed a number of acts of distraction, such as moving a pencil over paper (as though writing) whilst being engaged in reading a story, and writing at dictation (in which the experimenters say that the constant repetition of one word was of great value for overcoming “this habit of attention”). Stein and Solomons tried to develop a mode of writing divorced from conscious intention, from the event of meaning formation, going so far as to refer to automatism as “a general background of sound, not belonging to anything in particular”¹⁵.

Part of why Stein was so interested in divorcing language from the hum of the human motor was in order to access it in its singularity, pointing toward

¹⁴ Will, B. *Gertrude Stein, Automatic Writing and the Mechanics of Genius. Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 1 April 2001. Pg. 170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

language as if it were its own reality, as if there were nothing behind or beyond it. My ongoing experience of ~~, thought of through the lens of wave signification (a site of infinitesimal exchange and process that we recall is concerned with such phenomena that, once heard or thought, shift in perception, avoiding fixed signification), bears witness to a self-same desire to slough off associated meaning, to become what I might call disenchanted. This arises, at least in part, from my experience with recording sound beyond the threshold of human hearing, certainly beyond the threshold of mine anyway, sound that is bereft of association and thus orbits the apperceptive space of preconceived ideas and previous perceptions.

The idea of ‘positive’ distraction for me relates to the notion that attention and inattention can cohabit ~~, that one might be temporarily diverted from the other, only to rejoin, affected or changed, at a later date. The metaphoric implications of such ‘in’contiguity are too broad to explore here, but it’s worth mentioning the inherent difficulty of paying attention to ~~ without associating, to attend in ways that Stein framed as attentively inattentive, without reflecting, intentionally or otherwise, something that many people who experience ~~ (and indeed do not) will surely understand. This bears witness to the difficulty of ‘unhearing’ ~~ once I am conscious of it, or indeed, the unavoidable fact that no single method of mitigation seems to work for long.

In Stein’s book, *Everybody’s Autobiography*, she writes of her interest in a group of reporters, telling us that a photographer is the only one among them who looks intelligent and is listening, “Of course I do he said you see I can listen to what you say because I don’t have to remember what you are saying, they

can't listen because they have got to remember.”¹⁶ To which Stein appends, “of course nobody can listen if they have to remember what they are hearing...”¹⁷

This seems to be an extension of Stein's interest in automaticity, in divorcing “the sound-hum of the human motor” not only from reflection, judgement and will, but from recollection, and indeed representation. In Stein's portrait, titled *Henry James*, she asks and answers, “What is a sound. A sound is two things heard at one and the same time but not together.”¹⁸ I feel like the attention Stein paid to the almost metabolic nature of audition (Stein defined ‘genius’ as talking and listening at the same time and was said to have a ‘strong auditory consciousness’¹⁹) often emerges through the rhythms of habitual actions that, as they emerge, slowly hollow themselves out.

If a sound is ‘two things heard at one and the same time but not together’, I imagine that said two things might be the thing that makes the sound and the sound that propagates from said thing; it could be the sound and its potential meaning, heard as conscious intention, in other words the sound and what the listener thinks with and through as they listen to the sound; it could even be the sound and the sound-hum of the human motor... It might be all of these things, it might be none of them. Imagining, for a moment, it's the second possibility, ‘the sound and what the listener thinks of as they listen to the sound’, that which Stein was often at pains to keep separate in

¹⁶ Stein, G. *Everybody's Autobiography*. Exact Change, 2014. Pg. 224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Pg. 225.

¹⁸ Stein, G. *Writings, 1932-1946*. Library of America, 1998. Pg. 157.

¹⁹ Solomons, L. Stein, G. *Normal Motor Automatism*, (1896). *Psychological Review*, 3(5). Pg. 500.

her work, we remember that the only reporter Stein deemed ‘intelligent’ was the one who could listen because he did not have to remember.

In this sense we might be well served to look at the state of consciousness that Stein and Solomons say can accompany automatism, one that is purely cognitive, not controlling, but passive, or watchful, an attentive inattentiveness. Hence, for Stein and Solomons, their “problem was to get sufficient control of the attention to effect a removal of attention”²⁰, which, in my own experience, can manifest through walking, cultivating, often through a number of indeterminate factors, a sufficient lack of attention, in order to affect the transitory subsistence of ∼.

Whilst reading through Stein and Solomons’ paper I realised that my previous thoughts on walking and its relationship with ∼ were somewhat misguided. Previously I had believed that I was able to think, in other words, to hear myself think, unencumbered by the relentless presence of ∼, by ‘arriving’ at an unplanned and undetermined point in the walk, as if a location. I now think that it is more likely that said state is facilitated by becoming so engrained in the walk, which can happen at any time and anywhere, that I am not wholly aware that I am walking.

Stein’s notion of attentive inattentiveness is a highly generative way of thinking and living with ∼, it paradoxically reminds me to remain open to change, to indeterminacy, to the obverse of gestures, actions and dispositions. An ear (as more often than not ∼ is ‘located’ in the space just above my right ear, as if it were pulling at the helix to let more air pressure

²⁰ Ibid. Pg. 511.

in) emptied of its habits, becomes strangely indifferent, disenchanted, hosting whatever aural field happens upon it. This may seem like an overly negative disposition, but the use of such terms for me point toward a sense of possibility in which I am able to hear with the least possible skim.

6.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World...*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing asks: “What do you do when your world starts to fall apart?”, to which she responds, “I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms.”²¹ On a number of occasions in her book, Tsing beautifully explicates what a disturbance based ecology might consist of, particularly in relation to the cultivation of the matsutake mushroom in Japan. We are introduced to the patterned notion that, “if you want matsutake in Japan, you must have pine, and if you want pine, you must have human disturbance.”²² We learn that, according to Tsing’s forest-research interlocutor, Kato-San, “erosion is good”²³, that pine flourishes on mineral soils and that erosion uncovers them. The forest is not a garden, says Tsing, it has to grow itself, and yet Kato-San helps it along by creating a “certain kind of mess”²⁴, one that would advantage pine.

In my experience walking is neither a stilling nor masking of ~~, but a means of deliberate cultivation, a fostering of ‘intentional’ absence that nevertheless retains its indeterminacy. In the introduction to this essay I wrote that I

²¹ Tsing, A.L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Pg. 1.

²² Ibid. Pg. 151.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

believe thinking with \sim can be beneficial for its communication, that it contains within itself a need for clarity of expression and yet, obversely, the very fact that it can so often block attempts at communication means that it can potentially provide new ways of thinking about communicating, about such thing as proximity and the temporary nature of binary relationality. Placing such a contention alongside Tsing's experiences of the role of disturbance in forests, that "pines, matsutake, and humans all cultivate each other unintentionally"²⁵, leads me to develop a walking practice as a kind of phenomenological intuiting, one that doesn't stop or start with the self alone, but is a way of concentrating on, or thinking with, \sim , without becoming absorbed entirely,²⁶.

I have no good explanation as to what happens to \sim when I walk, sometimes it is simply drowned out, or absorbed, by my dehiscence, which has the decidedly unpleasant effect of making the latter all the more present. Of course \sim doesn't disappear entirely, if I really try and listen I can hear it, but as I walk it's not an obstacle, perhaps due to the metabolic nature of exertion, an ever-changing environment that I continue to pass through as it passes through me, a disturbance based ecology in which I am neither in harmony or conflict with myself and my surroundings, but aurally indifferent, disenchanted, "realigning possibilities for transformative encounters".²⁷

²⁵ Ibid. Pg. 152.

²⁶ For an interesting take on such a practice in relation to bodies of water, see: Neimanis, A. *Bodies of Water, Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury. 2017.

²⁷ Tsing, A.L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Pg. 152.

Clearly this dynamic is rarely simple, if I listen too hard or for too long to ~~, I can disappear into it. Living with it can necessitate both a need to be with and to do something else, whether walking, speaking, listening... One part is so often found in another, in the transitory subsistence of vortices, ripples and waves, arising and vanishing in the total process of the flow. To live in the midst of such vertiginous life is to become with transitory phenomena, finding ways to speak about ~~ as and when, crossing the waters with 'critical friends'.

What do I do when I can no longer hear myself think, when my ~~ becomes deafening? I go for a walk, and if I'm really lucky, I hear myself listening.