What to Do with All This Imperfection?

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From Voice to Paper

Flux is a problem. We instinctively assume the solidity of things we have found to be porous, and we cannot adjust our instincts to accord for that realization. This problem, as Miranda Niittynen reminds us via Judith Butler, runs to our very sense of self. Not only can we “never—or not without great difficulty—fully know others,” but “the belief that we [can] even know ourselves” is problematic (14). The ‘true,’ ‘authentic’ self is not, in a definitive sense, knowable by the self or communicable to the Other because, as Niittynen puts it, the self is “perpetually in flux” (15).

Navigating such non-linguistic flux requires the use of linguistic tools—Niittynen’s “language conventions” and “social norms” (14)—that bring with them their own complications. Ethnographers have advised that a more ‘authentic voice’ might be captured through the use of increasingly ubiquitous voice recording technology. Surely the unedited speech of a subject is closer to the subject’s ‘true’ point of view than the interviewer’s notes of the subject’s speech. The voice is being produced, after all, by the subject’s body as opposed to the interviewer’s pen. But the whole scenario—the very existence of the recorder in the room with the speaker, the expectation that the recording will be listened to—renders the communication mediated, controlled, and thus not ‘authentic.’ Then there are the transcription and editing processes that follow the recording. As Niittynen argues, voice recording is just another—though perhaps more convenient—linguistic tool that “only sustains the illusion of unfettered representation” (15) on which interview methods depend for legitimacy.

I would counter Niittynen’s assertion and argue that the voice recorder does allow some advantage over other recording tools, but I also concede to Niittynen’s claims that that advantage is one of degree and not of kind. This position is based on my own work with voice recording: in addition to writing poetry and essays, I work as a literary critic, and I will take this opportunity to reflect on the interviews I have conducted using a voice recorder. I will follow those reflections with a consideration of how an ethnographer’s relationship to authenticity and uncertainty of meaning compares to that of a poet’s.
Transcribing voices as captured in a recording can be a fascinating, and exhaustive, challenge. People speak far differently than they write, even if they are accomplished writers: they speak in partial sentences, they trail off, they take off on elaborate digressions based on associations collected in the back and forth of oral conversation, etc. By my own measures, I have achieved some success in typographically capturing the unique oral delivery of many interviewees. I measure that idiomatically, I must admit, by listening back to the recordings and reading along with my transcriptions. But I can also say that the final written forms of the oral interviews I conduct read much more quickly, and more naturally, than any essay I have authored or any Q&A I have conducted by written correspondence. Using a voice recorder has allowed me not only to document the thoughts and opinions of my interviewees, but also to engage with the loosened rhythms, syntaxes, and grammatical formations used in their oral expression.

To this point, however, I have not considered what Niittynen, paraphrasing Butler, claims regarding communicability: “normative frames are part of language construction, and it is these ‘norms embedded in language’ that police ‘what will and will not constitute recognizability’” (16). I pause at “recognizability” because that is exactly one of the constraints placed on me by the literary goals of my interviews. I consider literary interviews as a site of learning, primarily, and if I intend for the reader to learn from the interview, I must prioritize readers’ ability to recognize—that is, to engage with—what is being said. If I want a reader to read through my (admittedly long) interviews, then I must make certain judgements as to what might engage a reader’s attention.

So, while my process of interviewing, transcribing, and editing may be superficially similar to that of an ethnographer, my end goal effects a crucial difference. That is, I have an obligation to favour entertainment value. If my interviewee happens to go off on an errant or unclear tangent, it is my obligation to hide from the world that such a waste of breath ever occurred. This benefits everyone involved: the reader is kept from boredom and confusion, the interviewee appreciates my discretion, and I am saved from some tedious work. In the process, authenticity has been sacrificed. In a sense, I am attempting to do just what Niittynen advocates, to “recognize our irrecognizability” (18). I am not, however, openly acknowledging that irrecognizability; I am instead covering it up and presenting readers with a recognizable exchange, one derived from a recording that is, inevitably, partially irrecognizable (or at least partially boring and confusing).

While there are differences between the responsibility, ethics, and rigour required of the critic-interviewer and those required of the ethnographer, both desire to effect an understanding in the reader—and both must make some kind of compromise to achieve this, knowing s/he can only count on a reader’s partial understanding, blocked as we all are both by our “partial blindness about ourselves” (Butler 27) and by language’s inability to facilitate the communication of even that partial blindness to another. But what if effecting understanding—getting one’s points
across—is not the goal? What if the goal is, instead, to emphasize the failure of getting one’s point across? And what if one’s point is the failure to get one’s point across?

**Leaving the Question Mark There**

In her essay-poem “Essay On What I Think About Most,” Anne Carson claims error causes a “condition of fear” and “a state of folly and defeat”—that is, it prompts “shame and remorse” brought on by “realizing you’ve made an error” (30). Carson questions this usual association, extrapolating from Aristotle’s belief that error “is an interesting and valuable mental event” to posit instead the particular significance of error in the form of metaphor. In her thinking, “metaphor causes the mind to experience itself in the act of making a mistake.” She continues: “such mistakenness is valuable” for teaching “that things are other than they seem,” and for exposing “the juxtaposition of what is and what is not the case” (30).

While “there is much to be seen and felt” from the mistakes of metaphor (30), Carson lets that cryptic assertion stand, moving on to another form of error: omission. Turning to a 7th century Greek poem, Alkman’s “fragment 20,” Carson emphasizes the errors of arithmetic, grammar, and metrical form on which Alkman’s poem is built; as with metaphor, Carson cryptically describes these errors as valuable, for “out of [them] may arise unexpectedness” (35). A larger error, however, regards the subject of the poem itself: it is absent, and a bracketed question mark stands in its place. Philologists claim the missing subject indicates that the poem “is surely a fragment” and ought to be read as such. Carson ignores that advice, however, instead choosing to “leave the question mark there” (34). If we regard this choice through the ethnographers’ eyes, then it becomes a serious ethical lapse. Carson disregards the (quite reasonable) belief that the original subject of the poem has been lost to an “accident of history,” such as decay, and dismisses the philologists’ reticence as a reduction of “all textual delight to an accident of history.” Rather, she insists, the poet left the subject out on purpose, allowing the reader to “admire Alkman’s courage” in confronting an unknown subject (34).

Herein lies the key to Carson’s essay-poem: mistakenness itself, “the willful creation of error” (35), is the value of poetry. Poetry has only a tangential responsibility to uphold any level of authenticity. This is an argument for poetry as disrupter.

Although poetic practice and ethnographic practice take epistemological uncertainty in different directions—poets indulging it, ethnographers attempting to reign it in—an important connection remains. Butler claims that “if the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that fall outside the terms of identity, then any effort made ‘to give an account of oneself’ will have to fail in order to approach being true” (28). Failure is for Butler what error is for Carson: unavoidable. As Carson puts it, “the fact of the matter for humans is imperfection” (35). One cannot, you might say, measure imperfection—or uncertainty—using tools meant to gather certain, definitive, or ‘authentic’
measurements. Instead, one must accept error and failure, and the resulting imperfection should be imperfectly represented.1

‘Poetic licence’ is generally understood as the freedom to distort facts for the sake of art. Carson is certainly arguing for that, but she is also suggesting a twist on the concept: that a poet might retain a distortion that a philologist or ethnographer would be keen to resolve. As such, she finds herself halfway down the path Niittynen and Butler prescribe. Paraphrasing Butler, Niittynen suggests that “our inability to know ourselves…will lower our expectation of our own capacity for self-knowledge and ability to account for ourselves or others” (17). Carson, like Niittynen, acknowledges “our inability to know,” but while the ethnographer uses this inability as a check against overconfidence in her claims—that is, to avoid creating “subjects as [knowable] static others” (Niittynen 18)—Carson aims to hang confidently suspended in an acknowledged unknowing. And that confidence is not just for the poet: Carson-as-critic is equally confident in embracing error, for she is “uneasy with any claim to know exactly/ what a poet means to say (34).” She is more comfortable not knowing.

The poet’s interest is in errors, imperfections, and mistakes themselves, while the ethnographer aims to find what truth is available despite those distortions. Both acknowledge limitation: for the ethnographer this is an obstacle that must be accounted for and corrected, but for the poet this may be the final destination, or a springboard for further explorations.

Recording as Imitation

A recorded voice, played back, is not the voice that was recorded. It is, instead, an imitation or copy of that voice. The transcription of the recorded voice is a further copy, resulting in a manuscript that is two steps removed from the original utterances of the speaking subject. At each step, there is the possibility for error to emerge. That error might be intentional—as in an attempt to make an interview more recognizable—or it could be unavoidable—as in the event of indecipherable or missing language. In either case, the likely presence of error leads the interviewer/ethnographer to interpret with caution, so as to not misrepresent the speaking subject.

Unless one is a poet. In that case, the distance between an original utterance and its final representation might become a lush playground. The physical voice was once the only vehicle for poetry, and it remains important despite the form’s major migration to the page. In fact, the tension between voice-bound poetry (which has certainly not gone away) and page-bound poetry invigorates some of the form’s most vociferous debates and fascinating artifacts. Take, for a recent illustrative example of the latter, Jordan Scott’s Blert, in which he attempts to capture his persistent stutter on the page, and to make an engaging music from that repeated verbal ‘error.’

Given the interest in vocal imperfection, it should be expected that poets have pounced on, and will continue to pounce on, the artistic possibilities presented by the voice recorder. Performance artist Janet Cardiff does so in a manner that is perhaps relevant to the question of ethnography: by manipulating,
and creating, recorded “error.” Her several audio “walks,” which she describes as “similar to… an audio guide,” are records of her own peripatetic journeys that in turn direct listeners along the same routes (“Introduction to the Audio Walks”). These tracks are supplemented with sound effects recorded from the environs of the walks. “The virtual recorded soundscape,” Cardiff insists of one such walk, “has to mimic the real physical one in order to create a new world as a seamless combination of the two” (“The Missing Voice”). Nonetheless, a tension remains between the virtual and physical, with Cardiff’s recorded—indeed, curated—audio environment substituting itself for the real audio environment her listeners would otherwise perceive. What the listener is hearing is a deliberate inauthenticity, or “error,” but one which Cardiff hopes will act as a foundation for a third, “new” environment—one enriched by the walking directions and the “thoughts and narrative elements” she provides (“Introduction to the Audio Walks”).

In her creation of such immersive fictions, Cardiff seems to deliberately discard concepts of authenticity. But in her introduction to “The Missing Voice: Case Study B,” Cardiff explains that her “walks” were motivated by a desire “to dramatize [her] life, make it real by making it cinematic.” She began the process by “walk[ing] and tak[ing] notes on a mini voice recorder” (“The Missing Voice”). As she listened to her recordings, however, she notes that “this voice became another woman,” which, in speaking apart from and back to Cardiff, insisted on the “multiple personalities and voices” (“The Missing Voice) of the self. This is reminiscent of Niittynen’s claim that the self is “perpetually in flux” (14). Cardiff would later add a third-person voiceover and the additional sound effects to the recordings, thereby further distancing the piece from her original—but no more authentic—audio notes. For Cardiff, the distance between her “life” and the woman in the recording was established upon her first listen back. In Niittynen’s terms, Cardiff recognized her own “irrecognizability” in the face of audio mediation—but then added to that mediation in an attempt to make her work seem “real.”

The difference between Cardiff’s “real” and Niittynen’s “authentic” establishes a crucial distinction between poetic practice and ethnographic practice. In both cases, recording is understood as imitation, part of a larger series of mediations from self, to voice, to recorder, to ear, to transcription and editing, and finally to interpretation. Along the way, the “authentic” will be muddled with mistakes, errors, unknowing, and misinterpretation. The question is whether to cope, or come to terms, with the eventuality of mediative error—in order to recover some authenticity—or to build on it. Like Carson, Cardiff is less concerned with the verifiably “authentic” than with the judicious creation of inauthenticity: in the process of adding artful error to her original recordings, she attempts not to accurately capture the irrecognizable aspect of the “authentic” but to create what the audience might recognize as resembling something “real.” Instead of identifying the layers of mediation to get at some level of truth that might lie within or below them, Cardiff adds to those layers in an attempt to imitate the real. Imitating what an audience might experience as ‘real’ is, of course, an unpredictable endeavour, and it re-
veals the level of risk a poet or artist is allowed to take. If Cardiff fails to convince an audience of the realness of her work, this is not an ethical lapse on her part because both parties know that Cardiff is attempting to mimic reality, and not to capture it directly.

Such trickery—Carson’s “willful creation of error”—is unavailable to the ethnographer due to her ethical obligation to provide the most “authentic” account possible. Yet she must still confront error and failure. Niittynen argues that if ethnographers “interrogate their positions” amid this context of error, failure, and imitation, they must “realize that reflexive accounts, though important for the research process, can only be partial” (17). Thus, the source of the poet’s opportunity to exploit error for all its rich artistic possibilities is the ethnographer’s challenge to “partially” reach some level of authentic knowledge despite the inevitable failure of an important ethnographic tool—the voice recorder—to capture the inherently imperfect process of reflexivity. In both cases, however, the identification and acceptance of error/failure makes it possible to salvage some value from the aftermath of imperfection.

1 Even the form of Carson’s “Essay On What I Think About Most” takes part in this performed uncertainty: is it an essay, or is it a poem? Like much of her work, it contains the trappings of both, but cannot be said to be either, entirely. The title, too, is difficult to pin down and could suggest at least two subjects: what things the speaker most often thinks about, or what she thinks about most things. After reading the essay-poem, we can only assume that Carson means for the titular uncertainty—its linguistic error or mistake—to remain unresolved.

2 Scott performs part of his book in a video available at https://vimeo.com/7384677
Works Cited


