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**Bees Casting Shadows
on a Cloudy Day:
An Afterword**

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Abstract

In this afterword, the author of *Speaking into the Air* engages in correspondence with some of its critics. Rather than dialogues with the dead these are letters to the living. As acts of writing in hopes of connection, they are enactments and enhancements of the book's arguments.

Keywords

writing, communication, interpretation, translation, spirit, bone, *pensées d'escalier*

I am flattered, embarrassed, and thrilled by the attention to *Speaking into the Air* (SITA). In reading the pieces here, just as in hearing the talks at the incandescent gathering at Carleton in January 2020, whose glow only takes on brighter light and warmth in the foggy rearview mirror of the pandemic, I have often wondered just who is this fascinating author they are talking about! There is no reason, if the book is correct, to think that its author should have any interpretive privilege. I have no access to intention or interiority any more than anyone else does because books, like minds, don't have insides. I do have a denser set of relations to its coming forth than probably anyone else, and thus greater responsibility or care, but have no telepathic wiretap into what it is all about. I have a thicker archive but no monopoly on meaning! I remember the person, JDP 1999 as Jeremy Packer styles him, who wrote the book, the room he wrote it in at 1630 Ridge St., Iowa City, the window he stared out of while daydreaming, the rocking chair he'd read in, the squeaks made by the dial-up modem

whose connection would be ruined if anyone else in the family picked up the phone. It would be curious to meet that person again. (It is indeed curious to read again the book he wrote.) It would probably be an uncanny encounter, like Sigmund Freud instantly disliking the old gent who barged into his train compartment only to realize that the mirror on the door to the water closet had swung open and he was seeing himself.

This sense that the self is an other is, as several of the essays observe, native to the practice of writing. Writing is exterior, public. I tell my students to think of it like sculpture—working with materials, out in the open. In Mallarmé’s quip, you make a poem with words, not with ideas. And the words teach you where they want to take you. At least sometimes. (They can be an obstreperous bunch.) Perhaps to enforce this commitment to externalization and estrangement, and to engage in some therapeutic shadow-boxing with future commentators, in November 1998 I dashed off ten fierce self-criticisms after sending off the manuscript. I still have the document, grandly titled *Selbstkritik*, as if it were the musings of the young Marx circa 1844. Some of them are almost comically harsh or beside the point: “my history is very very thin”; “absurd that there’s nothing in there from Scotland in the eighteenth century.” I just discovered yet another complaint from a journal entry dated 11 February 1999: “the introduction--good grief. It’s hopelessly academic. I added it to meet Nussbaum’s critique, but it just makes a forbidding mass of intellectual history, most of it too loose to be useful anyway.” There’s lots more of that sort of thing on the hard-drive!

These anticipatory flailings parallel a brilliant and sad story called “The Secret Miracle” by Jorge Luís Borges about a Jewish author who has been sentenced to death by the Nazis. While imprisoned, awaiting his doom, he decides that since reality is never what we expect it to be, he will imagine all the possible ways his murder could take place so as to prevent them from ever happening! In the end, his shooting by firing squad is accompanied by details so banal that his faith in the omnipotence of thoughts never would have stooped to acknowledge them: a raindrop lands on his cheek, and though the day starts to cloud over, a bee casts a shadow on a courtyard tile. There is much more to the story than this, but as always, Borges offers an antidote to the delusions that the self can encompass the other or that mind ever has anything but a well-greased grip upon the world. You can’t outsmart time. You can’t expect the other to be a

projection of the self. Everything is always stranger than we think it, and often more ordinary. At the same time.

Self-criticism, at least, has the virtue of setting the bar so low that one is grateful for any engagement at all. My cup runneth over at the gracious and graceful engagements! As this collection proves, books, if lucky, sprout and germinate in all kinds of directions. The critics assembled here go places I could not have imagined—natural dyes in Japan and histories of aerial advertising! This whole issue is a study in post-hoc serendipity. I am grateful for all these friends, and only scholarly norms compel me to refer to everyone in what follows by surname.

I didn't imagine the dream of mental fusion being taken to the places it is here. Melissa Aronczyk shows how in an age when the personal is not only political but also commercial, when young people jostle with each other and themselves to establish their own brands-cum-identities online, advertising is a mode by which the most intimate wished-for connections can take place. And perhaps advertising has always been like this, the dreamworld of fulfilled desire. People in ads coordinate symphonically, in the same way that long-time colleagues on crime and fantasy shows finish other's sentences in smoothly orchestrated dialogue, as if modeling the relationship they want the viewer to assume with regard to the ad or show. Aronczyk's reorientation is deeply humane in its honesty about human interestedness. Marx wrote of the "meaning of human requirements." Poet Delmore Schwartz wrote of "the scrimmage of appetite everywhere." You don't have to take the recognition of our neediness in a dour Hobbesian direction, and Aronczyk does not. It might be the beginning of solidarity to admit that we all have to be fed. Indeed, feeding is perhaps the first act of care that any of us receive upon entering this world. It's anti-romantic to say we are precarious creatures seeking survival. (Hunger is a sign of health, as a wise doctor I knew liked to say.) But it's the truth, and it is a liberating one, provided that it is coupled with a social organization that tempers greed, monopoly, and grotesque accumulation (still looking!).

Ghislain Thibault places the dream of instant connection in its natural homeland, the sky, and shows (or sows, to use a great pun from his wonderful archive) the fragility of dissemination, even if—or rather precisely because—aerial advertising channels an ancient belief in the heavens as an open, perhaps sacred book for our reading and

guidance. His piece made me think of bookends in the history of aerial advertising. In 1918 the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio led a quixotic air mission over Vienna during which 350,000 leaflets were dropped with the warning salutation: "We are flying over Vienna; we could drop tons of bombs. All we are dropping on you is a greeting of three colors: the three colors of liberty" (i.e. the Italian flag). Note the old equation of message and projectile. In 2013, the comedian Kurt Braunohler commissioned a pilot to write "HOW DO I LAND" in the Los Angeles sky. More tragically, those beneath the canopy of drones—in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere—have learned to dread blue, sunny skies. Gray skies are less commodious for the killing-watching machines. The air can be a dangerous place. Beware what you speak into it!

Ganaele Langlois perhaps provides the most intense version of the dream in the cosmotechnical practices of Japanese textile-makers. Her story of the seasonally-informed cooperation of humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, "a composition with the living, a being-with that is both material and abstract, present and refracted," is exquisite. If I were to sign onto the possible beauty and music of dialogue, it would be here. Almost thou persuadest me to be a dialogian! Who couldn't love a practice so apparently untainted by capitalism, colonialism, pollution, or extraction, so rich with synesthesia, craft, care, and art. And it's especially nice that *things* are an essential part of the dialogue. I really didn't want to spoil the spell by thinking of other aspects of Japanese history (say, Nanjing) but—forgive me—I couldn't help it. Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Another question raised by many of the critics here is language itself. It is a good question since at least half of the contributors wrote in a language other than their mother tongue. Deng Jianguo, whose service as a translator I will never manage to repay, understands and sympathizes with the text well enough to use its principles—the alterity of self and other—in his translation practice. No author could ask for more. One of the most intimate ways that authorship is established and reinforced is the ritual of royalty payments, and I am grateful to be forever yoked to Deng in this pragmatic way as well! The paper trail is a mark of the friendship. We are companions, co-feeders.

Radha Hegde is interested in how people under pressure and on the make survive (like Aronczyk), and do so in the "English communication space" (like Deng). Shakespeare

is now the property of coaches, and if the Bard comes up at all it is to provide lessons in sealing the deal. (*SITA's* post-publication adventures don't hold a candle to Shakespeare's.) I have to confess that my first ever journal article, published in 1985, was on Indian literature written in English, so Hegde's essay meets an old interest of mine in the twisty fates of global English. It's a remarkable privilege to be a native speaker of the world language. I try to take responsibility for the unearned advantage birth gave me by stepping outside of the English bubble wherever possible. It seems only fair, given the urgent economic necessity that pushes Hegde's interviewees out of their mother tongues toward English.

Benjamin Peters raises the vexed question of the role of nations in our intellectual categories. (I should add here that his vacating of his upstairs bedroom in favor of a teenage man-cave in the basement made available the space in which *SITA* was written. He also oversaw and maintained the computer infrastructure, setting up a filing system that is still in use. The folder holding the files for *SITA*, for instance, is called "Dadbook.") His survey of the eclectic resources of the Russian tradition here convinces me that *Russian* is a usable adjective, despite its national and political messiness. Like all imperial languages—English, French, Spanish among others—Russian speakers sport many passports. Languages are hard to learn—especially Russian!—and you can only speak one or two or maybe three like a native. Language is a mark of finitude. I'd say, as long as there is a language, there is a case to be made for a theoretical tradition. Viva Russian media theory!

Karim Karim also takes us out of the comfy or at least taken-for-granted North American space. He echoes Aronczyk's point that we should attend to ordinary consciousness in all its mythic richness: advertising and religion are both utopian in their counterfactual ways. That the great Christian incarnation is a body (the Logos) and the great Muslim revelation is a text (the Qur'an) I take to stake out the fundamental ambit of communication theory. What could be more basic questions than how bodies become texts and texts become bodies? Mary and Muhammad are imperfect filters and yet they manage to conceive divinity amid the buzzing in their ears. Karim also usefully reminds us that angels can be scary—the first words out of biblical angels' mouths tend to be "fear not!" His conclusion that we aren't angels but can still seek the truth is one I heartily sustain.

Amanda Lagerkvist, whose existential media studies definitely knows from scary angels, reminds us of the ways that the Northern European welfare state made dialogue into a kind of official ideology. (This is also a point made by Sybille Krämer.) Of course I appreciate her tale of non-reception; *SITA* tells one such tale! Yet in fact I have always felt exceedingly welcome in Sweden among other Nordic countries. If there is a country whose culture celebrates or laments communication breakdown, it might be Sweden. Strindberg's plays and Bergman's films abound in dialogic mishaps or silences that cleave the cosmos in twain. Susan Sontag's "Letter from Sweden" (1969) has a nice line that sounds like an early *SITA* title: "Talking apparently never ceases to be a problem for the Swedes: a lean across an abyss." Perhaps Lagerkvist is faithful to the official cultural norm in telling what looks like a story of a failed reception (by Swedish mainstream media studies) that is also the story of an enormously productive and generous one (on her part). There could be no truer tribute to the book than this combination of thinking breakdown and doing warmth.

Lagerkvist asks whether it is better to holler or shout in a moment like this one. Carrie Rentschler asks a similar question about political implications, especially the question of scale that has always haunted readers of *Speaking into the Air*, including me. In a word, how to reconcile structure and agency? The book ends with finitude. How are we to reconcile the need for the embrace and care of fragility in the life-world when so much is obviously messed up? As she puts it so well: why make "small, relational changes between people when the needs for broad system-level transformations are so urgent?" Christian political philosophy, as both Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil showed, has a long tradition of thinking about the radical ways that love, in its care for creatureliness, can erupt surprisingly and transformatively into the world. The gamble is to suspend violence by upending its logic of tit-for-tat (think also of Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu). Jesus said, if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his load for a mile, which was apparently legal, you should voluntarily carry it a second mile so as to show that you are not a slave and are doing it willingly. You thus enact a radical transformation of the relationship. It's now voluntary instead of compulsion. This kind of practice is subversive but also quietist. It doesn't alter the system of domination or change who is master and who is slave. Hegel would later thunder that this attitude is singing in your chains and Nietzsche would rail against the resentment that (he thought) underlies such performances of caring under duress. We all know these

critiques. And yet, Rentschler asks, what is a revolution that is not also a revolution of habit? (Her emphasis on habit warms my pragmatist heart!) Is there not a revolution of small steps? Shouldn't a genuine feminist practice work in the lifeworld? I love her call for a routine rather than romantic revolution. We've had grand gestures enough. The true revolution would not only add roses to bread, but kisses to roses. This is a problem of structure, but it's also a problem of care. Let love break forth!

A question raised by several commentators here is the status of digital life. Rentschler asks about peer surveillance as care. Aronczyk asks about self as online brand. Tamara Kneese wonderfully asks about the infrastructure of the whole thing and the enormous costs of its maintenance. Only when you grow up do you meet the person who was born in the same hospital on the same day as you. It took me years to realize that *Sorting Things Out* (1999) by Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker, the brilliant book on infrastructures and their enormous cumulations of time and effort, was a kind of secret twin with *SITA*. (It took me less long to figure out that *The Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Loewenhaupt Tsing, a casual acquaintance from grad school, is a secret twin with *The Marvelous Clouds*.) It takes an enormous amount of gruntwork, Kneese usefully reminds us, to keep hardware and software alive. The inevitable swing toward decrepitude marks machines and bodies alike. (Some of us are kept in working order by Tylenol and physical therapy.) But breakdown is not without its affordances. The fragility—the painfulness—of the witness is the thing that makes the testimony. I also appreciate Kneese's eye for the small ignorable genres of digital life that are nonetheless packed with meaning like the screenshot. (Rentschler does something similar with the infographic.) *Platform temporality*—that's our fate, in oh so many ways! "Finitude is not a problem to be solved, but an imperfection to be embraced." There's a line worthy of inscription in granite.

Sybille Krämer is the world expert on how inscription works, on granite or any other flat surface. She shows the deep humanity in flatness; it is a way to escape the risk of being stabbed in the back or blindsided. Surfaces, in the old quip, are not superficial. *Operative reversibility*, the use of a surface to calculate, draw, graph, or simulate, is one of the greatest cultural techniques in history. I love her call for a media theory without the drama of inflated agency but with an appreciation for "less glamorous forms." Saint Augustine built his semiotic system on the principle that media disappear in use.

The sound gives way demurely to the idea as the body does to the spirit. He was thinking about speaking, not about writing and drawing, and my critique of his proto-spiritualism in *SITA* would have been better if it had known Krämer's revelations about writing. She recommends the same inversion as Jacques Derrida, and perhaps even more compellingly, as André Leroi-Gourhan: we should understand the origin of humanness not in the spoken word but in the art and technique of writing and drawing ("graphism" as Leroi-Gourhan calls it) on two-dimensional planes. Writing into the cloud—such a beautiful metaphor, one that Thibault's contribution also makes us think about. Maybe Borges's bee was doing that with its shadow at the moment of the execution.

Jefferson Pooley will not be surprised that I adore Krämer's piece, or that I adore his. He correctly and compellingly identifies writing as the media apriori of *SITA*'s argument. His reading of the fit of form and performance is so astute; it would tickle the fancy of my most hard to please Yale English colleague devotees of close reading! I am not sure if I had ever noticed that every name up for hermeneutic engagement in the book is dead, and so Pooley's reply makes me feel what a gift it is to be alive and to receive such engagement from a fellow mortal. (Pooley's own writerly text is also obviously a meta-level performance of his own argument.) Vertigo by codex, Dewey with a dash of Levinas—I'll treasure those quips. They fit very well this present exercise of writing indirect letters to living friends rather than performing dialogues with the dead. And note Pooley's take on *The Marvelous Clouds*: "a ramped-up aphoristic pointillism, a sense of montage in fast-forward. The book's ambition to excavate discrete elemental media is mimicked, perhaps, in its staccato, even digital, mode of delivery." I think Pooley is channeling Marshall McLuhan's posthumous tribute to the late work of Harold Adams Innis; McLuhan also noted a staccato delivery within a "complex mental cinema." McLuhan made Innis sound better, and Pooley does that for me. I'll gladly take any comparison to Innis and any stylistic upgrades!

There goes that disagreeable old gent again. What's he doing in here, interrupting my responses to my critic-friends? Oops, no, that was the door swinging open. No, wait, that was actually Jeremy Packer (aka JP20) sketching some uncanny Doppelgängers. To honor writerly discipline, I will here omit any undisclosed nonliterate oral events (guffaws, perhaps?) that accompanied the reading of his text. It's enormously flattering

to get three; most thinkers, if they are lucky enough to be periodized, only get early and late. I also like ending in nine as revolutionary years should (e.g. 1649, 1689, 1789, 1949, 1989). My colleague-mentor Sam Becker liked to say that writing a letter was mostly for the enjoyment of the writer, so I'll amp up the inherent self-indulgence here by suggesting a few more Doppelgängers together with their chief presiding spirit: JDP 1959: Carolyn Widtsoe Durham Peters, my mom (now named Person rather than Peters). JDP 1969, probably Jimi Hendrix or the Beatles. JDP 1979, probably Joseph Smith. JDP 1989, probably John Dewey or William James. (I'd be happy to meet a few more of these characters in 2029, 2039, and beyond, assuming the PT and Tylenol hold out.) As to JDP 2019, his medial condition is obviously Google and Wikipedia with a splash of Gutenberg and Monoskop. And as to cavorting with chemists, we can at least remind them that their periodic table is a preeminent technique of flatness! It's a hard sell, but one point of the ongoing conversation with natural scientists is our insistence on the cognitive value of the humanities. Humanists know stuff—not just about history or language, but about the genesis, architecture, and effects of knowledge. “We dance round in a ring and suppose/But the secret sits in the middle, and knows.” I hope Robert Frost wouldn't mind if we substitute the word “medium” for “middle” (to be pronounced *mead-yum* to preserve the meter). Media are perhaps the best bridge between humanities and science (and for proof, see JP20's interview with Peter Galison.)

Amit Pinchevski's friendly interruption rescues dialogue and dissemination from the doom of being separate ontologies (or even worse, “paradigms,” a word I could never use with a straight face unless for grammar). Instead, in their “elective nonaffinity” dialogue and dissemination sound rather like an old married couple. They know each other's moves, habits, and routines all too well and their tensions keep them both somehow going. “It bears wondering whether the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is at all tenable when it comes to communication”—a line worthy of Habermas, though not requiring explanation in a two-volume set. Get the chisel ready: “For the private to be ethical it must invoke the public—and for the public to be ethical it must invoke the private.” Here's another: “Once there is an Other, there is another Other.” I love the deeply ethical and performative reflection on definition: “To describe communication is already to take a stand as to how it should take place.” A clear and distinct definition of communication might destroy communication's very possibility.

We would have already closed down the options. A true definition would have to remain lacking. It is precisely that which nobody knows in advance, despite the most imaginatively enumerative efforts of Borges's doomed author or a nervous young scholar about to publish their first book. Communication is what happens in the face of the unknown. Genuine hospitality does not predetermine the guest. Every day each of us utters sentences that have never been heard before in the history of the universe and yet they usually manage to find a reception. If you wanted a definition of communication, it would be something like the intelligibility of the unprecedented. This is the same as hospitality to the other. (On that note, I look forward to more falafel!)

Finally, Margaret Schwartz's poignant memoir and portrait is happily alienating for me, in the same way that a photograph or a recording of your voice can be. I had no idea I was famous when she was in my seminars. Celebrity is perhaps more ascribed than lived—perhaps one reason stars tend to flame out if they can't deal with their continued ordinariness. That spirit is bone: amen! Whatever phrenological monkey business Hegel was trying to lift to the next level, he rightly saw spirit and matter intertwining—perhaps cosmotechnically! Note the deflation: spirit as bone is a lesson in dealing with ordinariness. I am grateful, but not a bit surprised, knowing her, that she heard, amid the din of grad school, a deafening place where hearing is often damaged, that scholarship is soul work. "The stakes, after all, could not be any more absurd: my everlasting soul, and the ins and outs of all my earthly days." But she knew this already. And as I finish this afterword, I realize somewhat sheepishly that I have mimicked the exact procedure she says I use in class! The democratic ethos is a secular version of the conviction that every person can be moved by the spirit of God. In this case, I think that is true.

I am not sure what *SITA* is since I am not sure what a book is. That should be up there with philosophy's hard problems. It is in fact kind of the same question as What is a mind? What is consciousness? Or, What is a person? Here's one answer based on my experience with *Speaking into the Air*: a book is a maker of community, a mediator of friendships. I cite Borges again, always a good place to end: "A book is not an isolated entity [un ente incomunicado]: it is a relation, an axis of innumerable relations." I am grateful for each of the friendships *SITA* has afforded, those here and

more elsewhere, and helplessly thank those who have shown their care by writing.
XOXO.

John Durham Peters, New Haven, 10 January 2022

John Durham Peters is María Rosa Menocal Professor of English and of Film and Media Studies at Yale. He thanks his colleagues Hannah Dick, Chris Russill, and Liam Cole Young for organizing this festival of reading, and all the contributors to the discussion!

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