

Mariske Broeckmeyer



Unvoicing Migraine
A Study of the Failing Voice

UNVOICING MIGRAINE

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Contents

Author's Note · xv

INTRODUCTION · 19

1. The Voice Is Failing · 35

2. A Borrowed Diary · 63

3. The Migraine Margarite · 87

4. Human Minus Body Equals Voice · 121

5. The Dialectics of Outside and Inside · 153

6. *Cripur Cripour*:
Toward a Nonperformance on Migraine and Voice · 169

CONCLUSION

Dissemination as Method: A Call for Generosity · 185

Appendices · 191

Bibliography · 199

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To Hella and Willem

Author's Note

These will be the records of times that got lost.
the blackouts narrated, the voids voiced and revived.

... I look at these objectives as they lie here before me, to then bluntly ignore the very heart of my intentions when I state that I wish I would have had more time to spend on time suspended.

I wish I could present myself to you being better prepared than I am.

Already, a first contradiction arises,
suspecting many more to come.

Over the past years, there were seasons I suffered an average of four attacks a week. And if I am truly honest, I admit that at times migraine never really left my body. When it didn't consume me, it lingered in the back of my skull like a little bug trapped behind the window ajar, restless and unable to find its way out. To a bystander its escape might seem so simple. Go free little bug, the window is open. Just a little to the left. Yes, to the left. Go now. Go.... Aarghh. Perversely enough it was probably the thought of having to create this very book that drove my body into a state of ceaseless suffering. Excitement, nervousness, frustration, euphoria, or just a simple touch of joy: all claim the same consequences. You must now think, and I'd understand if you would, that a frequency of four days a week is a plentitude of time to descend into the craters, to track the migraine monster and catch the creature in creativity. And indeed, I have ceaselessly thought about it, read about it, even held it in my arms many times as we slept side by side in the blackened cave of my bedroom. But as I am writing this, I feel that I have failed to truly look it in the eye, let alone capture the sensation of its warm breath upon my skin and turn it into something of aesthetic value that could make you understand both the pain and pleasure of it. As a happy fatalist, claiming to have accepted my fate, I have been patiently outwaiting my days of torment singing: It'll pass. It'll pass. It'll pass. Then, from the first moment things turned from unbearable to kind of bearable, I utterly overcompensated the time I had lost by working a manic amount of hours, eagerly sketching and describing the beast but forgetting to mention the passionate encounter we only just had moments ago and therefore instantly driving myself back into its arms. And the context of this endeavor in which I promised to create during times of torment, profoundly changed my relation to the migraine being. I felt obliged to welcome it, to even love it as a pet. Now more than ever I understand why the migraining Friedrich Nietzsche decided to call his pain a dog. "It is just as faithful, just as unfortunate and shameless, just as entertaining, just as wise, as any

other dog and I can domineer over it, and vent my bad humour on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives.”¹

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common (Dover Publications, 2006), 137.

Introduction

It is indifferent to every effort I have made to keep my head down and stay out of trouble. It ignores the drug. It ignores the ascetic diet. There is no counterintuitive modern logic to shield me from this thing. There is no logic at all. It responds only to cures that existed six thousand years ago, to darkness, to ice, to steam, and these aren't really cures — when this headache visits, I'm no more human than the feral cat that waits out its injury underneath a bush. And I'm not remotely interested in politeness to other living beings. And, weirdly, precisely because it defies modernity, because it defies society, it bears no relation either to human creativity or to thwarted human creativity. No crowd of ideas, images, and thoughts await concatenation and order, or collapse. This headache exists outside of human history.

— Andrew Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky*¹

On Art and Music: Mapping the Migraine Lands

I nod my throbbing head while reading Levy's words. Indeed, when an attack arises, much is annulled. The absence of focus,

¹ Andrew Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 211–12.

desire, and mobility in combination with a profound fear of light (*photophobia*) and sound (*phonophobia*) makes the creative inner scenery of the sufferer highly inhospitable. Nonetheless, many artists have turned to their migrainous sufferings as a source of inspiration. They made the descent into the black-out, explored and exploited a seemingly bare crater to create art not despite their migrainous impairments but through them, because of them, and for them.

Numerous examples of such *migraine art*² can be discovered in visual arts and literature. In their magnificent book on the subject, Klaus Podoll and Derek Robinson point to both established and nonprofessional artists when defining migraine art as a genre in itself. According to them, painters like Georgia O'Keeffe and Pablo Picasso supposedly used their migrainous encounters as a source of inspiration.³ The surrealist drawing *The Return to the Castle* (1969) by the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico is another beautiful example of such visual aura hallucinations introduced in an artistic context.⁴ Migraine art also made its way into literature, notably in the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by the English author Lewis Carroll.⁵ This famous absurdist book is known for being based on Carroll's migraine sufferings and results into a brilliant, inspiring description of many of the migraine features.⁶ During her visit to the Wonderland, Alice finds herself growing unusually tall (*macropsia*) or getting remarkably short (*micropsia*). Sometimes just parts of her body would distort. Her neck would enlarge until she could but look down on her otherwise unchanged body from the ceiling (*metamorphosia*).⁷

2 Klaus Podoll and Derek Robinson, *Migraine Art: The Migraine Experience from Within* (North Atlantic Books, 2008), 33.

3 Ibid., 297.

4 Gregory Fuller and M.V. Gale, "Migraine Aura as Artistic Inspiration," *British Medical Journal* 297 (1988): 1670.

5 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Macmillan & Co., 1865)

6 Richard Restak, "Alice in Migraineland," *Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain* 46, no. 2 (2006): 306–11.

7 Ibid.

Remarkably, there are relatively few examples of migraine-inspired music or sound art. This underrepresentation seems unsurprising when considering one of the most prominent symptoms of migraine is indeed a particular hypersensitivity to sounds and noises. The very act of producing sound intensifies the pain, and this tendency certainly explains the marginality of migraine music. Nevertheless, some arresting examples are provided by acclaimed composers and musicians. In her writings, the twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard von Bingen, for example, describes how she received musical inspiration from God during her migrainous episodes.⁸ And many centuries later, German composer Richard Wagner introduced his own migraine symptoms into the opening act of the opera *Siegfried*.⁹ A more recent example in pop music is provided by Wilco's singer, Jeff Tweedy. The lyrics of "Less Than You Think"¹⁰ carefully describe Tweedy's migrainous torment while the outro of the song consists of a slowly enfolding drone, capturing the painful increase of migraine in sound.¹¹

Many scholars have studied these migrainous paintings, writings, and compositions, for, indeed, much is to be learned from artistic interventions. Cases of migraine art and migraine music can be truly captivating, but they are not the object of these writings. This book only fleetingly crosses the fields of music therapy, musicology, and art history. Much more, it turns to the arts as a practice when lending an ear to the interaction between migraine and voice. My migraine. And my voice. Because although I commit to a reflection on migraine, I should stress that I feel unqualified to elaborate on the concept in general. I leave the data to the neurologists and the interpretation

8 Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard von Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 129.

9 Anna Göbel, Karl Göbel, and Hartmut Göbel, "'Compulsive plague! pain without end!' How Richard Wagner Played Out His Migraine in the Opera *Siegfried*," *British Medical Journal* 347 (2013): 2.

10 Wilco, "Less Than You Think," on *A Ghost Is Born* (Nonesuch, 2004).

11 Jeff Tweedy, "Shaking It Off," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2008, <https://migraine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/shaking-it-off/>.

of my words to the psychoanalysts. This is a personal testimony, a melody played on an instrument I master only half the time. Not seldom, I find the thing smashed to the wall and gone to pieces. Then, I bend to study the splinters and attempt to start anew.

Migraine mutes me. It occupies my body and leaves muscles, lungs, larynx, and tongue under its command. I cannot combat its coming. I cannot reverse how it ravages my vocal apparatus. I am rendered a voiceless singer, unable to resonate, unable to communicate: a voiceless singer in need of a story to restore a sense of self. In search for this new narrative, I decided to approach migraine through my artistic practice as a singer while at the same time turning to concepts provided by voice theory, disability studies, psychoanalysis, and feminist studies to create a theoretical framework in which the voice would not merely be tied to the paper but remained free to resonate.

Artistic Research and Voice: On Autotheory, Iteration, and Mixed Media

When studying the voice, the tradition of artistic research offers a valuable new approach. For this reason, I introduce artistic research into the field of voice theory as a different and supplementary form of knowledge that reaches beyond traditional academic research methods. Making the voice sound when studying it is crucial, for by doing so the voice turns into an object that localizes a body to be examined like a little insect in its own habitat, its wings shaking the air between us. However ungraspable, when the voice is sounding, it reaches beyond mere conceptual notions and becomes capable of offering embodied and aesthetic forms of knowing. Composer and poet Sandeep Bhagwati stresses the importance of artistic research as a complementary way of studying the world:

Artistic research asks: What do we not feel yet? What do we maybe want (or not want) to feel? What would the world feel/look/be like—if we found a new way to perceive it

and engage with it? [...] In research-creation we also influence reality, and this in a highly direct manner: we work on how we perceive ourselves, our emotional reality and our humanity — and thereby we change the way we understand the models we tend make of our physical and social reality. Research-creation sees reality as a constant negotiation between our models of it and our experience of it.¹²

Bhagwati shows how artistic research offers methodologies that are in continuous interaction with our “physical and social reality.” In doing so, he also advocates the value of artistic research within other disciplines. By allowing the voice to sound in an artistic context, this endeavor proves to be particularly relevant when operating in the sphere of disability studies. It is, indeed, in this context that the voice needs to resonate. The sounding voice implies a listener and, in contrast to the written word, reciprocity is inherent to the sounding of a voice; it reaches beyond a rupture and therefore enables an ecology of belonging.

Yet, the potential of artistic research when studying the voice reaches much further. Combining theory and practice to examine the relation between migraine and voice also provides the opportunity to question the singer and her relation to the stage. Through the devocalizing impact of migraine the possibility arises to redefine the artistic practice of the singer when her vocal apparatus falters or falls silent. And under these troublesome yet intimate circumstances, the scene is set to even challenge the boundaries of performance by creating a *nonperformance* on migraine and voice. A mere theoretical approach would never allow for a reconceptualization of the singer to take shape. One needs to use the voice in order to reflect on what it means for it to fail. So even when the migrainous skin is clammy and too sensitive to support another’s touch, theory and practice go hand in hand. They are in need of each other. Always.

12 AEC — European Association of Conservatoires, “EPARM 2021 — Keynote by Sandeep Bhagwati,” *YouTube*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Z4IGWF7Ydg>.

This oscillation between practice and reflection calls for its own distinct prose. Finding a way to build a linguistic bridge between both aspects proves to be especially crucial in the context of a study on voice. As a singer, writing lyrics, language has always been a fundamental part of my artistic medium. When the need for a reflective new way of writing announced itself, I wondered whether it was necessary for these texts to take on an entirely different tone. Writing lyrics is a highly personal process. However, these words always keep a universal ring to them. Music transports language into a sonic heterotopy, where the audience relates easily, carried away by rhythmicity and melody. The combination of music and text allows for the words to take on a different dimension. Writing theoretical reflections, I feel the need to introduce that dimension; lifting, balancing, amplifying, or neutralizing my words, whenever called for. I cannot simply write a matter-of-fact theoretical text. My body is curling in pain, and I have no intention of jumping over it in search for a composed and rational discourse. Neither would an autobiography or memoir do, for it is crucial to remain critical, to think ahead, and not merely to fall back on memory when lamenting bodily misery.¹³ In fact, the chapters to come argue against life-writing genres like the autobiography or the migraine diary, precisely because they claim to reveal the *essence of a self* by constructing a migrainous identity. I don't believe such a practice is relevant, for in the dimmed light of migraine the self slowly fades into the abstract. Instead, I wish to argue for the exact opposite of such a construction of identity. Through the artistic practice of capturing the failing voice, I approach migraine through a disintegration of the voice and a deconstruction of the subject.

To do so, I turn to autotheory, because it allows me to generate a dialogue between personal reflections (auto-) and an academic discourse (theory). These writings, with tentacles and tongues reaching into various fields and disciplines, call for an

13 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021), 15.

autotheoretical voice because the genre, as Canadian philosopher Lauren Fournier suggests,

seems a particularly appropriate term for works that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects. [...] Autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation, just as feminist artists and scholars have long argued.¹⁴

Autotheory not only bridges disciplines, it also offers a performative way of writing in which the self is not reconstructed from memory but is constantly evolving and establishing itself through discourse.¹⁵ It is “a site of becoming,” Fournier points out, “of subject formation — it is an ongoing process that produces the conditions of possibility for recognition, understanding, and difference.”¹⁶ By making use of autotheory, I find a way to constantly rewrite myself back into being when the body is beaten and the mind numb and undone. I reflect while always remaining in close connection to the corporeality of the lived experience. Writing autotheory, Fournier continues, is “a self-conscious way of engaging with theory”¹⁷ and “a method of using the body’s experience to develop knowledge.”¹⁸

In the writings that follow, I constantly shift between personal experiences, written in the first person, and more distant reflections on *the migraine sufferer*, written in the third. This alternation between points of view mirrors my constantly moving in and out of migrainous episodes; at times consumed by it,

14 Ibid., 2–3.

15 Ibid., 16.

16 Ibid., 68.

17 Ibid., 7.

18 Ibid., 25.

at others able to study it with clearheaded efficacy. It also offers me the possibility of taking a step back when the fear for narcissistic tendencies befalls me, which is a danger lurking in every endeavor to turn oneself into a theoretical source. All too often I felt blameworthy of navel-gazing and pointless me-search and many times I have wondered whether it was actually true that the more specifically personal you make something, the more chance it had to resonate universally. But by framing autotheory as a feminist practice, Fournier has urged me to lay to rest my fear for self-absorbed irrelevance:

Feminist artists continually face the charge of narcissism when they incorporate themselves in direct ways into their work (and feminists themselves are not immune from launching such critiques). One of the reasons why work by women and artists of color is particularly vulnerable to charges of narcissism is that women and racialized people have been historically overdetermined by their bodies — in contrast, always, to the supposedly neutral standard of the white, cis-gender man. With the leftover hold of Cartesian dualisms, this tends to lead to the bias (unconscious or otherwise) that women are *either* intelligent and critical or embodied and sexual; philosophically savvy or naively navel-gazing.¹⁹

Indeed, it is an illusion that keeping one's distance is crucial for achieving relevance. Quite the opposite is true. There is no way to speak about illness without acknowledging its presence. There is no way around this body, for it will not move when it is in pain. The power a specific embodied experience holds is not to shift *the particular* into *the universal*, Fournier argues, but rather to "turn a mirror to society, to show it to itself."²⁰ This is, of course, what art is offering the world as well.

The mirror presented by autotheory inspires self-awareness instead of narcissism. Fournier emphasizes the difference:

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

[There is a] distinction between “narcissism,” on the one hand, and “self-awareness” on the other, the two being, by the logic of this statement, mutually exclusive. In contrast to the uncritical narcissist, lacking in cognizant self-reflexivity (narcissism as a literal reflection: Narcissus dumbly gazing at his own image in the pool), is the self-aware person. By being conscious of what they are doing, the person who is self-aware is a different animal from the person who is not aware of their self-looking — namely, the narcissist.²¹

This repetitive circular motion between the self and theory not only marks these writings; it also introduces an important component of the migrainous artistic approach: iterativity. The artistic process behind this work follows a repetitive circular path, not unlike the migrainous loop that wavers between sickness and health. Keep in mind that there is no escaping this migrainous circuit. One cannot break it, one can hardly make sense of it; one can only return to it, over and over. According to Judith Butler, the process of iteration holds an important potential, which they explain in the context of gender performativity:

Through the reiteration of norms, sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the reconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which “sex” is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of “sex” into a potentially productive crisis.²²

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Routledge, 1993), 10.

In other words, the process of reiteration, constantly reentering migraine, reestablishes the experience but also offers the only possibility to destabilize it. By endlessly returning to it, something new arises, which “escapes or exceeds the norm,” potentially leading to a “productive crisis,” as Butler puts it. I am convinced that the potential of iteration also shows its value when translated to an artistic process. For this reason, iterativity is the foundation of my artistic endeavors. Concretely, this means that every time migraine announces itself, I turn to my artistic practice to leave a vocalic trace. Sometimes, these marks are small and insignificant; other times, they are more elaborate. But each time it is only the act of leaving the trace and of adding to the multitude that is of importance. It should be stressed that I do not aim for an artistic teleology that guides me toward overcoming or even comprehending this condition. Instead, I simply draw endless vocalic circles around the object, like a spiral that constantly starts anew, encircling, returning, endlessly repeating until the tiniest little shift engenders a new understanding or impulse. In this artistic cyclic motion of leaving vocalic traces, I search for the lived reality of migraine and voice, while being freed from meaning and freed from the aesthetic object, for nothing but the repetitive process matters, nothing else makes sense.

This iterative autotheoretical process defines my artistic practice and urges me to reach beyond my own voice in order to redefine the singer. Because attending to the voice when migraine announces itself makes me witness its failure. Slowly my vocalic capabilities disintegrate until my own voice disappears. In order to reconsider the singer when her vocal apparatus fails her, the necessity arises of combining sound art with visual art and installation art. Only by mixing different media a reconceptualization of the singer, the performance, and even the voice as such can truly take shape.

Chapters to Come: An Outline

In each chapter, I start by formulating a theoretical framework followed by a reflection on how these theoretical findings have shaped my artistic practice. Then, analyzing the artistic processes, new theoretical impulses are generated, guiding me toward the next chapter, in which a different theoretical framework is proposed. This way another loop is installed, a circle dance in which arts and theory cling to each other, ill at ease at first, yet thankful for this moment of intimacy.

In Chapters One through Four, the reader is systematically guided deeper into the migraine experience. With each chapter, the pain intensifies, the voice fails harder, and my physical reality imposes different artistic limitations. Taking these restrictions into account, each chapter proposes a new artistic methodology, developed according to my physical capabilities. In Chapter One, when the attack is rather mild, I am still able to use my own voice and to engage in a rather traditional compositional process. In Chapter Four, when the attack is raging at full force, only silence remains, and my artistic process is forced to redefine the voice as a silent object, soundlessly stared at as I hold it in my hands.

Chapter One attends to the voice as it fails due to migraine symptoms. It studies the voice when a vocal technical disintegration takes place, when the voice, tied to the bed, is missing from the public spheres and incapable of representing itself, when pain fights language and communication becomes obstructed, when migraine-specific symptoms alter the voice and when stigmatization shushes. In addition, this chapter introduces the necessity to search for an aesthetics of failure and aims at capturing the voice when it is chained to the bed. Turning to thinkers Elaine Scarry and Brandon LaBelle, this chapter addresses a few key questions: “How do migraine and voice relate? How to study this relationship? How to capture it artistically? How to register the failing voice? How to create an aesthetics of failure?” Still capable of using my own voice and of engaging in a compositional practice, the migrainous methodology of this chapter

results in the creation of the *Impulsive Incantations*, a quadrophonic audio installation.

In Chapter Two I turn to the field of disability studies to examine the value of life-writing and self-stories. Building on the work by Arthur Frank and Audre Lorde, I turn to the migraine diary in search for voice, while also attending to the problematic mechanisms embedded in these health journals. I rethink the concept of the diary through the artistic practice of borrowing language and borrowing voice as I create *A Borrowed Diary*, an audio installation consisting of a chorus of tiny speakers enveloping the listener. While borrowing the language and voice of others to capture my failing migraine voice, more questions arise: “What is all a voice can be? Could it be more than my own vocal cords? Could it be yours? Or the intersection of both, resonating in sync with the objects in the room?” I turn to new materialist understandings of voice that were proposed by Canadian thinker Lisa Mazzei to address these questions. Designated to an artistic practice in which I am no longer capable of using my own voice, another challenge arises: “How to define the singer when she is incapable of using her own vocal apparatus?”

In Chapter Three I explore the psychology of the migraineur and study the functionality of migraine in the life of the sufferer. Turning to concepts offered by psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and queer theorists like Jack Halberstam, I approach migraine as a language that communicates hidden emotional needs, conveying what cannot be put into words through bodily symptoms. I also elaborate on how to amplify this migrainous language as I translate arbitrary data into sound, through the creation of a headdress and performance tool called *The Migraine Margarine*. The core question of this chapter is: “How to turn migraine into a voice that sings in a language beyond the symbolic?”

In Chapter Four, I arrive at the core question: “What can the failing voice reveal about the nature of the voice?” In my attempt to approach this issue, I turn to the migraine voice

to address some fundamental concerns that lie at the heart of voice theory. Whenever confronted with the voice, will the listener pay attention to the sounding of the medium or will the medium be pushed to the back and merely operate as a carrier of meaning? Is there an alternative to this opposition? In order to theorize the voice, should it always be reduced to an abstract concept, separated from the speaking individual, or can the voice be studied without disregarding its uniqueness? What can the singer reveal about what it means to be voiced? And would it be possible to think a voice that is simultaneously singing and failing? First, I study conceptualizations of voice proposed by theorists Mladen Dolar, Adriana Cavarero, and Pauline LeVen and explore how the failing migraine voice relates to their findings. Then, inspired by the writings of Plato and Pauline LeVen, I introduce the cicada, a silent mythological embodiment of the voice, into my artistic practice. Soundlessly constructing this visual artwork out of plastic cicadas, entitled *Human Minus Body Equals Voice*, an important question returns: “How to define the singer when she is incapable of using her own vocal cords?” After addressing this question, I will build on philosopher Illit Ferber’s reflections on the qualities of lament to reintroduce the act of singing into my artistic practice. The voice returns, migraine has lifted, and we are back where we began.

Chapter Five breaks the iterative process of generating methodologies based on my physical capabilities. Instead, this chapter aims at locating the migraineur by questioning her relation to spatiality through the dialectics of outside and inside and introduces the materiality of the room as a source of imagination, by building on writings by philosopher Gaston Bachelard. The audio piece *A Sonic Study of Being through Illness and Isolation* was created during the pandemic, aimed at projecting my personal project into a wider context by asking: “How can my migrainous artistic methodologies become valuable in the context of a collective health crisis? How to attend artistically to the shifting of a self when it is subjected to illness and isolation? How to introduce these dynamic transformations into my sonic

study and give voice to the existential and spatial changes that take place over the course of the migraine attack?”

The final chapter reflects on how these artistic practices could be presented to an audience. I elaborate on the various audio installations that together constitute the migraine opera *Cripur Cripour* (2022). I argue for my decision to create this opera and how, along the way, the idea of a bombastic spectacle evolved into a *nonperformance*. More concretely, the work took shape as an exhibition consisting of several sound installations that ran at Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent, from February until July 2022. Yet today it resonates on in the format of this (audio)book.

Concluding these writings, I take a step back to reflect on the concept of artistic research and articulate how these general findings translated to my work. I study how external elements, like the context of presentation, influence the methodologies of the artistic researcher and argue for the generosity that *dissemination as method* implies. Then, I concretize these findings by shedding a light on how my physical reality demanded a redefinition of the singer and an exploration of the boundaries of performance.

At the end of this introduction, the need arises to apologise to my fellow migraineurs. This work undoubtedly falls short. Most certainly, I have failed to touch on what needed to be touched, to gently stroke the face, there, where the pain was most intense and to support the neck when it needed to find rest. These writings and vocalities take aural notice of experiences that were no other than my own. Other migraineurs might relate to some, others to none, of the phenomena mentioned here.

Migraine has many faces.

For this reason, I wish to look at what lies beyond migraine, make note of its consequences, turn to the residue: an acid stain on the carpet that transforms into a woolly eye whose gaze I constantly sense upon me and which morphs into a mouth that raves in a language I do not understand. Click click click, this tongue goes. Click click click, in disapproval. I do not argue with it. I have given up. I cannot win. We simply don't see eye to eye

(oh, it morphed again). Unless it lets me hide inside its gaping hole (ah, a mouth again) and swallows me lispily like a snake does its own tail; the beginning devotedly devouring the end. I dote on it. I don't outgrow it. And secretly, I relish in being shushed, a hissing silence where not a single sound appears out of tune.

The Voice Is Failing

The Voice Is Collapsing: A Technical Disintegration

Migraine is the third most prevalent illness in the world, affecting up to eleven percent of the population.¹ This neurological syndrome comes in different shapes and shadows: violent one-sided headaches that drone their way through cheeks, teeth, necks, and limbs or a florid nausea erupting into a flux of emesis, auras, and other visual disturbances, hallucinations of all sorts, aphasia and word-finding deficits, abnormal bodily sensations, temporal distortions, disturbances of identity, mood fluctuations, and inexplicable fears.² These symptoms form the constellation of an intriguing migraine universe. One can suffer sporadically from one of these or be chronically impaired by all of them.

When migraine enters, my body is reduced to an immovable lump of misery, an asexual blob of being without strength or focus. Unable to leave the bed or tilt the head, the sounding of a voice is all that's left. But, unavoidably, this voice is heav-

1 European Brain Council, "Disease Fact Sheets: Migraine," <https://www.braincouncil.eu/disease-fact-sheets/>.

2 Richard Restak, "Alice in Migraineland," *Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain* 46, no. 2 (2006): 308–9.

ily impacted by a syndrome that strikes with such great force. Abducted from its surroundings, silenced by pain, and jumbled by migraine-specific symptoms, the voice resonates in adjusted volumes, is tuned to an accustomed timbre, and is forced into tempered *talkativity*. As a migraine-suffering singer, I witness and experience these alterations. Frequently, routinely and almost faithfully, I retreat to my blackened bedroom when migraine manifests. Lying in silence, I notice how little of my vocal instrument remains intact and how distorted our relation becomes under these circumstances. When respiration is dominated by a flux of pain and vomit rather than a controlled movement of the diaphragm, all vocal technicalities are undone and morph into something more urgent, more immediate, more direct. This thin sheet of muscle between the thorax and the abdomen is now subjected to my bodily needs, instead of some composer's idiolect. Intrigued by the aesthetics of a failing voice in a failing body, I wonder what failure might teach us about the nature of the voice.

This chapter touches upon the impact of migraine on the voice. By focusing on the specific area of the vocal and the sonant I project the issue into a broader context of language, speech, and communication. First, I seek the migraineur's missing voice, muted and silenced by society. Then, I witness the faltering and failing of the voice due to the impact of intense physical pain, and I attend to the voice as it is molded and manipulated by migraine-specific symptoms. I argue for the potential of these disruptions in expanding our understanding of the voice by studying these deficiencies on a theoretical level in order to amplify them and make them resonate through my artistic practice as a migraining singer.

The Voice Is Missing: A Social Silence

Multiple times a week a hypersensitivity of the senses announces the onset of my troubles. The rattling rhythm of life becomes an unendurable commotion and temporary isolation proves to be inevitable. Slowly my body in pain slips into a void of torment.

For hours, even days, I retreat into the dark, shielded by silence and solitude. In this perverse heterotopy, trapped in passivity, I wait and endure. Eventually, I know, the torture will alleviate and the aversion abate. Migraines don't kill and when the sky clears after all its rumble and tumult, the body is still intact and the mind all the more focused. Life continues and I healthily return to my daily routine. The plausibility of another attack, however, is inescapable and ever-looming. I therefore constantly maneuver between the holes and navigate around the craters, as I make my way from what Susan Sontag calls "the kingdom of the well" to "the kingdom of the sick" and back:

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.³

The chronically ill permanently belong to both lands. In a way, even more so than for example the asthmatic or the rheumatic, the migraine sufferer truly lives a nomadic life. In an almost ritualistic manner she trudges between these two worlds—a ceremonial procession that goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Health induces sickness and only sickness will lead her back to health. She oscillates, fluctuates, pendulates, and is fated to live in constant adaptation to an ever-changing state of wellbeing. To her, neither sickness nor health can be considered the norm, and neither provide a trustworthy shelter she could occupy long enough to acclimatize or settle, she buries her passports and resigns herself to inhabit the borderlands. From this new *head-quarters* she witnesses migraine's daily spectacle and faces its ongoing battle between polarities: pain and comfort, desperation and inspiration, screams and silences, vomit and virtue.

3 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), 3.

The migraineur embodies these contradictions — all of them, all at once. But this inconsistent behavior is not easily understood by a bystander who is blissfully ignorant to the complexities of the migrainous wonderland. The sufferer appears, disappears, then reappears, unannounced, an unreliable presence. This alternating between extremities differentiates migraine from other chronic impairments and unavoidably raises doubt in the minds of her witnesses. Whenever she feels an attack approaching, she rushes to find shelter in order silently to suffer in solitary. Without anyone to see her hands, her hair, and her morale covered in sweat and bitter bile, her torment remains hidden and therefore never irrefutable: “to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt,”⁴ literary scholar Elaine Scarry rightfully suggests as she points to the unshareability of this sentience that happens deeply hidden in the innermost parts of our being.

The world watches the migraine sufferer with Argus eyes. People not only question the sincerity and severity but are also often incapable of accepting migraine’s inescapable recurrence and the lack of agency on the part of the sufferer, who cannot prevent another relapse. Again and again, the migraineur will be told that it is due to her own actions that migraine struck again. The advice given by oblivious benefactors on how to avoid another attack (eat less, eat more, sleep less, sleep more, don’t drink, don’t be so stressed, don’t walk under a willow tree, etc.) is endless and should not be considered innocent. Whoever fails to abide these diktats is susceptible to being blamed for provoking her own sufferings.

This intrusive stream of advice, which I call the *tyranny of temperance*, is a phenomenon that can be traced back to the 4th century BCE, when Socrates, as described by Plato, was consulted by Charmides, a young man suffering from recurring headaches, seeking a cure. Socrates offers the remedy of “a kind of leaf, which required to be accompanied by a charm, and if a person would repeat the charm at the same time that he used

4 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

the cure, he would be made whole; but that without the charm the leaf would be of no avail.”⁵ Socrates goes on: “these charms are fair words; and by them temperance is implanted in the soul, and where temperance is, there health is speedily imparted, not only to the head, but to the whole body.”⁶ Socrates never mentions the exact words of the charm and what follows is a long dialogue on the virtue of temperance. Could it be that with this charm Plato was referring to an ancient Greek expulsive incantation, a chant that needed to be sung in order to drive out the migraine from the sufferer’s body?

The Greeks believed that a person suffering from migraines was possessed by the half-headed migraine demoness, Antaura, who was said to rise from the sea, roaring like a hind and shouting like a cow, to come and occupy the sufferer’s body. For the demoness to be exorcized and the migraine to lift, an amulet was to be worn and an expulsive incantation to be sung repetitively.⁷ But the expulsive incantation and the personification of migraine in a hysteric hellion raises some concerns. Socrates advises temperance as the main cure for migraine headache. Interestingly though, the half-headed demoness is the embodiment of quite the opposite of the virtue of temperance: Antaura is an over-emotional, erratic woman, who needs to be expelled from the body in order to end the pain.

This resonates with the fact that migraine sufferers are all too often blamed, even by themselves, for provoking their own suffering due to a lack of temperance, sobriety, self-control, and moderateness. Even when the migraineur’s days are dominated by the attempt to avoid all triggers, she is held accountable when she fails to do so. Needless to say, when migraine arrives, guilt follows. The tyranny of temperance silences the sufferer, for whenever she speaks in order to find compassion, she is met with an exposé of her own wrongdoings. Her proclamations

5 Plato, *Charmides*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West. (Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 3.

6 Ibid., 4.

7 Allie Barb, “Antaura: The Mermaid and the Devil’s Grandmother: A Lecture,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29, no. 1 (1966): 2–3.

of pain and desperation are echoed by *did you nots*, *have you nots*, and *did you forgets*. The sufferer not only believes these accusations, but even wallows in them, because it is not only the bystander who is incapable of accepting utter powerlessness. If the migraines are due to her own faulty behavior, then, at least, she can cling to the illusion of being capable of changing her own fate. But in taking the blame, one loses the right to lament one's own pain. The tyranny of temperance turns victims into accomplices.

It is not only this bombardment of blame that silences the sufferer. Her intermittent disappearances from the public space eventually enclose her in social muteness. When migraines hit in rapid pace, the migraineur flees into the protective arms of isolation. Here she is shielded from the sounds of society, the smells of the living, and the sights of all there is to be seen. She rejects it all, because at this moment, existence is the trigger of her torment. When retreated in this secluded black box, removed from life and the living, it is not merely the body that goes missing, the voice too has withdrawn from the public sphere. Absent from meetings, gatherings, social affairs, protests, and manifestations, the voice can no longer represent itself. During these days of truancy, one cannot meet the standards of productivity, imposed by a society, in which efficiency is a virtue. In her lecture "My Body Is a Prison of Pain So I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically," Korean American contemporary artist, vocalist, and writer Johanna Hedva suggests that this is a silent failing, which makes it "impossible to be heard or be visible in any traditional capacity as a political being."⁸ A chronically ill person herself, she argues that "everywhere in our discourse on illness, trauma, grieving, and pain is the notion of moving on and getting over it. Getting back to work is what keeps the capitalist patriarchy

8 wccw, "My Body Is a Prison of Pain So I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically," *Vimeo*, November 5, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/144782433>.

going, so silence, denial, and erasure are necessary.”⁹ This muteness, enhanced by a medical hierarchy of almighty doctors versus patients in need, is problematic to the migraineur, who so frequently fails to be productive due to a condition that is invisible, mysterious, and insoluble.

The migrainous singer challenges the tyranny of temperance by the very fact that her voice does not give in to its forced principles of behavior. The self-restraint and passivity, constantly demanded from the migraineur, are counteracted by the act of singing, of producing sound even though she’d better lie still in silence, for phonophobia makes the sufferer overly sensitive to all sounds and noises, and singing only intensifies the pain. In that sense, all migrainous vocalizations become a masochistic portrayal of productivity, a product of a seemingly infertile soil, eroding the lands even more. Recordings of the sufferings of an invisible voice will function as a proof of existence, locating the missing voice. However, these chants are never truly capable of providing an adequate answer to the social muteness the migraineur encounters.

The Voice Is Floundering: A Communicative Complication

In order to find adequate treatment, the sufferer needs to make the world aware of her torment. But during these painful black-outs all coherence seems lost, all sense of temporality damaged, and all desire for language destroyed. When the attack hits and the migraineur retreats in her darkened fortress, she finds herself in an untellable and therefore unshareable situation. As Scarry suggests, pain resists being verbalized and even tends to actively destroy language. Pain occupies the brain and “causes an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”¹⁰ In the attempt to describe her sufferings, the migraineur stammers and falls silent. She grunts and groans but fails to name her pain.

9 Ibid.

10 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

Physical pain eradicates all but itself, and so the sufferer can only raise her voice to fire a primordial howl in the hope of making her inner torment known. The scream, as an outcry of agony, will expel the pain from the body and announce it to the world. As Brandon LaBelle suggests in *Lexicon of the Mouth*, the propagation of pain by a voice that has been raised usually exceeds the volume of normal conversation in order to be perceptible. It is loud because it needs to be heard.¹¹ The migrainous outcry, however, does not succeed in bellowing above the buzzing of common conference. Due to phonophobia, the migraineur fails to shout out her sufferings. The sound of her own voice hollering would only severe the pain substantially and her aversion of loudness will consequently keep her still. Her torment is merely suggested in sighs and soundless moaning and her search for help can only start when migraine has melted away.

In the hope of breaking the cycle, she consults countless doctors and many specialists. But hardly any migraine sufferer is capable of seeking medical treatment when fully consumed by an attack, as hospitals with flickering lights and noisy waiting rooms become inhospitable and must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, she can only speak about her suffering in retrospect, making a reconstruction of her maladies while being in good health, only to be frowned upon suspiciously by yet another doctor seemingly in doubt. He too acknowledges the challenges of speaking about pain. Well aware of the communicational divide that needs to be bridged, he proposes to having her express the severity of her ache through the indication of a number from zero (no pain) to five (as if she were on fire). Without having any experience of the latter, she politely points at number *four* but returns to the privacy of her bedroom unheard and unhealed.

According to Scarry, the difficulty of verbalizing physical pain lies in the fact that pain lacks “intentionality” or “aboutness.” This private and hidden sentience does not refer to any object perceivable in our shared world. Mid-attack, we are trig-

11 Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and Oral Imaginary* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 45–48.

gered by many sensations. We see the sun as she punctures our secluded black box. We hear the rumble and stumble downstairs. We smell the bile as it exits the body, desire the migraine to lift and fear its return. We would like to describe our pain as we describe what we see, hear, smell, desire, or fear, but find ourselves unable to. Unlike pain, all of these sensations refer to a perceptible object in the external world. We easily illustrate their features like size and color, but pain lacks such referential content.

We often turn to the linguistic structure of the metaphor to compensate for this absence. Our imagination becomes an essential tool to help us speak of what we feel inside in terms of what is perceptible around us. Scarry points out that in the attempt to describe our pain we turn to two kinds of metaphors.¹² The first type is the weapon metaphor, an external pain-giving agent or object inflicts pain on the body by attacking it from the outside: “The devil hit me” or “I’ve got a hammering headache.” The second type of metaphor depicts bodily damage that isn’t really there: “It feels as if my skull has been scattered to pieces.” These *metaphors of agency* might be a very fruitful first attempt to restore the communicative bridge but we nonetheless need to use them with some caution. In his beautiful migraine diary *A Brain Wider Than the Sky* Andrew Levy argues that the frequent use of metaphors might be problematic, because they don’t really tell the truth. They convey a sense of “visceral unease”¹³ but no one — neither sufferer nor non-sufferer — really knows how it feels to have your brain sliced up or to find your hair on fire. Because of its effect, the metaphor, he argues, is perceived to be a *nearly correct* illustration, while it is misleadingly *incorrect*. In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson substantiate this argument by stating that “a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsis-

12 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 15.

13 Andrew Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 51.

ent with that metaphor.”¹⁴ Metaphors of agency, Scarry observes, only describe the attributes of pain and not the actual sensation.¹⁵ It is crucial to keep this in mind.

In the hope of freeing the migraine metaphor from this conservative armed occupation, Levy seeks to repair and improve the overly used and much too concrete imagery. He introduces us to *Migraineland* by searching for a metaphor that could touch upon the “disrupted sensibility”¹⁶ of the migraine sufferer and approximate what it is actually like to have a migraine. Here are some of his attempts: “Hell, even my own breathing feels like a chainsaw to me” or “I’m the crash in between the two cymbals. Rather, my head is the crash my ears are making. If that makes any sense” or “Someone crying but trying not to because crying makes it worse.”¹⁷ As language is expanding, almost disintegrating, we notice Levy’s metaphors becoming less concrete and more nonsensical, but no less effective. The contrary might be true, these metaphors might bring us closer to what it really means to have a migraine. At the onset of an attack, even before the pain becomes unbearable, the migraineur feels dazed and distant. Deprived of her sagacity and eloquence she is left unable to express herself properly. She jabbers incoherently as the aphasic phantom enters the scene. And so it might not be the concrete metaphor of agency that keeps the gate to Migraineland ajar. It is the deconstruction of metaphor by the expansion of language that escorts us into the scenes where confusion is king and pain his golden ring. We accompany the migraineur as she fuses into the abstract and eventually witness her muteness, for Levy even concludes by stating that “maybe the language of migraine isn’t really language at all. It’s language disappearing. [...] Maybe the language of migraine is silence.”¹⁸

14 George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 10.

15 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 17.

16 Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky*, 52.

17 *Ibid.*, 51–52.

18 *Ibid.*, 55.

Levy's intentions were to improve the metaphor as a communicational tool. The expressive qualities of the metaphor improve as language expands, but when the pain becomes too intense, language starts to decompose until nothing but silence is left. Although this linguistic development might be able to lead us somehow into the migrainous craters, it remains after all an inward motion. In the end, the body in pain is left speechless and isolated. In "When Language Runs Dry," American doctor David Biro stresses the need to find an alternative to this muteness.¹⁹ He acknowledges the metaphor as a powerful and essential apparatus but calls attention to another problematic aspect of the overused weapon metaphor: When we use a metaphor too often, it loses its suggestive powers. No visceral discomfort bubbles up when one hears about a *banging* or a *hammering* headache. These terms could easily be substituted by expressions like *severe* or *terrible*. For this reason, we constantly need to reinvent and revive our external references. Literature, poetry, art, and even music might help us do so, he claims. In the midst of misery, it is not silence that awaits the sufferer but the ingenious prose and pictures of the great writers and artists of our times. Biro is convinced that literature and art should be borrowed in order to mediate the silent gaps. The words of literary migraineurs like Lewis Carroll, Haruki Murakami, and Emily Dickinson, and paintings by artists like Giorgio de Chirico might shed a whole new light on the migrainous black box and reshape the understanding of our own pain and sufferings. When Carroll describes his migrainous episodes as a journey through an absurdist wonderland, or when Murakami illustrates his auras by depicting them as little people entering the house to mess with the television, or when Dickinson compares the ritualistic characteristics of her recurring headaches to a ceremonial funeral procession, a much more nuanced and layered image appears. Borrowing metaphors from the great lit-

19 David Biro, "When Language Runs Dry: Pain, Imagination and Metaphor in Dimensions of Pain," in *Humanities and Social Science Perspective*, ed. Lisa F. Käll (Routledge, 2017), 13–25.

erary writers and artists will help us reshape and renew our pain communication.²⁰

Not every patient, however, feels the urge to look for solace in literature. This suggestion might work for some, but is inaccessible to others. And although it seems that, at times, metaphors might provide a helpful tool in counteracting the solitude of silence, in the end all metaphors do fall short, because they are always but a description, circling and never touching the core. For this reason, the use of such language in the sphere of illness has been debated extensively. In *Illness as Metaphor* essayist Susan Sontag famously states the following: “[T]he most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.”²¹ She reminds us that the usage of metaphoric language might not only stigmatize the ill, but might lead the patient away from the physical facts, which could have a negative impact on the search for proper medical treatment.

Perhaps the only metaphor truly touching the heart of migraine is not to be found in a linguistic construct but rather in the silent ritual the sufferer performs during her procession from sickness to health and back. The migraine metaphor lies in the ever-recurring maneuvers made in order to delay the inevitable and in the repeated routine performed in pursuance of relief during times of torment. The notion that rituals (even the ones that are casual, personal, and unconscious) hold a metaphorical quality is proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, who stress their relevance: “Each ritual is a repeated, coherently structured, and unified aspect of our experience. In performing them, we give structure and significance to our activities, minimizing chaos and disparity in our actions.”²² Rituals help the sufferer in structuring the migrainous chaos in which all sense of time and space otherwise threatens to get lost. The significance of these rituals becomes even more apparent when Lakoff and Johnson

20 Ibid., 23.

21 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 3.

22 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 233–34.

state that, “there can be no coherent view of the self without personal ritual (typically of the casual and spontaneously emerging sort).”²³ In the context of illness, rituals become a way to reconstruct a coherent sense of self when this sense of self threatens to disappear in the turmoil caused by pain and isolation. For this reason, I believe the most adequate migraine metaphor is not to be found in any verbal expression but in the ritualistic performance, provoked by the condition itself.

As language fails, the ritual of singing when suffering could replace the metaphor. The act of recording the voice could become part of a ceremonious routine, otherwise merely consisting of painkillers, coffees, and showers at fixed hours. The failing of language looms in the notion that the essence of these vocal recordings does not lie in a description or metaphoric representation of the migraine symptoms, but in something that resonates beyond what is evidently verbalized. For this reason, I choose to record my voice upon entering the migrainous caves.

The Voice Is Modified: A Migraine-specific Impact

Not only pain or social muteness leave the sufferer silenced; migraine itself molds and manipulates the voice. It pulls at the vocal cords and makes lips and tongues slip and splutter, consequently radically reshaping the soundings that escape the oral cavity. This impact on the migraineur’s vocality ranges from mild stutterings due to disruptions of concentration to complete and unsolicited silences. Menstrual migraines are accompanied by menstrual dysphonia. During the premenstrual period, the voice may sound breathy, constrained, lower in pitch, and much softer due to hoarse voice and vocal fatigue.²⁴ In some cases, when the attack occurs, poor articulation or dysarthria appears.²⁵ The sufferer awkwardly stutters and stumbles in her

²³ Ibid., 235.

²⁴ Anna Karpf, *The Human Voice* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 170.

²⁵ Klaus Podoll and Derek Robinson, *Migraine Art: The Migraine Experience from Within* (North Atlantic Books, 2008), 295–96.

attempt to speak. The episode is often also accompanied by a lack of focus, a muddling of the brain, and with this cloudiness comes *lapsus linguae*. Freud, himself a migraineur, stated: “[S]lips of tongue do indeed occur most frequently when one is tired or has a headache, or feels an attack of migraine coming on.”²⁶ And so, the tongue has become slippery and slurry, and, in some cases, these spoonerisms might turn into real mumbo jumbo. Some migraineurs are affected by fluent aphasia. Words pour out of their mouths, but they make no sense. We hear nothing but gibberish and meaningless blabber. A person suffering from amnesic aphasia fails at naming objects. She might point at a pillow and describe it as a soft square to put one’s head on. She recognizes the object and is well aware of its function but does not succeed in calling it by its name.²⁷ When expressive aphasia is manifested, a paresthesia of the lips and tongue takes place. Due to this dysfunction of oral and vocal muscles, the sufferer is left unable to speak. She finds herself attempting to talk but no words follow.²⁸

The occurrence of aphasia, a condition which deprives the sufferer of her capacity to communicate by disrupting her ability to write, speak, or understand language, causes the voice to shift from sense to nonsense and is an intriguing phenomenon in the context of migraine. It appears often as part of an aura, right before the onset of the headache, but it may as well last all through the attack. When we look at Ilit Ferber’s interpretation of Sigmund Freud’s book *On Aphasia*, we learn that aphasic utterings could be considered expressions of pain.²⁹ These voicings of the failing and floundering of language substitute the scream, she argues. In the context of migraine, this replacement of the loud by a modicum of mumblings is not hard to understand.

26 Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviere (Washington Square Press, 1920), 20.

27 Podoll and Robinson, *Migraine Art*, 295–96.

28 Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder* (University of California Press, 1985), 77.

29 Ilit Ferber, “A Wound Without Pain: Freud on Aphasia,” *Naharaim: A Journal of German Jewish Literature and Cultural History* 4 (2010): 142.

Due to the phonophobia, any extreme vocalization would only hurry the onset of the headache or increase its intensity. Could we then state that aphasic symptoms silence but also protect the sufferer by the faltering of her own voice? The migraineur's outcry of agony reverberates in the decomposition and disappearance of language. Any vociferous alternative would only drive her deeper into the arms of the migraine monster.

But then again, the lack of capacity for the meaningful has a dividing and disengaging effect. The disintegration of speech and the slipping into silence are undeniably isolating symptoms. The balderdash and the malarkey of the migraineur could therefore be considered a declaration of departure, a final foolish *encore*, a wonderfully unusual parting song clumsily sung, announcing the sufferer's retreat into temporary solitude. To the unsteady beat of a tongue that trips and lips that totter the migraineur marches back into her blackened cave and in the arms of the migraine monster she puts herself to rest. Quietly and in a strange but not uncommon moment of affection for the awful she calls the beast "Malitle Malofaly Malcridock," a nonsensical term of endearment only for his ears to understand.

So, whether caused by pain, a lack of focus, a neurological glitch, or an esophagus full of puke, nonsensical language is inherent to the migraine condition, leaving few sufferers unaffected by a certain amount of semantical incoherency. I am drawn to this uncontrolled blether-blathering, because I am not only convinced that these meaningless morphemes might indeed resonate in crooked harmony with the monotonous melodies of the migraine condition, but also believe that these *deficiencies* of the voice might somehow embody a potential to overcome the silence caused by pain, social muteness, and migraine-specific symptoms. Gibberish, just like any other form of nonsensical language, fails in the spheres of proper communication, but is central to what LaBelle calls our "oral imagination."³⁰ Instead of limiting speech to a strictly signifying purpose, the nonsensi-

30 LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth* 61.

cal, when being expelled from the body, functions as a vessel through which unconscious oral drives are expressed.

Might we hear in the nonsensical a manifestation of an oral poetics underlying speech in general? Is not the “noise” surrounding verbal articulations a sort of raw matter supporting rather than undermining our faculty of speech?³¹

LaBelle points to Julia Kristeva’s writings on the practice of signification. Kristeva argues that signification happens in the cohesion between symbolic speech, conveying a clear and meaningful message, and semiotic speech, “the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language.”³² It is precisely here that gibberish operates: in the tension between noise and meaning, the sounded and the semantic, corporeality and signification, not knowing and communication. Here, the voice tumbles and turns, flutters and flares, stumbles and stutters as it “reminds us of the potentiality promulgated in being an oral body.”³³

Sound poetry, as a spectacle of the nonsensical in an artistic context, also taps into this potentiality, as its corporeal dance gambols in the rift between body and language. Semiotic drives pour into the world through constellations of sounds and noises, possibly even mimicking the features of language but nonetheless freed from the dictatorship of a meaningful diction. LaBelle illustrates this magnificently:

Sound poetry, as gibberish stretching the mouth, aims for the operations of language, of the symbolic, by explicitly tracing over it, breathing into it, spitting on it and pulling it apart. In doing so, it pries open a gap on the terrain of sig-

³¹ Ibid.

³² Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (Routledge, 2004), 17.

³³ LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 62.

nification, it speaks through the oral imagination to rescue a disappeared voice.³⁴

Gibberish, sound poetry, and any sort of nonsensical language exceeds and overthrows the rules of proper communication, rules that unavoidably constitute what Butler calls *performativity*, which they describe as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”³⁵ It is a mechanism by which power maintains itself through language by the reproduction of norms. This mechanism might be outmaneuvered by an unconventional, eccentric, atypical stretching and bending of the mouth, conveying meaning beyond the sensical and straight into the spheres of sentiment. As LaBelle suggests: “Is not sound poetry, as that arena for extending the operations of the voice, calling forth a ‘right to speech’ often undermined by powers of language? [...] And in doing so, expanding the public sphere toward that of the outcast or the underspoken.”³⁶

As a mumbling migraining singer, I am fascinated by the emancipatory potential of the meaningless and intrigued by these outpourings of gibberish. I imagine how my own migrainous nonsense could turn into sound poems and lyrics based on nothing but the material poetics of a failing voice in a failing body. “Black, blackening, black, becoming black, blackened, black”: the words stumble to the beat of a rumbling stomach and gradually turn into a gagging noise: “Bbllak Bbllk Bllllllkkkkk.” These poetic guidelines for gagging are composed by a nauseous body and turn the verge of vomiting into a nonsensical ballad.

But there are more settings, some of them bordering an artistic scenery, in which the potential of the meaningless is manifested. After revealing the emancipatory ability of sound poetry, LaBelle in the same breath reminds us of the unifying power

34 Ibid., 65.

35 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Routledge, 1993), xii.

36 LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 71.

of spells and incantations.³⁷ These magic words, frequently used in the context of healing, are often but a line of syllables, and although we don't actually understand the *hocus pocus* and the *abracadabra*, their collective relatability is nonetheless undeniable. As with sound poetry, the meaning of these chanted spells and incantations bypasses what is intellectually comprehensible and moves straight into the realm of the bodily and the emotional. These semiotic effluxes outflank the semantic monoc-racy of meaning, directly to land in the spheres of sentiment. Therefore they might not only be helpful in relocating the voice that was lost in pain, neurological hindrances, or vocal technical limitations, but they might also possess the potentiality of resonating beyond the bedridden bunker.

This allows me to return to Antaura and the migrainous expulsive incantations of the Ancient Greeks and point out that a singer's tendency toward vocality and tonality in the context of pain and illness is not at all uncommon. The cry-out for help and healing has a long tradition of being chanted or sung. Over time, countless sufferers have turned toward shamanistic rituals and self-healing chants in the hope of finding treatment and relief. These magical formulae meant to provoke a healing effect through chant. The half-headed demoness was to be expelled from the body through the repetitive singing of the words:

Antaura came out of the sea. She shouted like a hind and cried out like a cow. Artemis of Ephesos met her (saying) "Antaura, where are you going?" (Antaura): "Into the half-part of the head." (Artemis) "No, do not go into the [half-part of the head]." ³⁸

Interestingly, Chrisopher Faroane discovers in these incantations some sort of a talking cure, he explains:

37 Ibid., 51.

38 Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae* (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993), 60.

[T]he indwelling demon is interrogated, upbraided, placed under oath and then commanded to leave the host body. The result is a forced conversation, [...] in which demons are forced to reveal their names and powers, often protesting that they are being mistreated.³⁹

The Voice Is Muted: A Stigmatizing Shush

These nursery rhyme-like incantations, sung in sync with the misery of migraine and with roots deeply embedded in the oral tradition, are plausibly the oldest example and the most authentic amplification of migrainous vocal music. Nonetheless, a few concerns come to mind with our half-headed demoness. As mentioned before, migraine is personified by a hysteric woman that needs to be shushed and expelled at once.

With three times more women suffering from migraine, migraine wears a female face. Half a face. A face that reads frigidity, frailty, negligence, unwillingness, unavailability, fakery, and fantasy. It is a face that lacks a body. A body to be desired. An asexual blob of being, failing the duties that come with womanhood. Erratic. Uptight. Eager and anxious. Restless and reckless. Countless connotations rendering her to be nothing but a beaming compromise. And so, she compromises and settles for less. Less than all and less than enough. She compromises and settles for a draw. Then draws the line on which to balance safe and sound. She compromises her spaces into nothing places where she can be unseen and unsung. She compromises and compensates until all exuberance fuses into the abstract. And the abstract is her home.

Yet, the migraine sufferer's exuberance should not be trapped in temperance. She should not be held accountable when she chooses to shift sobriety into spontaneity and when she refuses to mitigate her moods. Instead of aiming for a mere exclu-

39 Christopher Faraone, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.

sion or banishment of this ever-recurring “night-side of life,”⁴⁰ one might learn how to navigate the darkness and maneuver the dusk, how to master the migraine language or at times just accommodate to living lost in translation. For this reason, I propose the substitution of the expulsive by the impulsive incantation, as I am convinced that through the latter a much more nuanced and genuine sound of the migraine condition will resonate. Without ignoring its functionality or minimizing its misery, the *Impulsive Incantations* could give a voice to all that migraine is. They could facilitate a dialogue between opposite forces as they aim at serenading migraine in its entire conflicting complexity.

Notes from a Logbook: Toward an Aesthetics of Failure

Now it is time to turn to my artistic practice and shape these theoretical talks into tension, tonality, and tempo. The main aspiration of this first chapter was to shed a light on a few prominent questions: How do migraine and voice relate? How to study this relationship? How to capture it artistically? I began by turning to the artistic tactics that were familiar to me as a singer; I wrote lyrics and created musical pieces. Out of this first artistic impulse, three songs originated before I arrived at the *Impulsive Incantations*. First, I wrote the lyrics to *Tyranny of Temperance*, a song of which the lyrics reflect on this mitigating mechanism. Without any clear artistic view or conceptual framework, I composed and produced music to the words. The *Tyranny of Temperance* proved to be a first and spontaneous artistic attempt to study the relation between migraine and voice, and it never pretended to be more than an impromptu experiment to test the waters. Writing these lyrics, it was also the first time I brought myself to reflect on what migraine means to me. With this piece, the necessity for a personal approach became apparent.

A second composition was based on the impossibility of searching for an adequate migraine metaphor. In *My Dolly Hit*

40 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 1.

Me, a clear and comprehensible metaphor disintegrates as the music progresses. The lyrics focus mainly on the difficulty of pain communication through metaphor and was constructed out of a multiplicity of metaphors I compiled by reading and talking to other migraine sufferers. Migraine, however, not only infiltrates the lyrics; several symptoms are also represented in the music of the song. We hear an extreme crescendo of a high-pitched ringing tone, which captures the upcoming malaise during the start of an attack. The drums rumble and, slowly, becoming more and more chaotic, they capture the pulsating quality of the pain that gradually takes over the sufferer's consciousness. The short and glitchy sounds portray the hypersensitivity of the sufferer to all sounds and noises, a sensation that becomes worse as the attack evolves. As the piece unfolds, it roughly aligns with the course of an attack. The voice gradually becomes less and less intelligible until, swallowed by the aggressive soundscape that reaches a catharsis toward the end of the piece and the voice fully disappears.

Representing migraine symptoms through musical parameters felt like quite an evident approach. At least, it was my first impulse when attempting to build the bridge between my artistic practice and this medical condition. I shared this impulse with composer Richard Wagner, who also turned to the compositional strategy of representation when attempting to capture his own migraine symptoms in *Siegfried*, of the second opera in his cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: "At present my nervous system resembles a pianoforte very much out of tune and on that instrument I am expected to produce *Siegfried*. Well, I fancy the strings will break at last. And then there will be an end. We cannot alter it; it is a life fit for a dog,"⁴¹ Wagner wrote in a letter to his colleague Franz Liszt. In the same breath, he referred to his migraines as the "main plague of his life," neurologists

41 Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, *Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt: Erster–Zweiter Band (1841–1853, 1854–1861)* (Breitkopf & Härtel, 1887).

Anna, Carl, and Hartmut Göbel point out.⁴² In another paper they mention that during the 1860s a tinker established himself opposite of Wagner's house.⁴³ The sound of endless heavy hammering must have been headache-inducing to the already severely suffering composer. This event, perverse as it might seem, served as a source of inspiration for the opening act of *Siegfried*. During the overture, the music slowly rises, imitating the onset of an attack. The rhythm becomes pulsating, like a throbbing headache. We see a tinker forging a sword by hammering hard on it. As the neurologists point out, this is both a musical and a visual metaphor for the migraine headaches. At the height of this build-up, the tinker sings "Compulsive Plague! Pain without end!"⁴⁴ lamenting the migraines triggered by his own ear-splitting and therefore pain-inducing work. The man is forging a sword for his foster son, Siegfried. The boy is fearless, the sentiment is unknown to him, and precisely because of this lack, he might be the only person capable of slaying the dragon, Fafner. The third scene starts by the tinker describing this dragon. His portrayal of flames flickering and flashing easily coincides with the characteristics of a migraine aura, the Göbels points out.⁴⁵ This aura is also translated into rapidly flickering musical patterns. When this passage is played as was indicated by Wagner on the score, the speed exactly corresponds with the flickering of a scintillating scotoma,⁴⁶ which is a wavering blind spot that distorts the visual field of the sufferer.

However spectacular Wagner's transformations of migraine into music, I instantly became aware of the limitations this

42 Anna Göbel, Karl Göbel, and Hartmut Göbel, "Phenotype of Migraine Headache and Migraine Aura of Richard Wagner," *Cephalalgia: An International Journal of Headache* 34, no. 12 (2014): 1007.

43 Anna Göbel, Karl Göbel, and Hartmut Göbel, "'Compulsive plague! pain without end!' How Richard Wagner Played Out His Migraine in the Opera *Siegfried*," *British Medical Journal* 347 (2013): 1.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 4.

46 Schmerzlinik Kiel, "Wie Richard Wagner das Geheimnis seiner Migräne in der Oper *Siegfried* verbarg," *YouTube*, December 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b944q1ApIg>.

representational way of working forced upon my own compositional practice. Representing migraine symptoms felt like a strategy too literal and therefore quite constraining. For this reason, I turned to a different approach when composing a third song. Aiming to reach beyond bodily ailments and capture a different aspect of the migraine experience I turned to the work of Emily Dickinson when composing *I Felt a Funeral in My Brain*. This song not only obtained its title from the migraine-inspired poem by Dickinson,⁴⁷ also the words were borrowed from this famous migraineur. Following Biro's advice to turn to metaphors provided by great minds when one is in pain, I chose this poem because it offered an evocative portrayal of Dickinson's condition in the form of a funeral procession.⁴⁸ Due to her own migraine sufferings, Dickinson spent quite some time in isolation, and with this poem, she not only attempted to reflect on the disorienting and synesthetic aspects of migraine, but also played with the notion that when the rhythm of life is tuned to a purely individual bodily beat, fully disconnected from the common pulse of social life, days easily become like little rituals or absurd private processions one has to move through in order to make it through the day. In isolation, the passing of time itself becomes a ceremony. I will elaborate more on this notion in the coming chapters, but it should be mentioned here that the need to understand migraine as a procession was founded in the creative process of *I Felt a Funeral in My Brain*. The harmony of the song was inspired by Frédéric Chopin's famous *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B $\flat$ minor*, op. 32 (1840), as I felt the need to extend Biro's suggestion into the musical spheres and build upon the harmonic structures of a giant.

Although these compositions are undeniably part of the output of this study and I regularly perform them with great pleasure in a live context unrelated to this research, I still consider them to be mere exercises. They are preliminary studies I needed

47 Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 365.

48 Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky*, 91–93.

to go through in order to understand what my objectives truly were. For this reason, I consider these songs merely as building blocks in a process. They confronted me with the impossibility of capturing a failing voice when singing with an unrestricted one. Creating music about the concept of pain while not suffering always remains an external representation of symptoms, disconnected from the actual experience. Certainly, this representational methodology carries an aesthetic value. However, it became clear to me that this representational way of working did not touch on the full potential of my research objectives. I felt no need to create music *on* migraine, I wished to create *with* migraine. I was not aiming at representing the failing voice, I wanted to capture it, and to register the friction between body, voice, and language when migraine takes the scene. So, when the failing of the voice due to migraine was established over the course of this chapter, new questions arose: "How to capture the failing voice? How to create an aesthetics of failure?"

And so, I started compiling vocal fragments that I record clustered to the bed, moving in and out of migrainous episodes. I collected noises and written text fragments, diary excerpts, poems, and sound poems which I assembled into what I call the *Impulsive Incantations*. Out of migrainous gibberish improvisations, scraps of text, and endlessly repeated sighs and moans, I created incantations that aimed at measuring and articulating the impact of migraine on the voice. I did so by recording myself as I sung these fragments while in bed, in pain. As was mentioned above, this act of singing while migraining is in itself painful due to phonophobia. I therefore limited myself to the recording of just a few utterings per session, which I layered on top of each other. I might have added a melody in the beginning, might have done an overdub in the end, or created a short fragment of new material in the middle. Every migrainous recording session was like the nonchalantly overwriting of the same circle. Thus, the object gradually gained in thickness and little by little expanded in all directions.

This composition aimed at studying the suffering subject by repeatedly registering the raw materials in order to touch upon

the impact of social muteness, physical pain, and migraine-specific symptoms on the voice. To do so, I called upon the nonsensical and the ritualistic qualities of the incantation, thus making this study an artistic process. Uniting these phenomena in an ever-evolving ode to a state anterior to language, a carol of the cry and the mantra of the migrainous moan, the *Impulsive Incantations* aim at voicing the migraine body through evocative text, vocal improvisations, and a migrainous singing technique. I searched for an approach that could guide me beyond a mere representation of symptoms. And although many of my symptoms are to be detected in the piece (the pulsating quality of the pain, the intensity of the one-sided headache, the gagging of the voice as it vomits, the sensitivity of the skin, a general sense of malaise, phonophobia, aphasia, confusion, etc.), they are not at the heart of what the work wishes to convey. Rather, I want to capture the impact of migraine on the voice and to corporealize my conceptual findings and personal experiences in order to search for an aesthetics of failure. I am convinced that lending an ear to the failing voice could guide us toward a reconceptualization of subjectivity and that it could shed a light on the emancipatory dimensions of the voice.

Although created while in bed and in pain, the *Impulsive Incantations* still remain quite a traditional composition. I took textual material (a reworked version of the Greek expulsive incantation and a paragraph written while being clear-headed) and started building a musical piece around it. The compositional process remained highly similar to the artistic practice of my healthy days. Because I was in pain, the sessions were much shorter and I was unable to fully make use of my musical skills and knowledge but still, I somehow *perfected* this composition by returning to it and reworking it, each time I was in bed. Consequently, I am not sure that the *Impulsive Incantations* are truly capturing an aesthetics of failure. For in a way, I was still fighting failure and attempting to overcome it. Maybe it is precisely this struggle that resonates most vehemently through the piece.

I also realized that this bedridden compositional practice was only feasible when the attacks were rather mild. When the pain

intensified, I fully lost my ability for words and became unable to make vocalic contributions. Reflecting on the *Impulsive Incantations*, I comprehended that every migraine attack is of a different intensity and that I needed multiple artistic methodologies if I wanted to capture the failing voice in all its facets and if I wished to leave a vocalic trace after every migrainous episode. The artistic methodologies that I planned to develop were to be based on my physical capabilities. If the attack was rather mild, I could sing and compose. If the migrainous episode rendered me close to unconscious, a different approach was needed. In the light of this new strategy, the *Impulsive Incantations* are more than a *failed* attempt to capture the failing voice. They are the result of the artistic competences I was left with during these specific series of attacks, truthfully sketching the scene of the day but well-aware that this process might probably not be repeatable the next time migraine announced itself. This new plan of artistic action could not and did not aim at chasing the silent entity called *failure* out of the room. Instead, I searched for ways to bond with it, slowly, until a mutual trust was established and I could take it on my lap (not unlike Friedrich Nietzsche and his dog) to study it up close. I always remained aware that this creature could not be tamed, but I quite enjoyed and envied its unrestrictedness. Especially when migraine shackled me to the bed, failure proved to be my biggest inspiration.

I will not. I will not explain. I will not explain myself. I will not explain myself but to myself. This is a private undertaking, between me. Between these walls. You have no right to be here. None whatsoever. Your presence has a disruptive potential, which I fear. I know myself, am much too compliant. I will bend my body toward yours in search for angle that will make my face come out its best. When really, half a face is all I have. You have no right to be here. But you are. You are here. And so I'll burden you with my thoughts. They are after all worthless unless I speak them to you. Forgive me this conversation, much too intimate for your ears. Ears are weak and without defenses, one cannot shut them as one does the eyes.

And surely. You can have a say in this. Surely. An outsider's perspective might not be at all that bad. Go on, shed a different light, tweak it to a more agreeable tone. It might take the edge of these rigid walls, they are after all only brittle on the outside. But I do demand commitment. Not some half-heartedness. Half a heart is not enough to make the blood go round. And we must make the blood go round. Up to the brain and down the other organs: the larynx, the lungs, the stomach, the womb, the vulva. We need to make the blood go round in order to write ourselves into being. Write this body into being. It has died too many times. Returning only to die again. Barely there and dead again. Over and over. Over it, I am. So we must write it a script. Give it a libretto, a *mis-en-scène*, the props, and placings in order to be. To be even when the body isn't. To be bodily in the bottomless. To be bottomlessly bodily. To be all a body can be. A bodies, from top to bottom. A bodies. And a voice. Without fail, we must find it a voice.

A Borrowed Diary

A Story to Restore a Sense of Self

When illness strikes, life is shaken to the core, and this new way of being comes with hidden responsibilities. Society expects patients to deal with illness in a certain manner. Barbara Prain-sack points to Talcott Parsons when explaining this social tendency:

Parsons argued that sick people assume a role of “sanctioned deviance.” Sick people are perceived as dysfunctional as they cannot be fully productive members of society. But for the effective functioning of society it would be dangerous to leave sick people to their own devices. To do so would mean that sick people would be outside the remit of societal control. This is why, according to Parsons, societies have always given sick people certain privileges: They are exempt from many of the duties of healthy people, including work or caring for others. In many societies they have been entitled to receive help in the form of social care or financial support. In return for such assistance, however, they are also assigned specific duties: they need to do their best to get better and try to become fully functioning members of society as quickly as they can. If they refuse to work toward this expectation, they

lose the privileges that come with the sick role and become fully deviant.¹

The sick role comes with the duty to move toward health as quickly as possible. And even when it comes to expressing themselves, a series of unwritten rules shape the narrative of the sick. There are good and bad ways of being ill, and the expectations have shifted over the years. When American poet and feminist Audre Lorde wrote *The Cancer Journals* as a testimony to the life of a Black women suffering from the disease, silence was still the preferred key in which the ill were to lament their struggles.² In *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, a posthumous collection of essays speeches and poems, Lorde stresses the value of speaking up and the need for self-stories in order for the sick to become visible and even to survive.³ Slowly, the emancipatory and empowering potential of self-stories have shaped a new mentality and the popularity of autobiographical writings have led to a boost in the genre both on paper and online.⁴ Nowadays, the tables have turned: To be rightfully ill implies that one is to make oneself heard, to speak up and give a detailed and personal account of bodily or mental afflictions.⁵ This seems like an important and positive new evolution, encouraging stories out of the shadows and into the public spheres, and up to a certain point, it certainly is. Unfortunately, however, society still forces these narratives into a certain direction, preferring an almost fairytale-like apotheosis in which the patient wins the battle, overcomes the illness, and lives happily ever after. The *triumph narrative*, as it has been introduced by medical sociologist

1 Barbara Prainsack, *Personalized Medicine: Empowered Patients in 21st Century* (NYU Press, 2017), 88.

2 Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Aunt Lute Books, 1980).

3 Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press, 2017).

4 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 198.

5 Ibid., 210.

Arthur W. Frank,⁶ does not allow failure and does not take fatal possibilities into account. Instead, these plots of victory leave the audience with a sense of feeling good, making the frightful reality of illness more digestible and less threatening by describing it only in the light of the power to overcome.

Although it is rather dangerous how society encourages illness narratives towards happy endings, the act of narrating still holds potential within the life of the sufferer. According to Paul J. Eakin: "Narrative plays a central, structuring role in the formation and maintenance of our sense of identity."⁷ In other words, we actively create our identities through the act of telling stories. By doing so, a sense of coherence is restored in the life of the sufferer and in how society sees the sufferer. The ability to present a coherent narrative attests to the reflective abilities and the consciousness of the self. This notion "positions those who struggle to use words or those who are labeled as non-verbal and minimal verbal not only in the margins, but often outside the human category," critical disability studies scholars Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Elisabeth De Schauwer rightfully point out.⁸ Seen in this light, the need for self-stories in the context of illness becomes even more pressing. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Frank points toward the disruptive potential of illness and uses the metaphor of a shipwreck to illustrate how the sick person's sense of self can be shattered by the arrival of a medical condition. Indeed, all sense of direction is lost when the "present is not what the past was supposed to lead up to, and the future is scarcely unthinkable."⁹ In order to restore a sense of self, the patient tells stories, Frank suggests. When narratives of the self are constructed, memory is restored and coherence can be rein-

6 Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 94.

7 Paul Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 123.

8 Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Elisabeth De Schauwer, "Listening Beyond Words: Swinging Together," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 330.

9 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 55.

stalled. Society demands these coherent self-narratives, because only the coherent is rationally graspable and installs a sense of predictability, which keeps the system going.

Yet all coherency collapses when days do not progress according to the persistent linearity of time. From A to B, but not me. As a migraineur, I am subjected to a different current and move as the ocean that hauls itself unto the land, always a little further, always a little thinner, mitigating myself with every inch. The waterline progresses until the tide turns. Never sure of when to reach the tipping point but always in anticipation of it. Always expecting to take the turn. I have internalized this breaking point, have organized myself around it. Rippling, I am the waterline that is forever unstable, occasionally transgressing the expected but never, ever flooding the lands.

Still, this analogy does not quite hold water. Waves move in elegance. They change directions effortlessly. They do not *perform* a change of direction; they *are* a change of direction. I lack their purpose. I lack their dignity. I lack their continuity. I am fragmented, not fluid, an accumulation of unrelated things, a mismatch of events that as a whole do not make sense. Does this imply irrelevance?

When pouring life into a coherent narrative, “the self is being *formed* in what is told.”¹⁰ It is precisely through stories that a *narrative identity* is created.

[This notion is] founded on the idea that there is no pre-discursive self or subject independent from conventional speech. The subject, so the reasoning goes, is not an inherent given, does not have a core and is not stable, but is continuously constructed and constituted in and by stories the subject tells about itself: the subject gives itself reflexively form through and within spoken language.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer, “Listening Beyond Words,” 330.

So the self is constructed in the stories it tells, and these self-narratives are not only for the ears of the other; the sick also tell them to themselves. By doing so, a “dual reaffirmation” is established,¹² a reaffirmation of the relationship with the other: “Who is there to listen to me?” and a reaffirmation of the self: “Am I still here as an audience to myself?” While pointing at Lorde, Frank stresses the importance of becoming a witness to oneself, for only by being available to oneself, Lorde claims, the ability is gained to reclaim one’s own voice.¹³

Frank builds on Lorde’s writings to underline that when the need arises to *reclaim one’s own voice*, we enter the political sphere. This motion is inevitable, for the expression implies that the voice was not only interrupted, but silenced or taken away. Lorde points out that in the context of illness this happens frequently and on many levels.¹⁴ In the previous chapter, I briefly touched on this issue by pointing at the precariousness of the patient–doctor relationship. When entering a doctor’s office, the patient’s story is inevitably reduced to a constellation of symptoms to be caught and analyzed in the structures that constitute the physician’s understanding of the condition. However, a leftover remains that can never be processed by the medical matrix. This residue is the concrete, lived experience of the patient, exceeding the systems. This remainder is easily disregarded and consequently ends up being silenced. It is, however, of utmost importance that these unique stories are heard and acknowledged.

Frank addresses the impact on the patient’s sense of self when she enters this delicate relation:

Medicine [is] an ideological system that “calls” the patient to be an identity that medicine maintains for him; the diagnosis is the most prevalent form of this identity. The ideological work of medicine is to get the patient to accept this diag-

¹² Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 56.

¹³ Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*.

nostic identity as appropriate and moral. When the patient accepts this identity, he aligns himself as subordinate in a power relation.¹⁵

The imbalance of power, inherent to the relation between doctor and patient, unavoidably installs a hierarchy. And maybe, unconsciously, this whole endeavor is my attempt to see what happens when this hierarchy is challenged through the creation of a context in which it was legitimate to wonder: "Doctor, what can I teach you?" With time and through the many conversations I had with doctors and neurologists, both inside and outside their offices, I came to realize that this artistic and theoretical work could only ever be of value if I managed to challenge that order. As an artist I needed to grasp something that goes beyond the medical systems. Today, I know that it is precisely in the shadows of these systems that the arts show their true value. The arts do not pretend to capture or equal the concrete experience, nor do they attempt to reveal the limits of these systems. Rather, it is precisely through the aesthetic that one can be confronted with the question: "Doctor, what can I teach you?" And the answer could only ever be the work itself.

The Migraine Diary as a Substitute Voice

Now, the issue arises of how to make these fundamental questions resonate when, up to this point, I have only been able to attest to the muteness this condition brings. So far, I have merely witnessed how migraine occupies the body and leaves muscles, lungs, and larynx under its command. I have touched on how the tongue stutters and how lips stumble when aphasic symptoms are manifested and have lent an ear to the voice that fails when, clustered to the bed, it is unable to represent itself in the public spheres. I cannot hold back its coming and am well aware that only time reverses the ravage migraine leaves my vocal apparatus in. (It will pass. It will pass. It will pass.)

15 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 66.

As an inert little nonbeing, voiceless and only on the verge of being human, I feel the need to find a way to somehow still be there to experience my own absence. To do so and to become a witness to myself, the medical world advises to keep a health journal or migraine diary. In this booklet one is to monitor one's life and write down both frequency and intensity of attacks. This request instantly provoked a sense of ambivalence in me.

I must admit that I have always been reluctant to diaries, an aversion caused by my incompetence at keeping one. Past attempts were brief and half-hearted and the inconsistency of my writings merely exposed that I did not wish to be confronted with migraine when temporarily being freed. I did not want to witness the forced alliance of self-discipline and self-reflectiveness and was most hesitant to learn what their confrontation might bring.

Nevertheless, the migraine diary as a holy handbook of migrainous self-healing somehow fascinates me. *Ad nauseam*, both acclaimed physicians as herbal healers have declared this recording device indispensable in the life of the migraine sufferer. To understand the body and what triggers its misery, the migraineur keeps a journal. Foods, social affairs, lack of sleep, and even the weather are documented and analyzed in this little book of consumption and compunction. The level of pain is reported and the emotional impact carefully described. These diaries are intended to retrace one's steps, track down the roots of an attack, and map out the danger zones for the future. What to avoid? What to hold off, fend off, shuffle, or shake off and what to permit? Where to look for shelter?

Surely, these diaries can be useful in the patient's hunt for help whenever used, for example, to provide accurate information on the effectiveness of an ongoing treatment, to point out the side-effects of medication, or to signal medication overuse. Yet, it should be kept in mind that these diaries, as a tool for

self-reflection and self-healing, are a *pharmakon*¹⁶ and hold the potential of becoming harmful.

First, it should be stressed that locating triggers is a much more complex undertaking than one would assume. As doctor Michael J. Marmura points out, it can be difficult for patients to differentiate triggers (stimuli that initiate an attack) from premonitory symptoms (symptoms that occur many hours prior to the onset of the actual migraine). In other words, when irritation arises right before a headache or aura is manifested, all too often this feeling of annoyance is understood as the incentive of the attack, when in fact, chances are high that it is already a migrainous symptom that has entered the stage. Secondly, Marmura argues, it should be noted that “some patients may overestimate the effect of specific triggers such as weather or fail to recognize subtle triggers which may increase susceptibility.”¹⁷ As a result, many patients have an incorrect perception of their actual triggers. This becomes especially problematic when taking into account that believing a certain trigger will provoke an attack might induce expectancy mechanisms, capturing the patient in a self-fulfilling spiral, which has been proven to actually increase symptoms.¹⁸

Focusing extensively on migraine triggers [...] may have negative consequences: (1) patients may feel “blamed” or stigmatized for having a migraine, (2) migraine triggers may be impossible to figure out—especially in those with very frequent or infrequent attacks, (3) the triggers may not be avoidable, (4) focusing on triggers can increase anxiety or lead to anticipation of attacks, and (5) it does not address the underlying cause of the disorder. An excessive focus on avoiding

16 *Pharmakon* is a concept developed by Jacques Derrida. It originates from the Greek word *pharmakon*, which carries the dual meaning of both remedy and poison. See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

17 Michel Marmura, “Triggers, Protectors and Predictors in Episodic Migraine,” *Current Pain and Headache Reports* 22, no. 81 (2018): 2.

18 *Ibid.*

triggers may in fact be harmful. Avoiding stress in chronic pain is less effective than coping or adaptive strategies and may lead to anxiety, reduced physical activity, increased disability, and catastrophic thinking.¹⁹

In other words, the accuracy of these diaries is doubtful, which is a problem attesting to the individualistic perspective of the medical world that places a disproportionate amount of the responsibility on the shoulders of the sufferer. This individualistic perspective not only dwells the halls of hospitals, but it is also how society generally looks at disability. An impairment is still very often understood as a shortcoming inherent to the patient and is hardly ever pointed out as a social and cultural identity, experience, or phenomenon that arises in the interaction between the patient and their environment. All accountability is placed in the hands of the patient, unburdening society from its responsibility to mediate the gaps. This notion has been amply pointed out by disability studies.²⁰

And so, by continuously confronting the migraineur with her triggers and her failure to avoid them, these journals easily turn into a written law, adopted by the tyranny of temperance to hold the patient accountable for her own suffering. In fact, this tendency of becoming an unbosoming to the tyrant is inherent to the whole diaristic genre, as Michel Foucault remarks: "Writing will exert [a constraint] in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul. In this sense, it has a role very close to that of confession to the director."²¹ The journals also only generate a false sense of control and hold the potential of feeding the patient's fear for another attack. Focusing too much on the migrainous triggers, Marmura concludes, can induce cephalgiaphobia, a fear for the next attack that arises in between migrainous epi-

19 Ibid., 5.

20 Cynthia Wilson, "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities," *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 158.

21 Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (The New Press, 1994), 208.

sodes. This phobia could lead to chronification and medication overuse.²²

Yet, it is not only through the tyranny of temperance that these journals hold the potential of becoming harmful to the patient. When they are turned into a substitute voice, validated as more reliable witnesses due to their composition out of *objective* data, gathered in the midst of the attack, they turn into an object of what philosopher Lisa Mazzei very aptly calls the “tyranny of evidence,” a term referring to research practices that “hold no connection to life.”²³ These methodologies belong to the domain of traditional qualitative inquiry, Mazzei explains, “examples of such practices rely on gathering data, documenting what participants say and trying to determine what they mean by reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life.”²⁴ The health journal or migraine diary might very well be the perfect example of such a research tool, for it flagrantly fails at capturing the contradictory multiplicity that migraine is by reducing the experience to the answers and numbers on a standardized questionnaire.

Mazzei even takes the argument one step further when, reflecting on the research practice of sociological interviews, she finds that the problem of representation is inherent to the use of language and suggests that the request for the construction of a coherent self-narrative is, in fact, fundamentally oppressive:

Voice burdened with authenticity and self-reflexibility is emblematic of the human organism that sediments meaning in its compulsion for intelligibility. This voice, spoken by a humanist subject asking another humanist subject to give an account, is a voice constituted by signification and sub-

22 Marmura, “Triggers, Protectors and Predictors in Episodic Migraine,” 6.

23 Lisa Mazzei, “Voice without a Subject,” *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 151.

24 Ibid.

jection which [binds us] to a languaging that compels obedience.²⁵

A voice requested to give an account of a past event, Mazzei argues, is always forced to reduce that experience to something fixed and no longer fluid. This solidification is inevitable when one is asked to capture life in language, for in the motion toward meaning the truth is halted and consequently loses much of its complexity. When these records are analyzed, again so many nuances slip away.

Mazzei continues by arguing that date-stamped transcripts and research logs (not unlike health journals) initiate a “privileging of instants.”²⁶ In them, time loses its multilayered fluidity and is compartmentalized into bounded events that are separated from each other and ordered chronologically on a linear timeline. Within the context of a health journal, the migraineur’s life too becomes compartmentalized into days spent in the kingdom of the well and visits to the land of the sick, to use Susan Sontag’s terminology. As was mentioned before, the objective data, gathered while wandering the latter, are deemed to be a more reliable source. This classification of time into a hierarchy of separated instants implies that an experience like migraine is limited to the time during which it manifests itself, as if it was once lived and is now (temporarily) over, as if one could fully leave the outer world behind when entering the bedroom and not take migraine along when reentering the public sphere.

I have long regarded migraine in such a compartmentalized manner, dividing time into blocks of good and bad. Yet this view has kept me from understanding migraine in its full complexity. Am I still a migraineur the moment I set foot on the good side? The discrepancy between sick and well is overwhelming and ushers one into self-doubt. Working on this project on clear-headed days, I almost felt like an imposter, unaware of what really had been going down and all too eager to forget. I felt

25 Mazzei, “Voice without a Subject,” 153.

26 *Ibid.*, 155.

two-faced and this impacted my artistic approach, ushering me toward not creating works *on* migraine but *with* migraine. More than once, I wondered: Am I still entitled to speak when it all has faded, and the voice has returned?

I am
and I am not
capable of seeing myself as a whole.

Yet, by silencing myself whenever not being in pain, I too was privileging instants. I devalued the voice of my healthy self, as if I was not a migraineur whenever well and on my feet. On a medical level, this separation is also much more complex than what appears at first glance. Migrainous episodes flow into days of healthfulness and back by means of subtle and often untraceable symptoms caused by the prodrome (state before the headache is manifested) and postdrome (state when the headache has lifted). Apart from the edge of the bed, there is no clear barrier, only flux. But more importantly, this rigid division of instants is simply not how our memory operates.

Mazzei turns to philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of *duration* to reflect on the concept of memory.²⁷ Following Gilles Deleuze's reading of Bergson, she argues that time cannot be understood as a sequence of isolated instants neatly mapped on a linear timeline. The past is not something that is left behind but which is, in fact, carried into the now. There is no such a thing as a past that can be narrated in the present. There is only the collision of that past instant with the now. "There is only one time," Mazzei explains, "the time that includes both the present and the past, always together, always at the same time."²⁸ Feminist theorist Karen Barad comes to a similar conclusion: "The past is never finished. It cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook, or an acknowledgment: we never leave it and it never leaves us behind."²⁹ The duration out of which memory

²⁷ Ibid., 152.

²⁸ Ibid., 156.

²⁹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

is formed should therefore be understood as a multiplicity, and according to Mazzei, it is precisely the failure of the narrating subject to express this simultaneity that leads toward a privileging of instants.

The Borrowed Diary: Toward an Inquiry of Becoming

It is this notion of simultaneity that guides me in rethinking the concept of the migraine diary in an artistic context. Only a layering of voices holds the potential to replace the chronological linearity that leaves the temporality of migraine radically fragmented. Instead, an abundance of voices can undo the privileging of instants and will make *duration* resonate as a multiplicity. It will also unburden the voice from making meaning or telling a coherent narrative, an act that is not only in itself oppressive but simply undoable by a migraineur whose linguistic capacities have been washed away by waves of throbbing pain and emesis. By offering new modes to think about voice, Mazzei's concepts offer alternative ways of expressing that hold the potential of including people who are verbally challenged.³⁰ When more ways of expressing are accepted, more people will be heard. For this reason, I hope my borrowed diary will not only be relevant within a migrainous context but could function as a blueprint for others who are struggling for words.

I have composed this alternative diary out of traces that I collected when moving in and out of migraine episodes. On the one hand, these fragments consist of recordings made of my own voice. Unlike the phrases in a diary, these recordings do not try to give an account of the experience through a coherent and intelligible narrative. Instead, I have borrowed unrelated language from others that has come to me by chance: a sentence from a newspaper, an email coming in, or the header on a passing bus. The content of these lines does not necessarily intend to reflect upon the experience, rather it is the motion of leaving

30 Leni Van Goidsenhoven, ed., *Ongehoord: Over kleine interacties wanneer woorden niet vanzelfsprekend zijn* (EPO, 2021), 14–15.

a trace, making it sound, and of adding to the multitude that is of importance here. I have sung these phrases and recorded myself. On the other hand, when the act of making sound myself has become impossible due to the intensity of the attack, I have borrowed voices from others to create this diary: a man yelling under the window, a line from a movie keeping me company as it is softly playing in the background, or a word of encouragement by my partner checking in on me. Again, what is said is not important, it is the sum of sound fragments that counts.

Here I should make a side note: I do not retreat into solitude in search for a silence that is absolute. I might have implied that I did. But this hyperbole was the consequence of a context that did not support a nuanced sonority. My phonophobic brain indeed pursues protection, but, ultimately, it is the full-blown blackout that truly splits the ears. In complete silence, boredom rumbles like a giant drum, its paradiddles accentuating the pain with every beat. Without any distractions the bedbound become nothing but a tethered audience to their own symptoms. Shifting slowly, almost inconceivably, these symptoms perform an all-consuming spectacle, beautifully parading the aesthetics of boredom. But in this state of being it is all just a bit too much to bear. I do not search for total quietude. I cannot stand it. So, rather, I withdraw in order to master the volumes, regulating them with the tip of my finger like a maestro leading an orchestra of the miniscule. As soon as the haze of morning has lifted and I realize what daybreak will bring, I open my laptop and turn to the device's endless storytelling. I let it whisper to me, rumoring more bullshit than we both can bear. I lose myself in its cheap and uninspiring recitals and wish for this soothing voice-over to voice me over and over until the day is finally done.

These platitudinous vocal recordings, collected from movies and series, also testify to the utter triteness of the condition. Migraine is of the ordinary and the common. It not special, it is dull, boring, and banal. To proclaim otherwise would only denounce the experience of so many. It is important to keep reminding, mostly myself, of this plainness. Especially when the

tendency arises to sing the praises of the contentious beauty this condition might bring. The search for an aesthetic of failure is valuable, but it should never glorify the pain that is causing the fall.

In addition to these vocal recordings, I also borrow voices from the objects that surround me; recording the clicking and clattering murmurs from the materiality of the room. And this act of gathering material from others as a way of constituting a diary calls to mind Foucault's discussion of *hupomnēmata*, an ancient form of self-writing in which one collected quotes and excerpts from books, phrases one heard on the street or descriptions of actions by others. Foucault explains:

[These accounting books] do not constitute a "narrative of oneself"; they do not have the aim of bringing to the light of day the *arcana conscientiae*, the oral or written confession of which has a purificatory value. The movement they seek to bring about is the reverse of that: the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.³¹

The assembling quality of the *hupomnēmata* stands in stark opposition with another ancient form of self-writing Foucault refers to: the *health report*. This report, in which the migraine diary might very well have found its roots, documents a "detailed description of the bodily sensations, the impressions of malaise [and,] the various disorders one might have experienced."³² By doing so, the health report aims at constructing a narrative of oneself, which is of course the precise opposite of what lies at the heart of the *hupomnēmata*, aiming at going beyond just that. For this reason, I decide the act of collecting, rather than describing,

³¹ Foucault, *Ethics*, 210–11.

³² *Ibid.*, 217.

will be a much more appropriate practice in my search for a narrative that reaches beyond the self.

The multiplicity of traces, made from borrowed language and borrowed voices is called the *Borrowed Diary*. I not only use this diary to problematize the health journal as a mode of inquiry, but I also turn to it in order further to question what a voice can be: "Could it be more than my own vocal cords? Could it be yours? Or the intersection of both, resonating in sync with the objects in the room?" Mazzei encourages to think of voice "not as a 'thing,' nor as fixed, but of voice as a process of couplings and connections; voice as becoming, or becoming-voice."³³

The listener does not encounter these traces one after the other, which would entail the reinstatement of a chronology. Instead, the phrases are layered on top of each other, sounding through a multitude of little speakers. By drowning each other out, the unintentional voices of the human and more-than-human become hardly intelligible, and, as they let go of the narrative that was empty all along, they succumb to the alluring force of meaninglessness. Consequently, the listener will be confronted with the knots that tie these voices together, rather than the message they convey. Instead of expressing or representing what is perceived during migraine, it is the intersection of voices and their relationality that is resonating through the piece. More than through each individual statement, the migraine experience is sounding in the crossing of voices, which produces a buzzing that could never misrepresent. Instead, these voices hold the potential to affect and be affected in return.

Still, in order to maintain the concept of the diary, these traces are date-stamped. However, these relics of temporality remain unnoticeable for they only influence the moment of entry of each specific drone. Starting with January 00'00", each month comes in with a delay of thirty seconds: February 00'30", March 01'00", etc. The day decides the precise moment of enter-

33 Mazzei, "Voice without a Subject," 153.

ing. On January seventh the drone will come in at 00'07". A drone made on April twenty-eighth will enter at 01'58". This way, the date still leaves an arbitrary mark on the composition, yet a mark that becomes unrecognizable when drowned out by the multitude of voices and consequently never distinctly referring to a specific time and place.

The *Borrowed Diary* no longer attempts to register a specific experience in "search of representational truths,"³⁴ but aims to go beyond the experience in the hope of confronting the listener with all that voice can be: a connection, an entanglement, an "assemblage of enunciation."³⁵ The piece is presented as a chorus of tiny speakers, hanging from the ceiling and encompassing the listener who slowly shuffles through it. As these speakers are buzzing unintelligibly, they form a multilayered voice collage that does not succumb to the dictatorial power of the coherent narrative by claiming to name and resound an authentic experience.

Constructed of the cutting and layering voices, this work could be understood as a voice collage. My choosing the medium of the collage also stems from another important potential the art form holds. Because, according to queer studies scholar Jack Halberstam, the collage is the art form to problematize the notion of power:

Collage precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original. In this respect, as well as in many others, collage (from the French *coller*, to paste and glue) seems feminist and queer. [...] By maintaining a constant tension between the elements of the work, the collage asks us to consider the full

34 Ibid., 154.

35 Ibid., 158.

range of our experience of power — both productive power, power *for* but also negative power, or power to unbecome.³⁶

In the *Borrowed Diary* I turn to the medium of the collage in order fully to reject linear chronology. Voices are not arranged in a sequence but are sounding simultaneously, building layers upon layers. This polyphonic voice collage could be a mode of inquiry that holds the potential of surpassing the rigidity and oppressiveness of the health journal. On one hand, by redirecting the focus away from migraine triggers it undoes the tyranny of temperance, which only blames the sufferer and merely provides a fake sense of being in control. On the other hand, it overthrows the tyranny of evidence, which forces the sufferer into the straightjacket of a coherent narrative and of making sense in search of *representational truths*. Resonating, instead, are the connections, the knots that tie these voices together and confront the listener with the question: “What is all a voice can be?” Scattering into a manifold of voices I try to become a witness to my own absence, with Frank reminding me that:

Nothing here supports the common illusion that there is a single self-entity that each person has and experiences, a self-entity that is, so to speak, out there in Nature. What is out there in nature is of course, the body. There may be a cast of varied selves, but there seems to be only one body; how many selves can this body support?³⁷

Notes from a Logbook: On the Act of Borrowing

The incapability of performing a compositional process and the need to capture the failing voice in a direct and unpolished way, guided me toward the diary, a raw and immediate medium. Many concerns regarding the health journal were pointed out

36 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 136.

37 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 67.

over the course of this chapter, and, as a consequence, the need to transform this disputed little book into something of aesthetic and conceptual value, became my artistic objective.

With language unavailable and incapable of using my own voice, I decided to borrow the language and voice of others. First, I borrowed language by making small adjustments to scraps of text I found lying around the bed, and which I transformed into little diary fragments with only a minimum amount of effort. Often, these words did not reflect my state of being, however, by not doing so, these fragments were somehow capable of conveying more than the regular health journal ever could. The migraine diary only plainly reported the quality, the intensity, and the trigger of the pain, and therefore never really touched on the heart of the experience. After gathering some sentences, I would record myself singing them, making short improvisations, which took me no longer than a few minutes to construct. The result was a rough and unpolished sound-diary fragment, which already captured my state of being more sincerely than the plain reports of the health journal. Still, some issues came up regarding both the artistic process and the artistic result.

The audio pieces that resulted from this approach were interesting but not per se usable. Listening back to these recordings, it became obvious how desperately I was clinging to language, almost up to a point of it becoming ridiculous. When migraine had already made my linguistic capabilities undone, reintegrating language through my own voice felt counterintuitive and counterproductive. It was only when I let go of language that the stage was cleared for something new to take the scene. The best example of this was a diary entry that consisted of nothing more than a Zoom link: [https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88910246017?pwd=cjFEWGxhMVZMUms5bER2MGtpLzNqdzo91dWNEW](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88910246017?pwd=cjFEWGxhMVZMUms5bER2MGtpLzNqdzo91dWNEW.). I improvised on the random combination of letters and numbers, which in themselves were meaningless. After a while, words arose out of this arbitrary chain of signs, but they did not fully operate as such. Instead, my vocal improvisation wavered on the intersection between signifiers and sound objects, moans and melodies. Precisely by balancing on the verge of language,

I could register its disappearance. In this diary entry, the power and the potential of the nonsensical was portrayed once more.

I consider many of these recordings merely as stepping stones in a trajectory. These fragments were valuable because they guided me toward an artistic approach that allowed me to challenge the fixed format of the health journal, and I felt that the tyranny of temperance was, indeed, dethroned. The tyranny of evidence, however, was still clinging to its authority. And although the act of improvising had freed me from the burden of composing, this method was still asking quite a lot of me. Often I was incapable of editing these text fragments and of recording myself while singing. I needed to continue my search for artistic methodologies that could accompany me into the deepest caves of migraine.

And so, after borrowing language, I started borrowing voice, an artistic approach that paralleled my physical reality best and therefore became a valuable methodology. To *borrow a voice* entailed nothing more than the simple act of recording a few sentences that had caught my attention in a podcast or movie and storing them in a date-stamped catalogue. However simple this act was; it announced an important shift in my artistic practice. The singer had officially let go of her own voice in search for different artistic medium. On a theoretical level, this radical turn confronted me with the question: "What is all a voice can be?" On an artistic level, I had to ask myself: "How to define the singer when she is incapable of using her own vocal apparatus?" The answer to this question will be dealt with in Chapter Four, but it is important to point out that it originated here.

Determined to unsettle Mazzei's tyranny of evidence, I decided not to present these diary fragments in a linear order but instead to layer them on top of each other. This way they would resonate simultaneously and drown each other out. The effect would be a chaotic buzzing that conveyed phonophobic sensations while confronting the listener with the huge number of attacks I had suffered from. By doing so, I not only became capable of *thinking* voice as a multiplicity of knots and connections but of actually *making it sound* as such. I believe that this

is where the arts parade their full potential and offer a valuable new approach. My objective is to introduce the arts into the field of voice theory as a different and supplementary form of knowledge than that generated by traditional academic research methods. Making the voice resonate through artistic practice can lead toward an understanding that reaches into embodied and aesthetic forms of knowing. I am convinced that within the context of voice, it is essential to formulate an artistic answer to a theoretical problem, for only in this manner the voice is lifted from the paper and becomes free to do what it does best: resonate.

And when the question arises of how to become a witness to one's own absence, the borrowed diary formulates an unintelligible, yet pertinent answer by allowing the suffering subject to register its own shattering of voice. But when migraine undoes the sense of self and the sufferer dissolves in the sounding of a plenitude, could there be a functionality hidden in that act of *unbecoming*? Halberstam's notion of "negative power" or the "power to unbecome,"³⁸ which is presented by the artistic medium of the collage, makes me wonder whether such potentiality might in fact be embedded in the maneuvers of the migraine condition, albeit on a deeply hidden, unconscious level.

38 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 136.

I tend to be violent. I hide it very well. Even from myself. Violence has become a necessity, an essential act in order to restore an equilibrium. It is not a force that pushes me forward, upward, or onward, nor is it directed toward another, never toward another. No. When it pushes, it pushes in, into the head and into the stomach. It pushes and pounds until fluid pours out, a discrete eruption, close to the chest, that gushes into a river of liquid lust. Out with the lust. Out! Until there is nothing left to want. Nothing to be needed. Blissfully will-less. No will. No wish. Except for it all to be over. When the day repulses, the hours seep out in disgust. Flooding the floors. Leaving me. And everything

stained. Rotting. No, not rotting. More like acid biting its way, brutally. A sour stream that empties the stomach but never the head. Nothing ever exits the head. Nothing. Ever. It all just sits there. Twisting. Twitching. Tightening with every move. Straitjacketing thoughts are keeping me motionless. Still as can be. Not even moving a finger to get the hair out of the face or the despair out of the air. Still as can be, I lay. And I don't object. I am the object. I am a feeble jumper anyway, lacking the ability to jump all together. I do not walk or run well. Am clumsy and without defenses. No. No. I simply lay, still. Dead still. Still as can be. And hold my breath. Better be silent. Better be silent or it

will burst. Although it never bursts. I wish it would burst. Or break or burn. But it just fades. Slowly. In its own pace. A casual withdrawal, lacking the urgency it had upon arriving. It appears in no rush to rush out. It lingers a little. As if it wishes to delay our departure. How strange, I wonder, Have I welcomed it? I must have. I must have made my body too homey. Too holey. I must have received it too gladly now never to get rid of it ever again. We might have been bonding, just tell me now: Have we? Oh, what a horrible hull I am.

The Migraine Margarine

Know you, perchance, how that poor formless wretch — the oyster — gems his shallow moonlit chalice? Where the shell irks him, or the sea sand frets, he sheds this lovely luster on his grief.

— George Kunz and Charles Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*¹

Migraine as a Language Beyond the Symbolic

Migraine calls for silence; it does not tolerate even the faintest of sounds. In this sonic void, the senselessness of the condition resonates ever more brightly. Senseless, because although the body is suffering, it is not in need of an acute physical recovery for its survival. When searching for physiological proof, with hands hooked to the head, anchored there where the pain begins, one will not find broken bones, proliferating cells, or trickling blood. It almost seems perverse how intact the body is left when migraine's parade has passed. The physiological impact is ephemeral and insultingly minimal. The corpus, supposedly the crown witness to this terror, refuses to testify, perhaps out of forgetfulness or maybe because, somewhere along the way, even

¹ George Kunz and Charles Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science and Industry* (Dover Publications, 2001), 41.

the body got caught in disbelief. The disproportion between evidence and experience is emblematic for the migraine condition and, with no retrospective proof at hand, the migraineur's own bodily mistrust echoes on in social skepticism.

When nothing is damaged and there is no physical healing to be done, pain appears purposeless. Migraine consequently turns into a silent Sisyphean dance: inexpressible, ever-returning, and utterly senseless. Any attempt to accept this meaninglessness tends toward the absurd and goes against the values of society, aiming for a speedy recovery, in order to regain productivity as soon as possible.² Useless suffering is simply not accepted; neither by society, nor by the migraineur, nor by benevolent bystanders. But is migraine truly this useless? Some nuances might have been lost by denying migraine all functionality. According to neurologist Oliver Sacks (himself a migraineur on a lifelong quest for meaning), migraines operate with a profound functionality in the sufferer's life. They are symbolic events, he argues.³ They mean something, hint at something, or represent something. It is therefore crucial to keep in mind that migraines are not to be understood as mere meaningless punishments for the lack of self-restraint and self-control. Instead, they are to be seen as "a symbolic drama [...], their symptoms can constitute, as it were, a bodily alphabet, or protolanguage, which may secondarily and subsequently be used as a symbolic language."⁴ At times, the arrival of migraine might insinuate completely different issues, and in this light the condition itself could be considered a metaphor. But oftentimes, migraine even goes beyond being an embodied figure of speech and becomes an unintelligible secret language.

When understanding migraine as a physical expression of underlying and often deeply hidden issues, we can no longer cling to its meaninglessness. The symptoms form a bodily

2 Barbara Prainsack, *Personalized Medicine: Empowered Patients in 21st Century* (NYU Press, 2017), 88.

3 Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder* (University of California Press, 1985), 8.

4 *Ibid.*, 208.

expression, which, not unlike the scream, precedes languages but nevertheless fulfills a communicative function. In this sense, migraine becomes a nonverbal expression that amplifies the inexpressible. Therefore, although its code might be all but transparent, much is to be learned from the migrating body speaking.

Functionality: A Protective Reflex

For this reason, it could be stated with certainty that migraines do not simply befall unfortunate individuals without any cause or reason. Believing the opposite would entrap the sufferer in passivity and obstruct her search for relief. Although this condition is highly personal, with symptoms and strategies differing from patient to patient, it is safe to say that all migraines hold a *tactical value* to the sufferer, Sacks explains:

It is particularly as a protective reflex that we envisage the primary role of migraine, as a withdrawal of the whole body from “the operation of a noxious or endangering stimulus,” in short, as a particular form of reaction to threat.⁵

According to Sacks, migraine is, first of all, to be understood as a neurological process. When external stimuli trigger the over-excitable migraine brain, they set off a chemical cascade of neurological processes. This causes an attack to occur. The current of this chemical downpour is fixed and fast and, in her attempt to fully grasp the processes at work, the sufferer ignorantly slips into the abstract, for some of these neurological phenomena are simply too complex to comprehend, and others have yet to be detected. Secondly, Sacks argues, migraine must be considered a biological reaction, a bodily response. Due to intense sufferings, the patient retreats into the safety of a blackened bedroom and as she sinks into her symptoms, blocking out the outer world that harms her. Finally, migraines must be seen as an emotional

5 Ibid., 198.

experience, a symbolic event that holds “an emotional significance over and above its literal significance.”⁶

The symptomatic diversity between patients equals the variety of different purposes migraine can fulfill. For some patients the tactical value operates primarily on the neurological level, for others on the physical and for a small amount of sufferers, migraines are mainly emotional coping mechanisms.

The Psychoanalytic Pearl

Patients pertaining to this final category, for whom migraine carries an emotional value, often suffer severe and frequent attacks that cannot be linked to any prior circumstances. Migraine arises as a response to troublesome and even unendurable life situations and occurs as a way of dealing with often unconscious emotional needs and distress. The sufferer is somehow dependent on these outbursts, possibly cherishes them, and because their origin is so deeply rooted in the emotional being, the migraines become a part of the sufferer’s personality. Sacks argues that the attacks are best understood as psychosomatic illnesses like neurosis or hysteria.⁷

In these cases, the suffering is soaked in symbolism. The attack is not merely a physiological reaction but becomes an unconscious coping mechanism. Sigmund Freud explains this as follows:

Let us take as an illustration the hysteric headache or backache. Analysis shows that through elaboration and displacement this pain has become the gratification substitute for a whole series of libidinous phantasies or reminiscences. But once upon a time the pain was real, a direct sexual toxic symptom, the physical expression of libidinous excitation. We do not wish to assert, by any means, that all hysteric symptoms can be traced to such nucleus, but it is true that

6 Ibid., 212.

7 Ibid.

this is frequently the case, and that all influences upon the body through libidinous excitation, whether normal or pathological are especially significant for the symptom development in hysteria. *They play the part of the grain of sand, which the mollusk has enveloped in mother-of-pearl.*⁸

Interestingly, Freud turns to quite a “pearly” metaphor in order to illustrate the formation of the hysteric headache. He compares libidinous excitation with a grain of sand entering the mollusk. This derangement is answered with a direct physical response: the neurotic headache. Real pain is sensed and could be compared to the oyster’s nucleus. Through displacement, however, this headache, once rooted in a real sensation, now becomes a hysteric symptom, a gratification substitute for emotional needs. The hysteric headache envelops around this nucleus, not unlike the oyster that steadily covers the grain of sand in layers of nacre. By transforming the initial physical reaction into a coping mechanism, it is awarded with symbolic meaning—a pearl is formed.

The Pearl as a Protective Mechanism

Migraines are of course real and rooted in physiological transitions. They could therefore never be considered mere hysteric formations. But migraines are also not simply physical reactions to emotions. They fulfill a special function in the “emotional economy” of the individual.⁹ They mean something or represent something, and for this reason they should not be understood as a mere physical event, “but as a symbolic drama into which the patient has translated important thoughts and feelings.”¹⁰ For this reason, Freud’s gleaming metaphor might not at all be too farfetched.

8 Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviere (Washington Square Press, 1920), 342. My emphasis.

9 Sacks, *Migraine*, 221.

10 *Ibid.*, 222.

The pearl, a most perfect precious gem, suggests simplicity and sweetness. Being an ancient symbol of purity, this lustrous bulb of nacre seems quite the opposite of the vileness and viciousness that comes with the migraine condition. How could this object of veneration, ornamenting a head held high, to see and be seen, not only teach us something about the syndrome of the covered and curled-up, but even expose some of its most deeply hidden secrets? Let us therefore dive into the deep-down, and exchange the sickbed for the seabed where the mollusk prevails, seemingly at peace, opening her shell for feeding and respiration and, by doing so, unavoidably ingesting all sorts of irritators, like parasites and grains of sand. In the soft tissue of the oyster, pearls originate as the result of a defensive mechanism against attacks from the outside. When irritants enter and get stuck, the mollusk, unable to eject its intruder, captures the foreign body, layer by layer, in a husk of nacre — a tedious but thorough process. Pearls are thus not a harvest of health, cultivated in undisturbed conditions, but an immune response, a functional protective reflex, that very much resembles the migrainous formation.¹¹

The ancient Chinese regarded the pearl as the “hidden soul of the oyster,”¹² an obscure pain carefully concealed and cloistered in the core of this incandescent gem. In a like manner, some migraines enclose the most deeply hidden parts of the sufferer’s emotional being, meticulously enveloping the initial struggles in a bulb of blatant symptoms. And blinded by this extreme physical torment, the fundamental emotional issues become easily obscured and risk remaining forever undetected. When freeing the sufferer from built-up tension or accumulated emotional distress or restoring her neurological and biological equilibrium, migraines come to fulfill a purifying purpose. The pearl is a symbol of purity and has been praised for this quality by countless poets over the course of time.¹³ Its beauty reaches

11 Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 46–47.

12 Ibid., 303.

13 Ibid., 20–21.

us straight from the depths of the sea and does not require the hand of man to achieve this delicate perfection. In Sanskrit writings of the first Christian century it was referred to as *mukta*, literally translating as “the pure.”¹⁴ Whomever carried the name Margaret, meaning “pearl” or “child of light,” was known to be blessed in maidenly purity.¹⁵ For ages, the pearl was believed to be formed out of only the purest drops of dew, falling into the oyster when in the morning hours the animal rose to the surface and opened its shell. Gaston Bachelard is drawn to such images. Studying the imagination of matter, he argues that these reveries are embedded in the materiality of the object, rather than in our minds. The pearl, for example, arouses in us a sense of imaginary purity, a phenomenological experience, which very much differs from its scientific counterpart, rational purity:

Practical experience teaches us not to mix the pure with the impure. In such a mixture the pure is inevitably ruined. But how inert this ideal of rational purity turns out to be, so defenseless against insult and injury! Quite to the contrary, imaginary purity, grasped in the full flood of a long and resolute reverie, is the *will to purify*. Purity of this sort fears nothing; it *attacks* impurities. In the realm of values, whoever attacks no longer fears.¹⁶

However, understanding migraine as an active force, a drive to purify and protect, albeit an unconscious one, will neither comfort nor cure the sufferer when another attack has reduced her to an immobile lump of misery. It will neither counteract the helplessness nor transform inertia into vigor when she finds herself clustered to the bed once more. Nevertheless, the activism of purity, an image embedded in the materiality of the pearl, is a valuable consideration because it postulates migraine’s pur-

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 305.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will*, trans. Kenneth Haltman (Dallas Institute Publications, 2002), 254.

posiveness. It could lead the sufferer toward exposing and even accepting the underlying mechanisms at work and heartens her to, at the very least, wonder why she is yet again pushing this immense gleaming pearl toward the hilltop, only to watch it tumble down for the umpteenth time. This notion can shed a whole new light upon the scene that used to be regarded merely as the stage of a Sisyphean dance. Certainly, most migraines are cyclical, but with its meaninglessness dimmed or briefly out of sight, some sort of wry beauty might be spotted in this strange choreography of the absurd.

Evidently, much is to be gained by recognizing migraine's functionality. However, it should be kept in mind that these protective reactions, whether they are neurological, biological, or emotional, are almost always utterly disproportionate. Many migraines, as Sacks points out, are "protracted far beyond what would seem to be a reasonable adaptive function."¹⁷ Their symptoms and sufferings are colossal and not at all commensurate to what caused them in the first place. When migraines become bombastic, they indeed remind us of the pearl, an immense weight upon the mollusk encapsulating but a tiny grain of sand. As Bachelard explains:

Nature has a very simple way of amazing us — through exaggerated size. In the case of the shell, [...] we see nature dreaming and immense dream, a veritable delirium of protection that ends in a monstrosity of protection.¹⁸

Migraine could certainly be considered a *monstrosity of protection*. This condition overthrows all sense of proportion and its underdetermined character appears to be irrefutable. On the one hand, the sufferer is confronted with this fact when she is left insulted after a search for physical evidence that turned out to be in vain. And on the other hand, she faces this when real-

¹⁷ Sacks, *Migraine*, 162.

¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Penguin, 2014), 141.

izing this inner protective mechanism causes a disproportionate torment, as her symptoms are utterly incommensurable to what triggered them originally. Although migraine operates with a certain functionality, as a protolanguage or a protective mechanism, in its underdeterminedness we always encounter a flagrant excess, a surplus that is senseless and unsayable.

Shadow Feminism: Masochism as an Act of Revolt — The Silent Scream

Still, I wonder whether migraine is always merely formed as a passive reaction to its surroundings. Could it be that, in some cases, migraine becomes a pertinent answer to the context it originated in, a response to a life situation that is highly eloquent, precisely by means of its silence? The consequences of the migraine condition are extreme, as they force the sufferer into a tong-tied inertia, making her sink into the shells of a secluded bedroom and disappear into the deep-down for often multiple times a week. In these migrainous voids, only *dead selves* are encountered. Not because these sick and suffering versions are always only on the brink of being, but rather because these selves never evolve. The act of transformation attests to the living, but these sick selves are all similar and have always been exactly the same; they do not learn, they do not grow, they do not develop, they simply do not become. And for that reason, today's self could never fully be their consequence.

What does it mean to “surrender to a form of unbeing for which beginnings and ends have no meaning” at all?¹⁹ Constructing a coherent sense of self becomes quite impossible when half the days have blown up in your face. But who does the bombing? What if these lustrous bulbs of nacre were not worn as a pearly family jewel, but instead were used to deliberately bombard the consistency of passing days? Could it be that, in some cases, the holes in a chronology are in fact at the heart

19 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 131.

of a person's well-being? And if so, then what is the potential of this incoherency?

Perhaps migraine could be understood as a form of forgetting, not simply in the sense that it protects the self from unbearable memories and feelings, but rather as a form of forgetting as suggested in *The Queer Art of Failure*.²⁰ Here, Jack Halberstam proposes "forgetfulness as an interruption to general modes of transmission that ensure the continuity of ideas, family lines, and normativity itself."²¹ Migraine indeed enables forgetfulness precisely by blowing up coherent timelines. When the track that ties a person to its past is full of holes, it becomes quite impossible to retrace one's steps. In this view, Halberstam points out, "forgetfulness becomes a rupture with the eternally self-generating present [and] a break with a self-authorizing past. [...] Resistance lurks in the performance of forgetfulness," they claim, "hiding out in oblivion and waiting for new erasure to inspire a new beginning."²²

Could it be that when migraine enables forgetfulness by undoing the coherent self-narrative in order to keep the self safe and to set it free, it moves beyond being a forced retreat into inertia and instead becomes a masochistic act of revolt, albeit an unconscious one? Let us imagine migraine not only as an unbearable and untenable affliction, but also as a forceful answer to an unbearable and untenable life situation. Contrary to expectations, this answer is not a silent nod of consent under submission, rather it revolts "in a language of self-destruction and masochism. [...] It does not speak in a language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming [and] unbeing."²³ In this sense, masochism as a self-shattering mechanism is used as a life-saving tool, and migraine resonates as a deafening mutinous

²⁰ Ibid.,

²¹ Ibid., 123.

²² Ibid., 69–70.

²³ Ibid., 124–29.

scream. Keep in mind that “when one is powerless, only a negative freedom is at hand.”²⁴

Amplifying the Silent Scream: Towards a Performance Tool

As a voiceless singer, I feel the need to amplify this silent scream and to make the senseless and unsayable surplus sound. To do so, I designed a performance tool and headdress that translates the inner experiences into sound while bypassing language. The conceptualization of this instrument is based on an experiment executed in 1938 by doctor Harold G. Wolff, a man who carries a reputable title, for he went down in history as the *father of modern time headache research*. Together with his partner John R. Graham he performed the following experiment on many migraine patients:

Pulsation of the temporal and occipital branches of the external carotid artery were recorded by means of tambours placed on these arteries where they could be palpated under the skin. The tambour was connected to a Frank capsule by means of a thick rubber tube. A beam of light from a slit lamp was thrown on a mirror on the thin rubber diaphragm of the capsule in such a way that it was reflected into the slit of a camera, to be recorded on the moving bromide paper. Any pulsation transmitted to his air system by the artery caused the mirror to deflect the beam of light through an arc, the length of which was proportional to the force of the impulse.²⁵

Wolff and Graham's research showed that over the course of a migraine attack, the extra-cranial blood vessels in the temples would dilate. The more they widened, the more intense the headache became. When the vasoactive substance ergotamine

²⁴ Ibid., 132.

²⁵ Harold Wolff, *Headache and Other Head Pain* (Oxford University Press, 1948), 266.

tartrate was injected, an almost instant constriction of these blood vessels was measured and the pain subsided simultaneously. It was also established that manually putting pressure on the temples would equally constrict the vessels and ease the pain for as long as the pressure was performed.²⁶

The discovery made by Wolff and Graham was of great importance and would pave the way for decades of headache research to come. Although fast-moving modern-day medical research has rapidly caught up, [it remains] “hard to overstate the influence of this work.”²⁷ Treating migraine as a vascular problem resulted, many years later, in the development of efficient pain-killing medication, the so-called triptans. By performing a vasoconstrictive function (or so it was presumed at the time), it became the most effective and widely prescribed acute pain treatment for migraine headache. In 1938, Wolff and Graham’s experiment laid the foundations for the development of this drug, which up until today, is an important source of relief for many migraineurs.

Today we know that migraine is a neurological condition and not a vascular problem.²⁸ Vasoactivity is merely a symptom, similar to the aura or an upsurge of nausea, and not the cause of migrainous head pain. Consequently, today’s neurologists might not claim this phenomenon to touch the core of the condition. However, as a patient, I value this seemingly trivial symptom. First of all, because it led to the development of the triptans, a type of medication I am very much dependent on. And secondly, because this vascular action offered me the much-needed physical evidence of my suffering: the wider, the worse.

As a sound artist, I am also drawn toward the dilation of these vessels. The development of the migraine attack is portrayed by vasoactivity. Although their movement is offensively

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Peter Goadsby et al., “Pathophysiology of Migraine: A Disorder of Sensory Processing,” *Physiological Reviews* 97, no. 2 (2017): 554.

²⁸ Ibid., 553.

minimal, these vessels do shift in sync with my symptoms. The outline of the cells traces the course of the attack. They indicate the pace of a migraine's progression and to their momentum my ritualistic procession is marched. In the contours of these vessels I recognize migraine's ridged pattern, coming and going, their routine is mine and I value our synchronicity.

For this reason, I choose to voice the vascular. I do so by registering the vascular movements by means of a kymograph similar to the one Wolff and Graham used in 1938. These data I translate into sound. The movement of the vessels in the temples manipulate various musical parameters and accordingly generate an abstract, turbulent soundscape that develops according to the intensity of my pain.

In this setup, migraine becomes an active performer and is not reduced to a mere symbolic representation. It is impossible sonically to capture pain experiences or nauseous eruptions; all representational art fails or gets caught up in clichés. I am equally convinced that a purely retrospective composition with a musical structure based on migraine's development would fall short. This could never touch upon the core of this condition, when it would be made entirely while being clear-headed and fully detached from the bodily experience itself. I refuse to represent the body, so my only option is to use it, to turn toward the moment when migraine moves through it and to amplify the friction.

Precisely because it is the impact of migraine on the body that determines the sonic quality of the piece, each performance varies in intensity and length. Through a creative process, I transform these mockingly minor vascular movements into what they, in my perception, truly evoke. I amplify the empirical, yet futile physical evidence and boost it until it answers to the brutality in which we meet.

Not unlike the *Borrowed Diary*, this performance tool takes empirical evidence and turns these data into a voice that can affect. It is, therefore, important to note that I did not design this performance tool to portray pathophysiologies; they cannot bear witness to what truly happens to me. Rather, I create this

instrument to vocalize the inherent banality of the condition and to point out the discrepancy between the triteness and the harm that migraine brings. The throbbing pain in my temples is all I care for. In every beat resonates the blood that flows. Pulsating in sync. Sounding the unsayable.

Toward a Headdress

Embracing the temples, this instrument ornaments the head. The sight of this reminds us of a ceremonial headdress, worn by the patient, who walks her migrainous procession to the rumbling beat of her own vascular contortions. This image of the migraineur, embellishing herself with a headdress not despite of her sufferings, but rather because of them, brings to mind the image of abbess Hildegard von Bingen. She was a visionary, composer, healer, and migraineur in 12th-century Germany, and in her book on the healing powers of plants, entitled *Physica*, Von Bingen suggested a remedy for migrainous head pain that truly speaks to the imagination:

One who ails in the head should heat pearls in the sun. Then place them around the temples, tying them with a cloth and he will be cured.²⁹

This pain-killing tactic, by which a string of pearls is tightly strapped to the head in order to put pressure on the temples, not only references the vasoconstricting remedies, introduced many centuries later by Wolff and Graham, but also reintroduces the magnificent metaphor of the pearl. This symbol is powerful, but, as any metaphor used in the context of illness, it should be handled with care. When comparing migraines with margarites (a synonym for pearl), we enter deep and delicate waters, for a gemlike connotation could easily romanticize this condition and the torment it brings. Lost in sentiment, we double the

29 Hildegard Von Bingen, *Physica*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Inner Traditions Bear and Company, 1998), 154.

damage. And not unduly, Bachelard argues the gem to be “a psychological monstrosity of valuation.”³⁰ Indeed, the urge to over-value is imminent, a risk that should be kept in mind. But what if we turn toward the pearl, in search of a symbol of acknowledged functionality? We would allow ourselves a much-needed souvenir of our descent into the inner deep-down that reminds us why we ever so often slide back into our shells. These intimate insights don’t easily stick. They are volatile as vomit and slip through our fingers. When mirrored in the gleaming materiality of the pearl, we encounter ourselves in a vital confrontation. So, let us do as Hildegard did and take these pearls to tie them to the temples. When tightly trussed and lightly touched, the head is heavily adorned with symbolism. No mirror is needed to know we wear them as a jewel now. This is a token of our inmost and outrageous protective reflexes transformed into a ceremonial headdress.

This headpiece, however, is not to be worn as a symbol of glory. It is not the crown of a triumphant queen who earned it by battle, now firmly in control. There is no triumph over migraine and we must certainly not profess the opposite. If we do consider it a crown, it must be one involuntarily inherited from generations of foregoing migraineurs. Like migraine, it could be considered a family jewel, pitilessly passed on from parent to child. But because it is too ostentatious to be worn, it is kept hidden, locked behind the doors of the bedroom, a secret that shames and shuns the light of day.

We could also regard this headpiece as a ceremonial attribute, a formal object, worn by the migraineur as she rigorously performs her own healing ritual. For, when the attack arrives, the sufferer steps back from her daily life to perform a rite. She enters an apoplectic procession, a ritualistic inner passage through migraine’s four different stages: prodrome, pain, catharsis, and postdrome. She knows this sequence all too well,

30 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on Imagination of the Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture Publications, 1999), 9.



Fig. 4.1. Image of the Migraine Margarine headpiece, developed in close collaboration with Mexican jewel artist Jorge Manilla. Photo by Jorge Manilla.

and the mechanical repetitiveness strikes her as sacramental. Only by meticulously moving through these phases, sickness will be turned into health. The healing ceremony of the migraineur is therefore nothing but a performance of the rigid pattern by which the illness unfolds. With every step, the sufferer slips deeper into a state of altered awareness. A minor lapse of concentration turns into a feeling of derealization and eventually pain consumes close to all consciousness. The migraine ritual is a bodily routine, performed without will or thought. The actions are fixed and formal, because migraine leaves no space for spontaneity. And in isolation even the passing of time becomes liturgical. It is warped by only a few fixed actions, like the intake of pills or another flux of vomit. Its pace is tuned to nothing but the sufferer's bodily needs.

I call this object the *Migraine Margarite* (fig. 4.1). It is both a jewel and a performance tool. Sometimes I wear it as a ceremonial headdress that voices migraine in a language beyond the symbolic, revealing the inherently underdetermined character of this condition by amplifying the senseless and making unsayable surplus sound. Other times it becomes the headgear of an underground fighter, bombarding the linearity of time in order to clear her path to freedom. Although her silent scream of revolt will never resonate beyond the borders of her bedroom, at least she has learned to tune her ears to the mumblings of the migrainous voice.

Hildegard von Bingen, Patron Saint of All Migraineurs: An Interlude

In my body I endure exhaustion; even my little ones faint.
Now remember that the abundance which was made in the
beginning should not have dried up. Then you decided in
yourself that your eye would never fail until you saw my body

encrusted with jewels, for it wearies me that all my limbs are
laid bare to mockery. Father, see. I show you my wounds
— Hildegard von Bingen, *Ordo Virtutum*³¹

Abbess Hildegard von Bingen proves to be a prominent figure in this migraine narrative, and for this reason I will briefly turn the spotlights into her direction. Countless artists and composers have made the descent into their migrainous craters in search of inspiration. Many of these works of art, poetry, and music became astounding personal reflections, revealing intimate migraine universes and portraying a peculiar beauty, unique to this condition. Indeed, much is to be learned from the unusual and surrealist tableaux of Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico,³² and who better to describe the burden of recurring headaches and systematic isolation than American poet Emily Dickinson?³³ Migrainous musical testimonies that range from Richard Wagner to Wilco certainly have moved many sufferers to the core.³⁴ Yet, never was the work of an artist so inextricably entangled with a life as migraineur as in the case of Hildegard von Bingen, famous mystic and patron saint of all migraine sufferers.

Living in 12th-century Germany, the abbess of Rupertsberg was a well-known visionary, healer, botanist, artist, and composer. Von Bingen, however, did not have the benefit of good health. From the age of five she experienced visual disturbances, which later in life were accompanied by painful fits that ever so often drove her to the bed. Once devoted to a life in the convent, she came to understand these visions as divine interventions; they were God's way of approaching her. In Scivias, the first

31 Hildegard von Bingen, *Ordo Virtutum*, in *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, ed. and trans. Peter Dronke (Cambridge Medieval Classics, 1994).

32 Gregory Fuller and M.V. Gale, "Migraine Aura as Artistic Inspiration," *British Medical Journal* 297, no. 2 (1988): 1670.

33 Andrew Levy, *A Brain Wider Than the Sky* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 91–93.

34 Jeff Tweedy, "Shaking It Off," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2008, <https://migraine.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/shaking-it-off/>.

of three major works dedicated to the interpretation of these sacred encounters, she describes the experience as follows:

God punished me for a time by laying me in a bed of sickness so that the blood was dried in my veins, the moisture in my flesh, and the marrow in my bones. [...] And my spirit was also ailing, and yet was pinned to my flesh so that while I did not die, I did not altogether live. And throughout those days I watched a procession of angels innumerable, who fought with Michael and against the Dragon and won the victory.³⁵

The oeuvre of theological and philosophical writings in which she depicts, describes, and decodes these occurrences is extensive and detailed. For this reason, Sacks confidently declared the nature of her sufferings to be migrainous.³⁶ Her many visions of angels, falling stars, flaming eyes, and circular figures were common to the condition and understood as a consequence. Von Bingen's writings are ornamented with detailed illustrations of these holy demonstrations and reveal the beauty and complexity of the migraine aura. Might we consider these drawings to be the earliest exemplars of migraine art? Klaus Podoll and Derek Robinson pondered upon this question in their book *Migraine Art*,³⁷ comparing Von Bingen's drawings to modern-day equivalents of the genre and consequently confirming all presumptions.

And then I saw a great star, splendid and beautiful, come forth from the one sitting on the throne. And with that star came a great multitude of shining sparks, which followed the star toward the south, looking on the One seated on the throne like a stranger; they turned away from Him. But, in

35 Charles Singer, "The Visions of Hildegard von Bingen," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 78 (2005): 77.

36 Sacks, *Migraine*, 299–301.

37 Klaus Podoll and Derek Robinson, *Migraine Art: The Migraine Experience from Within* (North Atlantic Books, 2008).

the very act of turning away their gaze, they were all extinguished and were changed into black cinders.³⁸

These visual manifestations as well as her bodily sufferings carried a profound spiritual and religious quality. Von Bingen encountered the divine through auras and through the flesh and veins of her suffering body and accepted this arduous physical state as the inevitable consequence of her privileged role as a visionary. Migraine and her religious life were consequently very closely linked, and this entanglement resulted, apart from her intellectual work, in an enormous body of musical compositions. Almost eighty songs together constitute what is now known as the *Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum* (or simply *Symphonia*). All of them are completed with original poetic texts and many of these lyrics portray images that easily coincide with the typical visual disturbances of the migraine aura. In the awe-inspiring responsory *O Nobilissima Viriditas* we again encounter a prominent presence of the sun, the revelation of a wheel, and other circle-like shapes in flames.

R: O nobilissima viriditas,
que radicas in sole
et que in candida
serenitate
lucet in rota
quam nulla terrena excellentia
comprehendit:

R: O noblest green viridity,
you're rooted in the sun
and in the clear
bright calm
you shine within a wheel
no earthly excellence
can comprehend:

R: Tu circumdata es
amplexibus
divinorum ministeriorum.

R: You are surrounded by
the embraces of the service,
the ministries divine.

38 Hildegard Von Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columbia Hart and Jane Bishop (Paulist Press, 1990), 309.

Ÿ: Tu rubes ut aurora et ardes
ut solis flamma.

Ÿ: As morning's dawn you blush,
as sunny flame you burn³⁹

But the migrainous impact on her musical compositions was not limited to the textual material. Von Bingen described "the reception of music from God as a series of wrenching bodily afflictions."⁴⁰ Her body was nothing but a "poor, earthly vessel, sounding like a trumpet" as God's air moved through her,⁴¹ and the mystic manifestations were all a "musical touch of God."⁴² Von Bingen experienced music as God's instrument of discipline upon the body and for this reason it is essential not to neglect or undervalue the somatic aspect of her compositions. Her music was truly embodied and inseparable from the pain she experienced when receiving it from God. One of her better-known works is entitled *Ordo Virtutum*. This morality play was the first of its genre and gives voice to precisely this "metamusical struggle over body and flesh," as Bruce Holsinger points out.⁴³

Especially striking in this piece is that the lines of the Devil were shouted instead of sung. This bold musical choice reveals much about Von Bingen's relation to vocality. To her, singing indeed was not merely a "performance of the pleasures of devotion,"⁴⁴ but entailed sighing and groaning. This corporeality can be very well perceived, as Holsinger argues, in the fact that many of her chants, although not written to be performed by professional singers but by untrained and possibly very badly singing nuns, were nonetheless of immense range. *O vos angeli*, for example, exceeds the range of a common liturgical chant by ten notes and covers over two octaves and a sixth. Many of her

39 Text and translation found on the website of International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies, <https://www.hildegard-society.org/2017/04/0-nobilissima-viriditas-responsory.html>.

40 Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard von Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 129.

41 Ibid., 98.

42 Ibid., 102.

43 Ibid., 94.

44 Ibid., 134.

chants where therefore very difficult to perform by unprofessional singers. Holsinger suggests:

This excessively wide-ranging singing created a painful spectacle of the singing body. [...] Perhaps extreme range had a punitive purpose [...]. It may have been Hildegard's way of making her nuns suffer as she suffered, forcing them to participate liturgically in religious suffering just as she participated mystically. Even as they sang to the angels, the performers of Hildegard's compositions took part in the musical pain of the passion, performing their own musical "domination" as a reminder of their pathetic state as human beings in human bodies.⁴⁵

Von Bingen was a great creative mind and an independent thinker. Some called her the first composer in western music history, others awarded her the title of first female doctor and first female scientist. Whether all of this is true in the most rigorous sense is probably debatable, but she certainly has left generations to come with an enormous amount of medical and scientific knowledge. Unlike her spiritual and musical revelations, these scientific insights were not the result of divine demonstrations but were rooted in real-life experiences from in and around the convent. In the infirmary of the abbey, she combined physical treatment with spiritual healing and people traveled from afar to find her help. She gathered her knowledge in two major works. In *Causae et Curae* Von Bingen focused on the human body, studying the causes and cures of many diseases, while in *Physica*, she recorded the medical and scientific properties of plants, stones, and animals. In this work she also makes multiple suggestions for easing migrainous sufferings. Flowers of the elecampane put in wine or the first shoots of an apple tree; prepared pears with honey, galingale and licorice, sunbaked cakes of wild thyme or frankincense; the licking of pulverized heart tongue's fern from the palm of your hand; or the covering

45 Ibid., 135.

of the head with a woollen cap of wormwood until morning were all firsthand recommendations to temper the migraine torment. She also advised the sufferer to “dry a weasel’s heart, set it in wax, and then when you have a headache, place the wax with the heart in your ear for a little while so the heart might enter your head. Your head will be better.”⁴⁶ Although today their effectiveness remains rather doubtful, these instructions are certainly fascinating and inspiring.

The pearls, tied around the temples, indeed, inspire great imagination. And at the sight of it, we cannot help but be reminded of how Von Bingen and her nuns were often dressed in long white gowns, bedecked with flowers and wearing crowns of gold, ornamented with pearls and precious gems. During holy festivities, these women flouted the ecclesiastical rules of behavior by dressing up as brides of Gods, wearing jewels and letting their hair down. The patriarchal clergy forced its nuns to dress modestly and all ornaments were resolutely banned. The sight of these elegant nuns, singing and dancing in their handsome outfits must have distracted quite a few clergymen and, without question, Von Bingen was greatly criticized.⁴⁷ Though she was criticized, she was not commanded to end these practices, which is quite remarkable. She was permitted to continue, because everyone understood that her fashion statements were the result of holy visions. Whenever skeptics witnessed Von Bingen’s bodily horror during these episodes of enlightenment, they were instantly silenced by the terror and left in consternation; they could only acknowledge this woman’s privileged position.⁴⁸ We might therefore presuppose that migraine was indeed the source of Von Bingen’s authority and the condoned flowers and gems were the proof of her power as a religious woman in a male-dominated hierarchy. Here again migraine’s thwarted

46 Hildegard Von Bingen, *Physica*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Inner Traditions Bear and Company, 1998), 225.

47 Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard von Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2013), 79.

48 *Ibid.*, 91.

manners of being functional become apparent and the pearls in the abbesses' hair might just have been a testimony to this fact.

Now, if Wolff were to be considered the father of modern-day headache research, then surely migraine should not be left motherless. And who better to take on this maternal role than the great creator and controversial thinker, abbess Hildegard von Bingen.

Notes from a Logbook: Vessels to Voice

As a singer incapable of using my vocal apparatus, I aspired to turn migraine itself into a voice that sings in a language beyond the symbolic. But how? In search of an answer, I developed a new methodology based on the body's inability to resonate. And this new methodology, in turn, announced another important shift in my artistic practice. Muted and immovable, I had to let go of what I knew, for I could no longer make use of my musical competences. I therefore made a conceptual piece, a performance tool that would gather arbitrary data, which would be amplified and ordered to sing. Finding the right equipment to do what I had conceptualized was not easy, and along the way it became clear that quite some compromises needed to be made. The first decision to tackle was whether to use new high-tech equipment to measure the movement of the blood vessels or to find an old kymograph and simply repeat Wolff and Graham's experiment.

Soon I realized that all recent equipment was not portable and, therefore, could not be integrated into a head jewel. And so, I returned to Wolff and Graham in search of an old kymograph. Finding one was surprisingly easy, and this wondrous object (fig. 4.2), with its meticulous mechanics, had a bizarre Lewis Carroll-like vibe to it. I was eager to test it. Instantly, the first experiments generated a fascinating result. The shaky black lines on the old, yellowed paper had a compelling aesthetic quality to them (figs. 4.3–5), and I was at once convinced this was the right way to move forward. Many experiments followed and I learned that capturing my vascular movements was not

easily done. Each of the attempts was registered by the kymograph and became part of the score I generated. Placing the cold metal of the kymograph on my temples and strapping it tightly around the head also had a brief soothing effect. Nevertheless, these trials were often frustrating, and as a result the handling of this medical tool reminded me of my ever ongoing and often discouraging search for treatment. After a while, I gave in to the slow pace of this process, and I realized this conceptual artwork held the potential of somehow becoming an object of resistance, opposing the commercialization of the healing process, which rushed patients toward a speedy recovery in order to regain productivity. This dialogue demanded time; I was willing to invest it.

Up until the moment of these writings, I am still conversing with the instrument, changing the setup and adjusting the settings. Me and my migraine continue our search for a language we both understand, attempting to maneuver our way out of being lost in translation. With every attack the score grows, registering our conversations. One might consider these inscriptions nonsensical — they probably are — but at least a dialogue is installed. Me and my migraine were finally communicating. And it struck me that the black line on the paper generated by the kymograph very much resembled the rising and falling of an audio wave. Indeed, our language somehow wavers between sound object and signifier.

To translate the score into sound, I digitized the old paper roll. Then, I designed a tool that could read this score and which could manipulate several musical parameters. The migrainous voice was finally singing.



Fig. 4.2 (above). The kymograph. Photo by the author.

Figs. 4.3–5 (opposing page). Excerpt from the score generated by the kymograph. Photo by the author.

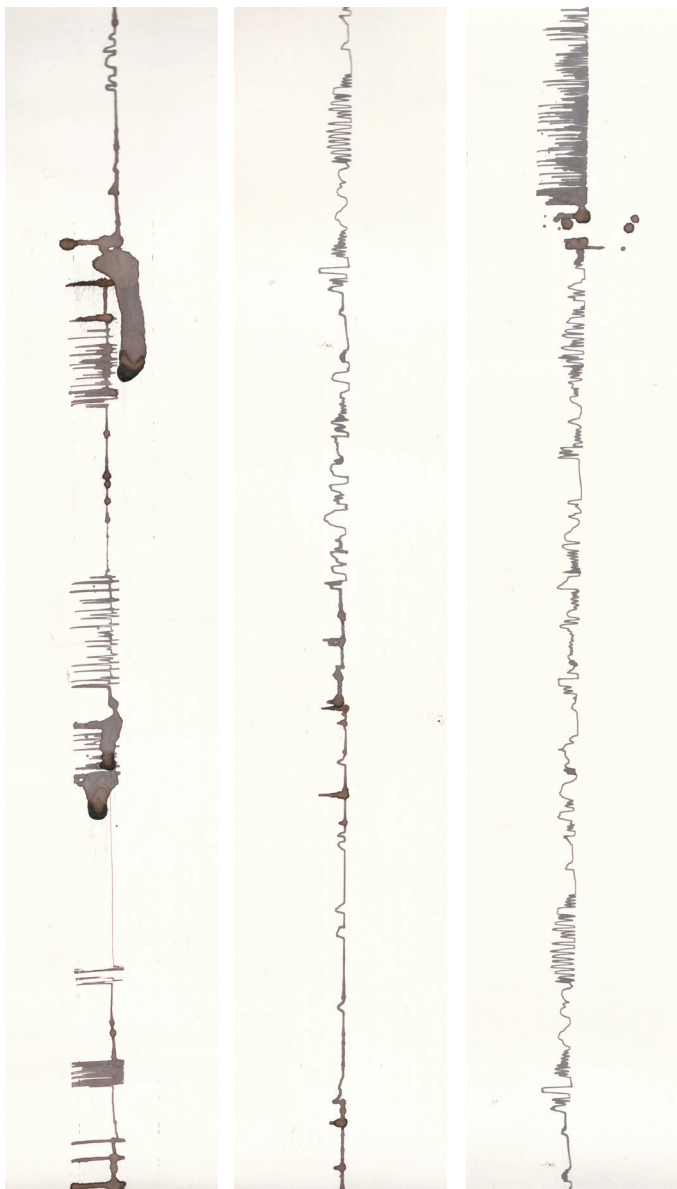




Fig. 4.6. The kymograph score rolled up. Photo by Mirjam Devriendt.

Summer, a dangerous time when men are at their weakest. Whenever pleasure is not far from danger, a continuous buzz arises, a mystic thrumming that anticipates the heat. Innumerable voices emerge, one by one, surfacing asynchronously. Heard but unseen, they call in choruses, producing sounds not necessarily pleasant, but striking: a courting call, a call of distress, a call to maintain personal space.

Their song is not inherently threatening yet relates to a time of inversion, of looming potential for subversion. When exposed to danger, they escape or play dead, they drop to the ground and start burrowing. Spending a long time underground,

they are adapted to a sunken life. They are always excavating chambers and when their time of entombment has ended, they are reborn only to sing and die again, a perpetual performance of an obstinate routine. Life. Death. Rebirth. Life. Death. Rebirth. A symbol of survival? They are certainly supreme in long levity and noise.

Heard but unseen, they form an acousmatic presence. We only sense their prominent eyes upon us and their gaze is most unsettling. It is believed that between these eyes there lies a large nose-like structure that takes up most of the front of the head and which is unusually sensitive. It is also said

that two membranous formations operate as the equivalent of ears. These auricles are capable of detecting the softest of sounds, the tiniest tic-toc and the most muffled melodies. Their senses are extremely delicate, hypersensitive, to say the least. They cannot tolerate their own commotion and are damaged by the sounding of their own vociferous voice. If only they could disable their own hearing. If only they could shield themselves from their own masochistic call.

Their abdomen is hollow and used only as a resonating cavity. They don't eat. They don't drink. They don't need nourishment. They are in fact free from any need. They need nothing other than song to survive,

to sing without interruption. Singers that do not require food? What peculiar singers that must be. They sing on and on, in need of nothing, nothing but song, nothing but to sing, nothing but to sing, straight up to their death.

Human minus body equals voice.

The power of their voice stems precisely from the underdetermination of its source. Whenever heard but not seen, a body is merely assumed. They are only a body insofar as they emit a voice but lack the fleshiness, the sexiness, the physicality. This body does not produce a voice as much as it is revealed by a voice. To them a body is nothing but an ephemeral husk, an erasable phys-

ical trace of a living voice. This voice comes into being through the encounter of mouth and breath, both physical phenomena. The voice, however, remains ultimately bodiless.

They lose themselves in song, delirious song, enchanting stupor, but at the same time put pressure on our associations with song. Truth or seduction? Do not ask what or how they sing but focus on the paradox they represent. In them the voice both disappears and is foregrounded. Might that be their power? Not the message, never the message but the act itself is all that seems of any relevance.

Countless mortal voices soar, unseen entities, repeating the same song in perpetuum; an eternal echo of the somatic cavity. Anonymous speakers. Each voice contributing to the infinite orchestra, stretching the air in search of a listener. Countless unique monologues; together a chorus, droning on and on, offering a mortal, living narrative, boundless and as manifold as the individuals creating it.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ This depiction of the cicada as a migrainous singer was created using borrowed language from Pauline LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Greco-Roman Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Human Minus Body Equals Voice

Only in song is there this place for the confusion
and the challenge of the human as human.

— Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*¹

Introduction

So far, it has been established that the migraine voice is failing. It does so on various levels, ranging from a vocal-technical disintegration up to a muteness forced upon the sufferer by stigmatization. Then, an attempt was made to capture this failure by recording the migrainous voice as it resonated in the blackness of the bedroom. And when the voice became incapable of sounding, the language and voice of others were borrowed and a performance tool was created that turned migraine into a voice, expressing itself in a language beyond the symbolic. Still, an important question remains: what can the failing voice reveal about the nature of the voiced? In my attempt to approach this issue, I turn to the migraine voice in order to address some fundamental issues at the heart of voice studies: Whenever confronted with the voice, does the listener pay attention to the

¹ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 126.

sounding of the medium (the resonance of a speaking voice) or is the medium pushed to the background, merely operating as a carrier of meaning (speech as a linguistic expression)? Is there an alternative to this opposition? In order to theorize the voice, should it always be reduced to an abstract concept, separated from the speaking individual, or can we study the voice without disregarding its uniqueness? Where is the voice, wavering on the crossroads between outside and inside, the material and the spiritual, situated? What is the potential of such a topographical study of the voice in the context of illness? And finally, what can the singer teach us about what it means to be voiced?

I strongly believe that the migrainous voice is capable of providing some vital insights with regard to these questions. The void in which it resonates holds the potential to study the voice differently. The artistic practice of the (failing) singer could confront us with the voice in ways that are offbeat, precisely by resonating beyond a silent representation.

The Object Voice: Understanding Voice through Linguistics and Psychoanalysis

Let us start by studying the voice up close and tune our ears to how the voice arrives at the ear of the listener. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar opens by elaborating on the two widespread functions of the voice. On one hand, the voice operates as “a vehicle of meaning,” carrying a message, while, on the other, it is “a source of aesthetic admiration,” and we hear the sounding of that voice in all its materiality.² These two functions never seem to coincide. When listening to the voice, we either attend to the meaning of the words, which forces the sounding voice as a material support to disappear in the background, or we witness how a pure voice comes to the foreground and consequently obfuscates the signifying expression. The perfect example of the latter, Dolar claims,

2 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 4.

is the singing voice, for “singing is bad communication.”³ To illustrate this seemingly provocative statement, he points to the virtuous but unintelligible vocal escapades of the operatic soprano. When she sings, the audience is filled with joy and awe. Her voice, because of its technical artistry, is a source of pleasure and admiration and consequently turns into an “object of fetishish reverence.”⁴ Yet, in order to grasp the nuances of the opera’s storyline, it is essential to read the libretto projected above the stage or in the booklet, for however magnificent and skilled the soprano’s voice might be, the sounding of her words in a musical context will always cloud her message.

We can infer from Dolar’s theorizing that the singing migraine voice somehow fails at both obvious functions. On the one hand, it breaks down as a bearer of meaning (for migraine undoes speech in its signifying purpose), while, on the other, it falls short at being a source of aesthetic admiration (migraine counteracts vocal technique, forcing the singer into a state of utter uncontrollability, fluttering between music and nonmusic). Could what remains be a voice that confronts us with what Dolar proposes as a third aspect of the voice: the *object voice*? He elaborates that the object voice “does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetishish reverence, but [is] an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation.”⁵ Resonating with Dolar’s argumentation, I wonder whether through failure the migraine voice might be able to go beyond its obvious purposes and expose a different way of understanding voice.

To address this question, let us start by attending to the voice in its most common function: as a signifier. When the voice aims at making sense, it operates as a bearer of meaning, a carrier of utterances, declarations, and all other kinds of linguistic expressions. However, in itself it does not add to the sense-making process. Referring to the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Sauss-

3 Ibid., 30.

4 Ibid., 4.

5 Ibid.

sure, Dolar explains that all elements in speech that contribute to meaning can be organized in linguistic structures. Phonology is the arranging mechanism which slices up the voice into its smallest possible meaningfully contrasting elements. These sounds are in themselves meaningless, negative entities that only signify in combination with one another when organized within the linguistic framework. Phonology also reduces the voice to such an extent that all corporeality is swallowed by the system: “[P]honology stabs the voice with the signifying dagger,” Dolar explains, “it does away with its living presence, with its flesh and blood.”⁶ In other words, no physical aspects of the voice escape the process of linguistic structuring.

This becomes evident when we are confronted with manifestations of the voice that seemingly counteract the signifier. For example, when listening to someone with a strong accent, our focus might get redirected; our ear turns away from the meaning of the words and toward the materiality of the voice. However, as Dolar demonstrates, both manifestations of the material voice within speech (accent, intonation, and timbre) and manifestations of this voice outside speech (coughing, hiccups, infant babbling, screaming, and laughing) are easily analyzed and returned to the linguistic matrix. Consequently, the voice is what falls outside these frameworks. When all elements that take part in the sense-making process are arranged in the linguistic web, we are left with a remainder, a surplus of making sense. For this reason, Dolar argues, the voice is “what does not contribute to making sense.”⁷ It is not a positive aspect that could be broken down in order to fit the binary system, nor is it an alluring imaginary attribute that could avoid getting caught in this procedure. No meaning could be attributed to it, because all meaning would get redirected to the structures. Phonology disassembles the “living presence of the voice into the lifeless

6 Ibid., 19.

7 Ibid., 15.

differential matrix”⁸ but leaves behind a surplus which is the object voice.

In order to understand how the failure of the migraine voice might hold the potential of confronting us with the object voice, we must first zoom in on how this voice resists being caught in the linguistic structure. Let us, therefore, lend an ear to some relevant manifestations of the voice as proposed by Dolar. First, we turn to the accent, which, as Dolar explains, can be easily analyzed, because it is after all “a norm which differs from the ruling norm — this is what makes it an accent, [...] and it can be described in the same way as the ruling norm.”⁹ Listening to someone with an accent, one might need some time to get accustomed, but once the ear adjusts, the materiality of the voice yet again disappears in the background, and the message is what grabs the attention. However, when attending to the migraine voice, symptoms like dysarthria (a lack of clear articulation), slurred speech, and the extreme diminution in volume due to phonophobia can alter the voice to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible for the listener to adjust. When these symptoms are manifested, the migraine voice might be rendered close to unintelligible, and by murmuring in an indecipherable accent, this voice resists being returned to the signifying matrix.

Intonation, another manifestation of the voice in speech, contributes to meaning and can therefore easily be linguistically analyzed, Dolar explains. When a question is posed, the pitch raises at the end of the phrase. This modulation does not obstruct but strengthens the signifying process; it helps the listener to perceive the sentence as a question. The migraine voice, however, when subjected to pain and intense nausea, lacks meaningful intonation. She expresses herself in nothing but monotonous mumblings. The absence of these modulations render her less intelligible, and, again, the migraine voice resists being returned the linguistic structuring process.

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 20.

Dolar also explains how manifestations of the voice outside of speech like hiccups, coughing, laughing, and screaming are incapable of freeing themselves from the linguistic structures. In the context of migrainous sufferings, the scream as an expression of pain, evidently, deserves some special interest. Initially, Dolar explains, the scream is nothing but a vocal reflex to a physical sensation. However, from the moment the scream reaches the other, it retroactively turns the outcry into an appeal, and what first was nothing but a bodily reflex now shifts into a request for help:

The first scream may be caused by pain, by the need for food, by frustration and anxiety, but the moment the other hears it, the moment it assumes the place of the addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other.¹⁰

When the scream is heard by the other, it is retroactively captured by the linguistic matrix. The migraine voice, however, encapsulated by the intimacy of her bedroom, does not resonate beyond the walls of her chamber. It does not reach the ear of the other and therefore never turns into a cry for help. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that often all help is unavailing in the midst of migrainous misery. When the attack is roaring at full force, there is nothing to be done but to outwait the torment, to lay still and trust time will take care of business. No food, no water, no pills, not even a loving touch will help her when she is wandering the cavities of intense physical pain. She wants nothing except for it all to be over. And so, it is safe to say that the migraineur's outcry does not reach the other, and that even if it would, it would remain unanswerable. For this reason, the migraineur's moans even retroactively resist being caught in the linguistic web.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

Many other migrainous features obscure the intelligibility of the voice. The voice fails as a vehicle of meaning when pain is fighting language, when nothing but gibberish escapes her oral cavities, or when slurred speech, dysarthria, and phonophobia reshape her utterings until rendered unintelligible. What is sounding is an ungraspable, inarticulate, silent, monotonous, and often very repetitive drone. According to Dolar, it is precisely through repetition that the object voice can be revealed. Whenever a word is uttered multiple times in a row, the meaning of this word somehow alters. Evidently, this word can still be analyzed by the linguistic matrix, but we are nevertheless confronted with a surplus, a remainder which is volatile and which cannot be pinned down or captured.

In its failure, the migraine voice takes on certain musical features without ever becoming an object of aesthetic admiration. All her technicalities are made undone, and her song is nothing but a sequence of moans and unforeseen modulations. When migraine strikes, she is incapable of abiding by the rules imposed by technical training. These rules transform the song into another complex language, Dolar explains: “[S]inging, by its massive concentration on the voice, introduces codes and standards of its own — more elusive than the linguistic ones, but nevertheless highly structured. Expression beyond language is another highly sophisticated language; its acquisition demands long technical training.”¹¹ By being entangled in a different structure (the complex system of technical training), the voice turns into a fetish object. This is why the singing voice cannot bring us closer to the object voice. The object voice can never be a source of “aesthetic pleasure,”¹² Dolar claims. Music might, indeed, induce the object voice but then erases it instantly by turning the voice into a fetish object.

Might the migraine voice, fully undone of all her technical capabilities, resonating in the privacy of her bedroom, unpolished and uncontrolled, be saving itself from this shift

¹¹ Ibid., 30.

¹² Ibid..

into the admirable? Migraine vandalizes all technical skills and leaves the singer with her instrument broken, as if it were a flute that was smashed against the wall and gone to pieces. When migraine hits, the singer is forced into a state far beyond amateurism. When recording herself in her bedroom, the distinction between an outcry and a deliberate melody is blurred and what is sounding would not be considered as aesthetically appealing. Of course, in the tradition of contemporary classical music, free jazz, and improv, many singers have entered the stage without the intention of creating vocalizations that were aesthetically pleasant. A performance of Luciano Berio's *Sequenza III for Female Voice* might not aim at portraying the voice in a *beautiful* way, nor did Yoko Ono's screaming attempt to please her audience with angelic reverberations. Nonetheless, in both cases the materiality of the voice is aestheticized and, according to Dolar's reasoning, thus becomes a source of admiration. The migraineur, however, is not at all in control of her instrument. Instead, her soundings are rampant and coincidental. The authenticity of this uncontrollability cannot be imitated during an improvisation, not even when the singer claims to *completely let go*. The physical reality of a sick body cannot be reconstructed. Certain sounds could of course be mimicked, as often happens in a wide range of vocal genres, but, then again, the audience witnesses mastery, and inevitably admiration will kick in. The nonperformative context of the migraineur's bedroom as she constructs her private diary also marks a clear distinction with the staged avant-gardist voice of the free improviser, entertaining an audience while in the spotlight.

The singing of the migraineur does not abide by the complex rules of vocal technical training. It does not even speak the language that resonates through the rules of technical excellence. From this, we can infer that through the sounding of the migrainous voice the boundaries between both widespread functions as a carrier of meaning and pure materiality become blurred. Precisely through its failure, the migraine voice becomes capable of putting pressure on the seemingly incapable opposition of the voice. By failing, the voice is able to

juxtapose both functions and to become an embodiment of its own paradox. Still, when the migraineur clouds the distinction between outcry and melody, between sense and nonsense, the voice still does not fully escape the linguistic structure, Dolar would argue. But because of its inherent and constant resistance to that structure, the object voice can be encountered in brief and ephemeral flashes. Our focus continuously shifts from flares of aesthetic fascination to scraps of meaningful speech and back. Sporadically and silently, the object voice penetrates this pattern. This is an unstable position, and as long as the voice is sounding the object voice will remain volatile.

There is, however, one typical migrainous symptom, which does portray the object voice in its purest form: the aphonic silence. When the migraineur attempts to speak, but no sound escapes the oral cavity, we still witness a voice, albeit a silent one. When nothing is sounding, the voice fully frees itself from the linguistic structures; what is left is pure surplus meaning. At this point, the object voice is, in fact, *inaudible*:

Inside the heard voices is an unheard voice, an aphonic voice, as it were. For what Lacan called *objet petit a* — to put it simply — does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them: it is both evoked and covered, enveloped by them, for “in itself” it is just a void. So sonority both evokes and conceals the voice; the voice is not somewhere else, but it does not coincide with voices that are heard.¹³

The object voice is inaudible. This makes it all the more ephemeral and difficult to grasp. We can never directly be confronted with its nothingness unless in the face of the aphasic silence. Yet, without ever being able to materialize it, the migrainous voice attests to this silent presence and even gently provokes it through a monotonous repetitiveness that remains forever unan-

¹³ Ibid., 73–74.

swerable. Nevertheless, the volatility of the object voice remains; a consequence of its unstable position, situated right on the crossroads between presence and absence: “The object voice,” as Dolar explains,

is the pivotal point precisely at the intersection of presence and absence. It discloses the presence and gives ground to its imaginary recognition — recognizing oneself as the addressee of the Other — but at the same time it is what inherently lacks and disrupts any notion of a full presence, it makes it a truncated presence built around a lack — the lack epitomized by the surplus of the voice.¹⁴

Might not this critical point between presence and absence be exactly where we locate the migraineur? When Dolar defines the object voice as “the part [of the voice] which can never be simply present, but is not simply absent either,”¹⁵ he reminds us of the state in which we find the migraine sufferer, dozed and dazed, a blotch of barely being. In Chapter Three, I showed that the underdetermined character of migraine, as a disproportional self-protective reflex, generates a meaningless and unspeakable surplus. Migraine, as an exuberant exaggeration, could consequently be considered a remainder that is unsayable and without meaning. This excess overflows the body and silently seeps into the voice through the cracks and fractures the symptoms caused, confronting us with the silent presence of the inexpressible psychological, neurological, or physiological needs of the sufferer, which are inexpressibly contained in the expressed. It could be stated that this attempt to tune in to the silence of the object voice, somehow, coincides with the artistic aims of this whole endeavor. For, again, this is an attempt to witness my own absence and an ode to the pivotal point between presence and absence. When the voice sounds, it locates the body. When we hear the evanescent serenade of the migraineur, gently evok-

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ing the object voice, we find the sufferer precisely on the verge between presence and absence. Her voice resonates in that void, yet points toward the world.

The Cicada: Understanding Voice through the Evocative Power of Myth

Although Dolar's psychoanalytic take offers us an alternative way of thinking the voice, his approach remains logocentric, considering speech and language as epistemologically superior. While he does value the remainder of the voice as *objet petit a*, this excess is still ultimately framed within a psychoanalytic structure that ties it back to language and meaning. In the opposition of language and the voice's materiality, a hierarchy is marked that clearly favors the first. This is the result of the inherent tendency within dualities to deem one of both oppositions to be more valuable than the other. To the psychoanalyst, everything is language; even the inaudible object voice is not completely freed from the semantic matrix and the body, as the physical materiality of the voice is understood as a linguistic structure in itself. Although the voice has its final destination in language, it reaches much further than the spheres of speech. The voice exceeds language and leaves behind a leftover. From a logocentrist point of view, this remainder is not dismissed but rather reinscribed within a framework of meaning, even as it marks its limits. This semantic approach turns the voice, as a cast-off of making sense, into a lack. As a migraine-suffering singer I feel the need to shake off the heavy weight of semantic supremacy in order to balance out the relation between orality (the voice as language) and vocality (the voice as whatever does not contribute to language). By incorporating the two at once, the migraine voice might be capable of offering an alternative to this time-honored opposition and therefore might reach beyond the initial hierarchy.

And so, I propose to step away from theorizing tactics for a moment and to approach the voice through the evocative power of myth. Let us reintroduce a metaphor that points toward the

potential of the migraine voice, because it embodies the paradox of the voice. In *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*,¹⁶ philosopher Pauline A. LeVen turns to Plato's *Phaedrus* to address the issue of the voice's inherent opposition. In this dialogue, touching on subjects as love, rhetoric, and writing, Socrates unfolds the invented myth of the cicadas when on a hot summer's day, he and a young man called Phaedrus take a rest under a plane tree and become captivated by the buzzing of innumerable cicadas above their heads:

Well, once upon a time, the story goes, cicadas were men who belonged to the generation before the Muses were born. But when the Muses were born and song made its appearance, some of these men were so struck by pleasure then that, as they were singing, they stopped caring for food and drink, and in their forgetfulness they died. From these men was subsequently born the race of cicadas, to whom the Muses give the privilege of not needing any nourishment, but of singing right up to their death without needing food or drink. After that, they go to the Muses to report who among men here honors whom among the Muses. [...] It seems to me, that the cicadas, singing as they do in the stifling heat above our heads and engaging in dialogue, are looking down on us.¹⁷

On one hand, Socrates describes the cicadas in this paragraph as singers and warns Phaedrus that their buzzing holds the aesthetic power of song, a pleasure which is dangerous and, for this reason, they "should sail past them, uncharmed, as one should pass the Sirens, the mythical songstressess who lure avid listeners to perdition on their shores."¹⁸ Socrates advises Phae-

16 Pauline LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

17 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Focus Publishing/R. Pullins & Co, 2003), 258e–259e.

18 LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*, 80.

drus not to be seduced by these “*cicadic Sirens*”¹⁹ and to stand strong against their alluring song. Interestingly, these cicadas are presented as bodiless voices. They are acousmatic presences, heard but unseen. They don’t require food or water, which raises the question whether a body that is not in need of nourishment could be considered a body at all? Yet, isn’t it precisely the reverberation of the body in the voice, the sounding of the corporeal, that causes the voice to become an object of aesthetic reverence, of seduction? In the cicada, the pleasure of a sounding voice seems to escape its physical reality.

On the other hand, the myth presents the cicadas as reporters to the muses engaged in dialogue with one another, an act which references the voice of the philosopher, the voice as a bearer of meaning. However, as LeVen points out, Socrates does not refer to the cicadas as actually saying *something*. What is heard is nothing but a continuous buzz. The content of their chatter is not of importance. What matters here is that they display the very act of dialoging. Precisely because these insects do not actually own a voice, or a body, they could be approached as a symbol of the voice. Simultaneously, they are bodiless singers, able to convey the pleasures of the voice without referring to a bodily reality and they are philosophic voices, representing the act of dialoging without actually conveying any meaning and therefore never obscuring the sounding medium. As LeVen points out: “The philosophical and musical insects [...] enact one of the paradoxes of the voice, by juxtaposing two functions usually kept separate: pure vocality and rationality. [In them] the medium *both* disappears and is foregrounded, that makes the voice so powerful.”²⁰ For this reason, the cicada as a *metonym for the voice*, “is a triumph of invisible physical matter that has power over both bodies and minds.”²¹ The cicada’s voice is the surplus voice that is neither body nor mind and which therefore becomes able to go beyond both.

19 Ibid., 84. My emphasis.

20 Ibid., 90–106.

21 Ibid., 106. My emphasis.

The cicadas provide us with a powerful metaphor of the voice, and their chant indeed reminds us of the migrainous hymn. These insects “are the ambiguous and metaphoric figures of a delirious song, and of a delirium that produces song.”²² This delirium certainly calls to mind the migrainous stupor that brings the sufferer to sing her song. Yet, the parallels between cicadas and migrainous singers reach much further than initially thought. To find out to what extent the comparison holds, we should turn to the poetic description of the cicada that introduced this chapter and approach it with both the insect as the migraineur in mind:

*Spending long time underground, they are adapted to a sunken life. They are always excavating chambers and when their time of entombment has ended, they are reborn only to sing and die again, a perpetual performance of an obstinate routine. Life. Death. Rebirth. Life. Death. Rebirth. They cannot tolerate their own commotion and are damaged by the sounding of their own vociferous voice. If only they could disable their own hearing. If only they could shield themselves from their own masochistic call. And they don't eat. They don't drink. They don't need nourishment. They are in fact free from any need. They need nothing other than song to survive, to sing without interruption. On and on, in need of nothing, nothing but song, nothing but to sing straight up to their death.*²³

Confusion arises. Is this a chorus of insects calling, or do we hear a distant choir of migraineurs? Midway the distinction blurs. The cicadas are not only a powerful metonym of the voice, they also symbolize the migraineur as she serenades her continuous oscillation between retreat and recovery, immensely nauseated she is never in need of nutrition; she sings until she dies; she

²² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 101.

²³ This text was generated through a creative reinterpretation of Pauline LeVen's writings.



Fig. 4.1. Close-up of cicadas pinned on the bedsheet. Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

sings until she dies again. In the symbol of the cicada, voice and migraineur are once again united.

For this reason, it feels natural to introduce the powerful image of the cicada into my artistic practice, creating a visual work out of numerous nylon cicadas (fig. 4.1). I pin these insects to a bed sheet, which I attach to the ceiling by only one corner. Confronted with this cicada-covered bed sheet, the listener encounters a visual abstraction of the voice that is silent and not sounding. Through these insects, the voice materializes

and solidifies into an object. The sight of this bed sheet is quite uncanny. Where did the sufferer go? We were expecting to find her, tightly tucked under the covers of her bed. When oblivious to the fact that these insects do not eat, one might assume they devoured the sufferer's body. "Human minus body equals voice."²⁴ Or did these insects consume the subject whole?

Human Minus Body Equals Voice: A Humanist Understanding of Voice

This mythological symbolization is a powerful metaphor that not only confronts us with the voice's inherent paradox, it also puts us in front of another essential question: "In order to theorize the voice, should it always be reduced to an abstract concept, separated from the speaking individual, or can we study the voice without disregarding its uniqueness?"

Philosopher Adriana Cavarero points out that over past centuries the voice has been a widespread object of study. Yet, she argues that when theorizing the voice, it has always been turned into a universal concept that has lost its connection to the one who emits it. The voice, although always regarded within a humanist context, has been studied as a voice in general, disregarding the living person who is speaking with an actual throat and tongue. When disconnecting the voice from its living source, it is silenced. Cavarero calls this tendency of muting the voice when theorizing it the "devocalization of logos" and defines it as follows:

If what is at stake in the term logos — a notoriously equivocal word that means, among other things, "language" — is "speech," then the "voice" also plays a part here. To put it formulaically, speech refers to speakers, and speakers refer to their voice. Plausible as it might seem, however, this is not the road taken by philosophy. Philosophy instead chooses a

24 LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*, 98.

path that, through precise strategies, avoids getting caught up in the very question of the voice.²⁵

The voice communicates the uniqueness of the person who produces it, Cavarero points out. The cicadas as migrainous singers embody this uniqueness. This, LeVen argues, becomes apparent when Socrates refers to these insects as “reporters to the Muses.” When they become messengers to the Muses, they take on an opposite role as the figure of the poet, who relies on the Muses for inspiration. The poet embodies the abstract, impersonal, universal voice. Keep in mind that the knowledge of the Muses was understood to be all-encompassing and therefore much too broad for common people to grasp. The poet, LeVen explains, was the chosen voice, the only one who could decode and translate this absolute knowledge into a language comprehensible to common people. Because of his privileged position, they were an essential interpreter of the Muses. The countless cicadas, on the other hand, form a chorus of unique voices reporting to the Muses. The Muses consequently depend on these insects and not the other way around. LeVen guides us toward the uniqueness of the cicada’s voice as follows:

Instead of a poet dependent on the Muses for his inspiration and knowledge, Socrates depicts a multiplicity of men honoring the Muses in different sonorous ways. [...] It is not one voice channeling that of the Muses through a mortal body, but instead each individual through their mortal, unique voice realizes the worship of the Muses. [...] The voice that the cicadas model, celebrates the chorus of individuals offering a mortal, living, narrative, unbounded and as multiple as the individuals creating it.²⁶

In this sense, the cicadas represent the uniqueness of the voice. Evidently, these insects are, yet again, only capable of embody-

²⁵ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 9.

²⁶ LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*, 103–4.

ing a symbolization of uniqueness, for these insects do not actually refer to an authentic sounding subject. When confronted with them as they are pinned to the bed sheet, one is faced with uniqueness as such. Uniqueness becomes a separate presence in the room, an entity that circles amongst us, belonging to no one, yet unmistakably there.

A Vocalist's Political Understanding of Voice

Ho-hum. Ho-hum. Ah. Ah. Ho. Ho-hum. A breath departs the resonating body. The tongue clicks and the throat rattles when sighs and singsong morph into melody. Let us now tune our ears to this singing migraine voice and finally consider its true potential. To do so, we should start by reaching beyond Dolar's understanding of the singing voice. After all, when taking the failing voice of the migrainous singer into account, his understanding of the singer proves to be quite limited. Dolar *de facto* ascribes the singing voice to a context of technical excellence, aesthetic pleasure, and utter admiration, a situation in which the voice is yet again captured in a complicated structure of rules and guidelines, which consequently turn the act of singing into a language of its own. Yet I wonder whether it would be possible to think a voice that is simultaneously singing and failing. The song of the failing migraine voice is certainly not the only example of this seemingly contradictory occurrence.

Indeed, there exists another highly intriguing vocalization of failure, a chant that serenades precisely the loss of language as such: lament. In her lecture at ICI Berlin, philosopher Ilit Ferber explains:

The cry of lament emerges from the abyss of profound mourning and sorrow, expressing the unbearable conditions of loss. It is cried out in moments when the pain overwhelms us with such an intensity that we are utterly unable to express it in words. As if our language had completely broken down, revealing its inadequacy in the facing of profound sorrow by

disintegrating into non-verbal exclamations and disconsolate cries.²⁷

Ferber argues that lament does not fulfill any of the linguistic criteria, because it is without content and unable to communicate. It is directed at no one and incapable of receiving a response. Its structure does not answer to the conventional conception of a statement and consequently overthrows any possibility for dialogue. Lament does not portray the pain of a particular loss, she claims, but it expresses the failure of language when confronted with loss.

In lament this failure is resounding as the loss of language as such. It is a sort of expression in which language itself falters and flutters, a linguistic breakdown. Lament is not only composed out of language failures, rather, it turns failure into the essence of its expression and even its strength. Ferber elaborates the potentiality of these failures:

The language of lament manifests a concrete possibility to think of failure not as the shadow of success but rather as constitutive in itself. In lament failure is not weaker than success, quite the opposite. It marks the unique strength of language, a strength that comes to being only in so far as language fails. Lament is the linguistic form that expresses language itself, language as such.²⁸

The failing of language reveals something about language as such and thus holds the potential to uncover and expose. Lament reveals that in the failing of a voice lies the heart of what it means to be voiced. The migraine song and lament take on a similar role, as they both hold the power to transcend the voice's paradox. This becomes even more apparent when Ferber designates lament as a language of borders and consequently dif-

27 Ilit Ferber, "Language Failing: The Reach of Lament," *ICI Berlin*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/ilit-ferber/>.

28 Ibid.

ferentiates it from all other language. She argues that “all language” is a positive expression transpiring over the borders of two neighboring lands: the land of the *revealed* and the land of the *silenced*. *All language* therefore operates in both lands.

What distinguishes lament however, is its bordering these two lands without belonging to either of them exclusively. It denies both revelation and silence even as it straddles the border between them. Yet despite its strictly liminal nature, lament harbors something that is pertinent to all language or to language as such. Lament is thus a language characterized by always being throughout the border, lying precisely at the border between the two lands. [...] It endeavors to leave its restricted position on the border to belong either to revelation or to silence. These attempts are doomed to fail because lament can only exist as a liminal language forever confined to a peripheral location — right on the border.²⁹

This topographical image positions lament alongside the migraine song and the metaphor of the cicada on the crossroads between orality and vocality and reminds us of the migraine sufferer, wandering the no-man’s land, perpetually on the verge of crossing the border that will lead her into the kingdom of the sick or back into the land of the well, forever failing to fit, caught in an endless cyclical movement, eternally resonating in these permanent in-betweens and therefore always belonging to the borderlands. She sings to her hidden headquarters, permanently positioned at the border, in a language that belongs uniquely to this region, an obscure local dialect resonating in repetitive silent ululation, phrasing the unanswerable, a phonophobic drone addressing no one. It is precisely through these repetitions and monotonous murmurs that lament’s eternal circular movement, mimicking the migraineur’s maneuvers and melodies, resonates. Ferber argues:

²⁹ Ibid.

Monotony is the deep linguistic symbol of the expressionless, which sends its radiation inward into the darkness of all mourning which absorbs its own light. Each word appears only to die. Lament does not only destroy itself in these acts of transition, it does so repeatedly. This cyclical rhythm becomes its most distinctive feature. Simultaneously, this circularity manifests the emphasis on the eternal principal of movement in lament.³⁰

Not unlike the scream, lament does not escape the linguistic structures. Instead, they both reveal these structures in their purest form and therefore constitute the “zero point of language.”³¹ Precisely because lament belongs to the spheres of neither revelation nor silence, it is capable of putting pressure on both. When lament is considered to be the zero point of language (and lament always implies some sort of a chant), then the zero point of language might indeed be a singing voice. “Speech begins by singing,”³² and this voice is not silent; it is sounding. It is a voice that resonates. I am, therefore, not only convinced that lament and the migrainous song hold the potential of revealing language as such, but that they are also capable of revealing uniqueness as such. To concretize this conviction we should turn to Cavarero’s definition of the uniqueness of the voice:

The voice is the equivalent of what the unique person has that is most hidden and most genuine. This is not an unreachable treasure, or an ineffable essence, or still less, a sort of secret nucleus of the self; rather it is a deep vitality of the unique being who takes *pleasure in revealing herself* through the emission of the voice. This revelation proceeds, precisely, from inside to outside, pushing itself into the air, with concentric circles, *towards another’s ear*.³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 26.

³² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 179.

³³ Ibid., 4. My emphasis.

Two essential features of the voice are disregarded when it is studied as a voice in general. Cavarero's definition calls attention precisely to these two elements. On the one hand, she suggests that vocal emission is always a *vital pleasure*, and she often returns to this notion in her writings. To her, as to LeVen and Dolar, the act of making one's voice sound is understood as inherently pleasurable. On the other hand, uniqueness reveals the inherent reciprocity of the sounding voice. The voice is relational, because it wants to be heard and always implies an answer. Again, both lament and the migraine song seem to fail on these accounts. These vocalizations do not originate in the pleasure of making one's voice sound (quite the contrary), and, as mentioned before, they do not attest to the reciprocity of the voice because they are ultimately unanswerable. However, the uniqueness of the voice is still very much sounding, possibly even louder than ever before. If failure indeed holds the potential to lay bare and disclose the structures, might we not be confronted with the core of vocal uniqueness when listening to vocalizations surging from a pain so deep that pleurability and reciprocity are only a distant echo? Is the voice not reduced to a surplus that is, in fact, nothing but uniqueness? And in the case of the migraine song, are we not approaching the core of uniqueness by returning the voice to the body? The uniqueness of the voice, as Cavarero points out, is after all rooted in corporeality.³⁴

The latter notion puts us in front of a final, crucial question concerning the voice: Where is it situated? The voice is both material and spiritual, LeVen explains. It does not belong to the body and although it originated in corporal tissue and physical reverberations, the body was left behind the moment the air sounded. "The voice is a symptom of its somatic origins," LeVen states "but it is detached from the body, it cannot be bound to it or subsumed by it."³⁵ Dolar positioned the object voice on the pivotal point between presence and absence, and according to

34 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 4.

35 LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*, 100.

philosopher Roland Barthes the voice exists precisely at the crossing between the body and language. This friction of body, voice, and language is what he calls the “grain of the voice,”³⁶ which he explains as follows:

the “grain” is the body in the voice at it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. [...] It is] something which is directly the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages and from deep down in [...] language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings.³⁷

When listening to the grain, we hear the body reverberate on the intersection between music and language, Barthes explains. The grain does not convey emotions, and it does certainly not serve the meaning of the text. It does not care for communication, instead exploring the diction and the sound-signifiers. Cavarero appreciates Barthes’s approach, yet remains critical of the fact that he again only refers to the voice as a voice in general instead of taking into account the unique reverberation of lips and tongue.³⁸ I, however, find in Barthes’s “grain of the voice” a way of listening that might redirect our ears toward the uniqueness of the voice. Barthes suggests that in fostering the grain, the singer finds the potential of (re)connecting with the audience through corporeality and bypassing language. Attending to the grain means “to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing. [...] In attending the grain of the voice, the listener experiences the interpretation of his body and that of the singer without resource to language.”³⁹ Hence the grain might help us retune our ears to the sounding of an individual

36 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 179.

37 Ibid., 181–88.

38 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 15.

39 Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 188.

body and return to the uniqueness of the voice, through a bodily pact made under the sounding of a bodily alphabet.

With my ears tuned to Barthes's grain, I am even more convinced that the lamenting singer will deepen our understanding of what it means to be voiced. Because indeed, as Cavarero argues, in song the voice finds "its most natural place of expression."⁴⁰ For this reason, I introduce the lamenting voice into my artistic practice, through a reinterpretation of the song *Como la cigarra* by María Elena Walsh. The song uses the metaphor of the ever appearing and disappearing cicadas as a symbol of endurance and remembrance. Initially the song was written to lament the hardships that come with the life as an artist, but later it became an anthem of persistence for the Argentinian people during the persecutions by the military junta from 1974–1983. Today, the song still reflects the endless struggles of any minority.⁴¹

A Vocalist's Ontological Understanding of Voice

By focusing on uniqueness, Cavarero approaches the voice from an ethical and political angle, rather than a philosophical one. In the context of illness, when finding help and getting adequate treatment is at stake, the uniqueness of a voice is especially vital and invaluable. But could it be that the failure of the singing migraine voice not only reveals the zero point of language and the zero point of uniqueness, but that it even holds the potential of guiding us toward an ontology of the voice? To address this question, I follow musicologist Martha Feldman's lead in her critique on Dolar's understanding of the singing voice when he reduces it to a mere fetish object. Feldman argues that the singing voice does not necessarily fully obfuscate the object voice but that it is precisely in moments of failure that it shows its potential of exposing the voice beyond materiality and mean-

⁴⁰ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 5.

⁴¹ Gabriel Plaza, "Como la Cigarra: La historia de la canción más popular de María Elena Walsh, que sobrevivió a la censura," *La Nación*, April 1, 2019. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/espectaculos/como-cigarra-himno-generacional-maria-elena-walsh-nid2228586/>.

ing: “Risky and dangerous, artful and seductive, eccentric and uncontrollable, the vulnerable voice exceeds language and sense to reveal voice in its very voiceness.”⁴²

To build this argument she points at occasions of willful failure in the singing voice, reverberations that induce a sense of intentional vulnerability and fragility instead of mastery and control. Engaging with classical singers like Cecilia Bartoli and jazz singers like Nina Simone she analyzes vocal escapades in which singers deliberately “flirt” with the breaking point in their voices and argues that these delicate vocal breakdowns hold the potential to “expose gaps in the very status of the voice.”⁴³ According to Feldman, and I fully agree, these brief moments of failure, overthrowing language and convention, puncture the adequate and legitimate voice, exposing the voice for what it truly is: “a messy surplus, located in the intangible spaces between music and noise, noise and signification, noise and language, bodily control and ownership and their loss or precarity.”⁴⁴

Unlike in the context of free improvisation, these failures are only perceived as such because they arise in circumstances of mastery; as ruptures in a framework of competences defined by certain genre-specific musical conventions. In the case of Nina Simone, Feldman points to only one single fragile and fluttering note, standing out in an otherwise very skillful vocal performance. This amplifies how control and freedom are in fact organized around these breaks; agency only exists in relation to these wounds, these gaps. Vocal technique consists of a set of rules that together make up the mastery, but these rules are built around a voice that is inherently always on the verge of breaking, leaving the body and disappearing as soon as it sounds. This notion sheds an interesting light on Laurie Stras’s observation that singers, usually only applauded by audience and critics for their virtuosity and mastery, often “perceive imperfec-

42 Martha Feldman, “Voice Gap Crack Break,” in *The Voice as Something More: Essays towards Materiality*, ed. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 188.

43 Ibid., 189.

44 Ibid., 188.

tions in the voice or their performance as imperfections in their characters.”⁴⁵ Feldman, however, argues that these vocal breakdowns, these little disruptions of music’s own linguistic rules, might be at the heart of what it means to sing:

The failing artist, the failing voice. Both index being overcome, exceeding, going beyond, and overspilling convention, where voice is seemingly abandoned by its companion, language, abandoned by proper diction and even musically proper pitches. Perhaps a masterful vocal performance is a performance of this speechlessness, and even notelessness; and yet it is also real in being deeply embodied.⁴⁶

The failing migraine voice when singing pushes this potential to the limit, to the point where it clips, distorts, becomes noise once more.

Voice without Organs: A Posthumanist Understanding of Voice

However important the uniqueness of the voice in the context of illness, it is the failing singer that urges us to go one step further and to study the voice beyond the subject. Along the way, I have learned that attempting to revoice the migraineur through a coherent narrative would miss the point entirely and risk ending up in misrepresentation. At times, even the simple act of making this voice resonate felt counterintuitive and counterproductive. With every piece I made and discussed in these chapters, I have moved further away from the subject, yet always lend an ear to what that motion could reveal about the migraine condition and the voice as such. Initially, this departure was merely initiated by my growing incapability to vocalize. As the pain intensified and

45 Laurie Stras, “The Artist’s Impression: Ethel Waters as Mimic,” in *The Voice as Something More: Essays towards Materiality*, ed. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 128.

46 Feldman, “Voice Gap Crack Break,” 195.

singing became impossible, I started borrowing voices, turning migraine into a voice and making use of the cicada to study the voice as a silent object. I now understand that by letting go of the subject, instead of trying to free it or revoice it, I can better capture what migraine in reality effectuates: a desubjectification. When we are reminded that this study does not aim at looking into what migraine *is*, but rather at what migraine *does* and what forces are operating through it, one can only conclude that the symptoms of this condition reduce the subject to an immobile blot of being and that its cyclical motion disrupts how the linear chronology of time is perceived. For this reason, I believe that instead of attempting *to voice the essence of migraine*, I should deploy the migraine experience as a productive gap and make use of the condition as a concept that could “rupture notions of the subject and time and allow a reimagining of voice that is no longer bound to instants or places or subjects.”⁴⁷

This voice without a subject is what Lisa Mazzei calls a “Voice without Organs.”⁴⁸ Building on concepts by Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson, she asks us to let go of our understanding of voice as a thing bound to a humanist subject and instead requests us “to consider how voice functions.”⁴⁹ Mazzei encourages us to tune our ears to the notion of voice as “a process of couplings and connections of different bodies, places, spaces, times, utterances and becomings.”⁵⁰ This “voice-as-becoming” is an entanglement of material and semiotic forces, a “voice thought as assemblage, a complex network of human and non-human agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the ‘individual,’ the ‘body,’ the ‘person.’”⁵¹

If Cavarero aimed for “a politics of saying where the uniqueness of each speaker makes itself heard as a plurality of voices

47 Lisa Mazzei, “Voice without a Subject,” *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 152.

48 Ibid., 154.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 155.

that are already linked to one another in resonance,”⁵² Mazzei urges us to go even further and “to reach, not a point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I.”⁵³ In the context of these writings and artistic gestures, I think it is essential to go beyond the individual subject and not merely to cling to *my* voice and *my* experience of what migraine is. By means of the Voice without Organs, I become fully capable of using these migrainous experiences and the vocalizations they bring about, not as a goal, but as a starting point to reflect on what voice could be.

In her essay, Mazzei concretizes the Voice without Organs in a written example. This voice does not refer to a discernible subject, time, or place and is distilled out of an assemblage of many different testimonies collected during various interviews. According to Mazzei, the Voice without Organs should never get caught in the act of representation and recognizability, and for this reason it could seemingly only ever exist in a written context. Because whenever the voice is sounding, it immediately refers to a body and to a humanist subject with lived experiences. I have, however, attempted to go beyond Mazzei’s silent assemblage, aiming at turning the migrainous experience into a void of experiment out of which the voice-as-becoming could reverberate. At the heart of these attempts lies the *Borrowed Diary*, which, by being composed out of many different and simultaneously sounding voices, could capture the subjectless voice best. Yet I am convinced that it is precisely through the combination of many approaches that the voice-as-voice somehow is revealed. Through the interaction of reflection and artistic practice, the voice inspired to reconceptualize subjectivity. Even the lamenting voice — or the singing voice in general, certainly but not solely when presented in an acousmatic setting where it is heard but unseen — holds the potential of confronting the listener with the subjectless voice. This might seem

52 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 200.

53 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Continuum, 1987), 3.

counterintuitive at first, for without organs a voice is incapable of being heard. Yet, the singing voice positions us in as strange relation to the subject, because in song the subject of the singer somehow disappears. Barthes explains this phenomenon as follows:

[The singer's] voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original [...], and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which, has no civil identity, no "personality," but which is nevertheless a separate body.⁵⁴

Let us now make this notion concrete and start by considering the lyrics of the song. When Mazzei points out that all literature is in fact an "assemblage of enunciations,"⁵⁵ then certainly song could be as well. Although a character in a book can present itself through a coherent narrative, we know that the author constructed this narrative out of a collection of instants, personas, times, and voices. There is no reason to think that the lyrics of a song did not undergo the same composing strategies. In addition, it should be kept in mind that Dolar claimed singing to be bad communication and that all too often the lyrics are not even intelligible. Instead, as Barthes suggested, language merely operates as a grain that rubs itself against the body and makes it sound. For this reason, it is safe to say that a clearly communicated coherent narrative is not what constitutes the heart of a song. When the singer turns to song, it is not her personal experience bound to a certain time and place that matters. Rather, she becomes a vessel through which a multitude of experiences flow at once. In the singer, the past and present of each member of the audience coincides. Transforming into this empty vessel, the singer somehow undoes herself of her subject and although the body is sounding, all references to the self are left behind. Singing, not unlike migraine is "an alienation of the self, in a

54 Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 182.

55 Mazzei, "Voice without a Subject," 158.

dispossessing of the individual,” as Cavarero points out.⁵⁶ The stage, a black box that operates as a heterotopy, facilitates the coinciding of countless times, spaces, and experiences. These instants move through the voice of the singer, always becoming and reaching beyond the actual experience. For this reason, I believe, song too allows for *duration*, a concept mentioned in Chapter Two, which harmonizes past and present and perpetuates a constant becoming by standing strong against the “erasure of life.”⁵⁷

Accordingly, I argue that the Voice without Organs is sounding through the multitude of artistic approaches and pieces created, and that it allows me as a migrainous singer to create myself “through connections and images and thereby opening time.”⁵⁸ With this multitude of pieces, I hope for a “perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality.”⁵⁹ I hope for the sounding of connections that can move and be moved in return.

Notes from a Logbook: Silence to Song

This chapter is related to two very different artistic works: the mixed-media object *Human Minus Body Equals Voice* and the reinterpretation of the song *Como la cigarra* by poet María Elena Walsh. “Human minus body equals voice” is a term I borrow from Pauline LeVen.⁶⁰ It alludes to the empty bedsheet: The body is missing and only the voice remains, materialized in a multiplicity of cicadas. The work initiated a radical, yet inevitable shift in my artistic practice. From then on, I was no longer working with the voice as an ephemeral vibration of air. Instead, I was handling it as an object with a textured surface, with a shape and a certain heaviness. Incapable of using my own vocal apparatus, I was urged to hold the voice in my hands as I silently pinned the cicadas to the bedsheet.

⁵⁶ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 75.

⁵⁷ Mazzei, “Voice without a Subject,” 157.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought*, 98.

Relying on my eyes instead of ears for the very first time, the question first raised in Chapter Two now became more pressing than ever: “How to define the singer when she is incapable of using her own vocal cords?” With every chapter and corresponding artistic practice, the singer has moved deeper into the subterranean of migraine, closer toward muteness and further from the reverberation of song. A shift occurred from performance to sound art and now to the visual arts. And yet, this subdivision into different artistic media may not be the most interesting way of interpreting this trajectory, especially because it implies that I experienced the migrainous silence as something that needed to be overcome. Incapable of using my own voice, I stubbornly turned to different practices in order to make myself heard in any available manner. But this was not what I was after, and I stand with Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Elisabeth De Schauwer when they point toward the “dangerous assumptions in trying to capture and representing missing voices, which seems to claim that ‘authentic voices’ exist and can reflect universal truths.”⁶¹ Instead of wanting to revoice the migraine body, my objective was merely to register the voice as it fails and to study whether this failure could challenge our understanding of voice.

Migraine, in that sense, encouraged me to expand the practice of the singer beyond the boundaries of the bodily and the subject. When understanding the voice as a series of couplings and entanglements between the human and more-than-human, the *Borrowed Diary* becomes an extension of the singer’s voice and even the patterned layering of cicadas on the bedsheet turned into melodic structuring, with the shape of the insects dictating the rhythmical phrasing. One could state that I evolved into a hybrid singer extending the voice toward the more-than-human in order to redefine voice and to redefine the singer. I did so because I simply had no other choice.

61 Leni Van Goidsenhoven, and Elisabeth De Schauwer, “Listening Beyond Words: Swinging Together,” *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 334.

Over the past years, the voice has always remained at the center of my artistic practice and after exploring all a singer could be, my physical reality invited me to return to my roots. As migraine runs its endless loop, the voice comes and goes, yet always reannounces itself through song. As an ode to this cyclic motion, I wanted to return to the beginning of this exploration and reintroduce the methodology of song. This time, I did not feel the need to try and capture migraine in melody. Instead, I surrendered to the comforting power of lament, as I was reinterpreting Walsh's *Como la cigarra*. Reworking this song, I became all the more confronted with the power of the singing voice. Singing in a language I didn't fully grasp reminded me of my nonsensical improvisations. In these contexts, where words are reduced to mere sound objects, I became aware that the singing voice might be capable of conveying something beyond language, something ungraspable by the signifier, something profound. But is this truly so? Is the singing voice revealing a hidden nucleus of the self? Dolar provided an unambiguous answer:

The voice as the bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order. This deceptive promise disavows the fact that the voice owes its satisfaction to this wound, and that its allegedly miraculous force stems from its being situated in this gap.⁶²

The singing voice might not be capable of revealing some deeper sense, but Dolar's sobering statement does invite us to redirect the ears toward the question of the voice's position, inhabiting the gap between presence and absence.

62 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 31.

The Dialectics of Outside and Inside

Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative. [...] Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being.

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*¹

Introduction

By continuously appearing and disappearing, the migraineur all too often gets lost from view. In this chapter, the need arises to relocate the sufferer in order better to understand the complexity of her cyclic motion and the dubious relation she holds with spatiality. We will do so by tuning into her lamenting call, which will guide us deeper into the paradoxical topology of the migraineur, a position she shares with the voice. By being a “bodily missile, which has detached itself from its source, eman-

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Penguin, 2014), 227.

icipating itself, yet remain[ing] corporeal,”² as Mladen Dolar puts it, the voice, not unlike the migraineur, problematizes the relation between outside and inside. Indeed, both migraineur and voice inhabit this ambiguity.

As a migraineur, I am drawn toward this opposition between outside and inside because my perception of these concepts is strongly influenced by the chronic condition I suffer from. I have become familiar with the turn into isolation. I flee, often multiple times a week, from the public sphere and retreat into the darkened cave of my bedroom. All sounds, noises, smells, and lights become intolerable due to a hypersensitivity of the senses. I carefully close all doors and curtains, shut out the world and hide from all traces of society. I am not really *there*, or at least it has become difficult to define what *being there* actually means under these extreme circumstances. And so, a clear spatial division has been made: the *outside* is for the living, the *inside* holds the nonbeing. This spatial opposition and my sense of self have become intimately connected.

Sequestered, I bend to keep an ear on the ground of this floor and listen to the discord of the situation. Phonophobia has driven me into isolation. This hyperacusis causes everyday noises to be perceived as overwhelmingly loud and painful.³ Aversion to sounds is the first sign of my troubles. Migraine announces itself by fanatically ringing my doorbell and aggressively banging at my door. Even the softest of sounds are exuberantly amplified. So, I carefully lock the doors and shut the windows and curtains, hoping to keep out the slightest hint of outside life and eliminate even the smallest possibility that its blaring cacophony erupts at the side of my bed. Even so, when the tram passes my window, screeching and squeaking, it splits my feeble skull. Domestic noises also become intolerable, their familiarity fades and melts into a sonorous haze. When the house sings its private anthem, I hear only senseless noises from

2 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 73.

3 Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder* (University of California Press, 1985), 25.

the abysses of hell. Phonophobia marks the migraine experience, and sound is no longer perceived as a neutral soundtrack to a daily routine. It has become a threat. With the world at full volume and sensitivity pushed to the limits (even the tap dripping becomes a vile assault), phonophobia operates as a disproportionate announcement or warning to the pain that will follow its very occurrence. The accompanying impact of the auditory on the sufferer's sense of self is significant: it pushes her across the boundary separating inside and outside. At the same time, migraine manages to wreak phenomenological havoc on this clear distinction. As the attack worsens, the migraineur enters a synesthetic in-between. Her senses merge. Lights, smells, sounds, and feelings all become equally deafening and these sensory categories, although always already somehow interwoven and interdependent, now truly start to fuse. This distorted sensory perception surrounds the sufferer in an all-encompassing haze of hypersensitivity, enveloping both external stimuli and internal impulses.

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard devotes a chapter to the dialectics of outside and inside. He argues that the interplay of these concepts is much more complex than the usual geographical distinction implies. When we strip them of all literal implications and introduce them into phenomenological spheres, we learn that outside and inside go beyond simple opposition and are in fact in constant exchange. I nod my troubled head softly in agreement with these assertions. As migraine continues its repetitive cycle, it imposes a sense of derealization and temporal distortion, and my perception of outside and inside slowly begins to shift. For the umpteenth time, bedridden in my bunker, the clear distinction between body and room, space and self, collapses with a thunderous noise.

We should not limit ourselves more than necessary by clinging exclusively to the "lazy certainties of geometric intuitions."⁴ In his writings, Bachelard pursues a "study of being"⁵ through

⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 235.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

a phenomenological understanding of outside and inside. To this end, he searches for poetic images that relate to this spatial division and are “new in its *nuance of being*.”⁶ Using these images, he proposes several new dialectic models that overturn the apparent opposition. Bachelard turns to poetry because “language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up.”⁷

Interestingly, Bachelard almost exclusively chooses poems that mention sounds (senseless noise, sonorous echoes, rumblings, and buzzes) and silences (quietude and stillness) to describe a being’s ever-shifting perception of outside and inside. Throughout the discourse of his essay, the aural takes a central role. Bachelard explains this preoccupation with sound as follows: “[S]ight says too many things at one time. Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself. It does not stand out, it is not bordered by nothingness.”⁸ In other words, he seeks to determine being by listening to the inner-spatial shifts.

As an artist working with sound I am drawn to Bachelard’s aural approach. For this reason, I turn to his writings as a theoretical and compositional framework for the creation of *A Sonic Study of Being through Illness and Isolation*. In this work I aim to capture the friction between the self and the space and portray their constantly shifting displacements. This piece takes aural notice of how my perception of being changes in accordance with my relationship to the room. Using the poems proposed by Bachelard as a textual outline, I turn to my voice as a vessel through which the self reverberates. Sounds from in and around the house provide sonic segments. By juxtaposing these textual, vocal, and sonic elements I attempt to unite the materiality of the room with the materiality of the voice. This audio piece is made in part while migraining and partly while being clear-

6 Ibid., 232.

7 Ibid., 237.

8 Ibid., 230.

headed. This way, it establishes a dialogue between the sick self, the recovered self, and the space in which they suffer.

Moving through Migraine

Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses.

— Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*⁹

Constantly shuttling between outside and inside, the migraineur is bound to a nomadic life. Migraine manifests itself in an endless cycle. Health leads to sickness and only sickness leads back to health. Each attack unfolds in the same manner with ritualistic precision. Like a ceremonial procession marching to the beat of high-pitched bells and dispirited drums, the migraineur maneuvers through four fundamental stages: retreat, revulsion, repose, and recovery. As the attack progresses, her sense of self—along with her sense of space—conforms to the severity of her sufferings, pushing her through several states of migrainous being over the course of one attack. I will illustrate these states of being by applying Bachelard's dialectical models to the phenomenological experience of a migraine attack.

First, the migraineur enters the stage of *retreat*. We find her in flight, the earliest state of migrainous being, as expressed in the paragraphs above, is a compulsive retraction from outside to inside. However, the impact of this inward motion must also be emphasized. With the arrival of an attack, all senses shudder at the rattling rhythm of life, which has become an unsupportable commotion. Hands to the ears, the migraineur flees and—in crossing the threshold of her home—she abandons her daily routine, leaving the living behind in her pursuit of isolation. Here, our understanding of outside and inside *is* based on a

9 Ibid., 229.

clear geographical distinction, forcing upon us a metaphorical thinking that operates through oppositions such as yes and no, positive and negative, being and nonbeing. In the motto of this chapter, Bachelard encourages us to go beyond these obvious symbolisms and to refuse the distinctness of the opposition. This liberating suggestion proves to be a real necessity in the investigation of the migraine cycle.

Silently, the migraineur closes, locks, shuts down, turns off, seals off, and undresses as she enters the state of being bunkered. For a moment she is comforted by the seclusion. As she trades spaciousness for closeness and the full-mouthed for the muffled, she feels better, at least for a breath or two. But soon her eyes and ears adjust. The silence is not soundless and the black not black enough. Her senses still suffer. Downstairs, the normally soothing domestic noises now seem to thunder. Volume cranked up to the absurd confounds meaning. Phonophobia phantomizes the familiar, turns the homey into the haunted and the intimate into the far-out. Uncanniness seeps in. At this point, hypersensitivity merges all senses into one painful blend, turning any ordinary sensory impression into an encounter with the bizarre. So when the sun enters the bedroom and hits the wall, it hurts the ears as much as the eyes. Synesthesia, a classic migraine symptom that blurs boundaries and distinctions, is beautifully rendered as a poetic metaphor by Tristan Tzara:

The market of the sun has come into my room.
And the room into my buzzing head.¹⁰

In this image the senses collide. Bachelard also writes with a touch of surrealism that reminds us of the migrainous oddity: “[We] experience the strange whirl of the sun as it comes into a room in which one is alone, for it is a fact that first ray *strikes* the wall. [...] Then everything starts buzzing and one’s head is

¹⁰ Tristan Tzara, *Où boivent les loups* (Poésie-Club, 1932), 24. Translation by Maria Jolas.

a hive, the hive of the sounds of the sun.”¹¹ In this synesthetic moment, the boundaries between the self and space begin to shift. When the sun strikes the wall, it piques the migraineur’s senses, all of them at once. It becomes difficult to distinguish external stimuli from internal impulses. Sufferer and space gradually come to coincide.

Then, as the torment increases, the migraineur enters the stage of *revulsion*. First, a state of blurred boundaries. The headache increases and approaches the unbearable. The migraineur becomes dazed by the intensification and learns that pain consumes space as much as it does thought and time. The latter somehow simultaneously seems stopped and stretched by physical torment and these temporal fluctuations are unavoidably heavily disorienting. The chamber grows on her, a bodily extension stretching her sufferings. The boundaries between her and the space dissolve, and the bedroom turns into an expansion of her suffering body.

Nausea now reaches an untenable, almost existential, height and bursts into constant emesis. “Swallowing and choking,” Brandon LaBelle writes, “lead us into these deep performances and issues, revealing the degrees to which the oral assists in regulating our sense of self. With vomiting, this reaches an extremely dramatic peak. [...] Lurching forward to get rid of what has found its way in, vomiting is the ultimate attempt to expel what is unwanted.”¹² At this point, the migraineur enters a state of flux. Aware of nothing but her physical existence, she withdraws into herself and takes the walls that hold her with her. Turning back into herself, she swallows the space. The room, taken in, is puked out, expelling the intolerance back where it belongs. All in a loop. In this convulsive interchange of outside and inside, the self and the space are in continuous dislocation. Bachelard explains this unstable state of being as follows:

¹¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 241–42.

¹² Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and Oral Imaginary* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 39.

[O]utside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and an outside, this surface is painful on both sides. When we experience this, [...] we absorb a mixture of being and nothingness. The center of “being-there” wavers and trembles.¹³

And with this thought he points us toward “Shade-Haunted Space,” a poem by Henri Michaux that aligns remarkably with the heart of migrainous misery:

Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space is. Certain (shades) especially, girding their loins one last time, make a desperate effort to “exist as a single unity.” But they rue the day. I met one of them. Destroyed by punishment, it was reduced to a noise, a thunderous noise. An immense world still heard it, but it no longer existed, having become simply and solely a noise, which was to rumble on for centuries longer, but was fated to die out *completely*, as though it had never existed.¹⁴

In this state of (non)being, the migraineur’s thoughts are entirely compromised as well as her sense of self. The extremes of the circumstances have pushed back the vastness of her inner awareness until nothing is left but the outer edges, the boundaries, the limits. Her inner self is reduced to nothing but a sense of narrowness that sticks on her insides, leaving no space for her to actually exist. Bachelard refers to this state as a phobia of inner space,¹⁵ a mode of being which he also recognizes in Michaux’s poem and which stirs him to describe the self as follows:

13 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 233.

14 Henri Michaux, *Nouvelles de l'étranger* (Mercure de France, 1952), n.p.
Translated by Maria Jolas

15 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 235.

[A] spirit that has lost its “being-there” (*être-là*), one that has so declined as to fall from *the being* of *its shade* and mingle with the rumors of being, in the form of meaningless noise, of a confused hum that *cannot be located*. It once was. But wasn’t it merely the noise that it has become? Isn’t its punishment the fact of having become the mere echo of the meaningless, useless noise it once was? Wasn’t it formerly what it is now: a sonorous echo from the vaults of hell? [...] In this “horrible inside-outside” of unuttered words and unfulfilled intensions, within itself, being is slowly digesting its nothingness.¹⁶

When the torment has finally reached its climax, we enter the third phase of migraine: the stage of *repose*. This easing of catharsis introduces the shift from increase to decrease. As pain and nausea commence their unhurried departure, the body enters a state of rest. The torment is not instantly gone, and the migraineur is still swallowed by the space, but she somehow experiences the room more like a mollusk in its shell. The chamber now holds and protects her. She is enveloped by a sense of safety. This experience is again beautifully conveyed by Tzara:

A slow humility penetrates the room.
That dwells in me in the palm of repose.¹⁷

Bachelard takes us deeper into the stage of repose by describing it as follows:

[W]ithdraw into oneself, and condense oneself in the being of a repose [...]. Then the great stream of simple humility that is in the silent room flows into ourselves. The intimacy of the room becomes our intimacy. And correlatively, intimate space has become so quiet, so simple, that all the quietude of the room is localized and centralized in it. The room

¹⁶ Ibid., 233. Emphases original.

¹⁷ Tzara, *Où boivent les loups*, 24. Translation by Maria Jolas.

is very deeply our room, it is in us. We no longer *see* it. It no longer *limits* us, because we are in the very ultimate depth of its repose, in the repose that it has conferred upon us. And all our former rooms come and fit into this one. How simple everything is!¹⁸

With the departure of the phonophobic phantom, the migraineur is left in stillness. And with this calm, eventually, comes *recovery*, the fourth and final state of this migrainous cycle. While the pain subsides and the nausea slowly ebbs away, a return of the self takes place. Little by little the “unreal sounds are restored to their concrete, familiar meaning,”¹⁹ writes Bachelard, who offers an illuminating paragraph by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Oh night without objects. Oh window muffled on the outside, oh, doors carefully closed; customs that have come down from times long past, transmitted, verified, never entirely understood. Oh silence in the stair-well, silence in the adjoining rooms, silence up there, on the ceiling. [...] Outside everything is immeasurable. And when the level rises outside, it also rises in you, not in the vessels that are partially controlled by you, or in the phlegm of your most unimpressionable organs: but it grows in the capillary veins, drawn upward into the furthestmost branches of your infinitely ramified existence. This is where it rises, where it overflows from you, higher than your respiration, and, as a final resort, as though on the tip of your breath. Ah!²⁰

Recovered, the migraineur is ready to re-enter the world, and so she does. She again crosses the threshold of her doorstep. The night has fallen, and the moment is highly charged. Re-entering society, returning to the world of the living, means “relaps-

18 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 241. Emphases original.

19 Ibid., 245.

20 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Vintage Books, 2011), 74–75.

ing into literal meaning.”²¹ But not entirely. At this point, the migraineur is more lucid than ever. She is invulnerable to the hustle and bustle and tempted to stare the passing headlights straight in the eyes. She feels alive and boundless, lustrous and limitless. But this moment of resistance is transient. The cycle is endless, and she knows all too well that the migrainous mill will soon, once again, start grinding her sense of self and space until nothing is left but a grating sound that is deafeningly senseless. Some boundaries were blurred to the point of irreversibility. Thus, when Bachelard suggests that “inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition” and that the opposition even “ceases to have as coefficient its geometrical evidence,”²² she agrees. At least she retains the benefit of an expanded experience along with the awareness that the force of this ever-recurrence is too strong to hold and will always break through the barriers of the bearable, an insight that resonates with the following fragment by philosopher Maurice Blanchot, again suggested by Bachelard:

About this room,
which was plunged in utter darkness,
I knew everything, I had entered into it,
I bore it within me,
I made it live, with a life that is no life,
but which is stronger than life,
and which no force in the world can vanquish²³

Localizing Migraineur and Voice: Toward the Absolute Local

The migrainous cycle presents a painful experience. Bachelard, in his writings on the dialectics of outside and inside, aims to transcend physicality by freeing himself from all “organic

²¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 243.

²² *Ibid.*, 245.

²³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'arrêt de mort* (Gallimard, 1948), 124. Translation by Maria Jolas.

causality”²⁴ such as pain and suffering in order “to give a situation of all situations.”²⁵ To do so, he draws upon the reveries of man, because daydreams allow him to access “pure imagination.”²⁶ This, he claims, is necessary for the pursuit of phenomenological understanding. My composition *Sonic Study of Being through Illness and Isolation*, on the contrary, is rooted in a concrete and hypertangible bodily experience. It also relates to a state in which imagination is not at all *pure* but utterly demolished. Physical pain devours all thought and seems to obliterate everything but itself, certainly leaving no space for reverie or creativity. Hence, the migrainous state of mind, in the depths of its misery, utterly contradicts Bachelard’s. Here again, we detect the opposition of open and closed: the mind that is free to wander contrasted with the mind that is utterly constricted, a door that allows or denies possibilities.

But regardless of any physical reality, art constitutes a “situation beyond all situations.” Art takes the rather passive “reverie of men” and turns it into an interactive space in which pure imagination can originate. This interactive space reminds me of what Adriana Cavarero calls the “absolute local,” and which she defines as follows:

[The absolute local is] absolute because [it is] freed of the territoriality of place and from every dimension that roots it in a continuity. The absolute local is thus the name of a taking-place [...] that has no predefined borders, nor any fixed or sacred confines. It is not a nation, not a fatherland, nor a land. It extends as far as the interactive space that is generated by reciprocal communication. It is a relational space that happens with the event of this communication

24 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 240.

25 Ibid., 228.

26 Ibid., 235.

and, together with it, disappears. The place and the duration are contingent and unforeseeable.²⁷

It is precisely in the sounding of all these pieces of sound art, created over the course of the various chapters, that the absolute local will open up and create a brief moment of resonance in which reciprocity becomes possible. It is here, in the absolute local, that we encounter the migraineur. For a short moment we become able to locate her and have done so by finding her lamenting call.

Notes from a Logbook: An Artistic Approach

The composition was made as the Covid-19 pandemic imposed a worldwide forced exodus, emptying public spheres. Buildings abandoned and squares escaped. Out of fear. Out of order. Hurriedly walking the dog, chop-chop, sniffing the eeriness, all ears to the absence, the familiar faded fast. Illness drove us back into our homes, mansions for many, bunkers for most. We deflated our worlds until they fit within the walls. The threshold, crossed and hermetically sealed, wrapped up anger and boredom, doubt and disease. Rooms rumbled a lethargic litany, and when a cough escaped the oral cavity, it was muffled by curtains and dulled by discomfiture. Keep it in. Keep it in. Keep it in. This forced retreat from the public arena back into our dwellings seemed to mark and amplify the opposition between outside and inside. We stared at the doorstep and, more than ever, saw a margin, an edge, an end. This inward motion unsettled our sense of self.

This *Sonic Study of Being through Illness and Isolation* is a standalone piece, it breaks the chain of artistic methodologies presented up till now. Instead of it being created as a consequence of my personal physical capabilities, it originated from the need to make sense of this time of collective crisis. I could

²⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 205.

not help but notice that this temporary retreat into isolation, forced upon us by disease, somehow mimicked the migraineur's maneuvers, albeit on a different scale, when large parts of the world went into lockdown. The withdrawal from the public spheres extended over months instead of hours and had deadly consequences for many. Nevertheless, most people, aware of the finiteness of the situation, had no choice but to wait submissively for their return into society. But when quarantined, the days can seem long and relentlessly repetitive. Confinement severely distorts the perception of time, a phenomenon equally typical to the migraine experience. Detached, we may have felt disconnected, and our sense of being became particularly troubled by deprivation of physicality. Our sense of space, too, was severely distorted, and we underwent the days in a state of dissymmetry and disproportion. Homebound for months, the distinction between self and space dissolved, and the house became an extension of our physical self. We performed our provisional routines to the creaking and clattering rhythm of the house. When the windows whistled, we whimpered along, and with this shushing hymn, we hoped to invoke "the power to make *space withdraw*, to put space, all space, outside, in order that meditating being might [again] be free to think."²⁸

This piece was created to artistically reflect on the health crisis by studying it through my migrainous lens. It started with a few questions: How can my migrainous artistic methodologies be adopted in the context of a collective health crisis? How to attend artistically to the shifting of a self when it is subjected to illness and isolation? How to introduce these dynamic transformations into my sonic study and give voice to the existential and spatial changes that take place over the course of the migraine attack? To amplify the synchronicity between a shifting sense of self and a shifting sense of space when subjected to illness and isolation, I make the materiality of the voice meet the materiality of the room. Bachelard argues that matter shapes our imagination. Creativity is not so much derived from deep

28 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 246. Emphasis original.

within ourselves but indeed stems from the materials we hold and inhabit. It is the ink that dictates the writing and the breath that prescribes our poetry.²⁹ In our case, it might as well be that it is the house which holds our hollerings. The house speaks as it rustles and rattles, and in this thumping we hear the tic-toc of our territory. Wholeheartedly it hums our hidden hymns, and when the pipes purr their poetry, I chime in. So when migraine arises and imagination is undone, the room's rumblings might recompense this loss.

Recording sounds from in and around the house, I became an audience, attentively taking in what happened on stage. I knew this theater like the back of my hand. Many times I had entered it, performing migraine and now staging isolation when no other scene would have me. Warbling away in unison, the house and I became one. As we belted, our timbres blurred. In this context, the voice is, once more, defined as the knot that combines vocalities of the human with the murmurs of the more-than-human. Created out of almost nothing but vocal sounds and domestic noises, this artistic process merged the materiality of the room and voice in a conversation that balances on the edges of meaning. Juxtaposing one unto the other, both self and space get lost in displacement, matter melts and disappears into one roaring drone.

The work was composed while being clear-headed but also incorporates the migrainous recordings that I gathered over the years. In a way, the pandemic presented an external incentive to compose with unused migrainous material, during days that I was free of pain. I had not yet experimented with this methodology. Some have asked me why this piece is still quite pleasant to the ears and why it is not more aggressive when it enters the darkest moments of migraine. I can only reply that aggressive sounds are again merely a representation of pain and frustration and that the experience of migraine entails much more than

29 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on Imagination of the Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture Publications, 1999), 2–3.

that. Aggression requires strength and decisiveness; I lack them both when it all goes down. I simply lay, still. Dead still. Still as can be. And hold my breath. Better be silent. Better be silent or it will burst. Although it never bursts. I wish it would burst. Or break. Or burn. But it just fades. Slowly.

Cripur Cripour: Toward a Nonperformance on Migraine and Voice

No woman is more mute
than the one who loses her singing voice.

— Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*¹

Notes on Artistic Practice: Scattering in Six Stages

As a singer and sound artist I have studied the relation between migraine and the voice. In previous chapters it was established that the voice fails when migraine is manifested. This failure arises on many levels, ranging from a vocal-technical disintegration to migraine-specific symptoms affecting the sounding of the voice and its linguistic capabilities and an enforced muteness due to stigmatization. The concept of the voice has been approached in all its facets: as a musical instrument, as a communication tool, as a representation in society, as the voice of the sick, as the female voice, as an object and as a mere sound. Both a phenomenological as a metaphorical approach have

¹ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 119.

been equally important, resulting into the development of an artistic process.

When the attack evolves, the pain intensifies and gradually the voice starts to fail. As a migrainous singer, myself clustered to the bed for often multiple times a week, I have attempted to capture this failing through my artistic practice. To do so, I divided the failing of the voice into six stages; a division based on the severity of the pain and on how the intensity of the experience affected my artistic capacities as a singer. In stage one, when the attack is rather mild, I am still capable of writing lyrics and of singing with a trained voice. By stage five, when the attack is at its peak, I can only lay in silence and passively witness how all my artistic capabilities have come undone. It should also be kept in mind that some episodes are more intense than others; sometimes I move from stage one to three over the course of an attack, other times from one to five, and sporadically I linger in stage four for days, even weeks.

To capture the failing of the voice in each particular stage, I developed a specific methodology based on my artistic capacities. Each stage, with its own corresponding methodology, resulted into a separate sound installation. Over the course of these six installations, a strong and healthy narrating voice slowly scatters and dissolves until nothing but silence is left. These installations aurally portray how an altered state of consciousness affects the linguistic and vocal capacities of the migraineur as the suffering increases. Together these installations constitute *Cripur Cripour* (2022), a nonperformance on migraine and voice that wavers between a concert and an exhibition, presented at Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent. Please allow me to walk and talk you through the nonperformance:

No more than six bodies can enter the room and only at fixed hours, for this recital runs its own rigid and endless loop. When the countdown at the entrance has come to an end, the doors open. Have a seat. In this black box, all sense of space shifts and the boundaries between in and out are blurred. Once entered, installations light up, one after the other, and start to sing. A voice, announced in song, guides the way through this spectacle of the intimate. Follow the call as it echoes health into sickness, the personal into the abstract, the aural into the visual; until vocality scatters and sinks into silence, a decomposition of voice that runs in six acts. When it all has come to an end, a light will hit the exit and guide the way out.

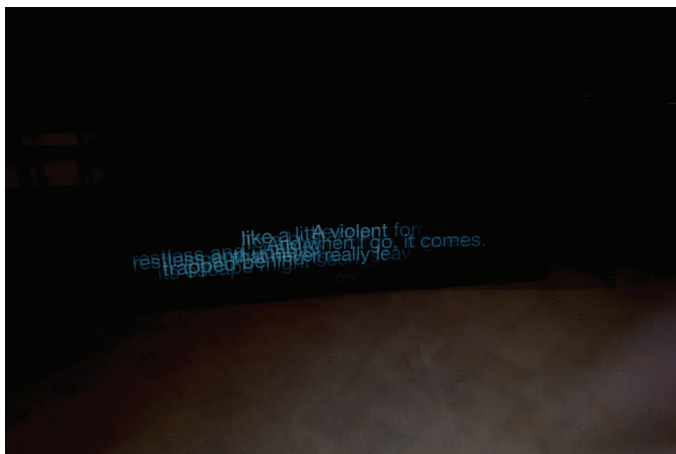


Fig. 6.1. Overview of Act 1. Stereo audio and projection 9'45". Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

ACT 1: PRELUSION. Have a seat. In this opening act, the migrainous landscape is sketched by a voice that combines spoken word with chant. Mostly created while free from migraine, it amplifies a strong, healthy, and technically trained voice. However, the narrative, a clear and personal testimony, trembles when melody announces itself. "Singing is bad communication."² In order to grasp the nuances of the storyline, it is essential to read the libretto projected below the stage or in the booklet, for the sounding of the singer's words in a musical context, will always cloud her message. The disintegration of meaning begins with melody.

ACT 2: IMPULSIVE INCANTATIONS. A voice hints toward a bed. Go ahead, lay down the head. The libretto was written while free from migraine, but the incantations were sung and recorded while fettered to the bed. This piece embodies the juxtaposition of an external reflection on the condition and the registration of

2 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 30.



Fig. 6.2. Overview of Act 2. Quadrophonic audio installation: 6'30".
Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

the impact of migraine on the voice. Meaningful speech slowly starts to falter as the *Impulsive Incantations* direct the ear toward the intersection of body, voice, and language. Conceptual findings and personal experiences are corporealized in chant and the migraine body becomes voiced through evocative text, vocal compositions, and a migrainous singing technique.

ACT 3: A BORROWED DIARY. As migraine intensifies, a chorus calls. Enter the choir, be enveloped by this vocalic cloud. This installation consists of eighty tiny speakers together creating a chorus of voices. The visitor is surrounded by voices that annihilate each other and turn into an unintelligible buzz. In this stage of the attack, when the pain is high, and a compositional process, and sometimes even the act of singing itself, has become impossible, I have turned to the language and voices of others. The *Borrowed Diary* was created out of texts and exclamations that coincidentally penetrated my bedroom (a newspaper on the floor, a message coming in, a woman yelling under my window, an episode of a show that was silently playing in the back-



Fig. 6.3. Overview of Act 3. Multiphonic audio installation: 5'30".
Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

ground, etc.). Out of these random voices and words I created a multilayered voice collage. This installation problematizes the concept of the health journal as a method of inquiry and redefines voice as an “entanglement of material and semiotic forces, a voice thought as an assemblage, a complex network of human and non-human agents that exceed the traditional notion of the ‘individual,’ the ‘body,’ the ‘person.’”³

ACT 4: MIGRAINE MARGARITE. Migraine continues to rise. A head appears, approach it. It is dressed in a jewel that wavers between a ritualistic headdress, a masochistic instrument of torture, and a medical device. Connected to an old kymograph, once used to measure the movement of the blood vessels in the temples, this jewel turns into a performance tool. Searching for physiological proof, it captures the impact of migraine on the blood vessels, and generates an ever-ongoing musical score. When vocal

3 Lisa Mazzei, “Voice without a Subject,” *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 155.



Fig. 6.4. Overview of Act 4. Mixed media: pearls, paper, mono audio, 2'00". Headdress concept: Mariske Broeckmeyer, design and creation: Jorge Manilla. Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

capacities are lost and all lust for language has faded, migraine itself turns into a voice that sings the unsayable in a language beyond the symbolic. Could it be that migraine communicates hidden emotional needs and expresses what cannot be put into words through bodily symptoms? The heavy buzz this score generates amplifies the migrainous language, and its illiterate monotony attests to the difficulty of finding adequate treatment. When it comes to the migrainous call, the sufferer and her symptoms are all too often lost in translation. By creating a headdress out of pearls, the question arises whether migraine could be understood as a self-protective reflex that resembles the formation of the pearl purifying the oyster. This headdress hints at a costume of this melodrama, yet the performer remains far out of sight. The use of jewelry is highly fitting in the context of this work, for it is the artistic medium *par excellence* to re-establish a connection with the body. This installation returns to corporeality. To design the jewelry I collaborated with Mexican jewel artist Jorge Manilla.



Fig. 6.5. Overview of Act 5. Mixed media object: cotton and plastic.
Photo © Mirjam Devriendt.

ACT 5: HUMAN MINUS BODY EQUALS VOICE. The darkest moments of migraine are entered. Here, all vocality collapses and only silence is left. A light hits an object. Approach it. Have a seat. A bedsheet is hanging from the sealing. One expected to find the migraineur under this blanket, however, her body seems to have been consumed by a multitude of bugs. Countless cicadas cover this sheet. According to Plato, these insects are a mythological metonym of the voice, embodying both materiality and meaning at once. In the face of this bedsheet, the voice is no longer a soundwave but has materialized into an object, a presence in the room that is silent, yet unmistakably there. This installation not only offers a confrontation with a silent symbolization of the voice. It also asks the visitor to reflect on the concept of uniqueness when it presents the voice as a multitude of insects.

ACT 6: LIFE. DEATH. REBIRTH. Migraine starts to lift and vocality returns. A lamenting voice penetrates the room, singing *Como la cigarra* (*Like the Cicada*) by María Elena Walsh. The song narrates the typical cycle of the cicadas, which are known for spending a long time underground before they appear. These insects do not eat, they do not drink, they do not need nourishment. This calls to mind the migraineur vomiting in the darkness of her bedroom, incapable of being fed for as long as the attack prevails. Instead of feeding themselves, these insects sing. They are in need of nothing other than song to survive, to sing without interruption, on and on, nothing but to sing straight up to their deaths. Not unlike the migraineur, they represent the endless cycle of appearing and disappearing. Life. Death. Rebirth. A fatal performance in perpetuum. For this reason, the cicadas are not only a metonym of the voice; they also symbolize the migraineur, serenading her continuous oscillation between retreat and recovery, immensely nauseated and never in need of nutrition; she sings until she dies; she sings until she dies again. In the symbol of the cicada, voice and migraineur are once again united. As this voice serenades the return of the migraineur into the land of the living, an insight dawns. These cicadas slowly entered the scene as the nonperformance progressed. They

announced themselves in the chorus of voices, presented during the third act. They also made themselves heard in the heavy buzzing of Act Four. As the nonperformance continued, the voice slowly shifted from vibrating air into a silent object and back. With this song, the cycle is completed. Or at least for now. A light hits the exit and time has come to re-enter the kingdom of health.

These six installations were presented in a big, darkened museum hall. Unlike in the context of a regular exhibition, the visitor was not able to move freely between the different installations. The room was entered as if it were a concert hall but the visitor soon realized to have stepped right onto the stage. The lights were out and the room was a black box. One after the other, the sound installations switched on and started playing. This way, the audience was guided through the exhibition by the migraine voice. A static setup became performative and when spoken word was combined with vocal melodies, the piece truly started to resemble an opera. There was a narrative, albeit a multilayered and incoherent one, that guided the visitor through the exhibition. It had quite a dramatic ring to it. Could it be that each of these installations took on the function of an act in an opera? Was this, in fact, a migrainous opera?

Notes on the Migrainous Opera: A Nonperformance

There is no context in which the voice thrives as in the classical opera. In these spectacles, the soprano chants with magnificent mastery. Through virtuous melodies and the finesse of her phrasing she portrays an ultimate control over the body, her instrument. To many, these vocal technical competences seem otherworldly, and the audience is left in a state of utmost admiration. Everyone owns a voice, but hardly anyone is capable of using it in the ways the soprano does. This realization makes her mastery stand out even more. The heart of the listener flutters in sync with the singer's impassioned vibrato, and not a soul leaves the theater without being moved to the core. Here, we witness

the sublime. Here, the voice triumphs. Here, the voice becomes “an object of fetish reverence.”⁴

The sounding of her vocal cords makes people ecstatic but through the bending and breaking of the words in utmost elasticity, the meaning of the words becomes obscured, rendering the words escaping her oral cavity incomprehensible to the listener. “Opera is essentially the sublime working of the human voice, which conquers the meaning of words as well as the visible realm or representation,”⁵ Cavarero points out. To grasp the storyline, the audience is bound to read the libretto projected on the side or above of the stage. In the spotlights of the opera, the vocal overwhelms the semantic, pleasure combats meaning and musicality always overpowers the words. As Cavarero points out, this appears to be a triumph of the female over the masculine:

Song is heard as naturally feminine, just as speech is naturally masculine. [...] [T]he primacy of song over speech — or rather the victory of a voice that even when it is a man who sings, evokes the feminine, just as speech, understood as the power to signify, evokes the masculine. [...] When there is song, melody and a voice, then there is generally a feminine experience, whether or not the composer or performer is a man.⁶

In the same breath, Cavarero reminds us that through history women were preferred as muted presences and still are, all too often, required to be elegant appearances holding their tongues. However, this silence imposed by the patriarchy only appertains to female speech, for when she sings, a woman’s sensuality seems to thrive:

4 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 4.

5 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 121.

6 *Ibid.*, 122.

By modulating themselves in song, [...] women's voices come to show their authentic substance — namely, the passionate rhythms of the body from which the voice flows. In this sense, the woman who sings is always a Siren, or a creature of pleasure extraneous to the domestic order of daughter and wife. The female singing voice cannot be domesticated; it disturbs the system of reason by leading elsewhere. Potentially lethal, it pushes pleasure to the limits of what is bearable.⁷

As a result, the act of singing is always associated with seduction and sensuality, a notion inevitably turning our virtuous soprano into an object of male desire.

So, there she is, the alluring soprano, expelling her skilled and powerful voice from her strong and healthy body. She is in perfect physical condition. Of this we can be sure. Imagine, there was a time and place in history, that even when she was menstruating, she would not have been allowed on stage. Menstrual dysphonia would cause female singers' voices to become hoarse and fatigued. The Scala in Milan, therefore, used to include grace days in its contracts, obliging singers not to perform during the premenstrual period and while menstruating. Luckily, however, these menstruating singers were still paid.⁸ We can therefore assume our soprano's physicality to be impeccable, and in her supreme presence the victory of the vocal over the semantic appears absolute. This triumph, however, might be much "less favorable to women than it would first appear,"⁹ Cavarero suggests while pointing to a study by Cathérine Clement. In fact, the voice that dazzles and dances leads the attention of the listener away from the storyline that is often fundamentally misogynist. The plot of the operatic drama all too often tells the same old patriarchal story: the female heroine is generally an atypical woman who disturbs the order of things. After

7 Ibid., 188.

8 Anna Karpf, *The Human Voice* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 170.

9 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 126.

being seduced, cheated on, ridiculed, and misled, this woman goes mad and eventually dies. The leading lady passes away singing and with voluptuous body and alluring melodies, she serenades her own death and the blackout of her own voice. Yet again, she ends up muted by the patriarchy.

I believe the failing migraine voice holds the potential of overthrowing this patriarchal dynamic. In operas, violent things happen to women; migraine might very well be the touch of violence in this drama. So, if we were to create a migrainous opera, we most certainly would need to exchange the virtuous for the failing voice. This shift implies some important consequences. Essentially, it prevents the possibility of a live performance. If we were to put the migraineur on stage, she would again sing with a strong and trained voice, erupting from her healthy and abled body. Attempting to capture the failing voice on stage would be like trying to catch one's own shadow; it is simply undoable. A performance would only portray a symbolic representation of symptoms, unavoidably disconnected from the actual experience. For this reason, I turn the operatic performance into the exhibition of a nonperformance.

Here, the voice is exhibited, but the body is not there. We hear the migraine sufferer, but we don't see her; she is an acousmatic voice. The absence of the body turns the performance into a nonperformance. In this context, unlike the operatic stage, it has become impossible to objectify the singer's body. This notion resonates with the fact that the migraineur is seen as a frigid asexual blot of being, unable to seduce or be seduced in return. Instead of enjoying a strong and healthy voice, spurring from a beautiful, seductive body that laments her own ending, and therefore the loss of her own voice, we encounter the migraineur as a failing acousmatic presence, which attempts to reclaim her voice, locate herself, and recover her body.

Objectives of the Exhibition

Step by step, the exhibition transitions from a personal narrative into an impersonal mythological symbolization of the voice: the

cicada. On one hand, this motion into the abstract raises the question of how much room there is for the unique story of the patient within the medical hierarchy. On the other hand, it wonders whether western philosophy and linguistics did not forget to actually hear the voice whenever they consistently reduced it to an abstract concept that disregards the individuality of the speaker. Along the way, our understanding of voice was challenged by the Mazzei's notion of the Voice without Organs, which does not disregard the subject but aims at moving beyond it.

In the exhibition, the visual aspect gradually takes over the aural. This transition problematizes the "videocentrist"¹⁰ approach of metaphysics that time and time again favors the gaze over hearing. "The result," as Cavarero explains, "is the firm belief that the more speech loses its phonic component and consists in a pure chain of signifieds, the closer it gets to the realm of truth. The voice thus becomes the limit of speech — its imperfection, its dead weight."¹¹ The videocentrist approach of metaphysics leads to the devocalization of *logos*, and consistently connects the voice only to language and thought, thereby denouncing the sounding of the materiality of the voice as inferior. We hear an acousmatic voice, the body is missing, but the sound carriers gradually take on a corporeal character: from two, to four, expanding up to eighty speakers. By the time the visitor arrives at Act Four and is confronted with the headdress and performance tool of the *Migraine Margarine*, the body is implied by the contours of the head. This jewel also refers to a headpiece from an opera; it is a costume that contributes to the drama. In Act Five, the visitor expects to finally encounter the body, hidden under the covers of the bed, which is hanging from the ceiling. However, the body is not there. The numerous cicadas seem to have devoured the body and what is left is noth-

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 41.

ing but a silent symbolization of the voice: “human minus body equals voice.”¹²

In this way, *Cripur Cripour* wants to reveal glimpses of the migraineur’s life in order to counteract stigmatization. At the same time, the work is autotheoretical in nature. It transcends the boundaries of my own experience to portray the importance of vocality in the context of illness. The work reflects on what we could learn from the failing migraine voice about what it means to be voiced. What are the consequences of a failing or muted voice? Is there such a thing as an aesthetic of failure? With these questions, I reach beyond my own personal experiences to address the importance of being voiced in the context of illness and project my personal findings into a broader context of language, communication, feminism, and disability studies.

At first glance, the title *Cripur Cripour* seems nonsensical, like the aphasic outbursts of gibberish that are common migraine symptoms. However, it can also be read as *cri pur cri pour* in French, referring to the Lacanian notion that the scream, initially an outcry of pain, which merely originated as a bodily reflex (*cri pur* or “pure scream”), is turned into an appeal as soon as it is heard by the other (*cri pour* or “cry for”).¹³ This nonperformance wavers between *cri pur* and *cri pour*. What is sounding is a mere registration of the failing voice, resonating in the privacy of a bedroom while enduring the migraine experience. The migrainous singer does not take an audience into account whenever she raises her voice. Due to her suffering, she is simply incapable of doing so. She only sings to become a witness to her own absence, registering herself in a sung sound diary, a private counter-archive never to reach the ears of the other. The voice that reverberates in the intimate context of isolation seems to be a pure physical outcry, never transcending the bedroom, and consequently never to be answered by the other: *cri pur*. At the same time, in the performative context of the opera, the audi-

12 Pauline LeVen, *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 98.

13 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 28.

ence becomes a witness to the intimate experience of suffering. Whenever the voice attempts to reclaim itself through an artistic process, the hope arises of resonating beyond the walls of the bedroom and of reaching the other, a cry for help: *cri pour*.

The title also references the term *crip*. This abbreviation of the word *cripple*, which originally carries an offensive connotation, has been reclaimed by people with disabilities and is now frequently used in the context of activism and disability studies.¹⁴ *Cripur Cripour* likewise aspires to reclaim the term critically, by expanding the spheres of the voice toward those who are underspoken or verbally challenged.

Finally, this nonperformance also reconsiders what a performance could be within the restrictive context of a pandemic. The migraine experience provides the perfect opportunity to experiment with this format because the condition is characterized by isolation and solitude. Thus nonperformance not only wishes to lend a stage to the failing voice, it also wishes to provide the visitor with a listening experience that suits the phenomenon of migraine and which takes into account the limitations the pandemic has forced on us. As an artist, I feel the need to investigate the artistic potential of this altered mode of living together.

14 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 15.

CONCLUSION

Dissemination as Method: A Call for Generosity

Arriving at the conclusion of these writings, I will take a step back to reflect on the concept of artistic research and elaborate on how these general understandings translate to my work. Getting my migrainous head around the ambiguous phenomenon of artistic research required some time, but this (still ongoing) exploration, highs and lows included, fascinated me from the start. Four years ago, I entered this new scene with nothing but the skills of a singer, and from day one the necessity to reinvent myself presented an urgent, yet compelling, challenge.

When the artist turns to theory in order to expand her practice, she seemingly devotes herself to a life of shuttling between two very different worlds. The artistic scene and the academic fields both impose distinct standards, require different qualifications, and confront the artist with a particular audience. Auto-theory builds the bridge between both sceneries; the artistic researcher turns to a voice that is truly hers and that translates to both contexts. However, flexibility is required at all times, for maneuvering between art galleries, libraries, concert venues, studios, and lecture halls compels the artistic researcher to continuously shape her voice to the ears of her spectators. Each new context requires her to approach her work from a different angle

and radically to reconstruct the gate by which the audience is invited in. At times, she might transform and temper her timbre to an extent that makes her fail to recognize her own tune, and arriving at work from counterintuitive angles might make her instincts stutter and thwart. Nevertheless, this shapeshifting dance is vital in order to truly resonate with an audience. For the message to sink in, each crowd demands and commands a different aspect of the work to be highlighted and to be saluted in a distinct prose. Whoever attempts to bypass this endeavor runs the risk of losing touch with the audience and fails to practice the full potential artistic research provides.

For this reason, I am convinced that the field of artistic research requires a certain amount of generosity of her occupants, a willingness to time and time again, reshape oneself to the image of one's surroundings. Evidently, this should not be done by renouncing, rather by expanding and reinventing oneself. When the voice attempts to reach out, the possibility arises that it will tumble into the void that runs between the artistic and academic worlds, echoing in vain or not resounding at all. However, it is precisely through the act of reaching out that undiscovered territories become exposed. Undoubtedly, a lot of potential is buried in these craters. New dialects might spur up from their fertile soils, transgressing borders and exceeding expectations.

The impact of this enforced flexibility not merely alters the vocalicity of the artistic researcher, it also infiltrates her way of thinking, her artistic practice, and her work. The presentation of work is the absolute objective of the artmaking process and the essence of the artist's being. For this reason, it is not absurd to assume that within the context of artistic research, moments of dissemination are of great importance. The artistic researcher lives from presentation to presentation, and each time she is requested to make use of a set of highly different mediums and to operate in function of a very diverse audience. Each conference, exhibition, performance, lecture, or seminar presents its own theme or topic, and this specificity needs to be taken in

consideration. And so, the artistic methodologies and aesthetic objects are shaped by the context of their presentation.

One could consider this a tiresome task, slowing down the artistic practice, even putting it to a halt. But one might equally proclaim that much is to be gained from this trajectory, running on sidetracks. Because the artist is challenged to integrate less obvious topics, to work with new materials, to adopt a variety of different methods, and to reach out to an unknown audience, these detours may navigate the research into surprising new directions. Could it be that this enforced flexibility holds the potential of enriching the artistic practice? To my mind, *dissemination as method* is inherent to artistic research. It is an inevitable consequence of the variety of contexts in which the research is required to be presented. This shape-shifting methodology is inescapable. However, the artist remains free to decide to what extent it is adopted. When fully integrating this method, dissemination becomes much more than a mere distribution of (intermediate) output. Instead, presentations are positioned at the heart of the research practice and even hold the potential of taking on a performative quality. In this manner, all presentations, both in written and spoken word, could transform themselves into fully-fledged performances and dissemination as method might emerge as a valid performative artform in itself.

This phenomenon was beautifully portrayed when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and all conferences were directed to the virtual spheres. Instead of wallowing in what went missing, many artistic researchers turned their lectures into wonderful online performances that combined visual arts, video arts, spoken word, and even dance. Some of these performances were interactive, others were prerecorded videos, yet almost always they carried an aesthetic quality that reached beyond the capacities of a simple presentation. It is precisely because art can offer profound and embodied insights that dissemination *as method* absorbs and transcends dissemination *of method*. The methodology is no longer detached from the work in retrospective reflections but resonates within each presentation in a manner that is integrated and aesthetically valuable. Because means and

objectives are intrinsically linked, the methodology resonates freely within the work.

For quite some time, I believed, the exaggerated focus on methodology by artistic researchers was caused by a need for validation. I assumed the urge to analyze methodologies endlessly was triggered by insecurity, a need to prove the importance of artistic research, a collective attempt to define the field or to mark the terrain we came to occupy. I now understand that the opposite is true. Indeed, artistic research is an enigmatic phenomenon; seemingly no univocal definition can be provided. “What is artistic research?” In fact, the answer lies merely in the act of posing of the question. Each project calls for a different methodology, a specific way to connect various fields, an innovative approach in order to create new artistic work. For this reason, the concept of artistic research must be reinvented time and time again and by every single researcher. As composer and poet Sandeep Bhagwati points out, artistic research cannot turn to the fixed models that are adopted by the academic fields. Instead, we actively need to reinvent these methods over and over:

Artistic Research researches the ways and means by which we build (and can build) models of the world [...]. In order to do so, research creation examines the role of our perceptions and emotions in understanding and constructing both the “real world” and the histories of ideas—and it pursues this goal by formulating, making, and demonstrating alternate models and offering unprobed perceptive/emotional possibilities. Artistic research thus is a kind of metaresearch that continually drives us to ask how we can at all understand anything. [...] If your research focuses on how we at all make models and methods, you obviously cannot adopt any existing methodology as your unique model.¹

1 AEC — European Association of Conservatoires, “EPARM 2021 — Keynote by Sandeep Bhagwati,” *YouTube*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Z4IGWF7Ydg>.

Having internalized both a theoretic and artistic identity and having truly embraced the value of dissemination as method, I have come to understand that methodology is the beating heart of artistic research, its vessels reaching unto the stage. In methodological freedom we differentiate ourselves from the academic fields, and this is where we provide added value. Not only are we not bound to certain pathways; we take it upon ourselves to rethink what it means to move, then offer the world alternative motions and meanderings, which can be experienced through embodied and aesthetic forms of knowing.

Dissemination as method was not only an essential tool to enter the various new environments artistic research demanded me to operate in, it also proved to be a necessity within the context of my research topic. When suffering from migraine, I am incapable of entering the stage, an act which is commonly regarded as fundamental to the artistic practice of the singer. Consequently, I was forced to develop methodologies that allowed me to disseminate my voice in ways that aligned with my physical reality. The incapability of performing confronted me with the question whether a singer should still be defined as such after stepping away from the stage. Over the course of these writings, it was established that, although my voice was failing and disappearing, I never stopped considering myself to be a singer. At all times, the voice remained at the heart of this endeavor and, therefore, I continued to see myself as a singer even when the act of chanting was reduced to a silent arranging of cicadas on a sheet. Reflecting on it, I realize that this is how I explored the boundaries of performance. The singer remained a singer but, when the stage was denied, was she still a performer? My migrainous opera *Cripur Cripour*, which I call a *nonperformance on migraine and voice*, was the answer to this question. The audience entered an experience that wavered between performance and installation, positioned at the edge between presence and absence, shifting from acousmatic vocalities toward the voice as a silent object.

This research started with the question: "What can my artistic practice as a singer reveal about the migraine experience?"

Along the way, I came to understand the necessity of turning this question around: “What can the failure of the migraine voice reveal about what it means to be voiced?” This question became the foundation of my endeavor and guided me to an understanding of voice beyond the subject and to the creation of an aesthetics of failure. My work resonated beyond the bedroom by stressing the urgency of expanding our understanding of the voice in order to create an ecology of belonging, extending the public spheres toward those who are labeled as differently verbal. Through an iterative process of artistic practice and theoretic reflection, I redefined the singer and explored the boundaries of performance. I amplified theoretical findings, so that when studying the voice, at least, it was free to resonate.

Many times, I have been asked whether this research had a therapeutic effect, whether it had brought me to tame the migraine monster, making it dance to my melodies like a wild bear in captivity, still as dangerous but forced to enter the stage in chains. It is a legitimate question, but one I cannot answer. Waves of clearheadedness will always flow into gushes of pain. The tide turns, whenever the tide turns. Regardless of incantations or other artistic sublimations, migraine runs its endless loop. When I go, it comes, and when I come, it goes. For this reason, the question is irrelevant. What migraine offers us, is not a triumph narrative,² but the opportunity to tell the story of what it means to be ill when neither full recovery nor fatal consequences are waiting ahead, what it means to waver between presence and absence, between being voiced and being unvoiced.

2 Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 94.

Appendices

Playlist

All audio files mentioned in these writings can be accessed on my website:

1. Prelusion
2. Tyranny of Temperance
3. My Dolly Hit Me
4. I Felt a Funeral In My Brain
5. Impulsive Incantations
6. A Borrowed Diary
7. Como la cigarra
8. Sonic Study of Being through
Illness and Isolation



Please listen with headphones.

Libretto

My Dolly Hit Me

*My dolly hit me
The bees came and bit me
Peacocks landed on my head today
Their beaks picking my brain away*

*Mind the black winged devils, tonight they're out
They'll come and slowly pull my eyeballs out
At dawn they'll gather in the east
To feed my spirit to the beast*

*And every heartbeat hammers
A spear into my scalp
And if I move the skull might scatter
If I bow the bones might break and fall apart
I'm startled by my thunder-storming stomach
My foot a dove approaching in a panic
The head feels like a comet, shredding pieces as I rise
And I watch its trail bewildered passing through my inner skies*

*I am the flashlight, I am crowning the camera
Rather my brain is the flash my sore eyes are making
I am the clash of opposites objecting
Rather my mind is the clash with the body that's quaking
And every heartbeat hammers
The heavens to the floor
The crowds have left and yet stammer
Hold still my inflating, deflating
My poor vibrating core*

*When you're not hollering but holding it all in
Like when you want to stop but energy is keening up inside
Or when you want to cry with all your might you try
To hold it down 'cause all of this for sure will make it worse*

*I Felt a Funeral in My Brain*¹

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
 And Mourners to and fro
 Kept treading — treading — till it seemed
 That Sense was breaking through —*

*And when they all were seated,
 A Service, like a Drum —
 Kept beating — beating — till I thought
 My mind was going numb —*

*And then I heard them lift a Box
 And creak across my Soul
 With those same Boots of Lead, again,
 Then Space — began to toll,*

*As all the Heavens were a Bell,
 And Being, but an Ear,
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
 Wrecked, solitary, here —*

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down —
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing — then —*

1 Emily Dickinson, "I Felt a Funeral, In my Brain" (1861), in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Harvard University Press, 1983).

Impulsive Incantations I

*Into the half-part of the head.
Half-head. Half-head.
Where reparation comes to spread.
Half-dead. Half-dead.
A silent spell. A hidden hell.
A ting-ting-tingeling bell
And soon it'll all be well*

*Into the half-part of the skull.
Awful. Awful.
The brittle bulging overfull.
Dreadful. Fearful.
Earful. Eyeful.
Unuseful. Ungraceful.
A hand full. A face full.
Another bang-bang-bangedibang bell.
Another secret spell.
Habitual hell.
And soon It'll all be well.
soon It'll all be well.*

Impulsive Incantations II

In sync with the wilting, molding flowers, I crimp and cower. I re-enter the egg that used to bear me — a brittle shell that holds me in vicious, malevolent disgust. Like the unborn Fulmar bird I squirt bile through the porous hull when endangered or in panic. So don't touch this feeble husk. It cannot stand your loving hands. Endearment vandalizes, fondling demolishes. Here in this comatose state of the consciously unconscious, your simple questions reach me in riddles. "Water?" How to know? How to answer? Nuances of the will are lost and details of the tongue long gone. I give you but defensive vomit, the stink of my soul, the ink in which my name was signed when my fate was sealed.

*Como la cigarra*²

*Tantas veces me mataron,
tantas veces me morí,
sin embargo estoy aquí
resucitando.*

*Gracias doy a la desgracia
y a la mano con puñal,
porque me mató tan mal,
y seguí cantando.*

*Cantando al sol,
como la cigarra,
después de un año
bajo la tierra,
igual que el sobreviviente
que vuelve de la guerra.*

*Tantas veces me borraron,
tantas desaparecí,
a mi propio entierro fui,
sola y llorando.*

*Hice un nudo del pañuelo,
pero me olvidé después
que no era la única vez
y seguí cantando.*

*Cantando al sol,
como la cigarra,
después de un año
bajo la tierra,
igual que el sobreviviente*

2 María Elena Walsh, "Como la Cigarra," *Poemario*, <https://poemario.com/como-la-cigarra/>.

que vuelve de la guerra

.

*Tantas veces te mataron,
tantas resucitarás
cuántas noches pasarás
desesperando.
Y a la hora del naufragio
y a la de la oscuridad
alguien te rescatará,
para ir cantando.*

*Cantando al sol,
como la cigarra,
después de un año
bajo la tierra,
igual que el sobreviviente
que vuelve de la guerra*

Like a Cicada³

*So many times they killed me,
So many times I died,
Yet I am here
Rising to life once more*

*I give thanks to the tragedy
And to the hand holding a knife
Because it killed me so badly
And I went on singing*

*Singing to the sun
like the cicada
After a year
underground*

3 Translated by Steven Blier, "Elena Walsh: Como la cigarra," *New York Festival of Song*, July 10, 2017, <https://nyfos.org/elena-walsh-como-la-cigarra/>.

*The same as a survivor
Who returns from war.*

*So many times they obliterated me
So many times I disappeared
I was at my own burial
Alone and weeping.*

*I made a knot in my handkerchief
But I forgot afterwards
That it was not the only time
And I came back singing*

*Singing to the sun
like the cicada
After a year
underground
The same as a survivor
Who returns from war.*

*So many times they killed you,
So many times you will rise to life again
So many nights you will spend
Driven to despair
At the hour of the shipwreck
And of darkness
Someone will rescue you
As they pass by singing.*

*Singing to the sun
like the cicada
After a year
underground
The same as a survivor
Who returns from war.*

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