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# Hearing Faces, Seeing Voices: Sound Art, Experimentalism and the Ethnographic Gaze

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> The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*)
>
> Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Anthropology may indeed be, for some artists, 'the compromise discourse of choice',[1] but it can also – potentially – provide valuable resources of critically evaluated knowledge and a continuously developing research framework by which to make art that deals critically with social realities. Of course there are dangers in artists colonizing one field of study after another, appropriating the useful bits without truly engaging with the ethos and ethics of other disciplines and taking up buzzwords and fashionable concepts in the most facile way, but if artists strive for responsible social engagement through their work, there is much to be learned by familiarizing ourselves with the issues and debates that occupy that group of disciplines known by the increasingly uncomfortable term, the social *sciences*.

It is sometimes problematic for artists who do fieldwork that, as Lucy Lippard describes in the context of the tourist, '... experience comes first and theory later, once we realise what we *should* be thinking.'[2] Thankfully, some sound artists, recordists and composers do take the time to *think* rather than blithely engage in the kind of sonic tourism and the commodification of ethnicity that marks many endeavours.

But developing self-reflexive research and production practices both in the field and in the studio (or at the desk) is as important for artists as it is for ethnographers and anthropologists. The following passage from Rosanna Hertz's introduction to *Reflexivity and Voice* is frequently quoted by ethnographers and could equally be taken as advice for artists engaged in cross-cultural practice: To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment. By extension, the reflexive ethnographer does not simply report 'facts' or 'truths' but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about ...The outcome of reflexive social science is reflexive knowledge: statements that provide insight on the workings

of the social world *and* insight on how that knowledge came into existence. By bringing subject and object back into the same space (indeed even the same sentence), authors give their audiences the opportunity to evaluate them as 'situated actors' (i.e., active participants in the process of meaning creation).[3] With the *sensory turn* in anthropology, the subjective experience of the senses – a primary element of artistic practice – is overtly recognized as an important aspect of fieldwork; with the *ethnographic turn* in contemporary art, much art practice involving fieldwork can similarly be mapped to varying locations on the 'experience/interpretation axis'.[4] In my own work, the interleaved and iterative processes of research, fieldwork and creative practice shares a great deal with ethnographic methodology as I strive for responsible engagement with other cultures and a praxis which is neither culturally insensitive nor insular. Yet the perceived need for sensitivity in cross-cultural work, reinforced by the kind of socio-political vigilance fostered by the social sciences, can also be stultifying. By implicitly challenging the position of anthropologists as 'privileged representers of difference',[5] artists submit themselves to 'the anthropological or ethnographic "court of judgement"',[6] sometimes a less than comfortable place to be. And an awareness of 'the indignity of speaking for others' can, and in some cases has, as Hal Foster points out, 'effected ... a censorious silence as much as an alternative speech'.[7] The challenge for both anthropologists and for artists whose work takes them to places 'where they *don't* live'[8] is to do more than provide a shallow reflection of the received mythology of the *other.* Much of my practice over the last decade or so has led me into political and ethical minefields – working with speakers of endangered indigenous languages and with vulnerable heart and lung transplantees – where there is always a tension between, on the one hand, the need to respect the people with whom I work and to contextualize the recordings, information and images I collect and, on the other, my ambition to experiment with sound itself and to express the ideas and issues that interest me through work that is not purely documentary. I don't want to exploit difference and make work that draws on the exotic mystery of the *other*, to construct an essentializing mythology in the way that, in early ethnographic recording, 'particular performances were important only insofar as they could be used to reconstruct a paradigm for song, story, narrative, or myth in a given culture.'[9] But I do want to investigate the boundaries between documentary and abstraction by working with the raw materials gathered during my fieldwork in ways that are not always representational but nevertheless reveal something about the subject (Figure 4.1). My exploration of what could be described as *composed documentary*[10] began in 1999 with *Upcountry.* This piece was originally conceived of as a sonic portrait of Kenyan master musician William Ingosi Mwoshi but moves beyond restrictive notions of portraiture to become as much about where he lives and my experience of it as about Ingosi himself. I sought ways of working with my sound recordings that would convey the subjectivity of my perspective without abandoning the context from which the sounds arose. As John Miller Chernoff puts it in relation to the anthropologist, 'finding the proper level of abstraction to portray with fidelity both the relativity of his own viewpoint and the reality of the world he has witnessed necessarily involves an act of interpretation ...'[11] I do not set out to *obscure* the margins: the listener usually recognizes which side of the border they are on, but as my work oscillates between speech

and sound and between sound and music, documentary and abstract elements inform each other so that the listener's experience is enriched through their interaction in ways that it wouldn't be through either conventional documentary or musical abstraction of recorded material alone. The apparent objectivity of documented reality is continuously questioned. As Katherine Norman describes it, *Upcountry* allows documentation and abstraction to 'disentangle, and even disagree'. She continues, 'You can be with Ingosi; you can be with Wynne. You can keep one person's world in mind whilst listening to the other's. And it isn't that difficult to accept both worlds ... A portrait that really sings is, after all, as much about the painter as the person in the chair. And observing the distance between the two is part of the whole experience.'[12] The result is a kind of intersubjectivity, a listening experience that reflects on the subjective experience both of artist and subject as well as implicating the listener in a more active and creative process. And of course there is the 'intersubjective turn' in anthropology (some anthropologists must be getting dizzy with all this turning), a

**Figure 4.1.** Thamae Sobe (image from *Hearing Voices* installation).

recognition of the self-reflecting nature of the endeavour to understand the *other* and the subsequent focus on field diaries, sketches and other materials generated in the field formerly dismissed as too subjective.

## STUPIDITY, INTIMACY AND TECHNOLOGY

I approach new projects with an attitude of openness and a willingness to embrace my own ignorance, a recognition of my own *stupidity*. Foucault sought to 'recuperate stupidity' as a philosophical strategy, arguing that intelligence represents 'stupidity already vanquished'[13] and that the best way to move forward is to allow the world to pass through us and affect our thinking rather than to begin by assuming our own intelligence. The philosopher

> must be sufficiently 'ill humored' to persist in the confrontation with stupidity, to remain motionless to the point of stupefaction in order to approach it successfully and mime it, to let it slowly grow within himself ..., and to await, in the always-unpredictable conclusion to this elaborate preparation, the shock of difference.[14]

John Cage famously approached composition from a self-professed position of not knowing what he was doing. Of course this is essentially a metaphor for what he saw as the appropriate humility with which to approach the making of art, but it is also a suitable posture for those engaged in fieldwork and research-based practice. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes 'If I have one consistent message for the students I teach and the researchers I train, it is that indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity.'[15] I became interested in click languages through following my ears and knew little about language endangerment or the circumstances or history of the Khoi and San peoples when I began the Botswana project; when I was in school as a child, Canadian history was almost exclusively about events after the arrival of Europeans so, having left Canada many years ago, I likewise knew little about the history or contemporary situation of aboriginal peoples in Canada before embarking on my project with speakers of the Gitxsan language in British Columbia. When I became artist-in-residence at one of the world's leading centres for heart and lung transplants I was largely unaware of the complex issues surrounding transplantation.

My research begins with listening – to the voices of the ostensible subjects of the work and those of academic/professional specialists (who are also *other* to me in significant ways), and to the environmental context of the fieldwork – asking sometimes naïve questions and building a perspective from the ground up. In the case of the *Transplant* project, photographer Tim Wainwright and I spent a great deal of time going through ethics committees, speaking to psychologists, medics, nurses and technical specialists and exploring the hospital itself both visually and sonically in addition working directly with fifty or so patients.

For the Khoisan and Gitxsan projects, the fieldwork was undertaken in collaboration with linguists with long-term involvement in those communities. This strategy gives me access to specialized knowledge before, during and after the fieldwork but

it also distances me somewhat from the speakers themselves. This distance, however, allows me to listen more closely and to concentrate more on the technical processes in order to make recordings that could constitute significant contributions to the documentation of these languages and important archival material for the community as well as excellent raw materials for my own work and that of linguists. These projects involve a kind of double-layered fieldwork: I am, in one sense, observing/recording the social scientists observing their subjects, allowing the social interaction and indeed the substance of the recordings to be determined largely by *their* working methods. By contrast, the *Transplant* project is described by anthropologist Tom Rice as 'an intimate form of ethnographic documentary, so intimate in fact that it can make uncomfortable, even shocking viewing/listening. Importantly, the installation brings its audience into such proximity with patients that we become, like the patients themselves, captive – unable to escape a confrontation with the reality of illness.'[16] As Schneider and Wright point out, 'Both artists and anthropologists play with distance and intimacy – an intimacy that is the currency of fieldwork – and both now overtly place themselves between their audiences and the world.'[17] Whilst we generally steered away from sensationalism and overtly emotional content in the *Transplant* project, the degree of intimacy in that work would feel less appropriate in my endangered languages projects. In the case of *Upcountry*, there was a huge cultural and economic gap between Ingosi and myself. Despite being recognized as one of Kenya's finest neo-traditional musicians he lives in considerable poverty on a *shamba* (smallholding) with no electricity or running water. But we are both artists and there is often a sense of affinity between creative practitioners stretching across cultures, which I think comes across in the piece, particularly when it premiered in London followed by a performance by Ingosi himself. The political and social history of the Khoi and San peoples in Southern Africa is unfortunately comparable to that of the most oppressed indigenous groups around the world. Since their traditional lifestyle has been made virtually impossible by the fencing off of land for cattle owned primarily by the Bantu-speaking majority in Botswana, the earmarking of vast areas of the Kalahari as game reserves, and the demands of the diamond mining industry to which Botswana largely owes its modest wealth, most have endured marginalized lives, including forced evictions and near slave-labour conditions in jobs that have little or no connection to their indigenous culture. Poverty, alcoholism and AIDS are rife and their social and economic marginalization further erodes the status of their various cultures and languages. It was partly in recognition of the gulf between their circumstances and mine that I chose to use photographs in which their faces are obscured by the recording equipment. Although there are similar, if less severe, problems with poverty and alcoholism on the Kispiox reserve in Canada and other significant differences between myself and the members of that community, I also found considerable cultural ground shared with some people with whom we worked, particularly those of my own generation. The complexity of this relationship inevitably informs the outcome of that project.

In the installations emerging from the Khoisan, Gitxsan and *Transplant* projects, I combine sound and still image in new ways: flat speaker technology allows me to *personalize* the sound because each large photograph *is* a loudspeaker, the actual source

of each of up to 24 independent channels of sound. In this sense, the work offers an alternative to what Susan Stewart refers to as 'the silence of the photograph' and its 'promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses'.[18] The photographs are *animated* by sound, but at the same time the actual images in *Hearing Voices*, my click-language installation, deny visual intimacy and make it clear that we neither hear nor see with complete objectivity. The images from which the sound emerges – photographs taken by visual artist Denise Hawrysio during the recording sessions and subsequently digitally manipulated – are composed to simultaneously reveal the process, symbolize my own presence and disrupt, frustrate, or at least problematize, the ethnographic gaze, the '"ethnotopia" of limitless observation'.[19] They question the easy association of the photographic image with *presence* and disrupt what Barthes describes as the 'antiphon of "Look," "See," "Here it is"'[20] common to all photography. The photographic composition suggests the '"facelessness" such people have suffered in world dialogues'[21] and highlights the power relations that are of particular relevance to technological mediation in cross cultural work. As David Toop puts it: the portraiture integrated into the playback system of this installation counters the shift towards a detachment from human agency, yet also engages with the mediating effects of recording technology. Faces are obscured; voices are extended, or filtered, until their meaning is abstracted. These faces, and voices, are both highlighted by the wider world of digital communications, and with conscious irony, absorbed by its power.[22] There is also tension in my work between the inherent, inescapable temporal movement of sound and the full stop of photography, Barthes' 'flat death'. In *Transplant* the symbolic death of the photograph is given further resonance through the parallel symbolism of organ transplantation and its offer to defeat physical mortality.

Practitioners experimenting with alternative approaches to ethnographic fieldwork now sometimes 'explicitly aim to give voice to researchers and researched, as multiple selves of the field.'[23] In this work, my own voice is implicit in the way the recordings and the images are manipulated, framed and presented. It is, in some respects, an attempt to achieve what Hal Foster advocates: 'a parallactic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other. This is one way to negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and fantasmatic ...'[24] The recording equipment is my symbolic presence within the frame and the technology itself represents the developed North; it stands between the viewer and the subject and means different things depending on which side of it one finds oneself.

It would be difficult to deny a degree of *voyeurism/ecouteurism* in my work, but within *Hearing Voices* there is also a critical awareness of recording as a symbol of power and of the economic inequity which inescapably frames my relationship with the subjects. The somewhat anxious repetition, throughout the history of ethnographic recording, of images of subjects listening to themselves may, on the surface, demonstrate *their* fascination with *our* technology. But a current of condescension lingers whereby the *civilized* viewer inevitably feels superior to the *primitive* folk who may never have heard themselves reproduced artificially. For Taussig, 'the more important question lies with the white man's fascination with their fascination with these mimetically capacious machines.'[25] In the developed world, recording devices

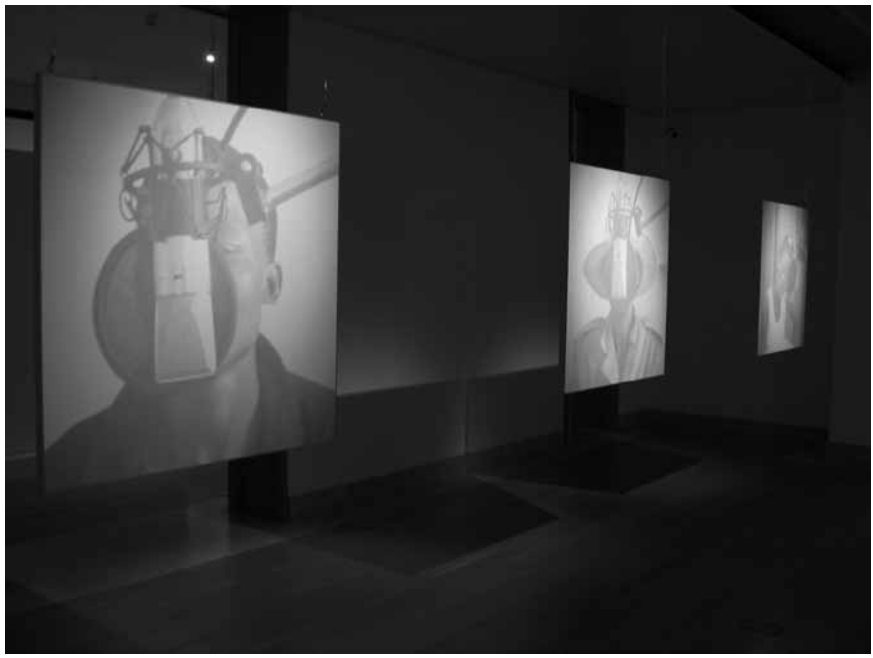

**Figure 4.2.** Cukuri Dako (image from *Hearing Voices* installation).

are, in a very real and very far-reaching sense, the 'technological substance of civilized identity-formation'.[26] This internalization of technology amongst those in the North is confirmed by my experience that people are sometimes more intimidated by microphones and recorders than those in remote areas who are less accustomed to seeing and using them. Perhaps a more intimate knowledge of their power and their ability to distort the truth leads to a greater suspicion of those who wield them (Figure 4.2). The *Hearing Voices* images are deliberately low in contrast and high in brightness: Joram |Useb, a representative of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa who opened the exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Namibia, noted that the faded printing of the images was a fitting analogy for what is happening to Khoisan languages and cultures. The composition and printing of the images also imply a questioning of visual dominance in the gallery context, encouraging the audience to concentrate on the sound and reflecting the importance of the *aural* in oral cultures.

*Hearing Voices* signals the impossibility of reproducing objective reality and highlights the microphone as a 'non-neutral interface'.[27] Unlike early ethnographers, for whom 'purging the messy means by which information was acquired' was perceived as necessary for maintaining the apparent objectivity and authority of their work, photography is used here to underscore the 'inevitable artificiality of the encounter',[28] to question the assumption that, in Heidegger's words, 'technology comes to presence ... in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place,

where *alétheia*, truth, happens,'[29] and to convey a sense of simultaneous movement towards and away from the subjects. We hear their voices as though our ear was centimetres from their mouths, but we cannot forget the technology that is allowing this intimacy. Jonathan Sterne notes that doctors have historically learned to forget that other means of hearing the *other* while maintaining physical distance, the stethoscope: 'In classic technological deterministic fashion, the tool stands in for a whole process from which it erases itself. Mediate auscultation was thus a "license to forget," a kind of reification. The forgetting associated with technology was the forgetting that all learners do as they achieve mastery ...'[30] The stethoscope and the microphone alike become tools of social mediation, allowing intimate listening while at the same time establishing a bodily distance between doctor and patient, documenter and documented – a distance that in effect 'renders social difference spatial'.[31] Recording technology, while helping to preserve oral history in non-literate cultures, can also be instrumental in its demise. In the traditional culture of many indigenous communities, specific individuals were given the task of remembering important stories or significant and potentially disputed agreements between individuals such as those concerning territorial rights. Writing and, later, recording devices, began to make these civic positions redundant, providing another 'licence to forget'. The rise of renewed cultural awareness and pride amongst native communities in Canada in the 1970s coincided with the availability of cheap cassette recorders and many families and clans recorded the voices of their elders. Once committed to tape, the stories – and sometimes the tapes themselves – were often forgotten. Recording technologies can thus obviate the need for embodied knowledge – 'knowledge literally stored in the body'[32] – and so accelerate the very changes in the social and personal spheres they may seemingly offer to ameliorate.

As well as signifying the social and economic gap between artist or social scientist and the *other*, recording technology also mediates emotional relations. Indeed, recording can replace emotional interaction: Warhol acquired his first tape recorder (a reel to reel) in the mid 1950s.

In the summer of 1965 he engineered a deal with Norelco to acquire one of their cassette audio recorders. This acquisition began his relationships with faithful machines that were both surrogates and mediators. He referred to the tape recorder as his 'wife' and quipped that 'when I say 'we' I mean my tape recorder and me.' He declared that his tape recorder finished whatever emotional life he had; an interesting problem 'was an interesting tape'. Terrified by death, driven by curiosity about how people lived their lives, Warhol stockpiled a knowledge system, an anthropological and sociological portrait of 'lived lives'.[33] It could be argued that the current ubiquity of digital recording devices in the North, and increasingly in *developing* countries, is having a similar effect on people's experience of the world: instead of just *seeing*, instead of being *in the moment,* many of us are busy stockpiling images that we assume will record the moment for posterity but most of which are later deleted, forgotten or lost, so that rather than enhancing our memory, the camera becomes a tool for its diminishment and a barrier to direct experience. I certainly hear differently if I am actively recording sound, but the barrier that the microphone and headphones constitute also, paradoxically, allows me to hear in far greater detail.

The authenticity of ethnography and documentary has often been signalled by their apparent naturalism. Keyan Tomaselli observes that 'overtly ethnographic films tend to lack technical sophistication and competent craft skills'[34] and unsteady hand-held camerawork and poor sound quality in some documentary films only add to their apparent realism and validity. Unfortunately, anthropologists and linguists often spend a great deal of time and money doing fieldwork, only to return with recordings that may suit their particular narrowly defined academic needs but are less useful as records of people and their rapidly changing cultures and languages, which could form part of a valuable archive for both community and academia. This is largely due to a lack of technical knowledge combined with the difficulty of working alone in less-than-ideal conditions, but also sometimes because of a desire to capture things *naturally*. Historically, 'ethnographic film is film which endeavours to interpret the behaviour of people of one culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the cameras were not present.'[35] In contrast to this illusory practice, my working methods in these projects has been relatively intrusive. I use a large, high-quality studio microphone placed a few inches from the mouth and a popshield to prevent overloading the mic. As a result, those being recorded are unavoidably aware of participating in a process of constructing meaning rather than behaving as though they were being captured as part of some unmediated reality. But, again paradoxically, this approach doesn't necessarily result in a lack of intimacy or excess self-consciousness.

Transplant patients spend long periods of time in a highly technologized environment: they often live in a 'spaghetti junction' of wires and tubes,[36] constantly probed, monitored and kept alive by bleeping, bubbling machines. Indeed many have devices such as ventricular assist devices (VADs, otherwise known as artificial hearts) inside them or nearby, noisily performing the functions of their failing organs twenty-four hours a day. So in some sense the equipment Tim and I brought to their bedside was just more *gear* – at least it would relieve the boredom and wasn't going to hurt. We used the process of setting up the equipment as an opportunity to expose and demystify it and, as Tim puts it, 'register the beginning of the communication process.'[37] But heart and lung transplant patients are, like people living on meagre government handouts in a squatter camp beside the Trans Kalahari Highway, in a very vulnerable situation: As with photography, the ethics of interviewing a person in this condition is a delicate matter, not simply because of vulnerability or privacy, and the close intimacy that draws out expressions of deep fears and all the other emotions we would expect, but because each person has become somewhat voiceless and helpless within the net of noise.

Physically and psychically they are invaded by its alarums, excursions and invasions. The secret internal sounds of the body have become louder than the voice. To be confronted in this state with an instrument of power (the microphone) that is notorious for its capacity to draw out, extract, and like a scalpel, open up, is to submit to the reverse process.[38] Although we made it clear that we were there to get materials for a work of art, we did not attempt to steer patients towards specific utterances to suit our own purposes.

The direction of the project was in some ways determined by the participants: we were there to listen, and because we had no medical or psychological agenda and no emotional ties to the participants, patients were remarkably open and saw it as an opportunity for their voices to be heard, both for their own sake and for prospective transplant recipients and their families. With us, they didn't need to play the dangerous game of positioning themselves as sick enough to need a transplant but well enough and emotionally stable enough to survive it, and the hospital psychiatrist commented early on that patients often revealed more to us than to her.

Sometimes, a responsible approach to subjects entails recognizing that they know what they are doing/saying, and respecting the trust they have given by participating. When I wrote to a project participant on the Kispiox reserve to double-check that there would be no objections to my publishing one of the photographs from our session with her and her brother in this book, she replied that if they didn't want me to use the photographs they wouldn't have let us take them. By contrast, the ethics unit at the university which held the purse-strings was so concerned about the precise wording of the consent forms that by the time an agreement was reached the fieldwork had been completed, ironically without formal written consent. For people with a history of oral culture, sometimes their word is enough. After all, treaties were written documents, too.

## EXPERIMENTALISM AND ETHICS

> Basic research is when I'm doing what I don't know what I'm doing.[39] (Wernher von Braun)

Although this statement may recall Cage's approach to composition as an activity in which he didn't know what he was doing, von Braun's biography alerts us to what can lie behind such an apparently apolitical stance. While he claimed to be more interested in space travel than in the military applications of rocket technology, he was a member of the Nazi Party and his work was instrumental to the development of Hitler's 'vengeance weapons', which were manufactured at the Mittelwork forced labour factory and later targeted on London. After the war, he worked for the US military, developing, amongst other projects, the rocket used for America's first live nuclear ballistic missile test.[40] Research and experimentation are seldom without ethical implications, and indigenous communities are sensitive about being scrutinized by outsiders, particularly in the shadow of supposedly neutral fields of study such as anthropometry.

They are 'not only beginning to fight back against the invasion of their communities by academic, corporate and populist researchers, but to think about, and carry out research, on their own concerns.' Australian aboriginals, the San peoples of the Kalahari (otherwise known by the less politically sensitive term 'Bushmen'), and some Native American groups have each been referred to by various observers as the most studied cultures in the world. 'The Navajos used to joke that a traditional family included the nuclear group, plus one grandpa … a couple of aunties, and at least one

anthropologist.'[41] There is resentment about this amongst some in these communities, but there are also many who still value the work of linguists and others who study and document their language and culture, who recognize the potential for such work to strengthen and preserve these and who see the work of outsiders as potentially complementary to that of community researchers and activists.

People can be understandably touchy when outsiders tell them that their language is dying, and there are examples of linguists being banned from working in communities as a result of their lack of sensitivity to such feelings. And in one notorious case, knowledge about traditional place names and territories acquired by a linguist working in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia was abused when he testified against the native community on behalf of Canadian National Railway, who wanted to double their track through First Nations territory against the wishes of the community.

In another case, knowledge gained by an anthropologist working with the Coast Tsimshian community somehow came into the hands of white commercial interests and the following season some very rich traditional abalone harvesting sites were virtually wiped out. It only takes one such instance for fieldworkers from any discipline to be viewed with caution or even hostility. Thankfully, the linguists who have worked with the Gitxsan language in the past have a good reputation in the community and we had no shortage of willing participants. We experienced only one directly negative reaction to our work, from a woman who said she was tired of people studying her culture and wished the money could be used to provide dentists rather than linguists. We are also aware that some people flatly refuse to work with any researchers because of the perceived possibility of commercial exploitation.

Experimentalism has been a key element in much art practice for at least a century and is also important in anthropology's attempts to adapt to changing relationships with its research subjects and to interrogate its position as a social *science* by looking at the practice of artists. Nevertheless, 'experimentation and creativity are differently conceived, and differently valued on either side of the border.'[42] Too much experimentation amongst anthropologists has historically 'proved unacceptable to the boundary-keeping institutional and professional rules of order in the academy' and the results consequently seen as 'idiosyncratic and certainly marginal'.[43] Artists are, of course, less constrained, but the experimental artist with an ethnological bent ought to be wary of the association of experimentation with the tropes of exploration and discovery. John Corbett writes: This notion of discovery or exploration helps undergird the idea that the composer is engaging in a value-free, experimental endeavour, even as it allows us to suggest the colonialist impulse submerged in its rhetoric. It is assumed that the discoverer-composer, out on the open seas of aural possibility, surely will bring back ideas and practices from distant lands, perhaps ones that can enhance the quality of Western musical life. Musical experimentation becomes metaphorical microcolonialism.[44] Nevertheless, such criticism should not stop the artist from moving into unfamiliar territory – 'unless, of course, s/he somehow lays claim to that territory'.[45] For artists, anthropologists and linguists to ignore cultures and languages that are under threat would be to take the path of least resistance by adopting the attitude of the overwhelming majority in the dominant culture(s). But as to whether it is possible for the relationship between artist/researcher and

*other* to be symbiotic rather than parasitical, there is clearly room for disagreement, and it is difficult to oppose self-described 'universal Cherokee artist' Jimmie Durham's critique of non-native artists working with indigenous subject matter. When he saw Lothar Baumgarten's *The Tongue of the Cherokee* in the Carnegie Museum in the mid-1980s Durham 'felt appropriated and sort of cancelled', and in response made an installation that included works titled *Not Lothar Baumgarten's Cherokee* and *Not Joseph Beuys' Coyote*. The latter piece, which refers to Beuys's 1974 gallery performance with a live coyote, is 'a skull-on-pole figure with one horn arm and one large rearview mirror arm (the better to see who is catching up from the past).'[46] But such an exchange is surely valuable. Although her priority is to promote the development of indigenous researchers, Maori writer Linda Tuhiwai Smith acknowledges that 'at some points there is, there has to be, dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions.'[47] Similarly, Audre Lorde has written of the 'creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.'[48] Although there is another, less politically charged, sphere of my work to which I return (often with some relief) between the projects under discussion here, I see language endangerment as a critically important subject as well as an area rich in interesting sounds. The linguistic diversity of the world is under threat: of the approximately 6,000 languages in the world, it is variously estimated that between 50 and 90 per cent will be gone by the end of this century. Both the Kalahari Desert and the west coast of Canada are fragile and dwindling 'pockets of residual diversity'[49] where there are numerous distinct indigenous languages considered by linguists to be *moribund*. Some languages, like Upriver Halkomelem, have only a few very elderly speakers, but rather than focus on the arguably more exotic subject of a language that could cease to exist with the passing of one or two elders, I chose to work with a language whose decline can still – potentially – be slowed down, and which still has enough so-called *competent* speakers to help make the archives richer and more valuable to both academics and the community. Once Gitxsanimaax is gone – and few, even within the community, would dispute that it will be gone as a living language by the middle of the twenty-first century[50] – the unique knowledge and ways of thinking it embodies will be gone with it, apart from what remains in memory and in archives.

I came to the subject of language endangerment through my attraction to the *sound* of vocal clicks in the native languages of Southern Africa, and my practice is based on experimenting with sonic material. These projects deal with the linguistic, communicative, social, political and personal dimensions of language, but I am also interested in using the voice – and contextual environmental sounds – as material for rhythmic experimentation and timbral and spectro-morphological investigation. I deconstruct, stretch, filter, and distil speech, listening 'inside and outside the material'[51] to find ways of working with it that allow others to hear more than documentary-style reproduction would allow. As Barry Truax and others have pointed out, techniques such as granular synthesis allow one to examine sounds on a micro level, so that when you *zoom out* again, there is a qualitative change in what you hear.

By leading the listener back and forth across the boundaries between speech and sound, sound and music, my work constructs an experience that explores 'the

various levels of meaning that can be derived from human communications.' Voice is the means by which the self is performed to others: 'Verbal language is ... used by almost all of us, so taken for granted, yet language is a complex act in which the message carried by speech is just one aspect of a convergence of cultural context, abstract sonic material, and human body functioning that encompasses breath and brain, gesture and noise.'[52] In my composed documentaries for radio, environmental sounds are also at times manipulated and new ways of listening become possible in the transitions between representational and more abstract or musical sound material. But the voice always returns and its detail is always clearly in focus. In *Hearts, Lungs and Minds,* a half-hour piece commissioned by BBC Radio 3

> The disorientating impression of envelopment in a confused web of sound is very strong, but this is repeatedly pulled back to specifics by recordings of the patients themselves. Feelings of fragility are pervasive and clearly audible in these bedside recordings: every tremor and lapse; the halting and wheezing of breath; ... the pain of what is said; the grain of how it is said.[53]

Patients' voices are not manipulated in any of the finished work emerging from the *Transplant* project, but in the work resulting from my collaborative fieldwork with linguists, where subjectivity and mediation are more significant elements and where the language is a central theme, the words themselves also become abstracted. The click-languages are broken down to the basic constituents common to all language, vowels and consonants (clicks), and these become the fabric of the composed elements of the work. The Gitxsan language is marked by a prevalence of voiceless fricatives and other nearly inaudible breathy sounds, which offer an interesting and unanticipated contrast to the astounding percussive energy of the distinctive clicks of the Khoi and San languages. These elements are becoming significant components of my current project. Of course, translating my subjects' words into something between language and music is itself a process permeated with issues of power – a site of 'asymmetrical relations',[54] as Michaela Wolf describes the process of language translation. Sarat Maharaj writes:

> How do we deal with difference without fixing it as a version of ourselves? How do we deal with difference without entirely reducing it to the terms and categories of our own language? It is not able to face the fact that it has demolished the other in some way. This act of violation at the heart of language, at the heart of conceiving the other leads me to look for para-linguistic ways of engaging the other.[55]

Sound art may offer one such para-linguistic strategy, a way of expressing cross-cultural experiences that language itself cannot achieve.

> The difference that is untranslatable is not a fixed and essential thing; it is itself a product of translation and is itself always in motion. I think the only way in which people who are different can come to constitute a common conversation is by recognizing the inadequacy of each of our positions as well as what is not

translatable.[56] Manipulation and abstraction of acoustic source material can, rather than obscuring the actuality from which it was derived, convey meanings and reveal characteristics hidden from the senses in the context of real-time experience or even when listening to untreated recordings.

## TRAGEDY, HUMOUR AND THE MUSEUM

What? Post-colonial? Have they left?[57] (Bobbi Sykes)

The consequences of colonialism for indigenous communities around the world have been – and continue to be – devastating. But the degree of devastation varies, and many of these communities also continue to develop and strengthen an identity that is different from the cultures that surround them, even if some of what outsiders view as the essence of that difference has changed and continues to change. Like a healthy language, a strong culture can adopt elements from other cultures without necessarily undermining its own foundations. Gitxsanimaax shows many of the signs of a dying language (the fact that it is rarely spoken at home by/to children, the rising average age of competent speakers); it will be a dark day when the Gitxsan language is no longer spoken, and some of the things that disappear with it will be irretrievable, but this will certainly not be the end of Gitxsan culture. The pathos with which academics and others often view indigenous culture is undoubtedly one-dimensional: it is a 'partial, Eurocentric view, and so satisfyingly tragic!'[58] 'There is sadness here', wrote one gallery visitor of *Hearing Voices,* so perhaps my own work is not entirely exempt from accusations of 'imperialist nostalgia'. But material conditions for the Khoi and San peoples are far worse than those of the Gitxsan community: the people I met in the Kalahari Desert didn't have much to laugh about. By contrast, and despite the absurd historical prejudice that Native North Americans constitute 'a sombre-eyed, dark-faced ebb and flow of indistinguishable taciturnity',[59] there was a great deal of laughter during our fieldwork on the Kispiox reserve, and this is reflected in the finished work. Some contemporary Native writers in Canada are 'confronting the white search for the "true" (that is, the vanishing) Indian with thoroughly hybrid real Indians instead.'[60] When I arrived at the National Art Gallery of Namibia to show *Hearing Voices*, one member of the board expressed her relief that the images did not portray the kind of culturally frozen stereotypes favoured by eco-tourist brochures, but rather showed members of a living – if beleaguered – indigenous community.

For both artists and anthropologists, it is in the gap between fieldwork and the final outputs of their projects that the playfulness and humour that often exist in the relationship between researcher and subject in the field can sometimes be lost as we think and analyse and process. In an essay entitled *How To Be as Funny as an Indian*, Ian Ferguson writes, 'My sister was once asked, by a … well-intentioned White Person, the … eternal question: "What do you people want?" "What we want," she said, "is for you people to lighten up."'[61] My Gitxsan work premiered as part of an exhibition titled *Border Zones: New Art Across Cultures*[62] at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, which includes a mix of indigenous and transnational artists. This

is a tricky context. The museum sits on traditional Musqueam territory and such institutions have been justifiably criticized by aboriginal groups around the world for removing cultural artefacts from their community context and displaying them, sometimes in inappropriate ways, for others to gawk at. And although the education system in Canada has become more enlightened since my childhood, Karen Froman points out that 'the vast majority of teachers currently employed in the public school system have no training in native studies, and fall back on the stereotypes and the old methods of teaching. Aboriginal people are still museum pieces.'[63] In drawing parallels between ethnography and pornography, Bill Nichols describes the complexity of our relationship to the exotic: 'We are caught within oscillations of the familiar and the strange. We acquire a fascination *with* this oscillation per se, which leads to a deferment of the completion of knowledge in favour of the perpetuation of the preconditions for this fascination'[64] (Figure 4.3). My work seeks to encourage visitors to think about why they come to such places by interrogating the voyeurism of exotica and by challenging practices of representation and concepts of *otherness* through drawing attention to its own *othering*. Like *Hearing Voices, Anspvaxw* creates tension through its paradoxical simultaneous movement towards and away from its subjects and through the potentially conflicting requirements of documentation/explication and privacy/respect. It aims to create a contemplative space in which the audience can think about the issues that underlie the work and in which my presence as an artist co-exists with the *otherness* of the subject rather than either subsuming it or presenting it under the guise of objectivity.

Thankfully, the MoA recognizes its own position as a site of cultural contestation and has, for some time, been engaged in 'a critical re-thinking of the relationships among cultural institutions, originating communities, knowledge systems, and collections of art and ethnology.'[65] The museum's relationships with Native communities are a matter of ongoing negotiation. Tahltan artist Peter Morin opened a conference there in 2005 with a moving and thought-provoking performance called *I grieve too much.*

The performance, which was relayed via CCTV from where it took place in the *visual storage* area to the auditorium in which conference attendees sat a few metres

**Figure 4.3.** Bob Wilson (image from *Anspayaxw* installation).

away, addressed the institutional display of native artefacts. Sitting blindfolded in front of one of the museum's display/storage cabinets containing items made by his aunts, he told the story of Essie Parrish, one of the last traditional 'sucking doctors' from the Pomo Nation in California. Some in her community felt that Essie's early death was caused by her allowing anthropologist Lowell Bean to record her performing a healing ceremony, which was later, against her wishes, shown widely across the country. *The Sucking Doctor* became a *classic* piece of ethnographic film, but for the Pomo community it became yet another betrayal by the establishment. Peter used the museum objects for a ceremony dedicated to his aunts, to Essie, and to the members of his home community who had been arrested on the day of his performance while protesting against the beginning of test drilling by Shell Canada on land held sacred by the Tahltan. Peter later wrote:

> These objects are our master works. When they were taken from our communities, our sense of accomplishment was severed. When these objects were taken, along with our children who were taken away to residential schools, our trust in the future dimmed.
>
> I wanted this performance to be broadcast to the theatre because I wanted to convey the experience of having your relationship to the objects mediated through glass, and through the informational panels in the museum. This is what I had been experiencing as an aboriginal person in the museum. I heard the objects singing and this singing was so close but beyond my reach. And I felt that these ways of knowledge in the museum were causing continued harm, because I felt harmed when I was there in the museum like my body was under attack from this extreme view that was presented as an authority on the aboriginal body.[66]

At the end of the performance, Peter put on headphones and began to sing. The singing was oddly evocative: was it strange because that's what happens when you sing with headphones on and can't hear your own voice or was it strange because it was a ceremonial song from a tradition we weren't familiar with? Eventually it became clear that the song was *I've Seen Fire and I've Seen Rain.* The museum is, for Morin, a site of trauma, but the story it tells is not, as the term *post-colonial* suggests to some, 'finished business'.[67] His performance conveyed a great deal about historical perspective, tradition and appropriation, but it did so without didacticism and with delicate humour, making critical use of that contrary movement in exotica between the strange and the familiar.

There is much in Peter's description of this work that resonates with both *Hearing Voices* and with *Anspayaxw*: a desire to make visible the 'vanishing mediators'[68] often at work in the museum context, the tension of hearing something that is close but unreachable, the questioning of the ethnographic gaze. I have tried to position my work between the usual approach of art museums or galleries which, as Lippard says, present ethnographic material, if they show it at all, decontextualized and with too little information, and the ethnographic museum, with its old-fashioned, educational approach and too much information for the average viewer, 'sometimes to the detriment of aesthetics'[69] and, I might add, of the dignity of the subjects. I want to do more than

just *play* with other people's words, but equally I don't want to perpetuate false and reductive models of cultural identity of the kind on which exotica thrives. Through my work, I attempt to explore what Steven Feld describes as 'strategies and possibilities for valuing indigeneity as something more than essentialized otherness ...'[70]