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ARTICLE

Secrecy, Surveillance and Poetic "Data Bodies"

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This article explores themes of secrecy and monitoring in three works of experimental poetry published since the millennium: Redell Olsen's *Secure Portable Space* (2004), "Who Not to Speak To" by Marianne Morris, and Zoe Skoulding's *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds* (2013). My analysis draws on Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's discussion of secrecy in *Liquid Surveillance*, along with theories of "data doubles" and "everyday" ubiquity of surveillance technologies, to show how these poets use innovative lyric forms to negotiate contemporary expectations of "public" and "private" communicative spaces.

Keywords: Redell Olsen; Marianne Morris; Zoe Skoulding; secrecy; surveillance; experimental poetry

This article explores representations of secrecy and monitoring in poetic depictions of "public" and "private" communicative spaces. My approach builds on Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's definition of secrecy as a "boundary of privacy" in *Liquid Surveillance* (2013), arguing that contemporary poetry offers new ways of conceptualising "inner" and "outer" spaces in the context of digital networks and data collection. Focusing on the experimental verse of Redell Olsen, Zoe Skoulding and Marianne Morris, I begin by analysing how Morris's poem "Who Not to Speak To" (2013) deploys imagery of a "digital mirror" to capture the complex layering of online communications, before examining themes of monitoring and intrusion in Olsen's collection *Secure Portable Space* (2004) and Skoulding's *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds* (2013). Each of these works develops a complex negotiation between concepts of public and private space, using poetic language to illuminate themes of mirroring, "data doubles" and visibility, as they become entwined with the daily realities of digital surveillance in the twenty-first century.

The intersection of secrecy, privacy and digital media in the twenty-first century presents a challenging topic for critical and creative thought. In *Liquid Surveillance*, David Lyon argues that new technologies present "renewed challenges in terms of the 'secrets' that exist," since "questions of 'privacy'" in post-millennial societies are "in flux and much more complex than was once imagined."¹ Musing on these themes in discussion of her collection *Secure Portable Space*, Redell Olsen anticipates Lyon's expression of privacy in flux with the observation that poets must "grapple with" the perceived boundaries of different spaces:

In the book the lyric "I" exists as a series of subjectivities produced by and in relation to mediatised technologies of representation and capitalism [...] It seems important to try and grapple with what I think of as the messiness and difficulties of the lyric in relation to different spaces. Spaces in which clearly there is a constant overlap between the boundaries of what might be termed "public" and "private" or "inner" and "outer". How that might show up in language seems exciting.²

Olsen's comments provide a conceptual starting-point for this article, prompting me to consider how the kind of "constant overlap" identified by Olsen may indeed "show up" in poetic efforts to consider the new conceptual spaces of digital media. Olsen's reference to "boundaries" invokes a potent set of imagery often used in discussions of secrecy, while her account captures an impression of shifting expectations about these boundaries in terms of public and private space.

In the poems I discuss here, spatial metaphors of boundaries and containment provide a framework for unravelling perceptions of secrecy and privacy in the context of "mediatised" technological environments. This approach chimes with a theoretical tendency to discuss questions of "secrecy" using language of borders and sovereignty. Responding to Lyon's statement about secrecy "in flux" in *Liquid Surveillance*, Zygmunt Bauman outlines traditional perceptions of "secrets" in terms of spatial boundaries:

A secret, like other categories of personal possessions, is by definition that part of knowledge whose sharing with others is refused or prohibited and/or closely controlled. Secrecy draws and marks, as it were, the boundary of privacy – privacy being the realm that is meant to be one's own domain, the territory of one's undivided sovereignty, inside which one has the comprehensive and indivisible power to decide 'what and who I am' and from which one can launch and relaunch the campaign to have and keep one's decisions recognized and respected.³

By defining secrecy as unshared knowledge that marks a "boundary of privacy," Bauman draws a direct link between secrecy and a personal "inner space," exemplified by the suggestion that to maintain secrecy is to mark out "one's own domain". Such metaphors of "territory" and "domain" are a common feature in discussions of secrecy and privacy; Bennett and Raab use similar terms when they define "the modern claim to privacy" as "based on a notion of a boundary between the individual and other individuals, and between the individual and the state."⁴

For Bauman in *Liquid Surveillance*, the preservation of secrecy as a "boundary of privacy" appears to be unravelling in post-millennial societies. In place of valuing "the realm that is meant to be one's own domain," Bauman finds evidence of a fundamental shift toward "public display of the 'inner self'."⁵ This, he suggests, marks a "startling U-turn from the habits of our ancestors."⁶ Bauman speculates that the appeal of a shift to "electronic life" is rooted in craving for attention and recognition, where "the area of privacy turns into a site of incarceration, the owner of private space being condemned and doomed to stew in his or her own juice."⁷ These issues surrounding voluntary exposure of private information emerge throughout Marianne Morris's poem "Who Not to Speak To," where Morris depicts performative elements of "public display" emerging in the multidirectional debate of forums in a so-called "cybersphere". "Who Not to Speak To" captures the intersection of personal opinion and public voice in lines that ironically exaggerate an apparent frenzy of online communication (**Figure 1**).

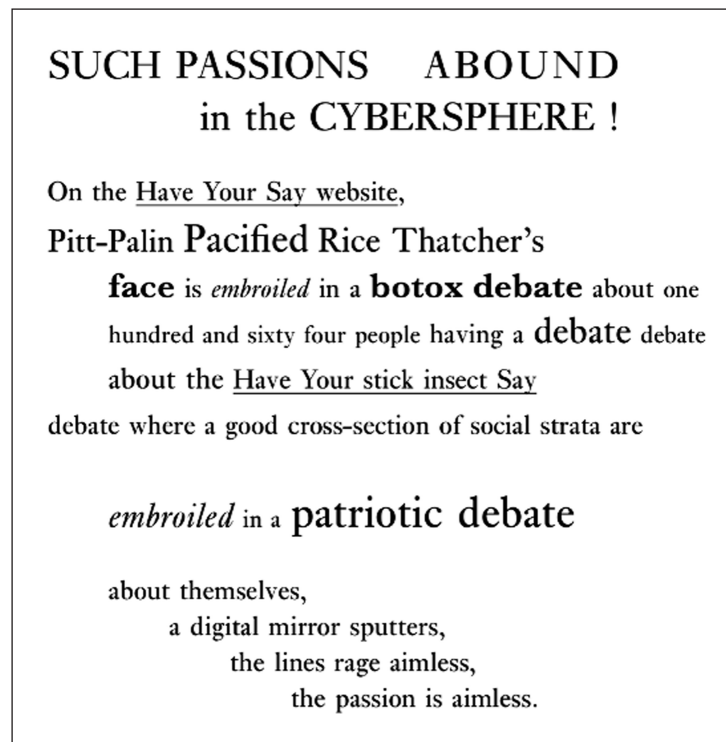


Figure 1: Marianne Morris, "Who Not to Speak To" (2013).⁸

"SUCH PASSIONS ABOUND/in the CYBERSPHERE!" the poem proclaims, with its combination of capitalisation and exclamation mark deliberately echoing the declarative formal properties of a traditional newsprint headline.⁹ Morris's poem plays with the capacity of typography and formatting to capture an impression of chaotic expression. The website title is underlined, invoking the html convention for distinguishing a hyperlink, while words in bold and italic, of different sizes and alternative fonts, jostle for attention on the page. The deliberately disordered typography used to describe the "Have Your Say" site is matched by use of vocabulary and syntax to convey an impression of contrasting discourse. The description mixes up an array of linguistic forms, disordering proper names, verbs and terms in a verbal enactment of the poem's earlier reference to "directions subjective and laughable."¹⁰ Names of politicians are spliced with commercial terms and contemporary themes in the context of this "cybersphere," where "Pitt-Palin Pacified Rice Thatcher" appears

as a monstrous conglomeration of (in)famous political figures. Similarly, issues around the manipulation of personal appearance and issues of national and international politics congeal in the mirroring phrases of "*embroiled* in a botox debate" and "*embroiled* in a patriotic debate." Even the name of the site itself is prey to intrusive displacements: the second reference to the "Have Your Say website" has the word "stick insect" stuck into it, still grouped by the hyperlink underline.

Morris's poem exists in more than one published form, and comparison between editions reveals variations in the poem's approach to the online interface between public and private discourse. The version quoted above emphasises "debate" on a website apparently designed to invite diverse views, with the official-sounding observation that it represents "a good cross-section of social strata". Terms like "cross-section" and "social strata" deliberately echo the kind of formal language used to discuss inclusivity on public platforms, as when a BBC diversity consultation cites praise for "programmes covering all the social strata" and efforts "to portray a good cross section of society."¹¹ However, a 2009 chapbook version of Morris's poem has "talentless, jealous, single women and haters" in place of the "good cross-section" (**Figure 2**). Inflected by the language of trolling and "haters," this line re-emphasises the web as a public space dominated by amplified emotions. The difference is subtle, but significant. In particular, the 2009 version's reference to "talentless, jealous, single women" captures the problematics of navigating online space in specifically gendered terms, by invoking the language of stereotyping and harassment to emphasise

On the Have Your Say website,
 Pitt-Palin Pacified Rice Thatcher's
face is *embroiled* in a **botox debate** about
 one hundred and sixty four people having a
debate about the Have Your stick insect Say
 talentless, jealous, single women and haters are
embroiled in a patriotic debate

Figure 2: Marianne Morris, "Who Not to Speak To" (2009).¹⁴

a "widespread culture of misogyny that exists online."¹² Both versions of "Who Not to Speak To" draw attention to the ways in which digital platforms can "occupy a double function as sites of empowerment and identity formation, on the one hand, and of surveillance and self-monitoring, on the other, particularly for women," by characterising the online forum as a context where personal views can quickly cross the "boundary of privacy" to become exclamatory attack.¹³ This is borne out by the confluence of anxieties and passions on the "Have Your Say" site, where botox, patriotism, celebrities, and politicians jostle for space amidst the "haters."

Returning to Bauman's reference to "public display of the 'inner self,'" it is evident that the "Have Your Say website" encourages people to escape the "incarceration" of private space, allowing contributors to reveal their abundant "passions" by giving voice to personal opinions on a public platform, including views that may be offensive to others.¹⁵ In principle, we might assume that each contributor to the "Have Your Say" site does so in anticipation of their words' reception and interpretation. However, it is notable that the "one hundred and sixty four people" engaging on the site are "embroiled in a patriotic debate/*about themselves*" (my emphasis), and Morris's depiction questions how far this engagement with a public space for self-expression actually reaches an attentive audience. The reference to debate "about themselves" suggests that participants on the "Have Your Say Website" may be entirely focused on having their *own* say at the expense of really listening to others. This implication is clarified when Morris introduces the image of a "digital mirror" to suggest that these efforts at communication are essentially "aimless" and solipsistic:

a digital mirror sputters,
the lines rage aimless,
the passion is aimless¹⁶

The figure of a "digital mirror" captures an inward turn inherent to this public display of interaction. The sputtering of the purported mirror implies multiple flaws in this situation, suggesting both the "splutter" of apoplectic speech and the sound of a failing engine. Despite the promise that "passions abound" in the so-called "cybersphere," communication in this section of "Who Not to Speak To" turns out

to be both repetitive and circuitous, as participants in the broiling mass of opinion on the "Have Your Say Website" continue to effectively "stew" in their own juice. Morris effectively depicts an electronic hall of mirrors, where figures talking "about themselves" continually fold in on their own digital space. The image of a "digital mirror" neatly suggests a narcissistic and self-monitoring impetus in online communications, as participants observe themselves rather than others.

While Bauman identifies public sharing of personal information as rooted in a perception of "the area of privacy" as "a site of incarceration," Alfred Hermida argues that "sending a message from a keyboard over the air to an undetermined audience provides a sense of freedom that can lead one to make comments that should remain private thoughts."¹⁷ Morris's poem interprets communication on the internet forum as an expressive form that fails to bring either freedom or productive response. In Morris's account, the private thoughts sent "to an undetermined audience" become directionless in the face of an audience similarly focused on sharing their own thoughts. The digital mirror only reflects back "aimless" passion, and while the forum may be public, efforts at external communication are illusory and essentially solipsistic. This is a neat twist on discussions of an "echo chamber" effect in uses of social media. Eli Pariser uses the term "filter bubble" to describe the results of a transition from the internet as "anonymous medium" to the use of social media as "a tool for soliciting and analyzing our personal data."¹⁸ For Pariser and others, the use of algorithms and self-defining networks leads to an "echo chamber" effect, where the individual's own view is constantly reaffirmed by viewing similar content. In Morris's image of the "digital mirror" and reference to individuals "embroiled in a patriotic debate/*about themselves*," the walls of the echo chamber have constricted to the individual's own "inner space". The repetition of "aimless" as "lines rage aimless" and "the passion is aimless" all suggest that the level of engagement with others' views has shrunk to the extent of a one-person filter effect. Amidst a proliferation of words, communication between individuals breaks down in favour of solipsistic and "aimless" self-expression, in a "public" space that may as well be private.

The kind of extravagant solipsism evident in "Who Not to Speak To" is also central to Redell Olsen's collection *Secure Portable Space*, which engages with questions of

privacy and "inner space" by reconfiguring imagery from pre-digital works to examine tensions and overlaps between "public and private" spaces in a contemporary environment. *Secure Portable Space* is divided into four discrete sections, the last of which reworks Charles Olson's "The Songs of Maximus" in a series of poems grouped under the collective title "The Songs of Minimaus." Punning on the similarity of the poets' last names, Olsen draws on key themes and imagery in "The Songs of Maximus," while also subverting and critiquing assumptions evident in the earlier work. For example, the aural pun of "Minimaus/Minnie Mouse" cheerfully substitutes an iconic cartoon mouse for Charles Olson's sonorous invocation of "Maximus of Tyre, a 2nd-century dialectician [...] the navel of the world."¹⁹ This playful use of Disney kitsch exemplifies the use of humour "to present a counter to the declarative ambitions of Olson's epic."²⁰ It also indicates the multiple layers at work in Olsen's verse. The title "Minimaus" resonates with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* along with Disney's Minnie, and these references are re-embodied in the human figure of the poet when Olsen wears cartoon mouse ears for readings.²¹ The doubling of Maximus/Minimaus captures the thematic and formal concerns of Olsen's project, which is presented as an altered "double" to Olson's earlier work. The poems themselves frequently return to such themes of doubling and layering, whether of figures, maps, characters, or the intertwining of material and virtual environments. Olsen uses techniques of splicing and multiplication to explore the relationship between different kinds of "portable space" – public, private, embodied, virtual.

The "Songs of Minimaus" consistently subvert latent categorisations in the "Songs of Maximus". For example, "Song 1" dedicates a full page to parsing Charles Olson's direct address to "you islands/of men and girls." Redell Olsen's version initially substitutes "plants" for "girls", addressing "you islands, of men & plants," where the repetition of "plants" anticipates the "outraged/mind of vegetable" that will appear in the next "song." Subsequent configurations re-emphasise the self, replacing "men" with "you islands, of me and plants," while the original line's "and girls" shapeshifts into the half-rhyme of "& gulls." By the end of the sequence each facet has been rewritten, or relegated to parenthesis: "you is island of (men) gull (& plants)," where the poem concludes with a question, asking "if you is land of gull, what then?" (**Figure 3**). In

a poem that consistently returns to experiences and emotions that have been sidelined or neglected, Olsen's vehement rejection of the collective female diminutive "girls" chimes with her invocation of Minnie Mouse, rather than Mickey, as a means of critiquing patriarchal language and drawing attention to gendered experiences of public space. Megarry argues that "the presence of women in public spaces inherently transgresses the stability of the public/private divide in patriarchal societies," and Olsen's lyrical interventions represent this transgression on the page, switching fluidly between voices and characters of multiple genders.²² In a twenty-first century circumstance where "gender inequality still characterizes the fields in which our technologies are conceived, built, and legislated,"²³ Olsen's use of shifting language sets out to reconfigure patriarchal dominance in the digital context.

As each verse unfolds, "The Songs of Minimaus" rework the content and structure of "The Songs of Maximus" to reinterpret perceptions of personal space in a networked environment. "And words, words, words/all over everything/No eyes or ears left/to do their own doings," Charles Olson observes in his "Song 1", introducing a context where "all senses/including the mind" are "invaded, appropriated, outraged."²⁵ Redell Olsen's twenty-first century version – "Song 2" in "The Songs of Minimaus" – invokes a similar impression of overexposure and information overload. However, as with Morris's "digital mirror," this imagery implies a turn inwards to a newly contained kind of "reality":

And crunch, crunch, crunch
all in everything
Eyes, ears wired
into the network (all
reality is what you make it, outraged
mind of vegetable, suffers under escape
key [brackets]²⁶

Olsen's repetition of the onomatopoeic term "crunch" playfully emphasises themes of consumption in both poems' reference to "all things to eat". It also evokes the

The Songs of Minimaus

Song 1

you islands, of men & plants

you island of me & plants
 you island of me &
 you island of me
 you island of

you is land of me & plants
 you is land of me &
 you is land of me
 you is land of

you island of me	& plants	
you island of me	& plants	& gulls

you is land of me	& plants	
you is land of	& plants	& gulls

when you is island is a gull what then?
 when you is island is a gull (and plants) what then?

when island a gull?		
when island a gull?	and plants?	
when is land a gull?	and plants?	
when is land a gull?	and plants	& gulls?

when is you a gull?	is land a gull?	island a gull?
when is you a gull?	gull?	
when is you a gull	gull is land	& plants?
when is you a gull	islands	& plants?

you is lands of men & plants

you is island of (men) gull (& plants)
 if you is land of gull, what then?

Figure 3: Redell Olsen, "The Songs of Minimaus: Song 1."²⁴

compressive qualities of digital storage; in the parlance of early millennium new media, to "crunch" a file is to reduce its size. Both interpretations reveal the "minimising" impetus of "The Songs of Minimaus", depicting a solipsistic turn inwards whose impulse is reduction and compression. Hence "all over everything" becomes Olsen's

"all *in* everything" (my emphasis), accompanied by imagery of containment in the static "mind of vegetable" and implied constriction of "[brackets]" (Ibid.). The senses are not overwhelmed by external forces, but rather exhorted to "make" their own reality as they are "wired/into the network".

The shift inward to become "all in everything" described in Charles Olson's "Song 2" echoes the solipsistic turn identified in Morris's imagery of a "digital mirror", and also introduces a wider network of imagery that considers the implication of bodies "wired" into a network. The implications of engaging with a networked environment are also explored in Olson's "Song 3," which re-works a hint of monitoring found in Charles Olson's "Song 2". A stanza in *The Maximus Poems* asks:

how can we go anywhere,
even cross-town
how get out of anywhere (the bodies
all buried
in shallow graves?²⁷

Olsen's version invokes elements of Olson's imagery and form, but reconfigures the thinly concealed bodies in their shallow graves as tracking "data bodies":

How can we go anywhere,
even across-town
without our data bodies knowing, (flesh,
no object) cards
in shallow casings²⁸

As in "The Songs of Maximus," Olsen's "data bodies" are figured as unseen, and both poems invigorate seemingly inert entities – the bodies, the data bodies – to imbue them with a lively capacity to trace movement and actions. In both cases, the imagined "bodies" appear to affect or impede free movement through public spaces, though this is stated more explicitly in Olsen's version. However, Olsen's substitution of the "shallow casings" of cards instead of the "shallow graves" found in Olson's

poem anticipates a new mode of intrusion, different from the kind envisaged in the earlier poem. This is a specifically "mediatised" environment, one in which the wish to traverse "across-town" is inevitably subject to tracking and monitoring.

Redell Olsen's conflation of "data" and "bodies" in "Song 3" of "The Songs of Minimaus" resonates with Donna Haraway's influential and much-cited invocation of the cyborg as "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism."²⁹ Olsen's verse disrupts boundaries between machine and organism, while also introducing the hybridity of organisms – as in the substitution and mixing of "girls" with "plants" and "gulls" analysed above. The "data bodies" of "Song 3" can be read in the context of early cyberfeminist hopes that conventional gender boundaries might be productively broken down in a virtual space, where "tools mutate into complex machines which begin to learn and act for themselves."³⁰ This would represent a progressive state, exemplified by Sadie Plant's hopeful account of "a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets."³¹ However, the optimism of Plant's vision of "distributed emergence" is countered by recognition of an online reality where, as Lisa Nakamura notes, "supposedly 'fluid' selves are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are 'solid'."³² Olsen's repeated use of imagery of constraint – "cards/in shallow casings" – undermines the possibility of reading these "data bodies" as an uncomplicated emblem of emergence from stipulated "rules of conduct." Instead, Olsen melds attention to the digital with reference to embodied activities that have historically been problematically coded as "feminine," whether shopping ("personal shopping is an art form of trust"), makeup ("gained second-place for/a black lipstick"), or domestic labour ("our souls are in the wash").³³ Such moments insist on the reinterpretation of embodied experience in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, digital spaces.

Olsen's project in "The Songs of Minimaus" uses the example of digital contexts to contemplate new ways of blending and representing public and private space. Like Morris in "Who Not to Speak To," Olsen contemplates the "double function" of digital platforms for both empowerment/identity formation and

surveillance/self-monitoring.³⁴ Whereas Morris focuses on the active sharing of "passions" online, Olsen is concerned with the tension between voluntary and involuntary ways of becoming "wired/into the network." Deborah Lupton has argued that use of digital devices means that networks become "entangled with our sense of self, our experience of embodiment, our acquisition of knowledge and meaning making and our social relations."³⁵ Lupton clarifies that this complex entanglement is not necessarily the result of voluntary acts or conscious decisions, since "the extent to which digital devices and sensors are embedded in public spaces means that we cannot easily escape becoming a subject of digitisation [...] public and private spaces are now reconfigured by computer code."³⁶ In Olsen's verse, the "embedded" nature of monitoring in public spaces prompts a state of constant digital subjectivity. The "data bodies" of "Song 3" illustrate the multifaceted aspects of becoming a "subject of digitisation" in a contemporary context, drawing attention to the ramifications of involuntary sharing in environments that are subject to invisible forms of tracking and identification.

The concept of the "data double" provides a specific technological genealogy for Olsen's "data bodies," and is a useful context for considering voluntary and involuntary acts of surveillance in "The Songs of Minimaus." In 1990 Mark Poster defined the "data double" as a version of the self rendered as a result of the collection and assimilation of data, leading to "the multiplication of the individual, the constitution of an additional self."³⁷ The origins of the term "data double" imply a simple mirroring of the embodied self in data form. However, it is increasingly discussed in terms of multiplication and multiple forms. Pramod Nayar describes an evanescent collection of personal information whereby individuals are "disseminated" across a series of databases:

Our choices and curiosities that make us what we are, are now in databases somewhere, to be retrieved at will by people with access to the database. Data converges upon matter, the body, even as the body is disseminated as zeroes and ones into the database. [...] Our identity is increasingly found in bits and bytes across multiple spaces.³⁸

Nayar's account emphasises the spread of intimate information across "bits and bytes" and "multiple spaces," drawing attention to the unwitting creation of entities beyond the control of the individual, stored in fragmentary forms in the records of companies and governments. The focus here is on the body's dissociation from its diversely multiplied traces, since it is disseminated across multiple databases and therefore no longer subject to the "boundaries of privacy" outlined by Bauman. Olsen's knowing "data bodies" are suggestive of the state of the "data double" as outlined by Poster and Nayar. However, they also maintain an impression of continued connection between the surveilled body and its data version. Instead of an individual's geospatial information becoming disparate data disseminated as "zeroes and ones", Olsen personifies these "data bodies" in terms of possession and connection to the embodied self. They are "*our* data bodies" (my emphasis), and the use of the possessive pronoun is corroborated by the implied consciousness of their "knowing" our whereabouts. Personified in this way, the data becomes a kind of body itself; in a figurative exploration of Nayar's terms, "data converges upon matter," but remains invested in an originating individual.

In Olsen's poem, the impossibility of moving without the data bodies' knowledge emphasises the involuntary nature of data traces left by individuals as they move through different public spaces, giving lyrical expression to Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel's observation that "new technological possibilities have allowed surveillance technologies [...] to permeate our everyday lives."³⁹ Olsen's vocabulary and syntax draws attention to the ways in which acquisition of "knowledge" by the poem's figurative "data bodies" applies to seemingly banal and universal activities. In the reference to going "anywhere, even across-town," the all-encompassing spatial adverb "anywhere" and inclusion of the intensive adverb "even" both draw attention to the all-pervading nature of the monitoring described. This capacity to "permeate" everyday actions marks a shift away from traditional perceptions of "top-down" surveillance by unitary states. As Simon Gilliom and Torin Monahan note in *SuperVision*, "for most of us, surveillance comes not from a unitary state bent only on domination and control, but from a chaotic blend of government, media, work, friends, family,

insurance companies, bankers, and automated processing systems."⁴⁰ Olsen's representation of "our data bodies" replaces notions of a "unitary state" with surveillant assemblages that are ephemeral in their role and construction.

Gilliom and Monahan's reference to a "chaotic blend" of surveillant entities in individuals' everyday lives corresponds to Olsen's understanding of "messiness" of the lyric in the "constant overlap between the boundaries of what might be termed 'public' and 'private' or 'inner' and 'outer'."⁴¹ Discussing *Secure Portable Space*, David and Christine Kennedy reflect similar interest in the lyrical response to "automated processing systems" when they interpret "Minimaus" as "an *involuntary* singing to virtual space" (my emphasis). In this analysis, "being or having a 'data body' means being turned into a public language in a different kind of public space which is beyond our control."⁴² The reference to a public space "beyond our control" recalls Olsen's commentary on the "messiness" of different spaces, and discussions of the poem tend to focus on this suggestion of a loss of control over personal expression, where secrecy or "inner space" is rendered impossible by a complex system of invisible surveillant entities. Zoe Skoulding develops this approach further when she argues that Olsen's subject is "enmeshed in the technological communication through which space is lived and produced."⁴³ Skoulding's choice of the adjective "enmeshed" suggests that the media-specificity of Olsen's subject itself constitutes a form of entrapment in a particular form or format, implying that Olsen's narrator has no choice but to engage with spaces that are no longer private. Discussing "a creeping extension of both commercial and governmental surveillance into different aspects of the private sphere," Ball et al use strikingly similar terms to Skoulding's account of a figure "enmeshed in technological communication" when they describe a contemporary "surveilled subject" as "unknowingly enmeshed in surveillance assemblages and subject to multiple lines of sight by virtue of the latter's ubiquity."⁴⁴ In these accounts, secrecy is necessarily abandoned, even in the simple act of traversing "across-town."

As the above analysis indicates, Olsen's "Minimaus" sequence certainly considers what kinds of personal agency might be lost in a messy "overlap" of boundaries between public and private language and expression. However, it is significant that

although the poem's "data bodies" themselves appear restrictive in their insistent "knowing," the bodies interacting with the space offered by modem and network are simultaneously imbued with new possibilities for self-expression. Rather than being "unknowingly enmeshed" in technological assemblages, the surveilled subjects in Olsen's sequence acknowledge, and at times appear to embrace, the nature of the spaces they now occupy. Whereas Skoulding interprets a reduction of "freedom" in Olsen's "Minimaus" poems, I argue that "Song 3" and other poems in the "Minimaus" sequence actively identify a new potential for self-expression within the altered communicative spaces they depict. For example, Olsen's "Song 3" begins with an invitation to:

Sing modestly!
Whine!

The exhortation to realise a new form of expression in these lines is clarified in close comparison of how Olsen adjusts the sense of the "Maximus" poems to suggest an increased, rather than diminished, agency for the speaking subject. Whereas equivalently placed lines in Charles Olson's "Song 2" prophesise that lyrical expression will be drowned out by mechanisms, asking "what can we do/when even the public conveyances/sing?", Olsen's exhortation to "sing modestly!" offers encouragement to blend human voice with mechanical sounds.⁴⁵ Read in this way, the lines offer a glimpsed potential for new forms of public self-expression through the development of an innovative voice melded with the effects of technological objects.

The emergence of an innovative expressive form in a digital context emerges in several moments within Olsen's verse; "And I am dialled up—dialling myself up", the poetic voice announces in the opening line of "Song 3", with the line's caesura suggesting a pause before a speaker replaces the passive sense of being "dialled up" with the agency of "dialling myself."⁴⁶ This configuration imposes a technologically-inflected specificity onto lines from "The Songs of Maximus," adding the intermediary of a phone call or modem in place of the simpler speech-act of Olson's "I am asked—ask myself."⁴⁷ In this way, Olsen's verse begins to hint at an alternative

understanding of "data bodies": rather than a restrictive figure of surveillance and control, the encounter between body and data might be read as an extension or enriching of "flesh" existence. Despite the inclusion of "our data bodies" as indicative of systems of monitoring and surveillance, moments such as the exhortation to "sing modestly!" in Olsen's "Song 3" introduce the virtual environment as a space for creative expression. Similarly, just as the "data bodies" echo and track the bodies moving "across-town", so the lines of Olsen's poems trace Olson's poem, offering a version which creatively re-enacts the shape and structure of the original verse, while including subtle distinctions, breaks, and glitches. As a result, interpreting Olsen's verse as depicting bodies "enmeshed" or compelled to "involuntary" expression in an ungovernable space doesn't quite capture the full complexity of Olsen's engagement with a "public language" in the "Minimaus" sequence.

With these readings in mind, I find that the development of a poetic subject as expressive "data body" in Olsen's "Minimaus" sequence comes closest to an approach developed and explored by Critical Art Ensemble. In the late 1990s, Critical Art Ensemble identified a "kernel of truth" in claims that "the virtual body is a body of great potential."⁴⁸ Though the idea of a data body as source of information for marketing is dismissed as the virtual body's "fascist sibling," Critical Art Ensemble seek to explore the disruptive, expressive possibilities of sustained interaction between flesh and data. Richard Rogers argues that the approach of Critical Art Ensemble moves away from Poster's conception of the self "impoverished" in its data form, to emphasise a combination of body and data:

While Poster believes that the data double impoverishes the self by reducing it to fields in a database with character length limits, the CAE actually thinks it becomes far richer. All data are in play: 'No detail of social life is too insignificant to record and to scrutinize.'⁴⁹

Just as Olsen's verse sustains a connection between our movements and the "knowing" of "our data bodies", the artist-activists involved in Critical Art Ensemble insist on "always connecting data-bodies to real-bodies."⁵⁰ Ricardo Dominguez, a key

figure within the group, heralds the development of "trans_bodies", whose hybrid between "real" embodiment and "data" version will become "multi-node citizens."⁵¹ For Dominguez, the development of a "multi-node" citizen relies upon a continuing acknowledgement of the relation between the "data-bodies" and "real-bodies" – a factor he relates explicitly to questions of privacy and secrecy. Contrasting CAE with Wikileaks, Dominguez claims that "everyone knows who we are, where we are, why we are doing the gesture, whereas the Wikileak hactivists are hidden and do their work in secret, making no attempts to connect data-bodies and real-bodies."⁵² Thus, a refusal to detach "real-bodies" from their data-based actions engages with one of the longest-running tropes of digital communications: the tension between potential for anonymity – secrecy – and a need to acknowledge the embodied human sources for digital "data".

Olsen's exhortation to "sing modestly!" anticipates more sustained imagery of a melding of human and machine in Zoe Skoulding's collection *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds*. Just as Olsen envisages "dialling myself up", Skoulding figuratively mixes the intimate sounds of the human body with those of electronic mechanisms. These are "data bodies" in a new sense, articulated as they are via the sounds and motions of machinery. Thus the opening poem, titled "The Museum for Disappearing Sounds," is filled with the sonic effects of electronic devices as "electricity sings in D."⁵³ The collection's conceit of a "museum" for sounds is referenced by numbered subsections of the sequence labelled "exhibit", and each exhibit introduces the presence of human flesh and actions merged with the machinery of various forms of communicative media, both digital and analogue. "exhibit 1" opens with "breath a crackle of static" and "a detuned radio in one lung," while a voice in "exhibit 4" emerges from a phone's "thin vibrations" and "shimmers on the end of a line."⁵⁴ Skoulding's verse uses similar terms to Olsen's "Songs of Minimaus" to contemplate the place of the individual within an environment dominated by electrified devices. Both deploy imagery of immersion and containment; Olsen's "Song 2" envisages "eyes, ears wired/into the network," while Skoulding narrates a first-person perspective slipping into an evocative morass of digital sounds, where "I

vanish in lossy compression" amidst whirring mechanisms and singing electricity.⁵⁵ The reference to "compression" echoes the themes of "minimising" found in Olsen's "Songs of Minimaus". Skoulding uses the context of sound technologies to create an impression of the first-person subject simultaneously subsumed into, and emerging through, the distorting effects of digital media.

In *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds*, Skoulding uses spatial imagery to explore a tension between "inner" and "outer" spaces via imagery of containment and over-exposure. A sequence titled "The Rooms" contemplates the affective experience of an environment overflowing with "data". "Room 4036" uses the motif of the room as a means of exploring the experience of digital overload. Here, the first-person narration describes an encounter with a cascade of unreadable "data":

When entering the room bathed in data
streams I flick a switch as glittering squares
cascade down the window from far above
the flyover
 where shapes of workers move
in offices of light and figures glide
over screens in rapid unreadable
patterns.⁵⁶

In this account, the glittering "cascade" of information is rendered incomprehensible to our narrator, for whom figures are merely glimpsed as "rapid unreadable/patterns." Discussing visibility and data, David Murakami Wood argues that the expansion of data will lead to "a vast ocean of largely unknown, uninterpreted and perhaps unknowable data," prompting a circumstance where "we are haunted by fragmentary and contingent meanings."⁵⁷ Skoulding's "Room 4036" envisages precisely this kind of fragmentation, which extends to difficulties with perception and visibility: "You enter the room in pixels," the poetic voice observes, "now you're breaking up." The technologised fragmentation of breaking apart into scattered pixels is echoed in the next poem in the sequence, where "I'm just playback/all pauses and stutters" and the

room is "faithfully/erasing every note it remembers."⁵⁸ As in Morris's depiction of the "Have Your Say Website" and Olsen's account of turning inwards to become part of a network, Skoulding's poem sets out to trace what it means to seek expression in or via data: in these cases, she finds "unreadable patterns."

Throughout *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds*, Skoulding explores a fascination with themes of archiving, tracking and the transgression of boundaries of privacy. In "History", the poem itself is cast as a potential repository of gathered information, as "Line by line it tracks/glances scattered in the street below."⁵⁹ The extended metaphor of the poem-as-monitor emphasises its ability to capture aspects of embodied existence that may be easily overlooked in daily life, but are self-consciously captured and archived here – echoing the conviction of Critical Art Ensemble that "No detail of social life is too insignificant to record and to scrutinize". "Room 401" takes this further, moving from the tracking of glances to imply absolute transgression of any notion of "inner space":

I'm waiting to enter your head here where the seconds are
suspended and you're sitting at the desk
by the window while night draws its own blank.⁶⁰

These lines suggest the permeability of an individual's innermost thoughts to an external monitoring force, announcing the possibility of purposeful observation by an entity constantly "waiting" for an opportunity to intrude on the private interiority of "your head". Again, spatial imagery prevails as a means of conceptualising secrecy; in this poem, the mind is conceived as a series of self-containing spaces, picturing memories as a series of rooms "diminishing/another inside that one/smaller still" until the final reduction of "the smallest imaginable/cell in the skull/which can't be contained in/this passage."⁶¹ Meaning is evasive here, as "the/beginning of the sentence slips away/before you reach the end." It is important to note, however, that the waiting entity in the lines quoted above has not yet succeeded; "your head" remains un-entered and therefore retains its as-yet unnamed secrets, at least during the temporal moment of the poem.

of falling asleep and "dripping into forests", or the "rustle of larch" that cannot be catalogued. However, the conflation of natural and technological imagery in "exhibit 3" refuses to comply with binary oppositions of urban versus rural, or embodied versus digital. Although it is used to imagine an escape from an unnamed monitoring force, the "natural" landscape in Skoulding's "exhibit 3" is nevertheless vulnerable to potential intervention, in the as-yet-unrealised possibility of unpicking stones "pixel by pixel". In this case, the possibility of invisibility – of an "unreadability" similar to that of the glittering data flows described above – offers comfort and a temporary reprieve from surveillant entities.

Whereas Skoulding identifies comfort and security in imagery of compression and invisibility, Marianne Morris's "Who Not to Speak To" traces ways of seeking reassurance in various forms of expression in public spaces. Away from the "Have Your Say Website" the first-person perspective longs for "some language I can trust," and locates it in the official infrastructures of daily life:

I just want some language I can trust I can
trust the announcement that all the lines are working.⁶⁴

The lack of punctuation and repetition of "trust" conveys a faux-naïvety in this determination to seek comfort in an official announcement. In contrast to the chaotic forms used to describe the "Have Your Say website", the formal "announcement" is conveyed in an unpunctuated sentence whose simplicity echoes the standardised, formulaic tone of public service communications. Here, the poem contemplates forms of reassurance and control. The comforting trust in official announcements suggests a key aspect of contemporary surveillance: the possibility that individuals may be complicit in their own monitoring, comforted by the trappings of security and the apparent certainty of official discourse.

I am concluding with discussion of Morris's ironic portrayal of an individual seeking reassurance in the discourse of corporate infrastructure, because it points to an important extension of the depiction of "digital mirror" or "data bodies" discussed in this article. Morris's account of public transport and retail spaces moves

from the specific aspects of digital networking to the environment of what Olsen calls the "mediatised technologies of representation and capitalism."⁶⁵ In a section of Morris's poem subtitled "FILMIC INTERLUDE", the environment of online debate is supplanted by the narrator's entry to a "retail space". Here she finds a mutual absence of threat in the brightly idealised environment of commerce. "NO ONE WILL COME," our narrator announces confidently, "BECAUSE I don't want to destroy anything." The assumptions behind this statement imply the presence of an observing entity, monitoring intentions or actions to "destroy", implying that someone certainly would "come" if such destruction were entertained. The account of the retail space chimes with Gabriel and Lang's observation that the purpose-built retail space is actively designed to reassure, since "an invisible hand has planned everything for your delectation."⁶⁶ For Gabriel and Lang, such environments offer "a synthetic oasis [...] a clean, genial, graffiti-free space," defined in terms of an orderly absence of threat or challenge. "There are no worries here," they observe, "no pushy salesmen, no invisible pickpockets, goods have fixed price-tags and are covered by the Trades Description Act."⁶⁷ Entering the retail space, the poetic persona of "Who Not to Speak To" defines her own discourse in terms appropriate to the "synthetic oasis", arriving "hopeful with anecdotes, charm, and energy". Like the wish for "some language I can trust", the cheerful banality of this entry to the retail space reiterates themes of containment and control within the poem, the consumer's continuing reassurance is predicated on compliance with the possibility of external monitoring.

Morris's depiction of the retail space in "Who Not to Speak To" chimes in significant ways with the references to bodies "enmeshed" with networks and mechanisms in the verse of Olsen and Skoulding. In this case, however, the "mediatised environment" is one which involves a different kind of "enmeshing," as the narrator sets out to "envelope" an unnamed and unvoiced addressee in the offerings of everyday retail:

I just want my items to envelope you,
look!
I HAVE BOUGHT YOU
a plant

a bottle
and a dimmer switch.

Morris's approach is characteristically playful in its childlike demand to "look!", and there is a sardonically humorous effect in the seemingly random items produced as a kind of faux-resolution at the end of the poem. However, though they may appear harmlessly eclectic, these gifts quietly embody imagery of monitoring and compliance. Gabriel and Lang describe gifts as emblematic of "reciprocal exchange relations," and in this case, the expected reciprocation for these gifted items is the other's willingness to be "enveloped," captured within the offerings of the retail environment.⁶⁸ This is a sardonic paean to the power of purchases, and the eclectic combination of items simultaneously mocks and emphasises efforts to deploy the materialist trappings of domestic purchase-power. The longing for "my items to envelope you" suggests that contemplating the "overlap" of "inner" and "outer" lives is not only about considering the kind of "public" expression evident in the "Have Your Say Website", but also involves tracing the various impetuses for monitoring and containment in contemporary iterations of "private" domestic space.

The account of official and commercial language in "Who Not to Speak To" aptly demonstrates how contemporary depictions of "public" and "private" spaces demand a move away from traditional conceptions of monitoring by dominant external forces. Instead, contemporary surveillance practices are embedded in the practical infrastructure of society. A level of complicity with such forms, and their capacity to be both reassuring and trustworthy, is captured in the apparent eagerness of Morris's anxious narrator to "trust" official discourse and redeploy retail items for the purpose of personal control. Similarly, it is present in Olsen and Skoulding's imagery of monitoring and the blending of individuals into the networks that dominate public and private spaces. While there may be opportunities for self-expression in the newly mediated environments envisaged by these poets – for example, in the invitation to "sing modestly" – imagery such as Morris's "digital mirror" or the all-knowing "data bodies" in Olsen's "Song 3" set out to explore the ways in which traversal of "mediated" spaces involves complicity with, and production of, reflected versions of the

self which move beyond the control of the individual, and whose workings may not be immediately seen or perceived. Perhaps, then, the real secrecy implied in these depictions of "inner" and "outer" space belongs to the systems themselves: inscrutable, uncertain, and imaginable only as "rapid unreadable patterns."

Notes

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- ³ Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance*, p. 29.
- ⁴ Colin Bennett and Charles Raab, *The Governance of Privacy: Policy Instruments in Global Perspective* (London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 4.
- ⁵ Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance*, p. 30.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29–30.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, *Liquid Surveillance*, p. 30.
- ⁸ Marianne Morris, "Who Not to Speak To" in *Dear World and Everyone In It*, ed. by Nathan Hamilton (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), p. 314.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 312.
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- ¹⁶ Morris, p. 314.
- ¹⁷ Alfred Hermida, *#TellEveryone: Why People Share and Why it Matters* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2014).
- ¹⁸ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You* (London: Penguin, 2012).
- ¹⁹ Charles Olson, *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*, ed. by Ralph Maud, Rev. 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2010), p. 15.
- ²⁰ David Herd, *Contemporary Olson* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 171.
- ²¹ The mouse ears are layered into the text itself, featuring in a montage of images on p. 74 of *Secure Portable Space*. For a list of other resonances in Olsen's use of the cartoon mouse, see Allen Fisher's 2005 review, which focuses on Mickey, not Minnie, to place Olsen's work in the context of a "significant tradition of figurative shifting" around Mickey Mouse in the twentieth century. <<http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/4/fisher.html>>.
- ²² Megarry, p. 48.
- ²³ Latoria Cuboniks, 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation' <<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/>> [accessed 20 April 2018].

- ²⁴ Redell Olsen, *Secure Portable Space* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2004), p. 87.
- ²⁵ Charles Olson, "The Songs of Maximus: 'Song 1'", in *The Maximus Poems* (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970).
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- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁶⁴ Morris, "Who Not to Speak To".
- ⁶⁵ Olsen, n.pag.
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Competing Interests

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