AUDIO RECORDING AND THE CO-WRITTEN SELF:

Reflections on an Experimental Methodology for Climate Justice

By

Carmen Warner
Alison Schultz
Sam Bean
Barbara Leckie

We sit in the living room, the four of us in our usual spots on the couch, chair, rocking chair, trying to forget the phone recording on the coffee table between us. We've been gathering for months now, experimenting with different methods and practices of co-writing in the humanities that might open up to more feminist forms of climate justice. Over steaming cups of tea and coffee, we've engaged in experimental writing prompts, co-editing sessions, and now this: recording our conversation.

The idea at the heart of these experiments is to shake up the way we think about climate justice and the autonomous subject. The autonomous subject, or the liberal self, goes hand-in-hand with Western histories of liberalism, capitalism, and their intertwined legacies. Private property, corporations as legal subjects, individual rights: all of these appear in the West as common sense, as ingrained and inevitable ways of being together in the world (see, for example, Graeber & Wengrow 2021; Liboiron 2021; McKittrick 2021). This definition of the subject of course, has had massive repercussions on the climate and on climate justice. Capitalist and liberal logics are key driving forces behind linked oppressions such as environmental racism, classism, and speciesism. In particular, the denial of Indigenous knowledges has been central to Indigenous peoples' continued displacement and disenfranchisement all over the world. When the liberal self appears as common sense, so too do individualized responses to the climate crisis. As such, the liberal self is also embedded in our climate humanities methods, particularly in our usual and often unquestioned understandings of writing. Even in their collaborative forms, we often imagine individuals with sealed boundaries lined up next to one another, like closed tomes on a bookshelf.

Our research group begins from the premise that the autonomous subject does not empirically exist, that the self is fundamentally co-written, and that acknowledging the co-written self will better serve climate action and equity. The co-written self pushes back against these individualized responses. What does it mean to truly recognize the co-written self in the context of climate change? This is the question we've been experimenting with, to see what happens when we unsettle our usual methods of co-writing in the humanities. Today, the experimental methodology is recording: what happens when you listen back, without the expectation that the recording will be transcribed? What happens when you centre oral communication as an essential form of cowriting in climate humanities work? Many scholars, especially Toronto School Communication theorists such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong have, to varying degrees, revered oral communication for being amenable to fostering dialogue, presence, and critical exchange (Sterne, 2011). These scholars, however, were also eurocentric, and in their focus on "dominant" communication transitions from orality to literacy to electronic eras, failed to engage seriously with concurrent and continuing oral cultures and traditions, particularly of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world. By positioning oral cultures as primitive and/or irrational and in need of "civilizing," binary understandings of orality and literacy and the equation of oral/written with past/present have been used to justify colonialism (see Biakolo, 1999; Teuten, 2014). In response to this, Biakolo (1999) in particular, called for a non-hierarchical, continuum-based model of orality and literacy.

The privileging of the written word over oral communication is obvious in academia, where conversation, meetings, and discussions, both in person and recorded in forms like podcasts and webinars, are "worth less" than the written word, particularly on CVs where the solo-published article or book reigns supreme. This general devaluing of orality raises questions for how we might align our feminist values with our climate

humanities methods and work. Can we imagine different avenues for and understandings of peer review? Part of the task here is to see the ways this colonial ordering of things has subsisted in our methods; our experiment in recording is an attempt to engage seriously with oral communication as a methodology in the climate humanities.

Barbara starts us off with a question about the etymology of care being tied to grief and lament and we go from there. The discussion takes us from Nordic culture and collective care of "charon" to the rise of Protestantism and capitalism, to forms of neoliberal care, putting kids in "care," modern healthcare as lack of care in Christina Sharpe's (2016) *In the Wake*, how care breaks off from the community as the idea of the autonomous subject emerged. What stories of care do we tell now? Are these histories shadows still running through words? Maybe we should map care as a site of struggle for meaning never resolved. Can we feel different variations of care all at once? Do meanings ever leave words?

We talk about Angela Davis and how social movements need to change vocabulary (Soriano-Bilal, 2012). Speaking of Angela Davis, we need to talk about labour and who care labour falls on. Who has the duty to care? And then we're talking about Raymond Williams and keywords (Williams 1985). Yes, yes, they are useful, but what keywords do we need for the climate crisis? Barbara asks another question: does paying attention to something constitute care? No, care is praxis, action. But can you pay attention to something without caring about it? And oh, how we're burnt out from all this paying attention. We come back to definitions: what about care as community? What meanings do we want to invoke when we talk about care and co-writing? What meanings should we leave behind?

The conversation continues in this way for an hour, orbiting the central issues of language, care, meaning, and climate. During it all, the phone, seemingly innocuous, sits partly wedged under a plate of cookies, its screen deceptively black, which helps us all, if only a little, to ignore that it is there, taking into its little speaker everything we say.

When Carmen gets home, she sends the recording to everyone and we all listen back over the course of a week, reflecting on both the content of what we talked about, and the feeling that results from the playback. When we meet the next week, we are all surprised. We find it definitively distinct from simply reading over meeting notes that we usually take. The difference, as we discuss, seems

to be largely in the flow of conversation: thoughts that trail off, questions that don't actually get answered, and perhaps most distinctly, all of the "mmms" and "yeahs," the interruptions and voices weaving together and layering that are punctuated throughout. This, for us, bring to the fore what often gets suppressed in the usual forms of scholarly output such as transcripts or conference proceedings: that undisciplined conversation is vital to cowriting. It enables forms of generous thinking that are fruitful for dispelling the myth of the liberal self as it lays bare the unavoidably intertwined nature of co-writing.

Listening back, we also found that we could fully invest in what others were saying. We weren't waiting for our turn to speak or trying to formulate a thought to add. In effect, we felt more fully oriented to the other, a state of deep reflection that doesn't often feel possible in the moment. In short, what we found was that the conversation we listened back to was not the same as the conversation we had had in person. It was a different experience altogether. Here, the gap between memory and recording is revealed: a kind of co-writing with our past selves and others.

Significantly, our audio recording experiment turned us toward the idea of feminist radical care. Through its grounding in "non-hierarchical collective work" (Hobart & Kneese 2020, n.p.), radical care as a concept actively departs from forms of self-care that are increasingly being co-opted by neoliberalism. This conception of care aligns with our research group's understanding of co-writing as diametrically opposed to the autonomous, liberal self and, instead, grounded in respect for each part of the co-written self, human, and more-than-human alike. While we approached every group meeting from this non-hierarchical perspective, we found that when we listened back to the recording the pressures of performance were alleviated, and we could focus even more on the other's voice in our ear.

Yet, also at the centre of all of these feelings and reflections—though often forgotten—is the everyday technology of the cellphone. This too, is an essential part of the co-written self. Sure, we write on our phones all the time, opening our notes app to scrawl down or voice dictate an idea, a grocery list, a memo. But a more capacious understanding of co-writing, the kind of co-writing we are thinking about, includes the technology itself: the tiny built-in microphone converting sound waves to electronic signal; the audio-processing hardware that transfigures analog sound into digital

data; the 'iPhone girls' working in Chinese factories (Nakamura 2011) whose "small hands" are used to build these devices using cobalt from exploited labour in the Congo and other minerals made into precious substances by technological desire (Angus 2024). The phone on the table recording our conversation about care and climate justice is co-written, just as we are with its materials and with each other, with our past selves and past others, with the community and environment in which we live and do this work, with climate change itself.

This experiment, for us, is part of a broader push to rethink the co-written self in the climate humanities and we hope to try this experiment again in a different setting to see how those things usually omitted from our humanities methods—like setting—affect our cowriting. It's worth noting that the liberal self is so embedded in every crevice of Western academia that it easily slips in through the back door of our climate humanities work. Even while centring our co-writtenness, we often caught ourselves slipping back into familiar habits of writing and editing, including in the writing of this reflection which one person wrote, and others suggested comments and edits individually due to time and funding constraints. We also had to reckon with larger power relations in academia where first author *does* matter and so had to choose accordingly. At every turn, the liberal self appears. Yet, it is worth noting these places where we are pulled unwillingly toward autonomy, because if we are co-written, then equitable responses to climate change must also be understood as co-written too. We must attend to interconnections that push against the usual divisions and logics that enable us to think about ourselves as separate individuals, of the phone as a discrete object, about social issues as separate from one another and from the environment. It may seem a simple thing, to record a conversation, but from the perspective of co-writing, it provokes us to rethink the very methods that inform feminist climate justice work.

Works Cited

Angus, Siobhan. 2024. *Camera Geologica: An Elemental History of Photography*. First edition. Durham: Duke University Press.

Biakolo, Emevwo. 1999. "On the Theoretical Foundations of Orality and Literacy." *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2: 42–65. https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.1999.30.2.42.

Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything : A New History of Humanity*. New York: McClelland & Stewart.

Hobart, Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani, and Tamara Kneese. 2020. "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times." *Social Text* 38, no. 1: 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971067.

Liboiron, Max. 2021. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2021. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke University Press.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2011. "Economies of Digital Production in East Asia: iPhone Girls and the Transnational Circuits of Cool." *Media Fields Journal* Vol. 2. https://mediafieldsjournal.org/economies-of-digital/

Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sterne, Jonathan. 2011. "The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 2: 207-225. https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2011v36n2a2223.

Teuton, Christopher B. 2014. "Indigenous Orality and Oral Literatures." In *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, edited by Daniel Heath Justice and James H Cox. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199914036.013.027.

Vocabulary of Change: Angela Davis, Tim Wise in Conversation. 2012. Film. Directed by Mohammed Soriano-Bilal. USA: SpeakOut.

Williams, Raymond. 1985. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 1st ed. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.