

Sounding the futures imaginary: a collaborative intra-modal storytelling methodology

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*We speak by sound
vacillating between a collective consensus filled
with old disks and CDs,
archived pieces of pasts in his storage
carefully catalogued, in the soft, moist soil
are plants that have lived long lives and are as
healthy he speaks, only when he has to,
in a garbled way The skunk nudged a pile of shimmering
circuitry and surface
we are imagining the future¹.*

While Covid-19 may have fractured our public, private, and professional narratives of normalcy, out of this slow-moving and surreal catastrophe, new images of the future imaginary begin to emerge as well as new creative practices for collaboratively (re)imagining the future. The Digital Literacy Centre (DLC) is an arts-based research collective exploring innovative approaches to literacy, digital media, and experimental methodologies for technologically enriched meaning-making practices. Like everyone in the world, each of us experienced the pandemic as a diffracted and intensely intimate individual encounter with the future's unpredictability, and yet also collectively, as a shared story, one that we narrated together in real time, however virtually. We decided to take up this evolving pandemic moment as a

¹ This text is a poetic representation of an online digital composite. We used Jim Anderson's () stir fry template to further diffract and algorithmically recombine our narrative strands, thus creating an ever-shifting digital story-creature who lives in chapter two of Skunk Tales (<https://disn.lled.educ.ubc.ca/wordpress/skunktales/>). Ideally, this creature would be connected to a Singling interface that would allow readers to hear the sonified words as they roll over the text, digitally stroking the skunk to listen to it purr. As we continue to elaborate upon the Singling platform and eventually create an online application of the interface, this virtual sonic affordance will become possible. For now, the sounding skunk lives in the future.

technological and creative research challenge to engage with the digital platforms at our disposal towards collaborative futures writing and imagining during a time of crisis. In this paper, we describe our arts-based research methodology, which was a bricolage of technologically-mediated futures imagining, writing, and sounding that enacts “diffraction patterns ... aris[ing] when specific aural experiences are rubbed against specific narrations of human-technological coupling” (Cecchetto 3). Through a series of collaborative creation sessions over the course of 14 months during the global pandemic, we wrote, composed and remixed an evolving futures narrative, *Skunk Tales*, part of which now resides online, available ([here](#)). We think of this academic article in which we will describe our storying methodology, as an additional chapter in the generative and ongoing *Skunk Tales*. In particular, we focus on four writing events: 1) The initial face-to-face meeting; 2) rehearsal and performance for the Arts-Integrated Research Group symposium; 3) virtual collaborative writing session; 4) remixing the text using a Stir Fry and the Patch process with graduate student participants.

Context and research questions

You are in an old room, filled with old disks and CDs where screens with slow logos move from one side to the other while people talk and talk. The screens, ancient as the room itself, are dusty and pixelated – nothing like what we can see these days. You smell the dusty screens and you know the smell I am trying to describe but you feel yourself, even before you walk into this holy room of classical music, that you are in a space that transcends time itself.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, on a mild afternoon in early March of 2020, members of the DLC research group gathered together in person—by foot, bicycle, and bus—in the basement of Dr. Kedrick James’ house, to write together about the future. The setting of this first storying jam is important: Dr. James is a musician, audiophile, and avid collector of vinyl records and sound-making and sounding equipment of all sorts—both analogue and digital. Along the walls

and down the hallways of the basement are shelves and shelves, floor to ceiling, of meticulously organized records that are arranged by geographic location, genre, time period, and artist, from historic field recordings to urban jazz and rock and roll. The place and time of this writing event is essential for it infused the storying process. The virtual and actual sonic environment, the visual environment, our togetherness in that subterranean Borgesian library of music—these provided the imaginative landscape and anchor points from which we each diffracted outwards into imaginative and literal space, time, and geography.

That afternoon, we gathered around the small table, our laptops open in front of us. The eery tension of a global pandemic moment of uncertainty provided narrative propulsion, along with whatever record was playing on the stereo chosen at a whim by one or the other of us. The story became a form of time travel. Together we turned the basement into a bathyscaphe and submerged ourselves in an unspecified future unknown. We were ourselves, but in the future: a research collective studying language, sound, literacy, modalities of communication, and meaning. Among the questions we wrote with were: What will sounds sound like in an increasingly digitized future? How will meaning and technology evolve together and apart? How can we collaboratively write the future in a way that allows for multiple perspectives and temporalities?

We wrote simultaneously, allowing the thoughts to come freely. We wrote for a set amount of time, and then read what we had written aloud to each other around the table. In this way elements and ideas and characters began to circulate among us. At one point in this first analogue session, a skunk passed by the basement window and into our storied universe, becoming the central cyborgian posthuman figure of our further imaginings.

The humans sit around the table vacillating between a collective consensus and individuating trajectories of fancy: they are imagining the future. There is a low hum of

dread and the concern that the future is shrinking – that there is less and less of it available. But also the concern that thinking in this way will enact the shrinkage. The skunk moves along the sharp blades and rocks...

Days after this first writing session, social distancing became a reality and our collaborative futures storying necessarily transitioned into virtual platforms and digital spaces. However, this first face-to-face gathering in Kedrick's basement, writing and listening to vinyl records provided an embodied, analogue, and thematic tether to the physical world; it was a place that we returned to again and again throughout our futures imaginings.

Methodologies: The creation of narrative atmospheres

The skunk nudged a pile of shimmering circuitry and surface, pushed at it with its nose and saw that it was wet-seeming in the afternoon light. Pressed a paw upon the coils and felt within its own digital enclaves an affinity and it opened its mouth while the students in the house leaned back to take in the sound of a single record.

Our experimental writing process is a nesting of arts-based methodologies and digitally-mediated creative practices: narrative futuring (Horst), collaborative writing in digital interfaces (Emerson), textual sonification using the Singling platform (James et al.), Zoom and Padlet as both collaborative interfaces and performance venues, and the Patch, a collaborative writing and performance workshop (James et al.). The resulting text/s, *Skunk Tales*, provides more of an unbounded futures atmosphere that does “atmospheric things” (McCormack) than an enclosed and representative short story with a beginning, middle, and end. This bricolage of arts-based, digitally enriched methods has much to offer the qualitative researcher interested in engaging with the unquantifiable realms of the imaginary, and finding/creating emergent and entangled meaning and insight there. Below, we describe this gathering of methodologies that allowed us to create the narrative atmosphere of *Skunk Tales*.

Narrative Diffraction

Skunk Tales in both form and composition, problematizes temporality, linearity, authorship, cause and effect, and takes *narrative* to its Roche limit where it disintegrates and commingles with poetry, music, noise, and nonsense. We take up story in an expansive sense as “any account of a series of related events or experiences”² (“Narrative”): Our *account(s)* are collaborative not only between the human authors involved in this project, but also with the interfaces, technologies, and spacetime contexts that constitute and co-instantiate production of the texts and sounds of Skunk Tales. The *events or experiences are related* in terms of our togetherness and various simultaneities— first our physical togetherness around a table, breathing in the same air and listening to the same vinyl records, and then later “together-apart” (Barad) at five different tables in five different geographical locations, patchworked together in virtual space. Like Alexander and Wyatt ours was a kind of virtual “kitchen research practice” in which:

We wrote. We wrote in response to what we heard, or what we imagined we heard. We made coffee. We talked. We read aloud our written responses to each other and wrote again, writing ourselves into each other’s words, and read aloud again. More coffee. More talking. Repeat. (101).

This methodology is a writing-as-exploration into the future imaginary (i.e. Beier; Gough; Adsit-Morris) that is not an attempt at prediction or representation of a unified vision of the future; Rather, this writing intentionally diffracts the very idea of representation. Van der Tuin’s description of diffraction is particularly helpful here:

Diffraction is said to shift a restrictive linguisticism. Diffraction is meant to disrupt linear and fixed causalities, and to work toward ‘more promising interference patterns’ both between words and things [and here we include sounds] (allowing for

² Definitions of narrative are innumerable, conflicting, and often complicated by academic terminology and abstraction. Because narrative, like the future, belongs to everyone who lives in time, we have chosen wikipedia as a resource for our definition, as it is widely understandable, vetted, and accessible to anyone with internet access.

things and bodies [and frequencies] to be active in processes of signification)...(26-27).

Collaborative Writing

In many collaborative writing practices, especially in the scholarly context, the collaboration act is a kind of negotiation of meaning, a braiding together of individual perspectives into a unified voice, even if that voice is admittedly multiplicitous. Taking up the first person plural perspective, we become an authorial multitude, like those of Deleuze and Guattari: “The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd....” (3). Collaboration can be in the form of a dialogue in which the individual voice/characters are distinct and attributable, as in the Jonathan and Dagmar researcher voices in their re-conceptualization of the interview process (Alexandar & Wyatt), or the dialogue format of Gale and Wyatt’s *Working at the Wonder*. The text, once written and especially once published, does not change – the first sentence is composed of the same series of words though they be read yesterday, today, or tomorrow. For the purposes of this paper and this context, we cohere into a concretized form and adopt the pronoun *we*—but in our collaborative storytelling, the pronouns were more complex and various, the texts more mutable and changing, the sounds and meanings “coupled with the environmental contingencies that are constitutive of any wave behaviour” and therefore “can never be perfectly reverse engineered from its constituent frequencies” (Cecchetto, 3). Our *we* was voluminous, undefined, and encompassed many quiet rooms of private thinking made audible. Indeed, it was a kind of chaotic assemblage, a gathering of subjectivities.

They are hear together. Here. Together. And the books, and the discs, and old boxes with armatures and moving parts.

Individualized fragments of datasets that are deliberately encrypted and differentiated from a collective pool of quantum data collected via BMIs (brain

machine interfaces). You are we, but humans decided to keep the illusion of individuality to an extent that they do not allow conflicts to arise – the world cannot afford such human stupidity anymore, anyway.

Music moves in your hand, and technology still can't catch up with the feeling.

Everybody moves around the professor's museum of old music, walking with respect

On a full stomach and with nothing better to do and driven by curiosity the skunk makes his way slowly, cautiously, meticulously towards it.

Polyphonic Padlet

In our virtual writing sessions, as well as our storying performance for the Arts Integrated Research Group (AIRG) symposium, we used Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) to allow each of us to simultaneously write within the same environment while retaining our individual voices and styles in separate columns. This is a polyphonic writing and reading space without the uniform linearity of most word processors. With Padlet, the reader can choose to navigate the page in any number of ways. One can read down each column from left to right, or flit across the gutters between columns and between utterances. Each utterance within a single column stands apart, and the most recent posts are placed on top of the columns so that in reading down the virtual page, one discovers the narrative consequence before the cause. In a live performance context, each new post seems like breaking news. When the Padlet environment is output into a document file, the columns are automatically collapsed into the single logic of a letter-sized page and a navigation of left to right, top to bottom. While we found this output interesting, we were more excited by the narrative possibilities inherent in the virtual environment rather than in the traditional page format.

The Sounds of Singling

The needle as the punctum of time taking you back to before the noise cancelling began, before we rode the filters to a place of calm. To a noisy world, filled with strange and unpleasant sounds. Exploding motors, waterfalls, garbage doors, insects and air ducts, blenders and coffee grinders, rubber tire friction, office chit chat, clanking bottles, an old

*green house creaking in the typhoons of the catastrophic present tense. Tense, but quiet.
Not a sound except for these four voices quietly vibing.*

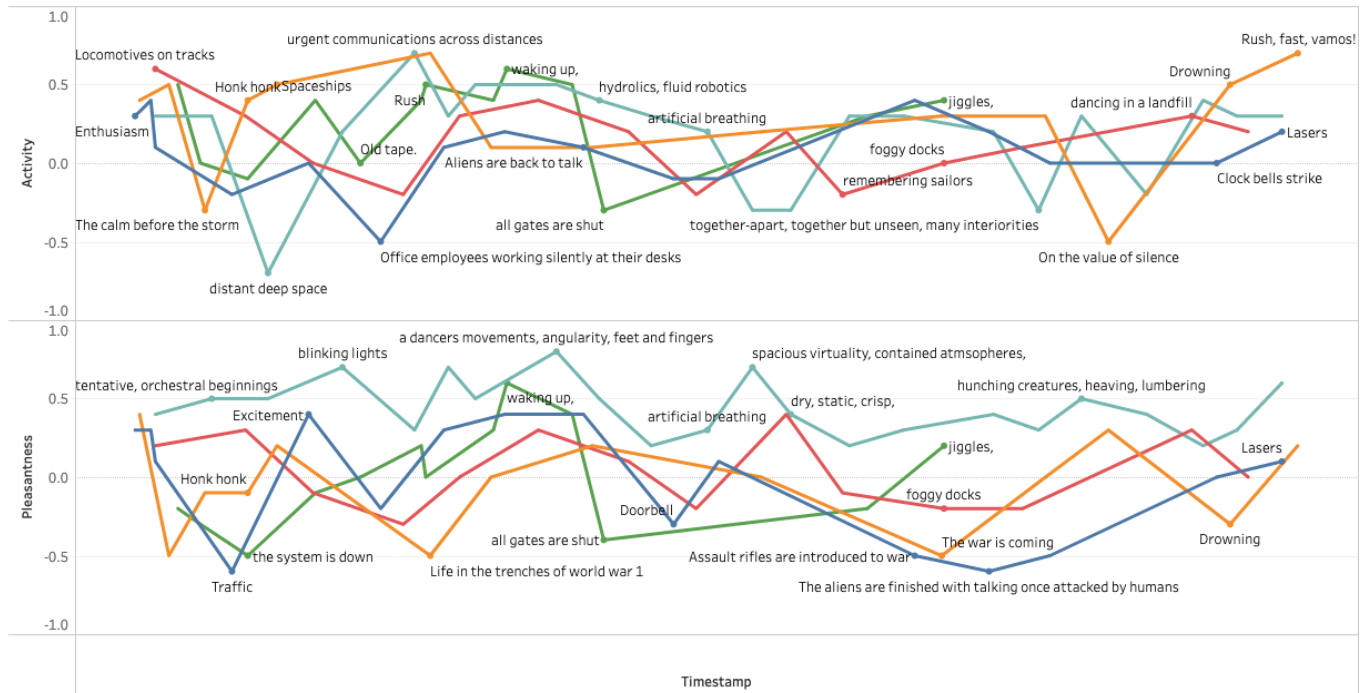
Sound plays a crucial role in our creative process. During our virtual storytelling sessions, we simultaneously sonified the emergent narrative data using Singling, a Text-to-MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) linguistic data sonification software developed by the DLC for qualitative research and textual data analysis. The Singling interface allows users to listen to specific syntactic features and general semantic characteristics of the input text. Singling transmediates discrete characters, symbols, and punctuation, as well as more complex word attributes such as class (noun, verb, adjective, etc.), length, sentiment, or lexicogrammatical category (LGC) (e.g. verbs indicating *feeling*, nouns indicating *weather*, and so on). Singling thus transforms texts into user-determined soundscapes that highlight particular forms and meanings. As we wrote *Skunk Tales*, we invited the emergent Singling soundings to permeate our imaginations and become entangled with the movements of the narrative. As Cecchetto argued, “It is precisely the forceful quality of sound that makes it an agent of modulation that can help to amplify certain elements of narratives of human-technological coupling, making them audible” (4).

Singling enables a different sonic encounter with a text, one that accesses “the invisible dynamics that are hidden beneath a visual perception and its linguistic organization” (Salome, 10). This program provides the qualitative researcher and analyst many analytic affordances (see James et al., in press). Here, however, we take up the platform in a more visceral, improvisational, and arts-based approach to sounding language. Each of us had the program open on our laptops and had prepared a unique set of text-to-sound transformations. The possible

combinations of transformations in Singling are virtually endless. The same text can produce radically different sounds when played with different settings, just as the same sounded text can produce radically different visceral experiences within different listeners. To illustrate the evocative generativity of a Singling composition, we recorded our storying performance for the AIRG virtual conference in October of 2020. For this conference, we performed our futuring method live - writing and sounding a chapter of Skunk Tales in the Zoom conference room with the audience present and allowing their presence to permeate the narrative. We now have this performance housed within the Skunk Tales webpage as a soundtrack to the story, and have since returned to listen again, and respond individually to the collaborative sonic composition. Our poetic and evocative responses map a wide territory of imaginative and visceral meanings, and have become another chapter of the story (Figure 1). As a futures oriented endeavour, we encourage listeners of Skunk Tales to share their own emergent responses to that composition in the webpage's comments section. As Voegelin describes of the implications of sound:

Listening generates place, the field of listening, continually from my hearing of myself within the dynamic relationship of all that sounds: the temporary connections to other listeners, thing and places, as the contingent life-world of my listening intersubjectivity that hears the actual, the possible, and even the impossible participating in the ephemerality of the unseen (3).

Figure 1. Sentiment analysis of the Skunk Tales performance at the AIRG virtual conference. The analysis is focused on the perceived activity and pleasantness of the visceral response and is marked with a timestamp of the auditory product. Online version available of the visualization is available here:



https://public.tableau.com/views/SkunkTales/SkunkTales_SentimentAnalysis?:language=en&:display_count=y&publish=yes&:origin=viz_share_link

Zoom

After the COVID lock-down started and we transitioned our weekly meetings and story-jams into Zoom. Suddenly we were faced with the psychic and physical demands created by the minute temporal delays and disturbances that are characteristic of the Zoom platform. As

Wiederhold explains in an article exploring what is commonly described as ‘Zoom Fatigue’:

Humans use a range of precisely timed vocalization, gestures, and movements to communicate, and they rely on precise responses from others to determine if they are being understood. Scientists call this synchrony. If a delay is introduced to this system, even if this delay is only milliseconds, subconsciously, our brains still register the issue and work harder to try to overcome it and restore synchrony (437).

This impossibility of achieving true simultaneity (humorously performed by a clapping experiment conducted by musicians attempting to jam together in Zoom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV691X28SU0>)—became co-productive of the sounds and narratives of Skunk Tales. As researcher/musicians interested in the meanings and materialities of sound, understanding and working to subvert the stilted sonic environment of Zoom conferencing became our first challenge. In addition to the minute delays that cause fatigue, the Zoom platform’s automatic settings have built in features that suppress or cancel out background noises and automatically adjust the speaker’s voice and volume for clarity. In this way Zoom effectively erases the speaker’s environment. While Hubert argues that, “[l]istening can be understood as a mutable and immediate encounter that reaches through acoustic space towards encounter”(72), Zoom simultaneously enables and prevents intimacy in the auditory encounter by suppressing the ambient and physical embodiment of the speaker. While this can be useful in allowing the speaker’s words to be audible, the richness of their physical and embodied presence in the world is cut off from the sound of the voice. This filtering, which is an automated boundary-making distinction between voice and environment, is artificial and arbitrary: where does the sound of the voice end and the environment begin? Indeed, as Haraway writes, “[b]oundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meaning and bodies” (595). In a similar fashion to the virtual background option of Zoom in which one’s actual environment can be replaced with any image, causing the speaker to resemble a moving simulacra, the objectified cut-out of the voice becomes a dis-located and dis-embodied signal. Silence, in this transformed auditory space, is a strange virtual deadness, a void-like emptiness that is compressed rather than spacious. Virtual silence is diametrically opposite the richness of embodied silence – which is full of sound – as Voegelin describes here:

The quiet creaks, trickles and gurgles of the house pierce through me. This is not really hearing but sensing sound. Sounds are tangible in this dense quietness. I am feeling through my body whole clumps of sense material. The quietness enhances my perception; I take notice of every whisper, hum and buzz. I feel them as phenomena filling the room and me, defining our contours as one without knowing what we are (85).

Interestingly, these virtual silences are so striking because they are heard always from within the embodied silence of a quiet room. In the advanced Zoom audio settings, however, we were able to mitigate against the noise cancellation effect by disabling the suppression options and instead selecting the ‘original sound’ feature. Interestingly, ‘original sound’ is described by Cecchetto as inherently multiplicitous in its existence “among other sounds rather than as a unity of its various overtones” (3). While ‘original sound’ in Zoom is never quite original, it does produce secondary and tertiary environments with their own original sonic spacetime in the form of a composite. With the settings, what we lost in verbal coherency we gained in visceral intimacy- we were able to play, sound, and speak together in a slightly more entangled way. Latency and delay however still prevented any illusion of synchrony. These settings became powerful thematic considerations in our future narrative, in which space and time play such a central role.

Mutating representations: The Patch and StirFry

The professor indulged them in a decadence of listening to the last revolution, watching as the vinyl turned to dust before their eyes and the sound unravelled into their ears. It would last in their memory alone. To play it was to destroy it

Gathering together the sounds and texts of Skunk Tales into a finalized output was contrary to the methodological processes of the storying. We desired to facilitate generative engagements with our narrative imaginings. The Patch (James et al.) is a writing and data analysis workshop in which participants are led through a series of creative collaborative

engagements with textual data. Due to lack of space here, we cannot explain the rich digital and analogue processes of the Patch Workshop (available on the website). We wish to briefly mention the creative students in a graduate course, Digital Methods in Literacy Research, who contributed their poetic interpretations of the textual data of Skunk Tales. In a virtual workshop with these students, we took up the text of Skunk Tales, scrambled, mixed, and remixed the narrative thus obliterating any semblance of linearity, and facilitated collaborative poetic interpretations of the data. The resulting collaborative poems and collaborative performances are another chapter of Skunk Tales, thus extending the nexus of our compositional intent.

To continue confounding static representation, we took the words of our original composition and entered them into recombinant format called a Stir-Fry text, authored by poet/programmer Jim Andrews. In this hyperscript, the reader's cursor triggers the replacement of one selection of text with another. This seemed like the perfect solution for nonlinear and non-hierarchical text compositions, providing a nuanced assemblage of text fragments that vary for each reader depending on their individual interactions with the text, adding a "liveness" to the reading reflecting the synchronous simultaneity of its composition. Naturally, this became another chapter of Skunk tales, one in which the individuality of the reader becomes a compositional agent in the recounting of the tale. The Skunk Tales webpage is an attempt to gather together our various lines of flight into one representational space. However, our desire was to create an unbounded space that might allow for further creative engagements as well as visitor participation in the Skunk Tales atmosphere of futures imagining.

Conclusions

Covid-19 provided a productive strangeness and temporality from which to imagine ourselves into the future. The protracted and profoundly alienating experience of

this moment has been described by many as having a science fictional quality. Infusing the texts of the story is this non-fictional fictionality and the real uncertainty of what will happen in the days ahead, let alone the years and decades. *Skunk Tales* is therefore a pandemic tale, sounding a future that is quickly receding into the past, while simultaneously signifying new possibilities for dynamic arts-based conversations between subjectivities, technologies, sounds, and meanings. Our diffracted writing was a performance of theory, fear, yearning, and creation in crisis and has implications for 21st century writing pedagogy and research, arts-based research, futures studies, and digital literacy research. We agree with Skains who makes an argument for engaging students with all of the “sign systems available” in digital contexts. She continues, the “future of writing is multiplicative: multimodal, collaborative, participatory, and distributed” (2). Our bricolage of methodologies gestures towards this multiplicative future of writing, a future that may be up to the task of producing what Stengers suggests are “other kinds of narratives, narratives that populate our worlds and imaginations in a different way” (5); *Skunk Tales* is our contribution of one such difference.

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