

# CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

September 4, 2016—The Shandaken Project at Storm King, New Windsor, NY  
<http://experimentallecures.org>

## ***“Hearing voices = you’re crazy / Not hearing voices = you’re crazy”*** by Sara Magenheimer

[Opens with a 14 second sample from the song *Never Leave Me (Uh Oh)* by Lumidee]

A disembodied voice is disconnected from a solid form or body. If you hear a disembodied voice coming from your basement, it has no visible shape or form. It could be a ghost. I call this talk “Hearing Voices = You’re Crazy, Not Hearing Voices = You’re Crazy” to draw attention to the both physically tangible and more intangible or metaphoric ways we think about the voice. To put it another way, in order to receive the information contained in the voice, one must use one’s imagination. There’s fiction even in the voice speaking fact. Upon the advent of the written word there were many detractors. A main criticism of written language was the fact that it left no room for dialogue. It moved only in one direction, it was a linguistic object. Philosophers wondered “how will we question the speaker when he’s not even there? When all we have here are solid immobile words on a page?” A singing voice moves in many directions at once. It conveys information in the form of language, but also as tempo, tone, pitch, and affect and probably a million other micro-perceptions. It’s one thing to hear someone speak, another to read their texts in your mind, and another totally different experience to hear the same text sung.

[Sung, altered using vocal synthesizer:]

*I confide in you, I believe myself to possess a most singular combination of qualities exactly fitted to make me preeminently a discoverer of hidden realities of nature. The belief has been forced upon me and most slow have I been to admit it even. First, owing to some peculiarity in my nervous system I have perceptions of some things which no one else has or at least very few if any. Some might say an intuitive perception of hidden things, that is of things hidden from eyes, from ears, and ordinary senses. Secondly, my immense reasoning faculties. Thirdly, the power not only of throwing my whole energy and existence into whatever I choose, but also bring to bear on any one subject or idea the vast apparatus from all sorts of apparently irrelevant and extraneous sources. I can throw rays from every corner of the universe into one vast focus.*

[Spoken live:]

That text was Ada Byron's letter to her mother in which she describes discovering her excellent math skills. She went on to become the world's first computer programmer. A singular voice can unify seemingly disparate thoughts creating a new space for new connections or tensions between diverse ideas. It mimics the feeling of being inside your own skull, where so many thoughts, observations, non-sequiturs are swimming around in the same material—you. But this you is a hybrid entity made up of many people sort of stitched together, a choir of DNA. Oliver Sachs talks about how when a musician can't practice their instrument they can simply imagine going through the motions of their normal practice routine, and doing this will ignite the same synapses in the brain, as if they were really playing. I used to practice drumming by walking down the street and counting 4-4 with my footsteps [demonstrates] (I don't know, you can't really—yeah! You can kind of hear that) and playing polyrhythms with my fingers on my thighs, like [demonstrates.] This works for any instrument, from clarinet to the guitar to even the voice. So, is imagining hearing voices practically the same as actually hearing them? The breakdown of the voice into non-linguistic utterances is about the ultimately physical, bodily manifestations of concepts, cognition, and identity.

[Live audio of two computerized voices:]

*Voice 1: Do you think objects each have their own unique rhythm?*

*Voice 2: Yes yes yes yes. Yes yes. Yes.*

*Voice 1: What is the rhythm of a plain white t-shirt?*

*Voice 2: What is the rhythm of a t-shirt that says Super Mom and has a grid of four pictures of Snoopy performing various jobs?*

*Voice 1: What size is it?*

*Voice 2: Large.*

*Voice 1: Snoo-oo-oo-pee-Y Super EM-O-O-O-EM?*

*Voice 2: This movie is too much. We need an interlude.*

[Recorded audio of Magenheimer's voice singing *Everybody's Talkin'* by Fred Neil:]

*Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Everybody's talking at me. I don't hear a word they're saying. Only the echoes of my mind. People stop and stare. I can't see their faces. Only the shadows of their eyes. I'm going where the sun keeps shining through the pouring rain. Going where the weather suits my clothes. Banking off of the northeast winds, sailing on a summer breeze. Skipping over the ocean like a stone. Ohhhhhhhhhhh. Achoo! Ah! Uh! [whistling] Wow! Woah!*

[Spoken live:]

The voice as language but also as failure of language. What the voice performs when it fails to perform. The voice as language's insufficiency to communicate the totality of our lived experience. And yet it's still seen as kind of the essence of our identity. The voice presents the spectrum from on one hand that which cannot be uttered to on the other that which can be fully articulated. Always physical, always grounded in the body. The pregnant pause. Voice as a way to name the unnamable. Intentional nonsense or vocalization that never coalesces into language is an anti-capitalist gesture. It wastes time, resources, and is entirely unproductive in the creation of meaning in an efficient way. It refuses recognizable form. It represents a relief from language and in a way a relief from sense. A kind of future-looking, utopic, visionary regression to a primal, pre-linguistic more human part of ourselves. Insofar as it reconnects us with our more animal origins.

Speaking of our origins, I'm going to end this talk with a little bit about my origins. I noticed that I speak louder, softer, faster, slower, use a certain accent, or even dialect, depending on who I'm addressing and my geographic location. In Philly, where I'm from, for instance, I might say "Would you like a glass of water?" [pronounced wood-er.] Or, "Is your appointment on a Monday or a Tuesday?" [pronounced Mon-dee and Tues-dee.] "Let's get an egg and cheese bagel for breakfast" [pronounced beg-el.] Or, "hand me that jawn." It feels really weird and unnatural for me to turn this on and off, it just comes out, when I go there. Do you guys know the word "jawn"? Yeah, OK. In case anyone doesn't, it's

Philly slang, it's a noun, jawn, J-A-W-N. So it can be used as a stand in for any person, place, or thing. "You going to the jawn later?" "You gotta airbrush them jawns." Or, "What the jawn!?" At college in Boston I was surprised to learn that I spoke a little like a Philly kid, it had never been pointed out before because where I grew up everyone else did too. In Boston I was teased so I learned how to pronounce "wah-ter" and the days of the week. It was a class thing as well as a geographic thing. My roommates at college turned out to be from Philly too, but they were from different backgrounds. One roommate's father actually was in the process of running for mayor of Philadelphia—but she had no accent, and the other's parents were a judge and lawyer with his own practice—they were the ones that taught me how to say wah-ter.

I speak to my mom—my mom is from South Philly, she's an Italian from South Philly, so she has a really thick accent, and we talk to each other in a kind of dialect that involves a lot of cursing. We use curse words to express sympathy and solidarity, as well as anger. It's a pretty nuanced ballet. Saying, like, "fuuuuuuuuck" is a gesture of empathy. It tells her I'm present and I'm listening, and I'm feeling what she's feeling. And it's a way to show her that she's safe to express herself without judgement. She doesn't really curse around her friends, only family. So, I just want to play this—I'll just end the talk with this phone call I recorded in which she is, sort of, explain a tech issue—my mom—is explaining a tech issue that she's having with her iPhone.

*Sara's mom: Hello?*

*Sara: Oh hey Mom!*

*Sara's mom: Oh hi Sara, how ya' doin'?*

*Sara: I'm good—how are you?*

*Sara's mom: Good!*

*Sara: Um, what's up? [laughs]*

*Sara's mom: Uhhh... something really got on my nerves today.*

*Sara: Tell me about it.*

*Sara's mom: Um, earlier in the day, and then I felt bad about it of course, but, um... We had to update our iPhones, and at one point dad finished my update, but somehow we both got on the same cloud and so when his—it's gotten really confusing—sometimes I get his messages, sometime both of our phones ring, and it affects the texts—and I'm getting too fucking sick of it!*

*Sara: Yeah*

*Sara's mom: And, um, he just laughs, he thinks it's funny, because nothing gets on his nerves, and, uh, meanwhile, he doesn't look into getting it fixed—*

*Sara: Because he likes it, he thinks it's funny—*

*Sara's mom: Yeah, and I'm getting really fuckin' annoyed! You know, and uh, it's just, you know, and then I felt bad getting so annoyed, but—*

*Sara: Well did you, like, get mad at the Apple store guy or whatever?*

*Sara's mom: Um, well, that's what he could do—bring it down the street or bring it to Apple, or call Apple support—I'm sure it's a problem that can be fixed.*

*Sara: Oh you got mad at dad?*

*Sara's mom: No, uh, yeah—I got mad at him because he's not fixing it...*

*Sara: [laughing]*

*Sara's mom: ...and I know it can be fixed and I know it's from the update, um...*

*Sara: Ohh, but you need his help to fix it and he won't—he doesn't care.*

*Sara's mom: Well he—I-I—well, I think it involves his phone, but then it involves only his phone and my phone together, so yeah, you know, you're right, I could fix it myself but I—*

*Sara: I bet you could try—yeah—*

*Sara's mom: I think I would need to bring his phone.*

*Sara: Yeah, and you might need his password and stuff.*

*Sara's mom: Right and I would need his phone because we're both on the same fuckin' cloud.*

*Sara: [laughing]*

*Sara's mom: So in one way it's really funny, and the best part was, when he finished updating—[laughing]*

*Sara: Because we're talking about a cloud! [laughing]*

*Sara's mom: Right!*

*Sara: That's making you like really pissed! [laughing]*

*Sara's mom: [laughing] The best part was, the day he finished updating my phone, he was so happy that we were both on the same fucking cloud!*

*Sara: [laughing] He was so proud!*

*Sara's mom: That we were both on the same fuckin' cloud! I think he thought it was romantic! [laughing]*

*Sara: That you were on the cloud together!*

*Sara's mom: Yeah that we were on the cloud together! [laughing] So I told him today, I want my own fucking cloud!*

*Sara: [laughing] Ohh, I want my own fucking cloud...*

*Sara's mom: I do. I want a separate cloud.*

*Sara: That's great Mom—yeah—you should have your own fucking cloud.*

*Sara's mom: I think I should! [laughing] I think I deserve that! So that every time his phone rings mine doesn't ring, and every time—it's like today—I sent him a text—Hi, this is [redacted], just to show him how texting works, that you know your message was delivered, and um, the text came back to me! [laughing] So, you know...*

*Sara: Yeah, when you call me, it says dad's cell phone, on my phone, so it looks like, I always think it's dad calling me but it's...*

*Sara's mom: Huh, huh, yeah. Then it's not just between our two phones—*

*Sara: Yeah, you guys are totally fucked [laughing]*

*Sara's mom: Yes! Exactly! Because it's all since that update that meanwhile when I'm talking to you about it and I'm sure, it, you know, hasn't been fixed...*

*Sara: Alright—that's cool, I gotta go though—*

*Sara's mom: Alright—*

*Sara: I love you—*

*Sara's mom: I'm glad you and Mike are on separate clouds! [laughing]*

*Sara: Yeah me too, I want my own fucking cloud. Alright, Bye!*

*Sara's mom: Alright, bye!*

Thank you.