

## 4

### CONCLUSION

#### *Thanks for Listening, Folks*

Our honeymoon trip, a fall foliage trek through Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont, included a stop at Mass MoCA, the newly-constructed Museum of Contemporary Arts in Massachusetts. The building was spectacular; the work was uneven; and I spent most of our afternoon there sitting on the stairs watching one performative piece: Tim Hawkinson's *Uberorgan*, "a giant, self-playing reed organ" commissioned by Mass MoCA to fill its largest gallery, some twenty-eight feet from ceiling to floor and 300 feet long. I thought about Trimpin's work as I sat there watching this piece work (or is it play?):

[T]he gallery and its contents insinuate the chest cavity and internal organs of a very large living organism. The beamed ceiling reads like a ribcage, and the translucent, biomorphic bags encapsulated in orange netting are unknown glands or organs delicately traced with blood vessels. *Uberorgan's* analogy to body organs continues from its visual to its sonic character. Hawkinson notes that every internal organ has a particular tonal signature, a frequency with which it sympathetically resonates due to its specific shape and density. *Every organism's body is, therefore, a potential concert hall.* (Art Card, Mass MoCa, my emphasis)

Last night, I wrote late in my office, waiting for tutors to gather in the Writing Center for a trek to the Acoustic Café, a coffee bar with an open-mike night on Tuesdays, in celebration of the end of the semester. (I haven't given up!) Kristen, one of the new tutors whom I hadn't seen much this semester—her schedule was frantic and my sabbatical meant that I didn't necessarily see every tutor each week—came in looking for one of the others. We exchanged pleasantries, and she mentioned that Mariann (my sabbatical replacement) had observed

her tutoring session the previous night. Apparently, it had been stressful, and Kristen remarked that she had needed “about a half an hour of debriefing” with Mariann when all was said and done. Others were coming in and sessions were going on and I didn’t get much more out of Kristen than that. This turned out to be the session already described in chapter one, the evening where the student arrived with an outline generated by her professor, convinced that she must figure out a way to write the paper using the ideas she has been told are her own.

Mariann and I stayed on at the café, after the tutors had gone home, listening to music and poetry and talking between sets about the semester. She offered, without knowing that I had already run into Kristen, to talk about the previous night’s session, beginning by characterizing Kristen as having a “gift for teaching” and describing Kristen as “really being able to draw students out.”

Mariann described the session as “a real loss of innocence” for Kristen. I recognized that feeling, and my chest tightened at the thought that I could be the occasion, even indirectly, for tutors to experience such a moment. She went on to say that Kristen was “truly horrified” by what she had learned in that session, that Kristen wondered aloud why the writing center couldn’t “talk back” to such professors, and she asked me if Kristen had seemed to have settled down at all by the time I saw her. I heard myself answering that she had seemed to, playing the tape of our discussion in my head, with Kristen saying that she “couldn’t believe anyone would consider that teaching” and with me off-handedly shaking my head and raising my eyebrows and replying “yeah, I know” while I checked the printer and searched for a student folder and did who-knows-what-else as I surely let her know that I didn’t find this occasion horrifying or even mildly surprising and that it was not in fact special to me in any way. Now I have learned that it might have been a defining moment for her—it might have been her Todd—and this is not the role I would have chosen to play. That makes me sad. I caution myself to remember that it is not mine, it is hers and it is the student’s; that it is not neatly summed up, it is messy. I hear Nancy and the problem of the turning point; I hear Bryan and his ego-fixation. And I know that I

need to get mine out of the way if I'm going to think usefully at all about what happened.

Martin—you remember Martin, our lone male tutor who appeared in chapter one—is a very successful student, an extremely bright student. Martin had pretty significant problems with our staff education class. I watched him, over the course of several weeks, disengaging from the class, until I finally decided it was time to open up a space for him—and others—to comment. When asked about the usefulness of the text, Eleanor Kutz's and Hephzibah Roskelly's *Unquiet Pedagogy*, Martin grinned a bit. I could tell he wanted to talk, and he did: after explaining that he was considering teaching and really had been looking forward to hearing the teaching stories presented in the text, he characterized the Kutz/Roskelly text as “not optimistic enough.”

I had no useful response. Optimism? Optimism struck me then, and does now, as not even the appropriate frame for discussion, since optimism seems decidedly outcome-oriented. Optimism is fact-based and, as such, it is rooted in the past. We can be optimistic about future events to the extent that we are able to link them in some way to previous successful outcomes. By contrast, *hope* requires us to anticipate successful outcomes even when we have no reasonable expectation that the future will be any different from the past; we simply believe it may be so. Hope in this way, to quote Ernst Bloch, is “capable of surviving disappointment.”

It was an optimistic impulse of a sort that left Todd and me struggling to ignore the static and *focus* instead. It is an optimistic impulse that has tutors imagining a right way and a wrong way for a session to proceed, adhering to writing center dogma about who holds the pen or who reads the paper aloud. I contrast this frame of optimism with the frame of hope offered by Jean Bethke Elshtain, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the Divinity School, University of Chicago: “While optimism proffers guarantees that everything will turn out all right and that all problems are solvable, hope, that great theological virtue, urges us to a different stance, one aware of human sin and shortcoming but aware also of our capacities for stewardship and decency and our openness to grace”

(127). Coming upon Elshtain's work was its own moment of grace for me. I had been struggling with the-trouble-with-optimism question all afternoon and left my office to attend a lecture by Elshtain sponsored by Fairfield's Department of Religious Studies. I went not necessarily because I thought Elshtain's topic, Christianity and Politics, spoke especially to me (though with the 2000 presidential election chaos in full swing, I had perhaps more "hope" than usual) but because the colleague sponsoring the lecture is supportive of me and of my work and it seemed only right to do the same. When Elshtain began her lecture, however, with the question "What does it mean to live in hope?" I was intrigued.

*Hope* seemed immediately to me to be the appropriate counterpoint to optimism, but I wasn't sure why. What is the difference, really, between hope and optimism? Why does performance, whether on stage with a saxophone or in a tutoring session with a student, seem like a hopeful act, if not necessarily an optimistic one?

Looking back at Mike's self-description—"uncertain of the future but eternally hopeful"—I realize that he too has arrived at this place and is struggling, as I am, to find words for it. Hope, as Mike suggests, contains an element of the future. Though Mike doesn't name this philosophy of his (at least not as far as I know), Bloch has. He calls it "concrete utopia," a philosophy which locates utopia in the material conditions of our existence so that we might look for instances of possible futures hinted at in our daily lives. Concrete utopia, according to Giroux and McLaren, "attempts to locate a possible future within the real" (146). They write, "[Bloch's] ontology of the 'not yet' or 'anagnorisis' (recognition) claims that one can ascertain figural traces of the future in remnants of the past. From such an extraordinary position one is compelled through Bloch's brilliant exegesis of hope to understand reality as fundamentally determined by the future rather than the past" (146).



Those summer RIC staff meetings contained elements of the future. Surely there were more typical moments during those sessions than the ones I recounted in the previous chapter. Surely there are

more typical tutors than Bryan or Mike, Katie, Donna, or Jill. But it is not in the typical that our hope resides. It is instead in the glimpse and glimmer of the future that excess provides.

A new semester has begun here at Fairfield, post-sabbatical for me, and many of the faces in the Writing Center are unfamiliar. One face in particular belongs to an “at-risk” student about whom I was alerted by a member of the student support services staff. Chris is a diligent student, an endearing student, but he is academically weak, according to the director’s reports. I worked with her to set up an appointment for Chris with Sydney, one of our peer tutors. When Chris and Sydney began their session, Chris’s body language suggested that he was anxious: Though he was pleasant, he never met her eyes; his knees and feet turned inward under the table, and he rubbed his hands together nervously as he tried to respond to Sydney’s questions. When she asked Chris about his goals for writing, he shook his head as he stared down at the table and said, “I just want to be able to write a paper all by myself.”

Ten minutes later, when I passed through the Writing Center on my way to class, I noticed Sydney and Chris writing separately, yet in tandem, each on a purple legal pad. Sydney reported that that was “pretty much all they did” for the rest of the session. That seems like a lot to me.

In his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali breaks his history of western music and political economy into four stages: Sacrificing, Representation, Repetition, and Composition. When he invokes the term *composition*, Attali is not at all using it in its ordinary literary sense, or even in its ordinary musical sense, both of which might suggest transcription, repression, linearity, and containment. His own definition of composition reads like this: “Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language” (134). Of the four codes, composition, according to Attali, is the only one that asks us to actively imagine a future. Attali writes, “Any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order” (143). For the writing center, such imagining involves refusing an identity construction that merely positions the center as a

reduplication of the sound of the academy. This is work. This is throwing out the script. But how I love the suggestion that two people make decisions about whether and how to invest themselves in what may appear to be sheer chaos and that those decisions, these investments, create an opportunity for a future, for new relationships, for new ways of being together.

It is striking to realize that the tutors themselves often have difficulty recognizing the significance of moments like the ones Sydney and Chris shared. The occasions they tend to downplay—"That's pretty much all we did"—are the very same occasions that for me are at the core of our work. Their dismissal makes getting at those moments that much harder. Maybe getting at them should be hard. Perhaps it's a place we—directors, scholars, teachers—shouldn't be *allowed* to go. When I interviewed the RIC tutors at the end of the year, I had trouble getting Bryan (who is normally so verbal) to talk about moments of excess in his own tutoring career. He seemed perplexed, sputtering a bit before Meg prompted him: "What about the work you and Joe did?"

"Oh, with the films? Oh, we just watched each others' films." Bryan and Joe, a Korean student, share a mutual interest in avant-garde film. Joe had, in fact, worked on several Korean films that Bryan was familiar with. They watched a couple together; they traded favorite films; they "talked a lot about film," in Bryan's words. He seemed reluctant to elaborate.

I pressed Mike, too, for more on his sessions with Jason, the Korean student he had worked with. Early in his response, he said, "A lot of what we did was just plain old talking. You know, where we both are as people." Specifically, I wanted him to consider the challenges of working with ESL students. To prompt him, I talked about the frustrations of international students who desperately and quickly want to improve their English in light of the added burdens of coursework, evaluation, and sometimes even their professors' expectations. Mike acknowledged these by saying, "Oh, yeah, the ESL stuff. We talk about that when we get to it." Then he got to the heart of his work with Jason: "But using English words is really where his joy is."

When I reflect on what I expected to find as I prepared for my summer at RIC, I realize that I was looking for evidence that Meg had put in place a program that somehow produced a community of tutors who managed to keep their options open. I wanted to find out how she did that, especially since every program that I had seen (including my own) produced a community of tutors who had shut their options down. I needed to figure out how to work toward the former and move away from the latter. The first few sentences of this paragraph sum up pretty well my expectations for that summer, and I am surprised by the Taylorized mechanization of even my own language: the production and management of community, the figuring-out and the working-toward. I hadn't quite let go. I suppose we can't fully let go. But I believe now, and I have seen at RIC, that "[c]ommunity is not a product; it cannot be built or produced. One *experiences* community" (Davis 196).

For Meg, the heart of the summer sessions is contained in a single line that was spoken somewhere around week five or six, during one particularly heated debate. The discussion gained momentum, with people jumping in, talking over each other, trying to get a word in and then finally giving up. Justin, in particular, tried several times to assert a position that, given the general leanings of the group, was likely to be an unpopular one. He sat forward, started to speak, was stopped, started again, was stopped again, and then finally sat back. It was clear that he was no longer going to try to make himself heard. At that moment, Mike jumped into the fray. When he was finally recognized, rather than make his own point (which was sure to be at the opposite end of the political spectrum from Justin's), he looked across the room, lay his open palm on the table, and said, "Justin, what was it you were trying to say?" Davis writes, "It is not in the work but in the 'unworking' that community is exposed, *not in the pulling together but in the brrreaking up* . . . 'Pulling together' doesn't produce community, but c-r-r-r-a-c-king up exposes it" (2000, 196-197).

When Sarah confesses that the summer sessions left her, rather than with a bunch of strategies in her tutoring bag, with the feeling that they had spent the summer "just talking," she is acknowledging the exposition of community in the c-r-r-r-a-c-king up. The sessions

leave the tutors not with the sense that everything has magically come together, but with, oddly, the general impression that things have been broken up. While this sensation can be unsettling, it is also strangely freeing.

Back to Hawkinson, to the *Uberorgan*, that “hilarious, enchanting, vast instrument, the one that “overcomes’ the classical pipe organ by subverting its pious grandiosity”:

The grand silliness of the *Uberorgan*, its low-tech sophistication and handmade craftsmanship, its complexity and truly vast scale are all put in the service of a playful, mirthful, even goofy end—the *Uberorgan* laughs at itself, and we smile along with it. The *Uberorgan* welcomes chaos and overcomes organization: its switches render the encoded score gloriously unpredictable and convoluted. (Mass MoCa Art Card)

Even as the summer sessions at RIC were not what I expected, they were still somehow just what I had imagined. The participants took an encoded score—Kenneth Bruffee’s “Collaborative Learning” and Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* being two notable examples—and rendered it gloriously unpredictable, setting the texts in motion with the pitch of a beast or the jangle of a set of keys. They sought creativity in repetition: What happens when we read *Women’s Ways of Knowing* again, knowing what we know *now*? Listening to it with a different set of ears . . . in the key provided by these new voices? And they welcomed the chaos that ensued when that repetition didn’t turn out quite as planned.

I have not had the opportunity to observe much of the tutoring for which the summer sessions prepared the RIC group, but I have been fortunate enough to have them tutor me on parts of this book. They have now just finished reading a draft of the chapter on the summer sessions, and an email message containing their responses to it was waiting for me in my mailbox this morning. Their notes are brief, but they comment very carefully on my writing. Barbara, for example, begins by highlighting what she liked about the chapter:

It’s so interesting to have witnessed the summer training first hand and to see what things you pick out for your book. I think your take on things was right on.



The last few sentences of her response, however, contain what she calls her “only criticism”:

[I]t left me hanging. It sort of ended but without concluding your point. . . . I was confused by that. Maybe it's me, maybe I missed something, because I like things to be tidy and in a neat little package.

Jill agrees that I seem to have “captured the atmosphere of the summer sessions” before gently suggesting that

it might be helpful to explain a little why we chose those readings, and what agenda we had in mind before the meetings began. This would provide more of a contrast for when you bring up the scrapping of *Women's Ways*.

She also was confused about the point I was trying to make with the journals.

In the middle of Bryan's note, where he summarizes his experience of reading the chapter and of seeing his own contributions in it, he writes,

All of the excerpts are great, particularly Donna's, Jay's and Katie's. I miss Donna. She was a great rabble-rouser. We had our different agendas, but I miss talking to her. We never even got a chance to argue.<sup>1</sup>

The tutors will not have the opportunity to respond to all of these concluding thoughts, though their possible comments ring in my head as I write this. I expect Mike might push away from the table for a moment after reading about the *Uberorgan*; Bryan would probably give a wry smile as he kept reading; Jill, Joanne, and Barbara might want more explicit connections made between the *Uberorgan*, my thoughts, and their own contributions to this text. They would all be right on. Like Mike, I was blown away by the relevance of the *Uberorgan* to this book when I sat and watched it that rainy afternoon. Yet now, removed from it in space and time, I am at a loss to articulate its relationship in any insightful, sophisticated way. Like

Barbara, I had hoped that my conclusion might straighten up the text a bit, that I could tie things together in some neat little package and present it to you, The Reader. But every day I listen to a session in the Fairfield Writing Center, or I talk to a tutor about the past/present/future, or I get a journal entry from the RIC group, and I find I want to say just one more thing. And another thing. I don't know how to make it end. I don't know that it does. I seem to be caught in my own feedback loop.

Yesterday, in my staff education course, we talked about rituals for writing, and I confessed that one of mine was to go back and re-read pieces of writing that I really like. So today I settled in with Blitz's and Hurlbert's "If You Have Ghosts." I especially love the ending, where Michael Blitz is recounting the noise from the writing center he heard from his office one afternoon. He writes, "I heard arguments and then laughter—lots of laughter. When I came in I found Ericka, Leana, and Sonya all laughing with tears in their eyes"(92). In the final paragraph of the essay, Michael says,

The three of them were clearly a safe haven for one another in that moment, and that's what moved me so much. They had told each other important things; they'd laughed out loud not only in amusement but also as an act of caring; in some ways they'd gone beyond the expressed purposes of the writing center to discover at least something maybe each would only have whispered. (92)

Blitz and Hurlbert conclude by remarking, "If we have ghosts, they would be in the after-image of this scene and the occasional questioning voice that wonders why such moments of shared discovery are not at the very center of what we're supposed to be teaching" (92).

I view this last line as a challenge, and I consider this book a partial response.

#### SECRET SOUNDS

For several months, these next two paragraphs marked the beginning of the draft of this book's conclusion:

Moving into our new house has meant adjusting to a brief but dense commute along Connecticut's I-95 corridor. I don't look forward to it, and I can't imagine I'll ever get used to it, but it has gotten me reacquainted with morning radio. Some programs, like the "Name That Member in the Month of September" contest, are admittedly inauspicious. Others have intrigued me enough to at least silently play along as the exits creep by. One New York station, for example, brought back the old "Secret Sounds" game, where the DJs play a familiar sound, amplified beyond recognition, and invite listeners to call in and guess the sounds. A few samples are guessed very quickly, while others take longer, and I sometimes find that I am listening to the same sound in the afternoon that was being played that morning. One particular sound I heard repeated morning and afternoon for two days—until a listener guessed it on the second afternoon. It was a CD being removed from its jewel-box.

I am not good at this game. I strain to hear what I think might be clues, listening for pitch and timbre, for characteristic noises. The sounds are always familiar to me, their names right at the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite make the connection. I couldn't believe, however that I had failed to recognize the CD jewel-box. I mean, the squeeze of a metal oil-can, okay. (Although it probably means I need to check the chain on my bike.) But a CD case?! I was pretty disappointed in myself. I went home and, when no one was looking, began loosening CDs from their holders, one after another. They all sound *slightly* different, I consoled myself. The pitch, I've discovered, really depends on how tightly the CD fits into the holder: the tighter the fit, the higher the pitch.

In a flurry of final revisions, I deleted the preceding Secret Sounds paragraphs altogether, turned off my computer, and went home. Three days later, I received this email message from Joanne (who had been reading the earlier version of the conclusion):

p. 164. Are you going to further your section on the CD-jewel box noises and connections? That last paragraph screams "tutoring sessions" and "WC" to me. Things like: straining to hear/listening/characteristic noises/familiar/making a connection/disappointment/slightly different sounds/tighter the fit, higher the pitch.

Great.

I frantically searched through various hard copies of drafts that I'd printed out, twenty pages here or there that had traveled with me to visit family and friends, to interview potential colleagues at MLA. I found an old version containing the Secret Sounds paragraphs and looked at what "scream[ed]" out to Joanne, and I was brought back to my writing about Todd, to my exchange with PC. The straining; the disappointment; the possible connections—some made, some lost.

I did not anticipate, when I had these encounters with Todd and PC, when I began thinking about these encounters or even writing about them, that this would become a book, in the end, about hope. Many of the moments that sent me to write were not narratives that, on first pass, seemed particularly hopeful. In fact, much of what we're met with every day is downright disappointing. The writing center could certainly become about those instances: the colleagues who don't understand what we do, the students who are difficult to engage, the mounds and mounds of administrative work that threaten to bury us each year.

We also know the writing center to be about other things: the colleagues (however few they may be) who actually get it; the student who works diligently with a tutor on a screenplay he's writing just for fun; the tutors who develop into careful, reflective teachers over the course of their years here.

But in the writing center I know most of the time, there exists no such clear demarcation between good moments and bad ones. Much the way Donna understands pain, I understand tutoring: the sessions are what they are. "Good" and "bad" seem to me to be labels that we assign in retrospect, labels that belie the complexity of the work of teaching and learning and writing and being human. Such designations led me to think about Todd as a problem to be solved rather than as a soul to be touched. Since then I've learned that most days in the writing center should be, when you get right down to it, about time spent—time spent with ourselves and time spent with others. And the question then is *How* is that time being spent? How might it be spent differently? Can the present suggest not only how we frame

the past (as in, “That was a really baaaad session”) but also how we frame the future?

In a write-up of the upcoming exhibition “Dangerous Curves: the Art of the Guitar” at the Brooklyn Museum, Jon Pareles characterizes the guitar as “no longer merely a machine that makes sounds.” He writes, “Without playing a note, it is already a bundle of meaning and possibilities” (p. 1). The last several decades of scholarship on writing centers has provided us with rich descriptions of the skills and strategies of writing center practitioners. We have not so self-consciously considered, however, the ways in which the writing center is no longer (was it ever?) merely a machine that makes writers (much less *writing*). How, without sounding a note, the writing center is already a bundle of meaning and possibilities hinted at, if not entirely contained, in the product.

Pareles attributes at least part of the guitar’s enduring popularity to its being “the most personal of instruments,” both for its anthropomorphic shape (body, neck, and head) but more for the “intimate treatment” it receives: “Cradled in a player’s lap or strapped across the chest, as close as a loved one, it is caressed or abused with both hands, while its vibrations are felt next to the player’s heart” (p.1). Pareles’s description reminds me of the intimacy of literate acts: a mother’s embrace that is soft and warm; the smooth marble library floor cooling the backs of my thighs on a hot summer day; a stinging assignment to the Pumpkin (-head) Reading Group. Students arrive at our doors carrying these memories with them as surely as if they were strapped across their chests, and we feel these vibrations next to our hearts.

We must strain to hear the notes they arrive playing as we engage the harmonics of their tunes. To paraphrase Mike’s poignant description of the RIC Writing Center, shot to Meg from across the Atlantic, this is the noise of the writing center I know at this point.